

Thanksgiving at Standing Rock
By Susie Kincade Nov. 28, 2016

Engulfed in the black prairie night, an anomalous glow on the horizon draws me to Standing Rock, North Dakota. When I turn the heavily fully loaded pick-up into the flag-lined camp entrance a friendly Native volunteering as a security guard asks me a few questions, looks at the load of supplies and gratefully waves me through. Immediately I feel the excited energy and the drumbeat of ceremony around me.

When I ask directions of a woman named Inka, she replies, "Did you just arrive?" My energy is so much more intense than hers that the answer is clear. She smiles understandingly and quietly shows me the way. I realize that I have entered something very much its own and am now part of it.

After quickly setting up my tent in the glow of high powered floodlights from the hillside encampments a half mile away, courtesy of police and the mercenary army of the Dakota Access Pipe Line, I follow my heartbeat to the drumming at the ceremonial circle.

"Mni Wiconi! Mni Wiconi! Mni Wiconi!" The call from the main ceremonial grounds greets me for the first of many times that week. Pronounced "mini which-oh-nee", it means Water is Life. Water is where life began on earth and water sustains all life each and every day. Hence, water is sacred.

I found a place in the circle and listened to a Havasupai elder who was speaking: "This is a sacred place, a portal to what is good. The service of evil is not welcome or allowed here. You are creating a sacred place where Spiritual Magic is happening! This camp is being watched all over the world as a model of a new way of doing community. I honor you all. You are all Sentinels rising to be part of an evolution for mankind. When you return home, be sacred orators and speak with your heart leading you. We must find a new way of talking, without angry words, so people will understand what needs to happen in caring for Mother Earth. You must go out and be an Orator for Her and this new way of being."

This is the premise, belief, foundation of the on-going ceremony of prayer and protection that is Standing Rock. When I joined the camp I entered this living prayer and became part of living ceremony. What I came to realize profoundly over the next four days is that ceremony is not something one performs or attends; rather, it is a way of being in the world. Some might call it a state of intentional grace. Indeed, that is how this camp operates.

~*~*~*~*~

That the Lakota people have invited the world to stand with them at Standing Rock is a milestone in itself. In the past, this tribe has been especially closed to outsiders; their ceremonies kept private in an attempt to protect their lineage from appropriation by those who have had a policy of genocide toward them. The fact that they have issued a global call for support reflects the scale of emergency. More than 300 tribes have joined in the water protection effort, as well as thousands of supporters from all over the world. Why all the focus on Standing Rock?

Standing Rock represents a nexus of sorts. So many issues come together here:

1. Oppression: After 500 years of colonialism and racism, enough is enough.
2. Social Justice: The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) was originally planned for Bismarck, ND but residents there protested. So it was moved to the existing location next to the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, to un-ceded treaty lands dating back to 1851. The Tribe was not consulted.

Their burial grounds and sacred sites have been excavated by pipeline bulldozers. The 1851 treaty has been dramatically violated.

3. Environmental Concerns: DAPL crosses navigable waterways 200 times, including the Oahe Reservoir that is on the Missouri River and is the source of drinking water for the Standing Rock Tribe. With an average of 560 oil spills in the U.S. each year there is sad confidence that this one, too, will have a breach. Because it is slated to go under the Missouri river and through four states including Iowa, scientists say that an oil leak could damage 1/3 of America's agricultural land by polluting the Missouri River and the massive Oglala aquifer underneath the Great Plains. 18 million people downstream rely on the Missouri River for their sole water source.
4. Climate Change: Many people believe it is time to use our resources to develop clean, renewable energy sources like wind and solar.
5. Corporate Greed: The restlessness of our culture toward corporate dominance and greed which leads to the gutting of the middle class can find a focus here at DAPL, where the risks are great, the potential damage catastrophic, and the need is based solely on corporate profits.
6. Government Protection of Corporations instead of its People: There is the issue of the Federal government taking the side of big business against the rights and interests of its citizens.

For the Lakota Sioux, the issue is simple. There is a prophecy that says the world will cease if a huge black snake is allowed to cross the land. The pipeline is that snake. They are fighting for their life...again. A further prophecy of Crazy Horse is that the 7th generation (Millenials) will rise up and reunite the red, yellow, black and white people and bring them together under the sacred tree of life so the world will once again be whole. The Lakota are fighting for the future.

