

PREFACE



A TRUTH THAT LODGES DEEP IN THE HEART

“I am no longer myself. I am someone else.”

T*he Wolf at Twilight* might never have come into being had it not been for a chance encounter in a dusty roadside café on the high plains of the Dakotas on a sweltering July afternoon. I had stopped for a glass of water and noticed an elderly Indian man sitting by himself at a table in the corner. He was the only other person in the café.

Feeling a need for conversation, I asked if I could sit with him. Much to my delight, he agreed.

Our conversation was casual, as might be expected of two men sitting together on a hot summer afternoon. I made passing mention of the Indian boarding schools — a strangely cruel but little-known era in American history when Indian children were taken from their families and placed in residential institutions far from their homes so that they could be stripped of their Native identities and reeducated into Euro-American values and ways. As I had expected, he had been part of that system.

“Oh, I learned,” he said. “I can speak good English. I became a Christian. But it changed me. I am no longer myself. I am someone else.”

His tone was matter-of-fact — almost fatalistic. But his words were chilling. It was at once one of the saddest and most damning comments I had ever heard about the situation of the Native people on this American land, and it brought me face-to-face with a promise I had made almost twenty years earlier.



THE YEAR WAS 1988. I had taken a job helping young people on the Red Lake Ojibwe Reservation in northern Minnesota to collect the memories of the tribal elders. It was a wonderful job, and tremendously rewarding. As well as working with young people, I had the good fortune to meet and share time with the elders. I sat at their tables, heard their stories, shared their laughter, and felt their sadness. It was a profoundly human time, and I valued it more than I can express.

But through it all, what struck me most deeply was the almost sacred value the elders placed on the importance of stories, and their hunger to pass these stories along. Stories were not mere entertainment to them, nor were they simple reminiscences; they were the traditional way of handing down the values and the memories of their culture — the way they had been taught by *their* elders — and they approached the task with something close to reverence.

There were times when I was near tears as I watched them struggle to communicate the knowledge their grandparents had passed to them and to hold back the pain that had been part of their lives. It was as if they held a precious fragment of the past in their hands and they were desperate to pass it on.

“No one has ever asked us before,” they said. “And we were made to feel so much shame about our traditional ways.”

This experience had a profound effect on me. It showed me how fragile the vessel of cultural knowledge really was, and how close it had come to being completely shattered. And it showed me how

hungry the young people were for knowledge of their past, and how difficult it was for the elders to give voice to that knowledge in a language not completely their own.

When I finished my work at Red Lake, I made a private promise that I would use such skills as I possessed to help the Native people tell their stories. It was the least I could do in gratitude for the gifts and trust that had been given to me.



NEITHER WOLF NOR DOG, the predecessor to *The Wolf at Twilight*, was one of these acts of gratitude. It was the story of a journey across the Dakota plains with a Lakota elder I identified only as Dan. During that journey he offered his thoughts about his people and their ways of understanding the world. It was a story intended to engage the reader and offer a glimpse into the contemporary Native life and heart.

My hope was that *Neither Wolf nor Dog* would give non-Natives a glimpse into a way of understanding they had never imagined. But, more important, I hoped that through Dan's story I would give voice to beliefs and points of view that had been too long ignored. It was a chance to use the traditional art of storytelling to teach and to heal. To a great extent, I believe it was successful.

But things quickly took an unexpected turn.

Non-Native readers, hungry for Dan's voice, began asking how to contact him. Native readers, appreciative of his insights, began asking where to find him. His thoughts were quoted in journals, on websites, in government reports. I was sought out to serve as cultural translator for non-Natives who were more comfortable with one of their own people than they were with the people they were seeking to understand.

Soon colleges, universities, high schools, tribal gatherings; Germans, Dutch, Chinese, Japanese; all began using Dan's words.

Everyone from missionaries in South America to the Maori in New Zealand found touchstones of meaning in *Neither Wolf nor Dog* that caused them to reach out to me, and, by extension, to Dan.

This was a great compliment as well as a great surprise. The book's intentions had been humble, even personal; suddenly, its effects were international. It had taken on a life of its own — the dream of all authors — and it had helped me fulfill my promise to share the stories and to help rebuild the narratives by which the Native people were understood.

But in doing so, it had placed both Dan and me in a difficult position. Dan was a real person. But I had fictionalized his story and distorted his identity to protect his privacy. I had also used him as he had suggested — as a vehicle around which to craft a story that gave voice to truths that had remained unspoken for too long.

