

Quakers and the Forced Assimilation of Native Americans (unabridged)

an interview with Paula Palmer

Paula Palmer is the director of Toward Right Relationship, a project formed by Boulder Friends Meeting (IMYM) in response to the call by Indigenous leaders for people of all faith traditions to raise awareness about historical and ongoing injustices committed against Native peoples and to find ways of implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Paula was awarded the Pendle Hill 2015 Cadbury Scholarship to research the roles that Quakers played in conceptualizing, promoting, and carrying out policies of forced assimilation of Native peoples over the last two centuries. Paula spoke by phone with Western Friend on May 20, 2015. The following text is an edited transcript of portions of that interview. To learn more about Paula's work, visit: boulderfriendsmeeting.org/ipc-right-relationship.

Western Friend: How are your plans coming along for your journey east; are you getting your hospitality arranged along the way and all that?

Paula Palmer: I am so far from getting that going. I had originally been intending to start this research in September, when I get to Pendle Hill, and then I realized that the best time to visit the Quaker Indian school sites would be in August, which means that now I suddenly have to do at least some preliminary research right away. I need to find out where the Quaker Indian schools were, and connect with libraries and historical societies and newspaper offices and local indigenous populations, because many of those indigenous populations still live in these locations. So just plotting those places on a map and making those contacts initially is something I am working on now.

WF: Do you have anyone who is going to be traveling with you?

PP: Well I hope that Jerilyn DeCoteau will be going with me. She is an Ojibwe woman, an attorney and educator who has been working with me for the last year and a half. She presents the Toward Right Relationship workshops with me, and she also presents them by herself. She is a board member of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition (NNAB). That's the coalition of Native American organizations that is asking for a process of truth, reconciliation, and healing over the continuing legacy of the Indian boarding schools. So I'm hoping that she will accompany me at least on the leg of that trip that will go through Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and maybe Iowa. We will just be going from site to site to where these Quaker Indian schools once were. I think it would be a wonderful and interesting experience for her as a NNAB board member, and I think it would also be a good way for us to interact with indigenous populations in those regions. As a NNAB member, she could also let people know about the Boarding School Healing Coalition and how it intends to support communities in developing healing processes for individuals and families who continue to feel the impacts of the boarding schools in their

lives. So there would be good reasons for her to go. And we are also good friends, so it would be fun to go together.

WF: When did the NNAB form?

PP: It's been a couple of years. I don't know the exact date. But I think they have just recently received their 501(c)3 status. They are now in the beginning processes of looking for financing to be able to carry out the visions that they have. They have been very supportive of the research that I'm doing. They have been trying for years to even just open the conversation with the churches that were involved in the boarding school era, and they have had very little success; they have not found ways to open those doors. So the relationship that we have established – the relationship between Boulder Meeting's Toward Right Relationship project and the NNAB – is the first real response that they have received to their call for churches to look into our own histories in the boarding school era. They are very supportive of the work that I am doing because they are hoping it will serve as a model for other church denominations, for them to do this kind of self-research and to contribute that research toward a national process for truth and reconciliation.

WF: I'm a relative newcomer to Friends. I've been attending for twenty years and I've still got huge gaps in my knowledge base about our faith and our history. Of course, we have a reputation for having been in the vanguard in the fight against slavery, but then you learn a little bit more and realize, "Wow, being in the vanguard was all about just getting to the understanding that we ourselves shouldn't be holding slaves." It seems like our reputation for good relationships with Native Americans might be another instance where our being in the vanguard might seem today like too little too late. Of course, that's not a helpful way to look at it, but it is kind of angst-y to think that you're doing this research that is so overdue – by centuries!

PP: I remember from reading *Fit for Freedom, Not for Friendship*, that Vanessa Julye and Donna McDaniel concluded that Quakers largely lived according to the values of the wider society. A few Spirit-led abolitionists like Lucretia Mott were certainly in the vanguard, and it's to them that we owe our good reputation. I am eager to find out whether there were Quaker voices raised in defense of the rights of Native peoples during that same time period and since.

