



STANDING WITH THE STANDING ROCK

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1

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Nearly 300 Native nations have pledged their support for the Standing Rock Sioux Nation to stop the Dakota Access Pipeline from tunneling under the Missouri river. Indigenous nations from South, Central and North America, and New Zealand are represented as well, speaking of their recognition that water is not just necessary to life, but is life, the same presence throughout the Earth and it connects us all on this watery planet. The Oceti Sakowin (Seven Council fires of the Sioux Nation) has convened for the first time since the Battle of Greasy Grass (Little Big Horn), heeding the call to protect at least this patch of the planet from extractive capitalism.



Members of the Great Falls Advocacy Team of the Friends Committee on National Legislation at Oceti Sakowin



OUR TIME IN THE CAMPS

Waking up to the drear damp Dakota November, I poke my head out of my sleeping bag, only to turtle it right back in. It is cold out there. The day persists in dawning however I try to deny it, though, so I give in, and sit upright on the back seat of the pick up I've been sleeping in.

Keeping the bag wrapped around my shoulders, I slice apples into a bowl, and dollop in some yogurt for breakfast. The water bottle, which was not in the cooler with the food, has frozen. Its a cold breakfast, but it is enough. I walk through the sleepy camp to the ceremonial fire, where an Elder is speaking and performing rites with tobacco. We stand in a circle, respectfully distant from the fire, absorbing the teachings as the growing daylight reveals a foggy morning.

The group of listeners follows the Elders to the river, where songs will be sung, prayers will be offered, tobacco will be sprinkled. The wife of the Elder empowered to sing the songs leads us to a jetty made of pallets, where we wait. It is cold and damp and early. It is disrespectful to eat or drink in the ceremonies, so we



don't have our coffee. We wait. The wife looks up the path, glowering and muttering: "If I have to go get that man and bring him here..." as she sets off to do so. While she's gone, an Elder from a South American nation (he looks Peruvian to me with his knitted woolen beanie, colorfully embroidered white pants, feathered flute and candle, but here we don't speak of modern nation-states, but of nations, so his origins are not elucidated) is invited to speak through an interpreter. He explains his way, his creation story, and his appreciation of the sanctity of water. He brought a candle to light for us. The candle was

store-bought, he laments, because the bees in his home place have left, and there isn't enough wax to make traditional candles.

After the ceremonies, we set out for our own camps. I got a cup of coffee from my hosts, picked up my cameras and headed out to get a work assignment. On the way through the camp, we were met with a call for all women and children to go to the big dome, as there was a build-up of armored vehicles on the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) side of the bridge, and some suspected that they would 'sweep the camp' whatever that means. None of the Quaker women I came with sought refuge, though none of us were particularly interested in getting arrested. Some of us had filled out the "arrest forms" the night before, with information



about who to contact if we were arrested, and written the phone number to call from jail in order to get bail on our arms, but we didn't think we'd be on the front lines of anything.

Personally, I had planned to swan around the edges of the action with my press badge, and document the mousier hangers-on rather than getting up front where I could be confused with someone brave. Around the dome, there were smaller groups getting their instructions for the direct action about to launch. We scanned the participants for our friends. There was still no word on exactly what was happening, because it was certain that informants were among us, so nobody but the Elders and their trusted circle knew the actual game plan until it unfolded. The supporters were told things like "we'll be walking together up the road". Many of us had attended the daily workshop on Direct Actions, and knew about linking arms, keeping calm, and rinsing

tear gas from the eyes. My friend and I went to Media Hill, seeking news, and to the Legal Tent, where a Friend was working.

