

The topic for today's sermon comes directly from the calendar. The first week in October is the time to celebrate Thanksgiving across Canada. And in Nova Scotia it is also the time to commemorate "Treaty Day."

This is an interesting juxtaposition of celebrations that is complicated further by the fact that it is also "Columbus Day" in the United States and in many countries in the Western hemisphere. Thankfully Unitarian Universalists are participating in a growing trend toward celebrating Indigenous People's Day instead of Columbus Day.

As a new resident of Nova Scotia, the concept of Treaty Day was a fresh idea to be explored. Fortunately on Monday October 1 I was able to attend the ceremonies commemorating Treaty Day. These started a Mass at Saint Mary's Basilica followed by a parade to the Grand Parade site with a sit down dinner after that.

I had met Billy Lewis at an earlier event and I sought him out following the Treaty Day events. Billy is an indigenous elder born here in Nova Scotia. He agreed to have lunch with me and to help me to begin to understand the indigenous perspective on Thanksgiving and Treaty Day. I very much appreciate his presence here today and I encourage him to set me straight if I misrepresent the indigenous perspective in my comments.

Let's talk first a little bit about the concept of thankfulness. The history of Thanksgiving in Canada goes back to the expedition of Martin Frobisher in 1578. The first celebration of Thanksgiving as a national holiday was in 1872 to give thanks for the recovery of the Prince of Wales following a major illness. Between then and 1957, Thanksgiving has been a moveable feast with different dates and different objective, often celebrating victory in war.

Finally on Thursday, January 31, 1957, the Canadian Parliament proclaimed: "A Day of General Thanksgiving to Almighty God for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed – to be observed on the 2nd Monday in October."

This raises the question for me, to whom and for what am I expressing my thankfulness at this time of year. Let's deal with the easy part first. What are we giving thanks for? I think we might agree that the wording approved by the Canadian Parliament might still be OK... "We are thankful for the bountiful harvest with which Canada has been blessed." The harvest of fish and wildlife, the harvest of forest and farmland, the harvest of oil and minerals.

The question: to whom am I thankful is more problematic. With UU widely varying ideas on the existence of God or the lack thereof, many of us are uncomfortable with expressing thanks to "Almighty God" as parliament decreed that we should. But if we are not thankful to God, To whom or to what are we thankful?

Despite many attempts to avoid the question, it still appears to me that the idea of expressing thanks requires an object of our thanks. I am aware that thankfulness is sometimes a synonym for being pleased or satisfied, but I think that is really an attempt to avoid the question at hand.

This was one of the first questions I put to Billy Lewis. To whom to what do the indigenous peoples express their thanks? He first pointed out that from an indigenous perspective thankfulness is not something to be promoted one day per year. In the indigenous spiritual tradition thankfulness is a way of being. Thankfulness is something to be acknowledged each and every day of our lives, morning and evening.

And when I asked, to whom or what are you thankful, Billy spoke of the indigenous concept of the Great Spirit. This is not an anthropomorphized God, not a God made in our image, but rather a spirit that animates all things in our universe.

I have learned one word so far of the Mi'kmaq language. Welalin! Meaning thankyou. Billy tells me that this in Mi'kmaq culture is the very first prayer. A one word prayer Welalin, Thankyou. I am reminded of the writing of the thirteenth century Christian mystic Meister Eckert "If the only prayer you said was thank you, that would be enough."

The Mi'kmaq depended on nature's bounty for survival. Therefore, they maintained a close spiritual relationship with all living organisms and their spirits. In indigenous traditions thanks is due every time something is taken from the natural world for human use, be that berries from a bush, or the life of a moose, a tree cut down to make shelter or firewood.

This attitude toward the natural world, contains the central idea of sustainable use of nature's bounty. Allow me to explain this perspective. If we are truly thankful for the gift of cod fish harvested from the ocean, would it be possible to take more and more of that resource until you had destroyed the resource the natural system that you were thankful for; destroyed the spirit of the cod fish, essentially wiping it from the face of the earth?

I am not trying to idealize the indigenous attitudes toward nature. It appears from the archeological record that indigenous peoples may have hunted the large mammals of North America to extinction, the mammoths, and giant bears and cats. The limitations on the exploitation of resources in some cases may just be a matter of technology and numbers rather than a culture of reverence for life.

That term, reverence for life just kind of slipped in here. It should be familiar to all UU's

for “A Reverence for Life” was the term that the great Albert Schweitzer used to describe his religious faith, and he was at least an honorary Unitarian, a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship.

Our culture in the future will not be a duplicate of the cultures of the past. But hopefully we can learn from the past and incorporate the best of many cultures over time. I recently received an email request to sign a petition against infilling of a portion of the Bedford Basin, to facilitate the construction of a large multi-story condominium. The email contained a link to a very compelling video that featured pictures of the sea birds nesting on small islands, fish and crabs living in tidal pools, osprey and eagles that lived on the fish and sea life... and all of this about to be destroyed, buried in rubble that would be the foundation for a condominium building. No one could watch that video without feeling the sacredness of the natural environment.

The unspoken message was that the land developer (how ironic is that phrase!) had no appreciation for the micro-ecosystem that was about to be sacrificed. The section of shoreline and the animals that depended on that shoreline could simply be taken for human use with no thought to their inherent value or to the sacrifice that was being demanded of them.

Would it make any difference if every time we destroyed a part of the natural ecosystem for our perceived benefit, we first took the time to honour the thing that we were about to destroy; to give thanks to the Great Spirit that sustains all life and the web of creation of which we are a part.

