Revelation Days:

Stories of Suffering, Resiliency, and the Demands of Justice

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Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, a place sometimes referred to as Prisoner of War Camp #334, or the "Rez," has been home to the Oglala Lakȟóta—a word which means "friend" or "ally"—since they were removed from their native lands during the period of "Manifest Destiny."

This epoch of rapid western expansion was primed by the appropriation of native lands, seizures which paved the way for the spanning of the Transcontinental Railroad right through the heart of the Lakȟóta homeland. Meanwhile, US Army Officer George Custer discovered gold in the Black Hills in 1874, leading to an inundation of the area with white settlers who began to kill, wholesale, the native buffalo population—a fundamental source of food, clothing, shelter, and spiritual connection for the Lakȟóta. Despite vanquishing Custer in the Battle of Little Big Horn and in numerous other battles, with new U.S. decrees like "sell or starve," the Fort Laramie Treaty and its protection of native lands grew obsolete. With destinies to fulfill and riches to reap, America quickly confiscated the land. We were tired of sovereignty, we were tired of Ghost Dances, we were tired of sacred hills, we were tired of the Lakȟóta.

Later, the Dawes Act of 1887 fed the Lakȟóta the "American Dream" of individual land ownership, abasing their communal, collectivist identity by cunningly dividing the reservation and handing ten million acres of it to rich, white ranchers—who, to this day, own 95% of cattle present on the reservation, according to a leader from the Thunder Valley Development Community.

Inspired by the Church-endorsed Doctrine of Discovery, boarding schools then separated children from their families under the axiom "kill the Indian, save the man." In order to rid the Indian of his or her personal value and sense of being human, the student was stripped of her name and conferred a number instead. They were just digits in an indiscriminate mass. Mere animals to be herded, "savages" to be "civilized." Many were sexually abused by clerics. Moreover, schools prohibited children from speaking their indigenous Lakȟóta language. With no language to pray, the spirituality which gave their entire life significance was lost. Their vision and hope was destroyed. And today, etched among the granite spires of those Black Hills is now the faces of four American presidents who presided over the dismantling of their sacred lands.

Wasichu invasion decimated their way of life, leaving the Lakȟóta to cobble together leftover shards of their identity. The Lakȟóta word *wasichu* refers to all non-Indian peoples, but another version of the word, however, means "the one who takes the best meat for himself." It means "greedy." And after my time on the Rez, I discovered that truly we have taken the best meat for ourselves. That when the myth of American history and its relations with Native Americans was unveiled, I found the visage of genocide vile and distressing. Which may be why high atop the water tower of Oglala, a tattered American flag wails in the plains wind—*upside down*.

In these pages I will begin to tell the stories, in my whiteness, of being red; of those who have been deprived of their voice, who endure in the want of sustainable economics, who suffocate in the grasp of alcoholism, who persevere through paralyzing trauma. I will begin to tell the story of their spirituality and culture which provides an alternative way of seeing compared to our predominant liberal American model. And more than anything, I will

begin to tell the stories of those who walk amidst the rubble of their own way of life.

Because of its vast area, the remoteness of living situations, and absence of any real public health services, to name a few, validating statistics on the Rez is incredibly problematic. Nonetheless, some estimates gather that life expectancy for Pine Ridge's 40,000 or so tribal

members hovers around 46 for men—the lowest life expectancy in all of America, and on par with countries like Iraq and Somalia. Half of the tribe is 18 years old or younger, and many young girls get pregnant by the ages of 14 or 15. Rape is ubiquitous. Children are born into the dereliction of dilapidated trailers and deteriorating homes with battered, exposed, and sunken-in structures. One-third of these have working electricity. Many go without running water, and those that do, they drink and bathe in the same water said to be rerouted through a northern bordertown's sewage line—a line tested over 120 times to be infested with dangerous levels of arsenic, a poisonous chemical.

Oglala Lakota County has the lowest per capita income ($8,768) of any county in the United States. A 2005 U.S. Department of the Interior data publication recorded an unemployment mark of 89%, and has since ceased from publishing employment data on the Rez. At small businesses, organizations, or churches like Our Lady of the Sioux in Oglala, hours are scarce and many can only afford to allot 12 hours for every two weeks. Tribal members I spoke with working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs lamented the devastating five weeks they went without pay during the latest government shutdown. The Lakȟóta understand one of the only way routes to a modest living means working for the government—most often the military.

