

Standing with Standing Rock Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

Tell Me a Story about a Time When You Felt Most Alive...

Throughout this month, we're exploring stories of times when we felt most "alive."



Sometimes those moments are found in the most ordinary of places. Other times, we find ourselves called to dramatic moments. Earlier this month, I found myself in one of those moments. I wasn't old enough to go to Selma when Dr. Martin Luther King issued his call

for clergy to come, but when I read the email from Father John Floberg, Episcopal priest from the Standing Rock area, for clergy of all faiths to join him at Standing Rock Reservation, Sioux members in witness, I knew I had to go. Unitarian Universalists quickly responded by organizing two vans, leaving from the Twin Cities by the statewide organization MUUSJA, Minnesota UU Social Justice Alliance. There were at least 37 Unitarian Universalist ministers and members of congregations responding to this call. We left on Tuesday, November 2nd, and drove from the Twin Cities, arriving at Standing Rock around dinnertime.



We arrived at the Oceti Sakowin Camp and were quickly given an orientation. There are currently approximately 2,000 people living in the camp, and it has continued to grow since April. There was to be no alcohol, no weapons, and no photographs of the camp. The reasons for

no alcohol and weapons was fairly clear, but the reason for no photographs was because there were elements to the camp which were considered sacred by the Sioux Tribe, such as the sacred fire, which was faithfully tended both day and night, and had objects sacred to the Sioux. The tribal elders also did not want people taking pictures of sacred ceremonies, such as the Water Ceremony, led by and for women; or the drumming circle, which was led by some male members of the tribe. I was grateful that

people were just being present to one another instead of attempting to snap pictures of every moment.

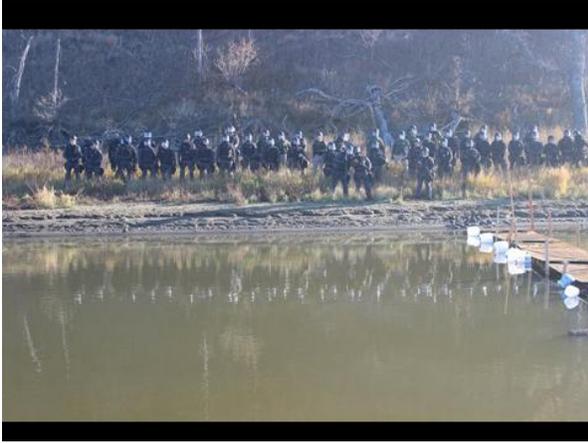


The camp was an impressive experiment in democracy and collaboration. Although to the outside eye it may look chaotic, there was an obvious organizational structure. An orientation to camp was given at 10:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. and we were offered on-going messages from speakers about how to behave, what volunteer jobs were needed and how to be helpful.

Each morning began with a Water Ceremony, led by women. One of the tribal elders held water and invited us to stand in a circle to receive the water in our left hand. After all the women had been served, men were invited to participate in the ceremony. Then, we followed Pearl, the native American tribal elder to the river. We took a pinch of tobacco and poured a drop of water into the river, praying for the days intentions. It was a beautiful and powerful way to begin the day.

I didn't eat at the camp, but as I passed by, I noticed a camp tent which was overflowing with food. Volunteers worked in the kitchen and at the tent to produce meals which were supplied by donations. I worked in the clothing tent for most of one afternoon, sorting winter coats for those who might be wintering there and for anyone who wanted to go "shopping." Note: the camp does not need more clothes! I can personally attest to the fact that they were overflowing with way too many used and donated clothes. They could use money, as it costs at least \$1,500 per day to remove the port-o-potties and take out the trash.

On Wednesday afternoon, we were invited to attend two public protests. The first was walking to the Cantapeta Creek bridge, stopping just short of where two armored vehicles had been burned in the previous week's protests. On the other side of the vehicles were a phalanx of police. I counted twenty-six police cars and four armored tanks. We walked to the bridge, prayed, sang and returned to the camp without incident. About a half hour later, we were invited to join another protest by a body of water that separated the tribal lands from what was claimed as private lands.



Some protestors entered the freezing cold water to stand in front of the police officers. It was hard to know exactly what happened next. From my vantage point, I could see officers taking aim at some of the protestors and firing tear gas, but I couldn't tell why they were provoked to do so. I could not see any protestors rushing out of the water or endangering them. At that point, we were told by the Elders in charge to go back to camp, so I started walking back to the

camp, about a half hour hike. One woman who was hit by a rubber bullet was injured, but didn't require hospitalization. Others who were in the water were suffering from hypothermia. I met one of the women who was in the water when she came to the clothing tent in search of warm and dry clothes to change into. She said it was a pretty traumatic experience, but that she'd do it again.

That evening, the clergy were asked to meet in a local gymnasium for orientation and for a sack lunch supper. Rev. John Floberg spoke and recalled why he had asked us there – to bear witness to the prayerful, peaceful, non-violent and lawful witness. He didn't say this, but I also suspect that having 500 clergy descend upon Standing Rock might net some sorely needed media attention. A Native American member of a local tribe (I didn't write down the name of the tribe) who also teaches American history, gave us a brief history of the area, including the tribes that lived in this land, the treaties that were promised and then broken, and the struggles of native peoples to retain their integrity and culture in the face of increasing encroachment and numerous broken treaties.



The next morning, we gathered in a large circle and acknowledged the damage done to Native people and their lands by the 1823 "Doctrine of Discovery" which had been supported by many faith traditions. *(Here is a brief summary of the Doctrine of Discovery: When European monarchies invasively arrived in the Western Hemisphere in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and later centuries, during the so-called Age of Discovery, they claimed the lands, territories, and resources of the Indigenous Peoples, asserting that the*

*monarchies had a right to appropriate on behalf of Christendom).*¹

In 2012 (Justice GA in Phoenix, AZ), the Doctrine of Discovery was repudiated by that General Assembly. In a dramatic show of religious solidarity, Rev. Floberg had representatives from the faith traditions present to read a repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and then handed it to tribal leaders to do with it what they wished. They chose not to put it in the sacred fire that burned at the heart of the camp, but to burn it in a separate place.



Then, we marched enmasse to the bridge where we gathered the day before and formed what's called a Niobrara Circle of Life and surrounded the area. Speakers from the 25 faith traditions represented, plus the leaders from several tribes who invited us there, spoke. Unitarian Universalist

President Peter Morales attended and participated in both the Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery and was one of the speakers. In addition to the speakers, we prayed, sang, chanted and offered our gratitude for the invitation to attend. The police



were in militarized armored cars and stood silently on the other side of the bridge, with machine guns in hand, but not making any aggressive moves. Then, our hosts miraculously produced sack lunches for 500 hungry clergy, laity and other participants and we sat down in the grass under a bright blue North Dakota sky and

broke (sandwich) bread together. Our van was scheduled to leave at 1:30 p.m. to head back to the Twin Cities, so after lunch, we returned to our camp gathered our things and hit the road, arriving back in the Twin Cities around 10:30 p.m. on Thursday, November 3rd.

¹ http://www.nyym.org/?q=doc_of_disc_factsheet

It was a powerful witness and an opportunity to participate with other clergy from many different faith traditions who care about native issues, about the lasting effects of racism, colonialism and white privilege, and protecting the environment. I expect I'll be speaking more about this experience in the days and weeks to come. Thank you to the members of the Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship who support ministry which enables your ministers to attend such events.

Kathleen

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