

Quakers and the Forced Assimilation of Native Americans

An interview with Paula Palmer

Paula Palmer is the director of Toward Right Relationship, a project formed by Boulder Friends Meeting (IMYM) in response to the call by Indigenous leaders for people of all faith traditions to raise awareness about historical and ongoing injustices committed against Native peoples and to find ways of implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Paula was awarded the Pendle Hill 2015 Cadbury Scholarship to research the roles that Quakers played in conceptualizing, promoting, and carrying out policies of forced assimilation of Native peoples over the last two centuries. Paula spoke by phone with Western Friend on May 20, 2015. The following text is an edited transcript of portions of that interview. The full interview is posted in Western Friend's online library at: westernfriend.org/media/quakers-and-forced-assimilation-unabridged. To learn more about Paula's work, visit: boulderfriendsmeeting.org/ipc-right-relationship

Western Friend: I've still got huge gaps in my knowledge base about Quaker faith and history. We have a reputation for having been in the vanguard in the fight against slavery, but when you learn a little bit more, you see that being in the vanguard was mainly about getting Quakers to stop holding slaves themselves. Well, we also have a reputation for good relationships with Native Americans. So this research that you are planning to do on the Indian boarding schools run by Quakers, is it going to tell a similar story?

Paula Palmer: I remember from reading *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*, that Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniel concluded that Quakers largely lived according to the values of the wider society. A few Spirit-led abolitionists like Lucretia Mott were certainly in the vanguard, and it's to them that we owe our good reputation. I am eager to find out whether there were Quaker voices raised in defense of the rights of Native peoples during that same time period and since.

In the 1800s, the United States was completing its domination of the whole land base from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and European Americans were wondering what to do about the remaining Indigenous peoples. There were over 600 different Indigenous societies in various stages of trauma at that time – trauma from the loss of their land, loss of their hunting grounds, their populations, their leaders. And yet, they were still perceived as a threat by European Americans who felt that they had the right to populate and

extend their ways of life over this entire land – and they didn't imagine sharing it with the Native peoples.

Quakers, from what I've read so far, were very concerned about the federal government's policy of extermination, which was being carried out by the U.S. Cavalry. Estimates vary widely regarding the number of Indigenous people who lived on the landmass that became the United States when the Europeans first arrived – somewhere between 8 million and 30 million people. But it's pretty well established that 90-95% of that population perished over the next 200 years. Extermination almost happened.

Quakers wanted to prevent wholesale extermination of the tribes that had not yet moved onto reservations, those that were not yet "controlled" in any way by the U.S. government. The war was on. The Cavalry was after all of them. The Quakers wanted to bring those wars to an end.

So it appears from what I've read that Friends supported the creation of reservations where Native people would live by certain rules in exchange for goods supplied by the U.S. government. They would be prevented from hunting buffalo and required to become farmers. Their children would be required to go to school to learn English and learn to fit into a European society and economy. The schools would teach Christianity along with the manual skills that would prepare Native children to become farmers and homemakers and learn to live in a Christian European culture.

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WF: So in their minds, they were offering a refuge?

PP: Well, they were trying to stop the killings on both sides. One thing that I'm interested in finding out through my research is whether Quakers had any other ideas for ways of accommodating all these different cultural groups within the United States. Did any Friends at that time see value in the Indigenous cultures, or advocate for Native peoples' right to maintain their ways of life? Did they offer any other ideas about ways to share space?

WF: We could use those ideas today, huh?

PP: Well, today, 150 years later, we see the policy of forced assimilation in a very different light. Native people from Australia to Canada and throughout the United States are bearing witness to the damage that was done to generations of Native children, especially in the boarding schools. Whether the children were treated cruelly or kindly, the intention of the schools really was to annihilate Indigenous cultures, to “kill the Indian; save the man.” Children were made to abandon the ways of their parents and grandparents and ancestors. They were made to become non-Indian. But what were they to become? Many survivors of the boarding schools say they became lost between two worlds, unable to belong anywhere. Psychologists tell us that trauma like this can be passed down from generation to generation, and Native people are asking now: How much of the despair and disease in some Indian communities today is attributable to the boarding school experience?

