

travelling on the Good Red Road

Remembering a
Cherokee Corn Dance in
the mountains of Wyoming

K.G. Evans Jr.

"I got your coffee, but they didn't have the cigarettes you like..." Shining Eyes called across to me.

It was a mid-July morning and I was pumping gas into a Ford Ranger at a convenience store in Pinedale, Wyoming, and while doing so watching honest to God cowboys drive cattle right down the middle of the main road while traffic stopped at the intersections allowing the men and animals to pass as if this were a common occurrence. The only other time I

had seen a cattle drive was in the swamps of South Florida and that was when I was a kid.

I was here on a summer break from my teaching job in Florida, and Shining Eyes - Karen as I had first known her - an old friend, had extended an open invitation for me to spend time with her if I was ever 'out west.' I contacted her and she was more than glad to play hostess to me that summer. We took in the sights of Aspen and we spent the better part of a week on the

Colorado Trail. I could have spent the entire summer on that trail, but Karen, Shining Eyes, wanted to attend a Native American Corn Dance in Wyoming.

With my thoughts back to the immediate situation regarding the store not having the brand of cigarettes I preferred, I came up with a plan B and called to her. "That's alright, just grab me a pack of Marlboros."

"Okay!" shouted Shining Eyes and she dove back into the store.

I finished pumping the gas and took my position in the passenger seat. Shining Eyes took the driver's seat and handed me my coffee and cigarettes. Instead of one pack though, she gave me two.

"Why the extra pack?" I inquired.

"When we get there, you have to give the Elder a tobacco offering." This excursion was becoming more complex as it progressed.

Shining Eyes explained that the Corn Dance was primarily a celebration of thanksgiving through dance. The dancers themselves were required to wear all white along with any appropriate regalia.

I hadn't brought any white clothing, but she pointed out not everyone there had to dance, but those that didn't were expected to support the dancers, having gone through a purification by immersing one's self in an icy river seven times. Being a Florida boy, I wasn't looking forward to that.

As our journey continued west, we left the plains of central Wyoming and entered the mountains. The craggy outcroppings, the angular slopes and the snow covered peaks were something that never failed to inspire awe any time I saw them. Another aspect that struck me was the lack of people. On the road in Wyoming, we never saw another vehicle, not to mention the absence of any structures. We only encountered a single country general store on the road out from Pinedale. The roadside sign for the business proclaimed, 'Last Gas for 50 Miles.' Although we had our camping gear in the back, I wouldn't want to be stranded on this road, I could only imagine what form of clawed and toothed beast may lurk in the bush.

We left the hard road and headed down a dirt forest road used by loggers. It meandered through a narrow valley cut by the Greys River, which ran below the road.

The weather was warm enough where we could roll the windows down, and between the fresh and rarified mountain air, along with the warmth of the sun, I couldn't but help feel like a kid again. Watching the rushing of the river and pine trees below us pass by, I imagined I was an eagle flying through a mountain pass, the mountain tops beckoned to me to fly higher to reach their summits. It

was a good place and a good day to be alive.

After a while, the valley widened and the road descended toward the valley floor and the river. In a small clearing near the banks, was an encampment. It consisted of cars and trucks parked at the edge of the clearing, and a scattering of tents clustered around a motor home and a trailer. There also was a tipi set off from the main cluster.

Shining Eyes parked among the other vehicles and we walked toward the center of the campsite. There didn't appear to be much activity, other than a couple of men and a woman working on a small domed framework by the river.

We reached the motor home in the center and knocked on the door. We were greeted by a rotund, late middle-aged woman with long dark hair streaked with gray that was weaved into a single braid.

"Welcome you all! Welcome!" she enthused and reached out with open arms to give us both a hug. This was the first of many hugs I was to receive over the course of the next few days. I was brought up in a strict environment and hugs weren't too common.

"It's good to have you all here! I'm Star." She exclaimed.

Grandmother Star was the archetypal matriarch. She fussed over all her guests as if they were her children. She was a native of Wyoming; her mother having grown up on the Wind River Reservation, and then married a local cattle hand.

We introduced ourselves, as

When one form of life becomes dominant over others, another form of imbalance occurs and it has an effect on the greater whole. This is why it's important for the People to tread lightly on the Red Road... a path you take through life. If you stay on this path, you are mindful of your actions with your relations. You need to decide how your actions impact the greater whole

Shining Eyes offered one of the packs of Marlboro, which Star graciously received as she ushered us into the motor home.

Seated at a table were two men. The first she introduced as Seeker. He was a middle-aged, clean shaven man with long black hair tied into a ponytail. I never found out much about his background other than he worked as a coyote trapper and that he was an alcoholic who'd had an epiphany and turned toward spirituality to help with his struggle.

