



Story

How the Spider Symbol Came to the People, an Osage story from Native American Animal Stories by Joseph J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac

Sermon

For many years, there was a tradition at the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assembly that involved recognizing the Native tribe that was indigenous to the city where we met. At Opening Ceremonies, a representative of that tribe would come and welcome us to their ancestral land. This tradition was started because many UUs felt it was important for us to recognize that someone was here before us. We didn't want to be one more group of entitled mostly white people who took our privilege for granted. This tradition worked pretty well, until General Assembly came to St. Louis, because there are no intact Native tribes left in the state of Missouri. The Osage Tribe had been shipped west in the early 1800s to make room for American settlers. So the Assembly Planners got in touch with an Osage representative in Oklahoma, which is where their Reservation is, and asked if they would consider sending someone to St. Louis to greet us onto their ancestral lands. This is the response they received:

"Why should we drive four hours to come to St. Louis to speak to your Assembly for two minutes so you all can feel better about yourselves? We have our own issues in our own communities that we need to deal with. We are not going to carry your water for you. This is your work, and you need to do it."

You would not believe the drama that ensued from that response! It sure was a wake-up call, and we started asking ourselves, what does it mean to ask someone to symbolically welcome us to their ancestral lands, knowing that culturally, materially, economically, nothing will change from the welcome. Are we willing to give up our homes, our communities, are we willing to increase our taxes to pay First Nations people the real value of what their land is worth, land they were often forcibly removed from and underpaid for? Or is it instead much easier to hear pretty words that assure us that we haven't done anything wrong, that the moral failings of our ancestors aren't are own, and that listening to the words of those removed from the land we live on absolves us of any responsibility?

So this sermon, the last in our world religions series, is about what it might mean for us to do our work. It is impossible, and I think irresponsible, to even consider speaking about Native Spirituality without acknowledging the near genocide that occurred so we could live here. Given that reality, what does it mean for us to carry our water?

The Osage people hadn't always lived in Missouri. They originally lived in the Ohio River Valley and came west because of ongoing wars with the Iroquois, their longstanding enemy. When the Europeans came, both the Osage and the Iroquois saw an opportunity to further their interests by making alliances with the newcomers. The Osage became allies of the French. The Iroquois sided with the British. Their fighting turned from dominance over hunting grounds to dominance over trap lines and trading posts. North American fur had become all the rage in upper class Europe, and the tribe that controlled the trap lines had access to European goods like guns, horses, soap, woven blankets, metal pots and utensils, salt, and unfortunately, alcohol.

France and Britain also used Native rivalries for their goal of trumping the other in controlling North America. This was the era of colonialization, where European powers sought to divvy up the world for their political and economic purposes. They insisted on their native allies joining them in war in return for exclusive trading rights. The Iroquois fought for the British and the Osage fought for the French. This is one reason why the Osage

relocated completely west of the Mississippi by the mid-1700s. The British controlled everything east of the Mississippi, the French everything west of it. But there was more to it than that. The British usually wanted land and the French wanted furs. To move to French territory meant leaving behind the threat of European settlers who wanted land. It felt pretty safe west of the Mississippi.

But then something happened in 1776. The American Revolution, largely paid for by France, which wanted Britain out of North America, succeeded in creating the United States, but its western border still stopped at the Mississippi River because France held on to its territories. So far, so good for the Osage. But the war between Britain and France wasn't over. French dictator Napoleon Bonaparte began an aggressive military campaign and he needed money and in 1803 he agreed to the Louisiana Purchase, which put 14 states, including Missouri, into American hands.

This is when the Osage saw the writing on the wall. American settlers were on their way, and they knew there was no point in fighting. They'd seen what was happening in the east. Native people would try to hold on, in vain, and lose. Rather than fight and lose, the Osage sought to make the best deal they could for their people.

When I think of these negotiations I am reminded of our story, where the leader of the Osage goes in search for a symbol for his people. He saw a deer, and became so focused on finding that one animal that he forgot where he was and ran right into the web. He didn't want the lowly spider to be his symbol. Why defer to a small insignificant insect? He wanted a majestic light footed deer. But in the end, he saw the worth of the spider and it became the symbol of his people. To use the words of the spider, "I watch and I wait, then all things come to me." The Osage people seem to have learned the lesson. They didn't want to be blindly running through the woods. They wanted the wisdom of the spider, of the well-crafted web of life holding them, and so rather than rise up in arms, they came to the negotiating table to see what was possible.

