



Words by Friends: Paula Palmer

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By Marta Rusek

Image credit: Tony Umile

As someone who regrets not knowing more about Native American history and advocacy for Native peoples, I was very glad to receive some much-needed clarity in my recent *Words by Friends* interview with Paula Palmer, Director of the [Toward Right Relationship project from the Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee of Boulder Friends Meeting](#). Paula has been an advocate for the rights of Indigenous peoples for over 20 years, and I hope her perspective is one that will prove to be as inspirational and eye-opening for Friends as it was for me.

A Quick Note about Terminology

Over email, I asked Paula what term should be used when referring to or writing about Native peoples. She admitted that there is no consensus on this question, but offered a helpful piece of advice: "**If you know a Native person, ask how they like to be referred to.**" She went on to explain: "I generally use the term Native people (or referring to tribes: Native peoples) or Indigenous people(s). Some people like American Indian, others prefer Native American. In other countries, other terms are also used."

How long have you been on your spiritual journey with the Religious Society of Friends?

I am a convinced Friend. During the 20 years I lived in Costa Rica (1973-93), I met **Monteverde Friends** in the course of protesting U.S. Central American policy and military operations in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras. I sensed a groundedness or equanimity in them that I lacked as a peace activist. Together we founded the **Centro de los Amigos para la Paz** and I began attending worship there and in Monteverde when I could make visits from my home on the other side of the country. Monteverde Friends and I offered each other mutual support in their work with the impoverished San Luis campesinos and in my work with the Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous Bribri peoples of the Atlantic Coast, similarly inspired by Paulo Friere's Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

When I returned to the US, the only thing I knew I would do was to explore what it would be like to be a Quaker. The Boulder meeting became and remains my spiritual home, and I am profoundly grateful for it.

How did you become involved with Toward Right Relationship?

My life's work has been advocating for the rights of Indigenous peoples -- for 20 years in Costa Rica and then for 17 years in Boulder as director of the non-profit organization, **Global Response**. We carried out international campaigns at the request of Indigenous communities that were struggling to defend their rights and their lands against incursions by oil, gas, mining and other industries. These campaigns took me to the **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**, where Native people from around the world gave testimony on the historic and ongoing impacts of the **Doctrine of Discovery** (the 15th-

century justification for European Christian imperialism, genocide, colonization, and white supremacy). The UN and the **World Council of Churches** called on faith communities to acknowledge and address the ongoing consequences of this religious-political doctrine.

I heard this call with my Quaker ears and brought the concern back to **Boulder Meeting's Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee**. We formed a study group and resolved to educate meetings within **Intermountain Yearly Meeting** about the Doctrine of Discovery and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. I experienced a clear and strong leading to develop an educational program that could serve this purpose. With help from Native American educators, **Canadian Friends Service Committee**, and the Canadian interfaith organization, **KAIROS**, I created a workshop called "Roots of Injustice, Seeds of Change: Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples." Now, five years later, we have presented this workshop about 160 times in 23 states at the invitation of churches, schools, colleges, and civic organizations. Nine Native Americans and more than 60 non-Native people are trained facilitators who offer the workshop in their own areas. Boulder Meeting supports my Toward Right Relationship ministry by managing a restricted fund for donations and by providing a Spiritual Care Committee and an Oversight Committee with whom I meet regularly. These are invaluable gifts and blessings for my personal spiritual formation and for the work I am led to do.

Another call came in 2015, issued by the **National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition** and the **Native American Rights Fund**. They urged churches to research and report on the roles each denomination played during the era of the Indian boarding schools. I felt led to undertake this research - or at least initiate it - on behalf of Quakers, and was able to do so with scholarship support from Pendle Hill, Swarthmore College, and the Louisville Institute. As I learned about the leadership role Quakers played in the forced assimilation of Native children by means of Quaker-operated Indian boarding schools, I realized that the Religious Society of Friends is in need of informed reflection on this period of our history, in light of the devastating multi-generational trauma that Native people continue to suffer as a result of the boarding schools. My slide presentation, "**The Quaker Indian Boarding Schools: Facing Our History and Ourselves**," can be [viewed here](#). With other Friends who are engaged in this work, I am asking whether now is the time for American Friends to enter into a Truth and Reconciliation process that can lead us toward right relationship with Native peoples.

Why is the work of building right relationship with Native peoples so important?

