

**“Belonging to the Earth”**  
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
October 13, 2019

*The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Audio recordings of sermons can be found online at <http://ucmvt.org/worship/sermons/>.*

## Reading

Selection from *Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-based Change* by Sherri Mitchell<sup>1</sup>

“The relationships that exist between people and place are often memorialized through defining words that merge into story. As Indigenous people, our lives comprise these words and the stories that they illustrate...Every living thing has its own creation song, its own language, and its own story. In order to live harmoniously with the rest of creation, we must be willing to listen to and respect all of the harmonies that are moving around us.”

“I was a young woman, in my early twenties. It was a warm early summer day and I was seated in a meditative state in my backyard. At that time, I was learning how to track energy. For several months, I had been deepening my ability to see the life force that permeates our world. As I was sitting there, I noticed a tiny ant crawling across a blade of grass. As I watched the ant move along, his little body began to light up. Then, the blade of grass that he was walking on lit up. As I sat there and watched, the entire area surrounding me began to light up...While I sat there breathing with the world around me, the firm lines of my being began to fade. I felt myself expanding and merging with all that I was observing. There was suddenly no separation between me, the ant, the grass, the trees, and the birds. We were breathing with one breath, beating with the pulse of one heart. I was consumed by this achingly beautiful and complete sense of kinship with the entire creation. This single moment of open awareness allowed all of the teachings that I had been raised with to sink deeply into my heart. I got it.”

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<sup>1</sup> Sherri Mitchell, *Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-based Change* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018), 45-48.

## Sermon

I want to start my sermon this morning by expressing my gratitude for the indigenous people who have shared their stories and experiences in public ways through their writing and speaking allowing me (and all of us) to learn from their lives and their wisdom. I know, too, that there are many others whose stories stay hidden or buried and for their lives and stories, I am grateful as well.

How do any of us come to know to whom and where we belong?

Sherri Mitchell, whose writing I just shared, learned this early on having grown up on a small Indian reservation on an island in central Maine where her people have lived for over ten thousand years. Her place in creation was taught to her through oral traditions passed down from generation to generation.

For Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation whose family was forced from their land, whose grandfather attended an Indian boarding school, and who grew up in the fields and woods of upstate New York, this is a complex question. She was not raised amongst the Potawatomi people and she shares that in the absence of a cultural elder to whom she could ask - who am I in the world and what is the world like - she turned instead to the woods and the fields which became her doorway to culture. She says, "In the absence of human elders, I had plant elders instead."<sup>2</sup>

Our worship theme during the month of October is "Belonging." We ask, "What does it mean to be a people of Belonging?"

Although Sherri Mitchell and Robin Wall Kimmerer are both indigenous, they came to know their place and their sense of belonging in different ways. For both of them, however, belonging - to the land and to a community that goes back tens of thousands of years - is central to their life stories.

A sense of belonging is something that I believe we all yearn for. We yearn to feel that we are included, that we are known, that we have a place amongst others.

So often, our relationship to place is a key part of our sense of belonging.

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<sup>2</sup> On Being with Krista Tippett, Robin Wall Kimmerer: The Intelligence in All Kinds of Life, July 19, 2018, <https://onbeing.org/programs/robin-wall-kimmerer-the-intelligence-in-all-kinds-of-life-jul2018>.

We, Unitarian Universalists, acknowledge the centrality of place in our spiritual lives by naming Earth-centered traditions as one of the source we draw upon for wisdom and guidance in forming our beliefs and for making ethical choices in living.

These sources are outlined in a small card in the cardholder in your pews and also in the gray, Singing the Living Tradition, hymnal in your pews. This church year, I will be gearing at least six of my sermons towards one of these sources asking how can this particular source of wisdom speak into the times we are living in.

The sixth source that we have identified as Unitarian Universalists is “Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.” It was added to the then list of five sources in 1995.

Indigenous people in what we now identify as the United States for millennia have celebrated the sacred circle of life and continue to today.

For those of us who are not native to this place, part of our journey of belonging is to learn more about both the natural history of this place we now reside and also the history of the first peoples who were here whose stories have been erased from the mainstream history we have come to know and continue to tell generation after generation. And with Vermont celebrating Indigenous Peoples’ Day as an official state holiday for the first time tomorrow, it seems like a good time to bring this history and story into our awareness.

I myself am still early in my own journey of learning about this land on which I now reside and the earliest people who called this home. This feels important to me - essential really - to feeling a strong sense of belonging here - in a place where place and the land matter so greatly to people. It has taken several years of visiting Vermont and now living in Vermont to feel myself more a part of the natural environment here - to acclimate to the hills and valleys and rivers (and long winters) that go with life in this northern climate and landscape. I am still on this journey and I have come to realize how essential it is to know the stories of the land that go back years and years, to know the stories of the people who have been stewards of this land for years and years.

I want to express thanks to Liza Earle-Centers who participated in a workshop on Teaching Abenaki Culture in the Classroom this past August and shared some of her learnings and resource with me.

Since moving to Vermont, I have learned that the Abenaki are the native inhabitants of this region. The Western Abenaki who have inhabited this land for thousands of years consider N'dakinna (pronounced nn DA kin na) their homeland. It is the "Dawnland,"<sup>3</sup> the place where the sun first shines at daybreak. A description of the "dawn land" on the website of the Co'wasuck Band of the Pennacook Abenaki is quite detailed and shows how the land and waters of the earth are central to indigenous identity and sense of belonging.<sup>4</sup>

The description begins in the northwestern corner of N'dakinna where the Abenaki, Algonquin, and Mohawk nations meet which is where the Chateauguay River and the St. Lawrence River meet near Montreal. It continues to describe the multitude of waterways - lakes, rivers and creeks named for particular characteristics such as 'the river which has long turns' and 'rocky place' - across the northern portion of the land to the east down south and to the west as well as the significant mountain peaks with names meaning 'moose head mountain' and 'saddle mountain'. The contours of land and water give shape and name to this place where the Abenaki have belonged for generations upon generations going back to just after the Ice Age.