The United States was completing its domination of the whole land base from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the 1800s, and European Americans were wondering what to do about the remaining indigenous societies. There were over 600 indigenous societies that were experiencing various stages of trauma at that time – trauma from the loss of their land, their hunting grounds, their populations, their leaders. And yet, they were still perceived as a threat to the European Americans who felt that it was their right to populate and extend their ways of life over this entire land.

During this time, Quakers, from what I've read so far, were very concerned about the policy of extermination, which was being promoted by the federal government and the US Cavalry. The Quakers wanted to prevent wholesale extermination of the Native peoples who had

not yet moved onto reservations. And so, a policy of forced assimilation seems to have been their best idea of how to prevent the murder of all of the remaining non-reservation indigenous people. I think we can empathize in our minds with Friends during that time, grasping for a way to end the US military assault on Native peoples and trying to figure out a way that the remaining Native people could continue to live on this land.

It appears from what I've read that Friends supported the creation of reservations where Native people would live by certain rules in exchange for goods supplied by the U.S. government. They would be prevented from hunting buffalo and required to become farmers. Their children would be required to go to school to learn English and learn to fit into a European society and economy. The schools would teach Christianity along with the manual skills that would prepare Native children to become farmers and homemakers and learn to live in a Christian European culture.

Knowing what we know now, 150 years later, we see the policy of forced assimilation in a very different light. Native people from Australia to Canada and throughout the United States are bearing witness to the damage that was done to generations of Native children, especially in the boarding schools. Whether the children were treated cruelly or kindly, the intention of the schools really was to annihilate Indigenous cultures, to "kill the Indian; save the man." Children were made to abandon the ways of their parents and grandparents and ancestors. They were made to become non-Indian. But what were they to become? Many survivors of the boarding schools say they became lost between two worlds, unable to belong anywhere. Psychologists tell us that trauma like this can be passed down from generation to generation, and Native people are asking now: how much of the despair and disease in some Indian communities today is attributable to the boarding school experience?

The intention of Quakers and other denominations was to improve the lives of Native people, starting with that generation of children. The intention was to improve their lives by making them farmers and Christians, by making them like us, assuming that they would be better off being like the European Americans. It appears that they were unable to see the Native cultures in a positive way, having equal value to their own.

So, in my research I'll be asking: How did Friends express their intentions in providing schools for the Native people, in religious, cultural, social, and economic terms? What were their goals? How did they evaluate what they were doing? Were there debates? Were there people who raised questions about the forced assimilation policy, either on theological or moral grounds? I'm so interested in looking for primary sources – letters and journals and reports to yearly meetings from the Friends who were directly involved in the schools – to see what their hopes were, their doubts and concerns, and what they learned in the years they spent running and supporting these schools. How did their ideas change? And of course I'm also hoping to learn as much as I can about the Native children who attended the Quaker schools and their families and communities – how did they feel about the Quaker schools? What impact did the schools have on them?

WF: I'm going to be so interested to read whatever you produce from all of this.

PP: I think it is easy, from the place where we now, are to be critical of the attitudes of these Friends. And yet I think that we will also find that we have much in common with them. I think this research will provide an opening for us to examine ourselves also, and to ask ourselves, "What are we missing in our analysis of the issues of our time? What are we blind to? What are we not seeing? What are the contradictions in our own expression of our religious values? Are we living with integrity in our communities and on the land?" That's the way I'm going into this.

At the same time, we clearly need to bring to light the harm that has been done, and the Society of Friends needs to be open to the truth, as painful as it may be. That's one reason why I think it would be good for Quakers to take the first steps in this research, because we are seekers of the truth. We are guided by that old Quaker tenet that if we seek the truth, the truth will set us free. So I think it's important for us to find out as much of the truth as we can.