The other man was introduced as Bear Claw. Grandfather Bear Claw was Star's husband, originally from Oklahoma, his mother being of Cherokee heritage. He was a Medicine Man to some degree. He was clean shaven, with close cropped gray hair and his face was as lined and as craggy as some of the rock formations we'd seen. His eyes were

*Below:
Cattle in the high street of Pinedale, Wyoming
Photo taken in the 1970's*





the deepest of blue, much like the mountain sky. At times his eyes seemed to pierce right through me, much like a laser and other times they were much like pools of liquid compassion and understanding.

Both men rose to give us hugs. As we took our seats around the table, Grandfather spoke, "You are welcome here and we're glad to have you here. However, I have to ask, what is your purpose here? What do you hope to learn... to find?"

Shining Eyes immediately responded, stating she was here to give thanks by dancing, and learn more about something she called the 'Red Road.' I was relieved that she took the lead, as in reality I had no idea why I was here other than to be in her company. Essentially, I was there on a lark, to gain an experience that might give me a good story to tell.

After Shining Eyes stated her purpose, I noticed the barely perceptible nod from Seeker, then both sets of eyes turned to me.

Seeker's eyes were brown and unfathomable. However, Grandfather's were in the piercing mode and I could feel the blue laser like light passing through me.

"Uh.... I'm here because of her" I offered. I couldn't think of anything else to say and I didn't want to lie to them.

"Oh?" replied Seeker in a nasally and high pitched voice that didn't quite match his visage. "Are you two married?"

"Oh no!" Shining Eyes said rather quickly. "We're just friends."

"I see," offered Grandfather in a grave and sonorous voice. "Are you here to dance?"

I was relieved I was being asked a question that I could provide a definitive answer to. "No, I'm here to support the dancers."

Grandfather's gaze softened and I could feel the intensity scale down a bit.

"Good," he replied. "Supporters are always welcome. Of course, you'll still have to attend the



Left:
The Greys River
in Wyoming

As I gazed at the scene, I couldn't help but ask myself why anyone would want to change this? Why would anyone want to strip the sides of these mountains for coal or clear cut the trees? The answer was obvious and I knew it, money. Still, how could people destroy this, even for the love of money? I was starting to see this was our home

others were beginning to arrive.

"That went well..." I offered, to get a gauge on Shining Eyes' take on it. She looked at me with what appeared to be more light coming from eyes than usual and said, "Better than you might think."

The morning light became bright enough through the filter of the wall of our tent for me to find my clothes and get dressed. Shining Eyes was moving a bit slow as she had done most of the driving, and was slower to dress. She apologised and encouraged me to get out and about to start my day.

I walked over to the trailer where others had started to gather. Grandmother Star called me over with the promise of fresh, hot coffee. I was starting to detect a slight Southern accent in her speech and being from Florida, I found it pleasing.

As I approached the trailer, the others came to me, and a round of introductions started along with the ubiquitous hugging. First was Red Hawk, a full Native American of Shoshone heritage from the Wind River Reservation. He was to be the drummer for the dance. I remembered him working on the framework I'd seen. "It's for a sweat lodge," he informed me. I had heard of sweat lodges before, but hadn't been in one.

Next was Richard and Sandy. They didn't have Native American ancestry, but they were here because they followed Native American spirituality and traditions. They were the owners of the tipi, and they told me that they had bought it cheap, as it was originally made for Harrison Ford, the actor, but he wasn't pleased with the colour of the cloth of the covering and wanted another made to his exacting

specifications.

After them were two ladies, Silver Otter and Ariel. Both were from Idaho, and were also aficionados of Native culture. Ariel, a short, slight woman of middle age with long raven hair, was also a practitioner of Wicca. She explained there were many similarities and she took learning from both traditions. Silver Otter was also middle aged though slightly taller and fuller, with long auburn hair. She claimed Cheyenne heritage, though not a full blood like Red Hawk.

Last were an elderly couple, Laughing Coyote and his wife Linda. Almost as round as he was tall, and supported by an old hickory cane, Coyote, as he was commonly called, was from Utah and had Ute heritage.

Then Shining Eyes joined us, and the round of hugs and introductions started all over again. With the hugging, the sharing of each other's background and the firm but gentle clasps of my shoulders and back, I was feeling more at home than I had felt in quite some time; beginning to feel as if I were a part of a family.

Grandmother Star called for our attention as Grandfather Bear Claw and Seeker approached the group. We all fell silent as Grandfather started to speak in a voice that still had a touch of gravel, but was softer than yesterday.

"Thank you all for coming. If you all will join me in the arbor, we will greet this new day with thanks."

We followed as a group into a clearing, where Shining Eyes told me the actual dance would take place, and formed a line facing the red and yellow light streaming from behind the mountain tops. I fell into line and Grandfather spoke.

"Each day is a gift, a blessing from the Creator. It is up to us to

purification ceremony."

"I'm aware of that and that should be no problem." I exclaimed with perhaps a bit too much obvious relief.

