
Recovering the Sacred Northland

Reactions, Critical Learning, and Transformation

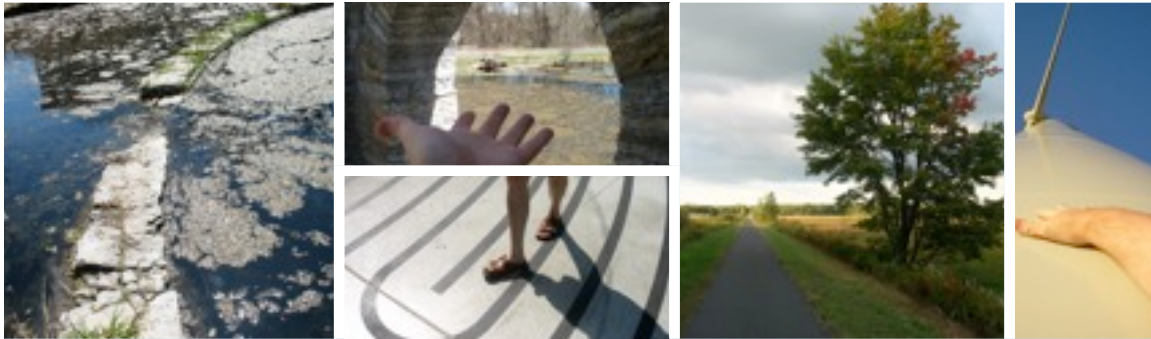
Scott Schumacher



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*"That which has an existence - has a right to be, has a right to be protected,
and has a right to be sustained"*

-Sarah McFarland Taylor

Recovering the Sacred Northland was a journey into a labyrinth of deepening my connection to nature, sustainability, and the sacredness that exists in all of us - not as beneficiaries of the resources of our world - but as stewards of the land, and our deep and winding connections with one another. Throughout this journey, I read books while on a train to Portland, Oregon. I rode my bicycle on a trail in Minnesota, which was once a train route that carried over 400 people to safety, away from a deadly firestorm. I also walked several labyrinths, which have now become my own sacred metaphor for the constant turning of life - ever connected, and ever unfolding.

Entering the Labyrinth from the Farthest Point Outward

I first read Winona LaDuke's book, Recovering the Sacred: The Power of Naming and Claiming, while riding an Amtrak train to Portland, Oregon. As I traveled this long journey westward that would take me through Glacier National Park, I was faced with much of the "claiming" of land and culture of the United States. Once a home to the Blackfoot and Kootenai Indian tribes, containing many sacred sites, it is now under the jurisdiction of the National Parks Service. Along this journey, other white parents and children wore homemade Indian feather headbands,

and made stereotypical Indian calls through the darkness of tunnels, while I would read about the constant and ongoing struggles of Native Peoples to maintain their traditional ways of living. Passing through the vastness of the park, I would drift to sleep, envisioning a time gone by - when the first peoples cared for and respected the land. This was the time long before white settlers would make and break treaties, collect tribal memorabilia for entertainment purposes, measure the skulls of the Anishinabe Indians, or commit acts of violence and genocide for the purposes of Manifest Destiny and colonization.

It was this first trip along the train - the farthest I had been away from home in years - where my interest in the efforts of “Recovering the Sacred” began. I believe it planted a seed within me - one that had an interest in growing through the knowledge and wisdom of peoples and places in my home state of Minnesota. As Sarah McFarland Taylor would say at an upcoming conference, “Before traveling out to find purpose, stay in one place. Clean up your own back yard, and your own spiritual and cultural heritage.” It was time to return to Minnesota, and to discover the sacred spaces most close to me, in an effort to understand the damage done by my ancestors to Native Peoples and to the land.

Green Sisters - Planting Seeds and Growing Change

In July of 2006, I attended the Wisdom Ways Summer Conference, entitled “Waters, Woods, Prairies, and Peoples of the Northland.” This was also the biennial conference for an organization called Sisters of the Earth, a network of women concerned with healing the human spirit and restoring the earth. As the conference began, I was surrounded in an auditorium by women beating hand drums, while a large image of the Earth was displayed on a screen in front of all 300 conference attendees. Throughout the weekend, I would tour labyrinths in the twin cities, eat organic and locally sourced food, sing songs about the Earth and healing, and listen to speeches from Winona LaDuke and other women who have strived to take it upon themselves to create organizations and movements that assist in the healing of the Earth and native communities.

