

The Erasure and Disappearance of Indigenous Women

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Abstract

In response to the latest statistics regarding the violence and disappearance of Indigenous women, the authors of this paper attempt to honor the often overlooked sacrifices they make for the physical and spiritual well-being of Indigenous peoples. The abstract statistics are manifested in the lives of two Indigenous women who mysteriously disappeared but left a lasting impression on one of the current authors. Specifically, he carries with him their lessons of tribal relational identity, true equality between the sexes, and the belief that love given selflessly never ever really disappears.

Keywords: disappearance of Indigenous women; statistics of violence of Indigenous women; physical and spiritual well-being of Indigenous women; tribal relational identity, gender equality

Introduction

There is no official national count for the number of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) in the United States (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2018). Data are just now coming regarding the scope for the problem of urban MMIWG. The Urban Indian Health Institute (UIHI) looked at cases across 71 cities and identified 506 “unique cases” of MMIWG (UIHI, 2018, p. 8). Of those 506, 280 (56%) were murder cases, 128 (25%) were missing persons cases, and 98 (19%) had an unknown status. On November 26, 2019, President Donald Trump’s signing of an executive order launched a task force named *Operation Lady Justice* (OLJ); the task force gets its name from a work of art created by a Choctaw artist DG Smalling (Germany-Wall, 2020, January). The Department of Justice found that there were 5,712 reports of missing Indigenous women in 2004 (Department of Justice, 2004). Among those 5,712 cases, only 116 were logged into the Department of Justice Database (Department of Justice, 2018).

As cited in Germany-Wall (2020), the Center for Disease Control reports that four out of every five Indigenous women have experienced violence in their lifetime (Germany-Wall, 2020). Murder is the third leading cause of death among Indigenous women. The CDC reports that 55.5% of Indigenous women have been victims of intimate partner violence and 66.5 % have experienced psychological aggression from intimate partners. Nearly half of Indigenous women polled (i.e. 48%) have reported being stalked and 56.1% have experienced sexual violence. The median age of MMIWG is 29 years old (UIHI, 2018).

Despite the fact that 71% of Indigenous women live in urban areas, there is little research on experiences of violence for urban Indigenous women and girls (Norris, Vines, & Hoeffel, 2012). The UIHI found that of the victims of sex trade, 39% had been sexually assaulted at the time of death (2018). Indigenous women are twice as likely to experience a rape/sexual assault compared to all other races in America (RAINN, 2019). The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN) writes that Indigenous women are at the greatest risk for sexual violence in the United States.

With the latest statistics regarding the violence against Indigenous women, it is crucial that men in general, including Indigenous men, begin to treat them with greater respect and to consider conspicuously disproportional visible sacrifices they make on a daily basis for all of us, including the invisible positive influences they provide in their modeling, guiding, nurturing, and the challenges they offer to us to become responsible, creative and loving human beings. Indigenous peoples have lived for centuries with the idea that we need each other, yet recognition of the contributions of Indigenous women to our well-being has too often not been honored. We believe that men in general often fail to acknowledge their utter dependency on, much less their appreciation of women.

Spirit Speaking Truth in Peyote Meeting

A couple of months ago at a Native American Church meeting (Stewart, 1998), I sat around a fire and a half-moon dug out hole within a teepee with seventeen other Indigenous people, waiting for peyote medicine (buttons that grow in clusters on a cacti plant that grows near the Rio Grande River) to ingest. I reflected about the work my women friends had done preparing the peyote for participants to swallow like cookie dough and drink as a tea.

At this meeting, no one expressed appreciation to them for this sacred work they had done. After the night's ceremony, the next morning, our eighty-five-year old Road Man (the leader of the ceremony) told the women to leave the teepee, fetch the traditional breakfast, and serve it to the ceremony's participants. One woman hesitated in departing from the teepee. The Road Man repeated his imperative. There was total silence. She said quietly, "I gladly share my life for my people." As she left, a few men chuckled. The Road Man whispered in a grave voice that revealed that he had heard the full meaning of what she said. "It is true. Our women have always sacrificed their lives freely for us." I went into a space for the entire night in which I considered sacrifices that women make for us, and more particularly for what they have sacrificed for me. On the one hand, I considered that the disappearance of Indigenous women is increasing at an alarming rate, but I also reflected that Indigenous women are often unappreciated. They have been moving through this earthly space, sacrificing their lives for the rest of us with too little appreciation and historians have largely erased them from their books.

