

COVENANT AND THE COURAGE TO LEARN January 8, 2012

“Hey Nan,” said the cutest boy in the fifth grade, “are you part Jap?” This in 1947, when I was 10 years old. “You must be, you sure look like it!” It was the first time I realized that I looked like I might be part Asian.

It was not just Phil who thought that. Depending on what was happening in the world, the question was asked in several different forms in the coming years. Was I part Korean? Chinese? Vietnamese? Nothing in my family history showed evidence of an Asian ancestor.

As a young adult I married an Army officer. We were expected to attend the parties at the Officer's Club, which often had foreign officers in attendance. I noted that the Asian officers, expected to participate in the dancing, surveyed the roomful of tall American women, and their eyes lit up when they spotted this short, vaguely Asian appearing woman.

It was not until much later that I learned the story that I think explains my round face, brown almond shaped eyes, and then dark brown hair. It stems from my father's side of the family, who all seemed to share the same sort of features. My great-grandfather of record was a farmer in Central Illinois, who was, so the story goes, a mean man. He often took the crops to town to sell and stayed several days, enjoying the companionship and products of the local tavern. And when he returned, he took his meanness, (and hang-over) out on his wife.

One time when he was in town on such an errand, a lone peddler came to the home, and stayed for a few days. About nine months later, my grandfather was born, who had the only brown eyes and brown hair in that blond, blue-eyed family. Lone peddlers of the late 1800's tended to be Jewish. Sephardic Jews, unlike the Ashkenazi, come from Southeastern Europe, an area in which the Mongols were present, and they often reflect an Asian heritage.

I think, having experienced a very mild form of racism, I was more sensitive to it than others of my age and class. I had an experience when I was a little older that heightened my awareness. My family lived in Southern Illinois, which still had segregated schools through Elementary and Junior High School. I asked my parents about this. They said, looking significantly at each other, that although the state constitution forbade segregated schools, they were still present in Southern Illinois. They were supposed to be *separate but equal*. And I knew from the way my mother said that phrase that there was something wrong. She did not approve.

My Junior High School (7th & 8th grades) was located just a block and half from the African American Junior High School. One day the principal asked me to carry a stack of books to that school. He was donating our used text books to the black children.

I did so, and as I walked up the very worn steps to the entrance, the phrase *separate but equal* echoed in my ears. The steps were grooved from the many feet over many years that used them. The floors were worn and creaked when I stepped on them. Everything I saw screamed *not equal, not equal*, including the used, worn, outdated books I handed to the receptionist, who thanked me warmly.

The experience awoke a sense of the injustice that prevailed in our relationship with the African Americans who lived in our small town. It never went away. It did not go away in the classist society that permeates the life of an Army Officer's wife. It did not go away during the busy years of rearing three children. And it was present front and center during the fourteen years I lived in Mississippi, from 1977 to 1991.

I knew what racism was, I abhorred it, I fought it at every opportunity. I tell you this story because I know that you all have variations of the same kind of story. You all have experiences of coming to awareness of the injustice present in the world.

And you have all, in different ways, tried to make a difference, tried to change the injustice, searched your hearts and declared, I am not prejudiced. I fight the good fight. I am not racist.

However, I learned that just because I understood, as far as a privileged white person can, a lot about the racist structure of society and the personal racism I had seen expressed toward people of color, I still had gaping holes in my knowledge of, and thus understanding of racism expressed in other ways, specifically against Native Americans.

I had some general knowledge, I had read a few books—*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, and Vine DeLoria's later work, *God Is Red*. I was familiar with George Takaki's history of multicultural America, *A Different Mirror*. I think I should have been more aware. The area of Southern Illinois in which I grew up is the Shawnee National Forest. Why did I not ask questions about the Shawnee? In Mississippi I met, through the Craftsman's Guild, some Native American women

who made beautiful intricately patterned baskets out of the bounty of pine needles present there. I think our conversation consisted of my admiring their work 2

vociferously, and wishing I could afford to purchase just one.

Thus, when the issue of racism against Native Americans surfaced here, I was not prepared. And I think that at 74 I should be prepared for almost anything. It was a great challenge to me, as it was to many of you. (I refer to this as *The Great Hoo-rah.*)

Now, the thing about a hoo-rah is that people don't stop to think about what they are saying. They don't take that deep breath, pause to make sure they understand the meaning of what they heard or read, and they do not assume good intentions. They hear or read, and they fire back an answer. And since many of us are quite literate and vocal, the answer may be hurtful. They forget that we actually have some guidelines to help us navigate stormy waters.

I'm going to tell you about one of my guidelines, and then one that we all share. My guideline comes from feminist theory, which says: if someone, especially someone who is of an oppressed class, tells you that they have been hurt, whether physically or emotionally, they are speaking the truth of their experience. If a woman tells you that she has been assaulted, you assume she speaks the truth, and you don't start asking questions about how low was her neckline or how short was her skirt. While it is possible she does not speak truth, you assume that she is until it is proven otherwise.

If an African American man says that he was turned down for a loan, while his colleague who earns the same income and has roughly the same expenses was accepted, and is convinced that it was due to racism—you assume he speaks the truth.

When a child tells you that good old Uncle Charley was hugging him or her too tight, you better check out good old Uncle Charley.

Assume the person with lesser power speaks the truth until you are shown convincingly otherwise. That's the first guideline.

I do not assume that all of you accept feminist theory. However, there is an even more inclusive, critical guideline. That is the covenant that the members of this congregation crafted and voted to adopt. It provides the guidelines for how we treat each other.

