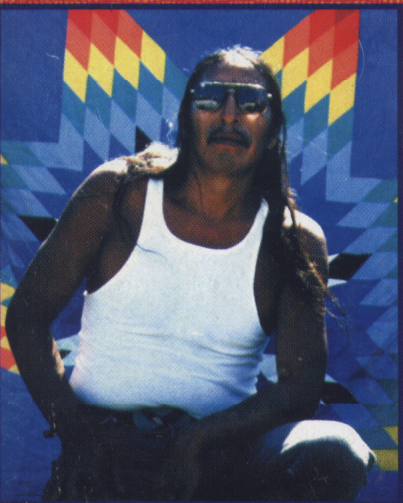




THE SPIRIT OF THE LONG HOUSE

The stories of Johnny Moses



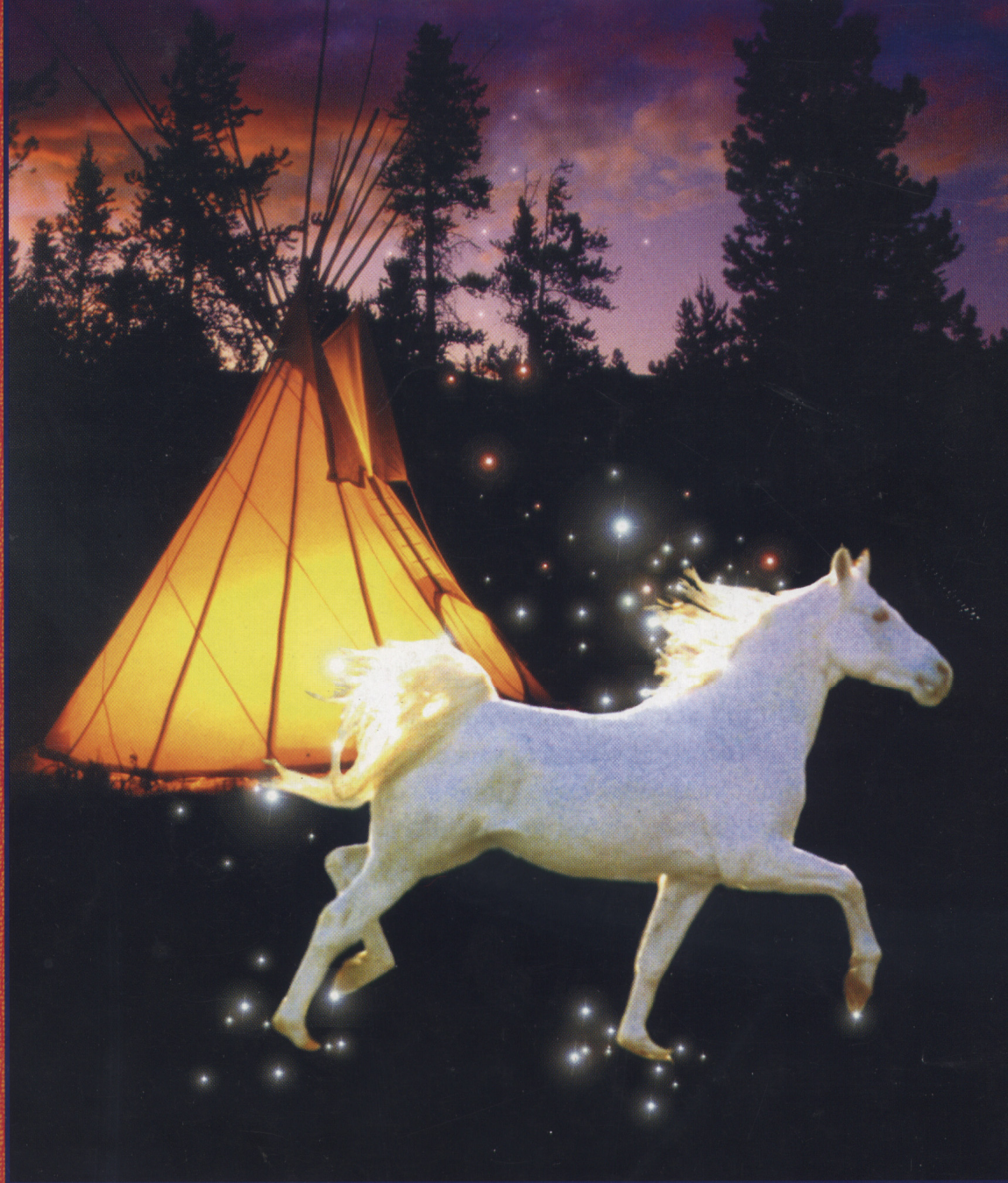
DAVID SWALLOW LIFE AS A LAKOTA MEDICINE MAN



BECOMING A SHAMAN IN MONGOLIA

SACRED HOIOP

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LIVING WITH SPIRIT



DANCING WITH THE STAR NATION

ANCIENT LAKOTA SIOUX TEACHINGS

ALSO

FINDING THE SPIRIT OF THE HORSE

MASKED AFRICAN DANCERS * PACIFIC COAST ART

CREATING COMMUNITY



THE LODGE OF RED CEDAR

by Annie Spencer



Continuing In her search for the nature of community Annie travels to the waters, mountains and forests of the Western coast of Canada to meet with Native American Storyteller Johnny Moses.



Building community seems to me an essential part of our journey to wholeness. Again and again, when I explore the Native American culture I learn how a strong small community underpins an earth-based, shamanic spirituality.

We are told by some that Native American teachings cannot and should not be taken out of context. That they are culture-based and not easily understood by westerners who come from such a different social background.

However, we struggle along, knowing that the teachings resonate with our hearts, relieved to find ways to strengthen our connections with the land and all other natural beings once more. But many of us work in comparative isolation. In our fragmented culture we often feel quite alone on our path.

Last winter I was fortunate enough to be driven up the West Coast of Canada to spend a weekend with Johnny Moses and a circle of his followers.

Johnny Moses is a Native American storyteller of Nootka, Saanich, Snohomish, Dwamish, and Chehamus descent, who shares his Northwest Coast stories and traditional *Si.si.wiss* medicine teachings.

The drive up the Canadian coast was breathtaking. On one side steep pine-covered slopes rose up to snowcapped peaks. On the other lay the sea, filled with islands large and small. The cedar forests were both magnificent and heart rending. Every so often great swathes of brown wasteland cut through the forest, reminding me of patches of mange on a sick dog. Now I understood the horrors of clearcutting.

