

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

Hihanni waste! Good morning!

Hoyeki yapi emaciyapi yelo nahan cante waste nape ciuzapelo!

My name is Alfred Walking Bull and I greet you all with a good heart.

It is a practice in Lakota culture to ask the forgiveness of the elders in any group for speaking in front of them. We do so because we know we have not lived as long as you, we do not have your wisdom and we ask your forgiveness for speaking so boldly or—more practically—expressing ideas that you may have heard over, time and again, and are just too polite to correct us on.

In my professional life, I'm the Communications Manager for PFund Foundation, the regional community foundation serving the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, Two-Spirit and allied communities in the upper Midwest states of Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

We invest in bold leaders so that LGBTQ communities can thrive. Simply put: we raise money and we give it away to queer individuals in our region to support their work and their development as leaders.

We have Three Elevated Priorities: LGBTQ People of Color, Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Communities and LGBTQ North Dakotans and South Dakotans. We invest in these communities as a priority because—as a community foundation—we know that strategic investment in marginalized folks leads to better outcomes for the whole community in general.

It's an honor to work in this cross-section of communities and identities. Every day I wake up, grateful in the knowledge that because of where I've come from to where I am now, I have the honor of connecting my communities with the resources they need to grow and thrive. It's good work if you can get it.

I'd like to thank Jim Foti for asking me to speak today. Our history goes back years to when I was a student journalist in South Dakota, looking at internship opportunities here in Minneapolis while he was at the Star-Tribune. Our connection was renewed when I moved here five years ago when I met his husband, Ralph Wyman, who serves as PFund Foundation's treasurer on the board of directors.

It never ceases to amaze and humble me when anyone asks me to speak. From my perspective, I'm still a kid, bumbling and rambling in the world who occasionally comes up with an insight that I share on Facebook. When others find resonance with what I have to say, I seriously get worried that they'll expect profundity on a regular basis. But the great thing about social media ramblings is that we can find people, places and sentiments that give us encouragement when we need it most.

Today, as we gather, I call to mind the world around us. It's a difficult time for many of us on the margins of society. Beyond the current political climate and condition, there has

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

been building, this sense of societal contraction to progress. Like any animate being, society has continued to regress quickly after forward momentum. If you're a pessimist, it's thought of as, "one step forward, two steps back" or, if like me, you're an eternal optimist, it's "two steps forward, one step back."

Our brother Bayard Rustin had similar thoughts on this in his correspondence to a professor at Wayne State University in 1969. In his letter, he wrote, "I am 59 years old. I am black and I have lived with and fought racism my entire life. I have been in prison 23 times — serving 28 months in a federal penitentiary and 30 days on a North Carolina chain gang, among other punishments.

"I have seen periods of progress followed by reaction. I have seen the hopes and aspirations of Negroes rise during World War II, only to be smashed during the Eisenhower years. I am seeing the victories of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations destroyed by Richard Nixon."

Today, we are witnesses again to that tiring song and dance of the push and pull of human cognitive dissonance. For the elders in this place, I'm sure it's familiar and frightening at the same time. The pulling backward of American society is so openly and so unapologetically racist, misogynist, xenophobic, without conscience and with seemingly unchecked power. The limits of our civic institutions feel like they're at their breaking point.

So what is it that sustains us on the margins of society in such times? How do we renew ourselves every day when every day is replete with a stream of awful decisions, hateful rhetoric, and the incitement of violence against those pushing forward still? For his part, Bayard reminds us all that it is simple: we must hold tightly to our humanity to guide us.

"I have been in a bombed church. My best friends, closest associates, and colleagues-in-arms have been beaten and assassinated. Yet, to remain human and to fulfill my commitment to a just society, I must continue to fight for the liberation of all men. There will be times when each of us will have doubts. But I trust that neither of us will desert our great cause."

As a person of faith, I've had to lean on what it is that I hold most dear in these times. Now when I say "faith," I don't simply mean a monotheistic faith with smells, bells, whistles and brocaded robes. When I say, "faith," I mean the trust I give each day to the world around me that it is for all of us and against none of us.

