

“Revised Outlooks”

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<https://firstunitarian.org/revised-outlooks/>

There’s something about kids that makes them want to build a fort. It’s almost innate, and I know it happened to me.

It often starts at a young age with pillow forts, made out of whatever cushions and blankets are available, to create a cozy space away from the rest of the family.

Then maybe when you’re a little older, you level up and go outside and build a snow fort. A snow fort can be cozy, too, but it also may have a strategic purpose if a snowball fight is brewing.

And then, depending on your climbing skills, you might graduate to a tree fort. I’m not totally clear on the difference between a tree fort and a tree house, but I think it’s a matter of who’s invited.

So forts might capture one’s imagination at an early age, and those of us fortunate enough to travel might get to visit some actual forts to fuel our interest. I was pretty little at the time, but I have very clear memories of visiting [the big fort on Mackinac Island](#), Michigan, and taking in the sweeping views of Lake Huron.

In college, I was invited to visit Puerto Rico, where I was enraptured by the architecture of [El Morro](#), a massive pile of stone that has been part of San Juan’s history for nearly 500 years. And, for families who really want to mix it up, there’s a civil-war era historic site in Tennessee called [Fort Pillow](#). It’s named after an actual confederate general and is just one of hundreds of forts across the American landscape.



So if your childhood had some parallels to mine, maybe you grew up thinking of forts as protective and benign and scenic. I went through life that way for quite some time.

I first visited [Fort Snelling](#) the same year I went to El Morro. I went in with a tourist's perspective and took in the period costumes and well-restored rooms. It wasn't until some years later that my view got complexified, when I better understood Fort Snelling's history in the colonizing of Minnesota.



This picture is of a concentration camp for Dakota people in the 1860s. Forts were protective all right, but they were quite selective in who they protected, and were dismal places for everyone else.

More recently, I was struck by a [tweet](#) from a website called [The Decolonial Atlas](#), which has a very interesting collection of nontraditional maps. The website offered a map showing the locations of hundreds of forts across North America and made this comment: "Settlers live on a continent full of places named Fort, but refuse to admit that it's stolen land. Like, what do you think all those forts were for?" The answer of course is that conquering, killing, and confiscating were exactly what so many of the forts were for. That's hardly the benign view I grew up with, but it's a more well-rounded and fully honest perspective. And I'm grateful to have this more complex, more complete view of history.

But as we are seeing nationwide, not everyone responds to a revised historical outlook with gratitude, or even a matter-of-fact acceptance. Reality can be upsetting. And right now, around the country, there are many new laws going into effect to ban public schools from teaching ideas that cause anyone to "[feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex.](#)" Some of the folks promoting these laws claim to be for small government, but they've taken to legislating which emotions are allowable in history class.

Our assembly theme this month at FUS is "Holding History," and the topic could hardly be better timed. History is a hot potato right now, hard for many to hold, and there's an organized assault on some of the facts that make up the true stories of our country. And our humanist and Unitarian Universalist values around facts and reason and inclusion call on us to pay attention - to pay attention and to take action on behalf of history and the many different kinds of people who created it.

How did we get here? Well, these troubled waters have a lot of tributaries. A main factor is that millions of Americans received truly terrible educations in American

history. No, not just boring history educations, [like the famous depiction in “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,”](#) but instead egregiously inaccurate ones.

Would history books lie to you? [Yes, they would,](#) and they did. We are discovering more and more misrepresentations all the time.

This illustration is from the official state of Virginia history textbook from 1957. It shows a well-dressed man of African heritage and his family being greeted with a handshake on the deck of a ship by his new enslaver, by his owner. As anyone with a real history education can tell you, not a thing about this is realistic. The wordings in the book are equally outrageous, with sentences like this one: “A feeling of strong affection existed between masters and slaves in a majority of Virginia homes.”



The book says that “many” enslaved people were taught to read and write, when the reality was that such teaching was illegal. And the book describes plantation life as “happy and prosperous” for all.

The textbook was written by politicians in the years after public schools and the military were officially desegregated, moves that freaked out white racists. This book’s narratives are utterly farcical, and yet, this was the official history book in Virginia for more than twenty years. The lasting damage to the truth and to history is astounding, and it helps explain the huge gaps in racial understanding that we have today.

Of course, up here in the far north, it’s tempting for us to roll our eyes at what was happening in the late Jim Crow south. But disinformation and whitewashing haven’t been limited to a particular region.

