

Awakening

By Robert Francis

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Bear Cubs & White Men

I had been fasting and praying on a hill. It was late at night. I was curled up in a quilt, fast asleep when I was awakened by what sounded like a baby crying. Jumping up, I looked around in the darkness to see a black bear cub, very close, not more than six feet away, crying loudly for his mother. This scared me! "I wonder where that cub's mother is." I thought. Maybe I'm in between the cub and its mother. This can't be a healthy situation." I thought the best thing to do was to stay within the protection of the circle, not to say or do anything, just hunker down, cover my head, close my eyes and hope for the best. Then I felt something chewing on my ear and the side of my face! "Oh no! Is this the mother bear?" I thought. But no, it was another cub. So now there were two of them! I got up to shoo them away, and then, suddenly, the two bear cubs changed into two young white men, neatly dressed, both with well-groomed black hair.

The young men said I had been on the hill long enough. "You are very hungry," they said. "Come with us; we'll take care of you." I stepped across the west side of the circle and followed the young men down the hill. At the base camp, my sons Peter and John joined us. The young men had a shiny black limousine. I climbed in the back along with Peter and John, and the young men drove to our house, where we were joined by my wife Janet, our daughter Sarah and our youngest son Luke. From there, the young men drove us to the city. They owned a fancy restaurant in the downtown area. At this time of night, the restaurant was closed, but the young men were taking us there and would prepare a special meal for us. As we walked across the parking lot to the restaurant, I quietly asked Janet, "Do you think this is really happening?"

"In waking life," Janet said, "Bear cubs don't normally change into white men. I think this is a vision."

"But you're here," I said.

"Yes, I'm here," Janet answered.

After eating a fine meal in the restaurant, I felt bad about leaving the hill. Then I thought about how hard the ground was, with hickory nuts and sticks under the quilt and never being quite able to get comfortable. I said to one of the young white men, "Do you think I'll rest better tonight?"

The man looked at me in a strangely savage way, as he and his brother stepped toward me. "You'll rest tonight and always," he said, "for now we will take off your head." They lunged at me and one of them tried to strangle me, but I fought him off. We fought them both off and ran from that place.

Starting from sleep, I found myself back on the hill, wrapped in the quilt, secure in the circle.

Note: The preceding story was reprinted with minor changes from Talks from the Heart, Volume 3, Chapter 6 "Ceremony" by Robert Francis, 2005.

Meeting the Great Evangelical Christian Author

Several years ago, I had the privilege of meeting one of the most widely renowned evangelical Christian authors of the late 20th and very early 21st centuries. I was excited at the prospect of being introduced to this distinguished older gentleman, as I had these burning questions I wanted to ask him:

1. In your book, why do you refer to Indian spiritual helpers as “witch doctors?” When you make reference to other non-Christian spiritual helpers – Jewish rabbis, Moslem imams, Buddhist or Hindu holy men – you do not use disparaging terms to describe them. Why do you single out Indian spiritual helpers for insult?
2. In your book, you tell a story about a young Indian woman requesting to have her name removed from your church’s membership role. You refused to remove her name from the role unless or until she joined another Baptist or similar evangelical Christian church. Why do you presume to take away another person’s freedom of choice in spiritual matters? Doesn’t a person have a right to not be counted as Baptist or Christian?
3. Rather than focusing directly on God, as the title of your book might suggest, it seems to me that your book focuses exclusively on reading and studying the Christian Bible within the parameters of evangelical Christian doctrine. In your opinion, is there any way to “experience God” outside of or apart from reading the Christian Bible?
4. I have heard that you have said “The next ‘Great Awakening’ will start among the Indians of North America.” What do you mean by that? Or, if you consider that God told you this, what do you think God means?

Regrettably, I never had a chance to ask the distinguished author even one of these questions. At our meeting, I never even had an opportunity to speak.

Upon introduction, the man shook my hand and immediately began a confusing story about how, in a special ceremony at a Christian conference center in Oklahoma, he was “adopted by *all* the Indian nations,” a “magnificent headdress” being placed upon his head. Finishing the story, the man shook my hand again, declared how wonderful it was to meet me and walked away. That was the end of it.

For What Do They Seek?

Many evangelical Christians say they are looking for what they call the next “Great Awakening.” As I look back at the tangible results of the “Great Awakenings” that began in the early and late parts of the 18th century, it seems to me that the English Colonists and new white Americans of those days were primarily awakened in their resolve to steal more Indian land. So, my question is, “Whose land will be stolen as a result of the next ‘Great Awakening?’”

