

Fallen Stars Within a Book of Ghosts

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I dedicate this essay to all those who envisioned and helped to write Pute Tiyošpaye (Lip's Camp): the History and Culture of a Sioux Indian Village but who are no longer with us.

It is easy to become distracted when looking at old photographs and writings from the past.

Today I skimmed through an old and tattered book from the 1970's, Pute Tiyošpaye (Lip's Camp: the History and Culture of a Sioux Indian Village) published in 1978 but written in the mid 1970's by my students from Crazy Horse High School at Wanblee, SD, my hometown. Elijah Whirlwind Horse, a respected Lakota Principal of Crazy Horse High School, had always dreamed of a writing project where students would demonstrate their writing skills by compiling a "live and true account of life" in the Wanblee community where Elijah had grown up. Elijah wanted to document Lakota culture and teachings before our Lakota elders passed on. He assigned his 2 year project to Loretta Jackson, another teacher and myself, a new teacher. We worked on this "book project" with several students, two teacher aides, Priscilla Doyle, Cindy High Horse and two Lakota elders, Vicki & Ellis Chipps, relatives of mine who have since passed.

As I read through some of these dog eared pages of this book and look at the faded pictures, I remember the youthful smiling faces of my students. It brings back memories and tears

as I look and remember all the promise that each student had, along with my highest hopes. A sad memory of the funeral of one of my students, Marilyn Larvie, who died tragically in a car accident while I was teaching at Crazy Horse High School. After all these years, I can still see the sad and grieving face of her mother very clearly. I remember loveable, likeable playful "Orbie" in the seventh grade who wasn't paying attention after we read a story. When I asked Orbie what astrological sign he was born under, Orbie said "the Hisle sign" which made the whole class laugh. Hisle is a small community close to Wanblee. This handsome young Lakota boy who had so much promise left us way too soon. Elijah Whirlwind Horse, who envisioned this culturally and historically significant book, was among the first to journey "south."

I can imagine Elijah smiling as he greets our former students at the door. Tragically, Elijah's son, Kevin Whirlwind Horse, who helped to write this book, never had a chance to finish college and raise a family for his life was cut short too. This copy of Pute Tiyošpaye is one of a few original copies left and it is a part of Elijah's legacy to his people.

Through the years, I've received those phone calls that a person dreads to receive. I am reminded why Memorial Day is among the most difficult days for any Lakota to get through. We Lakota share centuries of loss, cultural genocide as well as a common history of broken treaties, broken promises, broken hearts and broken dreams.

It's overwhelming to think of the staggering losses within our Native American people this day. I am forced to recall conversations forever left unfinished and faces of students who traveled "south" too soon. Some of my brightest students have now become graduates of life, receiving their diploma from the spirit world. Despite all of my greatest dreams and wishes for these young hopefuls, I find that only their absence remains. They have become photographs in a book, a generation of loss, a sky absent of stars but their memories are stored for all time within my heart.

I think back often and wonder what shadow had its jealous eyes upon my people? I can think of a few such shadows, hopelessness, poverty, alcohol, drugs, suicide, an absence of footsteps on the Red Road. This is a story I find repeated over and over again throughout all Native American tribes. Sometimes when I think of home and the reservation, I see a wall of grief. The greatest loss of our people in modern times occurred when people have fallen off the path of the Red Road. Loss of culture, spirituality and identity, have helped to continue the destruction that the white man started. We are losing our youth one by one, and they seem to be leaving at younger ages in smaller coffins. It takes wisdom to realize that along with the death of our youth, our culture and future die too. We are burying the most valuable resource we Lakota have, one son or daughter at a time.

It is sad that families today look upon the mistakes a family member makes as justification to

write the person off during their time of need. Avoiding scandal seems to have become the top priority for some of our Red people when they distance themselves from less fortunate family and tribal members for the sake of appearance. This is a very cowardly and nonspiritual way to treat a relative. There is a price to pay for that form of wickedness. The "lucky ones" sometimes survive a misstep or two off of the Red Road, sometimes our children go to prison where they soon become the "living dead" who are condemned and forgotten. Should we mourn their absence as well?

As I thumbed through the pages, I realized that this book produced by my youthful students has now become a "book of ghosts." Many died before ever reaching age 30. Of all those who contributed to the book project and those who helped to write it, only a handful have not yet made their journey "south." I am looking forward to a wonderful reunion with them when I cross over that river myself. Is it a greater loss to lose a rose in the summer of its beauty or to observe its icy death in winter?

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Her grandfather was John Fire, Chief Lame Deer, Tahca Uste, a well known Lakota Holy Man from the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation in S.D.

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