Every thirty or forty miles our road was blocked by an inlet. Then we had to join queues of cars waiting for a ferry to the next bit of navigable coastline. Getting out of the car at one of these ferry stops I breathed in the strong scent of cedar so different to the diesel fumes that hang around our roads. Here wilderness was the norm and the road with the odd small town clinging to its edge seemed insecure and out-of-place.

I wandered off into the woods that came down to the very roadside. Within the forest the floor was covered with a springy residue of leaf humus and rotting branches.

The light was dim, shot with the odd shaft of sunlight. Why did it feel so like paradise? Just a few old trees. Perhaps old - and undisturbed - had something to do with it. Certainly these trees emanated a strong feeling

of peace and magnetism. It was hard to leave but I heard the ferry hooter sounding and hurried back to the car.

Finally we arrived at our destination, a small town almost at the end of the road. We went immediately to the hall where the weekend gathering was to be held.

I was slightly shocked as we were welcomed into a bleak neon-lit community hall with chairs piled round the side of the room. It was cold and harsh and uninviting and I didn't particularly look forward to the weekend. However, I was trapped here miles from anywhere so I would have to stay.

How fortunate that I couldn't run away. I stayed and felt the warmth of a community build around me.

How did the community evolve? I suppose there were a variety of ways in which it was being built. According to the tradition of the longhouse tribes of the American West Coast, winter was the time for work on your spiritual development. In the summer you were occupied with the necessities of life: gathering and growing food; making and mending dwellings; transport and clothes etc. In the long dark winters the inner life of the community was attended to.

TELLING THE STORIES

This is when storytelling happened. And what stories! They might continue for six, ten or even fourteen days.



Stories were a group affair. They were extremely rude and full of farts and sex. Also, from the very beginning, everybody had to join in. Every time the storyteller paused he had to be encouraged with a 'go on..' or a 'what next...' I suppose if these failed to be expressed he realised that he had lost the attention of his audience and either changed his mode or stopped for the night.

