Angry Bird Builds a Bridge

Text by Dee Axlerod
Photographs by Sarah van Gelder

I met Angry Bird during my second stay at Oceti Sakowin camp, located near the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe reservation in Cannonball, North Dakota. The camp, a conglomeration of tents, tipis, yurts, and other ad hoc housing, is home to Natives and non-Natives from all over the world, there to protest construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). I was there as a journalist—but also in support of my Native American daughter and grandchildren, and my many Native friends back home in the Pacific Northwest.

I met Jimmy, a.k.a. Angry Bird, when I sat in on a small and quiet meeting held in a green army surplus tent. The meeting became a planning session, powered by the strong desire of Jimmy to build a bridge from Oceti Sakowin camp to Turtle Island, a sacred Sioux burial ground currently owned by the US Army Corps of Engineers. Just days before, police had been observing the camp from the vantage point of the burial grounds, in the process trampling over the more than a dozen graves there. Angry Bird had had words with them, and ever since then had wanted to hold a ceremony where the graves had been disturbed.

Within a couple of hours of the group decision, the project was under way. A small group worked all night, and by the time I rejoined them just before sunrise, they were more than halfway across the river. As the sun rose, Jimmy’s bridge was completed.

Angry Bird’s action is just one of many that have taken place at Standing Rock, North Dakota, since April 2016. Members of 289 tribes, together with non-Native allies, have gathered to block construction of DAPL, which would carry oil from the Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota under Lake Oahe on the Missouri River—the primary source of drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe—and across four states to refineries and shippers in Illinois, crossing numerous bodies of water along the way.

Standing Rock can be understood as a watershed event in the history of Native Americans. As indigenous peoples begin to heal from the effects of five hundred years of oppression, they are emerging as leaders of worldwide efforts to stanch the degradation of the natural world. Adopting Mahatma Gandhi’s and Dr. Martin Luther King’s principles of nonviolent resistance, warriors have become “water protectors.”

But for members of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, the dispute is also intensely personal, as DAPL plows through ancestral burial sites on Turtle Island—the last remaining stretch of land between the pipeline and Lake Oahe. The corporation behind DAPL, Energy Transfer Partners, together with highly militarized police officers from North Dakota and several neighboring states, barred all others access to the island.

Shortly after sunrise, Angry Bird’s bridge was destroyed by authorities who used a grappling hook to pull it apart. But his determination inspired others, who had quickly gathered from the nearby Oceti Sakowin camp, bringing with them drums and sage, first aid supplies, and a canoe. Over the course of two hours, water protectors swam across to the island, standing in the icy water before the line of police until hypothermia threatened and other protectors took their place. There were a few jeers and insults hurled, but most water protectors told police they loved them and would pray for them.

“Water is life,” they said. “We all drink the same water.” They were greeted with mace and rubber bullets. Angry Bird and his friends back home in the Pacific Northwest.

I wanted to tell Angry Bird how much I admired what he’d done, so I was glad to run into him the next day. He was helping construct winter housing for the camp, but took a break to tell me about building the bridge. Below is Angry Bird’s story in his own words.

The reason for that bridge is that the veterans and the elders got fed up with this disrespecting our ancestors. I live here, and that’s my relatives buried up there, and I don’t think they have the right to build on that hill.

The personal note is that they kind of hurt my heart. It just kind of seems like they kind of control, they push to control with power. To me, it’s a religious thing. There’s innocent people that just wanted to pray, and they got maced. It kind of hurt my heart to see the negativity of the police toward the people just standing in that water. It’s scary that one got rubber–bulleted. People were just standing in the water, and it’s like these other guys got no mercy and we’re just human target practice for them. I think something has to stop before somebody’s life has to go. I don’t like them threatening my life and saying I ain’t gonna see the daylight of day again. But they don’t scare me, it just gives me another reason to be strong in my belief . . . We never done nothing bad, we just wanted to pray. They enclosed us in a circle with sniper guns and rifles, very hostile people. They don’t understand that these people, all different walks and nationalities, are living in harmony with each other and helping each other. People were kind of feeling that, and seeing that, hey, you don’t have to have weapons and guns to do what you believe in.

It’s not like we’re brilliant, you know. We’re just trying to say, “These are our ancestors. They’ve been here longer than you guys have.”

They don’t care. They’re gonna take all the oil out of Mother Earth, Mother Earth’s gonna fall apart. You take the water, you end life. Without water you don’t get grass; without water, you got nothing. They’ve got to understand that and, hopefully (might), if people keep praying for them and tell them, “Hey, we forgive you for your misguided . . . Open up your eyes once in a while.” Things have got to change in life, before life’s ended.

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