As we look into our role in carrying out the policy of forced assimilation, I hope we can do it with love for the Friends who carried it out, and with love for the Native children and families who were damaged by it directly, and with love for their descendants who continue to suffer from those damages today. I hope my research will open opportunities for Friends to reflect on what this history means for us as a Society today. I hope we will find appropriate ways to support the healing processes that Native people are developing for their communities.

WF: So how do you think about that? What do you imagine the benefits will be from accepting the truth of our history?

PP: Well, the reason for doing this now is because Native American organizations and tribes are asking for the country at large to take stock of the consequences to all of us of this process of forced assimilation of the native population. As we learn more and acknowledge what did happen in this country, and how that history has impacted the Native peoples, we will have an opportunity to ask how healing can occur, and that will bring about a kind of dialogue that we haven't had before – between Native people and non-Native people, between the churches and the government and the Native communities. All these actors need to be involved in looking at this truth, and looking for what needs to be done for healing to occur.

WF: I am totally with you, so I feel a little obnoxious pressing this further. But part of me believes that people act out of self-interest. So I'm wanting to ask it again: What good is it for European Americans to heal their societies with the Native societies?

PP: I think there's a real cost to all of us – as individuals and as a nation – from living in denial of the truth. I think that most of us know at some level that we live in denial of the truth, despite five hundred years of doing our best to cover it up. We hear our politicians spouting these great national values, yet most of us do know that if we just scratch that surface a bit, we can see that we as a society have never lived up to those values. Our whole society has been built on two fundamental crimes – genocide and slavery – and we've never

as a society faced up to that. And because we've never faced up to it, we've never healed from it. It is obvious that no one in this country today is isolated from the turmoil that racism still causes.

When some people are asked to think about the history of the Native peoples in this country, they very quickly go to, "Well, what do they want? Do they want us all to go back to Europe?" I think that kind of response – the fear that we live with and cover up and hide from, but underneath it is there – shows an awareness that we did not come by our land, property, and possessions in an entirely good way; and there are debts to be paid here. I think those of us who enjoy privilege – and even if we don't desire privilege, we benefit from it – I think we live in considerable fear. And that's what healing can do for us. We will no longer live in that fear.

WF: How do you imagine living in a society that's healed of these crimes? What would that be like?

PP: That's a question we pose in our workshop: What does Right Relationship look like? We ask people to really think about that in their own communities. None of us can answer that question alone. Relationship requires two parties at least. One party can't find right relationship; only two parties can do that together. What that means is that we really need to have dialogue. There's no way that any one of us can define what right relationship will look like, that definition must come through a process of dialogue and reconciliation. I think what moves me most when we present the workshops is that most people do respond out of a deep place of recognition. I'm talking now about European Americans responding to the workshops – most of them do respond to the material from a place of deep sorrow and regret. That's the place change can come.

WF: Would you describe the workshop in brief and its purpose?

PP: The workshop is an experiential exercise that takes people through 500 years of the history of the colonization of this country and helps people identify with the Native populations throughout that story, as their populations were reduced by genocide, and their land was taken from them by colonization. So it tells a 500-year history in just 45 minutes, but it does it in a way that people are able to feel it. The purpose is to give people a chance to take the first step in the healing process that Walter Echo-Hawk lays out in his book, *In the Light of Justice*. Echo-Hawk is a Pawnee attorney who lays out five steps toward healing this wound of genocide and colonization, and he says the first step to recognize the harm that's been done. So that is the deeper purpose of this work that I'm doing – to bring about that healing process, by facilitating the first step in the process, recognizing the harm that has been done. We have so successfully covered up that harm through our education system and through our national sense of self-congratulation and exceptionalism. We've covered up the harm for a long, long time, and it needs to be uncovered. This experiential workshop uncovers it so we can recognize it. And that opens up the possibility of taking the other four steps that could get us to a place of healing for the country as a whole.

