

COMMENTARY: November 2010 Newsletter

The PBS series “We Will Remain” has been showing again. It deals with stories of the Native American’s contacts with Europeans coming to this continent and eventually occupying almost every portion of it. They are almost uniformly sad stories about clashes of cultures, clashes of spiritual and secular world views, clashes of mismatched numbers and power. They’re similar to the stories of the encounters of indigenous peoples with Europeans all over the world. Stories in which the accidents of history and geography, the development of technology, and the peculiar imperialism of monotheism led to the assumption of superiority by those with guns, metal armor and God-on-their-side.

The behavior of powerful leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson was not unknown in human history. (Jefferson had no qualms about pushing the tribes of the Northwest Territories across the Mississippi and Jackson gave not a second thought about de-populating the Southeast of our country and sending the Cherokee – who, by that time, were often more “civilized” than the settlers who were hungry for their lands – on the genocidal “Trail of Tears”) Ask the victims of Ghengis Khan, the Incas, or the President of Sudan about their experiences with better armed and willful predators. The milk of human kindness has soured too often in the world’s history.

It’s not asking too much of us to remember the full history of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag, which includes not only the cautious friendship extended by Ousamequin, the Massasoit (or Great Sachem) of the Wampanoag Confederacy, and the help he gave the Pilgrims in surviving their first years in Plymouth, but also the near extinction of the tribes when Pilgrim and Puritan immigration so expanded that all tribal lands were wanted. Thanks were given by both peoples at the “first Thanksgiving”, but only by the settlers at the subsequent ones.

As descendants of the Pilgrims (the church they founded in Plymouth was among the early Congregational churches to become Unitarian) it behooves us to remember the entire history of our forebears’ encounters with First Peoples... not out of guilt, because times were very different and it was a very long time ago, but rather, to remember because over these past almost 400 years we have learned many lessons. Unitarian Universalism is no longer the religion it was when, in embryo, it arrived on these shores. It pays to remember these lessons because they are still so desperately needed in both America’s domestic and international affairs.

It has been a custom to pass out four grains of corn at the service before Thanksgiving to remember the daily ration (four grains of corn per person) the Pilgrims were reduced to during the horrible first winter in which over half of them died. That hardship is worth the recollection if only to render our own sense of blessing, indeed of plenty – and hence thankfulness – deeper. Perhaps we could use those little grains of corn to also help us recall the far greater sacrifices made, not by our religious ancestors, but by the peoples who first welcomed and then were victimized by them.

~ Richard