

Building Right Relations With the Wabanaki People

January 31, 2016

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Service Committee

I believe in the power of love and compassion to heal and transform.

I believe in the power of love in a room full of strangers, with loved ones, kindred spirits, and yes, with enemies.

I believe in the power of love in the fearful and uncertain corners of my heart – where healing and transformation begin.

I just finished reading Daniel Quinn's 1995 book, *Ishmael*. I didn't read it when it was first published. I think the Universe was waiting for me to be ready. I carry it around with me – good company on this path with Wabanaki people - and with people like you, exactly like you.

The book invites us to learn about the cultural prison in which we live. *Ishmael* tells us that this prison is fueled by the industry of - consuming the world – thinking and acting as if the world belongs to us.

With each page I turned, I thought of the indigenous people of this land. And I thought of the colonizers – the colonizers from hundreds of years ago and those who live within my DNA.

I thought of my work with Maine-Wabanaki REACH. REACH provides healing and wellness work for Wabanaki people – in their communities, in Maine cities and towns, in prisons and jails.

REACH provides educational events and ongoing supports to non-Native people who desire to be allies. We support one another to show up and act – through legislation, attending rallies, writing letters to the editor or to policy makers, volunteering for and organizing events, and talking about this with the people in our lives.

We learn about how we have all been impacted by history – whether it was the events of 1492 or 2015.

We seek to decolonize – our thinking, our way of living, our structures and systems which imprison us and separate us. We take on the responsibility for our own learning - in order to break out of that prison, to dismantle this prison.

We seek to build a community that truly knows itself and recognizes that we belong to this world, that the world does not belong to us.

We seek to do this – not with guilt and shame, but with love and compassion.

Ishmael spoke words that echoed in me – he said, “People need more than to be scolded, more than to be made to feel stupid and guilty. They need more than a vision of doom. They need a vision of the world and of themselves that inspires them.”

I’ve been reading Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer for months – savoring the teachings in this book. The author, an Onandaga woman, learned about plants from her elders, from her study of botany and from plants themselves. Her writing is poetic, wise, and inspired - about living in balance with the planet – the other beings, air, water, plants and the earth which roots them.

Kimmerer offers lichens as models of harmony and symbiosis – she writes...

“These ancients carry teachings in the way that they live. They remind us of the enduring power that arises from mutualism, from the sharing of the gifts carried by each species. Balanced reciprocity has enabled them to flourish under the most stressful of conditions. Their success is not measured by consumption and growth, but by graceful longevity and simplicity, by persistence while the world changed around them.”

The Wabanaki people, like the lichen, lived and thrived in this land for thousands of years. Living with values of generosity and in a reciprocal relationship to this land.

Then we arrived.

And the world changed around them. It keeps changing. The people and the planet suffer for what we have done, what we continue to do.

As Braiding Sweetgrass advises us...

“For millennia, these lichens have held the responsibility of building up life and in an eyeblink of earth’s history we have set about undermining their work to usher in a time of great environmental stress, a barrenness of our own making. I suspect the lichens will endure. We could, too, if we listen to their teachings.”

What worked for living in balance with this world is still available to us today.

Maria Girouard is a Penobscot woman and a REACH colleague. She taught us about the Seven Fires Prophecies which describe seven ages through which native peoples would live. The seventh fire of these prophecies is a time when the world is be-fouled, when the rivers run bitter with disrespect, the fish become too poisoned to be fit to eat and the ocean turns black.

Maria suggests that we live in that time now.

She tells us that a period of great hope is prophesied next – the 8th fire, an eternal fire of peace. Some native ancestors call it the great healing – a road of spirituality rather than materialism.

“Many” Maria said “believe we are entering the time of the great healing now. But the great healing is not a spectator sport. It’s a critical call to action. All peoples, of all races and religions must come together and work for the good of all. And in order for any change or healing to take place the truth must be told, and received by compassionate ears.”

Maria continues: “The old traditions say that this new time, this move toward a more harmonious world will begin in the East and will sweep across the continent like the dawn of a new day. So, here we are, perfectly positioned in Wabanaki land where the light from a new day first touches Turtle Island.”

May we join together - to receive truth with compassionate ears and work for the

good of all.

Maria would say...

“Thank you for being here to participate in this time of hope. The ancestors have been expecting us.”

I say to you...

The day has come.

Ground of Humility

The path is old in the east
Dawn blesses us first each day
Shining the light of truth
Where soft footsteps once fell on fertile ground -
On this land I think I own

Elements of the air around me
Drift unchanged across time and space
From the last breath of the first people
Whose land and lives were claimed
By the ones who share my skin

The trees and stones bore witness to their suffering
And for generations they have stood
In solemn prayer
Generations of grief and hope
Rooted deeply
In this land that I think I own

There are voices which have been silenced
And they are dying to be heard
If I can only stop talking

Quiet my busy mind
And break open my heart
To all that I don't know –

There are worlds that exist without me
With ways of knowing and being
Strengths and hurts
Their language and traditions
Children and land were
Stolen not lost

The people are ready to teach
They're ready to be heard
If I can only stop talking
Settle my knowing mind
Sow seeds of curiosity in my heart
Resist my urge to retreat and
Open my whole being
To listen to the teachings

My expertise is not needed here
My expertise has never been needed
Only my love, my attention

I stand firmly on this ground of humility
Open these eyes through which I see the world
Through which I see myself
My inheritance, my privilege
I throw all I that know away
Save the knowledge of my own heart

The path is old in the east
You and I – we have found ourselves
And one another on this well worn trail
I bow to you and

Acknowledge all that you hold dear
We each lay down what we've been carrying
And sit in the early morning light
The trees and stones encircle us in prayer
The day has come