

Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief

Thomas Yellowtail (1903-93)

Early Years and Traditional Values

I was born on March 7, 1903, just south of Lodge Grass, Montana. My father's name was Yellowtail, which was the shortened white man's name given to him that has become our family name. The full meaning of his Indian name was "Hawk with the Yellow Tail Feathers."

In my younger days, the old, great warriors who participated in the Plains wars were still living, and many of the traditional ways still lived, even though we were already on the reservation. I still remember seeing the old warriors around the camp fires and at all the traditional ceremonies. When they danced in the warrior's way and then gave their war whoops and shot their rifles into the air, we children were certain that we had seen the end of our days, and—whoosh—did we run for cover! We would hide under the blankets or behind something and just peek out to see these tremendous leaders, until another shot came out—and we dove for cover again!

The Lodge Grass Valley was called the "Valley of the Chiefs" because of all the great war chiefs who were living there in my early years. I only wish I remembered more about all of their stories. I never participated in any of the traditional life of the Indians who roamed over the plains, but when I was a youngster all of my teachers had lived that life, before Indians were forced onto the reservations. These elders took great care to explain and show to us by their example the values by which all men should live. It is their spiritual values and attitudes toward which we must center our lives.

So in my time, I did learn about our traditional ways, and Grandma and I have tried to practice those ways during all our years up to this day. Grandma and I were married on April 27, 1929, and the changes that we have seen on the reservation and in this world have been greater than I could have imagined. The world we see now is very different from the one our ancestors knew, and even the one we knew as children. Almost all of the changes I have seen take place make me sad, and I will speak about them. My hope is to tell about our traditional ways, and how those values and the sacred rites that remain with us are even more important to our people today, because without them we cannot live. You have also asked many questions about my own life and I will answer them, not because my life has been important, but because young people nowadays

should see the differences between their lives and those of us older folks.

I hear people today talk about “traditional Indians” and “modern Indians.” They say, “Get rid of those old, traditional ideas and start to think like a modern Indian; it is the only way you can get ahead.” Many people seem to think that we have to make progress away from the old values and beliefs, toward some new types of ideas that are supposed to be better for us. They are mistaken. It would be better for them if they progressed from their new, modern ideas back to the old, traditional beliefs. They do not understand anything about the traditional ways.

When I hear someone speak of our traditional life or of traditional Indians, I always think about the values of the people who lived in the olden days—values which were established in order to walk a sacred path through life. It is hard to speak about the attitudes that a person has toward the world in which he lives, and most people today don’t even consider who they are in relation to the world around them, or in relation to Acbadadea, the Maker of All Things Above. The life of the traditional Indian was rooted in the sacred; he saw the natural world around him as a miracle created by Acbadadea. The traditional ways allowed the Indians to reflect on the mystery of life, and they were always aware of their place in creation.

The traditional American Indian is an individual who has self-esteem in his sacred way of life, a person who is trying to follow the straight path in everything. He tries to do things right and not be greedy. He doesn’t try to invent things in order to possess them; he is not that way. He is a person who is willing to help others. He will want enough to live on, but that is all the Indian cares for. He shares whatever he has been given with his fellow man and does not try to get ahead of the others. He knows the meaning of poverty and of gratitude. He also knows about religion; he knew long before the white man came and brought all kinds of religions. Indians are ready to help others and do not require much of anything. In my case, when I make medicine and doctor people with my prayers, I don’t ask for anything. It is up to the individual that I pray for. If he offers me something, I am ready to accept. It is that way among the people of all Indian nations. Anyone who follows the sacred ways can help others live. That is why the Indian is not rich in possessing wealth and money. We Indian people are rich in spiritual wealth, which is more important.

The Indian people have recreational doings such as dances. At our powwows we enjoy a little fun. Even during the dancing and celebrating, our traditional ways are present. At every powwow, the Indians will have a big giveaway. They will give away what they have on hand, even if they are not rich. Even being poor, the traditional Indian is ready to help and give what he has.

He would take his shirt off and give it to one that needs it and he would go without. That is the way of life of the Indian. I think it is a very good thing. We may be poor in one way, but we are rich in spiritual things, and it is great to have spiritual possessions that can help others. In the Indian way, whenever someone does something good, they have a giveaway. It is just the opposite for white people. The Indians show humility by giving something away. When someone has a giveaway, they give because they are thankful for what they have. If they have done something well, it is really God, Acbadadea, who has given them the ability to do it. Praising songs are sung for people who are being honored. I have my personal praising songs that I sing for such people. I would gather them in front of me, if I were there, and sing my praise song, march around the floor, praising them up. Then I would say words for them. "These are my children now and they have done a great thing." Then I would pray for them. All the relatives would come forward and give the man who praises and prays for people a lot of gifts. That is separate from the main giveaway. I hardly ever use my praise song on anybody, because people might think I am expecting too much, too many free gifts. Of course, I pray for the people anyway.

When a traditional Indian possessed spiritual powers, he did not try to come out and make a show of what he had. Indians are always private in protecting holy things. It is very difficult to talk about some holy matters, and they are not advertised. Some spiritual matters that pertain to the tribe as a whole are of course public. But individual spiritual matters pertain only to that person, and no one should boast about the gifts he has been given.

