

STRENGTH OF AN INDIAN WOMAN

BY Agnes Patak

Go ahead Linda and let them in. Yes, please come in. Welcome. It's not often that we have guests from a human rights organization.

I hope our testimonies will help you understand the emotional and physical abuse we, as Native People endured in those boarding schools. I'm sure you heard the stories of the very cruel punishment that was given if you ran away and got caught or if they heard you speak your own language. But are you aware that when the Nazi's were looking for a way to deal with the Jewish people they looked to the United States to see how they dealt with their Native People? Ours was just a different kind of concentration camp.

I was eight years old when my mother died. The government didn't think my father was capable of taking care of his children, so they put each of us in different boarding schools. It was many years before any of us saw each other again.

The day they took me away was the only time I saw my father break down and cry. After a few years at the school I finally understood and felt the pain of my mother's boarding school years, her anguish, her anger. I have vivid memories of her, till the day she died, getting down on her hands and knees to scrape away the kitchen's old wax with a butter knife only to apply a new layer for the scraping of another day. I came to know the strict boarding- school regimens she adopted for washing dishes, ironing clothes, making beds. Sometimes I have felt a rage inside me for those who cut the natural loving bond between a mother and child that extended long after the boarding school experience.

I didn't have any friends there, except Theresa. She refused to stop speaking Indian, refused to quit praying to the spirits. She would always

remind the other girls not to forget that they were Indian. I really admired her strength and determination. While no one else would talk to me, Theresa always had a kind word for me. I grew to love her like the older sister I never had. I'd sneak her extra food ,she'd break it into bits and share it.

I saw her challenge them again and again, daring them to do what they finally did to her. They silenced her. I saw Sister Luke with hate and venom spewing from her mouth , "you dirty savage Indian" she spat and then pushed Theresa down, down two flights of concrete stairs and I said nothing. My screams were silent. I was consumed with agony and terror. I saw murder done in that school and I said nothing.

And when they sent Theresa's broken body home to her mother, telling her that pneumonia had killed her little girl, she didn't believe them. She saw the bruises on her face, shoulders, legs and back. She found her daughters neck broken. She came running back to the school, screaming "why? What did you do to my baby?" I said nothing.

I saw little girls taken in the night from their beds. I heard the moans and groans and sobbing. "Shut up! Shut up" I cried. They were returned in a huddled mass beneath the sheets. Their eyes were glazed and their bodies torn and ravaged.....and I said nothing.

The priest told me I was a good girl but these others were bad and needed to be taught a lesson.

I saw a baby being born one night to a mother who was little more than a child herself. I saw her frightened dark eyes pleading with me to save her child.....then later when the grave was dug and the baby lowered into the ground... I said nothing.

On different occasions, I would see some of the older girls being taken to the doctor. They would return a few days later confused. The sister told me

these girls need to be "fixed". That we didn't need more Indians. When I finally understood what was happening.....I said nothing.

I was so good at saying nothing it was like I had become one of them. I was very loyal. I didn't want the abuse and injustices my mother was forced to experience. I just wanted to be with my sister and brothers. And when I left that school, it was a long time before I could pray and for years I believed in nothing. When they took me from my home, I lost my language, I lost my culture, I lost my identity and nobody ever told me "Welcome home, I'm glad you made it back".

Your're asking me should Native people who were forced into boarding schools sue for the abuses they endured? Should the U.S. Government pay for the generations of harm it has caused? You want to know if the Catholic Church should be made to pay?

Do you really believe that money will make this all go away? Tell me , can the courts offer healing? Tell me!