

Millennium Heartbeat

Presented by

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Introductory Remarks

Good evening. Thank you, Dean Moen, for the kind introduction. Kathy Nelson, I also want to thank you for the work you have done to prepare for this event. Gary Keller, I appreciate your being here to videotape my lecture. Past lecturers, family, friends, colleagues, and students, thank you for coming to hear me speak. I am especially glad to see Nancy Skeen in the audience. Hers was the first Harrington lecture I attended. To the selection committee, I am highly honored that you chose me. It is a great privilege to stand before you tonight and to have the opportunity to speak my mind. A great privilege, especially for a woman.

I want to congratulate next year's lecturer. But I have to tell you, getting ready for this night may be a little disconcerting. Two weeks ago on a golden morning, I was walking toward Slagle Hall when I heard someone behind me calling my name. I turned to see my old friend, Leroy Meyer. He said, "I haven't seen you for a while. Are you ready?" Climbing the stairs toward my American literature classroom on the third floor, I was thinking, *I'm not even ready for this class, much less the Harrington*. When I walked into the room, I found it empty. First, I thought my students didn't like their reading assignment and had boycotted the class. Then I looked at the clock and saw I was an hour early. Relieved, I headed back to my office, and on the way I met Larry Bradley, just getting off his bike. When I told him I'd found my classroom empty, he immediately knew why. I got there early. It must have also happened to him. When I arrived at Dakota Hall, I met Dean Spader. "Are you ready?" he asked. Later that day, Lila Rucker asked me, "Are you nervous?" I answered her the same way I'd answered the others, "Not yet." But tonight I feel as nervous and as ready as I'll ever be.

Millennium Heartbeat

Almost thirty years ago, I chose to study, teach and write about literature that affirms the right of all of us to live on this Earth. According to America's indigenous literature, "This earth is your mother, she holds you." Leslie Marmon Silko's story "Lullaby" teaches that "we are together always" (51). I have found this to be true. And this evening, as I miss the person I would most like to have in this audience, my own mother, Gertrude Barton Clark, I know that I am at the same time with her, as she is with me in my body, my voice, my spirit and song. I am fortunate to have with me tonight my husband, Jerry Wilson, with whom I have shared more than half of my years. Before I moved to

Oklahoma, a neighbor in Tennessee warned me against pursuing a doctorate. He said men weren't interested in women smarter than they were. Well, once I met Jerry, I didn't have to worry about that. I found a man who's at least as smart as I am.

Together we are parents of a son and a daughter, Walter Clark and Laura Grace Wilson. They have been nurtured by an extended family of friends, many of whom we met on this campus, and by others in the communities of Vermillion, Wakonda, Yankton and rural Clay County. We are grateful.

As Walter and Laura were leaving us to further their education, we gained a new daughter through USD's Branches Program, Prisca Ngondo, who came here from Zimbabwe a little over four years ago. We are fortunate that she has joined us.

Growing up in Tennessee, I was the first person on my father's side of the family to graduate from college. My education affirmed what my father, James Page Clark, taught me, "The more you learn, the more you know how much you don't know." I continue to experience this truth.

In her autobiography, *All Said and Done*, Simone de Beauvoir asks a provocative question: "What stroke of chance has brought this about?" (1). I was lucky to be born to parents who read to me and sang with me before I could understand the words. I've always loved books, and my relatives encouraged my reading. As I graduate to the next stage of my life, I'm increasingly conscious of what I have always understood with my heart, the essential nurturing of family. My Grandmama and Granddaddy Clark and the way they lived on their 200-acre farm gave me a foundation for understanding the primary concepts in American Indian literature. They raised enough potatoes, chickens, cattle, hogs and corn, to provide them with all they needed or wanted. I followed Grandma into the woods to pick blackberries. It was itchy business, but the blackberry pies she baked in the wood stove were the best food I ever tasted.

I often think of that quiet way of life before electricity and running water, when they cooked and heated with wood and we drank and washed with sweet rainwater from the cistern. My granddaddy never drove a tractor or car. He plowed with horses, and I sometimes went with him to buy groceries in the town of Tennessee Ridge. It was four miles, round-trip, in the open, horse-drawn wagon. As I stood on the gate and watched him milk the cows, my granddaddy asked me to sing to him. He praised my singing, which may be the reason I could imagine myself a poet. At the same time, I realize that asking me to sing was also a way to keep me occupied and out from under his and the cow's feet.

