

the best of
SCHLAGBYTES
volume one

Spirituality
Native Americans
Sacred Spaces



DR. CARL A. HAMMERSCHLAG

WELCOME TO SCHLAGBYTES

Schlagbyte's are the random musings of my rational mind and intuitive soul. For the last six years these weekly ramblings have sustained me. They have allowed me to get out whatever pain and suffering were stealing my spirit, and also allow me to celebrate the awe, wonder and joy in my life.

These are my opinions, you may or may not share them. Over the years many of you have posted responses to these Bytes, some laudatory others confrontative. We have become a readership, who respond to each others' opinions. Some bless me, others curse me and more than a handful, think I'm hopelessly irrelevant.

Schlagbyte's fall into five categories:

- Current events (politics, philosophy)
- Spirituality (values, beliefs, Native Americans, awe)
- Healthcare (policy, practice, ministry/industry)
- Lifestyle (movies, television, sex, romance, humor)
- Family (kids, grandkids, vacations)

After perusing the archives I've decided to put together "The Best of Schlagbytes." They are the perfect reading during your morning toilet trek. They're brief, they'll make you think, and if they piss you off you can wipe yourself with them.

Welcome to my world and enjoy the journey.

Carl A. Hammerschlag, M.D.

THE BEST OF SCHLAGBYES
SPIRITUALITY › NATIVE AMERICANS › SACRED SPACES

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PRAYER – 10/3/96

A Spanish businessman who is a devoted Roman Catholic stopped to pray at a church during a trip to Stockholm and ended up a millionaire.

The church was empty except for a coffin, so Eduardo Sierro knelt down and prayed for the deceased. When he left the church, Sierro signed a condolence book after he saw a note asking those who prayed for the dead man to enter their name and address. He noticed that he was the first one to sign. It turns out that he would be the only one. Several weeks later, he got a call from the Swedish capital informing him that he was a millionaire.

It turns out that the man he prayed for was a 73-year-old real estate dealer with no close relatives who had specified in his will, "Whoever prays for my soul gets all my belongings." This is a metaphor for life; pray for somebody you don't know, and you become related to them. Native people have been telling this story for generations. Prayers bring the planet together as relatives. Our self-interest lies in being good to others.

EASTER/PASSOVER – 4/13/98

These are the days of new beginnings. This is the season to free ourselves from the chains that bind, a season of renewal in the Judeo-Christian tradition; this is the time of rebirth, a time to break out and liberate ourselves. On Easter Sunday, Christians will reaffirm their faith and experience the freedom of salvation. Jews at the Passover seder are asked to consider that it is they themselves who escaped from bondage. The Exodus was not something which their ancestors did for them when they left Egypt, but something they must personally identify with. The Hebrew word for Egypt is Mitzrayim which comes from the root Tzar which means a narrow place.

Here is a message for this season. We must all liberate ourselves from our personal Egypts, from those narrow places that imprison and wound us. This is the story of our whole lives. We are born into this world--squeezed, battered, and smooshed--but we come through that birth canal to see a new light. I wish you in this season of growth the privilege of looking at what enslaves you and rising up to meet it.

A RENDEZVOUS WITH CLOUDS – 3/22/99

Tim Fleming, M.D., my friend and colleague for nearly 30 years, is dying of cancer. We met in the Indian Health Service where Tim served as General Medical Officer to the Hualapai Indians in northern Arizona's Grand Canyon country. We shared a similar healing awakening in Indian country when, fresh out of medical school, we discovered profound teachers in the mysterious art of healing.

After a decade in Indian Health, he became an emergency room doc and assistant professor of emergency medicine at the University of New Mexico. In 1994 he was diagnosed with a rare and progressive malignancy. In his just released book, *A Rendezvous with Clouds* (Chamisa Press, Santa Fe, 1999), Tim tells us about his extraordinary life's journey from doctor to healer to patient and now teacher. Tim has been operated upon, irradiated, and given chemotherapy. He is doing all he can, including participating in Native ceremonies. His cancer is doing all it can, and so it keeps coming back.

This book is Tim's legacy--a distillation of his life story and his current transformation from caregiver to care-receiver. Tim shares his journey from a place so deep inside, it forces you to touch a place inside yourself that will force you to confront your own mortality.

A Rendezvous with Clouds made me realize again how precious every moment is and how much I take for granted. I want to spend as much time fishing as I do talking, and I will say thank-you more.