From more than one source, not just from the author mentioned above, I have heard the expectation that the next “Great Awakening” will begin with the Indians. I don’t know why some prominent evangelical authors and leaders believe this, but some do. Perhaps the Spirit of Creator is speaking to their hearts about this. Perhaps Creator is saying, “You need to listen to those who were here in this land long before you came.”

From my own observations and experiences, I can say with assurance that some white evangelical Christians are genuinely interested in listening, open-mindedly, to what American Indians have to say. I feel very fortunate to count several of these among my friends. However, also drawing from my own observations and experiences, I will venture to say that many or perhaps most white evangelical Christians, comfortable only with hearing their own self-described orthodox theological precepts parroted back to them, selectively listen only to those Indians who are willing to scratch their ears as desired.

In any event, it seems that many of those looking for the next “Great Awakening,” think they already know exactly what it is and what it will look like when it comes. They are looking for a certain package, something that looks like, or sounds like the Angry God and Hell-Fire preaching of the earlier “Great Awakenings.” Certainly, they think a “Great Awakening” cannot be at variance with the evangelical Christian doctrines and practices developed and advanced in this country during the past 300 years. The thinking seems to be that if the next “Great Awakening” is to come by way of the Indians, then by Golly, white evangelical Christians must take the initiative now to evangelize and instruct and indoctrinate the Indians more forcefully than ever before, so the Indians will know what to say and how to wake everyone in the “proper” evangelical Christian way. Otherwise, wouldn’t more white evangelical Christians stop preaching to Indians and start quietly and honestly listening to Indians?

The supposed need for a “Great Awakening” presupposes that someone is asleep or comatose; someone needs awakening. I don’t know for sure, but I think most evangelical Christians are thinking it’s everyone else who is asleep. But have you ever thought you were awake when you were not? Have you ever “awakened” only to discover later that you were still asleep – still dreaming? And the meaning of a dream remains hidden until the dreamer is fully conscious.

Awakening: Follow Up

By Robert Francis
October 2008

The amount of feedback received in response to the short essay entitled “Awakening” with its stories about bear cubs changing to white men and the encounter with a great evangelical author was truly amazing.

It would seem the essay struck a chord with indigenous people of numerous tribes from Florida to Washington State. Many have heard the rhetoric from white evangelical Christians about a “Great Awakening” that will supposedly begin with American Indian people, and many have also experienced or witnessed the white evangelical inability to quietly listen. Once again, I must qualify my own statement here by saying that some white people, including some few white evangelical Christians have and continue to truly and honestly listen to indigenous voices. Some of these I am proud to count among my nearest and dearest friends. However, by my estimation, these remain a tiny minority within the greater community of white evangelicals.

In addition to replies from indigenous people across the country and at least one reply from across the ocean, the essay “Awakening” received a couple of short responses from white evangelical Christian readers. These did not introduce or identify themselves, except by name. They did not make the effort to let me know who they are or where they are from – who their people are, so it is difficult, at best, for me to fully understand what they are trying to communicate.

Religious Pedophilia

One white evangelical reader sent web-links that he said “might interest me.” Having a dialup internet connection on the extreme end of the most decrepit phone line of a very rural county, I seldom make the effort to check out websites, even the ones sent by people I know. However, in this case, my curiosity was peaked, so, slowly but surely, I went to the sites. One site was simply an advertisement for Christian rap music and the other site was for those seeking employment in evangelical Christian youth ministry on Indian reservations.

“We can’t reach the adults, so we do our best to reach the children.” How many times over the past centuries has this sentiment been expressed by evangelical Christian missionaries attempting to proselytize and colonize the many and diverse tribes of Indians in the Americas? Cephas Washburn was the first Protestant Christian missionary west of the Mississippi River. In the early 19th Century, Washburn headquartered his mission to my own Chickamauga Cherokee people at what is now the town of Lamar, Arkansas. After years of fruitless evangelical work aimed at adults, he changed focus. His first convert was a little girl. From that time to this, missions to indigenous peoples in America have had a primary focus on children and youth, the idea being, “If we can just get them away from their parents we can empty them of their heathen ways and fill them with the light of Christian truth and Western Civilization.” The notorious boarding school era was the extreme of this, but the overall strategy is still in use. Threats and violence have been replaced with the lure of snacks and games to draw children away from the influence of their parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents to age-segregated Sunday schools, Vacation Bible Schools and summer camps where they may be indoctrinated to place supreme value on Middle Eastern stories and European theologies and devalue the indigenous wisdom of their own peoples. During the formative years when they should be learning from their own elders, they are pulled away. By their late teens, assuming they have lived into their late teens, in most cases they will have dropped out of the missionaries’ churches and youth groups and, in many cases, are left with neither the white man’s religion, nor the indigenous spirituality of their own people. And, when their own children say, “Hey, we want to go to church today; they have free pizza!” They say, “OK, go ahead,” because the one thing they remember from their indigenous roots is to have respect for all ways and not to interfere.