A watercolor painting by the artist Amy Hook called "Aerial View of N'dakina" shows what the "Dawn Land" would like like from way up in the sky. There are no borders or lines instead the land is defined by its waterways and mountain ranges.

The land acknowledgement that we started our service with today is a way of bringing more centrally into our awareness the relationship between people and place that precedes us. This is a legacy and history that we are a part of and our own sense of belonging is expanded when we honor the original human inhabitants of the land.

Today, there are four recognized bands or tribes of the Abenaki in Vermont: the Elnu, Koasek, Missisquoi, and Nulhegan bands. The Elnu tribe is mostly located in southern Vermont; the Koasek in the eastern part of the state; the Missisquoi in the northwestern corner; and the Nulhegan in the Northeast Kingdom.

The history of indigenous peoples all over the world and here in this particular piece of land we now call Vermont is a history of thriving, decimation, return, reclaiming. This story continues today.

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<sup>3</sup> The old Abenaki word for Dawnland is Wobanakik.

<sup>4</sup> "N'dakina - Our Homelands & People," <http://www.cowasuck.org/history/ndakina.cfm>.

A relationship to the earth has been integral throughout this entire history with cultural, spiritual, economic, and political significance. This sense of belonging is soul-deep as Sherri Mitchell describes in the reading I shared of her experience really feeling her connection to and one-ness with all beings - with the breath of the Earth itself.

I heard a similar sentiment shared by Melody Walker Brook in a talk she delivered at Tedx Stowe in April of 2018 sharing what it means to weave a cultural thread through seven generations.<sup>5</sup> Melody Walker Brook is a citizen of the Abenaki Elnu band and an educator, activist, and artist. There are many meaningful points she makes in the nine minute talk, and I encourage you to watch it.

One teaching that struck me was the idea passed down by her Abenaki ancestors that all that is a part of creation is a person and therefore has a spirit, a consciousness and will. Each of us human persons is to hold all beings, all non-human persons, with as much esteem as we hold ourselves. “Ego has no place in my world,” she says.

This kind of humility is powerful and difficult for those of us geared to place human agency, concerns and desires in the center. Yet, this humility, I think is key to discovering true belonging - belonging that is rooted in the very earth we travel upon and depend upon for our existence.

So, what would it mean to become indigenous to a place? That is, to be so natural to a place that it seems we come from it? That it holds our origins.

Robin Wall Kimmerer poses this question in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*.

After following this train of thought for a while, she suggests that perhaps this isn't possible.

“*Indigenous* is a birthright word,” she writes. “No amount of time or caring changes history or substitutes for soul-deep fusion with the land...But if people do not feel

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<sup>5</sup> Weaving a thread through the 7 generations, Melody Walker Brook, TEDxStowe, April 26, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFSRiQ2h6NY>.

indigenous, can they nevertheless enter into the deep reciprocity that renews the world? Is this something that can be learned? Where are the teachers?"<sup>6</sup>

And then, she remembers one of the plant teachers she has come to know - *Plantago major*, the common plantain. Here, some of you may know it as Broad Plantain, or just, Plantain, a common weed in Vermont's pastures.

It is also known as Englishman's Footstep because the plant came over from Europe with English settlers and seemed to follow everywhere they went cropping up along wagon roads and railroads - spreading its low, flat leaves and tiny seeds along the way.

At first the Native people were distrustful of this plant. They soon learned, however, that the leaves when rolled or chewed were good first aid for cuts, burns, and insect bites. They learned that the plant's tiny seeds are good for digestion and that the leaves can heal wounds without infection.

And now, after five hundred years of living as a good neighbor, people have forgotten that this plant was once a foreigner, an immigrant to this soil. Now, plantain is so well integrated into our landscape that most people think of it as native. Botanists call these kinds of plants "naturalized."

And so maybe our task, Kimmerer suggests, the task of those of us who are not indigenous is to instead become naturalized.

She writes: "Being naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities. To become naturalized is to live as if your children's future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it. Because they do."<sup>7</sup>

To know ourselves as belonging to the earth, then, demands something of us as much as it offers something to us. That feeling of belonging is medicine and healing for the soul. And, it is also the source of our stewardship.

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<sup>6</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013) 213.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 214-215.

What I am coming to know in my own journey of belonging is that belonging is there, available for any of us to feel at any moment, and also that it is taught to us. Belonging is passed down through the stories of our ancestors, stories that are inherently embedded in the land, and when those stories are lost they must be reclaimed.

If we are attentive, if we listen closely to the Earth itself and to the plants and animals who have inhabited the planet for longer than we human beings have, then we can learn ways of belonging.

Belonging is a journey. It isn't something that is handed to us. It isn't something we are entitled to. It is a gift. A gift that we can share with others - humans and other beings alike- through our own extending of hospitality and grace and story. It is a gift we can receive with our own humble listening and reclaiming of lessons passed on with the passage of time. If we open ourselves to this journey, then we can remember our belonging.

We can come to remember, as Joy Harjo writes:

“Remember the earth whose skin you are:  
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth  
brown earth, we are earth.”<sup>8</sup>  
So may it be.

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<sup>8</sup> Joy Harjo, “Remember,” from *She Had Some Horses* (1983). <https://poets.org/poem/remember-0>