

“Reckoning with the Past”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
November 14, 2021

Reading [“History”](#) **Linda Hogan**

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This is the word that is always bleeding.
You didn't think this
until your country changes and when it thunders
you search your own body
for a missing hand or leg.
In one country, there are no bodies shown,
lies are told
and they keep hidden the weeping children on dusty streets.

But I do remember once
a woman and a child in beautiful blue clothing
walking over a dune, spreading a green cloth,
drinking nectar with mint and laughing
beneath a sky of clouds from the river
near the true garden of Eden.
Now another country is breaking
this holy vessel
where stone has old stories
and the fire creates clarity in the eyes of a child
who will turn it to hate one day.

We are so used to it now,
this country where we do not love enough,
that country where they do not love enough,
and that.

We do not need a god by any name
nor do we need to fall to our knees or cover ourselves,
enter a church or a river,

only do we need to remember what we do
to one another, it is so fierce
what any of our fathers may do to a child
what any of our brothers or sisters do to nonbelievers,
how we try to discover who is guilty
by becoming guilty,
because history has continued
to open the veins of the world
more and more
always in its search
for something gold.

Sermon

The image of the Sankofa bird, which Liza spoke of earlier in the service, is striking. In many ways, it defies logic. The bird's head is turned backwards even with its feet facing forward. The image illustrates the meaning of the word Sankofa, "return and get it." Within this one image, past, present, and future connect. It is a symbol of the importance of learning from the past.

Like the Sankofa bird, we decide what is worth retrieving from the past. We do so with the desire to have a deeper understanding of life so we can bring that wisdom forwards.

A quandary for us is that the past is not neutral terrain. On the one hand, there are elements of the past that can elicit positive feelings. Aspects of the past can envelope us in warmth making us feel more at home in ourselves and our place in the world, like a cozy, knit sweater or warm blanket on a chilly November evening.

Many parts of our shared history can make us feel proud. I invite you to think of some historical event or person that makes you feel proud and brings you comfort.

In this way, the words of William Faulkner, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," can be a balm. These moments and people from the past can bring succor for the isolation one might feel in going through a challenging time.

Yet, we know that when we look backwards like that Sankofa bird, we can also find painful events whose ripples are still seen and felt today. Much of this painful truth has been buried or ignored - histories that we'd prefer to forget.

On a collective level, there is much in our history that goes unnamed, unclaimed, and unexamined.

In light of this tendency, I was moved by an event that took place on October 16, just a few weeks ago. On that day at the State House, the leaders of each legislative chamber, read a statement of public apology for the state's role in eugenics. The public apology came after the Vermont legislature passed a joint resolution earlier this year "sincerely apologizing and expressing sorrow and regret to all individual Vermonters and their families and descendants who were harmed as a result of state-sanctioned eugenics policies and practices."

This apology came 90 years after Vermont's sterilization law was enacted. The law was used for decades following its passage to sterilize targeted populations who were deemed unfit to procreate, including indigenous people, French Canadians, mixed race people, people with disabilities, and the poor. Sitting in the chamber that day were about 30 people, including a number of Abenaki people who had been directly impacted by the state's policies.

Much of the history of the eugenics movement in Vermont and throughout the United States has been pushed away and made part of a forgotten past. This movement and the policies associated with it caused an incredible amount of pain for those who were targeted by it. For those directly impacted by the eugenics movement, forgetting can be an act of survival. Yet, we know the trauma continues to live on.

In speaking of the pain we cause one another, the poet Linda Hogan writes, "only do we need to remember what we do to one another."

This act of remembering, this turning towards the painful parts of our past, is a necessary act of repair and a necessary act for shaping our present and future.

In this spirit, I invite you to join me in turning towards this part of our past.

In the early part of the 20th century, eugenics was gaining in popularity across the United States. Vermont was not alone in having active support for ideas and policies

that sought to improve upon the human race through the control of breeding within the human population. In 1935, 33 states had state-sanctioned sterilization policies in place based on eugenics theories. Eugenics was much more popular than most of us would assume today, and it was supported by a surprising number of liberally-minded historical figures, many affiliated with progressive social reform of the early 20th century, including liberal religious clergy.

Eugenics first came into public consciousness in Vermont in 1912 when the outgoing Governor, John Mead, gave his farewell address. In that address, Mead told the Vermont Legislature that it was time to do something about “our degenerates” and he suggested that marriage restrictions, segregation, and sterilization would be appropriate measures. Mead expressed a concern that was already present and growing in the state of a perceived decaying of the upstanding “old stock” of Vermont’s original Anglo-Saxon settlers. Eugenics tied this “degeneracy” to heredity, and Mead’s remarks were the first time eugenics policy was publicly endorsed.

Mead’s remarks paved the way for University of Vermont Zoology Professor, Henry Perkins, to create the Eugenics Survey of Vermont in 1925. Perkins was a Mayflower descendent who married another Mayflower descendent. Both came from families of distinguished academics.