As one of only three men in attendance at this conference, I was profoundly moved by the wisdom, passion, and energy of the women around me. The disappointment I felt in that other men were not participating in this conference was soon replaced by feelings of joy and belonging, as this community of women welcomed me wholeheartedly. In fact, I feel incredibly privileged to have been in the presence of these women for this time. Their deep spiritual bond with the Earth

clearly resonated throughout the weekend. I did receive some good brushes of thanks for also being the only participant to arrive by bicycle!

One of the first panelists of the conference was Kara Ferguson, a representative from Peta Wakan Tipi/Dream of Wild Health. Dream of Wild Health is a garden project which focuses on “seed saving” of traditional Native American agriculture in the Upper Midwest. The organization also cultivates and fosters the cultural wisdom of indigenous peoples. Kara spoke of the saving of 600 year-old seeds of Native varieties of corn, which would immediately germinate, and when analyzed for their nutritional quality, would produce corn with 2,000 times the antioxidant value of corn bought in supermarkets today.

“The corn has a 100% germination rate. It wants to grow, as much as we want to grow it,” Kara exclaimed.

Kara also spoke of the desire for deep healing upon the land, and it was one statement that she made, that sparked many more ideas in me about healing, even as it related to my own practices of holistic massage and bodywork.

“We need to fall in love with the earth again. We need to walk barefoot upon her soil, to massage and heal her.”

As Kara spoke of the barrage of genetically modified products in our food system, tomatoes picked while green, then injected with hormones to make them red upon their delivery destination, I thought of the parallels in society at large. Are we fast becoming a “genetically modified people” through our everyday practices? Our reliance on pharmaceuticals to treat depression, addictions, stress, high blood pressure, diabetes, and other diseases - might they be traced to our continuing spiritual disconnection to the Earth, and to the older, wiser systems of food production and self-reliance? Does the consumption of “cosmetic food” lead to the development of “cosmetic people”?

Just as Kara’s words began planting many seeds of thought and ideas in my mind, the very articulate and unapologetic speech by Sarah McFarland Taylor sounded a very new and direct battle cry for any environmental activist. Taylor pulled no punches when she described many in the New Age and environmental movement as “White Native Wannabes” and “Colonial Culturalist Transvestites” who continue to desecrate the religious symbols of Native peoples.

“Do not spend your time visiting Native sacred places as simply a path to your own well-being. Do not co-opt a spiritual practice for your own gain. Do not visit sacred spaces merely to recharge your crystals. Clean up the damage in your own back yard! Stay in place. Dig in. Clean up the damage done by your own spiritual and cultural heritage, and attend to those places that have been wounded. How convenient it is to merely step outside one’s own history and tradition, to go to a sweat lodge and forget about the damage done by you!”

“That which has an existence - has the right to BE; has a right to be protected; has a right to be sustained. We have stolen lands, then stolen spirituality away from Native peoples to become “plastic medicine men” and “plastic medicine women” who sell others’ traditions to make a quick dollar. On whose terms are you giving a blessing, or have you been bestowed to lead a religious ceremony?”

Out of all of the conference, I believe these words were the most important for me to hear. As a holistic healing practitioner, I must be respectful of those traditions that are not of my ancestry. Co-opting the religious practices of Native people for my own economic gain would be a continuance of the desecration and “cultural colonialism” that Sara McFarland Taylor illustrated.

Touring Labyrinths with Marilyn Larson

While at the Wisdom Ways Summer Conference, I registered for a labyrinth tour, hosted by labyrinth designer, Marilyn Larson. While touring six different labyrinths in Saint Paul, she explained to us that “there are no rules or set guidelines to walk a labyrinth.” However, while entering our first labyrinth, she illustrated an example of ritual and guidance while walking the labyrinth.



Upon entering, Marilyn would greet each participant with a simple question:

“Traveler, what do you seek?”

As a participant, I responded, *“Wisdom and ancient Knowledge.”*

Her response would be, *“Go and seek it!”*

As we carpoled to other labyrinths, I rode in the car with Marilyn, to learn that she herself was a traveler, seeking much wisdom and knowledge. A woman in her 60's, Marilyn spent the previous five years traveling to and between many temporary homes, house-sitting, creating labyrinths, and working diligently on a video documentary about her recent journeys into healing.

The most profound labyrinth, in my opinion, was the Global Harmony Labyrinth that resides in Como Park in Saint Paul. This labyrinth contains an image of “yin and yang” illustrated in an image resembling two opposing hands as its circular path. The labyrinth was designed and installed to commemorate the sister-city relationship between Saint Paul and Nagasaki. Its long outside paths created a wonderfully meditative and calming walk. I spent much of my time taking digital photographs of feet, shadows, long paths, and people walking along the paths of this and other labyrinths. It was also this time when I felt the metaphor of “education as an unfolding labyrinth” start to develop in me.



