

When These Beams Were Saplings
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
October 11, 2009

Meditation

May we breathe into this moment...
Here, now, in this place... this moment...
Let our selves breathe into presence
 The presence of one another...
 The presence of the moment...
May we breathe into this moment...
 With appreciation...
 With gratitude...
 With love...
Love overflowing.
We are not alone.

Readings

from *The American Soul*, by Jacob Needleman:

The crimes of America are as much a part of its meaning as its ideals, and to embrace one without the other will lead us nowhere. We need a new and more precise understanding both of what is possible for us and of how we fail, a new understanding both of what we ourselves actually are and of how we actually can and must change.

Obviously, no search for the meaning of America can turn away from the fact that America was built on the destruction of its native peoples and on the institution of slavery. These two massive crimes stand before us like the angels of Eden with their flaming swords. No entry to a new understanding is possible without confronting them. To a great extent, the material success of America rests on these crimes and others like them.

The greatness of America as embodied in its Constitution and its legendary leaders stands in stark contradiction to these titanic immoralities. *But neither side of the contradiction eclipses the other.* ...America is both good and evil at the same time. ...We need to apprehend what is good in America, but without self-inflation; and what is evil in America, but without self-flagellation.

the words of Black Elk:

Hey! Lean to hear my feeble voice.
 At the center of the sacred hoop
 You have said that I should make the tree to bloom.
With tears running, O Great Spirit, my
Grandfather,
 With running eyes I must say
 The tree has never bloomed
Here I stand, and the tree is withered.
 Again, I recall the great vision you gave me.
It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives.
 Nourish it then
 That is may leaf
 And bloom
 And fill with singing birds!
Here me, that the people may once again
 Find the good road
 And the shielding tree.

Sermon

Not too long ago a few trees were felled in the Hingham Cemetery behind the Meeting House. I assume they were diseased or damaged and had to come down.

If you go back there you can count the rings on the stumps which remain. The trees were about 150 years old. Perhaps planted just after the Civil War – one imagines in the spirit of renewed hope in the future.

150 years. Well, if trees can see, these trees had seen a lot.

As I counted the rings I felt a surprising and poignant intimacy with what had been lost. Imagine the seasons those trees experienced – the storms, snow and ice, oppressive heat and bone-chilling cold. Imagine the events in human history during all those years. Picture the changes in the surrounding landscape through those years.

And then contemplate this, if you will: Many of the beams over our heads, along with the posts supporting those grand beams, were saplings almost nine hundred years ago. When *those* trees were felled, some of them were six hundred years old.

Imagine the rings of *those* stumps. Imagine – if we can, for likely we cannot quite – the landscape here on these hills when *those* trees were saplings.

Strain, too, for it is not easy to do, to imagine the human presence here when these beams were saplings.

Hingham has begun a year-long celebration of the 375th anniversary of its founding in 1635. The booklet outlining the celebration begins by noting that:

Bare Cove, as it was first called, was inhabited by a few families as early as 1633, but the earliest significant settlement took place in 1635 when Peter Hobart from Hingham, England, and his followers landed at the foot of what is now Ship Street 375 years ago.

Well.

Though it was called neither Bare Cove or Hingham, we know that others did live here before the English arrivals, and had lived, hunted, fished, farmed here for a long time, likely rested in the shade of the trees which became these beams.

In short, there is a deeper and longer history here. If the beams could speak, they could speak this history, could speak of those who lived here during the hundreds of years preceding contact between the cultures of the so-called Old and New Worlds, could speak of the tragic history since, the clash of cultures, what turned out to be the near impossibility of mutual understanding... and so the theft... so the destruction... so the genocide.

When these beams were saplings?

The continent was populated by tens of millions of human beings – North and South America together may have had a population of over 40 million – some say as many as 100 million at the time of contact in 1492. Then, by the time of English settlement here, disease which had come with the earlier explorers and settlers had already decimated the communities living here. Some Wompanoag villages were empty of people, fields left untended.

How different history here might have been had the indigenous peoples been resistant to the diseases brought by the Europeans, or had the Europeans somehow had a greater depth of understanding and generosity of heart. Perhaps a shared culture of cooperation and peace would have arisen and been sustained... and we'd be telling a very different story today.

Of course there were many Europeans with good and generous hearts, and with high and noble ideals. But even those could not well understand what they were encountering. Even those understandably, tragically, ended up largely trying to re-create a European landscape and way of life here - to be sure more democratic in the end (and in that influenced not only by their own Enlightenment thinkers, but likely also by tribes such as the Iroquois) but even so, in the process destroying for all intents and purposes what was already here – landscape and culture both.

Could the story have unfolded differently? We would like to think so. But... a triumphalist theology (a theology which taught that the sacred was apart from, not part of, nature... that paradise was in another world not this world) coupled with rapacious greed, superior material technology (not to mention germs against which the native peoples had little resistance) all conspired in the direction with which we are now all too familiar, the direction which has brought us to... the present moment.

