



TOUCH THE EARTH

A Self-Portrait of Indian Existence

Compiled by T. C. McLuhan

Born in 1868, Chief Luther Standing Bear spent his early years on the plains of Nebraska and South Dakota. At the age of 11, he was one of the first students to enroll at the Indian school at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which was established in 1879. After four years at the school, he became a teacher and taught at the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show as an interpreter in 1898 and spent his later years lecturing and writing. In his statement, Chief Standing Bear speaks of the Lakota, which is the tribal name of the western bands of Plains people now known as the Sioux (the eastern bands call themselves the Dakotas). Lakota tends to be used interchangeably with Dakota.

THE LAKOTA WAS A TRUE NATURIST - A LOVER OF NATURE.

He loved the earth and all things of the earth, the attachment growing with age. The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tipis were built upon the earth and their altars were made of earth. The birds that flew in the air came to rest upon the earth and it was the final abiding place of all things that lived and grew. The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing and healing.

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

Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water was a real and active principle. For the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept the Lakota safe among them and so close did some of the Lakotas come to their feathered and furred friends that in true brotherhood they spoke a common tongue.

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

The great care with which so many of the Indians utilized every portion of the carcass of a hunted animal," writes anthropologist Dorothy Loe, "was an expression, not of economic thrift, but of courtesy and respect; in fact, an aspect of the religious relationship to the slain." The Wintu Indians of California lived on very densely wooded land where it was difficult even to find clear land to erect houses. "Nevertheless," continues Loe, "they would use only dead wood for fuel, out of respect for nature." In the following passage, an old holy Wintu woman speaks sadly about the needless destruction of the land in which she lived -- a place where gold mining and particularly hydraulic mining had torn up the earth.

THE WHITE PEOPLE NEVER CARED FOR LAND OR DEER OR BEAR.

When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots we make little holes. When we built houses, we make little holes. When we burn grass for grasshoppers, we don't ruin things. We shake down acorns and pinenuts. We don't chop down the trees. We only use dead wood. But the White people plow up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't, I am sore. Don't hurt me." But they chop it down and cut it up. The spirit of the land hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depths. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. The Indians never hurt anything, but the White people destroy all. They blast rocks and scatter them on the ground. The rock says, "Don't, You are hurting me." But the White people pay no attention. When the Indians use rocks, they take little round ones for their cooking. . . . How can the spirit of the earth like the White man? . . . Everywhere the White man has touched it, it is sore.

Born on March 20, 1871, Taranga Mani, or Walking Buffalo, was destined to become an emissary of peace on behalf of the Canadian government. A Stony Indian, he spent his very earliest years in Morley, Alberta, but was soon adopted by a white missionary, John McDougall. He was educated in the white man's schools, but never gave up "studying nature." In his old age, he was asked by the government to make a world tour as a representative of the Indian people. In an address in London, England, at the age of 87, he said: "Hills are always more beautiful than stone buildings. You know, living in a city is an artificial existence. Lots of people hardly ever feel real soil under their feet, see plants grow except in flower pots, or get far enough beyond the street light to catch the enchantment of a night sky studded with stars. When people live far from scenes of the Great Spirit's making, it's easy for them to forget his laws." Taranga Mani died in 1967.

WE WERE LAWLESS PEOPLE, BUT WE WERE ON PRETTY GOOD terms with the Great Spirit, creator and ruler of all. You whites assumed we were savages. You didn't understand our prayers. You didn't try to understand. When we sang our praises to the sun or moon or wind, you said we were worshipping idols. Without understanding, you condemned us as lost souls just because our form of worship was different from yours.

We saw the Great Spirit's work in almost everything: sun, moon, trees, wind, and mountains. Sometimes we approached him through these things. Was that so bad? I think we have a true belief in the supreme being, a stronger faith than that of most whites who have called us pagans. . . . Indians living close to nature and nature's ruler are not living in darkness.

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.

The proud tribe of the Nez Perce (Forced Nose) Indians was led by a most remarkable man named Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kecht — Thunder Traveling to Lifter Mountain Heights — or Chief Joseph, whose description of the death of his father was quoted in Section 1. His affection for the land out of which he came never ceased, and Chief Joseph was unremittent in his attempts to remain in the valleys and mountains of his birthplace. In this passage he makes clear (as he was always accustomed to do) his sentiments regarding ownership of the earth.

THE EARTH WAS CREATED BY THE ASSISTANCE OF THE SUN, AND IT should be left as it was. . . . The country was made without lines of demarcation, and it is no man's business to divide it. . . . I see the whites all over the country gaining wealth, and see their desire to give us lands which are worthless. . . . The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same. Say to us if you can say it, that you were sent by the Creative Power to talk to us. Perhaps you think the Creator sent you here to dispose of us as you see fit. If I thought you were sent by the Creator I might be induced to think you had a right to dispose of me. Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with it as I chose. The one who has the right to dispose of it is the one who has created it. I claim a right to live on my land, and accord you the privilege to live on yours.

