



























Mekasi and other Poncas shared their dreams for the future in the spirit camp tepee. Mekasi told the Tanderups, “Our people lost the sacred corn when we were removed to Oklahoma, and it would be great to bring that corn back to its homeland. This is where it grew; this is the area it used to grow in, and it would be great to revitalize that corn.” Mekasi asked Art, “Would you mind if we plant it here?” Without hesitation Art said he wouldn’t mind at all. “Absolutely. Absolutely, we can plant it here,” he enthused.

But the last time the Poncas had planted corn in their homelands had been 137 years before. Had any of their seeds survived? Art explained that Mekasi “and another gentleman, Amos Hinton, started searching for the medicine bundle that had some of that corn crop, that the Lakota had harvested [in the] fall of 1877,” when the Poncas had been removed. “They found that medicine bundle and were able to get that handful of red sacred corn.” The Poncas worked with the Pawnees who had also resurrected some of their sacred corn in the Grand Island, Nebraska, area. They brought some of their seed varieties, too, to plant at the Tanderups’ farm.

After more than one hundred winters, however, would the seed grow again? Art, who had been planting corn for decades, was concerned that the seed would not germinate. “We had planted about four acres of corn that year,” Art recalls. “When we were planting the red [corn] first, I said to Amos and Mekasi, ‘Did you save some, in case it doesn’t grow?’ And they said, ‘It’ll grow, have faith! It will grow. This corn is sacred, and it will grow.’”

Sure enough, the Poncas and Art were delighted a few weeks later when little corn seedlings pushed out of the spring soil and began to climb toward the sun. “We had a beautiful crop of corn that year,” Art remembers. “We harvested the five different varieties. Mekasi hauled it all back to Oklahoma, and they planted eighty acres of corn next year.” Ever since then, the Poncas have been converging on the Tanderups’ family farm twice a year, first in the early summer to plant and then in the fall to harvest their corn.

This fifth year of Ponca corn-planting at the Tanderup farm is special. Before the planting begins, a ceremony is held. Four VIPs sit in front of

a large table, covered with a bison robe. Art Tanderup sits on one end; Larry Wright Jr. is seated on the other. Helen nestles cozily between her husband and Casey Camp-Horinek, a councilwoman of the southern Ponca tribe of Oklahoma and Mekasi's mother.

Almost exactly 160 years ago, Ponca chiefs had signed over millions of acres of their homelands to the U.S. government, later to be redistributed as homesteads to people like Helen Tanderup's family. Today, on this topsy-turvy farm, instead of the Poncas giving up more of their land, Art and Helen Tanderup are signing a different kind of treaty, a deed that returns the Poncas' one-acre corn plot to them. Later the Tanderups will expand to ten acres the parcel of land that they are repatriating to the tribe.

During the ceremony, Art talks about how the Tanderups' return of the land grew out of facing the Poncas' history together at the spirit camp. This day on the farm "has been many years in the making," Art says. "We remember Mekasi talking about such an action several years ago when we sat in that tepee at the Ponca Trail of Tears camp. . . . We talked about bringing the corn back to its homeland. We talked about the homeland being taken away from the people. We talked about growing that corn again. And making all the relatives healthy. We talked about how it would be great to have some of the homeland back again."

Art acknowledges, too, that the Tanderups' return of ten acres to the Poncas is one modest step toward making amends for the history that dispossessed and divided the Poncas. "It's an honor for Helen and [me] to make this happen," he says, "and to give a small piece of what was theirs, and so terribly taken away. Such a tragedy in our American history and then to have to be driven away from this land that was taken from them. So, this is just a small gesture. . . . It can never make what went wrong right, but it can show how we feel about this and how we are honored to give this small piece of land back to the people that . . . were the stewards of this land. They took care of it. They knew how to take care of it."

After he speaks, Art signs the deed to transfer the land to the Poncas and then passes it to Helen, who quietly and decisively adds her signature. The onlookers clap their hands. Casey and Larry wipe tears from

their eyes. Casey is to speak next, but she is overcome with emotion; she bows her head on Larry's shoulder. Helen comforts her. After a few moments, Casey composes herself and says, "This day our Mother the Earth sustained us, and gave us reason to live. This day the wind is blessing us . . . allowing us to become one in spirit."

