Dangerous memories of the Trail of Death

Facing our past and moving toward peace

Peter Digitale Anderson

It was hot and humid. Only mid-morning, and the sun was already beating down on us, raising temperatures to the mid-80s, with hardly a cloud for respite. Yet as we walked near the border between Indiana and Illinois, where once the vast forests of the East met the prairie, we knew our discomfort was minor compared to those who had walked this path one hundred and eighty-one years ago. Unlike the Potawatomi, who were being evicted from their land, our group had easy access to water and food. We spent most of the trip in a van rather than on foot. We did not experience our way of life disappearing as we left native forests behind. We were not being forced from our homes at gunpoint traveling for two months as our children and elderly died along the way.

Our group was traveling together on a pilgrimage remembering the Trail of Death, an opportunity through Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS). Over the course of nine days, we drove and walked from Plymouth, Indiana (near the original home of Chief Menominee's band of Potawatomi), to Shawnee, Oklahoma (the area where many Potawatomi eventually settled after first being forcibly removed to Kansas). Guided by George Godfrey, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and a researcher of the Trail of Death, alongside our instructor Katerina Friesen and historian Rich Meyer, we traced the path of the removal, learned from other Potawatomi, and stopped to lament and commemorate significant locations along the way.

The Trail of Death was one example of Indigenous nations being forcibly removed from their homelands in the early and mid-1800s, a contemporary to the well-known Trail of Tears removing the Cherokee from the Southeastern states of Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. In the early decades of the United States, the population was growing, and people sought new land to farm and settle. Millions of Americans crossed the Appalachians to squat on Indigenous land, despite federal treaty agree-

ments promising to prevent this. New treaties (the United States signed several dozen treaties with the Potawatomi[1]) urged Indigenous Nations to cede their land and move to "Indian Territory" west of the Mississippi. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, empowering the federal government to "negotiate"—often through manipulative, coercive, and violent tactics—with Indigenous Nations to clear them from lands desired for white settlement. Throughout the following decade, the Potawatomi were persuaded to relocate; finally, in 1838, Chief Menominee's band, one of the last refusing to leave Indiana, was rounded up and marched to Kansas. More than eight hundred and fifty people were removed on this Trail of Death, with at least forty-one Potawatomi—including many children—dying along the way. Many more perished after they arrived in Kansas, as they arrived just before winter and were given little shelter and provision.[2]

Dangerous memories and embodied learning

That's some heavy history. But I'm not Potawatomi; I'm as white as a northern and western European guy can get. Why would I spend a week driving in a smelly van, walking in the heat, and camping in summer humidity for a history that is not my own?

But it is my history. I grew up on land taken from the Potawatomi; my community's existence was built on their removal. And it is not only history: the Potawatomi and other Indigenous Nations are still actively fighting for the national sovereignty they have been promised, and the ideology that empowered the Indian Removal Act is still influential today.

In *Faith in History and Society*, theologian Johann Metz describes two types of memory.[3] There is a type of memory that has only a loose relationship to the past, offering an idealized history to those who have benefitted, an idea of the "good old days" in which there were few problems, none of which risk the future we imagine we are progressing toward. Then

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1   The Kansas Heritage Society lists forty-four treaties between the United States and the Potawatomi. See "Potawatomi Treaties: Treaties between the Potawatomi and the United States of America, 1789–1867," *Kansas Heritage Group*, http://www.kansasheritage.org/PBP/books/treaties/title.html.

2   See Thomas J. Campion, "Indiana Removal and the Transformation of Northern Indiana," *Indiana Magazine of History*, March 1, 2011, https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/imh/article/view/12592.

3   Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, translated by David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1980).

there are "dangerous memories" that challenge our assumptions about ourselves and our history, forcing us to be honest about the harm that has been caused, reminding us of those whose lives and dreams have been trampled underfoot for the sake of our own community's advancement.

The former "memory" lies to us and comforts us, letting us believe that everything is essentially fine. The latter is more difficult and more painful but invites us to learn, to grow, to acknowledge suffering, and to work toward healing. One memory listens to and responds to the leading of the Spirit, the suffering of the incarnate Christ among those we have forgotten or ignored. The other memory embraces spiritual blindness, tuning out the voices of those our nation and ancestors have harmed in the name of progress. Wrestling with the past and its challenge for the present is a deeply spiritual activity.

I signed up for the pilgrimage because this wrestling matters to me. When I was a kid, "Indians" were presented as part of an idealized, harmless memory. I grew up in Indiana (which ironically means "land of the Indians") where Indigenous people were either fictional or historical. Many places were named after them, such as the Potawatomi Zoo and Miami Road. It was fun to look for arrowheads alongside freshly plowed fields. They were the antagonists when playing Cowboys and Indians or mysterious figures in historical fiction. Nobody I knew complained about them being turned into sports mascots (my favorite baseball team as a kid was the Atlanta Braves).

