

## Institutions, Innocence, and Complicity

Readings: 'Greenland's History – or the History of the Danes on Greenland' by Sven Holm  
'The Powwow at the End of the World' by Sherman Alexie

It's always hard to know when to begin a story. Our story today is about the northern bands of the Ute tribe. Does the story begin thousands of years ago when people first made their home in the mountains and valleys and plains of what is now Utah and Colorado? Does it begin as they developed an identity as Utes and a connection to the land they lived in? Does it begin in the 1630s with the first interaction with Europeans, Spanish Explorers, who introduced horses to the Utes? Horses changed the Utes' ways of travel and hunting and their understandings of wealth? Or does it begin in the 1860s, when the American Unitarian Association, our religious forbearers, entered the scene? Or it could begin somewhere else entirely.

For our purposes today, I'm starting the story in the 1860s, aware that I'm making the Unitarians play a central role in a way that they wouldn't had I started the story somewhere else, aware that there are many ways to tell this story, aware that the sources that I have to tell this story, the written tradition of history, largely tells only the perspective of white people. As I tell this story, I invite you to remember that so much is left out, so much of the story has been lost.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1860s, the attention of the country turned from The Civil War and Reconstruction toward the west. Settlement was expanding, as farmers and miners and others settled with greater density. There was a furious debate about what the U.S. government should do about Native Americans in the western part of the United States. Everyone in the debate believed in Manifest Destiny, the virtue of westward expansion, the belief that the whole North American continent was promised to people of European descent by God, that the West should be transformed into farmland. The debate was about how to make that vision a reality – and what should be done with the people who lived there, who didn't share that same vision.

One side of the fight believed that the Native people should all be killed. Their presence was incompatible with westward expansion and so they did not deserve to continue living. They could never adapt to a new way of life. The other, relatively progressive position was that Native people could be taught white ways of farming and family structure and, within a few generations, assimilate into white culture. Many of the strongest advocates of this position had been deeply involved in the abolitionist movement, people like William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

At that time, most tribes in the west had signed some sort of treaty with the U.S. Government and were living on reservations, land set aside for them. In exchange for giving up land for white settlement, most tribes were promised regular food, clothing, money and other supplies. These treaty obligations were overseen by Indian agents, federal employees, who disbursed supplies, and were expected to teach natives white ways including agriculture and Christianity. They were also tasked with resolving any conflicts that emerged between the tribes and the white people who, inevitably encroached on the land the tribes had been promised.

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<sup>1</sup> My source for much of this sermon is Decker, Peter R. *"The Utes Must Go!" American Expansion and the Removal of a People*. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum Publishing, 2004.

At this time, Indian agents were notoriously corrupt. They regularly pocketed money due to the people they were supposed to serve. They sold supplies meant for the Native people. For the progressives, this was the problem. The reason that tribal people weren't assimilating to white culture was that the examples they had was corrupt and immoral. If only the Indian agents were moral, this would all be different. The Quakers petitioned President Grant to allow churches to nominate Indian agents. The thinking was that churches would select agents who were moral men, usually clergy, who would be a good example for the tribal people, which would make assimilation happen more quickly. Grant took the Quakers' suggestion. This was called "The Peace Policy." It began in 1868.

The tribes of the West were then divided up among the Protestant denominations. At that time, the American Unitarian Association, one of our predecessor denominations, was still largely within the Protestant fold. The Unitarians were assigned the two Northern agency outposts of the Ute Tribe, whose traditional land spanned most of what is now Colorado and Utah, along with parts of New Mexico, Arizona, and Wyoming. By the time the Unitarians received their assignment, the Utes had signed a treaty with the government that restricted them to a reservation made up of the most mountainous, least habitable part of that land.

