

A GOOD TIME FOR THE TRUTH

RACE IN MINNESOTA

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 MINNESOTA
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY PRESS

also took what life threw their way and didn't complain—seemed to resonate with him. Mid-job, I noticed there was a sign on the wall stating that it was illegal for customers to be back there in the shop, an edict he'd apparently decided to ignore in my case. Even though he stepped in to help me replace and tighten the belts, he also decided to completely ignore the sign that said, "Shop Charge, \$45 hr.," because when I pulled out my checkbook to pay for the parts and asked why I shouldn't pay him at least enough to split the difference on time with him, he said, "Well . . . why? Done it yourself, din't ya?"

Minnesota Nice can be *really* nice. Interesting and complicated too.

Bridging the gulf between us is *hard*. It takes courage and effort. And the effort often results in an encounter that can be both unrewarding and unpleasant. But what alternative do we have? The demographic makeup of Minnesota, like the rest of the country, is changing rapidly and radically. By 2050, the majority of America's citizens will be comprised of groups who used to be called "minorities." The majority here in Minnesota is likely to remain white for some time, but populations of color, especially the Latino population, will see a dramatic increase. The Somali population of the state was already so large by the year 2000 that Islam quietly supplanted Judaism as the state's second most prominent religious faith.

As we move forward, we can lean on this: that although it tends to happen slowly and only with great, conscious effort, people and cultures *do* change in response to the changing realities and needs of their times. If we are to sort ourselves out and make good lives for ourselves in this ever-more-multicultural landscape, we've got to start by talking less and listening more. We can listen—really listen—to one another's stories and learn from them. Collectively, we can learn to tell a story that includes *all* our stories . . . fashion a mosaic-like group portrait from those stories that we all can agree truly does resemble *people like us*.



SEEDS FOR SEVEN GENERATIONS

Diane Wilson

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We cared for our corn in those days as we would care for a child; for we Indian people loved our gardens, just as a mother loves her children; and we thought that our growing corn liked to hear us sing, just as children like to hear their mother sing to them. . . . The singing was begun in the spring and continued until the corn was ripe.

—Buffalo Bird Woman, *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*

On a warm afternoon in mid-June, a small group of children moved slowly down the path between two long, raised garden beds. A few of the children were as young as eight years old; all of them were from Native families living in the Twin Cities. They were Ojibwe, Dakota, Lakota, HoChunk, Oneida, and Diné. Most of them had never gardened before, never held a corn seed in their small, damp hands. One young girl did not know that food bought at the store came from the vegetables harvested daily from the soil.

But on this summer afternoon, they were quiet in their anticipation of planting a Dakota corn seed that has rarely been grown, much less eaten, in the many years since the Dakota were removed from Minnesota after the 1862 U.S.–Dakota War. They

had already learned from an Arapaho elder, Ernie Whiteman, that the garden was on Dakota homeland, land that has not known these seeds for many generations. Now they listened closely as Ernie showed them how to plant six seeds in each mounded hill and pat the earth firmly over each seed.

While the children planted, elder Hope Flanagan sang a traditional song in her clear, strong voice. As always, the music woke something in us, elevating the simple act of planting seeds to a connection with the sacred, a moment of remembering what it means to be Native. Even the birds seemed to listen, circling overhead as they drew closer to the fields.

In the quiet that followed Hope's song, one of the youngest girls said, this is how we used to dance for our corn. She slowly moved each foot in an intuitive dance that reconnected the spirits of these children with their ancestors. As she danced to the blood memory of an ancient tradition, the hearts of the adults—all of whom carry the scars of historical trauma—were uplifted. Estella LaPointe, a beautiful Lakota woman, would later say that helping children plant this corn was healing for her.

As I watched, I thought of my mother, who was enrolled at the Rosebud Reservation and grew up in a boarding school on the Pine Ridge Reservation. After her family fled the Depression in South Dakota to look for work in Minneapolis, she married a young man of Swedish descent and raised her children far removed from any Native community. My siblings and I attended predominantly white schools where we learned a version of history that could not explain my mother's silence about her past, why she and my aunts attended boarding schools, or why she received an annual check for allotment land in South Dakota that was so small she and my aunts used to laugh about their inheritance. My father, on the other hand, recognized only that we were white, like him.

As an adult, I spent many years learning who my mother's family was, a process that forced me to discover a different history from the one I was taught in school. Our family story led

me to the dark truth about the genocide of Native people in this country and the earlier generations of children who were forced to attend boarding schools. My family's small role in this history had been shaped by government policies that ultimately threatened either assimilation or extermination. Finally, I understood my mother's silence. I was left with the question of what, if anything, I could do to transform the legacy of pain and loss that I had inherited.

