

Once You Were Children

Sandy White Hawk

Once you were children
Innocent with no thought that evil or harm existed
Your hearts were pure and trusting
You played without fear
Until they came and took you
Until..... that first day of school
When they took your clothes, your toys, and your hair, your name
No talking, no laughing, no friends
Only crying, thoughts of home, wondering when you get to leave
Then they took your innocence, dignity and trust
Then..... you became victims
Once you were children
Then you became victims
Victims who were at the mercy of those who only knew darkness and evil
Victims of evil and harm that words cannot describe
Some of you came home
Some of you wandered for years before you found your way home
Some are still wondering in pain, shame and confusion
Some never made it past the school yard gate
Left to lay in unmarked graves
Those who made it home.....
Their bodies carry the scars seen and unseen – spirits broken
Their hearts walled up – not able to trust – show or receive love
Lost in the swirl of alcohol and violence that repeated for generations in your families
and communities – only because that is all you knew
Carried these wounds and scars in shamed silence believing the lie that Indians are
less than human.
Then.....You spoke
Told the stories of those prison schools
You shared your pain – encouraged each other
You found sobriety and peace
You found friends and laughed again
Then.....you found healing
Then you became survivors
Once you were children
Then you were victims
Then you were survivors

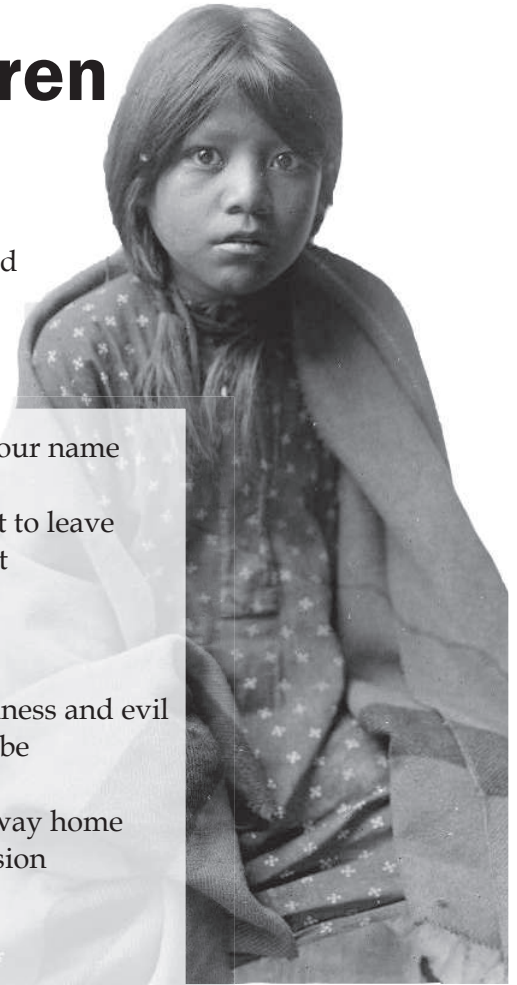


Photo: Edward S. Curtis, <loc.gov>.

Survivors who walk the Red Road – with pride and dignity
 and with the strength of your ancestors
 Now you are warriors
 Taking back your language
 Healing in ceremonies
 Warriors who carry the battle scars of brutality
 Some scars invisible to the eye yet deep and permanent
 Warriors who bravely tell their stories to their grandchildren
 So they understand.....
 So they can have compassion to understand some of that pain they still see
 You tell our grandchildren so they know the legacy they come from
 A generation of warriors who
 Once were children
 Then were victims
 Then were survivors
 Who are now warriors
 Warriors who we honor today – their relatives can stand with pride of their strength
 A community who is here because these warriors gave them life
 Warriors who share their stories – breaking the silence – mending the sacred circle of life
 Once you were children
 Then you were victims
 Then you were survivors
 Now you are warriors

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Truth and Reconciliation for Native Communities

Sandra White Hawk is Sicangu Lakota, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, and a U.S. Navy Veteran. She was adopted out of her tribe into a white missionary family when she was 18 months old. Read her story here: <www.wearecominghome.com/Sandy_White_Hawk.html>. Recently, she participated in the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which investigated the state's removal of Native children from their homes. A 13-minute film, "First Light," documents these practices from the 1800s to today and tells the story of an experiment in truth-telling and healing for Wabanaki people and child welfare workers in Maine. Watch the film here: <upstanderproject.org/firstlight>. Learn more about the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare TRC in the documentary film, "Dawnland" <dawnland.org>.



After you read the poem and Sandra White Hawk's story and watch the film(s), discuss the potential of truth and reconciliation commissions to bring about healing.