

# A Brief History of an Apology

Here are questions. How is it possible to engage in a process of healing for the evils of history? Who has the right to ask forgiveness for historical crimes? Who will be chosen to represent the perpetrators? Who is qualified to bring a spirit of contrition that is commensurate with the gravity of the occasion? And by whom will this person or delegation be appointed?

I have in mind, specifically, the centuries of violence committed against Native American peoples by the United States.

Of whom should forgiveness be asked? Would the request be tendered at official ceremonies, or in private, person by person by person? Who will represent the survivors of the victims and the violated, and how will these be chosen? On the point of reparations, how will historical trauma be quantified? What is the algorithm of loss, and how is loss to be tallied? In land? In memory? In boarding school rosters, on prison rolls? Along the Powder River, or the Washita? At Acoma? Near Sand Creek, in the Great Swamp, at Zia?

Other questions. What about the relocation and assimilation policies of the federal government that persisted into the 1970s, and led to incalculable destruction of culture and life? Or the poisoning of tribal land and water, which continues to this hour? The full effects of generations of uranium mining cannot be assessed, as cleanups remain unfinished and cancer rates continue to rise.

Who will determine the amount of restitution—will there be restitution?—or the protocols of apology? And if forgiveness is refused, what then?

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?



[Bartosz Brzezinski/Flickr](#)

\*

In 1990, the one hundredth anniversary of the massacre at Wounded Knee in South Dakota, members of the United States Congress drafted this expression of official regret.

*HCON 386 IH*

*101st CONGRESS*

*2d Session*

*CON. RES. 386*

*To acknowledge the 100th anniversary of the tragedy at Wounded Knee Creek, State of South Dakota, December 29, 1890, wherein soldiers of the United States Army 7th Cavalry killed and wounded approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot's band of the Minneconjou Sioux ...*

It is unclear why Congress felt compelled to “acknowledge” a well-documented event. The statement confers no added legitimacy on historical truth, but only raises questions about the legislature’s prior understanding.

*Whereas, in order to promote racial harmony and cultural understanding, the Governor of the State of South Dakota has declared that 1990 is a Year of Reconciliation ...*

Reconciliation is not unilaterally “declared” but, to fit the definition of the word, must be jointly and freely entered into (con, with) by more than one party.

*Whereas the Sioux people who are descendants of the victims and survivors of the Wounded Knee Massacre have been striving to reconcile and, in a culturally appropriate manner, to bring to an end their 100 years of grieving for the tragedy of December 29, 1890...*

Here, the word “reconcile” has no object, which confuses the matter. Grammatically, the statement implies that the Sioux have been trying, since 1890, to make peace among themselves.

*Whereas it is proper and timely for the Congress of the United States of America to acknowledge, on the occasion of the impending one hundredth anniversary of the event, the historic significance of the Massacre at Wounded Knee Creek, to express its deep regret to the Sioux people and in particular to the descendants of the victims and survivors for this terrible tragedy;*

The writer prefers ‘regret’ over ‘apology’. It is uncertain to what extent the writer or writers debated the distinction. Regret is sorrow for some past action or failure, but it contains neither an implicit admission of personal responsibility for that action or failure, nor a commitment to right a wrong. An apology assumes prior agreement, by all sides, on the terms of the issue at hand, but such an agreement has been neither demonstrated nor even mentioned.

Regret is not apology. It is as if I say, "I am enamored" to a loved one, instead of "I love you." The former sentiment is self-centered, literally – not to say imprecise, and touched with timidity. Regret, like a hedge, is commonly a measure taken with an eye to the preservation of one's self-interest. An apology, on the other hand, is an implicit and total disavowal of all self-interest. Its sincerity demands the courage of vulnerability. Apology cannot be faked, at least not for long; the slightest false note rings like a cracked bell. Human beings are highly attuned to dissimulation. Insincerity, whether in tone or word, is something most people are fluent in.

At this point, the resolution once more, unnecessarily so it seems, "acknowledges" the event, expresses regret yet again, and commits one further obfuscation by identifying the crimes at Wounded Knee as an "armed conflict."

*Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the House of Representatives (the Senate concurring), That– (1) the Congress, on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Wounded Knee Massacre of December 29, 1890, hereby acknowledges the historical significance of this event as the last armed conflict of the Indian wars period resulting in the tragic death and injury of approximately 350-375 Indian men, women, and children of Chief Big Foot's band of Minneconjou Sioux and hereby expresses its deep regret on behalf of the United States to the descendants of the victims and survivors and their respective tribal communities*

But the word "conflict" denotes a fight or a battle, which this was not. The resolution did not make provision for reparations to descendants of the victims.

\*

Eighteen years later, the United States government tried

again.

Joint Resolution 14 was introduced on April 30, 2009, during the 1<sup>st</sup> Session of the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, and was easy to overlook, for it appears, oddly, two-thirds of the way through the 67-page [Defense Appropriations Act of 2010](#). This resolution was intended to “acknowledge a long history of official depredations and ill-conceived policies by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes.” Though it does officially “offer an apology to all Native Peoples on behalf of the United States,” there seems to have been no mechanism for Native peoples to officially accept or reject the resolution.

*IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES*

*April 30, 2009*

*Whereas the ancestors of today's Native Peoples inhabited the land of the present-day United States since time immemorial and for thousands of years before the arrival of people of European descent;*

As with many such documents, the antique and ungrammatical “whereas” is again in use, in an effort to confer a degree of authority on the pronouncement.

*Whereas for millennia, Native Peoples have honored, protected, and stewarded this land we cherish;*

*Whereas Native Peoples are spiritual people with a deep and abiding belief in the*

*Creator, and for millennia Native Peoples have maintained a powerful spiritual connection to this land, as evidenced by their customs and legends;*

Here, the histories of five hundred separate nations and discrete cultures, spanning twenty millennia, vanish in an undifferentiated haze of condescension. Then the reader

arrives at 'real' history:

*Whereas the arrival of Europeans in North America opened a new chapter in the history of Native Peoples;*

*Whereas while establishment of permanent European settlements in North*

*America did stir conflict with nearby Indian tribes ...*

The writer – perhaps a young attorney with a couple rules from Freshman Composition class still fresh in his mind – acknowledges the legitimacy of the opposing side, with an emphatic “did” that *does* reveal the speaker’s fair-mindedness (because demonstrating objectivity enhances a writer’s authority). This brief concession accomplished, the writer reverts, within the same sentence fragment, to his thesis:

*... peaceful and mutually beneficial interactions also took place;*

*Whereas the foundational English settlements in Jamestown, Virginia, and Plymouth, Massachusetts, owed their survival in large measure to the compassion and aid of Native Peoples in the vicinities of the settlements;*

*Whereas in the infancy of the United States, the founders of the Republic expressed their desire for a just relationship with the Indian tribes, as evidenced by the Northwest Ordinance enacted by Congress in 1787, which begins with the phrase, “The utmost good faith shall always be observed toward the Indians”;*

The quotation here is from Article Three of the 1787 Northwest Ordinance. Known as the “Good Faith Clause,” the passage concludes with these words: “their [the Indians] lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights, and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars

authorized by Congress.” As events were soon to prove, “just and lawful” wars were by no means difficult to conjure. Good faith notwithstanding, the 1787 Ordinance established provisions for carving states from the Upper Mississippi and Great Lakes regions, and a legislative procedure for admitting those states into the union. The expansion of the nation’s boundaries, not Indian relations, was the primary focus of the document.

Native peoples are mentioned only once more in the Ordinance, in Section 8, which grants the governor of each future state the power to further divide his territory, as he sees fit: “and he shall proceed from time to time as circumstances may require, to lay out the parts of the district in which the Indian titles shall have been extinguished, into counties and townships, subject, however, to such alterations as may thereafter be made by the legislature.”

The wishes of the land’s first and present inhabitants concerning these matters were not solicited in the drafting of the document, nor were they reflected in the final product, nor were its provisions ever acknowledged by the tribes. At any rate, the issue of land ownership was decisively resolved by the American victory at Fallen Timbers in 1794, the attendant destruction of Shawnee and Miami fields and towns, and the subsequent forced removal of Indians from the lands in question.

