

*A Seat at The Table: Looking at Our American Past*

Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill

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America. What does it mean for something to feel American? What are some experiences in your life, or places you've been, that made you feel connected to your American past?

As some of you know, I am a graduate student of early American history, and work as a docent for a historical society in Greenwich. With a holiday and theme this week that encourages us to look at our national American past, being able to place myself in an accurate setting for inspiration was a huge benefit. I'll take you there with me now, if only through imagination.

I am sitting in a kitchen from the 1700's. The floors are original, thick, dark brown and beautiful, and pair gorgeously with the red accent wall paint, that deep and dusty red you only find in an old building. The giant fireplace takes up half the room, and there's a hint of smokey smell in the air from the last time it was lit. The cool light pours through the window, lighting up the countless scratches on the table where I sit. How many people might have sat here in the past, how many meals must have made their way across this surface that I am now writing on.

Out the window and across the green field, I can see the barn and the granary- behind it a field of grain that extends far back to the trees on the horizon line. To the other side, one of the local peacocks saunters lazily across the road- very few cars drive through, and this bird knows he runs this town.

The leaves are golden and gorgeous. There is not a sound besides the old grandfather clock ticking. I have a feeling that if I were to dim the electric lights and park my car down the street out of sight, I could convince my brain that I was in fact in the past. I take a deep breath.

This. To me, this is that feeling of "America".

The chair I am sitting on has the word "Mayflower" carved into it. It is not in fact from the mayflower ship, however carbon wood dating says that it is from the 1600's. It is low and sturdy, stronger than any other chair in the building made after it. I sink back in the chair and contemplate- the Mayflower.

Oh, the Mayflower.

Sometimes we take for granted the experience of early pilgrims during that first year. We don't recognize the true horror and suffering involved in the thanksgiving story. It was a time where "the living were scarce able to bury the dead." Of the 102 pilgrims who sailed on the Mayflower, only 57 of them made it to the first thanksgiving. Meanwhile, the new diseases brought by Europeans would kill over 80% of the population, most of which before the pilgrims ever landed. Native Americans and Pilgrims alike experienced a mass death event as worlds and germs collided, both in such droves that both all involved "Found their cultural tools insufficient." Neither group could explain or understand what was happening to them.

This moment in American history was a brief moment of universal suffering on both sides that United both groups, though in the background, the machine of coloniality was being created, and imbalances were being drawn that would exponentially grow and tip the scales of power into one of the greatest atrocities in human history.

In this way, we can understand Thanksgiving as the best relationship that they had, a brief moment of respite, the calm before the storm. Perhaps it is better that we remember the good times, for there is very little glory in the frontier wars to come- wars, such as the Pequot and

Metacom, that would be the bloodiest in relation to all in American history, even until today. If that doesn't make sense, think on it- 30% of the colonist population was killed in the wars, as well as 60% of the remaining native. This violence and animosity would fuel the flames of an ideology of war- an exponential explosion of hatred for native Americans, and a belief that the only solution was their removal, through physical and cultural genocide.

Studying early American culture can be incredibly exhausting, in that to understand the motivations of your colonial subjects, to "get in the heads of the pilgrims" you have to confront some truly heinous and racist world views. How can I relate to the pilgrims on any level without conceding some of my core values?

There is a saying that my history professor has drilled into me and my classmates- no one in history acts irrationally. No one in history is motivated by pure evil- or rather, no one thinks they are evil- they are motivated by their culture, their trauma, and their ideologies- motivations that we as a modern audience have the hindsight to categorize as bad.

Trying to relate to historical people is hard because of how different their values were, but we can understand people without sharing their worldviews. We need to understand, to learn from the past.

No one in history acts irrationally. I can't say that if I had been born in that time period in those conditions, I wouldn't have held those beliefs. We all think ourselves rational beings, as good people with good motivations. But if we do not call into question our own privileges and biases, we fall into the same perpetual trap. The native American genocide is not just one of physical violence, but of cultural genocide too. Think of all the puritans, how deep they held their religious views- deep enough to cross the world for their beliefs - when they went out to civilize, proselytize, and convert the native population from their "barbaric" way of life, they believed they were saving their souls. They believed they were doing the right thing.

To say that a group is simply evil is reductive, and in not being able to relate, we miss out on an opportunity to see the ways in which patterns of colonialism sneak into our own lives. It is not, "that was then, and this is now". Everything is connected. Question everything.

As a historian, you are trained to see the veins of ideology and find out the motivations and biases of your subject. This is something I've had the privilege to learn, a conclusion I've reached after challenging my own assumptions.

When I was a kid and first started learning about history, mainly through PBS, I used to imagine all the ways I would travel back in time and interact with the people I was learning about. All the time I wished I could bring a solar powered laptop with me to show historical figures movies about their lives. Or imagining what it would be like to invite Hamilton to see the musical. The most common daydream I had was how I would use time travel to help save the native Americans from the impending threat of the arriving European powers. In my fantasy, there would be a time travel agency that would create briefcases full of vaccines, and another with high tech weapons, and a team of us would go up and down the coast of America to every native tribe, preparing them for the arrival of the colonizers. Couldn't be too hard right?

