

Draw the Circle Wide
Sermon, July 30, 2017
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The Unitarian Church in Charleston

The song “Draw the Circle Wide” came to have special meaning for me when I went on an intercultural immersion trip to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota in January 2010. The trip was part of my Master of Divinity Program at Wesley Theological Seminary. And yes, it was very cold in South Dakota in January.

For the Lakota people who live on the Pine Ridge Reservation, stories are an important part of their tradition. So in the spirit of this tradition I am going to tell you the story of my trip. And just so you know, it is also a Lakota custom for the hearers of a story to give gifts to the storyteller, so you can see me after church to do that!

This story is all about circles, something that is also important in the Lakota culture. Black Elk, holy man of the Oglala Lakota describes the symbol of the circle like this...

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything and everything tries to be round.

In the old days all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four quarters nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion.

Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back again to where they were.¹

¹Black Elk, “The Great Circle,” <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Wisdom/BlackElk.html>.

The students that I went with to Pine Ridge first had to define the circle of our own immersion group and get used to that culture. Our group included young and old, or older, shall we say. We had black and white, male and female, a Hungarian exchange student, Methodists, Lutherans, and even two Unitarian Universalists. We stayed at the Pine Ridge Retreat Center. We learned to get along and cooperate as a group as we did work projects putting plastic over windows of houses to keep out the bitter South Dakota winter winds.

Our group of students then expanded our circle as we formed relationships with the people of Pine Ridge. We sang the song “Draw the Circle Wide” for our hosts as we visited different places on the reservation. We shared worship and a potluck dinner at the Makasan Presbyterian Church. We were warmly welcomed by Asa the minister and his wife Tristita.

Each day we helped with the after school program at the retreat center where the children of the reservation came to play and have a hot meal. These children with their bright faces and dark eyes shining were main characters in the story as they shared their energy and excitement with us every day. We also got the opportunity to know Valerie Brown Eyes and hear her story. She had left the reservation but came back to learn Lakota crafts. Now she makes her living selling jewelry made with porcupine quills.

We saw signs of hope on the reservation such as the new transit system, the Red Cloud Indian School that sends 92 percent of its graduates to college, and the Oglala Lakota College that is providing greater opportunities for a college education on the reservation. We visited the offices of the Lakota Fund that gives loans and training to help start small businesses.

But the images of despair on the reservation are still haunting. We will never forget the dilapidated trailers where people lived, the junk cars that littered the yards, and the thin stray dogs that prowled outside.

Our group toured the reservation guided by tribal member Kelly Looking Horse. We came face to face with the long history of racism and oppression that has led to the stark realities of life on the reservation. The rate of diabetes on the reservation is eight times higher than in the rest of the United States. The alcoholism rate is estimated to be

as high as 80 percent.² According to a study published this year in the Journal of the American Medical Association, life expectancy in Oglala Lakota County where Pine Ridge Reservation is located is the lowest in the United States. People live an average of twenty years less than in counties with the highest life expectancy.³

Unemployment at Pine Ridge is about 80 percent. Our Wesley group visited the commodity warehouse on the reservation where the residents get free rations monthly based on treaty agreements. We helped people load up food supplies to take home. Kelly Looking Horse described how the people are in survival mode and stated that Native Americans are “institutionalized.” He said that when white people show up at a Native American house, it is assumed that they are there to arrest you or take away your kids.

Moving on to the Community Center, our group met senior citizens who were there for the noontime meal. A woman named Pansy told me about the schooling given to Native American children when she was a girl. She was taken away from her family and shipped off to boarding school when she was only four. The children were not allowed to speak the Lakota language at school and they didn’t understand English. Her cousin was punished for speaking Lakota by having a paper bag put over his head.

The next stop on our tour was the Wounded Knee Memorial. It was there in 1890 that that the US Calvary massacred several hundred Lakota Indians, primarily women and children, that they had been escorting. Today the monument is a rather plain bare site exposed to the prairie winds. At the burial ground Kelly Looking Horse gave each of us some ceremonial tobacco. As instructed, we offered it up to the sky and down to the earth and each said a silent prayer.