So much has already been written about how Indigenous people are more likely to think about their individual identities in terms of their relations to family, clan, tribe, ethnic group, and the natural environment (Deloria, 1988/1969), but I would add that if one wants to see relational identity in action, it is Indigenous women who enact it most profoundly, with their various selfless love offerings and on-going, backbreaking caretaking that extends into old age (Cross, Day, & Farrell, 2011). But as much as these concrete sacrifices have contributed to our survival and happiness, Indigenous women's love and modeling have also had tremendous effects upon the characters of their children, lovers, and friends. It was during the peyote meeting that I was able to remember and visualize two Indigenous women friends in my life that had suddenly disappeared. I walked out of the peyote meeting wanting to make sure their contributions were not totally erased from history. Their relational awareness they demonstrated is what it means to be a human being. I have become more and more aware, in a visceral way, that I am to a large extent, made up of the love offerings they gifted me.

Before jumping into the following stories about these two women, it is only right to acknowledge two other women who co-wrote this paper with me, challenged me, rephrased many sentences, and did the research on the topic of violence against Indigenous women. One is a Lakota/Cree woman in our Master's Professional Counseling program, Stephanie Wescoup, and the other is Gul Nahar, an Asian American, originally from Bangladesh who recently attained her Ph.D. in Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum with an emphasis on English Education, and is in the process of looking for an assistant professor position at a University in the U.S. They are in a long line of women who have always helped me to define and re-define my identity. I have been blessed to have lived much of my life on an "Indian rez" and other predominately Indigenous areas, as well as having worked in several Indigenous work environments where I have had constant interaction with Indigenous women. My experiences with them have been dramatic, calming, and expediently rousing and humbling, causing me to adapt, re-stylize, re-think, mindfully feel, suffer, and undergo multiple alterations to become who I am. In the following reflections, I will consider two Indigenous women who suddenly disappeared, but whose influence continues.

Barefoot woman. I remember when I first observed her, I pre-maturely characterized her. "She is kind of unkept and aesthetically insane, or possibly heroically lost." Her short hair was always a mess. She was wounded in the heart, and this woundedness colored everything she experienced. Yet her simplest acts always moved me emotionally. Though she was spontaneous, her behaviors seemed to have far-reaching intentions. Strangely, her spontaneity was never written on her face. She had a desultory air that perplexed me. Her reserved wildness pulled me in and caused me to be initially devoted to her unconditionally. She was most striking when she danced at Sun Dance, nothing jerky, but elegant. The first time I ever saw her, she danced with no moccasins, on a the ground that was scalding, and there were still a few stickers that we missed during the clean-up. Of course, I was willing to sacrifice my feet and give her my moccasins. At nightly meals at Sundance, she told me stories about the life she had led, but not everything, as I would eventually learn.

Enticingly detached. After that Sundance but still early in our relationship, one evening, when we had been drinking awhile and were both intoxicated, she convinced me to drive us to a bar to dance at one o'clock in the morning. I did not drink once we arrived and spent the next hour sitting at a lonely table watching her dance with one cowboy and cowgirl after another, never with the same person more than once. Driving home she said she was worldly and bisexual and knew she was a "charmer."

She was a free spirit, indifferent toward propriety, which seemed to make her irresistibly enticing to most people. Hers was an emotional intelligence and non-attachment that would only frustrate any man or woman who tried to tame, capture, or connect with her in a sustainable, intimate relationship. She would always better anyone in emotional combat because she was able to effectively alter the argument into an emotional-intuitive exchange at which she had no peer. The depth of her emotional-intuitive rationales ultimately proved to be convincing. No matter what the content of an argument initially was, she quickly revealed to her opponent that their argument was subjective; that is, motivated by self-interest, resentments, and desires. Her insights and interpretations, though intuitive, which I at this stage in my life felt were generally unreliable, made sense to me because of the power with which she was able to articulate them.

Impressed and convinced of legitimacy of her outlooks, I tried to open myself up more to trusting my emotions and intuitions. I worried that I too could become as discontent as she, if I gave myself over too much to the emotional-intuitive dimensions of perception. I often thought of her as an emotional-intuitive genius, but I felt like she may be opening herself up to destructive irrational torments.

Emotional honesty. When she learned I was not interested in a romantic relationship with her, she seemed to relax, and we were able to engage in a more trusting relationship. Our knowledge that each of us was committed to each other in friendship opened the way to difficult and honest conversations that enhanced our growth.

