

**Paula Palmer's Talk, FGC Gathering July 2018, Theme: "The Power of Truth"
Title: "From Truth to Healing with Native Peoples: Listening is the Way"**

Good evening, Friends. It's an honor to be able to share my journey in ministry with you tonight.

One thing I've learned from living and working with Native peoples is to be attentive to place – to the earth beneath our feet, to all the living beings that surround us, and to the humans whose stories are embedded in the land. So to begin, I want to acknowledge the many Native peoples who have lived, loved, traded, danced, farmed, hunted, and prayed here amid these Great Lakes, and fought for their right to be. It's good to remember that this land is still called by its Seneca name – Ohiyo.

Native people say that the land remembers. I live in Colorado now, in the territory of the Arapaho people, but I have memories of this land, too. I have family stories from this region, and my own stories. Some Quaker relationships with Native people are also rooted in this land. I'm going to share some of these stories tonight.

My ancestors on both sides of my family came from Germany in the 1840s. They bought land about one-hundred miles north of here and founded a German Lutheran town they called Frankenmuth. The fertile land of Central Michigan had supported a very large Native population until it was wrested from them by the Treaty of Saginaw, a couple decades before my ancestors arrived. The territorial governor, Lewis Cass, promised the Chippewas that they could remain on smaller tracts of land in Michigan "forever." But then Cass became Secretary of War under President Andrew Jackson, and he was put in charge of enforcing the 1830 Indian Removal Act. He broke his promise to the Chippewas and forced most of them to move west. Some of their land became my family's farm. It lies along the Cass River, which was named for Lewis Cass, the primary agent of Indian Removal.

My parents didn't learn this history in Frankenmuth schools. My 98-year old father and I learned it together just last month by searching the internet for a couple of hours. What does this history mean for my family? What does it mean to the Chippewas, expelled from Michigan and spread out now across the Dakotas? I know that we are bound together in the story of this land.

My parents moved to Valparaiso, Indiana, which is about 200 miles west of here. That's where I was born, on land where some of Robin Wall Kimmerer's Potawatomi ancestors had lived. The federal government purchased the land that became Valparaiso from the Potawatomi leader, Chiqua. In 1838, a mounted militia drove Chiqua and 860 Potawatomi people out of northern Indiana across the Mississippi River to Kansas. The Potawatomi remember this as the Trail of Death. My family doesn't remember it at all; we didn't learn it in Valparaiso schools. I returned to Valpo as a college student to study at Valparaiso University; I didn't learn this history in my college courses either. Yet, I know I am bound together with the Potawatomi people in the story of this land.

I'm grateful for some lessons that I learned at Valpo, though. I was there in the late 1960s when the Black Panther Party was gaining force in nearby Chicago. We invited the Panthers to speak on campus, and afterwards some of us asked them how we could "help" in the Inner City neighborhoods. We imagined organizing weekend activities with the children, or taking them on field trips – or something. The Black Panthers were very kind. They told us, *Thanks, but no thanks – we're taking care of our kids and our communities. That's our job. Your job is in the suburbs where you come from. Educate your people. Root out racism in your institutions. Lift your feet off our necks.*

Such an important lesson! It's not for us – speaking now as a white person – to fix them; our job is to fix what's wrong in ourselves. Since that time, by living and working with many communities of color, I've learned to listen for what they ask us white people to do, and then do my best to do it. So, when I lived in Costa Rica, and people of African descent and Indigenous

communities asked me to help them write and publish their own histories, I spent 20 years working with them to do that.

I wasn't a Quaker then, but I was a Quaker later, when I heard Indigenous leaders at the U.N. call on the churches to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. This is the doctrine that European Christians invented to justify genocide, slavery, and colonization in the lands they – quote – discovered. This Doctrine still perpetuates injustice among the Indigenous peoples of the world today. I heard that call from Indigenous leaders at the U.N. with my Quaker ears, and I felt a leading to bring their message to Friends and other people of faith. This was the beginning of my ministry, Toward Right Relationship with Native Peoples, which has been under the care of the Boulder meeting for the last 6 years.

I think the practice of listening for calls to action from people who have suffered injustice is something like our Quaker practice of “expectant waiting.” Often, I hear the voice of God most clearly through the voices of oppressed peoples.

