

# Report to Section IX on Presentation of Full Apology Letter to Society of Indian Psychologists

By Catherine Adler

We, the Members of Section IX, have offered the Full Apology Letter to Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native People last Friday at the National Multicultural Conference and Summit in Portland, Oregon.



This report gives you some of the story behind the letter and the actions needed in going forward. The integrity of Letters of Apology ultimately depends on whether words are followed by deeds.

## Background

This letter came to Section IX through Stephen Soldz, a psychoanalyst who for many years has been a light for social justice. Stephen's tireless work in confronting APA's complicity around torture policies has made him a beacon of hope in our Section and has transmitted to each of us the bad-ass audacity needed for a good fight!

Joseph Tremble, Professor Emeritus at Washington State University and long-time friend to Native people, caught the beam of Stephen's tenacious sprit and wrote for help.

In September, the Australian Psychological Society offered to the Aboriginal people, as well as to the Torres Strait Islanders, a full letter of apology along with a reckoning—a way of going forward. And so it seemed like a good time for The Society of Indian Psychologists to try again with the American Psychological Association. But the APA, quite rudely and acting outside governing principles, declined to put the matter on the table.

Stephen put the word out to our listserv and that is where the energy first began to build. Jessica Benjamin, Donna Bassin, and others lent their support for a response. Lara Sheehi organized Section IX members to take our banner and march from the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the EPA in Washington, standing in solidarity with Standing Rock. Leilani Crane added her graceful force at council, and all those who have encouraged these efforts from a distance have added to this growing campaign.

But it wasn't until Lynne Layton, Section IX President, brought her energy to the mix that things began to take off. Lynne has this way of connecting people so that 1 plus 1 leads to a multitude. Lynne knows and transmits that *work is love made visible*.

After a dedicated month of diligent work writing the Full Letter of Apology and building a grassroots coalition across five other Divisions, the letter was brought on Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, to the Multicultural Conference and Summit meeting (NMCS) in Portland. The organizers had, at the very last minute, graciously given us multiple possibilities for presenting our apology. Jan made the letter into a poster that was displayed throughout the meetings, and we were told that the conference would kick off its Town Hall final session with the apology.

### **Letter of Apology Ceremony: A Culminating Moment**

Section IX members Jan Haaken, Leilani Crane, Sanjay Nath and I presented the Full Letter of Apology to Native American, Native Hawaiian, and Alaska Native Peoples to The Society of Indian Psychologists.

The difference between presentation and ceremony became clearer to us as we worked together with the NMCS organizers and the Elders from the Society of Indian Psychologists.



Meanings and expectations around time often emerge as a site of conflict and painful encounters in such events. There were concerns that the time allowed would not be sufficient for the gravity of the ceremony. The NMCS Program Committee had many demands to accommodate, however, in their final Town Hall session. We were able to work within the time they allowed us to make this a truly meaningful event.

At this very large Town Hall meeting, filled with conference attendees, we from Section IX and SIP, all found one another. Jan Haaken was masterful in her quick choreography. When our time came, we all went to the front, the four of us from Section IX on the left of the mic at the front of the room, and on the right, 10 people from The Society of Indian Psychologists.

Jan led us in the opening statement regarding our intentions. As is traditional, before our request for forgiveness and guidance was made, we presented loose-leaf tobacco wrapped in red cloth to Art Blume,

president of SIP, and the apology letter wrapped around bundles of sage to the SIP drummers, Melinda Garcia and Karlee Fellner.



Karlee drummed, sang and keened. The Ceremony had begun, the sense of the burden of suffering being *Theirs* shifted, becoming all of *Ours*. How does this happen? Why does this happen? When this phenomenon transpires in the world, in our consulting rooms and on the street, when we stop to help or allow ourselves to be helped, what sort of field do we join?

Wendell Berry says it just fine with from this passage spoken by Burly Coulter in the short story, Wild Birds:

*"The way we are, we are members of each other. All of us. Everything. The difference ain't in who is a member and who is not, but in who knows it and who don't"*

It seemed to me last Friday, standing together, that “knowing it” has something to do with shared suffering that goes along with empathy, solidarity and mutual support.

We left the majority of the ceremony time for the response...which was powerful, beautiful, and profound.

Art Blume, President of SIP, was clear and eloquent stating that he never expected to live to see the day when a group from APA would offer such an apology. Receiving the letter graciously, he added that the tobacco and sage offerings did, he hoped, indicate a true intention on our part to back our words with action.



As the ending came, we began, awkwardly, to return to our seats. But Karlee leaned in gently saying, “wait, this is the part where you greet each of us, look into each of our eyes, give the apology person-to-person and receive our thanks for your commitment.” As members of SIP embraced each of us presenting the letter, their spirit of graciousness was palpable. It was one of those moments when the personal and the political meet on what feels like sacred ground.



## Going Forward

The new President of the APA, Antonio Puente sat with us for the ceremony. He let us know that the Full Apology letter had been uploaded during the ceremony to the Board's web page and is **on** the agenda for the first board meeting of the year.

Steps we each can take:

1. Write to Dr. Puente, thanking him for this and let him know that you personally look forward to the meetings outcome on this matter: antonioenriquepuente@gmail.com
2. If you are connected or know anybody who is connected to other Divisions, send the letter to them and ask that they get their Divisions to sign on to this [Apology Letter](#) or write one of their own. The Divisions that have signed on so far are:
  - Section IX, Psychoanalysis for Social Responsibility, a section of Division 39 (Psychoanalysis)
  - Division 24, Executive Committee, Division of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology
  - Division 27, Society for Community Research and Action
  - Division 45, Society for the Psychological Study of Culture, Race and Ethnicity
  - Division 26, Executive Committee, Society for the History of Psychology
  - Division 35, Society for the Psychology of Women