We saw the people walking close together, arm-in-arm toward the bridge infamous from the events of November 20. During that Action, I had heard, a volunteer had used a semi tractor to try to move the burned out shells of vehicles from the road, left over from the last time the armed forces working at the behest of DAPL had met peaceful prayer with force. Both times the authorities had said that the trucks were blocking the road (even though their own barricades were far more effective at blocking the road), which was a "sign of aggression". So the Water Protectors tried to move the trucks, and that, also was deemed to be a sign of aggression. On the 20th, words were spoken and objects were thrown, which elicited a disproportionate response of water cannons and explosive devices. Quite a few





people went to the hospital, some with permanent disfigurement. None of the victims wore a badge.

So today's action was a march to the same spot - or to be precise, a spot about a football field away from the site of the confrontation, just to be absolutely sure that nobody would get the wrong idea - to pray. The slow march, with the banners and signs and sweet songs saying "water is life" proceeded toward the armored and barricaded bridge. Native leaders were quick to let people know if the Elders didn't want people up on the hill, or going any further. In general orientation we learned that this is in Indigenous-led action, and we were to follow Indigenous leadership AT ALL TIMES. Surprisingly enough, even the media folks complied.

We learned that this is not our show, that we support this fight in whatever way its leaders decide is most useful. We come prepared to work and not expect anything in return. Every

person who comes to camp must try to bring more resource than they use. Ceremony and prayer are the bedrock of Indigenous peoples' connection to land and water and are central in protecting them. Actions ARE ceremony and along with meetings, usually begin with prayer. We expect to observe and follow, and have been gently told to not push our own ideas about what kinds of action should be taken, or what the time frame should be. Indigenous leaders have been resisting settler colonialism for a long time and have good, culturally grounded reasons for their decisions. We were cautioned to be sure that any direct action we join has been approved by Indigenous leaders. There may be attempts by agents of self-declared leaders to provoke confrontations. When simply walking and praying is seen as a "sign of aggression", we learn what it is like to be a minority in this country. They deal with this sort of surreal polity every single day, in public spaces, in department stores, in schools and in the media.

We bear witness to these actions. We can give testimony, both in the legal and the Quaker senses, to the fact that there is no aggression in prayer. There may be some hotheads who push the limits set by the Elders; itchy ones ready to give in to the urge to bellow their righteous indignation at extractive capitalism, but I saw here only powerful, peaceful prayer. Over on Turtle Mountain, I saw the constabulary standing on the hillside, spraying water cannons over the edge, broadcasting twisted propaganda. I heard a man on a megaphone say "If you cross that bridge, we will turn the water on you. If you go back across the bridge, we'll retreat from this hill." Two things threats or promises that were not kept. The Protectors crossed the jerry-rigged floating bridge to the base of Turtle Mountain, which is not only their sacred land, but was granted to them in a treaty of 1868, and they were not sprayed with the water cannons. Not this time. They later crossed back over the bridge, and the armed forces did not retreat. Why talk at all, Mr.

Megaphone Man, if your words are meaningless? This is what native people and other minorities deal with every day in America. Their white allies (us), can not know what that is like, though we can guess. Maybe we can make America great again by giving it back to its rightful owners.

So our powerful prayer by the barricaded bridge came to a close, and we headed back to camp. The marchers had some lunch, warmed their feet by a fire, took care of their needs, and





then regrouped to head over to Turtle Mountain. Their path took them right by our little Quaker camp, with its blue “Quaker Friends” flag. Later we had visitors who noticed that.

We marched again singing with our banners, to the muddy edges of the Cannonball River. The Lakota were on the Turtle Mountain side of the temporary bridge, at the base of the hill. The various flavors of armed officers were on the top, in a perfect picture of jack-booted power over the people. The people below called up: “Brothers, we are here in peace and prayer. We are all relatives. We want to talk. Can you hear us?” The sol-

diers mockingly held their hands to their ears, and smirked, without using their megaphone to reply.

