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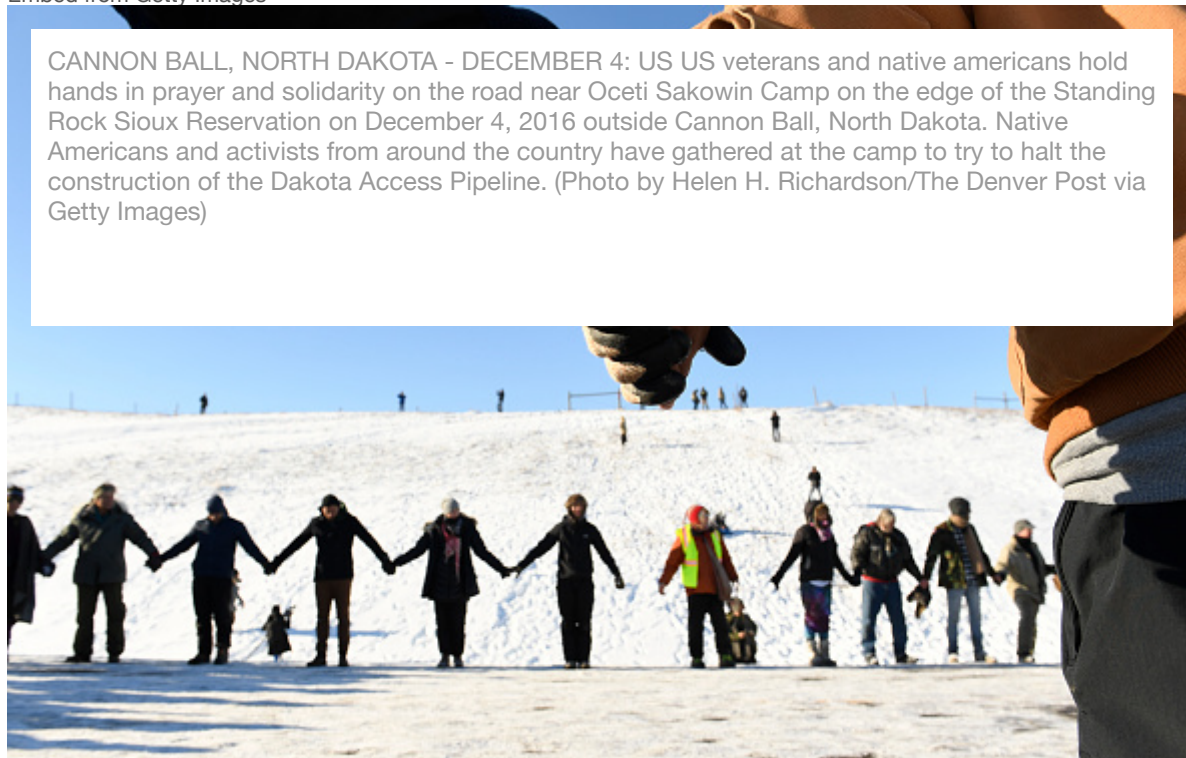
How Standing Rock solved my 2016, First World problems

Original article at <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/standing-rock-solved-2016-first-world-problems/>

Andy Bichlbaum December 29, 2016

Embed from Getty Images

CANNON BALL, NORTH DAKOTA - DECEMBER 4: US US veterans and native americans hold hands in prayer and solidarity on the road near Oceti Sakowin Camp on the edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation on December 4, 2016 outside Cannon Ball, North Dakota. Native Americans and activists from around the country have gathered at the camp to try to halt the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. (Photo by Helen H. Richardson/The Denver Post via Getty Images)



Denver Post | Helen H. Richardson

2016 was a rough year. After Nov. 8, it became almost unlivable. In my case, a sustained state of anxiety and depression erupted occasionally into nausea and panic. Behaviors buried since the Bush era made their reappearance, and I even did some brand-new things, like physically threaten someone who called me a faggot. It was as if *something* — myself, I guess — was trying to figure out how to exist in this new reality.

Before the election, I hadn't always been at peace, but I'd settled into a homeostasis in which I felt at least *possibly* useful, based on the idea that action at the bottom could affect things at the top — like Obama with the Keystone XL pipeline, for example. But now what? Under

power that would clearly never give a flying fuck about any progressive pressure unless it actually stopped the whole system, my psychic bedrock seemed to be crumbling.

