

Potential UU Initiatives for Action about American Indians (at the Congregational Level)

The European explorers and settlers who founded what became the United States hardly encountered virgin wilderness, although that narrative was common among U.S. history textbooks until about 1975. Nor did they buy it from its original owners, Native Americans.¹ By and large, they took it or "bought" it from owners who were coerced to "sell" it. Partly to rationalize this immoral taking, non-Natives have since covered over the true story and in various ways continue to put down the people whom we (largely) supplanted.

History is not a movie that can be unreeled backward. However, some anti-Native acts continue to cause harm in the present. With committed action, they can be reversed; Unitarian-Universalists can play a pivotal role. UU congregations can take any of the following steps to help undo the harm that they and the rest of U.S. society have caused and are still causing American Indians:

- (1) Eradicate names in our atlas that disrespect Native peoples;
- (2) Give up American Indian names and mascots;
- (3) Rename Columbus Day;
- (4) Evaluate how American Indian history is taught in nearby school districts and, when needed, critique and improve the treatment.

Each of these tasks is well-suited to strengths that many Unitarian-Universalists display.

Place names

Many racist terms remain on the American landscape. Native Americans are upset by names like "Devils Lake," "Heathen Meadow," "Devils Tower," and the like. They realize that European Americans — often Protestant ministers, including Unitarians — gave such names to their sacred sites precisely upon learning that these places carried religious meaning. American Indians near Devils Tower, Wyoming, consider the name blasphemous. To them, it is a holy site, "The Bear's Lair." "It's like calling the Vatican the 'house of the Devil,'" said one Native American.² Natives are right: in many cases, these names were deliberate attempts to stigmatize the religions of Native Americans as pagan. They made it easier for non-Indians to look down on Native Americans as primitive and savage.

In a nation that prides itself on freedom of religion, Native American religions have not usually been included and are still subject to various interferences. And why not, if they are truly, as the landscape implies, the work of the devil. If non-Native Americans no longer believe that Native religions are the devil's work, it is time to remove that implication from the names all across America.

"Squaw" is a plainly derogatory term. Whether it derives from a French corruption of an Iroquois epithet for vagina, similar to "cunt" in English, or is merely an Algonquian prefix meaning "female," it has taken on contemptuous overtones over the centuries. Hence many Native Americans are unhappy with place names and political jurisdictions incorporating "squaw." It is hard for non-Indians to claim that places like "Squaw Valley" or "Big Squaw Tit" mountain show respect for Native American

¹Because Native Americans often call themselves American Indians, I shall use both terms interchangeably.

²Quoted by James Brooke, "Spirit Lake Tribal Members had a Devil of a Time Redeeming Their Good Name," St. Paul Pioneer Press, 11/20/96.

women, especially when Native American women do not concur.

In 1990, 700 places or geographic entities had "squaw" in them. In 1995, two students at Cass Lake-Bena High School in northern Minnesota began a movement that eventually convinced the Minnesota Legislature to eliminate the word from geographic and place names in the state. Localities scrambled to rename themselves or the creek, bay, or other geographic feature tagged with the offending name.³ Since then, Maine, Montana, Oklahoma, and South Dakota have followed suit and done away with "squaw" on their landscapes. Just one UU congregation might effect a similar change in its state, especially as it picked up allies.

Resources:

The search engine of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names is geonames.usgs.gov/pls/gnispublic/f?p=115:1:9177294458429003165::NO:::. Enter "squaw," "devil," "heathen," or other terms of interest, select a state, and it lists all places in that state with that name. "Squaw" comes up twice in Florida, fifteen times in Alaska, and hundreds of times in between.⁴ "Devil" (and "Devils," "Devil's," etc.) appears more than 1,500 times.

Native Net, nativenet.uthscsa.edu/archive/nl/9610/0029.html, offers "Background Info on Minnesota law banning the 's' word." Students at Cass Lake-Bena High School can supply additional information.

Rep. Donna Loring, non-voting tribal member representing the Penobscot Nation in the Maine legislature, can be reached at 117 Ten Road, Bradley, ME, 04411, 207.827.0525(H) or 207.827.0525(W).

Mascots

According to an article in Chronicle of Higher Education, most Indian mascots "were invented in the first three decades of the 20th century."⁵ This was during the "Nadir of Race Relations" (1890-1940), when most sundown towns formed and racism as an ideology rose to its highest point in U.S. history. While it is glib to say that mascots represent disrespect, their origin in this era suggests they are problematic. As an organization, Unitarian Universalists have endorsed retiring Indian mascots.

Even when a high school, college, or community respect their own "Braves" or "Indians" sports teams, opponents operate under no rules of civility. They may chant "Scalp the Braves" or brandish a cartoon of an opposing football player with his head in a noose captioned "Hang the Indians." Yet

³One tiny town, Squaw Lake, ironically located on an Indian reservation but with a white mayor and largely white council, still refuses.

