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Enduring Values In A Changing World

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LANDMARKS

Enduring Values In A..... Changing World

—by Dorothy Milligan

Most of us travel a tortuous path in a search for our own identity. Who am I? Why am I here? and How am I going to get there? seem to be questions the average thinking person dwells on — particularly in his teen and young-adult years.

One can't generalize about any group of people, of course, and say: "These people have the answers." However, having spent some four years working with, talking to, and enjoying Indians of Oklahoma's Five Civilized Tribes, I have come to believe that Native Americans are less bothered by those perplexing problems of personal identity than any other people I have known. I believe there are some aspects of their way of life that we could emulate and thus make our own lives happier.

EXTENDED FAMILY

A high-school-aged Seminole-Creek boy made his home with my family several years ago. Every time we attended any sort of gathering, even those that were not really Indian get-togethers, Jacob always found someone he knew, and the pair were always very glad to see each other. "That's my cousin," he'd tell me later. I came to believe that Jacob probably had more cousins than anyone I'd ever known. Later, I learned that by white-man definitions, most of these were not really cousins at all. They were merely members of the same clan. Relationships are not as concentrated as they are in our Anglo nuclear family. Any maternal aunt is like a mother to the Indian child. I've known probably twenty Indian youngsters who told me stories about the same grandmother. We'd have said she was a great aunt, but they regarded her as a grandmother and felt very close to her. Any uncle is like a father, and children respect his paternal influence.

It is not at all unusual for children to be brought up by uncles, aunts, grandparents, or even older cousins. Many young parents move to the city for better jobs. If they feel the environment is not suitable for bringing up children, they are likely to leave the children with a relative, secure in the knowledge that the children will be loved and wanted by members of this extended family. Members of the same clan are regarded as cousins.

Quite a contrast to our nuclear family: mother, father and two stiffly starched children! Indians are, of course,

much less mobile than Anglos. They tend to stay in one place, put down roots and to acquire many, many family and clan members. The family is a support system not only in times of sorrow but in times of joy and celebration as well, and each family member has an awareness of "Whatever happens, I am not alone."

Elderly people, in particular, have a pleasant role in Indian society. I talked with many oldsters and their families, and I was touched by the obvious love and pride felt by each person for the senior relative. "The Old Ones say" often prefaced any story they told me. Medicine men, in particular, stressed that wisdom comes only with maturity. "I had some training in medicine when I was only about 50," a 105-year-old active medicine man told me, "but I didn't begin to help my people until I was well past 60. It takes a long time to know the right herbs to use and to be able to resist 'witching' for the power and glory that comes to the medicine man," he told me.

How many Indians stay active and alert late in life is amazing to me. I talked with several men who had sired children in their late 70's.

MATERIAL POSSESSIONS

It came as a bit of a shock to me to realize that many Indians cannot accept the principle of land ownership. Many told me, "One may as well talk about owning the sky or the river. The land is a part of Nature. It belongs to all of us."

Lack of interest in material things extends to personal possessions as well. Many Indian homes in our area have several automobiles parked nearby, but often none are in running condition, and the family must depend on others for transportation. One seldom sees one or two people riding in an auto; the vehicle is almost always crowded. Indians have owned property in common for so long, they expect to share. "What I have today, I share with my family and friends, and they will do the same for me tomorrow when I have a need," they told me. For economy's sake, I could wish for the Indians that they might learn some maintenance skills, but I have to admire their willingness to share and their indifference to the getting and spending that infects the Anglo society.

NATURE AND RELIGION

So much has been written about the Indian's reverence

for nature and his need to be attuned to forces of nature that I won't belabor that point. I saw repeated evidence, however, of the Indian as a conservationist. Many rely on wild game to supply meat for their tables, but I never saw hunting or fishing done for the sport of it, and I never saw Indians who favored killing more game than was needed for immediate use.

It was interesting to me to watch the Cherokees, for example, in their stomp dances making "feeding the fire" a part of their ritual before their own meal is eaten. "Feeding the fire" with meat — preferably game, but certainly some choice part of an animal saved for this special occasion — is a part of their worship service. They recognize fire and meat as gifts of God, and they express their gratitude to their Creator by returning to the fire a portion of the meat they have been permitted to possess.

Somehow I think of worship in traditional Christian churches as being primarily a female activity — perhaps because women outnumber men in most churches. Among the Indians who participate in stomp dance ritual, there are usually more men than women, and it is the men who are leaders in the worship service. Somehow there is something very masculine and majestic about a worship led by men who have fasted for the previous 24 hours and who are now dedicating themselves to several hours of dancing as a way of showing their love and reverence to God.

