

Repenting a Genocide (Indigenous People's Day)  
Sunday, October 15, 2023  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

Wikipedia notes that October 12 in the United States as "Indigenous Peoples Day was instituted in Berkeley, California, in 1992, to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas on October 12, 1492. Two years later, Santa Cruz, California, instituted the holiday. Starting in 2014, many other cities and states adopted the holiday. In 2021, Joe Biden formally commemorated the holiday with a presidential proclamation, becoming the first U.S. president to do so," [Indigenous Peoples' Day \(United States\) - Wikipedia](#).

Because of the Monday holiday bill of way back when Indigenous People's Day was celebrated this year this past Monday on October 9. But why did Berkeley, California institute Indigenous People's Day to coincide with the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas on October 12, 1492, back in 1992? Why not make Indigenous Peoples' Day some other day that wasn't already a holiday? Because it was a protest of the celebration of Columbus.

But why protest Columbus? In my childhood all I knew of Columbus was the little rhyme, "In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue," that he had three ships, the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria, and that he was looking for a shorter trade route to Asia.

In 2019 Gillian Brockwell wrote an article for the Washington Post titled "Here are the indigenous people Christopher Columbus and his men could not annihilate." She wrote, "This year the District of Columbia joins at least five states and dozens of cities and counties in replacing Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day. It's part of a decades-long reckoning with the sanitized version of the European colonization of the Americas,".... (in the Americas) Columbus and his crew searched and searched for gold to no avail, so they filled their ships with something else they could sell: people. Of the 500 Taíno they took — selected because they were the strongest and healthiest specimens — 200 died on the voyage to Spain. Many more died once they had been sold into slavery.

So Columbus tried again for gold, but this time he and his men didn't go looking for it. They ordered all Taíno people 14 and older to deliver a certain amount of gold dust every three months. If they didn't, their hands would be cut off.... At this point, the Taíno were refusing to grow crops, and those who didn't bleed to death after their hands were removed began to die of famine and disease. When they fled into the mountains, they were hunted down by dogs. Many killed themselves with cassava poison.

Columbus's men also continued to sexually abuse Taíno women and girls. In 1500, Columbus wrote to an acquaintance that 'there are many dealers who go about looking for girls; those from nine to 10 are now in demand.'

As the population plummeted, they abducted indigenous people from other islands, like the Lucayan, to work the fields and mines of Hispaniola. When the British colonized the Bahamas in the 1600s, the islands had been deserted for more than a century,” [Indigenous Peoples Day: Christopher Columbus did not annihilate the Taíno - The Washington Post](#). Do remember though that the title of this article was “Here are the indigenous people Christopher Columbus and his men could not annihilate.” Yes, there was a genocide, but some survived.

Christianity sanctioned much of the atrocities and killings through the Doctrine of Discovery. An article by Bill Chappell for NPR in 2023 when the Vatican repudiated the doctrine noted that, “the doctrine was laid out in a series of papal “bulls,” or decrees; the first one was issued in 1452. They authorized colonial powers such as Spain and Portugal to seize lands and subjugate people in Africa and the ‘New World,’ as long as people on the lands were not Christians.” Chappell also noted that, “The doctrine was invoked as a legal and religious standing by Europeans who ‘discovered’ new lands and violently seized it from people who had been living there for generations. It has been cited in different arenas for centuries, including by the U.S. Supreme Court — as early as 1823 and as recently as 2005,” [Vatican repudiates the 'Doctrine of Discovery,' which underpinned colonialism : NPR](#).

With this history Columbus doesn’t seem like he should be much of a hero. But in the 1980s I dated Pasco Schiavo two of whose heroes were Lee Iacocca and Christopher Columbus. Also, in the 1980s I was told by my assigned ministerial mentor Christie Orr that until she was born on October 12 her name was meant to be Helen. But since October 12 was her birthday, her father, Mr. Antonucci named his daughter Christie after Columbus.

Harmeet Kaur in an article this week for CNN, “How Indigenous Peoples’ Day came about and why it matters today” wrote, “To understand the history of Indigenous Peoples’ Day, it’s important to understand how Columbus Day came about.

“Columbus had been celebrated unofficially around the US since the late 1700s. In 1892, President Benjamin Harrison issued a proclamation commemorating the 400th anniversary of his landing. As waves of Italian immigrants arrived in the US in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, they faced prejudice and discrimination. To combat negative perceptions, a group of Italian American elites took up the cause of Columbus Day, arguing that the contributions of Italian immigrants had helped make America the nation it was. In 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt designated Columbus Day a national holiday.”

