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
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

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.