TIME AS AN ALLY

Before I started THE INDIAN WAY, I had heard people mention "Indian time," implying that Indians were often late for appointments and perhaps undependable. I resented Anglo generalizations and vowed I didn't for a minute believe all Indians were vague and unconcerned about time. As a result of my naivete, I played a lot of solitaire the first year I attended Indian activities. I wouldn't classify Indians as undependable, but I would certainly say that many of them have never become enslaved to time clocks. They recognize that clocks and calendars are man-made for his convenience, not his incarceration. The fact that a pow-wow is advertised to start at 2:00 p.m. doesn't necessarily mean that it will get underway before 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. Indians move at their own pace, and if they find the earlier hour inconvenient, they arrive when they get ready. Indians don't get upset if someone shows up an hour or so late — or doesn't show at all. They wait patiently if they have time; if not, they move on and do whatever they want to do. "Something must have come up" is the way they excuse their Indian brother who has failed to keep his appointment.

Indian nonchalance toward time frustrated me when I started, but I came to see that on many occasions it is better to arrive late, relaxed and serene, than to get there on time, frazzled and irritable. Of course, I wondered how they held jobs since most employers have a rather inflexible attitude about schedules. Some told me they live by Anglo rules five days a week, but on the weekend they slow down and enjoy being Indian. Others shrugged and said, "My boss understands. I get there when I can." I know many Indians who are excellent workers who thoroughly enjoy their work. Those who don't like their work usually don't give more than token service to their jobs. They are not about to get on a treadmill of spending a lifetime at employment they don't like and for which they're not suited.

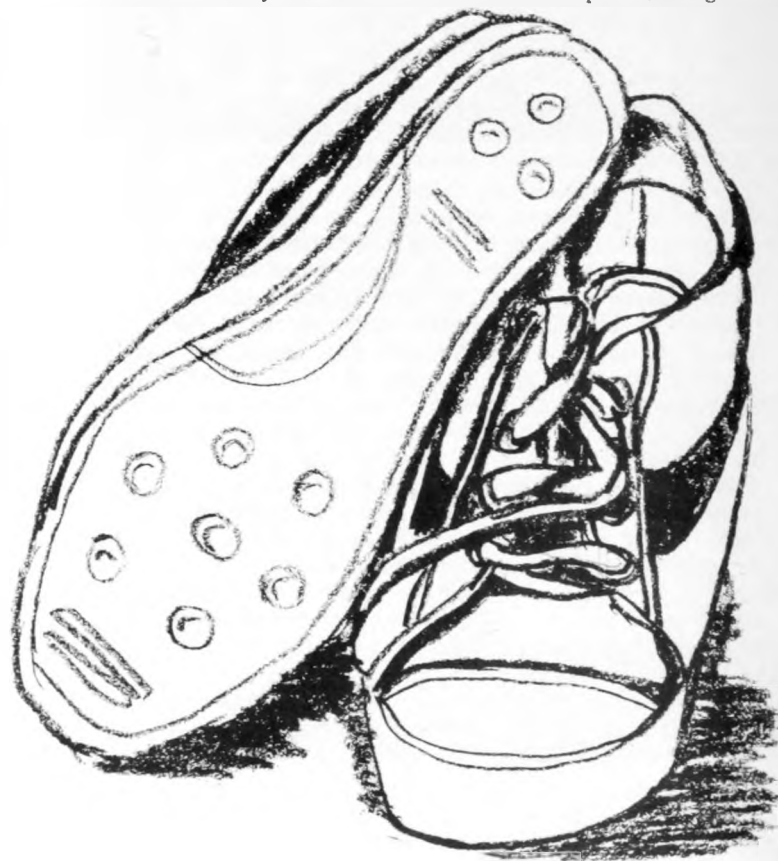
A SENSE OF MAGIC

The supernatural is very real to the Indian. Magic colors his life. The medicine man not only cures physical ailments, but he can work charms to insure mental well-being as well. I met medicine men renowned not only for their abilities to help stroke victims, for example, but also for their skill in dealing with family and personal problems. I met a teacher-coach, for example, who was positive he would not have found the good job he now has had he not enlisted the help of his medicine man. A Seminole woman told me, "My daughter's husband drank and ran around on her. My daughter was very unhappy, but we didn't want her to leave him because they have small children. We went to our medicine man, and he made medicine for us. Now her husband stays home. Alcohol makes him sick now, and he leaves it alone. They're happy."

