

GRANDFATHER THUNDERCLOUD

CHAPTER 1

Grandfather Thundercloud stood in the middle of a circle of about fifty or sixty people. He was in his seventies, about 6'3" and very thin. When he spoke he sounded like an old black man from the south. The sky overhead was totally clouded over and it was misting lightly. It looked like it was going to rain all day. People were wondering if the medicine wheel ceremony would get rained out. Grandfather Thundercloud looked up (I think he held or pointed his thunderbird pipe up to the sky) and said, "Grandfather, Wakan Tanka, we are here to do sacred ceremony to extend all life itself and I ask that no rain fall on the sacred fire once it is lit." I looked away and when I looked back a moment later there had appeared a small circle of blue sky directly above the fire which Grandfather was lighting. Within ten minutes there was not one cloud in the sky. Not one. Solid blue to the horizon all the way around.

So began Grandfather Thundercloud's medicine wheel ceremony at a psychic woman named Joy's house somewhere in Westchester County just off the Taconic Parkway in July 1990. The wheel consisted of 28 stones in a circle 28 feet across with a small fire-pit in the center. I helped him lay them in place equally spaced as he measured it all out by steps.

Thundercloud gave a long teaching about many subjects, the interconnectedness of all life, the four directions, healing, Jesus and the meaning of the Sacred Fire. He told stories of his visions and experiences, how he became a healer and more. He talked about the power of prayer and taught us ways of praying, like making an offering of cornmeal to the fire. At the end he smoked his sacred pipe and blessed us all individually.

I was assisting this day by tending the fire. I kept it going during the ceremony. As Thundercloud finished he instructed me not to put out the fire but to let it die by itself. The fire

was understood, literally, to be God. As the fire dwindled I noticed the sky darkening over. When it finally went out I felt the fire jump out of the fire-pit and into my solar plexus. In about 10 minutes the rain started falling again. There had been none since Grandfather's request at the lighting of the fire. Now it started again lightly, with overly large drops, but within a few minutes it was a downpour. Once it started pouring it poured nonstop for two or three hours. Probably two inches of rain fell after waiting so politely all that time for the Sacred Fire to go out.

That was also the day I was invited to play on WFMU's on-the-air musical barbecue with Nick Hill. I had had to choose one or the other. As we drove back to Grandfather's lightning struck off the highway about thirty yards away from us. It made no sound. He seemed not to notice it.

1990

CHAPTER 2

My friend artist Aviva Rahmani lives on an island off the coast of Maine. The farmers on her island were in trouble. She said it hadn't rained in two months. She was the first person who told me about medicine wheels. She had learned about them from Sun Bear. Ironically Sun Bear was one of the few people I ever heard Thundercloud criticize. I told her Grandfather Thundercloud was a great rainmaker. I met him in June 1990 at Grandmother Twyla Nitch's house on the Seneca reservation in Brandt, NY. Aviva contacted Grandfather and invited him to Vinal Haven in hopes he could do a ceremony to bring rain. He asked me to tend the sacred fire for him. As I recall, he and his wife Helene Sorkin and I met at the ferry landing. He got there first and when I got there it was already raining, and hard. He was trying to stay dry. Even though he was a rainmaker he would always get a cold if he got rained on. A year or so later a psychic told him he was allergic to rain and hypnotized him out of it. Anyway it

rained hard for the whole ferry ride. When we arrived he asked Aviva to take us to the ceremonial site. The rain let up as he surveyed the area but it started again as soon as we left. It rained all night and all morning. When we arrived to do the ceremony the rain stopped and the sun came out and shone throughout Grandfather's medicine wheel teaching. His teachings were largely about gratitude and particularly about sending thanks to the four directions. He led us in his technique of thanking the directions and making offerings to the fire. He insisted that the sacred fire, properly lit and honored, was none other than God 'in person'. He often reached his hands into the fire and moved them like he was washing them and was never burned. He also looked directly into the sun without ill effects on his eyes. He said it was shame that caused the sun to damage the eyes. Unlike any other native holy person I've met Thundercloud used garden sage as his smudge. All of the others use the other three kinds I know of; the leafy sage of South Dakota,

the sagewort of the desert Southwest and white sage. Like most, he burned cedar needles. The red heart of the cedar tree was the most sacred to him, and the one he always started the sacred fire with. He was very connected to the trees and he prized cedar above all others. If ever a cedar was going to be felled he would get in his car and travel a long way to bless it before it came down. No one reimbursed him for his expenses and in fact he never charged for his healing work. It was all by donation. One person's life was saved for \$40. For another he performed an exorcism and told me how he did it and told me the blow by blow, which I will share later.

