

Though We've Broken Our Vows

by Rev. Michelle Collins

December 1, 2013

I often found myself in an odd position of tensions when the Thanksgiving holiday rolls around. On one hand, I'm excited about getting together with family or friends, which this past week included among other things a tofurkey roast. I enjoy the holiday as a time of family and gratitude. But on the other hand, I've found myself irritated when complete strangers wish me well for the holiday, like when a drug store clerk automatically wished me a "Happy Thanksgiving." I wanted to say, "What makes you think that I even celebrate Thanksgiving anyway."

I'm not quite sure where this reaction comes from. It might be a bit of the San Francisco Bay Area mentality that has seeped into me (which I do get teased about this a good bit, by some folks). In San Francisco, there are alternate views of many traditional holidays, including an insistence on calling Columbus Day Indigenous People's Day instead, which I think is actually a good switch by the way. The alternate words to the song The Farmer in the Dell, well, that's a different story.

But I also think back to the origins of the Thanksgiving holiday, especially when I see the stereotypical cartoons of the happy Pilgrim standing next to the happy "Indian" with a smiling turkey alongside them. Unlike what I learned in elementary school of how Thanksgiving was a celebration when "Indians" and Pilgrims sat down together and shared food, the holiday was originally far different. The first Thanksgiving was declared in 1637 by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in celebration of a massacre of 700 Pequot women, men, and children. That's not exactly a Thanksgiving that I want to celebrate.

This mix of feelings found me not with my family early Thanksgiving morning a few years ago, but on a boat headed to Alcatraz Island. Bundled up against the cold, I joined 4,000 other people, both those of indigenous descent and allies, for an annual Thanksgiving Day pilgrimage to the island.

In the late 60's, there was a new federal law declaring that Native Americans could reclaim federal land that had been taken from them if it was no longer in use. Tribes from across the country united and acted on that law in 1969 to take over Alcatraz Island, which had been vacant since 1963 which is when the last prisoner left, so it was technically unused at the time. The activists managed to hold onto the island for nearly two years before being evicted. To

commemorate this history, one day per year, Thanksgiving Day, the usual tours of the island and prison are suspended and a sunrise celebration is held there.

That morning, under a clear open sky, we got off the ferry and wound our way through the prison complex. I anticipated that we would see a glorious sunrise that day. The celebration took place in an enormous circle twenty people deep around a bonfire, set under the Alcatraz's central tower. There was drumming and dancing, prayers and singing, both in English and in a variety of indigenous languages. I was swept away with it, calling the "oh" of applause along with everyone else. The music moved through different types and groups of dancers from different tribes danced by themselves or along with others, with various speakers mixed in. The moments were filled with joy and energy and exuberance. As the ceremony proceeded through the music and dancing and speeches, I wondered what part was planned for the exact moment of the sunrise, when the sun broke above the horizon. With the amount of planning and intentionality evident throughout the program, it had to be something special. As the light hitting the tower changed from grey through varying shades of gold, I waited to find out.

As the light strengthened, the ceremony progressed to its central point... honoring warriors and veterans. Through prayer and song and recognition, veterans of the Alcatraz possession and Wounded Knee, and veterans of other Native American actions were recognized and honored. This was the central reason we had gathered... to honor the warriors, to name their commitments and sacrifices. It was an oddly subdued moment compared with the joy and exuberance that had preceded it. And we also gathered to make a statement, which had been made with the possession of Alcatraz. In the words of one of the speakers, it was to say "We are still here!" Despite everything that had been taken, and all the promises that have been broken, that they were still there and their culture had not been completely torn from them.

So much has been taken. The eviction from Alcatraz was just the latest in a long history of broken treaties and broken promises. There have been some 236 or more treaties made between the government of our country and Native Americans, and not a single one has been honored. Not one. And the missions, the forced schools, the massacres, the relocations... The Lanape (Lə-nah'-pay) people who began in the Delaware and Pennsylvania area faced multiple relocations over the past few hundred years, with treaty after treaty made that took more and more land from them. And they have gone back and forth from being federally recognized to not to being recognized again. Currently three Lanape tribes in Oklahoma are federally recognized, several in Canada, and a few more tribes in our area are recognized by New Jersey

and Delaware, but not by the federal government that is.¹ Our record as a country seems to be abysmal!

Where does this leave us now? Wandering and looking for meaning in a bleak field of shattered promises? Avoiding thinking about them because it feels overwhelming or makes us feel powerless to change it? While acknowledging the reality of broken promises, of broken vows, I believe we have the power to keep it from being bleak, and I hope we have the power to make a different reality.

The song we just sang is based on a poem by 13th century Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi. The original poem reads: “Come, come, whoever you are. Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.”

We as a people have broken vows many, many times. But rather than living in a place of despair, Rumi calls us to live in a place of welcome and of joy. This is what I experienced this at the sunrise celebration – it was not a time of despair as it could have been. It was a time of joy and honor, a time of empowerment and solidarity. While the recognition of the warriors and conflicts was somber, it was surrounded by joy and energy. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vow a thousand times.