The person who possesses spiritual powers must respect them; he must be afraid of them. Fear is a part of the respect of sacred things. Once you know about these things, you will also love them, because you will see that without a sense of the sacred you are less than a man. Man must realize that his importance is nothing compared to Nature and that the sacred realities are even much greater than Nature. A medicine man is required to refrain from many things; in my case, for instance, there are things that I am required not to do and to stay away from. There are general rules that must be observed by all people, and there are special rules that are given to some men as a condition for their medicine powers.

If a man violates these rules, it may bring harm to himself and also to other people. Many of these rules are secret things that each holy man knows about, and it is important for him to observe these rules so that the sacred things will not be lost. It is not just how you act, but how you are in your heart that is considered by the Medicine Fathers. If you think that you deserve more

than another man or that you are better than everyone else, you may not be given any help. But if you follow the sacred path, then you will probably be allowed to keep what you have been given.

When one of us has been entrusted with sacred things, we should try to pass them on so that the spiritual path will always be present for those who choose to follow it. At such time when a man is getting old, getting close to the time of retirement from the world, he can pass on what he has to a younger person who may carry on the work with the medicine things. He should select someone worthy so that his people may live. After this knowledge and the spiritual gifts have been received by the younger person, then the older man is ready to pass away. He has fulfilled his final responsibility, and the spiritual tradition will not be lost. This is good, and the next one can carry it down the line on to the next generation.

As I explain more about our traditional life, these things will become clearer. Spiritual matters are difficult to explain because you must live with them in order to fully understand them. I have lived with these all my life, and I am still learning. Now it is time for me to talk about things which apply to all people of the tribe. We have talked about many of these things over the last three years, and soon our work with this book will be finished. We have discussed private matters about my dreams and visions that do not concern our tribal, sacred way, and those will not be part of the book. When my stories are told, one part of my responsibility to pass on my sacred knowledge will be fulfilled; I will then only need to select and instruct my successor in the duties of the medicine man. I have been blessed with medicine powers that I never expected, and, as chief medicine man of the Crow, my duties will only be done when my successor is ready to carry on. I may be around for many years yet, but we must always be ready to meet our Maker. In 1981, I suffered a heart attack after the Sun Dance, so this may be an indication that I am to carry on for only a few more years in my duties as Sun Dance chief.

After the dancers come out of the Sun Dance, many of them go to the river to bathe. This refreshes the dancers, and reminds them of the ordeal they have just completed. During those three days that you spend in the Sun Dance, your body is burning. When you come out you want to go to the river. Last year, I worked pretty hard in the Sun Dance; it was very hot working on people and doctoring. After we finished the dance and came out that afternoon, I wanted to go bathe and purify myself. My head was strange, I felt different, and I thought that maybe I had a sunstroke. I went swimming in the river; it was lukewarm to others, but to me it was like getting into ice water. This was in July, when even the water in the river would not feel cold, but it was like ice water for

me, and something was wrong with me. I got out and back into my clothes and when I came back that evening, I was shivering, I was freezing. Then they took me in to the hospital and found out it was a heart attack. I was lucky that I recovered from that and came out of it, and now I am back again. I regained my strength, and I am back to work again and today I feel all right. We don't know how or what is going to take us. It is the same for every individual in this world, so everyone should be prepared each day to pass on and meet his Maker.

I intend to continue in the Sun Dance.

I will continue in my efforts to preserve our spiritual ways, and when I am called to leave this world and journey on, when Acbadadea, the Maker of All Things Above, calls me to Him, I will go, knowing in my heart that I have done everything I can to purify myself and help carry on our sacred traditions so that my people may live.

We should understand well that all things are the work of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains, and all the four-legged animals, and the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples. When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will fear, and love, and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as He intends.

—Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

The Vision Quest

One of the main rites of the Sun Dance religion is the vision quest. It is a period set aside for solitary prayer at a remote place.

A person will usually spend three or four days of fasting on the vision quest, saying his prayers during all that time. He goes away up in the hills, gets away from people, and goes off by himself, and there he fasts and prays for either the three- or four-day period he selected before he began his quest.

There are many intentions that a person may have when he prepares to make a vision quest. He may want medicine, some kind of power to help him in battle or in all of his life. Strong medicine powers would protect the man so that he would not be wounded and could not be hit by an enemy's arrow. That kind of medicine would make a man successful in battle with the enemy. A lot of men seek those kinds of powers, and that is what they have in mind when they start out on the vision quest.

Some men might seek different kinds of medicine power or understanding. They may want

to be able to heal or doctor people. They may seek the answer to a question or a problem that is bothering them or their family or tribe. And above all, a man may want to pray in this way because this is a way to come closer to Acbadadea. In this rite each man may awaken in his heart the knowledge of the Maker of All Things Above. A man may pray for any of those things because they would be helpful to him, his family, and his tribe, but a man also must pray for virtue and the correct understanding with which to face life.