This long journey brought me here, to this field, to these seeds. When a friend told me about Dream of Wild Health, a small garden where they were growing out old seeds that had come from tribes around the region, I immediately asked if I could volunteer. This was, perhaps, my own blood memory rising up, a call to remember a relationship with the earth, with plants and animals, that dates back to our earliest ancestors. The seeds hold that memory; they can help us recover who we are as Native people through the simple act of growing our own food once again. With each seed that we plant, we are reclaiming one of our richest cultural legacies: our traditional foods.

As it was with my family, I had to learn the story, or history, that could explain the heartbreaking rift between Native people and the land. Only then could I understand what Ernie once told us: "If you control the food, you can control the people." By reconnecting with our own stories, we know what was taken away, and the lessons we need to teach our children.

Long ago corn was a gift to the Dakota at a time when the medicine people were concerned about a shortage of food. They had heard that a Being living at the bottom of a lake could help the people survive. A young girl bravely swam toward the bottom where a woman dressed in white buckskin gave her a gift: four male corn seeds in one bowl and four female corn seeds in another. The Sacred Woman explained how to plant the seeds so that the Dakota people would always have plenty of food.

Afterward, they gave thanks to the Creator and held their first green corn dance. They named this lake Spirit Lake for the holy being who gave them the gift of corn.

Corn became one of the foods that the Dakota relied on as part of their seasonal food cycles. In June, the month when the strawberries were ripe, corn was planted on ground where there was a good growth of wild artichokes, indicating rich soil. While some corn was dried and saved as seed or as food in bark containers for the winter, women generally grew only enough corn to eat for a few weeks. In September, families moved to the lakes for harvesting wild rice, which once grew all around the Twin Cities area. When Louis Hennepin visited the Dakota living near Mille Lacs in 1680, he was fed wild rice seasoned with dried blueberries and smoked fish eggs, served on a bark platter.

Throughout the summer, women gathered wild foods, including berries, plums, nuts, *psincha* and *psinchincha*, roots growing at the bottom of shallow lakes that women harvested by feeling for them with their feet. They dug wild turnips or *tipsin* using sharp sticks, water-lily root, and the *mdo*, a potato-like root. In November, the deer-rutting moon, the Dakota hunted deer, followed by ice fishing in January and muskrat hunting in March, which was also maple sugar time. Throughout the year, food gathering activities were honored with prayers, songs, and ceremonies.

The Dakota also hunted bison, elk, and deer living in the tallgrass prairie, an immense area that included southern and western Minnesota. Described as a sea of grass, the prairie was formed over thousands of years through a fortuitous combination of glacial till, wind-dropped organic material, manure from grazing animals, aeration by prairie dogs, and an occasional fire. The result was a vast landscape with deep topsoil and hundreds of species of plants and animals. Yet none of them were as important to the physical and spiritual health of the Dakota as the bison. Lakota medicine man John Fire Lame Deer once said:

The buffalo gave us everything we needed. Without it we were nothing. Our tipis were made of his skin. His hide

was our bed, our blanket, our winter coat. It was our drum, throbbing through the night, alive, holy. Out of his skin we made our water bags. His flesh strengthened us, became flesh of our flesh. Not the smallest part of it was wasted. His stomach, a red-hot stone dropped into it, became our soup kettle. His horns were our spoons, the bones our knives, our women's awls and needles. Out of his sinews we made our bowstrings and thread. His ribs were fashioned into sleds for our children, his hoofs became rattles. His mighty skull, with the pipe leaning against it, was our sacred altar.

This spiritually based and ingenious use of every aspect of an animal or plant demonstrated deep gratitude and respect combined with a sophisticated understanding of the natural world. As Jack Weatherford tells us in his book *Indian Givers*, in the time before Columbus, indigenous tribes of the Americas developed three-fifths of the world's crops, including corn, potatoes, squash, and beans, gifts that today are seldom acknowledged. Traditional diets were based on locally grown, seasonal, whole foods, with no evidence of "lifestyle" diseases such as type 2 diabetes that are such overwhelming issues today. Over centuries of close relationship with the Plant Nation, Native people accumulated a vast knowledge of plant properties that became the basis for modern pharmacology. They also knew they needed to maintain balance and harmony between hunters, gatherers, and the environment in which they lived in a way that ensured their long-term survival.

