

*Introduction:*

I was sitting one day around a table with a man named Thomas One Wolf. Thomas is considered to be a messenger among his people. His job is to travel between a great number of tribes and convey information passed from one set of Elders to another.

Thomas was talking about how his brother had passed away, and in doing so took with him the knowledge of how to mix and make the paints his people used for their ceremonial totems. He went on to say that there had been a time in his life when he would never have imagined that he would sit down with the White Man to discuss the ways of the American Indian.

Thomas said that over the years the youth of his people had lost interest in the traditional ways. He sat one day with his Elders discussing this problem. One of the Elders spoke up and said, "Uncle, we've run out of Indians! We have to be willing to share what we have with all those who have an open heart".

It seems to be true. I have been on the reservation and seen the kids there emulating a culture blown in on radio waves and television signals. I have listened to the Medicine Teachers sadly talk of parents discouraging their children from learning the traditional ways. I have sat in ceremony and noticed that at times half or more of the participants were non-Indian.

Thomas One Wolf told me, "When an Indian talks about his culture you will hear about Wounded Knee. You will hear about the Trail of Tears. You will hear about

suffering and persecution along with all of the beautiful things about his people. But when an Indian talks about his Spirituality, you will hear about harmony with the Creator, respect for our Grandmother Earth and all her living creatures. These will be two different conversations”.

Wherever I have gone, I have found a willingness to share from Elders based in large part upon my willingness to honor and respect those who are teaching. It would be naïve to think you can separate the Spirituality of the Indian completely from the Culture and I believe no one should try. Still, I wonder if it is necessary to be an Indian to experience the power and beauty of their Spirituality, often called “Walking the Red Road”, any more than it is necessary to be Tibetan to experience Buddhism. Because Jesus was Jewish, does that mean only a Jew can truly be a Christian? Millions would beg to differ, not to mention some obvious conflicts in ideology. The rocks in the dreamer’s (sweat) lodge do not ask to see tribal enrollment papers before they giveaway their energy in ceremony, they give away equally to all who sit in the ceremony.

This is important to me for many reasons. This is in part because this story is not about “trying to play Indian”. More importantly, I have come to believe in the power and healing of the good Red Road and would like to see its traditions and teachings survive and be better understood, especially by non-natives. I believe a great deal of good can come from their practice and that people of all races can benefit from them. I also believe that there are aspects of the Red Road that a non-native may never fully comprehend if they were raised outside the Culture of a traditional Indian upbringing.

Conversely, a non- native person may see things or identify experiences differently that a person raised in the Indian culture, and in doing so may be able to add to the richness of the traditions rather than diminish them.

I address this topic now because of something that is called “Cultural Poaching”. There are those who maintain that the Spirituality of the Red Road cannot be separated from the Culture of the American Indian. They object to non-native individuals representing themselves as spiritual teachers and healers of the Red Road traditions, and vehemently oppose those non-natives who charge money for such practices. They consider this behavior to be “poaching their culture”.

I do not know if these people are right or wrong. I respect their desire to preserve and protect their cultural integrity. I agree with them that the wholesale monetization of their Spiritual practices by anyone, especially people who were not raised in all the nuances of their culture, is especially troublesome.

I personally have never represented myself as any kind of “medicine man” or as affiliated with any tribe. I have also never shared anything I have been taught by “hiring out” as a paid “Medicine Teacher”. Typically it has been, over the years, a labor of love and gratitude on my part that has cost me thousands of dollars if I were to add it all up.

This is the way of it for me. I cannot avoid the controversy surrounding this sensitive and valid topic, any more than I can avoid the truth of my own experience and how it informs my life.

I have been in many ceremonies with people from all backgrounds from all over the world. I have prayed with people where there were two and three different languages being spoken and while no one person could understand all the different tongues, the feeling in the prayer was clear to all of us. If you truly believe the teachings of the Medicine Wheels, you will come to see, as Thomas One Wolf put it, “we have all been Indians”.

This is a story about seeking. It is a story about questioning everything that gets found. It is a story about Magic in a time when reason has been appointed God and Magic has gotten cast out of its rightful place at God’s side into a Hell of cynicism and intellectual arrogance. But Magic is not Lucifer, cast from the side of God for refusing to help Man. Man expelled Magic in a desperate, futile attempt to put Creation in a box. It is the nature of Magic to endure, and so it does. Magic does not need Man nearly so much as Man needs it.

When something you have never seen or heard before moves you and causes you to feel or to change an idea, that is Magic. When you believe something is possible when only a moment before it couldn’t be done or didn’t exist, that is Magic. Magic exists in all Creation, that physical laws can sometimes explain how it came to be manifest does not diminish its power. Who can look at a beautiful sunrise and dismiss its wonder with a dissertation of the Earth’s circle around the Sun? Only someone with a heart so separated from Life and so afraid of its own smallness that it has to try and put Creation into a box and throw a wet blanket of intellect over it.

My heart was once like that. I was so afraid of Life that I could not see Magic. I used to say I was cynical like it was something to aspire to. I didn't recognize that cynicism was just a more socially acceptable form of cowardice. It was in this broken down state that I stumbled onto the good Red Road.

I have had many teachers, not all of them two-legged. I have had many more lessons, few of them easy and fewer still completely understood. I have tried at times to turn my back on this path, and I have always questioned each new experience it has brought me.

I am not qualified to address the cultural aspects of life as an American Indian. That is not my story, and that is not important to the telling of my story.

In order for any spiritual discipline to survive, let alone flourish, it must be available to all who seek its experience. It must also evolve. It must be a means of spiritual contact and development that is not governed by skin color, geographical location, blood type, ancestry, or any other similar limitation. It must be something a person can call upon whether they live in an isolated rural area or a crowded urban city. It must be flexible enough to withstand the debate and differences of opinion that will arise among its practitioners. Finally, it must not be so specific in its doctrine that it eliminates the uniqueness of each seeker's experience. We all come to the well down different roads and we are all likely to describe the water as something more than wet, but what is important is that we all get the chance to drink and know that there is no "one right way" to hold the ladle.

So how did I come to write this story?

It was 1995 and I was sitting in a restaurant in Rosarita Beach, Mexico with a few friends and a man who had been an influential teacher in my life. This man had come along at a time when I was searching for some kind of spiritual compass and extended himself and what he knew of the Red Road and allowed me to study and learn what he had learned along that trail. We had been at it for a few years by the time we found ourselves sitting in that beachside restaurant. You will meet him in this book.

In the middle of dinner he turned across the table to me and said "You have to make me a vow". Now a vow is pretty serious business, it goes deeper than a mere promise. "To do what?" I asked. "You have to write a book about what you have learned along this journey, you have to tell your story". So I made the vow.

I struggled for years with how to convey this story, not in small part due to considerations and concerns regarding the sensitivity I have to the issues discussed in this introduction. I did not want to write a book where I portrayed myself as some kind of Medicine Teacher or a "how to" guide for the ceremonies I have been privileged to do.

Finally, I decided to simply tell the story as it unfolded, revealing the person I was at the time, all my doubts, misgivings and incredulities, and the struggle that my wife and I endured as we made our way through the challenges of not only a new spiritual path, but also the dark journey of her battle with mental illness, and how we used the Red Road as a bridge back to sanity.

As I close this introduction I want to say that it is with the deepest respect for my teachers that I tell this story. I swear across my sacred pipe that this is my experience. For that is all I will ever really have to give away. My Experience. It is the only truth I could ever hope to own.

WALK IN BEAUTY

WES HAMIL