

DISCUSSION GUIDE

An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States

by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014)

Discussion Guide by Gail Forsyth-Vail and Pierce Alquist

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Introduction

In 2012, attendees at the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) General Assembly (GA) learned some rarely told history of the United States. They learned about the Doctrine of Discovery, the “legal” basis on which the continent was taken from its Indigenous inhabitants. The GA delegates passed a resolution repudiating the doctrine and calling upon Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations to find out more about Indigenous history in this land and the ways in which this history has led to injustice that continues to this day.

Recently, Beacon Press published *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Indigenous scholar and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. This extraordinary book offers an alternative narrative to the one told by textbooks, politicians, media, and leaders. Its publication provides a timely opportunity for Unitarian Universalists to respond to the 2012 resolution and to begin to imagine and work toward mitigating the continuing effects of U.S. colonization and marginalization of Indigenous people. In a book [review](#) published in Counterpunch, Ron Jacobs writes:

Some stories cry out to be told. Often, the reason they have not been told is because those in power fear the particular truths of the tale.

The story told by Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* is one such story. It has been too long in telling. Dunbar Ortiz writes her narrative with a measured rage that enlivens the history being told, challenging the reader to reconsider every other history ever written about the United States.

This powerful book begs to be discussed and shared in trusted community. Unitarian Universalist groups and congregations can support people to delve together into the spiritual, emotional, and intellectual challenges of seeing their nation’s history through an unfamiliar and painful lens. It is hoped that discussion groups will find the capacity and the encouragement to take follow-on action afterward.

This discussion guide is flexible. Adapt it to congregational, cluster, district or regional programming for adults of all ages and life stages, for campus groups or young adult groups, for youth groups, or for cross-generational groups. Two formats are offered:

- * A single, 90-minute session guides a one-time discussion as might occur in a regular book group.
- * Three 90-minute sessions allow participants to read and process the book in three parts for a deeper exploration of the content and its implications.

Single-Session Program

Goals

- Provide a framework for readers to respond to *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*.
- Invite participants to explore the origin, settlement, and expansion of the United States from the point of view of Indigenous people, examining myths about U.S. history presented in the dominant culture narratives.
- Lead participants to identify new understandings as a result of reading and discussion and to commit to actions which result from these new understandings.

Materials

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or an LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, but do not post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
 - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - We agree to use this time for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than to debate politics or public policy.
- Write these reflection and sharing questions on newsprint and post:
 - What did you learn growing up about Indigenous people in the United States, their culture, history and the myths that surround them? What was the source of your learning? Has reading the book changed your understanding of what you thought you knew?
 - What narratives did you learn about U.S. American holidays as they relate to native people? How have your understandings changed? How do those changes affect your sense of personal and national identity?
 - Has this book changed your understanding of the history of a particular place or region in the United States which is important to you?

Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words from page 1 of Dunbar-Ortiz's book:

Under the crust of that portion of Earth called the United States of America – “from California to the Gulf Stream waters” – are interred the bones, villages, fields, and sacred objects of American Indians. They cry out for their stories to be heard through their descendants, who carry the memories of how the country was founded and how it came to be as it is today,

It should not have happened that the great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere, the very evidence of the Western Hemisphere, were wantonly destroyed, the gradual progress of humanity interrupted and set upon a path of greed and destruction. Choices were made that forged that path toward destruction of life itself – the moment in which we now live and die as our planet shrivels, overheated. To learn and know this history is both a necessity and responsibility to the ancestors and descendants of all parties.

Creating a Covenant (5 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (10 minutes)

Invite each person to introduce themselves and, in a sentence or two, capture their emotional and spiritual “temperature” after reading the book. Ask:

What feelings and impressions remain from your reading?

Allow silence for a minute or two for people to find their words. Then, invite each person to speak briefly uninterrupted. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Sharing and Conversation (20 minutes)

Invite participants to speak, one at a time, as they are moved. Ask the group not to respond to one another's comments until every person has had a chance to share. Ask:

- How did you respond to this book's retelling of United States history?
- What stories, facts, or historical events mentioned in the book are most memorable to you? How did they touch you?

After all have spoken, invite participants to respond to what others have shared. Remind them that the group has covenanted to speak from personal experiences and
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perspectives, rather than challenging the validity of others' experiences and perspectives.

Sharing Stories (35 minutes)

Invite participants to share one way in which reading this book has led them to a new perspective and new understanding. Suggest they may share a story of a place, an event, a holiday, or a childhood memory. Call attention to the questions you have posted. Say that the questions may help them settle on one story to tell.

After all have spoken, invite participants to respond to what others have shared.

Discussion and Commitments (10 minutes)

Ask:

What actions might we take, as a group or individually, in response to the book and the issues it raises?