But I admit that I also feel despair and powerlessness.

A few years back, I called up my mother to ask her a seemingly innocuous question about my great grandparents and when they had immigrated to the United States. After hearing a charming story about how they met on the boat on the way here, I thanked my mother and thought that was that. Of course, it wasn't. She got interested in ancestry research and then for Christmas gave me my very own copy of the ancestry software, complete with a subscription to ancestry.com. With my own interest piqued, I spent the next six months digging into various branches of my family tree, as I've heard that a number of folks here have done as well after I shared about another bit of my ancestry research a few months ago. Really interesting stuff, especially when I found some more back story on some of them. One of those was the Rev. Chad Brown, one of only two of my direct ancestors that I know have pages on Wikipedia. He was a Baptist preacher who came to the colonies in the 1630's from England and was quite the patriot – a founder of Providence, Rhode Island, wealthy, owned slaves, and he had a particular area of expertise. He was an expert in treaty negotiations, which, with a little

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenape>

reading between the lines, means he was the one who created treaties with the local indigenous population.

Needless to say, I became more and more uneasy as I unearthed these facts. So I reached for the phone and called the relative that I thought would be the most sympathetic to my feelings. After telling her about our common ancestor and all that I had found about him, her response was, “So what.” “So what! What do you mean, so what!” “So what. I bet nearly everybody has something like this in their ancestry; what does it matter that you happened to find out exactly what it was in ours.”

I’ve struggled with this question ever since. And not in a theoretical sense, but in a real lived sense. I’ve struggled with trying to hear my heart’s own answer. Why does it matter? What difference does it make that I know this, and what does it mean for my own life’s path?

My feelings start to give me an answer. The feeling that was in my heart as I learned of my ancestor and his oppression of the Native Americans in the Providence area was a feeling of dismay that made my cheeks burn. It was a feeling of shame. This shame wasn’t just a signal that I was presently on the caravan of despair, but it was also a signal from my heart that it did matter to me. I felt a connection and responsibility for my ancestor’s actions, and my shame made sure that I paid attention to it and didn’t just dismiss it.

In the Lanape (Lə-nah’-pay) story that we heard earlier, the animals and the trapper had to do work to find a mutual understanding, finding beads that were acceptable to trade rather than animal skins. They all came to the council and talked openly about their needs and their issues and they were willing to listen to each other. Later in the story, the same didn’t happen between the Lanape and the Europeans. According to the story, “when Europeans came to this country they were very big on giving a piece of paper and signing a piece of paper and that was an important thing. We tried to explain to them that the paper is nothing. The beads that are made by people whose heart and breath are beating in them are much more long standing and much more of a contract between people.”² Just like the trapper and the animals before, the Lanape and the Europeans didn’t understand things the same way. But the difference was they never did change. The infamous piece of paper, or many pieces of paper and treaties that were formed between the European settlers and the Native Americans not only didn’t harmonize with both cultures but also those are the very pieces of paper that consistently weren’t honored creating a legacy of broken vows.

² <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/Linguistics/LenapeLanguageResources/pdf/story.pdf>

Brazilian educator Paolo Freire calls oppression dehumanizing. It diminishes us as human beings, and as Freire says, acts “[as] a distortion of the vocation of becoming more fully human.”³ Acting against oppression is to act in a way that honors the humanity of ourselves and others, in a way that engages us in this great vocation of becoming more fully human.

My feelings as I learned about my own ancestry were the result of this dehumanizing. Oppression is dehumanizing for all who are connected with it, for the oppressors as well as those who are oppressed. Acknowledging this oppression and its impact on us is a first step, and acting on it takes it even further. Rumi calls on us to first acknowledge the reality of our broken vows but then not to stay on a caravan of despair. But I hope that we also don’t get onto a caravan of indifference either.

Despite what my relative said, it does matter. It matters because it has to matter. If it doesn’t, then we are forfeiting our work of becoming humans among other humans in our world. To walk in this world means to acknowledge the humanity and needs of others and to find joy in being together. It matters to me to find out more about the impact of my ancestor and what is going on today for the people who were affected by him. And it matters because I don’t want to be indifferent or silent about it.

As the sun rose and bathed Alcatraz in its golden light, we honored the warriors, the veterans of Native American struggles for the recognition of their humanity and for land that could be theirs. We honored their struggles in the difficult vocation of being human against all odds. Then the speaker called on all present, both those of Native American descent and allies, she called on us to find ways to be warriors. Being a warrior, she said, is to stand up for the right thing. Being a warrior is not to ride on a caravan of despair. It is to see the despair and then to act, and in that action one finds a grace that can heal despair. This is what we are called on to do as human beings. To see, to remember, and to take action – to be warriors. This is stronger than we usually talk about here, but I want to challenge each of us to explore ways that we can be warriors for what is needed and what is right in the world. If our vision for the future is bright and strong, then we have to be equally passionate about our work to get there and to build the world that we wish to see. May it be so.

³ Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*