During my time I worked with a kindhearted man from the Oglala Housing Development just down the road, removing snow fences, repairing shattered windows, and escaping our duties to take drives through town. He graduated from Pine Ridge High School at the age of 15, and, hoping to evade the snares of booze and trouble, appointed his drunken brother to sign his enlistment papers for the Navy soon after. When he noticed his training began to incorporate more close-quarter street fighting, it wasn't long after that he found himself on a boat in the Persian Gulf. 17 people from Oglala, which is essentially the size of a suburban neighborhood, were deployed there. Only 9 are still alive—the rest have killed themselves. After returning home from Kuwait for a stint, he was deployed as a FEMA relief worker in New York City on the morning of September 11, 2001. He remembers his ex-wife thinking that his sudden departure was a cruel joke, all the way up to the moment her husband slipped through her fingers and she watched him board the plane east towards the crumbling towers. Staring out over the cratered hood of a hail-damaged Chevy, he recounted images of mangled people, fingers and toes strewn along the ground and the bare skin of a dismembered torso tattooed by the melted metal of his NYPD badge.

Years later he was blasted several feet into the air by a roadside IED in Afghanistan. Though he's since relearned how to walk, every day he struggles with PTSD and with the triggers that remind him of the trauma, of death. His memories are one chip in a wide mosaic depicting how trauma, and, in turn, strained family life, are the deeper scars of militarism and depleted economics. How when America has gone to war, so has the Lakȟóta.

The other option, of course, is abandoning family and the reservation to work in bordertowns, principally Rapid City, SD, which lies an hour and a half north of Oglala. Rapid City, like many towns bordering reservations across the country, is considered among Lakȟóta to be deeply discriminatory. In addition to alarming disparities in access and quality of education, housing, and nutrition, numerous civil rights complaints have underlined discriminatory treatment by law enforcement and administrators of justice (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights). As one Lakȟóta elder

told me, in a place where families of upwards of 15 people live together in one cramped trailer, "the power of family is too strong" for their people to live disconnected from their homeland; in fact, most who do leave eventually return home. Nonetheless, deprived of access to work, a very basic human right, Lakȟóta people are deprived of a *why*, a vocation, a way to transform their lives, a reason to live.

Many turn to the bottle to fill this void. Though the reservation is "dry," bootleggers and bordertown alcohol vendors boom. Drunkenness is overwhelming at all hours of the day. With no work, many are indentured to the bottle and other drugs like methamphetamine (often despite being pregnant), leaving children neglected or in the care of their grandparents and sober relatives. Apathy, which can at times be a necessary coping method, is pervasive and numbing. Approximately 85% of families experience alcoholism on the reservation, and 1 in 4 children are born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Tribal members spoke of the immense pressure to drink, even as children, to fit in socially, while others pointed to it also as an escape from a despairing reality, inundated with alcohol and drugs. Some children simply begin to drink by imbibing the remainder of their passed-out parents' bottles.

The implications are devastating. Estimates say about 8 in 10 people experience substance abuse or violence in the home. The deterioration of family life rages on, outmatching the measly sum of 5 mental health professionals to care for them, particularly teenagers. With a school dropout rate of 70% and teacher turnover 8 times higher than the national average, the education that could be an escape, that could liberate, is powerless.

One parishioner of Our Lady of the Sioux fell fatefully into the abyss of alcoholism too. Effectively vacating the life of his son, his boy only knew an inebriated world and a father drawn away by the bottle. And one night, while he drank with other friends, his son strung himself to the ceiling fan of his room—just outside where his father was drinking. He wasn't found until two days later.

Around a third of children on the Rez seriously consider suicide, and in just three months in 2013, over 103 attempted suicide in all. 9 died. A fictional internet character called "Slender Man" inspired the slew of attempts through videos on Facebook shared amongst the children. When a pastor, alerted to the phenomenon, drove frantically to Kyle, a remote town in the northeastern corner of the reservation, to check the trees where the Lakȟóta teenagers had planned kids to take their own lives, he met a congregation of them and a line of empty nooses, dangling in the cold, midnight wind. His action saved the group who, though together, felt desolately alone.

One afternoon as I played billiards in the basement of an organization in Pine Ridge with some friends around my age, one girl gently rested her arm on the table to aim for a shot. As her sleeve slipped up her leathery arm, she revealed a forearm overlain with scars. Dozens of them. Deep wounds. Wounds I cannot unsee.

This is the scar tissue of "Manifest Destiny."

Another morning earlier in the trip, amidst a driving rainstorm, I travelled with a Lakȟóta elder to pray at the site of the 1890 Massacre at Wounded Knee. Through sludge we trod to the elegy of rain, thunder, and mud smearing under our shoes.