My life has always been much easier than my grandparents', but I'm not sure it's any better. They could feel the pulse of the earth. It was their sustenance and hope each day they lived on that farm. They called it, "our place." My grandparents' place is only a hint of what it was when they lived there. Now where the hog pen used to be, there's what they'd have called a "beer joint." Yet the farm is complete in my memory as are the dearly loved images of my grandmama with the long, gray hair she braided at night and twisted into a bun in the morning, and granddaddy who parted his white hair in the middle and always wore overalls.

My hometown of Clarksville was founded in 1784 in the rich Cumberland River valley of Tennessee, and named for George Rogers Clark, who was famous for fighting the British and the Shawnee Indians. In 1786, Clark negotiated a treaty with the Shawnees. But settlers continued to move into Shawnee territory; and in 1792, the Creeks and Cherokees joined the Shawnees under their leader Cheeseekaw in raiding a number of white settlements along the Cumberland River.

By the time Tennessee became a state in 1796, Cheeseekaw was dead, a new treaty with the Indians had been signed, and the resistance had been suppressed (Debo 86-93). The name "Tennessee" is derived from the name of an ancient Cherokee village named "Tennasse" that was located on the Little Tennessee River. In the 1960s, when I was a teenager, Clarksville still thrived on the sale of corn and tobacco. In other words, like my relatives and others of European ancestry living in the United States, I enjoyed the bounty of resources stolen from the indigenous people; and I took them for granted. I knew a Cherokee family well, and often spent the night in their home with my friend, Brenda. But I knew nothing of their culture.

I always loved school, and from childhood, I wanted to be a teacher. In Clarksville High, my geometry teacher, Frances Kennedy, taught me infinity. From my senior English teacher, Marcelite Welker, I learned to value my own life by writing about it. From my favorite teacher, Marion Page, with whom I spent four years learning Latin grammar, history, and mythology, I learned the universality of truth.

While my education prepared me well for the university, most of the African American people who lived in Clarksville were not so lucky. In the sixties, our schools remained segregated. My first experience in an integrated classroom was as a fresh woman studying French at Austin Peay State College. What I learned from my African-American classmate, from the Civil Rights Movement, and from observing and

teaching in Clarksville's African American community nurtured within me a growing respect and empathy for people of color.

In 1971, after completing my undergraduate and master's degrees in English, I decided to leave Tennessee. I was not happy there, for a number of reasons—the dissolution of my first marriage, my increasing discomfort in a racist community, my desire to learn more about literature, and the larger world.

During the summer of 1971 while touring Europe, I saw the plays of Shakespeare and Shaw on the London stage, had a conversation in French on the train from Nice to Barcelona, and visited the former home of the Brownings in Venice, accomplishing what I had set out to do. But more important, I began to affirm my relationship to places and people I had never met before.

Yet, after I had settled in Oklahoma, I began to miss my relatives and wrote a series of poems I called "Tennessee Talk." Oklahomans talk southern, but it's flatter than the Tennessee tone. I remembered calling my granddaddy "Boots;" and his telling me, "You talk Dutch. Go shake a bush" (*Wild Iris* 17).

I was lonely for the voices and presence of my relatives, but in the land and people of Oklahoma, I found a new way of seeing, a freer way of living. From the Okies, I learned a fierce resilience; and from Kiowa, Osage, Lakota, Seminole, Shawnee, Cheyenne and other Native people, I learned the power of stories and the meaning of generosity. I listened to Kiowa stories, visited the homes of arrow makers and members of the Native American Church, danced with the Osages and Poncas, and fell in love with the infinite sky. I read John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, which expanded my vision of the power of creation and of the bloody conquest of this free western land.