The organizers of the crowd then called “Mike Check!” and all of us said in unison “Mike Check!”. The Elder then repeated his message, bit by bit, and we amplified his voice up to the soldiers. No reply. I don’t know if this action achieved the ends that the Elders hoped. I do know that it got little if any coverage in the media, because it was peaceful. I also know that it moved me deeply. Our one voices, reaching up to the powers that be, and either reaching them





or not. Our huge, thousands-strong circle of hand-holding allies, giving testimony to the power of love and peace changes people. Each heart that was touched by our coming together in peace and speaking out respectfully, carefully and honestly is like the molten core of our planet, radiating out and concentrating the center of our gravity.

My friend Gertie has a nephew who is a Sheriff's Deputy in North Dakota. He may have been up there. Some Deputies or National Guard soldiers are Natives. They were up there. Their hearts were touched, even if some of them mock or smirk. Most of them were up there, wishing they were home with their families instead of standing jack-booted above their neighbors and friends, snared in this fight for nothing but profit.





IS MY LIFE NOT VALUABLE TO YOU?

There is a passage in Mark, chapter 4, where Jesus and the disciples cross the Sea of Galilee in midst of a giant storm. A storm so severe it overpowers their boat. So severe it brings terror even to those expert fishermen. Winds growing ever more fierce, waves and water swamping the boat. As the fishermen panic, Jesus lies asleep in the back of the boat. He is unconcerned by the waves. Undisturbed by the wind. The disciples, filled with anxiety and fear, wake him up, shouting "Teacher! Do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus wakes up, rebukes the wind and calms the seas. He says to the disciples "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The disciples know his power. It is not the storm they're afraid of. It is the fact that they believe they are dying and Jesus, the one with the power to save them doesn't seem to notice. That question, "Do you not care?" is the disciples' plea to know that they are valued and loved. They cry out "We're about to perish, and you are absent!"



WATER IS LIFE

The story of the disciples in the boat was told by Amelia Kegan at the Friends Committee on National Legislation's (FCNL) Annual Session just two weeks before the actions at Standing Rock that ended with a disproportional use of force by DAPL against the Water Protectors. She said "People across this country are facing killer storms and yet those in power, the ones we look to for leadership and help, they appear asleep in the back of the boat, unconcerned by the waves. Undisturbed by the winds." There may not be a more apt description of the situation at the Oceti Sakowin Prayer Camps. People are facing an existential threat to their lives and their lands and their ways, and it doesn't matter what they do, they are called aggressors, and face violent

unprovoked attacks with dogs and chemical weapons and water canons and nobody cares. DAPL keeps drilling despite the order to stop, and nobody cares. They are crying out “Is my life not valuable to you?”

Their lives are valuable to me, and their call to spirit-led, prayerful action speaks for this Friend. We don't have to wait for DAPL or the Army Corps of Engineers or President Obama to stake out justice for us. As Amelia said: “We have power together to help rebuke the winds of structural oppression and the waves systemic injustice. We gotta take some responsibility for the ways in which institutionalized racism, discrimination, and privilege pervasively seep into the oxygen of society, blighting our world and choking off our movement towards justice.” And who better to do this than people of faith? Who better than us to carry on the Quaker legacy of bearing witness, speaking truth to power and giving testimony?

My time in the camps confirmed for me that Love Works. It is louder and more cogent than violence. It is more persistent than aggression, and that makes it feel less urgent. In the face of



