

“The Echo of Monsters”
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My passion for history is rooted in the stories of people I grew up with and the places I lived. Perhaps my passion was seeded by my grandfather who walked the line between telling and performing not only family tales but also stories of puritans in England and America, the development of law and legal systems, and local stories of Lynn, Salem, and Marblehead. Whatever story he embarked on was prompted by conversation about some current event or idea, and he had a way of making distant history come alive. My passion for history has also grown through travels with my father to historical sites where we immersed ourselves in the stories of places such as Colonial Williamsburg, Yorktown, and the Tower of London. And my passion is continually fed by the place I live. On the North Shore and in our Commonwealth, we are surrounded by history.

A mentor of mine, Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Kathleen Rolenz wrote, “Throughout history, we have moved to the rhythms of mystery and wonder, prophecy, wisdom, teachings from ancient and modern sources, and nature herself.” Historical learning is inherent to theological exploration and spiritual growth, and we UUs are called to engage with history not only to learn and grow personally, but also to discern beliefs, values, and actions in the contexts of those who came before us.

It’s a common saying (attributed to civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs) that history is the story we tell about ourselves. We are called to remember that “history” is not only about the past. Every day we, individually and in community, are creating history. As UUs who hold transformation, justice, pluralism, interdependence, generosity, and equity as our core values rooted in love, we need to ask so many questions. Questions such as: whose story is this? Who is telling it? Why? In these current times when nearly every value we’re committed to is being challenged and undermined by competing stories, engaging with history has become ever more critical. We must broaden our history beyond our often used monsters and heroes dichotomy.

As a historian with a particular focus on enslavement and indigenous history, I am consistently engaging with the diabolical and monstrous. In fact, I titled this sermon “The Echo of Monsters,” but it might better be named “Echoes of Monstrosity.” When we explore history, we engage with humanity and encounter stories of the heroic and monstrous deeds of communities and individuals.

Our society has a fascination with ancestry and genealogy. The oldest, largest, and most preeminent genealogical society in the United States sits about two blocks from here. We use our ancestry to create connections that span centuries.

On this Indigenous Peoples’ Day weekend, it seems apt that we turn to the writing of Tink Tinker, an indigenous liberation theologian. “What is important,” Tinker wrote, “in terms of our day-to-day existence in Indian communities throughout north America, we understand that our ancestors continue to live in very real ways...These ancestors continue to live in us, both in our

memories and in our physical lives as we continue to eat the produce of the earth where they have returned in one way or another.”¹ We heard this sentiment echoed in this morning’s reading.

Ancestors connect us to our past. We look not only to our personal ancestors but to our community ancestors as well. This congregation has, since the beginning, existed in relationship to my home church in Salem. When the Winthrop fleet landed off Salem in 1630, the voyagers rejoiced at the prospect of worshipping in Salem’s church.

Let’s set the scene: Five cannons fired in the early hours of Saturday, June 12, 1630. The *Arbella*’s firing announced the arrival of John Winthrop’s fleet in Salem Sound.

Weaving through the passage between Bakers Isle and Little Misery Isle, they dropped anchor.² William Pierce, master of the *Plymouth*, went ashore to personally alert John Endecott, the outgoing Governor of the colony, of their arrival. In the afternoon, Pierce returned to the fleet with Endecott and Salem minister Rev. Samuel Skelton.

Eventually, a Pawtucket man joined the Winthrop party aboard ship for the night and the Pawtucket sachem, Masquenomoit, came aboard the next day.³ Likely two of the first Indians Winthrop encountered, the Pawtucket men’s visit surely reminded him of the colony’s charter and his missionary oath. In the governor’s oath, Winthrop vowed to bring “the natives of this country, called New England, to the knowledge of the true God.”⁴ Advancing the Gospel among the Natives of New England was a core element of the colony’s charter and central to Winthrop’s own personal priorities.⁵

Missionary work was central to the colonial endeavor in Massachusetts Bay. This congregation is tied to the missionary work of Winthrop as well as John Eliot, who served as minister from 1631-1632. From land acknowledgements to the name and seal of the Commonwealth, the echoes of colonization persist; our history, sanitized to create a hero/monster dichotomy where the European settlers always take on the role of hero.

Salem, too, is very publicly confronted with the echo of its monstrosity. Every October, over 1.2 million visitors descend on Salem, Massachusetts. This number has steadily increased each year,

¹ George E. “Tink” Tinker, *American Indian Liberation: A Theology of Sovereignty* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 109.

² Winthrop misidentifies Little Misery Isle as “Kettle Isle,” which he had just passed. The “narrow strait” he describes clearly should indicate Little Misery Island.

