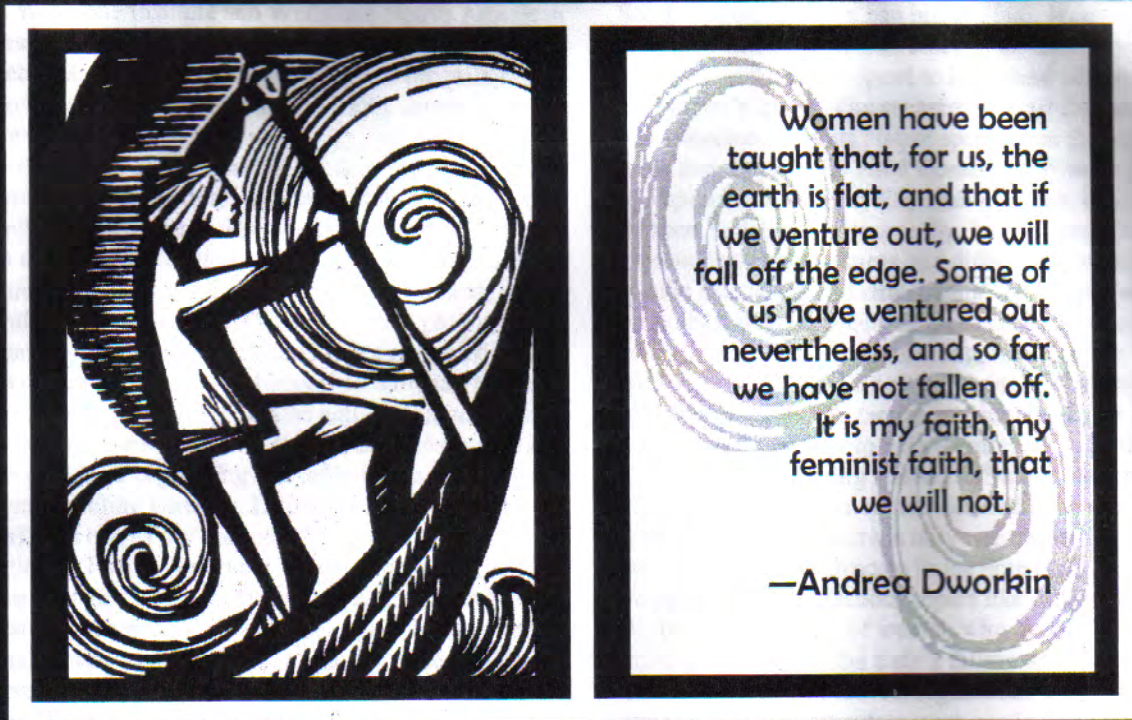


Rain and Thunder

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Women have been taught that, for us, the earth is flat, and that if we venture out, we will fall off the edge. Some of us have ventured out nevertheless, and so far we have not fallen off.

It is my faith, my feminist faith, that we will not.

—Andrea Dworkin

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Historic Convening of Native American Women

Report by Suzanne Sunshower; Photos by Carla Rae Marshall

Along with over a dozen other women, I was privileged to attend the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center's (NAWHERC) *Emerging Leadership Activist Training Program*, held in Pierre, South Dakota. NAWHERC, the Indigenous Women's Political Caucus, and the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault co-sponsored this training event by the Sheila Wellstone Institute and Wellstone Native American Leadership. Usually a two-day program, our training was conducted in one day. I have compiled this program report from my notes; however, it is not a strictly linear accounting of events.

For those who are unfamiliar, I'll share background information about some of the sponsors of this program and the Wellstone movement. The Sheila Wellstone Institute is an arm of Wellstone Action, which offers training to citizens interested in learning about progressive action, leadership and lobbying. Sheila Wellstone, wife of progressive Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, was a respected fighter against domestic violence and sexual assault, and the Institute named for her offers programs aimed at training advocates working to end domestic and sexual violence to further develop their organizing and lobbying skills. Sheila Wellstone Institute Director, Lonna Stevens (Tglingit/Dakota), was one of our instructors for the day.