At the University of Oklahoma I studied works from all the periods of British and American literature to prepare myself to be a professor of English. OU's program in Native studies was only beginning, under the leadership of Alan Velie. In 1975, ironically, on a second trip to Europe, I found a book called *Speaking for Ourselves* in a London bookstore. The only authors in the anthology I'd read were African American poets Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks, whose work I'd studied in a modern poetry class. *Speaking for Ourselves* featured literature by Native Americans like Vine Deloria, Jr., N. Scott Momaday, Wendy Rose and Simon J. Ortiz. Through reading the anthology, also including work by Latino (then called Hispanic American), Asian American, Jewish American, and other ethnic American authors, I discovered there was much more to American literature than I had studied in English courses. I decided to write a

dissertation on American Indian poetry because I loved reading and writing poetry and I thought it could teach me about my relationship to the land.

It is a wonder that the indigenous people of the Americas and the world have survived into the twenty-first century. Millions of Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600 during the Spanish invasion. During the next four centuries, most of their lands were stolen by the Spanish, the French, the English and the Euro-Americans; and many of their life ways were destroyed; yet through a fierce resistance, many Native cultures have survived.

The indigenous writers voice the millennium heartbeat. Like the drum, their voices sustain the Earth. They dance at the center of our world. For more than ten thousand years indigenous people have lived in North America, and they carry a deep knowledge, understanding and love of the land. We all need them to teach us what we must do and what we must not do if we want to assure a life for future generations on what the Iroquois people call Turtle Island.

American Renaissance poet, Walt Whitman, had an intuitive ear for the heartbeat of this continent. The artist, nature and society are interrelated, and Whitman's aesthetic was based on this understanding. Whitman wanted his writing to go beyond the page, to influence us to improve society by living in harmony with nature. In his 1871 essay *Democratic Vistas*, he wrote

In the prophetic literature of these States.. .Nature, true Nature, and the true idea of Nature, long absent, must above all, become fully restored, enlarged, and must furnish the pervading atmosphere to poems and the test of all high literary and aesthetic compositions. (984)

In 1891 Jose Marti asserted, "The European university must yield to the American university. The history of America, from the Incas to the present must be taught inside out, even if the archons of Greece are not taught at all. Our Greece is preferable over the Greece that is not our own. We need it more" (1708). I have come to agree with Marti.

The architects of our new millennium in these United States, and world wide, must establish its foundation in nature, which is where indigenous people are rooted. Traditionally, to determine a course of action, the Lakota, Iroquois and other indigenous people look forward, to the seventh generation. Most of you in the audience are probably

familiar with the Lakota concept *mitakuye oyasin*, meaning all our relations, both human and animal.

Ironically, though this basic relationship was violated by the Euro-American taking of indigenous lands, the concept of all humans being related is consistent with the principles upon which the United States was founded. We assume the right to select our leaders, that "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" are "inalienable" rights, and that all have the right to justice. You are correct in thinking that Washington, Paine, Jefferson and Franklin had a much more limited perspective on relationship than the Lakota. Yet, we can credit America's founders with establishing a set of human principles that the people of the United States and much of the rest of the world hold sacred. There is evidence that America's founders were influenced by the Iroquois, who had formed a league of nations built on these principles at least a hundred years before the first Englishmen arrived.

But while the Iroquois clan mothers selected and could remove their leaders, all except Euro-American males were initially left out of the elections and governmental structure of the United States. The indigenous people, African Americans, and women had no direct voice. Though they called it a democracy, in the eighteenth century, white men ruled. And when we consider the leadership of our country, even today, we have to acknowledge that our nation still lacks true equality, which is what we must have. We absolutely must not limit our inheritance of freedom, justice and opportunity to a wealthy class, the male gender, the Caucasian people or even the human race.

Speaking for themselves, Native American writers had to first present their perspectives on American history, a history they have never separated from the places where it happened or from non-human beings. In 1973, to dramatize historical injustices, the American Indian Movement and the Oglala Civil Rights Organization took over the small community of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, located at the site of the 1890 massacre. The place was well chosen, for it had long been a symbol of the genocide of America's indigenous people. The AIM and Oglala activists insisted that the corrupt rule of the tribal government at Pine Ridge must end and that a traditional form of government must replace it. They insisted that the United States recognize the Sioux as a sovereign nation and demanded the return of the lands guaranteed them by the 1868 Fort Laramie Treaty, including their sacred Black Hills.

