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# Healing Historical Trauma Through Spiritual Activism

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Courtesy Sweetwater Nannauck/Idle No More Washington director Sweetwater Nannauck protests in 2014 at the National Mall against the proposed Gateway Pacific coal export terminal near the Lummi reservation.

 by **Frank Hopper** Jul 13, 2016 ...

Healing Historical Trauma Through Spiritual Activism.

When **Idle No More Washington** Director **Sweetwater Nannauck teaches** what historical trauma is, she tells a story about her father.





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“In the year I was helping him treat his cancer, he was telling me stories and one time he was talking about boarding school,” Nannauck shared in a recent interview with ICTMN. “He said he remembered how the hospital was right across the street from the boarding school, from Mt. Edgecumbe High School [in Sitka, Alaska] and he said he was probably in about ninth grade or something.”

“He said they took him out of his class and across the street to the hospital. He said they put him under and they cut a piece of bone out of his hip and put it on his hand. And you could see the scar there on his hand, too, on his wrist and his hand. It’s really jagged, like it wasn’t a nice clean cut. It was all... like they butchered him. And I said, ‘Dad, why did they do that?’ He said, ‘I don’t know. They never told me.’”

Years later, while helping co-author a University of Washington study about Native Healing, one particular doctor also working on the study evoked feelings of anger in her. Now she recognizes he was triggering her historical trauma, but back then she didn’t know what was going on.

“I do prayer and meditation everyday and I would just ask myself, ‘Where is this anger originating?’ And then I could see my father there in the hospital and they’re operating on him, experimenting on him. And I could feel his pain, what’s going on, you know, the anger that you couldn’t do anything, you’re helpless. I share this story because it shows how historical trauma carried onto me and I was reacting to it.”

The doctor she had to work with, a white researcher using Native culture to further his career, was too much like the nameless doctor who butchered her father’s hand when he was a boy. Her father’s original trauma left an emotional wound in her spirit as strong as if the operation had been performed on her.

“What I found was doing the healing work involves forgiveness. And forgiving them and praying for them, who harmed my father. And then even today, with this doctor who was always doing and saying ignorant things, to forgive him. And then it was just, it was over. It was cleared out.”

As director of Idle No More Washington, Nannauck is a veteran of many campaigns to restore balance, seek justice, and promote healing within the Native community. In light of the Lummi tribe’s recent success, assisted by Idle No More, to block construction of the **Gateway Pacific Coal Export Terminal** near the Lummi’s traditional fishing waters, Nannauck reflected on her life as an activist.

“The work I do is different than conventional activism. I don’t even like to call it activism. It’s our way of life, our Tlingit Kusteeyee, our Tlingit way of being. I told you about my ancestors. I’m sure they didn’t consider themselves activists.”

Nannauck grew up in Kake, Alaska, living with her grandparents, Paul and Lottie Nannauck, Tlingit elders in the village, who spoke only Tlingit at home and ate mainly the traditional foods family members gave them as tokens of respect.





“My grandfather told us stories every day,” she recalls. She learned the history and stories of her clan from him and regularly attended cultural events and Native gatherings with her grandmother.



Her love for them made their pain hers, and their pain had roots going back centuries, to the papal bull ‘Dum Diversas’ of 1452 that laid the groundwork for the European oppression of indigenous people all over the world. Nannauck believes this pain travels across generations and



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“We need to heal ourselves, too. So I look at activism in more of a holistic way. Healing ourselves also brings healing for the Earth, healing for our ancestors, and for future generations.”

She notes, due to colonization, the Earth itself is a victim of trauma, and the healing of the Earth is really just an extension of healing our own colonially-wounded spirits.

“I find with healing, that’s where we need to start, healing that historical trauma. It’s like a backlog of pain and trauma that a lot of times we’re not aware of today. And for any kind of healing work, that’s the number one place to start before working on a current issue.”

This is different from the more familiar form of activism, which is oppositional and based on fear.

“What I see today in non-Native activism, a lot of their work comes from a place of their mind or ego, which is based on fear. They have to fight to get something. And what I see with a lot of Natives doing this work, it comes from a place of our spirit and our heart, which actually brings about a larger change.”

One key difference between conventional activism and what Nannauck calls the “spiritual activism” of Native people is the use of ceremony and prayer.

“I see that all across Turtle Island, like in the KXL pipeline protests. A few years ago at the White House they came there, the tribes, and the people brought their teepees and their horses and they were doing ceremonies there. It’s totally different than doing a blockade to get your photo in the paper.”

Nannauck believes these traditional methods of prayer, self-examination, and ceremony are vital to decolonizing activism and healing our spirits. In addition to organizing Idle No More events, she teaches free workshops for people to recognize historical trauma and how to heal it, both in ourselves and Mother Earth.

Through her love for her father, Nannauck has transformed the trauma of his boarding school experience into a powerful medicine that teaches what historical trauma is and helps new generations of Native people free themselves from the often invisible yoke of colonization.





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