Wellstone Native American Leadership was created, in 2006, to strengthen Native American leadership and civic engagement, in partnership with tribes in Minnesota and the Dakotas, as well as the rest of the country. Director Peggy Flanagan (White Earth Ojibwe) team-taught with Stevens from the Wellstone program packet.

NAWHERC Executive Director Charon Asetoyer (Comanche) was instrumental in founding the Indigenous Women's Political Caucus (IWPC) with Cecelia Fire Thunder (former Oglala Sioux president) in 2006. The IWPC's mission is to support grassroots activism, encourage Native American women to network and meet about women's rights and social justice issues, as well as develop strategies for dealing with legislation. Since its inception, the IWPC has steadily gained membership, a clear indication that more and more Native women are asserting their voices on the local and national levels. Most women who were at the training session are IWPC members.

Described in the welcoming flyer as an "historic convening of Native American women," the program was attended by community leaders from several South Dakota reservations, including three veterans of the campaign trail: Asetoyer, Faith Spotted Eagle, and Theresa Spry. Many of the attendees are not only trusted leaders within their own tribal communities but have become known to non-Natives as well, because of their dedication to speaking out on behalf of Indigenous women. However, the gathering was rare and important not just because of the stature of the attendees, but because the conference room was full of busy women

who had adjusted schedules to come together and network, learn from each other, and share discussion over issues vital to the health and welfare of Native women and Native people in general.

The special program for Indigenous women was held the day before the 3rd annual *Women for Women Day* on January 31st at the state capitol. Started as a response to the South Dakota abortion ban bill of 2006, *Women for Women* is a day when women (and some men) from across the state converge at the state capitol to lobby and educate legislators on women's issues. The separate *Activist Training Program* was coordinated by its Native sponsors in the acknowledgment that, beyond the 2008 *Women for Women Day* topics of *Reproductive Rights, Education, Violence Against Women, and Equal Opportunity*, Indigenous women face extenuating circumstances and difficulties which warrant special discussion and strategizing, sometimes separately from other women. Many of these special concerns were voiced within the activist meeting, to which the Wellstone instructors responded by giving thoughtful answers, and by suggesting innovative tactics and strategies that Native women could employ to help themselves and others.

At a similar training session in Minnesota last year, trafficking of Native women was deemed to be a top priority, as was the fact that there is only one trained Native American sexual assault advocate in the entire Minneapolis area. However, in South Dakota, topics like Indian child removals, the criminalizing of women who ingest drugs or alcohol while pregnant, and the state's failure to implement Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) regulations were some of the subjects in which attendees were particularly interested, because bills addressing these subjects were currently in play in the South Dakota legislature. The issues of reproductive justice, and "Sovereignty for Safety" – expanding tribal jurisdiction, and respect for such, in order to fight sexual assaults on Native women – were also highest priority discussion topics in South Dakota.

One problem, noted as a persistent concern, was failure of the mostly-white South Dakota Legislature to address bills concerning Native Americans in a timely fashion. Laura Ross, lobbyist for the South Dakota Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault (the Coalition), agreed with complaints from within the room, saying, "Legislators don't want to touch Native American issues," she then ticked off a list of bills put forward by Native legislators Sen. Theresa Two Bulls and Rep. Tom Van Norman that were still waiting for a vote. In exasperation, she said, "That's a lot of bills to have no one paying attention to!"

"The killing fields," called out former Native issues lobbyist Mary Ann Bear Heels-McCowan (Sicangu Lakota, Rosebud Sioux). "That's what I used to call it when bills go to committee and never come out."

"Except for fry bread," Madonna Thunder Hawk

“Convening Native♀, cont. 2

(Cheyenne River Sioux) joked, referring to the legislature’s naming of Indian Fry Bread as the official state bread. A former Native issues lobbyist, also, Ms. Thunder Hawk added, “Many legislators don’t vote on Native bills. In four years, no votes. There’s a frontier mentality in South Dakota. They’re still fighting the Indian wars, that’s why they haven’t voted on Indian bills.”