In his selection of a single anodyne phrase to support his claim, the author of the 2009 Resolution commits the fallacy of suppressing evidence, cherry-picking from a document intended to set the legal groundwork for the expulsion of the region’s first inhabitants.

No matter. By alluding to the “Northwest Ordinance,” the young attorney has made a logical appeal and provided concrete details to support his claim, which is the first rule in college essay writing. The irrelevance of this ordinance to



the events at Wounded Knee went unnoticed, apparently, by the committee. He may have safely assumed that few people would bother to check.

*Whereas Indian tribes provided great assistance to the fledgling Republic as it strengthened and grew, including invaluable help to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their epic journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Coast;*

*Whereas Native Peoples and non-Native settlers engaged in numerous armed conflicts in which unfortunately, both took innocent lives, including those of women and children;*

The second assertion is misleading. The phrases “engaged in armed conflict” and “both took innocent lives” imply an equivalence of power, a condition that ceased to obtain as the nineteenth century wore on and the United States doubled in size. By 1890, the year of the Wounded Knee Massacre, according to estimates, fewer than a quarter million indigenous people remained alive within the present borders of this country, while the US population exceeded 60 million.

By the time of President Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act of 1830, the eastern tribes could not mount any lasting resistance to American expansion. Prior to 1830, it was possible for confederacies of tribes (notably under Pontiac and Tecumseh) to face the westering Americans on roughly equal military terms, and even at times to prevail in battle. The First Seminole War (1816-19), and the decisive victories by the Ohio Valley tribes over Harmar’s army (1790) and St. Clair’s army (1791) attest to this. But by 1830, hopes of effective resistance had faded. The victories of Red Cloud and Sitting Bull, and the defeats of Fetterman and Custer, all lay in the latter half of the century, but these events could only postpone the inevitable. The wagon trains and railroads and mining outfits would not be stopped for long.



By the time the Apache and the Nez Perce were making their final stands, in the latter half of the century, American strategy had settled into a grimly effective process of eradication, dispersal, removal, internment, and forced assimilation, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands by exposure and disease. Accurate mortality figures are not known. Genocide may not have been the explicit or official goal, but it was the effective result, of a century of US policy.

*Whereas the Federal Government violated many of the treaties ratified by Congress and other diplomatic agreements with Indian tribes...*

*Whereas Indian tribes are resilient and determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their unique cultural identities;*

*Whereas the National Museum of the American Indian was established within the Smithsonian Institution as a living memorial to Native Peoples and their traditions; and*

Now, because his pretenses are beginning to sound like excuses (a museum?), and because the attorney must fill the rhetorical hole with something, he invokes the only phrase from the Declaration of Independence that he can recall from high school ...

*Whereas Native Peoples are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among those are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness:*

... in an weirdly improper context, before proceeding to recapitulate the main points (English 101: "How to Write an Effective Conclusion") of his Resolution:

*Now, therefore, be it Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,*

*SECTION 1. RESOLUTION OF APOLOGY TO NATIVE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES.*

*(a) Acknowledgment And Apology—The United States, acting through Congress—*

*(1) recognizes the special legal and political relationship Indian tribes have with the United States and the solemn covenant with the land we share;*

*(2) commends and honors Native Peoples for the thousands of years that they have stewarded and protected this land;*

*(3) recognizes that there have been years of official depredations, ill-conceived policies, and the breaking of covenants by the Federal Government regarding Indian tribes;*

*(4) apologizes on behalf of the people of the United States to all Native Peoples for the many instances of violence, maltreatment, and neglect inflicted on Native Peoples by citizens of the United States;*

Finally, we arrive at the true purpose of this Resolution, which, it turns out, is not to express contrition, but to abjure responsibility and to preempt future claims for reparations:

*(b) Disclaimer.—Nothing in this Joint Resolution—*

*(1) authorizes or supports any claim against the United States; or*

*(2) serves as a settlement of any claim against the United States.*

The apology “was never announced, publicized or read publicly by either the White House or the 111th Congress,” observed Mark Charles, spokesperson of Navajo Nation, who wanted to highlight the “inappropriateness of the context and delivery

of their apology.” In view of the document’s dull-witted insolence, Charles’ response is restrained. It would be difficult to find a more shameful mess of inanities than S. J. Res 14. Its mock-sonorous patronization is appalling. The arrogant tone serves only as a cheap mask for the writer’s laziness and ignorance. It is an embarrassment to any thoughtful citizen.