The Eugenics Survey, which ran until 1936, collected data on dozens of families believed to show one of three D’s: delinquency, dependency, and mental defect. Ten families were chosen for detailed pedigrees that were published as part of the survey. Those running the survey used state records and interviews of people who knew the families to put together these profiles which were meant to illustrate the degenerative nature of these individuals.

The survey was used in 1931 to support passage of legislation called “An Act for Human Betterment by Voluntary Sterilization.” Earlier attempts had been made to pass sterilization laws in 1931 and 1927, and in 1931 there was enough support to make it legal.

Vermont’s passage of this sterilization law was made possible by a Supreme Court ruling four years earlier in the case, Buck versus Bell. Carrie Buck lived in Virginia and was 17 when she was committed to the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded. This colony was established in the Progressive Era in part to provide care for a vulnerable population but also to separate out and remove this population from the

gene pool. It was here that Buck was deemed unfit to procreate and was targeted for sterilization.

Although a sterilization law had already passed in Virginia in 1924, those running the colony wanted the affirmation of the courts before proceeding with their plans, and so they arranged a test case with Buck as the plaintiff. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court which ruled 8 to 1 in favor of upholding the law.

Of significance for us, Unitarian Universalists, is that two of the Supreme Court justices who voted in favor of upholding the sterilization law were Unitarians: Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. and William Howard Taft, who served as President of the United States from 1909-1913. Holmes wrote the majority opinion for the case and stated: “It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind...Three generations of imbeciles are enough.”

Due to Vermont’s sterilization law, there were over 250 sterilizations performed in the state between 1931 and 1963. Though the language of the legislation referred to these as “voluntary” sterilizations, they were, in effect, compulsory and forced upon those deemed by the medical establishment to have inferior or defective genes.

The eugenics movement as a whole in Vermont as well as around the country led not only to the egregious indignity of sterilization. It also led to marriage restrictions, the separation of families, and segregation within communities.

The impacts of the eugenics movement were profoundly and personally felt. Some people, particularly women, who were unknowingly sterilized, would only later realize what had happened to them when they tried to have children later in life and were not able to. The impact of the Eugenics Survey lingered on as people living in Vermont were afraid to claim their native and other ethnic backgrounds for fear of being targeted and ostracized.

I know this history can be difficult to take in, so I invite you to take a breath with me and to notice what is coming up for you as you hear this history. (pause)

So, how do we address such grave harm?

It might be easy to say that all these years later we weren't the ones responsible for these past events and all that pain. Yet, the recognition of these past wrongdoings and of the work yet to be done to bring about healing can be powerful.

One of the first public recognitions of the impacts of the eugenics movement in Vermont came in 1995. That year, an installation was put together at the Fleming Museum of Art at the University of Vermont that recognized the university's past involvement in eugenics. Henry Perkins directed the museum from 1931 to 1945.

Fast forward about 25 years: In June 2019, the University of Vermont issued a statement of apology for the suffering caused by the university's role as proponents of eugenics. This followed the removal of the former UVM president Guy W. Bailey's name from the university's main campus library in 2018.

Since then, other institutions have also slowly started to examine and come to terms with their role in or connection to the eugenics movement.

This fall, Middlebury College announced that it would be removing the name of John Mead from the college chapel. The former governor whose farewell address laid the groundwork for the adoption of eugenics policies in Vermont was a member of the Middlebury class of 1864. College administration has said that the intention in removing Mead's name is not to erase history but to engage with it so we can learn from it.

As part of the apology statement on October 16, State Representative Jill Krowinski said: "I am also hopeful that today's apology will bring this time in our history to more Vermonters, and lead them to read more about our past so that we all can learn from it and know we need to do all we can to be thoughtful with the laws we create in the future."

The beliefs and ideas of the eugenics movement in Vermont and in the United States lost favor after we witnessed and experienced the horrendous outcomes of those same ideas brought forward in Nazi Germany.

Yet, the belief that some people are superior or inferior to others and the desire to enact policies that would maintain the superiority of one group over another still

remain. The harm to individuals and families of these past ideas and policies still remain.

We name and recognize the past so that we can re-member, put ourselves back together. We name and recognize the past to do our part in bringing repair and wholeness.

To address past harm, we can be mindful of the history that shapes those we call neighbor.

We can look for linkages in the present day to what was happening a century ago and notice patterns that can be disrupted.

We can commit to not forgetting and to making our present and future actions antidotes to past mistakes.

I invite you as you go forward into your week to reflect on some part of the past that needs mending. I invite you to learn more about it, to search out the voices and stories of those most affected, to tend to your own broken heart and spirit if that history has affected you.

In our reckoning with the past, may we commit to knowing the stories that bring pain along with those that bring pride. May we learn from the past and commit to building ever more inclusive and diverse communities in which all people are treated with dignity.

So may it be.

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