In Dakota we say, *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which means "all my relations." We understand that all beings have a spirit and we are required, as good relatives, to treat all of our relations—including plants, animals, air, water, land—with respect. As Ella Deloria explained in *Speaking of Indians*, "The ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative." Acting as a good relative meant accepting many rules and responsibilities, from a sense of

restraint in harvesting only what was needed to offering hospitality and food to every visitor. Ella described the elders as saying, "Give food! Give food unstintingly! Let nothing be held in reserve for one alone. When all food is gone, then we shall honorably starve together. Let us still be Dakotas!"

When the Europeans arrived bearing iron kettles and hoes, guns, beads, and cloth, these gifts were welcomed as useful new tools. Native women married fur traders, creating kinship responsibilities as well as economic opportunities for both sides. In the early years these relationships were managed by assimilating traders into the tribe.

By the nineteenth century, however, an insatiable desire for land brought immense pressure and new changes to both the Dakota and the Minnesota landscape. Between 1830 and 1900, virtually all of the tallgrass prairie was plowed under by European settlers eager to establish homesteads and farms on this virgin, fertile soil. As this rich habitat was diminished, plants disappeared and the bison moved further west, greatly reducing the availability of traditional foods for the Dakota. The largest, most diverse ecosystem in the central United States was virtually destroyed within seventy years.

In its place came a new form of agriculture: monoculture. Early farmers began to shift from basic subsistence farming that included a variety of crops and livestock to growing vast fields of wheat as a cash crop. By 1890 Minnesota was the national leader in wheat production, aided by new developments in farm technology.

Surrendering to immense pressure to relinquish much of their land in the treaties of 1851 and 1857, the Dakota were placed on a small reservation alongside the Minnesota River where they struggled to survive on government-issued commodity goods and annuity payments. In 1862, families neared starvation while the agent refused to make treaty payments from a warehouse filled with food that belonged to them, and the tensions between the Dakota and settlers exploded in a six-week war. Afterward, treaties were abrogated and all reservation lands seized as the

Dakota were forcibly removed from the state to a harsh, make-shift reservation in Crow Creek, South Dakota. In the first few years, the Dakota and HoChunk—who were also removed despite not participating in the war—lost an estimated six hundred children to starvation and disease.

As Minnesota was building its reputation as the primary wheat producer in the nation, in 1878 the first federal boarding school was opened in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. With the support of both the federal government and churches, nearly five hundred new schools were created for the purpose of assimilating Native children by forbidding their languages and spirituality and forcing them to dress and act according to European values. Typically underfunded, the schools provided inadequate diets, and thousands of children suffered from malnutrition, disease, and even death.

By the 1930s and 1940s, many tribes had been relocated to reservations, essentially surrendering their traditional foods and medicines as they were forced to surrender their homelands. The vast knowledge of the natural world that had been accumulated over many generations was displaced as families turned to the federal government's commodity food program to survive. Traditional diets were replaced with high-starch, high-fat foods that further undermined the health of Native people, leading to escalating levels of diabetes and heart disease.

Despite pressure from the government, tribes were slow to adapt to the demand that they, too, begin to cultivate the land using European methods, a system that violated indigenous values of respect and reciprocity for all beings, including plants and animals. The clash between cultures that began in 1492 was as much about our drastically different food systems as it was about our differing values, languages, and spirituality. Throughout the government's multifaceted assimilation policies, controlling Native food systems has been a consistent, and deadly, theme.

By the turn of the twentieth century, decades of growing wheat as a monoculture crop had exhausted Minnesota's rich soil. Farmers diversified into horticulture, sheep, corn, and dairy

production and began to rotate crops to help sustain the health of the soil. After World War II, farmers focused on corn and soybean production, a shift that ultimately led to our current industrialized farm system of growing limited crops using intensive chemical fertilizers and pesticides and relying on genetically modified seeds. As recently as 150 years ago, the United States did not have a commercial seed industry. Today, companies like Monsanto control what has become the world's largest commercial seed industry, promoting a form of genetic Manifest Destiny throughout the world.

This modern-day agricultural system represents a profound cultural shift toward treating the earth, and the foods she provides, as commodities. If the land is a commodity, she can be sold; if our plants and animals are commodities, they can be grown in factories under conditions that emphasize profits rather than relationships. If our children are targeted as consumers, they can be manipulated to depend on foods that will shorten their life expectancy. Our children will be the first generation to live shorter lives than we will. How our communities eat and how our food is grown is intimately connected to the environmental issues we face. The food choices we make create the world we live in.

Despite the claims that an industrialized food system is needed in order to feed our rapidly expanding global population, in Minnesota, hunger has doubled over the past five years. Children account for 40 percent of Minnesota's hungry. A sixth of the world's population is now hungry, while diet-related diseases in this country are reaching epidemic levels that disproportionately affect low-income communities of color.

