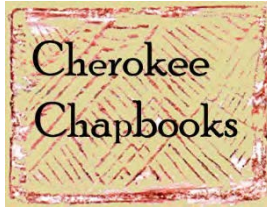


**A Memoir
of
Chief Two
White
Feathers**

Donald N. Panther-Yates

A MEMOIR OF CHIEF TWO WHITE
FEATHERS





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PANTHER'S LODGE

Phoenix

THIS E-BOOK, *A Memoir of Chief Two White Feathers*,
was published by Panther's Lodge as part of its
Cherokee Chapbooks Series in November 2011.

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“PAUL RUSSELL (Two White Feathers) is a spiritual healer, herbalist, principal chief, storyteller and teacher, ceremony chief, conjurer, traditional grass and straight dancer, keeper of seer traditions, amateur astronomer and geophysicist, painter, leather worker, jeweler, mechanical engineer, computer programmer, third-level Midéwiwin Lodge priest, flue and drum maker, songwriter, singer, composer, recording artist, stone carver, potter, mask and mandela maker, knife maker and gunsmith, bow and arrow maker and woodworker/carpenter.”

– *American Indian Religious Traditions: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Suzanne J. Crawford and Dennis Francis Kelley (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), vol. III, p. 1043.

“WRITE this down,” said Chief Two White Feathers, and I wrote it down inside a green composition book. “Our grandfathers have taught us always to remember that a life without honor is not life.” He checked it and seemed satisfied.

Thus began an amazing series of sessions in which I asked questions of him and received answers about a variety of subjects. Our interviews and lessons took place over about four months from May 1996 in the cramped living room of his trailer in Hartsville, in the car while traveling, in my office on Music Row, beside the fire, in a tipi where guests were lodged, while working together outside or on walks in the woods. At the end, my sketchy notes occupied only half the journal. But I felt that I had tapped a whole, living body of knowledge, a way of life and of viewing the world.

I had met Paul Russell and his wife, Penny, also known as Sonyaquay, or Money Woman, or Talking Eyes, six months before, when friends took me to a Tihanama gathering outside Nashville. They described him, in whispers, as “a powerful medicine man.” The night before, I had returned to spend some time with Chief and Talking Eyes. We stayed up most of the night talking, one on one.

The first night we visited together, I learned fifty words in universal sign language along with how to say them in the Tihanama language. “Columbus learned sign language in ten days,” said Chief.

“To the government we’re an embarrassment,” he said, as I accompanied him on his morning chores feeding the dogs, pigs and chickens. He was dressed in moccasins, faded red sweatpants and a black tee shirt with a Native American design. His scraggly gray hair

was held back in a Scunci. “They don’t know what to do with us. We ought to have died out a long time ago. Did you know they still count Indian warriors in Washington? They get the tallies from the chiefs. They monitor even those tribes that are not recognized. Non-recognition is a form of recognition, I guess.

“It used to be against the law to practice our religion,” he continued. “Most Indians don’t know the story behind Jimmy Carter’s passage of AIFRA in 1979 [American Indian Freedom of Religion Act]. In the old days, there didn’t use to be as many powwows as there are today. Things were different. There were a few inner circles, but the Navajos and others closed their circle years ago. When I started my medicine training I told people I was studying to be a conjuror, learning how to do magic tricks. Even my wife and children didn’t know what I was doing at first. One teacher in Florida down with the Seminoles would sit me on the end of a dock. We weren’t supposed to look at each other. He spoke in a real low voice and I had to memorize everything in a code. If I wrote anything down, he made me put some mistakes in it to confuse anyone who didn’t have permission to read it. It’s all still in there but sometimes it takes me a while to dredge it out.

He gave me an example of the memory technique taught to him by his predecessors. It involved long chains of association in words and pictures with a quixotic arrangement. Each entry was like the fragment of a dream or landmark scene along a journey or everyday walk one knew like the back of your hand. He said often he came to a link or barrier he could not cross and had to abandon the train of thought. Perhaps he could not “go there” at the time, or anymore, for one

reason or another. He said more than once, "You know I'm a big permission person." On these occasions he would take a long drag on his cigarette and simply fall silent.

"Another of my teachers would meet me at truck stops across America—in the Mojave desert, Oregon, Utah, out in the middle of nowhere. He used to come to me in dreams. One day, this stopped and I never saw him again. I knew him only as Grandfather.

"Secrets are not secrets once they're told, are they?" he said, after getting half-way down the story of a healing he had performed among the Seminoles. "For once I was a medicine man," he said. "They thought I was one, and I was on that occasion. They were very grateful for what I did. I have a trailer set apart on the Big Cypress Reservation for me where I stay every time I go visit.

