

Back to nature: unearth in broad detail

The land of the free. (as opposed to free of the land)

"Come pray for us" said the Native American Lakota elder.

"I am not sure how to pray?" said the twenty something girl that had flown out from LA to join him.

We were learning how to bear witness in the Black Hills of South Dakota and these were two of the many voices that were heard in the council circles over the coming week. And with over 109 attempted suicides (10 successful) in the last four months alone, the Lakota people do indeed need our prayers.

The gathering of 150 of us offered many lessons and one was perhaps in something called karma - but not the kind karma that prays for a better rebirth with an incense stick - but the kind that traces a century of genocide and cultural domination into the present day lives that are still struggling to survive there. The kind of karma that begins with the physical slaughter at Wounded Knee to the destruction of native ways by forced removal into catholic boarding schools. The kind of karma that gives the phrase 'the land of the free' a bitter taste of betrayal and hypocrisy.

Here is a whole generation of Lakota now living out an inheritance of physical and sexual abuse received in these boarding schools. And unfortunately they are living it out with their children. So if your looking for answers as to why so many kids are trying to take there own lives - you wouldn't go far wrong by starting the search with Capt. Richard H. Pratts educational edit of "Kill the Indian, and Save the Man". And if you term 'Saving the White man' as the rape of children in your care - then the US government has helped 'save' many young Indian lives.

If you look at the figures today the Lakota have a plague of epidemics - sexual, alcoholism, violence, mental health - all scars from a legacy of trauma. And what has this got to do with me you may ask ?

Clues can be found in the millions of dollars of gold that came out of the black hills into American & European banks, churches and governments. Or the still toxic open pit uranium mines that cover the land - the uranium of which went to

feed hungry governments in there race to build nuclear weapons so our countries could 'defend themselves'.

The Lakota grandmothers (but not daughters who still want to have children) still go to these open pit mines - opening themselves to dangerous amounts exposure. They do two things - run tests to check about their toxicity affecting their community (which is high) and also offer prayers of apology to the earth, which they hold so sacred. They pray for the land, they pray for their people and they pray for us. And when I asked a man why on earth would he want to pray for us after our culture has destroyed so much of his - he simply said - "It is the Lakota way"

Another one of the stories that I carried with me from that week was of a Lakota man finding his daughters best friend hanging in a closet two days before our gathering began - a grim addition to a tally of suicides that were still continuing from the weeks before

And so I left these lands with that ringing in my ears. A land of intense beauty and hardship. I headed east to New York.

The first conversation I encountered was with a man who was having 'an incredibly hard time' with his property attorney on the sale of his third house. He spoke of how he was stuck in New York and 'so damn frustrated and helpless' and ultimately how he just wanted to go back to his life of 'travel between my houses'. And even now, writing these words I can feel how jarring a contrast it is between such human lives. How can such gaps exist in our species?

But something that the Lakota man said about his daughters' dead friend reminded me to look deeper.

When he was describing how the Lakota community had come to adjust to all the trauma he said "'not normal' is our new normal". And what really struck me the following week was how - back in "civilisation" - "our normal is also 'not normal'".

Because how can we live in a culture that considers it normal for one of us to own

so many houses whilst so many others are with so little? And how can the holy trinity of Work, Nuclear Family and Entertainment excuse us from taking time to care about the things around us ? By hiding from the shadows that our lifestyles create - we kill our own hopes of being well and whole.

Or as the journalist Charles M. Blow puts it - "One doesn't have to operate with great malice to do great harm. The absence of empathy and understanding are sufficient."

So perhaps there are some interesting comparisons between the young dead Lakota girl and the white property owner. They both speak of a deep sense of lack and loss - unable to grasp relative meaning - they both speak of hopelessness - unable to find a value in things. For her, perhaps the pain stems from deep trauma and for him perhaps it's greed and will-full ignorance. Either way the fruits of depression and addiction are similar.

Yet, that said, we can never forget or forgive the ultimate difference - he still gets to live where as she does not.