Each day in camp there is an orientation for all newcomers where the principles of Lakota life are presented: Prayer, Respect, Compassion, Honesty, Generosity, Humility, and Wisdom. Elders are revered, women respected, children embraced. If you go to Standing Rock, do not miss this meeting – it is critical to understanding your place in the culture and to having the greatest impact. Stand back; respect Native decisions; volunteer! “You’re not here to roast marshmallows, but to participate in a sacred action for water,” we were reminded.

Camp life is full, with daily women’s meetings, non-violent action training, sacred prayers, water ceremony, chores – cooking and cleaning for hundreds – and dozens of volunteer opportunities, from sorting donations to building and winterizing, to picking up trash. An important message: Come self-sufficient and ready to contribute. Women – bring a long skirt as that is respectful attire at all ceremonies...and it’s all a ceremony.

If you’re looking for the leader of the camp, forget it. That’s not how they roll in Standing Rock. Leadership is more egalitarian. Many people work together to make decisions, and there isn’t always agreement. But there is always respect, which leads to cohesive action.

Exploring the busy camp, I and my fellow pilgrim from Eagle, Liz Gauthier, dodged the occasional horse and bareback rider and appreciated direct eye contact with everyone we passed. The “cell phone hunch” doesn’t exist at Standing Rock, except for on one small hill where there is wi-fi service and a charger powered by humans taking turns on a bicycle. We dropped off medical supplies at the Medic tent, including milk of magnesia for tear gas burns on the skin. We stopped in at the Oglala Sioux encampment where Liz had friends, a group of youth who had run 500 miles from Arizona to raise awareness and solidarity for Standing Rock.

We passed several young men pounding together a winter shelter. A shirtless man from New York City chopped away at huge stumps with an axe. We offered him one of our donated chainsaws and he whooped his appreciation. Generating firewood was a top priority as the camp readied for the coming winter and there was plenty of cutting and chopping to do.

Back at our tent, our Colorado camp had grown to about 20 people, mostly Iraqi Veterans Against War. While the vets trained for non-violent action nearby, several youth from the International Indigenous Youth Council (IIYC) looked through our donations. Their clothes had been ruined by police using tear gas and water cannons. Still shaken by the ruthless police encounter two nights prior, they were extremely grateful as we pulled out bag after bag of warm jackets, pants and boots. Their morale lifted considerably as they shouldered bags of fresh clothes to share with their group. It felt great to put our donations directly into the hands of people who needed them.

Witnessing, even second hand, what the police did to unarmed praying protesters gave me a different perspective on what is possible in America. The planes flying overhead 24/7 were said to be dropping chemicals over the camp at night, and though that wasn't confirmed, I could imagine it happening. It struck me that we are dangerously close to becoming the tyranny we're fighting against in Syria, where chemical weapons could be used by our government on our own people. The militaristic presence of armored vehicles, snipers, razor wire and massive barriers looked like a scene from Iraq. I witnessed veterans working hard to find a peaceful way to be with all of this.

In contrast, I also experienced a way to confront such terror. Inside the camp I never felt threatened. It felt very...dare I say, holy? I never felt endangered or panicked. One morning we got an urgent call to evacuate women and children. I knew the drill and executed it without any alarm. We had discussed this in the women's meeting the day before and our group had planned for it together. My truck and one car were the designated escape vehicles so we removed them to the camp exit. It turned out to be a false alarm, but through that drill, other actions and protests during my time at Standing Rock, I felt calm and safe. I feel sure that is because of how the camp was being held spiritually. This is the hopeful side of what I experienced at Standing Rock.

By Thanksgiving Day, I had found my place and pace. Liz and I rose at 5:30 a.m. each morning to the resounding call from an elder announcing over the microphone, "Rise! It's another beautiful day in Standing Rock! Come make your prayers for water and for this day!" Trying not to brush up against the ice inside our tent, we threw on our warmest outer clothes and walked the quarter mile about the day and made prayers for water, safety, future generations in myriad native tongues.

I had brought a jar of sacred water we blessed in a community ceremony in Eagle before the trip. After all the elders and Natives had made their morning offering of prayer and announcements, they opened the mike to anyone else. I asked if a white person could speak and they welcomed me.