Winona LaDuke and the Wind Rose of Calloway

By far, the greatest benefit to the Wisdom Ways conference, was to hear Winona LaDuke present the keynote address. Winona spoke of the continued destruction of Native culture in the United States. From stories of anthropologists who came to study the widows of heads of her native Anishinabe ancestors, to the efforts to reclaim artifacts from historical societies and museums, she recounted the long struggle of Native Americans in the naming and reclaiming of that which they hold as sacred.

“How ironic it is that one culture has the power to claim what is and what is not sacred for another culture.”

“When ever there is a sacred mountain or land lost to treaties, it is named for a white man - often a President - who has created much devastation for my people.”

Most recently, Winona LaDuke has been vocal in preserving the integrity of Minnesota wild rice that is harvested in northern Minnesota. As efforts mount for the University of Minnesota to genetically modify Minnesota wild rice, LaDuke has been a staunch lobbyist to preserve the very ‘wild’ nature of wild rice, and to preserve the culture and practice of “ricing” on the White Earth Indian Reservation.

Mirroring the final chapters of her book, *Recovering the Sacred*, Winona LaDuke spoke of new initiatives on Indian reservations of the Upper Midwest to rebuild their communities. The White Earth Land Recovery Project, an organization founded by LaDuke, focuses on the re-purchasing and reclaiming of land once utilized by the Anishinabe people. Other projects include those supporting local traditional agriculture and food distribution, nutrition and health promotion, and those encompassing renewable energy.

“Indian reservation land in the Upper Midwest is often vast and bare. We have a lot of wind, and we’re learning how to harvest it. We believe that we have enough wind potential on Native Land to power the entire country.”

In fact, an organization named Native Wind, is currently in the process of building 3000 Megawatts of tribally owned wind projects in the northern Great Plains. According to their website (www.nativewind.org), projects in the Dakotas are well underway.

“110 MWs of renewable wind energy are on the intertribal drawing boards, with 30MWs at Rosebud Sioux reservation, and an 80MW project to be distributed on eight reservations along the Missouri River. These carbon-free resources will conserve water, enhance downwind air quality, and build sustainable reservation economies that broaden contemporary tribal opportunities.”

At the conclusion of her keynote, Winona LaDuke spoke lightheartedly about the efforts of many consultants and scientists in measuring the wind capacity, or *Wind Rose*, of areas of the White Earth Reservation near Calloway, MN.

“It sounds like a great folk song, doesn’t it? The Wind Rose of Calloway.”

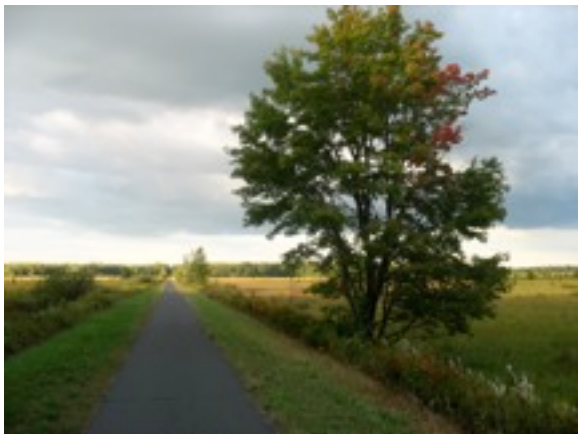
As the applause for Winona LaDuke’s keynote speech ended, singer Sara Thomsen took to the stage to once again lead the participants in song. Much to everyone’s surprise, Sara had written

the chorus to a new song - The Wind Rose of Calloway, which she sang, and subsequently taught the conference participants.

Seeing Winona LaDuke run back onstage to embrace Sara Thomsen after this moment gave me much hope that healing and reconciliation between Native People and Whites was still a distinct possibility.

The Willard Munger Trail - Hinckley to Finlayson

After hearing Sarah McFarland Taylor say the words: Stay in Place. Dig in. Clean up the damage in your own back yard, I began to search for areas in my own home state of Minnesota that I could explore within the metaphor of “Recovering the Sacred Northland”. After returning from my experiences bicycling in Portland, Oregon and Madison, Wisconsin, I wanted to continue to explore wonderful places by bicycle. I chose to travel portions of the Willard Munger Trail in Northern Minnesota, mainly because of the rich and tragic history surrounding the Great Hinckley Fire of 1894.