The United Nations and the World Council of Churches gathered testimony from Indigenous peoples from all parts of the colonized world, who said, essentially: For five centuries we have suffered genocide, colonization, forced assimilation, discrimination, theft of our lands and resources, removal of our children. The consequences of these policies include impoverishment, disease, alcoholism and substance abuse, suicide. These problems are not going to go away until we get to the root cause, which is European Christian white supremacy and domination. The dominant society must de-colonize their minds, legal systems, educational systems, churches and other institutions that consciously or unconsciously perpetuate the oppression of Native peoples.

My observation is that most white Americans have some sense that Native people here were treated unfairly, and that our own prosperity is partly a consequence of these injustices. We read about the terrible conditions on many reservations and we turn away, feeling depressed and hopeless about their situation and not really wanting to look at ourselves and how our prosperity is linked to their despair. Or we say (very inaccurately), "well, now their casinos are making them rich and we don't need to worry ourselves about this anymore."

The late **Dr. Vincent Harding** told me he had not really connected with the experience of Native peoples until late in his life when he visited Palestine with the **Dorothy Cotton Institute**. Seeing colonization there, he returned to the U.S. with new eyes to see colonization here. When FGC invited him to speak at the **2013 FGC Gathering** in Greeley, CO, he asked to share the plenary with **Dr. George Tinker**, an Osage colleague at **Illiff School of Theology**. Dr. Harding's life was cut short just as he began exploring the prospects for a national Truth and Reconciliation process for healing the twin foundational crimes of our nation: genocide and slavery.

Walter Echo-Hawk, a notable Pawnee attorney, proposes a process for healing the wounds of genocide and colonization in his book, ***In the Light of Justice***. He draws on spiritual traditions from many cultures to propose a five-step process, and he describes how the oppressor class of people as well as the oppressed class stand to benefit from carrying out this process. **Brett Shelton**, who directs the **Indigenous Peacemaking Initiative** based at the **Native American Rights Fund**, says that the goal of Indigenous peacemaking circles is "healing for everyone in the circle."

I have come to believe that the ills we see in our country that Dr. King categorized as "racism, militarism, and consumerism" will not be addressed or changed until as a nation we face up to our foundational crimes against Native peoples and people of African descent. If a national process of Truth and Reconciliation seems like a pipe dream, we can take significant steps in that direction by starting in our own communities and churches. In Boulder, the Toward Right Relationship project founded a community-wide Working Group that is reaching out to the Arapaho tribes whose homeland became our hometown in direct violation of the **1851 Treaty of Ft. Laramie**. Other positive examples exist, including a very moving story of Truth and Reconciliation in the rural community of Twisp, Washington, which is chronicled in the film documentary ***Two Rivers***. One of my tasks in the coming year is to create a website where I hope to post guidance from Native leaders and positive examples and models of Native and non-Native people together taking steps toward right relationship.

What can Friends do to help support your work and raise awareness about the historical and ongoing injustices committed against Native peoples?

The first thing is always educating ourselves. A good book for a study group is **Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz's *An Indigenous Peoples History of the United States***. Friends who would like a Toward Right Relationship facilitator to offer workshops at their monthly or yearly meeting can reach out to me for more information - we have one program for middle/high school students, another for adults. To learn about Friends' participation in the forced assimilation of Native children by means of Quaker Indian boarding schools, **watch my slide presentation and follow it with worship sharing around the queries at the end**. Learn about Canada's **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** for their residential schools and CFSC's collaboration with First Nations.

Interestingly, Canadian Friends did not operate residential schools for Native children, but their yearly and monthly meetings are implementing the T&R Commission's recommendations for Canadian churches. American Friends operated some 30 Indian boarding and day schools for various periods of time over a 200 year span; will American Friends see a need for our own Truth and Reconciliation process?

The Ben Lomond Quaker Center is offering a 3-day workshop "Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples," April 13-15, 2018, and **Pendle Hill** will host a 4-day workshop May 3-6, 2018. **New York Yearly Meeting (NYM)** Friends will again offer a week-long workshop at the **2018 FGC Gathering** in Toldeo,

OH. These are important opportunities for collective, Spirit-led discernment and preparation for taking actual steps toward right relationship with Native peoples.

On the [Boulder Meeting's website](#), Friends can learn more about the [Toward Right Relationship ministry](#). Quarterly and annual project reports for four year are posted there. If Friends feel moved to make financial contributions in support of this work, donations can be made online on the [Toward Right Relationship website](#), or write a check to Boulder Friends Meeting (please write Right Relationship on the memo line) and mail to Treasurer, Boulder Friends Meeting, PO Box 4363, Boulder CO.

Learn more about Paula Palmer on [Boulder Friends Meeting's website](#). Friends are also encouraged to read Paula's [essay on Quaker Indian Boarding Schools](#) from [Friends Journal's October 2016 issue](#) [here](#).