If only the natives could have been strong enough to fight back, right? If only they had been civilized enough to engage in proper warfare (sarcasm). Setting aside total ignorance for the variety, complexity and expanse of various tribes, native Americans were not a monolith; and many communities were in fact, already very much aware of what was coming. Columbus sailed the Ocean blue in 1492, remember? That means a hundred years before the first thanksgiving. In fact, the first introduction in Plymouth in March 1621 was by a native american named Samoset, who went to the colonists, introduced himself in English and asked if they had any beer!

My childhood fantasy was naive, and also, one that reflects a pattern of white savior ideology- going back to our very subjects. For example, look at part of the motivation for Massachusetts colonization- to help save the natives from their wretched state. But Many early North American colonists, especially those in Massachusetts, were motivated by the idea that they needed to save the natives from the violence of the Spanish- these heathenish, CATHOLIC Spaniards, who were going to convert them to the WRONG religion! They thought that by going to America and bringing them protestant civilization, they would save them both from Spanish extension and from the wrath of god. The Massachusetts state seal was the image of a native American, with the Latin words, “Come over and Help us!” Though the phrase was changed, the image of a Native American is still featured on the Massachusetts flag, a symbol many Native American activist groups have tried to change over the years because of its connection- showing how far we haven’t gone.

Come over and help us!

So, we see a pattern of white colonizers who thought that by conversion and civilizing missions, they were doing what was “best” for them. Who was I, a seventh grader who had just watched Guns Germs and Steel for the first time, to think that I had personally figured out the solution?

At the end of the day, all this talk of hypotheticals and if we could turn back time is pointless.

What if, what could have been- hypotheticals have no place in a history classroom. History may be a story, but it is not a fantasy.

Was there ever another option, besides this violent coming together of two very different worlds?

There are certainly those who would say no. Some historians look at this in the long perspective, and describe the changing ideologies, cultures and economies as a kind of natural event. Though capitalism as we think of it does not exist yet, the swirl of that storm had started and was gathering strength through imperial British power and mercantilism. Events being set in motion as momentum is gathered - you can’t stop a war, just like you can’t stop a hurricane.

Modernity is a word used a lot in historical discussion, and is tied to the concept of civilization, they are twin sisters. Modernity is a way of looking at the grand expanse of history as a constant evolution forward, with technology, economic policy, and culture coming together in a way where all paths converge to this singularity on the horizon. You can’t stop progress. The question being, who decides what is progress?

Modernity is an essentially classically liberal idea, dating back to the thinkers of this time period such as Locke. Locke said that “as time goes on, civilization advances, and things “get better”. This concept has been the basis of manifest destiny. That the native way of life was primitive, that they would eventually become assimilated into the new global western world. Were these philosophers proposing these theories as a justification for their own practices, a self-fulfilling prophecy? The capitalist’s argument, that “if I didn’t take advantage of others, someone else would?”

So, do we take Modernity as an inevitability? Just because that’s the way things have been going, does that mean it will always stay the same? When do we start to question the narrative that defines western civilization? We may not be able to change the past, but we can change how we tell the story- where it starts, who are the heroes and villains, fact vs fiction. Still, the truth doesn’t take away the hurt.

If things could have been different, they would be, but also, we have only what we got.

You can't change the past, yet we still benefit from it. These things I've discussed are things I've learned through education. Who has access to educational space? Who writes our history? My privilege has allowed me to pursue education and gain access to opportunities I wouldn't have had, for example, sitting in the Mayflower chair, writing at the old table. Who gets access to this sacred historical space?

Beyond any of that, the ability to enjoy the American past, and think fondly back to these times and objects, is a privilege. Can native and African American people enjoy any sense of respite or sentimentality in looking towards the past? Why is the past more holy than the present?

And FURTHERMORE, why is this story the story of our national beginning, instead of that of Jamestown? Is it because of the massive slave trade that cannot be divorced from the context, or sanitized in the same way as the pilgrim story? That the true founding of America is a story that has, on every level, built on the exploitation of African Americans and extermination of native Americans from its inception.

In 1630, nine years after the first Thanksgiving, John Winthrop among others, finished construction of the First Church of Boston. Though not on the Mayflower and part of the "first batch" himself, John Winthrop was the leader of this puritan community, as governor. To us as a modern audience, we might be most familiar with him from a quote of one of his sermons, given as their boat reached America after the arduous journey across the sea- titled "A Model of Christian Charity"

"For we must consider ourselves that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

One of the most famous sermons in American history, it is as much about God as it is about our national identity. Quoted by JFK, Reagan, and Obama alike, the metaphor is one that extends beyond any one-party ideology.

Is America a shining city on a hill, to be looked at as a triumph? Or, through the terror and trauma of manifest destiny, is our nation a failed experiment, a cautionary tale?

There's a reason that I bring up John Winthrop, and it is the same reason that motivated these thoughts altogether. That church - that building - The First Church in Boston, still stands to this day. And that congregation is a Unitarian Church. The reason you don't see puritans around anymore is because their religious tradition changed over time- and is a part not just of our national history, but our congregational history as Unitarian Universalists.

Are we a city on a hill? How can we be a good example? And how can we learn from the past, not only to avoid similar mistakes, but to heal the trauma? As Americans, in giving thanks for what we have, we must also recognize what has been taken, and what was never ours to begin with. What is America? A story to be told, in full, no exemptions, a story that has not yet been told. Let us pick up the pen and write anew.