The Leaven, Not The Bread

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I met a Native American man many years ago when I was working as a reporter in La Crosse, Wisconsin, who was a keeper of the old ways.

Stumbled upon him, actually, while I was bombing around the dirt roads of Jackson County trying to find a forest fire.

Wilbur Blackdeer was there in his yard with a dozen friends and relatives, waiting to evacuate if they needed to.

What caught my eye in the clearing around his modest house were the frames of long lodges and other artifacts of a tradition I had experienced thus far only in museums or in commercial ceremonies performed for white audiences.

The fire never materialized. But my interest was kindled. And about a week later, I went back,

to visit Wilbur, to ask him about the lodges, to learn about Native Americans, and his tribe, the Ho Chunk, then still known as the Winnebago.

Wilbur, who was 75 years old that summer, did not describe himself as having any official status in the tribe. He was, as much as anyone, a spiritual leader.

The lodges in his yard were real, working lodges, used for ceremonies, rites of passage.

Members of his tribe regularly came to him for help or guidance, young men seeking vision quests, couples wishing to be married, children to be named. Wilbur’s life- work was to keep alive a way of life, to tell the old stories, to honor his tradition.

I spent that summer visiting Wilbur every week or so. We would sit on stumps out in his yard. I learned to bring him tobacco, to honor his time with me. Sometimes, we would talk for only a few minutes. He’d announce, “Gotta go in the house now,” and I knew that was my cue to leave. Other times, he’d talk a long while.

I was never quite sure whether I was assuming too much by showing up, making a pest of myself, but at the end of the summer, Wilbur offered a strong affirmation – I was invited to join him and his family at a harvest feast.

On that day, the long lodge was covered over with canvas. Fires were lit with a bow and a stick, not with a match. A deer was killed and butchered, to be cooked along with beef, chicken and pork, with corn and squash from the garden, in pails hung over the open fires.

When the prep work was done, the men filed in one door of the lodge, the women through another, and the drumming began. I was assigned to a “guide” as I was told that once we were inside, there would be no English spoken.

Throughout the afternoon, many dances were held, dances that told the stories of the tribe, and gave thanks for the harvest. Guests rose to dance before the hosts, honoring them and receiving an offering of tobacco through the peace pipe taken from a medicine bundle.

When it came time to eat, the pails were portioned out to family leaders, who shared with those around. The meal was eaten without salt or seasoning, from hand-carved wooden bowls with wooden spoons.

Then came “dessert.”

With more offerings of tobacco, the ceremonial bundle that had been opened on a low mound of white sand was taken up and two wooden bowls were placed on it. Into the bowls was poured a dark, sticky liquid. I looked over at my guide, who muttered "buffalo blood" – the only English words he had said all afternoon.

As I watched, two of the younger men donned buffalo headdresses and stuffed hair tails into the back of their pants, and as the drums pounded, they began circling the inside of the lodge, leading a line of participants as they went.

When they reached the bowls, they stooped on hands and knees, and without touching anything with their hands -- like the buffaloes -- they slurped up some of the liquid.

As each dancer passed, he or she did likewise. And as they danced, some would lower their heads, make horns of extended index fingers, and snort and grunt at each other.

There was a lot of laughter in this. After only a pass or two, my guide smiled, pointed, and indicated I should join in. More than a little self conscious about dancing, and highly concerned about the blood, I stepped up anyway, and when I came to the bowl, bent down just as they had – lots and lots of laughter now – and stuck my face in to --- not blood -- but maple syrup. Howls ensued.

When the last bowl was empty, The leader stooped once again, and edging his "horn" under the bowl, tried to tip it over. The shallow bowl skittered off its sand dais into the dirt, but remained upright. Everyone laughed. The next dancer tried, and the next, without luck.

Finally, an old man with skill born of apparent experience, adroitly hooked his forehead under the lip of the bowl and tipped it on end. It teetered a moment, then dropped upside down. As it hit the ground, the drums stopped and the dance was over.

I count that day as one of the great honors of my life. I think that when such a cultural divide can be bridged, when a connection is made, there is real honor.

Wilbur, whose life spanned a century of change, for his culture and ours, honored his tradition by keeping the old stories alive. His honor and his tradition makes me think, too, of how we honor our tradition. What tradition means for us.

And in many ways, we are so totally not like this. We do not do it this way. We are a religion that pushes away tradition, a religion that challenges the old stories, the old assumptions. We are constantly seeking, constantly asking questions. Our free and responsible search never quits.

