

Often, well meaning non-Indian men or women will approach me saying, "I have a burden for the Indians." This statement most often comes from those I do not know and have never met before. It is generally followed with an offer to come to teach our little Indian children or to come with me to preach to the Indians. When I do not immediately jump at such an offer, the person may be somewhat taken aback. The following poem is an attempt to express the thoughts and feelings I have when I hear these words.

The Burden

By Robert Francis © 2003

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians
and anxiously wait for my reply
thinking your words warm my heart.
Instead they send a chill down my spine.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Be my Indian guide; take me to your people.
Be my Tonto; I'll be your Lone Ranger.
I'll be your Custer; you be my White-Man-Owns-Him.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
You've always dreamed of this:
A two-week adventure with lifetime bragging rights,
Indians left to live or die with the consequences.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Have you, your church, your denomination
ever opposed the slaughter, the theft of land,
the termination of our ways of life?

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Is this the burden of Columbus and Smith,
of Bradford and Amherst and Sevier,
of Wayne and Harrison and Dawes?

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians
to kill the Indian but save the man?
The only good Indian is the one who died
or behaves as one already dead.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Is this the burden of the gospel of greed
that comes calling itself civilization
preaching the salvation of selfishness?

A burden for the Indians, you say

you have a burden for the Indians.
Is this the burden of a cannibal culture
prowling around, looking for one to devour,
crossing earth and sea for a single convert?

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Who am I to pass judgment on another?
But, you will know them by their fruits.
Grapes will never grow on sawbriers.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
Did Creator lay such a burden on your heart?
"My burden is light," the Great One says.
"You are the burden and I will cast you off."

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians.
The white man's burden lays a heavy load
that bends and breaks the backs
of all for whom he is burdened.

A burden for the Indians, you say
you have a burden for the Indians,
and you anxiously wait for my reply.
GET OVER IT! I say; then maybe we Indians can
get over 500 years of your burden lain on us.

For those non-Indians who feel they have a burden for the Indian: The "white-man's burden has consistently made things worse for American Indian people. You may be thinking that what you are feeling inside is different. I hope it is. Are you willing to help without seeking to control? Are you willing to listen before you speak? Are you willing to observe before you ask questions? Are you willing to acknowledge the neediness of your own people and of your own self as well as the neediness or "plight" of the Indians? Are you willing to acknowledge that the healing of your people and the healing of other peoples, including American Indian peoples, is intricately bound together? Are you willing to understand that healing for Indian peoples does not mean Indian people becoming more like you? Are you willing to lay aside the idols of civil religion and denominational or religious dogma that you may hear the voice of the Spirit and act on what you hear? If you have answered "Yes" to, at least, some of these questions, there is hope. Let's talk.

Bible References: Matthew 23:15; Romans 14:4; Matthew 7:16; Matthew 11:30; Jeremiah 23:33