In olden days, all young men had those kinds of feelings, and that was why they would go on the vision quests. Sometimes a few of them would go out together. Maybe four or five of them would take a sweat bath together and start out together. When they got out to the hills, each one would go on his solitary way. Each one had to face the medicine powers alone. One would take that pointed hill over there; another one would take the next hill. They would scatter, each by himself, putting in his days. Some would stay four days, some less. Some of them might have received something by the time they came back; some may have come back without anything. Some of them would have been successful and might have had a vision, have been visited by an animal, or have had a dream or something to bring back, and that is good—that meant something. Another would come back and say that he did not receive anything. It means that he would have to try again later, and usually he would. He would try again later on and try again and again. Many of them ended their days by saying, “I tried not once, but a number of times, and finally I was visited by a bird or animal that gave me medicine, and I finally have some medicine, some kind of power or understanding.” And that was the way in those days.

They would have kept trying until they got something. Some of the most sincere ones would probably receive something the first time they went on a vision quest. It depended on the sincerity of the person. If they had a good, strong intention, then they may have been the ones who were successful in their dream or vision right away. They would have been told afterwards what to do to preserve the medicine power given by the bird or the animal, and they would have done what they were told. Perhaps they might have been told to make a medicine bundle or carry part of the animal with them when they went on their raiding party against the enemy or when they needed to make their medicine.

Before a man would go out on a vision quest, he would first consult with a medicine man. It was the duty of the person who asked for instruction to bring a pipe or a smoke to the instructor. If the medicine man accepted the responsibility to instruct the younger man, then they would first

offer the smoke with a prayer. Then the medicine man would tell the young man what to do to prepare—how to go through purification before going up and all the other necessary information. He would explain to the young man how he should pray and fast. Not all young men wanted to seek war medicine. Some would have had a different purpose. The instructions for the prayer depended on the young man's intention.

In those days when people wanted to go fasting, they first prepared themselves by taking a sweat bath to purify themselves. This is still my practice because it is very important to undergo a purification before and after every major undertaking. Right after he was through with the sweat bath, the vision seeker would get up to where he wanted to spend three or four days upon the hill or high mountains. According to his own choosing, he would select a place where he wanted to fast. Many would sacrifice a finger when they got up there. They would chop off the top of their finger and offer it to the Great Spirit or to an animal. If a bird came and took that piece of finger, then the bird would probably come back after a while and adopt that person, give him medicine, and tell him to go home. This could happen in one or two days' time, although the person's intention may have been to spend four days. If he was visited by an animal of some kind who felt sorry for him sitting there torturing himself, then the medicine power would say, "I have come to see you; you are torturing yourself; you had better stop that and go home, and I will give you some kind of power and tell you what to do." After the man would get home, that bird or animal—it might be a hawk, or a crow, or a meadowlark, or any kind of bird or animal—would come to visit that person and tell him what to do. The person would end the fast right then and there and go home; he would have received something already.

People on the Crow reservation today still use the vision quest. Young men and women go out on vision quests. Some come to me, and we pray, and then I take them into a sweat bath. I have to go to work and cut some wood and build a fire and heat up some rocks and sweat with them in there and pray for them; then they purify themselves and set out afterwards. We take the sweat bath during the day so that they will still have daylight to go up to the place of the fast, right after they are through with the sweat bath. If they don't have a place in mind, then I recommend a good place, take them there, and I say, "Now this is where you should stay for the fast," and then I go away. The person should then stay in exactly the same place. We carry wood along with us which we gather as we go to the spot. They do not have fire all the time, just in the morning and evening. One in the morning, just as the sun rises, and one as it sets in the evening. They build little fires

and put some sweet cedar or sweet grass on the fire to purify themselves and their pipe. They say their prayers, and they retire when the dark comes. Even when the vision seeker sleeps, he or she should face the east.

In the olden days, the man going out to seek his vision would wear a buffalo robe, moccasins, and sometimes a loincloth. When he reached the area of the retreat, he removed all of his clothing and almost always was exposed to Nature unless he covered himself with his robe while he slept. I instruct those who ask my advice to follow the traditional way of the old-timers. Plenty-Coups and all the great Absaroke warriors sometimes went into battle without clothing, and so it is also in spiritual warfare. We will speak again of different clothing for each of the rites of the Sun Dance religion, and you will see that in almost all cases the person participating in the ceremony must first humble himself before Creation, both outwardly and inwardly, before he can receive something of value.

I tell them all these things, and many more: "Watch out if you are visited by an eagle; watch him; he may talk to you and drop a feather to you. If so, go and get that feather; it was given to you by the bird; it means something great."

Yes, I have been consulted by certain people who want to go on vision quests; they come to me, and I take a sweat bath with them, and then they start out. If they don't know where to go, I go with them and get them to the right place. I sometimes give them special advice on what they might say in their prayers. All of this keeps me busy, but that is what I am supposed to do if an Indian youth comes wanting to go on a vision quest. I give them some sweet cedar for incense to be put on the fire, and on the way to the place where they will fast, we stop and gather quite a bit of sweet sage for their bedding. When we arrive, we lay sweet sage in a circle over the entire area where they will fast. This includes the place where they will sleep. At the edge of the bed of sweet grass we make the area where they will build the fire in the morning and evening. This is done toward the east. Light and knowledge come from the east, and this is the main orientation of the prayer.

