Chapter 4

Culture

My father, Doyle Francis, crossed over in the fall of 2000. Not long afterward, we noticed my mother having problems remembering things. More and more often, her answer to almost any question became, "I don't know; my memory went with Doyle." I have never seen my mother cry or weep, not when her grandson died, not when her mother died, not when her siblings died, not when her nieces died, not when her husband died. I think this is something passed down in the family from a time when there was so much violence, so much death, so much loss that there was no energy left with which to grieve. Even small children and babies were taught not to cry, as a crying child or baby could alert the enemy to the position of hiding women and children during battle. My mother actually told me once that when she was a little girl, the one thing she was sure to get spanked for was crying. Come to think of it, I never saw my grandmother cry either. Arthur H., in his little book *The Grieving Indian*, writes of his Ojibwe people having a "no-crying ban....likely put in place during the Indian wars" (p. 76). Grief was denied, pushed down and packed up to be carried by subsequent generations. My mother couldn't grieve, and so she forgot, simply stopped remembering. In a very real sense, her memory really did leave with my father; the three fires of her mind crossed over ahead of her.

In a dream, I was gazing out a front window of our home, looking east across our lower pasture and the neighbor's field toward the wooded banks of Pecan Branch Creek, when I was surprised to see a cougar emerge from the timber along the creek. As the cougar made her way across the field and jumped the fence into our pasture, I called for the family to "Come and see this!" I was thinking how wonderful it was to see a cougar, but as she approached more closely, I could see that this cougar was not well; she was skin and bones. As we watched, the cougar walked right up very close to our house. All this time, she had been angling towards us, so that we could only see her left side. But as she neared the house, she turned her right side toward us, and we could see that she was horribly wounded on that side of her head, as if maybe from a shotgun blast at close range. I wondered whether she could live after sustaining such a wound.

In another dream, I was walking on my parents' farm, the place where I had done most of my growing up. I was walking toward the West. Ahead was a gate opening onto the property of an old man who had promised me, when I was young, that he would shoot me if he caught me trespassing on his land. I was determined to walk through that gate. But then, from the corner of my right eye, I caught sight of her, the cougar, approaching silently, stealthily, from the North. I stopped and turned toward her. One should never turn ones back on a cougar. As she approached, I could see how vital and healthy she was, not skinny, not wounded, but with well-formed muscles rippling beneath the tawny hide. She walked right up to me, and I was plenty nervous. With penetrating gaze, the big, yellow eyes peered deeply into my own, delving the depths of my soul. Then, the cougar placed her right paw on my chest, just over my heart. I looked down to determine, with some relief, that the razor-sharp claws were still in their sheaths. And then, very gently but

firmly, the cougar turned me around until I was facing the East.

I can't explain why, but from the beginning, I associated the cougar from both these dreams with my mother. My mother was/is dying of progressive dementia, yet the spirit of my mother remains vital, healthy and powerful, and in some mysterious way is still present to provide needed guidance. The concept of "mother" or "etsi" in Cherokee has multiple levels. There are those powerful human beings who create each subsequent generation, conceiving, gestating, birthing, nursing, nurturing. In some cases, it may not be the same one who births *and* nurtures, but these are our mothers. There are the mothers of past generations: grandmothers, great-grandmothers, great-great and great-great-great grandmothers, going on and on and on and on. There is the collective presence of our people or our tribe. This is also our mother. There is the Earth herself. There is the Sun. There is the entirety of the Universe: Creation/Creator. This too is our mother.

Now, please bear with me as I relate a couple more stories; I will try to be brief.

My mother and my mother's mother had what they called "ghost plant" growing on both sides of their front steps. I couldn't figure out why they had it growing there. It didn't have pretty flowers or any spectacular beauty but was just a pale, almost white-looking gangling plant tending to grow in bunches. If anyone asked Grandma or Momma about the ghost plant, they didn't say much, only that it had been in the family a long time.

Sometime after my father died but before my mother's memory problems got so bad she could no longer live by herself, the family gathered to do some fix-up work on her house in southeast Missouri. Some of us were painting the porch railing, when my son Luke said, "What is this I'm standing in?"