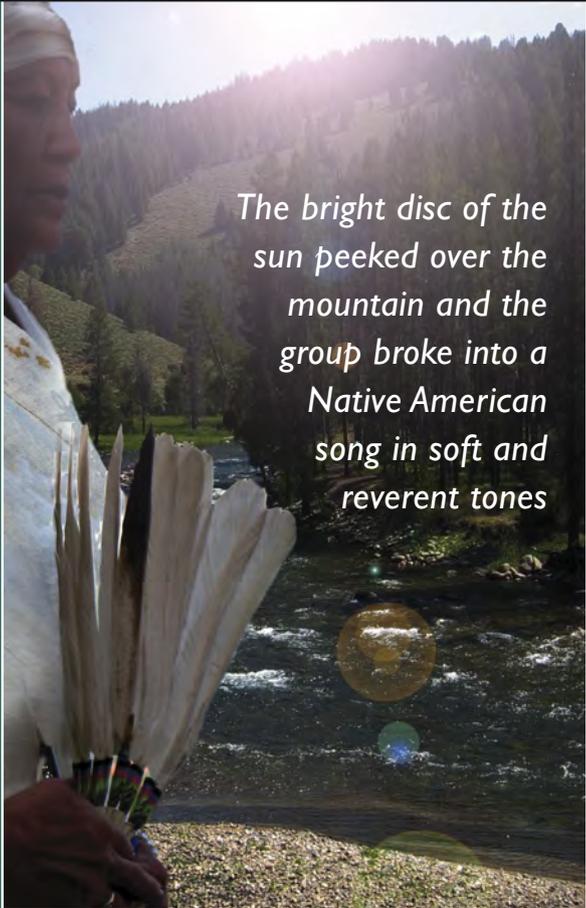
"Is there anything you wish to find, to learn?" Grandfather asked.

I was on the spot again. I couldn't think of anything I wanted to learn. My knowledge of this gathering was limited and I couldn't provide a specific answer. "I'm not quite sure what I want to learn," was all I could offer, "I like to think I have an open mind and I like to go with the flow of things. I guess I'll learn as I go along."

I saw the barest of smiles crease both men's mouths.

"Very good then," replied the Elder. "We start tomorrow morning. All are to gather here before the sun comes over the horizon to greet the new day. You have the rest of this day and the evening to prepare your accommodation."

With that, we went to get our camping gear. As we did, we saw more cars and trucks pulling in,



The bright disc of the sun peeked over the mountain and the group broke into a Native American song in soft and reverent tones

make the best of each day and be thankful for it. We show this by greeting the sun each morning with a Cherokee Morning Song."

No sooner than he'd finished, the bright disc of the sun peeked over the mountain and the group broke into a Native American song

in soft and reverent tones:
"We n' de ya ho, We n' de ya ho,
We n' de ya, We n' de ya,
Ho ho ho ho,
He ya ho, He ya ho,
Ya ya ya."

After this, Grandfather led us to the river. The only ones that stayed behind were Star, who was preparing breakfast, and Coyote and Linda. I was a bit sorry about this, as I was starting to like Coyote's quirky sense of humor.

When we reached the bank of the river, Grandfather spoke again.

"The Corn Dance is one of the most important ceremonies to the Cherokee People. It is when we celebrate the harvest and give thanks for the bounty we received. It is important that those that participate be pure and of good intent, and that is why we perform the purification ceremony."

At this, everyone began to strip down to their underwear and wade into the cold rushing waters of the river. And when I say cold, I mean cold, as the water was coming from snow melt in the mountain tops.

We split up into groups of three, where the one in the center - supported by the other two - dunked their head in the water seven times.

When it was my turn, I wasn't sure I could finish it. By the fourth dunking, I could feel a headache coming on, but when I completed the seventh round - gasping for air as I did - I never felt more wonderful. I

felt clean, pure, and reborn.

After donning our clothes, we headed to the trailer for breakfast, and after Grandfather invoked a blessing, Shining Eyes and I found a spot under a tree and were enjoying the repast when we saw Seeker sauntering toward us.

As he approached, I noticed he was smiling, something I didn't see yesterday. His grin revealed crooked teeth that were a little too large for his mouth. But what was the most striking were the laugh lines around his eyes. They revealed someone that loved life and loved to laugh.

"How you guys doing?" he asked us in general, and turned to me and asked, "You're not dancing, are you?"

"No, I'm afraid not," I replied. "I didn't bring anything white with me to wear. Had I known..."

"Oh that's okay man." he interjected, "We understand, not everybody's into it. There is something you could help with though, are you good with fires?"

"Well... I was a Boy Scout..."

"That's great!" he enthused, "Alright man. Let's go!"

When we reached the fire, I noticed a large pile of wood along with a large chopping block fashioned from a tree trunk and a double-edged axe.

"This is where the sacred fire will be." Seeker explained. "We put it on the west of the arbor to help purify the spirits as they enter. That's where the spirits come from you know, same direction as the rain."