"Things changed overnight. Few people know how the freedom of religion law came about. It was because of the Russians. We was over there breathing down their necks about Afghanistan. They turned around and said, 'How can you talk to us about human rights—look what you're doing to your Native Americans.' They were really indignant. They had their facts together. Every time we'd bring something up they'd return to the subject of Indians. Finally, it was decided if the Americans would give the Indians their freedom back, the Russians would withdraw from Afghanistan. Jimmy Carter came back and put through AIFRA."

A small group of acquaintances were about to go into a sweat lodge at the edge of the field on his property, known as Resting Eagle. Some years before, a

large eagle had died and was buried there, and Johnny Cash and other Nashville notables had gotten into the habit of visiting the site. This time, some neighbors dropped by. Was it true we got naked, smoked sage and sat around on hot rocks? Chief just looked at them and said, "Have you ever tried to sit on a hot rock with no clothes on?"

Some of the disinformation started out as misinformation, he said. The classic case was the dumb Indian stereotype. It went back to the first encounters between the red man and the white man.

"A true Indian speaks slowly to a stranger," he said. "It is considered rude to talk too fast. You show your respect by taking your time. You are to show you are thinking about what you are saying. Well, the white man thought that meant we were dumb. He suspected we were making things up. But Indians tell the truth. And they're smart. It's funny how a trait of intelligence got turned into a sign of stupidity."

"Why were Indians called redskins?" I asked in one of our language lessons. "The Frenchmen who landed in the St. Lawrence asked the Indians who they were," replied Chief. "It was done in sign language. The Indians told the white men, 'We are who we are—people.' The sign for this is similar to the one meaning 'paint', especially red paint. It's made by rubbing your fingers across the top of your left hand. The one sign shows 'This is me.' The Tihanama word is *gennu*. The other sign imitates the mixing of paint--*shish*. The Frenchmen didn't understand the difference. The question was repeated. The Indians repeated their answer, more insistently each time. The Frenchmen thought they were saying they were Redskins. They

reported that back to the King, to those who had sent them. It got put in books. Later, they did not want to correct their mistake. And they never have corrected it.

“A lie will never stand unless it’s written down,” added Chief. “You’ll test it against what you know. If it’s not true you won’t repeat it. It will not be spread. It goes nowhere. But if you put it in a book it is believed by millions.

“The way it usually played out was the government would send someone to make contact with the Indians. They always tried to find the Indian ‘emperor.’ Their instructions were to locate the biggest chief they could, so they could sign a treaty. They’d find someone and then they’d go back to the settlements. They’d get caught up in politics back where they came from, and it might be years before any Indian laid eyes on them again. They wouldn’t be able to find their way back, or they’d send someone else instead. They always expected the same people to be in that place. Well, we may have moved! The government always wanted us to stay put. They’d make a map and write ‘Cherokee’ across a whole mountain range. The government made up the name of that tribe. It’s really a Shawnee word. It means ‘those people over there.’ Part of the deal with treaties was: ‘Sign this treaty and we’ll make your name live forever. They tried to buy off Sam Houston with that tactic, and when he refused, they named the town of Houston after him anyway.”

“There were no colors in sign talk,” he continued. “There were names for directions, or arrows, but originally no fixed names for colors. The colors associated with directions are different for different tribes. The old Indians always had splendid painted

things about them. To indicate a color, you would simply point to it on your clothing or in something you both could see. But to show a direction you did not point to the true place of it. There was a convention. In front of you was South, behind you was North, your right hand side was West and your left was East.

“The European was called the Paleface, or White Man, because when he introduced himself (they all did this) and removed his hat (they all had hats) the natives were amused to see a naked tan line across his forehead. The word for white became a sign you made by passing your hand across your brow. The white man was also called Wide Eyes.”

I questioned him about the origin of Indians. “There was a land-bridge,” he told me, “but most of the traffic went the other way.”

HE said he was Cherokee, Potawatomi and Shawnee, and that Talking Eyes was Seminole and Ojibwe. Her mother was a white woman. He also had a good deal of white or European, though “when people bring this up they don’t realize that I’ve kicked the white guy out.” His Russell grandfather was on the Cherokee rolls in North Carolina. He was also a tiny bit Tihanama and was Thunderbird Clan by their reckoning. He followed Gray Dog as chief of the Tihanama in about 1986. Talking Eyes was Bear Clan. His other grandfather was a Shawnee warrior named Pipes. Because of the long generations in his genealogy, his grandparents were born in the days of Indian removal. Shawnee warriors killed more white soldiers than all the other tribes put together. Talking Eyes’ father was Ojibwe and had a seat on the council. His

name was Tall Man, a gem and jewelry specialist, craftsman and artist. Her teacher on the Isabella Indian Reservation was Sheds No Tears, a weaver and dream analyst.

He described himself as “retired from public life,” and said Chief Piercing Eyes when he was head of the Pan-American Indian Association had seen to it that he got a short write-up in one of the editions of the *Encyclopedia of American Indians*. In that entry, Chief’s occupation was listed as “technician.”