Chief Flying Hawk, a Sioux Indian of the Ojibla clan, was a nephew of Sitting Bull; his full brother was Kicking Bear, who had been a leader of the ghost dances. Flying Hawk was born "about full moon of March 1852," a few miles south of Rapid City. As a youth he took part in tribal wars with the Crows and the Piegans and at the age of 24 had fought alongside the great Chief Crazy Horse when Custer's command was wiped out on the Little Bighorn in 1876. He became a chief at the age of 32. Later Flying Hawk joined Buffalo Bill's Show, Colonel Miller's 101 Ranch Show and the Sells-Floto Circus, and travelled throughout the country with each of them. He died at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, in 1931. In his old age, he said:

THE TPI IS MUCH BETTER TO LIVE IN; ALWAYS CLEAN, WARM IN winter, cool in summer, easy to move. The white man builds big house, cost much money, like big cage, shut out sun, can never move; always sick. Indians and animals know better how to live than white man; nobody can be in good health if he does not have all the time fresh air, sunshine and good water. If the Great Spirit wanted men to stay in one place he would make the world stand still; but He made it to always change, so birds and animals can move and always have green grass and ripe berries, sunlight to work and play, and night to sleep; summer for flowers to bloom, and winter for them to sleep; always changing; everything for good; nothing for nothing.

The white man does not obey the Great Spirit; that is why the Indians never could agree with him.

The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization. And when native man left off this form of development, his humanization was retarded in growth.

Chief Luther Standing Bear

Born in the summer of 1848 near the present site of Billings, Montana, Plenty-Coups, or Alesk-chaa-shoosh — Many Achievements — received his name from his grandfather who said "I have dreamed that he shall live to count many coups and be old; my dream also told me that he shall be a chief — the greatest chief our people will ever have," a prophecy that was later realized. Plenty-Coups died in 1932, shortly after willing to the American people his land of 200 acres (located in a valley in south-eastern Montana) to be a park as "a memorial to the Crow Nation" and "a token of my friendship for all people, both red and white." At his request, he was buried at the back of his house in the grove of cottonwood which he had planted as a young man. The following is an extract from his autobiography.

BY THE TIME I WAS FORTY, I COULD SEE OUR COUNTRY WAS changing fast, and that these changes were causing us to live very differently. Anybody could now see that soon there would be no buffalo on the plains and everybody was wondering how we could live after they were gone. There were few war parties, and almost no raids. . . . White men with their spotted-buffalo [cattle] were on the plains about us. Their houses were near the water-holes, and their villages on the rivers. We made up our minds to be friendly with them, in spite of all the changes they were bringing. But we found this difficult, because the white men too often promised to do one thing and then when they acted at all, did another.

They spoke very loudly when they said their laws were made for everybody; but we soon learned that although they expected us to keep them, they thought nothing of breaking them themselves. They told us not to drink whiskey, yet they made it themselves and traded it to us for furs and robes until both were nearly gone. Their Wise Ones said we might have their religion, but when we tried to understand it we found that there were too many kinds of religion among white men for us to understand, and that scarcely any two white men agreed which was the right one to learn. This bothered us a good deal until we saw that the white man did not take his religion any more seriously than he did his laws, and that he kept both of them just behind him, like Heibers, to use when they might do him good in his dealings with strangers. These were not our ways. We kept the laws we made and lived our religion. We have never been able to understand the white man, who fools nobody but himself.

As a child, Chief Luther Standing Bear attended the white man's school at Carlisle. "I remember when we children were on our way to Carlisle School, thinking that we were on our way to meet death at the hands of the white people, the older boys sang brave songs, so that we would all meet death according to the code of the Lakota — fearlessly . . . The brave song was to fortify one to meet any ordeal bravely and to keep up faltering spirits." Here, in a passage from his autobiography, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, he talks about that experience and about some of the most ordinary customs of the white man that were offensive or deleterious to the Indian.

THE CLOTHING OF THE WHITE MAN, ADOPTED BY THE LAKOTA, HAD much to do with the physical welfare of the tribe, and at Carlisle School where the change from tribal to white man's clothing was sudden and direct, the effect on the health and comfort of the children was considerable. Our first resentment was in having our hair cut. It has ever been the custom of Lakota men to wear long hair, and old tribal members still wear the hair in this manner. On first hearing the rule, some of the older boys talked of resisting, but realizing the uselessness of doing so, submitted. But for days after being shorn we felt strange and uncomfortable. If the argument that has been advanced is true, that the children needed delousing, then why were not girls as well as boys put through the same process? The fact is that we were to be transformed, and short hair being the mark of gentility with the white man, he put upon us the mark, though he still retained his own custom of keeping the hair-covering on his face.