Love potions play a big part in affairs of the heart. Often we see young women married to much older men. Usually, they're second wives married to former widowers. Several have told me that the man went to the medicine man and paid money (probably \$20 because inflation has had an effect even here), and got a charm to win himself the young bride of his choice. The charm is usually a sticky substance which is put in the girl's hair. As soon as the charm is firmly in place, the girl finds the man irresistible. She is his for life — or for however long he has asked that the charm work.

Medicine men have helpers (invisible to all except a chosen few) called by various names in each tribe. All of them understand the term "Little People," however. The Little People are elf-like creatures who may take care of domestic duties, or they assist the medicine man in making medicine. They guard his house when he is away, or they go with him when he goes on journeys. If the medicine man dies, they may stay on the place or they may find another budding shaman who needs them.

I heard many stories of the Little People stealing



away children who showed promise of becoming medicine men or women. They take the child away to their own land and impart to him the wisdom of the race. Once they have chosen a child for a position of such importance, the youth will usually have an unhappy life if he refuses to accept his calling.

Many people who told me stories of the Little People were educated and talented people. A few confessed, "I've tried not to believe some of these things I was taught as a child, but I guess it's ingrained."

Why not? In this very prosaic world, couldn't we all use a little magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at some of the beliefs of his family — a lot of mumbo-jumbo, she said. However, when her young husband became ill and died within a few days, she found comfort in "the Indian Way." Here is her story:

"I guess when Frank died I realized how Indian I really am and how some traditions can be a comfort when they're needed.

"They took Frank to the funeral home, and they wouldn't let me ride with him, but that was the only time I left his body until he was buried. We stayed with him at the funeral home until we brought him home to his grandmother's house because that was where he had grown up. Some of us sat with his body from then — Wednesday morning — until he was buried Friday.

"All during that time, we didn't eat. That's a custom with the Seminoles. I don't think I could have eaten anyway. Somehow it was a comfort to me to stay with him as long as I could, and I came to understand why our people have always done it that way.

"We put all Frank's favorite possessions in the casket with him. He had a beaded belt and some black boots

he liked real well, so we put those in. He collected old coins, and I didn't think it would be right for us to keep them, so we put those in.

"I took only the things from his wallet that I'd have to have — Social Security, insurance information, etc., but I left all our pictures and everything else. We put in his comb, everything he'd need. Indians believe if the deceased doesn't have everything he needs, his spirit will keep coming back and searching, so we always try to provide comforts for the other world. His grandmother had a beautiful quilt that we wrapped the coffin in to keep him warm.

"If ever a person could say a funeral is beautiful, I believe I'd have to say Frank's was. We had the service in both Seminole and English, and we had many white friends as well as Indians there, and the white ones were surprised, I think, at the beauty and dignity of the service.

"Memorial Day came less than a month after Frank's funeral, and all the family got together to build the little house to put over his grave. I went to the cemetery to help.

"Frank's grandmother brought a big pot of medicine for us to wash in before we started working on the grave. Always before, I'd thought this was a silly custom — the medicine doesn't do any good, I'd said. Somehow it was different, though, since it was Frank's grave I was helping to fix. I wanted everything done just right, the way Indian people have always done them."

Traditional Indians grieve intensely for a prescribed period. (At one time, it was a year of mourning. Now, most limit the period to one month.) Then, they may have a ceremony such as the ancient Choctaw pole pulling in which all friends and relatives meet to eulogize the deceased. They have a "cry" at this time, wailing loudly for the departed. When everyone has had his turn, the occasion becomes a joyous one; a feast is held and when the beloved dead is mentioned again, it is with reverence and love rather than intense sorrow.

Sometimes the medicine man comes to the home of the bereaved and burns cedar in the four corners of the house and yard, saying an incantation to rid the place of sickly sorrow.

The Indians' dealings with bereavement are, of course, methods which modern psychology approves. It seems to be necessary to "work through" feelings of grief and even hostility toward the dead before the survivors can go on with the business of living.

In many of the Indian ways, we have learned that they stand on solid ground. There is good reason for their customs, and at least in some, we might be wise to borrow from their philosophy. The traditional Indian is forced to put a tentative foot into our mechanized world where the individual may be reduced to a number, but he holds firmly with one hand into the world of his ancestors to a time when God and Nature were one; the important affairs of life were conducted with a dignity and a reverence, and few were the people who had to ask: "Who am I and what am I here for?"