“It’s not our jobs to educate about racism,” Director Stevens said at one point, keeping the meeting on track by suggesting the women learn to use the same political tools that have been used against them. While she empathized with the frustration that many of the women have felt over legislative failures, she opined that Red Rage (bitterness about treatment of Native people stemming from colonization by whites and historically racist governmental policies) was “not going to heal our families. We need it [Red Rage] – it gets us places, keeps us motivated – but we need to learn how to walk away from oppression, whether it’s race, class or gender, with our dignity.” She then also noted that “some folks aren’t at that place in their healing yet,” and still experience Red Rage when frustrated with the System.

Lobbyist Ross commented that it’s hard to get white women to understand the unique perspective that Native women have when discussing issues of safety, family, and reproductive justice, which was one reason why Native women were meeting separately before joining the other (all-white) participants at *Women for Women Day*.

Ross reminded attendees, “Take the issue of access to birth control in South Dakota,” she said, referring to the Birth Control Protection Act bill (which was killed in the South Dakota Senate a few days later), “and making white women understand that when they were having the Pill pushed on them, Native women were being sterilized against their will. It’s a different historical perspective.” She spread her arms wide to illustrate, “It’s miles apart.” She thought a moment then said, “White women *progressed* to fighting for rights and laws to protect them from abuse. Native women had these cultural provisions, but they were taken away through governmental controls.”

Yet, Ross pointed out, the Birth Control Protection Act (a necessary bill to protect women, because pharmacists in South Dakota can legally refuse to fill birth control prescriptions) had two Native sponsors, Sen. Theresa Two Bulls and Rep. Tom Van Norman. In other words, even though Native people have a differing historical perspective, they are working to defend the rights and safety of all women in the state.

As the discussion moved farther into reproductive justice and the Birth Control Protection Act, Ross talked about how hard it is to get legislators to listen to reason. She made a remark that struck me as funny in an ironic way, “It’s very difficult to have an intelligent discussion during a bill hearing.” She explained, “It’s my opinion that women’s bodies

are the most legislated in this state,” but, interestingly, little of the legislation is for their protection. The pharmacist/birth control issue “is being turned into a Christian, moral issue and it’s being couched in those terms.”

Charon Asetoyer said, “Most IHS [Indian Health Service] units follow state laws around birth control. They need to loosen up the reins on family planning, because I’ve seen young women in our [NAWHERC] offices who are going to have

another baby and don’t know what to do, some are even suicidal.” Yet another reason, she concluded, abortion must be an available option.

A voice across the table commented that she knew of someone who’d had several abortions and she was uncomfortable with that. Asetoyer asked her, “But can you respect her right to make that decision, even if you don’t agree with it?” Discussion continued around the subject, and then Asetoyer’s voice rose again with finality: “Since *contact* [with Europeans],” her fist hit her hand and she shook her head, “we’ve been *told* what to do. And this is just one position that I will *not* be moved on!”

I brought up something that was going unmentioned but that I knew was being thought by some of us in the room. I wondered if the seeming push in the state to force women to have children was racially motivated, and Asetoyer picked up on that thread.

“They want their white women to have more children and they’ve turned it into a religious mission from God,” she said, then went as far as to speculate that if the white, right-wing religious forces that control the state could get away with it, they’d okay birth control and abortion for Native women and other women of color, while still denying birth control to white women.

Eugenics (Asetoyer said the word) – the forced sterilization of women of color, and the frowning upon of them increasing their family size — is not just a fantastic or paranoid delusion that many women of color have, it has been a fact in the U.S. Although rarely addressed in most activist circles, Native women have lived this reality and their stories of sterilization are being heard more frequently now.

This was just the type of frank turn in discussion that



Peggy Flanagan, Lonna Stevens, and Charon Asetoyer display *Indigenous Women's Health Book, Within the Sacred Circle*.

"Convening Native♀," cont. 3

might not have taken place if more white women (other than Ross and one attendee) had been in the room, making us, perhaps, more self-conscious or defensive about what was being said.

When Peggy Flanagan from Native American Leadership took the floor, she spoke to us about organizing. "Don't exhaust yourselves, build leadership so people can take over." She urged, "Don't be afraid to share information; don't keep it to yourself." She told us to recognize the potential in others within our community, and to encourage those who have potential and perhaps don't even know it.

"Our stories are who we are," Flanagan said, after sharing a personal story from her childhood involving domestic violence. When connecting with others or lobbying a legislator, she suggested talking about how we, or someone we love, is affected by the particular issue. Statistics, alone, won't do the job of communicating our concerns.

