Considering Generational Trauma
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UU Society of Sacramento
Reb Lucy Bunch

Readings
Joy Harjo was appointed the United States poet laureate in June 2019, and is the first Native American poet laureate in the history of the position. Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, on May 9, 1951, Harjo is a member of the Mvskoke/Creek Nation and belongs to Oce Vpofv.

This poem is titled Remember

Remember the sky that you were born under,
know each of the star's stories.
Remember the moon, know who she is.
Remember the sun's birth at dawn, that is the
strongest point of time. Remember sundown
and the giving away to night.
Remember your birth, how your mother struggled
to give you form and breath. You are evidence of
her life, and her mother's, and hers.
Remember your father. He is your life, also.
Remember the earth whose skin you are:
red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth
brown earth, we are earth.
Remember the plants, trees, animal life who all have their
tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them,
listen to them. They are alive poems.
Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the
origin of this universe.
Remember you are all people and all people
are you.
Remember you are this universe and this
universe is you.
Remember all is in motion, is growing, is you.
Remember language comes from this.
Remember the dance language is, that life is.
Remember.

This second reading is from the book Braiding Sweet Grass by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is a mother, scientist, decorated professor, and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She lives in Syracuse, New York, where she is a SUNY Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology, and the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment.
In this section of the book, Kimmerer's students are on a weeklong field excursion. They are digging spruce roots to use as binding for the materials of the roof of their huts.

Before long all the chatter ceases and a mossy hush befalls us. There is just the sshhh of the wind in the spruce and a calling winter wren. Time goes by. Way longer than the fifty minutes classes they're used to. Still, no one speaks. I'm waiting for it, hoping. There is a certain energy in the air, a hum. And then I hear it, someone singing, low and contended. I feel the smile spread across my face and breathe a sigh of relief. It happens every time.

In the Apache language, the root word for land is the same as the word for mind. Gathering roots holds up a mirror between the map in the earth and the map of our minds. This is what happens, I think, in the silence and singing and with hands in the earth. At a certain angle of that mirror, routes converge, and we find our way back home.

Recent research has shown that the smell of humus exerts a physiological effect on humans. Breathing in the scent of Mother Earth stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, between lovers. Held in loving arms, no wonder we sing in response.

Sermon

It seems there is a lot of talk about trauma these days, and rightly so. Each of us has had some experience of trauma in our lives, no matter how small of how big. It is part of being human. As much as we love and care of each other, we also hurt each other, cause each other pain and trauma.

But after talking with our racial justice team and listening to the video, I have been considering trauma on a larger scale– communal trauma, generational trauma. We are experience that right now as well.

There is no better example of generation and communal trauma than the experience of Native Americans. The trauma that their communities experience at the hands of white oppressors was profound and continues to be. The US Government tried to eliminate them, take their land, wipe out their culture with the implicit approval and often enthusiastic participation of white citizens. Its really a miracle that natives survived at all. I never heard any of this history when I was growing up – in fact I thought that CA was above all the racism and oppression because we were never a slave state. But now we know.

What happened to native Americans in our country is a profound trauma. They have struggled for more than a century to hold onto their heritage, their spiritual practices. Some have struggled to climb their way back from the trauma – surviving poverty, drug addiction, alcoholism. A second curse after the first. That is what traumatized people do to cope. You see this all over our country now – drug addiction and overdose deaths from people – of all races – who are medicating themselves from unprocessed trauma. Child abuse, spousal abuse, Gun violence, political strife – all can be traced back to unprocessed trauma.

The National Institutes of Health writes, "The human response to psychological trauma is one of the most important public health problems in the world."

Native Americans have found ways to cope and heal, and many communities are thriving now, but not all.

In processing our own trauma – Indigenous communities have a lot to teach us – and I want to reflect on that this morning. We all need to learn how to process - how to metabolize our trauma – as individuals and communities. It is only through processing our trauma that we can become resilient.
But first let's step back and consider trauma itself.

Rev Dr Elizabeth Stevens is a UU minister who wrote her doctoral dissertation on the ministry of trauma. She says what many experts say – that trauma is a physiological response – its not a cognitive response. We can't think our way out of it. It lives in our bodies. Trauma at its root shatters our experience of reality – breaks up apart and ruptures our understanding of how the world works. We feel disoriented and disconnected.

And because trauma is in our bodies, we must consider different ways of processing our trauma – Stevens calls it metabolizing our trauma – releasing it from our bodies.