That's how, a few years ago, I heard a call from Native people who are working to heal the wounds suffered by generations of Native children in the Indian boarding schools. Since the churches operated many of these schools, Native organizations were asking all the denominations to find out what roles we each played in carrying out the policy of forced assimilation of Native children. I heard this call, and I felt led to do that, or at least get it started – for us Quakers.

Soon I was reading about the first Quaker Indian boarding schools, which were built in New York to teach Seneca children, and in Wapakoneta, Ohio – about one-hundred miles south of here – to teach Shawnee children. Seneca and Shawnee leaders had invited Quakers to teach their children the skills they would need in world that was rapidly changing – but that was before the Indian Removal Act forced them to start life over, west of the Mississippi.

In the West, everything was different for Native peoples, and things changed for the Quakers, too. Instead of building Indian schools in collaboration with Native leaders, Quakers started building Indian schools in collaboration with the federal government. After the Civil War, Quaker men began serving as managers of all the Indian reservations in Nebraska, Kansas, and Indian Territory, as employees of the federal government. Quakers built some 25 boarding schools and day schools on the reservations, and they recruited Quaker teachers to carry out the government's policy of forced assimilation. They believed they were saving lives – physically, by putting an end to the Indian wars, and culturally, by rescuing the children from what many of them saw as a dying savage race.

I have thought a lot about these Friends. For four months, I sat in the Quaker historical libraries at Swarthmore and Haverford colleges, reading minutes of the Quaker committees that supported the Quaker Indian Schools, and reading the teachers' journals and letters. It was easy to love many of these Friends. They were earnest, self-sacrificing, dedicated to their mission, Spirit-led. If I had graduated from Earlham College in 1870, I easily could have been among them.

As it happens, 150 years later, I felt Spirit-led to learn about this era in the shared history of Quakers and Native peoples and to ask: what does this history mean today – to us Quakers, the spiritual descendants of the boarding school teachers, and to the Native American descendants of the boarding school students? We are bound together in this story.

When I tell Friends I'm studying this, they often respond with a wince and then something like: *But our schools weren't as bad as the others, were they?* They were bad enough for one Kickapoo father to say to a Quaker school recruiter: *"Take that ax and hit him on the head. I would gladly bury him. I would rather do that than send him to school."*

They were bad enough that when the Kanza chief Allegawaho broke down -- under pressure -- and took his son to the Quaker school, he said, *"This is the darkest period in our history."*

The Quaker schools were bad enough that Sitkala-Za, a Dakota woman, wrote this about her first day, at age 8, at a Quaker boarding school in Wabash, Indiana – which is about 150 miles west of here. She wrote:

"I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!...I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me....for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder."

The Quaker schools were bad enough because they set out to eliminate Native cultures altogether. Joseph Webster, the agent for the Santee Sioux, wrote, *"The whole character of the Indian must be changed."*

This is why I'm troubled when I hear Friends say, *"Well, at least they had good intentions."* We want so much to believe this. It's true that the Quaker teachers were well-meaning, they wanted to "help," they worked hard, and they did what they thought was best in very challenging circumstances. But, what were their intentions? Their intentions were to change everything about Native peoples -- their clothes, their hair, their dwellings, their economy, their gender roles, their marital practices, their language, their names – their whole character -- and make them conform to a "superior" European Christian way of life.

What do we call this? A Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission recently called it “cultural genocide,” and the Canadian government issued an apology for their residential schools.

I’ve heard several Quakers say that we don’t need to apologize to Native people for the Quaker Indian boarding schools. We didn’t run those schools; why should we apologize? We might be able to ignore the connection between ourselves and our spiritual ancestors. But Native people don’t have that privilege.

The damage that was done in the Indian boarding schools is very present in Native communities today. When you rip families apart, when you criminalize language and ceremony, when you teach shame, the damage doesn’t stop with a single wounded generation. The wounded pass the damage on to the next generation and the next. We understand this now as multi-generational trauma. We can see this trauma today in the epidemic of suicides among Native teenagers. We can see it in the high rates of addiction, illness, chronic poverty, infant mortality, and violence in Native communities. Native Americans are dying from it every day.