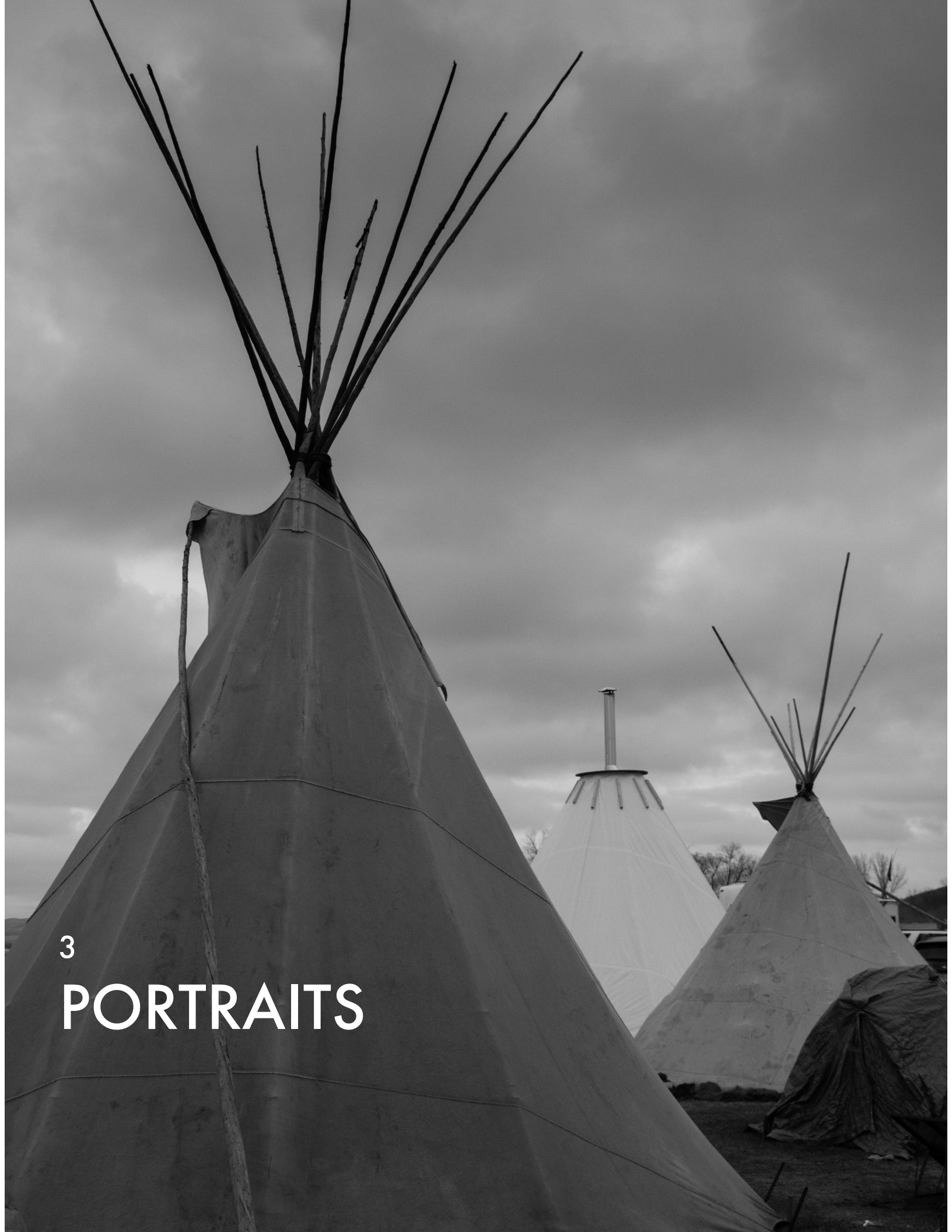


massive injustice , callous environmental ruination and belligerent overuse of physical and political force it feels urgent to stand up and fight back.

What the Lakota Elders of the Oceti Sakowin know, however, is that standing with the patient rootedness of love works. They've been doing that here in America for centuries, so they know how. Standing against the molten lavaflow of white colonizers hasn't been easy, and if you look at the desperate situation that is modern Reservation life, it can be argued that patient love hasn't gotten them much.



But when you're standing in a giant circle, holding hands, praying and speaking collectively up to the armored representatives of twenty various policing agencies, who are there not to respond to the catastrophe of climate change or the emergency of endangered children, or the crisis of poverty and homelessness in the face of the advancing winter, but to respond to the threat to corporate profits, when you're standing here, the power of love and spirit-led action is reverberant. Our human microphone echoed the words of the Elders: "We love you. You are your relatives. Talk to us."



3

PORTRAITS



























