

Rev. Linda  
Embodied Faith  
December 11, 2016

I am jealous of Christianity. True confession. I have a friend from divinity school who is doing a blog on advent and here is what she posted the other day:

“In Advent we anticipate the moment when God will become incarnate in Christ - the time when unconditional love, radical welcome, and unending justice *materialize* in a human form. God showed God's love for us by inhabiting a body, fully human and fully divine – a body that walked this earth and laughed, cried, experienced delight and heartache, and suffered profoundly. This belief is at the heart of our faith as Christians, and it is one reason among many that I believe that our material world *matters* to God. That the joys, lamentations, safety, and physical concerns of those who are oppressed *matter* to God. That bodies matter to God. That lives matter to God.”<sup>1</sup>

I so want to believe that. I want a god that I believe came to this earth and become human and witnessed our lives and died for us so that we might live a better life and will greet us when we die and welcome us into a kingdom of beauty and forgiveness.

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<sup>1</sup> Olivia Hamilton, Ann Braden Advent Calender <http://tinyletter.com/oliviahamilton>

I thought about becoming a United Church of Christ minister and except for the small problem of not believing that Jesus is the son of god and that I am not a Christian, it lures me still.

Perhaps it is our Puritans roots as Unitarians that gets me. The Puritans had some mighty ideas about where religious authority resided that we still claim for ourselves as Unitarians.

The Puritans did not want to be ruled over by a hierarchy of priests and bishops. They wanted more direct access to God and Christ so left England and came here and asked questions like: Where is authentically commanding religious authority to be found? How is it known? And what are the conditions of its appearing "unto us?" The Puritans' answer to those questions found expression in the covenant of the local church. They granted ultimate religious authority solely to that *convincing power* of truth evident in the understandings reached and tested over time by a body of loving individuals mutually pledged faithfully to seek and to heed truth together, in ongoing community, so long as their earthly life should last.<sup>2</sup>

We still do this very thing. The power in our community comes from the wisdom generated from our sincere listening when we gather in loving and wise and intentional community as a congregation. We carry on this tradition from the Puritans. But there were many things that the Puritans believed that many people,

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<sup>2</sup> <http://uudb.org/articles/unitariancontroversy.html>

including those who would later be called Unitarians, decried, especially that some people were born saved and that others were born damned.

What we kept was a version of the Puritan form of governing themselves: that the greatest authority among us lives between when we gather intentionally to hear, what for Puritans was the word of God and for many of us as Unitarian Universalists has become, the word of love.

We come in our faith as Unitarian Universalists to honor *The Inherent Worth and Dignity of All People*, which has to mean not that a single person's worth and dignity is greater than the worth and dignity of the whole but that when our worth and dignity is balanced within the whole, a greater worthy and dignity is possible.

This is the place of us. This is where we come to figure out how to be an us, not how to be a bigger me but a better we. That's why it is hard sometimes and takes so many dang conversations and committee meetings other times. This is where individuality meets the other and is made into something more than each of these can be alone. That's why we make a mess out of it all sometimes and why it lifts us so high sometimes we feel like we can touch the robes of Athena.

In our country, we don't have a lot of models of how to work for a we, for how to take our individual worth and make it quiet enough to hear the worth of others so that we might all be able to hear what love is asking of us now.

Make no mistake, this is religious work and it is hard and good and worthy of us all, and our Puritan brothers and sisters risked their lives for it and then made a mess of it by dividing people into those who were good enough for god's love and those who weren't. How much harder to do this work deciding that we are all worthy of love!

And that's when it gets really hard sometimes, when the night is long and it's difficult to know what's me or you or us and what the way forward should be and who we should be in it. That's when I get jealous of that Christian god with arms and hands, that incarnate, embodied god that can really show up and point the way out clearly.

And then something happened in the last weeks that gave my faith arms and hands and it happened in North Dakota at the pipeline. Let me give you a little history first before I tell you how that happened.

The Dakota Access Pipeline is a 1,772 mile conduit that was slated to carry crude oil from North Dakota to southern Illinois. It started in February of 2015 with the US Army Corps of Engineers, the federal government body in charge of the nation's waterways, sending a letter to the Tribal Historic Office to initiate the permitting process. The Tribal Office responded requesting a full archeological investigation. It never heard back. Other tribes became concerned saying they had not been consulted as the pipeline was scheduled to cross as they wrote "cultural properties,

sites or landscapes vital to our identity and spiritual well-being.”<sup>3</sup> Another large issue is that the pipeline was to be laid under portions of the Missouri River that are the main water source for the Sioux tribe living in North Dakota.

An alternative route north of Bismarck, N.D. that would have avoided those portions of Missouri River and the sacred burial sites was proposed but rejected because of its proximity to areas that supplied water for that town. The population of Bismarck is 92% white.<sup>4</sup> Rev. Jesse Jackson called this change of plan away from Bismarck and their water supply and into the Missouri River “environmental racism.”<sup>5</sup>

From a video called Mni Wiconi: The Stand at Standing Rock<sup>6</sup> comes the following words spoken by various Native American people interviewed at Standing Rock:

Mother earth is the grandmother of everything and the water is her blood and through this blood we live.