First World problems, of course. Most people in the world have recently known, or currently know, exactly what it's like to live under power that's indifferent to their lives and desires. Even many Americans know this — for example, the Lakota Sioux of Standing Rock, who are seeing the last shreds of their world threatened by the “Black Snake,” as they call the oil industry trying to build a pipeline right through their watersheds. For them and other First Nations, our coming autocracy is just a new flavor of authoritarian disregard.

Hmm. Maybe *they* could help with my bedrock erosion problem.

My friend Jean-Louis had been living at Standing Rock for the past five weeks, near where a camp of sometimes 15,000 “Water Protectors” had been going strong since August. Jean-Louis, who's 76 years old and the heir of a famous artist, had decided to use his small fortune for the cause. He'd so far invested \$300,000 in the resistance at Standing Rock, and planned to spend another \$300,000 too.

He'd asked me to come twice already, and offered to pay for the trip. I hadn't accepted because I didn't know what I could do to help — but now, on his third invitation, I knew exactly why I needed to go: not to help, but to learn. I would take a camera and ask the Water Protectors what people like me could learn from people like them about protecting our world from brutally indifferent power. I'd plunder Standing Rock not for oil, but a new way of being.

My plane ticket to Bismarck was for Monday, Dec. 5. That was also the day the Army was threatening to evict Oceti Sakowin, the main Water Protector camp not on Native land. In response, 2,000 veterans had begun arriving to form a “human shield” around the Protectors.

Then, as if on cue, Monday's forecast came to include a blizzard, the season's first. If the Army acted, they'd be facing 2,000 veterans *and* a big snowstorm. Instead, they relented, refusing the pipeline's “easement” through traditional Sioux land, the issue that had started the encampment in April. It was a massive victory — partial but still historic.

Another effect of the blizzard was that it took me three hours to make the 60-mile drive from Bismarck to Standing Rock Monday evening. Sometimes I had to roll down the driver-side window and watch the yellow line.

Embed from Getty Images

CANNON BALL, ND - DECEMBER 02: Snow covers the ground at Oceti Sakowin Camp on the edge of the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation on December 2, 2016 outside Cannon Ball, North Dakota. Native Americans and activists from around the country have been gathering at the camp for several months trying to halt the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The proposed 1,172-mile-long pipeline would transport oil from the North Dakota Bakken region through South Dakota, Iowa and into Illinois. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)



Getty Images News | Scott Olson

When I arrived, I saw shacks and teepees, but the people were all hidden inside, wringing what warmth they could from their heaters and fires. I slept at my friend Tito's camp in Oceti Sakowin, next to a roaring fire in a sturdy shack that Tito and friends had had the foresight to insulate.

My first morning, I had coffee at the neighboring Two Spirits campsite, then wandered around the Oceti Sakowin camp for a while. I told myself I was "scouting" for my mission: to ask what the rest of progressive America could learn from these people who'd stalled a project backed by billions of dollars.

The inside of my nose felt alarmingly stiff, and I kept slipping on the ice. It was beautiful, everything a resistance camp should be — flags fluttering, teepees rising picturesque against the snow — but almost no one was visible: People were still inside, trying to keep warm.

I went back to Tito's camp to warm up. Then back to the Two Spirit camp. Then back out to "scout" some more.

And then, I suddenly realized I didn't fully understand my own question anymore. What could "we urbanites" learn about resistance? When I tried to form it into words I might actually ask, I found I simply couldn't. I searched the environment for cues to how I might phrase it, but at my New York speed, I just couldn't see much of anything.

I got in my car to drive to the casino hotel, where Jean-Louis was staying, and where my friend Rupa Marya, the physician, had set up a medical response clinic. Maybe they'd help me make sense of my time here.

I inched back towards the gate through which I'd entered and found myself in the midst of a total shit-show. Cars were stuck or sliding all over the place as they tried to accelerate up the incline to the highway. My own car slid into a snowbank and had to be dragged out backwards by a local with a 4×4. Someone suggested driving to the south exit, with a less steep incline, but that was completely blocked by a trailer. Two and a half hours later I was back exactly where I had started.

I tried to meditate. It took me a while to find a warm, quiet spot, but then my thoughts were so loud and bouncy that just trying to watch them exhausted me. I think my mind felt betrayed: I'd come here to find some solidity, some meaning in a suddenly meaningless world, but instead I felt more groundless than ever.

I walked and shivered for an hour, then got back in my car to try the south exit again. This time, it was clear. I accelerated up the path to the highway and... success! I drove the 10 icy miles to the casino in under an hour.