It was here at Wounded Knee that his ancestors were slaughtered by Major Samuel Whiteside, commander of the U.S. 7th Cavalry, who surrounded the Lakȟóta in the snaking gullies as his men, their fingers coiled around new military test weapons, called Hotchkiss guns, perched high in the hills above. His crew opened fire, the rapid-fire, revolving cannons cutting down over 300 unarmed Lakȟóta—a large majority of them grandparents, woman and children. They were research subjects in the science of erasing life, and doing it as quickly as humanly—or inhumanly—possible. American soldiers eviscerated the Lakȟóta women sprawled and stacked on the snow, mutilating their breasts and carrying them off as war trophies. Left overnight, a blizzard froze the mangled dead in grotesque poses. 20 Congressional Medals of Honor were doled out for the 7th Cavalry's "valor," the most of any single "battle" in American history— more than WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The

late Lakȟóta Holy Man, Nicholas Black Elk, who witnessed the massacre, is translated in *Black Elk Speaks*, mourning, "I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch, as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. And it was a beautiful dream."

Atop the hill, though his mouth was open, he couldn't speak, and I sensed his throat—like sinews of a rope—tighten. He peered into the darkness of the sky, and his tears, falling, merged with rain.

"You only know what America tells you."

The centuries-long pressure of poverty, oppression, and genocide, examined crudely here, has, in its long, grueling work, eroded their voice and degraded their freedom. They are molded by economic and cultural domination which has insisted, both subliminally and explicitly, that they were and are "savages." Their collective agency has been suppressed, and, hopeless, many feel like spectators to a destiny which never involved them. And in a capitalist society, who can blame the 89% plundered unemployed for capitulating to the erroneous cultural suggestion that joblessness means uselessness, and uselessness, meaninglessness? Let the sinless one among us be the first to cast the stone.

Living in the squalor of a reservation, being labelled as the "school shooter," being watched with suspicion in a store, your wife's perfume reminding you of napalm, car exhaust of Chinese concentration camps, living on the battlefield where your ancestors lie buried, or seeing the faces of your oppressors scored, like idol gods, along the stone of your sacred hills in the distance—this crucible produces an effect that is truly immeasurable and utterly inexplicable. And when transmitted generationally, these wounds on each Lakȟóta heart manifest in haunting trauma, in excruciating pain—more agonizing than any statistic ever can capture. Generational trauma seems to be this erosive work, this depletion of spirit, on a collective heart. It is the handiwork of a provisional existence where the future is uncertain and it is impossible to gauge when, *if ever*, this form of dehumanizing existence will end. An existence which impelled one Lakȟóta elder to ask sincerely, laboring to get into the car to celebrate Sunday Mass: "Are these those Revelation days?"

Few Are Guilty, All Are Responsible

No history book accurately captures the trauma and devastation of American colonialism. Living with them and listening to their stories is the one true pedagogy. A pedagogy of how the past can bear decisively, even against one's will, on the now. And as a white, American male, this education leads me to insist that the reality of life on Pine Ridge must evoke a reckoning. That when we, as a nation, stand before God, we will have to answer to our history.

So, for the sake of human rights, the demands of justice, and our own penance, America must transition from its oppression into an epoch of restoration. If we cannot redress our wrongs and remove them from the very tree we crucified them to, we as a nation can never truly call ourselves free. We can never truly speak of justice. We can no longer be the nation we claim ourselves to be. How long must our brothers and sisters live imprisoned and dehumanized, reserved from the vitality of a dignified life? The question is really life and death. Meanwhile, America's liberal model is revealing its limits on Pine Ridge. As the spokesperson for the tribal president said to me, "Give your capitalism, your western civilization, another look. It doesn't work here." But if we let the Lakȟóta speak to us, every American may find how the Lakȟóta's own spirituality and social ethic can enrich new ways of seeing relationships between individuals, among society, and with God. It is by listening that the dream will rise again.

The Lakȟóta phrase *mitákuye oyás'iŋ* is the bedrock of Lakȟóta Spirituality and means "we are all related." The understanding comes from the Lakȟóta belief in the respect and sacredness of all things, and that the divinity is infused within every particle of creation. Each creation, then, is spiritually equivalent to human persons in dignity and shares a common heritage of divinity. They see themselves