So the Unitarians sought ministers to serve as Indian agents, to be a shining moral example and teach the Utes how to farm, convert them to Christianity, and otherwise assimilate them to white culture. And the people they found to do the job were not well suited to the work. No one goes into the ministry thinking, "what I really want to do is go far away from everything I've ever known to negotiate conflicts, operate within a complicated bureaucracy, and teach people with no interest how to farm." The people the Unitarians set, were, as far as I can tell, people who couldn't hack it in congregational ministry. They were the people for whom this was their only option. And they were weird, a historian describes one of them, Rev. Jabez Nelson Trask, in this way:

'Trask walked about the agency in a dark-blue swallowtail coat, skin-tight trousers and, to protect himself from the sun, an old-fashioned floppy beaver hat with a broad brim, and a set of green eye goggles. To the modern observer he might resemble Kermit the Frog. But to a nineteenth century Ute, he looked more like an evil spirit... In the end, Trask proved to be "a needless crank" [and] "tactless and incompetent."<sup>2</sup>

Historians assess that the incompetence of the ministers sent for this task probably benefited the Utes, at least in the short term. It wasn't just that the people were strange and ineffective, but that the tasks before them were impossible. The White River Agency in Northern Colorado, one of the agencies staffed by Unitarian ministers, was at 6,500 feet elevation. The growing season there was 70 days in a good year. The farmers and gardeners among us know that you can't grow enough food to sustain yourself through the winter with that short of a growing season. Crops regularly failed. Even the Utes who were willing to try agriculture quickly realized that their traditional hunting and gathering was better suited to this land than the agriculture demonstrated by the Indian Agents.

In 1876, Rutherford B. Hayes was elected president. Once he took office, he changed the policy toward the Indians. It would no longer be clergy sent to civilize them, but men with more practical skills who would teach them white ways. A man named Nathan Meeker was appointed as an agent for the White River Agency. He was not Unitarian, though he was close. He was a great admirer of many Unitarians and shared the utopian visions common to many of our religious ancestors. For the brief time he spent at White River,

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<sup>2</sup> Decker, 61

he kept up a correspondence with the Unitarian Association, asking for supplies, a clergyman, and a carpenter to be sent.

And, as so many of these stories go, it ended badly. Meeker believed that the Utes needed to farm. His failure of imagination and empathy led him to believe the Utes must assimilate. He withheld rations from those who didn't farm, in violation of treaty rights. Meeker believed that, if the Utes didn't have their horses anymore, they would be forced to take up agriculture. He started plowing up pasture lands, making it harder and harder for the Utes to find land for grazing horses. This prompted a conflict with a Ute leader, Johnson. It is unclear what happened. Johnson said they exchanged harsh words. Meeker says he was physical assaulted. Meeker then, literally, called in the cavalry. And when the cavalry unit entered the land promised to the Utes, again, a violation of their rights under treaty, the Utes defended themselves and their territory. Many on both sides died. During the fighting a group of Utes came to the agency where Meeker and his family were, several miles from the battle, and killed the men and abducted the women and children, who were released after several weeks.

This event, known as "The Meeker Massacre" led to the Utes being expelled from Colorado. Even though a peace commission found that the Utes were not at fault for the battle, they were removed from Colorado, forced onto the Uintah Reservation in Utah, northeast of Salt Lake City. The site of the White River Agency is now a town called Meeker.

And why do I tell this hard story today? In part because tomorrow is Columbus Day, which many are now calling Indigenous People's Day. Whatever we call it, it is a day to grapple with the complicated and confusing history of our hemisphere, the pain and loss, triumph and tragedy.

I don't tell this story so we can look back at history in judgement of others' missteps – and pat ourselves on the back for not perpetuating injustice in that particular way. Of the two options under discussion, assimilation and annihilation, the more compassionate path was chosen. There was a failure of imagination, a failure of empathy that led to such limited options. There was a commitment to white cultural supremacy and manifest destiny that clouded everyone's vision, that made an entire country unable to consider anything beyond annihilation and assimilation. I know, 150 years from now, people will look at the history of our time and clearly see the limits of our vision, our failures of imagination and empathy – and we probably can't begin to imagine what those will be, as we are so deeply attached to our own assumptions, our own limited visions.