She asked us to list reasons why people fail to participate in a group that is trying to organize. We called out things like: "Fear," "Historical Trauma," and "Lack of time or commitment." Flanagan recommended that if we're trying to organize a meeting or event then we should make sure basics are covered. Such as: *Will people be fed? Will there be transportation? What exactly will be the agenda?* And, to remember to allow people to share ideas.

During one of the breaks, I tried to meet a few women, and get names and emails. Here are some of their stories:

I met Heather Olsen (Oglala/Yanktonai) who works as Tribal Liaison for United Sioux Tribes of South Dakota Development Corporation and as Coordinator for Sioux Nation Film Commission. She has received praise from the state

legislature for her efforts in pointing out the benefits of the state adopting a cooperative approach with area tribes, in dealings with the television and film industry. Her newest idea is to get Native youth involved in filmmaking to encourage their creativity, and because she believes such an artistic pursuit would raise their self-esteem, even paying off in higher grades in school.

MaryAnn Bear Heels-McCowan talked about hitting a wall with her plans for a Native American Day at the state capitol. Apparently, there are legislators who do

not want The Drum to be a part of a ceremony inside the capitol building. When I inquired - *why not?! -* in astonishment, she said defiantly, "Because the drum is the heartbeat of the People." In South Dakota, the disrespect for (and fear of) the First People of the land runs so deep that the 'People's heartbeat' is not to be heard within the walls of the white man's capitol of Indian Country. Bear Heels-McCowan said, sadly but resolutely, that if she was given



IWPC members discuss Native bills with Rep. Tom Van Norman, in House balcony.

more grief about the matter she would go to the press.

Carla Rae Marshall (Lakota Sioux) and I joked about never having any pictures of ourselves because we are always behind the camera or doing the interview. Marshall is currently freelancing as Publications/Media Coordinator for the Coalition (Against DVSA). When I lost the roll of film I took, Carla was kind enough to share her photos with me for my story. She also made sure that I got a photo of myself.

I spoke for a bit with Faith Spotted Eagle (Ihanktonwan Nakota), who ran a rugged 2006 campaign for the state house, and she told me about her efforts with the Brave Heart Society. The reformed Brave Heart Women's Society mentors young girls on the brink of womanhood, providing a new tradition of coming-of-age ceremonies, in hopes that family members will again take up the traditional cultural role of preparing their girls and providing private, traditional ceremonies for them. With the help of female family members, emphasis is placed on girls learning about healthy relationships, healthy living, and the "arts and virtues" of traditional womanhood. Thirteen girls participated in the 'first' ceremony on Yankton Sioux Reservation, called *Isna Ti Awica Dowanpi*, or "singing for those who live alone." Until the Indian Freedom of Religion Act in 1978, the *Isna Ti*, one of the Seven Sacred Rites of the Dakota/Lakota/Nakota people, was unlawful.

Spotted Eagle said that not only have the girls gained in self-esteem and sense of purpose from their association with the Brave Heart Society, but young male relatives have shown more interest in having healthier, respectful relationships with young women, too. All of which can only aid in beginning the healing in so many lives that needs to be done.

Theresa Spry (Oglala Lakota Sioux), a contender in the much-watched state Senate primary of 2006, told me what it was like to walk into a room and see her activist sisters. Beaming, she said, "I felt like doing a Snoopy dance!" She squeezed my arm in obvious delight. "We never get together like this, we just don't see each other enough...it's so hard because of schedules, you know." Spry also mentioned that she's not done running for office, we will hear about her in the future.

After break, we dove into

a talk about lobbying, and testifying in front of the legislature. Lonna Stevens reminded us that often legislators haven't even read the bill that we want to talk about, "it was probably read by their assistant." Yet, she insisted that, "Your one visit with personal experience is worth five visits of a lobbyist." She further encouraged, "If you can't sway a legislator, then think about who you can get to talk to him that he *will* listen to. Remember, too, that you don't have to

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understand the bill, what we need to understand is the gist of it, and what they [bill supporters] are trying to accomplish." In other words, know what the other side's hoped for result is and how that will affect you and your loved ones.