When a person is on a vision quest, he must have certain attitudes and intentions for his prayers to be sincere, and then he must carry these over into his daily life. It is easy to forget what you learned during this trial; unless you remember to carry on your prayer continually during every day of your life, you will not have learned one of the most important purposes of the vision quest. Each time we talk about one of our sacred rites, you will hear me talk about the spiritual attitudes

which a person must possess as that person participates in any rite. It is possible to learn the outer steps that must be accomplished in a rite without learning the inner meanings that are the keys to the sacred traditions. Each seeker must therefore open his heart to the Great Mystery as he tries to follow the sacred way, because the perfect accomplishment of the outer steps of a rite will be worth nothing without the knowledge of the inner meanings. If the intention of a person is to achieve outward glory and superiority over other people, then that person will never be given great medicine, because that person's intention and attitudes are not in harmony with the correct spiritual purpose. If the reason you participate in a rite is wrong, then you will receive no reward. If you participate because you know the purpose of the rites and you want to express your gratitude and love of the sacred ways, then you may eventually receive a great reward.

It will not be the extent of the outward achievement that determines spiritual rewards. Those individuals who possess great physical strength may be asked to give much more in order to show their sincerity. All men are not given the same physical gifts, and when you remember that it is the interior values that make the real worth of a man or woman, you can see that some individuals must sacrifice much more in order to express the same degree of sincerity than another person who has less to give. Everyone should keep these thoughts in mind as they try to understand the Sun Dance way and the meaning of the spiritual tradition that it represents.

For those who have been sincere in the solitary invocation, Acbadadea will send a reward in the form of some medicine power. There are many different medicines a person can receive in different ways: different animals, different birds, maybe the little people, or one of the powers of the universe. When a person returns to the world after a vision quest, he does these things: first, when he gets home, he takes care to say prayers; he must take a sweat bath using sage, and so forth, to purify himself again before he gets back among his people. Then the meaning of the vision must be explained by the medicine man at home. After the instructor hears the whole story of the vision, he can help explain things to the young man which may not be clear. The medicine man knows what must be done by the recipient of the medicine in order for the recipient to protect the medicine. So after the young man tells his story, we take a smoke and say prayers; then the medicine man tells the young man what he has been given and what he must do. The recipient of the medicine usually is instructed to make a medicine bundle that will preserve and protect the medicine power. I have spoken of the bundle which protects the medicine rock of Chief Medicine Crow and the great care which is exercised to protect the medicine in a sacred manner. In the same

way, many men and women will make medicine bundles for their own medicines in accordance with the instructions of a vision or a medicine man. These bundles serve as a constant reminder of the spiritual gifts we have been given and the corresponding attitudes which must always be present in order to safeguard our spiritual blessings. The medicine man will instruct the young people in both the outward procedures and the inward attitudes to be remembered by the successful vision seeker.

Young people may think they know enough, that they don't need help or instruction, but that is not so. It is necessary to consult a man who has had experience in the sacred ways in order to help a younger man follow the straight path. Some men may need less help than others, and some men are given great gifts without great effort. You never can tell, because some men will work hard for years and years and they may never receive great rewards that we can see. But all men should seek the help of a man who has learned the spiritual ways before they try to do something by themselves. You can better understand spiritual matters after years of following a sacred path. There is always more that can be done, and you cannot keep your power or understanding unless you continue your walk through life in accordance with the rules regarding spiritual matters. A man must be humble before the great mysteries will grant him anything. A humble man will ask for guidance from a spiritual man.

This is the explanation of one of the four major rites of the Sun Dance way. The sweat bath, the Sun Dance, and the use of the pipe or smoke with prayer are the other main rites. There are many other rites which were important in the sacred lifeway of the olden days, and some of these other rites are even carried on to some extent today. While these other rites should not be neglected, it is important to remember that the four main rites make up the center of our spiritual heritage, and without them we would be lost. In our modern world today, we may seem like drowning men because of the loss of much of our spiritual tradition. As drowning men we should cling to these four rites as our lifeline and never let go, because this lifeline can save us.

The Sun Dance

The preparations for the Sun Dance and the lodge itself take a great deal of time to organize. People will set up their camps in a large circle around the place where the Sun Dance lodge is to be constructed. No tents are set up to the east. The camp of the sponsor and the medicine man are always set up in the same line with the sunrise, the Center Pole, and the fire for the outdoor sings.

As others come, they camp to form the circle of all the tents. It makes a sacred circle of everyone who comes to share his prayers at the Sun Dance, even if some of the campers are not to participate in the dance itself. There is the outside circle of all the tribal camps that surrounds the inner circle of the Sun Dance lodge. Prayers flow from the tribal circle to the Sun Dance lodge, and blessings flow from the Center Pole of the lodge to the tribal circle, and then to all of the created world.