The longest paved trail in the United States, the Munger Trail is a 68-mile trail that cuts through a long stretch of rural northeast Minnesota. Stretching from Hinckley to Duluth, the trail is paved over what once was a passenger railroad line that saved hundreds from the clutches of a firestorm that would completely obliterate the communities of Hinckley, Sandstone, and what is now Finlayson, in Pine County Minnesota.

I biked along the Munger Trail from Finlayson to Hinckley, then back to a cabin near Sandstone where my partner and I were staying. Fourteen miles by bicycle may not seem like a long distance, but my intent was to “ride with reverence” along this passageway. After reading the book, [Under a Flaming Sky: The Great Hinckley Firestorm of 1894](#), I wanted to “feel the distance in my bones” that many who attempted to flee this raging fire would have had to travel. Even though many survived by riding the train north to Duluth, steam engine locomotives in the 1890s did not travel the speed of today’s automobiles.

Along the ride, while witnessing spectacular views of open fields and meadows, I imagined seeing only fire and smoke, and continued my ride. I passed by the very small and shallow Skunk Lake, and wondered how so many could have survived by immersing themselves in this puddle of a lake. Finally, once reaching Hinckley, I visited the Hinckley Fire Museum and memorial monument.

I still feel a mix of contradictory emotions regarding the circumstances and events of the Great Hinckley Firestorm, mainly how it is remembered and memorialized. In 1894, Hinckley was a burgeoning lumber town. The area was once home to some of the oldest old growth forest in the United States. Much like today, sustainability and environmental protection measures were an afterthought. It was not until hundreds died in this horrific fire, that many began to realize that the precious resources of timberland could be erased in the blink of an eye. However, among the monuments and museum artifacts one discovers in Hinckley, little mention is made of the value of sustaining forest land. Moreover, the victims of this fire are memorialized much the same way as those who have died in wars fought overseas. We memorialize those who died from tragic circumstance in sacrifice to their country, or to industry, yet the harder lesson of learning to prevent these tragedies from happening again is barely seen.

Daniel James Brown's book was ironically a breath of fresh air for me. By portraying the true-to-life events of this firestorm, I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the real lives of the victims and survivors of the Great Fire.

To me, the Munger Trail is a symbol of conservation, remembrance, and reverence. Its spectacular views of the diverse natural landscape of Minnesota show the very essence of a land that should be preserved and respected.

As well, symbolically, we are all "running from a firestorm" of impending global climate change. Our own encroaching fire is evidenced by the decreasing numbers of honey bees, the drowning of polar bears who can no longer swim to find frozen land, the shortening of growing seasons, and the short time before global "peak oil" is a grave reality. Like many survivors of the Great Hinckley Fire who needed to "start over again" with nothing, many of us, undoubtedly, may face the same fate. Rising sea levels will decimate coastal cities. More wars may be waged in the pursuit of oil and resources as they become scarce and expensive globally. Many of us will not be so lucky as to "hop the train out of town" to escape.



Camp Coldwater and Coldwater Spring

I became interested in Camp Coldwater and Coldwater Spring almost by accident. One day I stumbled upon the book, [Listen: The Story of the People at Taku Wakan Tipi and the Reroute of Highway 55 or The Minnehaha Free State](#) while eating at Hard Times Cafe in Minneapolis. The book told the story of the reroute of highway 55 in Minneapolis from the perspective of activists and citizens who opposed it. Not only did they oppose the reroute, the destruction of park land, and the demolishing of homes, but they were all part of the longest citizen occupation of land, some believe, in the history of the United States.

Within the land they occupied were four trees, sacred to many Native people, aligned in the four cardinal directions - east, west, north, and south. As well, Coldwater Spring, a 10,000 year old natural spring had been a gathering place for many Native Americans for thousands of years. Once believed to be the “center of the earth” for Native tribes who would use its waters for sacred ceremonies, Camp Coldwater is also known as the “birthplace of Minnesota” as it was the first settlement of European-Americans in Minnesota that was not primarily a fur trading post, fort, or mission.

While unsuccessful in saving the four sacred trees, or in preventing the re-route of highway 55, Coldwater Spring was saved by an act of the Minnesota Legislature, which prevented the Minne-



sota Department of Transportation from digging below the water table of the spring. Highway 55 was re-routed again to preserve the spring, and it is now part of the property owned by the United States Bureau of Mines.

It should as well be noted that the drawing and re-drawing of boundaries of protected land within the Bureau of Mines

property containing Coldwater Spring by the Minnesota Historical Society has been a point of contention since plans for the re-route began. Because it is located on federal property, with largely unoccupied buildings part of the Bureau of Mines, access to Coldwater Spring is limited to weekdays between the hours of 9am and 3pm. I made three attempts to visit Coldwater Spring before learning this information, and finally being able to schedule a weekday to ride my bicycle to the spring.