The occupation was controversial. Many in the community of Wounded Knee and on the Pine Ridge Reservation suffered from the resulting violence in the standoff between the activists and the federal government. But it can be argued that the activists were motivated by

the same principles embraced by America's founders. Native writers were inspired by the takeover. Faderman and Bradshaw were correct in suggesting that the takeovers of Alcatraz and Wounded Knee "provided us with a turning point in history" (2). They were also correct in stating that the popular reading of books like *Custer Died for Your Sins*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and *Black Elk Speaks* had helped Alcatraz and Wounded Knee to replace the Little Big Horn in the American consciousness.

Vine Deloria, Jr., was born in 1933 in Martin, South Dakota. A member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, he came from a distinguished Yankton Sioux family on his father's side. *Custer Died for Your Sins*, subtitled *An Indian Manifesto*, published in 1969, was a biting indictment of U.S. policies, delivered with insightful wit and humor, as suggested by its title. Deloria said that when a young Indian was asked one day at a conference the definition of a peace treaty, he answered, "'That's when a white man wants a piece of your land" (*Custer* 167).

Unlike a number of scholars in the 1990s, who were critical of *Black Elk Speaks*, Deloria defended it, calling it "a North American bible of all tribes" (Neihardt xiii). Neihardt and Black Elk's book emphasizes the balance and unity of the traditional Lakota way of life, and also the severe injuries their culture suffered as their land was invaded and stolen. Most of the people who died in the Wounded Knee Massacre were women and children. A witness, Black Elk sometimes felt that his people's "dream died there," yet he continued to pray that his people would "once more go back into the sacred hoop and find the good red road and the shielding tree!" (233). Black Elk, Deloria and other authors have influenced Lakota people to return to their indigenous traditions, including their language and way of life.

Indigenous literature is rooted in oral tradition, the lived and told stories handed down for millennia. I have found it essential to learn about these stories from the contemporary authors themselves. In 1977, after I read Leslie Silko's first book of poetry *Eaguna Woman* and her novel *Ceremony*, I traveled both to Laguna Pueblo where she grew up and the setting of her work, and to visit her at the University of New Mexico where she was teaching. Silko explained to me that the stories told in the poems within *Ceremony* express the outlook she gained from growing up at Laguna Pueblo. The sources of her inspiration, she said, were the stories told by her people, and the land and the spirits surrounding Laguna. Silko and many other Native authors have helped to reshape American literature. They have also influenced our mainstream culture. The climactic scene of *Ceremony* takes place at an abandoned uranium mine near Laguna. The central character, a veteran

of World War II in the Pacific, sees the connection between the mining of uranium and the nuclear bombs dropped on Japan and understands that he is part of not just a tribal, but a larger identity. At that moment, in Tayo's consciousness,

...human beings were one clan again, united by the fate the destroyers had planned for all living things; united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter. (258)

I believe that *Ceremony* has helped to inspire the movement toward nuclear disarmament. In books such as *Almanac of the Dead*, Silko continues her message that the survival of the human race and the healing of the world depend not on particular tribes, races or cultures, but on restoring the relationship of individuals to community and the natural world. She says she writes "to realize the wonder and power of what we share" (Arnold xi).

While I read various genres of literature in the seventies, it was the poetry that moved me most. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, language is "fossil poetry" (1573) and as Osage poet Carter Revard and others have shown, poets are able to give words wings. In 1976 when I found his poems in an anthology called *Voices of the Rainbozv*, Revard showed me the world anew. In his poem "Driving in Oklahoma," he sang of the deep distance between the meadowlark's natural definition and the present to which we had sped in less than a century. Seeing the meadowlark, he heard "its five notes pierce / the windshield like a flash / of nectar on mind" (*Ponca* 25). As he wheeled down the highway listening to country music on the radio, he found himself "wanting / to move again through country that a bird / has defined wholly with song / and maybe next time see how / he flies so easy, when he sings" (25). "Driving in Oklahoma" questions the assumption that "technology is freedom's other name" (25), suggesting instead that there is a freer state of being. As Revard's poetry shows, we can learn to live more completely by observing the meadowlark.