Five years after the Louisiana Purchase, the Osage ceded the eastern part of Missouri and relocated to Western Missouri, hoping that would be it. But the settlers kept coming. By 1825 the Osage had ceded all their lands in Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma and moved to southeast Kansas, hoping that would be it. But the settlers kept coming. By 1870 the Osage were forced to cede their Kansas territory and relocate to Indian Territory in northwest Oklahoma, a large tract of barren land no one else wanted. Relocating three times in 60 years had taken its toll. They were a broken people.

Except for one thing; somehow, they had seen fit to take the money that was offered when they left Kansas and buy the barren land they were shipped off to. They had learned what private property meant in the white world. It meant the land really belonged to you and no one could take it away. They were the first tribe to buy their own reservation. And when oil and gas were discovered on that reservation in 1897, they became the wealthiest tribe in the United States. And make no mistake about it, white business interests were furious and tried to find a way to cash in, but for once, the law was on the Osage side.

Some thought they would now be in paradise. No more poverty. No more vulnerability to white people. No more exile. Just like the spider sitting in its web waiting for what would come, their promised land had found them. But, that was not exactly how it worked out. Yes, the money was a godsend, but it couldn't wipe out the damage that had been done. It couldn't wipe out the dehumanizing impact of being shipped off because someone else counted more. The alcoholism didn't go away, the high rates of domestic violence didn't go away, the high rate of criminal behavior and the high rate of incarceration didn't go away. The self-sabotaging behavior that is so common when a people internalize the discrimination that oppresses them, did not stop. No money could erase the past. Money couldn't carry their water for them.

Tomorrow evening is the beginning of Passover in the Jewish faith. Tomorrow is the night that Jewish people around the world remember that on a dark night, thousands of years ago, the angel of death passed over Egypt slaying the eldest born in every Egyptian household. Because Moses had told the Jewish people to mark their doors with the blood of a lamb, the angel of death passed them by. This was the final act that convinced Pharaoh

to let them go so they could find their promised land.

Now you may wonder what this has to do with the Osage people. Well, because they sided with France, and France was a Catholic country, many had converted to Christianity, and so they took the exile story and saw themselves in it. They took their Osage religion, that saw everything as an interconnected whole, that saw the animal world and the human world as one, that could see God in a spider, and combined it with their Christian faith, and suddenly the people of Israel are just like them, a people separated from their dignity and worth, who are wandering the desert looking for home.

Guess who Pharaoh was? Imagine the power of that symbol for them.

Since that grand dislocation, when everything was taken away and they were left in Oklahoma on land that no white man wanted, they have been trying to figure out what it will take to finally walk out of exile. What will it take to internalize the truth that they no longer need to be the lamb that is slain so that the angel of death will pass by for someone else? To use the central symbol of Passover, they are seeking the strength to take their place, as a people, at the Seder table.

When I think about the Osage people, and the Jewish people, and all people who have suffered injustice, this is what I wonder: What does healing mean? How do you get to be whole again when your worth and dignity has been so damaged?

Many years ago I had the opportunity as a chaplain to sit with a woman who had been raped, and she, for some reason, decided to tell me about her journey of healing. Her first attempt was to undo the damage that had been done. She went to therapy because she wanted to return to the person that she had been before the rape and she tried for years to return to the innocence that had been stolen from her, but it only seemed to increase the power the rape had over her. She finally came to understand that she could not undo the rape; she could only manage the new reality of who she had become. When she broke through into this place, one of the things that happened to her is that she could connect to a new level of empathy for all those who experienced powerlessness. She knew what it felt like. For her, healing meant learning to embrace the new reality of who she had become so that the violation done to her no longer controlled her life. She had become someone different, wounded but stronger than before, kinder, more understanding, not unlike a spider, watching and waiting for the holy to land in her web.

The primary impact of violence is to separate us not only from our own worth and dignity, but from being able to truly embrace and affirm the worth and dignity of all living things. The act of violence, whether received or given, sends us in exile away from our own hearts. Our world is such that there are small and not so small acts of violence that happen to us, around us, and from us, all the time, whether it is in the school yard, in our homes, in our marriages and friendships, in our economy, in the workplace, in the national culture of fear and domination that seems to poison so many. Our challenge is not so different from that of the woman who has been raped, or the Osage who continue to rebuild their people and their communities.

We are to be like the spider, watching and waiting patiently, weaving strand after strand, even as the wind breaks what was just woven, so that we can connect to the worth and dignity that is like water refreshing a dry stream. To use traditional theological language, that is God. God is when we move through the death of separation and back into the connection of life, from exile into the Promised Land.

Perhaps that is what the Osage representative meant when he said to those General Assembly delegates, "We are not going to carry your water for you. This is your work, and you need to do it."

May it be so. Amen.