Native American Wisdom

Compiled by
KENT NERBURN, PH.D.
and
LOUISE MENGELKOCH, M.A.

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wealth—but to be born in Nature's wide domain is greater still!

I would much more glory in this birthplace, with the broad canopy of heaven above me, and the giant arms of the forest trees for my shelter, than to be born in palaces of marble, studded with pillars of gold! Nature will be Nature still, while palaces shall decay and fall in ruins.

Yes, Niagara will be Niagara a thousand years hence! The rainbow, a wreath over her brow, shall continue as long as the sun, and the flowing of the river—while the work of art, however carefully protected and preserved, shall fade and crumble into dust!

George Copway (Kahgegagahbowh)
Ojibwe

What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the children of the earth.

Chief Seattle
Suqwamish and Duwamish

I love that land of winding waters more than all the rest of the world. A man who would not love his father's grave is worse than a wild animal.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

☆ The character of the Indian's emotion left little room in his heart for antagonism toward his fellow creatures. . . . For the Lakota [one of the three branches of the Sioux nation], mountains, lakes, rivers, springs, valleys, and woods were all finished beauty. Winds, rain, snow, sunshine, day, night, and change of seasons were endlessly fascinating. Birds, insects, and animals filled the world with knowledge that defied the comprehension of man.

The Lakota was a true naturalist—a lover of Nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth, and the attachment grew with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power.

It was good for the skin to touch the earth, and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth.

Their tipis were built upon the earth and their

altars were made of earth. The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth, and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing.

This is why the old Indian still sits upon the earth instead of propping himself up and away from its life-giving forces. For him, to sit or lie upon the ground is to be able to think more deeply and to feel more keenly; he can see more clearly into the mysteries of life and come closer in kinship to other lives about him.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Teton Sioux

You ask me to plow the ground. Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stones! Shall I dig under her skin for her bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut my mother's hair?

I want my people to stay with me here. All the

dead men will come to life again. Their spirits will come to their bodies again. We must wait here in the homes of our fathers and be ready to meet them in the bosom of our mother.

Wovoka
Paiute

Great Spirit—I want no blood upon my land to stain the grass. I want it all clear and pure, and I wish it so, that all who go through among my people may find it peaceful when they come, and leave peacefully when they go.

Ten Bears
Yamparika Comanche

I love the land and the buffalo and will not part with it. . . .

I want the children raised as I was . . . I don't want to settle. I love to roam over the prairies. There I feel free and happy, but when we settle down we grow pale and die.

Satanta
Kiowa Chief

2

The Ways of Words and Silence

"It does not require many words to speak the truth."

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

The first American mingled with his pride a singular humility. Spiritual arrogance was foreign to his nature and teaching. He never claimed that his power of articulate speech was proof of superiority over "dumb creation"; on the other hand, speech is to him a perilous gift.

He believes profoundly in silence—the sign of a perfect equilibrium. Silence is the absolute poise or balance of body, mind, and spirit.

The man who preserves his selfhood ever calm and unshaken by the storms of existence—not a

leaf, as it were, astir on the tree, not a ripple upon the surface of the shining pool—his, in the mind of the unlettered sage, is the ideal attitude and conduct of life. . . .

Silence is the cornerstone of character.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

Silence was meaningful with the Lakota, and his granting a space of silence before talking was done in the practice of true politeness and regardful of the rule that "thought comes before speech."

And in the midst of sorrow, sickness, death, or misfortune of any kind, and in the presence of the notable and great, silence was the mark of respect. More powerful than words was silence with the Lakota.

His strict observance of this tenet of good behavior was the reason, no doubt, for his being given the false characterization by the white man of being a stoic. He has been judged to be dumb, stupid, indifferent, and unfeeling.

As a matter of truth, he was the most sympathetic of men, but his emotions of depth and sincerity were tempered with control. Silence meant

to the Lakota what it meant to Disraeli when he said, "Silence is the mother of truth," for the silent man was ever to be trusted, while the man ever ready with speech was never taken seriously.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Teton Sioux

In my opinion, it was chiefly owing to their deep contemplation in their silent retreats in the days of youth that the old Indian orators acquired the habit of carefully arranging their thoughts.

They listened to the warbling of birds and noted the grandeur and the beauties of the forest. The majestic clouds—which appear like mountains of granite floating in the air—the golden tints of a summer evening sky, and all the changes of nature, possessed a mysterious significance.