After the Nashville Board of Education called my office one day in July, the chief and I agreed to make a presentation on teaching Native American culture during the upcoming teachers workshops in August. Our audience was to be all the social studies teachers in the metro system. We decided our plan would be more than just to help them teach Thanksgiving. We were going to review five hundred years of Indian history. Chief was going to be a living exhibit of Indian culture. He had done such appearances before.

The next day, there was a message on my voice-mail from Talking Eyes. She said they would be “out of the country, for several weeks, probably.” I began to worry I might have to do the workshop by myself.

Chief blew in the morning the presentation was to take place. He’d been to the Circle of All Nations gathering presided over by William Comenda, chief of the Zitigan Zibi First Nation north of Ottawa and one of the keepers of Canada’s sacred wampum belts. He’d stopped off en route at a favorite casino in Michigan. On the way back, he made a detour by Pipestone, Minnesota to sweat with members of the American Indian Movement, including, he said, Dennis Banks.

They called him Old Guy. Talking Eyes drove the car back to Tennessee. He'd cut the stay short and sold some jewelry for a bus ticket home.

"No one can say the old chief don't keep a commitment," he said cheerfully, fastening on an otter drag and positioning his roach hair-piece. "Look it: I got twenty cents left over." He pulled some change out of a pouch and talked about how casinos had changed the Indians' lives in Michigan.

We arrived at the school building with minutes to spare. The corridors were jammed with teachers scurrying to their rooms. Chief's regalia rustled and jingled as he walked. He carried an arrow and flute for the dancing and drumming. No one batted an eye at all the paint, bone, buckskin, feathers, fur, beads and shells. I carried a cottonwood and deerhide drum with a buffalo painted on it from my days at the Native American Educational Services College.

"Indians are the only men who are allowed to be beautiful," he said. "Now you take a powwow dancer. There's nothing more beautiful than that. You can't call him handsome, though. You can only call it 'beautiful.'"

When we reached the classroom sixty schoolteachers sitting in pupil-sized desks were waiting for us. The bell rang. I glanced around. Boy, did they look sour! We did our thing. I lectured, sang a song and drummed. Chief told stories, taught sign talk, played his flute, danced the straight dance and even said a prayer (in Tihanama).

Our cultural demonstrations were followed by a Q&A period. Why did Indians wear feathers? Why were Indians always fighting each other? Why did Indians disappear? How did the term "Indian giver" originate?

Chief didn't look like an Indian (this not a question but comment). Were we registered? Did we have papers? Did we grow up on a reservation? Was alcohol not a big problem (this also not so much a question as comment)? Some of the answers were amplified subsequently in my sessions with Chief, which continued until the fall.

"A LOT of people go from one medicine person to another," he said once, giving me a hard look. "They figure maybe one can help them if the other hadn't or wouldn't, without realizing that is a sign of lack of faith and disrespect for spirit. I don't like the word 'practitioner,' though they use this of medical doctors. Would you trust your health to someone who is still practicing?"

I asked him what was the proper way of approaching a medicine person. He said in the old days, you were expected to get an introduction or appointment working through the medicine person's spouse or helper. Usually they lived on the edge of the village apart from others. No one did medicine work full-time. If they were not available or busy with other things they put a stick across the path to their lodge. That meant they weren't seeing anyone that day.

The traditional way was to ask the wife or helper if you could see the medicine man, or you might approach him directly. When the time of your visit came you brought tobacco, greeted him respectfully, spread a blanket or set some other gift on the ground before him and told him what your complaint or trouble was, asking him if he could take the case. The original fee for such services was one dressed deerskin. Later, a nice quilt or blanket became the standard. Anything offered

was to be natural, preferably handmade. Nothing metal was allowed. "Dead presidents," as Chief called cash, were an affront.

If the medicine man rolled up the blanket and placed it behind him, that meant he accepted the case.

Medicine (*shin*) and teaching (a word which meant "reflecting the heart") were similar processes governed by a shared protocol. There were four possible situations where a gifting (*bish*) of this sort can take place. In the first instance, the medicine person and one to be healed (or taught) were both (a) qualified and (b) willing. The medicine person was able to diagnose the illness and knew how to treat it. He had experience of it. The one to be healed sincerely desired the healing (or teaching); he had right intention (*quuzi*), which he demonstrated in showing respect for the other. Of the four scenarios, this was the most favorable for healing to occur. Even so, healing did not always take place. "Permission" might be lacking. Whether the medicine man was allowed to treat the person was decided in the Spirit Lodge. If permission was denied, the deerskin or blanket was returned.

