

Rights Action – September 20, 2012

“DO WHAT YOU KNOW TO BE RIGHT”

by Cathy Gerrior, a Mi'kmaq Elder and Ceremony Keeper from Turtle Island.

In July, Rights Action had the honour of leading an educational seminar / road trip of 18 North Americans to 4 mining harmed regions of Guatemala. Below is a 2nd article by one participant, Cathy Gerrior, a Mi'kmaq Elder and Ceremony Keeper from Turtle Island. We recommend you read her first article:

“A NATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF GOLD MINING IN GUATEMALA AND IT'S DEVASTATING IMPACTS ON OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS, THE MAYANS” (<http://rightsaction.org/action-content/native-perspective-gold-mining-guatemala-and-its-devastating-impacts-our-brothers-and>)

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DO WHAT YOU KNOW TO BE RIGHT

(taken from "The Ten Indian Commandments")

By Cathy Gerrior, whiteturtlewoman@gmail.com, September 20, 2012

i have working on this second article for some time now, trying to find the words to both describe and honor some of my observations and teachings from Guatemala. In all fairness, i have only seen, heard, and experienced a small amount of Mayan culture and belief systems. i was struck many times, though, by how similar we are and how i immediately felt a kinship with the Mayan People.

i recognized right away that we are indeed brothers and sisters.

Kwe. i am called wape'k mikjikj e'pit - white turtle woman, and i was deeply moved by the Mayan people and their struggles. i did not travel there as a tourist, but rather was invited by a caring group of people who belong to an organization called Breaking the Silence and we joined a delegation led by Grahame Russell of Rights Action. To better follow what i write here, consider reading the first article i wrote after the trip: “A native perspective of gold mining in Guatemala and it's devastating impacts on our brothers and sisters, the Mayans”

(<http://rightsaction.org/action-content/native-perspective-gold-mining-guatemala-and-its-devastating-impacts-our-brothers-and>).

As a native woman, i recognized that both my motive and my role was somewhat different than the others gathered together for the teachings that were about to unfold as we visited, over the course of 8 days, four different mining harmed regions of Guatemala. They came to witness and learn the many devastating truths that were about to be revealed around the oppression, exploitation, and attempts at genocide of the Mayan people, specifically around the issue of Canadian Mining Companies currently operating in Guatemala and other Latin American countries.

As a native woman, i already carried many generations of these truths in my whole being, almost as if it were part of my DNA. i was not there to learn these truths - i already knew them intimately. i was there to stand with our native brothers and sisters and to offer what i could in

terms of support and Ceremony as they, like we have here for seven generations, fight for their land, their rights, their culture, their dignity, and their lives.

Still, the painful details of these truths spoken by the people left me devastated and shaken to the core. What struck me hard was that their present struggles are our native people's histories prior to the forcing of our children into the residential schools.

There was a time when our native people here lived freely and in harmony on Mother Earth. We always recognized that we needed Mother Earth for our survival - she does not need us. It was not possible to own Mother Earth. Our teachings were that we were responsible for walking on her gently, with respect for all things. In my conversations with the Mayan people, these teachings are the same among our cultures.

i witnessed in Guatemala that the bond the Mayan people have with our Mother the Earth has not been entirely broken. Many still live off the land in balance and harmony, as our people once did. They have not been caged into reservations. At first i felt grateful to witness this. That was quickly squashed the moment i also realized that this bond the Mayans still have with our Mother is exploited by the wealthy, as well as foreign countries to keep the Mayans in extreme poverty.

Poverty, it seems, is used as a successful tool by certain cultures to keep native populations off-balance. The natives are distracted by the need to just survive, and so are unable to stand up for their rights and freedoms. In Guatemala, extreme poverty is used to force the Mayan people to work as cheap labor (\$2.00 per day minus expenses) to plant and harvest their own fields that they were forcibly and illegally evicted from, growing produce for export to Canada and the US at huge profits. i myself can never see items like tropical fruit and coffee the same way now that i have seen the true origins of them being provided to us at 'cheap' prices.

Like the Mayan people today, our poverty really began with the loss of our lands through 'evictions'. The land that provided all our needs and sustained us became coveted by other cultures. At first, we tried to accommodate them. As more Europeans arrived, massacres, rapes, and the burning of our crops, food stores, and homes immediately put us into poverty and survival mode.

Labeling us as heathens and savages seemed to legitimize the brutality used to gain access to and control of our ancestral lands.

This is what is currently happening in some Latin American countries, including Guatemala, only there and now it is with the use of military or paramilitary men with machine guns against farmers with hoes.