In 1976 I wrote to Revard at Washington University in St. Louis, where he was a Professor of English, to ask about his poetry. My letter was forwarded to him at The Old Manor, Sunningwell, near Abingdon, Oxfordshire, England where he was living while researching the origins of a manuscript of medieval poetry. The first letter he wrote to me in a correspondence that has lasted almost thirty years describes riding the

bus to the Bodleian Library and seeing the "kestrel falcons hovering in the way Hopkins described them in 'The Windhover.'" He said he was sorry that he couldn't make his poem as good as Hopkins'. He said his own poem was "smaller," but that he "did try to set the poem's two halves at balanced play" and the contrast between the "country" musics of the radio and the bird, "ought to expand its meaning from sights to visions, [from] sounds to music." Revard also mentioned "Wazhazhe Grandmother," a poem he'd recently published in a magazine, called *Suntracks*.

"Wazhazhe Grandmother" tells of Revard's grandparents choosing to build their homestead "where the Osage hills begin" (*Ponca* 46). A century earlier, when their ancestors lived along the Osage River valley, in what is now Missouri, they regarded the hills around them as sacred, because their ancestors' remains were there. Revard describes Bird Creek's "timbered hollow" on the Osage Reservation of Oklahoma, where his grandparents lived, as a quiet place that "seemed waiting for" his family (47). He remembers an abundant variety of life there—prairie chickens, deer, kingfishers and "deep pools" of water, like the original Osage land the mythical elk made habitable. But Bird Creek was dammed in the 1950s, and the land is now "at the bottom of Lake Bluestem" (47). Revard's description of land so carelessly destroyed for profit is more than nostalgic. By offering a full account of nature that was a given when he was a child, Revard allows the reader to confront the extent to which Osage people's history and lands have been exploited and obliterated. Though he was educated at Oxford and graduated with a Ph.D. in English from Yale, Revard has always valued what he learned from his relatives living close to the land, which is another reason I appreciate his work.

Revard came to USD for the first time during the spring semester of 1979. Here he wrote the poem "Dancing with Dinosaurs," which connects the evolution of dinosaur to bird to ceremonial dancing. Revard gave an extraordinary reading here in Farber Hall in the spring of 2001. He is the eldest of the eight poets featured in my book, *The Nature of Native American Poetry*.

Because I admired Lakota culture and had used *The American Indian Speaks*, edited by USD English Professor John Milton, as a text in teaching Native literature at the University of Oklahoma, I was excited about coming to teach at the University of South Dakota in 1978. Before Jerry and I left Martha, Oklahoma, our friend Eula, who had traveled to this part of South Dakota, told us "the pheasants there are as thick as the sparrows are here."

While her description was a bit exaggerated, there are far more pheasants here, and deer and turkeys; and while it was hard to leave our family, friends and the Wichita Mountains of Oklahoma, we found many like-minded people in Vermillion. The artist Robert Penn lived next door. Twenty-five years ago he needed a bicycle and asked if I'd trade him mine for a painting. His beautiful watercolor has been with me ever since. Penn's teacher, Oscar Howe, had a studio on the second floor of what is now the National Music Museum. In the spring of 1979, poet Roberta Hill went with me to his studio. Her poem, "Woman Seed Player," was inspired by their conversation and by Howe's art (Whiteman 74). Kevin Locke, hoop-dancer, flutist and philosopher, was a graduate student in the School of Education when I came to USD. Once, years later, when he returned for a performance, Kevin invited me to join him in leading the hoop dance on the stage of Slagle Hall. A high honor, indeed.

The year we moved to South Dakota, Jerry and I joined the Black Hills Alliance—a group of Native and non-Native Americans of vision and creativity and great hearts. We did not want the Black Hills to become a national sacrifice area for corporations like Union Carbide, who were planning to mine uranium to fuel the nuclear industry. The Black Hills Energy Coalition joined with the Alliance to circulate petitions and get signatures to allow the citizens of South Dakota to vote on the issue of uranium mining.