On the day I traveled Coldwater Spring, I witnessed four deer calmly standing under shade trees as I biked along the road into the Bureau of Mines property. Two eagles were also flying overhead at one point. When I arrived at the spring, it was clear to me that many people had left offerings upon this area. A labyrinth of stones, tree limbs, and animal bones lay just to the north of the Spring. Within the twists of the labyrinth are stone cairns (stones stacked upon one another), pine cones atop beds of pine needles, offerings of beads, stones, coins, and trinkets. In the hollowed out trunk section of a nearby tree, someone had left a beautiful watercolor painting of a large tree. A small tripod of sticks held a stone, dangling from its center. This tripod reminded me of the tall wooden tripods that Earth First! activists would lock themselves to during their occupation of the area. The dangling stone seemed to also point downward, marking the land once again as “the center of the earth” in this place.

I spent three hours at Camp Coldwater and Coldwater Spring. After walking the labyrinth, I walked upon the remaining stone walls of the structure marking coldwater spring. I stood within the walls of the main stone structure and looked through the arched windows. To me, it was as if they were portals to the four sacred directions. After taking photos, I took off my shoes, and dipped my feet within the waters of Coldwater Spring. I wanted to channel whatever energies I could to provide healing to this beautiful place. My intention for this visit was not for my own healing or cleansing, but to be of witness to this sacred place, and to offer whatever healing I could.

Coldwater Spring is poorly maintained. The waters in its stone collection well are murky and muddy. It is said that the spring is only giving out 70% of the water capacity it did before highway 55 was built near it. The Bureau of Mines buildings are broken down and abandoned. The Minneapolis Parks Commission provides one security guard for the premises between 9am and 3pm, Monday through Friday. While the spring has been saved from destruction, there are ugly scars all around her. Where thousands of trees once stood, a six-lane highway resides. Where eagles flew overhead, roaring airplanes cross the sky as they arrive and depart the Minneapolis Airport.

As I left Camp Coldwater, the four deer were still gathered under shade trees, simply watching my bicycle and the Minneapolis Parks patrol car depart through the gates.

Conclusion - Nature for Sale - What is the Price?

Throughout this course, I had been bombarded the theme of “nature as a resource to be used for profit” it seems. From the attempts by the University of Minnesota to genetically modify wild rice, to the demolition of park lands to build a highway and a light rail system, I felt that my previous attitudes of “progress” had been both crushed and transformed. Is it “progress” to build a faster highway and a light rail system through lands that were considered sacred by Native people? Is it “progress” to genetically modify foods, or to ship them thousands of miles before they land on a market shelf?

Each unsuccessful attempt to visit Coldwater Spring brought me very interesting and compelling images. Once while riding the Hiawatha Light Rail from my apartment to the station near the spring, I saw a child playing with a toy bulldozer. I looked to my left at highway 55 next to me and thought of the bulldozers that plowed through Minnehaha Park. I thought to myself, “Children learn messages when they are very young, indeed.” Another time, while walking by the entrance to the Bureau of Mines, I noticed a long row of young trees, each marked with a tag that simply read “Sold”. I took a short film with my digital camera of the scene. The tiny “sold tag” flapping in the wind, hanging from a tiny tree branch. To the right of the tree - highway 55 in all of its noisy glory. Above the clouds - an airplane ascending from its takeoff. Down the hill from the tree - a meandering stream. Nature was for sale.

I once spoke to some friends about the re-route of highway 55 and the occupation of the area by activists. They were unaware that the occupation ever took place, but assured me that “If there is one thing that the City of Minneapolis values, it’s their parks system. I’m sure they took the time



to beautify this area and make it incredibly enjoyable for everyone.”

I remained very silent to this statement. Silent and saddened. The idea that the taking of sacred lands is justifiable “so long as some land is preserved for park space” somehow seems deeply wrong and unjust.

Consumerism and development are still trumping culture, sustainability,

and community, and most of us are numb to this at best, as cogs in the wheels of an ever turning system. I would like to say that I came out of this course with more positive thinking, but that is not the case. Perhaps the hard lessons are very necessary so that we as people can begin to think critically and unwrap the layers of numbness and conditioning that have plagued us since we were very young.

Social and environmental justice do have much deeper meanings for me now, however. I am able to now critically look beyond the surface of “progress” and development. There’s a lot of “recovering” that we all have to do at this point. I’m thankful for the stories I’ve heard, and to witness so much love for the sacred, for sustainability, for the “older wise ways” of building community, and cultivating a deep love for the Earth.