

Pine Ridge Re-Member Trip August 16-23, 2019

Friday August 16

Phil Gabrielson, Clare Kuhn, and I left the First Congo parking lot at about 9:00 a.m., having filled our rented van to the gills with donations from our wonderful congregation. We traveled through pastoral and wooded parts of our state on through the southern plains of Minnesota and into the state of South Dakota. We made a brief pilgrimage to the Dignity Statue, a 50' high stainless steel statue of a Native American woman in Lakota/Dakota dress. She looks out over the horizon and holds a billowing star quilt at her back. I very much like her name; it's right to honor the dignity of these first nations.

Saturday, August 17

Our goal today was to tour the Badlands (the National Park Service's version of them). The park offers an astonishing landscape of eroding rock peaks and valleys that lend themselves to imaginative interpretations. A few native species graced us with their presence: a tawny-colored toad, two mountain goats, and a community of whistling prairie dogs. We tried our luck at entering the reservation at the southwest end of the park through Scenic (which for the record is not itself scenic, but has an inspiring view). Our "shortcut" was almost as long as backtracking via I-80, but it made for a beautiful traverse of the reservation.

We arrived and settled into the main bunkhouse, Shelem. This was a less populated week: only 32 volunteers instead of the 55 or 60 that participate in the weeks of full summer. Cory True, the new director, gave us an efficient orientation to the week's work and good food for thought. He cited an article by Rachel Naomi Remen that discussed the differences between "helping" and "serving"; I found it so useful, I looked it up on line (<http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=940>).

"Serving is different from helping. Helping is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength. If I'm attentive to what's going on inside of me when I'm helping, I find that I'm always helping someone who's not as strong as I am, who is needier than I am. People feel this inequality. When we help, we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity and wholeness. When I help, I am very aware of my own strength. But we don't serve with our strength, we serve with ourselves. We draw from all of our experiences. Our limitations serve, our wounds serve, even our darkness can serve. The wholeness in us serves the wholeness in others and the wholeness in life. The wholeness in you is the same as the wholeness in me. Service is a relationship between equals.

Helping incurs debt. When you help someone, they owe you one. But serving, like healing, is mutual. There is no debt. I am as served as the person I am serving. When I help I have a feeling of satisfaction. When I serve I have a feeling of gratitude. These are very different things.

Serving is also different from fixing. When I fix a person I perceive them as broken, and their brokenness requires me to act. When I fix I do not see the wholeness in the other person or trust the integrity of the life in them. When I serve I see and trust that wholeness. It is what I am responding to and collaborating with.

There is distance between ourselves and whatever or whomever we are fixing. Fixing is a form of judgment. All judgment creates distance, a disconnection, an experience of difference. In fixing there is an inequality of expertise that can easily become a moral distance. We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch. This is Mother Teresa's basic message. We serve life not because it is broken but because it is holy."

--Rachel Naomi Remen, *adapted from a transcript in the [Noetic Sciences Review](#)*

Sunday, August 18

This is our first day of full-on Re-Member activities, beginning with “Wisdom of the Elders” (words from Native American thinkers and commentators) and a re-telling of this country’s dismal history with its original populations. As shameful as was the behavior of white Europeans in power, there is no question that most tribal nations were not duped or unaware of the dishonest, dishonorable, violent, racist, and sadistic treatment they received over the centuries. It’s difficult to listen to this history without flinching.

We followed this reminder with a trip to Wounded Knee to hear Dakota Soaring Eagle’s description of the massacre (earlier known as a “battle”) of WK. Afterwards, we walked up to the cemetery that memorializes some 300 women, children, and elderly slaughtered by the US Cavalry. The cemetery also shelters the remains of Lost Bird, an infant survivor of Wounded Knee who had to endure various indignities as a token Lakota woman in a white society, including being displayed as a trophy.