We hold to no creed. No revealed truth. We seek truth and meaning from a host of sources. And we’re open to finding even more sources as they present themselves. Sometimes we even make them up.

No story is automatically more sacred than another. Every bit of reality is fair game. We say we have an “open canon,” which means that the poetry of Mary Oliver or the songs of Pete Seeger ring just as true for us as the books of the Bible or the Koran or the Upanishads.

We do organize around food, just like Wilbur, but our feasts are more likely to offer vegan, free-range, organic and gluten-free options, or else be catered by a local deli.

And when someone suggests we make communion out of apples, or flowers, or little jars of water we’ve collected on vacation, we say yeah, go for it.

We speak in the vernacular. We change up the script. Sometimes we even rap.

We have stripped our sanctuaries bare of any hide-bound symbolism. In our architecture we have given up tall spires and bell towers originally intended to draw our attention upward to a transcendent whatever because of a lot of us have rejected whatever. If there is an idol here, it is only this grimness, this slavish denial of decoration.

But even that’s up for grabs. You want to dress steampunk? Cool. You want to wear flipflops instead of wingtips? Fine!

Nor do we hold on even to the abstractions of our ancestors. We make no creed of a nugget from Channing or Hosea Ballou. We do not repeat the tropes of the past.

We are the religion of change. The religion of no tradition. We are the anti-tradition. We are the uncommon denomination, the religion where all your answers are questioned. We are like perpetual six-year-olds, why, why, why, why.

But we are old, too. We are older than old.

And we have great stories.

All the stories you need for a great religion.

We have stories of martyrdom, like Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in 1553 for the heresy of challenging the doctrine of the trinity. He reads his Bible, finds no mention of the mystical union of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Gets all up in John Calvin’s business about it and is burned over a fire of green wood that sputtered and smoked and licked at his flesh for a full half hour before he finally succumbed.

And we have stories of tragedy: like the story of Margaret Fuller, the most learned woman in America, literary critic for Horace Greeley’s Tribune, more erudite than any man she ever met, might have gone on to do even more advancing the politics of sexuality in those pioneering days, except that in 1850, at age 40, she and her husband and their two-year-old child were on their way back from Europe when their ship capsized and they were drowned.

We have schismatic stories, like the story of the American Transcendentalists, the nation’s first counterculture, hippies, you could say. Off in the woods, communing with nature, setting up actual communes and home schools and hiding away escaped slaves. Ralph Waldo Emerson especially pushing back on his own Unitarian colleagues, whom he thought of as cold, rational, void of spirit. The pendulum swing of our own liberal faith taking a hard spiritual turn.

And stories of sacrifice and prophecy, like the story of the group that came to be known as the Iowa Sisterhood, in the late 1800s, when places like Wisconsin were still the frontier, but where the New England clergy – all men, of course – were reluctant to go. They were pretty comfortable back in their cozy pulpits, with well-to-do congregations.

But somebody’s got to serve out here. And who should do it? Women!

Women previously barred from ordination, women beginning to assert themselves and at the same time willing to do the hard work, to care for congregations, to live through harsh winters in drafty attics for little or no pay. Women exactly like Olympia Brown, whose name our membership book bears. Or Eliza Tupper Wilkes, who founded the last church I served. Or Mary Safford, Eleanor Gordon, Ida Hultin, almost 20 more.

As our movement grudgingly came to accept them, they forged a new turn in faith. Theirs was a ministry of nurture and community, not blathering abstractions from the pulpit.

We even have our own miracle story, the story of John Murray, told earlier. Of course, it’s a kind of non-miracle, a miracle in which nature didn’t do anything unnatural.

But how great is that? What do they say about the weather, just wait, it will change? And when it doesn’t, Glory Be!

These are all good stories, all good parts of our tradition. In the back of the hymnal you can find the words of many more prophetic men and women. You can even find Francis David from the 16th century, speaking in Hungarian Egy Az Isten (Edge Oz Eeshten), “God is One.”

But still, what does it mean to honor them? Unlike Wilbur Blackdeer, and even unlike other traditions much closer to ours, we don’t often venerate these ancestors. We do recite their words from time to time, but we do it not so much for the truth they spoke as for the fact that they spoke it.

We honor our ancestors, we honor our tradition, by honoring their spirit, by honoring their lead. They spoke the truth they saw. We should speak the truth we see.

They questioned the assumptions of their day, both the assumptions of the culture in which they lived and the assumptions of their own faith communities and colleagues. We should question the assumptions of our day, both of culture and of our own community.