Present a range of possible actions, including these:

- Find out more the history of indigenous people in your state or region, including stories of resistance and survival and share those stories
- Learn more about the Doctrine of Discovery and about the 2012 GA resolution to repudiate it. Work with others in your congregation or community to figure out a plan of action.
- Work with congregational and community leaders to observe Indigenous Peoples' Day in October. For information, explore resources on uua.org.
- Research and discover local Indigenous groups in your area. What justice issues are they engaged in? Find out if there is a role that those who are not Indigenous can play in support of those efforts.
- Get involved in efforts to retire/replace sports team names or mascots that present stereotypes or inaccurate or offensive names of Native American people.

Record ideas on newsprint. Ask volunteers to commit to specific actions and timelines to move forward.

Closing (5 minutes)

Share these words, from the sermon "The Other Side of the Pond" by Jan Carlsson-Bull, used with permission.

Once a body of belief begins to crack, once what is held to be historic gospel begins to erode, once any of us becomes privy to another story, another history,

another reality, we cling to the familiar only out of a need to be reassured, only out of a penchant to take our cues from loved and respected teachers and preachers and parents and grandparents and touted authorities on this and that because climbing into a boat guaranteed to rock is just way too scary.

But conversations matter. Stories new to us but ancient to others matter. Histories written or recalled across generations from a different lineage matter. A religion that holds faith and doubt in reverent balance matters as we consider in the chalice of religious community what happened and what didn't. A religion that holds faith and doubt in reverent balance and the search for truth in the highest esteem matters mightily as we ponder the formation of heroes and history.

Extinguish the chalice.

Three-Session Program

Goals

- Provide a framework for readers to respond to *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*
- Invite participants to explore the origin, settlement, and expansion of the United States from the point of view of Indigenous people, examining myths about U.S. history presented in the dominant culture narratives
- Invite participants to explore the history of Indigenous resistance to colonization and the lingering and destructive effects of colonization on Indigenous people
- Lead participants to identify new understandings as a result of reading and discussion and to commit to actions which result from these new understandings.

Session 1

Introduction and Chapters 1-5 (pages 1-94)

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

Preparation

- Write these covenant points on newsprint, but do not post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
 - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate politics or public policy.

- Write on newsprint but do not post:
 - We are a nation of immigrants.
 - We are a multicultural nation. Various groups, including oppressed groups, have made “contributions” to our culture and greatness.
 - We are a nation founded on a covenant. Faithful citizens came together of their own free will and pledged to each other and to their god to form and support a godly society in this promised land.
 - We are an exceptional nation, a city on a hill, a shining light and example for the world.

Chalice Lighting & Opening Reading (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these words from page 1 of Dunbar-Ortiz’s book:

Under the crust of that portion of Earth called the United States of America – “from California to the Gulf Stream waters” – are interred the bones, villages, fields, and sacred objects of American Indians. They cry out for their stories to be heard through their descendants, who carry the memories of how the country was founded and how it came to be as it is today,

It should not have happened that the great civilizations of the Western Hemisphere, the very evidence of the Western Hemisphere, were wantonly destroyed, the gradual progress of humanity interrupted and set upon a path of greed and destruction. Choices were made that forged that path toward destruction of life itself – the moment in which we now live and die as our planet shrivels, overheated. To learn and know this history is both a necessity and responsibility to the ancestors and descendants of all parties.

Creating a Covenant (5 minutes)

Post the covenant points you have written on newsprint. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (20 minutes)

Tell the group you will invite each person to introduce themselves and, in a few sentences, share what stays with them after reading this section of the book. Ask:

- What feelings and impressions remain from your reading?
- What stories, facts, or historical events mentioned in the book are most memorable to you? How did they touch you?

Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person to speak briefly uninterrupted. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person may choose to pass.

Sharing and Conversation (30 minutes)

Share these two quotes from the book (p. 2-3):

1. Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" celebrates that the land belongs to everyone, reflecting the unconscious manifest destiny we live with. But the extension of the United States from sea to shining sea was the intention and design of the country's founders. "Free" land was the magnet that attracted European settlers...

2. Origin narratives form the vital core of a people's unifying identity and of the values that guide them. In the United States, the founding and development of an Anglo-American settler-state involves a narrative about Puritan settlers who had a covenant with God to take the land. That part of the origin story is reinforced by the Columbus myth...

Ask:

Where and how was the United States origin myth taught to you? What words, actions, rituals, songs, and experiences solidified and reinforced that myth for you?

Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person to speak briefly uninterrupted. Allow about 15 minutes for this part of the conversation.