It is clear Casey is thinking of her relatives and their painful experiences. She offers "my deepest sincerest prayers to the ancestors of my people," and breaks down again. Referring to those standing behind her, she says, "My children back here; they're all named for those who walked this very trail you're standing on. And when we call their names, we're calling those spirits. They're here with us." Casey then signs the deed to great applause. She hands it to Larry to sign.

Larry tells of how pleased he is to be "with our friends, our relatives . . . to be here as part of this historic [day]. For Art and Helen and their family to be willing to do this says a lot of them." He continues, "This means a lot. To be able to sit here as partners, to come together out of the goodness of your heart and undo what the federal government did. The federal government separated our Ponca people into two different governments but Art and his family . . . have brought our nations back together to unite us with this land." Larry adds that the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska is buying 1,800 acres of land near Niobrara. "One day we'll plant Ponca corn there," he says. The Poncas then honor Art and Helen by draping Pendleton blankets, woven with colorful geometric patterns, over their shoulders. The couple accept the gift gratefully, even as the sweat rolls down their faces on this summer day.

It is not often that settlers learn about the specific piece of land they occupy, of how Indigenous people were dispossessed and displaced from it. It is rare, too, that Indigenous people have the opportunity to meet and share their history with the descendants of the settlers who displaced them. The Tanderups came to know the truth of the place where they had settled. The Poncas gently offered this truth to them, as a kind of gift.

It is even more unusual for settlers to take some responsibility for this truth, and rarer still to take action to make amends for it. The Tanderups are uncommon settlers, indeed. They went from allying with the Poncas

politically, to working with them to plant their sacred seeds, to repatriating some of their land to them in an act of accountability and personal atonement.

I don't tell you this story to lionize the Tanderups as white saviors who took pity on the Poncas and gave them a small donation of land. I am relating what the Tanderups did because they show us what can happen when settlers and Indigenous people face their painful truths together, plant new seeds of friendship, uncover paths to reconciliation and redress, and imagine new futures. They show us other possibilities of how we can hold unsettling knowledge within us and learn to live together on haunted land.

The ceremony that took place on the Tanderups' farm was reminiscent of much grander processes to reckon with and make amends for widespread human rights abuses that have occurred around the globe since World War II. These enterprises go by many names, including restorative justice, reparative justice, transitional justice, redress, and truth and reconciliation. They are big umbrella concepts that cover an array of measures: restitution, compensation, reparations, rehabilitation, apologies, and memorials.

Some atrocities have involved so many victims, have entangled such a web of perpetrators, and have been condoned by so many members of the larger society that conventional legal systems cannot adequately deal with them. Truth and reconciliation experts—whether survivors, activists, scholars, or lawmakers—have all struggled to figure out how to bring healing and justice to huge numbers of people who have suffered collective trauma. They have wrestled with how to hold perpetrators responsible for such heinous abuses and how to properly engage with the bystanders who stood silent in the face of these crimes or benefited from them.

Beginning in the 1980s, nations in Central and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia established truth (or truth and reconciliation) commissions to investigate and make redress for human rights abuses as they sought to transition from dictatorships to democratic societies. Nelson Mandela's government enacted the most high-profile



Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) after the majority-black population finally toppled apartheid and gained power in South Africa in the 1990s. In the twenty-first century, other nations have continued to use TRCs to investigate past crimes and make amends.

Everyday citizens have also initiated truth and reconciliation processes to bring to light abuses and agitate for redress. In 2004, for example, the city of Greensboro, North Carolina, established a TRC to inquire into a 1979 confrontation between white supremacists and anti-racist demonstrators that left five protesters dead. Two criminal trials by all-white juries had failed to convict any of the white supremacists involved, although a civil trial had found the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazis jointly liable with the city's police department for the wrongful death of one victim. Many Greensboro residents believed that there was a larger systemic problem at the heart of the conflict and that Greensboro needed a truth and reconciliation process in order to address it.

Nearly all truth and reconciliation efforts, whether at the international, national, or local level, encompass at least three components: truth telling, bearing witness and acknowledgment, and redress. The humble ceremony at the Tanderups' farm followed this model. Ponca leaders told of the mistreatment their people had suffered. The Tanderups acknowledged these past harms while witnesses looked on. The Tanderups then made some recompense for past acts of dispossession.

