

WinkWorld September 2004

Dawn shares an experience from Pine Ridge.

"I'm going to try and say this without getting too angry and don't take this personally, but our ancestors seven generations ago told us all of this already, they told us this would happen now. They told us, 'Take the good that the whites bring. Learn from them'. So we did that and our language and culture were systematically destroyed. What you call colonialism, I call genocide. Now, all these many years later, here come the whites, with all of your research, telling us what we already know - that we need to speak the language to our children to keep our history, our community of people alive. We see you and think, 'What do they have planned for us now?' We already know all of this and here you are trying to save us again."

I was on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation at the Reservation Wide Educational Conference presenting a workshop called Linguistic Human Rights and Heritage Language Instruction. As Mom and I walked up through the parking lot, we were some of the only Anglos there. "Mom, I feel like such a flippin' gringa", I told her, knowing that our skin color and manner of dress in our presenting clothes instantly set us apart and what we represented evoked anger and pain.

The man stopped speaking and I shared my story about the parking lot, about feeling so very gringa. "There is a word in Spanish used in Latin America for people from the United States. Gringo, or for a woman, gringa, is usually quite derogatory. There are a variety of stories about where it originally comes from, but the one I first heard when I was 16 years old and living in Mexico was that as the U.S. forces invaded Mexico from the North in the U.S.-Mexico War, they wore green uniforms and the Mexicans called out to them "Green go! Green go home!" At this point there was laughter in the class and it was pointed out to me that, appropriately enough, I happened to be wearing a green shirt.

"Now, I know that in Lakota there is a similar word, isn't there?"

"Wasichu", they smiled and nodded.

"I knew there would be! Okay, just call me Wasichu Wink, then."

"It comes from the word 'wa si 'i' chu', which means "takes the fat from the land", the man who opened the conference with a prayer in Lakota explained.

So, I sat down and we started talking. Most importantly, I listened. What a gift it was to me. I'm not familiar with so much about the Lakota culture and the realities on the reservations today. I learned a lot.

"So, I have a question for you," I said, "I am white. This is my work. This is what I'm passionate about. What do I do?"

And he got very quiet and said, "Keep doing what you're doing. Somehow we have to get past the rage and keep doing what we know is right despite the fact that we now have whites coming and telling us it's the thing to do".

We all learned a lot in that classroom last week, I think. I know I did. Ultimately, I remembered, it's not about us, it's about the kids and doing everything we can for them right now in the present. We all have unique gifts and contributions. We all work toward common goals. We are partners doing our part. All any of us can do is our own small part, again, and again, and again, and...