So at the end of this story my group of Wesley students was challenged to expand our circle further. We had to decide how to respond to our experience from our place in the wider world. We had to look to God or whatever we held sacred to determine what to do next. We needed to figure out how this story would go on for us.

² Re-Member, “Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.” <http://www.re-member.org/whypineridge.aspx>, 2017.

³“Longer Life Expectancy? It depends on Where you Live.” <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/life-expectancy-in-us-inequality-where-you-live/>, CBS Interactive Inc, 2017.

This story about the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation raises the question about how to respond to the problems of racism in our society today. Racism extends its destructive tentacles in many directions—against indigenous peoples, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and all those considered different from the dominant white culture. I know that many here at the Unitarian Church in Charleston have been engaged in the struggle against racism for some time, particularly through the Charleston Area Justice Ministry. There is always more to be done.

Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the need for two types of action to transform our society—direct self-transforming action and structure-transforming action.⁴ For many of us, work on personal transformation requires making some honest acknowledgements and accepting responsibility. Although one may not personally engage in racist behavior one can be complicit in racism because we are all part of a society that is built on racist constructs. These constructs provide whites with economic and social benefits and privileges at the expense of people of other races.

Wellesley College researcher Peggy McIntosh sat down and made a list of the daily effects of white privilege in her life. Some examples of such privileges for whites are:

- “ I can do well in a challenging situation without being a credit to my race.”
- “Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of my financial reliability.”
- “If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.”⁵

And the list goes on. These are just a few examples. Those who have white privilege are challenged to think of examples of it in their lives. Whites can seek personal transformation by admitting rather than denying this privilege.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: the Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington (New York, 1986), 643.

⁵ Peggy McIntosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” <http://www.welcometable.net/archivedsite/documents/white-priv.pdf>, 1988.

Emphasizing the necessity for personal transformation in combatting racism is not to say by any means that the other critical components of fighting racism can be ignored. These include striving to make structural changes in our society at large.

I would argue that internal transformation must go hand in hand with the external components of anti-racism work. Acknowledging one's role, either intentional or unintentional, in racist practices can form the basis for reaching outward.

As Unitarian Universalists we need to proceed to get our own house in order. We can look at who is in power in our leadership in our congregations and in our greater denomination. We can examine whether our churches are truly welcoming to all.

In the wider world, we can participate in efforts to dismantle the structures in our system built on discriminatory practices. We can continue to work here in Charleston to ensure equal benefits and rights for people of all races in terms of housing, health, education, and the justice system. We can continue to fight for the cause of immigration rights and support our church's efforts to help refugee families. We can seek to change the holiday of "Columbus Day" into a celebration of "Indigenous People's Day" that lifts up justice for indigenous peoples rather than validating colonialism and oppression.

Native American activist and theologian George Tinker emphasizes the larger structural context that breeds racism. He asserts, "The economic well-being, the stability of the United States *depends upon* oppression. Capitalism is built on necessarily oppressing other people."⁶ He advocates reimagining a new way of being that requires resistance to the status quo.⁷ Honesty about how we look at ourselves and our history is necessary in order to reimagine a better future.

As described by one of my professors at Wesley Beverly Mitchell in her book *Plantations and Death Camps*, racism is a defacement of humanity brought about by the failure to see the sacredness in others.⁸ Whether or not you call it God, the concept of an inner sacredness serves to reinforce the belief in our connection to the holy, our connection to each other, and our connection to the rest of nature.

⁶ George Tinker, *Soul Work* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 122.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸ Beverly E. Mitchell, *Plantations and Death Camps; Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 50.

Such an understanding of our connectedness and our common humanity provides the basis for the first principle of Unitarian Universalism upholding the inherent worth and dignity of every person. By striving for both personal and structural transformation, we as a people of faith can work toward making this principle a reality.

In the words of Black Elk,

The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.⁹

Together we can draw the circle wide and wider still. We owe it to the children of Pine Ridge and to future generations everywhere.

May it be so and blessed be.

⁹ Black Elk, "The Great Circle," <http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-Html-Wisdom/BlackElk.html>.

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