Sometime during the week before the lodge is set up, the people are told, "Tomorrow we'll go up to the mountain after the long rafter poles." These are the long rafter poles that will go from the outside of the lodge up to the Center Pole. We will also need some shorter poles, forked posts that are to be set up vertically around the outside of the lodge. These should be from cottonwood trees. They are furnished by different individuals, who will donate them.

After the donated poles are brought forth, we go up to the mountain. That is the hardest chore to do; it takes a whole day. We leave early in the morning, cut all of the necessary poles, and bring them back down. In this way, both the forked, upright posts and the rafter poles used to put up the lodge are there at least one day before the erection of the lodge. The distance from the outside of the lodge to the Center Pole is twelve to fourteen paces. We used to have twelve paces, but now with so many dancers, we try to have fourteen paces. This means each rafter pole must be at least seventeen paces long or almost fifty feet in height. It is hard to find good, straight pine trees of this length, but we try our best.

After the twelve rafter poles are cut, we clean off all the branches except for the very top. Then we are ready to transport them to the Sun Dance camp. This can be very difficult. The pine rafter poles are only found way up on the mountain, so we travel far to find our materials. While we are on the mountain, we will also cut smaller pines that will connect the rafter poles on the perimeter of the lodge so that our sacred lodge circle will be complete.

If not enough upright poles have been donated, we must go and cut them on another day. They are from cottonwood trees; they must stand about eight feet long above ground, underneath the fork that will support the rafter poles. They should be at least two to two and a half feet in the ground, so the post will be over ten feet, not including the fork. These are to be found along the river, and we do not have to travel so far to accomplish our work.

The center tree is picked by the sponsor early during the winter. It is always a cottonwood tree. The sponsor will go into the woods and look for the forked tree and locate one. On the day before the lodge is to be erected, we go to bring in the Center Pole. We gather all the men who are

going to help to get the tree. It's heavy; quite a lot of men will go. We come to it, and we have a ceremony before we cut it. We say one special prayer before we cut the poles on the mountain, and now we have another ceremony just for the Center Pole. I use a pipe and my feathers; I'm the one to do that. After I smoke my Indian pipe and offer a prayer, I sing the song of the Center Pole, and when I am through, I use my feathers. I smudge the feathers with incense, and then I pray while I touch the tree with my eagle feathers. "Now we're going to use you; at our Sun Dance we are going to use you. You are going to be the center tree. On you will be the bird; the eagle will be there and the buffalo will be up there, placed on you. We want you to give us power, transmit the power that is going to be on you when the dance has started and is going on. You will be the staff of this dance that is coming up; it is you who will join us to all of the powers of the universe, to Acbadadea. People will come to you; markings will be put on you indicating our three days that we will spend with you. The power will be placed on you. The Medicine Fathers, Seven Arrows, will be there on the center tree, and the sun dancers will put their hands on you and say their prayers, and we want you to help us. We want you to have moisture that you will provide us, for we are not drinking, we are not eating, we'll be suffering. We'll come to you and put our hands on you and give prayers to all of the Medicine Fathers who are going to be on you watching all of the dancers to see who is sincere. When the sun dancers are through with their smoke and prayer, they will put the ashes of their smoke at your base on the ground where you are to be set up; that is for you. Through you we will send our prayers and from you we will receive all of the blessings from above. Help us." I say all these kinds of words, and the men who are there hear this prayer.

We sometimes have about thirty men or so to participate in cutting the tree and in taking it to the site of the Sun Dance. When I am through with my prayers, the tree is ready for the men who are going to cut it with an axe. When it's down, we all go to the stump where it has been cut. Generally, sap will come up, and everybody wants to bless himself with the sap that is from the tree wherever it is cut. There will usually be plenty of sap there, so people can put their hands on the stump and bless themselves with the sap. "*Aho*, we are going to have our dance and it is not going to be too dry for the dancers. It will be a good Sun Dance." You can tell by the sap on that tree what the dance is going to be like. If it is a dry one with no sap, we know it is going to be a dry dance with a lot of suffering. So when it's full of sap, they all say, "*Aho, aho*." All the men that are there will listen and pray.

When we are through with our prayers, they will trim the tree while it is lying there. They

will trim off the branches that we don't want so it is clean up to the fork. If there are any big limbs above the fork, we may cut some of those off, but we leave the fork and the tiny limbs at the top of each side of the fork. Now here is the tree, and it is ready to be taken out of the woods. It is brought out by all of these men who will bring it to where the lodge is going to be. We try to bring in the Center Pole on the day before we will set it up and erect the lodge. Sometimes we will cut it on the morning of the day the lodge is to be built, but this is not so good.

Finally it is time to erect the lodge. The Sun Dance itself will start that night at dusk, and we have work to do. When we're ready, the butt, the end of the tree, is placed right next to the hole that has been dug for it. It is a big hole in the ground, about two feet across and four feet deep. We need about thirty-five or forty men; the more the better, for the tree is a good size and heavy. It is put up by manpower, so it requires a good number of men to lift it.