\*

Who will decide how, or whether, to begin?

It was at this time, on November 7, 2019, as our list of tough questions lengthened, that an article appeared, with all the punctuality of the universe, on the Reuters news wire.

EAGLE BUTTE, S.D. (Reuters) – For the last 50 years, Bradley Upton has prayed for forgiveness as he has carried the burden of one of the most horrific events in U.S. history against Native Americans, one that was perpetrated by James Forsyth, his great-great-grandfather.

This week Upton, 67, finally got an opportunity to express his contrition and formally apologize for the atrocities carried out by Forsyth to the direct descendants of the victims at their home on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota. ...

During an event on Wednesday on the reservation, Emanuel Red Bear, a teacher and spiritual advisor, told descendants that they deserve Upton’s apology.

“Only one man had a conscience enough to come here to ask for forgiveness for what his great grandpa did,” he said. “There needs to be more.”

Upton’s journey to forgiveness began when his great uncle sent him photographs of the carnage when he was 16 years old.

"I knew immediately that it was wrong," he said. "I felt a deep sadness and shame."

Two years later, Upton became a student of a Buddhist mediation master.

"I prayed for the next 50 years for forgiveness and healing for all of the people involved, but particularly because my ancestors caused this massacre, I felt incredible heaviness," he said ...

The event was reported by news outlets as far away as Taiwan. Not long after his apology, National Public Radio interviewed Dena Waloke, a descendant of Ghost Horse, a Lakota killed at Wounded Knee. "I think our kids have to know," Waloke said, "our grandchildren, that it was a massacre but still cannot be going on with anger because it happened, you know? We need to forgive and heal from all that. That way, you know, this nation, the whites and the Lakota, we can all be together, have a better world for our grandchildren. That's what we think about is our grandchild, not us." I do not know how widely Waloke's sentiment is shared.

\*

The Book of Exodus speaks about inherited guilt. The Commandments of the twentieth chapter are found chiseled on plinths and erected in town squares all across the United States. Often, these are engraved on concrete slabs formed into the shape of tablets, like the ones Charlton Heston carried in the movie. The words are usually printed in a faux-Gothic script (whereas antiquity sheds a sort of legitimacy on even the meanest pronouncement). If the Reformed Christian numbering system is followed on these public displays, you will see, for the Second Commandment, some version of this: *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.*

The remainder of the commandment is usually left out. Here it is in its entirety.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

*(New International Version, 20.4-6)*

To a modern sensibility, there is something distasteful about punishing the children for the sins of the parents. But we see that the effects of evil do persist, passed down from parent to child, as a sense of shame, or worse. This shame may be adequately buried – even for a lifetime, even from oneself – or it may mutate, and manifest as some new form of malice or self-abuse.

Evil is viral, and those possessed of a fragile or warped sense of identity are most susceptible. It pollutes across space and down generations, infecting oppressor and oppressed alike, even unto the third and fourth generations. Some, like Upton – by some alchemy of grace and introspection – manage to heal themselves, transmuting an inherited evil into a good.

This conception of guilt serves as a reverse image of the Seventh Generation principle espoused by many Native American cultures, which holds that every decision I make today should be determined by its impact on my descendants, down to the seventh generation. To my mind, these two ideas represent two sides of one coin. Both proceed from an understanding that the past determines the future.

Journalist Ernestine Chasing Hawk writes the story of Upton's apology for Native Sun News. Unlike the reporters of the Reuters article, Chasing Hawk – knowing the pathology of evil – is careful to detail her subjects' lines of descent.

Bradley C. Upton and his two sisters are fifth generation descendants of Forsyth and fourth generation descendants of Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon. Forsyth was the commanding officer of the U.S. 7th Cavalry Regiment and Bacon served as a lieutenant under his command during the massacre at Chankpé Ópi Wakpála.

“We have observed and experienced vividly in our family histories both past and present, the very dark shadow of the massacre and its karmic effect,” Upton said.

Upton said for years he and his family members have been praying in both the Buddhist and Christian faiths asking for healing, not only for the Lakota Nation but for his families “karmic debt” of commanding the Wounded Knee Massacre.