For example, I and millions of American kids grew up on Schoolhouse Rock, the peppy little Saturday morning cartoons that offered lessons about grammar, science, and American history. Gen Xers and probably their parents can still sing these catchy ditties today. Schoolhouse Rock got the equivalent of billions of views in its day and

helped countless kids learn their conjunctions and adverbs. But a few of these cartoons did not do us, or history, any favors.

The lyrics to one cartoon, called [“The Great American Melting Pot,”](#) tell the story of American diversity entirely from the perspective of European immigration, which had peaked sixty years earlier. Unmentioned are the millions of people who already lived on this continent, or the millions more stolen from Africa, or the millions of immigrants who didn’t come from Europe.

And the melting pot ideal of assimilation, the idea that immigrants from around the world blend into a single European-based culture, has long been out of favor, replaced with newer metaphors like a mosaic or even a salad bowl. But the idea of melting into an easy-to-digest sameness was reinforced for so long that it’s hard to dislodge.

A second cartoon, called [“Elbow Room,”](#) celebrates Manifest Destiny, the idea that whites were destined by God to take over the continent. This song makes reference to trampling down the wilderness and repeats the motto “In God we trust,” and the whole cartoon would leave a kid to think that the land was devoid of humans prior to colonization. A blank slate, just waiting for new arrivals in need of more elbow room.

I don’t mean to beat up on “Schoolhouse Rock,” because overall, its cartoons did a lot of good, and even its creators said later that they would have left out the idea of Manifest Destiny. But as they were making “Elbow Room,” a good question for someone to ask might have been “What do you think all those forts were for?”

So we have had all these visions of American history are comforting and comfortable to a shrinking majority. And they are deeply ingrained in the national psyche. Lots of kids who saw “Schoolhouse Rock” went on to study very little additional American history (or science or grammar, for that matter). And if they did pursue more history, they may well have gotten more of the same narrow perspective. So their personal outlooks never got revised.

These comforting perspectives can lead to a belief in a kind of baked-in benevolence. And people can get very upset when you tell them the world is not as benign as they have believed it to be.

Among scholars who study white supremacy culture, such as [Tema Okun](#), this is known as the "[right to comfort](#)." The assumption is that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort. As Okun puts it. "This assumption supports the tendency to blame the person or group causing discomfort or conflict rather than addressing the issues being named." Another way to look at it is that people get more upset about *hearing* that slavery was horrible than they do about the fact that the millions of lives were destroyed.

The poem we heard earlier, "[Anger](#)," by [Lynn Ungar](#), captures what can happen to those whose comfort is taken away: "The world is not what you were promised... and you are being asked to care about suffering and danger that could break your heart if you let it in." Many people don't let it in, and get angry instead.

In a complicated way, all this reminds me of a song from the musical "The Wiz," the famous African-American version of the Wizard of Oz story. In "The Wiz," the Wicked Witch of the West character oversees a sweatshop, and she serves as a metaphor for slavery. And this witch, named Evillene, sings a lively song called "[Don't Nobody Bring Me No Bad News](#)." In the lyrics, she wakes up "already negative," so she doesn't need any more negative information, and if you want to be her buddy, those are rules. She even says she'll make you an offer you can't refuse if you bring her bad news. She threatens those who would tell her the truth.

She's a cartoonish character in the movie, but there are all kinds of real-life Americans with the same attitude, and making similar threats. These are the people who do not want facts or historical narratives that might cause them to "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress."

Unfortunately, proponents of white supremacy and authoritarianism find that there is much to gain politically by stirring up these sentiments. It worked in 1994, right before that year's midterm elections - there was a well-respected set of new federal education standards that became a political football and scared white parents around the country, and white people voting out of fear vote to the right. The same strategy is working right now at the local and state level with manufactured controversies about how racial history is taught and about the "freedom" to go without a mask. But as we know from covid-19, bad news that doesn't go away when you deny the facts; in fact, the opposite happens - the crisis is magnified.

History and facts clearly are suffering in the public square. Fortunately, the degree of suffering varies from square to square, and there's actually some good news these days if you look.

First, here in Minnesota (and actually in lots of areas), extremist, anti-science, anti-literature, anti-learning-about-race candidates [pretty much lost their efforts to take over school boards](#). We've had contentious public meetings and [large numbers of elected officials resigning or not running again](#), but fact-based candidates mostly prevailed.