Trickery, trinkets, and alcohol were also used to cheat us. Our history here also includes blankets infected with measles and small pox that were distributed among the people. Entire communities perished. Beef infected with tuberculosis was also deemed an effective tool to free up more land. Bounties on our Scalps was introduced and are still on the law books in Halifax to this day. Treaties were entered into as an attempt to walk together peacefully, but were never honored by them. Papers were produced proving to us that we never had the right to be there in the first place.

Then we were put on reservations, breaking our bond with our Mother the Earth, and finally we were forced into residential schools to take the indian out of the child, breaking our bond with our children. The laws were made to condemn, eliminate, control, and/or assimilate, rather than serve us.

Indian Reservations are where extreme poverty, inadequate housing, food, clean water, and health care have long been documented. It was also impossible for us to continue to live in the

way we were taught. We were promised that we would be provided for and became wards of the government.

The elders here speak of their families going to the Indian Agent for their food allotment. It was called 'Rations Day'. Indian Agents were agents of the government and were given food and supplies to sustain the native population as well as keeping us caged. Often these agents quickly realized they could use these supplies to create total power over the 'savages' as well as amass personal wealth by selling the goods to others. Many of our people starved or froze to death.

Each large family was allotted exactly four cents worth of flour. The women named the bread they made after this ration and so "Four Cents" is still made today in native communities, as the allotments are really not that much larger.

In Guatemala, the Mayans are not even afforded that. They are neither caged in reservations nor are they free. They are in this uneasy limbo - living off the land, in extreme poverty, surrounded by wealth, waiting and wondering if/when they will again be forced off their lands to produce profits for the next plantation of mono-crops or for a mining company, with no protection from their government, police, or the courts. All they have are their lands and their lives, which they are being robbed of.

The Mayan People do not (yet) have the history of residential schools. i am fearful though that the dominant societies have not learned from their crimes against native peoples, leaving them more likely to repeat them. Profit, it would seem, dictates their priorities.

In North America, all school-aged children (5-16 years old) were taken from their families in every native community and sent to residential schools to be educated and become 'functioning members of society'. One of the devastating realities was that many of the priests and nuns who were moved from churches for 'unacceptable behaviour' were placed in institutions where those they were 'tending' to had no voices. Orphanages, youth detention centres, and residential schools are but a few. These places became the hunting and killing grounds for pedophiles, child predators, and sadistic people, all who claimed to be working in the name of God; therefore, with impunity.

Generations of Native children were brutalized, violated, raped, threatened, and killed. The days of family and community, warm embraces and loving care were gone. Their only human touch now was when they were being punished or assaulted.

They were savagely beaten for speaking their language and were taught that their parents and culture are evil. Those who tried to escape and run away were tracked down by the RCMP and brought back to the school to be publicly punished and humiliated.

The generational impacts on the individuals, the communities, and the culture were devastating and long term. Survivors were left with nothing - doomed to a lifetime in limbo. Many have spoken of feeling stripped of all spirituality. Unable to trust anyone or anything. Feelings of guilt and shame for what happened to them as well as not being able to protect their brothers and sisters are life-long. There are many issues of drug and alcohol abuse ...

But we are slowly breathing back our Ceremonies, our language, our culture, and our deep connection and responsibility to Mother Earth, in hopes of healing. And the healing is happening.

i recall a vision i had shortly after my first experience with Native Ceremony almost ten years ago. It was during a song being sung by my teacher, brother, and friend gkisedtanamoogk. We were in Circle, releasing the Ancestors from the Sacred Fire. As my brother sang, i saw an eight pointed star, golden, glimmering, pulsating, and glorious as it rotated inside a circle. i felt excited, joyful, and alive. Then suddenly, chunks were wrenched from it at random until it

became still, only a shell of its former self, and in almost total darkness. i wept, feeling empty. Slowly, small fragments began returning. With each small piece came a small light and it began to slowly pulse and glow again. Tentatively at first, like a tiny heartbeat. As more found their way back, it became stronger and brighter, which then began to attract even more pieces. The vision ended as abruptly as it had begun.

i like to believe i was one of those small fragments finding my way back to where i belonged. One small piece that makes the whole more complete, alive, and stronger. i have worked to help our people in their healing ever since that moment. Standing in solidarity with the Mayan People is now an important a part of my work.

When i was asked at one point why i chose to go to Guatemala to stand with the Mayan People, my response was simple. "If people had stood with us 500 years ago, would our history be different today? How can i not?"

The Mayans in Latin America are currently dying from North America's history of brutality and greed. There are several amazing organizations who are currently standing with them in solidarity. They stand for justice, equality, and fairness. They stand to protect culture, ancestral lands, dignity, and human lives. They are still only a few, standing up against the powerful force that is greed. Please don't let them stand alone while another native people becomes broken and empty.

All my Relations.

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RIGHTS ACTION

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