

**The Abenaki**  
**October 18, 2020**  
**Rev. Dr. Judith E. Wright**

Shirley R. asked me this summer if we might do a service around Columbus Day about Native Americans and the possibility of advocating for an Indigenous People's Day to replace Columbus Day.

I agreed, and Shirley and I decided to focus primarily on the Indigenous people of the Lakes Region.

Thus, began my crash course in learning about the Abenaki, a study of a people whom Abenaki Chief Donald Stevens said:

*Our people were once as plenty as the trees in the forest,  
and now we are a small grove in the meadow.  
As leaders, we must maintain deep roots to our past  
and bend with the changing winds of the future.  
We must stand strong like the mighty oak that provides shelter  
against the elements to preserve our culture and our way of life.<sup>1</sup>*

Today, Indigenous Americans continue to struggle with the challenges of preserving their ways of life. Prior to the arrival of the settler colonists, there were two great Indian families in the eastern part of what is now the United States:

The Algonquians and the Iroquois.

The Abenaki Tribe is mainly part of the Algonquian family, and lived here, around the Lakes Region, Quebec, and the Maritimes of Canada for about twelve thousand years before the settler-colonists arrived. They formed with four other tribes the Wabanaki Confederacy.

“Wabanaki” means “Dawnland,” in eastern Algonquian language.

“Abenakis” means “Natives from where the daylight comes” or “people of the East.”

Prior to the Europeans, the Abenaki living in our area were a peaceful people,

Unlike many other North American Native tribes, the Abenaki have been patriarchal in their governance. Their chief elders are chosen for their wisdom and leadership ability. The chief's authority is primarily advisory. A chief is a person who is highly respected by the tribe.

Importantly, a chief rarely acts without the approval of his tribal council.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce D. Heald. A History of the New Hampshire Abenaki. The History Press, 2014. Address by Chief Donald Stevens. P. 14.

What the tribal band of elders have said is considered tribal law. Such tribal law is inherited from one generation to the next.

Long ago, the men were designated as the hunters, and they did so with bow and arrow, and spears, as they fished in the lakes, and hunted for bear, deer, and moose to provide for their families.

Indian scholar Solon Colby describes the Abenaki as follows:

*The Abenakis lived in bands of extended families and were considered extremely friendly. Hospitality was to them an unwritten law that would be obeyed and was part of their nature.*

*Each man had different hunting territory inherited through his father. During the spring and summer months bands came together at temporary villages near rivers and lakes, such as Lake Winnepesaukee at the Weirs.<sup>2</sup>*

Such family bands traveled to the seacoast and to the Cowass meadow in Haverhill, New Hampshire for planting and fishing. The women were the cultivators of the soil, planting corn, pumpkins, squash, melons and beans. They would grind the corn for corn mush or corn cakes. When they cooked their corn and beans together in an earthen pot on an open fire, they called this dish *succotash*. In the spring, the women would tap the maple trees and boil the sap into syrup.

When the Europeans arrived in the mid-1600s, they learned that the friendly Abenaki had homes that were sixty to eighty feet long, with a round roof. During the winter months, the Abenaki lived in small groups in such wigwams, covered with bark and lined with bear skin for warmth<sup>3</sup>.

For entertainment, the Abenaki up to this day hold pow-wows or celebrations. This is a time to celebrate with friends, as well as teach about the customs of the tribe, and to celebrate their ways of life. There is sacred dancing, that continues to this day, with different meanings given to each dance.

There have always been during such celebrations displays of items made by crafts people in the tribe. An important part of the celebration is the telling of ancient stories.

Some tell of a trickster, who was a racoon character for the Abenaki.

*Many of the stories taught people how to treat others:  
not to be jealous, to be generous, patient, brave and respectful,  
and to share what you have.*

*Some tell about how to quiet crying babies, how to arrange a marriage,  
how to bury the dead.*

*Others give important survival information.*

*If you fear becoming lost in a fog,*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 23

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 25

*take a dog in your canoe that can sniff for land and point you home.*<sup>4</sup>

And so much more. Stories told from generation to generation for thousands of years.

The Abenaki as a religious people, originally believed in spirits present in nature.

The name *manitou* was given to a spirit which could be either good or evil, as well as greater or lesser spirits. The Abenaki believed in the immortality of the soul. Their main deities were *Kechi Niwaskw* and *Mach Niwaskw*, respectively representing good and evil.<sup>5</sup>

They believed in the concept of personal power -*Meteouin*. According to the collectors of ancient Wabanaki Tales, Alice Mead and Arnold Neptune, *meteouin* is

*... is the personal power and self-awareness that develops over time as a person matures.*

*In the Dawnland each person is an individual who must discover the source of his or her power by him or herself.*

*Without it, a family's very survival is at stake.*<sup>6</sup>

The Abenaki, with the coming of the settler-colonists, reportedly easily converted to Catholicism, and because of such religious conversion, they became aligned with the French Canadians.

When the French and British fought over Native lands, (1688-1763), Abenaki lands were right in the middle of these historic conflicts. Eventually, the mostly peaceful Abenaki left New Hampshire. Some joined forces with the French, and others migrated to Vermont or went further West.

I want to share with you now just a few thoughts about the Abenaki language.

I discovered that their language is very rich in imagery. While they had no written language, pictorials were used. And they memorized what needed to be passed from one generation to the next.