This gesture of personal truth and reconciliation may seem like a quaint throwback to the early civil rights era or a naive dream of a utopian future. Many Americans may think the Tanderups and the Poncas are Kumbaya-singers hopelessly out of touch with the mainstream.

Yet, in a global context, the Tanderups and the Poncas are in step with a growing movement for reconciliation between settlers and Indigenous people. It is the United States that is the outlier. New Zealand created a tribunal to hear and respond to the grievances of its Indigenous people, the Maori, way back in 1975. In 2008 the Canadian and Australian governments both made official apologies for Indigenous child removal. Truth and reconciliation processes in these places have been far from perfect, but all of these nations are seriously confronting,

in a very public manner, the damages their past policies inflicted on Indigenous peoples.

But in the United States, wide public dialogue about and awareness of American Indian experience is nearly nonexistent. Most settler Americans are willfully forgetting these histories. Sometimes an event, like the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock, flares up and briefly ignites a public conversation, but most Americans have little understanding of the broader context of Indigenous struggles. The fire of interest burns down and leaves only a faint whiff of smoke.

As a historian for more than two decades, I have written about and discussed how settler authorities forcibly removed Indigenous children in Australia, Canada, and the United States. Wherever I speak—whether on a college campus, in a church, or for a civic organization—I am invariably asked why the United States has not done what Canada and Australia have done. Why have we not held an investigation about and apologized for this heinous abuse?

Sadly, the United States is simply engaging in business as usual. As Canadian historian and politician Michael Ignatieff wrote in 1998, “All nations depend on forgetting: on forging myths of unity and identity that allow a society to forget its founding crimes, its hidden injuries and divisions, its unhealed wounds.” Or as Roger Epp, another Canadian, puts it, for a liberal democratic society to operate, “some things ha[ve] to be forgotten.”

This book explores what could be possible in the United States if we engaged in collective soul-searching and dared to remember and acknowledge. Histories of dispossession have shaped all of us on this stolen continent. And they will continue to do so. Witness the 2020 Supreme Court decision *McGirt v. Oklahoma*, which ruled that land that had been reserved for the Muscogee (Creek) nation in the nineteenth century—most of the eastern half of Oklahoma—remains Native American territory.

If you are a settler descendant, you didn’t point the bayonet, shoot the gun, or sign the law that led to dispossession. You didn’t squat on Indian land or take up a homestead. That was a long time ago, and something that maybe your ancestors, but certainly not you yourself, did.

What's more, many of you do not even have ancestors who took part in dispossession. They may have come here not as settlers but as slaves. Or they may have been recruited from Asia to build railroads in the Sierra Nevada or from Mexico to pick grapes in the Central Valley of California or harvest sugar beets in Colorado. Or maybe your ancestors immigrated directly to urban areas in the twentieth century, far removed from Indian lands. Maybe you and your family just recently arrived. You had nothing to do with America's founding crimes.

But unless you are an American Indian or Alaska Native, you are living on stolen land. The theft may have happened a long time ago and been carried out by others, but most of us are nevertheless still trespassers. And we are also ongoing beneficiaries of this theft. Even though we rarely admit it, Indian dispossession and removal opened up new possibilities and prospects for settlers, even as it foreclosed so many opportunities for Indigenous people.

We do not have to remain captive to this history, however. Many tribes, like the Poncas, and many settlers, such as the Tanderups, have made truth and reconciliation an intimate encounter and practice. They show us that confronting our painful histories can enrich and empower all of us. As Art puts it, "This whole pipeline thing is something we wish didn't happen. But, the other side of it has fulfilled our lives so much. . . . the experiences we've had, the relationships we have built. . . . it has been just phenomenal."

What would it mean to face our history of settler colonialism, as the Tanderups and the Poncas have done? How would it change us, in our everyday lives and in our relationships, to confront our past? How would it transform our society? Reckoning with the past is not to be feared or avoided. It is a path to living more fully and responsibly. Not just to survive, but to revive and thrive.

The first step, as I learned from the Tanderups and the Poncas, is for each of us settlers to become familiar with the history of our own families and the places where we have settled, to learn how this land passed from Indigenous to settler hands.

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