Johnny never had this trouble as his stories were told in the most outrageous ways with endless funny voices. Also we had to participate: there were responses and choruses and sounds to be made at different recurring points. Soon everybody was involved and we had a complex choral production going, all of it choreographed by the drum. So by the end we felt that the stories were ours, we clapped and shouted for more and felt a sense of personal involvement and achievement and we really knew the mortals and immortals, beetles and slow worms, salmon and bears who had peopled the tales.

The storytelling wound its way through our days and evenings. Although many were quite simple and made the many children highly delighted they were clearly not for their ears alone. They include the whole group. They tell of history, and they give spiritual teachings;

they remind of the codes by which the tribe lives, they tell of animal teachers. And they bring the whole community together.

Johnny told one story to illustrate the relationship between the West Coast tribes and the Christian missionaries. In this story he stresses the good qualities of his people: their hospitality, their tolerance, their humour. He also leaves out mention of the worst the Christians did. He turns the description into a lighthearted encounter.

What pain these encounters produced were dealt with through appropriate grieving and ceremony. I talked at another time to Delbert, a native counsellor who incorporated western techniques such as Gestalt and NLP with more traditional methods.

He stressed the importance of deep sobbing - 'singing the song of sadness' - and explained how the people would 'sob themselves back together'. A deep sigh is a strong reminder of the sacred breath of life.

Then also we sang. Johnny taught us native songs. There are different songs for different seasons. So, for example, there are the *Fall Welcome* and *Farewell* songs, the *Fall Doctoring song*, the *Falling Leaf song* and the *Brushing Wind song*.

I thought I would never be able to join in but Johnny said the words are not important. Focus on the tune and the rhythms and the words will look after themselves.

I learnt that the stories and songs that I was hearing belonged to specific tribes or even families. Johnny explains; "Many of our native people would go for long walks along the beach and along the forest and many people would have their own walking medicine songs." I had spoken previously to another native man about the chants that he knew. He said that he would be happy to share them so long as his mother never found out. She would be angry because these were songs that belonged to their family.

I realised that each community develops its own fabric of songs, chants and stories that have a local focus and colour and tie the people more closely to one another and to the land on which they live.

I remembered the landscape that I'd travelled through to reach this small town and noticed how different it was to anything I knew in Britain; and realised that if we borrow native chants it should only be for a beginning, an encouragement, to get us started. Each one of us is full of songs and stories connected to the places and the people around us. Now I was



beginning to understand why Johnny told me not to concern myself with the words, encouraging me instead to accustom myself to the sounds. He might have continued and said that I should find my own words. But then most things are left unsaid. Little is spelt out.

On the surface everyone is having a good time. Underneath, if you notice and concentrate, the teachings are transmitted almost subliminally and appear to arrive from within.

THE POTLACH CEREMONY

All through the Saturday, I was aware that there was a lot of activity in the little kitchen adjoining the hall. There seemed to be a continuous group chopping and stirring and chatting and laughing. In the evening I discovered why. While the majority of the group had been in the hall, telling stories, singing and praying, a huge and amazing meal had been slowly preparing in the kitchen.

Two women were giving a Potlach and so we were to have a feast that evening.

A Potlach is an important community ritual on the Northwest Coast. It is a Giveaway with at least two functions. You may either give a Potlach to celebrate life or to signify life patterns that you were

now giving away. You might also give a Potlach to ask for healing. At a Potlach you tell your story and your reasons for giving it. You then give away to everybody present. Two women did one the weekend I was present. Each one brought out rugs and cloths, spread them in the centre of the hall and filled them with piles of stuff. Traditionally you bring stuff from your own home. It was stressed that it was not appropriate to do an Oxfam-type clearout. These had to be special and beautiful objects, ornaments, books, records, jewellery, furniture, clothing, pieces that made up the fabric of your everyday life.

In this hall, although people were clearly poor, the piles were huge and we all received many gifts. I received ornaments, cloths, back copies of the National Geographical and a beautiful reversible cotton jacket.

Having received these gifts, we were asked by Johnnie to keep them for at least a year. He told us that it was important to pray for the donor each time that we saw anything we had received from her. I guess in a small community, some special objects would circulate and circulate. This would be another way in which everybody became more and more interconnected.

