

Listen to, do not consume, Native American Culture

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Listen, do not consume.

Eight years ago, I stepped into the pulpit at a small Congregation in southern Illinois to preach about Christopher Columbus and what a rotten so-and-so he was.

Except, that sermon got set aside that weekend when a video found its way into the public realm from the scrap box of stuff leftover when a tv-reality program went to air.

The clip became known as “the Access Hollywood tape,” and it flipped an already bonkers political season onto its head as all of the United States – and much of the world – listened and watched as one of the two major party candidates for US president that year bragged about groping unsuspecting women by their genitals and joking that “when you’re a star, they just let you do it.”

It seems quaint now to consider how many leaders of that candidate’s party at the time howled in protest at such a disgusting display of unabashed vulgarity. Conversations were had about how to replace him at the top of the ticket and how this could truly seal the fate of the Grand Old Party for that election cycle, and perhaps for years to come.

Remember those simpler, more innocent times? When we thought ethics and character mattered in politics in our nation?

Yeah.

That candidate then and the same candidate eight years later has an utterly unevolved approach to life: the world is a buffet from which I am free to gorge myself, with no regard for other humans or their lives.

Last week I read the most recent book by Mary Trump, niece of the Former Occupant. In it, she describes growing up in a nightmare of dysfunction and malignant narcissism that revolved around her grandfather, Fred Sr. Her father was Fred Junior, who proved to be a bitter disappointment to his father, who shifted his attention to Fred’s younger brother Donald.

The children in the family were played off against each other. None had a place in the family that was safe or secure – all had to compete for attention – there was nothing that looked like love to be had. Cruelty was the model for power, and the patriarch wielded it with as much glee as skill, with predictable results. Young Donald grew up to be the psychopath we see today, and all the other siblings struggled to find success – or

at least avoid disappointing the old man. It was a truly grim read. No one in that family survives whole.

The family ethos revolved (and still does, to a large degree) around consumption and empire-building. More is more. Bigger is better, make someone else pay, give the minimum and demand the most.

It is a sad commentary on our culture that *that* family dynamic fits so cleanly into the empire-building ideal upon which our nation was founded. England wanted more colonies, more property, more resources, to claim as her own. The world was her oyster, as it was, and anything that white Europeans “discovered” was theirs to claim, no matter who might be living there at the time.

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 came to America by an Italian guy underwritten by the Spanish crown, who was desperately off course for his intended destination.

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 – at that time there was only the Holy Catholic Church, still steeped in the military conquest and expansionism culture of the Holy Roman Empire – the second order of the day was to “civilize” and convert to Christianity whatever kind of savage natives they might encounter, and to that end, priests accompanied soldiers among the ship’s companions.

And so, when Columbus arrived in this hemisphere, he carried with him more than just 90 disgruntled sailors. 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 the 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 that's what he did. Acquisition and exploitation was the charge he was given by his sponsors, and that's 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 perhaps only slightly ironic that of all the things Columbus brought back with him from the Americas, it was probably the previously unknown strain of syphilis that decimated his crew and then great swaths of Europe around the turn of the 16th 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.

My original thought when considering Columbus Day was to examine the ways in which Europeans have historically raided foreign cultures for their riches and art, while doing profound violence to the people of those cultures. This is a topic that often comes up in October, when we celebrate Indigenous People's Day.

And we look around us in 2024 and see a 78-year-old rich white guy who views the world around him as his own personal buffet of pleasures to be consumed, without regard for the human lives involved.

Columbus didn't discover America. The Vikings were here first, and some other folks, and even another Italian explorer named Vespucci made the trip before Columbus did. Columbus didn't prove that the world is round. Galileo had started that rumor, and by the end of the 15th century, pretty much it was accepted as fact, no matter what the pope said. 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.

What happened was, he got good publicity. He became popular after the American Revolutionary War when new Americans were crafting their own national history and English heroes were not terribly popular. Columbus was Italian and hired by Spain, plus he was kind of lost to history before that, so his story could be mostly created out of whole cloth, weaving in details for texture and character, and voila! America had an early hero. It didn't matter that his bio was pure fiction, that his finances were a mess, and that he failed at managing the riches his sponsors gave to him. He was a good story as long as you didn't look too closely, and that worked for America.

Good thing we're past all that now, hmm?

October is the month in which we explore DEEP LISTENING. Over the centuries, that has not been a particularly popular skill set for those coming from European colonizer culture. Listen? To whom? It's not like there were any *people* in the western hemisphere when Columbus arrived.

Our reading today from Rev. Myke Johnson gives clear instructions to those of us who are white in this modern society: Native Culture is not ours to consume. Native art is not ours to use as decorations in our homes. Last year, I drove across the southern part of the United States, from San Diego to New Orleans. I saw so many tourist attractions and rest areas along the way, hawking "Indian art" of cheap shiny metal embedded with turquoise-dyed stones and little plastic Indian headdress replicas with plastic beads and brightly dyed plastic feathers. Most of them were marked "Made in China" on the bottom. White people's capitalism is grim to observe at close range.

What I didn't see was signs inviting people to stop at any of dozens of Indian Reservations along I-10. There were small markers that read "Apache or Navaho or Gila Nation Land," and nothing more. Occasionally there would be an exit to take travelers to those places, but there were no signs hawking jewelry or art, or cheesy plastic tomahawks.

Because the Natives living there are not offering their culture to us to consume. They are doing all they can to preserve their history and culture after hundreds of years of efforts by white people to erase them entirely.

If we want to learn about native culture, if we want to be allies and support those who are of American Indian heritage, we must listen, and we must listen deeply.

The sins of our fathers have left a gash in Indian culture as deep as the Grand Canyon and as wide as the Mojave Desert. Generations of "advanced culture" have done unspeakable harm to our native neighbors, and most of us really cannot fathom the enormity of that generational trauma.

So let us listen, then, to what Native peoples have to tell us, even if all they offer is silence. We are in no position to demand education from them. We must do our own homework. We must read, and read sources from the Native experience, not just the white people's version of history. We must listen, and not argue. We must listen and feel empathy. We must listen, and not try to police the tone of righteously angry people.

Listening deeply means we must do just that – listen, without talking, without arguing, without asking "but what about ..."

No. Listening requires humility.

Listening requires continued humility. We cannot truly understand the generational trauma our ancestors have visited upon the ancestors of our contemporary Indian neighbors.

Listening is spiritual practice.

Which is to say that it *takes practice*.

Deep listening requires us to be willing to be wrong, to be corrected, to feel discomfort at our own complicity in a system that we did not create, but one that we perpetuate and benefit from, however unintentionally.

Deep listening requires practice.

Listening without arguing is *hard work*. It is not something many of us have been taught from an early age, and it is something that only some of us have spent a lot of time focusing on as adults.

But, like any practice, deep listening is a thing we can do, badly at first, but we can improve as we go. We can listen to learn. We can listen to develop connections with others. We can listen and get a greater understanding of some ancestral wisdom.

The best time to start listening is a lifetime ago. The second-best time to start listening is today.

May each of us spend some time this week intentionally engaged in the practice of deep listening and see how it affects us and our relationships.

This is my prayer.

May it be so.