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Through my research, I’m hoping to learn how Friends in the 1800s expressed their intentions in providing schools for Native children. How did they describe their goals in religious, cultural, social, and economic terms? Were there debates? Did any Friends raise questions about the forced assimilation policy, either on theological or moral grounds?

During my term as the Cadbury Scholar at Pendle Hill, I’ll be able to do research in the Quaker history collections at Swarthmore and Haverford colleges, where there are letters and journals and reports to yearly meetings from the Friends who were directly involved in the schools. I want to read about their hopes, their doubts and concerns, and what they learned in the years they spent running and supporting these schools. And of course I want to learn as much as I can about how the Native children and their families experienced the Quaker schooling.

WF: I’m going to be so interested to read whatever you produce from all of this.

PP: I think it is easy, from the place where we are now, to be critical of the attitudes of these Friends. And yet I think we will find that we have much in common with them. I think this research will provide an opening for us to examine ourselves today, and to ask ourselves, “What are we missing in our analysis of the issues of our time? What are blind to? What are the contradictions in our own expression of our religious values? Are we living with integrity in our communities and on the land?” That’s the way I’m going into this.

At the same time, we clearly need to bring to light the harm that was done in the Indian boarding school era and the part the Religious Society of Friends played in it. We need to be open to the truth, as painful as it may be. That’s one reason why I think it would be good for Quakers to lead other denominations in undertaking this research, because we are seekers of the truth. We are guided by that old Quaker tenet that if we seek the truth, the truth will set us free.

As we look into our role in carrying out the policy of forced assimilation, I hope we can do it with love for the Friends who carried it out, and with love for the Native children and families who were damaged by it directly, and with love for their descendants who continue to suffer from those damages today. I hope my research will open opportunities for Friends to reflect on what this history means for us as a Society today. I hope we will find appropriate ways to support the healing processes that Native people are developing for their communities.

WF: So what do you imagine the benefits to us will be from accepting the truth of our history?

PP: The reason for doing this research now is because Native American organizations and tribes are asking for the country at large to take stock of the consequences of this policy of forced assimilation. As we learn more and acknowledge what did happen in this country, I think that will offer us an opportunity to ask how healing can occur, and that will bring about a kind of dialogue that we haven’t had before – between Native people and non-Native people, between the churches and the government and Native communities.

WF: Well, I feel a little obnoxious in pressing this further, but part of me believes that people act out of self-interest. So I’m wanting to ask it again: What good is it for European Americans to try to bring about this healing?

PP: I think there's a real cost to all of us – as individuals and as a nation – from living in denial of the truth. Most of us know at some level that our country's prosperity – and our own – are products of terrible injustices committed against the Indigenous peoples of this land, despite five hundred years of doing our best to cover them up. We

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hear our politicians spouting these great national values, yet most of us do know that if we just scratch that surface a bit, we can see that, as a society, we have never lived up to those values. Our nation's wealth has been built on two fundamental crimes – genocide and slavery – and we've never as a society faced up to that. And because we've never faced up to it, we've never healed from it. No

one in this country is isolated from the terrible ongoing consequences of racism.

Sometimes, when European Americans are asked to think about the history of the Native people in this country, they very quickly go to, "So what do they want? Do they want us all to go back to Europe?" I think that kind of response – the fear that we live with and hide from, but underneath, it is there – shows that in some way we know that we did not come by our land and possessions in an entirely good way; and there are debts to be paid. I think those of us who enjoy privilege – and even if we don't desire privilege, we benefit from it – I think we live in considerable fear. And that's what healing can do for us. We will no longer live in that fear.

In his book, *In the Light of Justice*, the Pawnee attorney Walter Echo-Hawk says that the first step toward healing this wound of genocide and colonization is to recognize the harm that's been done. We have so successfully covered up the harm of forced assimilation through our education system and through our national sense of self-congratulation and exceptionalism. That harm needs to be uncovered – and held to the light of truth. ❖

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