Sacred Spirit: The Lakota Sioux, Past and Present

Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me? Are you talking to me? You must be talking to me, I don't see anybody else.

Here we are on the Black Hills of South Dakota. My name is Travis Harden. I'm a Miniconjou, Yankton, Lakota, and Winnebago. My Indian name is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], it means Paints His Face Red. I got that from my grandfather.

And I teach children how to sing, how to make jewelry, how to do art. And also I'm a dancer. How do you like me so far?

Here we are in Lakota homes. This is where all the Indians live. There's a Indian community here. A lot of Indians have moved to the city from the reservation to get away from the problems of the reservation.

This is low rent housing and there's a lot of alcoholism here. There's a lot of gang violence. That's why I teach kids how to sing.

I teach kids from around the neighborhood. And I'm trying to give them something to get into besides the gang violence, trying to be a gangster.

In English, my name is Delaney Apple. I got a Lakota name. It's [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], which means, Helps First. And currently I'm a manager working at a Native American adolescent treatment center for substance abuse.

This community got a bad name in the '70s because it wasn't a part of city limits. So we got a lot of violence out here, a lot of drinking. It just got ugly, so we got a bad name. But it's not like that anymore.

This is my house, me and my family live. Been living here for about four years. Come on and see an urban Indian home, unlike the reservation. These are pictures of all my nieces and nephews. And these are pictures of all my kids.

We got the Black Hills right here, like right at the foothills of the Black Hills. And it's like, today, people my age take things like this for granted. How beautiful, how close we are to our backyard. This is where we came from.

There's a story that goes, the Buffalo maiden brought us and put us in a cave in the Black Hills. And we're like supernatural beings. We could float through rock. And we came out too soon.

And we are called [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], which means Buffalo People. And when we came out we got tricked. And we came out too early. And we lost the ability to fly, the ability to communicate with spirit and things like that. But we still had our spirituality and our language and our own identity.

My name is Mitchell Zaphir. My Lakota name is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], or Pretty Voice Hawk. I'm a Lakota and French descent.

And I've lived here Rapid City since 1981. I have a jewelry studio here. And I make my living primarily from creating Lakota jewelry and other crafts.

In Lakota creation stories, they say that the Lakotas were once what you might call semi divine people. They came from the stars, and they actually lived underground. And Iktomi, Iktomi is like a trickster, and he came in the form of a man. He said, if you come with me, I'll show you a place where there's all kinds of magical wonderful things.

They followed him and they came out onto the Black Hills. And when they came into the Black Hills, that's when they cam into human form. But then they couldn't go back.

And so the Creator gave them buffalo so they could live. But also with that, came all the pitfalls of human beings. Like jealousy. You could compare this to, like, the story of Adam and Eve. How Adam was tempted to leave Eden.

Being an artist, I used to do a lot of Indian designs. I put them on horse dance sticks. And they'd represents symbols, things that the horse did with the person that had danced with the stick.

So I went a step further. And during the Christmas time I do Indian designs made out of Christmas lights. Some of the Christmas lights, they move. So sometimes I'll have a running buffalo, and it looks like its running.

Over here is a buffalo skull I did for my neighbor. The buffalo is a gift from Mother Earth to the people, so they could survive. We used to use every part of the buffalo.

Nothing went to waste. Even the manure, we'd use to start fires. We used the stomach for water bags. We used the hooves for tools, and the horns, we used everything. Nothing went to waste.

I heard that there were estimations of anywhere from 30 million, even 60 million buffalo. And they were exterminated, primarily because as long as the Indians could hunt buffalo, they would not accept being confined to a reservation, because that was their lifestyle. They had migratory patterns. That was all they knew.

It would be like, if somebody came to you today and said, you need to give up what you're doing now, and start farming this land. If you didn't want to be a farmer, you would resist. And so this is what the Indians have done.

Long time ago, our ancestors used to travel. Why we're so rich in our culture is because all our culture is living with living things, with the Great Spirit, the sky, the trees, the ants, the ones that swim and crawl. All of those people, they're all people, they're all nations. And we were raised, and we were taught from our ancestors, that this is the life we're supposed to live. We have to live on the land.