Our trip to the White River Visitor Center in the Badlands was more positive in tone. Ranger Matt, a resident of Pine Ridge (Kyle) and a delightful speaker gave us his conception of intersecting ecological systems marrying science and Lakota values. Also of note: in the visitors’ center was a 19th century photograph of a Lakota “registrar” or historian recording the “winter count” on a buffalo hide. A ranger explained to me that the hieroglyphs on the hide were mnemonic symbols that allowed storytellers to recount tribal history. Something to research!

Our last stop of the day was Feather Two, a 160-acre allotment that Re-Member is developing as a community center. The progress on this land over the past seven years has been amazing. Land has been cleared, buildings completed for administration and community activities, two hoop houses have just been erected, and the garden is established if a little behind the season. This last was due to a Memorial Day blizzard and a mid-June frost. (I’ll never complain again about April snowstorms.) These garden plots will help teach PR residents to grow their own vegetables and use them in cooking. A very good thing considering the paucity and poor quality of produce in the handful of so-called grocery stores on the reservation.

Anila Wakan, a holy man and teacher, spoke to the volunteers tonight. He described to us his own Hanblečeya (dream search, sometimes called a vision quest) that inspired him to become a holy man. The apocalyptic dream he was given sounded terrifying, but he drew from it the confidence that earth would survive. More than anything, he conveyed the message that each human being’s most important quest is to figure out why we have been put on earth and what our purpose is. (That’s a good question!!)

Monday, August 19

This is our first workday. I watched a perfect sunrise over the plains with a gibbous moon at my back. The decision to walk or run was quickly determined by the endless squadrons of mosquitoes that rose from the grasses lining the dirt road. I kept in mind Anila’s reference to grandmother earth—old and beautiful and, today, resplendent with black-eyed Susans, blue sage, birdsong, and the smell of warming prairie.

My four-person team’s service today included assembling seven outhouses, doors and toilet bench not included for the nonce. The work was very satisfying especially as the team grew in efficiency and in something approaching quality. After lunch, we sanded bunkbed boards for several hours. It was warm work under the South Dakotan sun, and it doesn’t lend itself to conversation among sanders.

I had the opportunity to chat with the new manager of the workshop, Trevor. He has four children the oldest of whom are in a school that has armed guards, which reassures Trevor about their safety. This is the third or fourth time I have heard a PR resident indicate concern about the availability and misuse of arms in this country. I had always assumed that these people, so proud of their warriors and their contributions to the US military, would be more tolerant of the gun culture.

Will Peters talked to the group tonight. As usual, his message is aimed principally at the young people in the room, as it should be. After all, as one of the Native American elders has wisely observed, the earth is not an inheritance from our grandparents and parents, it is a loan from our children and grandchildren.

Tuesday, August 20

Our task today was to skirt Tannen Dreaming Bear's trailer and build a stoop and front stairs for its only entrance. I was assigned cutting duty to prepare panels that will block air and moisture from getting under and into the house. We've been told that this simple enhancement (if the word "enhancement" can apply to amateur skirting) can save a family thousands of dollars. Another volunteer and I measured and mounted the panels around the trailer tongue—something to be proud of...

This evening was Larry Swalley's presentation on Lakota spirituality, beliefs, and traditional cultural values. It's most certainly important to strive to reclaim one's language and cultural heritage, but it's just as certainly an uphill battle fought against a dominant culture that is mostly indifferent to the cultural and spiritual wealth of these others.

Wednesday, August 21

I was elated to learn that my assignment today was bed delivery. In all my years of coming to Pine Ridge, I've never participated in a delivery (also have missed digging outhouse pits, which I don't really mind...).

Our first delivery was to a house in one of the "clusters" (an idea in the 80s to form small communities of cluster homes with shared infrastructure; it's not been an unalloyed success). The parents were at home with a baby and a toddler named Dancing Wind, who was entranced by a video of a pow-wow. The parents told me that they had taken in four other children, presumably related to them somehow, and had done so to keep them together and out of foster care. The family was looking forward to a pow-wow on the Rosebud reservation, some miles north of Pine Ridge. I had to admire their determination to keep the family together, provide for them, and teach them their culture.

