

What Can We Say About Columbus Day?

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What can we Unitarian Universalist say about Columbus Day? Well let me begin with a confession. I find it so hard to talk about Columbus that I usually take what is called the Columbus Day weekend as one of my Sunday's away.

For those new to the church, let me explain a Sunday off for the minister. My agreement with you, and this is typical of all UU ministers, provides me with ten Sundays out of the pulpit per church season. When I am off the Lay Worship Committee, as they did last week, or working with our ministerial intern, lead the worship services. I appreciate this and I also know that the Lay Worship Committee conducts thoughtful and meaningful services. This is one of the hallmarks of our Unitarian Universalist religion- to recognize that the members of the congregation have as much right to the pulpit, have as much to offer as the minister does. But before I digress too much more, perhaps to avoid sharing my confession, let me come back to what can we say about Columbus Day.

While I was at Andover Newton Theological School, I like all our other students, Glenn, Marguerite, Matt and Edmund, had to do an internship. I was very fortunate to be able to do mine in Winchendon, where I was living. I had an off site supervisor, who I received supervision from weekly, but I was the minister for Winchendon with all the duties and responsibilities and excitements and pleasures of being the minister- "the ministerial intern." Part of the newness and excitement was being able to preach the truth as I saw it, to speak from the pulpit about the hard things, to address issues facing society and the interface between society, culture and personal stuff. This still remains my focus and hopefully serves our needs as spiritual/religious people.

Columbus Day was coming up it was the 5th or 6th ever sermon that I was going to be preparing for Winchendon and - I am getting to my confession, really, I am. And I prepared a scathing sermon about Christopher Columbus and all the negative things I knew about him. It bombed big time. As I was preaching, I think you know this too, preaching is not just me up here and you down there but it is a reciprocal exchange. We interact during preaching. Most times of course I just have to say what I think and believe, what I have researched and prepared for, or I would lack an integrity that you deserve, that I deserve. But sometimes I have seen disbelief, disapproval, disagreement or other looks on the faces of those in the pews. One of you wisely gave me a framed poster it says, "A nodding congregation does not necessarily mean agreement with the minister." Preaching is a reciprocal relationship. But on that day in October of 1989, I missed the mark. There was a lot of criticism of my sermon and upset that I challenged most of the myths surrounding Columbus and upset that I named him as a racist, money hungry venture capitalist, environmental rapist, and murderer of men, women and children. Ever since then I have been afraid to preach on Columbus Day weekend. In fact, that was such distressing events that I must have thrown out that sermon for I can not find it on any of my old computer discs or in hard copy among the many hundreds of old papers I have. There you have it: my confession.

Now what can I do? It is the day called Columbus Day and I am standing here. All I can do is tell you what I think I can do about Columbus and what Unitarian Universalist can do about Columbus. I still have not changed my mind on Christopher Columbus though one of the advantages of being a UU is that we can change our minds because we are usually in a constant learning mode. So this is what UUs can say and learn.

I/ we can learn from the death and destruction and devastation that he caused to speak out if we see it emerging again and continue to examine

the myths that too often get attached to some people without our critical analysis. The myths surrounding Christopher Columbus are enormous and with just a little critical research and sometimes common sense, on our parts, they can easily be debunked. For example: he was not the first to believe if you sailed west you would reach the East- many before him said the same. For example: he was not the first to believe that the world was round- sailors knew this as fact just from observation of sailing vessels. For example: he was far from the first to reach the new continent, research indicates that from about 6,000 BCE not just the Vikings, but the Irish, those from China, Japan, and the Afro-Phoenicians, P. 38 who were blacks from Africa, all had made it to parts of North America, plus his own journal entry's make reference to the maps of these earlier sailors. ¹

Columbus is also responsible for mass destruction of the peoples of and the environment and culture of Haiti, the Canary Islands and other first peoples who lived on the continent. He sent hundreds/thousands of those inhabitants as slaves to Spain and, Europe, those who remained on the islands and the lands that he entered were forced to leave aside their agriculture, their trades, their families to bring massive amounts of gold to Columbus and the governors he left behind to rule the land. Those who brought their yearly quota of gold were given a metal tag to wear around their neck. If a native who was not wearing this tag was seen it was assumed they had not provided the yearly quota of gold, and they were punished by having their hands cut off. The brutality of Columbus' first, second and subsequent visits is often passed over lightly but Bartolome de las Casas, an adventurer, plantation owner, who became a priest who was part of these early expeditions, recorded pages about the brutality enacted and his futile attempts to stop it. At one point, the conditions were so harsh that many

¹ Pgs. – 65 James Loewen. Lies my Teacher Told Me: the New Press, New York. 1995

women could not bear children, and those that did killed their children upon birth rather than subjecting them to slavery as practiced by the Spaniards, also the need to meet the gold quota took the people away from agriculture and care for the property to such a degree that famine and starvation occurred. The environmental destruction of the land to find gold permanently disfigured the islands and lands. And all the while Columbus was amassing incredible fortunes for himself, his family and the monarchy. It remains difficult to find anything kindly to say about Columbus beyond the fact that what he was doing was no different than anyone else at his time would have been.

Why then is he remembered? The frank answer is that he represents the ability of white man to triumph and the assumption that progress is the natural evolution from primitive to highly developed civilization. Why did he succeed? 1. Because of military might- they had guns the natives had bows and arrows. 2. Because of the beginning of venture capital and investments in other places. Columbus sent back two or more of the commodities needed to be successful- humans, albeit as slaves, money in the form of gold, and other resources from the new lands. 3. The rise of European power, resourcefulness and control began with the voyages of Columbus.

I am sorry but no matter how I look at it is not a pretty picture. What I can learn though is that human's inhumanity is not new, that without critically examining the social cultural structure that I am living in we are at risk of repeating similar abuses. As Unitarian Universalist we can learn that the issues of race, class, colonialism and oppression are as much a part of us as are the calls to justice, equality and compassion. Unitarian Universalist can learn that without careful analysis of those we might label Heroes myths about them become facts, that obscure the harder truths, and that speaking the truth to power still remains one of the challenges of being a Unitarian Universalist. What I can learn is that 16 years later I have even less

tolerance for Columbus and Columbus Day than I did back then and that I will only speak about him if I can be direct about this distaste, even if I were to get criticism.

So enjoy a nice long weekend and be kind to others because somewhere and somehow each one of us has been oppressed and hurt by ones more powerful than we are. Blessed be and pray that we become part of the solution and healing solace that our world needs. Amen