

Tongue Ring Protest Gone Awry

Joy Conrad-Rice

It was a hot afternoon and we had stopped near the US/Canadian border to get gas and refresh ourselves. We were a group of four, my husband, myself, and two teenage girls, my step-daughters, ages 13 and 16. We had spent a week in Idaho at my family's lake cabin and were bound for home in interior British Columbia, Kamloops, to be exact. The girls were looking forward to seeing their friends and getting ready for school.

I thought things were fairly calm when out of the blue my husband announced that we were going to stop in Vernon, BC, a 1.5 hour drive from Kamloops, so older daughter could have her tongue ring replaced.

"What? Her tongue ring? I thought she had it taken out for good!"

"I guess not. Her tongue's not swollen now, and the guy who put it in says he has a different material that won't cause a reaction.."

"Well, why does she have to do it today?"

"She wants to save herself an extra trip to Vernon. And she wants it done before school starts."

"Well, how do you feel about it?"

"I'm not keen on it, but it's her choice, she's old enough, almost 17."

"How long will it take? I'm not happy about this."

"Not long, if he isn't busy. He's open late on Friday nights."

While husband was paying for the gas, I took a chance and tried to engage older daughter in dialogue about this looming event.

Standing next to her by the car in the hot sun, I said, "I hear you're going to get a new tongue ring."

"Yeah."

"Um, you know why you want to do this? What are your reasons?"

"I just want to."

"But why? What benefit is it to

you?"

"It's cool."

"Have you talked with your Quaker friends about this? Are they doing it?"

"No, I don't know if... They live so far away."

"Well, I have to tell you, I believe what you're intending to do violates several of our Testimonies - the Testimonies of Simplicity, Love, and Peace. Mutilating the tongue that way is not in accordance with our Testimonies."

"I don't care. I'm going to do it anyway."

Slam went the car door. End of conversation.

The rest of the trip was tension-bound, of course. I informed the three in the car that I didn't like being made to participate in this event. Being there when she had her tongue pierced would make me an unwilling cooperator. Since I opposed the plan, and I felt trapped, what was left to me was a protest.

So began the tongue ring protest that went awry.

When we reached Vernon and everyone tumbled out of the car in front of the place that did body piercing, I headed north on foot with instructions to my husband to pick me up as they headed home. Thinking the time span would be about 20 minutes, I set off into the warm air along a street that would eventually link up to the major north-south highway. They couldn't miss me, I thought.

I was wearing a blue cotton summer dress with a matching shirt and carrying my purse and a head scarf. On my feet were sandals. I felt good, healthy, and firm in my convictions. I would show them. Protests were part of our religious tradition.

Well, needless to say, the 20 minutes turned into longer when the girls insisted on stopping off at their

cousin's home after the piercing event. They ended up staying there for a couple of days, so it was only my husband in the car when he set off towards home and to look for the wayward wife along the way.

Of course he backtracked to the piercing place, thinking I might have returned there, then drove slowly along streets in the area, even glancing into coffee shops where I might be waiting for him.

When his initial search failed, he set out north on the highway, realizing that if I had been stubborn enough to continue walking, my feet would have carried me quite a distance by now.

He must have driven past me while I was making a quick phone call at the O'Keefe ranch and restaurant a few kilometres north of town. Calling home with my one and only Canadian quarter just got me the answer phone. At least I could tell it I was still walking. If my husband got to Kamloops without me, he could turn around and come back for me.

I headed out onto the highway again. By this time it was dark. It was still warm, though, and there was no wind. The scarf around my head protected my hair and face from the wild air pushing at me after a big truck passed. For safety I walked towards oncoming traffic.

So I kept on walking. And walking. Where was he? The stars lit the way and a partial moon provided some light, as there were few clouds. It got very quiet. Except for the occasional truck and the sound of my own feet crunching into the gravel on the highway's shoulder, the only sounds were night birds and barking dogs. The only sounds I could hear, that is.

It occurred to me there might be wild animals in the woods on either side of this highway. Surely there were deer, bear, coyotes, and little critters like skunks, quail, raccoons, and mice. To

alert them to my presence, I began to sing.

I made up a little melody and continued to sing it in different forms. My feet were holding up pretty well, but I guessed they would be the first part of me to feel the effects of this trek.

This protest was getting out of hand. It was supposed to have stopped hours ago. Where was he?

By now it was midnight. Wilderness closed in on me. The moonlight disappeared. I began to get thirsty. I was still walking strongly, however, at a swift pace, and convinced myself that I could walk all the way to Kamloops if I had to.

I kept looking for that familiar car, however. Why hadn't he found me? Didn't he know I didn't have any Canadian money on me? And no credit card?

The highway led up and down hills along meandering creeks, through First Nations reserve land. My spirit kept me buoyant. I was determined not to give in. Also, I began to realize that if I sat down to rest, I would want to stay down a long time. The bottoms of my feet began to burn.

There was no town in sight. No rest area. No public telephone. (I had remembered that I could call collect from a pay phone.) Here and there I saw a yard light nestled among tall dark trees. Walking down a road to one of those isolated homes and the inevitable dog at this hour was out of the question. I had to continue walking.

So I walked and walked. The soles of my feet felt like raw dough.

I continued to sing to myself and the animals and the trees. I wondered if a curious bear was walking along an animal trail parallel to me and the highway.

I felt strangely uplifted and very safe. I felt protected. What was that walking beside me?

Finally I saw a sign that said Falkland, 7 km. Relief swept me, I was almost to a town. Surely there would be a public phone or even an all-night cafe.

The next few kilometers seemed longer than the others. I continued to sing and walk, walk and sing. I wasn't cold and I wasn't really tired. It was just that my feet hurt. And it was late. Two in the morning!

Finally, I saw a motel and a telephone booth. A quick phone call, collect, revealed that my husband was home - asleep - but he would come and get me.

While I waited, I experienced a friendly inquiry from two dogs roaming around the motel. One was a Rottweiler and more interested in sniffing out garbage food than me. The other animal reminded me of a Malamute Husky. Beautiful dark coat, svelte shape, and a head - what was strange about it? Too narrow? I did not know for sure, but I welcomed its attentions. Gracefully he began nuzzling up to me, sniffing, even jumping up to check out my face. His paws were soft against my collarbone. I petted him and cooed at him. Soon he wandered away with his pal.

Not long after, someone staying at the motel engaged me in conversation. When I mentioned the beautiful dog that seemed so friendly, she said, "That's no dog, that's a wolf. A tame wolf. Not supposed to be out of his yard."

"Gulp. A wolf," I thought. No matter. He had capped off my trek. Was he a reward to me for finishing my protest? For staying strong and knowing I was protected? For walking about 25 kilometers in seven hours?

Now things have quieted down at our house. My feet recovered with only a few minor blisters. Older teenager started school and showed off her new tongue ring to her friends. Oddly, she never stuck out her tongue to me.

Whether I made my point of protest I will never know for sure. My best hope is that someday, when thinking of doing a controversial action, she and her sister will pause, reflect on their Quaker step-mom's protest, and think, "Ahah! That's what she meant!"

Joy Conrad-Rice is a member of Vernon Monthly Meeting.