"Ghost plant," I answered, matter-of-factly.

"Is it sage?" Luke asked. The question took me by surprise. For the first time in my life, I was really looking at, really noticing this plant I had lived so close to all through my growing-up years.

"Break off a piece, crush it in your fingers and smell it," I said.
Following my instructions, Luke said, "It's sage."

A few years ago, I was in southwest Missouri helping with a ceremony. The man who lived at the place where the ceremony was being conducted asked me to help him carry some things from the garage. Once in the garage, I noticed bundles of sage on a shelf, not just any sage, this was ghost plant, just like Grandma and Momma had grown. "Where'd you get this sage?" I asked.

"A friend of mine brings that up from Texas," the man answered.

It was around 1817 when my fourth-great grandparents, on my mother's side, left their home in the Cherokee country of eastern Tennessee to move to eastern Texas. The reason I say it was around 1817 is because there is some controversy about whether my third-great grandmother was born in Tennessee or Texas, and she was born in 1817. If indeed our family was in Texas by 1817, it means we were among the first Cherokees to arrive there, being already there before the larger group of Chickamauga Cherokees moved into Texas from Arkansas in 1820. In 1839, the Republic of Texas, under President Lamar, made war against the Texas Cherokees and

Associated Bands, with the aim of total extermination and/or expulsion. Forced out of Texas, our family went to a remote area in the mountains of Arkansas, although some wound up in Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma) or went back and forth between Arkansas and Indian Territory. When I was a boy, my mother told me stories of some of the uncles who "went back to Texas" along with their families and associated with the Comanches there. I wish I could still remember the names of the uncles in the stories. I was not quite clear as to whether these were brothers of my great-great grandmother or brothers of my great-great-great grandmother. When my mother told the stories, they seemed to be about things that had happened not so long ago.

So, now I could put it all together. The ghost plant is native sage from Texas that has evidently been with our family, growing by the front steps of houses, since the first half of the 19th Century. I brought some ghost plant to our home in Bates County, Missouri, but during one of our notorious west-Missouri droughts, due to my neglect, the ghost plant died. I was thinking, "There's still a lot of ghost plant growing at Momma's house in southeast Missouri." But, when I went there after attending a murdered relative's funeral in July 2013, I found that the people renting my mother's house had worked hard to kill out all the ghost plant, thinking it was just a weed. I only found a few plants which I carefully dug out and brought back home. My eldest sister, Marcia Rainey was the only other person I knew who also grew the ghost plant. She had it growing at her home in central Missouri, but when she separated from her husband she wound up also losing her ghost plant. And, what of those few little ghost plants, transplanted in the hottest part of the summer? They all died but one, and for awhile, we thought that one last ghost plant was also dead. Even so, we watered it and fed it, protected it from chickens, loved it, nurtured it, prayed over it. Finally, it began putting out tiny new leaves, and before long, new plants began sprouting from the roots. We have ghost plant now, on both sides of the front steps.

Just one more story; this one is short, I promise.

Early in the morning of February 21, 2014, I was up on the hill to pray and tend the Sacred Fire of our people that is kept here at the Daksi Grounds. As I was leaving the Sacred Circle, I heard a low honking to the South. Turning in that direction, I saw a flock of large, white birds approaching, flying low. "A flock of snow geese," I thought and stopped at the east gate to turn and watch them fly over. However, as the flock drew near, I saw it was not snow geese but swans. In a V formation, the nine, snow-white birds flew directly over the arbor which shelters the Sacred Fire, clearing the peek of the roof by no more than six to ten feet. I could hear the whoosh of their wing-beats as I watched, wide-eyed, and I continued gazing, awe-struck, until the flock disappeared over the northern horizon.

In November 2014, my son John saw five swans fly over as he was hunting deer near the Daksi Grounds. Since then, my wife Janet and son Peter and I have seen other flocks of swans in the area.