Meridel LeSueur and her family were also members of the Black Hills Alliance. In 1979 I met LeSueur when she offered to trade books with me at a conference at the Foolkiller Theatre in Kansas City. Born in Iowa in 1900, she was the great granddaughter of an Iroquois woman and an abolitionist preacher. Her writings combine a vision of democratic Utopia with an affirmation of women, dual symbols in her work of the strong, central life-giving force of the earth, and of earth exploited. Perhaps more fully than any other twentieth-century writer, LeSueur developed the organic democratic principle—that society should reflect the balance and freedom and tenacity of nature. In her history of Minnesota, *North Star Country*, Le Sueur wrote, "Like a lion the people leave marks of their passing, reveal that moment of strength when the radicle plunged into the soil, in a fierce struggle on a strong day, and a nation held" (11). LeSueur taught me that every root has a radical.

Her vision was global, as in her poem "Doan Ket," or "Solidarity," written for and sent during the Vietnam War to the women of North Vietnam.

She wrote,

What strikes you, my sisters, strikes us all. The global earth is resonant, communicative.

Conception is instant solidarity of the child.

Simultaneity of the root drives the green sap of the flower.

In the broken, the dispossessed is the holy cry. (52)

In 1980, taking note of an earlier judicial decision that "a more ripe and rank case of dishonorable dealing will never, in all probability, be found in our history," the Supreme Court upheld a US Court of Claims ruling that our government had violated the 1868 Ft. Laramie Treaty. The Court ordered that the Sioux be compensated by the government, in the amount of \$17 million, which was the value of the Black Hills in 1877, plus 5% simple interest on that amount, which came to slightly more than \$120 million. The money was placed in a Treasury Department account.

The Sioux Nation has not claimed the money. Many Lakota insist that the Black Hills are not for sale. I believe that in refusing compensation, the Sioux asserted their right to justice, and also their understanding that it is the land that owns people, not the other way around. Some have said their refusal to accept the payment came at too high a cost. But had they compromised their beliefs and their rights and taken the money, the heart of the Sioux nation might have been lost—for to the Lakota the Black Hills remain the "heart of everything that is."

Perhaps the most influential conference I ever attended was the International Survival Gathering of 1980, held on Marvin Kammerer's Ranch near the B-52 runway on Ellsworth Airforce Base. The gathering was free, everyone camped, and we heard speakers like Winona LaDuke, John Trudell, Madonna Thunderhawk and Sister Rosalie Bertell. We talked about the dangers of radiation, ways to use wind, sun and other renewable energies, and how to build sustainable communities. At night we listened to the music of Jackson Browne, Jim Page and Bonnie Raitt. People from all over the United States, as well as Europe, Japan, and other countries were there. We recognized not only the radioactive threat of uranium mining, but also the broader threat of nuclear power and weapons, and the Lakota people's concerns about the destruction of the Black Hills.

Linda Hogan, a Chickasaw poet, attended the gathering with her family. Poems it inspired were published in her collection *Daughters I Love You*. "International Survival Gathering 1980" describes our complex feelings of promise and fear:

At ground zero
In the center of light we stand.
Bombs are buried beneath us,
destruction flies overhead.
We are waking
in the expanding light

Radiant morning.
The dark tunnels inside us carry life.
Red.
Blue.
The children's dark hair against my breast.
On the burning hills
In flaring orange cloth
men are singing and drumming
Heartbeat. (17)

Hogan and other Native writers joined the struggle to protect the land for future generations. The price of uranium fell, and the uranium mining companies lost interest in the Black Hills. Though no one credited our Black Hills Alliance, I think we made a difference.

But our fight was not over. From 1983-85, the Nuclear Waste Vote Coalition fought a South Carolina firm, Chem Nuclear's, attempt to build a low-level nuclear waste dump at Edgemont, south of the Black Hills. Through the initiative and referendum process, the voters of South Dakota said no to the nuclear threat.

In 1983, Gerald Clifford, who had formed a Black Hills steering committee, visited Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey and asked him to sponsor a bill for the return of Black Hills land to the Lakota. Bradley had visited the Pine Ridge Reservation in the 1970s to give basketball clinics. Along with New York Representative Shirley Chisholm, he introduced The Sioux Nation Black Hills Act, which became known as the "Bradley Bill." The bill would have returned to the Sioux 1.3 million acres of public land in western South Dakota, including some areas held by the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management in the Black Hills. In addition, the Sioux would have received the money the Supreme Court had allotted them, which by 1987 had grown to \$190 million.

