



Struggle-La-Lucha.org

Peltier's message of struggle: 'We made things better for our people'

written by Leonard Peltier

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National Day of Mourning march in Plymouth, Mass., Nov. 25. Photo: Jimmy Powell

The following message from Indigenous political prisoner Leonard Peltier was read at the 52nd National Day of Mourning in Plymouth, Massachusetts, on Nov. 25, 2021. For more information about his case, visit WhoIsLeonardPeltier.info.

Greetings relatives,

Each year as November nears, I try to think back on all that has happened in my world in the past 12 months. And I know that in my world I can only see a very small part of what is happening on the outside. For me, this year somehow seems to carry

more weight than usual.

I have passed ever so slowly into the world of the elderly. I am now closer to 80 than to 70. The truth is, I never believed I would live this long. I was just past 31 years old when I came to prison. It was almost half a century ago. My body is now the body of an old man. And it is harder to try to keep myself from being overtaken by sickness or depression or loneliness. They are constant companions here. I keep them at arm's length and I know I cannot ever let them overtake me. If I allow that to happen it will be the end. There is no mercy here. No compassion.

I cannot even imagine what it is like on the outside. I only hear stories and cannot believe half of what I hear.

For me, the best days here at USP Coleman 1 in Florida were the days when we could be outside in the yard and feel the sun. Even though they purposely built the walls so high that we cannot even see the treetops, the occasional bird or butterfly gives a welcome glimpse of our relatives in the natural world, but even that is very rare now.

I know COVID has cost all of us, you and me, in many ways. And I offer my condolences to all of you who have lost loved ones and friends to it.

Here inside the steel and concrete walls it is no different. Constant lockdowns caused by both COVID and violence have made life here even harder than usual. I have not been allowed to paint in 18 months and we are almost always in some form of lockdown.

We are stuck in our cells for days at a time. It is an extremely rare day when we get to go outside to the yard.

I feel moved to try to explain something that has been on my mind for many years. I think maybe it will be helpful if I say the words out loud.

When we started to emerge from the darkness of residential schools, it became clear that we had to go back to try and reclaim what they robbed from us.

And what they robbed us of was the very heart of who we were. Our language, our ways and our connections back home. They wanted us to leave those “schools” thinking like little non-Indians who would just go along with the program and not rock the boat. Even with all the terrible damage they did to so many of us, many of us did survive them. And then we began the process of reclaiming our culture and way of life. I know that process continues to this day.

I am so deeply saddened in hearing the stories of all the children’s graves they are finding at residential schools. I guess I was one of the lucky ones who made it home. But the deaths of those children is so sad and outrageous and I am glad the world is finding out at last.

Back then even our home at Turtle Mountain was under threat of government termination. I remember how hard my dad, who was a World War II veteran, fought to save us.

Fighting the outrages

Over the years we fought so many fights to keep our way of life alive and protect the natural world.

After our family was relocated to Portland, Oregon, I took part in the fishing struggles with Billy Frank and his Nisqually people at Frank’s Landing. The rednecks were cutting up their nets and attacking both women and men who just wanted to continue to fish as their ancestors did.

And when they shot Hank Adams it was a very dark time and outraged all of us, but we stood strong to protect the Nisqually people. I will always be proud of that.

There were so many outrages back then.

When the land at Fort Lawton in Washington State fell into disuse, we went there and occupied it under old treaty law. That was also a hard time. At one point soldiers were pointing flame throwers at us. But we held our ground and eventually they gave in.

We put our good friend Bernie White Bear in charge and he helped to build the Daybreak Star Center that is still a great asset to Indian people today. Bernie is gone now, as are so many of the others from those days.

Same thing when we took the abandoned Coast Guard Station in Milwaukee with Herb Powless. Our actions might have been unpopular at the time, but they led to a school, alcohol treatment center and employment office. The school is still thriving and is an asset to the Native community and the Milwaukee area. Herb is gone too.

So even though the price we paid was very, very high, we did make things better for our people and we did help to turn things around.

I wonder if many people understand the events in our history and how connected they are. I was born in 1944. The massacre at Wounded Knee was in 1890. That was just 54 years earlier. Both Geronimo and Chief Joseph died only 35 years earlier, in 1909. Think about that. Today, 35 years ago was 1986. Not very long ago at all.

I want to leave you with some positive thoughts.

Retired United States Attorney [James Reynolds did an interview](#) with the Huffington Post last week and actually apologized to me for all the wrong they did to me. I hope that it spreads all over the world and I am grateful to him.

I can say that I am heartened and encouraged by the courageous water protectors from Standing Rock to the beautiful manoomin (wild rice) lands of Northern

Minnesota.

I am proud of Winona LaDuke and her people's work to protect those beautiful lands and lakes and her work to offer alternatives to fossil fuels.

Using hemp could fix so many things. It is not something we can fix in a year or 10 years but it is something that all reasonable people should understand.

We cannot poison the water that sustains us. All of us. Not just Native and First Nations people, but all people. We have that in common. People should understand, we are trying to protect our homes and our natural lands. Water IS life.

And I am deeply grateful for the courage and vision of Deb Haaland, the new secretary of the Interior Department. I know she went to Alcatraz this week. That is an acknowledgment that [what we did was right and honorable](#). I was not at Alcatraz, but those of us, women and men, who stood up in those days were right. And in other parts of the country we formed our own branches of United Indians of All Tribes. So their efforts led to others joining in.

I heard that Deb Haaland said that the day has come when Indians no longer have to protest to be heard by the U.S. government. That is music to my old ears.

Our people were, and many still are, suffering.

Anyone of any race would do the same things to stop the sufferings of their people.

I wish all of you good health and happiness in all you do. You are in my prayers and I am grateful to all of you who have supported me or will support me going forward.

I still hold out hope that I can make it home to Turtle Mountain while I can still walk out under my own power.

I remain grateful for the gift of life.

In the Spirit of Crazy Horse,
Doksha,
Leonard Peltier