There, I headed through the nightmare of slot machines to find Rupa and her makeshift clinic, set off in a corner of the "Pavilion," an arena of sorts attached to the casino, normally for cattle shows and the like, but now serving as a staging and sleeping area for 2,000 people taking refuge from the sudden bitter cold.



Andy Bichlbaum and Rupa Marya (second from left), along with nurses in the makeshift clinic at the Casino Pavilion. (WNV / Andy Bichlbaum)

With veterans in camo scattered among civilians, it looked like a cross between a military deployment and a disaster relief zone, which in a way it was. Except that in the middle of this one, four singing drum circles traded off, pulling from circle to circle a cluster of videographers. Absurdly, I videotaped as well.

When I tore myself away to find Rupa, she embraced me as if I were the only thing that mattered. “Look, it’s the Yes Men guy!” she bubbled over to the other physicians and medics.

How was she, I asked. “It’s a disaster,” she answered instead. There were dozens of cases of hypothermia, and a half-dozen people were just plain missing. “One thousand people slept here last night,” she told me. “Two thousand tonight. Can you imagine?”

Just then, someone brought to Rupa a dazed young Protector who’d been out shoveling snow from the casino driveway. “Hypothermic,” Rupa said matter-of-factly, and walked him to a physician just outside the partition.

I suddenly wanted very badly to feel useful, and asked Rupa how I could help.

“Help?” She sounded delighted. “Do you have any training?”

“Um, no.”

“Well, we’re actually good. But thank you so much.” She didn’t seem to realize I’d asked *her* for a favor.

We stood together watching the drumming, which had now given way to a full-on round dance. “Wow, isn’t *this* amazing?” she said, before being called away to fix another Protector.

For a second I wondered if now was the time to go around asking my question. But I was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of envy — of Rupa, of the 2,000 veterans, of everyone here who knew what they were doing and why. To know what to do, to have the tools to do it, and then to just do it, suddenly seemed like the only state in the world worth aspiring to. It felt like *all* the unhappiness I’d ever experienced in my First-World life was due to not knowing how to be of service. When I had known — happy. When I hadn’t — not. Any misery I’d ever felt was precisely to the degree that I didn’t know how to be useful. It was just that simple.

So instead of asking my question, I went to find Jean-Louis, hoping he might have something useful for me to do. I thanked him for flying me out here.

“Oh, you’re welcome. There’s someone I want you to meet,” he said, and introduced me to a sexy, sassy, long-haired gay Navy vet named Hey. That’s their real name, and they use the pronoun “they.”

“I’m a pretty princess,” said Hey, drawing giggles from Jean-Louis.

I was instantly over my angst, at least for now.

Hey had been here since August, since the encampment had started to grow, in a sagging tent called “the Pretty Princess Palace,” close by Tito’s camp in Oceti Sakowin. Like Rupa, Hey betrayed no fatigue at all, only energy and a caring beamed all around: towards Jean-Louis, who’s 76 and straight, with an irreverent and disarming flirtatiousness; and towards a Native couple struggling to change their two small children out of wet clothes, with: extra mittens, a hundred-dollar bill, and a promise to find them space in a room for the night, which Hey straightaway dropped everything to fulfill.

Somewhere in there we plotted an idea for a prank news team. It would go like this: “Hi. I’m Sharla Jones from KNET-TV. Could I play with your hair?” The questions would get progressively weirder, finally ending with “May I pee in your butt?”

I suddenly felt at home. And that night, as we lay huddling together in a sleeping bag against the bitter Great Plains cold (one of the two gas heaters wouldn’t start), Hey told me just how they’d gotten here. It was strange to get my wisdom transmission from a Navy queen rather than a Sioux elder, but I guess that’s just how it works.



Andy Bichlbaum and Navy veteran Hey (right). (WNV / Andy Bichlbaum)

Here’s their story.

Hey became a veteran the usual way: They served in the military and survived.

The way Hey ended up in the military is also the usual one: poverty. That, plus a crazy father and drugs and so on, made military service feel like the only option available.

In the Navy, Hey discovered sex with men.

Also, they committed some war crimes.

Many obnoxious things have been written about how, in war, people find something deep and intense. That's partly because the military experience is so carefully engineered. Over the millennia that there have been armies, they've evolved to organize adolescents into persistent units of a size that our ancestors knew on the savannah: up to 200 and no larger. It's a small, trustable world, all you need and all you can really rely on. It's satisfying down to the marrow, an experience to literally die for — or kill.

But then, once the cocoon of savannah reality molts away, you feel pretty bad about having killed on command — at least if you're Hey.