"The important thing is once the fire's lit and the dance begins, it can't go out."

"You mean during the dance, right?" I asked.

"Naw man, it has to stay lit until we're done. For the rest of the week man."

"Oh..." was my chagrined reply. "I have to stay with it all the time?"

Seeker stuffed his hands and looked around sheepishly. "Yep, you'll probably have to sleep near, or next to it, depending on how light or heavy you sleep."

"So, I'll be sleeping under the stars then..." Well it wouldn't be the first time and perhaps it wouldn't be the last.

"Oh, one last thing," Seeker said, "that pile of wood is only for the sacred fire. We have another wood pile for the community fire."

We then split up into groups of three, where the one in the center - supported by the other two - dunked their head in the water seven times. When it was my turn, I wasn't sure I could finish it, but when finished - gasping for air as I did - I never felt more wonderful



The wood for the sacred fire is special, Grandfather picked it out himself, you can't swap the wood."

I looked at the wood and noticed it was fairly green and wasn't split. I knew enough to realise it wouldn't burn like that. I then cast my eyes to the block and axe. "I'm going to have to split the wood too?"

"Yeah, we didn't have time to do that. I hope you don't mind." Seeker said with a hint of apology in his voice.

"No, I'll be fine." I replied. "It's been a while since I swung an axe, but it's like a bicycle, right?"

"That's the spirit!" Seeker exclaimed with gusto.

By dinner time I had a huge pile of split wood and the sacred fire was roaring. I was delightfully surprised when Grandmother told the others I was to be served first. "This boy's been working hard all morning, I saw it. The rest of you were lying around, doing nothing!"

"Ah come on Grandmother!"

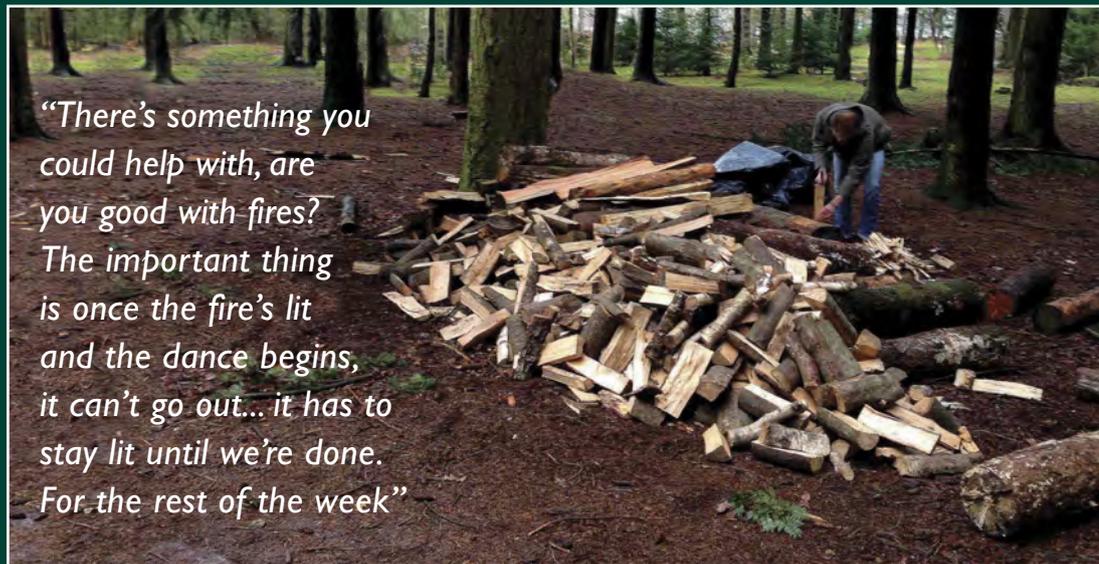
Seeker shouted out, "We had to get our ceremonial dress ready!"

"I'm sure that just taxed all your abilities too Seeker!" she retorted to the laughter of all, including Seeker.

In the afternoon the dancers gathered at the edge of the arbor. The men were dressed in white leggings with a white loin cloth, white painter's pants or white sweatpants. The women were all dressed in white dresses with a hem that came below the knee. Red Hawk carried a drum and stick, Seeker had a turtle shell rattle and Grandfather carried a turkey wing feather fan.

Grandfather went into an explanation of the dance, telling us Red Hawk would sing a traditional song in Cherokee appropriate to ceremony while drumming, and Seeker would accompany on the rattle. Grandfather also stressed it was most important that the dancers only circled the arbor in a 'sunwise' or clockwise direction, as this was the direction that White Buffalo Calf Woman had used when she taught the first People the teachings of the Four Directions. I was told it was also important that I stay on the outside of the fire and not come between the fire and the dancers.

