

# *Reconciling With Indiana Jones*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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5 December, 2021



*Advent Sunset © 2021 Rod E.S.Q.*

In the season of advent, we sometimes look forward – to the past. Christmastide is often a time to hear familiar stories, seeking out our fix of nostalgia, partly as tradition, and partly as longing for times we remember fondly. It's also an

opportunity to see familiar stories in new ways.

And adventure is a theme in many stories from my childhood, particularly movies – the kind that I seek out every once in a while, as sources of comfort... reminders of a simpler time, with familiar narratives and characters, as well as musical scores and scenery that capture the time when they were made.

I imagine each of you have some version of a comfort film or show that you would gladly watch again, even though you've seen it dozens of times and already know exactly how it's going to turn out.

For my particular age demographic, these often include classic films from the eighties... and occasionally the nineties. With epic musical scores and iconic imagery that I relate to in a way that is simply impossible for me to replicate with today's hero flicks.

Now, it is rare to find a film that is “perfect” all the way through, or which has stayed that way. And I continue to enjoy watching a whole variety of comfort films, despite their many flaws. This morning, I'll go over just a selection of my childhood media where I've increasingly seen issues that systematically prop up throughout.

I remember playing the Ghostbusters soundtrack record at full volume at my grandparents' house – much to their chagrin – singing along to

the iconic theme song by Ray Parker Jr. in faux-English, pretending to know the words even though I didn't yet know the language. The theme song just *got* me.

Just as epic is the theme song for the Indiana Jones movie franchise. If you've ever heard the Indiana Jones theme, by legendary film composer John Williams (of Star Wars fame), you will know that it's music that *instantly* evokes adventure. It seems unlikely to me that one could hear the Indiana Jones theme without immediately imagining riding off into the sunset on a mission to save the world in heroic glory.

With current streaming services, I've had a chance to revisit these comfort films quite regularly now, maybe even rediscover some that I had forgotten about. And alongside my welcome stroll down memory lane, and the warm and fuzzy sensations that come with comfort watching, I've also been finding a creeping sense of discomfort when watching some of my old favourites.

The truth is that, some of the values and worldviews that the film industry has often seen fit depict are no longer aligned with the values that I have come to embrace, especially as I've become part of Unitarian Universalist communities of faith.

So, while I still feel the euphoric sense of adventure when I hear the Indiana Jones theme, or when I sing along to the Ghostbusters theme song, I've realized that there are at least parts of those films that simply don't sit right – it's uncomfortable.

I feel this as I see these films perpetuate barriers to full inclusion.

Let's start with *Ghostbusters*. Putting aside the observation that the ghostbusting characters are terrible scientists, with an implausible grasp of physics, my discomfort comes with the behaviour and attitudes that the film depicts. One of the film's stars is the celebrated actor Bill Murray, and in the film, he masterfully portrays one Dr. Peter Venkman with an aloof wit and a flawless deadpan delivery.

But I've increasingly felt creeped out by this character – the ghostbusting Dr. Venkman consistently performs with poor professional boundaries, to say the least – particularly when it comes to his romantic advances on a woman who is also a client of his ghostbusting business. This would be an inappropriate practice in any business setting, but Dr. Venkman's repeated failure to accept her clear refusals takes it to another level. In the movie, this kind of interaction is depicted as an endearing romantic subplot... obscuring the undertone of harassment that is now so plainly clear to me. It is uncomfortable to watch.

A friend of mine recently pointed out that the *Ghostbusters* film also seemed to have an inexplicably active agenda against environmental government regulation – somehow, it turns out that the Environmental Protection Agency is one of the main real-world antagonists in the movie... perhaps a bigger one in the film than the ghosts themselves. This bizarre subplot escaped me in any of my multiple viewings, but once she pointed it out to me, it struck me by how out of place it is. It's cringeworthy.

I still watch the movie every once in a while, but I go into it knowing that I cannot “unsee” the troubling elements in it.

The original Indiana Jones trilogy is much worse. Once I get over the excitement of the epic theme music, I start to pick up on troubling elements throughout. Even if we put aside the fact that Dr. Henry “Indiana” Jones Jr. is a terrible archeologist, who wantonly destroys priceless cultural and archeological sites while claiming to salvage valuable artefacts that “belong in a museum” as he punches bad guys, he also has some unsavoury character traits.