³ Richard S. Dunn and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649*, Abridged Edition (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 27–28; Lawrence Shaw Mayo, *John Endecott: A Biography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), 52–53.

⁴ Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England*, vol. 1 (Boston: William White, 1853), 351–52.

⁵ Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America’s Forgotten Founding Father* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 157–58.

and the season's arrival progressively gets earlier and earlier. Roads close and sidewalks become un-navigable. Each year, Salem's tourism season gets progressively longer and persistently more intense. What happened over three centuries ago continues to define Salem's identity. Salem is a place where tragedy transformed into tourism.

I remember walking downtown as a young child and having monsters (costumed strangers) jump scare me, popping out from behind what 11 months out of the year are harmless corners. I was disturbed a week ago to read a reddit post from a local mother whose child was brought to tears by this and most commenters responding with "well move someplace else."

Just a few weeks ago, a young woman from Northern Ireland who was visiting Salem, remarked that she was "shocked people actually live here." For so many, Salem is nothing more than a theme park, a witch-y version of Disneyland. A tour guide the other night encouraged his 30+ tourist group to look inside peoples' windows and to "not be afraid to get right up to the glass."

The spectre of Salem's darkest hour persists. Our local economy relies on the tourism based around a community tragedy. Our local sports teams are the "Witches." The Salem Police Department logo depicts a witch on broomstick. We have a statue of Samantha from Bewitched in the center of town mere block from the site of the courthouse where many were tried and found guilty of witchcraft. Our history reverberates into the present.

As part of my recent campaign for Salem City Council, I had the opportunity to hear directly from residents about their experiences with local tourism and the city's visitors. One of my neighbors, a historian of renaissance and early modern Europe, has a particularly relevant notice to Salem's visitors. A small wooden sign hanging on her door reads: "They were not witches." Other residents lament that the events of 1692 are often all people know of Salem's history.

Just to be clear, I'm not against Salem tourism. In fact, it is an incredibly important driver of our local economy.

In the case of Salem, who are the monsters that ignited the monstrous hysteria? To paint the Salem witch trials accusers as monsters is to misunderstand the history. "The tragedy has at different times been judged by both amateur and professional historians to be the result of religious fanaticism; power-mad ministers; hysterical girls; local disputes; as hysteria; misogyny; anxiety caused by political turmoil; frontier life, and Indian wars; hallucinations caused by rotting grain; psychological distress; or even a result of the persecution of 'real' witches."⁶ The search for the true "culprit," the real "monster" of the Salem witch trials continues.

Even the witch trials themselves have become a popular shorthand to monster-ize. "Beginning when the trials were still in living memory, Americans referred to the excesses of Salem's witchcraft trials in public debates over such things as smallpox inoculations, religion, and revolution...In each case, in every era, Americans evoked Salem witchcraft to vividly illustrate the folly of a course of action by either fellow citizens or their government that they believed to

⁶ Gretchen A. Adams, *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2.

be extreme, irrational, and capable of destroying the nation itself.”⁷ Let’s not forget the President’s liberal use, that’s definitely the wrong word... *copious* use of the term “witch hunt” throughout the last decade.

Within our own tradition we see the spectre of monstrosity. Unitarian Universalist history is interwoven with the history of native boarding schools, eugenics, enslavement, and colonialism. We can and must confront those echoes of monstrosity head on. We are called, as a community, to ever widen our circle of concern.

We are a both-and tradition. We are paradoxical. We experience the complexity of identity. We are a *new* tradition with deep historical roots. We are a historically Christian community that strives to embrace all; that does not profess an orthodoxy nor seek a singular source of love, life, and divinity. Our tradition is *new* in part because we are constantly creating and re-creating it. Our faith *must be new* because we are always already widening that circle of concern so we can *learn* more, *grow* more, and *love* more.

In telling our stories, we construct heroes and monsters that may reflect our anxieties and our yearnings. Our histories are just as much about us as they are about their subjects.

As we gather here, we have chosen to seek truth through this community, through relationship with one another and our histories.

So, hear this morning’s sermon as a call to reimagine, to transform, our relationship with the stories we tell ourselves. Our historically Christian tradition can lean into that history and find community and strength from our theological ancestors. We are the inheritors of an incredible and complex tradition. We are called to grapple with historical monstrosity. We are called to ask how we, as Unitarian Universalists, experience, hear, and learn from the echoes of monstrosity and respond with love.

I’d like to close with words from Rev. Leslie Takahashi.

All that we have ever loved
And all that we have ever been
Stands with us on the brink of all that we aspire to create:
 A deeper peace,
 A larger love,
 A more embracing hope,
 A greater generosity of spirit,
 A deeper joy in this life we share.

⁷ Gretchen A. Adams, *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 3.