Mother Earth was respected like she was a person. Every time a white man stabs a fence into the ground, he is torturing Mother Earth. She's alive, too. And so to see what they've done to the earth, and how they cover it up, and they build these big buildings, and they throw their trash all over, it's sad.

My name is Michelle Means. And my Lakota name is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], which means Eagle Woman. I live here in Kyle, South Dakota, located on Pine Ridge reservation. I work at Little Wound School. And I'm a teacher here.

I knew that there was a desperate need for Indian teachers on the reservation. And I wanted to be a role model and start teaching our Indian children things that they need to know as Indian children. Because when I came back to the reservation, one of the things I noticed of the youth, they weren't proud to be who they were. They were picking up wearing clothes from different ethnic groups, just like the world out there.

And boys weren't proud of their hair anymore. A long time ago, when I was growing up, we all had long hair. And we were proud. We were proud to have our long hair.

And we were told that our hair is sacred. You don't just chop it up and dye it and do all these crazy things to your hair. Because your hair carries memories.

This drum group consists of all of my brothers. Maybe not blood brothers, but throughout the years, we've sang together and more or less come together and bonded as to become brothers. We'll take care of each other, just like a family. I appreciate you guys.

[SIDE CONVERSATION]

I'm a drum keeper. The drum keeper usually keeps the drum, and takes care of it like he would one of his own kids. And it's a big responsibility in a way. It was passed down to me from my father, and I'm pretty grateful for that. I tell my son, one day, when I pass on, or I'm not going to be here, you're going to be the next one for me to pass my drum down to.

My name is Brian Thunder Hawk. My Lakota name is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], meaning Jealous of Him. We're just like any other people.

And it's hard to live, especially on a reservations. It's really hard. Very little work to find. And I just got a lot of families through singing through the drum.

The drum also has a spirit. It's living also. I take care of it, and cherish it, and respect it. Music it keeps going.

It makes me happy. It humbles me. It makes me feel good.

Music itself is the universal language. But music, to us, and the dancing to us, it brings back memories of days we roamed on the plains, with no restrictions, no regards to the laws, or anything. We were wild animals.

And it brings that side of us out. It brings that warrior out of us, when we're dancing and stuff. In fact, that's what our dances are for, to portray how we would sneak up on our enemy or on prey, on a buffalo we're hunting and stuff.

When it's real hot like this, those rattlesnakes come out of their holes because it's hot. And sometimes they get inside these junk cars or they hide, they stay underneath. And we have a lot of rattlesnakes around Indian country. You got to be careful.

And also, a long time ago the grass dancers used to come in and stamp down the grass. And they'd scare the stakes away. The could feel that thunder of the beat on the ground with the drum. And it'd sound like buffalo, too, to them, so they'd leave the area. And then they'd stamp down the grass for elders and everybody to come in.

[SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE] Hello. My name is [INAUDIBLE], of the Cheyenne River Reservation, and my Indian name is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], Little Bear.

Right now we're headed to a pow-wow. A pow-wow to us is just like a celebration. It's like a big party. Everybody's getting together in summertime. People are feeling strong for themselves, so everybody wants to get out and dance and show their stuff.

Here I am, standing in the Badlands. Why is it called the Badlands? Because it's so bad.

This is where they filmed Starship Troopers. It looks just like the moon, or planet Mars, or planet Zeroid. The cavalry couldn't cross it, they'd stay out of it because it was so tough, but our Lakota people made it through there, through the winter. They survived. They made it to Wounded Knee, where they were all massacred. And that's why I like to come and sing here, because my voice carries.

I am Indian. My mom's full-blooded, and my father's a white man. Through my whole life thought I could never dance or do anything because I had light eyes and light skin. But my mom was dark.

So, finally, I finally just got up enough nerve and said, forget all this thing saying that I'm not Lakota. But yet all my cousins are dark. I'm a Lakota, too. Yep. These are my two cousins. Any guy, hands off.

Putting my [INAUDIBLE] together, it's what I wear on my head. It's made out of deer hair and porcupine hair. To us Lakotas, our feathers are like individual friends. So when I'm dancing, I make sure this guy's going to be dancing with me.

