

Healing Our Nation's Oldest Wounds

by Paula Palmer

As I write this in late November 2013, Americans across the country are gathering together in their homes to give thanks. In southeastern Colorado, Cheyenne and Arapaho people are gathering together, too, but for a different reason. This week marks the 149th anniversary of the massacre at Sand Creek, where on November 29, 1864, the U.S. Cavalry murdered approximately 200 unarmed Cheyenne and Arapaho women, children, and elders who were supposed to be under their protection. After the massacre, volunteer soldiers paraded through the streets of Denver, waving body parts carved from the victims' corpses. No one knows exactly how many people died at Sand Creek that day, because the survivors were prevented from returning to mourn and bury their dead. Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors would fight back for more than a decade, but eventually their peoples were banished from Colorado. Today, their descendants live on reservations in Montana, Wyoming, and Oklahoma.

No one knows exactly how many people died at Sand Creek that day, because the survivors were prevented from returning to mourn and bury their dead.

Each Thanksgiving Day, the Cheyenne and Arapaho return to Sand Creek, now a National Historic Site, to mourn, to pray, and to run. Last year, members of the Boulder Friends Meeting joined them there. As the sun rose above the frigid plains, we watched elders bless and paint the young runners who were about to set off on a 175-mile relay run to Denver. "It's not a race," said Otto Braided Hair, the Northern Cheyenne organizer of the annual Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run. "It's a prayer."

How does healing happen? For the Arapaho and Cheyenne peoples, it comes from reverent remembrance, community, and empowerment. The young runners return to their rightful homeland and honor their ancestors; they also challenge and celebrate their youthful strength and courage. They embody the hopes and the future of their peoples.

And how does healing happen for people of European descent who live in Colorado now, in the Arapaho and Cheyenne homelands? What role can we play in the healing process, as we continue to benefit from crimes committed against this land's first peoples? How does healing happen throughout the American continent, where we all live on lands that were wrested from Native peoples by murder, trickery, betrayal, and theft?

Through a participatory exercise, we trace the historic and ongoing impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery.

As we struggled with these questions, the Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee of Boulder Friends Meeting developed a workshop to help other people wrestle with these questions, too. We have since presented this workshop in dozens of settings – Friends gatherings, other faith communities, colleges, and civic organizations. We call the workshop, *Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relationship with America's Native Peoples*.

Through a participatory exercise, we trace the historic and ongoing impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery, a 15th-century justification for the European subjugation of non-Christian peoples and the theft of Native peoples' lands. We learn how this Christian (oh, so un-Christian!) doctrine became embedded in European mindsets and cultures, as well as in the legal systems the Europeans established in their colonies throughout the world. We hear the Seneca chief Cornplanter rebuke George Washington and denounce the Doctrine of Discovery, saying, "All this land belonged to the Six Nations. No part of it ever belonged to the King of England, and he could not give it to you!" And we learn that as recently as 2005, our Supreme Court cited the Doctrine of Discovery as justification for denying land rights to the Oneida tribe.

The colonization of North America is a relentlessly brutal story, and Native people continue to suffer its consequences: the highest rates of suicide, infant mortality, school dropouts, alcoholism, unemployment, and diabetes and the lowest life expectancy among all of

our country's ethnicities. In our workshop, as this history unfolds, we feel the weight of it. Then we hear the words of Rio Ramirez, a young man of the Tohono O'odham Nation, that go straight to the heart of the matter:

Knowing this country's history is the first step we need to take in the long process of repairing our people and our land. Look at the problems my people have now with things like substance abuse, lack of identity, and diabetes. Look at the crisis the earth is in with climate change and pollution. Our history tells how this came about. Sometimes when people learn about the broken treaties, relocation, and genocide, they feel guilty about what happened to Native Americans. Those feelings are okay as long as we move past them and try to help each other now as human beings.

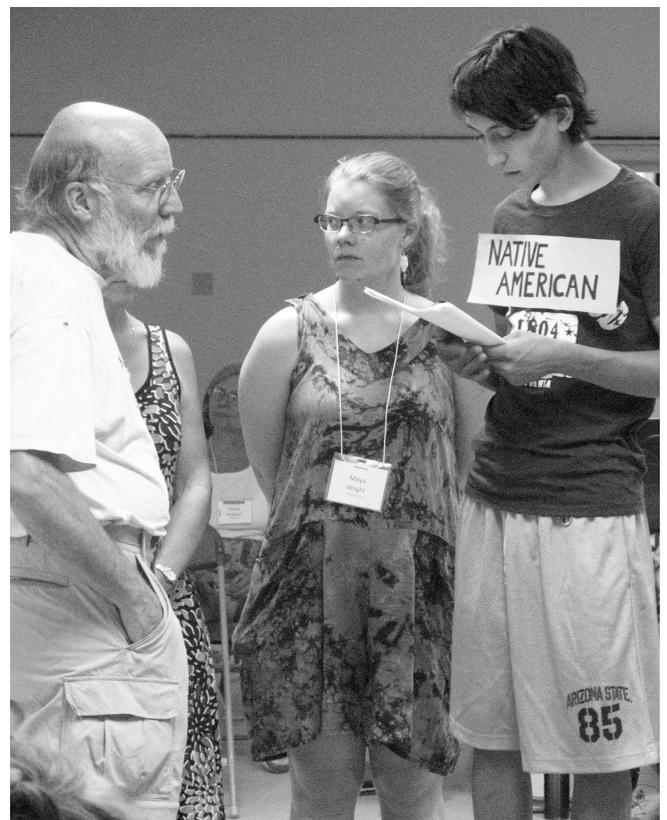
No one here today made these things happen. But we are the ones who are living now, and we need to understand that we are all in this together. I think we all have an obligation to use the talents we have to make the earth a better place. I am working on my reservation to make a better future for my people and for our land. You are working here in your own ways. It helps me to know that you are working for this too, that my people are not alone.