This is something definitely worth celebrating. At the same time, those of us with level-headed school boards shouldn't get too comfortable, because a lot of the shenanigans we see around the country happens at the state level. The state level is where that horrible Virginia textbook was created, and state legislatures are passing those laws that ban teachers from talking about anything that might cause discomfort or distress. So if you're happy with how your school district approaches history and race, and if you don't want to see your local officials overruled, you'll want to pay close attention to next year's legislative and statewide elections and support candidates who share your values.

Local officials who are bravely doing the right thing are just some of the people doing good work these days. Recently, I found myself inspired by the story of someone who I would never have imagined existed: the inspiration came in [a Wired magazine article about a Wikipedia editor](#). No one will probably ever make a blockbuster movie about a Wikipedia editor, but this person is a hero nonetheless.

As you may know, Wikipedia is an enormous online encyclopedia that is written and edited mainly by volunteers. And until I read the Wired article, I wasn't aware that people sympathetic to Nazis had been influencing some of the Wikipedia pages about World War II. They were inserting phrases that glorified Nazi officers and minimized some of the horrors they committed. And these editors were doing so by citing questionable sources or offering pure hearsay.

Enter Ksenia Coffman, who grew up in Soviet-era Russia. Coffman has little patience for disinformation, and so she has worked since 2015 to scrub rubbish from Wikipedia. In the past several years, she has made 97,000 edits and created more than 3,000 Wikipedia pages. And she keeps watch over 2,000 articles, getting a notification every time someone makes a change, so she can check it out and prevent

backsliding. Like those school board members holding the line, Coffman could be doing literally anything else in the world with her free time, but she's choosing to take care of history and the truth.

And historians of all kinds continue to do an incredible job of broadening the stories. This work of expanding the narratives beyond the conquests and political acts of white male leaders blossomed in the 1960s, with the rise of African-American history and women's history. And these large-scale expansions continue in journalism and academia.

You may have heard of a newly published book called "[The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity](#)," by David Graeber and David Wengrow. The authors take issue with the normally accepted timeline of human history - that we went from hunter-gatherers to agriculture to hierarchical city-states. They argue that things were not nearly so linear, that humans were not merely carried along by technological and ecological trends but made all kinds of choices about how to organize their societies. We don't have time this morning for me to read you the book's 700 pages, but I want to briefly share a couple of narratives.

One is about [Cahokia](#), the once-great city that existed not far from where St. Louis is today. I've mentioned Cahokia before, and I finally got to visit just a few weeks ago. Cahokia was a prosperous but authoritarian society that existed for about 300 years before abruptly collapsing in the 1300s. Various theories for its demise have included a shift in climate or poor agricultural practices. But the authors of the book float an entirely different reason: maybe people left because they didn't like it. Maybe they didn't like living under tyranny and violence and decided to ease on down the road.



It's amazing how we dehumanize our long-ago ancestors into passive creatures, when they were fully capable of making choices, just like us. Right now, the population of the city of St. Louis is one-third of what it was in 1950 - if modern people can relocate because they wish to live differently, why wouldn't earlier humans do the same?

A second narrative from the book is an even bigger upending.

So many of us were raised on the idea that Europeans came to this continent to “civilize” the people who were already living here; again, another dehumanizing viewpoint. But Graeber, an anthropologist, and Wengrow, an archeologist, describe a well-researched opposite scenario: It turns out that a group of Indigenous people in eastern North America became highly critical when they learned about European “civilization” - they found it overly competitive, cruel, dogmatic, irrational, oppressive, and rife with inequality.

This kind of sounds like the culture we live in today, but this was centuries ago. And the book’s authors make the case that, when the Indigenous critique made its way back to France and was shared among the intellectual class, it began to cause significant self-reflection on European values, and this examination helped bring about the Enlightenment.

There are, of course, people who would find this account distressing, as it elevates indigenous people and does not help the reputation of white European colonists. To those who are distressed, I might recommend the quiet comfort a pillow fort.

For the rest of us, I close with this thought from Ksenia Coffman, the Wikipedia editor. The work she is doing is time-consuming, it involves conflict, and it’s never-ending. But Coffman doesn’t view the protection of history as a battle - in fact, she steers clear of all war metaphors. She instead thinks of history as real estate. “You have to have a security system,” she says. “You have to maintain your house.”

And human history is a house with room enough for everyone’s story.