This said... the guardedly good news of the present moment is that the story is not over. The human story, the story of life on this continent and on the planet continues to unfold. And as it continues to unfold, we just might do well to consider that we still have things to learn from the people who were here, on this land, this continent, first – many of whom are after all still here. Not that they were or are perfect, for they weren't, they're not. But they knew things about living on earth that the non-Indians among us have not well-remembered or perhaps never quite knew.

In this morning's first reading, Jacob Needleman offers from the perspective of an American of European origin the challenge we now face, over 500 years after Columbus – the challenge of somehow neither denying the evil (his word, and it is appropriate) woven into American history, nor forsaking the goodness and idealism in American history.

What *would* it mean, in the spirit of Needleman's analysis, now to embrace *both*, these centuries on as we face the huge challenges of war and peace, climate change, extinctions, poverty, inequality?

Perhaps Chief Luther Standing Bear of the Sioux gave us a hint when he said, in 1933:

The white man does not understand America. He is too far removed from its formative processes. The roots of the tree of his life have not yet grasped the rock and soil... The man from Europe is still a foreigner and an alien. And he still hates the man who questioned his oath across the continent.

But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong. Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers' bones.

Can we grow into a better way of living in time, grow into a deep enough relationship with the land, our lives grasping rock and soil? Contemporary Indian writer Vine Deloria is not sure: "There probably is not sufficient time," he wrote not too many years ago, "for the non-Indian population to understand the meaning of sacred lands and incorporate the idea into their lives and practices."

Yet if we do have time, if we can change as we need to change, Deloria suggests that addressing both our ecological and social challenges "depends in large measure on adopting the Indian style of life."

What could he mean by that?

Surely we cannot turn and live literally as the Wompanoag and Iroquois and Sioux and Ojibway lived when these beams were saplings or when Columbus landed in the West Indies or when Peter Hobart landed at Bare Cove. Too much time has passed, there are too many of us.

We cannot all live in the long house of the Iroquois or the teepees of the plains peoples. We cannot all survive on subsistence farming, hunting, gathering.

To adopt "the Indian style of life" must have another meaning.

What then?

Does the necessary work we have before us have to do with learning to couple our technology, which is prodigious and in so many ways quite wonderful, with values and integrity and with a profound appreciation for and love for the land and the water, for tree and bird and flower?

We don't need to forsake the "miracles" of science and technology – the knowledge we have gained of creation's secrets, the ways in which our lives have been made genuinely easier, all of it part of the adventure of the human spirit, and indeed most of it necessary to meet the challenges we face.

But our science and technology are not *enough* to see us through to a more sustainable way of life. To answer my own question of a moment ago, yes we *must* couple our scientific learning and our technology with values and integrity and with a profound appreciation for and love for the land and the water, for tree and bird and flower.

Here the traditions and other ways of knowing of the first peoples of this continent can help us. (Ways of knowing, not incidentally, that live at the margins and in the depths of the western traditions as well, and that need to come closer to front and center.)

And it all might be as simple to begin with as *practicing* a love for and appreciation of the particular parts of the natural world in which we live and move and have our being. *That tree*

outside our window. *That* goldenrod or aster that captures our attention this early fall as we leave the house or walk the sidewalk or woodland path. *That* sparrow or crow or oriole which calls us awake of a summer's morning.

I say *practice* a love and appreciation for all this and more, because we so often *don't* notice, *don't* appreciate, *don't* thank as we move all too quickly through the hours and lists of our days.

But it seems to me that living more sustainably, choosing at this crossroads of time what Black Elk called the "good road," must begin with *loving* the world in which we live, must begin with *appreciating* the life which sustains our life; and not just loving and appreciating, but *knowing and experiencing* that we are part of the world of nature, not separated from it, not in a battle against it.

All this would be to learn from the people who were here first. And would be to unlearn the theology which says that God is out there and that nature, far from sacred, is solely to be used and exploited.

In short, our challenges are at least as much spiritual as they are material. So our responses to these challenges must be both spiritual and material. For from a spiritual grounding in the here and now of land and water, of place, won't we more naturally be moved to apply our love and our passion as well as our knowledge and our technology in the direction of a better way of life, a more just and peaceful and sustainable way of life as *part of* nature, one inextricably interdependent whole?

For as Chief Seattle said many years ago and we must all increasingly take to heart – now: "This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth."

A recent study suggests that exposure to natural environments helps us not only to be more at peace and happier, but leads to more generous behavior, leads us to live from inner values of kindness and compassion rather than focused on outward goals as the world measures such things of fortune and success.

Remarkable!

There *is* much to be done: to make peace, to stop pumping carbon into the air, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.

My simple suggestion this morning then is that one place to begin is to learn at least this from those who lived here when these beams were saplings: We do belong to the earth, and not the other way around. And to learn this deep into our bones by practicing every day – noticing, appreciating, loving, thanking.

And then *turning*, not out of fear but out of love and gratitude, *turning* to the Great Work at hand, *turning* to Black Elk's good road, *turning* to nourish the roots of the tree of life.

Who knows what we might then together accomplish? Who knows what the trees outside our windows today might then see during the next 150 years, the next 600 years?

For the story is not over.

So may it be.