

The Dirt is Red Here
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
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In the science fiction world of “Star Trek: The Next Generation,” the holodeck is an enclosed physical space that the holodeck visitor can program to look a particular way and to be filled with apparently real (though actually imaginary) characters with whom to interact. The holodeck is place for recreation and solace and exploration outside the constraints of work and other obligations and habits. In the holodeck, what happens in any given moment is contingent upon hundreds of preceding contingencies. In that way, time spent in a holodeck is similar to time spent in “real life.” Time spent in a holodeck is also less boring and much safer in that the visitor can end the computer program at any time.

The poem used as today’s opening words (“Holodeck (with apologies to Star Trek)” is found in *The Dirt is Red Here: Art and Poetry from Native California*. In it, Miwok/Hopi poet Wendy Rose describes what happens when “they” come, leaving it to the reader to imagine who “they” are:

“I go into my head
private holodeck
so easy
like breathing . . . “¹

When “they” come and the door to the holodeck of the mind and heart are *unlocked*, it is possible to enter the psychic space where ancestors and contemporaries beg a person not to die, where allies stop, know, agree, and remember that there is reason to grieve, where allies do not scold a person for feeling sorry for himself or herself again, and where allies actually listen (which feels like a miracle because it is so foreign to life outside). When the door to the holodeck of the mind and heart is *locked* and one is trapped outside, it feels unnatural, and it feels like death.

¹ *The Dirt is Red Here: Art and Poetry from Native California*, Margaret Dubin, editor, Heyday Books, Berkeley, California, 2002, p. 70.

Ah, if only space *were* the final frontier. Then it would be only a matter of time before human beings explored its far reaches. The Star Fleet mission statement notwithstanding, space is *not* the final frontier. The final frontier, the greatest unknown, is consciousness itself, individually and collectively. Time is not the variable which will unlock the secrets of the consciousness frontier. The variable which will unlock the secrets of consciousness is – greater consciousness.

To venture beyond previously surveyed dimensions of consciousness, the way is not forward. As it happens, we need to *retrace* our steps – to repair the damage caused by our steps and the steps of our ancestors and contemporaries. Too often, we stomp through our days in a haze of anxiety, and the last thing we want to do is to look around or behind. Anxiety seems justifiable given the demands placed upon us by the need to pay for a roof over our heads and food for our bellies, not to mention the psychological, social, and spiritual hungers for belonging, status, prestige, power, and mentoring.

The haze of anxiety lingers in atmospheres through which we have passed. The haze may fool us into thinking that the best we can do is to suck it up and *deal*, as individuals or in a small bands of the like minded. The trouble with finding comfort as individuals or in a band of the like minded is that we may not be conscious of the ways that we perpetuate harsh judgments upon those who do not look the way we do, move the way we do, speak the way we do, or think and feel the way we do.

For those of us who identify as white (as white in whole or in part), our challenge is to transform ourselves from being part of an oppressive “they” as in the “Holodeck” poem by Wendy Rose. The challenge is to transform ourselves into allies of people who are oppressed by racist assumptions and stereotypes lodged deep within our consciousness which are expressed in our social institutions and social relationships. For those of us who identify as white in whole or in part, the journey toward being an effective ally of people of color is likely to be long, difficult, sometimes painful, and sometimes discouraging. Even so, our journey is not nearly as long, difficult, sometimes painful, and sometimes discouraging as the life journeys of people of color.

Yesterday morning, nine members joined me for the first of seven sessions focused on white identity development. This antiracism curriculum was developed by Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Dr. William Gardiner. You are invited to attend the next six sessions, which take place from 10 a.m. until noon in the Founders' Room.

The journey from oppressor to ally is one that is widespread among Unitarian Universalists. For example, at General Assembly in Salt Lake City in June, then Unitarian Universalist Association president Rev. Bill Sinkford described the little-known history of Unitarian involvement with the Ute Indians. As reported in the *UU World* magazine, "He explained that, after the Civil War, when tribes had been moved onto reservations, U.S. President Ulysses Grant asked various religious groups to take responsibility for particular tribes. The American Unitarian Association accepted responsibility for the Northern Ute people, then living in Colorado."