In the next two situations, the medicine man (or teacher) and one to be healed (or taught) are not equal. Either the medicine man is qualified, but the one to be healed is not firm in his faith, or the one may earnestly desire the healing while the other one does not have the ability or knowledge or training to perform it. Under which circumstances did the greater healing or teaching transpire? asked Chief. The answer was the second of the two. Perhaps twice as much healing would take place. The key is the heart and intention of the person to be healed. This is more important than the training or

experience of the healer. Many people thus obtain cures from medicine people with very limited knowledge, even from fakes. In the same way, people seek knowledge from the untaught and sometimes receive good answers.

The fourth situation featured an unqualified medicine person and unwilling patient. No healing (or teaching) was passed. "That may seem obvious," said Chief, "but the surprising thing is that the fourth situation is the most common. Anyone who says, 'It's worth a try,' or 'It would be fun to ask such and such to see what they say,' and goes to a false medicine person or teacher engages in this behavior."

WHEN I had the occasion to question Chief further on the directions, he laid out the Tihanama scheme. North was the place of the Thunderbird and the Buffalo. Its color was white. Its number was one. Its element was fire. It was the land of wisdom and responsibility, of chiefs' councils, of the shaman flying on his drum through the roof of the world, the gateway to the stars. That's also where dragons lived.

"Sure Indians have dragons," said Chief. "Hadn't you never seen a Cherokee dragon egg?"

He seemed amazed at my ignorance. This was a stone passed among Cherokees, its connection with them a mystery. It was white on the outside and inside was the swirling yoke of a dragon. He told me the story of the Piasa, a pterodactyl-like being that survived to historical times.

"And look," said Chief. He showed me a small, flat-edged stone with a stick painting on it. "I made this."

“How did you know what the Piasa looked like?” I asked.

“Those were Potawatomi scouts,” he said. “My grandfather and other elders repeated the stories.”

“In the beginning,” he continued, “Great Spirit set foot on earth coming from the North. This is why South is always the direction in front of you in sign talk. Great Spirit walked the Red Path to the South and traced the inner circle of the world. The outer circle runs sunwise around the horizon. The inner circle makes a cross and goes counterclockwise. It is the Indian star, for it mirrors the energy deep within the core of creation. Great Spirit then walked East. He ended his walk in the West, the place of the waters.

He said North was the first of the Sacred Directions to be invoked in smudging and other ceremony because it was the first of the winds. It was the first Arrow. The Tihanama word *namag* meant “singing stone”. Their own name translated as Eighth Arrow, the last of the directions. South was the direction in front of you no matter which way you were facing. To indicate south you pointed straight ahead. East was on your left side, west on your right. The sign for Spirit was a counterclockwise vortex made above your head. That motion was counterclockwise from our perspective but clockwise from Spirit’s. All these signs commemorated the First Walk, when Great Spirit created us and taught us to communicate. South was the direction Great Spirit faced when he gave us sacred language. He put our heart on our left side, with Mother Earth.

The two totems that lived in the North were Thunderbird and Buffalo. The Thunderbird was not the

same as the Thunder Beings, nor was he a Phoenix. In sign talk, he was called "Lightning and Thunder, Thunder and Lightning." Chief sounded the name in such a way that the two elements seemed to echo and reflect off each other—Zi Na Zi. Thunderbird was originally one of Great Spirit's messengers, a hawk. He was Man's protector and spirit guide. The Thunderbird took prayers to Great Spirit and brought messages to the people. After a time, he began to think this power was his rather than Spirit's. He grew haughty and self-important. Kiyanawah burnt his feathers with lightning and put the fear of thunder in his heart to remind him of his responsibility.

"Thunderbird is the clan of chiefs and other spiritual people," said Chief. "Its teaching is a warning to be humble and not take credit for the powers that are gifted to us."

Buffalo sat in the North and had a similar teaching, according to Chief. Like the Thunderbird, he did not always exist. The Buffalo was sent to the people when they were hungry. Thus all parts of the buffalo were honored and used. Thus also the Indian spread his feast on a buffalo robe, and the marrow of the buffalo was used to anoint the Sacred Pipe. Medicine men wore the horns of the buffalo in their headdress. One day, the Buffalo might cease to exist. He might be taken away just as he was given. When that happened there would also be no more Indian people.

He grew quiet. "Some people have called me the Last Indian," he said. "I *hope* that is not true."

I pointed out to him it seemed paradoxical that Fire was the element of the North. Heat and cold were opposite. How could Fire be an element like the others

in the first place? It did not occupy space. It was something that appears to be alive but burns, brings death, consumes, and dies.

"They tell me I can build a fire under water," he remarked. He said he was Fire Clan on the Potawatomi side, which together with the Ottawa and Ojibwe (Chippewa) made up the Three Fires. The Potawatomi themselves were called People of the Fire. Fire was central to all Indian life. "Why is it that white people seem to know so little about it?"

The word for fire in the Tihanama language was spirit-of-smoke (*shadama*).