[Echo-Hawk's "Five Steps to Healing the Wounds of Colonization" are: 1) Recognize that harm has been done: acknowledge that injury or harm has taken place; 2) A real apology is sincerely made and forgiveness requested: the person or institution that harmed another apologizes in a sincere and appropriate way, admits the specific harmful actions they have committed, and asks for forgiveness; 3) Accepting the apology and forgiving the wrongdoer: the harmed person or community accepts the apology and forgives; 4) Acts of atonement, the process of making things right: the parties agree on voluntary acts of atonement by the wrongdoer that will wipe the slate clean; and 5) Healing and reconciliation: the atonement acts are carried out in a process that fosters justice and compassion and genuine friendship.]

PP: So right now, this is what we are able to do. We are able to bring people to that first step. The Toward Right Relationship workshops can serve as a catalyst or motivator for the groups to focus on their own communities and ask themselves, "What would right relationship look like in our community?" That's a conversation that needs to happen locally. We as a project based in Boulder, CO, cannot do that for all participants. But we can set the stage for it, we can motivate. We can lay a foundation for each of those communities to find their way forward, based on who they are and where they are and what relationships they can build wherever they are.

WF: That's very helpful, thank-you. And I have a similar question about you and your calling. I understand that this particular set activities that you're engaged in right now is kind of the current incarnation of a larger life calling of yours, which I would love for you to talk about a bit, about how you started feeling drawn to working with Native cultures.

PP: Well the main thing I can say about my life is that one thing led to another. I never had a plan. So I'm only able to see this in retrospect.

WF: You and Steve Jobs

PP: Is that what he said? [Laughs.] . . . I became an activist early in my life. When I was in junior high and high school, I always felt that injustices needed to be addressed, that it all had to do with fairness. I grew up during the civil rights movement and became involved in the civil rights movement and in the peace movement during the Vietnam War era. Eventually, after college, I felt that what I needed to learn was how people live in a non-militaristic society. The only society then and now that has chosen to eliminate the army is Costa Rica. I was not a Quaker at the time, but Quakers had gone to Costa Rica and established the Monteverde community for that same reason in 1948, when Costa Rica abolished the army. So that's what drew me to Costa Rica in the early 1970s. I was feeling very discouraged that the U.S. continued on this militaristic course. So I went to Costa Rica with this idea of learning how people live in a non-militaristic society.

The part of Costa Rica that I ended up staying in was the Atlantic coast, the Caribbean Coast, which is where the largest indigenous population lives. So I began developing friendships with the indigenous people, the Bribri people, and I ended up living there for 20 years. Over those years, I used my writing skill – the one skill that I felt confident in – to help the Bribri

do something that they wanted to do, which was write down their oral traditions. I spent 20 years hearing the life-stories of Indigenous people and also the life-stories of Afro-Costa Ricans who lived in the same region. We eventually published five books of oral history, telling the history of Costa Rica from the point of view of the Bribri people and the Afro-Costa Ricans. For me, this was an amazing experience and I am eternally grateful for it. This was the place of my greatest learning. In my work with the Bribri, I learned how they lived, and how they thought about the relationships between the spiritual world, the natural world, and human society. I learned a lot about their struggles, defending their land and their rights, defending their culture, maintaining their culture during 500 years of assault on their lands and on their cultures. They helped me see the world through their eyes.

When I came back to the U.S. in 1993, I worked for a Native American organization that was based in Boulder for a couple years, until it moved to Albuquerque; that was the American Indian Science and Engineering Society. I was a writer for them. When you're a writer, you get to spend your time listening to people and learning from them. So that was my introduction to the issues and concerns of Native people in this country, to their movements for sovereignty and justice and healing.