Feelings of guilt, it turns out, make PTSD a whole lot worse. If you blank out in a horrific killing experience but feel no guilt about it, that's one thing — you'll suffer, you'll relive the horror at inopportune moments, it'll "haunt" you. But if you have guilt about the experience, if you consider yourself to have been an agent of "war crimes," it's a whole other thing, as studies have shown.

So, for over a year after the Navy spit him out in 2011, Hey would wake up almost every night choking in terror, unable to breathe. Recreational drugs did no good, and neither did a real estate job and an apartment.

Then, in September of that year, Hey heard the call of the savannah from a little paved square called Zuccotti in downtown New York City, perhaps the least savannah-like place in the United States.

Hey went to see it: maybe a hundred, 200 people occupying the square, roughly the same size as a Navy unit, but fighting for common decency rather than oil. Hey dropped everything and moved in. For the first time since their discharge, life felt ok.

A machine that gives people like Hey what they *need*, community, and then spits them out after making them do terrible things, has exactly nothing to recommend it. But can another kind of battle, with good as the object, provide the same sorts of satisfaction?

Occupy answered a deep yearning for comrades and a purpose that included fighting injustice. I'd felt it too. I didn't move there — my apartment was 10 minutes away by bike — but I visited every spare minute I could, and got involved in a number of projects and working groups. Once, I ran into a friend who told me that for the first time since she'd known me, I seemed content, without my usual searching look. I think it was that feeling of satisfaction that my body remembered, there in the Pavilion, when I'd felt that overwhelming desire to be of service.

Hey experienced Occupy a few times more fully than I did. When the police evicted the occupiers a month later, they were one of the first arrested. But Occupy didn't end with the eviction, of course. There were hundreds of people like Hey who'd let everything fall to be a part of the battle, who weren't going to just pack up and go back to wherever. So when Superstorm Sandy struck New York City, the Occupy networks sprang into action, becoming

the most effective relief agency ever. Hey helped rebuild a few hundred homes in New Jersey.

Then, in 2012, Hey embarked on a six-month silent meditation retreat in which they learned to stay put when the past came to haunt them. And when Standing Rock began swelling in August of 2016, Hey was there right away.

I asked Hey whether they knew *why* they needed so much to be part of these struggles, to this degree.

“I’d like to think it’s compassion,” Hey answered. “But it’s probably just to atone for my war crimes.”

Is that why I too feel drawn to battles like these? Is living in a wealthy country itself a war crime, since we live on the backs of those who can’t enjoy such prosperity?

This battle, in any case, was momentarily won. First Nations people had stood up, resisted a pipeline, and stopped it for now. That much was empirical. It’s also empirical that almost everything good — the eight-hour day, the end of slavery and child labor, the right of women to vote and gays to marry, what have you — was won through struggle, sometimes cold and harsh. The long arc of history does in fact bend towards justice.

But Hey’s story showed me *how* this empirical stuff could happen, how shit and blood could be spun into meaning. Or at least it was one such way, one window into the process. If Standing Rock were a proverbial elephant, I’d taken a magnifying glass to one tiny bit of its skin. What about the rest of the vast reality?

Those 2,000 vets who’d arrived just before me — had some of them, like Hey, collapsed at the end of their service and ricocheted around until they found a community to truly serve with, without war crimes this time? What other stories had brought them here? And what about Rupa and the dozens of medical and legal professionals who’d left jobs and obligations to be of service here?

Most of all, what about each of the Sioux, Omaha, Dene, Ho-chunk, Creek, and others who’d come and endured months of discomfort and sometimes violence, to make Standing Rock the next Wounded Knee? Had some of them too found community, that they’d missed as much as anyone else? What else?

The idea of a formula that “we” can learn from any “them” is sloppy at best, colonial at worst. Yet since things do change, and movements do win, there must be a formula. Maybe it’s just not one we can ever wrap our heads around, or that can ever be reduced to a few words on a camera, or probably to words at all. The elephant is humongous, beyond anything most of us can imagine, which is why we can’t begin to absorb it.

Yet Standing Rock is being absorbed, just as Occupy was. At the dinner table, or in bed, or maybe even at the office water cooler, stories like Hey’s are radiating across the country in all kinds of ways. Those who participate in struggles let others see the elephant through one particular patch of skin, helping to mobilize something inside for the new struggles of 2017 and beyond.

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Andy Bichlbaum is a co-founder of the Yes Men, a group dedicated to giving mainstream journalists humorous fodder for covering important issues and doing their jobs. The Yes Men have made three feature films about their "identity correction": impersonating leaders and big corporations who put profits ahead of everything else.

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