Then, invite participants to discuss the language Dunbar-Ortiz uses to debunk the origin myths. Ask:

- How does it change your picture of the origin of the United States to hear about civic and social organization in Indigenous communities, cities with large populations, extensive trade networks, strategic land management and other complex markers of civilization? How does that contrast with the image of virgin wilderness that is often promulgated?
- Does the use of words such as invaded, genocide, and unlimited warfare to describe the settlement of the United States alter your understanding? How does this contrast with words like clash of cultures and assimilation? Why does the way we tell the story matter so much?

Sharing (35 minutes)

Post the list you have written on newsprint. Ask participants to consider and discuss how indigenous people are excluded from stories we tell about United States history and values.

Then, invite participants to consider ways in which Unitarian Universalist history, theology, and tradition are bound up with the story we tell about United States history and values.

Closing (5 min)

Share “Only Begun,” words written by William Sinkford, in “Voices from the Margins;” used with permission:

Spirit of Life and Love, dear God of all nations:

There is so much work to do.

We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy.

Help us hold fast to our vision of what can be.

May we see the hope in our history,

and find the courage and the voice

to work for that constant rebirth

of freedom and justice.

That is our dream.

Amen.

Extinguish the chalice.

Session 2

Chapters 6-8 (pages 95-162)

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1

Preparation

- Post the covenant from Session 1.
- Write on newsprint, but do not post, these reflection questions:
 - How did the place that is important to you become part of the United States? Who was displaced?
 - What stories did you hear as a child or teen about the original Indigenous inhabitants?
 - If do not identify as Indigenous, are you aware of the voices and concerns of contemporary Indigenous peoples who live in or near the place that is important to you? Who or what raised your awareness?
 - If you do identify as Indigenous, how is the place that is important to you connected to that part of your identity?

Opening Reading & Chalice Lighting (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share “Our Voices Must Be Heard,” words of Jonipher Kwong, from the book, *Voices from the Margins*, used with permission.

Spirit of Life,

You speak to us from the East and the West

You speak to us from the North and the South

You call to us from the depths of our being

We respond with enthusiasm and fervor

We cry out from Manila to Maui

We shout from Alaska to Alabama

We proclaim your wondrous love from the highest mountains to the deepest ocean

Our voices must be heard. We shall not be silent.

Our voices must be heard.

Review the covenant from Session 1.

Conversation (20 minutes)

Invite participants to share any thoughts or insights that have emerged so far from their reading. Ask:

How have your knowledge and understanding of indigenous Peoples' history in the United States deepened or changed through your reading? What are you mulling?

Sharing (20 minutes)

Ask participants to think about a geographical place in the United States that is important to them. Post the reflection questions you have written on newsprint and read the questions aloud. Say, in these words or your own:

If you know little about the story of your place, you are not alone. You may want to consider finding out more, going forward.

Allow silence for two or three minutes for people to find their words. Then, invite each person to speak briefly, uninterrupted. Mention that for this conversation and any others, each person reserves the right to pass.

Discussion (30 minutes)

Share these words from the book:

Neither superior technology nor an overwhelming number of settlers made up the mainspring of the birth of the United States or the spread of its power over the entire world. Rather, the chief cause was the colonialist settler-state's willingness to eliminate whole civilizations of people in order to possess their land...Jefferson was [the] architect [of the colonization of North America]. Andrew Jackson was the implementer of the final solution for the Indigenous peoples east of the Mississippi.

You may wish to display a few Jefferson nickels and a US \$20 bill with Jackson's portrait on it.

Say:

The book presents a version of U.S. history that doesn't correlate with dominant culture narratives about key U.S. American traditions, holidays, and heroes.

Lead a discussion using these questions:

- How do we as a nation talk about (or not talk about) the death marches, ethnic cleansing, physical and cultural genocide, land theft, and other racist policies and actions?
- What do we tell our collective children? How might we begin to talk about these issues in our communities and families? In our congregation?

Discussion (10 minutes)

Share this quote from the book:

Indigenous nations had defied the founding of the independent United States in a manner that allowed for their survival and created a legacy—a culture of resistance—that has persisted.

Then, say:

Dunbar-Ortiz points to the idealized image of the noble savage and the pervading myth that the indigenous people passively accepted Western colonialism and refutes them, offering instead a detailed account of their 'culture of resistance.'

Lead a discussion, asking, "How do the stories and information about Indigenous resistance to colonization impact your understanding of US history?"

Closing (5 minutes)

Share these words, from the sermon "The Other Side of the Pond," by Jan Carlsson-Bull, used with permission.

Once a body of belief begins to crack, once what is held to be historic gospel begins to erode, once any of us becomes privy to another story, another history, another reality, we cling to the familiar only out of a need to be reassured, only out of a penchant to take our cues from loved and respected teachers and preachers and parents and grandparents and touted authorities on this and that because climbing into a boat guaranteed to rock is just way too scary.

But conversations matter. Stories new to us but ancient to others matter.

