

# The Small Work in the Great Work

by Victoria Safford

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5 In his book *On the Rez*, Ian Frazier tells a story about South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation. In the fall of 1988, the Pine Ridge girls' basketball team played an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times  
10 when the host gym was dense with anti-Indian hostility. Lead fans waved food stamps, yelling fake Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater." Usually, the Pine Ridge girls made their entrances according to height, led by the tallest seniors. When they hesitated to face the hostile crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first. She surprised her teammates and silenced the crowd by performing the Lakota shawl dance and then singing in Lakota—"graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time," in Frazier's words. She managed to reverse the crowd's hostility—until they even cheered and applauded....

15 We stand where we will stand, on little plots of ground, where we are maybe "called" to stand...in our congregations, classrooms, offices, factories, in fields of lettuces and apricots, in hospitals, in prisons (on both sides, at various times, of the gates), in streets, in community groups. And it is sacred ground if we would honor it, if we would bring to it a blessing  
20 of sacrifice and risk, just as the floor of any gym in South Dakota might suddenly be sanctified by one child, one young woman's dancing and her song (ancient, holy), the interior clarity of her spirit, that spoke there to the hate-filled world, and transformed that place with faith and deep remembering.

25 Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope—not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of "Everything  
30 is gonna be all right." But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there,  
35 beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.