

The Power of Prayer: "We Are Water"

Agnes Baker-Pilgrim travels the world as chairman of the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers

By Brent Merrill

"We are water," explained Siletz Tribal Elder Agnes Baker-Pilgrim of her theory on life. "Water is getting crucial and we don't talk to the water anymore."

Pilgrim, who lives in Grants Pass, Ore., was referencing recent scientific studies that have determined that water can hear.

ment here in Oregon that has plant life that grows nowhere else in the world."

Pilgrim traveled to South America in June 2005 and Spain in September of that year on behalf of the 13 Grandmothers group. In October, she traveled to New Zealand.

hatha. She was one of nine children (third from the last). By the time she graduated high school, her parents had died and she was raised by her two brothers.

She worked in a doctor's office as an assistant to the doctor and a nurse. She has married three times in her life and had

She has achieved worldwide fame normally reserved for athletes, movie stars and politicians by constantly reminding people of the importance of protecting Mother Earth and looking seven generations into the future.

The trip to Sedona to gather with the other members of the 13 Grandmothers group was the seventh gathering of the important and historic group.

The sixth gathering was in New York City and the group was hosted by well-known designer Donna Karan. The Grandmothers stayed at the home of musician Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary fame.

"It was a really good gathering," said Pilgrim. "We met with the producer of our film (*Laughing Willow*) and with Ann Rockefeller-Roberts and Bethany Yarrow. People were so touched by the Grandmothers."

The fifth gathering was at last year's Nesika Illahee Pow-Wow in August on the Siletz Reservation. Grandma Aggie brought her group of 13 Grandmothers home to her people. The group participated in the Tribe's annual pow-wow parade with Grandma Aggie leading the group and waving an eagle feather fan from her motorized scooter.

"It was a very spiritual gathering," said Pilgrim of the annual Siletz pow-wow. "It was our first gathering on the ocean. It was amazing."

Pilgrim said there was a certain pride in getting the opportunity to bring the group to her homelands. "It was really nice to bring the Grandmothers to my Tribe," said Pilgrim. "Some of the Grandmothers had never been to a pow-wow before. It was a fun time, but it was also a serious time. The blessings on the people were important to all of us."

Giving blessings on the people has become a way of life for Grandma Aggie. She recently became an ordained minister.

"Now I can perform marriages," she exclaimed. "We used to have to bring in the priest at the 'I do' part. Now I'm able to do the whole thing."

Grandma Aggie believes her message to the world is one of achieving peace and harmony with each other and with our planet. She believes we can do it if we do it together.

"We can join together and fight to save our Earth Mother and salvage our own existence," she explained. "Together we can make a difference."

Grandma Aggie says the key to the future is our children. And their children.

"We have to protect this world," said Pilgrim. "We don't own it. Our children own it. Kids need the same opportunities we had. Together we need to preserve the animals. We need to pray that we will stop killing the dolphins and the whales. We need to stop polluting and we need to stop cementing Mother Earth's face. Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is our gift and we better use it wisely."



Agnes Baker-Pilgrim greets a friend at the Nesika Illahee Pow-Wow (above) and leads the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers in the pow-wow parade (right) in 2009.



Photos by Brent Merrill

"We are all water babies," she said. "Did you know that 75 percent of our bodies is water? We all should guard the water of the world. We need to begin to bless the water." Pilgrim should know.

As chairman of the environmental group the 13 Indigenous Grandmothers, Pilgrim travels the world to give water blessings. She did this telephone interview just hours after returning home from another trip to help people through her blessings and the attention she brings to causes just by showing up.

Pilgrim had just returned from a water blessing in Sedona, Ariz., and she has been to New York City and even Australia for recent blessings.

"I spoke to Parliament (the Australian ruling government representatives) about the importance of preserving water resources," said Pilgrim. "We shared aboriginal knowledge."

The 13 Grandmothers group was formed on Oct. 11, 2004, in Phoenixia, N.Y.

As part of her duties to the Grandmothers and to her personal heritage as a "prayer person," Pilgrim has in her own words been called upon to pray for all of Creator's creations — both person and place.

"I travel to a lot of different lands being a voice for the voiceless," wrote Pilgrim in *World Pulse* magazine in 2005. "All things created need a voice. I am called to pray for the Bengal tigers, for animals in Africa, for wolves, for salmon and for the Ganges River in India. I went to Australia to pray for the Murray Darling River and its pollutions. I prayed for the condors and now they are coming back after being gone for over 200 years from Oregon."

"I have been called to lead prayers to stop clear-cut logging and to lobby in Washington, D.C., to save our Siskiyou Monu-

In the 1990s, Pilgrim revived the Sacred Salmon Ceremony in Southern Oregon. The ancient ceremony, which begins with a morning prayer circle, was once a commonplace occurrence on the banks of the Applegate River.

Pilgrim offers the first pieces of the freshly cooked, traditionally staked out salmon to those gathered and they in turn return the bones and skin to her. Young men emerge from a nearby sweat lodge and cover the skin and bones offering in cedar boughs before running to and then diving in the river to leave the skin and bones on the river bottom. The sound of drumming fills the backdrop. The women dance.

Pilgrim, whose Indian name is Taowhywee, which means Morning Star, came from humble yet important lineage within the Tribe. She was born near the mouth of the Siletz River in Logsdon, Ore., on Sept. 11, 1924, and at 85 she is the eldest member of the 13 Grandmothers group.

Her mother was a Takelma princess and the daughter of Chief George Harney, who was instrumental in helping both the Siletz people and the people of the Grand Ronde Indian Reservation. According to family records, Chief Harney was the first chief of the Siletz people in the 1880s.

Chief Harney, who made three trips to Washington, D.C., on behalf of Indian people, is honored in Grand Ronde with a stained glass window tribute at the historic St. Mary's Church.

Pilgrim said Harney worked closely with the legendary and somehow fairly controversy-free priest of the reservation, Father Crockett. Crockett is well-known to Native historians for the journals and diaries he published of his time in Indian Country.

Pilgrim said her father was Coos Indian and her grandfather was named Ol-

six children during that time. Her first two husbands passed away.

Pilgrim is proud of her family and has 18 grandchildren and 27 great-grandchildren and one great-great-granddaughter.

Pilgrim, whose parents and siblings have all walked on, has written that she is the oldest living member of the Rogue River Indians who lived in Southern Oregon for more than 20,000 years. Pilgrim has described her children as "First Nations Natives who walk the talk."

Pilgrim survived cancer in the early 1980s and chose a "spiritual" path around the age of 45. She graduated from Southern Oregon University in her 50s and achieved a bachelor's degree in psychology and a minor in Native American studies.

Despite her accomplishments, Pilgrim had to convince herself that she was worthy of being a person of prayer and healing. So many people throughout the world are glad she did.

She made a deal with the Creator that if she lived she would "keep busy" for the rest of her days on earth. She lived and she has prospered in her spiritual quest to help the people of the world. More than that, she is effective and her legacy grows by the day, by the deed.

As an Elder, not many people are more respected in the Native community than "Grandma Aggie" as she is referred to by everyone who knows her. Pilgrim was honored by her own Tribe on May 27, 2000, as a "Living Treasure" and by the Oregon Council of the Arts as a "Living Cultural Legend."

Pilgrim has met with diverse, yet well-known people like Martha Stewart, Gloria Steinem and former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt.