

We Are Water – West Central MN
07/22/2020

Wičáŋǰpi Iyótaŋ Wiŋ (Autumn Cavender-Wilson):

[[Dakota introduction]]

My name in English is Autumn Cavender-Wilson. In Dakota my name is Wičáŋǰpi Iyótaŋ Wiŋ. I'm Wahpetuwan Dakota from Pezihutazizi K'api Makoce or the land where they dig for the yellow medicine, which is a place on the Minnesota River at the junction of the Minnesota and Yellow Medicine rivers here in Southwestern Minnesota. I'm a wife, I'm a mother and I'm a midwife.

We've lived out here for a while, but this is the first summer actually we bought kayaks for ourselves. So we've been out on the river almost every other day for the last two weeks. One of the things that I'm reminded of is these stories that one used to be able to paddle from here, from this area by Granite Falls, what is currently the Upper Sioux reservation, all the way down to Mankato without ever touching a major river. So intact was the wetland system, so intact was like the small rivers and tributaries and waters on the plains and how much we don't have that anymore. And how very, very different the ecology of this whole place looks from the surface of the water.

Even doing hikes and walking around, and even driving through the river valleys, so frequently we are on top looking down. And how wonderfully beautifully small one feels on the river, surrounded by these incredible Bluffs and these amazing Cottonwood trees reaching and rattling, just the wealth and abundance of this river system in particular. There's very old accounts from the 18th century, the very first missionaries and for traders paddling up the river and then being shocked and, in many ways, very much awed by the sheer abundance of this river system. Literally food just dripping into the water, the weight of berries on the trees just causing them to pour over. And that as beautiful and as abundant and as life-filled as we see the river now from its surface paddling along, it is only a fraction of the life and beauty that once existed there prior to conquest.

And what does that leave us with then, in terms of responsibility of restoration? What does that leave us with in terms of our need for accountability? Not just to Native folks and the Indigenous peoples of this particular space, but also accountability to place, to that ecology. What do we owe to make up for the damage that's been wreaked upon this place?