The Lakota associate *He Sapa* (the Black Mountains) with their earliest existence. Relating the Black Hills to the origin of the Lakota Nation, John Fire Lame Deer told Richard Erdoes of a spotted eagle rescuing a beautiful woman from a flood that had covered the area

near Pipestone, Minnesota, where the Lakota had formerly lived. According to Lame Deer,

...a big spotted eagle, Wanblee Galeshka, swept down and let her grab hold of his feet. With her hanging on, he flew to the top of a tall tree which stood on the highest stone pinnacle in the Black Hills...It was the only spot not covered with water. ...

(Erdoes and Ortiz 94-95)

Oscar Howe created a painting from this story, his *Origin of the Sioux*.

According to Charlotte Black Elk, "Everything material, everything spiritual comes together" in the Black Hills. In an interview with Shirley Sneve, Black Elk pointed out that in the Lakota creation story, the heart is understood to be the greatest part of *Maka*, the earth. She noted that modern technology appears to substantiate this belief. Holding a satellite photograph of the Black Hills, Black Elk demonstrated that the land area is shaped like a heart. Her account is one of many from the oral tradition indicating that of all places on the earth, the Black Hills is to the Lakota the most sacred, the most central (Sneve "Interview").

A descendent of Nicholas Black Elk, Charlotte Black Elk traveled from Manderson to Washington, D.C. and all over the state of South Dakota, including Vermillion, to speak about the ancient relationship between the Lakota and the Black Hills. She was a tireless and eloquent advocate of the bill to return public lands in the Black Hills to the Lakota, But in 1987 the Sioux Nation Black Hills Act was derailed. South Dakota's congressional delegation opposed it, and two of the nine tribes withdrew their support. Yet, the effort planted some seeds; and I believe that someday justice will triumph, and the Lakota will regain the access they need to their sacred Black Hills.

Americans should acknowledge the gifts all of us have received from the indigenous people, including their literary tradition, which can help us to understand our responsibility to protect our natural environment. Our struggle continues as Native Americans, environmentalists and scientists join together, to influence our government to act responsibly to preserve the living Missouri River, instead of caving in to short-term economic interests.

We must speak for the birds and other animals. Cattle should not be subjected to experiments that reduce their quality of life for the sake of economic development. Infecting animals with human diseases, altering their genes and routinely using antibiotics to grow our meat may result in dire consequences. These animals are also part of creation

and worthy of a full life. The cruelty we humans inflict on them may come back to haunt us.

Industrialization of agriculture, by crowding thousands of animals in feeding operations, destroys the quality of their lives and our own, as our land, water, air and food are polluted. We must be vigilant and willing to act and speak, to preserve what remains. Our relationship to the land is a meeting ground, a place from which we can move toward reconciling our differences. As Colin Calloway points out, the history of the American West carried on the Native American oral tradition, in winter counts, petroglyphs and pictographs "is part of a long continuum that shaped the West as it was by the time Europeans arrived and even as it is today" (19). As Calloway says, "Without its long Indian past, America's story is a blip on the screen of human existence" (20). In the recent restoration of Spirit Mound, I've been encouraged to see our university and community joining together in its transformation from feedlot to native prairie.

During the more than twenty-six years I've lived here, I've come to know the Wase Wakpa community of Vermillion and the indigenous people of the surrounding area. By their generous and loving friendship, they've taught me the meaning of the *Tiospaye*, as their family has extended to embrace my own. The continuance of our interdisciplinary American Indian Studies Program and its development into a department in the College of Arts and Sciences, along with other programs promoted by the University of South Dakota, must respect and nurture the indigenous presence. Like the indigenous community, we all must recognize at the same time, the relationships we share with the larger world. We must not waste the opportunities for enlightenment that people from far-away cultures offer us.