When the challenges we face seem overwhelming, I remember the words of Clifford Canku, a Dakota elder and spiritual leader from Sisseton. After a long conversation about historical trauma, he asked me to remind people that the past five hundred years is a short time in the history of Native people in this country. The Dakota have been present in this place, Mni Sota Makoce, for thousands of years, and it is our spirituality that has allowed us to survive. Tell them, he said, that's who Dakota people are,

not the statistics you read in the paper. We are people who raise beloved children, who treat the earth as our mother, and who regard being a good relative to be of utmost importance to the community. Tell them that our ancestors suffered so that we could be happy.

Once we see that the past five hundred years is a break in our connection to this rich cultural legacy, then the question becomes how we begin to reclaim it. A Dakota elder, Glenn Wasicuna, explained that we do this healing work by returning to the traditional values that every tribe carries. In this way, we become the people that our ancestors were; we honor the sacrifices they made and the suffering they experienced.

We also do this healing work by returning to the traditional foods and medicines cherished by our ancestors and by relearning what it means to have a deep, loving relationship with the earth. For some of us, that means remembering that gardening is ceremony, as Dakota scholar and gardener Teresa Peterson has said, and reconnecting with the old seeds that were once planted and saved by generations of Native families. For many years, these seeds have been hidden away in drawers and jars, waiting to be grown once again as food for the people.

In 2000, Potawatomi elder and seed keeper Cora Baker wrote a letter to Dream of Wild Health—at that time a garden in Farmington—expressing her dying wish that Native people might once again begin to garden. She included her lifetime collection of seeds, many of them gifts from people passing by her garden: Mandan corn from North Dakota, Hopi black turtle beans, Lakota squash. A few came with stories of sorrow, like the Cherokee Trail of Tears corn. Others, like the traditional tobacco thought to be eight hundred years old, inspired awe. Without exception, these seeds had survived because they were nurtured by the people; and the people survived because they nurtured the seeds.

When I first heard about Cora's gift, something in my heart

immediately responded. As a gardener, I understood that her seeds were a fragile living record of the past, a tangible inheritance from our ancestors who knew that future generations, our generation, would need them for food. Our ancestors protected these seeds at all cost, knowing that they, like our children, are the future.

We began growing out Cora's seeds, a few varieties each season. In the beginning it was enough to simply help plant and grow any variety, regardless of its origin. And yet, as a Dakota woman and grandmother, I felt the lack of any Dakota corn in Cora Baker's gift, and I did not know of any Dakota corn being grown near the Twin Cities. Instead, we were surrounded by a vast sea of commercial, GMO corn.

In 2013, a gift of two varieties of Dakota corn from Teresa Peterson and the Science Museum of Minnesota allowed us the rich, healing experience of growing this corn on her homeland. Dakota families at Upper and Lower Sioux have protected these seeds by growing them in their own gardens and sharing them with other families. At Dream of Wild Health, this corn has now been planted by children of many different tribes. We are learning to work together across tribal borders as we reclaim one of the most important aspects of indigenous culture: our food. If today we plant Dakota corn, then tomorrow we plant seeds from other tribes, thereby ensuring the survival of all our precious foods.

Through my work at Dream of Wild Health, I have found a way to transform my family's experience into a renewed relationship with our community, the land, and these seeds. When seeds are planted with prayers and songs, tended with love, harvested with care, and shared with our community, then our food once again becomes the core of our culture. When we know where our food comes from, we can choose not to be victimized by an industrialized food system. Slowly, over many seasons, I have learned how the world view that rationalized the genocide of Native people is threatening the health and well-being of the earth, our food, and every living being.

As we plant the Dakota corn with children who are learning

about their traditional foods, we are rebuilding an indigenous relationship with the land. We are recognizing that one of the casualties in this long siege of assimilation has been our relationship with the earth that emphasized how we are all bound together in a web of relationships right down to the smallest bacteria. Many of us have forgotten that learning about plants and animals was a lifelong commitment, where the real test of living was to establish a balanced and harmonious relationship with nature. Why? Because our survival depends upon it.

Today many of our children are growing up in paved cities, afraid of bees, unable to recognize plants, and often completely ignorant of where their food comes from. And yet they will inherit this world; they will become its stewards. We are responsible for teaching our children that plants and animals are co-creating this world with us, and the lessons they offer can help us reverse the harms that humans have inflicted. As we say in Dakota, *Mitakuye Oyasin. We Are All Related.*

When we care for our Mother, when we raise healthy children, when we garden, returning to these old ways will help us transcend the trauma of the past, as well as that of the present, and provide healing for our ancestors. When the blood memory of our children remembers the green corn dance, that is the rhythm of the heart calling us home.