

# Sacred Land Film Project

Around the world,  
indigenous people stand up  
for their traditional sacred lands  
in defense of cultural survival,  
human rights and the environment.

In an era of fake news, where do we turn for the truth? Do I believe my old friend Tim Mentz, a cultural resource specialist of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, who says he walked along the route of the Dakota Access Pipeline and found 27 burial sites, 16 stone rings and a vision questing site for high chiefs—and then watched as they were all bulldozed the day after he reported his discovery? Or do we believe the lawsuit the pipeline company filed against environmental groups that claims that Tim and Earthjustice made it all up to raise sympathy money and rouse “eco-terrorists”?

Are there really people out there who would intentionally destroy sacred sites, send attack dogs and militarized police to scare observers away, and then viciously lie about it afterward?

As I arrived at the fire circle in the center of camp, a police helicopter aggressively buzzed the sky and heavily armed men loomed on a nearby hill. A Lakota elder addressed the crowd around the fire. “I am a direct descendent of Sitting Bull,” said Jumping Buffalo. “Our ancestors are buried on top of that hill. As the women were praying yesterday, a man shot an M16 rifle

## The Lessons of Standing Rock

BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

at them. We have never fired a bullet or a water cannon, but you know what we will give? We will give them our prayers. We will not hate them. Your prayer lasts forever. Thank you for standing with us here at Standing Rock.”

Native Hawaiian scholar J. Kēhaulani Kauanui summed up the significance of this epic moment in the long struggle for indigenous rights: “They have brought their understandings of the sacred into the mainstream—though there is still much work to do.” Indeed.

Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk and I screened *In the Light of Reverence* and *Standing on Sacred Ground* at Sitting Bull College in Ft. Yates by night, and by day we sat with elders and activists and talked about treaty rights, environmental justice and how indigenous women’s leadership had turned the tide at Standing Rock from anger and protest to prayer and spiritual resistance. The framing of “protector” as compared to “protestor” represents a stroke of genius—with roots in the distant past.

The day after our screenings, a most extraordinary thing happened in the gym of Sitting Bull College. As thousands of U.S. war veterans streamed into Standing Rock to fulfill their oath to protect Americans—all Americans—Wesley Clark Jr. knelt at

the feet of Lakota elder Leonard Crow Dog and made a heartfelt citizen apology for the long war against Native Americans, the systemic racism, the holy places violated. It was an historic moment and I felt at least in a small way the Sacred Land Film Project helped till the soil that sprouted the seeds of global support, common purpose and reconciliation at Standing Rock.

The standoff marked a turning point in American history. The unity of tribes, allies and supporters, acting as guardians not protestors, and motivated by a feeling of shared responsibility to take care of water—this was a revolutionary tipping point for our culture. And then, a brief victory—when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers denied Energy





