

*“If we could only hear each others’ prayers,
it would relieve God of a great burden”*¹

RECENTLY, I ATTENDED AN AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE GATHERING of “Friends and Native Americans²” at the Friends’ Meeting House in Boulder, Colorado.

We began each day of the gathering with worship sharing. The first morning we held in the Light the topic of ‘religious values’, after which we watched “In the Light of Reverence”³, a film that documents the struggle of three indigenous nations — Lakota, Hopi and Wintu — to protect their sacred sites. The second day, the proposed topic had been ‘making it right’. However, the sense of the meeting was, as proposed by Inez Talamantez⁴, that we should reflect further on ‘respecting Indigenous spirituality’. On the third day, the focus of our worship was ‘interconnectedness’. I was greatly moved by a prayer from the Siddur⁵ shared with us by David Segal⁶.

During our time together, we heard of repeated instances of the desecration of sacred places by diverse activities, from resource exploitation to recreation. Perhaps one of the most extreme is the use of 33 million gallons of ancient aquifer water per day to slurry coal from the sacred Black Mesa in Arizona to a coal fired thermal generating plant 200 miles away, while Navajo and Hopi water holes go dry and the sacred mesa is eaten away by open pit mining.

While it is a U.S. federal crime to climb Mount Rushmore (a monument to past American presidents), the Devil’s Tower on the Wyoming/South Dakota border (which is sacred to the Lakota) is officially open to climbers, even while sacred ceremonies are being conducted there.

Telescopes from many nations are situated on Hawaii’s sacred mountain, while native Hawaiians have to seek special permission to visit their sacred site.

During our meetings for worship, we were reminded that Indigenous Peoples’ spirituality is rooted in the land. Chris Peters⁷, Pohlik-lah-Karuk, told us that the moral and ethical foundation of Indigenous societies rests with continuous, ongoing revelations. Sacred places are sacred to all of life. Their destruction, it is believed, has an impact on all of life, all over the world.

Gerald One Feather, Lakota, reminded us that the Sun Dance will be held in Lakota Territory this July. He spoke of the importance of listening to the environment, to the group and to the spirits. According

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to Gerald, a spirit will speak only once, so it is important to be attentive, always fully present. He said there are

different levels of listening — the deeper you go, the more wisdom you get. Each level requires different skills.

Henrietta Mann⁸ told us that, for the Cheyenne people, Bear Butte in South Dakota is the spiritual centre of the universe. In spite of disruption and oppression, the Cheyenne people continue to have strong prayer lives. They continue to perform their sacred ceremonies. According to ‘Henri’, one’s spiritual journey is woven into one’s life. The greatest assets for Cheyenne survival have been their loving connection to the land they call “Mother” and their strong spiritual rootedness. We were reminded of our relationship to earth, air, fire and water. Especially water: babies are 90% water, adults are 75% water, and elders are 65% water; by this we are related to water everywhere.

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and even thoughts. We heard the concern of many that ceremonies misunderstood and improperly performed could do serious damage, hence a deep concern about persons from other cultures performing or even participating in sacred ceremonies for which they have not been properly trained. In some societies, the only ceremonies one knows anything about are the ones that

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one has been trained to do. Others are held in secret by those whose responsibility it is to conduct them. It is believed that only through the maintenance and proper performance of ceremony will the world remain in balance.

Although the Gathering was sponsored by Friends, participants came from many and varied faith backgrounds. I found myself deeply moved by the Jewish prayer, resonating strongly to the importance of spiritual rootedness in the land; stirred by the drumming and movement of Aztec dancers, and by Hawaiian chant. Lifting my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my... I felt devastated by the large house that had obstructed the formerly panoramic view of the mountains from the meeting room windows, further devastated by the sight of more unnecessarily large houses being built on the foothills themselves, my childhood spiritual refuge... What I felt was an infinitesimal fraction of the devastation felt by Indigenous peoples at the continuing des-

ecration of the Sacred in their belief systems.

The Gathering has left me with a sense that, however we pray, whatever our ceremonies, whatever our way of upholding the sacred, it is the total of all of us doing this, with respect, with good hearts and clear minds, that helps to preserve the little balance we have left in the woven fabric of creation. It is the absence of mindful prayer that allows the desecration of the Sacred to continue.

The Gathering of Friends and Native Americans in Boulder this spring offered those present a small window through which we can begin to hear one another's prayers. My prayer is that we will listen. ... ☞

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES:

¹ While traveling in New Zealand last winter, I found a greeting card (credit: Gerar Toye, <<http://www.globalgypsy.com>>) that resonated strongly with me. The front shows a photograph of a young Hindu woman praying at a temple in Singapore. The caption to the photograph reads, "If only we could hear one another's prayers, we would relieve God of a great burden".

² Gathering of Friends and Native Americans: Outreach to Create New Partnerships, sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, gathered in Boulder, Colorado of individuals present from many faiths for four days in April, 2004, to enter into a conversation about issues of concern to Indigenous Peoples

³ Produced by Christopher McLeod and narrated by Peter Coyote and Tantoo Cardinal

⁴ Professor of Native American Religion, University of California, Santa Barbara

⁵ Book of Prayers, Judaism

⁶ Legislative Assistant for the Religious Action Centre of Reform Judaism, Washington, DC

⁷ Executive Director of the Seventh Generation Fund, Arcata, California

⁸ University of Montana, elder with the American Indian Science and Engineering Society

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As an Aboriginal person, I feel it every time I walk into a crowded room. I am less Noah Augustine than I am a Mi'kmaq Indian. As a minority person, I am always fully aware of my minority status. I can see its reflection in the eyes of the majority.

— Noah C. Augustine, "Aboriginal Voices, Quaker Voices", page 9