

**What Florida Won't Teach About Columbus**  
**Rev. DC Fortune**  
**UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley**  
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Christopher Columbus was not a hero. He did not know quite where he was headed, didn't know where he was once he got there, and didn't find any of what he was looking for. Instead, he introduced some very real horrors upon the people and lands that he did encounter.

Columbus was sent west across the ocean for all the reasons explorers went anywhere in those days: to find riches and wealth and resources to exploit, to claim new lands for whatever government hired him, and to navigate a shorter route to India and the traders located there.

As a subtext of this agenda was a command and blessing by the Church. In 1492, the same year that Columbus set sail, Spain Isabella and Ferdinand expelled all Jews from Spain. The Iberian Peninsula was prime real estate in centuries of conflict and conquest among the Holy Roman Empire, a large and thriving Jewish community there, and the conquering forces of Muslims originating out of the Turkish and Ottoman Empires and lands to the east.

Isabella and Ferdinand expelled the Jews just as they were sending priests with Columbus to propagate Christianity upon whomever he might encounter in his exploration, and to lend legitimacy to the Spanish quest for greater land acquisition.

It is important to remember, at this point in the narrative, that any culture's foundational story plays a significant role in how that culture behaves and conducts itself for all time. What happens at the beginning sets the tone for events that follow. Like a cast iron pan, systems carry with them the flavor of their birth story. If you season a new pan by cooking spicy chorizo sausage in it, the things you cook in that pan for a long time will bear a hint of that spice.

And so, when Columbus arrived in this hemisphere, he carried with him more than just 90 disgruntled sailors and a couple of priests. He brought a culture of imperialism and colonialism, of European and Christian exceptionalism and assumed superiority. People who were not Christians or of European ancestry were simply considered to be less than human – animals, even – and available like merchant goods for the consumption of men.

When he arrived on Hispaniola, Columbus first made friends with the natives, then captured and enslaved them, bringing some back to Spain as gifts for Ferdinand and

Isabella. In return for the gifts and his efforts, the monarchs offered Columbus governorship of the island and its surrounding lands, and a fancy title as Admiral of the Ocean Sea. He was not a good governor of land and people and shortly faced mutinies and rebellions, and he developed a penchant for killing and enslaving the island natives.

Columbus came to this hemisphere with the idea of consuming what he found here, and he did. Acquisition and exploitation were the charge he was given by his sponsors, and that is what he set out to do. He brought back fruits and vegetables, musical instruments of the island people, their jewelry and art, and as much of their culture as could be sold in the royal court of Spain.

It is only slightly ironic, that of all the things Columbus brought back with him from the Americas, it was the previously unknown strain of syphilis that decimated his crew and then great swaths of Europe around the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually it settled down into more of a chronic ailment that killed people slowly, but those first few years were brutal and deadly. It is perhaps the only real punishment Spain experienced for its colonization of the new world.

There was a time not so long ago when men were universally understood to be entitled to sexual access to women's bodies for their own entertainment and pleasure. Less than 50 years ago, spousal rape was not illegal. One hundred years ago, white men could use women of color in any degrading or dehumanizing way they wanted, largely free of recompense. 150 years ago, white men could kill their enslaved people as punishment for any offense, real or conjured, without fear of punishment. Women, and all people of color, were property, things to be owned and maintained in whatever way the master felt was appropriate.

This culture did not spring fresh from the earth when our nation was founded. Nor did it emerge as the trade in enslaved African people grew in the American south. The culture of treating some people differently than others was delivered to America by an Italian guy underwritten by the Spanish crown, who was desperately off course for his intended destination.

In his early descriptions of the inhabitants he found, Columbus wrote about how they had no concept of private property, no greed, no cruelty. They were helpful and kind, and responded with grief but not arms when he kidnapped some of their members. The idea of consuming other's resources instead of sharing was foreign to them. Why engage in conquest when there was enough abundance for everyone to have plenty?

This is the weekend when the United States celebrates the efforts of Christopher Columbus, the last of a series of explorers to discover the North American continent, but the first to have the backing of both church and crown.

The official Columbus Day holiday was created by US president Benjamin Harrison in 1892, in response to the lynching of 11 Italian immigrants by an anti-Italian mob in New Orleans the year before. The details of Columbus' adventure were not widely known then as they are now, and so it was easy to spin a heroic story from whole cloth when the need presented itself. Columbus Day was intended to be a one-time event, but eventually grew to be an annual national holiday. In Italian communities in larger cities, there are parades and celebrations, and a procession that carries a statue of Saint Christopher through the community. It has become as potent a symbol of national heritage as St. Patrick is to Irish Americans. Old Pat has his own problematic story as well, I assure you. But that is another sermon for another day.