I tell this story because it is a Unitarian story, but it is also a story of everywhere. The choir sang beautiful words of friendship written by Thomas Jefferson to the Potowatomi people and other tribes. About 15 years after that letter full of lofty words about brotherhood, the land we are on right now was ceded to the US Government by the Potowatomi people in a treaty in 1821. They received land west of the Mississippi River in return. They were allowed to remain here until 1840, when they were removed. Tribal families assembled on the land that is now the Amtrak station downtown for the forced march west, leaving the land they had known for generations.<sup>3</sup> There are stories like this about nearly every square inch of our country. It is important that we know these stories.

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<sup>3</sup> Peppel, Fred. 'Kalamazoo's First Residents Our Native Americans.' *Kalamazoo Public Library*. Retrieved from <http://www.kpl.gov/local-history/general/native-americans.aspx>

Knowing is an important beginning. It is not enough. We are called to work toward reconciliation and seek forgiveness. In 2009, the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly was held in Salt Lake City, Utah, on land that was once Ute land. At that gathering of thousands of Unitarian Universalists, Rev. William Sinkford, the president of our association then, apologized for our historic action. He said: 'And so, to the Ute People, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations offers our heartfelt apology. We participated, however ineptly, in a process, that stole your land and forced a foreign way of life on you... we ask your forgiveness and we promise to stand with you as you chart your way forward.'<sup>4</sup> As he said this, Sinkford reminded those gathered that the work of reconciliation is not a one-step process. It is not a task that gets crossed off a to do list. It is something that we do over and over and over again. We are perpetually seeking reconciliation. We are perpetually helping one another set down our burdens.

At that gathering where Sinkford apologized, Forest Cuch responded. Cuch is the Executive Director of the Utah Bureau of Indian Affairs and a member of the Ute Tribe. Speaking for himself alone, he accepted the apology. He then said he attended one of the schools founded by one of the Unitarian ministers sent to the Utes – after that minister was kidnapped by a group of Mormons, which is a whole other story. He was grateful to that institution. And he reminded those gathered that the tribes in his area and everywhere "are still suffering from intergenerational trauma... forgiveness is not going to solve that."<sup>5</sup>

Just as it's hard to know where to begin a story, it's hard to know where to end it. There is no easy ending today. The stories are hard and complicated. What is our complicity, what is our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists now that we know how our forbearers acted in the name of the faith we share? I don't know the answer to that, but I know that we need to wrestle with this – and not just this. What is our complicity, what is our responsibility as people who live on the land the Potowatomi were removed from? What is our complicity and what is our responsibility, as people who live on a continent that Native people were largely removed from? Tribal land is about 3% of the land in the United States.<sup>6</sup> If we call tomorrow Indigenous People's Day, how does that symbolic gestures call us into greater action and awareness?

I'm not sure. But I have invited you all into this story and this complexity because we aren't going to find our way to reconciliation alone. We are not going to find our way to reconciliation if we don't know these stories. We cannot grapple with histories and the questions they ask of us alone. The only way out is through. The only way through is together. We, in so many ways, are the beneficiaries of systems of oppression. We need to know what is happening and what has happened. Only then can we begin the work of envisioning something else. Only then can we expand our empathy and imagination to hold a new vision – the vision of a beloved community, a nobler world, the vision of a world of greater understanding, a world where all our hearts are bound together, a world of love, and a world of justice.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Transition to Opening Worship and Worship Service.' *Unitarian Universalist Association*. Retrieved from [http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/gapc/090624\\_opening\\_worship.pdf](http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/gapc/090624_opening_worship.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 'Opening Worship, General Assembly 2009.' *Unitarian Universalist Association*. <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2009/ga2009/opening> (Quote is in video.)

<sup>6</sup> numbers to make this calculation come from: 'Frequently Asked Questions.' *Bureau of Indian Affairs*. <http://www.bia.gov/FAQs/> and 'Major Uses of Land in the United States, 2002.' *United States Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service*. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib-economic-information-bulletin/eib14.aspx>