But what if your six-year-old child wants to play in the traffic on the highway? Will you let her do that? What if your twelve-year-old wants to watch movies with the registered sex-offender who lives down the street? Will you let him do that? There’s free pizza there too!

I think it is a good thing that American society, as a whole, no longer condones physical child abuse and has no tolerance for adults having sexual relations, consensual or otherwise, with those too young to fully understand the ramifications of what they are doing. But, what about spiritual child abuse? What about religious pedophilia? Why do we stand by as our children and youth are lured away by those who mess with them spiritually, by those who still seek to destroy our cultures?

All Figured Out

The other white evangelical reader who responded to the “Awakening” essay said that yes, a “Great Awakening will come.” She said the white people will listen to the Indians. The Indians will be amazed by this and will forgive the white people, and then all people will come together.

She seems to have it all figured out. In the end, if I understand her correctly, all will be fully assimilated and fully Christian. But, what if the Awakening has already come? As I look back, I believe my own

Awakening as an Indian person began in February of 1973, when I was a skinny 13-year-old. For many, the Awakening began earlier, in 1969 with the beginning of the Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island or even before that, but for me, it was the takeover and occupation of Wounded Knee that really jolted me from my slumber. Until then, I thought the struggle was over and lost, but as I watched a group of Indian people doing something that once-more gained the attention of the news media, the whole country and the entire world, I began to realize that there was still something to save, something worth the fight.

How many times have I heard it said that we are the seventh generation? And what does that mean? It may mean many things to many people. To me it means we are the generation to finally awake from the horrible numbing nightmare of the American Indian holocaust, that we are the ones to begin the process of decolonization and cultural restoration. I used to think our generation had to do it all, bring it all back. I do not think that any longer. But this I know: Not all but many Indian people, indigenous people across the continent have awakened.

It has been 35 years since the occupation of Wounded Knee, nearly 40 years since the beginning of the occupation of Alcatraz. A new generation has been born since then, and they are coming into their own. In 1985, when my wife Janet was pregnant with our first child, I had a dream in which I was struggling with a great serpent. I fought long and hard, holding that serpent at bay but unable to kill it. Finally, when it looked like that serpent would defeat and kill me, a little child came. Taking the weapon from my hand, this little child sliced off that great serpent's head. When our son Peter was around three or four years old, it dawned on me one day that I had seen him before he was born. He was the child of my dream. But the child of the dream represented more than just Peter. That child is the eighth generation.

These past few years I have watched our young people take the lead in the stickball games, the social dances and the stomp dance and also in language study. Their generation will go further than ours. The Awakening has already come, and I do not know, but it could be that there are those who have missed the call to wake up.

For those who think that white people listening to the voice of indigenous people will surprise indigenous people into assimilating together with white people in the church, I have this to say: One who has awakened and extricated himself from the belly of a beast is careful not to be swallowed a second time. And as for your empire for which you may envision eternal growth, there is but one message, a message delivered by a prophet that you claim to hold dear, a message for all empires of all time, whether religious, economic, political, military, or as usual, a combination of all of that: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4b K.J.V.).

For those who would respond:

As with all the things I write, this follow-up essay is intended primarily for those who attend Mid American Indian Fellowships meetings and/or those in the Mid American Indian Fellowships E-Mail Linkup. From there, things I write often go out to other indigenous e-mail groups across the continent and around the earth. I welcome thoughtful responses, including those that disagree with me or challenge my point of view. I ask only that; if I don't already know you, please introduce yourself thoroughly when contacting me. Rather than giving just a name, let me know who you are and where you are from – who your people are. This will give me a context within which to better understand your communication.