Before we set it up, there is another ceremony. While the tree is still on the ground, a man is selected again—a veteran who has been in a war—to tell his story and offer a prayer. After his prayer, he ties the flags onto each branch of the fork of the center tree near the top. There are two flags: one is a blue one, the other is a white one. The white one represents the earth; the blue one represents the skies, the heavens. After this prayer and after he ties the flags, he receives a little present from the sponsor. A bundle of tobacco will also be tied next to each flag to represent the prayers that are being raised to the Medicine Fathers when the tree is lifted. The tobacco can be tied just above or below where the flag is tied, but the flag and tobacco should be tied very close together. The flags and the tobacco can be furnished by someone who wants to offer a prayer for the coming Sun Dance. After the tree is raised, the flags will be seen flying about forty feet up from the ground. Probably no one even sees the tobacco bundle after the tree is raised, because it is up so high that something that small is almost invisible. But we know that the offering is there, and all of the Medicine Fathers know that the offering is there and that we have taken great care to prepare everything correctly.

While the tree is still on the ground, the same man will paint three rings on the tree before it is set up. These three rings are about four or five feet above the ground and are made by using charcoal from the fire where the outdoor sings were held and water. This mixture makes a dark-colored paste, and the veteran uses his hands to paint the rings. The three circles represent the three days the Sun Dance is going to last. If it is to be a four-day Sun Dance, then four dark rings will be made. All the people can see these marks. The number three also has other meanings for the

Indians. The first meaning of the three rings is the number of days of the dance, but the three rings also represent the sacred circles of progression from the physical world, to the world where the Medicine Fathers dwell, and then to the pure world of Acbadadea above and beyond all other creation. All three worlds are connected in the Center Pole.

The last thing to do before raising the pole is to sing the "Tree Song." The Center Pole is still lying on the ground. A number of men will get on each side of it, and we are ready to lift it. We face each other and clap our hands without using a drum; we use our hands to take the place of a drum. Now we sing the song, repeating it four times, and then we whoop and holler and reach down and grasp the tree and lift it about four feet off the ground. Then we put it down and sing the same song again, four times. After we repeat the sacred song four times, we lift the tree up a second time, then lay it down again. A third time we repeat the song four times, then lift the tree up again and lay it back down again. The next time, the fourth time, is the last; after we sing the song four times, we reach down, pick the tree up and hold it up. We don't lay it down anymore; we come right along with it, on, on, on, and on up, until it is set up right. The more men to do this, the easier it is. There are long ropes that have been placed running around the fork of the tree. The ropes will be pulled from the east side when the top of the tree gets beyond our reach. The men with the ropes will start pulling, keeping the tree from swaying to one side and trying to keep it going straight. Besides that, some large poles about twenty feet long are being used to help. A rope is tied between each set of two poles, and these sets are used to push the tree up from the west, while others pull on the ropes from the east.

Up and up the tree goes, until the butt of the tree drops into the hole that has been dug for it, and now it stands there. We then put dirt around the base and tamp it in tight so that the pole is straight and the opening of the fork faces east. I will be at the outside edge of the circle and direct the raising of the tree. If it is too much one way or the other, the fork will be straightened. I tell them which way to turn, until the fork is just right from the sponsor's position towards the rising sun. As I stand in the position of the sunrise, I can sight a line from the doorway of the lodge to the Center Pole, the chief's pole where the medicine man and sponsor will sit inside the lodge, the sacred fire for the outdoor sings, and on to the camp of the sponsor and the medicine man in the larger camp circle. We know where the sun is going to be coming up in the morning, on the horizon in the east, so we orient the lodge and the camp circle in harmony with the sun. It is the responsibility of the Sun Dance chief to line everything up and run everything properly. Green willows are

brought and tied crosswise with the fork of the tree; one bundle goes on the east side, the other on the west side. Then the twelve upright poles that mark the outside of the lodge are set up. The outside ring of the Sun Dance is made by the upright cottonwood trees, each of which has a forked top facing the Center Pole. Each of the twelve pine rafter poles that meet at the Center Pole is placed into one of the upright cottonwood forks. The chief's pole is the first rafter pole that is placed from the upright cottonwood where the sponsor and medicine man are located to the Center Pole. The chief's pole goes up first; the next rafter poles to be placed into the crotch of the Center Pole are opposite the chief's pole from each side of the doorway. Then comes one from the south side and then one from the north side, and then the others can be placed according to where they fit best.

People always ask, "What is the significance of the twelve poles; what do they mean?" Well, I tell them this makes the sacred circle of the lodge. The upright poles form the sacred circle representing the spiritual reality of our tribe. The rafter poles link the sacred circle to the Center Pole, which is the sacred point where all three worlds are connected: the physical world of the tribe, the spiritual world of our Medicine Fathers, and the pure world of Acbadadea. There are other meanings also; the lodge is round, and that represents the earth, which is round. The twelve poles, leading from each forked pole to the center, represent the twelve months of the year. The twelve months represent another circle, because in it we are brought back to a new beginning. Each of the twelve poles represents a month of the year when we must have our monthly prayer meeting, when the moon is full and up in the air, and we should continue prayers each day between the twelve appointed monthly Sun Dance prayer meetings. The drum which we use to help carry our songs to Acbadadea is also round. All things in Nature's way are round.