This is what it means to witness. This is what it means to testify. To speak the truth you see.

What this means, too, I think, is that maybe we are not always going to be popular. We might not be the ones to establish institutions or to become the dominant trend. A couple of years ago in seminary, the UU students were talking about whether our liberal faith might just be the religion of now. Bruised maybe by the fact that no Unitarians or Universalists seem to have ascended to the executive branch since the early days of our nation, we were indulging a bit in the hope that finally, maybe now, maybe somehow, it will be once again our time. Now, when most of our culture claims to be “spiritual, not religious,” maybe we are just liberal enough that those who check None of the Above might choose us instead.

I think there is some slight hope in that. While most mainstream denominations are plummeting off a cliff, our numbers are for the most part flat.

But the religion of the future? We may only be treading water. And as for a sudden sea change when everyone will begin swimming toward our boat, well, our pattern has been different.

An example lies in the idea of universal salvation, the idea that a loving God would condemn no one to hell for eternity, the Universalist idea. By the late 1800s, Universalism in America was the sixth largest denomination and on the rise. So maybe, like us, those Universalists were thinking hey, now is the time, we’re the religion of now. Except what happened was that the Methodists and the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians all began backing off hell and damnation themselves, emphasizing the Social Gospel and the importance of good works in this life. The Universalist message was either coopted or embraced, depending on your perspective, and so all differentiation was gone. No need to join a Universalist church any more, your own church says essentially the same thing. And so we won. And we lost. Universalism as an actual denomination declined.

Zoom ahead to the last few years, again we break new ground, accepting into our arms the LGBT community, rallying for rights, standing up for same sex couples. Then what? State after state rose up until finally the Supreme Court ruled that marriage equality is the law of the land. A blessed day for UUism? Maybe. But more, a blessed day for LGBT community.

Accepted by in any state, increasingly accepted in many denominations – Lutherans, and even the pope, the pope for god’s sake, coming off of the hard line. What happens? We win. And so does everyone else.

I wonder now what this means for the Black Lives Matter movement, at the moment, embattled. But in the long run? Who knows?

And so I think differently about Unitarians and Universalists and our role in history and in the now.

Maybe our role is, and always has been, to live on the edges, to push back on society, to point out things that don’t make sense, to call out injustice, speak the truth. Maybe we are the ones on the margins.

Rev. Rob Eller Isaacs has an even better phrase. He says we are the leaven, not the bread. We’re the yeast. We make things rise. You can’t make a loaf out of just yeast, of course.

But we are necessary.

We are the yeasty ones, This is how we do it, right? Raise your hand if you have ever signed a petition, or had a yard sign, or a bumper sticker, or served on a committee, or worked a phone bank, or voted in an election …. Have I got everyone yet?

This is how we do it. How we honor our tradition.

By being the yeast.

We are like Servetus not because we read our Bibles exactly as he did, but because we call into question, we challenge, and we go to the mat.

We are like the Transcendentalists not because we all worship nature but because no two of us thinks alike.

We are like the Iowa Sisterhood not because we face the same challenges, but because we are willing to do the hard work.

Our ancestors were bold. We honor them by being bold, too.

A few days after the harvest feast, Wilbur Blackdeer was hospitalized for a mild heart attack, brought on by a touch of pneumonia caught in the rain.

“People don’t live too long, you know,” he told me from his hospital bed.

In fact, neither do traditions. Wilbur’s tradition, too, has changed over time. In other indigenous nations, the rise of the Native American Church, and the prominence of certain rituals like the Ghost Dance speak to the influence of colliding cultures. The tradition responds to the moment. It finds a new way.

All traditions move and grow.

Wilbur especially straddled two different worlds. Those dancers with headdresses and tails? They were wearing Rebok basketball shoes on their feet.

But even as they step into the future, they hold on to things that matter, that help give their lives meaning.

That’s how it is for us, too.

Just as Wilbur’s family gathers around the lodge, we come here to find our inspiration, our spirit.

We come here in honor.

We come here in tradition.

Here we hold ceremonies, rituals, rites of passage. We seek meaning, purpose. We give thanks. We break bread. We hold up the worth and dignity of each person.

And we find ways to support and honor family life, too. Couples are married. Children are named. We keep alive a way of being, our liberal religion, We keep alive the flame. We honor our tradition.

Traditions can live if we keep the fires burning.

If we remember, if we honor the spirit of those who have gone before us.

They live in story and ritual, in reverence and connection.

They live in honor.

They live in covenant.

May it be so.