She told me that the only kind of wisdom she respected was based on “ragged naked emotional honesty.” She even exposed my constantly curious outlook as intellectual guardedness against emotional depth. For the first time in my life, I remember crying in front of another person when she persisted in telling me that I lacked depth because I did not feel anything when talking about my relationships and personal interests. Once I accepted her assessment of me, I came back with curious questions, and she responded that I was using questions to turn the table on her. She said I was using my hero Fredrick Nietzsche’s will-to-power (Nietzsche, 1968) on her. She said that I knew she felt vulnerable in discussions because she was “uneducated,” and my questions were not only taking the discussion out of the emotional realm but also functioned as a dishonest validation of her vulnerable intellectual self-concept. Then she put me back in a space to work through my emotions.

In another interaction I told her that her intuitive awareness sometimes crossed the border into “paranoia.” She abruptly left the room only to come back to tell me that I had “cruelly” and “childishly” called her a name. I replied that I was sorry to have called her “paranoid.” But sometimes, I added, she made subtle judgmental interpretations about others, seemed to be justifying her desire to distance herself from others. I also noted that she often drank too much and put herself in dangerous situations following such distancing. She wanted time to think about my interpretations. I did not see her until the next summer at Sundance but stayed in contact with her by phone. I remember her making distinct resolutions to make positive changes in her life and I believe she did.

Transformation. Over that winter, she sought out a medicine man and his wife who doctored her regularly to help her deal with what she called “invisible torments.” She thought evil spirits haunted her and had driven her to seek out risky situations in her past. By the next Sundance, she no longer saw evil spirits nor experienced bouts with depression. Across the dance circle, I saw that she was still wearing my old moccasins. She pierced with a feather that year. At the end of the Sundance, she gave me a note telling me to drop by the restaurant where she worked.

When I arrived, she was sitting next to an Indigenous man. I introduced myself, and he said, “Hello, I am Murderer. That is my name.” I said, “Nice to meet you,” expecting him to say “aaay” (a way Indigenous people indicate we are joking). But he didn’t. He replied in words like the following. “When my sister here was raped by my cousin when she was 13, I went out drinking with him. We got drunk, and then I told him I knew what he did to my sister, and I was going to kill him. He begged for his life. He told me that his uncle, my father had raped him. I told him that it did not surprise me. Then, I pulled out my gun and killed him. I named myself “Murderer” because of what I did. I went to prison for twelve years. I did a lot of soul searching in prison. I do construction work now but also help young men to assume important roles in our tribe. Helping them has helped me. My sister wants your opinion about whether she might be ready to help at the women’s shelter.” I told them I could not answer that question, but I could ask some questions that might help her make that decision herself. She said, “He always asks questions.” In the end she decided she would offer her services at a local women’s shelter.

Barefoot woman may have found her final healing by becoming a “healer” when she worked at the shelter for women. She told me that she wanted to comfort and to help women to protect themselves from violence. She said that she decided “to look her rape experience in the eyes,” and work through the profound scars it had left on her. She no longer hated men in general, thanks to her brother and me and felt led spiritually to transform her negative horrifying

experiences into actions by helping others. She said, “I have realized that my constant thinking about pain I feel is a waste of the pain.”

Later that year, having not heard from her for a month, I received a phone call from her brother. He told me she had disappeared three weeks prior. The last anyone had seen her was when she left the restaurant where she worked. He said the weekend before her disappearance she seemed more content than ever before. She has not been heard from for almost 40 year. Nobody knows what happened to her. But her life still effects the living, including me.

I spent a year, waiting and hoping she would call me. I am still drawing from her encouragements about learning how to feel. She taught me that Beauty and grace are all tangled up in pain and violence. Hope comes when I can get to the point where I can, like Barefoot Woman, take a wider view of what is going on in this landscape we call life and to share my gifts with others.

Plains Indian woman. Not quite ten years later, I became friends with an Indigenous woman who would change my life and then disappear. After interacting with her a few times, only just gradually emerging from my socially conditioned sexism and elitism, I thought, “she is not beautiful in the stereotypical sense, but her character is resplendent, and, while not highly educated, she is intelligent.” She was 32 years old, the same age as I. She was a tall slender woman, commanding a kind of reverence upon first encounter. Her complexion was dark brown and hair was nearly black. She was mysterious to me, inside and out. A woman with stoic expressions, funny but never silly, yet she was always cheerful and graceful.