One of my other identities is as a person in recovery from alcoholism and addiction. My story is not unlike any other alcoholic or addict, it is filled with moments of humility, trial but also joy. What I have learned in my program of recovery is that faith in a higher power doesn't mean an Abrahamic god or even a supernatural deity. Faith is the trust that what got me from where I was to where I am now will get me to where I need to be.

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

So, too, for all of us, whether it's our profession, our place in society, our unearned privilege, our earned privilege, our gifts and talents, our experiences; they all signify the trust we've put into this animate being we perceive as human society. What got us from where we were to where we are now will get us to where we need to be.

While we live in a society here in Minneapolis where people are generally free to identify how they feel most fits with their authentic selves, I'll still get an occasional raised eyebrow when I identify as a practicing Catholic.

For most, this is a simple matter of identity, like being left-handed or six-foot-three, it simply is. But for some folks who hear this part of my identity, the push-back is strong, and rightly so.

The Catholic church is responsible for the genocide, colonization and subjugation of many indigenous nations. The Catholic church has used its position time and again to reinforce secular injustices in the name of apostolic supremacy and dogmatic authoritarianism. The Catholic church has continued to not just debate the merit of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer lives, but to put us in a box where we're encouraged to deny our full selves as our god's creation.

For indigenous folks, even within my family, I've heard time and again that I'm colonized, that I suffer from Stockholm syndrome, or worse yet, that I'm a collaborator, plotting to take part in the continued destruction of my people. For LGBTQ folks, the common response is more tempered, but they ask, "Wouldn't you feel more comfortable in an Episcopal or Lutheran church?"

To all of these charges, I can only recount the circumstances of my birth as my mother told me—time and again—growing up. "I knew you were coming but your dad was gone, out working. So I drove myself to the hospital and they told me you were in trouble. You had your umbilical cord wrapped around your neck, you had meconium poisoning and you were coming out breach."

At this point, I should say that the healthcare on the reservation in 1982 was such that what would ordinarily have been minor birth complications, required an emergency flight to the nearest large hospital, about 220 miles away. Depending on who was telling the story, I spent the first three to six months of my life in an incubator. After that point, my mother made a choice to have me baptized into the Catholic church.

In terms of how I view the practice of things today, I'm a borderline heretic. My opinions on Christian religious matters are what an archconservative Catholic cousin of mine calls, "moral relativism." It's a tricky place to be because what I consider moral—like not separating children from their parents and putting them in cages, or celebrating in practice the autonomy of women to control their bodies as freely as men do, or recognizing the inherent dignity of black and brown bodies and our rights to live free from the fear of death by the state—are negotiable positions for people like my cousin.

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

But what remains is that I was baptized into a faith that I don't always agree with, and it taught me how to live justly and practically among my fellow humans. When I came out during my confirmation process in college, I feared the worst. I had done the research beforehand and knew what the catechism had to say about queer people: that we are to be respected but are called to a life of chastity and celibacy, to attempt the impossible task of removing ourselves from full personhood and love.

The Benedictine brother who worked with me sat back in his chair, took a breath and said, "So? That's the way god made you." It was a revelation to hear and a joy to internalize. What I had come to know about the church chosen for me had been turned upside down. From that point on, I knew my religious home was one of justice, love and empowerment.

Even still, deeper, at the core of how I practice my Christian faith, is a promise.

I think back to my mother, Zintkala Oyate Win, Lorraine Iron Shell-Walking Bull. This summer marks the fourth year since she transitioned from this world to whatever lies ahead. Along with my father Ralph Walking Bull, who passed a decade ago, she is a foundation of how I guide my life in this world.

She was a woman who had survived the Catholic boarding school. A woman who had admitted her powerlessness over alcohol and found a solution in the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous for the last 33 years of her life. A woman who had been shot at by her own people, stood up to bullies and wore proudly her indigenous, traditional identity.

In times of crisis, she would pull out her bundle of sage and smudge herself and then take out her rosary and quietly recite the prayers she had been taught. Then, she could do anything. She was resilience incarnate in so many ways. She was loved by her children, grandchildren, nephews and nieces and feared by fools who didn't know her until it was too late.