Columbus Day became the Italian version of an Irish American St. Patrick’s Day. But knowing a fuller history of Columbus it has been suggested more than once that Italian Americans can find a more worthy hero.

Kaur continues in this week’s article, “Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement, Native American activists in the late 1960s formed the Red Power Movement, built on principles of self-determination and cultural pride. At a 1977 United Nations conference in Geneva, Indigenous delegates from around the world resolved ‘to observe October 12, the day of so-called ‘discovery’ of America, as an International Day of Solidarity with the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas.’

“It would be longer before their calls were adopted. South Dakota became the first to officially celebrate the day (calling it Native American Day) in 1990. The city of Berkeley, California, embraced Indigenous Peoples’ Day in 1992 as a protest to the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ arrival. Now, numerous states

and more than 130 cities observe the holiday,” [How Indigenous Peoples’ Day came about and why it matters today | CNN](#).

Kaur notes that some Native Americans see the day as a day to tell the history of this land from an Indigenous viewpoint, “Kitcki Carroll, an enrolled citizen of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma and executive director of United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc., sees the day as an opportunity to tell a different story about the US.

“Indigenous people have often been erased from the country’s historical record — a survey from the National Congress of American Indians found that 87% of state history standards don’t mention Native American history after 1900, while 27 states don’t mention Native Americans in their K-12 curriculum.... For others, Indigenous Peoples’ Day is about reclaiming power and celebrating progress. Crystal Echo Hawk, a member of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma and CEO of the social justice organization IllumiNative, points to the gains that Indigenous people have made in recent years, from political representation to media visibility.

“For too long, Native peoples have been rendered invisible or misrepresented in popular culture and media, but Native peoples are no longer tolerating or settling for erasure,” she wrote in an email to CNN. ‘Indigenous Peoples’ Day serves as a reminder of the diversity and depth of Native peoples, and how hard we’ve had to work for recognition and visibility,’” [How Indigenous Peoples’ Day came about and why it matters today \(msn.com\)](#).

There is a [page on Indigenous Peoples Day on the website of our Unitarian Universalist Association](#). In the last section of the page titled, “Unitarian Universalist Association Grounding”, it notes that,

“The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has passed many resolutions on Native peoples' rights since the 1970s. In 1993, the General Assembly passed a resolution on Justice for Indigenous Peoples, where the UUA resolved to learn from indigenous peoples about the richness of their cultures and about the problems and issues they face, support local indigenous peoples' political action committees in their struggles for social justice and religious freedom, and act individually and through coalitions to respect and support indigenous peoples in preserving their cultural pride and heritage and in protecting their natural resources.

“In 2007, the General Assembly passed a resolution on Truth, Repair, and Reconciliation, where the UUA resolved to uncover our links and complicity with the genocide of native peoples and with all types of racial, ethnic, and cultural oppression, past and present, toward the goal of accountability through acknowledgment, apology, repair, and reconciliation. (And yes, we Unitarians had boarding schools. [Timeline of Unitarian Universalist Relationships with Native American Peoples and Nations | Harvard Square Library](#))

“In 2012, the General Assembly passed a resolution repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, where the UUA resolved to expose the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine and eliminate its presence in the contemporary policies, programs, theologies, and structures of Unitarian Universalism; to invite indigenous partners to a process of Honor and Healing (often called Truth and Reconciliation); and to call on the United States to fully implement the standards of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the U.S. law and policy without qualifications.

“To more fully recognize these and our many other resolutions on the rights of Native peoples, Unitarian Universalist staff and headquarters now recognize Indigenous Peoples Day as an official holiday in place of Columbus Day...,” [Indigenous Peoples Day | UUA.org](#).

Of course, recognizing a holiday and passing resolutions are not enough to repent a genocide. But there is progress. The September 2022 [Seminole Tribune](#) noted that, “The U.S. Department of Interior, led by Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), has completed its initiative to rename hundreds of geographic sites across the country.” “A lake in Florida’s Marion County has been renamed as one of 650 geographic sites across the U.S. that were put on a U.S. Department of Interior list due to the use of the word “squaw,” which is considered an offensive ethnic, racial and sexist slur, particularly toward Native American women.

“Squaw Pond, a remote eight-acre lake located in the Ocala National Forest in the north-central area of the state, has been renamed Bumblebee Pond. It was the only Florida site identified on the list. The landmarks and sites are located on federal lands and waterways,” [Florida lake with Native slur renamed • The Seminole Tribune](#).

The same issue of [The Seminole Tribune](#) on its National Native News page reported that “Oakland is the first city in California to use city-owned property as reparations for European settlers stealing Native American territories.

“City leaders and an Indigenous nonprofit announced the five-acre land grant to the East Bay Ohlone Tribe on September 5.