Upton, a professional musician and music teacher who resides in Longmont, Colorado, said he and his family have struggled with this “dark shadow” for more than a century.

Like a secret, or like a story the children must not overhear, the evil of the past infects the air I breathe; it is diffuse and ever-present, as elemental to modern American life as electromagnetic radiation. Evil demoralizes. It overshadows the life of a nation just as abuse overshadows the life of a family, or an individual. Left untreated, it makes a person anxious and unwell, judgmental and self-destructive, querulous and suspicious, and leads to spiritual death. Bradley Upton tells the reporters from Reuters of his belief “that the impact of the massacre can be seen throughout his family tree, which has been plagued by alcoholism, abuse and betrayal.” A case history in trauma, endlessly replicable.



[Northwestern Photo Company/Flickr](#)

\*

The story of Bradley Upton's apology begins, not at Wounded Knee, but at Blue Water Creek, near the Platte River in present-day Nebraska. There, in 1855, during a punitive expedition against the Sioux, 600 US soldiers (including elements of the 2<sup>nd</sup> US Dragoons, forerunners of the 2<sup>nd</sup> US Cavalry Regiment, which begot the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, a unit in which I served for two years, 1989-1991) under General William Harney attacked an encampment of 250 Brulé Lakota, killing eighty-six women, children, and men and capturing seventy more. Harney Peak, in the Black Hills, a range sacred to Lakota, was named for the commander.

In 2016, after years of protest and petitioning, the US Board of Geographic Names re-designated Harney Peak as Black Elk Peak. At the renaming ceremony, where tribal members gathered to commemorate the return of the Wakinyan Oyate (the Thunder Beings) to the mountain, one of the speakers was a man named



Paul Stover Soderman, a [seventh-generation descendant of General Harney](#). Chasing Hawk covered this event as well for Native Sun News. Her story appeared on March 28, 2019, under the headline, "Ceremony welcomes Thunder Beings back home."

"I am a direct descendant of General William Selby Harney," Soderman said, "who was the general who commanded the army that committed an act of genocide at ... Blue Water Creek and attacked the Little Thunder village. He was also the third signer of the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty," Soderman shared.

The 1868 Treaty set aside lands for the Lakota, including the Black Hills, but contained many onerous conditions inimical to Lakota sovereignty and traditional practices and beliefs. Following George Custer's illegitimate expedition to the region in 1874, and the gold rush that began later that same year, the treaty was, for all intents and purposes, broken.

"I found out about 15 years ago who my ancestor was and we started to take action toward anything we could do to honor that 1868 Treaty when it comes to the Black Hills and Paha Sapa [the Lakota name for the Black Hills]," he said. "One thing that we thought would be good was to make an attempt to take his name off this mountain."

Bradley Upton of Colorado learned of the Black Hills ceremony soon afterward. In the November article, Chasing Hawk writes:

While visiting with his neighbor ... [Upton] happened to mention the healing his family must do.

"She told me about the ceremony that Mr. Brave Heart had performed, a ceremony to not only rename Harney Peak to Black Elk Peak but the ceremony of forgiveness of the carnage that Harney caused at the slaughter at Blue Water Creek," Upton shared.

Upton was brought to tears and said he immediately set out to contact Soderman and Brave Heart.

"A couple of days later I was fortunate to meet Paul and his wife Kathy who shared the power of Mr. Brave Heart's ceremony with me and invited me to their sweat lodge as both new and old family," he said.

Upton contacted Brave Heart.

The Lakota elder comforted him by telling him he was carrying a dark shadow that was not his to carry.

"He couldn't stop crying and he told me he was a descendant of Major General James Forsyth and Brigadier General John Mosby Bacon," Brave Heart said and told him, "You came to a place to heal."

\*

The English historian Arnold Toynbee (d. 1975) made an observation about these matters, and I don't know whether his contention is valid, but it is often in my mind these days. He identifies the destruction of Carthage (146 BCE) at the end of the Third Punic War as a sort of moral inflection point in the history of Rome. The war with Hannibal had ended and Carthage was no longer a threat, but Rome, on flimsy pretexts, sent an expedition to besiege the city. Roman forces destroyed Carthage and scorched the surrounding lands. Some say the soldiers cast salt into the fields, and trod the salt under with their horses' hooves, to sterilize the soil and ensure that the place might never again be inhabited.

