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This land is my teacher

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Nayeli Guzman

Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope. Part 9 of 12

Nayeli Guzman is a 22-year-old Zapateco woman from Mexico who went to New Mexico to be part of the effort to restore traditional agriculture. Throughout the United States, Native, Chicano, and other peoples are rejecting industrialized food to grow their own instead, thereby reclaiming the health of their traditions, culture, bodies and land. They are sharing ancient seeds and techniques with others, Native and non-Native, while sharing the harvests with the community. And they are contributing to what may be the single largest movement in the United States: creating a sustainable food supply chain. Here Nayeli talks of one such program, at the Tesuque Indian Pueblo, where she and other farmers are using long-abandoned farmland to grow long-abandoned crops.

By Nayeli Guzman

Tesuque, Pueblo, N.M. -- Damn, I should have brought my beans! I wanted to show you my collection. One of my favorites is called powami, a Hopi ceremonial bean. There?s a really beautiful one called Maine yellow eye, which is all white, and right at the part where the bean sprouts there?s a little yellow moon on there. There?s another one called provider. It?s almost the color of those trees -- wine color -- and the skin is almost like a rainbow. When you put it against the sun, it looks like an oil spill from your car. Man, those beans are so beautiful. We cooked some red Mexican beans for the harvest festival and everyone loved them.

We need to keep the traditions alive. We need to preserve the seeds. We need to preserve the soil. We need to preserve the planet.

Farming was in my prayers for a long time. This land is my teacher, it?s my altar. It?s at the heart of my culture; we?ve always done that. We?ve strayed so far from it that I feel we have to go back, no matter where we come from. I?m just being responsible to the struggles my ancestors went through. They fought for *tierra y libertad*, which means land and liberty. In fact, we?re still going through that struggle today, with our food and even our genes being colonized.

It?s always good to be able to give food. Everyone should be able to go home with something good. It?s the *best* , dude. We don?t think of what we?re producing in terms of money, but just in terms of health, food for our families. You always have an abundance of food. It?s a really good feeling to have people come and be able to say to them, ?Here, take this!?

What we want to do next year with the kids at the Head Start is to have each have their own little garden. This year our program was too young to do that, but we were able to deliver pumpkins for Day of the Dead. The kids carved them and gave them to us as gifts, like a little thank-you note. We want to have workers from the Tesuque farm program go in and help them maintain the garden and teach them. We?re also working with the senior center, giving them food from the abundant harvest. For our harvest festival we gave them squash, pumpkins, cucumbers, all kinds of things. We?re trying to stay connected with the elders and to keep them around as long as possible.

We sell food at the farmers? market, and people on the pueblo can order the food they want from the fields. Part of me feels like we should be giving the food away to the people because we?re growing it on their land. But if they?re able to work, they should be farming for themselves, at least having a little plot of corn.

A few have become inspired to go out there and do it themselves. And I?ve noticed a higher level of pride among the people, about being Native and preserving their way of life.

I see this plan spreading to different communities, not just the reservations -- all over the place. I see other communities coming over here and learning and taking that back to their people, and starting it up all over again. It?s our responsibility as human beings. We see it happening on a global scale already. There are farmers meeting together from all over the world.

A goal of this program is for the pueblo to become completely self-sustaining so that during the growing season people don?t have to purchase what they can grow themselves here. Another goal is to preserve the traditional way of life of the pueblo.

We need to all work together as land-based people and not look at what color we are or where we come from, because the land is not like that. Creator is not exclusive, so there?s no reason we should be. They tell us, ?The more biodiversity you have, the richer your soil is going to be.? It?s like that with people. The more different kinds of people you have, the more able we?re going to be to survive. That?s why we need everybody working together. We can?t compartmentalize ourselves. That?s what industrial agriculture does.

If people would only open their eyes and their ears and their hearts to living in community, everything would work so much smoother. It?s not a Native thing; community is a human thing. It?s already in us; we just have to bring it back out. One person can grow corn, one person can grow something else, and they can share. That?s how people used to survive way back when.

What we?re doing is very simple. These ideas are not an alternative for us -- they?re just a way of life. We?re just doing what Creator meant for us to do.

About the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

Among income inequality, seemingly endless wars, and debilitating climate change, it is difficult for many to imagine a path to a better way. In fact, throughout the industrialized North and the global South, solutions to these great challenges are in various stages of construction -- and much of the lifting is being done by women. Grass-roots women?s movements -- progressing often almost without money or access or institutional power -- are emerging and offering alternative and empowering visions.

The above is part of a series, titled "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope," which will appear in NCR *by writer and organizer Beverly Bell, coordinator of* ***Other Worlds****[1]. She features empowered women who offer alternative visions as they birth a new and more just world order.*

Seven of the articles in this series are available in a 2010 Lenten booklet, *Cry Justice! Cry Hope!* with additional reflections by Sister Joan Chittister. Click here to order. [2]

All the stories from the "Women: Birthing justice, birthing hope" series

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