The second woman, Connie, threw the feast as part of her

Potlach. She was wheelchair-bound with ME and a beautiful and lively woman. While Connie was responsible for the feast, so many people were involved in its preparation, turning up with food, cooking, serving etc that it seemed a total group event. And what a feast it was.

Tables and chairs were set up the length of the hall and filled with so much food that even though we were seventy people, we struggled to eat it all. There were roast meats including bear, stews, cold meats, fish, oysters, cooked vegetables, salads, gravies, sauces, sweet dishes. I sat there in amazement as dish after dish appeared on the tables around me. Later of course there was a huge clearing and washing up. But again we all joined in and it was fun washing up as different people came to dry up and stack plates and to gossip and exchange stories.

DOCTORING THE PEOPLE

Later each evening, there were healings. While Johnny choreographed and people who were training with him took major roles, again we were all encouraged to join in. We made a circle of sound around whoever was sitting in the chair, drumming and chanting specific doctoring songs (I just focussing on the notes and the rhythms).

You could feel the strength of the protective circle and the



stillness and light that collected inside it. Then Johnny would pass his hands over the subject, taking out, smoothing, spreading light from a candle, turning to us every so often and leading us into another song. Some were slow and gentle, some quite strong, and occasionally we had a very fast driving chant that was quite exhausting to keep up.

Throughout our time together, a spiritual presence pervaded the place. A simple altar with candles had been set up in the East. And time was regularly given to prayer. At the end, on the Sunday afternoon, the circle was closed as it had been opened by a few who were training with Johnny. They had made a four year commitment to their spiritual path.

Every weekend in the winter months they had to travel wherever Johnny travelled and dance their dances for the group. These dances and the songs that went with them had to be searched for and developed by each individual. Then they all learned one another's song and rhythm so as each came into the centre, eyes closed, to summon up their spirit helpers, the others supported them by singing and drumming vigorously. At the end, when each dancer was clearly in quite a deep trance, the dancer's own drum would be used to guide them back to their seat.

By the end of the weekend I felt warmed and full and contented. In each part of the proceedings, be it Potlach, feasting, dance, storytelling, song or doctoring, we had all been involved. Our

individual offerings had been woven again and again through, around and among those of everyone else in the hall.

By the end, a myriad fine threads connected us to one another, held us as a group, creating a resilient, loving, laughing community.

Annie Spencer has worked for many years with Native teachers, and integrates the Medicine teachings she has learnt from them with her skills of humanistic psychology. She facilitates groups both here and abroad.

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PHOTOS:

Landscape photos © 1998 Annie Spencer.

Inset photos: Page 10: Kwakiutl village c1885 showing long houses.

Page 11 ~ Left : Mask (Kwakiutl c1890).

Right : Tsimsbian Long House and poles.

Page 12 : Kwakiutl potlatch c1890. The blankets are to be given away in the ceremony.

Page 13 : Wooden shamans rattle

A Catholic priest came to the people as a missionary from Cambridge, England. At first he couldn't understand a word of their language. So he stayed with the tribe for a few years and they taught him their language. More than that, they adopted him into their tribe and he became one of them. As he became more familiar with the language, he started preaching of Jesus, of the Church, of the concept of Hell and told them that everyone who didn't believe in Jesus went to Hell. They were amused by his stories.

"Well," said they, "our ancestors clearly haven't got the directions to Hell as no one from our tribe has ever been there." However the priest persevered so in the end he persuaded them to get baptised, learn the Ten Commandments and only eat fish on Fridays. Being mischievous, one suggested that he try to convert the old Indian doctor who lived in the hills. So the priest went up and in time the old man, too, got baptised and his new name was Andrew.

Well, he didn't come down and he didn't come down and he didn't come down to confession. Not that he needed to, because the gossips in the village knew all of his business so they as good as did his confession for him. But the days and weeks and months went by and still the old man didn't come down. So finally the priest went up the mountain once more to visit him. It happened to be a Friday and when the priest arrived the old man was cooking a succulent steak of venison in his frying pan.

The priest was horrified!

"What have you got to say for yourself?" He demanded.

The old man was unperturbed and explained in a quavery voice: "I am an old man and it is difficult for me to hunt for food. This deer came and gave itself away. It stood in my path so I shot it. It was heavy and I am weak so I took the dead animal by the legs and dragged it down to the river. There I baptised it in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost and renamed it 'Fish'."

