

Prayer Vigil

THE PRAYER VIGIL FOR THE EARTH

by Bill Rolph

The Prayer Vigil for the Earth this year began its second cycle of four years. The fifth annual Vigil on the Mall began and ended with the blessing of the Elders from several indigenous nations of the Americas. The power of the presence of the native peoples was most powerful to me this year. Their wisdom continues to guide in harmony with the earth, the universe, and each other. There was not just a physical presence, nor just the prophetic words they spoke about the state of the races and the earth -- but a presence that came through in Nature's varied forms, in signs that life is everywhere connected.

Soon after the ground blessing ceremony on Friday, September 26th, a dragonfly appeared to me as I was walking back to the circle from my car. The dragonfly's spiritual purpose is to be guardians of sacred space. What seems so unlikely to me was that one appeared at all on the Mall. Here it was flying by and zigzagging around me. I talked to it, calling out and thanking it for coming. This was clearly a affirmative sign that the energies in the Vigil site were building quickly.

The rhythm of the men and women erecting the tipi's was joyful and seemed choreographed. On Saturday morning, after one ceremony in particular, sea gulls, geese, and a single grackle entered the space of the Sacred Circle unexpectedly. Also, later in the day the clouds formed in stable concentric circles and remained overhead. Clearly, all our relations were making an impact on us.

At dusk on this setup day, the Sacred Circle or Hoop was complete. A presence had been established on the Mall. I - we - looked on it with awe and excitement. Tomorrow could not come fast enough.

The sunrise ceremony on Saturday began at 6:30 with pipe ceremony and lighting of the fire. A solid 100 individuals are present. From my vantage point as Fire Keeper, I observed the intimacies of the rituals and feel the strong spirit presence build as the ceremony proceeds. Moreover, throughout the day the fire becomes my consummate focus, my only active relationship. The power of the fire and the prayers sent up, through tobacco and

other offerings, in large part depends on how well I attend and care for it. This sacred duty, if you will, is the joy-in-doing I feel throughout the Vigil. I learn a depth of give-away I never before experienced. This is soul work for me of the highest order. This is my heart's desire in the world.

Another presence of which I am custodian the Vigil is the Mayan stake, an empowered and magical presence, coming again this year but with Mayan Elders from Guatemala, placed (with all due ceremony) five feet from the fire. Between the fire and guiding individuals to it for prayers and explaining the presence of the Mayan stake, I am fully engaged throughout the weekend. Many children with their fathers came to the Fire, including Stewart Henderson and Bruce Lupin and their children.

Many other brothers came, including Forrest Craver and Craig Blumstrand (from Minneapolis), who departed soon after the Sunrise ceremony to conduct the first in a series of Staff Workshops. Throughout Saturday and Sunday morning about ten brothers came to the Vigil. I was pleased that many men came



Mayan and Native American Elders at the Prayer Vigil

over to say hello. I appreciated seeing us on the Mall. Bill Sanda took stunning photographs throughout the Vigil, including a gorgeous shot from atop the Washington Monument that encompasses the 13 tipi's as well as the Mall all the way to the and including the White House. I acknowledge Bill for his hearts work, which is sensitive in the most human and professional manner. He reveals many individuals, standing or moving alone or in small groupings, in moments of joy, surprise, and thoughtfulness - truly, moments of intimacy photographed as well as I have ever seen. We were a family of black, brown, red, white, and yellow. We were Bahai, Christian, Indigenous, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, and more. Many communities came in traditional dress. In a way, it was a riot of color.

I was moved to tears several times, because I felt the feelings of the prayers, as well as the sounds of the music and sheer amount of energy present. There was such a spirit of togetherness and harmony all the time! Early on, the Peace

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Ceremony involved everyone in the extended circle holding a flag of the world, and when the name of the country was called, the flag bearer stepped forward and waved a flag while everyone called out - let there be peace in so-and-so and let there be peace on earth. This was a very impactful time for me, because I realized just how large our human community is on this planet, how many national entities there are, and how tenuous our life is at present with a decline of natural resources.

The Malawi drummer's voice and drumming spurred on the participants to heights of such infectiousness, joy, enthusiasm, and spontaneous clapping. The spirituals and other vocals were equally deeply moving. At one point, William Commanda, Keeper of the Algonquin Prophecies, presented the story of the Seven Prophecies (read aloud in English), while the centuries old wampum belt was taken around for everyone to see. This was a very thought-provoking and beautiful moment: here was a series of prophecies past about human futures and here we are at the threshold to the 8th Era with decisions to make; at the same time, the powerful presence and beauty of this beaded belt moved among us to see and, even, to touch.

My memory of this Vigil weekend revolves around being acknowledged doing my best as Fire Keeper. I am blessed, amazed, humbled, honored, delighted, joyful, and much more. I feel ecstatic. Early on Saturday, Chief Michael Ravenhorse came up to me at the fire, and in such an open and loving way proceeded to tell me about Cherokee ways of fire keeping. This was a spontaneous give-a-way to me. I felt trusted and acknowledged like we had been friends for a long time. Several things I learned I began immediately to do. Hopi Elder Thomas Banyaka complemented me several times.

Throughout the weekend, strangers and friends alike came up to me and told me how much they appreciated and respected me. Feedback from the universe through individuals close at hand. Last night I was talking to a friend who told me it is clear

I have a tribal memory. I do, and more than that. All together, I feel clearly empowered in my mission to be a leader in healing relationships. This year, through the Elder Staking Ceremony and the Vigil, I realized that this mission goes beyond just human beings (to heal our personal and national relationships) to include stewarding our relationship with the earth - our earth mother, who gives everything to us. My experience as Fire Keeper this year has brought me emotionally into alignment with my mission.

There are many things, of course, I could write about. I am mentioning only the most meaningful experiences to me, however. On Sunday, Hopi Elder Thomas Banyaka described the Hopi Prophecy, using a symbolic map of human history. Interestingly, this morning was overcast, which to Thomas was not by chance. He commented that often after such an event of energies and celebration, a light and cleansing rain sometimes follows. The clouds thickened, so to speak, as he spoke. In a most wonderful dance of coordinated movement, the program continued and closed, while tipi's were silently struck, the perimeter was taken down, and the site began to breakdown.

Before the final circle, a gentle sprinkle began, and then the Vigil participants dispersed. Slowly the rain increased to a downpour over the next two hours. When I left at 4 o'clock, the Mall area was totally barren, the trash trucks had come and gone, and nowhere was there any physical sign the Vigil had ever taken place.

In the downpour I drove away thrilled, drenched, and satisfied that this was the strongest showing the Vigil ever made. A last thought for me was this: the Washington Post ran a story and a picture in its Sunday edition on the front page of the Style Section, an AP writer posted a one-page release, and the AP photographer showed up and took pictures, one of which the local Washington Times ran. It is clear the Vigil made news and entered the public domain. We began this cycle successfully through an organized focus on the theme of harmony and unity among the races and interfaith cooperation about the earth.