

On becoming a Tribal Elder

Some years ago I read in the local paper about some happenings up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, and in the story an old friend from my mission school days was quoted. The man is about my age, and was as goofy as any of us in high school. But the story referred to him as a tribal elder, and it made whatever he was quoted as saying sound deep and profound. When I first read it, I thought, “Yup, same dumb old Louie.” But then I read it again and, by golly, coming from Louie-the-tribal-elder, there was depth there, if somewhat cryptic.

I had always wanted, when the time would come, to be called a tribal elder. When I read the story I was sixty four and qualified for Medicare and social security, which ranked me as “older;” but elder is something special. So I set the date when I would become a tribal elder – my 65th birthday, which was coming up in several months. I imagined that on my birthday I would be infused with wisdom, something like the Pentecost is described in the *Bible*. I didn’t expect a tongue of fire to appear over my head, nor to instantly speak in several languages. I just imagined I would arise that fateful morning, and my voice, in a strange deepness, would utter profundities, kinda like Russell Means in a press conference, or Chief Oren Lyons saying just about anything.

But on my birthday nothing like that happened. My first utterance sounded just like me the day before, “What’s for breakfast?” And my wife didn’t fall to her knees in awe. “Prunes and oatmeal, its good for you.”

I certainly don’t mean to make light of tribal eldership. In all our tribes, we pay great respect to elders, and we heed their words – for there is wisdom that comes with age. But age doesn’t always confer wisdom. And in all societies there are old fools, just ask any Grandma.

And respect doesn’t always come with age either. Several years ago, when the movie “Dances With Wolves” hit the screen, my wife and I went to see it with several friends. After the show we had coffee together and were talking about it. Doing a bit of name-dropping, I mentioned that I know Floyd Red Crow Westerman quite well. In the movie, he played the part of wise old Chief Ten Bears, and with great dignity, a stellar performance. “Can you believe Floyd and I are the same age?” I asked. In one voice, they responded, “He’s not THAT old, is he?”

I first met Floyd Westerman at the Encampment for Citizenship in New York City in the summer of 1956. The encampment was a month-long workshop bringing together youth from all over the U.S., and a few from other countries. Luminaries counted among the encampment’s alumni – besides me and Floyd, of course – include civil rights leader Julian Bond, DC Congressional Delegate Eleanor Holmes-Norton, and past Interior Assistant Secretary Ada Deer. It was a very enlightening experience, and Floyd and I had a great time, including some post-workshop adventures we won’t talk about here. We have been good friends ever since.

Floyd has earned the great respect accorded him from all quarters. He has always given much to Indian country, and the most precious gifts he could give – his time and fine talents. Until “Dances with Wolves” he likely didn’t have much money to give, largely because he did so many freebees for Indian causes. He was always ready and willing to perform, and most of the

causes had little or nothing to pay him.

Though he often hides it in his humor, his depth and wisdom come forth in the lyrics he has written and sung over the years. In the book, *Vision Quest*, by Don Doll, Floyd is quoted: "I see people having so many things in life, and their lives are empty because everything they have is outside them. They buy all these possessions to make life complete, and it's nothing because life begins and ends in the spirit inside us."

To me, Floyd Red Crow Westerman is indeed a tribal elder.

Post script: After I finished this essay, I received a draft copy of a proposal from an Indian organization here. I had agreed to serve as a volunteer advisor in a project for which they are seeking funds, and they sent me a copy to approve before they sent it on to the funding source. In the proposal they had a bio sketch in which I am described as a "tribal elder." I don't know that I deserve the honorific, but man, it feels good.

Do I feel any wiser? No. But I do feel great.

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Charles E. Trimble is an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He is retired and living in Omaha, Nebraska. He can be reached at cchuktrim@aol.com.