"There was a Cherokee woman who came to the Seven Nations gathering," he also remarked. "She had fire coming out of her eyes. No one knew why, but there it was."

ON FRIDAY, May 10, we had lunch together at Arnold's, a "meat and three" restaurant near Broadway and Music Row. Chief said hello to Albert Gore, Sr. as we went through the line. He pointed out several other famous regulars sitting at battered vinyl and chrome dinette tables. I had spoken to Chief the night before about hiring him to build a log cabin for me on land I owned on a lake at Dyestone Springs just off the Natchez Trace, about ninety miles away. We now drove there in my Camry, listening to CDs of Native American music on the way. Included was Bill Miller, who lived in Nashville and had just released his "Raven in the Snow" album. Chief put in a demo tape of his own music. He used to play in a rockabilly act with his sister Sunflower called "Buddy and Sissy." They still kept a recording studio in the barn at her place filled with what looked

like garage-sale electronics. Sunflower now worked at the Piggly Wiggly store.

We glided down the Natchez Trace. We met hardly any other traffic and gazed out on hilly expanses of old growth woods devastated and clear-cut in certain stretches. Chief observed that the “biggest emptiness was the absence of our people.” He said that the Natchez along with the Avery Trace “used to connect empires.” The Natchez were an old tribe like the Yuchi and Tihanama. With their innumerable stone graves, the Yuchi were the dominant people in this territory that once lay between the Cherokee on the east and Chickasaw on the west. They were called Children of the Sun not so much because they came from the south but because their hair turned blond and lightened in the summer. “Any one of them who had blue eyes,” he added, turning his gray-blue eyes to me in the car, “was likely to be tapped as a medicine person.”

Our time together was intense and uninterrupted. In a week of long visits, Chief covered the following subjects, which I can only list: constellations called the Path of Souls, Pony, Bear, Medicine Bag, Medicine Wheel, the Seven Dancers, Guide, and the Medicine Stick (two); Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson and Loretta Lynn; Dodge’s Store on Gallatin Road; Castalian Springs and Bledsoes Fort; old stone fences; a sacred site used for vision quests on a ledge behind the Walmart store in Red Boiling Springs; difference between a medicine man or herbal doctor and shaman or spiritual practitioner; Old Stone Fort; axes placed at east door of circle and why circles and lodges are built at about 100 degrees NNW, oriented to the “old true north”; the names of herbs and the uses of Joe-Pye

weed; story of Ishi, the last Indian; corn magic; Sequoyah and the Elati or Lower Cherokee; names and naming customs and ceremonies; Hartwick pines, redwoods and sequoias; his genealogy, including Tillman surname, real estate history of Manhattan and Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan preacher; four levels of the Medwewin Medicine Lodge; medicine maps; Tecumseh (including the true pronunciation of the name) and his brother Tenskwatawa, or The Open Door; balancing mind, spirit and heart; how to approach a medicine person for a service; clans and their specialties; the meaning of the Iron Butterfly design; Gypsies, witches or Wicca people and other hangers-on; chakras or centers of inner energy; his life between 1988 and 1993; law enforcement's category of "unknown spiritualities and the powers thereof"; ley lines, vortices and portals; crop circles; numerology; the Black Noise of alcoholism and Green Peace of healing; the Indian "hen penny"; personal medicine bags and crystals; trees and their names and properties.

We were relaxing during the heat of the day in a tipi at Resting Eagle. I asked him about the difference between medicine men and shamans. Little Chief, his aged white dog, had dug himself a cool bed out of the earth on a hillock overlooking the Christmas tree farm on the property, now overgrown. Chief said that shamans could have a convention, it didn't matter where, Africa, Siberia, South America, and they would all be able to understand and communicate with each other and exchange client information and trade secrets. When two medicine men met for the first time they questioned each other and often bartered for secret formulas or specialized experience with certain herbs.

He said when two chiefs from different tribes came across each other traveling in the woods or wilderness they sat down facing one another and sang a song to the other. It was to be a song none had ever heard before and no one would ever hear again. It was composed on the spot. The language might resemble animal noises and go on for some time. No accompaniment, not even sticks, was allowed. Death songs summing up a man's life were similar. They were never repeated.

"An Indian isn't 'from' anywhere," he said. "He describes his home, or more properly lodge, as the place where he sits (*adji*).

"Indians don't own things like the white man and they never could accept the white man's definition of property. The word *biqui* is the closest thing to 'have' or 'own,' but it simply means to have the use of for a time, perhaps your life. A related word is *bishtar*, gift or gifting. Even your name, or more properly what you are called, is a gift."

One night we are talking outside his trailer, lying on the hoods of our cars. It was a full moon. A cloud passed over its face. From the stillness of the woods came an eerie call. Three notes answered by a chorus of the same. The melody was beautiful but haunting, dignified and wild.

"What is that?"

"You felt you weren't supposed to hear it, didn't you?" said Chief.