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But there is more to this history than the idealized past; there is a dangerous memory ready to challenge. Many of my ancestors first came to Indiana in the years after the Potawatomi and Miami were removed, just as the land was being surveyed, parceled, and sold to settlers. Many of Indiana's residents with German heritage came in the mid-1800s because of the promise of open, unoccupied land where they could farm and thrive. While it is true that, as far as I know, none of my family directly participated in forcibly removing Indigenous people, it seems they were quite content to reap the benefits, building their lives on newly claimed land, ignoring or ignorant of those who had once called it

home. They came to work hard, farm the land, raise their children, and secure a future for their families—all good and noble intentions. I assume most of them were good-hearted people and kind neighbors. Nonetheless, individual morality does not negate cultural evil. My childhood home, the wellbeing and wealth of my family, the very existence of my hometown and my family's roots in Indiana, did not come from nothing; they were made possible by America's theft of Indigenous lands. (Mennonites—which included some of my forebears—are also facing this historical complicity in colonialism, a key theme of the pilgrimage.[4])

This dangerous memory extends beyond my direct ancestors. The United States also has a national myth, an idealized, sanitized history, that we use to tell our story. The United States was forged out of the hard work and pioneering spirit of explorers, cowboys, settlers, and patriots. God gave us, a special and privileged people, this land as our Manifest Destiny. The land was empty and uncivilized; it was our calling, our duty, to tame it, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The citizens of the United States were always the heroes of the story, and our moral and cultural superiority were a gift for us to share with the world.

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But as with Indiana, so with everywhere else. The land was not empty; our ancestors did not respect the dignity and humanity of the people living there and did not respect their ways of life or claim to their home. This mindset was not new; it was simply another expression of the Doctrine of Discovery, a legal framework born out of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1500s giving European Christians a theological foundation for invading and claiming non-Christian, non-white lands. Both explicitly and implicitly, this doctrine has undergirded European and US colonization and the destruction of Indigenous Nations ever since, especially in Africa and the Americas.

It is imperative for me, as a Christian, to confront and repent of the ways this oppressive, colonizing attitude of moral and cultural superiority is embedded within my own worldview. It is imperative for me, as a spiritual leader, to recognize how it appears in my teaching and mentoring.

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4 Paul Schrag, "Gospel of Conquest," *Mennonite World Review*, March 4, 2019, http://mennoworld.org/2019/03/04/editorial/gospel-of-conquest/.

It is imperative for me, as a peacemaker, to see and resist the ways the Doctrine of Discovery continues to shape society and harm marginalized communities today. Ultimately, facing our dangerous memories is not about placing blame or feeling guilty; it is a process of healing spiritually, leading to humility, repentance, and learning to love the Other whom we have harmed.

Transforming historical harms

The Potawatomi Trail of Death is tied to my own history, both my personal ancestry and my cultural heritage. The beliefs that led to Indigenous removal have left wounds on my own soul in the form of arrogance, privilege, cultural isolation, and spiritual blindness. They irrevocably harmed the Potawatomi who lost their land, saw their language and culture nearly destroyed, and continue to struggle for the survival of their nation. Reading about the history would not be enough; spiritual transformation requires activity, relationship, an embodied form of learning. Dangerous memories demand actual change.

One resource that I have found useful in this process is *Transforming Historical Harms*, a manual from Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding.[5] This was born out of EMU's STAR program for trauma healing and Coming to the Table's work of healing racial wounds between descendants of enslaved and enslaver Americans (slavery itself being deeply tied to the Doctrine of Discovery). I believe the Transforming Historical Harms (THH) framework holds significant potential for helping groups and individuals face and process the evil of the past and turn toward a more hopeful, just, and healthy future.

The THH framework consists of four dimensions:

Facing history—looking at the history of a relationship, conflict, or event from the perspectives of all involved, seeking truth at the risk of upsetting one's preferred beliefs. One of the most uncomfortable parts of our pilgrimage was facing our history, the reality of the harm that had been done. Through readings, conversations, historical locations, and personal reflection, we both learned and faced the facts about the Potawatomi removal.[6]

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5   David Anderson Hooker and Amy Potter Czajkowski, *Transforming Historical Harms* (Harrisonburg, VA: Eastern Mennonite University, 2012).

6   See, for example, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 2014).

Making connections—building authentic relationships of understanding and respect with the "other side." A key part of the pilgrimage was not simply learning about the Potawatomi but also meeting some of them and being welcomed into their reality. No longer were Indigenous people confined to history and fiction; they were real people wrestling with identity, culture, and politics.

Healing wounds—creating intentional spaces and rituals for the physiological, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive healing of trauma. Although I can't say whether the pilgrimage was healing for our Potawatomi hosts, it was deeply so for many in our group. Full of ritual and reflection, we walked parts of the Trail, journaled and reflected, sang and prayed, and more.

Taking action—in partnership with the "other side," working to change cultural and institutional systems that perpetuate harm and injustice. By the end of the trip, our group was left with a question: What does it look like for us to take action, to show solidarity with the Potawatomi and other Indigenous peoples? In many ways, it still felt so big, so long ago, that it was hard to know where to start.

These are not one-time activities; healing and transformation are long-term, ongoing processes. Nor are they necessarily sequential steps, although one dimension often leads to another. In reflecting upon our pilgrimage, I saw how elements of all four dimensions were incorporated into the trip, both in our activities during the week and in our discussions about what might come next.[7]

About the author

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7   This essay is adapted from Peter Anderson, "Dangerous Memories of the Trail of Death: Facing Our Past and Moving toward Peace," *Fiercely Alive*, July 16, 2019, which includes a photo essay documenting the 2019 Trail of Death pilgrimage and a concluding list of specific actions steps; http://fiercelyalive.com/dangerous-memories-of-the-trail-of-death-facing-our-past-and-moving-toward-peace/.