

# Reflections on Visiting Standing Rock

November 11-16, 2016

*When I decided to go to Standing Rock with a small group from Albuquerque, my Quaker Meeting provided much spiritual support, as well as an abundance of supplies and cash donations for the camp and great enthusiasm for hearing about our work and witness there. This is the report I wrote once home. The analogy here is, at best, an inadequate reflection of what is happening there: as a white settler on this land, I cannot fully understand or convey the impact of ancestral trauma and the legacy of colonization, genocide, and displacement for Indigenous People, nor can I truly comprehend the healing that is taking place in this momentous movement for Indigenous land, water, and freedom.*

*I was inspired to imagine this story when my friend, Amalia Montoya, asked me a question that resonated with my own thoughts from October 27—the day the police pushed Water Protectors off the 1851 treaty camp near Oceti Sackowin, including trampling prayer ties and pulling men from their sweat lodge by force.*

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Imagine leaving your home to drive to your Meeting House for worship and finding the road blocked. The only other route will lead you on a circuitous trip through town, making you too late to join worship that day, so you return home.

The next week the same blockade is present so you approach those guarding the road to ask questions. Their response is to become aggressive and push you back by force. Again, you return home.

The following week, you leave extra early to take an alternate route. Along the way you are surveilled: state and local police are parked at major intersections; a helicopter circles continuously above you; and there are unusual interruptions to your phone service. When you finally arrive at the Meeting House, you find it fenced off with razor wire and surrounded by a large group of 50 or more law enforcement officers in full riot gear—helmets, gas masks, large canisters of pepper spray, militarized vehicles, batons at the ready. They even point assault rifles at members of your community, who are gathered in shock, sadness, and anger. Workers you don't know are digging up the grounds of your Meeting House for a project that was approved, they say, by the State and will benefit all. You know your community opposed this work: you were at the meetings and gave testimony about what this land means to your friends and family, and explained why it will threaten the health and well-being of thousands of people.

When you try to access the Meeting space, you are assaulted by law enforcement officers. You know this happens elsewhere but you had never had to stand locked-elbows with others for protection from police simply to worship in the manner in which you believe. You know the Quaker history of persecution, imprisonment, and suffering imposed by the State. But you have not personally experienced being denied access to your sacred space while watching its desecration and destruction.

You and others decide to keep a 24-hour presence there with an ongoing Meeting for Worship, and people connect in ways that are rich and deep. Over time, more members of your community arrive, the digging and demolition continue, and you watch as more of your community's spiritual home is

destroyed along with countless hours of work and love that built a garden, a flower bed, and a meeting room filled with a multitude of memories in shared meals, meetings, worship, struggle, and love.

What is happening pains and angers you, and while Quaker principles require that you acknowledge the Light in those who are destroying your beloved community home, at times anger overflows among you, and those who express it are labeled violent: *words* and *prayers* are met with physical assault by baton, taser, rubber bullet, tear gas, and pepper spray. People are pushed farther away and become demoralized and divided. Many are traumatized.

Others come to support in increasing numbers. This is both energizing and difficult, for people come with good intentions and ideas, but lack awareness of how Quakers move collectively together. You graciously accept desperately needed help while struggling to maintain Quaker ways that are not well-known; in fact, they are more often confused with oatmeal, the Amish, or some grey-clad people who use odd words like “thee” but died long ago. So you initiate practices for newcomers to learn your traditions, or at least behave respectfully while in your midst. This is essential but wearying work. Some people eagerly learn and graciously acknowledge mistakes. Others are resistant, even belligerent, in the face of reminders that things are done differently here.

Meanwhile, winter is setting in and there is a huge collective effort to prepare: structures are built, food is brought in, firewood is cut. Law enforcement threatens to stop delivery of vital supplies. In the outside community and around the country, few people seem to know what’s going on. No relief is in sight from the State or Federal Government; in fact, they seem to all but support the military-like assault. Yet despite what seem like unbeatable odds, you and everyone around you persevere. You have discovered a strength of Spirit that guides you. You *know* that what is happening is more than this one project and that the power of faith, love, and hope is stronger than fear, and you are not afraid.

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In October, I was invited—along with others—to accompany my friend, Amalia Montoya, to Standing Rock. She is Indigenous and had decided it was time for her to go and had invited a small group to accompany her. We know each other from several years of organizing together in Albuquerque and over time have become friends. In considering whether to accept her invitation, I sought guidance in silence and prayer and in conversation with members of my Meeting. I began to feel a deep sense of Spirit moving and knew I would go. Quite unexpectedly, a profound movement of Spirit also occurred in my Meeting, along with a groundswell of support for undertaking this journey.