Rio Ramirez reminds us that we are all in this together; we all need to be part of the healing process. Here in Colorado, when Friends participate in the Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run, we experience exhilarating moments of oneness with the Cheyenne and Arapaho people and liberation from our shameful history. These moments are fleeting, though, unless we also commit ourselves to the ongoing work of building just and honest relationships among our peoples.

So we ask, What can we do? Our workshop offers some specific suggestions for individuals and for faith communities in a 24-page "Resource Kit for Allies." For example, we urge faith communities to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery and to endorse the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Boulder Monthly Meeting and several yearly meetings on the east coast have done so, and Inter-Mountain Yearly Meeting will consider approving a Minute when we meet this summer.

The most helpful prescription for healing that I have found is in a new book by the renowned Pawnee attorney for the Native American Rights Fund, Walter R. Echo-Hawk. *In the Light of Justice: The Rise of Human Rights in Native America and the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* lays out a five-step process for healing our nation's oldest, deepest, most intransigent wounds. Echo-Hawk's prescription is grounded in the world's wisdom traditions and in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It also rests on our country's foundational documents, even though at the time of their writing, "inalienable rights" applied only to white male landowners, certainly not to Native peoples.

The historic and ongoing injustices suffered by Native Americans, Echo-Hawk says, "threaten our national self-image, undermine our origin story, and show that we have not lived up to our ideals." It is time, he says, for the people of the United States to "confront our inner demons from the legacy of conquest and bring ourselves to face the collective wrongs committed against Native Americans, because their claims implicate the legitimacy of a nation built upon the taking of tribal land, undermining of sovereignty, and the historical mistreatment inflicted upon American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians during the growth of the republic."



Justice for Native Americans, says Echo-Hawk, cannot be achieved under U.S. federal Indian law until these laws come into conformity with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Approved by the U.N. General Assembly in 2007, the declaration recognizes and describes in detail the inalienable rights of Indigenous Peoples. If our three branches of government would undertake to align our laws and policies with the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Echo-Hawk says, the light of justice would shine at last on all the peoples of our land.

*Justice for Native Americans,
cannot be achieved
until U.S. federal Indian law
comes into conformity with
the U.N. Declaration on
the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.*

Drawing from the world's wisdom traditions, Echo-Hawk sets forth these five steps for national healing, and urges all Americans to take these steps together.

Recognize that an injury has occurred. The historical wrongs of colonization “scar both the victim and perpetrator communities ... like a festering wound that will not heal without conscious and determined good faith efforts.”

Make a real and sincere apology. This “helps relieve the injured party from anger, resentment and shame, and it restores lost dignity. ... It relieves [the perpetrator of] the burden of shame, guilt, and remorse for harming another. ... One must also ask the injured party for forgiveness.”

Accept the apology and forgive the wrongdoer. “Real forgiveness is indispensable to healing collective historical wrongs. ... Our eyes are opened to compassion and to rebuilding the relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven.”



Perform acts of atonement. Undertake a process for making things right – make amends, repair harms, offer restitution and compensation commensurate with the harm that has been done. This is the essence of restorative justice.

Heal and reconcile. “We are healed three ways. First, the victim community regains its dignity ... [and] the chain placed by intergenerational trauma is broken. Second, burdens of remorse, guilt, and shame have been lifted from the perpetrator society. ... [Third,] the communities are reunited. ... Upon reconciliation, ... we can honestly say, ‘I am you, you are me, and we are one.’”

The path toward healing is the path of right relationship. Our feet are barely on the first step: acknowledging the harm that has been done. That is a good place to be: knowing where we are, aware of the steps ahead, looking for openings in the way forward. ❖

Paula Palmer is clerk of the Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee of Boulder Monthly Meeting, CO (IMYM), and director of the Meeting's “Toward Right Relationship Project” (see boulderfriendsmeeting.org/ipc-right-relationship). To request a presentation of the committee's workshop, “Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relationship with America's Native Peoples,” contact Paula at paulaRpalmer@gmail.com. About the workshop, Paula writes:

“In the Doctrine of Discovery, we find the roots of injustice. In the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, we find the seeds of change. In this workshop, we ask, ‘How can we – as individuals and as a religious society – nurture these seeds of change to bring forth the fruits of right relationship among all peoples?’”