Grandfather then lead the dancers into the arbor, followed by Red Hawk and the others. Red



"There's something you could help with, are you good with fires? The important thing is once the fire's lit and the dance begins, it can't go out... it has to stay lit until we're done. For the rest of the week"

Hawk began beating his drum and broke into song, and it didn't take long for me to get lost in the rhythm and sounds of it. It was explained to me later that song was synonymous with prayer, and I noticed that some of the dancers were experiencing a similar if not more intense effect from it than I'd had, going into a sort of meditative state. At one point, Grandfather closed his eyes and never re-opened them until the dance was done.

After a while, I noticed a substantial piece of wood had fallen away from the flames. The problem was, in order to grasp it by a part that wasn't smoldering, I would have to go over to the other side of the fire and place myself between it and the dancers. I considered getting another piece of wood, but it seemed like such a waste.

I studied the piece and something inside me, not a voice but more of a feeling, told me if I grabbed it by the glowing embers, I would be all right. I leaned over and grabbed the spot by my thumb and forefinger. To my amazement, it didn't burn me, and I placed the wood back on the fire.

I inspected my fingers and other than a bit of ash, there appeared to be no burns or blisters. I performed that feat several more times over the course of the next three days, but since then, I've never been able to duplicate it.

As the dance continued into the afternoon, I glanced back at the campsite and noticed Coyote and Linda sitting under an awning on

camp stools next to their old canvas tent. I couldn't help but wonder why they weren't here by the arbor. Then I realised, they never came to the river and so weren't purified. Even from this distance, I could see the longing in their eyes, particularly Coyote's.

By late afternoon, the dance was done and the dancers went to their tents to change into more casual clothing. I split some more wood so I would have plenty to last me well into the next morning. After that, I sat on the ground and looked through the flames at the mountains beyond the campsite.

As I gazed at the scene, I couldn't help but ask myself why anyone would want to change this? Why would anyone want to strip the sides of these mountains for coal or clear cut the trees? The answer was obvious and I knew it, money. Still, how could people destroy this, even for love of money? I was starting to see this was our home. Not only that, it was the home for other species that didn't necessarily compete with us but complemented us. How could people devastate something like this?

As I pondered, I noticed a shape through the flames on the side of a mountain opposite. Instinctively, I knew it had always been there, but this was the first time I'd noticed it. The shape was a roughly circular clearing on the side of the mountain. It wasn't absolutely open, as two intersecting lines of trees ran through it much like the cross hairs in a rifle scope.

As I rose to take it in better, I

felt a presence near me and as I turned toward it, I saw Grandfather standing next to me. He was looking toward the mountain as well, with a smile spread across his face. I knew he was looking at the same sight as me.

"Grandfather," I said almost in a whisper, "what is that?"

"That's a Medicine Wheel." He replied in a hushed and reverent tone.

"What's a Medicine Wheel?"

"Long ago," he began the story, "when the People were first on the earth, the White Buffalo Calf Woman came and taught them of the Four Directions. From the Four Directions we get the seasons of winter, spring, summer and autumn. We also get the four elements of wind, water, earth and fire. When all of these are in balance, everything is as it should be. When the four seasons and four elements are in balance, we have harmony among all the relations."

"Relations?" I inquired.

"In a sense," he responded "perhaps in a much broader sense. The Oglala and Lakota People have a term known as *mitakuye oyasin* or 'all my relations.' It implies all life on earth is related and needs each other. It also implies that all life creates a sum greater than its whole, which is the Great Spirit or God. When one form of life becomes dominant over the others, another form of imbalance occurs and it has an effect on the greater whole. This is

why it's important for the People to tread lightly on the 'Red Road.'"

"Red Road,' I've heard the others mention it."

"Yes," responded Grandfather. "It's essentially a path you take through life. If you stay on this path, you are mindful of your actions with your relations. You need to decide how your actions impact the greater whole."

It sounded simple enough in theory to me, but I suspected it was much harder in practice.

Grandfather continued "If you are in balance with yourself, you can easily walk the Road."

By now, I was beginning to believe in serendipity. All the feelings I had moments before about the love of money and the destruction of the environment were now being articulated by this wise man beside me. This couldn't be a coincidence.

"How do we stay in balance as individuals, Grandfather?"

As Grandfather spoke, his gaze never left the Medicine Wheel. "Just as there are the four directions, seasons and elements; each of us has four aspects; that of warrior, teacher, healer and what you might call shaman. Modern society tells us labor should be divided and specialised, that we should do only what we as individuals or society as a whole thinks we do best. When we do this, people become imbalanced and their spirits become sick. Some try to compensate by filling their lives with material things,

giving them a rationale to continue their current path. Others try to dull the pain through drink or drugs. All of this suffering could be avoided if people realised and practiced their other aspects other than the one they fell into."

