

The Beginning of the End for Wounded Knee as We Knew It:

Subtitle: Our Childhood Before We Learned to Hate

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[Prolog]

I dedicate this reading to the Spiritual child within. My child within is beckoning to yours and wants you to come out and play; and play hard. Allow that Spiritual child within to speak to you. Become again this child, full of wonder, untarnished trust, unconditional love and pure awe. This is who I want to engage and share a path, embark upon a journey together and perceive the world anew. So, let's go! Tag, you are it!

[A little autobiography to share with you before the reading]: Over the last year or so I have been getting acquainted with my Native heritage. My Anishinaabe ancestors are of the White Earth Reservation. My family has a long history with both the Ojibwe and Oglala Lakota people. It is in this last year in becoming aware of the beauty and uniqueness of my ancestor's perspective on life and way of being that my life has evolved and my heart has opened to other possibilities. I must give much credit to my wife and fellow sojourner **Cindy** who led me onto a path of Spiritual awakening. It is a sacred trust now that has descended to me and it is speaking to me. This essay is about two cultures that co-exist in the same space and time. Long ago the two happen upon a fork in the path of life, each taking its own new path. I have a "**foot**" in each culture. It is from this vantage point that I wrote this essay and read it to you now.

[Begin Essay] So, our childhood dream place, Wounded Knee South Dakota, among our Oglala Lakota friends and the magic of the place for us; the end would come, precipitated by events beyond our control; before most of us had lived yet into our late teens. It has a very rich and complicated history; **especially** from the point of view of children.

When Wounded Knee II went down [1973], I was living in Rapid City. I was a student at South Dakota School of Mines and Technology [SDM&T], things were progressing reasonably. I received a phone call from my then mother-in-law early one morning. She said, "David, you may want to turn the TV on." Her voice was stressed with emotion and disbelief. At first, it wasn't resonating with me that something was really affecting her. She said it once more, and then paused. I think that she was expecting some kind of a response but I wasn't sure if I should ask any questions or just turn on the TV. I finally spoke and said that I would turn the TV on. She said ok, said that she loved me and hung up. When the picture came flickering into view, the sound started right away in those days before the picture flickered into view and I **heard** "Wounded Knee", I saw a news anchor reporting the take-over of the small hamlet of Wounded Knee. He said that approximately 200 to 300 armed AIM members and the local "Native" population had taken this action to protest the neglect and attempts at eliminating their Native Culture. They said, "That their people are dying". There was video of the area though not the village itself in real time with a local reporter describing what was going on. The anchor person returned to the screen and thanked the local guy and then said as going to commercial; "**there are hostages**"!

I leapt from bed and hurriedly got ready to go to Wounded Knee. I called a good friend Steve, and ask for his help after explaining the circumstances. He said that he would and was ready by the time I got to his place. We drove in from the Porcupine Butte route and as we rounded a curve just before you drop into the valley, that beautiful valley; there was a road block. There was a single car parked across the highway with two men outside the car, their weapons drawn. It turned out that they were FBI agents. We instinctively slowed our car and held our hands up except for the one steering the car. They gestured that we stop and get out of the car. I explained that was my family down there and I didn't know anything about their status and was extremely concerned. They accepted that and began getting us up to speed. The more important part was that they didn't know there was anyone in the village apart from AIM. I gave a description of everyone including the Czywczynski family. At the Time, I didn't know that they weren't home the night of the takeover.

This information was radioed in after the agents had gathered all the knowledge and detail that I could remember. We asked if we could stay as this might be the best and quickest way to find out about my family. Things settled into a kind of routine. I had brought binoculars, Steve and I climbed to the top of a hill with an unobstructed view of the village. The two FBI guys were armed with side arms only. The hill Steve and I climbed was split by the road, probably rose about 50 feet or so above the road surface. The guys had parked their car across the road at the split thinking this would keep folks from passing. Maybe, but what it did was provide a perfect position to get flanked and not have the high ground as well. They were sitting ducks. Steve and I thought about this and stayed on top of the hill from where we had a 360 degree view. I had brought a few photos of my family to help the agents and Steve identify folks. We

took turns looking down into the village hoping to get a glimpse of family. Nope! We could see what appeared to be some few hundreds of folks milling about.