Together, living in mutual respect, we can imagine the next millennium as a period of joy, serenity, prosperity and justice. Although we are living in a time of war, we all know better. We have to continue the struggle for justice and peace. War threatens not only humans, but our Earth. In a poem "shapings," Tsalagi/Cherokee author Allison Hedge Coke embodies the Earth as a woman, overburdened and burned by careless waste and destructive energy. This woman, the Earth, is pounded into a "crumpled mess." And then she is dissected, and preserved with formaldehyde. Hedge Coke asks us to acknowledge all we have received from our mother the Earth, saying, "As we hold dear all that is sacred,/all the children of the world/and those that follow, / she reminds us of / what we were / meant to be / and once again offers us/warm bread while/breathing us back to life." All this, our mother the Earth has given us. Hedge Coke simply asks, "Mustn't we

love her, too?" Hers is a moral and a material question, because if we fail to love her, if we allow the "rulers/of the free, dictated, and corporate worlds/all at odds with one another" to use and abuse and kill her, as Hedge Coke's poem says, "Not even wind can image her/back into material shape." (*Poets Against the War*).

Allison Hedge Coke read on this stage last spring. As a teacher, my goal has always been to provide my students with the skills and resources they need to understand the world around them and to take their places as members of the world community. I have felt that one of the best ways to nurture them was to bring contemporary Native writers to campus to be heard by them and the larger community. I believe that through the guidance of authors like these, and by viewing the world with an open heart and mind, it is possible to learn to live responsibly. In our struggle to sustain life for future generations, the indigenous voices allow us to hear the heartbeat of our Earth.

As a person of northern European ancestry, my own transformative journey toward understanding other cultures has been long and sometimes painful. I've had some successes, but also failures and setbacks. While I am committed to dismantling the legacy of dominance, I know that my own transformation requires me to acknowledge the privileges I've had from being white, and the racism that is part of my inheritance. And I am convinced that it is my responsibility, not only as a teacher, scholar and writer, but as a human being, to help to build a fair and balanced society that truly values the contributions of women and of people of color. I was discouraged by the results of our recent election. Yet, I find some hope in the voters' choices of Cecilia Fire Thunder, the first tribal chairwoman at Pine Ridge; of Stephanie Herseth as South Dakota's first U.S. Congresswoman, and of Barak Obama as U.S. Senator from Illinois.

From Black Elk and from my own journeys, I've learned that the good red road runs north and south. One morning standing on one of the Mule's Ear Peaks at Big Bend National Park, in Texas, Jerry and I were looking out over the Rio Grande toward Mexico when we heard a song. From the west a man came riding a white horse on the path between the villages of Santa Elena and Boquillas, just across the river. Oblivious to us, he defined that morning with song. His song and his image, bearing cloth sacks filled with what he had grown or gathered to trade, remains in my memory, more than a metaphor for that place defined with song. Experiencing the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua in 1987 and the life of Maya refugees in Chiapas in 1992 as a Witness for Peace also convinced me that we must reach across the Rio Grande

and build true friendships with the people of Latin America who struggle against poverty and oppression to sustain themselves.

I chose to enter and stay in the ivory tower of the university because I found it a place where people treated each other with more fairness and respect than I had seen on the outside. While I have since learned that this is not always the case, I truly believe that if we human beings have a thirst for knowledge and a means of satisfying it, most will choose the path toward a better world. It is important to read literature by writers from cultures different from our own and to engage in respectful dialogue with people of other cultures, not primarily because we need to understand what makes others different from us, but because we need to recognize our common values and needs in this world. While we must be honest with ourselves about our faults, mutual respect and progress will not result from focusing on the worst manifestations of our own culture or that of another. American culture is constantly changing, and we can improve it only by working and striving to accomplish humanity's best principles. We whites have to acknowledge that we did not establish, nor have we lived, according to them all.

I believe the dream of a better world is universal. This dream is expressed in the words of Acoma poet Simon Ortiz who wrote in his epic poem *From Sand Creek*: "That dream / shall have a name / after all, / and it will not be vengeful/but wealthy with love/and compassion/and knowledge. / And it will rise/in this heart/which is our America" (n. pag.).

I could not have taught here without this dream. And one cannot value this dream without recognizing the discrepancy between what is and what should be. I have fallen in love with this place. I want to stay here and to continue to make it my home, to live and die and be buried here, beside my mother's grave. But I see the suffering of the original people from whom the land on which I live was stolen just 150 years ago. I must, in whatever ways I can, work to right the wrongs. The effort to understand my relation to this place, to indigenous cultures, and to natural lands has helped me to recognize the value of what I have learned from my own relatives and also my responsibility to community, to the heartfelt dream of America.