All this combined to furnish ample matter for reflection to the contemplating youth.

Francis Assikinack (Blackbird)
Ottawa

Because we are old, it may be thought that the memory of things may be lost with us, who have

not, like you, the art of preserving it by committing all transactions to writing.

We nevertheless have methods of transmitting from father to son an account of all these things. You will find the remembrance of them is faithfully preserved, and our succeeding generations are made acquainted with what has passed, that it may not be forgot as long as the earth remains.

Kanickhungo
Treaty negotiations with Six Nations

You must speak straight so that your words may go as sunlight into our hearts.

Cochise ("Like Ironweed")
Chiricahua Chief

A treaty, in the minds of our people, is an eternal word. Events often make it seem expedient to depart from the pledged word, but we are conscious that the first departure creates a logic for the second departure, until there is nothing left of the word.

Declaration of Indian Purpose (1961)
American Indian Chicago Conference

I believe much trouble and blood would be saved if we opened our hearts more. I will tell you in my way how the Indian sees things. The white man has more words to tell you how they look to him, but it does not require many words to speak the truth.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

Good words do not last long unless they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father's grave. They do not pay for all my horses and cattle.

Good words will not give me back my children. Good words will not make good the promise of your War Chief. Good words will not give my people good health and stop them from dying. Good words will not get my people a home where they can live in peace and take care of themselves.

I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises. There has been too much talking by men who had no right to talk.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

not therefore take it amiss if our ideas of the white man's kind of education happens not to be the same as yours. We have had some experience of it.

Several of our young people were brought up in your colleges. They were instructed in all your sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger. They didn't know how to build a cabin, take a deer, or kill an enemy. They spoke our language imperfectly.

They were therefore unfit to be hunters, warriors, or counsellors; they were good for nothing.

We are, however, not the less obliged for your kind offer, though we decline accepting it. To show our gratefulness, if the gentlemen of Virginia shall send us a dozen of their sons, we will take great care with their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them.

Canassatego
Treaty of Lancaster

It was our belief that the love of possessions is a weakness to be overcome. Its appeal is to the material part, and if allowed its way, it will in time disturb one's spiritual balance. Therefore, children must early learn the beauty of generosity. They

are taught to give what they prize most, that they may taste the happiness of giving.

If a child is inclined to be grasping, or to cling to any of his or her little possessions, legends are related about the contempt and disgrace falling upon the ungenerous and mean person. . . .

The Indians in their simplicity literally give away all that they have—to relatives, to guests of other tribes or clans, but above all to the poor and the aged, from whom they can hope for no return.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

The Indians were religious from the first moments of life. From the moment of the mother's recognition that she had conceived to the end of the child's second year of life, which was the ordinary duration of lactation, it was supposed by us that the mother's spiritual influence was supremely important.

Her attitude and secret meditations must be such as to instill into the receptive soul of the unborn child the love of the Great Mystery and a sense of connectedness with all creation. Silence and isolation are the rule of life for the expectant mother.

She wanders prayerful in the stillness of great

woods, or on the bosom of the untrodden prairie, and to her poetic mind the imminent birth of her child prefigures the advent of a hero—a thought conceived in the virgin breast of primeval nature, and dreamed out in a hush that is broken only by the sighing of the pine tree or the thrilling orchestra of a distant waterfall.

And when the day of days in her life dawns—the day in which there is to be a new life, the miracle of whose making has been entrusted to her—she seeks no human aid. She has been trained and prepared in body and mind for this, her holiest duty, ever since she can remember.

Childbirth is best met alone, where no curious embarrass her, where all nature says to her spirit: "It's love! It's love! The fulfilling of life!" When a sacred voice comes to her out of the silence, and a pair of eyes open upon her in the wilderness, she knows with joy that she has borne well her part in the great song of creation!

Presently she returns to the camp, carrying the mysterious, the holy, the dearest bundle! She feels the endearing warmth of it and hears its soft breathing. It is still a part of herself, since both are nourished by the same mouthful, and no look of a lover could be sweeter than its deep, trusting gaze.

She continues her spiritual teaching, at first silently—a mere pointing of the index finger to nature—then in whispered songs, bird-like, at morning and evening. To her and to the child the birds are real people, who live very close to the Great Mystery; the murmuring trees breathe its presence; the falling waters chant its praise.

