

## **The Indigenous Art of Listening**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 13, 2024**

I wonder if you have ever experienced the awe of ancient petroglyphs – unique markers carved into stone and rock by long ago indigenous peoples. If not, I invite you to imagine. Symbols of mountains, horses, people, birds, rain – a plethora of images serving as tribal, religious, or travel markers. Pause, appreciate the ingenuity of the symbols, the wonder of the art of peoples long past, still crafted by indigenous peoples today. But I invite you to listen, centered in silence. Listen to the art. The air filled with soft yet persistent murmurings of faith and companionship and culture and story. Now remember or imagine kivas, underground, circular spaces created for religious ceremonies. Within, immersed in sacred and holy space, one can hear the whispers of ancient practices of faith and ritual and sacred words. Pause, ingest, and bring beauty and awe with you in your heart and soul and being, receptive to the wonders before you. This is not limited to indigenous mastery, but soul-touching art and places of worship held sacred in every society. Be attentive to the art, to the space, to the ancient stories for, as an Indigenous proverb provides us, “Listen to the wind, it talks; listen to the silence, it speaks.”<sup>1</sup> I offer, listen to the art. Listen to the space. And may I note there are many ways to listen. Some listen with sight, some with touch.

On this day when we honor Indigenous Peoples Day, we learn this ancient, sacred, embedded teachings and lessons of deep listening, available to enrich the lives of all. We learn how this sacred art can heal an aching people, an aching culture, an aching way of life as the predominant culture erases those who seem disposable. I start off with a personal reflection of an indigenous person, a man contemplating on what, to him, it means to be an indigenous person. Thomas Doty notes, it begins with a walk. “I saunter along the creek,” he writes, “listening to the end-of-summer trickling of water. I listen to the drumbeats of a woodpecker

---

<sup>1</sup> Traditional Indigenous proverb

far off in the woods. Squirrels rattle through dry leaves looking for autumn food.”<sup>2</sup> This reflection marks what is inherent to the way of life of indigenous peoples. Truly listening is sacred, it is wonder, it is relationship and connection with the natural world, personifying, in a way, the rustle of the leaves to send a message to the heart of one who listens. So, I invite us to listen, to listen to the water or the trees or the squirrels, for this is where true wisdom and true faith lies; this is where relationship with the earth is readily available. In this current day society, as noted in our Story for All Ages, we, the predominant culture, are covering up the sounds with concrete, with cities and trains and highways.<sup>3</sup> The whispers fade into the background.

And yet before we truly hear the rain, before we can truly listen to the kiva, before we engage with the words of the elders or the ever-present wisdom tales, one must learn to listen to the silence. “Listen to the wind, it talks; listen to the silence, it speaks.”<sup>4</sup> A time to truly pause in stillness and quiet, listening to that which cannot not be heard – the wind, the rock, the still, small, voice within. Through intentional, reflective silence we create a sacred space within our very beings, ready to be receptive to the stories hovering all around us – it’s about reception to the world around us. Just as profound as the wisdom of the elders is a moment of nothing but quiet contemplation and emptiness. For it is story we are ready to hear; it is story we work to be receptive to. Narratives found in the wind and the land and whatever space one finds oneself in. I offer the wisdom shared by Thomas Doty, the same reflective, indigenous man mentioned above, considering the importance of sitting with silence: “Eventually, I feel the place vibrate with life, happy to have its story shared and listened to. The more deeply I listen, the better the story is told.”<sup>5</sup> Silence cultivates within us space for deep listening.

---

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native\\_way\\_of\\_listening.html](https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native_way_of_listening.html)

<sup>3</sup> *Can You Hear the Plants Speak?* By Nicholas Hummingbird with Julia Wasson, Illustrated by Madelyn Goodnight

<sup>4</sup> Ancient Indigenous proverb

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native\\_way\\_of\\_listening.html](https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native_way_of_listening.html)

Once we have mastered silence, the world beckons. We see and hear narratives in space and place, we see and hear tales that linger from times far past, we listen to the history of the earth upon which we live.

Storyteller Thomas Doty elaborates. In cultivating his role as storyteller, he listened to the tales and wisdom of the elders – a revered group in indigenous cultures. He listened to the wisdom and tales of the elders, and he connected that spoken word with physical place. He visited those places from which the narratives were told, from where the tales originated. In listening to the landscape, he heard the whisperings of all the indigenous peoples who had survived before – the “Tree People, Salmon People, Bird People, Human People, and the oldest ones around, the Rock People” just as the elders had done.<sup>6</sup> The wisdom of the Rock People and the Tree People became his wisdom, became his stories, which he shared through his own art of storytelling – wisdom he only received with quiet reception of the land around him, paired with wise insights of the elders. What was the plight of the salmon people? How did the human people find meaning? This was his query. These are the narratives he heard.

Stories linger. Doty reflects, “Without words, a story survives as a ghostly presence in the place where it lived.” Held in waterfalls, in the wind, ready to be heard. “As people cross the creek,” he writes, “they carry their stories with them. Where they settle for a spell, their stories find a home.” Doty writes that you can feel those spaces where tales linger – where their ghostly remnants remain.<sup>7</sup> I imagine a constant state of reception to all that may remain around us – tales of faith, of horror, of perseverance, of love, of survival, of joy, ready to be shared and heard by any receptive ear. Wisdom, insights, perspectives, left indiscriminately by those who have come before. That receptivity cultivated when we live with silence allows us to hear them. Through a constant openness, we can receive those ghostly remains which can in turn shape our lives.

