

## Indigenous Americans: We Are Still Here

by Rev. Danielle Di Bona



### A Time to Reclaim

When I was young, maybe your age, I learned a family secret. I learned that I was one-half Indian....Wampanoag Indian. Wow! What a surprise. I had thought I was Italian. My father had been born in Italy and we didn't live on a reservation! But on that day I learned that I was bi-racial.

I wonder if you know what "Wampanoag" means. We are the people of the sun, or the people of the east. In these tribal names we become grounded to our place, and that is very important to native people.

Would you like to know how to pronounce Wampanoag?

The first syllable is "Wamp." The second is "ah" and the next is "no." The last one is the hardest. It is "ohg."

As I got older I learned a lot about my

mother's people, their history as well as their culture today. For example, I learned that the Wampanoag had greeted the Pilgrims and taught them how to fish and to plant corn.

As an adult I became more active in Indigenous life, participating in pow-wows and learning how to cook native food.

Many people think that all the Indigenous people are no longer on the land. Many people think that we lived in the past. But...here we are.

As you can see by the picture, we are just regular people doing regular things in regular clothing. We only wear our regalia for pow wow and other important events.

A long time ago many indigenous people were forced off their land. Many of my people died from war and disease.

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But we are a vital people now, and one thing that we want you to know is about Thanksgiving. Yes, there was a great feast, but it wasn't called Thanksgiving. The first real Thanksgiving was called for by the colonial governor of the settlement after the Indigenous people were no longer on the land. It was a time to thank God that there were no more Wampanoags around.

Columbus Day is another holiday that feels strange to Indigenous people. Many native people are urging their state governments to change the name to Indigenous Peoples Day, to honor the people who were lost so many years ago and to celebrate our strength. What do you think of that?



The Reverend Danielle Di Bona, although officially retired, serves as a chaplain for palliative care patients at the South Shore Hospital in Weymouth, Massachusetts and for UU organizations including Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUM), the UUA Board of Trustees, and the Finding Our Way Home retreat for UU religious professionals of color.

## EXPLORING TOGETHER

**F**ive hundred years ago, the vast continents of the Americas were home to vibrant Indigenous nations with distinct cultures and languages. Trading routes wove across the lands. Cultivated crops and expert hunting sustained the communities. Then, Europeans arrived. They began to take over the land and destroy the Indigenous people. It is part of American history.

But it's not just history. There are 573 federally recognized Indigenous nations in the U.S. today. We honor the resilience and strength of America's First Nations.



Artist rendering of planned Ohlone Arbor

© Sogorea Te' Land Trust

## Taking Back the Land

"When I look at the Bay Area, it's always home," said Corinna Gould (Chochenyo and Karkin Ohlone). "My ancestors have been here since the beginning of time." But the Ohlone peoples are not a federally recognized tribe and have no land of their own. And urban development has destroyed many ancestral burial places.

Gould co-founded Sogorea Te' Land Trust in East Oakland, CA to buy land to be lived on and cared for by Ohlone people. The trust has invited non-Native people who live in the Bay Area to pay a completely voluntary Shuumi Land Tax. It is one way to help restore self-determination to the area's first communities. [Learn more: www.sogoreate-landtrust.com](http://www.sogoreate-landtrust.com)

## Your Place Was There Before You!

From Alabama to Utah, white settlers used the words of people who already lived there to name U.S. states.

■ **What is the origin of your state's name?** It may be a clue as to who, before you, called the land "home." Look it up.

There is more to learn. ■ **Find out how Europeans took the land where you live and who they took it from.**



**We are still here, living our lives as Native peoples of our respective nations, because our leaders fought to protect our homelands and ways of being.**

– Debbie Reese (Nambe Pueblo)

## Today's Water Protectors

Indigenous activists, including many youth, led protests against an oil pipeline in North Dakota that threatens the water supply to the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservations. The protests delayed, but did not stop, the pipeline.



Photo by Susan Melkisethian/flickr/Creative Commons

- Where are the descendants of Indigenous people who used to live where you live now?
- What place names near you have a Native American origin?



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## Awakening the Languages

**A**s White settlers pushed across North America—bringing war, disease, and genocidal policies and dispossessing Native people of their land—Native Americans were forced to adopt the culture, language and lifestyles of the white settlers. As a result, hundreds of distinct Native languages went silent.

But, in a growing movement to revitalize indigenous languages, many Native American communities across the United States are teaching new generations of children—and adults—their ancestral languages. In Massachusetts, for example, the Mashpee, Aquinnah, Assonet, and Herring Pond Wampanoag communities are re-learning their ancestral Wôpanâak language which had been spoken by tribal citizens for thousands of years. In fact, many words now used in English are actually derived from the Wôpanâak language. There is “moose,” and “pumpkin,” from pôhpukun (ponh-pu-kun), which means “grows forth round,” and “moccasin,” from mahkus (mah-kus) which means “covers the whole foot.”