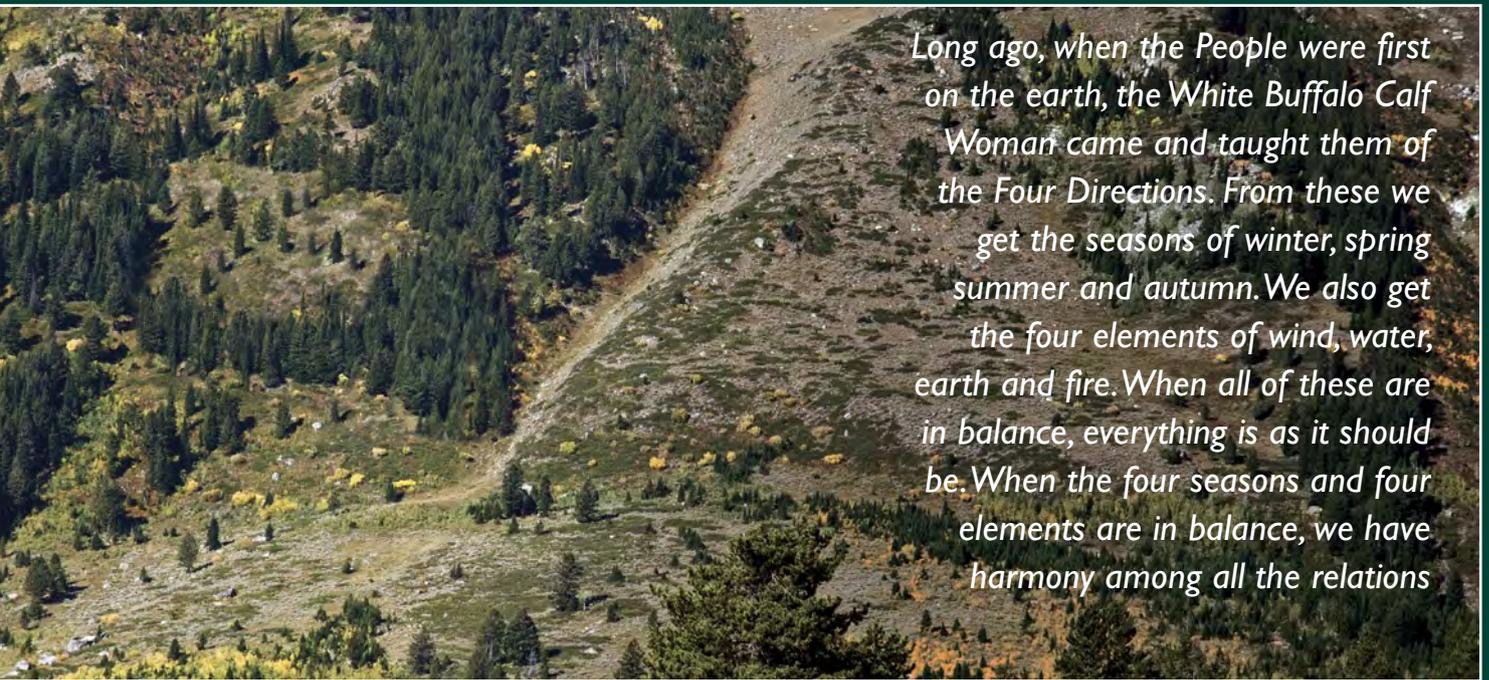
At this point I was stunned. I saw how many of the difficulties I experienced in life were due the imbalance of my aspects. "I've been a warrior and now I'm a teacher. I've never given much thought to being a healer, let alone a shaman."

Grandfather turned toward me and looked at me with eyes of understanding. "I know, but the time will come when you'll discover these aspects and learn to develop them. Once you recognise and actualise all of these aspects and keep them in balance, you'll be a sum greater than your whole. It will take time, but you're on the right path now."

He turned and began to walk to the motor home. After a couple of steps, he stopped and said over his shoulder, "By the way, you're the only one to have seen the Medicine Wheel so far. Don't tell anyone yet. Let's see how long this remains our little secret."

I awoke the next morning curled up in my sleeping bag next to the Fire. Even though it was July, it was still freezing at night at this latitude and altitude.

We only had one dance that day, in the morning, and after the dance and dinner, I saw Grandfather,



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Seeker and Red Hawk pulling plastic tarps over the framework of the sweat lodge. "Seeker's doing a sweat today," Coyote explained, "are you going to it?"

"I don't know," I answered, "I don't want to leave the Fire."

"Don't worry, go on, you'll have a good time. You might learn something too."

"Hey Brother!" Seeker called out, "You joining us for the sweat?"

"Yeah, Coyote told me I should."

I walked over to Grandfather to offer any assistance, and it was then I saw he was making a willow wood Medicine Wheel.