So you see that the Sun Dance lodge itself contains and represents the world and the time from one Sun Dance to the next. It brings man into direct contact with all of the powers of the universe, with the Maker of All Things Above. The Sun Dance lodge contains all of the dancers and all of the spectators who share their prayers there. Everyone who has been to the Sun Dance should remember all this and carry it with him always.

So, after the center tree is set up, we'll keep on working until everything is done. We start this in the morning, and we may be through by about three or four in the afternoon. Sometimes we are through about one or two o'clock, and that is fortunate because some of the dancers will want to have a sweat bath that afternoon to purify themselves before going into the Sun Dance. When

they come back from the sweat ceremony, the sun may be setting, and it will soon be time to go into the lodge. They will have what dinner they want before going in.

After all of the rafter poles are set up and each of the upright forked poles into which the rafter poles sit are connected to each other to form a complete circle, then brush is placed around the outside of the lodge to enclose it. Many of our helpers have retired to their camps because the heavy work is done, but this final work must be completed. Pine or cottonwoods can be used for the purpose. Only the doorway to the east is left open. The sacred circle is complete.

Now it is for me to place the buffalo and eagle at the center. Before I fix the buffalo head to the Center Pole, its face is painted with a special white clay that we mix with a little water so that the paint will not blow off with the wind. When the buffalo is roaming out in the prairies, he decorates himself with dirt. It is a medicine the buffalo creates by rolling in the dust and whipping it up. He always does this before a battle. You will see him breathe strongly and snort through his nostrils as he breaks the ground with his front feet, sending up a cloud of dust to paint himself with this medicine before his charge into battle. He is going to war, and he prepares himself by making medicine and painting. He concentrates completely on the task before him.

In the same way, we prepare for our sacred warfare by painting and making special prayers and medicine on the second day of the Sun Dance and by painting the buffalo head before we place it on the tree. You can see now that everything in the Sun Dance has a meaning; if you think about it, you will understand.

After the buffalo is painted, we place him on the west side of the Center Pole, right under the chief's rafter pole. The buffalo will face the sponsor and the Sun Dance chief during the dance. We place a bundle of sweet sage in each nostril of the buffalo and tie the sage so it will stay there for the three days. We use sweet sage to offer a prayer to Acbadadea in many of our ceremonies, and we use the sweet sage in each nostril of the buffalo to represent the buffalo's breath. In the same manner a sincere person's breath can carry a prayer. When we blow our eagle bone whistles during the Sun Dance, our breath does carry a continual prayer. While the singers are beating on the drum and singing, the dancers are blowing on the eagle bone whistles. The drumming is the heartbeat of the Sun Dance, and the heartbeat and the breath of the eagle bone whistles send a prayer to all of the Medicine Powers in the universe and to Acbadadea.

The eagle and the buffalo that we use in the Sun Dance are no longer living but are stuffed. The sponsor may have one or the other that he would like to use, but I have both: I have a buffalo

head and an eagle that we generally use. One year when the dance was very, very hot, the buffalo started to cry. All the dancers could see the real tears that the buffalo shed. Then in the heat of the afternoon of the second day, water came forth from the neck of the buffalo. It was a miracle, and all of the dancers came to touch the sacred water and then rubbed their hands on their heart. Everyone got up and danced in thanksgiving for the great blessing that the buffalo was giving to the entire tribe through the Sun Dance. Everyone felt that his suffering was recognized, and all of the dancers knew that their prayers were being heard.

I have had my own eagle for only about five years now. The eagle wanted to give himself to me for the Sun Dance, I imagine, because this great bird came down from the sky into a coyote trap on my brother's ranch. He was found in perfect condition. I had quite a time getting him stuffed, though, because no one wanted to have anything to do with it. It is unlawful for anyone to possess eagles except for those Indians who use them in their sacred ceremonies. Sun dancers need the eagle feathers and the stuffed eagle as part of their religion, and this is allowed. Government men have come to watch our ceremonies to see how we use the eagles. They have asked me many questions, and they were well satisfied that we use them in a sacred manner; therefore they allow us to use them and don't bother us. I was told we could even ask the Forest Service for the feathers from eagles that have been killed in Nature and found by the government. I know they have many birds, but I have never had success in any of my requests when I write or go to their office.

For this reason, no one would help me preserve my bird, but a friend offered to try his hand. He bought a book and read it and then said, "I'll try and we can see how it works." It did work out well, and today I have a fine bird thanks to this young man who stuffed the bird. It is good that I have both the buffalo and the eagle to use at the Sun Dance. They are very important and bring blessings to us all.

The last thing to do before the lodge is complete is to put the eagle on the rafter poles. Of course we purify the eagle with incense before he is tied onto the poles. When the eagle is in place, the lodge is complete. Now I have fulfilled my responsibilities in preparing the lodge, and I may retire for purification with either a sweat bath that has already been prepared nearby or at least with a plunge into the river. Then I have my dinner, and after I take my last drink, I put on my Sun Dance skirt and prepare for the Sun Dance to begin.

