

First Light

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Gkisedtanamoogk: Imagine you're about to have a little one, the love that you have for that little one. And then imagine somebody outside of your family you don't even know making claims on your little one.

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They don't like the way you live, and they're going to take your little one by force. Imagine what the loss is when this is not just your family but your entire community loses its children.

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Esther Attean: My people's continued existence depends on children being able to be who they are and know who they are, and that transfer of knowledge through the generations—cultural knowledge, spiritual knowledge—those things that make us who we are.

Gkisedtanamoogk: They look at us, they look at you and they reflect. This is the way I'm supposed to be.

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Esther Attean: In the late 1800's, Congress gives money to start boarding schools, to forcibly remove Native children as young as four and five years old from their homes

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and their communities, bring them thousands of miles away, to an institution where they're forbidden to speak their language, forbidden to communicate with each other.

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It was seen as very progressive, and had a lot of support and that filtered its way into the child welfare system. You know, "Native children are better off raised in white homes, you know, let's save those poor Indian kids."

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Gkisedtanamoogk: Growing up not knowing even if they're Native American? It's not just about removing children. It's dismantling everything of their being in the process.

Esther Attean: That cultural assimilation, to kill the Indian to save the man, to kill the Indian in that child.

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Gkisedtanamoogk: The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 was an atonement. The premise of the Indian Child Welfare Act was not to forcibly remove the children from their families, but find ways within the community, within the families, to keep them there.

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Esther Attean: This law was passed and Maine in particular still had one of the highest rates of removal of Native children. We have people who are still disconnected from our communities because they were taken when they were little. We have young people in foster care now that have a story to tell.

Jennifer Rooks: Next on Maine Watch, coming to terms with the past. Maine has become the first state in the nation to form a truth and reconciliation commission focusing on child welfare.

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The ceremony creating the Maine Wabanaki-State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission mandate took place at the State House in the Hall of Flags. As the five tribal chiefs and Governor LePage sat down to sign the mandate, they took with them

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the words of Denise Altvater, who herself had been taken as a child.

Denise Altvater: It's time for truth, it's time for healing, it's time for peace, and it's time for forgiveness.

Jennifer Rooks: When they took you, do they tell you why?

Denise Altvater: They never told us anything.

Jennifer Rooks: They just took you?

Denise Altvater: To this day, I don't know why. The people who ran the home, I used to say that they abused us

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and I now realize what they did was torture us, sexually abused us. You know no one ever believes that any of this stuff ever happened. For one thing, nobody ever really talked about it. But to know that there's going to be a special commission, a place, a time so that you can tell your story and that they are going to believe you that it really happened and then it's going to make

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a really big difference. It's going to change things. I think that is so powerful.

Gkisedtanamoogk: I'm one of five commissioners mandated to discover what the truth is.

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Esther Attean: Many of our people have never shared their stories. It's a total contradiction to silence.

Male Speaker: The truth hurts. The truth is very painful, very painful for us.

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Sandy White Hawk: It's the families themselves who decided to walk through the fear and to tell what happened that are making history. They're the ones making history, not us, the commissioners.

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We were in Indian Township meeting with the community and this woman just spoke up.

Georgina Sappier-Richardson: How do you propose that we're supposed to be healing?

Sandy White Hawk: When we went through that experience, we experienced that alone, we experienced it in isolation, and we've kept it that way. And then when we open it, if we open it and we're with each other, that's how we can heal, amongst the circle of relatives.

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Georgina Sappier-Richardson: I can't get over the nightmares. All we did was beg for our foster mother to hug us and say they loved us. My baby sister and I sat in a tub of bleach one time, tried to convince each other that we're getting white. And then they knew they would accept us. Where was the state? Where was the state that was supposed...they were supposed to have been our guardians, but where where they?

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They weren't there for us, but we didn't know. We knew nothing else but foster people. And how come it took so long for y'all to get a group together to see if they can help us? You can't heal someone that's gone through hell.

Sandy White Hawk: When we tell it, we feel it in our bodies, we feel it in our spirit, we feel it in our heart. But I also believe that

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we can get to that point where it has far less power over us. Part of the fear of sharing what happened to you is you relive some of that pain. And by her doing what she did, she showed them that you could share it and come back. That's the perfect example of the readiness that it's time.

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We witnessed over the last 27 months the incredible strength of the Wabanaki people, the people of the dawn, the people of the first light.

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Charlotte Bacon: Our essential finding is that between 2002 and 2013, Native children in Maine were still five times more likely to enter foster care than non-Native children. We take these essential numbers—the disproportionate rates of removal over time, the gaps in identification—and we link them

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to still present realities of racism and disposition, and we frame them as evidence of continued cultural genocide against Wabanaki people.

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Gkisedtanamoogk: When we come out and acknowledge exactly what this is about, then we can start the process of healing, then we can start the process of change.

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Female Speaker: This program is supported in part by Mass Humanities, improving civic life in Massachusetts through grantmaking and public programs since 1975.

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