This tattoo right here, my friend gave it to me. I'm glad I have this tattoo. Because now he's passed away to the eternal spirit world. So I have something on my heart to remember.

The word pow-wow, it's my understanding, came during the fur trade, when the fur traders saw how much furs we had, this natural living. And were astonished, and wow, pow-wow. We have our own word, [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], which means dance. And [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE] when the people dance. And that's how our language is, simple and direct.

There's a lot of red, white, and blue because I have a lot of relatives who fought in the war, in Vietnam, and in World War II. So I wear it to kind of honor them.

We are the only people, the Plains Indians, that allow the American flag, the flag of our oppressor, to be flown in any of our ceremonies. There isn't an Indian Nation in the entire Western hemisphere that allows the flag of their oppressor to be allowed in their ceremony.

This is my cape, I wear on top. This is my apron, my side-drops. And it's [INAUDIBLE]. I mean hawk.

[SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE]. Also known by my colonial name, Russell Means. I'm an Oglala Lakota patriot.

These bells I wear on my feet, are to keep the rhythm of the drums, and also kind of add my own little song along with the drum as I'm dancing. These are my moccasins. They are beaded with the sunburst colors. And it's made out of rawhide and regular leather. And then we use deer sinew to sew them up because it lasts longer.

When we first met them, every instance, we welcomed the Europeans with open arms. We gave them land, and food, and taught them how to live in the Western Hemisphere.

This is my headband. [INAUDIBLE] since represent when we would wear war paint to go out to war. This is just a common grass dance design, with the arrows, and then the sun.

We have a beautiful failing among our people. And that is, we have the tendency to believe the white man.

Feather's an eagle feather. It's one of the first feathers I ever got given to me when I first started dancing. Usually you have your woman, or your mom, braid a little braid that sticks out here and has a stick that goes inside there. Now I'm ready to pow-wow.

I want to be free. I know what freedom is. I know what faith is. And I know the beauty of my heritage.

I know we can't go back to the way we lived, except for freedom. We've always lived with reverence for our grandmother, the Earth. And if you take care of your mother, she will take care of you. That's an axiom of our life and our future.

The heartbeat is the drums, the heartbeat of Mother Earth. And when the dancers are touching the ground, they're being at one with the heartbeat, with the drum. So there's a connection there, there's an energy that flows through the people, through the drumbeat.

The gathering of the people. It's like a carnival or a fair. And it's a good time and it's happy. It's also time to meet new people and friends.

People come here for usually three or four days. They camp. They live here. People are all here together. And they come from all over, in every direction, from all the different states.

A lady asked me, why is it that Indians carry the American flag at their pow-wows? And I think a lot of Native people really love this country. Not necessarily America, but they love this land, and all the things that it represents. America is an idea. And you look at the history of this country, and it kind of culminated in Wounded Knee in 1890.

The Lakota people were traveling in the dead of winter with a white flag of truce, and they were surrounded by the United States Calvary. And shortly thereafter they were disarmed. And this was primarily a group of elderly men, women, and children. And they were massacred.

The people that did survive and told their stories tell that a wagon load of whiskey was brought out to the [INAUDIBLE] cavalry. And they were drunk.

I don't think they would have make those decisions to kill people if they weren't drinking.

They were ordered to disarm the Indians. And at that point a medicine man began praying and reached over and threw dirt in the air. And the shooting began. And the people were killed.

There are estimated around 148 people that were buried in the mass grave at Wounded Knee. There were babies, infants, pregnant women. Here we have a part of a clothing item from a three or four-year-old boy who was killed there.

We also have other artifacts. These were called tee pee bags. And these were found under a woman at the massacre. This one, you can see, is covered with blood.

My name is Julie Lakota, and I'm the archivist for the Oglala Lakota College tribal archives. That's not a tradition, to keep anything when a person dies, especially something with blood on it. There are a lot of elders who have said that they don't want to keep anything from our dead ancestors, and would like to see everything burned and buried.

After the massacre at Wounded Knee, one of these old Indian medicine men said, a people's dream died in the bloody snow at Wounded Knee. A people's dream died there. And the aftermath of that was that Indians were confined to reservations.

