

Coming Home

Dustina Gill

Dustina Gill, Sitomni Sa Yapi Win, Paints Red around Her, hails from the Wahpekute band of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate of South Dakota. A lifelong advocate of native youth, Dustina established Nis'to Incorporated, a native youth nonprofit organization. *Nis'to* is a Dakota word that means concern for others outside of ourselves.

They said there was nothing good here for our children to return home to.
So they kept them.

When they returned, broken, bruised, and ashamed of their beautiful brownness, we wiped their faces with sage water and combed their hair with tea while we sang songs of ceremony, generations old.

We held cups of warm sage tea to their lips as their little brothers and sisters burned sage and smudged them, until their souls began to awaken.

Their grandpas stacked wood around the rocks and set them ablaze until the wood turned into ashes. The hot red rocks glowed brightly, waiting for the prayers to descend.

We sat outside the inipi by the fire and told stories of how our Kuns'ipi and Unkannapi ran back home in the darkness from the orphanages and boarding schools. Following the stars and their hearts.

We told them stories of how many did not make it back home and were forever lost.

We told them how we turn that pain into prayer
For the future generations to not know that fear.

And to not know that fear as parents for our own children, as they sleep innocently.

We took them into inipi, and poured water on the rocks and sang songs of prayer as the steam and smoke from the cedar and sweetgrass filled the air with the scent and feeling of the comfort of a mother's womb.

They emerged, strong. Resilient, knowing the creator had heard their prayers and knowing they were not alone.

That they would never feel alone again.

That the creator was always only a prayer away.

Because when the government said,

“The only good Indian is a dead Indian”

And then, when it became too expensive to kill us they said,

“Kill the Indian, Save the Man”

They took our ceremonies, they cut our hair and they broke our families when they stole our children.

But

Our children found their way home, back to their ceremonies, back to their relatives. Back to something that others fought to keep them from for centuries.

And

We only grow stronger

Epilogue

It's referred to as the three As in our history of Native Americans. Annihilation, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian”; Assimilation, “Kill the Indian, save the man,” also known as the boarding school era; and Acculturation, when Congress passed the Indian Relocation Act, moving us off reservations in an attempt to not only assimilate us, but to terminate tribes from existence.

Each has a deep root of historical trauma that has become generational trauma. Each one taught the children that the worst thing to be was Indigenous.

The boarding school era did the most damage for our people. The children were taken on the spot and sent hundreds of miles away, and many were never seen again. Many that returned home had survived atrocities that were so traumatic.

Everything about us had been declared illegal: our ceremonies, our gatherings, and our way of life. Illegal up until 1978, when Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. While we still practiced our ways, we had to in secret. Not many people practiced the traditional ways.

The Dakota people (formerly known as the Sioux) call the sweat lodge *inipi*. It is used for prayer and purification. It resembles the womb of the mother and brings a spiritual healing.

The grandparents were cherished, grandmother is Kuns'i and grandfather is Unkanna. Their roles were and still are crucial to spiritual upbringing of the children.

We are only a couple generations away from the eras of the three As. There has been much healing from them, but also still much healing needed.

Many of our children are on what is called the "school-to-prison pipeline."

The Indian Relocation Act is still ongoing, and foster care has become the new boarding school. A majority of Native Americans in the system were raised in foster care. Tribes and relatives struggle to bring them home because once in the system, our children become easily lost in a world they do not understand. When they do, there is much healing to be done because of the damage that has taken place.

Focusing on the strengths, using our Dakota culture in our work has brought many opportunities to our youth and has helped strengthen their families.

The eras our people have survived broke down the societal system that was a part of raising our children.

While we cannot bring back that entire system, we are applying parts of it to our work.

I am part of what is called a "trickle effect" of the boarding school era. I am a survivor of trauma. We are told time and again, historical trauma is in our DNA, but so is the resilience and strength of our ancestors. My Kuns'i taught me to focus on the strengths. It is this concept that I used in establishing Nis'to Inc. and that I use in my work. Happy memories are a form of resilience; this is one of the main goals of every single activity, to bring about the opportunity to make happy memories. Happy memories become foundations of a person's spirit. When they are having a difficult time, they hold them up.

Drawing on memories of having depression or loneliness, they have something positive to draw on as well, and that gives them strength. With those memories comes a smile of remembrance, a feeling of positivity, and the reminder of the good things in their lives.

For example, we take kids to dig our traditional medicines. Knowing that they have the knowledge of those plants, their uses, and have visited spaces their ancestors also harvested gives them such a strong sense of identity and pride; it makes them resilient when they come across something negative in life. Racism, for example. Living on a reservation has its challenges in a society where there are people who are not kind to native people. Having such knowledge makes them strong in those situations.

I am Sitomni Sa Yapi Win, Paints Red around Her. I am Wahpekute and am enrolled in the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate and reside on the Lake Traverse Reservation in northeastern South Dakota.

We are the walking prayers of our ancestors. They survived so that we may live.