⁴There is some duplication; the website lists a creek more than once, for example, as it flows through different counties and states.

⁵Charles F. Springwood and C. Richard King, "'Playing Indian': Why Native American Mascots Must End," Chronicle of Higher Education, 11/9/01, B13.

American Indians are still among us. It's not really like "Kill the Vikings," it's like "Kill the Caucasians." Nor is Notre Dame's "Fighting Irish" a suitable analogy, because although opponents may yell "Kill the Irish," Irish Americans played a key role in naming Notre Dame's teams. The moment Irish Americans at Notre Dame no longer desired the name, it would change. In this sense, "Fighting Irish" honors Irish Americans. Very few teams named for American Indians were named by American Indians. Retaining such names, instead of honoring American Indians, tells them that they are both powerless and disrespected in their homeland.

Target the more offensive names first. Of these, "Redskins" and "Savages" stand out. High schools in many states still call their athletic teams "Redskins," as does the NFL team in our nation's capital. Unlike the Atlanta Braves, which set up a commercial relationship with the Eastern Cherokees, or Florida State University, which made an agreement with the Seminole Tribe of Florida, no school or team has contacted any Indian tribe to get their blessing for "redskins." Like "savages," it's a term of contempt in old Hollywood westerns, as indeed it was in our American past. From the Chronicle article, here is a useful quotation:

The omnipresence of American Indian mascots serves only to advance the inability to accept American Indians as indeed contingent, complicated, diverse, and genuine Americans. Ultimately, American Indian mascots cannot be separated from their origins in colonial conditions of exploitation. Because the problem with such mascots is one of context, they can never be anything more than a white man's Indian.⁶

Every year, Native American newspapers run a centerfold consisting of four sports team pennants: the Atlanta Niggers, the New York Kikes, the Chicago Polacks, and the Washington Redskins. Their point: no multicultural democracy would ever inflict terms like these on the public and on its minorities. And of course, we don't ... except "Redskins." High school teams in Goshen, Indiana; Morris, Illinois; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and various other cities also use "Redskins." UUs need to start a dialogue in every community still burdened by this name.

Almost as bad is the bucktoothed symbol of the Cleveland Indians. Some high schools have similarly caricatured logos for their "Indians," "Braves," or "Warriors." These too must go. With allies, UUs may kick up enough of a fuss that never again can such symbols unify a campus. Once that is clear, the name or mascot must change, because otherwise it will cause endless division.

If congregation members cannot persuade a high school or college (or the Washington Redskins) to change their name, they can get their local newspaper to pledge not to use it any more. Several major papers refuse to print "redskins," including the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Seattle Times, and Portland Oregonian. They write "Cowboys Defeat Washington," finding it perfectly possible to get the news of the game out without using a racial slur.

Resources:

Lawrence Baca, "Native Images in Schools and the Racially Hostile Environment," Journal of

⁶Ibid.

Sport & Social Issues 28 #1 (2004), 71-78.

Monroe Gilmour, in North Carolina, is a leader in this movement; contact him at mgilmour@buncombe.main.nc.us; NC Mascot Education & Action Group, main.nc.us/wncceib/NCMEAGindex.htm. He has helped persuade 29 North Carolina public schools to drop Indian mascots and team names.

Barbara Munson, "Not for Sport," Teaching Tolerance Spring/1999, 41-43.

Cornel Pewewardy, "The Deculturalization of Indigenous Mascots in U.S. Sports Culture," Educational Forum 63 (Summer 1999), 342-47.

Jay Rosenstein, In Whose Honor, video, c. 60 min., focuses on Chief Illiniwek (U. of Illinois) but treats the general issue; inwhosehonor.com/.

Ellen Staurowsky, "Making Sense of the American Indian Mascot Issue," in Learning Culture Through Sports (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

Columbus Day

South Dakota, Alabama, and Hawaii have renamed Columbus Day. Other states (New Mexico, for one) have come close. Until your state does, Christopher Columbus is one of just two people whom we celebrate with named holidays. He started the Atlantic slave trade (from west to east, of enslaved Native Americans), and his son started it from east to west (enslaved Africans). The other named holiday celebrates a man — Martin Luther King Jr. — who tried to help our nation get over the vestiges of that slave trade that still haunt our society. Do we really need to continue to celebrate Columbus? Can't we see him for what he was, a complex person not suitable for emulation, but surely worthy of study?

A Unitarian congregation might begin this project by researching Columbus and developing a well-reasoned non-polemic portrait of him that explains why he should not receive a named holiday. This portrait should also include coverage of the "Columbian Exchange," which Columbus started, partly unknowingly. It should also include an account of how the U.S. and your state came to adopt Columbus Day as holiday in the first place.

