

Homecoming: Healing The Elder's Tears

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“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again.” — Maya Angelou

Healing the Heart's Hurts

The human heart is the most vulnerable part of our being, yet it is this vulnerability that in large part makes us human. Each human heart has carried within it the pain of sorrow, disappointment and betrayal while continuously yearning for healing.

Personal and historic hurts own a sense

of timelessness—they do not simply dissipate with the passing of time. The heart's hurts need treatment, care, sincerity, and patient acts of love to properly heal. Without healing, a hurt can fester and cause irreparable damage to the person inflicted with the wound.

To Avenge or to Heal?

A common reaction to being hurt is to strike back to revenge a wrong, or to even the score. Americans familiar with history know of the bloody feud between two Appalachian families, the Hatfield's and McCoy's. After an initial fight, these families chose revenge as a path of redress, a choice that resulted in violence, death and ruin lasting for generations. We have the freedom to choose how we respond to injustice and that response is critical in shaping the future.

The voice of wisdom warns us away from the path of vengeance and points to a less traveled path. This less-traveled path is difficult but it can lead to forgiveness, reconciliation, cooperation and, ultimately, love. The life of Jesus Christ profoundly demonstrates the less-traveled path, and it serves humanity well as a model for healing our hearts.

Healing the Past

When we look at history, we can see that both good and evil have been a part of each nation's history. The injustices that are inevitably part of every nation's history need to be in some way resolved. The way a nation and its people respond to past injustices can serve either to redress or magnify such injustices. If those hurts are resolved, it opens a path to a deeper level of trust, cooperation and shared prosperity.

All of us living today are inheritors of the fruits of the past, both good and bad. Technology, systems of laws, and scientific and spiritual knowledge are in large part inherited from those who came before us. However, we also have inherited from the past a karmic debt—a debt based on the things that were done with selfish motivation, things that harmed innocent people. We are constantly seeing the result of these debts reflected in the ways we relate as people. Racial, ethnic and cultural antagonisms rooted in the past call for reconciliation in the present or they will remain as a threat to our future well-being.

For those living in the United States, it is important to realize the long trail of tears that our Native American forebears have walked. Here, the karmic debt that is a result of injustices rendered has yet to be fully paid. Absorbing those tears of sorrow is part of the healing process of this nation. To be a healer of the heart requires a willingness of people to sacrifice for the sake of the aggrieved, i.e., such healing requires sacrificial love.

Service, an essential element in the process of healing and reconciliation, is integral to the Religious Youth Service (RYS). The RYS draws together young men and women from all religions and cultures to serve those in need, and especially those who are suffering. Often during RYS projects, an environment conducive to healing and reconciliation is created.

Choosing the Native Americans First

The path to peace is a rough road that requires personal investment as well as people willing to pioneer pathways for harmonization. Dr. Sun Myung Moon founded the Religious Youth Service and its parent organization, the Universal Peace Federation, as an integral step in moving humanity forward along a

pathway of peace and reconciliation. There is a beauty in seeing former enemies come together in the service of those in need. For nearly three decades, the RYS has been a catalyst in bringing together young adults from nations, religions and cultures that have had an adversarial relationship. Turning former enemies into friends is an essential step in generating an environment for lasting peace.

People tend to come together more substantially when they share a common purpose. Efforts to communicate and work cooperatively can focus on taking care of the shared objective. When that objective has universal appeal, such as helping children, needy families or suffering communities, it becomes especially significant. The RYS places young adults in situations where they are pushed to break through barriers of tradition, racial prejudice and historic grievances. In working together for a common cause, former antagonisms are oftentimes replaced by a warmth of concern and friendship.

With an awareness of both the historic and current situation of Native Americans, RYS Director Gary Young decided that RYS' first project in the USA would be to serve the Native American community. The Native American Alcoholic Association (NAAA) in Oakland, California became the project host and they invited RYS to work closely with their staff in a unique endeavor designed to help Native Americans in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Working Together as Cousins

A 12-nation team of RYS volunteers was selected from its alumni base, i.e., those who had already served on projects in other parts of the world. This religious and culturally diverse team included Jains, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, a young Christian minister from Louisiana, a South African Jew, two Buddhist monks, a female Buddhist scholar from Thailand and an NGO leader from Nepal. The youngest participant was Hari Vamsa, a young, blond-haired American girl who was a devotee of Krishna. This amazing mixture of people came together quickly, undoubtedly because of already having had an RYS experience of living, working, eating, talking and sharing together in service.