Can you visualize a religious or spiritual service held on the pristine shores of the Bedford basin, before the bulldozers were allowed in? A spiritual service where we the people, acknowledged in a deliberate and conscious way, the sacrifice that we were requiring of the animals and plants and ecosystems.

If this was our routine practice; if we expected our leaders to show some humility before the great spirit of the natural world that sustains us all, would we change our ways as a people? If we acknowledged the sacrifice being made for our benefit would we develop a more sustainable attitude toward our environment?

Let's turn our attention toward Treaty Day for a moment. Since 1993, Treaty Day is held annually on October 1 in Nova Scotia marking the beginning of Mi'kmaq History Month. The purpose of Treaty Day is to promote public awareness about the Mi'kmaq culture and heritage for all the citizens of Nova Scotia. The specific treaty being celebrated is the treaty of 1752 that provided for peace and friendship between the Mi'kmaq people and the Crown. It was signed to end hostilities between the Mi'kmaq people and the British Crown, which was represented in Nova Scotia at the time with mostly military outposts.

There is a long history of treaties between the Mi'kmaw people and the British Crown from the 17th century to the 20th century. At first they motivated as attempts to gain the support of the Mi'kmaw people in battles for territorial rights with the French and later the rebellious American colonies. The Crown needed the support of the Mi'kmaw people in these wars and the Crown was prepared to guarantee Mi'kmaw rights to access to hunting fishing and farming resources, in return for their help.

Later treaties were modified as the pressure became economic in nature and the British and the European immigrants took more and more of the resource base from the indigenous peoples until finally in the 20th century, treaties were largely ignored and the Mi'kmaw people were confined to smaller and smaller areas with less and less access to natural resources.

Even when human beings are pursuing the most blatantly selfish and inhumane policies we find a way to justify our actions on moral grounds, and religion is usually complicit. For the subjugation of the indigenous people of North America the roots of that justification lie in the Doctrine of Discovery. I quote here from the UUA web site:

“The Doctrine of Discovery is a principle of international law dating from the late 15th century. It has its roots in a papal decree issued by Pope Nicholas V in 1452 that specifically sanctioned and promoted the conquest, colonization, and exploitation of non-Christian territories and peoples. Hundreds of years of decisions and laws continuing right up to our own time can ultimately be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery—laws that invalidate or ignore the rights, sovereignty, and humanity of indigenous peoples around the world.”

I attended the General Assembly of the UUA this year in Phenix Arizona. There the delegates voted to specifically repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and to work to eliminate its remnants from American laws and practices. Before I could comment on the effect of the Doctrine of Discovery on Canadian history I would need to do some more research.

Recounting this history of broken treaties with the Mi'kmaq is painful for me. I am the beneficiary of this overpowering and exploitation of the Mi'kmaw peoples. At the same time there is no going back. The best that we can hope for is to learn from the past and to find a better way forward. In the context of the historical record it is painful to think of Treaty Day and Thanksgiving being celebrated on the same week. What have the Mi'kmaw to celebrate on a European inspired Thanksgiving Day?

It is not all darkness. In 1985, the Supreme Court of Canada confirmed the validity of the Treaty of 1752. This ruling not only validated Aboriginal Treaty rights but also confirmed the unique relationship which exists between the Mi'kmaq and the Crown.

I am indebted to Billy Lewis for an idea that may point the way toward preserving our integrity and living the spirit of the Treaty of Friendship and Peace of 1752. Billy Lewis has been pointing out, to anyone who would listen, that Treaty Day is seen by most Haligonians as a matter for the indigenous peoples.

We speak of treaties between the indigenous peoples and the Crown. The Crown was represented at Treaty Day in 2012 by a detachment of Royal Canadian Mounted Police in their red tunics and uniformed members of the Canadian armed forces. The mayor of the city of Halifax spoke, but there was very little representation of what I would call the people of Nova Scotia.

We tend to speak in terms of indigenous rights that are protected by treaties. But treaties are about rights and obligations between two parties. What about the obligations of the people who represent the other half of the treaty. What are my obligations, as a beneficiary of this treaty of Friendship and Peace?

No one, including the indigenous peoples of Nova Scotia is suggesting that we can turn the clock back to a time before the arrival of Europeans. But neither is it acceptable, for our own integrity and spiritual growth, to ignore entirely the treaties made by our ancestors, treaties that we continue to benefit from today.

We have a responsibility to learn about the issues that concern our treaty partners and to take action to support their rights and needs. One example... The process of drilling for natural gas and oil using hydraulic fracturing techniques involves drilling thousands of feet down into the earth and pumping chemicals that are known to be hazardous to life into the earth.

Imagine the reaction if such an idea had been broached with the Mi'kmaw in 1752. We plan to drill holes deep into mother earth and inject poisons that will flush gas and other poisons to the surface of the earth, so that we may burn this gas and pollute the air, thereby risking the balance of nature that sustains our climate. Such a concept is anathema to our indigenous peoples and for good reason.

At the treaty day ceremony there were representatives from the Mi'kmaq communities on Cape Breton Island protesting drilling for gas adjacent to Lake Ainslie. Lake Ainslie is the source of some 20% of the fresh water in the province.

I hope that in the years ahead, that this congregation will renew and strengthen its connections with the Mi'kmaq people, educating ourselves and our children, not offering charity, but standing in solidarity with the Mi'kmaq peoples.

We cannot transfer our responsibility as citizens to the concept of “the Crown.” As the inheritors of the benefits of these treaties, we must take action to honour our commitment, our commitment to the concept of Treaty Day; to work together to build a better, more compassionate and just and sustainable, Nova Scotia.

May it be so. Amen