We left on November 10 in a caravan of four cars loaded with supplies and ten people gifted with cash to donate as we were led. We arrived the next day at Oceti Sackowin and set up camp between the Red Warrior and Two Spirit Camps. We were prepared to be self-sufficient, because we had heard the camp kitchens were stretched and stressed and that we could support best by being self-contained.

We came ready to do service in camp or to support direct action, depending on what was needed. We learned that experienced camp organizers had initiated five days of action to re-energize the camp after people were pushed off the 1851 Treaty Camp. We heard a call for ‘as many bodies as possible’, and decided to participate. So, for three of our four full days there, we left camp at 8:30-9:00 in the morning and did not return until 3:00 or 4:00 pm. Because camp security was tight, only the organizers knew the destination of the large caravans (up to 150 cars) with which we traveled to

Bismark and Mandan: first, for a prayer ceremony at a Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) supply site; then, a march and ceremony at the North Dakota State Capital and Federal Building; and finally--at the railroad crossing for the same DAPL supply site--ceremony and a railroad blockade to honor Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. (Indigenous Women suffer increased levels of violence, rape, and death in the vicinity of man-camps for oil-field workers).

Before the first of these ceremonies, White People were called to act as a protective barrier between law enforcement and the Water Protectors, particularly those performing ceremony. White People were asked to put our bodies on the line and risk arrest—in part to reshape the narrative of who is arrested (specifically, “to get more white bodies in jail”)--and to protect the ceremonies taking place at these sites. Given the history of U.S. Law that all but erased many indigenous ceremonies (by outlawing their practice, often under penalty of death), it was clear to me, as a Quaker, that this is why I had come: to hold space for Indigenous Women, Elders, and People to pray. For two of these days, I observed that when white people were on the front line, there was no escalation of violence from police even though they came fully equipped to use militarized force--they were outfitted for war against people who were unarmed and committed to prayer. In contrast, on the last day of our participation when Indigenous People held the front line—and even though the leaders of the action announced we were ‘not looking for arrests today’ and we would leave when ceremony was finished—at the end police moved in with batons, tasers, and pepper spray, impounded vehicles (without allowing time for Water Protectors to return to their cars), blocked the road, and searched each car for specific individuals to arrest. We were told 20 or so Water Protectors were arrested that day.

Though the bulk of our experience took place outside camp on actions and ceremony, the community being created in the camp itself was the larger story. Each morning, a voice on the loudspeaker woke everyone at sunrise. There was a water ceremony at 8, and a walk to the river for all present to offer prayers. Music or stories or news were going all day, and the presence of Spirit and Ceremony is strong and deep. Protocols to align oneself with Lakota values created an actively decolonized space where white folks and white values were asked to step back. During our stay, the camp began a nightly class on decolonization as a way to educate non-native people about colonialism and how we (especially whites) could learn to see and interrupt colonizing behaviors in ourselves and others. I believe this is ongoing work for us all.

I cannot speak for what this movement means to Indigenous People or where it will lead. I can only reflect on what I have heard: that there is a tremendous healing taking place; and that the power of living through this moment together cannot be undone, pipeline or no. It was my honor to witness part of it for a few days and to offer what I could in service and hope.

With deep respect and gratitude,

Tina Kachele

*Clerk, Albuquerque Monthly Meeting*

## Suggested Reading

*(for more background on the camps, the treaties, and the state of the pipeline)*

The Beginning is Near: The Deep North, Evictions and Pipeline Deadlines by *Winona LaDuke*

<http://www.indiancountrynews.com/index.php/columnists/winona-laduke/14339-the-beginning-is-near-the-deep-north-evictions-and-pipeline-deadlines>

*Terra Nullius and the History of Broken Treaties at Standing Rock* by Kiana Herold

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/38399-terra-nullius-and-the-history-of-broken-treaties-at-standing-rock>

We are our own medicine: Report from Standing Rock (AFSC delegation)

<https://www.afsc.org/story/we-are-our-own-medicine-report-afsc-delegation-to-standing-rock>

Epistle from Travelers to Standing Rock (NEYM)

<http://neym.org/news/epistle-travelers-standing-rock>