



FIRST NATIONS REPATRIATION INSTITUTE

Generation After Generation We Are Coming Home©

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I was born in 1953 on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. At the age of 18 months, I was adopted out to a white missionary family. This family was originally from Illinois but moved to South Dakota to “work with the Indians,” a phrase my adopted mother always used when she referred to her missionary call to South Dakota. Because of their close work with an Indian church, they were aware of babies being born to already large poor families. They believed they would be helping a child have a better life in a home with money and ‘stability.’

The very thing that I was to be “saved from,” poverty, abuse and alcoholism, was thrust onto me by life’s natural unfolding. My adoptive father died as a result of a farm accident when I was six. The farm was lost and my uneducated, emotionally unstable mother supported us on a minimum wage job as she faded in and out of sanity. I was the target of her pained, frustrated, broken heart and endured years of verbal, physical and sexual abuse.

Growing up was difficult because of poverty and abuse. I often think I probably could have survived that alone. But it was the feelings of “**being different**” of “**not fitting in,**” because I didn’t look like any one around me, that lead to unbearable feelings of isolation. I grew up without an Indian face to reflect my image concluding that I was ugly and unwanted. All I knew was that I did not fit in anywhere and at the age of fourteen I learned to numb those desperate feelings with alcohol and drugs. However, somewhere deep within myself I had a sense-as small as it was-that I was Indian and that it was a good thing. I had no language for those feelings. I never discussed it with anyone. I did not know how I was going to get out, but I felt that someday I would. I was locked in years of isolation and confusion. It truly was the loneliest place to be, a dark time unlike any other time in my life.

I survived and graduated from high school, joined the Navy, got married and had two children. During the last twenty four years I divorced and have overcome the cycle of addiction to alcohol. I also began healing from the wounds caused by my adoptive mother. In 1988 I went home to Rosebud for the first time. My family not only remembered me, but has come to expect another relative to return each year. I was one of nine brothers and sisters, all but one fostered or adopted out. My mother, Nina Lulu White Hawk, was the oldest of twenty children, most of whom had endured the hardships of boarding schools. My family welcomed me home and encouraged me to keep coming back.

There was a time when I felt that my feelings of isolation, confusion and shame were solely a result of the abuse. I now know that they were **a result of not being connected to that spiritual center as an Indian woman.** I have since gained a sense of pride, dignity and sense of belonging and purpose in my life. This is a direct result of our traditional songs and ceremonies. I have very good counseling through out the years but it was not until I first heard the drum that my heart began to open and the years of shame, anger and resentment began to leave. The healing affects of sage, sweet grass and other medicines quieted my raging spirit and replaced it with a sense of purpose to my life. Our ceremonial

songs, given to us by our ancestors, those old songs spoken in our language encouraged that part of my heart that I had closed many years before. My spirit is Indian, even though for a long time I did not know what that meant, the songs, ceremonies and medicines healed me and brought me home to my self.

Today even with the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act we still have many children put in placement of white foster homes. Our Indian families and communities are still healing from inter-generational trauma of boarding schools, adoption and foster care. This systematic removal of our children has its roots in the time of when reservations were first formed. In the 1890's the government in its assimilation policy began the systematic removal of our children. They took children and placed them in boarding schools. At the same time missionaries came and then the social service system. Their answer to the poverty on the reservations was to convince us that our children "deserved a chance at a better life." Many broken hearted mothers did hand over their children to Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities and other similar agencies. Many were coerced with shame by being told, "You don't have anything to offer your child." The Child Welfare League of America had an Indian Adoption Project which focused on placing Indian children. The League has since made a public apology for the insensitive and damaging affects the project added to the near destruction of Indian families.

I find it ironic that these agencies looked at the concentration camp conditions of the reservations **created** by the United States government, and instead of saying, "how can we help improve their quality of life?" they concluded that children, the only thing we had left to secure our future, needed to be taken from their families. Quality of life is not solely determined by money and possessions. Quality of life is family, sense of belonging. How many biographies have we read people say "we were poor, but we had each other." As Indian people we denied the security of our family. Our communities are still recovering from the devastating affects of this era.

Today even though there has been some improvement and understanding I still see too many parental rights terminated, far too many children in foster care. Sadly misguided social workers still believe it is "in the best interest of the child" to place Indian children outside of their culture. And while the Indian Child Welfare Act is a federal policy we still have to be vigilant to ensure that tribes maintain jurisdiction over their children.

There are counties who have specialized ICWA (Indian Child Welfare Act) units staffed with ICWA attorneys, ICWA judges, trained ICWA social workers. They learn the ICWA policy and understand that the purpose of ICWA is to strengthen the Indian family using the extended family system. On the other hand we also have counties whose workers ignore the ICWA policy and even actively work against reunification of Indian children. I know because I hear the stories from social workers who witness blatant violations of the ICWA policy and don't know how they can bring justice to the families they try to represent. I also hear the stories from mothers, fathers, grandparents, and other family members. Stories of how extended families were not notified that a relative needed placement.

What is the solution? I believe we need to put our hearts and minds together to strengthen families. We need to find ways to keep **families intact during crisis**. And most importantly states must recognize that the Indian Child Welfare Act is a **federal policy** and work with the tribes, following their lead in matters affecting child welfare.

There are meetings happening right now through out this country, minds are coming together trying to bring a solution to help families in crisis. They spend many creative hours over the topics of, "safety and permanency." Meanwhile, at the same time an adult adoptee/fostered individual who was raised in a 'permanent home' is struggling to make his way back to his beginning, finding his people, searching for that sense of belonging. Are we looking in the right direction? The essence of who we are begins in the womb. How are we trying to honor that undeniable truth and ensure wherever we place that child that he will be able to answer these questions. Who am I? Where do I come from?

As I have traveled and listened to stories on all sides of this issue one comment stays with me. "When you take a child from a family you are taking them from their grandparents." Right now as you read this a grandmother is praying for the return of her grandchild.

Generation after generation we are coming home.

Mitakuye Oyasin,
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