Rome had debased itself, the historian argued. It had betrayed long-honored principles of justice and of clemency toward defeated foes. Thereafter, the empire drifted through centuries of dictatorship, foreign wars, oppression, and the extortion of conquered peoples. Cicero would describe Rome's destruction of two great cities – Carthage and Corinth – as "gouging the eyes" from the Mediterranean. As Roman imperial power apparently waxed in magnificence, Roman crimes in fact polluted the heart of the social organism. Cultural and moral

decay set in and social life gradually degenerated until Constantine's soldiers, with crosses sewn onto their tunics, put the empire out of its misery at Milvian Bridge (312 CE).

The Athenian destruction of Melos (416 BCE) may illustrate the same point. Strategically unwarranted, the siege ended with the execution of the island's adult men and the enslavement of its women and children, and coincided with the beginning of the decline of democracy at Athens.

A nation rooted in atrocity will bear noxious fruit. Unless it be transplanted in good soil, how can it do otherwise than yield corruption?

\*

Basil Brave Heart, teacher and healer and combat veteran, lives on the Pine Ridge Oglala Lakota Reservation. In a *Rapid City Journal* article (December 27, 2019), he was asked whether forgiveness is possible, 129 years after Wounded Knee. "Forgiveness has its challenges," he said, "but it is possible."

Many Lakota relatives are suffering from the trauma of these actions and wondering – how can we forgive when we are still hurting and angry?

Recently, historic apologies for the Wounded Knee Massacre have been shared with the communities of Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge. These apologies have taken the lid off of something painful, like doing an emotional surgery. The displacement, abandonment, and lies that denigrated our way of life are coming to the surface. Anger, anxiety and depression all arise as part of the process of forgiveness. These feelings come from the trauma that has not been worked through yet...

Forgiveness is one of the most profound and difficult things we can do. It takes prayer and commitment. Going

through this process does not mean that the original difficulty goes away. As a Catholic boarding school survivor and veteran with PTSD, I know this to be true...

Back in 1938, my grandma taught me about the power of forgiveness. Her teachings have been with me throughout my life. The meetings and ceremonies of apology and forgiveness that happened in the last year are a spark to ignite a long journey of intergenerational healing. By connecting with our breath and asking for spiritual assistance, all people can return to our original human blueprint of compassion, love, and equanimity. Our challenging work of forgiveness will create wholeness for ourselves and the future generations. Forgiveness is the password to our divinity.

\*

The crisis is one of values. It can be met ... only by a radical shift in belief, a profound realignment of thought and spirit.

– Elizabeth Ammons, *Sea Change* (2010)

There is a movement afoot these days. Good-hearted people, singly at first but in ever-increasing numbers, are setting about a great work. We are in the midst of one of those sea changes of sentiment, I believe, that sweep through history at times, quickening human consciousness. These changes arrive like the rogue winds that wander desert places, descending with a swiftness to rattle the walls, and leaving in their wake a landscape trembling and bright. They are watershed events, dividing everything that has come before from everything that will come after.

One such change must have occurred in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when Moses, Buddha, Socrates, and Confucius lived and taught. Two millennia later, the telescope and the microscope inaugurated

another great shift in the feeling for things. Henry Power, in his *Experimental Philosophy* of 1664, proclaimed that

This is the Age in which all mens Souls are in a kind of fermentation ... Me-thinks, I see how all the old Rubbish must be thrown away, and the rotten Buildings be overthrown, and carried away with so powerful an Inundation. These are the days that must lay a new Foundation of a more magnificent Philosophy.

Now I hear similar words spoken today, calls from every side for destruction of old modes and habits.

The change this time, unlike previous transitions, does not concern humanity in relation to physics, or to god, or to the cosmos: it has to do with humanity in relation to itself. I see proof of this in the altered trajectories of individual lives. Soderman and Upton are only two examples among many, individuals committing acts of healing, in ways unthinkable only a short time ago. Their paths to the Pine Ridge reservation were long apprenticeships for a single agonizing encounter with themselves, an encounter in which they were met—not with hostility and mistrust—but with compassion and forgiveness, almost as if they had been expected all along.

