Walking the Perimeter of Truth, Indigenous Peoples Day, October 8, 2017[1]

This summer, heading to New Orleans for General Assembly I needed a place to camp, so I studied my atlas – which still remains one of the best ways to find websites, the internet notwithstanding! – and found a state park in the right place. The Trail of Tears State Park. It was in the right place and it called to me. That's how I ended up camping on a high hill above the Mississippi River.

As I drove into the park I couldn't miss the beauty of hills, the forests, and the river, but my heart was so heavy.

This was where the Cherokee Nation, the people I had learned about as an Oklahoma tribe while growing up in Dallas, Texas, this was where the remnant of that Nation had crossed the Mississippi River almost two centuries ago. This was where a people who lived in the southeast for centuries, for millennia, had crossed one more barrier into the place the new government – the American government – designated for them. I'm ashamed to say that camping there that night their ordeal came home to me in a new way.

Do you remember Joy Harjo's first step for conflict resolution?

> 1. SET CONFLICT RESOLUTION GROUND RULES:
>
> Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.
> Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.
> Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill.
> The land is a being who remembers everything.
> You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs—
> The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the night to walk the perimeter of truth for understanding.
> As I brushed my hair over the hotel sink to get ready I heard:
> By listening we will understand who we are in this holy realm of words.
> Do not parade, pleased with yourself.
> You must speak in the language of justice.[2]

As I ate dinner, I remembered names that the Cherokee left all over the southeast, the marks left on lands where parts of my family live. As a society, we've kept the place names, thinking of how beautiful and picturesque they are, and we've kept stories of cooperation between native peoples and European settlers. What we don't talk about is how these people were removed. We don't talk about the settlers who, wanting more land, used their religion, their laws, and their power to create narratives about how these people needed to be civilized, enslaved, and

[1] Manuscript varies slightly from spoken sermon.
[2] Joy Harjo, "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings,"
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/141847/conflict-resolution-for-holy-beings

were not even full people. Narratives about how they needed to be overseen and have guardians, how they needed to be educated out of their cultures, civilized.

Eating dinner I thought of how my people had worked, have worked to erase these people.

Eating dinner in my camp, I thought about the people who traveled the Trail of Tears, forced by the American military. I thought of their hunger, the children and elders who died on the way, the women who are forced to march while they were in labor. I didn't eat much that night.

> **"The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the night to walk the perimeter of truth for understanding."**

But as I sat there I also heard the joyful cries of young people playing along the river.

How discordant is that? To be sitting along the Trail of Tears, thinking of erasure and genocide, while listening to young people playing, enjoying cool water on a hot evening and the beauty of their surroundings?

This is part of what it means to be a descendent of European settlers. Settlers who participated in that erasure and genocide, even if only by benefiting from it. I have no reason to think my ancestors actively inflicted this, but I know that some of my ancestors were some of the first settlers in Massachusetts and I know that in various waves they moved into Ohio, Illinois, and Iowa as land there became available. And how did that land become available?

My ancestors certainly benefited from the genocide committed under cover of the Doctrine of Discovery and manifest destiny. That doctrine or decree that legitimized the conquest of the Americas, that idea that Americans developed that called them to settle and civilize the West.

And so I sat on a hill above the Mississippi, hearing youths playing and celebrating, feeling the cool breeze beginning to stir in the forest, hearing insects and small animals and birds greeting the dusk. That is one of my favorite times of the day – one of the times I feel closest to the sacred, when I pause and deeply connect as the day changes, as we move in a transitional time.

And this is part of what it means to hold my various identities: a descendent of European settlers who has dedicated a large part of my life to working on environmental issues with Tribes and others; a Unitarian Universalist dedicated to social justice; and a woman who loves this land that is my home.

> "**Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand…**
> **Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected and treated with goodwill…**
> **You will have to answer to your children, and their children, and theirs…"**

We can hold all the parts of this discordant story – the pain of history, the laughter of youth playing, our love of this land, toxic legacies felt and perpetuated today. We can hold all the parts. But that doesn't mean I haven't tried to escape doing that.

I also visited Scotts Bluff National Monument this summer, this time with my mother. When we arrived at the visitor's center, my mom wanted to get her national parks passport stamped, so I went into the exhibits alone. The displays showed Cowboys and Indians like you see in Western movies. They mentioned that the destruction of buffalo had caused the decline of Indians on the Great Plains. They discussed a "massacre" where a man named Scott was injured and later died of those injuries. They told how the area had then been named for him. The Indigenous nation wasn't named, and any names they had given the land or significance it had for them was missing. But the white settlers, military, and cowboys were glorified.

My mom appeared at my side. She wanted to go outside to see a covered wagon with me. I love my mom and this trip was an important time for us to be together. I tried to just enjoy being there together, but I started telling my mom how upset I was about the exhibits. I'll admit that I did go on quite a rant…

Finally I realized I wasn't talking to the right person.

As uncomfortable as it was, I headed back into the interpretive center and asked the staff questions about who originally lived there. I stood with them as they searched their files for an answer and realized they didn't have that information and found their own discomfort. I listened as they explained how out of date the displays were – they're due to be updated in a few years – but realized that they should be able to answer my questions. I stood there with compassion but I didn't let any of us off the hook.

Sometimes compassion means helping ourselves and others look at something shameful and ugly, and staying there in it with ourselves and others.

Afterwards I went out with my mom to appreciate the beauty of the park.

Going into that interpretive center is very far from all I can or should do, but noticing, remembering, and asking myself and others questions, even while I let myself be stunned by the beauty and joy of the land, is a start.

On Indigenous Peoples Day and all days we can listen and hold awful, complex realities even while we hold our love of our lives and relations. We can "walk the perimeter of truth searching for understanding."

When Indigenous Peoples' Day was begun in 1992 on the 100th anniversary of the founding of Columbus Day, it was an effort to readdress how we look at history and how it affects our present day. In talking about Indigenous Peoples' Day, the UUA website says it "reimagines" Columbus Day from a celebration of colonialism into a time to recognize and celebrate the heritage and contributions of indigenous peoples, recognize historical truths about genocide

and oppression of indigenous peoples in the Americas, organize around current injustices, and celebrate indigenous resistance."[3]

To paraphrase Walter Bruggemann, "Every time [an oppressed group] tells one of its stories, it means an assault on and refutation of another one."[4]

What we ask and how we spend our time matters. Sitting with the legacy of genocide, slavery, and exploitation are not how most of us want to spend a holiday weekend. But what could be more important for how we live in this world?

What will you do on Indigenous Peoples Day? How will you walk the perimeter of truth and speak the language of justice?
What stories will you listen to or tell so that we might come a little closer to a version of history that acknowledges the reality for those who weren't and aren't the colonizers?
Will you find out about the poets Joy Harjo wrote about?
Will you learn some new history? Maybe the history she wrote of?
Will you look at how we appropriate Tribes' names, images, place names, and stories in larger American culture, whether that's in sports teams, costumes, imagery, or elsewhere?
Will you learn about environmental struggles that Indigenous peoples are engage in and find a way to witness and respond in solidarity?
Will you move toward holding all the parts of our story?

And will you find and hold, perhaps at sunrise or at sunset, a time of stillness, the peace and beauty of the land, and the legacies that brought us to today?

I invite you, in this brief time of silence, to let your heart settle on some way you want to honor Indigenous Peoples Day.

[20 Second Pause]

Amen.

[3] http://www.indigenouspeoplesdayma.org/faq/, http://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/dod/indigenous-day

[4] Brueggemann, Walter. The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education (Kindle Location 753). Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.