We now live in this white, European-based culture that treats the world like its own grand flea market, where trinkets can be collected and riches exploited, like a buffet of pleasures to be consumed, without regard for the human lives involved.

Columbus didn't discover America. The Vikings were here first, and other folks, and even another Italian explorer named Vespucci made the trip before Columbus did. He didn't prove that the world is round. Galileo had started that rumor, and by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it was pretty much accepted as fact. People didn't have a clear idea of how vast the planet was, and so were not allowing for the entire western hemisphere to be in the way of a Western passage, but still. Columbus didn't prove anything new and didn't discover anything that hadn't already been reported. In fact, he did exponentially more harm than good in his actions.

The question now falls to us: What are we to do with this knowledge? Truth is an uncomfortable thing. Once you see a truth and acknowledge it, you cannot UN-see it. There is no going back. We cannot retreat to a cartoon story of the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria bobbing merrily across the ocean to "discover" a new place and make new friends with the cheerful, primitive people they found.

Once we know the depth of such a truth, there is a very human resistance to claim any part of such a horrific story. That was then, this is now. How can I be responsible for any of that? How am I supposed to deal with this?

This is why Florida Governor Ron DeSantis does not want accurate history taught – because it makes people face uncomfortable truths and acknowledge the lingering, still active culture of harm that exists today.

I have been reading recently a book called “On Repentance and Repair, Making Amends in an Unapologetic World,” by Rabbi Dayna Ruttenberg. It is the UUA Common Read for this year, and the UUCSV Board is reading it as a group. There is a copy or two that might be available if others want to read it too.

In this book, Rabbi Ruttenberg talks about harm in three realms: harm done, harm felt, and harm observed.

We are all guilty of doing harm, she says. We also have all experienced harm, and we have all seen harm done to others.

This is not about separating the world into good or bad people, but about a process through which we can repair relationships damaged by harm done.

What on earth can we possibly do to heal the harm done by Columbus, and the harm perpetuated through centuries by subsequent generations of this brutal culture of consumptive, white supremacist imperialism?

Well, as with most big problems, there are multiple steps, and the first step is always to acknowledge the harm done. No, it wasn't your fault. No, you didn't do it. But harm was done, and we need to acknowledge that. Harm was done and we can feel empathy with those harmed.

Once we get a handle on understanding the harm that has been done, then we can look at the next steps to repair that harm as much as is possible at this late date. An apology means nothing if it is not backed up by changed behavior. And changing our behavior takes practice and learning. I have faith that we, as human beings, are able to do this kind of work.

Our world, and our denomination, are at a turning point in terms of how we understand our relationships with each other. The Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries produced a culture of radical individualism, of personal responsibility and personal freedom. Today we are seeing a shift toward an understanding of the importance of relationships. Our focus is shifting from me and you to us, as a community. Our freedoms will not go away, but they are being connected spiritually and practically with an understanding of our responsibility and obligation to the communities in which we live.

We cannot live in a world any longer where some people are “others.” Any child that is hungry is our concern. Any person in danger is our concern. We are living in community at many levels, from the community of people in this room, to the community of your family unit, your school classroom or workplace, pick up basketball team, bridge club, neighborhood, town, county, state, country, and world.

There is no “other” any longer – there are not people who can be dismissed as unimportant, or less than. This is a growing realization that we are experiencing, and it is uncomfortable, particularly after all of that individuality stuff we’ve been doing for so many years.

The heritage of Unitarian Universalism is steeped in the white supremacist, empire-building, culture-consuming cultures from which we emerged. We carry the seasoning of all of the things that have been cooked in the cast iron pan of our history. We carry the bitter taste of profits from the slave trade. We carry the flavor of transcendental wonder. We carry the flavor of the eugenics movement that was so attractive to Unitarians around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We carry the flavor of the civil rights work we did, and of our failures associated with black empowerment within our own community.

That’s a lot of stuff flavoring the things we do today. With cast iron cookware, overpowering flavors can be scrubbed down to the point where they no longer prevent us from cooking something marvelous. Cultures and communities are much the same. There is a lot of work to do, and it will take determination and real effort, but it is possible, and it is worth it.

Our heritage is one of constant growth and learning. We are faced now with another big hunk of learning, and I have faith that we, as a love-based spiritual and religious community, are up to the task.

May you have a blessed and thoughtful holiday weekend.

Amen.