If the child should chance to be fretful, the mother raises her hand. "Hush! Hush!" she cautions it tenderly, "The spirits may be disturbed!" She bids it be still and listen—listen to the silver voice of the aspen, or the clashing cymbals of the birch; and at night she points to the heavenly blazed trail through nature's galaxy of splendor to nature's God. Silence, love, reverence—this is the trinity of first lessons, and to these she later adds generosity, courage, and chastity.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

Children were taught that true politeness was to be defined in actions rather than in words. They were never allowed to pass between the fire and an older person or a visitor, to speak while others were speaking, or to make fun of a crippled or disfigured person. If a child thoughtlessly tried to do so, a parent, in a quiet voice, immediately set him right.

Expressions such as "excuse me," "pardon me," and "so sorry," now so often lightly and unnecessarily used, are not in the Lakota language. If one chanced to injure or cause inconvenience to another, the word *wánunhecun*, or "mistake," was spoken. This was sufficient to indicate that no discourtesy was intended and that what had happened was accidental.

Our young people, raised under the old rules of courtesy, never indulged in the present habit of talking incessantly and all at the same time. To do so would have been not only impolite, but foolish; for poise, so much admired as a social grace, could not be accompanied by restlessness. Pauses were acknowledged gracefully and did not cause lack of ease or embarrassment.

In talking to children, the old Lakota would place a hand on the ground and explain: "We sit in the lap of our Mother. From her we, and all other living things, come. We shall soon pass, but the place where we now rest will last forever." So we, too, learned to sit or lie on the ground and become conscious of life about us in its multitude of forms.

Sometimes we boys would sit motionless and watch the swallows, the tiny ants, or perhaps some small animal at its work and ponder its industry and ingenuity; or we lay on our backs and looked

long at the sky, and when the stars came out made shapes from the various groups.

Everything was possessed of personality, only differing from us in form. Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library and its books were the stones, leaves, grass, brooks, and the birds and animals that shared, alike with us, the storms and blessings of earth. We learned to do what only the student of nature ever learns, and that was to feel beauty. We never railed at the storms, the furious winds, and the biting frosts and snows. To do so intensified human futility, so whatever came we adjusted ourselves, by more effort and energy if necessary, but without complaint.

Even the lightning did us no harm, for whenever it came too close, mothers and grandmothers in every tipi put cedar leaves on the coals and their magic kept danger away. Bright days and dark days were both expressions of the Great Mystery, and the Indian reveled in being close to the Great Holiness.

Observation was certain to have its rewards. Interest, wonder, admiration grew, and the fact was appreciated that life was more than mere human manifestation; it was expressed in a multitude of forms.

This appreciation enriched Lakota existence. Life was vivid and pulsing; nothing was casual and commonplace. The Indian lived—lived in every sense of the word—from his first to his last breath.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Teton Sioux

What boy would not be an Indian for a while when he thinks of the freest life in the world? We were close students of nature. We studied the habits of animals just as you study your books. We watched the men of our people and acted like them in our play, then learned to emulate them in our lives.

No people have better use of their five senses than the children of the wilderness. We could smell as well as hear and see. We could feel and taste as well as we could see and hear. Nowhere has the memory been more fully developed than in the wild life.

As a little child, it was instilled into me to be silent and reticent. This was one of the most important traits to form in the character of the Indian. As a hunter and warrior, it was considered absolutely necessary to him, and was thought to lay the foundations of patience and self-control. There are times when boisterous mirth is indulged

in by our people, but the rule is gravity and decorum.

I wished to be a brave man as much as a white boy desires to be a great lawyer or even president of the United States.

I was made to respect the adults, especially the aged. I was not allowed to join in their discussions, or even to speak in their presence, unless requested to do so. Indian etiquette was very strict, and among the requirements was that of avoiding direct address. A term of relationship or some title of courtesy was commonly used instead of the personal name by those who wished to show respect.

We were taught generosity to the poor and reverence for the Great Mystery. Religion was the basis of all Indian training.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

We send our little Indian boys and girls to school, and when they come back talking English, they come back swearing. There is no swear word in the Indian languages, and I haven't yet learned to swear.

Gertrude S. Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa)
Yankton Sioux

4

The Ways of Living

"Our fathers gave us many laws, which they had learned from their fathers. These laws were good."

