



Meditation on the Pilgrimage to the Site of the Sand Creek Massacre

Margaret Hotze
Conference Co-Lay Leader
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Long before Peyton Manning's shouts of "Omaha" were heard throughout the land, long before the city of Omaha rose from Nebraska prairie, Omaha Indians made their home along the Missouri River in southeastern Nebraska. I wonder if Manning knows that "Omaha" means "those going against the wind or current," or "upstream people," in the language of the Omaha nation.

I was born in southeastern Nebraska, in Otoe County, named for the Oto Indians who had migrated to the Central Plains just before the Europeans. The very name "Nebraska" is an Oto name meaning "flat waters," referring to the Platte River. I grew up in the land which had been inhabited by the Omaha, Oto, Pawnee, Ponca, Sioux, and more. We sold honey to the Sioux Bee Honey Company in Sioux City, Iowa, named, of course, for the Sioux Indians.

My mother had an affinity for Native American peoples and I knew as a child that she did research and gave programs on well-known Indians. I was intrigued but somewhat disconcerted in reading our family history to discover that an ancestor in Virginia, Jesse Parker, had been an Indian fighter who was captured by Indians, but escaped and was rescued by a scouting party. Our youngest daughter married a man whose grandmother was an Alaska Native, from the Aleut people. Our grandchildren now carry within them the genes of one who fought native peoples and of those who were native to the land. I'm sure that is true for many of us.

My husband was born in Red Willow County, Nebraska (a mistranslation of the Dakota Indian name for Red Dogwood Creek), and grew up on a farm near Indianola, in an area that had been a favorite hunting ground for Native peoples. The site of the last great Indian battle between the Sioux and Pawnee was not far away. Indian arrowheads and buffalo wallows were found on the family farm, and one small china doll. It came to light among the roots of a lilac bush, most likely lost by a little girl on a covered wagon. That doll speaks to me of the intersection of cultures: the Indians are now gone; the settlers remain.

So it is with Colorado. This state was also home for several tribal groups: Cheyenne, Arapaho, Sioux, Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee, Osage, and Ute. We recognize familiar names as coming from Native languages: Arapahoe and Cheyenne, of course; Arkansas, Arickaree, Niwot, Olathe, Ouray, Saguache, Uncompahgre. And in Colorado, as in Nebraska, the clash of cultures was all too evident. Forts sprang up all over Colorado: Fort Collins, where I live; Fort Morgan, Fort Lyon, Fort Saint Vrain, Fort Carson, and many more. Forts were established to protect fledgling settlements from Indians, and to protect Indian lands from being encroached upon by settlers. But we know the rest of the story: mass migration of miners and settlers began crowding the Indian territories. Treaties were made, treaties were broken. The only tribe left with land in our state is the Ute, with two bands on reservation land in southwestern Colorado.

We know the story of the Cheyenne and Arapaho at Sand Creek. We know that they were people who sought peace with the white settlers, and that their chief, Black Kettle, eloquently and forcefully worked for peace. We know that the Governor of the Territory of Colorado, John Evans (a Quaker who had become a Methodist), had promised the Indians that if they lived in peace near a fort, no harm would befall them. They were told that their safety would be insured as long as a large American flag was flown over their village. We know, too, that John Chivington, a Methodist minister turned soldier, led an attack on that village which resulted in the slaughter of innocents and the desecration of their bodies.

2014 is the 150th anniversary of that attack. How do we respond? Can we stand together with the descendents of the Cheyenne and Arapaho, grieve together, and promise to work together for the good of all? As the song says, "We are called to act with justice, we are called to love tenderly, we are called to serve one another, to walk humbly with God." (From "We Are Called," # 2172 TFWS.)

Patrick Mendoza, author of Song of Sorrow: Massacre at Sand Creek, writes at the end of that book, "All come from the Great Spirit and all must be held in forgiveness. You must always remember that good and evil are deep within each heart and no man is separate from his brother. Pray that all hearts come to good."

So come. Come out to the prairie at Sand Creek. Come to listen. Come to listen to our Indian brothers and sisters. Come to hear the voice of the Spirit, speaking to us. Come to experience a time of healing. Come, knowing that this Annual Conference Pilgrimage is not the end of our journey. Come with hope that we can be part of a new thing, a new way of being in fellowship with our American Indian brothers and sisters. Come, praying that all hearts do come to good.