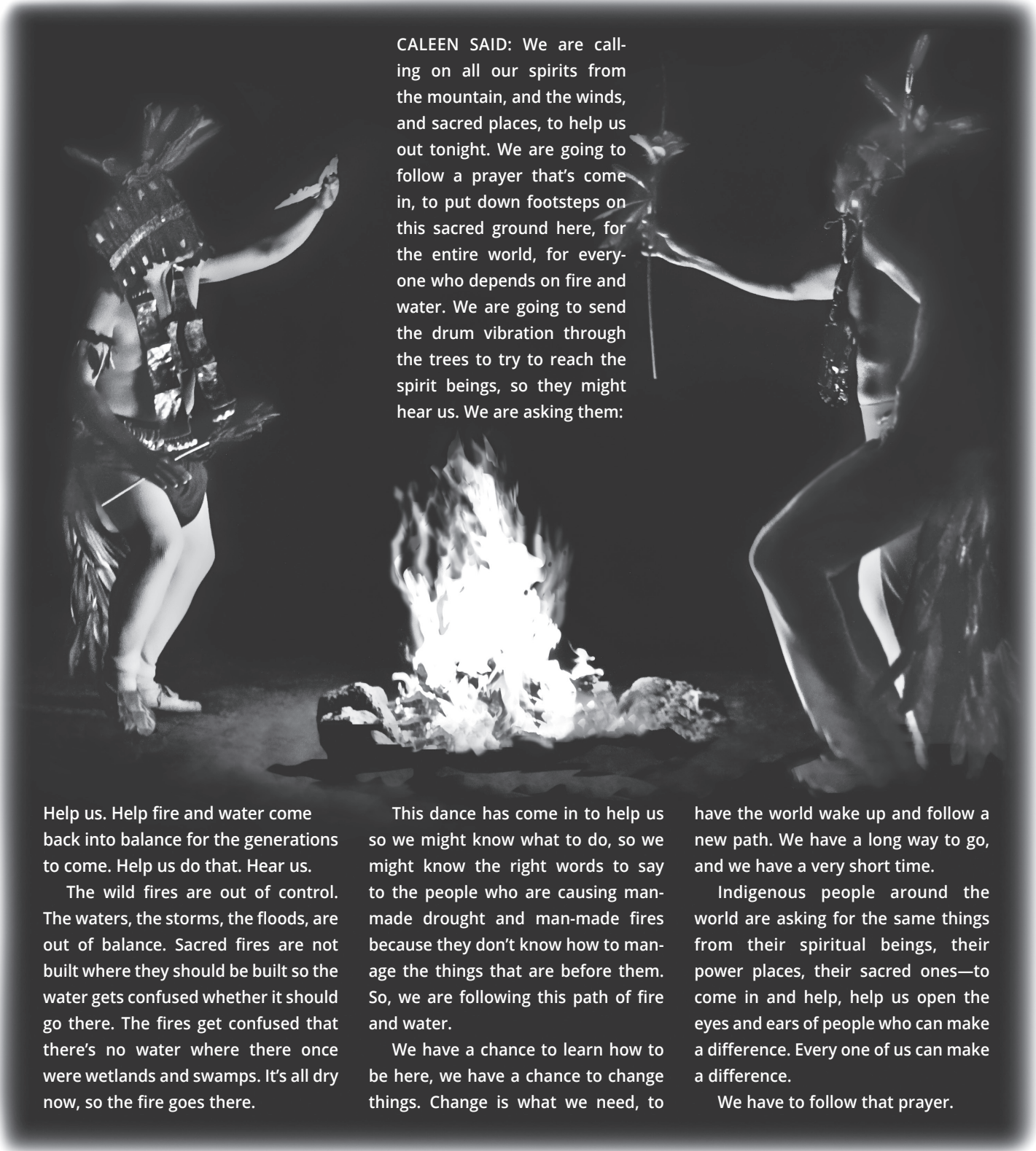
Transfer's permit to drill under the Missouri River—was undercut by a double whammy as a new president called off the environmental review and railroaded through both the Dakota Access Pipeline and Keystone XL. But something had shifted. The power and strength of grassroots people awakened

the world and should give us all hope, even as the days grow darker. A new era is born.



It was near midnight when the dancers finally appeared. Walking slowly out of a shadowy forest beneath Mt. Shasta, abalone shells, glass beads and bone whistles

clattered softly and announced the start of the Fire and Water Ceremony. The crowd hushed as Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk walked to the fire, prayed to the four directions, and poured a water offering on the fire. Steam hissed and a cloud of mist rose amidst swirling smoke.



CALEEN SAID: We are calling on all our spirits from the mountain, and the winds, and sacred places, to help us out tonight. We are going to follow a prayer that's come in, to put down footsteps on this sacred ground here, for the entire world, for everyone who depends on fire and water. We are going to send the drum vibration through the trees to try to reach the spirit beings, so they might hear us. We are asking them:

Help us. Help fire and water come back into balance for the generations to come. Help us do that. Hear us.