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

Our fathers gave us many laws, which they had learned from their fathers. These laws were good. They told us to treat all people as they treated us; that we should never be the first to break a bargain; that it was a disgrace to tell a lie; that we should speak only the truth; that it was a shame for one man to take from another his wife or his property without paying for it.

We were taught to believe that the Great Spirit sees and hears everything, and that he never forgets, that hereafter he will give every man a spirit-home according to his deserts: If he has been a

good man, he will have a good home; if he has been a bad man, he will have a bad home.

This I believe, and all my people believe the same.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

The true Indian sets no price upon either his property or his labor. His generosity is limited only by his strength and ability. He regards it as an honor to be selected for a difficult or dangerous service, and would think it shameful to ask for any reward, saying rather: "Let the person I serve express his thanks according to his own bringing up and his sense of honor."

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

Praise, flattery, exaggerated manners, and fine, high-sounding words were no part of Lakota politeness. Excessive manners were put down as insincere, and the constant talker was considered rude and thoughtless. Conversation was never begun at once, or in a hurried manner.

No one was quick with a question, no matter

how important, and no one was pressed for an answer. A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Teton Sioux

This is a happy season of the year—having plenty of provisions, such as beans, squashes, and other produce, with our dried meat and fish. We continue to make feasts and visit each other, until our corn is ripe.

At least one of the lodges in the village makes a feast daily for the Great Spirit. I cannot explain this so that the white people will comprehend me, because we have no regular standard among us. Everyone makes his feast as he thinks best, to please the Great Spirit, who has the care of all beings created.

Black Hawk
Sauk

When you begin a great work you can't expect to finish it all at once; therefore do you and your brothers press on, and let nothing discourage you

till you have entirely finished what you have begun.

Now, Brother, as for me, I assure you I will press on, and the contrary winds may blow strong in my face, yet I will go forward and never turn back, and continue to press forward until I have finished, and I would have you do the same. . . .

Though you may hear birds singing on this side and that side, you must not take notice of that, but hear me when I speak to you, and take it to heart, for you may always depend that what I say shall be true.

Teedyuscung
Delaware

My young men shall never farm. Men who work the soil cannot dream, and wisdom comes to us in dreams.

Wowoka
(member of a non-agricultural tribe in Nevada)

If you ever get married, my son, do not make an idol of your wife. The more you worship her, the more she will want to be worshipped. . . . My son, this also I will tell you: Women should never be watched too closely. If you try to watch them,

you will merely show your jealousy and become so jealous of your wife that she will leave you and run away. You yourself will be to blame for this.

Anonymous
Winnebago

During the first year a newly married couple discovers whether they can agree with each other and can be happy—if not, they part, and look for other partners. If we were to live together and disagree, we should be as foolish as the whites.

No indiscretion can banish a woman from her parental lodge. It makes no difference how many children she may bring home; she is always welcome. The kettle is over the fire to feed them.

Black Hawk
Sauk

Grandfather says that when your friends die you must not cry. You must not hurt anybody or do harm to anyone. You must not fight. Do right always. It will give you satisfaction in life.

Wovoka
Paiute

If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian, he can live in peace. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow.

All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it. You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases.

If you tie a horse to a stake, do you expect he will grow fat? If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth, and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented, nor will he grow and prosper.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

☆ We are all poor because we are all honest.

Red Dog
Oglala Sioux

5

The Ways of Leading Others

"No person among us desires any other reward for performing a brave and worthy action, but the consciousness of having served his nation."

Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea)
Mohawk

Something is wrong with the white man's council. When the Micmac people used to have council, the old men would speak and tell the young men what to do—and the young men would listen and do what old men told them to. The white men have changed that, too: Now the young men speak, and the old men listen. I believe the Micmac Council was far better.

Peter Paul (1865)

Why should you take by force from us that which you can obtain by love? Why should you destroy

to show it without pay! I have no faith in their paths, but believe that every man must make his own path!

Black Hawk
Sauk

We do not want churches because they will teach us to quarrel about God, as the Catholics and Protestants do. We do not want to learn that.

We may quarrel with men sometimes about things on this earth. But we never quarrel about God. We do not want to learn that.

Chief Joseph
Nez Perce

I think that wherever the Great Spirit places his people, they ought to be satisfied to remain, and thankful for what He has given them, and not drive others from the country He has given them because it happens to be better than theirs!

This is contrary to our way of thinking; and from my intercourse with the whites, I have learned that one great principle of their religion is "to do unto others as you wish them to do unto you!" The settlers on our frontiers and on our

lands never seem to think of it, if we are to judge by their actions.