He always ended his medicine wheel teachings with a pipe ceremony. His pipe was carved into the shape of a thunderbird and was not made of the traditional red pipestone. It was a yellowish stone. He smoked a light shag tobacco and did not fully inhale if memory serves. He said it would be too strong. He lit his pipe and offered prayers to the Great Mystery. He then proceeded

clockwise to bless everyone in the circle as we all stood just inside the ring of stones which was the wheel. In front of each person he would take smoke into his mouth and press the pipe bowl into the person in four points, similar to the sign of the cross. Then, holding the pipe in his left hand he drew each person in with his right and blew the smoke over their right shoulder while the beak of the turquoise eagle pendant he always wore dug into their breast bone. I always marveled he was able to get all the way around the circle (usually 20-40 people) without having to reload the pipe.

As soon as the medicine wheel drew to a close on Vinal Haven a light rain began falling again and it fell for the rest of the day, all night and into the next morning. I do not remember if it kept going after that, but if there was a drought it was over.

1991

CHAPTER 3

There were many mysteries around Grandfather Thundercloud. Perhaps my favorite was the time I went with him to the supermarket near his beloved Branchville, New Jersey. The layout of the market was such that when you entered there was a very wide open view. You could see part way down most of the aisles. There were a few dozen people in the store including four or five infants. From my vantage point next to Grandfather I saw babies' heads whip around the moment we walked in. Their faces broke into the most ecstatic smiles of adoration. I met him at Grandmother Twyla's and we bonded immediately. This was only a few days after I started seriously looking for Native American wisdom. As soon as I was able I went to see him in Sparta, NJ. Shortly before we met circumstances following a chimney fire forced him to vacate his beloved home and healing room in Branchville. Unfortunately, he was never to have a real home after that point.

I was having trouble trying to find the house and the sky was filling with very dramatic dark storm clouds. They got blacker and blacker taking unusual forms until I finally found where he was staying. I wondered then, as I still do, which one of us caused those clouds. They happened again the next day when he took me on a trip and showed me the location of a former Lenape village along the Delaware River, but I don't think it rained, at least not much, either day.

Grandfather could talk to animals and he could understand them too. He did this telepathically. Once he took me to Space Farm, a wild animal park out in the country where the Space family had given him a lifetime free pass. There was a huge Kodiak bear named Junior there who had been born and raised in captivity and was over twenty years old. He was about the size of a VW minibus and shared a small concrete enclosure with a much smaller cringing female who seemed determined to stay as far away from him as possible. He did not look happy. It

was a very hot bright humid day and Junior was flat on his face on the concrete next to a dank little pool of water too small to swim in. Parts of his body were rubbed nearly hairless and a detached tooth dangled stubbornly outside his mouth. Apparently attached in some way the vets didn't want to mess with. Grandfather said, "Watch this." He had already told me he was a spirit bear. I can't explain what this means exactly but he said it meant that bears recognized him and were bound to obey him. In other words he outranked regular bears in 'bearness'. Chew on that.

As soon as Grandfather said "Watch this," Junior perked up, like a dog who has just heard a dog whistle. Splayed on his belly he now had a look of alertness about him and he slowly looked over his right shoulder, as if dreading what he might see. He caught a glimpse of Grandfather and quickly looked away as if he hoped he imagined it. He looked back again and this time he started moving his front paws into position to push himself up. Slowly and

painfully Junior sat up on his haunches, still facing away. He looked over his shoulder and Grandfather's face was set in a stern and unyielding expression I had never seen before. Junior forced himself, with great difficulty to stand all the way up on his hind legs. After a few seconds he started to come down but apparently Grandfather would not release him and he forced himself back to standing. He stayed that way for what seemed like a long time in obvious discomfort until I started begging Grandfather to let him down and finally he did. He then told me about some other animals he communicated with, including water buffalo and wolves. He couldn't stand being around the wolves because captivity was so unbearable for them. It hurt him too much to hear them begging him to let them go. He told me a little about how he was able to communicate with them telepathically by sending mental pictures. Some years later friends got a puppy who was a little too frisky and nippy. I decided to try and get him to leave

me alone by sending pictures that would make him see me as dominant. Instantly that puppy flew into attack mode and to this day 10 years later he is the only dog I've ever known that tries to attack me every time he sees me. So I guess I got that technique about half right and that's not close enough, so I leave it alone.