"Those are women out there!"

"They're coming out of their cave where they've been celebrating being women. That's their greeting to Watisa Zu." Watisa Zu was Grandmother Moon, the Evening Sun.

He says there are male and female flutes. He goes into the trailer and comes back out and shows me Talking Eyes' flute. A woman's flute has four holes, a man's five. He goes back in and comes back with Talking Eyes and asks her to play the three notes we had just heard. She does so. It would not be right for him to play them, he says. He says he knows women's special language, the words only women speak among themselves. He has to teach the words, as he is the only instructor left. He also gives instruction in women's dance steps, though he feels uncomfortable when doing it. I ask no more questions about the strange rite my ears had just witnessed.

Another time I went for a swim in Crane Creek, the nearby stream. You found the most unusual fossils there. I spotted a peculiar rock in the creekbed, which in ages past had been at the bottom of the sea. It looked like a piece of reddish brown brick that had been tumbled in rock shop and worn down into a rough, pockmarked ball. Was it made by human hand or was it the work of nature? I held it in my own hand and carried it back to Chief and Talking Eyes.

"You've been passed a beauty stone," said Chief upon examining it. "This was an heirloom. A female heirloom. Mothers would pass them to their daughters. They used them to make things beautiful, to polish pottery and smooth skins. After a while people forgot what they were for. This type of rock is people stone, Indian rock. Every native woman treasured her beauty stone. She kept it in a place of honor in her lodge. It *was* the lodge, a symbol for the lodge."

"Why was it passed to me?" I asked baffled.

“Perhaps you are meant to pass it to your wife,” he said.

“Just watch out she doesn’t hit you over the head with it,” said Talking Eyes, looking up from her beadwork.

Once late at night when we were driving down to my half completed cabin at Dyestone Springs, a Tennessee highway patrol car pulled us over on the deserted Natchez Trace near She-Boss Place. “Just tell him you are traveling,” said Chief. My car had New Jersey plates. I rolled down the window and gave the patrolman my license and drivers registration. He went away and came back after a few moments. He asked for the passenger’s drivers license, which Chief produced.

“Now I’m going to be arrested for riding drunk, I suppose,” joked Chief, who never touched a drop of alcohol.

The patrolman came back. He was very polite and apologetic. “Y’all have a good evening,” he said, sending us on our way without explanation.

“What was that all about?” I asked Chief. He told me his son was a policeman in Trousdale County. On more than one occasion Chief had helped the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation solve a mystery. There was a category in their computer records, he said, called “Unknown spiritualities and the powers thereof.” Now, he said, I was probably flagged the same way. “I don’t think they’ll ever bother you,” he said complacently.

One night beside the fire, Chief and I had a conversation about the Orions, an alleged alien species. What he told me confirmed all I had heard in rumors from others. He knew them as spiritual beings, shape

changers who came from the constellation of Orion. They were the party animals of the universe, into sex, drugs and rock and roll. Androgynous, they mostly assumed the shape of good-looking male humans. In their home, he said, they were reptilian-looking demons, ugly and frightening, complete with fangs and horns and tails. He met one in the music business who became his boss, a dispatcher-promoter for Orion bus tours. Orions were perfectly charming most of the time.

“If they are thoroughly evil does this mean they aren’t open to the power of love, light, truth and goodness?”

“They have turned away.”

“Can they be turned back?”

“I would not like to try,” said Chief, quietly. “I don’t want to be responsible for converting a god.”

Chief used to say that my cabin was just “the outside world rearranged and reused.” With Stone Bird, a glum Cajun man, he built it over four weeks out of poplar logs purchased at a Linden sawmill. I picked up the funky nineteenth-century windows and doors from a salvage shop in Lawrenceburg, and Chief and I framed them in. It had a dirt floor, porch and sleeping loft. The battleship-like iron stove came from Tall Man via Talking Eyes and had kept several generations of their family warm on the Isabella reservation. Chief laid and sealed the tin roofing and neighbors helped us raise a twelve-inch solid iron well pipe for the chimney. When it was done, he stood back, lit a cigarette and said, “Don’t the sun look good shining on that flashing.” He said it was the fourteenth house he had built in his lifetime. I paid him \$900.00 for his work.

ONE DAY, Chief was giving me what he called mind training. It was hot, so we went down to Winding Stair Creek and stood in the middle in the cool, rushing waters for our lesson. Curiously, there was no word in his language for body. The Western mind-body concept made no sense. He said that the foundation of spiritual control or *kus* was diet. You are what you eat. Mind training could give you the ability to do incredible physical feats. A ninety-year old woman could do back flips. The shaman flew through the air on his drum. Gymnasts and many athletes often possessed this ability without really being aware of it. A large part of it was balance and awareness-in-the-round. Many people, however, could never begin to train their spirit. Either they denied they had a spirit or they lacked a proper foundation in the way they lived. There were even people who allowed their spiritual flame to go out. These he referred to as “shell people.” One such person—a male “witch” who came to gatherings hoping to feed on spiritual energies—was “just not level yet.” Half dead, he meant.