For my part, I am of the opinion that so far as we have reason, we have a right to use it in determining what is right or wrong, and we should pursue that path we believe to be right.

If the Great and Good Spirit wished us to believe and do as the whites, he could easily change our opinions, so that we would see, and think, and act as they do. We are nothing compared to His power, and we feel and know it.

Black Hawk
Sauk

From Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit, there came a great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things—the flowers of the plains, blowing winds, rocks, trees, birds, animals—and was the same force that had been breathed into the first man. Thus all things were kindred, and were brought together by the same Great Mystery.

Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky, and water was a real and active principle. In the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept the Lakota safe among them. And so close did some of the Lakotas come to their

feathered and furred friends that in true brotherhood they spoke a common tongue.

The animals had rights—the right of man's protection, the right to live, the right to multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man's indebtedness—and in recognition of these rights the Lakota never enslaved an animal, and spared all life that was not needed for food and clothing.

This concept of life and its relations was humanizing, and gave to the Lakota an abiding love. It filled his being with the joy and mystery of living; it gave him reverence for all life; it made a place for all things in the scheme of existence with equal importance to all.

The Lakota could despise no creature, for all were of one blood, made by the same hand, and filled with the essence of the Great Mystery. In spirit, the Lakota were humble and meek. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"—this was true for the Lakota, and from the earth they inherited secrets long since forgotten. Their religion was sane, natural, and human.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Teton Sioux

Whenever, in the course of the daily hunt, the hunter comes upon a scene that is strikingly

beautiful, or sublime—a black thundercloud with the rainbow's glowing arch above the mountain, a white waterfall in the heart of a green gorge, a vast prairie tinged with the blood-red of the sunset—he pauses for an instant in the attitude of worship.

He sees no need for setting apart one day in seven as a holy day, because to him all days are God's days.

Charles Alexander Eastman (Ohiyesa)
Santee Sioux

Grandfather, Great Spirit, once more behold me on earth and lean to hear my feeble voice. You lived first, and you are older than all need, older than all prayer. All things belong to you—the two-legged, the four-legged, the wings of the air, and all green things that live.

You have set the powers of the four quarters of the earth to cross each other. You have made me cross the good road, and the road of difficulties, and where they cross, the place is holy. Day in, day out, forevermore, you are the life of things.

Black Elk
Oglala Sioux

8

The Betrayal of the Land

"Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth?"

Tecumseh
Shawnee

Nothing the Great Mystery placed in the land of the Indian pleased the white man, and nothing escaped his transforming hand. Wherever forests have not been mowed down, wherever the animal is recessed in their quiet protection, wherever the earth is not bereft of four-footed life—that to him is an "unbroken wilderness."

But, because for the Lakota there was no wilderness, because nature was not dangerous but hospitable, not forbidding but friendly, Lakota philosophy was healthy—free from fear and dogmatism. And here I find the great distinction between the faith of the Indian and the white man. Indian faith sought the harmony of man with his sur-

roundings; the other sought the dominance of surroundings.

In sharing, in loving all and everything, one people naturally found a due portion of the thing they sought, while, in fearing, the other found need of conquest.

For one man the world was full of beauty; for the other it was a place of sin and ugliness to be endured until he went to another world, there to become a creature of wings, half-man and half-bird.

Forever one man directed his Mystery to change the world He had made; forever this man pleaded with Him to chastise his wicked ones; and forever he implored his God to send His light to earth. Small wonder this man could not understand the other.

But the old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart, away from nature, becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too. So he kept his children close to nature's softening influence.

Chief Luther Standing Bear
Oglala Sioux

Some of our chiefs make the claim that the land belongs to us. It is not what the Great Spirit told

me. He told me that the lands belong to Him, that no people owns the land; that I was not to forget to tell this to the white people when I met them in council.

Kanekuk
Kickapoo prophet

No tribe has the right to sell, even to each other, much less to strangers. . . . Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the great sea, as well as the earth? Didn't the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?

Tecumseh
Shawnee

This is what was spoken by my great-grandfather at the house he made for us. . . . And these are the words that were given him by the Master of Life: "At some time there shall come among you a stranger, speaking a language you do not understand. He will try to buy the land from you, but do not sell it; keep it for an inheritance to your children."

Aseenewub
Red Lake Ojibwe