The second recipient of a bed had a home up on a pine-studded hill. The house was very spare and its resident too shy to stay longer than to indicate the placement of the bed. This isolated residence was in stark contrast to the clump of run-down houses in the cluster settlement. I can well imagine the preference for this other setting high on the land.

At the third home, we assembled two single beds for a grandmother and her grandchildren (note the theme of absent parents). As we were leaving, my heart warmed to glimpse the young teenage boy who lived there gingerly testing the give of the mattress with his hand.

Back at Re-Member, we had the privilege of setting up a community dinner for local residents and artisans. Before things got too wild, Wilma, a Lakota elder and retired tribal police officer, hailed me to come to her picnic table. We talked for some 45 minutes about her life and livelihood. At present, she teaches traditional star quilt-making at Oglala Lakota Tribal College. Wilma clearly rules with a firm hand, has opinions about everyone on the reservation, and isn't shy about sharing her judgments. She must be a formidable pillar of the community.

I ate my dinner at a young (7th-grader) bracelet beader's table. She graciously answered my questions about her school in Rapid City. Her grandmother lives on the reservation and is teaching her traditional beading and quilling. She lit up when I suggested purchasing one of her bracelets. I wish this young girl much success as she straddles two worlds.

Tonight we learned to play the Lakota bone game. It certainly brought out the competitiveness in everyone! Just wish I could understand how to keep score...

I append here an excerpt from Red Cloud, a Lakota who tried his best to negotiate with the invading white settlers and to save his people from annihilation.

“I was abused and slandered, to weaken my influence for good. This was done by men paid by the government to teach us the ways of the whites. I have visited many other tribes and found that the same things were done amongst them; all was done to discourage us and nothing to encourage us. I saw men paid by the government to help us, all very busy making money for themselves, but doing nothing for us. . . .The men who counted (census) told all around that we were feasting and wasting food. Where did he see it? How could we waste what we did not have? We felt we were mocked in our misery; we had no newspaper and no one to speak for us. Our rations were again reduced. You who eat three times a day and see your children well and happy around you cannot understand what a starving Indian feels! We were faint with hunger and maddened by despair. We held our dying children and felt their little bodies tremble as their soul went out and left only a dead weight in our hands. They were not very heavy, but we were faint and the dead weighed us down. There was no hope on earth. God seemed to have forgotten.” (1890, after the Wounded Knee massacre)

Thursday, August 22

Today we toured the reservation, something I don't necessarily need to do having toured before, but with so small a group of volunteers this week, there were no work teams staying behind. We visited the Pine Ridge Chamber of Commerce (which has some lovely art pieces); the Oglala Lakota Tribal College History Museum (always worth the trip and always sobering); the OL Tribal College Bookstore, Betty Black Elk's kitchen for lunch (yes, that Black Elk!); and ended in Red Cloud, where there is a very rigorous K-12 parochial school that is starting a bi-lingual curriculum, a Catholic Church, the Heritage Center, and Red Cloud's grave.

It's always difficult to come to the end of this week, even though I plan to come back to Pine Ridge. There is so much unfinished business, so many ways to serve, so much to learn.

I've found this passage from Russell Means. It reminds me that the original Lakota values aren't just an admirable world view that belongs to someone else in a different era; we ignore Lakota wisdom at our peril and at the peril of our Grandmother Earth.

“For millennia, we Indians lived as part of the earth. We were part of the prairies and the forests and the mountains. We knew every blade of grass, every plant, every tree. We knew the winds and the clouds, the rivers and the lakes. We knew every one of the creatures that fly and crawl and burrow and run and swim—all our relatives with whom we share this earth. We are part of the earth, but not the most important part.”

“Sadly, the white man equates happiness with the pleasing of his senses. My Uncle Matthew King used to shake his head and say, ‘The white man is like a little child; you have to be patient with him.’ But Grandmother Earth is running out of patience. What Eurocentric societies have done to indigenous peoples all over the world they are now doing to themselves— poisoning the land and air and water, abusing one another as they abuse our sacred Grandmother. We are approaching the abyss of species suicide.”

- Russell Means, *Where White Men Fear to Tread*

Mitakuye oyasin,

Eilene Hoft-March