The river valley from which rises the low hill upon which the Sacred Circle at the Daksi Grounds lies has long been associated with swans. A small group of Acadians, who reportedly traveled through the area following their

removal from Canada in the 1700s and stayed for awhile with the Osage, called this the Marais des Cygnes (the Marsh of Swans), an appellation which remains in use to this day, though woefully mispronounced. Long before that, the Osage, unless I am mistaken, always referred to this as the Place of Swans or the Place of Many Swans. A century or more ago, greedy market hunters eradicated the swans that used to winter here in abundance and gave the place its name. But now, the swans have returned to the Place of Swans. That which was lost is being restored.

Webster defines culture as 1: CULTIVATION, TILLAGE 2: the act of developing the intellectual and moral faculties esp. by education 3: expert care and training <beauty~> 4a: enlightenment and excellence of taste acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training b: acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills 5 a: the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thought, speech, action, and artifacts and depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations b: the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group

From so-called conservative religious and political sources, one often hears culture or "*the* culture" (as if there is only one), referenced as an enemy to be overcome, as in the statement, "We must engage the culture."

Remember, Aniyvwi is People and Aniyvwiya is Real People. Tsisqua is Bird and Tsisquaya is Real Bird. And what sort of bird is the Tsisquaya or Real Bird? Is it the golden eagle, the bird who flies highest? Is it the heron, with his fancy plumes? Is it the blue jay who acts like the boss of all the birds? Is it the mockingbird who can sing all the bird songs? No, Tsisquaya doesn't fly higher than others. Tsisquaya has no fancy plumage. Tsisquaya doesn't try to dominate others. Tsisquaya is content to sing his own song. Tsisquaya, the Real Bird, is the plain, unpretentious sparrow. And, is there not a great diversity of sparrows?

For what it's worth, here is my own working definition of an indigenous culture: An indigenous culture is that which makes a people who they are, giving them their own unique identity, setting them apart and connecting them within the circle of life, as a people, in the land and with Creator. In a paper entitled "Restoring Indigenous Culture," written in 2006, I provide

A Model of Indigenous Culture

> What is an indigenous culture? What does an indigenous culture look like?
>
> Imagine a circle with a cross in it – a medicine wheel. On the east side of the medicine wheel is **Language**. The spirit of an indigenous people is that people's language. It is in the language that the people's understanding of the universe and the people's place in the

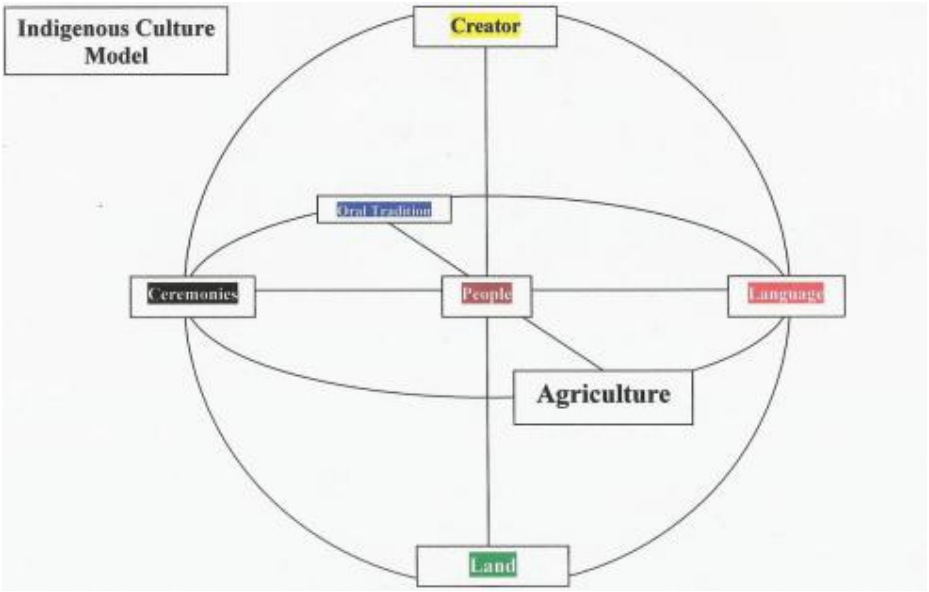
universal order is expressed.