The wild fires are out of control. The waters, the storms, the floods, are out of balance. Sacred fires are not built where they should be built so the water gets confused whether it should go there. The fires get confused that there's no water where there once were wetlands and swamps. It's all dry now, so the fire goes there.

This dance has come in to help us so we might know what to do, so we might know the right words to say to the people who are causing man-made drought and man-made fires because they don't know how to manage the things that are before them. So, we are following this path of fire and water.

We have a chance to learn how to be here, we have a chance to change things. Change is what we need, to

have the world wake up and follow a new path. We have a long way to go, and we have a very short time.

Indigenous people around the world are asking for the same things from their spiritual beings, their power places, their sacred ones—to come in and help, help us open the eyes and ears of people who can make a difference. Every one of us can make a difference.

We have to follow that prayer.

For the next hour, dancers circled the crackling flames. Wildfire pranced about in orange flicker feather regalia. Blue jay feathered water dancers calmly circled, trying to contain ferocity, but then came a flood. Chaos reigned in the spirit world of waves and infernos. Eventually, after many rounds and many songs, balance was restored.

Under early morning stars, Caleen brought things to a close. “There used to be so many tribes setting those fires and praying about them—not just a campfire, but a spiritual fire that helps us. That’s what we are trying to share and hopefully you can feel that and be part of it so when the time comes you will step up, you will have the courage and strength and will put that fire—that light of life—on your heart and then you will be able to speak about it, to stand up for it, and talk about it. That is what we have not been good at, is talking about it.

“We have to calm ourselves down, because they make us so angry that we are willing to just walk away and not deal with it. That is our downfall. It seems overwhelming at times but when we come to places like this and I see all of you here

In September, Caleen joined Lisjan Ohlone leader Corrina Gould to open this year’s Run4Salmon. On a 2-acre parking lot in Berkeley, they held a press conference and a prayer ceremony, as Caleen supported Corrina’s battle to stop a 5-story retail and condominium complex on the site of the oldest Ohlone village on San Francisco Bay. For 5,000 years, a 30-foot high shellmound grew on this spot, nurturing the burials of Corrina’s ancestors. A hundred generations of villagers looked straight out to landmarks now known as Alcatraz and the Golden Gate. Tule canoes glided past salmon migrating up Strawberry Creek to spawn, right in the very spot where Corrina and Caleen were speaking—today the only unbuilt-upon-land in the area. Deep down, perhaps everyone knows it is sacred ground.

Corrina said, “Sacredness means a lot of different things to people. But it is something that deep inside of us we can feel, and we sometimes cannot explain what that means, but there is a connectedness to this particular site. This is a place we hold deep inside of our souls.”



ALL PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER MCLROD

**Pua Case, Corrina Gould, Wounded Knee DeOcampo and Caleen Sisk lead a prayer vigil at the West Berkeley Shellmound to protect an historic Ohlone village and burial site.**

it gives me strength. It gives us that little boost, to know that we are not alone—we are not here doing this all alone.

“Other people are starting to realize what they can do. We can all do something. We

can all make a difference. Always remember, you are not spectators, you are a part of these dances, you are part of these songs, you are a part of this prayer. Ho.”



As Corrina and Caleen spoke, a third grade class walked across the parking lot and sat at their feet, listening quietly, absorbing history in an outdoor classroom with two remarkable teachers. Back in their school, our Run4Salmon teacher’s guide is a sign that curriculum in California is changing, another hopeful indication that our decades of work are paying off. Yet in 2017, native people still see their sacred sites bulldozed. They are still called eco-terrorists. To bring the camaraderie and spirit of resistance from Standing Rock home, we must all stand up with them.

In a cloud of sweet sage smoke, a hundred people walked quietly around the parking lot—a growing swarm of protectors following indigenous leaders who hold profoundly important answers to the most pressing problems of our time.



**Spirits ran high on this year’s Run4Salmon, a two-week ceremonial journey following the route of winter run Chinook salmon from the ocean to northern California’s McCloud River.**



**Maria Dorsey**  
Running with the Salmon