



American Friends Service Committee

To Friends Everywhere: an Epistle from the American Friends Service Committee

“People can be transformed by being open and human. We believe that people have a need to be heard, but how they are heard really matters – if they take the risk of telling their story, it needs to make a difference.” – Denise Altvater

On March 1 and 2 more than 100 of us gathered at Friends Center in Philadelphia for the AFSC Corporation Meeting. For two days, Quakers and AFSC staff worshipped together, engaged in business, and learned ways to work in partnership for peace and justice. A strong spirit of mutual respect and common cause drew us together as Friends and staff spoke about how to be effective allies and explored actions that individual Friends, meetings, and churches might be led to take in working alongside AFSC.

On Friday we spent the evening exploring trauma healing and reconciliation. Denise Altvater, a member of the Passamaquoddy tribe of the Wabankai, who has worked for AFSC for 18 years told the story of her work in Maine with Wabanki and state child care workers to establish a truth and reconciliation commission—the first between a sovereign tribal nation and a U.S. state, and the first in which victims and perpetrators have proceeded in unity. On February 12, it was seated in Hermon, Maine. Preceding it was a day of reflection and prayer for the telling of the hard stories of children who had been taken from their homes, from their people, from their ways, and placed into foster homes with white families.

The foster care system was a tactic to eradicate the culture of the few Wabanaki who had survived physical genocide. The intention was, as Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania said, “to kill the Indian, but save the man.”

Many of the children are now adults and still suffer from the trauma of being taken. Denise says, “Across the board, however you were taken, in a real good way or a real bad way, whether you were taken from a good home or a bad home, whether you were placed in a good or bad foster home, the people taken didn’t feel like they knew where they belonged. The trauma that had the deepest impact was the trauma of being taken. It was a real strong and real life-long traumatic event.”

Denise is clear that the harm done was part of the system: “During the boarding school era, the foster care era, child welfare workers were doing their jobs and they thought they were doing the right thing. It’s not an issue of them being good or bad, right or wrong.”

The focus of the truth and reconciliation process will be the healing of the Wabanaki through the telling and receiving of their stories, the healing of the child care workers, and changes in policy and practice.

Child welfare workers and tribal members have worked together on developing the declaration of intent; they were mistrustful at first, but when they told each other stories about who they are as people, their hearts opened to one another, and they have moved together to make the commission a reality.

As the tender, difficult stories are told and really heard, the healing can begin, the reclamation of the birthright of all people: to one's own culture, to one's own heart, to a sense of belonging.

Denise says, "No amount of money could make up for what happened to me." For her, it's all about feeling joy again, reclaiming that birthright, which has been elusive since the trauma of being taken from her home and the trauma of the abuse she suffered at the hands of her foster parents.

Moving from harm to healing is a focus of AFSC's work all over the world. In 13 countries and 38 U.S. cities, AFSC works from the understanding that peace begins with healing from the trauma of war, violence, and other forms of harm. The interruption of cycles of violence through healing lays the foundation for peace. Our work, drawn from Quaker faith and testimonies, arises from the understanding that people have the answers they need within and listening undergirds all transformation. At its best, our work reveals the power of love.

We appreciate our deepening connection to Quaker monthly meetings, churches, yearly meetings, and Friends everywhere. Last year we launched an AFSC-Quaker meeting/church liaison program to work with Quaker congregations for peace and justice. The program has been well received and we hope that many more meetings and churches will join with us in the coming year. If you are interested, email friends@afsc.org.

Please hold us in your prayers, challenge us, and engage with us. None of this work can happen without communities reaching out in love to help make peace possible.

In Peace,

Shan Cretin

General Secretary

Arlene Kelly

Clerk, the Board of AFSC