Thursday, May 03, 2012

Ya'at'eeh, my name is Mark Charles. I am of the Wooden Shoe People, and I am born for the Water Flows Together People. My maternal Grandfather is also of the Wooden Shoe clan and my Paternal Grandfather is of the Bitter Water Clan.

I have had the privilege to travel throughout much of our country and even to many parts of the world. One question I am frequently asked is "How does it feel to be Native American and live in the United States?"

It took me a long time to know how to answer that question. I found that if I answered it completely honestly, then my words were so full of emotion and even anger that it shutdown any conversation But if I tempered my answer, in an effort to keep people engaged, I felt dissatisfied because I was not adequately articulating what I was feeling. Finally I began using this image to describe to people how it feels:

Being Native American and living in the United States feels like our indigenous peoples are an old grandmother who lives in a very large house. It is a beautiful house with plenty of rooms and comfortable furniture. But, years ago, some people came into our house and locked us upstairs in the bedroom. Today our house is full of people. They are sitting on our furniture. They are eating our food. They are having a party in our house. They have since unlocked the door to our bedroom but now it is much later and we are tired, old, weak and sick; so we can't or don't come out. But the part that is the most hurtful and that causes us the most pain, is that virtually no one from this party ever comes upstairs to find us in the bedroom, sits down next to us on the bed, looks us in the eye, and simply says, "Thank you. Thank you for letting us be in your house."

I think something that has been taken from our indigenous peoples has been our ability, and the opportunity, to be the host people of this land. And in fact, today, we are so far removed from the role of host that we often feel like forgotten guests in our own home.

This neglect is evidenced in the 2010 Department of Defense Appropriations Bill that President Obama signed on December 19, 2009. Page 45 of this 67 page document contains a generic, non-binding apology to Native Americans on behalf of the citizens of the United States. This apology was never announced by the White House or Congress, nor has it been read publicly by the President. In fact, most of the country, including the nearly 5 million Native Americans who live here as citizens, do not even know it exists!

I do not feel that this apology, and the way it was buried, is an appropriate or respectful way to speak to the indigenous hosts of this land. I am especially hurt that his apology was never clearly communicated to our elders, many of whom endured the horrors of disenfranchisement, re-location and boarding schools. So for the third anniversary of the signing of this bill, I have reserved the space in front of the US Capitol building. On that day I, and a diverse group of Citizens, are hosting a public reading of H.R. 3326.

Our mission is to invite our nation's citizens and leaders, as well as members of the global community, to gather at the US Capitol on December 19, 2012 and join our efforts to communicate as publically, as

humbly and as respectfully as possible the contents of H.R. 3326 (and the apology enclosed therein) to the Native American tribes, communities and citizens of the United States of America.

It is our hope that this event will establish safe and honest common ground where a national conversation for reconciliation between our country and Native America can begin.

Mr. Anaya, I would like to invite you, both personally, and as the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to join us. I also would ask you to communicate these stories and this invitation to the United Nations and to the broader global community.

And finally, I would like to thank you.

Thank you for hosting this conference. Thank you for seeking out the host people of this land, for sitting down next to us and looking us in the eye. And thank you for listening to our stories and hearing our concerns.

A'he'hee' shi'naai.
(My older brother, I thank you)

Mark Charles