---

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native\\_way\\_of\\_listening.html](https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native_way_of_listening.html)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

The earth holds its history. In any one mountain crossing, generations of people have traversed the landscape.<sup>8</sup> Selling goods, escaping hardship, looking for a new life – held in the crumbling rocks and towering boulders. I think of the history of any one piece of land, the very earth below my chair and my floor and my basement as I write this sermon. Beauty, yes. Roaming animals, changing landscape, children born and raised. And there is undeniable hardship. Indigenous peoples displaced. Slaves brought from Africa. Desecration of the land. And all of these are stories to be told, are narratives to be heard – narratives society tries to hide but of which we can always return to. For our history is who we are, and it is held in the swaying grasses, the gentle summer breeze, the lush green forests. May we receive these whispers with an open, attuned mind.

Deep listening becomes a way of life, much greater and more significant than periodic curiosity of the world around us. The art of listening is not simply a skill, it is a capability ingrained in a way of life.<sup>9</sup> Listening to the earth beneath the flowers, to the insights of revered elders, receptive to stories and wisdom held in people, rocks, and wind alike. Silence is sacred just as is spoken wisdom. Receptivity to the surrounding world and all the cherished mortal beings within it opens the mind and the body to insights and wisdom otherwise dismissed and overlooked. It is a practice, a way of engaging with the expansive and wondrous world all around us. And it is steeped in beauty and hardship and wonder and awe.

Listen to the land below us. Land where indigenous peoples grew crops, fished, hunted, and traded. Inhabited by peoples for more than 10,000 years, following the bison and the mammoth and the caribou of which they ate. Land was never considered property; this curious and novel notion was introduced with the settlers. Land encompassed culture, relationship, spirituality, faith.<sup>10</sup> Land and the peoples held within was usurped by Europeans, disrupting the earth, the ancestors, the spirits, desecrating culture, perpetuating centuries of abuse. May we pause in silence, ready to be receptive to this hard truth. May we listen to the land, and this

---

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native\\_way\\_of\\_listening.html](https://www.dotycoyote.com/writing/native_way_of_listening.html)

<sup>9</sup> <https://kendalnetmaker.com/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/>

history held deep within it. May we hold space for story, for story is what makes the abstract a reality.

I stood in a vast circle of interfaith clergy responding to the indigenous cry for justice following the crisis of the Dakota Access Pipeline – a pipeline to be built through indigenous land that could destroy drinking water, threaten burial grounds, demolish culturally significant historical sights – their livelihoods and safety dismissed and overlooked. And so, we joined as faith leaders, and we listened. We listened to indigenous peoples read and ultimately burn the words of the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal document that forced them off their land. We listened to the drums and the vocals and the stomping of feet of music passed down through generations, historically used as a celebration or as a lament that has persisted for centuries, if not more – lifting up in this moment an historical moment of pain and sorrow. We listened to poetry, to speeches, to songs of faith and pride and perseverance and beauty that they were not about to let go of. We bowed our heads in prayer offered by the elders, prayers for the future. Through spoken word and song, through drumbeats and prayer, we heard the plights of this marginalized group. Sound was intentionally employed to inspire sorrow and action. And through intentional moments of silence, the words and message sunk into our very hearts and beings. I pray and I hope our presence offered them what they needed – knowledge that they were loved, respected, that they were important and revered, as we joined in solidarity and in faith. And through our own words and deeds and actions, and those of the indigenous peoples, this message was heard by those in power. The stomps and cries and drum beats live in my heart to this day.

Several years ago, I attended General Assembly virtually. In the midst of worship services, of classes and workshops, of votes and business meetings, we heard of the 215 unmarked graves of indigenous children found at a residential school in Canada. This is a story that needs to be heard. This is a story that needs to penetrate hearts and souls and minds and spirits and call for an uproar in response to a tragic atrocity. So may we hear the narrative. The narrative of indigenous children forcibly taken from their families to assimilate them into white culture at

residential schools. Children were stolen and many died and in death treated with such disdain and insignificance that their graves were not even marked; deaths expendable and as such not acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> These are the stories we need to hold in our hearts. These are the tales the earth carries and always will carry, these are the accounts of the ancestors, carried in downpours of rain and grieving wind. These are the narratives of those children who will never become elders so may their voices live on in the survivors. What happened on the earth below us? Atrocities. So may we listen. And listen. And listen, so that these voices will not be forgotten. May we love. May we learn. May we care. May we engage. May we act. May we help heal.

And so, on this day may we close our eyes and envision the petroglyphs – jagged yet beautiful symbols of rain and birds and mountains, knowing this is a sacred story we must listen to in the silent artwork. Knowing that in that moment of reverence we may know ancient heartbreak and joy and sorrow and celebration passed down through generations of art steeped in silence. As we pause, listening to a world that covers natural whispers with concrete, we connect with the land below the asphalt, below the cities, below the highways and know the great history of what survived before us. Places speak, stories linger, and the earth has a narrative to share. And when this hidden and ancient and sorrow-filled narrative finds its way through the cracks and we, through the silence, hear the suffering, may we be the ones to act and love and care. For if listening is to be sacred, it must capture moments and murmurings of joy. And faith. And beauty. And love. It must imbue us with wisdom and insights and inspire us to be receptive to the world. If listening is to be faithful, it must capture moments of pain whispered by the very earth, calling us to bring our full selves to usher more love and healing and peace to this beautiful, broken world.

May it be so, and Amen.

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/20/canada-indigenous-schools-unmarked-graves>