“People have a mistaken belief they can take vitamins or eat organic food or drink pure water or be a vegetarian and become stronger,” he said. “That is part of the problem. About the most you can say for bottled water is that it’s wet. A lot of food is like that—more or less neutral. Society—and I’ve decided to call it U.S. Society—doesn’t have enough spirit in their food. The ancient Indians were tough! They lived to incredible ages. What accounted for that? The white man could never understand why we didn’t want his beef when he put us on reservations. We got our strength from the buffalo. We got our gracefulness from the deer. We got

our medicine from the waters. We did not want to become like cattle or pigs.

“Modern science solved the world food shortage but created a different problem, a spiritual one. What do they make all those fertilizers out of? The answer is minerals—earth. Well, people weren’t meant to eat rocks! There’s too much minerals in the food chain, and that’s part of the reason why people are so hard and stony today. To walk with a sacred step you got to be pure. You got to be limber. My body is like a camel’s. I can go a long way on little.”

As if to illustrate his point, an animal stirred in the bushes on the other side of the creek. I went over to see what it was and uncovered a mangy yellow dog, all skin and bones. It had a bed in the brush on the bank, but it was too weak and famished to move. I tried to coax it out but it just groveled and hung its head and curled its tail between its legs. That dog was a mess! When I went back to join Chief in the creek, we were happy to see it stumble down to the water. We watched as it began gnawing a rock. The abandoned pet had no hunting skills. It had always been fed by humans. The only thing it knew how to do was eat what was available—in this case, rocks. Chief went down stream and came back with a fish skeleton. He spoke to the dog and gave him the bone. “Maybe he will learn how to scavenge,” he said.

Another of Chief’s teachings was that of the Three Mountains. This he received from Gray Dog, the chief who preceded him in office, who had got it in “chief training” from his teacher, and on and on. It was, Chief said, part of the medicine of the Paint Rock or Tihanama tribe, what made them a medicine people to

whom other tribes often turned. In particular, it was a teaching of the Thunderbird Clan. Its distant origins were with the Maya in Central America, he said. He used it extensively in his “counseling,” as he called it, private consultations with those who came to him with personal problems. It would surface from time to time in our talks.

Chief would often remark, “Everyone is responsible for their own spiritual maintenance,” or, “Perhaps you must pray with more intention.” Then he would remind me of the Three Mountains.

The smallest circle is three, the number of balance (*sko*). You cannot have a circle with only two persons. All life is built on the Three Mountains. These are mind, heart and spirit—*kus, ho, sha*. Most people forget the third one. All of us overemphasize one or the other. Those who use their mind too much have a tendency to be skeptics about nearly everything. Their mind is active all the time to the exclusion of their heart and spirit. Another extreme of the mind is greed and acquisitiveness. It is the mind that is always scheming to get more and have more. The pleasure center of the body is located at the base of the brain. It makes all sorts of bargains with the mind to stimulate the senses and satisfy the appetites.

Those who overemphasize the heart fall into one of two pitfalls. Either they are so generous and sensitive they give everything away or they are cruel and violent. Anger, fear, sorrow, courage, giving, joy—these are all of the heart. The word for “good” in Indian sign talk is to move the hand out from the heart in a steady, calm, level fashion. Truth is “speaking from the heart.” The word “maybe” is a “split heart”—*ghian ho*—and the

word for “lie” is “forked tongue” – *ghian shoda*. With these expressions, Indians show others they are “people of the heart.” And indeed, most Indians have a tendency to overstress the heart, just as most white people gravitate toward imbalance of the mind.

The ones who pay too much attention to spirit either become foolish or arrogant and proud. They think the rules don’t apply to them or they live in spirit to such an extent they even forget to take care of their basic needs. Spirit is only one of the mountains, the Mountain of Universal Love. It is not everything. We are spiritual beings, but we are also emotional and intellectual beings. There exist also the Mountain of Truth and Mountain of Respect.

What of the body? That *is* the mountains, he said, whose name means “high earths” (*mon baka*). In the same way, we are said to be made from earth, come from earth and be of earth. The three mountains are really one mountain range, or group. They lie close to each other like ridges or saddles of hills and are formed of the same stone. They are all equally high, equally hard to climb. You can see the summits of the other two from the summit of any one of them. We will climb them all over and over.

Mind, heart and spirit are heightened points of consciousness and existence. When in balance, they go together to create what is called our “nature.” There is no exact translation for this – *gennu*. Chief called it “one of those paragraph words.” Depending on context, it could mean “essence, being, life, permanence, identity, pride, mystery, existence, way, purpose, destination, goal, striving, dedication, devotion, coherence, unity, pureness, expression, concentration, consciousness,

conscience, integrity, uprightness, godliness, secret, what is deep within.”