He must have heard me approach as he started into another story, "Sweat Lodges are another form of purification and healing. It is in the sweat lodge at the elements of Earth, Air, Fire and Water come together. It is also where these elements in our bodies can co-mingle with that of the earth. Buffalo skins and willow branches aren't as common in these modern times and we have to make do with what we have on hand." He indicated toward the sweat lodge with its PVC framework and plastic tarps. "I'm a firm believer it's not so much following the ritual and dogma to a tee, as it is the intent, when it comes to ceremony. However, I like to err on the side of caution and hence this Medicine Wheel woven from willow branches."

He rose and entered the lodge to hang the Medicine Wheel from the apex of the framework.

Soon, the others arrived. Seeker spoke to each in turn, asking what they wanted to do and get from the sweat. He came to me lastly, and his question to me was more in the form of a request.

"I need you to do me a big favor Brother... Grandfather was supposed to be the fire tender for this, but he has something he needs to do. Can I get you to do it?"

Although I quickly agreed, I was a little disappointed as I wanted to participate in the sweat. "Oh, that ain't a problem Brother," Seeker offered after I voiced my disappointment, "all you have to do is bring in whatever number of stones I ask for out of the fire and place them in the pit in the middle of the lodge. After that's done,



make sure you close the entrance flap all the way so light doesn't come in, and then take your own seat." I was relieved to hear this and began working on the fire.

"These are stones from a lava flow," Seeker told me, "they shouldn't crack when I pour water on them."

In about an hour after the fire was lit, the stones were glowing with a dull shade of red.

Seeker addressed the gathering, "Alright folks, it looks like we're ready. When you go into the lodge, go around the pit in a sunwise direction. If you feel you have to leave, go out using that direction. Oh, and make room for the fire tender when he has to go out to get more stones between the rounds. He's pulling double duty for us." he offered in my direction with a wink and a nod.

We all stripped down to our shorts and undergarments and after a smudging of sage, the people crawled through the opening and found seats in the lodge. Seeker looked a little lost in thought, as if he were trying to remember something.

He then instructed me to pull three stones from the fire for the first round. "Make sure you brush them off with that broom when they're on the pitchfork." he instructed, "There's no ventilation in

there and any contaminates from the fire could cause a big stink, if not kill us with carbon monoxide poisoning."

I confirmed I would do my utmost not to let that happen. With that, he gave me a hug and entered the lodge. He went behind those already seated to sit on the right side of the opening and called to me for the stones. I placed three on the tines of the pitchfork and brushed them off and passed them through the opening where Seeker grabbed the handle and placed the stones in the pit. I then smudged myself, entered and secured the flap.

With that the interior of the sweat lodge was dark, perhaps the darkest place I had ever been in. If there is any light at all it comes from the glow from the stones when they're first passed in. It was also quite warm as the stones were hot and when the water was

After the stones were in the pit and the flap secured, water was poured on them and prayers were offered



poured on them, it became even hotter, much like a sauna.

The leader of the sweat offers prayers at the beginning of each round, but apart from that, he or she has little to say after that. Sometimes a participant may bring in a small ceremonial drum or rattle and use them. Some may engage in traditional songs as well. It depends on the participants.

The first round went well and I was instructed to bring in more stones for the next. I left the lodge in the sunwise direction and prepared the next lot of stones to be

brought in. After the stones were in the pit and the flap secured, water was poured on them and prayers were offered. Soon however, I noticed that it was becoming unusually hot, much more so than the first round. It also wasn't a normal feeling of heat, more of a prickly sensation. I was soon aware I wasn't the only one to experience this. It went beyond a physical feeling. It felt like an actual foreboding, as if something of ill-intent were among us.

We were instructed to leave the lodge. It was a slow process as we followed each other out in the sunwise direction. Once we were all out, most of the participants went into the cooling water of the river. I was the last one out and I crawled to where I left my shirt, looking for my pack of cigarettes. I pulled one from the pack and lit it. Above us near the camp, I saw Grandfather and Coyote looking in on us, their faces expressionless.

Seeker came staggering to me. I asked, "What went wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he answered, "I felt something very definite, something related to a vision quest a friend of mine was on and I was his guide."

Seeker didn't offer any more details and I didn't press the issue. All I could think of then were Skinwalkers, which Coyote had told me about. Some were shape-shifters, taking on the form of animals or other humans, others, such as a wendigo, were wandering spirits, possessing the minds and bodies of victims they chose.

Seeker took a couple of considered moments and then asked me for a cigarette. I was more than glad to oblige as I needed one to calm my nerves. He

accepted one and ripped off the filter. He then held it between thumb and forefinger and presented it to the cardinal directions. He then made a circle with it above his head. With that done, he lit it and directed each exhalation toward the sky. I looked up and saw Grandfather and Coyote turn and return to the Fire.

Tobacco is sacred to the Native Americans, and is used in many of the ceremonies and once sanctified, as in the ritual Seeker performed - presenting it to the Four Directions, all our relations and the Great Spirit - it can be used to offer prayers.