It was important to us as newcomers to understand as much as we could about the background and situations of the resident community members. The NAAA center used the 12-Steps approach developed by Alcoholics Anonymous as part of the healing process for residents. Many Native Americans had unique dilemmas and problems that originated in connection with their often-tragic history. Uprooted from their culture and looked down on by large parts of society, individuals often felt adrift, without an anchor. Part of the NAAA approach to healing included ways in which those afflicted could positively reconnect to their Native American heritage. The community initiated various educational approaches to help revive the spirit of its residents through restoring their native pride.



Project leaders at the center hoped that they could rebuild step-by-step the pride of the patients. Low esteem is often a problem with alcoholics, but this problem is magnified for the urban Native American population who often feel out-of-sync with their surroundings and incapable of fitting into the larger culture. The NAAA staff plan had us work on building a traditional Native American sweat lodge as a way to provide medical, spiritual and psychological support. Sweats are good for the cleansing process in the treatment of alcoholism and various diseases, and a sweat lodge would serve to reconnect the residents to a part of the rich Native American tradition. Our efforts

might in some way provide medical, spiritual and psychological support for the residents.

Many of our volunteers were from Asia, having come from Nepal, Thailand, Japan, Korea and India, and those at the center felt a sense of kinship with them. Most of the volunteers had no direct history with Native Americans and so at least there was no history of animosity that existed between their people. In a sense, the volunteers were viewed and treated as cousins—people who were part of the community's extended family. Residents quietly found in the relationships with the international volunteers a freedom that arises as trust grows. They were relationships built on a purity and mutual concern, and they were relationships that allowed a form of healing to take place.

Conversations were not the main form of communication; instead, the work was. We volunteers put our hearts and sweat into building the lodge. We wanted this lodge to be a way to show our care. Our efforts were met by those using the facility with more than equal sincerity, energy and skill. The old men, together with the younger men and women, found various ways to contribute to each step of the process. As our work neared its completion, we gathered around the lodge to offer some words of dedication and a closing prayer—a deeply moving, emotional experience for everyone present.

The Prayer of the Grandfather

This world is filled with a multitude of preachers, ministers, rabbis and imams, all praying at their respective places of worship every day of the year. My honest opinion, however, is that many of these tradition-bound prayers couldn't move a fly off the back of a beaver. I don't intend disrespect here, but it needs to be recognized that there are just too many rote prayers, prayers said out of obligation, prayers for show, and prayers for the wrong reasons. How often do you hear someone pray who moves you to shed tears through the power of that prayer? Maybe you've been fortunate to have that experience.

Authentic prayer goes beyond language, flowing beyond the realm of the literal to carry one into a dimension of imagination. A strong, deep prayer instantly penetrates your heart, liberating you from all that ails you and weighs on your soul. A good prayer does not need to be communicated in the language you speak or even in words you understand. Rather, a good prayer, a darn good prayer, a damn fine prayer will knock you down, lift you up and move you to a place that is accessible only to the hallowed few.

There was a rather old grandfather living at the work site who was not much of a talker. He joined us whenever he could and found various ways to contribute to the ongoing work. We really did not know what he was thinking or feeling about our presence at his home. He simply did not speak about the things that lay deep inside his heart. Soon, however, as in the first eruption of a volcano, we would discover what was hidden beneath his apparently calm exterior.



We were closing our work and thought it a good time to form a large circle and share face-to-face with each other about our experiences. Grandfather gathered with us in the circle when the sharing began. One volunteer excitedly shared how rich an experience he had working and talking with those from here and abroad. A local resident shared how the time together moved her and how the lodge would carry their memory in it. The sharing was emotionally reinforcing but it was the Grandfather who brought us into a greater and more profound sense of reality. Grandfather quietly asked if he might share a few words with all those gathered, and then the diminutive elder, worn with age, stepped forward and spoke.

“Your coming has meant much to us. We see and feel your care. You came from all different places and joined us ... (sob) we want to thank you! Please, I need to say some things, so I will pray a prayer in my native tongue.”

Grandfather prayed in a language none of us could understand. As tears welled up in his eyes and his faltering words, unrecognizable, arose from the depths of his heart, we listened in silence.

The sounds of his words wrapped themselves around us, seeming to weave patterns inside our bodies. Suddenly, his words dove into the depths of our own hearts, filling us with emotion. Together we stood transfixed in empathy. The words of Grandfather's staccato prayer were punctuated by a growing wave of sobs, sobbing no longer from a single source. It was like the first drop of rain before the clouds released the multitudes. Soon the entire group joined in the chorus of sobs. Our faces glistening with tears, together we felt that we were not afraid and that we were not alone—we were one.

We all knew that Grandfather's tears lamented a critically wounded history. But his tears could be embraced by our tears, all of us together discovering our reunion in God's tears. In that moment, we clearly felt that we stood as One Family in God's love.