Because the language of the Abenaki is entirely oral, there are some disagreements among scholars as to how to spell and what are the meaning of some words.

The Natives who inhabited New Hampshire, as well as Canada and Maine, gave most of the names to our current rivers, lakes, and mountains. These names were written down by French missionaries. When there were attempts to translate the Abenaki language into English, what often happened is that the true meaning of the Abenaki words was lost.

The language is "soft-spoken and fluttery, in texture."<sup>7</sup>

Historically only a few people outside of the tribe are known to have successfully managed to become fluent in the language, after a lifetime of study.

For example, for moose there are different words,

depending on whether it was a male or a cow moose, a yearling male or female, a two- year old, and so forth.

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<sup>4</sup> Alice Mead and Arnold Neptune. *Giants of the Dawnlands*. Loose Cannon Press, South Portland, Maine, 2015, ix.

<sup>5</sup> Heald. P. 29

<sup>6</sup> Mead and Neptune. X.

<sup>7</sup> Heald, p. 46

There is no gender to their words, but their nouns are divided into those that are noble and ignoble.

Generally, all living things were considered noble, and inanimate objects usually ignoble.

A tree, for example, would be considered noble while it lived, but once fallen, the tree fell into the ignoble category.

Here are just a few examples of Abenaki words that are alive today:

*Asquam*'s meaning is "a broad sheet of water". "*Wenne*" means "smiling." Thus, "*Winnesaquam* means "Smiling big waters."

"*Winnepesaukee*" can be translated as Shirley has said, as "smiling lake in high places."

*Winnepesaukee* is actually a derivative from the native word *Wi-wininebesaki* which means "the lake in the vicinity of which there are other lakes and ponds" or literally – "The Lakes Region."

The word "*Merrimack*" that we have today is a greatly changed name from Abenaki's.

. One word for bear in Abenaki is *misha*, and *mag* means big. *Misha mag* was the Great Bear or the totem of the Abenaki. *Misha mag* eventually became *Merrimack* to the English settlers. One final example, the word "*Opechee*" comes from the Abenaki word *Sipe*, the name for bird, and "*Opechee*" is thought to mean "Robin Lake."

Shirley and I have now given you some of the rich history of this region's Indigenous people. For me, it is a tragic history of conquest and genocide. It is a story that needs to be told, and ways found going forward to no longer conquer and destroy, but for all to come to value differences.

Our Time for All Ages Story of *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth* gives us a vision for how people living in different cultures with different truths about what is, can learn to listen and respect each group's truths, and find peaceful ways to live together in harmony.

It's a beautiful story, that cautions all to not believe that their way is the only way. People believing that they have THE TRUTH can lead to violence, war, genocide.

It's clear that the early explorers and colonial settlers -at least on a governmental level – believed in white supremacy.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, who wrote *An Indigenous History of the United States*. last year's common read for all Unitarian Universalists, and was a featured speaker at this year's UU General Assembly, states that "*everything in US history is about the land –who oversaw and cultivated it, fished its waters, maintained its wildlife, who invaded and stole it; how it became a commodity (real estate) broken into pieces to be bought and sold on the market*<sup>8</sup>."

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz asks everyone to question the current narrative given as US history that is a story of settler colonialism conquering the land. In the telling of that story, the history of Indigenous Peoples is often erased. Erasing, the history of those, who, like the Abenaki lived here for twelve- thousand years before Europeans arrived on this country's shores.

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<sup>8</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous History of the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. P. 1.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's central question for all of us is, would acknowledging the true reality of US history work to transform American society into a more inclusive culture that includes the history of Indigenous Peoples?

We are called as a people of faith, for example, to fully understand the legacy of those early settler-colonists who interacted with the Abenaki, and who created the Anglo-American settler-state, with the well-known story of the Puritans having a covenant with God to take the land.

This original story is reinforced by the stories about Christopher Columbus, who, in truth, never even landed in North America! He landed in what is now Cuba and Haiti, and on later trips, explored South America.

The story of the Puritans is also reinforced *"by the "Doctrine of Discovery," a series of late fifteenth century papal bulls that sanctioned the European nations acquiring title to the lands they "discovered" and the Indigenous inhabitants lost their natural rights to that land after Europeans arrived and claimed it."*<sup>9</sup>

A possible step in the healing process with Indigenous Peoples is to advocate for an Indigenous Peoples's Day.

This is a Day which reimagines Columbus Day.

Indigenous Peoples Day would educate about the genocide and oppressions of Natives, as well as join with Indigenous Peoples to resist any injustices occurring today to them. UUs across the continent are engaged in doing this.

Within New Hampshire four towns have already declared Indigenous Peoples' Day:

Keene, Dover, Durham, and Hopkinton.

And the School Board in Concord has also changed on their school calendar

Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day.

One possible goal for us as UUs is to advocate for Indigenous Peoples Day here in Laconia.

Let me end this sermon with a question for all of us - what do we know about the history of the land upon which our church is built?

Do we think about the Abenaki who lived here long ago?

As I walk around Lake Winnesquam in the beauty of this Fall, I now sense the presence of those who came long before the colonial settlers arrived.

I see in my mind's eye wigwams and Abenaki in canoes fishing, on the lake I now think of as "Smiling Big Waters."

Peace and love to you.

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<sup>9</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, p. 3.