Indians actually didn't have American citizenship until 1924. Prior to that, they had to get permission to leave the reservation. The Indians were confined to a specific area, so they wouldn't be in a way of progress. Americans developing farms and ranches and mining and cutting timber.

The Lakota word for white man is wasichu. And literally, the wasi ichu means, takes the fat. Wasi ichu takes the fat. And this name came about because the white men would come in and take all the timber, or the gold.

They would kill the buffalo, just take all the resources, and they didn't want the Indians to have anything. And the Indians were viewed as being in the way, because they didn't do anything with the land. They just existed on the land. But the European concept was develop the land, to farm it, to cut hay, and to cut timber. And I think this has to do with the concept of acquiring wealth.

My name is Geraldine Bluebird, and my Indian name would be [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE] [INAUDIBLE], which means river. And I have lived here on the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. All my life, I was born here, raised here. This is my house. And next door here I have a trailer house.

Right now there's between 20 and 28 people that stay here with me. We have one working bathroom. And so when school starts, we have quite a traffic jam, getting the kids ready.

We have about anywhere from 10 to 12 kids in school. There's Kenny, Alicia, Harrison, Stella, Kincaid, Elia, Joe, Tommy, Jamie, JD, Justin, Junior, and that's about as far as I can probably go. And that's with my eyes closed. Sometimes it's hard for me to even remember the names when they're in and out. I want one to sit out or something, I go through the list sometimes.

Hello. My name is Joe Lends His Horse. And I'm the outreach director here for the Journey Museum. My name, Lends His Horse in Lakota is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE].

Life is hard here. And it's a little harder than most, because we don't have much here. We have one store, a few fast food places. But there's no place to get a job. There's no types of factories or anything here. There's no clothing stores or anything.

Everything that we want to do, or even to get to a grocery store to buy clothes or shoes, you have to travel a distance. There's no theaters. There's no roller skating rink. There are no swimming pools. Anything a kid would enjoy, we don't have here.

These are all the animals and birds that are indigenous to this area. And growing up, I ate skunk, and porcupine, and jackrabbits, and also prairie dog. They kind of taste a little like chicken. But nowadays we are all eating fast foods, [INAUDIBLE] chemicals in there, too.

I believe that a lot of Indian people suffer from diabetes because their bodies cannot tolerate the processed food. Because their diet in the past was primarily natural grains and natural meat.

Now we have a lot problems with diabetes, obesity. When you eat something that's running on a hoof it's mostly lean meat. And you diet changes 50, 60 years later to other types of meat. And it makes it a little hard.

This guy, he's a mechanic. And he has to survive on the reservation. So this is how he survives, by fixing cars, selling parts.

They can leave their junk car here. He probably pays them $20. He fixes people's cars all the time. That's how he survives on this Pine Ridge Reservation.

It's a dry reservation. There's no alcohol sold on this reservation. So the people have to drive to the border towns to get alcohol. And when they do that they get drunk and they get on the highway. And they wreck sometimes because they're too drunk.

I lost a lot of friends that died in car wrecks and a lot of people got hurt. And I have friends that are crippled because of this alcoholism that's done to our people. It's our worst enemy.

All of us evolve over the years. I think that the Indians did not develop a tolerance to alcohol because they have only been using alcohol the last 100 years. Where other people have been using it for 2000 years.

I don't think it's any greater or any worse than it is in any other culture. Because you're on a reservation, it looks like a greater problem. Nobody gets to hide. They don't get to jump in their car, drive into their nice garage in the suburbs, and shut the door and hide. It's all right here, in your face.

My name is Cherokee Rose. In Cherokee it's [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE]. But Cherokee rose is a real thing. It's a very real thing. It's this type of rose that grows out of a rock.

In working with a lot of adolescent kids who came from alcoholic homes, what I've tried to get them to see was that, your opportunity to be a victim is going to be daily. You're going to get a chance to be a victim your whole life, if you really want to. To refuse to be a victim, and to refuse to accept that as a perspective, is probably the most warrior step that a human being could make in today's society. Because it's so prevalent. It's become a cultural perception.