Our second resentment was against trousers, based upon what we considered the best of hygienic reasons. Our bodies were used to constant bathing in the sun, air, and rain, and the function of the pores of our skin, which were in reality a highly developed breathing apparatus, was at once stopped by trousers of heavy, sweat-absorbing material aided by that worst of all torments — red flannel underwear. For the stiff collars, stiff-front shirts, and derby hats no word of praise is due, and the heavy, squeaky, leather boots were positive tormentors which we endured because we thought that when we wore them we were "dressed up." Many times we have been laughed at for our native way of dressing, but could anything we ever wore compare in utter foolishness to the steel-ribbed corset and the huge bustle which our girls adopted after a few years in school?

Certain small ways and observances sometimes have connection with larger and more profound ideas, and for reasons of this sort the Lakota disliked the pocket handkerchief and found the white man's use of this toilet article very distasteful. The Indian, essentially an outdoor person, had no use for the handkerchief, he was practically immune to colds, and like the animal, not addicted to spitting. The white man, essentially an indoor person, was subject to colds, catarrh, bronchitis, and kindred diseases. He was a cougher and a spitter, and his constant use of tobacco aggravated the habit. With him the handkerchief was a toilet necessity. So it is easy to see why the Indian considered the carrying of a handkerchief an uncleanly habit.

According to the white man, the Indian, choosing to return to his tribal manners and dress, "goes back to the blanket." True, but "going back to the blanket" is the factor that has saved him from, or at least stayed, his final destruction. Had the Indian been as completely subdued in spirit as he was in body he would have perished within the century of his subjection. But is it the unquenchable spirit that has saved him — his clinging to Indian ways, Indian thought, and tradition, that has kept him and is keeping him today. The white man's ways were not his ways and many of the things that he has tried to adopt have proven disastrous and to his utter shame. Could the Indian have forestalled the flattery and deceit of his European subductor and retained his native truth and honesty, could he have shunned whiskey and disease and remained the paragon of health and strength he was, he might today be a recognized man instead of a hostage on a reservation. But many an Indian has accomplished his own personal salvation by "going back to the blanket." The Indian blanket or buffalo robe, a true American garment, and worn with the significance of language, covered beneath it, in the prototype of the American Indian, one of the bravest attempts ever made by man on this continent to rise to heights of true humanity.

To clothe a man falsely is only to distress his spirit and to make him incongruous and ridiculous, and my entreaty to the American Indian is to retain his tribal dress.

I arrange Mari, a Stony Indian, in a passage from his autobiography, comments on the white man's education that he received.

OH, YES, I WENT TO THE WHITE MAN'S SCHOOLS. I LEARNED TO READ from school books, newspapers, and the Bible. But in time I found that these were not enough. Civilized people depend too much on man-made printed pages. I turn to the Great Spirit's book which is the whole of his creation. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature. You know, if you take all your books, lay them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for a while, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity for study in nature's university, the forests, the rivers, the mountains, and the animals which include us.

Born in March 1890, Sun Chief grew up among the Hopi in Oraibi, Arizona. In his youth, he attended the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California, where he acquired a good knowledge of English and adapted quickly to the white man's ways. However, he later returned to live with his people in Oraibi. Between 1938 and 1941 he wrote the story of his life, the following extract is a comment on his early experiences.

I HAD LEARNED MANY ENGLISH WORDS AND COULD RECITE PART OF the Ten Commandments. I knew how to sleep on a bed, pray to Jesus, comb my hair, eat with a knife and fork, and use a toilet. . . . I had also learned that a person thinks with his head instead of his heart.

The war dance was usually performed in the evening. It was only brought out on prominent occasions, or at domestic councils of unusual interest. In the dance, the war-whoop and the response always preceded each song. It was given by the leader, and answered by the band. Anyone present was at liberty to make a speech at any stage of the dance. The speeches were often piousnesses between individuals or statures upon each other's foibles or perhaps reminders of patriotic feeling. The following is a speech spoken by Ono-sa.

FRIENDS AND RELATIVES, WE HAVE REASON TO GLORY IN THE achievements of our ancestors. I behold with sadness the present declining state of our noble race. Once the warlike yell and the painted band were the terror of the white man. Then our fathers were strong, and their power was fat and acknowledged far and wide over the American continent. But we have been reduced and broken by the cunning and rapacity of the white-skinned race. We are now compelled to crave, as a blessing, that we may be allowed to live upon our own lands, to cultivate our own fields, to drink from our own springs, and to mingle our bones with those of our fathers. Many writers ago, our wise ancestors predicted that a great monster, with white eyes, would come from the east, and, as he advanced, would consume the land. This monster is the white race, and the prediction is near its fulfillment. They advised their children when they became weak, to plant a tree with four roots, branching to the north, the south, the east, and the west; and then collecting under its shade, to dwell together in unity and harmony. This tree, I propose, shall be this very spot. Here we will gather, here live, and here die.