“Under the proposed ‘cultural conservation easement,’ Oakland would retain ownership of the designated area, but the Sogorea Te’ Land Trust would have nearly full control over the use of the land, for cultural, environmental, and educational purposes, in perpetuity...”

“On September 23, the Mechoopda Indian Tribe of Chico Rancheria and Chico State Enterprises completed a landmark agreement that returns the 93 acres of land know as the Butte Creek Ecological Preserve (BCEP) in northern California back to the Mechoopda Indian Tribe of Chico Rancheria.”

And, “Rep. Mary Peltola’s election to the U.S. House of Representatives made history in several ways.

“With her recent swearing-in, it became official for the first time in more than 230 years: A Native American, an Alaskan Native and a Native Hawaiian are all members of the House – fully representing the United States’ Indigenous people for the first time, according to Rep. Kaiali’i Kahele of Hawaii. Now, there are six Indigenous Americans who are representatives in the House.”

In the January 2023 edition of [The Seminole Tribune](#) it noted that, “When Ron Corn, Sr. graduated high school in 1977, he said he was among the last generation of Indigenous children Wisconsin schools actively tried to assimilate into non-Native culture....

“Now, as chairman of the Menominee Nation in Wisconsin, Corn this month signed an agreement with the state to ensure not only that there will not be assimilation attempts again, but that there will be support to teach Native culture in schools.”

And that, “Hundreds of Indigenous people disinterred by archeologists at the historic Etowah Mounds in Northwest Georgia will be returned to their descendants with the cooperation of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.”

Back in the fall of 2013 our denominational magazine The UU World reported on several UU congregations working to make amends. All Souls Church, Unitarian Universalist, in Sioux Falls, S.D. provided support to the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Native American Spiritual Group at the South Dakota State Penitentiary, by paying for ceremonial botanicals and assisting with one of their quarterly spiritual conferences; commissioned a collage painting by Native American artist Jerry Fogg, titled Past, Present and Future; and invited Native American author Joseph Marshall III to speak about his book, *The Lakota Way: Stories and Lessons on Living*, at a community forum. In Schenectady, N.Y., Director of Religious Education Melissa MacKinnon led the UU Society of Schenectady into a relationship with the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) people. That relationship included helping support a flotilla of more than 200 Native and non-Native canoeists last summer. That trip down the Hudson passed through Albany and on to the United Nations in New York City to raise awareness of environmental crises and to explore ways for Native and non-Native people to respectfully live together. In the Hawaiian Islands, traditional cultural practices and languages were banned following the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1893, until 1971. The First Unitarian Church of Honolulu has long supported indigenous Hawaiians in restoring some of that heritage. Steve Lohse, chair of the congregation's Social Justice Council, said that the church is currently supporting the Kanenuiakea religious community of O'ahu and is also working with a group called Interfaith 'Ohana. One of the goals of these combined groups is to promote legislation that will help guarantee access to traditional sacred sites. They are beginning the process of federal registration of more than 30 sacred sites. [Congregations build bridges, relationships with Native Americans | UU World Magazine.](#)

In a 2022 article in the [UU World](#) it was reported that “In 2018, First Parish in Portland, Maine, invited Sherri Mitchell, a lawyer and activist for the Wabanaki people—comprising four independent Tribes that span Maine and Canada’s maritime provinces—to speak at its weekly service. Her presentation was not your typical Sunday fare. Mitchell revealed some brutal history of the Portland church, including the story of a former minister who, along with other church leaders, assembled a posse to hunt down and kill Wabanaki people for bounties in the 1700s.”

The article continues, “Rather than hanging their heads when confronted by this dismal truth, congregation members began brainstorming potentially restorative actions. For First Parish’s Wabanaki Ally Team that emerged from the painful reckoning, publicly acknowledging the sins was a starting point, but they progressed quickly to allying with Wabanaki groups to back legislation asserting Tribal sovereignty in Maine to correct ongoing injustices,” [From Remorse to Action | UU World Magazine.](#)

As we learn our history from the viewpoint of the indigenous people of this land we begin to know some of what needs to be done to give back respect, land, rights, and honor.

Native American botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer says, “Cultures of gratitude must also be cultures of reciprocity. Each person, human or no, is bound to every other in a reciprocal relationship. Just as all beings have a duty to me, I have a duty to them. If an animal gives its life to feed me, I am in turn bound to support its life. If I receive a stream’s gift of pure water, then I am responsible for returning a gift in kind. An integral part of a human’s education is to know those duties and how to perform them.” When we know those duties and how to perform them, we will know what we need to do to repent a genocide.