We are bound together with Native communities in this history and its ongoing consequences.

Reverend Barber has said, *“It’s time to make America cry again.”* There is much to grieve in this history – for ourselves and for Native Americans. Brokenheartedness is not a bad thing; it may be a necessary thing to bring about change in a country that mythologizes its history and denies its original sins of genocide and slavery. But, before we start pointing our fingers at others out there, let’s ask: how much are we mythologizing our Quaker history? How much do we mythologize our families’ settler stories? How much Truth can we stand?

I struggle with these questions. What helps me most is remembering the spiritual practice of Early Friends. Rex Ambler says Early Friends practiced diving deep for the Truth. They learned – from their own experience—that peace is only possible if we open our hearts to the Light of Truth – if we allow the Light to illuminate our “darkness” and expose our transgressions, leaving us naked, as George Fox said, before the Lord. Early Friends had the courage to do this because they also had faith that the Light of Truth would give them the strength to change what was not right in themselves, and it would show them a way to peace.

I pray for this faith today. I was blessed with a leading to dig down for Truth about our Quaker history and its ongoing consequences for Native Americans. I was also blessed with a meeting that named a Spiritual Care Committee to help me carry out this ministry. For five years these Friends have prayed with me for the insight and the courage to be faithful – and they are all here, in the front row, tonight. We meet together every month. We begin in worship, and then they ask, Friend, how does the Truth prosper with thee? This old Quaker query takes me to my most vulnerable places. Up come my doubts and fears:

Why isn't there unity in the meeting about my ministry? If there isn't unity, is my leading true? Who am I accountable to – to the meeting? To Native Americans? To God? What if I'm off the mark? I think Friends were off the mark when they ran the Indian boarding schools, but they prayed and listened for the still small voice within, just as I do now. How can I be certain I am led, and not mis-led?

And up come a whole set of material worries: How can I support myself to carry out this ministry? Why is it so hard to ask Friends to support ministry financially? Do Friends take ministry seriously?

The old query, *Friend, how does the Truth prosper with thee?*, led me to wrestle with a lot of uncomfortable truths -- about myself, about my family history, about my hometown, and about us Quakers. As I've begun to act on these truths, the Light is revealing ways forward.

I'm especially happy about the work we're doing in Boulder. Our local group is called Right Relationship Boulder, and this year we are welcoming the exiled Arapaho people back to their homeland. For 150 years, they have been exiled in Oklahoma and Wyoming, but now we have started a dialogue and we're working with city and county officials to designate land where the Arapaho people can be again in the Boulder Valley.

I'm excited, too, that Quakers in Canada and the U.S. are beginning to organize and support each other as we come to grips with hard truths and ask: How can we move forward now, with Native peoples, toward healing?

In a wonderful book called "In the Light of Justice," the Pawnee attorney Walter Echo-Hawk, lays out a clear path to healing. He says the first step we need to take is to acknowledge the harm that has been done.

I learned the importance of this from my Ojibwe colleague, Jerilyn DeCoteau. She grew up on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota. Both of her parents were raised in Indian boarding schools. During her childhood, Jerilyn said, the main social events were funerals. There were so many deaths from suicide, illness, and violence – and she had no way of understanding the cause of such despair and dysfunction in her community. She could only conclude that Indian people were really screwed up.

"What a difference it would have made," she told me, "If someone had said this was not my people's fault! If someone had said, we caused this harm. If someone had said, 'We were wrong. We are sorry.'" As an adult, Jerilyn came to understand multi-generational trauma. Now she is working with other Native people to heal. To the churches that want to support this healing,

they say: *Learn the truth. Acknowledge the harm that was done. Apologize. Make amends.*

To my ears, these steps to healing sound very much like the steps to spiritual peace that Early Friends practiced: *Acknowledge your unrighteousness. Let the Light open your heart and give you the courage to change what needs changing. This is the way to peace.*

I believe that healing, as well as history, can bind Friends together with Native peoples. If we want to move with Native Americans toward healing, toward peace, let's remember these words from Lilla Watson, an Indigenous leader in Australia. She said, and I hear echoes of the Black Panthers back in Chicago: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation – your peace -- is bound up with mine, then let us work together."