



A TEWA WOMAN'S REFLECTION ON URGENCY

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Native American GreenFaith convergee



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BEATA TSOSIE-PEÑA is of mixed ancestry from Santa Clara Pueblo and El Rito. She is a poet, mother, farmer and is certified as an educator, early childhood specialist and in permaculture design. She is a Green For All Fellow, and is currently chair for Honor Our Pueblo Existence (H.O.P.E.) The realities of living next to a nuclear weapons complex has called her into environmental health and justice work with the local non-profit organization, Tewa Women United for the last nine years. She believes in the practice and preservation of land-based knowledge, spirituality, language, seeds, our Earth, and family. Her intentions are for healing, wellness and sustainability for future generations.

In my ancestral homelands of northern New Mexico there resides knowledge that is held within Tewa deserts and forested landscapes, where mountains are elders, and our rivers are alive with a spirit that has sustained us since time immemorial with traditional knowledge that continues to guide us to be caretakers of this place. Countless prayers of First Nations are recorded here within shared memory of all that exists, and so is an act of violence so great that it will forever be recorded in sacred time. For in the western region of our Tewa world, in our beloved Jemez Plateau, site of a dormant supervolcano, and home to numerous ancestral, cultural sites, is where man first birthed the atomic bomb at Los Alamos National Laboratories (LANL).

The first nuclear device was detonated on July 16, 1945 in southern NM and the subsequent fallout poisoned generations of the more than 30,000 land-based Peoples who lived adjacent to the Trinity test site, and this plume would also cross state lines. “The National Cancer Institute (NCI) is carrying out a study to quantitatively estimate the range of possible radiation-related cancer cases in New Mexico that may be related to the nuclear test.”¹ This will be the first attempt at a public health study about cancer some 75 years after the Trinity Test. The group, Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety, reports that, “The people who lived adjacent to this bombing site in southern NM have cancer rates four to eight times the national average,” and have never been granted justice or even an apology.² The people of New Mexico and those downwind and downriver from Los Alamos deserve sincere acknowledgement and repentance from the U.S. government, access to healthcare, and speedy inclusion in the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. It will take a national and global outcry for this atonement to be enacted.

Other Indigenous and land-based peoples were also irreparably harmed by environmental releases during the production at LANL leading up to this first explosion, which was then followed by the countless deaths of those on the

1 “Study to Estimate Radiation Doses and Cancer Risks Resulting from Radioactive Fallout from the Trinity Nuclear Test,” *NIH: National Cancer Institute*. Retrieved from <https://dceg.cancer.gov/research/how-we-study/exposure-assessment/trinity>

2 “Commemoration Events of Trinity Atomic Bomb Test and Church Rock Uranium Tailings Spill Set for Saturday, July 16 in Tularosa and Church Rock, New Mexico,” *Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety*, July 10, 2016. Retrieved from <http://nuclearactive.org/commemoration-events-of-trinity-atomic-bomb-test-and-church-rock-uranium-tailings-spill-set-for-saturday-july-16th-in-tularosa-and-church-rock-new-mexico/>

receiving end of these a-bomb-inations in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This first assault of the nuclear age began a rapid declaration of war on Mother Earth and her Peoples, in which there were 2,053 nuclear explosions “tested” above and below ground, and in our oceans. We now have “naturally occurring” levels of background radiation as a result of these tests, and it is estimated that about 40% of the population will develop cancer.³

In my Tewa homelands in north central New Mexico, it is difficult to reconcile how we existed in reciprocity a rural, land-based agricultural existence as farmers, ranchers, and seed savers, isolated from the industrial age, only to be thrust into the nuclear age when the “land was seized under a set of values that separated the Peoples from the land.”⁴ This forcible act imposed a culture of violence on our soils, seeds, air, waters, future generations, and spiritual existence that continues to enact harm to this day. Soil samples collected by soil chemist, Morgan Drewniany, with the Indigenous women’s non-profit Tewa Women United in the Rio Arriba Valley of New Mexico in 2015, offers a preliminary study on soil contamination by LANL: “Over 100 samples were tested for arsenic, perchlorate, RDX, and hexavalent chromium using quantitative or semi-quantitative colorimetric methods. All four contaminants were found to be elevated, with levels above or closely approaching established health-protecting quality limits. It is clear that with levels this high, the health of those exposed is threatened as are the surrounding waterways.”⁵

I know that nuclear energy is a false solution to our current energy crisis, if only because of the teachings held in our shared stories as Peoples impacted by the nuclear age. This is knowledge that has gone around the world, and now needs to be reburied and held as sacred, never to be forgotten in our oral her-story.

