Creating a New Story

Ritual, Ceremony, and Conflict Transformation between Indigenous and Settler Peoples

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Tsitsalagi. Nwhtohiyada idehesdi. In the words of my ancestors: “I am Cherokee. May we live together in peace.” With these words I invite you into my story and other stories of peacemaking that I have been privileged to share. I am also of Settler descent, and I know within my body and life experience the generational conflicts that are a legacy of colonization. Conflict continues between Indigenous and Settler peoples today, as many Indigenous peoples live with injustices that remain largely unaddressed in the wider society. In this chapter, I share my story, and the stories and reflections of others participating in reconciliation and peacemaking rituals and ceremonies involving Indigenous and Settler peoples. These ceremonies take place in the United States, where I grew up, and in Australia, where I now make my home. The first story is of the Two Rivers Powwow in Twisp, Washington, and the reconciliation processes taking place between Native peoples and Settlers there. The second story is of the Myall Creek Massacre Memorial in New South Wales, Australia, where Aboriginal and Settler Australians are working together to facilitate reconciliation and restorative justice. The ceremonies described in this chapter are transforming rituals; they “challenge the status quo”—the distance, alienation, and mistrust between many Indigenous and Settler peoples that characterize relationships in these nations. The participants in these ceremonies are creating new relationships of mutuality and respect, and new narratives that invoke more just ways of living together.3
Two Rivers Powwow

A group of Methow Indians, other Native peoples, and Settler-descended peoples have been meeting in Twisp, Washington, since 2000, sharing rituals of storytelling, deep listening, and communal meals. The culmination of these processes is the annual Two Rivers Powwow, a weave of traditional Native ceremonies and new reconciliation rituals involving Settler and Native peoples.

In 2006, I participated in the powwow. I invite you to travel with me to the confluence of the Methow and Twisp rivers. Listen carefully and you will hear the waters rushing over the rocks to join as one powerful river. These are the traditional meeting grounds of the Methow Indians, who were driven from this valley by the United States Army in 1886. On that day, the Methow people were given fifteen minutes to leave their homes, forbidden to gather even a single possession.

In the Two Rivers Powwow, people are invited to perform together rather than be spectators, as evidenced in the friendship dance, where Native and Settler people dance together.

Photo by Sandor A. Feher
or a handful of food. Today’s Methow Indians remember the longing with which their elders described the smell of food and the smoke from the cooking fires that followed them out of the valley.

Today we are gathered together around campfires on the same grounds. The air is filled with wood smoke and the smell of salmon, venison, and corn cooking over the coals. We will soon sit under the pine trees and feast together, Settlers and Natives, at long tables laden with the food from the cookfires, along with bitterroot, wild carrot, camas root, and kush kush—all traditional staples with a long history of sustaining the people.

The many rituals that make up the three-day powwow are based on Native ways of knowing and being that integrate mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects of their experience with the natural world. John GrosVenor, an Echota Cherokee who is one of the founding members of the reconciliation process in the Methow Valley, explains, “When we dance, in theory, every time a foot hits the earth, it’s a prayer, and the singing, eating and drinking are also part of that spiritual connection to the land.”4 These rituals link Native peoples to their ancestors and to the coming generations, as explained by Stephen lukes, a Colville elder: “The Ancestors of these ones from the valley are still here, the Spirits are still here. By singing these songs we sing that they might be awakened again, to know that they are not forgotten.”5 Stephen explains that it is a new experience for a number of Native peoples here to have a safe space in which to share their history and worldview with Settler peoples: “We are making a way for the two sides to understand each other. Indian blood has been spilled here for years, before any of us ever came here. Thank you for how you’ve treated us here. We don’t get treated that way other places we go.”6