We spoke the words in unison earlier. Here they are again:

Granting each other freedom of mind and spirit, we commit to this community of mutual care. In that spirit of caring, we pledge to be mindful when speaking of and to one another. We will walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness that we and our children may always be fulfilled. So that the world may be fulfilled, we dedicate ourselves to the work of justice and peace, seeking always to soothe sorrow and to inspire joy.

These beautiful phrases, your beautiful phrases, are printed on the back of your order of service. They are present for a reason. They can help build good relationships among all of us—but only if you accept them in your heart. You voted for this covenant, and the covenant calls you to accountability.

The covenant calls us to *be mindful when speaking of and to one another*. It calls us to *walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness*. This means we need to take the time to breathe before we fire off a clever, or insulting, or argumentative e-mail or facebook entry, or in face to face conversation. It means we need to try to understand the other person. It means we need to assume good intentions. It may mean, and I do not say this lightly, we need to change, and that is difficult.

Living in community is not always easy, and yet social scientists tell us that we are not fully human unless we do so. We are social creatures, and we need other humans around us.

For too long we, and I speak specifically of Unitarian Universalists now, held up the ideal of radical individualism. We talked the language of rights with great skill, and forgot to include the language of responsibility.

The right to vote comes with the responsibility to know a great deal about the issue or person you are voting for. The right to consume alcohol is paired with the responsibility of not driving when drunk. The right to drive a car comes with the responsibility of obeying the traffic laws. And all of these responsibilities are required so that we do not harm one another.

Living in community requires laws—thou shalt not rob another person; thou shalt not assault, nor damage the property of another person. It requires customs, such as shaking hands when we meet someone, which developed from the necessity to assure another that we were not carrying a weapon.

And if one wants to experience deep relationship, it requires agreements on how we will treat each other—i.e. Covenants. We covenant together when we marry and we covenant together when we join others in a faith community. Indeed, it is the basis of our faith community.

We do not ask our members to agree to a common creedal statement. However, we do ask that they agree to *walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness*.

Therefore: We have to learn to breathe before we respond to a perceived insult or put-down. We have to learn that discussion is not battle—a zero-sum game. We have to learn the ways of love, we have to learn the assumption of good intentions when interacting with our covenanted companions.

Now, to return to the hoo-rah that hurt feelings and damaged relationships. I have to confess that I did not understand some of the things that were being named as racist. However, I drew on what I had learned from feminist theory—if someone says they are being hurt, they feel that, whether you intend that or not. I asked myself—what am I missing?

So, I asked for help from a trusted colleague who is Native American. He gave me a reading list. I brought the books along with me today. It was a lot of reading, and none of it was enjoyable. I wish I did not have to know what I learned.

From general knowledge I already knew that the natives of the Americas were victims of genocide from the day the esteemed Christopher Columbus set foot on Hispaniola. I had always heard or read that in terms of a gentle sigh of regret. That is, too bad the natives had no resistance to the diseases carried by Europeans. Smallpox killed a lot of Europeans, but over the years they had developed some resistance to the disease. Not true for the natives the Spaniards found in the Americas. It is estimated that the introduced diseases of Europeans killed 80% of the population of North and South America.

However, I learned that the loss of life—the total extermination of whole tribes of natives—was also carried out by vicious attacks on the people who survived the pox and other diseases. The Spanish had attack dogs, armored and trained to bite and tear. They dug pits and lined them with stakes, then threw women and children and men into them, piling the bodies one upon the other. We know the details of these atrocities because they wrote them down, and even drew pictures of them for the edification of the people back home.

The English came later and farther north. The details of their death-dealing are only a little less vicious. Lord Amherst sent smallpox infested blankets to a village, thus ensuring the eradication of the native population, which meant an expansion of the area open for Anglo settlement. We named a famous university after him.

The earliest attacks tended to be more vicious, and the later a little less so. However, the end result was that whole nations of people were killed, and the 5

remaining few driven from their lands.

I have spent several months reading this history, its causes and effects. Our great American experiment in democracy is based on the genocidal acts of our ancestors. I would rather not have had to learn this.

It took courage, inner courage to read, absorb, and think about our history. There were illustrations I could only look at for a few short seconds at a time. And yet I knew I must do so. If we are to live up to our values, we must know our history. If we are to build a society that is truly free and open to all, we must do it with eyes wide open.

I have a challenge for you. I brought with me the collection of books I read. I am going to leave it here, with a sign out sheet. I challenge you to each read at least one of these books. They will be available, and you can take turns. I do not expect you to enjoy the process. Do you have the inner courage to do so?

The board has agreed that next November, during Native American month we will develop a program,

perhaps in conjunction with the university to help us further grow and learn. Perhaps by this time next year, all of us will be truly educated about our difficult history. Perhaps we will know enough and care enough to speak and act in an anti-racist manner in a Native American context as well as an African American context.

Let us pray for the courage to grow.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.

Recommended Reading:

American Holocaust, by David Stannard.

Complete history of the post-Columbian treatment of Native Americans. Difficult reading, very instructive

Pagans in the Promised Land by Steven Newcomb.

Good history, contains an analysis of the effect of Christian doctrine on the policies of the Europeans.

Racism in Indian Country by Dean Chavers. *Series of essays on the current picture*

oNative American/Euro-American relations, particularly in the west. Not as well-written as the others IMHO.

1493:Uncovering the New World Columbus Created.

A broader view of the effect of the Columbian exchange on the economics and history of the world.