Plains Indian Woman lived with her nuclear family and mother on a “rez” dirt road far into the center of her reservation. I was teaching her daughter in the seventh grade, and she sent a note inviting me to dinner, which was the first time I met her and her family. I was to visit their home many times. Usually, whenever I entered through the door, she was in the kitchen cooking. Her white cowboy husband would be in the living room sitting with their younger daughter who was ten years old. Plains Indian Woman would usually say to me, “Come on in and get a snack. I have made fry bread.” For “meanness,” I would say, “I am not hungry.” She would say, “You know it is really rude to refuse food from an Indian. Get in here.” She loved being a wife and mother, cooking, making blankets, often knitting when we talked. I found I could relax with her. She knew her tribal language well and could explain many traditional principles and tell many tribal stories. She never talked quickly, but rather slowly with lots of long pauses. She was mostly introverted but could express her views in an articulate and passionate way when the time called for it. She was a private person, though close with her family and her few intimate friendships, which included ours. She danced at her reservations’ Pow Wows and was known by her tribal people as exceptional, though she never danced in competitions. Her dancing was austere yet paradoxically free and joyful. Her words, gestures and general well-being seeped into my soul from the time I met her until she disappeared.

The most personal and local utterance is the most universal. At first, I thought she had limited herself by focusing only on mundane family affairs and Indigenous issues, that she could have become a powerful leader in the larger world, potentially impacting all kinds of people. Early in our relationship, I remember thinking that her knowledge and wisdom was more like a craft than an art because it was unrefined by an awareness of the aesthetic theories of the Western canon. Yet, one day she had the audacity to tell me, “Your use of big words not only alienates many people you want to communicate with because they are haughty, they also take away a direct forceful way of getting at what you want to communicate.” I found myself ruminating about the challenge and then attempting to follow her advice.

She was authentic within her circumscribed existence, and I came to respect her, though I knew I could never have restricted myself in such a way. In fact, her restricted domestic life taught me vital lessons. I came to understand how one can look so deeply into their individual and tribal life that they can discover universal truths about all human beings and about all relationships. She lived and reflected deeply upon the life she led and the circumstances in which she lived. While I felt the need to go to Morocco, Paris, Stonehenge, and Buenos Aires, for her, the greatest adventures occurred at what she called “the local level.” She believed that working on family and local Indigenous issues and the way she made fry bread for her family tapped into universal truths. We began regular debates on equal standing about tribal, existential and political issues. I argued about the importance of expanding awareness through travel and exploration of diverse ideas. But the first time I saw her dance at the local pow wow I finally understood universal beauty and by observing how she listened to and taught her children I knew that I had witnessed universal love.

She taught me that it is in the depths of local, personal, and interpersonal experiences *Spirit* dwells and acts as a reservoir for all living things. She encouraged me to restrict my own range of consciousness in my writing in order to penetrate the depths of the topic I was considering. She told me that I was already adept at looking at larger contexts,

but then would add, “that’s good but be more focused.” Because of her suggestions I found myself exploring issues more deeply.

Unconditional acceptance. Similar interests cemented our relationship into a close friendship. She was an eloquent, confident, and sympathetic, never a contentious conversationalist. She developed her ideas thoroughly but knew when to detach from a topic with humor and relax the intensity. She spoke in an honest but affectionate way. For instance, once I told her that all our arguing had brought me closer to accepting her perspectives. But in response, she said, “I don’t want you to agree with what I say. Just let it affect you. We have respect for each other and that matters a lot more than agreeing with each other.” She encouraged me to think in Western as well as Indigenous ways. She said, “You are so White looking; you can be a bridge that I can’t because I am a dark Indian. Be proud of who you are.” She showed me unconditional acceptance. In fact, she never judged anyone but rather expressed a kind of profound emotional love and acceptance of everyone. She taught me how to engage with others in conversations, even in debates, in a tone that communicates unconditional acceptance. She said, “Don’t give up on people just because the don’t agree with you. Love them all.”

Fearlessness. She taught me more than soft virtues; she taught me fearlessness and courage. Here is an example. I had gone over to their house, and we were sitting in the living room. She showed me a beautiful shawl that had been given to her. It was green, with a black and yellow peyote water bird on it, with yellow fringe. She started making fry bread in the kitchen but had left the cooking with her kids for a moment. I went into the kitchen to help the kids, while she and her husband remained in the living room. Within four or five minutes of being in the kitchen, the stove blew up in flames. The fire was on the stove and floor. The kids ran from the room, and I was trying to get flower powder on the fire to put it out, but I gave up. I was breathing scalding hot, unbearable air and had fallen on the floor. When she and her husband came into the kitchen, I was crawling away coughing, telling them to back away. The husband held his hand in front of his face. Then out of nowhere, Plains Indian Woman came running in toward the flames with that Peyote shawl pulled wide. She literally fell across the flames on the floor and then the stove. The flames immediately went out. We were all coughing and acting dramatic, except her. I said, “Your shawl is ruined.” She said, “I loved it when I had it and it helped save my house. Came in handy didn’t it... aayy” and laughed.