On the north side of the medicine wheel is **Oral Tradition**. Through oral tradition an indigenous culture is taught, learned and passed from one generation to the next. The oral nature of the tradition ensures that it will remain dynamic, living in each new generation, rather than devolving into dead dogmatics.

On the west side of the medicine wheel is **Ceremonies**. The ceremonies of an indigenous people are physical acts of prayer through which relationship with Creator and all of creation is maintained.

On the south side of the medicine wheel is **Agriculture**. Indigenous agriculture includes every aspect of farming, as well as hunting and gathering and the raising and collecting of medicinal herbs. It is the way that the people procure food and medicine, connect and interact, giving to and receiving new life from the land.

Now imagine another circle that includes the directions of above and below. Now the model has gone from a two-dimensional medicine wheel to a three-dimensional gyroscope. Above is **Creator** (although in actuality Creator, or the Creating Action of the Universe or what Leanne Simpson terms “the implicate order” (p. 54), permeates all or is all.). Below is **Land**. Being indigenous means being of and connected with *this* land, where we are at, not of some other land. In the center is the **People**, not the individual, mind you, but the People.



These four: Language, Oral Tradition, Ceremonies and Agriculture

> are aspects of indigenous culture. They are not parts, they are aspects, each integrated so completely within all the others that if one is damaged or taken away, everything goes out of balance and spins crazily toward destruction.
>
> Without our Language we cannot maintain our Oral Traditions with anything close to accuracy. Without our Oral Traditions we cannot understand and maintain our Ceremonies. Without our Ceremonies we cannot maintain our Agriculture in the way it was intended. Without our Agriculture, we cannot fully comprehend our Language. In all of these, we relate to both Land and Creator. All of these aspects make us who we are as an indigenous People.

In her book, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, Leanne Simpson outlines Scott Lyons' quest for a Nishnaabemowin (Ojibwe) word for culture. According to Simpson, Lyons came up with a roster of words, translations of which include:

- Respectfully doing something meaningful in a certain way to produce a certain outcome
- Tending to grow, to be good or skilled at something, knowing how to do it, and doing it frequently - doing things to bring about more life
- Living with a particular character - utility linked to vision - a way of life defined by values
- That which was given to use
- That which was given to the people to live by (pp. 141-143)

The words of Lyons' roster outlined and discussed by Simpson seem to communicate a sense of flow, as in the flow of a river, some more specifically than others, but there is also an overarching sense of a continual flow resulting in the creation, propulsion, nurture and emergence of life (pp. 142-143).

So, an indigenous culture may be thought of as a three-dimensional medicine wheel as illustrated above, but an indigenous culture is also a river. Think of a river. What is a river? It is hard to define. A river is intricately connected to everything to the extent that it cannot be isolated or removed from its place. Even so, the place of the river is ever-changing, as is the river itself. A river seems to be confined or defined by its banks, but the banks of a river are always in flux, as the river snakes back and forth across the flood plain, alive and giving life. Every river is different from every other river, even so, it is, unmistakably a river. Those who attempt to control a river threaten the life of the river along with the life of all the river touches, which is to say, everything. However, a river remains determined to be as it was meant to be. From time to time a river will shake itself to remind the colonizers or empire builders they are never in full control. We could stand to learn a thing or two about indigenous cultural resurgence through dialogue with rivers.

Crazed humans want to own everything

No matter what they have to do
Money and things become their drug
Driven not caring about being
In madness crazed humans
Poisoning the water and air
Disrespecting the mother

Crazed humans going nowhere
Children of earth be careful
Doing one's best is very good
Mistakes are part of the lesson

We are sunshine and clouds
We are water in rivers flow
Remember the mother
Crazed humans forgot her

- John Trudell from "Some People Say"
in *Lines from a Mined Mind*

There are times when I wonder whether there remains any hope for our indigenous cultures. There are times when I think, "What's the use? It's not worth the struggle. It's a lost cause, and I am so very tired." And then, I think of the mother cougar, fatally wounded and yet restored to health and vitality. I think about the ghost plant, nurtured by our mothers to be nearly lost yet not lost in this generation. I think about the swans and their resurgence from near extinction. If they can do it, so can we.