He did not wish to be perceived as a spokesperson for all things Native, and I had no wish to be seen as an historian or documentarian. Our goal had been to counter the tragic and reprehensible misrepresentation of Native people in this country and to articulate Native values through a powerful story. As he had once told me, people learn by story, because stories lodge deep in the heart. Our creation, *Neither Wolf nor Dog*, had been a teaching story in the Native tradition, and, by all indications, it had lodged deep in people's hearts.

Then, sadly, Dan died.

It was a loss to me and to everyone who knew him. It seemed like an appropriate time for me to withdraw and let the book make its own way.

But it was not so simple. Dan had captured peoples' hearts and imaginations. His story had touched readers who had never before given a thought to Native America. He had articulated the feelings of many Native people who had been seeking a voice by which to explain themselves to their non-Native friends. Most important, his story had contributed in some small fashion to the reshaping of the

American cultural narrative that for too long has depicted Native peoples as savages on horseback, drunks in gutters, and wisdom-bearing elders possessed of some mystical earth knowledge.

People wanted to hear more from Dan and more about him. They wanted me to tell more of his story.

I resisted. I was proud of what we had accomplished. But Dan was gone, and I was uncomfortable serving as a spokesman for a Native point of view and weary of trying to explain the literary method of the project we had undertaken. The book spoke for itself. There was no need to say more.

But then came that chance meeting in the café. In that old man's simple, off-handed comment, I heard the echoes of all the yearning and struggle in the voices of the elders at Red Lake. They, too, had lost their identities. They, too, were no longer themselves, and it was this fate that they so wanted to help the young people avoid by sharing their stories. More than anything else I had written, *Neither Wolf nor Dog* had let people be themselves and see themselves.

Was I breaking my own promise and abdicating my moral responsibility by refusing to tell more of Dan's story, simply because I did not want to deal with the questions and challenges that it posed?

I carried this quandary with me until the following summer, when I was invited to participate in a sweat lodge on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

A sweat, truly done, is a hard thing. What on the outside looks to be only a crude mound of blankets and tarps piled over a low, convex frame is, on the inside, a place of sweltering, breathless blackness that pushes you to the very limits of your physical endurance and strips away all spiritual artifice and pretense. As I huddled on the dirt floor in the steaming darkness of the sweat lodge, I prayed, as best I could, for guidance in how to proceed with this story I had been given.

I asked the Great Spirit, *Tunkashila*, God, Grandfather — whatever you choose to call him or her or it — to give me courage to do what was right, whether that was walking away from Dan’s story or traveling farther down the trail of its telling.

Almost in a swoon, somewhere between trance and unconsciousness, I heard the echo of Dan’s words from years before come floating back to me: “You’re here for a reason. The Creator has given you a task. It is not for you to decide. If you are afraid or if you are too small, it is too late.”

It was as if I was being reminded that my involvement with Dan’s story was not a choice; it was a gift and an obligation. Dan’s words — “I am reaching out for the grandchildren. You must help the grandchildren, too” — echoed deep in my conscience.

I thought of the young people at Red Lake, sitting rapt at the tables of the elders, trying to take in the truth of what they were hearing. I thought of the elders themselves, so hungry to help shape the lives of the young people with their stories. I thought of the quiet words of the man in that dusty café: “I am no longer myself. I am somebody else.” And I thought of Sitting Bull’s earnest entreaty, “Come, let us put our minds together to see what kind of lives we can create for our children.”

I emerged from that sweat knowing what I had to do.

I had to tell more of Dan’s story.

I had to tell it so that Native children do not lose who they are, so they do not become somebody else. I had to tell it so that an America that has closed its ears and hearts to the presence of its first inhabitants would be reminded that there is more to the Native experience than hatchets and tomahawks and casinos and powwows. I had to tell it so that the dry bones of historical fact could be animated with the heartbeat of a human story.

I had to tell it because it was the only honorable way to fulfill the

promise that I had made on the Red Lake Reservation almost twenty years earlier.

This, then — *The Wolf at Twilight* — is the fruit of that promise. It is the part of Dan's life I had left untold. It takes us to places that for too long have been hidden in shadow and reveals truths about what has been taken from Native people and what the rest of us have lost in that taking. But it also reveals what we may all yet become if we heed Sitting Bull's poignant entreaty and put our minds together to see what kind of lives we can create for the children.

I hope you find it worthy of your time. If it opens your eyes to another way of understanding, I am grateful. If it simply entertains you, I am pleased. But what matters most is that it touches you.

For it is, above all, a story of Native America, and its goal is to lodge deep in your heart.