

A Sacred Whole—“When I Am You, You Are Me, We Are the People”

Course: Indigenous Perspectives on the Sacred

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Désirée Akhavan, a Bahá’í living in Brooklyn, New York, USA, was one of a large class of learners who enrolled in the Wilmette Institute’s 2018 iteration of Indigenous Perspectives on the Sacred. Her enthusiasm for the course is infectious and her determination to keep on learning is inspiring:

“I am so excited to continue my learning and find ways to apply it. I already have some ideas about areas of research I’d like to pursue (once I am able to make some more time). For now, I wanted to share a poem that I wrote, inspired by some of the readings we did during the course.”

Below is Désirée’s powerful poem that captures the evils of the blatant disregard for the rights and dignity of fellow human beings and the toll such disregard has on the oppressor. The solution? Read on. And do not miss the postscript after the poem where Désirée talks about the door that the poem opened.—THE EDITORS

We the people

We invaded your land and staked a claim that
all men were created equal, and
then stripped you of your manhood and
raised the flag of freedom above your cage.

And then we took your children,
Sent them to school where we silenced them,
And like lines off a chalkboard
We erased their collective memories.

Like cattle we raised them and
Branded the Indian out of them, and
Quenching their spirits for God’s sake,
our schoolhouses became slaughterhouses.

And then we herded you onto reservations,
Declared your minds lost when you resisted
And forced you into asylums,
Ignorant of our own imprisoned minds.

We gained new territory but
lost a piece of ourselves, and
with every step forward in the Long Walk
we fell backward.

Blindly we shackled our souls in the name of freedom and
liberty for “all,” and
Buried our humanity in the mounds of those
we named savage.

And yet we persisted. We came with drills
And water cannons and blasted you
When you stood to protect the waters,
And soon we will have nothing to drink but your tears.

If only we could look into the waters and see
Beyond ourselves, see your reflection, that
I am you, you are me,
We are the people,

That a beating to your body severs my soul, and
When you are chained and bound, so is my spirit.
Your children forsaken are the children I have yet to birth,
And when you are kept in darkness, my future is bleak.

Each moment of pain inflicted
Sears its memory into my skin, never to be forgotten.
I cannot find my way back through the woods of despair—
Every day, I am trespassing.

Only the beat of your drum will
Steady the rhythm of my heart,
And only when you dance finally free,
My spirit will rise,

For I am you, you are me, we are the people.
We call you “red,” but cut me open and
See the color I bleed—
You simply wear your heart on your face.

—DÉSIRÉE AKHAVAN

Postscript. After the course on Indigenous Perspectives on the Sacred ended, Désirée shared this:

“The Wilmette course was timely as I had begun exploring ways of engaging with indigenous peoples in urban centers like New York City. I attended an Iroquois beadwork class taught by a Mohawk woman and stayed connected with her through social media. I reached out to her to share my final project, the poem, and to get her feedback. We set up a time to meet and spent an hour and half in meaningful conversation (mostly me asking questions and listening). As she shared her thoughts on what action is needed, and how we could move beyond discourse to effect actual change, our conversation resulted in a plan for collaboration that will enable me to be of further service to the indigenous population in New York.”