Next, for 16 years, I was the Executive Director of a non-profit organization called Global Response. We responded to requests from Indigenous communities who were dealing with environmental threats. So if a community in Peru, for example, was trying to keep a mining company from coming into its territory, they could contact us, and we would launch an international campaign to support what the local Indigenous community was doing. Our work was to defend the rights of indigenous populations and help them protect their natural resources and their lands. That made it possible for me to communicate with and collaborate with the people on this planet who I most admire and appreciate – the indigenous leaders around the world who are standing up to these multi-national corporations and corrupt governments all over the planet, including our own country, and speaking for the rights of their people, the rights of the land, the rights of Gaia, the living earth. So that was the learning path of my life.

WF: And how did the Right Relationship committee come together in Boulder Meeting? How did you start doing these workshops?

PP: Our meeting's Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee actually formed way before I was part of it, in the 1990s. It started as a project of Right Sharing of World Resources, growing out of some work that people in Boulder Meeting had been doing in India. Then the committee began supporting and collaborating in work that was being done on Pine Ridge Reservation through AFSC. So the name of the committee changed to Native American Concerns Committee. Then about six or seven years ago, the committee began broadening our concerns internationally. So we changed the name again to Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee, which is the name that it has now. Many members of Boulder meeting have participated in the committee's work over the years. The most recent focus of the committee is responding to the call that came from Indigenous leaders at the United Nations and at the World Council of Churches, asking for churches to look into the

continuing impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery, the papal doctrine that sanctioned European expansion into other continents. The committee began studying the Doctrine of Discovery and felt that we needed to not just educate ourselves, but educate the Boulder Meeting and then educate Intermountain Yearly Meeting, about the Doctrine of Discovery and the importance of refuting it. As a committee member, I participated in those early discussions, and then I felt called to create an educational program that we could take to the different meetings in IMYM, with the ultimate intention that IMYM would approve a minute to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. As it turned out, IMYM did approve a minute that the committee brought to the 2014 annual session, but the minute emphasizes implementing the U.N. Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, rather than repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery.

WF: Yeah, I was there. I think the Doctrine of Discovery was seen as an example of a larger egregiousness that needs to be refuted.

PP: Yes, they didn't use the Doctrine of Discovery terminology, but the minute definitely refutes those systems of dominance. We laid the groundwork for the discussions at IMYM by presenting workshops at monthly meetings throughout IMYM. These are the Toward Right Relationship workshops that I created.

WF: And in brief would you please describe the Doctrine of Discovery?

PP: The Doctrine of Discovery was articulated by the Popes and the European monarchs of the fifteenth century. It was their justification for European explorers to claim the lands that they discovered and claim ownership of those lands. It was basically the justification for European countries to take lands from non-Christian peoples who inhabited the lands that the explorers "discovered." So it applied to Africa, Asia, and the Americas. From the beginning, it was a pact between the European monarchs and the popes, so it was political and religious. It expressed a pretty powerful idea: that God granted Christian Europeans the right to take lands of non-Christian peoples.

WF: And we ran with them.

PP: Yes.

WF: Earlier when you were talking about the Quaker role in the boarding school movement . . . Do you have a sense of the relative numbers of populations of Indigenous people in the 1800s time period? I imagine it plummeted over the course of that century.

PP: Yeah. Estimates of the number of Indigenous people on the landmass that became the United States at the time of the arrival of a handful of Europeans vary widely – between about 8 million and 30 million. Actually, those estimates just refer to the lower 48 states. It's pretty well established that 90-95% of that population perished over the next 200 years. So starting in 1492, until about 1700, the population decreased by 90-95%. Extermination almost happened.

WF: I'm sure for some peoples it did. Many.

PP: Yes many, whole societies totally gone.

WF: So, Friends in the 1800s are looking at this policy of extermination, and they're thinking, "There's got to be a better way," and I thought I heard you say that they were mostly concerned with Native people who were not on reservations.

PP: Well, that's where all the fighting was happening. Some Native people by then were already on reservations. But the Lakota, for example, were not. For them, the policy was still extermination.

WF: So then, the boarding school movement, was this directed towards people who were living on reservations or outside of them?

