

An Unpaid Debt

We Americans pride ourselves on our fairness, our open government, our democratic principles, and our pursuit of peace and “liberty and justice for all.” We cry out when we see oppression and intolerance, and willingly intervene when called upon to do so by our own people or by the international community. And we do have much to be proud of.

But we are not the perfect nation we believe ourselves to be. We have much to be ashamed of which our nationalistic pride won’t allow us to acknowledge. We have yet to apologize for our treatment of the native tribes who peopled and protected this land before we wrested it from them. Following our so-called “Manifest Destiny” and the directives of a “just” Christian God, we waged a war of annihilation on these innocent people. We stole their land, suppressed their culture, displaced their religion, and murdered not only their warriors but their women, their children and their elders. We made treaties with them which we had no intention of keeping. When our words failed, we turned to our guns. We waged an intentional campaign of death and deceit, marching under the same flag so many of today’s Americans would defend with their lives for the very principles we then flouted so viciously. What we believe of America is not true when we take this shameful history into account.

How did this happen? What brought us to the point where we could wreak such destruction with pride and impunity?

The failing is in white America’s pathologically dehumanized relationship with nature. The Native Americans were never estranged from nature as we are. They recognized themselves as having sprung from the land in which they lived, and they held it sacred in a way we can hardly begin to understand. Chief Seattle was right when he said “Your God loves your people and hates mine.” But he could well have added “and He hates the land which gave us both life.” White America’s god preached dominion over the earth. The Indian’s god was the earth , and the Indian felt a responsibility of stewardship towards it.

Many have argued that the displacement of the Native American was an inevitable outcome of the arrival of Europeans on American shores. Perhaps so. This does not change the fact that our government has never properly acknowledged, regretted, or tried to atone for this shame which lies at the foundation of our nation. And it does not condone our continued willingness to let these once proud people languish and decline under the weight of our materialist aspirations.

If there is an inevitability here, it is the inevitability of our continued destruction of the environment and its inhabitants as we race to conquer what we wrongly think of as ours for the taking. We all but destroyed the Native Americans in the space of fifty years. Our current greed is causing one of the largest mass extinctions in the history of our planet. What a sad legacy if all we end up valuing—if all that survives—is ourselves.

Many may wonder why I have chosen to publicize my feelings about the Native Americans at this late point in my career. The purpose of this essay is to emphasize the danger of our society’s failure to maintain a normal, natural relationship with Nature, such as the Indians had. I have insisted that such a unity with Nature is essential to our survival since I began writing over sixty years ago. Much of my writing has concentrated

on the pathological tendencies in art brought on by our disassociation with Nature. These are indicative of the underlying lack of respect we have for the process which gave us all life. Note that I say the *process*, not the “god.” We are all here on equal terms, as a result of Nature’s Creative Process—an “imperfect” process to be sure, but without the so-called imperfections we would not exist. It is our responsibility to work to understand this process, and our role in it, as sincerely and objectively as we can. If we are able to achieve a high degree of sincerity— if we can “be sincere about being sincere”— we’ll soon realize the essential connectedness and equality of all living things—that we humans have no special place in this universe, nor special purpose on this earth, which gives us any right to eradicate other life forms for reasons of selfish convenience. We are in fact the only species capable of transcending the imperatives of our genes, and as such we have a special responsibility to protect our fellow creatures and their habitats—to exercise stewardship instead of dominion. The Native Americans recognized this, and lived their lives accordingly, taking into account the impact of each significant decision on the next seven generations. This is the attitude we need to achieve, the attitude that needs to permeate our daily lives and inform the decisions we make along the way. If we want true peace—from the inner peace of the individual to peace among races and nations, we’ll work to achieve what the Native Americans once had—and which we took from them.

Charles Biederman, June 2001

I’d like to thank Randy Pflueger for bringing me so much information on the Native Americans over the years, and Neil Larsen for discussing these ideas with me and helping me put them on paper.

The most comprehensive history of white America’s methodical annihilation of the Native Americans that I’m aware of is the television series “The Way West”, produced by WGBH Boston. I highly recommend this to anyone interested in the subject.

For further reading I would suggest:

“Native American Wisdom”

Classic Wisdom, New World Library, Novato California

Edited by Kent Nerburn and Louise Mengelkoch

“In Pursuit of the Nez Perces, as reported by General O. O. Howard, Duncan McDonald, and Chief Joseph”

Mountain Meadow Press, Kooskia, Idaho

Compiled by Linwood Laughy

Chief Seattle’s speech to Isaac Stevens, Governor of Washington Territory and Superintendent of Indian Affairs, in response to the Indians being forced to sign treaties and move to reservations; January 1855.

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