

The heartbeat of Native America



Highland Views

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Columnist

We're told that North Carolina has the largest number of Native Americans of any state east of the Mississippi — one estimate says there are 100,000. Of the eight tribes recognized here, the Eastern Band of Cherokee is the only one officially acknowledged as a sovereign nation by the federal government.

As Lakota holy man Black Elk said, there are many hoops (tribal circles with central fires) within the one big hoop of the earth. Many of these hoops are still green and growing.

Robert appeared at our chaplaincy door one afternoon. His long, dark hair and bronzed complexion gave away his native blood. From the Yurok tribe in Northern California, Robert told me how he and his brother used to communicate with loud whistling across "the rez." You wouldn't want him to demonstrate that whistle in a closed space.

For an annual interfaith service, I asked Robert if he would carry an elk-hide drum made by a relative in Montana. Robert walked into the church beating the drum steady and slow. Along with several Native American friends, he chanted to "center us in the space." It felt like the history of Anglo-Native conflict was coming full circle there, with Native voices and drumming "creating sanctuary" in the center of the dominant religion.

Other Native women and men found their way into our welcome center. Talented guitarists, painters and poets came through and their presence was appreciated.

A few weeks following that service, Robert was found floating in the canal

— a homicide victim. We led a memorial attended by many of his street friends as well as a pastor, priest and rabbi who remembered his drumming chant. The same drum was heard in that circle of memory.

I always will remember how Robert would call me "Crispy" in a loud greeting as he came in the door or met me on the street. A kind-hearted man with a good sense of humor, stories to tell and a very loud whistle.

Born in Seattle, a city named for Chief Sealth of the Suquamish, and raised in a county named for the Snohomish, I never felt far from the "first peoples" of the Northwest. Through the years, as I visited the lands of the Skagit, Swinomish, Snoqualmie, Stillaguamish and other indigenous tribes, I had a disturbing awareness that my ancestors were complicit in the near-extinction of the original inhabitants of my own "native land."

We say "First Nations" for good reason. Washington State has 29 recognized tribes and we're told there may have been up to 500 nations across the continent before the United States was formed. These nations were nearly wiped out, along with the buffalo, bear and other original inhabitants, decimated by the obsessive scramble to "tame the frontier" and claim "God's country."

The word "savage" means untamed, uncivilized, wild. It comes from the Latin word "silvaticus" derived from "silva" or woods, forest. A savage is a person of the forest (like a "pagan" is a person of the country and a "heathen" a person of the heath or heather). Anything savage can seem a threat to anything disconnected from wild nature.

A savage person belongs to a "primitive" society. I've always thought that should be honored as "prime," "first," original — aboriginal. But we fear that wildness because our ways (including

our religions) are not the ways of the wilderness.

Reading Vine Deloria and Dee Brown while in seminary, I was even more troubled by the tragic history, especially the story of Wounded Knee. Deloria's theological work, "God is Red," made much of the other theology I was reading seem weak and irrelevant.

Not long ago I read "The Heart of Everything that Is," a book that describes the powerful story of Sioux Chief Red Cloud and the resistance he led against the encroachment of gold-hunters and land-seekers in the 1860s. Red Cloud and his coalition of tribal groups were the protectors of more than 700,000 square miles of land stretching from Canada to Kansas, from Montana to Minnesota. This territory "accounted for one-fifth of what would one day become the contiguous United States."

Political and military leaders were determined to force Red Cloud to give up the land for Western expansion. If their "treaties" wouldn't work, they would capture or kill him. He ended up leading "the only war [America] would ever lose to an Indian army." It's quite a tale.

Looking back at the broken treaties and disastrous policies toward Native Nations, we would do well to keep in mind the worldview we have systematically attempted to silence: Everything is connected in a web of sacred relations.

Where does that drumming heart, or whistle, still sound?

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