I personally have gone to a lot of alcohol and drug problems. Not only myself, but other people in my life, friends, people I worked with. And the conclusion I've come to is, I look at my children and see the Lakota word for children is [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE]. And [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE] literally translates as Sacred Being.

The Indians had a very moral culture. They lived a very moral way of life. What they call natural law that came from [SPEAKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE], from God, the Creator. It said you shall love each other, you shall help each other. You shall respect the elders, respect the children. They're all sacred.

These sacred spirits are our ancestors. And we are the culmination of their lives and their love. If we have parents that are good people, and they try to teach us to love God, and to live according to spirituality, then we will keep on being sacred spirits. But if we don't have guidance, we could turn out to be a thief or a liar, anything.

These are tough, and they stand a lot of rain. And if it does leak, the rain runs down the poles. So it just stays dry in here. This is nothing new. This has been going on for thousands of years.

The white man talks about when time began. And [INAUDIBLE] his world for two reasons, the clock, and money. Without one or both-- without just one, he'll go berserk. He's schizophrenic. He's got to have money and time.

There was this British man that visited this one time. And he was so used to time. Everything was done by the clock.

What time are we leaving? What time are we eating? What time are we doing this? What time are we doing that? And I could never give him a time.

We don't have a concept of time, hours. So if I was to tell my uncle, I'm going to be there tomorrow morning, that'll be any time the sun comes up till noon. Afternoon is when it's noon till the sun goes down. And night is when the moon comes up till morning.

Indian time, if I might, is something that people laugh about-- white people laugh about-- and the Indians laugh about it all the time. But the idea behind that concept is not altogether bad. It's you do what's important first. And the stuff that's not important doesn't have to be done right away.

The concept of the invention of time is absurd. It's absurd. Think about it. There is no time, so therefore times on your side. If there is no time, then you have time for everything. You're never in a hurry. That's true freedom. You're never in a hurry.

The most common misconceptions about North America pre-Columbus, is that somehow, this was a savage, wild, untamed, completely uncivilized place. When in actuality there was established cultures and all of the things that go along with great civilizations, like established language, medicine, art. All of those things were here.

Because so much of our culture was land-based, when the land was taken, then there were whole pieces of the culture that kind of went away.

We made treaties with them, giving them the land. Then found gold here 100 years ago, and took the land back. We sent Custer in, ostensibly, to let the white people come in and take over the land.

A lot of anger, resentments, historical grief. And I'd get mad with the white people. They killed off our people. The cavalry, in the government.

To the victor goes the spoils, and so this land was taken from the Indians. They were allowed to move to reservations, and placed there, and given the worst land in the state, and told to make a living. My name is Thomas [INAUDIBLE]. I'm Chief of Police, Rapid City, South Dakota.

Subjugation has as many different faces. There's telling somebody, OK, you can't speak your language. You can't practice your religion. You can't dress that way. Here's what you can be. This is what we will allow you to be.

It was 1978 before Indian people were given back the right to even hold a pow-wow. That's pretty late in the day, right.

I have no idea what the solution is. Because I think, at this day and age, I don't think the government-- the national, the federal government-- is going to be able to give this land back to the Indians.

There was a lot of money that was offered to essentially pay people back for what they lost. The government's attempt to say, here's your money. Sorry we broke all the treaties. See ya.

The money's been put on deposit for them. So, there are those who want to take it, those who want it left and want the land back. And it's not going to be settled readily, I can assure you.

What I want is an apology. I want people to say they're sorry. And that takes and admittance from your heart. Because you can give me money, and all I can do with your money is going to buy things. It's not going to heal my rift, in my heart or in my mind.

There's no more excuses. If I want to learn my language. I am capable to go out and sit with the Elder and ask them questions and learn. If I want to go out and learn a song, I have ears. I can sit and listen. I have the capability within me to acquire everything in this world that I want.

See I believe very solidly and very strongly in that which endures. You can't destroy it. It's impossible. You may change and alter the face, the outside, the external part of it. But you can never change what's inside of me that makes this way. Never. I will give it to my children. My children will give it to their children, and their children will give it to theirs.