So we lay there prone, occasionally rolling over on our backs to rest and stare up into the sky. I must have drifted off for a minute dreaming about simpler times, more care-free times; then woke with a start. Steve had nudged me and said he sees a caravan of cars starting up toward Porcupine. **That is where we are!** I took the binoculars and looked down into the valley and sure enough several cars were on the way packed with armed men. We scrambled down the hill to the agents and told them what we saw. They had us take cover behind their car. Steve and I took up a position behind the wheels hoping these might stop any rounds that might come our way. The caravan stopped short of the “road block”. They dismounted and walked a bit toward us. They were just out of effective pistol range. There were scores of armed men. One of the agents had radioed in our situation before the cars had quite reached us. The men started to jeer the agents, and taunting. They hollered out a list of grievances and what had happened historically and was still happening to their people. They yelled out that their people were dying. At a point in time, they all aimed their weapons at us. I looked at Steve and him at me and we nodded as to say nice to have known you. We were anticipating a roar of fire for what seemed an eternity. It never came. All of a sudden they continued jeering. We stood up to see what was happening. It appeared to me that they were getting ready to head back down when a small aircraft appeared overhead, low altitude. The men took aim and fired all at once. The sound was deafening. The small plane maneuvered violently. There were so many weapons and the distance so short that I thought the plane would be shot down. The plane and its occupants flew away not to return. There was no evidence to me that they had been

hit. Thank God. Unfortunately, this is how much of the world was introduced to Wounded Knee and the Oglala Lakota people.

As long as I can remember my mom and I would travel to Wounded Knee to be with family whenever my dad went to sea. He was in the Navy. The excitement became stronger as we got close to the highway 27 turnoff and going north from highway 18. The landmark I looked for was the lone pine at the crest of the hill just before descending into the valley. My maternal grandfather and three of his four sisters lived here. Agnes was married to Clive Gildersleeve and together they owned the Wounded Knee Trading Post. There was a museum dedicated to helping tell the story of the Oglala Lakota who lived on the Pine Ridge Reservation. Grandfather [Wilbur Riegert] was the curator. He was also the postal clerk. Grandpa was wheelchair bound for much of his life. He was injured playing baseball for Haskell, a boarding school for indigenous people located in Kansas. The trading post with built on home was on one side of the street. Uncle Clive had a wonderful outdoor wood fired oven with huge grill top. The construction was of a kind of stone from the Black Hills. The thing was massive, at least from a child's perspective. It had a chimney which I thought was very cool. We spent many evenings on the patio; visiting and such. Uncle Clive and other men of the community told wonderful stories that had me riveted. There were several cabins across the street. There were horse pastures and up on a hill adjacent the store was a windmill that pumped the sweetest drinking water I ever tasted. It had a sweet grass/sage aroma and the taste was refreshing and divine. I used to "ride" the wooden connecting shaft up and down as the windmill operated; listening to the wind blow through the structure and the repetitive mechanical noise, almost musical. It

was an idyllic place to spend much of my childhood growing up. I made friends easily and got on with the kids in the extended neighborhood. We would play hard, inventing all sorts of games, play baseball, and ride horses. Boy, these guys and gals could ride! There was a creek that ran through the valley and at different places fairly deep and wide pools would form; about neck deep. Never once did anyone ever say anything about me being non-Native. I don't think we were much aware, not yet.

My mom was the oldest of three sisters. When the sisters had children, they all started to come out to Wounded Knee in the summers. In their own way, my cousins had adventures and formed friendships. On one summer day we were playing cowboys and Indians with the neighbor kids. I don't know how this got started. We were all on horseback; riding hard through the ravine that was located behind the trading post and between the big hill that the mass grave and the Jesuit church was located. We were whooping and hollering and we all had ended up kinda clumped together; our horses prancing and excited. The horses and we calmed down and were taking a breather when one of the neighbor kids says, "Hey we wanna be the cowboys for a change." Without much thought or discussion, we swapped roles and took off again. The secret was that my cousins and I always wanted to be the "Indians" but could never figure out how to ask. We played at this and had a great time.