1990 or 91* (this is stitched together with writing and edits from various years)

CHAPTER 4

I was feeling like I needed to be in nature and I asked Grandfather where I should move to, imagining myself living in the deep woods, but he said Woodstock. He said there were lots of artists and musicians, which at the time I didn't think I cared about. I only wanted to commune with spiritual beings.

So, accompanied by my mystical girlfriend Peggy Preheim, I came up to look at rentals in the Woodstock area. We stayed in Linda Mary

Montano's Art/Life Institute in Kingston for a weekend or so. Linda was in year six of her seven year chakra performance so the entire interior of the little rustic building was painted pale lavender. Peggy and I made lesbian love, which somehow felt right. Much, much later I learned that Pauline Oliveros and Linda were once lovers.

I had the idea, I don't remember why, that the place I would live would have a tree growing out of a rock. This was probably because of a teaching Grandfather gave me. He took me to a park where there were big rocks and waterfalls. He drew my attention to several tall trees growing right on the rocks. Their roots were not able to penetrate into the rocks and they just found any footing they could in cracks between rocks. It was amazing how well they could survive. They were quite tall.

So anyway I looked at two places which I thought I might possibly be able to afford. They were fairly far away from Woodstock and they both had something in the yard that you could

call a tree growing out of a rock but I didn't rent either of them.

Not long after that Grandfather asked me to keep the fire at a ceremony he was doing in Woodstock at the Wittenberg Center.

It was a remarkable ceremony. There is a phenomenon I've observed in spiritual matters. Sometimes different people see different things. Across the meadow at the tree-line a couple of hundred yards away to the south, a large hawk at the top of a pine tree was calling out in that harsh way they have. It started in the beginning of his teaching and cried out repetitively the entire time until the event broke for lunch. I stayed out there tending the fire. The hawk flew off to the west and out of sight. When the company returned from lunch for the second half of the teaching the hawk returned and took up screaming again, right until the end of the ceremony. There was another native man there who wanted to offer prayers with his pipe as well. First Grandfather offered his pipe blessing to the circle. The hawk kept calling. Afterwards

the other man offered his prayers and the hawk stopped. Even though this went on for hours it seems like I was the only person who noticed it. The ceremony ended, everyone left and I stayed behind with the fire, waiting for it to go out. But it wouldn't go out. I was feeling angry and I didn't know why. It was just a feeling that was present and uncomfortable. It felt connected to the fire refusing to go out. The embers would not die. I racked my brain trying to get a grip on what I was angry about or who. Eventually I realized I was angry that I was going to have to die. Then I saw I was angry at God. That I had to live a life that was painful and ultimately futile. Once I had that insight the fire went out and I got up to go to the house to pull myself together for the drive back to Brooklyn. But I had no idea where the house was and it had gotten dark and I had no flashlight. So that was another adventure for a few minutes but I did finally locate the house at the Wittenberg Center.

The only person there was a large jovial Dutchman in monastic garb. Swami Bob was swamified by Brahmananda Sarasvati aka Dr. Mishra at the Ananda Ashram which he founded in Monroe NY. He also swamified Linda Mary Montano, but she renounced and returned to Catholicism. He was also guru to Sharon Gannon and David Life, who founded the Jivamukti Yoga School. We had a lovely conversation in which I learned that music is the highest art form for Hindus because everything is vibration and the vibrations of music can heal and harmonize. He also explained being swamified as receiving a transmission, analogous to a seed, which grows inside. He could see I was exhausted and invited me to stay over, which I did. In the morning I met the director, Rev. Betsy Stang, whose office was across the hall. I asked her if she knew of any apartments for rent and she said the center was looking for an intern. The deal was 20 hours of work per week in return for a room. So it was

Grandfather Thundercloud who landed me in Woodstock.

The logo on the Wittenberg Center stationery was a tree growing out of a crystal, which is of course, a rock. I am forever grateful to everyone involved.