The story of the reclamation of the Wôpanâak language, and the journey of the Wampanoag community’s master speaker, Jessie Little Doe Baird, can be found in the documentary film, “We Still Live Here – Âs Nutayuneân.” In the film, you’ll learn that, even though the last fluent Wôpanâak language speaker died over 150 years ago, today’s Wampanoag were able to rebuild the words and the orthography (structure) of the language by studying documents written in the Wôpanâak language hundreds of years ago.

To learn more about WLRP, visit [www.wlrp.org](http://www.wlrp.org). You can find the film online at <https://www.makepeaceproductions.com/wampfilm.html>.



Some children are learning to speak the Wôpanâak language of their ancestors and celebrate their Indigenous culture in school.

Photo:Wôpanâak Language Reclamation Project

## Some Mascots Aren't Cute

“Go, Tigers!” It can be fun to wear sports fan clothing and cheer for a team. But when a team’s name uses a racial slur, or a mascot looks like a harmful stereotype, that’s not fun. In the U.S., many team names use words associated with Native Americans. Some say these names are meant to honor Native Americans. However, many Native Americans do not feel honored when team fans dress up or yell cheers in a way that mocks Indian history and culture.

Do you know of a sports team that uses Native American words, images, or a mascot?

Find out who is working to change that name.

How can you and your family support these efforts?



## PARENT REFLECTION

# Un-Learning About “Indians” Together

**M**ost adults who grew up in the U.S. learned a story of the nation’s beginnings that cancels out the stories of nations that were already here. Columbus’s “discovery” of a “New World” was the first big lie, erasing thousands of years of Native American history.

Most adults grew up learning about Indian tribes—not as resilient, contemporary, sovereign nations with their own cultures, governments, and priorities, but as peoples of the past, easy to represent with a collage of tipis, dream catchers, headdresses, papooses, and long black braids. Few adults were taught how the colonist settlers and their descendants worked to literally erase Native Americans in warfare, by stealing land, and with residential schools and calculated genocide.

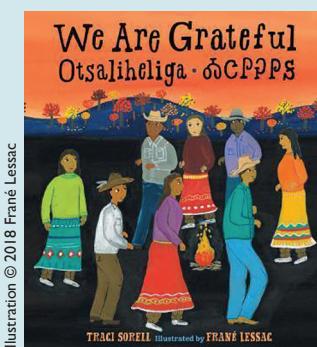
Indian stereotypes are still soaked into American culture. But today’s adults need not teach their children as poorly as they were taught. Guide children toward accurate information. Locally and online, today one can find many Indigenous individuals and communities inviting the public to learn.

Use the Internet carefully to explore contemporary Native American lives, issues, arts, and culture.

■ Visit Matika Wilbur’s (Swinomish and Tulalip) photographic account of contemporary life in hundreds of sovereign tribal nations.  
[www.matikawilbur.com](http://www.matikawilbur.com)

■ A Native American-run cultural center or museum, in person or online, is a window into the presence and the past of Indigenous people in your area. One is the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Ledyard, CT.  
[www.pequotmuseum.org](http://www.pequotmuseum.org)

■ Take the time to find the stories that contemporary Native Americans want to share. Clear your shelves of older books with words or illustrations that demean Native Americans or locate them firmly in the past. Discover what’s positive, what’s problematic, and why on the American Indians in Children’s Literature blog site.



■ Check out PBS KIDS’ “Molly of Denali.” Indigenous people are writers, advisors, production crew, and the actors who voice Native characters. The animated main character’s cultural heritage is from three Alaska Native groups in the Athabascan linguistic family.

## FACT:

**In the last U.S. census 5.2 million people identified as American Indian or Alaska Native.**

## FAMILIES:

**WEAVE A TAPESTRY OF FAITH**  
Provided by the Faith Development Office of the Unitarian Universalist Association  
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## FIND OUT MORE

■ The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI), “the unified voice of Indian Country,” is an invaluable source on history and contemporary issues of American Indian and Alaska Native peoples. Browse a colorful, comprehensive 2019 report, *Tribal Nations & the United States: An Introduction*. [www.ncai.org](http://www.ncai.org)  
Watch a short video: [www.ncai.org/proudtobe](http://www.ncai.org/proudtobe)

■ The 2019-20 UUA Common Read offers two Beacon Press books: *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2015) and *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States for Young People* adapted by Jean Mendoza and Debbie Reese (2019). Download the discussion guide: [www.uua.org/books/read](http://www.uua.org/books/read)