We are gathered to celebrate the symbolic “coming home” of the Methow. Brightly painted tepees have been erected, and the Methow will camp in this meadow for three days. Two Native drum groups are present, and their songs and drumbeats resound across the meadow. This gathering is public—all are welcome to attend the rituals and ceremonies that make up the powwow. One morning is devoted to the naming ceremony for a young Methow woman who has come of age. Gifts are exchanged, and she ritually gives away the pile of shawls she is wearing, one by one, to women designated by Pearl Charley, the elder leading the ceremony. At the end, the young woman receives a new traditional dress. Many women, including myself, sit wrapped in handmade shawls—each one representing many hours of labor and love. People of Settler descent participate respectfully in this exchange, a stark contrast to the times when similar Native “giveaway” ceremonies were banned throughout North America. Later we participate in a memorial ceremony marking last year’s passing of a Methow elder. Spencer Martin, one of the Methow Indians who has been instrumental in the reconciliation processes, describes the role of these rituals within the larger ceremony of the powwow, explaining how they link us with
the cycles of life: "This often happens in conjunction with a memorial—death and birth—when someone is gone, someone else comes," and that the giving of gifts at the ceremony is "a subliminal way of taking the grief away." For many people here, this gathering also symbolizes the death of old relationships and the creation of new ones that are more healthy and just.

Some of the gifts that are exchanged are symbolic of reconciliation and the new relationships that have arisen out of the process. In the initial reconciliation ceremony in 2000, Craig Bosel, one of the ranchers in the valley, gave Stephen Lukes his rifle, saying, "Throughout history, the white man has given the Indian little but trinkets. They never gave them their guns. Today I give you my rifle. It was my grandfather’s and his grandfather’s, and his before him. May it accompany you to the happy hunting grounds and beyond."

At the Two Rivers Powwow, Native drummers issue an invitation for Settlers to drum with them, signifying new relationships. As Cheryl Race, one of the founders of the memorial, explained when her husband Ron was invited to drum, "It was as if they were saying ‘He is one of us.’"

Photo by Sandor A. Feher
At this and other ceremonies and rituals that are part of the powwow, those of us present are called upon to be witnesses, not spectators. Spencer Martin admonishes us not to walk away but to share what we have experienced here, articulating what that means for all of us, our families, colleagues, and our wider communities: “This is a formal ceremony of reconciliation. Remember what has taken place here today. Your part in this is to know and be able to speak about it. There’s no such thing as everybody just come and watch. You have a job to do here.”

Sometimes we dance together; sometimes we sit quietly and listen to the drum and the sounds of the river. One evening we gather in the meadow, under the stars hanging on the tops of the pine trees. We watch the first showing of the Two Rivers documentary, which tells the history of the colonization of Indigenous peoples and contrasts it with the story of the coming together of Indigenous and Settler peoples in this valley.

In the closing ceremonies on the final day, I am given a beaded headband made by a gifted Cherokee artist and charged with taking the story of these reconciliation rituals overseas and bearing witness to what I have experienced. This is both a gift and a responsibility that I know will be more challenging than slipping a DVD into my luggage. In this ceremony, I have gained a new identity. I am now a messenger for the people, relationships, and processes that make up this ceremony.

At this powwow, we are involved bodily as we eat and dance, emotionally as we hear stories that bring tears and laughter, spiritually as we join in prayer and song. In viewing the Two Rivers documentary, we are also involved intellectually, a necessary part of coming together in a good way to deal with the experiences of colonial injustice and racism. All of these processes combine to link us together in new ways we would not have imagined before the powwow. And on the last day, as we dance in a circle, ribbons and feathers turning in the late afternoon sun, we also know how fragile these connections may be, given the contrary forces that lie outside the powwow grounds. We realize that the relationships we celebrate here in our gifting and eating and dancing will require a sustained commitment along the journey we see ahead of us, as Ray Levesque, the Tlingit master of ceremonies, explains: “Let us work at this relationship. It’s not just a one-time ceremony. It’s a way of life. So let the healing begin. Let our dances be our prayers. All this land is sacred to our people.”