Stevens made an interesting point when she noted that sometimes Native people speak out against a bill that is sponsored by groups "we often work with and are well-meaning," but because the Native viewpoint is brought in at the end, it might turn out to be something Native people cannot support. "The problem is that we weren't invited to conceive the bill – we weren't at the first table."

She also spoke about protecting those who are to give sensitive testimony. "Make sure it is a safe environment for your witness. Maybe that Congress or Senate shouldn't hear that victim, but send in an E.R. tech or an M.D. for that testimony."

About which, lobbyist Ross noted, "We've had a helluva time finding women to testify on rape and sexual assault in this state," referring specifically to achieving testimony that persuades the legislature to include the rape/incest clause in their multiple abortion ban bills. "Women were shut down after legislators listened to women [supplied by ban fans] testify that they'd kept their babies after rape, and the men bought it, lapped it up. Rape is nothing, was the message they were only too glad to take away from that. Women were demoralized to hear that."

Something Stevens suggested that surprised me was asking pharmaceutical companies to help with efforts to pass the Birth Control Protection Act. "Can they be our allies? Sure. Do they have money? Yes! Make it a drug issue. Tell drug companies that if legislation against women's birth control passes, they'll [legislators will] start messing with other drugs and their access."

She warned against legislators who push constitutional amendments. "Constitutional amendments trump state laws," she told us, commenting that the gay marriage amendments were a fiasco for advocates working to end relationship abuse, because the laws apply to *anyone* unmarried – straight or gay, leaving even more people unprotected from batterers.

In a digression to this discussion, she mentioned meeting a woman in another training session who told her, "I didn't know that if you don't want to have sex with your husband and he does it anyway, it's rape." Proving to me, again, how important these training sessions have been for the women who have attended them.

Peggy Flanagan left us with some thoughts on voting in Indian Country. "We haven't always had the best relationship with the government, as Indian people," an understatement that made many of us laugh. "So there are issues of mistrust. Indian Country is often targeted for voter intimi-

dation," she warned. She then left us with another bit of wisdom: "Know your rights at the basic level."

After completing the training session, we were all given a copy of the beautiful new book, *Indigenous Women's Health Book, Within the Sacred Circle*, produced by NAWHERC, and co-edited by Charon Asetoyer, M.A., Katharine Cronk, Ph.D., and Samantha Hewakapuge, M.A.



Sally Roesch Wagner embraces Charon Asetoyer.

We were also encouraged to attend the pre-Women for Women Day dinner being held at another hotel. Asetoyer called to our attention that "there has been some grumbling about us meeting before the event."

Sadly, there seemed to have been some trepidation about Native women gathering singularly, and comments were made by some of our white activist counterparts. At one meal table where I sat, a few

Native women half-joked about it "being like the old days – whites afraid of gathering Indians..." Nevertheless, the group of proud Native women gathered for two meals with their white sisters – dinner that evening and lunch the next day.

Before dinner, Charon Asetoyer stood at tableside to address the crowded dining room. She spoke about her hope that the *Women for Women* organizers and sponsors would learn to make room at their activist tables for all women of color, "or they will *make* a place themselves." To which we women of color applauded loudly.

At the next day's lunch, after an initial round of lobbying, and before congregating in the Senate and House balconies to witness bill hearings, we were treated to a guest speaker. Sally Roesch Wagner, who is from South Dakota and a pioneer feminist scholar (having earned one of the first doctorates in Women's Studies in the U. S.), gave an inspiring talk that included insightful quotes from feminists past. Most memorably, she warned about the coming Presidential election: "Careful of our rush to the center. You don't dialogue from the center – that's where you may end up – you dialogue from your deepest truth," she said, spreading her arms wide.

After her speech, there was a photo op with Ms. Wagner. Slipping through the crowd with other women from the Native women training session, I saw Wagner light up when she espied Charon Asetoyer beside her. She drew Asetoyer into an immediate embrace, exclaiming, "Charon!" She then turned to the crowd, arm across Charon's shoulder, and said, "This woman's one of my *heroes!*"

At that moment, I witnessed not just a great photo op but a show of shared sisterhood and mutual respect between two women with different histories; an opportunity for healing graciously taken.