In reflecting on our traditional, pueblo life-ways and unique worldview that has endured three waves of colonization and the constant environmental

3 National Cancer Institute, “Cancer Statistics,” 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.cancer.gov/about-cancer/understanding/statistics>

4 “Community Summary of CDC’s Los Alamos Historical Document Retrieval and Assessment (LAHDRA) Project,” 2010. Retrieved from http://www.lahdra.org/pubs/Final%20LAHDRA%20Community%20Summary_December%2002%202010.pdf

5 Morgan Drewniany, *Red Dust* (2015), 1.

violence and racism of corporate and military institutions, I look to our elders. Our sacred mountains that have born witness and continue to hold teachings of sustainable living and abundance. In our ancestral homes, now ruins at Puye Cliff Dwellings, is a prime example of some of the first solar powered architecture. My human elder, Kathy Sanchez, likes to say, “The only safe nuclear energy is 92.96 million miles away found in our sun.” This we can tap into with the full blessing of the first Peoples of this land. Solar and wind energy is nothing new when looking at pre-history and what we can learn from Indigenous People.

The Winter People’s energy system consisted of values in which nothing was wasted, everything was recycled, you only took and harvested what you needed, water was regarded as life and medicine, and people were taught to love, respect, and take care of one another.

I am from the Winter People, and I am Badger clan. At Puye, you can see where the old ones built their winter adobe (mud brick) homes on the southern side of a tall Cliffside, where they would be heated by full sun. In the summer, they moved to a village on the top of the mesa (flat mountaintop), where basins built into the rock harvested rainwater, and they could live in the relative coolness and life lessons that the forest offered. This is an example of how the Tewa summer and winter clans came to be, living in balance of seasonal time, with shared roles and responsibilities that was accepting of their place within life and a watershed that was all too precious and deeply respected. Their energy system consisted of values in which nothing was wasted, everything was recycled, you only took and harvested what you needed, water was regarded as life and medicine, and people were taught to love, respect, and take care of one another.

When we look at forests as an example of how energy is utilized, it is comprised of a watershed that begins at the top with natural springs, clouds, rain and air, and supports different levels of life until returning to the valleys and riverbeds at the bottom. This cycle is continuous, and is part of natural law. Current environmental regulatory agencies chop up this cycle so that what is relevant in one permit regarding groundwater, is not relevant to another permit regarding surface water or storm water and so forth. Indigenous Peoples' worldviews are often rendered as meaningless within scientific racism because we cannot speak of harm to the big picture that sustains all life and includes human life. Yet, so many of our permit processes are in a value system that functions on "allowable" levels of harm rather than the precautionary principle of "doing no harm". We must return as much as possible to these natural laws, which supersede all governmental law that is only destroying our ability to live as spiritual human beings and as an integral part of our ecologies. The scientific community needs to advocate for Indigenous People's ability to act as experts in helping to heal this land we are part of, and be a partner in enacting environmental regulatory reform that is inclusive of our unique worldview.

The impacts of our dependence on dirty energy are being felt globally in Indigenous communities.

We were never meant to dominate life, but to take care of all our relatives with gratitude and good will. This includes our plant relatives, our waters, the animals, the insects, the soil microbes, and even stone, which hold great energy. Native perspective sees rock and minerals as alive and also having a spirit, and I remember having to clarify with my children when learning in their science textbooks that rocks are classified as "not alive," that we have another perspective that is just as valid as any scientists. I have a line in one of my poems, "Have you ever looked into the shining eyes of coal?" I can't help but think of this when I see what harm is being released through the burning of coal, the mining of uranium, metals, and other minerals.

