

A Postscript to the short story "The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop"

[Note: This was written in January, 2009, (with minor revisions in April, 2010) and is probably best understood as a postscript, as it may be better not to say very much about the story before it is read for the first time.]

I would like to say something about a short story I wrote titled "The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop".

I have thought about this 9 page short story many times over the years.... In its original version, I thought it was unique and very relevant to our complex and challenging times. In its revised version (which came about more than 20 years after the original version), I see it as a healing story, and I have read it many times with that outcome in mind. I hope that someday the story will be better understood, and more appreciated. It has occurred to me that if I offered some of my thoughts about the story, it might help readers to a better understanding of the story... help shine a light on the good qualities of the story. So here, in what I call a postscript to "The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop", I would like to say something about the influences which had a part in forming the story. And I'd like to say something about the process of revisioning, since the story was first written in 1984, and was last revised in 2006. I'd also like to encourage readers to search the story for one particular sentence, which I believe is something worth finding.

The story was first formed in the summer of 1984, while I was living in Portsmouth, NH (USA). I was working in a restaurant as a dishwasher. I had found a used canoe at a yard sale, and had found a way to have the canoe "docked" on property which was on a small river outside Durham, NH. On weekends, I would hitch a ride to Durham, NH, walk three miles or so with my backpack to where the canoe was, and go "canoe camping". Part of "The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop" was written while I was sitting in a canoe which was "anchored" in the middle of a quiet river, with only the river, the trees, the sky, and a slight breeze as my companions.

There were three significant literary influences which were in the front of my mind that summer. First, I had explored into Native American literature. And I was, at that time, wondering if there was some way to create a story which would grow out of the images in the following two passages:

1) From "Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux" by John G. Neihardt, this is part of a prayer made by Black Elk when he was an old man:

"Hey! Lean to hear my feeble voice.
At the center of the sacred hoop
You have said that I should make the tree to bloom

With tears running, O Great Spirit, my Grandfather,
With running eyes I must say
The tree has never bloomed

Here I stand, and the tree is withered.
Again, I recall the great vision you gave me.

It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives.

Nourish it then
That is may leaf
And bloom
And fill with singing birds!

Hear me, that the people may once again
Find the good road
And the shielding tree.”

2) From a speech which I first read in “Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches made by Noted Indian Chieftains” by W.C. Vanderwerth. [Note: In that book, the speech is titled “The Indian’s Night Promises to be Dark”, and the speech is attributed to Chief Seattle. There is some speculation, brought forth in recent years, which suggest an alternative interpretation—that the words of this particular speech were written by someone else, but attributed to Chief Seattle. Although, there is something about the following passage which, I believe, transcends the source of the words, it may be necessary to read the whole speech with some skepticism about its source.]

“Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people....”

It is also worth mentioning that at this time I had just finished reading what I considered to be a most profound and insightful book titled “The Myth of the Eternal Return” by Mircea Eliade. Part of that book was about how some primitive and indigenous people recreated their connection to the sacred beginning by reliving their particular myth of creation (and thus returning to the “center” and the “beginning of time”).

And so there I was, sitting in a canoe, “anchored” in the middle of a quiet river, with these kind of thoughts in my mind....

The story which resulted from my efforts did not find a warm welcome from other readers. While it is true that I worked with an illustrator in North Carolina in 1987 to create an illustrated version of the story, the story moved into the background of my life, and remained unpublished. While I thought of the story from time to time, I never thought about changing anything in the story. I thought that I had said all I had in me to say on that subject. I did not think that there was anything else I could do about the story and its mission in life.

Then, in Spring, 2004, I found myself in a creative frame of mind, but with no particular ideas for writing projects. I thought of having another look at “The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop”. At this particular point in time, there were two influences in the front of my thinking. One was that I now had a collection of quotations which I had created from the discourses of a spiritual teacher, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, who lives in India. (That collection of quotations, titled “An Arrangement of Quotations from ‘Sathya Sai Speaks’ Vol. 1-15” was completed in 1997, and since then I have made use of it as a source of spiritual inspiration. It is accessible at the website of The IPCR Initiative at www.ipcri.net). Second, since 2001, I had been slowly building an initiative called The Interfaith Peacebuilding and Community Revitalization (IPCR) Initiative. I had not yet made a significant outreach effort with the written materials I had

developed, but documents had been created... (“water was flowing...”) (The first significant outreach effort would come in Spring, 2005.)

When I began to re-examine “The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop” story at this time, I did not have any clear goal in mind—I just felt that I might be able to do something constructive if I tried. The results, however, were inconclusive. When I finally reached the point when I felt it was time to stop writing, I had four different versions of the story, and not one of them seemed complete. Sometimes that’s how it is with revisions.

Then, in the Summer of 2006, I was in the process of writing a letter, and I became determined to send one of the versions of the story along with the letter. That’s when I decided that it really was okay to take the two poems that framed the story out of the story. I had thought for more than 20 years that these two poems had to be a part of the story... and finally came to believe that the story needed to go on without them. I believe readers will understand that there are decisions in life which are like this.

The only other comment I would like to make about this story is that I am convinced that it contains one line—one sentence—which encapsulates the advantages of having many different paths by which we, as humans, can access the wisdom associated with religious, spiritual, and moral traditions (the wisdom associated with love, virtue, sacrifice, forgiveness, peace, etc.) And I truly believe *that one line* can be helpful to interfaith relations in many different communities, especially at this critical point in the evolution of spiritual understanding. (The challenges of our times are such that it is now critical for us to access the storehouses of wisdom which have accumulated over the many centuries of human experience, and which have been confirmed again and again as essential to individual well-being and social harmony by the saints, sages, spiritual leaders, and sincere practitioners of all religious, spiritual, and moral “world views”.) But I cannot simply extract the line from the story—readers may not understand the implications of that line if it is taken out of the continuum of life experiences which give it meaning. And so I am going to offer readers the opportunity to see if they can find it... to see if they can guess which sentence I am referring to. (The story is only 9 pages long, so there is a fair probability that readers can be successful at this.) And I invite discussion of that sentence, and of the other messages and symbolism that are in this story. Maybe this story will remind readers of other stories they know that have similar messages and symbolism. I would like to hear of those stories.

I do realize that the story itself may still not find a warm welcome from readers. The story is not like most other short stories, and it may not have enough of what readers look for in a story. Yes, that may be. However, I do believe that it is a healing story, and (as I said earlier in this postscript) I myself have read it many times with that outcome in mind. This I believe: Do not deny the validity of your own experience. What is felt to be true is a guide and guardian which cannot be lightly set aside.

This is my postscript to the short story “The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop”.

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Leesburg, Virginia (USA)
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(and April, 2010)