"The results were tragic, Sinkford said. Although the Unitarian ministers assigned to the Ute people attempted to protect them 'and did somewhat less damage' than some other denominations, Sinkford said, they still had a hand in the ultimate loss of Ute lands as the tribe was forced to move to the territory that became Utah. Sinkford asked two Ute representatives, Forrest Cuch and Clifford Duncan, for forgiveness. Cuch said, 'I thank you for that and I join with you in this reconciliation on behalf of all of our people.'

"The UUA's shared history with the Utes was uncovered as the result of a responsive resolution passed at GA two years ago, the Truth and Reconciliation Resolution, which called on the UUA and congregations to uncover and acknowledge historical wrongs they have done to African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, and other groups, and to work toward reconciliation with those groups."²

Just as those who identify as white in whole or in part are not invariably oppressors, so those who identify as people of color in whole or in part are not invariably victims. In her poem "Literary Luncheon: Iowa City," Wendy Rose writes:

² See <http://www.uuworld.org/news/articles/145506.shtml>. See also "Truth, Repair & Reconciliation" here: <http://secure2.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2009/ga2009/144286.shtml>.

“According to the windows
 that face the slow-spilling brown river
 we are sipping not our coffee
 but blizzard winds that surprise us
 rolling from the north.
 Still-bare trees
 are slowly colored white
 and the earth implies
 this
 is the source
 of the cold I feel.
 Not so.
 The great ones gather
 at the university buffet
 like cattle around
 alfalfa and barley.
 I maintain
 without willing it
 an Indian invisibility.”³

Who among us has not chosen the invisibility of a closet from time to time? The desire to “pass” in the dominant culture is understandable. The irony is that if everyone who slipped into a closet for not fitting in for one reason or another met everyone else who slipped into a closet for one reason or another, there would be more of us *inside* the closet than outside of it! One reason to become an ally is to find and support other allies – to add energy to a spiral of creative energy, fulfilling work, and the kind of authentic relationships that incidentally can banish existential loneliness for good.

Hopeful news regarding antiracism work is not hard to find if we take the time and invest the energy to look for it. For example, this month Elinor Ostrom became the first woman to win the

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Nobel Prize in Economics. According to the Reuters news service, “Professor Ostrom, 76, shares her prize with with a fellow American academic, Oliver Williamson . . . Both professors specialise in economic governance and the deployment of authority to resolve conflicts.”

“Professor Ostrom has written notably about how common resources like forests and fisheries are best exploited if the rules and regulations are set by their actual users rather than by government. Pointing to her research into ‘economic governance, especially the commons’, the judges noted how she “challenged the conventional wisdom that common property is poorly managed and should be either regulated by central authorities or privatised”.⁴

Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Clyde Grubbs, who serves Throop Church in Pasadena, is Texas Cherokee and was delighted at Elinor Ostrom’s award. “Wow! For the economies of local community, she shares the Nobel for Economics. What a wonderful thing for Indigenous People's Day! Non market community economics . . . indigenous ways of being human is not about an ethnicity it is about a way of relating to community.”⁵

Rev. Grubbs notes that indigenous ways are “Non commercial, sustainable (not destructive to Mother Earth), production for community use not for profit, plenty of exercise in community activities, water, mainly plant based diet. Spirituality based on engaged work in community and with nature, rather than escapism.”⁶ Today and in the years to come, may we retrace our steps, repairing damage done by our ancestors and ourselves. May we have the courage to choose engagement with life’s challenges, not escape from life’s challenges. May it be so!

⁴ See <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/76yearold-is-first-woman-to-win-nobel-prize-for-economics-1801779.html>.

⁵ Posted by Rev. Clyde Grubbs on his Facebook page in mid October 2009.

⁶ Email message from Rev. Clyde Grubbs to Rev. Ann Schranz on October 22, 2009. See also his website (A People So Bold), <http://www.peoplesobold.net/about-people-so-bold/people-so-bold-returns-with-a.html>.