

## Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

Rev. Andrew Frantz

Sunday, October 11, 2020

### Indigenous Rights: the Story of Thomas King and Edward Curtis

*This sermon is the second of three parts of the morning message delivered this Sunday. Candi Tomlinson's message about indigenous rights came just before this sermon, and Carol Rard's message about indigenous rights followed this one.*

Let me tell you a story.

This is about two men who set out to photograph Native Americans. One is Edward Curtis, who did so around the turn of the century – 1900, that is. The other one is Thomas King, who had the idea to photograph Native American artists as a chronicle for the year 2000.

Thomas King, the second photographer, is the writer who told this story. He wrote a book called “The Truth About Stories.” He says,

*The truth about stories is that that's all we are. “You can't understand the world without telling a story,” Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. “There isn't any center to the world but a story.”<sup>1</sup>*

So this is the story about the two photographers, Edward Curtis and Thomas King, as told by Thomas King.

Edward Curtis's photographs set out to construct and to capture an idea that was already fixed in the American imagination—the idea of the noble savage. The popular idea in America—those days and even now—is that the “Indian” was dying off and disappearing. Edward Curtis was supposedly photographing the Indian before he died off completely.

The trouble with this narrative is that Indians weren't disappearing. In spite of the attempted genocide, the cultural genocide that Candi was talking about a moment ago, Indigenous people weren't disappearing around 1900. They were changing. But popular culture didn't want to see the reality of indigenous people

I am using the term “indigenous people,” but when I am quoting from the book, Thomas King uses the term “Indian.” He says,

*[Edward] Curtis was looking for the literary Indian, the dying Indian, the imaginative construct. And to make sure that he would find what he wanted to find, he took along boxes of “Indian” paraphernalia – wigs, blankets, painted backdrops, clothing—in case he ran into Indians who did not look as the Indian was supposed to look.<sup>2</sup>*

*Native culture, as with any culture, is a vibrant, changing thing, and when [Edward] Curtis happened upon it, it was changing from what it had been to what it would become next. But the idea of the “Indian” was already fixed in time and space. Even before [Edward] Curtis built his first camera, that image had been set. His task as he visited tribe after tribe was to sort through what he saw in order to find what he needed.<sup>3</sup>*

Thomas King, remember, is the one who is telling this story. And Thomas King admits that as a young man he himself was caught up in trying to find his own identity as an indigenous person and falling into the stereotypes that we find in the photographs of Edward Curtis. Thomas King was a Native American born in California in the 1940's. He grew up in a neighborhood with a lot of Mexicans, and tells a funny story about trying to date a white girl in high school. He gets up his courage to ask her to the dance and at first she says yes. The girl's name is Karen.

*Then about a week before the big evening, Karen called me to say that she couldn't go to the dance after all. I'm sorry, she told me. It's my father. He doesn't want me dating Mexicans.<sup>4</sup>*

Race is complicated in America. Race is a construct. Race is about perception as much as it is about identity. Who do you see me as? Who do I see myself as? For Thomas King, he went through a phase of wanting to look more Indian.

*In the 1970's, being recognized as an Indian was critical. ... Not wanting to be mistaken for a Mexican or a White, I grew my hair long, bought a fringed leather pouch to hang off my belt, threw a four-strand bone choker around my neck, made a headband out of an old neckerchief, and strapped on a beaded belt buckle that I had bought at a trading post on a reservation in Wyoming. Trinkets of the trade. I did resist feathers but that was my only concession to cultural sanity.<sup>5</sup>*

Thomas King sets out to photograph Native American artists in 1994, deliberately as a response to the work of Edward Curtis in 1900. But he realizes the challenge, that he is still caught up in the trap of what Indians are supposed to look like. And the moment he realizes this is when he and his brother are looking at a statue of Will Rogers.

Do you know who Will Rogers is? I didn't really know much about him, of course he is way before my time, but I guess I think of him as a famous cowboy—which he was. He was also the leading film star of his day, and was a public speaker and many other things. And he was an indigenous person. A Cherokee Indian.

Thomas King is driving out west to photograph native American artists, he and his brother stop at this statue of Will Rogers, and his brother says to him,

*The Indians we're going to photograph,... What if they all look like Will Rogers? I know he's Indian, said my brother, and you know he's Indian, but how is anyone else going to be able to tell?<sup>6</sup>*

So my story about Edward Curtis and Thomas King is really about racial identity in America and about the invisibility of the native American, the way that white America has constructed an imaginary version of indigenous people, maintained the myth that they all disappeared in the past, and ignores the reality of real-life, present-day indigenous people.

I'll end my story the way that Thomas King ends every chapter of his book, "The Truth About Stories."

*Take the story of Thomas King and Edward Curtis. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Talk about it at coffee hour. Tell it to your family at Thanksgiving. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas King, "The Truth About Stories, a native narrative." Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. p. 32

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 37

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.40

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, pp. 45-46

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 42

<sup>7</sup> Adapted from Thomas King, p. 60