I had been away from that “rez” two years when I heard she had simply disappeared while visiting a midwestern city at age 38. Our honest friendship lent itself to mutual spiritual development, and one that was devoid of clingy attachment. Possibly because we never really came to overtly expect anything from each other, we were able to offer each other great security and a fluid friendship. If she were kidnapped and possibly murdered by persons somewhere in a city just south of her reservation, I am confident she faced her dire situation fearlessly. She knew her kids would be cared for by her husband and extended family. I also believe she did not judge her attackers. She knew we are ‘spirit’, and the body is just a vehicle. She identified more with her spirit, my spirit, and her family’s spirits than our bodies. She had told me after the fire incident that nothing could really harm her. She was part of ‘*Tanka Shala*’ (Creator) and nothing and nobody could ever really destroy her. I still feel her influence and presence.

Discussion

At the heart of the living contributions of the above Indigenous women, was their willingness to give to others and to honor their Indigenous roots. In the context of our larger society’s valuation of individual achievement, name recognition and fame, it is ironic to foreground their lives in this paper. Just as Indigenous people lived for many centuries, making temporary encampments and then being careful not to leave any traces behind, I am certain that these Indigenous women would not have had the slightest interest in being given any more recognition for their lives than the appreciation of the persons they loved. Nonetheless, the descriptions above may serve as reminders to us that their unselfish love (as well as the millions of other Indigenous women) deserves a reciprocal response. Further, it is hoped that their lives can serve as models for us to follow.

Relational Identity

Possibly the greatest contribution that ‘*Indigenous spiritualities*’ have to offer the world can be found in the Lakota idea of ‘*Mitakuyeoyasin*,’ or “all my relations,” or as some interpret, “we are related deeper than blood” (Bad Hand, 2002). Foundational to this idea is that none of us exist in isolation; everything is inter-connected. My identity is largely the people I have opened myself up to. This does not mean that I have not guarded myself from negative characteristics, values, and influences from even of the people I have admired most. And though I have not always consciously seized upon their gifts; nonetheless, I realize that aspects of their personalities and ways of being have unobtrusively become a part of who I am. When I look back on my life, the persons who I believe to have influenced

me most are female. In the instances described above, I think that part of the reason I was able to grow with these Indigenous women to the extent that I did, was because we respected each other and demonstrated unconditional acceptance tempered with honest appraisals. I find it impossible to define myself apart from my relations with the women described above. This idea may seem rather obvious to many people, but I believe honesty demands that we acknowledge and consistently describe our individual identities in relational terms.

Equality in Relationships

Much of the narrative above concerns identity and power negotiations between each of the two women and myself in the context our hierarchically oppressive society. In order to gain some semblance of authentic connection required that I humble myself, in terms of the dominance provided to me by my sex and in terms of my narrow view of education. As I interacted with the women described in this paper, transformative experiences could not emerge until I learned on a visceral level what equality in relationships truly is.

Paradoxically, when I first began humble myself, I tried to make these women authorities in a variety of areas and have them guide me into greater awareness. But we realized that this was hurting our relationships. I learned that being connected to another person as a “student” for too long is ultimately limiting. If we intended to really grow as human beings our relationships had to be based on a foundation of equality. While there were areas of interest and psychological domains in which one or the other might illuminate the other, it was crucial to stay in the spiritual space of ultimate human equality. If I put myself, consciously or unconsciously, in a position of a superior-inferiority polarity, soul growth was stunted in both of us. We must move beyond asymmetry into symmetry and equality. When I assumed a subordinate student position, I continued to thwart our mutual development. Feelings of unworthiness are just as egoistic a pride because it denies the divinity with share with the Creator. Real growth is dependent on friendship based on equality which does not blossom between different sexes, genders and cultural groups without hard work by both parties.

I found that until I could be truly open, honest and trusting, my journey was uncertain and extraordinarily difficult. I had to work through many of my unresolved issues to approximate a mutual relationship based on equality. I was required to deal with my judgmental attitudes, control issues, and conscious and unconscious assumptions regarding power differentials. The women described above helped me to see how my ego was defended and how real honest exchanges were blocked. Once on the road to more genuine relationships with these women, I found that our more equal relationships provided a fast track to higher awareness.

In conclusion, this paper was written in loving memory the two Indigenous women described above who continue to live on in my life. It is also for all those Indigenous women who have been murdered and raped, and the millions who selflessly carried disproportionate burdens to sustain Indigenous people through many centuries.

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