



FIRST NATIONS REPATRIATION INSTITUTE

Restoring First Nations People to Their Homelands©



Sandra White Hawk, Director ~ 8416 Blazing Star Circle, Shakopee, MN 55379 ~ 651. 442.4872
www.wearecominghome.com ~ sandywhitehawk@gmail.com

Truth Healing Reconciliation in Indian Child Welfare

by

Sandy White Hawk

CW360 Culturally Responsive Child Welfare Practice, Winter 2015

The First Nations Repatriation (FNRI) Institute provides technical assistance, education; research and advocacy on the process of Truth, Healing and Reconciliation for the healing and return home of First Nations people impacted by foster care and adoption. The Institute promotes Truth, Healing and Reconciliation as a way to address historical trauma and disenfranchised grief caused by removal of Indigenous children to foster care and adoption.¹

FNRI evolved from a grass roots effort that began in 2000, to bring awareness and healing to Indian communities impacted by adoption and foster care. I wanted to develop a format to share the impact of adoption and began framing it in Truth and Reconciliation.

In 2003 while in Ft. Thompson, SD an elder instructed me; “Don’t talk about Truth and Reconciliation without including healing. If you do not leave time for healing; there will be no reconciliation.” The Forums were born and in 2004 I organized the first Truth Healing Reconciliation (THR) Community Forum.

Adult adoptees told their stories to social workers, mental health professionals, adoption workers and community members. A Guardian ad Litem inspired me to continue and develop the THR model when she reflected, *“This will forever change how I advocate for Native children.”* She heard the pain of separation from culture and that that pain is not always connected to an abusive home. That being transracially adopted created its own unique set of lifelong painful, confusing issues that western clinical approaches often cannot address.

We used our traditional Lakota sacred songs and healing ceremony which provided a therapeutic and spiritual healing of the intergenerational disenfranchised grief and trauma expressed.

At this first Forum there was an expressed need for adoptees to meet regularly. Now the **Adoptee Potluck Talking Circle** has met in Minneapolis monthly for 10 years. This social and spiritual time is therapeutic; a time to engage with others adoptees and birth relatives. We do not criticize or degrade our loving adoptive parents but we do talk about the emotionally isolating experience of being transracially adopted.

In 2007 we provided a THR Forum for foster youth. A participant shared her experience: “Two small brothers told their stories of being taken from their families and who were still in placement. Their story of abusive foster homes and what they went through was painful to hear. A white lady social worker broke down. She cried so hard her shoulders shook. She apologized to the boys although she had not worked with them. She apologized for not understanding and not listening and just following the policies of her organization. I cried when one of the little boys got up, went to her, put his hand on her shoulder and said “Its ok, it isn’t your fault,” and he allowed her to hug him. The strength of spirit that little one possessed amazed me. He was so small in physical form but mighty and pure in spiritual form.”

The social worker represented the social workers who did not listen; who made decisions about that young man without discussing anything with him. In her expressed remorse the young man was heard. He saw her tremble with sadness and had compassion for her. They nurtured each other’s pain.

¹ In 2012 FNRI received 501(c) 3 status. FNRI is the first of its kind to address issues from the Adoption Era – the time before the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed in 1978.

Generation After Generation We Are Coming Home

In that moment the social worker experienced the revelation of what seemingly routine decisions have on a foster youth. In that moment the young man whose life had to have seemed that no one cared became a teacher and a healing agent – he had a purpose, his life had a meaning – in that moment.

All those years he was not heard. Not one social worker made sure his one simple request, to talk to his mother on his birthday, was acknowledged. At this moment he taught the social worker that of all the things that had been done to his body – not speaking to his mother on his birthday - was the most painful. Maybe his social worker thought, “That parent doesn’t care anyway. She’s missed his visits.”

But it doesn’t matter what we think. It matters what children need. It doesn’t matter if a parent is hard to find and or workers are overwhelmed with a huge caseload – it’s the nature of the job an incredibly hard job.

I have learned that grief and loss of adoption and foster care impacts everyone it touches including workers.

The FNRI Model is simple:

TRUTH - A process of sharing.

HEALING - Encouraging – listening – traditional songs and ceremonies.

RECONCILIATION - A time to establish new relationships, evaluate, reflect for change.

Reconciliation begins with the individual – it is a process not an event.

The elder from Fort Thompson was right. “If you don’t leave time for healing there will be no Reconciliation.” In that moment with the young man and social worker healing took place. Reconciliation can now begin.