as inherently dependent upon the land, water, plants, animals, and all other things for their existence, and those, in turn, depend on them—their lives are in accord with the earth. Because for the Lakȟóta, full humanization is discovered outside oneself in the significance one feels as an indispensable piece of the great web of cosmic existence. Consequently, eagles are sacred creatures for Aboriginal peoples because they, who reach greater heights than any other bird, can see the relatedness of the world. Their cornerstone of *wóuŋšila*, kindness, compassion, and mercy, is why picking up hitchhikers is expected, and why families distribute money among themselves to survive. In what they would call a spirit of *wačháŋtognakA*, or generosity, their love is exemplary. When one Lakȟóta elder's daughter called and revealed that her husband left her, stole her purse, and now has nothing left, she called me to take one of her only—and most culturally sacred—possessions, a star quilt, and sell each one she owns without a second thought. These truths fly in the face of American individualism which, rejecting the orders that conferred significance and transcendence in a charged world, has turned disenchanted. While Lakȟóta prophecies tell of the unification of all the peoples under one sacred "hoop," meanwhile, America has grown mute, unable to speak about cultural values, moral horizons, and collective vision. Bodies are cheapened and commodified for the media and marketplace, and the environment is raw material—instruments for our projects. We care less. We live for ourselves. Depersonalized and disconnected, with income inequality widening to its greatest lengths ever, border walls being erected, and nuclear weapons tested and armed, we are less concerned with the well-being of others. And while the Lakȟóta believe in a socio-centric self embedded in a world erupting with ineffable Spirit, in our model powerlessness cripples, nihilism demoralizes, and resignation to the status-quo—the sense that things cannot change—shackles. Ultimately, no way of seeing, even the Lakȟóta's, is perfect; but what could we learn? What we might find is that in the truths of the oppressed lies our own salvation.

To the Lakȟóta, no action, however disharmonious to the totality of the community, can ever be deemed irreconcilable. They insist humans are fundamentally good, and so, unlike the American criminal justice system, no person is disposable, and peace never unachievable. Seeing justice like the Lakȟóta requires seeing justice—and the universe—relationally. It requires seeing that equality, harmony, brotherhood, and kinship among all peoples is the natural order. This restorative alternative can challenge our reigning model of retribution by actually engaging power dynamics and the core of abuse and trauma, seeking to heal relationships now infiltrated with diseases of mistrust and fear, rather than punishing and burying them. While retributive justice should condemn us to death for our centuries of racism and hatred, restorative justice holds out hope for reconciliation. Though the centuries-old scars of oppression may take many more centuries to heal, ultimately, these ethics of relationality, interconnectedness, and healing can not only frame the Lakȟóta's liberation, but also makes America's own healing possible. Lakȟóta justice leaves the light on so that, from amidst the darkness, oppressor and oppressed might rise and return to encircle the warm hearth of brotherhood.

In all, life on Pine Ridge exhibits this truth—that in addition to the inhumane conditions, our system of oppression, merely probed here, is revealing our nation's failure to satisfy one's most intrinsic right: the right to be fully human.

And so the American is an inheritor of this brokenness, and though you may not have pulled the trigger of a single Hotchkiss gun, you are still responsible to own the shadow which now hangs over Pine Ridge. This history and present reality is our problem, this is our responsibility, and the only thing worse than our history of oppression is our ongoing indifference. Thus the first step to restoration is caring enough to experience a true awakening to the truth that our ancestors crucified this people, our brothers and sisters, and that because our humanity is bound in kinship to them, our own hearts need healing. We must awaken to our identity as the "them" in Christ's last words: "Father, forgive *them*, for they know not what they do."

We know not what we do. We know not the truth of the remaining prisoner of war camps in America. We have not beheld the bare bones of when the best

meat has been taken for ourselves. For determined to kill all that is Indian, we are determined to kill ourselves (Brown). And only through forgiveness can all be born again.

One afternoon as I drove under the outstretched sky, I approached again the site of the Massacre at Wounded Knee. Tumbling over the land rumored to contain a mass burial site of

countless women and children, my tires headed down towards the gulch where bullets from the test-guns were hurled. Where a dream had died. I imagined the chaos, the squealing of horses, rising, bucking, falling. There was no one at the gravesites, no one peddling art trinkets in the parking lot. All was quiet.

But as I continued further on the road, I noticed a man straddling my lane line who appeared to be walking towards me. His thumb was not outstretched, and he did not appear like he needed a ride. As I got closer, time slowed and I began to make out a man strutting in black, a red bandana sealed tight over his mouth, a flat bill cap cocked sideways, black sunglasses draped over his eyes. He stopped. I froze.

And suddenly he raised his arms like he was coddling a rifle, peering down a barrel which aligned straight through my brain. I stopped breathing for a moment, for several moments, for a minute. I don't remember. I rounded the bend, looking in the mirror as he held that pose until I disappeared into distance.

I still reel from this moment.

What if the imaginary gun was real? Maybe these words wouldn't be here. By retributive standards, wouldn't I, the *wasichu*, the one who for centuries has consistently taken the best meat for himself, have deserved it?

Something tells me he was just observant, attentive, astute, learning from the way his oppressor secured her own "destiny." Maybe it was just a little imitation.

A little performance of what it might be like to be Lakȟóta: a gun aimed towards your innocent body as America asks, "So you want to be Lakȟóta now?"

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