Shabonee (or Shabonea), a peace chief and spokesman of the Potawatomi, was born on the Maumee River in Ohio, in 1775, and died in 1859. Many times he saved the white settlements from destruction by warning them of intended Indian uprisings. In 1832, the leader of one such uprising, Black Hawk, asked him twice to join his cause, but Shabonee refused. Instead, he tried to persuade Black Hawk to give up his plans, and when this failed, he warned the nearby settlers. In revenge, the Sauk and Foxes killed Shabonee's son and nephew.

Earlier, during the Winnebago War with the settlers in 1827, Shabonee had also refused to contribute to his aid, giving his reasons to two Winnebago chiefs.

IN MY YOUTHFUL DAYS, I HAVE SEEN LARGE HERDS OF BUFFALO on these prairies, and elk were found in every grove, but they are here no more, having gone towards the setting sun. For hundreds of miles no white man lived, but now trading posts and settlers are found here and there throughout the country, and in a few years the smoke from their cabins will be seen to ascend from every grove, and the prairie covered with their cornfields. . . .

The red man must leave the land of his youth and find a new home in the far west. The armies of the whites are without number, like the sands of the sea, and ruin will follow all tribes that go to war with them.

On January 14, 1879, Chief Joseph addressed a large gathering of cabinet members and congressmen. He appealed to President Hayes to allow what was left of his tribe, whose members were dying by the score, to return to their old territory in the Northwest. His appeal was ultimately successful and in 1883, a small party of women and children were allowed to go back to their old home. Joseph was never granted this privilege and spent his remaining days on the Colville Reservation at Nespelem, Washington. He died there September 21, 1904.

I HAVE SHAKEN HANDS WITH A GREAT MANY FRIENDS, BUT THERE are some things I want to know which no one seems able to explain. I cannot understand how the Government hands a man out to fight us, as it did General Miles, and then breaks his word. Such a Government has something wrong about it. . . . I do not understand why nothing is done for my people. I have heard talk and talk, but nothing is done. Good words do not last long until they amount to something. Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father's grave. They do not pay for my horses and cattle.

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

I am tired of talk that comes to nothing. It makes my heart sick when I remember all the good words and all the broken promises. There has been too much talking by men who had no right to talk. Too many misinterpretations have been made; too many misunderstandings have come up between the white men about the Indians.

If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian he can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. . . . You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born free should be contented penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases. If you tie a horse to a stake, do you expect he will grow fat? If you pen an Indian up on a small spot of earth and compel him to stay there, he will not be contented nor will he grow and prosper.

I have asked some of the Great White Chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he will stay in one place, while he sees white men going where they please. They cannot tell me.

I only ask of the government to be treated as all other men are treated. If I cannot go to my own home, let me have a home in a country where my people will not die so fast. . . .

I know that my race must change. We cannot hold our own with the white men as we are. We only ask an even chance to live as other men live. We ask to be recognized as men. We ask that the same law shall work alike on all men. If an Indian breaks the law, punish him by the law. If a white man breaks the law, punish him also.

Let me be a free man — free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself — and I will obey every law or submit to the penalty.

Ihipawopai, an old Yuma Indian, gives her views of the changes that confronted her at the beginning of the twentieth century.

SICKNESS COMES WITH YOU [THE WHITE MAN] AND HUNDREDS OF US die. Where is our strength? . . . In the old times we were strong. We used to hunt and fish. We raised our little crop of corn and melons and ate the mesquite beans. Now all is changed. We eat the white man's food, and it makes us soft; we wear the white man's heavy clothing and it makes us weak. Each day in the old times in summer and in winter we came down to the river banks to bathe. This strengthened and toughened our firm skin. But white settlers were shocked to see the naked Indians, so now we keep away. In old days we wore the breechcloth, and aprons made of bark and reeds. We worked all winter in the wind — bare arms, bare legs, and never felt the cold. But now, when the wind blows down from the mountains it makes us cough. Yes — we know that when you come, we die.

Ihehaka Sapa, or Black Elk, the holy man of the Sioux, tells of the spiritual impoverishment suffered by his people when they were obliged to leave their old homeland and take up the white man's ways.

THE WASICHUS HAVE PUT US IN THESE SQUARE BOXES. OUR POWER IS gone and we are dying, for the power is not in us any more. You can look at our boys and see how it is with us. When we were living by the power of the circle in the way we should, boys were men at twelve or thirteen. But now it takes them very much longer to mature. Well, it is as it is. We are prisoners of war while we are waiting here. But there is another world.