Histories written or recalled across generations from a different lineage matter. A religion that holds faith and doubt in reverent balance matters as we consider in

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the chalice of religious community what happened and what didn't. A religion that holds faith and doubt in reverent balance and the search for truth in the highest esteem matters mightily as we ponder the formation of heroes and history.

Extinguish the chalice.

Session 3

Chapters 9-12 (pages 163-237)

Materials

- Chalice, candle and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1
- Optional: Computer with internet connection and projector

Preparation

- Post covenant from Session 1.
- Write on news print and post this quote from Native historian Jack Forbes: “While living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of that past.”
- Write on newsprint, but do not post:
 - Taming the continent
 - City on the Hill
 - New frontier
 - Civilization
 - Democracy
 - Go West!
 - Manifest Destiny
 - No-fault history
 - Multiculturalism
- Optional: Find and mark the UUA webpages on [Doctrine of Discovery](#) and [Indigenous Peoples Day](#).

Opening Reading & Chalice Lighting (5 minutes)

Light the chalice and share these excerpts, quoted in the book from the Proclamation of Indians of All Tribes who occupied Alcatraz Island in 1969:

We, the Native Americans, reclaim the land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery.

We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land, and hereby offer the following treaty:

We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for twenty-four dollars (24) in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago.

We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of the land for their own to be held in trust by the American Indians government and the bureau of Caucasian Affairs to hold in perpetuity- for as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea. We will further guide the inhabitants in the proper way of living. We will offer them our religion, our education, our life-ways, in order to help them achieve a our level of civilization and thus raise them and all their white brothers up from their savage and unhappy state...

Furthermore, it would be fitting and symbolic that ships from all over the world entering the Golden Gate, would first see Indian land, and thus be reminded of the true history of this nation. This tiny island would be a symbol of the great lands once ruled by free and noble Indians.

Conversation (20 minutes)

Say:

Dunbar-Ortiz quotes the late Native Historian Jack Forbes who often stressed that, "while living persons are not responsible for what their ancestors did, they are responsible for the society they live in, which is a product of that past."

Lead a conversation, inviting participants to explore the implications of the quote. Ask:

What responsibility do we, our communities, and our nation have for the ways in which our society is product of the past?

Sharing (30 minutes)

Say:

Dunbar-Ortiz states that the central question of *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* is "How might acknowledging the reality of United States history work to transform society?" Let's consider first that which you know best. How might acknowledging the reality of United States history work to transform your understanding of your own identity, and the stories told in your family, your local community, and/or your congregation?

Invite people to share one at time without interruption as they are ready. If there is time left after all have shared, invite participants to respond to what others have shared.

Discussion (15 minutes)

Share the list of words you have written on newsprint. Lead a discussion, asking:

- Have you encountered any of these words or ideas recently in conversation, media, news reports, or somewhere else?
- How are you thinking differently about the words or phrases, and about the context in which they are used?
- Have you shared your new understanding with others?

Discussion and Next Steps (15 minutes)

Share these excerpts from the 2012 UUA General Assembly resolution repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery, which Dunbar-Ortiz quotes:

[The delegates call on the UUA and its member congregations to]:

Expose the historical reality and impact of the Doctrine of Discovery and eliminate its presence in the contemporary policies, programs, theologies, and structures of Unitarian Universalism; and...

Invite indigenous partners to a process of Honor and Healing (often called Truth and Reconciliation)

[collaborate with other religious groups] to propose a specific Congressional Resolution to repudiate this doctrine...and call upon the United States to fully implement the standards of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of indigenous Peoples in the U.S. law and policy without qualifications.

Ask:

What actions might we take, as a group or individually, in response to the book and the issues it raises?

If you have an internet connection and projector explore the pages you have marked on uua.org for ideas on actions to take. Suggest possible actions:

- Find out more the history of indigenous people in your state or region, including stories of resistance and survival and share those stories

- Learn more about the Doctrine of Discovery and about the 2012 GA resolution to repudiate it. Work with others in your congregation or community to figure out a plan of action.
- Work with congregational and community leaders to observe Indigenous Peoples' Day in October. For more information, explore resources on uua.org.
- Research and discover local Indigenous groups in your area. What justice issues are they engaged in? Find out if there is a role that those who are not Indigenous can play in support of those efforts.
- Get involved in efforts to retire/replace sports team names or mascots that present inaccurate or offensive names and stereotypes of Native American people.

Record ideas on newsprint. Ask volunteers to commit to specific actions and timelines to move forward.

Closing (5 minutes)

Gather participants in a circle around the chalice. Thank them for being part of the discussion group. Ask each in turn to share, in a few words or a phrase, something they are taking away from the experience of reading and discussing this book that they intend to share, in some way, with others.

Extinguish the chalice.