We have been here for 1000 of years. We are citizens of these lands.

We have no other place to go. We have no other homelands. Enough is enough.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2016/09/dakota-access-pipeline-protest-timeline-sioux-standing-rock-jill-stein>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.towncharts.com/North-Dakota/Demographics/Bismarck-city-ND-Demographics-data.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/previously-proposed-route-dakota-access-pipeline-rejected/story?id=43274356>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4FDuqYld8C8>

We have a resolution that goes back to 2007 saying that we don't want any pipelines through our land and under our river. They say the pipelines won't break, but who will come when they do.<sup>7</sup>

The Corps did not take into consideration any tribal concerns and concluded its investigation finding there would be no "direct or indirect impacts."<sup>8</sup>

By the end of August of this year, protesters helped block construction sites, led by Standing Rock Sioux, who said their drinking water was being threatened. Tribal members from many tribes showed up, the largest Native American protest in history.

In early September, Dakota Access bulldozers plowed a 2 mile long, 150-foot path through Sioux tribal burial ground. Protesters come to stop the bulldozers. At least 30 people are pepper-sprayed and 6 people, including a child, were bitten by security dogs.

From the video Mni Wiconi again:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.motherjones.com/environment/2016/09/dakota-access-pipeline-protest-timeline-sioux-standing-rock-jill-stein>

Three hundred tribes congregated and said they would unite and stand together with prayer, that this was a spiritual issue for them. We are not opposed to energy dependence, but we are tired of paying for it.

We have to look into our heart to figure out, how far are we willing to go....What is your gift, what is your talent, what is your spirit telling you that you want to do?

The only thing that keeps us going is prayer.

In September, The Dept of Justice, the Department of the Army and the Dept of the Interior ask that the construction by Energy Transfer Partners be halted voluntarily until it can be determined whether construction is in violation of the National Environmental Policy act. The request was ignored.<sup>9</sup>

Energy Transfer Partners sued the Army Corps for delaying construction saying that the pipeline, which is 90% built, would not be rerouted. The number of protesters grew and included many UU ministers and congregants from around the country. Use of police force increased involving rubber bullets, water cannons, in temperatures ranging from 10 degrees to below zero, and tear gas. 26 protesters were hospitalized and 300 injured.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/21/dakota-access-pipeline-water-cannon-police-standing-rock-protest>

An estimated 2,000 military vets come to Standing Rock to support the Native American protestors who called themselves, The Water Protectors. By this past weekend, there were over 10,000 people in this makeshift city.

On Sunday afternoon December 4, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers legally blocked the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, specifying that Energy Transfer Partners needed an easement to drill beneath the Missouri River. Construction is now halted.

This means that a people that have the earth as a basis of their spirituality were heard. No matter what happens next, something just happened that matters. A people who claim earth as mother and the water as her blood, were heard. I would call this a theological victory.

This means that an incarnational faith, a faith that has hands and arms, a faith that can hold us in the night, a faith that alludes to something real, solid, whole, good, nurturing, alive can be a faith in this earth and its people and this faith can sustain us. It can be a faith that tells us that when we are all lost and lost again, that there is an original goodness within and around us all that calls us back and back again to itself, to its heart, to its love, to its wholeness so that we might be made whole again. This faith is not new but its victory is new and so it now stands before us and calls to us, reminds us that we are not alone.

I think of our Puritan cousins who granted ultimate religious authority solely to that *convincing power* of truth evident in the understandings reached and tested over time by a body of loving individuals mutually pledged faithfully to seek and to heed truth together, in ongoing community, so long as their earthly life should last.<sup>11</sup> Is that not exactly what happened here? Did not a group of individuals committed to seeking truth together listen for the voice of love and truth, put their own individuality into the hands of the community, the us, the tribe ultimately, and let the will of the whole guide and lead them, no matter what came?

These are mighty arms, these are mighty hands. And so, when it's difficult to know what's you or us and what the way forward should be and who you should be in it, turn to the holy text that this congregation inscribes with our sacred gathering, meeting, listening, loving and longing and read it slowly, with patience, with devotion, until you can recognize yourself as one of its authors.

And when the night comes, and it always does, and you are alone, take your need to be part of something that is real and holy and embodied and powerful enough to make us into all that we have come to be and to receive us when we have given what we have come to give- to the stars and the ground and the wind and the moon and the trees and the leaves and the ocean and the sand and the dirt and the rocks and know yourself as made of it all, as one of this mother's creations, as a part, as a creation of beauty and intention with a purpose and place and home no less

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<sup>11</sup> <http://uudb.org/articles/unitariancontroversy.html>

extraordinary than the moons or the trees or the birds or the leaves or the most magnificent of oceans.

Take heart my dear people. Take heart.

Let it be enough to make us holy, to feel holy, to know every living thing as holy.

Let it be enough.

Amen.