You see, one of the wonderful things about childhood when you are allowed to have one, is that in our case all of us were not acutely aware that this ravine was where the 7th Cavalry had murdered Big Foot and his band in 1890. These murdered people were those interned in the mass grave up on the hill. The beautiful thing about this time and in this community; the

parents of all us kids let us be kids. There were powwows and Sun Dances that we were permitted to attend, as spectators. I was always in awe of my friends and especially when there were these wonderful gatherings that shown the beauty and majesty of our friends families' culture. These ceremonies were spellbinding for us kids. A Sun Dance would last four days. Imagine a huge shade in a circular layout perhaps 150 feet in diameter. The shade was ~ 20 or so feet deep. These were constructed of pine and covered with pine boughs. Under the shade were drummers, perhaps 8-10 folks per drum. There were many drums. Some played a kind of flute, and all were chanting or more like singing. The men and women were dressed in beautiful costumes adorned with elaborate and exquisite bead work. Many had elaborate head dress of feathers and other ornamental gear. At one Sun Dance there were many hundreds dancing. My friends did their best to explain the spiritual significance of the ceremony itself and also that every minute detail had meaning and significance. I am sharing this with you as I experienced this as a younger teen. I was nearly overwhelmed. There was not anything in my experience to prepare me for this. I was later invited at the age of 15 to participate in a Sundance and that part of it to do with the Vision Quest. I was invited and mentored by a Holy Man of the Rosebud and Pine Ridge. There were (15) men taking part. I did have a vision, a very powerful one. My mentor explained to me step by step what was going on and what it meant, the ceremony/ritual. He was able to speak with me until I left my body. When we returned to our body, he and the other Holy Men interpreted the Vision of each of the 15 and explained what it foretold. This was my first out-of-body Spiritual experience. I was not able to process this "event" until recently and it disturbed me for all that time between then and now. I knew that it was real and I realized that there was another way of being, an intuitive Spiritual

way. I wasn't able to "square" it with the two realities until now. Now I understand and am on that path, the one taken long ago and nearly forgotten. I will leave the particulars of the Sun Dance and the Vision Quest for another time.

The Gildersleeves, my Grandfather, and my great aunts were all generally respected and well-liked by folks in and around the village of Wounded Knee. I can speak for my family in terms of the love and respect that was reciprocal.

Please keep in mind that these remembrances are from the perspective of a child growing up over a span of time into teen years.

Things began to unwind in the late 1960s. My Uncle Clive and Grandpa were approached by a group representing the Sioux Corporation. Grandpa and that generation were ready to retire. The corporation was proposing a project that would "develop" Wounded Knee that ultimately would provide jobs and a source of revenue for the Pine Ridge Reservation and its people. As it turned out, this was not the case for the proposed project. Over a relatively short period of time, it was discovered the true nature of the enterprise. What became clear was that if there were to be any benefit for the Oglala Lakota people, it would be unintended. Part of the proposed "development" involved dramatically altering the mass burial site. The "plans" were at best grotesque and horrifying. As you might imagine, this precipitated bad feelings and a complete sense of betrayal that these folks could be brought among the people. I was in the room where this conversation took place and I remember getting the feeling that this was not good. I became troubled buy these events and a change started to take place with my friends. It took a while, but I came to understand why.

I am now an elder by virtue of my age. Over the last two years being home again in Duluth and recent events around the passing of my mother, a very powerful desire to become aware of my Anishinaabe heritage and to start down the path of learning and discovery has taken hold. I've come to understand that a duty and a legacy of my ancestors have descended to me. I am now trying to become what the Anishinaabe and the Lakota consider an elder to be. I am also aware that **child** within me is happy that this is so.

[The following is from my ancestral perspective].

So, do not be afraid to look and see what is going on around us. I would add do **not be afraid of being who you are.**

In fact, it is our duty and honor and privilege to know who we are and be then that person. There is a time to be a warrior, but there is also a time to be a peace maker. I will fight if I must. Peace is often the more difficult undertaking but also often the more noble. So, you two-leggeds stand up straight and tall and exhibit the kind of bravery that honors our ancestors and at the same time show respect and love for our children. I pray, become a teacher if you already aren't; and at the same time learn to honor your elders and learn to listen and in the doing of this, **become wise.**

These things I have been told and I now believe. If you think about it though; it must be true.

[The End]