Let's reflect for a minute on the scale of trauma present in our world right now – you can make this last as well as I. A pandemic, political turmoil, overt racism, extreme gun violence.
These are traumatic experiences that we share as a community - communal trauma.

But what about generational trauma? Generational trauma is not just experienced by one person but is passed on from one generation to the next. It can be passed on through behaviors or by DNA. In the medical field, the concept of generational trauma was first recognized among children of individuals who survived the Holocaust. For Native communities, the trauma of their genocide is passed down through the generations. In my own family generations of alcoholism have left their mark.

The pandemic is already a source of generational trauma – and communal trauma. We have experienced this trauma together – some much more than others- and there will be repercussions for the generations to come.

Let's stop here and take a deep breath together and let it out with a sigh. Just listening to this litany can have an effect on our bodies and breathing out with a sign helps to release some of the tension.

This is a hard subject. In order to metabolize our trauma, we first have to name it. That is the most important step in the whole process.

So, lets consider what we can to learn from Native Americans about how to metabolize our trauma. They have been very generous with their wisdom, recognizing that if humans can be healed, the world will be healed as well.
The first piece of wisdom is reflected in the Harjo poem – Remember.
Remember where you came from, who you are, who are you ancestors, remember how you are connected to the earth. In the tv show Finding your roots, celebrities are told of their

genealogy and as their stories unfold you can see the change that it has in them – whether the stories are tragic or noble. They are remembering – who they are, who are their people, the are finding a sense of wholeness in the connection to those whose lives and choices led to the gift of their own life.
Remember.
Native Americans have held on to their traditions as much as possible. What traditions have been passed down to you? Who are your people?
Remember

The second piece of wisdom we can draw is that processing trauma is communal. We all metabolize trauma in different ways, but we do it better together. We are doing it right now. We do that through our sharing of joys and sorrows, though ritual that we share. Through singing together. Through prayer. Stevens talks about trauma informed ministry. That means that Roger and are aware of what things might be on your mind – what tragedy has unfolded in the world and we speak about it, so that our community can begin to heal. We are aware when there may be tension in the room. After Trump was elected we came together in a powerful way – lighting candles and being with each other for reassurance and stability. I knew that my sermon was important that morning, and I spoke the truth as I knew it so that we could name our trauma.

I remember several years ago we did a powerful ritual about sexual aggression and abuse. We had many different sizes of rocks -some pebbles and some almost boulders. Women who had experienced sexual trauma were invited to come forward and place a rock on the cairn we were creating (and cairn is a burial mound). The women did not have to say a word, just come forward and place a stone.
Here is the most important part, after each stone has been placed, everyone present said to the woman – each one "we honor you and hold you in love". There were many tears that day, and in my office in the following days. And some of them were not me!
This is profound communal healing of trauma.

The final wisdom we can learn from native communities is to stay deeply connected to the earth.

Robin Wall Kimmerer has given us wonderful ways to consider this idea. I am deeply moved by the reading that Roger shared – College students silently digging for spruce roots – feeling their connection to the earth, finding their way back home. Home to this beautiful earth which holds us in her loving arms.

In one section of the book Kimmerer talks of a time that she moved to a new part of the country where the plants and animals of the land were unfamiliar to her and she needed to get acquainted, both for her work as an environmental studies professor and for her spirit to feel a connection to the land.
So she sought out a wise tree, an ancient tree that was grounded in the land and spent time with it. A tree that could teach her, comfort her, sustain her. A tree that she knew would help provide the wisdom of time a place.

Where is your tree? Or your water place, your river view. Where is the place where you can be held and loved by mother earth. The place where you can let the earth heal you?

All three of these pieces of wisdom – remembering, healing is communal and be with the earth – arise from one great wisdom. Our trauma is exacerbated by our disconnection. Disconnection with ourselves, with each other, with the earth and all life.

So let the healing begin.
Name your trauma, find out where it lives in your body – you know your back, your neck or shoulders? Your feet? Your bowels? Move with it, release it.

Reconnect with your origins, with the practices of your ancestors – rituals, stories, songs food, places.

Be with community – come be here with us, our rituals, our singing and sharing and being. Let yourself be loved by this community.

Find your tree. Or your river, or ocean, or plot of earth. Wrap your arms around it and breathe in its scent. Ask it for support and advice. Let yourself love and be loved by this beautiful earth.

We can't take back what happened to the native people of our land. But we can honor them. Their land, their spiritual values. We can learn from them.

We cannot undo the trauma that we have experienced and will continue to experience as individuals and communities, but we can heal, together and with the gifts of our beautiful earth. So May it be.