I also think back to my grandmother Susan Standing Bull-Iron Shell. A woman who was born into a newly-created world of fences and men in uniforms with guns, dictating her life. A woman whose parents and grandparents had known the freedom of religion, the freedom of movement, the freedom of self-determination until the creation of the reservation system. A woman who was rooted in her culture but had to adapt to an ever-whitening and restrictive world where once she would have been the decision maker of her home but was now expected to demur to men who spoke English. A woman who carried water, chopped wood and stoked the fire every morning. A woman who brought into the world five daughters and one son and countless generations grandchildren.

I think back to these women and am honored by their love and lives in this world. They were women of faith, whether expressed in Catholicism or in our traditional Wolakota beliefs, who endured far worse than I ever will. And I think to the promises they made to each other and the promises they made to me so that our family, our people, our nation,

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

would continue to live. I think back to them and the promise that—because of our shared faith and fate—I will see them again in love and gratitude. And I want to tell them all that I have done with the life they gave to me.

Above all, in Lakota culture, beyond supernatural or deified practices, we are called to be good relatives because we have been shown, time and again, how our fate is connected to one another. We are free because we fight for the freedom of one another. We are liberated because someone fights to liberate us. We are joyous because we have seen sorrow and we are resolute because we have known defeat. We rely on one another.

As you'll hear in today's reading, this concept is one that stands the test of time. When we despair, our energies depleted or our well runs dry, we are called to remember that we can and should rely on one another. When one of us celebrates in prosperity, we are called to help others to that prosperity because whether it's a god concept, a community of peers, or the records of history, we are encouraged and strengthened to uplift one another.

In Lakota tradition, we believe that the universe began when the first being—Inyan—let its blood flow forth, manifesting all of creation, our understanding of the Big Bang. In all things in creation, Inyan's blood lives and binds the universe together. This is our understanding of how we're related and how our rising together is inextricably linked.

As I said in the beginning, I'm fortunate to work where I do. Beyond the simple acts of grantmaking, our foundation truly lives into its values and priorities. Our board is filled with examples of folks who open their homes to queer, youth of color experiencing homelessness; who toil tirelessly from sunrise to sunset as social workers; who educate students on subjects like history and queer theory, preparing them for the world; who tend to the financial health of the community; and who tend to the spiritual and emotional health of allies like yourselves. They all come together to cast a vision for our community year after year.

We also work to deconstruct the premises of systems of supremacy and oppression. My coworker and comrade in the work, Tom Vance, PFund Foundation's Development Manager, is a new homeowner. Not long after he'd settled into his cavernous property in the Powerhorn neighborhood here in Minneapolis, he asked me something shocking. He asked, "Do you think that I can deed my property to a local tribal nation after I pay it off?"

I stammered, "I should think so, yes." I asked why and he said, "I don't need to keep acquiring property after I die, why not just give it back to the people who it belongs to in the first place?" It was then I knew my comrade understood the concept of reparational justice and that I was indeed in the right place at the right time.

It doesn't take acts of Congress, rulings from the Supreme Court, or pontifications from on high to strengthen the bonds between us all. Sometimes, all it takes are small, simple acts that demonstrate a joyous commitment to justice that can uplift us all.

Relative Frequency: The Promises of Seeing Connection

I'll close with words from one of my favorite poets, Joy Harjo a Muskoke tribal citizen, with the eponymous piece from her latest book, "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings."

1. SET CONFLICT RESOLUTION GROUND RULES:

Recognize whose lands these are on which we stand.

Ask the deer, turtle, and the crane.

*Make sure the spirits of these lands are respected
and treated with goodwill.*

The land is a being who remembers everything.

*You will have to answer to your children, and their children,
and theirs—*

*The red shimmer of remembering will compel you up the
night to walk the perimeter of truth for understanding.*

As I brushed my hair over the hotel sink to get ready I heard:

*By listening we will understand who we are in this holy
realm of words.*

Do not parade, pleased with yourself.

You must speak in the language of justice.