The place of this encounter—the “furnace of the truth,” as bishop and theologian Rowan Williams calls it—is where one comes face to face with oneself, often the last person in the world we care to see. To “come clean” is a common idiom, one that nicely figures the refining power of the truth’s furnace. It is painful, bitter, but the burden that awaits me on the other side is lighter, much lighter than the one I’ve carried till now. A good deal of religious truth turns on this point. Freed of that burden, I am better able, mentally and physically, to be a faithful helpmate to my brother and sister. Until that occurs, I am only a burden to myself and to the world.

Until there is a reckoning for historical evil, this nation cannot hope to steer clear of the crash pattern of exploitation of human life and of nature, too. "Here," Linda Hogan writes in *Dwellings* (1995), "is a lesson: what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing."

That the work of peace and justice is hopeless and lonely, all of history bears witness. "It sounds silly to say *work without hope*, but it can be done; it's only a form of insurance; it doesn't mean *work hopelessly*," wrote the English war poet Keith Douglas, only a year before he was killed in Normandy at age twenty-four. They are difficult words, and they take on added weight every time I think of them.

\*

The better part of my childhood was spent reading histories of the Eastern Woodland nations: the ill-starred uprisings of Pontiac and Tecumseh, the doomed alliances with the British and the French; canoe flotillas convening for the trading days at Michilimackinac, the seasonal dispersal to the hunting grounds. I was riveted by the tough freedoms of their existence, the harsh tuition of war and weather, and a talent for woodcraft and watchfulness that are mostly lost to this world. The harvest celebrations, too, and the somber winters of scarcity, and a relentless sense of humor that survived all of it. To wander the stacks looking for books on Indians was happiness. Shawnee and Erie, Wyandot and Delaware: I revered their stories like living things, because they are living things.

By the time I was old enough to walk alone to the library, the people in the books had been gone from that part of Ohio for nearly two hundred years. The trees and animals that they had known remained, however, though much diminished in kind and number. Nevertheless, the woods around the neighborhood—somewhat ragged and littered—were the only connection I had to the first inhabitants. I spent a lot of

time there. I remember, when I was nine or ten, setting off on a walk one early Sunday morning. I kept on for several miles, through unfamiliar neighborhoods, until I had passed well out of the suburbs, and came to a little valley where a thin black stream flowed through icy grass.

I sat at the edge of the woods and kept watch, fearful of trespassing, but all was calm in that beautiful place whose existence I had never suspected. In the black branches of a tree, a squirrel's tail flickered like an oil lamp flame. A bird perched on a broken stalk and sang, and in the winter cold I could see the tiny puffs of breath from its beak—a puff for each string of notes—backlit by the powder blue sky. Indians were on my mind that morning, as they were most days, and I imagined a band of women and men and children, Shawnees or Miamis, filing out of the treeline and down toward the stream. No doubt, they knew the place well, I thought.

Expectation faded to a nameless absence that spread across the little valley. Forty years on, I recall the stream and the sky clearly.

I could not have described on that morning the sense of something that had come and gone. And though days and months might pass in unawareness of it, still to this day that feeling has not left me. I never returned to that place.

\*

It's funny how a difficult truth has the power to single you out. Others have noticed this. "What you look hard at," Gerard Manley Hopkins observed, "seems to look hard at you"—and has a way, I would add, of making a person feel alone. Not that you cannot forget it, but that it will not forget you. In my mind, something is watching the boy who is sitting on a hillside, waiting for people who will never return. But it was only me after all.

There are other times when I've stood looking at myself, it



seemed, through someone else's eyes. One time, when I was very ill. Once, when I was beaten by several people on a street at night. Again, when I watched the desert skyline blaze with oil well fires. And again, as I sat at a table, alone in an efficiency in a midwestern city, writing a letter of apology to someone I had wronged.

Why was it, I wonder, on these occasions that I drifted out of myself, a stranger looking on with, it seems, a kind of pity?

Illness, violence, forgiveness: these three. They have long memories.



Wounded Knee Massacre Burial Site/Wikimedia Commons