I held up the jar and offered it to the sacred fire. I said, "I am a humble white woman with an offering of sacred water from 200 sources all over the earth. Yes, as our elders have spoken, Water IS Life. And Water is also ALIVE! The Native people of the earth know this. Most of us white people have forgotten but we need to remember it. Water is the only element that magically comes in 3 forms, liquid, solid, gas, and it is mutable by our prayers. So please let me remind the white people here when you go down to the river, don't just go through the motion of praying and tossing tobacco into the water. Go with intention of Love and Gratitude because those intentions actually change the properties of water." I

referred to Emoto Matasuri's work and to the fact that we are at least 75% water so we can change our cellular being by blessing every sip of water we take into our body.

Deep inside, I knew that moment was what I had come to offer Standing Rock. I felt complete. So when a few minutes later, the elders invited me to walk with them, leading the water blessing procession to the river I was humbled and honored. As Liz and I walked behind the elders holding our jar of sacred water I felt the my entire community walking with us. All those who donated, all who helped clean, sort, and pack the trucks; those who came to the ceremony in Eagle to help bless the water I was holding... ALL were there with us. And I realized that each of the several hundred people trekking down to the river were carrying their communities too. Standing Rock was and is far greater than the sum of its parts!

I stood out on the small wooden dock next to the elders and at their signal raised the jar to the crowd and called out, "Love and Gratitude for water!" Then I poured it into the Cannonball River and we all watched the ripples move outward on and on in the still water as they hit the far bank and echoed around the world. It was a beautiful.

After the water blessing, I joined a peaceful action. We marched down the road to a blockaded bridge where there was a burned out truck and where, four days prior, 167 unarmed protectors were maced, tear-gassed, hosed down with water cannons and shot with rubber bullets. One girl nearly lost her arm. Some of Liz's Oglala friends lost teeth, broke an arm and one boy was shot four times.

On Thanksgiving, however, it was quiet at the bridge. We heard prayers, drumming and songs from elders. One elder announced that NoDAPL would have a day in International Court on Dec. 9 which got a rousing shout, no doubt making the snipers in their armored vehicles across the bridge a bit nervous. Helicopters, drones and planes circled incessantly drowning out many of the words but never dampening our spirits. We created a huge circle of about 250 people to hold the space while sacred burning sage went round and round. I noticed on the far side, actress Jane Fonda stood in solidarity with the rest of us. (Later that night she was seen serving a community meal – no muss, no fuss, just there helping like everyone else.)

From the bridge we could see and hear the progress of another action about a mile away. Water Protectors had crossed a branch of river where, a month before, they had been attacked, maced, tear gassed, shot, and set upon by dogs – all this while standing in the freezing river, praying. But on Thanksgiving Day, the predominant sound was the quavering voice over the police bullhorn: "Please go back across the river. We do not want a confrontation today." The protectors agreed. They would cross back as soon as the police removed themselves from the hill, known as Turtle Island, a sacred burial ground.

Singing, praying, beseeching the police, made no difference. Neither side budged for five hours. With a friend, I gathered up coats and food for the protectors at Turtle Island and drove over to support them. We joined a "mike check" in which one person led and hundreds of us echoed the words so that he police, dressed in black and looking like storm troopers on top of the hill could hear the message clearly:

"We are your relatives."

"We honor and respect you."

"We are like you. We need clean water."

"You need clean water."

“We do this for our children.”

“We do this for your children.”

“We do it for all future children.”

“Won’t you join us in protecting water.”

Several police ventured down and spoke to the protectors. Conversations were had; communication started; humanity shared. Then some 500 of us created a gigantic circle in the tall prairie grass by the river and prayed for the police, the government, corporations to hear and open their hearts.

As I gazed around me, I noticed a large eagle’s nest in a nearby cottonwood. Beyond it a sniper stood at the ready next to his Humvee, sights on our group of unarmed people in prayer, standing on land stripped from its original people, commandeered as the bed for a pipeline to deliver profits to mega-corporations in an outdated paradigm of human existence on the only planet we have for our survival.

The surreal irony of that scene broke my heart. I know I will never be the same. A part of me remains at Standing Rock forever as I walk with newfound grace in a world that makes little sense.

When people ask what they can do I offer this: First, in whatever way suits you, pray! Send intentions of support for this peaceful action. We each have our part to play in the future. We all need to be awake, involved, and active. So find your personal Standing Rock. I say, “Know what you stand for and please, go stand in it with fierce courage.”

To learn more about how to support the peaceful civil action at Standing Rock, visit

www.ocetisakowincamp.org

Eagle writer and activist, Susie Kincade, will be returning to Standing Rock to serve in whatever capacity she can throughout the winter.