The Sun Dance lodge is like the white man's church; it is our place to pray to Acbadadea. The Indians do not need a church to capture the presence of God, because He is all around us in

Nature. We carry out all of our sacred ceremonies in Nature, without the aid of any permanent building. When the dance is over, we leave the lodge standing, and over the years it naturally returns to the earth. In the same way, everything returns to the earth in its own time.

As each sun dancer approaches the lodge, ready to begin the ordeal, he should be aware of the sacred character of the lodge. It represents the earth and all creation as well as the circle of seasons that travel through time. The center tree is the staff of life, and on it are these medicines and the representatives of the Maker of All Things. It is through the Center Pole that we meet God, so we must go to the center of the circle and understand the responsibility of being placed at the center of creation. Spiritual realities are more than you can imagine, but if you follow the Sun Dance religion correctly, then you can begin to understand this, and the responsibility of participation in the Sun Dance will become clear.

You can see that it takes a great deal of preparation to construct the Sun Dance lodge, but after we have completed the lodge, all of the medicine powers of the universe are present on the Center Pole. Seven Arrows and all the rest are there representing Acbadadea, even though we do not see them. Throughout the Sun Dance, the Medicine Fathers will be carefully watching the dancers. They will see who is sincere. They listen to all the prayers; they see who is continually dancing and who is concentrating on his prayers.

The dancers will have their gaze fixed on the eagle or on the buffalo or on some spot on the tree. All the time they are dancing, they will concentrate on that spot. Oftentimes dancers will see the buffalo or the eagle just as if he were alive. If the dancer has concentrated on the buffalo and has been sincere in his prayers, then the buffalo will know. For those sincere dancers, the buffalo will be alive. To everyone else the buffalo will just be up there mounted, but to that dancer, he will be alive. It is the same for those dancers who watch the eagle. They see him alive up there. The bird or the buffalo may dance with the sacred songs, and it will be a great comfort to the dancers.

The most sincere dancers will dance almost continually for the three days, even though they have no food or water for this entire time. They will always be up, going forward to the center tree and dancing back to their place while always facing the tree and concentrating on their spot. These dancers will be given something by the Medicine Fathers, especially by the buffalo. A wild buffalo will charge a person, hook him with his horns, and throw him in the air and let him fall. The same thing will happen to the dancer in the lodge. It generally does not happen early in the

dance, but on the second day. Each dancer is beginning to get dry and to suffer, and those who keep going continually, even after they start suffering, will be rewarded by the buffalo. The buffalo will charge and catch the dancer, hook him up and throw him up in the air, and the dancer will “take a fall,” as we say. Before the dancer takes a fall, the spectators see the dancer staggering around as he comes forward to the tree, and he may weave out of his own trail on the way back to his place. Each dancer has his own trail to the Center Pole from his position on the outside of the lodge. The dancers on either side of the man who is ready to take a fall will notice that the staggering dancer can’t come back to his post on his own trail and that he may weave into another dancer’s trail. So the other dancers will stand stationary at their posts on the periphery of the lodge and blow their eagle bone whistles to give support. The singers also will notice that the man is almost ready to fall, and they’ll say, “Don’t quit singing. A man is about ready to receive something; he’s going to fall, so don’t quit.” Until the man falls, the singers will keep singing; sing, sing, sing while this man is dancing, wobbling all over the ground. Finally he will take a hard fall. When that happens, it is the buffalo that throws him up in the air; the man hits the ground and he lies there, unconscious.

When that happens, we hurriedly go and cover him up with cattails and sweet sage. Then we pray for him. He is gone into a vision, so nobody bothers him. We will keep the dance going; he lies there. That reward is medicine coming from the Sun Dance, given to him by the buffalo. He will give the dancer something, probably tell him what to do, what kind of feathers, colors, or medicine to make. Different persons will receive different things. The person who has gone into a deep sleep will probably lie there for twenty minutes. After he has received his reward, he will wake up, he will probably hear the singing, and then he is ready to get up and dance again.

A person should not be afraid when this thing happens. It is good for a person to continue dancing until he falls. It could be that some of the other animals that are not visible, but present in spirit, will knock the dancer down and then they will give him something. He may receive some power or message of some kind, and so he may be of some service to his people afterwards, all year round.

That person, by attending later prayer meetings, will be advancing a little toward the understanding of the Sun Dance religion, toward the nature of God. The more a person participates in all of our monthly and daily prayers, the more understanding he will have of all of the things that are to be learned in the Sun Dance religion. It is the way that was given to us long ago, and

has always been, and is still continuing today.

I should explain to you here that in setting up the Sun Dance lodge, we are really making the universe in a likeness; for, you see, each of the posts around the lodge represents some particular object of creation, so that the whole circle is the entire creation, and the one tree at the center, upon which the twenty-eight poles rest, is *Wakan-Tanka*, who is the center of everything. Everything comes from Him, and sooner or later everything returns to Him.

—Black Elk, Oglala Sioux

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