The spirit of these elements is not being honored or respected in a way that is in line with "taking only what we need." Minerals and fossil fuels are being unearthed at such an accelerated rate that the prehistoric time held within them is being released too rapidly, and as a result we can all feel the reality of this fast paced society we have created. It is a model that cannot sustain human life in the epochs of time that is held within stones and mountains. True time is held in cycles of cosmic spirals rather than the linear, binary existence that came with the colonizers mindset.

The impacts of our dependence on dirty energy are being felt globally in Indigenous communities. There is a direct connection to environmental violence perpetrated against mother Earth and the violence enacted upon women, girls, and other genders. Women and girls are the first to feel the impacts of climate change when it comes to the devastation of super storms, long-term drought, and relocation due to sea level rise. In my region we are impacted by long-term drought that has made our forests extremely susceptible to wildfires.

In 2011, my Pueblo of Santa Clara lost 80% of our lands and watershed to the devastating Las Conchas wildfire. Now we are working to remediate the dangers of flooding due to forest loss and earthen mountainsides that burned so hot it became like hardened glass, and regrow our cathedral forest that my children will never know as it once was. It is estimated that it will take over 300 years to regenerate. We remain hopeful and strong as a people working toward healing. What is painful is that the fire was diverted north towards our homelands in order to protect LANL facilities and the nuclear waste dump there known as Area G, where more than 30,000 barrels of mixed radioactive waste lie above and below ground in unlined dirt pits. This was the third time these labs housing plutonium were threatened by wildfires, and I can't help but think that nature is trying to cleanse herself. It is also a site riddled with seismic fault zones, and is located above our sole source aquifer, which means that more than half the population of New Mexico depends on that water for survival. I can tell you stories for hours of hundreds of contaminated sites that pose further threats to our water and health.

Indigenous women are also the most vulnerable when it comes to negative impacts on the well-being of our bodies. Women's bodies are more

susceptible to contamination, and exposure to toxicity is only increasing. There are many studies of toxicity found in breast milk and the implications for future generations. Mohawk midwife, Katsi Cook, teaches us about “woman as the first environment.” It is known amongst Native populations that our health and wellness are very much dependent on the health and wholeness of our surroundings. One cannot be separated from the other. When I was pregnant with my daughters, all of their ova (eggs) were developing within them with the potential for reproduction. In my pregnant state, three generations were being held all at once. This is true for all diverse cultures and another reason why we must protect those most vulnerable in our communities.

As a Native woman living adjacent to a nuclear weapons facility, I can tell you that I am not protected by current environmental radiation exposure regulations. My children are not protected. Do you know who is? Known as “reference man,” the International Commission on Radiological Protection defines him as a 154 lb. adult, white male, of western European descent and custom, being 5’7” in height, and between 20–30 years in age.⁶ According to Dr. Mahkijani, women are 52% more likely to get cancer from the same dose as a man, and infants when exposed to radioactive iodine are 75% more likely. Some of the toxins from nuclear sites can cross placental boundaries. This is an example of how environmental justice intersects with reproductive justice.

This environmental racism also does not consider the lifestyle of Native and land-based Peoples, who are outdoors for longer periods of time, still grow their own food, harvest rain water and use natural springs and bodies of water in our ceremonies, hunt, fish, gather wild plants, gather natural clays and dyes, etc. This puts us at risk for multiple and cumulative exposure to toxins over long periods of time, a factor that is also not considered when determining “allowable” levels of contamination into our environment and when determining water quality standards. We cannot wait for science to validate the harm we know is happening. We must be counted as experts that can help heal this place we are a part of. The process of health studies,

6 Arjun Mahkijani, “The Use of Reference Man in Radiation Protection Standards and Guidance with Recommendations for Change,” *Institute for Energy and Environmental Research* (April, 2009), 11.

while needed, is costly and takes long periods of time. We must not be required to give up our ancestral ways of knowing in order to protect ourselves from environmental violence. It is time that for-profit industries are held accountable, and that we are no longer classified as collateral damage for the war machine or fossil fuels industry.

While co-facilitating at the 2016 GreenFaith Climate Convergence in New Orleans, Louisiana, I was struck by the resilience and personal truths of the people there in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The locals all spoke of how hurricanes were common; it wasn’t until oil and gas companies began dredging canals, destroying wetlands and cypress groves, the natural buffer to these storms, that the impacts became so devastating. Man made impacts compounded by climate change and human error, have created a situation that threatens coastal life ways on a global scale.