PP: They made the schools on the reservations. What they were trying to do was to bring onto the reservations what they called the "wild tribes," the ones who had not signed treaties that created the reservations, the tribes that were not yet "controlled" in any way by the U.S. government. The war was on. The Calvary was after all of them. So the Quakers wanted to bring those wars to an end.

WF: So in their mind, they're offering kind of a refuge.

PP: Well, they were trying to stop the killings on both sides. One thing that I'm interested in finding out is whether Quakers had any other ideas that didn't see the light of day? Did they have any other ideas at that time to accommodate different cultural groups within the United States? Were there other ideas about sharing space?

WF: Yeah, we could use those ideas now, huh?

PP: So that's why I'm so eager to read some of these primary sources, and to get a sense of what the discourse was among Friends at that time.

WF: When you look at our world today, what do you see as the main obstacles to progress along these lines?

PP: I think a lot of it is that those of us who have, we want to protect what we have.

WF: Yeah, I like my stuff. . . So I'm curious now – What keeps you going? What gives you hope?

PP: I've been very fortunate to meet and work with Native peoples throughout my life, and my work in the Toward Right Relationship project is a continuation of that. Now, for example, I'm meeting Native people who are working in their own communities with healing modalities that they draw both from their tribal traditions and from mental health models from the larger society. I'm meeting Native lawyers and educators – so many Native people who are working so diligently. And for them, this work is not optional. It's not a job; it's their lives. What keeps me going is knowing all of these Native people for whom this work is not an option.

WF: And these are people you love, I presume, on a personal level.

PP: Yes, very much. So it seems to me that it's not an option for me to bail either. It's not an option for me to say, "I'm sorry, this is hard. It makes me feel too bad. I'm sorry, but I can't make money this way." It's not an option for me to give up.

WF: How do you see your Quaker faith helping in that? Or do you?

PP: I think my Quaker faith keeps my heart open. It keeps me in listening mode.

[Long silence.]

WF: Well, I am so grateful you will be able to report back to us.

PP: I don't feel like I was able to answer that Quaker faith question.

WF: You did. You did. I appreciated what you said deeply.

PP: I want to make sure that it's clear someplace that the Indigenous Peoples Concerns Committee is a standing committee of Boulder Meeting. At some point, the committee came to realize that the Toward Right Relationship workshops have potential to go outside IMYM into the larger world of colleges, universities, schools, and other faith communities, into the wider world. When we started to realize that, I was already working full time on it, in faithfulness to a leading. So Boulder Meeting created a restricted fund to support this ministry – the ministry of offering the workshops nationwide and of doing the research on the Quaker Indian schools. The meeting accepts funds for this project, which should be directed to "Toward Right Relationship project."

WF: So, the research on the boarding schools, that was a natural extension of the five stages of healing? That's your personal growth edge on recognizing the truth?

PP: Yes, and also because it's what we were hearing Native people wanted churches to do. Just as we heard the call from Indigenous leaders around the world, saying, "Understand the Doctrine of Discovery. Look into this, people. Get what this is about." So, that was the first step. And then we started hearing the request from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition that churches needed look into their roles in the boarding school era, and bring this truth to the attention of their denominations and to the country as a whole. So that seemed like something we should do.

WF: How does your fellowship at Swarthmore fit in?

PP: I applied for Pendle Hill's Cadbury scholarship first and got that. Then I started applying for other research fellowships. I applied for a scholarship at Haverford, and did not get that. Then I applied for the Moore Fellowship at Swarthmore, and I was awarded that fellowship for 2015 to conduct research in Swarthmore's Quaker History Collection. So that will supplement the room and board at Pendle Hill this fall. Now I'm raising money to be able to visit the sites of the Quaker Indian schools as I drive from Colorado to

Pennsylvania in August. It will be a winding route through Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, and Indiana.

WF: Well you deserve every scholarship and donation and fellowship you get.

PP: It's going to be a very interesting process.