Congregational task forces can then be creative. Several years ago, for example, a middle school student in Connecticut read the chapter on Columbus in Lies My Teacher Told Me. Growing thoughtful about Columbus Day, he organized a middle school protest: he and his friends showed up for school on Columbus Day and tried to break in and hold class! It's a simple matter to use the web to discover if anyone has tried to change Columbus Day in your state. UUs can then join groups already protesting Columbus Day from Idaho to Maine, often providing essential non-Indian allies.

Resources:

Bill Bigelow, ed., Rethinking Columbus (Milwaukee: Rethinking Schools, 1998).

Alfred W. Crosby, The Columbian Voyages, the Columbian Exchange, and Their Historians (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1987). This booklet tells how the world changed as a result of Columbus's first two voyages.

Loewen, The Truth About Columbus (New York: The New Press, 1992), reprinted in 2006 as Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus: What Your History Books Got Wrong.

William McNeill, The Age of Gunpowder Empires, 1450-1800 (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1989). This booklet tells how and why Europe was able to subdue the Americas

and the rest of the world. The usual Columbus legend makes it easy for non-Indians to infer that Europeans are just "naturally" superior.

Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), chapter one.

American Indian history

A UU task force, hopefully including parents, can check what their middle school and high school children learn about Columbus in school. Using *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (below), they can evaluate the textbook. To their child's teachers they can donate Bigelow, *Rethinking Columbus* (above), which has lots of ideas about how to use Columbus Day to raise important issues. If the teacher has not put the poster contained inside Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me About Christopher Columbus*, on a classroom wall by October 1, parents can donate it and ask to put it up. Then they can share the book that it came from, which invites teachers and students to think about their American history textbooks by comparing textbook treatments of Christopher Columbus with primary source material. Both Bigelow and Loewen raise issues of historiography and multiculturalism, intending that learning history never again be a rote process.

This task force can go on to see how American Indian history is taught in nearby school districts and, when needed, critique and improve the treatment. Some high school students know the mythic (well, bogus!) story about how the Dutch bought Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads. Some do not. If students in your district know this story, invite the school system to teach against that myth directly, for it constitutes ongoing slander against Native people.⁷ At the modern end of our chronology, many treatments of American history leave out Native peoples after the Plains Wars of the nineteenth century. UU groups can help arrange for Native speakers in area schools. They can also make sure that teachers know the concept "syncretism." That word explains why Western Europe came to dominate the world. It is also key to understanding how all cultures develop. And it is a gift to Native children, who otherwise can mistakenly believe they must choose to abandon their Native culture as they prepare for roles in contemporary American society.

Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale have put together a checklist for evaluating books for their treatment of Indian issues in *Through Indian Eyes* 2006. A Unitarian task force can use it to critique the books for young people in a community or school library. If Slapin and Seale make a telling critique of a book in the collection, photocopy the write-up and paste it into the book, perhaps on the inside front cover. The book is not thereby defaced but increases in value, because readers now see a critique of it as well as its text. UUs can also ask librarians to order some of the books Slapin and Seale and other informed sources recommend.

A local UU task force might also choose to investigate how their own land and the rest of their community was wrested from American Indians. Competent secondary works of history exist in most states, treating these matters. Local reference librarians, the staff at the state historical society, and professors of state history at local institutions of higher learning can quickly point to the best sources in

⁷Loewen's *Lies Across America* contains an essay showing this problem.

your state or area. Treaties should rarely be taken at face value, for three reasons. First, Native Americans usually signed under conditions of coercion rather than free choice. Second, the signers often represented a rump portion of the tribe or nation rather than the majority. Third, the United States often did not live up to its end of the agreement, especially to its responsibility to keep its own citizens from intruding within areas reserved to Natives. When Natives attacked the intruders, state or U.S. forces then retaliated, sometimes leading to another treaty taking additional land.

Resources:

Loewen, Lies My Teacher Told Me (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), chapters 2-4, and the many books cited therein.

Loewen, Lies Across America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), essay titled "New York; Manhattan: Making Native Americans Look Stupid," and others.

Beverly Slapin and Doris Seale, Through Indian Eyes (Berkeley: Oyate, 2006, www.oyate.org). Reviews children's books, finds many inhumane and incorrect portraits of American Indians.

Justice for the First Peoples

The above ideas have the advantage of being specific and do-able. However, they hardly exhaust the range of actions that UU groups might take. Any UU group that takes one of these actions or acts in some other way on behalf of justice for the first peoples of this land should share results of its work with Congregational Services of the UUA. Email congservices@uua.org or call Congregational Services at 617-948-6461. Don't forget to look online at the UUA's ARAOMC resources at <http://www.uua.org/leaders/leaderslibrary/araomc/index.shtml>. You may find additional support and resources at UU Allies for Racial Equity at <http://www.uuallies.org/>. They may inspire imitators or help others avoid pitfalls.