The life-giving waters that we had so reverently interacted with, endure so much harm and violence on the journey south, that by the time they reach the Gulf they can no longer sustain life.

At this same convergence, we visited the Houma Nation, who are the first climate refugees in the United States, and were awarded a lump sum to help with relocation due to their island disappearing by sea level rise. It was there that I reflected on how this Nation were comprised of several tribes fleeing genocide, and found refuge in these wetlands that were willing to take them in. Now they are faced with being dislocated again, and it’s obvious that First Nations Peoples are an indicator species of the continued colonization and violence enacted on this continent. All the diverse people who call this planet home would do well to ensure that Indigenous Peoples are healthy and thriving, as their survival is now entwined together.

I also hold close to my heart a desperate plea from a young woman activist at a GreenFaith climate convergence in Rome, who shared how her home

islands of Fiji were disappearing into the ocean. How you could toss a rock from one end of their island to the other. Again, it is people like this who are suffering, while an elite few have benefited from their continued demise.

While in New Orleans, we visited an aquatic conservatory, where I was also able to reflect further on human impacts to our shared waters. As a spiritual anecdote, I can tell you that four years earlier I had the honor to bear witness and participate in a ceremony at the headwaters of the Mississippi River, called The Gathering of Condolence and Peace. This ceremony was the culmination of the hard work of an elder from the Akwesasne Nation to bring to life a healing vision that came to him in a dream. This ceremony was done in order to help all First Nations Peoples heal from the 500+ years of genocide and historical and generational trauma enacted upon them. It is a long story, full of beautiful signs and many miracles, but the piece I want to share with you is about after it was done. All the Indigenous People who attended from the four directions of mother earth, ended up at these headwaters. I never realized how small the beginnings of the great river are. We could walk across it easily. The water was sparkling, pure, pristine, and we all laughed, played and splashed as one inter-generational family. I remember making my offerings and prayers, and marveled at the experience while being 5 months pregnant with my future son.

Here I was, four years to the day that this powerful ceremony had happened, looking out over the Gulf of Mexico at this same rivers end where it emptied into the sea. What were the chances, except I knew it was a completion of a spiritual journey. The scientists at the aquatic center shared with us the reality of “dead zones.” The life-giving waters that we had so reverently interacted with, endure so much harm and violence on the journey south, that by the time they reach the Gulf they can no longer sustain life. The waters have picked up so much pollutants, residual toxins from oil spills, and industrial fertilizers from Big-Ag. farms that it only serves to feed toxic red algae in which no other life can exist. My heart broke at this realization, but knew that it was a story I was meant to share.

I offer this story as a means of reflection that the water in our bodies comes from the same source as all other water on our planet. That first and foremost we are water beings, born from water, and cannot live without

water’s life giving gifts, a covenant that we share with all other life here on mother Earth. We also share our life and resiliency with our corn mothers, and all our seeds, which evolved with us so that we could thrive in mind, body and spirit. It is important that they are adapted to the changes that are happening, that they are protected from genetic contamination; for it is in them that our true sovereignty is held. We lose it all when we lose our ability to feed ourselves. It is profound how growing corn teaches us to be in a good way with ourselves, each other, and with earth.

To all my relations reading this, I urge you to listen deeply to the struggle and voices of global, Indigenous communities who are currently putting their lives on the line to protect what they hold as sacred.

To do this, we must work to ensure the health of our lands, air, and waters, so that this memory held within the cells of our seeds and genetic memory, can continue to inform our journey as spiritual human beings. This journey that is awakening us to a time of healing, a time that will right the wrongs that are so apparent. To do nothing is sealing our destructive end and is a path that is no longer an option. We must at least try. Our spiritual evolution awaits our higher selves, and can be nurtured alongside our reclamation of meaningful relationships to all of creation. To all my relations reading this, I urge you to listen deeply to the struggle and voices of global, Indigenous communities who are currently putting their lives on the line to protect what they hold as sacred. That you open yourselves mind, heart, and spirit to the healing that happens when we love and respect water as the source of all life, how it will ultimately lead to loving and respecting ourselves and each other, and that it will give you the strength to take actions as a fellow “protector,” one in harmony with all life and creation.



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