The fourth earth is called Honor and literally means the “desire” (*ya*) for fulfillment of the sacred “vibration” (*na*) and harmony of life—hence *yana*. A way of summing up the Three Mountains teaching is to say that the foundation for honor is respect, truth-telling and universal love. We become everything we can be and were intended to be through thoughts that show we respect all beings and things (mind), through words that show we seek and acknowledge the truth (heart) and through actions that show we are part of the force of universal love (spirit).

I once asked Chief if he spoke for all Indians. It was a pointed question and his reply was spot-on. “Only as you might speak for all white people,” he said.

Chief had a teaching about the three barriers to spirituality. He called these Fear, Power and Old Age. “Fear, that’s the obvious one,” he says. “Most people are afraid of what they experience. Their God is usually the Jehovah of the Bible. But does a loving father or grandfather do things to his children to make them scared of him? Does he get angry at us? Does he punish us? I can’t tell you how many students I’ve had who ran from what they saw. It scared the hell out of them! Ninety percent of people on the spiritual path turn back because of fear.

“You don’t always encounter these barriers in the same order. It’s not like you get past one and that’s it. You come up against all of them repeatedly. But the most common one is fear. The second one is called power. This is when you forget where your power is coming from. You think it’s your power. You get

arrogant and egotistical. You try to use it for selfish purposes. After a while you no longer have it. You may pretend you do, but you don't. You're faking it. You are stuck in the second barrier, which is Power. Ninety percent of those who overcome their fear fall prey to power. Those who slip into this can't progress because they claim to be further along than they are. No one can help them. You can't tell them anything because they think they know all the answers. They proclaim this by their actions, so no one bothers with them. Once you have power you must use it wisely.

"The third barrier is called Old Age, but this is not what you think. It has nothing to do with age. You can get past fear and you can get past power but Old Age gets you almost every time. Another word for it might be taking things for granted. You might notice there is always some down time. You can't be on a spiritual high all the time. That is the barrier of Old Age. But if you did not have these barriers you would not have any progress. You would not be aware of how far you have come and how far you have to go."

DURING the tail-end of our sessions, Chief addressed the following subjects that, again, I can only list: three Seminole languages; approaching an Indian healer or practitioner; order of prayers in a sweat lodge; time travel and other dimensions; Quannah Parker; Clara Luz, a Mapuche medicine woman; origin of the expression A-ho (Navajo); three types of councils (general, chiefs, three chiefs, or general, peace and war); adoption (*heyka*) customs and rules; Moundbuilder society and caste system; Andrew Jackson's career; paths and trails across North America; previous places

where the Tihanama lived, including Show Low, Arizona.

Chief often said there would come a time when the Mother Earth (Tisa Bakha) might be overwhelmed by her task of self-healing. He worried that high-voltage power lines were disturbing some of our instincts for survival. What was all the clutter on the airwaves doing to those in another world, he asked. He prophesied a sudden shift in the earth's magnetic field. He monitored the creeping magnetic north and changing stars with an ancient Yuchi stone circle—and with geodesic and radio equipment in a toolshed on the hill. Not only would machines turn against their masters, he predicted, but our own memory would go down if there were a global computer crash. We would be reduced to gene memory. "People won't know who they are," he said. "They'll stare at a burning car and say, 'What is that?'"

What would you carry in your wallet for that kind of emergency, I asked.

Symbols, he replied. Indian symbols.

One day he asked me to write down the following: A father gives his child his heartbeat. The honor paid to a father is "May your people always call you blessed."

At one time or another, he used the following adages or proverbs: Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking . . . Gold is the yellow rock that makes the white man crazy . . . Old as the stars . . . Don't tell anyone where your berry patch is . . . The snake always gets the second one down the path . . . When you've shit in your hat you don't want to wear it . . . Locks are for honest people . . . Thought comes before speech . . . It's not the fire but the man beside the fire . . . Speak from the heart .

. . . A spring is where the Earth Mother breathes . . .
Hawks are the messengers of Great Spirit . . . The Milky
Way is the spirits of our people . . . When there's a circle
around the moon the ancestors are in council.

"People ask me what they can do about the world," Chief told me toward the end of our interviews, "and I tell them to stop lying. Tell the truth to yourself and others. Refuse to accept compromise as a way out. Honor your brothers and sisters. Lots of people come to me and say they already respect the environment and all the other beings. But they have left out human beings. Listen to the teachings of our elders. They know where everything is. Pray with intention. Stop going from circle to circle criticizing the way they are run. Do your own spiritual maintenance each day and don't worry about others. If everyone brought one good person to the circle there would be little fault to find in anyone there. We'd have a perfect circle."

And so ended the last interview I had with him.



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