I find it quite jarring that the Indiana Jones character consistently behaves with misogynistic and chauvinist attitudes toward his leading ladies, using patronizing and dismissive language, with poor professional boundaries, and exploitative dynamics. Not to mention blatant disregard for personal and public safety. The next time you

watch one of the Indiana Jones films, I challenge you to see the problems with his approach – once you see it, you can't unsee it. To paraphrase Dr. Jones, his professional standards “belong in a museum”.

Moreover, the people of colour in the franchise are often portrayed as scary and irrationally violent at worst, or exotic and comical at best. Even the people of colour who are “good guys”, in supporting roles to Dr. Jones, tend to be portrayed in a way that is played out for laughs, with little dimension to their characters beyond comic relief or an air of foreign intrigue. In the original trilogy, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is probably the worst offender in this sense – if you watch it after today, you'll know what I mean – though *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* also displays a firmly colonial approach, where Jones acts in a way where he seems entitled to casually claim and occasionally destroy indigenous cultural heritage.

Of the three, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is probably the most palatable of the lot, but Dr. Jones' poor professional boundaries remain – and get him in trouble – and all the while, people of colour remain the most expendable background characters, casually being killed off with barely any grief displayed. It's usually only when the leading white people are in danger, or get killed, that the film seems to present any real stakes.

In my latest nostalgia trips, I recently rediscovered the Crocodile Dundee franchise. And while this wasn't exactly an old childhood favourite of mine, I still found myself drawn to its 80s nostalgia charm.

And... again, I found myself sitting with the discomfort of a film establishment that did not take into account everyone in the room. While I found the films mostly entertaining, there were routine instances of misogyny and occasionally awkward navigations of Australia's colonial history. I was also rather upset to see that, among the few scenes that featured transgender characters, these characters were played out for laughs and with little regard for the dignity and humanity of trans folks. I couldn't help thinking that, if a trans person

saw this film, they would walk away feeling harmed, disrespected, and with a message that society does not value them.

And just recently, I've started rewatching the 90s sitcom *Seinfeld*. A lot of its comedic genius continues to hold up. There is a lot to say about the whole series, but the one thing that has frequently popped up for me is its consistent insensitivity, stigmatization, and poor understanding of mental health issues. Some episodes feel outright harmful. I am glad that this is a conversation that has been given more space in society these days, and I've even found some good recent series that deal with mental health in very affirming ways. It's just a shame that a television classic fails to consider its impact through its considerable run time.

In some ways, seeing these problematic parts of old favourites might feel like I've lost something... old comforts are now sources of new discomforts. I nonetheless feel that I've gained something more valuable – a better sense of what others' experiences might be if they saw these films... particularly people who have a different life experience from mine. In revisiting these old favourites and viewing them with a newer, more critical and inclusive perspective, I see myself as embarking in a bolder, far more exciting adventure – to connect more closely with everyone who might be in the room, in an exercise of more radical inclusivity.

Perhaps the specific bits of pop culture that I've cited here today are beyond the entertainment categories that you might be more accustomed to. But I suspect there are old favourites of yours that may end up looking different once you see them through a lens of radical inclusivity, taking into account the values that you hold dear, in contrast to the attitudes and approaches that the filmmakers might have found more marketable for mass audiences.

My friends, nostalgia for the good old days may bring the occasional, welcome, comfort to our current lives. And it is also helpful to be

mindful of the rose-tinted lenses that nostalgia sometimes uses to obscure the reality that those simpler times might not have been all much simpler for others who share our space.

My friends, the adventure of broader inclusion of all who we might encounter calls us to see beyond the stories we might be used to. It might be uncomfortable and require work – adventures usually do. And it may bring deeper connection with anyone who might be in the room.

My friends, we share in this adventure together – into the sunset!

So may it be,  
In Solidarity and faith,

Amen

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### *Suggested Hymns:*

#### **Opening Hymn #226 People, Look East**

Words: Eleanor Farjeon, 1881-1965, used by perm. of David Higham Assoc. Ltd.

Music: Traditional French carol, harmony by Martin Shaw, 1875-1958, used by perm. of Oxford University Press

BESANÇON

#### **Hymn #106 Who Would True Valor See**

Words: John Bunyan, 1628-1688

Music: English melody, arr. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958, used by perm. of Oxford University Press

MONK'S GATE

#### **Closing Hymn #224 Let Christmas Come**

~)-| Words: John Hanly Morgan, 1918- , © 1984 John Hanly Morgan

Music: English melody, adapt. and harm. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958, © 1931 Oxford University Press

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