Once Seeker accomplished this, he asked the others if they wanted to continue with the sweat. All were in agreement and after another smudging, they entered the lodge.

Once again, I passed the stones in and sealed the flap, I could feel whatever had been there before was gone. It felt clean and pure in there, as if a new day had dawned with the promise of good things after a bad one.

We started the third round and my eyes were drawn to the apex of the lodge. I could make out the barest hint of the willow Medicine Wheel. My first reaction was to check the flap, but no light leaked from it. I couldn't see any light leaking from elsewhere. Turning my concentration back to the Medicine Wheel, I saw it was becoming brighter. It was also showing colours, mostly blue, purple and silver streaks running through it. The streaks began to move about the Medicine Wheel. I was mesmerised by this and this lasted until I was instructed to provide stones for the fourth and final round.

Once that round was done, we all left the lodge in the sunwise fashion and jumped into the river to savour its coolness. Some of us shared with each other what we may have seen or felt. I mentioned to Silver Otter about my experience of the Medicine Wheel and she said she saw the same thing.

The next day was the last day for the Corn Dance itself. The dance started in the morning and lasted into the early afternoon. It was decided dinner would be postponed until closer to supper time so we could have a feast. Richard and Seeker started a

Red Hawk set up an awning and brought out his big social drum for a drum circle, and others joined him in the circle, each with their own stick and keeping time



charcoal grill to cook venison and elk steaks. Red Hawk set up an awning and brought out his big social drum for a drum circle, and others joined him, each with their own stick and keeping time. Red Hawk sang traditional songs and said that those who beat the drum after he had stopped owed him a quarter. To the best of my knowledge, he didn't become any richer that day.

As for me, my duties at the Sacred Fire were done, but that didn't mean I was out of a job. It was now my charge to maintain the community fire, but this was less of a demanding job, as I didn't have to worry about it going out and I could tend it from any position. Shining Eyes offered to assist as she didn't have to perform in the Dance.

Once we stoked to a roaring blaze, we stopped to take in the scene. We were in a community now. We had a family. We were in the company of good people that cared not just about us, but cared about the same things we did. Gone was the competition amongst so-called peers and colleagues, ready to stab us in the back for their own self-aggrandisement. Gone was the system that would roll over anything to advance itself, regardless of the harm or costs. Gone was the desire to fill our lives with meaningless rubbish, or indulge in consumption or gluttony to satisfy an unarticulated want. We had peace and contentment. We had balance.

The dinner bell rang and when we reached the trailer, Grandfather stood ahead of the others and began to speak. "I'm so grateful and so blessed to have been here in the company of such fine folk. I hope you all learned something during your time here and more importantly, I hope you take something of here out there."

Everyone murmured in agreement and I heard a few people say 'Aho' which means I agree. "Now", he continued, "Before we dive into this wonderful meal, we have to bless this food, and I think it's fitting if Gives With His Heart were to give the blessing.

Gives With His Heart, I said to myself, I don't know that person, unless... Smiles broke out amongst all my family and the hugging began. Grandfather explained about how Seeker and he were

watching me, and Seeker commented, "He really does give with his heart, more than anyone I've ever seen." Shining Eyes was the last to give me a hug and whispered in my ear, "It's so you."

My blessing was short and sweet. All I could think about was how fortunate I was to have this family. Oh, and the food smelled good too. Thank You Great Spirit!

After the meal, plans were being made about going to a Sundance in Colorado. When asked, Shining Eyes and I said of course we would attend. Grandmother invited us to stay with them until they left for it, and we accepted.

Seeker told us of a pre-historic Medicine Wheel in the Big Horn Mountains. Maps came out, directions were given and plans were made for more adventure and discovery. Perhaps those are stories best told later.

That was fifteen years ago. Since then, time and distance have proven to be formidable barriers. Circumstances that could or couldn't have been avoided

reinforced the barriers. I've crossed many bridges since then, a few I had to burn to light my way forward to where I'm at today. During the turmoil of modern life, the balance was hard to maintain, and maintaining contact with people living two thousand miles away became less of a concern and eventually contact was lost.

This is perhaps the greatest regret I have in my life. I do know they are still there, I can feel them. Soon, I'll be going home.

K.G. Evans Jr. has been a mechanic, ships engineer, High School Social Studies teacher and is a veteran of the United States Air Force. His travels and assignments have taken him to the East Asian Pacific Rim along with the American Gulf coast, the Rockies and the deserts of the Southwest, where he respectfully immersed himself in the local cultures. He is currently retired and resides on an old family farm in the South Carolina Lowcountry with his best friend and familiar Gretchen, a Miniature Schnauzer.
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The photographs in this article depict the actual events or locations, but all the photographs of landscapes were taken in the Wyoming Greys River Area.

Below:
The Bighorn
Medicine Wheel
It is around
24 metres in
diameter, and
was constructed
around 1200CE or
possibly a century
or two after this