In the book's closing lines, Tim concludes, "The days ahead will be spent collecting moments and closing the sacred loops. I will write, take long mountain walks, listen to loud, loud music, and remember how blessed I am for having had the opportunity to be a caregiver."

So, I want to say to you, my brother, "Thank you for walking with me on this healing journey. We have been kindred spirit in this life, and you will never be far away from me. In beauty may you walk, my brother, knowing the beauty you leave behind."

THE GREAT WHALE HUNT – 6/7/99

I'm in Warm Springs, Oregon, home of the federated tribes of Paiutes, Wasco, and Warm Springs Indians. Warm Springs is located on the high desert plateau in Eastern Oregon, a vast stretch of hills dotted with juniper and cactus through which the Deschutes River flows. In the distance, the snow-capped Cascade Mountains touch the sky.

It's 6:00 am Saturday morning. I'm on my way to the Crooked River Wilderness area to go fly-fishing. I'm listening to the only radio station, KWSO, 99.1 - Warm Springs public radio which is playing Indian pow-wow songs. Snowy peaks reflecting the sun's brilliance sparkle like a billion diamond mirrors...the shrill piercing cry of the singers, the hypnotic drumbeat, the view—they all make my skin prickle. On this Sabbath morning, I feel the awe that is the Creator made visible. It makes me appreciate all the gifts that Native people have shared with me of which an appreciation of the spirit and the power of prayer have been the most precious.

This is the same weekend that the Makah tribe in Washington's Olympic Peninsula has exercised its ancient tradition to hunt the whale. It's been 75 years since a Makah man has paddled the great canoe to hunt the behemoths. For centuries, this ritual was the defining moment in initiating men into full tribal membership. It was outlawed by the government in an international attempt to protect the species from annihilation. It didn't matter that tribal people have never decimated any species that they were dependent upon for life and spiritual growth to the point of extinction. Natives took only what they needed and then treated those creatures with enormous reverence. Any animal sacrificed was prayed over—its last life breath symbolically sucked out to perpetuate its memory and its power. The decimation of the world's whale populations was done by seafaring nations who slaughtered whales wholesale, processing them on factory ships that were killing machines. They performed no sacred rituals, no sense of the sanctity of the animals sacrificed. Still, the Native people of the world were saddled with the international ban and, as a result, lost the traditions that initiated men into the culture. The Makah had not hunted whale for so long that they had to import other native people who still knew how to harpoon, sing the traditional songs, and prepare the meat.

Meanwhile, the environmentalists were out in force. In boats and helicopters they protested this culture-affirming ceremony, even though they knew that the taking of whales by every indigenous whale hunting tribe in the world had never been responsible for the elimination of the species.

I was especially saddened when I learned that the night before the hunt, some of the young Makah warriors partied and drank into the early morning hours, violating the sacred trust of their ancestors by such debauchery. It saddened me that they could not kill the whale with harpoon alone nor could they seal its

mouth in the traditional way to prevent it from sinking. Still, I hope that as the ceremony is revived, the hunters will become more experienced, that its sanctity will be restored, and that the memory of their ancestors will be honored by their heartfelt participation.

Ceremonies that honor our unique connection to life--that transmit an ethic of morality to succeeding generations--will allow us to thrive in the millennium. The reason the young Makah hunters do not remember their ceremonies is because they have not been practiced.

So, driving through Eastern Oregon listening to pow-wow songs, I am imagining the restoration of celebrations through the world that give thanks for the sanctity of life and of sacrifice. I pray on this Sabbath morning that we restore our appreciation of the sacred.

AUTUMN LEAVES – 10/18/99

I just returned from Maine, which was in its full autumnal brilliance. Following a two-day seminar with hospice workers, I took an extra day to go up into the north woods.

I love New England in the autumn where the only predictable events are the magic of turning leaves and the collapse of the Boston Red Sox. Driving through this awesome spectacle of colors, my guide and friend stops at a turnout overlooking Mooselookmeguntic Lake, which sits like a diamond in the middle of a stained-glass kaleidoscope. My friend tells me the lake is named after an Irish trapper who, after years in the woods, became so wild with desire that at this very spot he looked hungrily at a moose (and I don't have to tell you the rest of the story).

We drop down to the Rangeley River and--in the freezing cold--don thermal vests and wool caps before wading into the pristine stream. The action is quite light, and my eyes keep wandering to the colors around me; they so demand my attention that I get out of the water and sit down against a tree. Looking at the leaves, I actually begin to feel their vibrations. A hum is transmitted from leaves to branches to trunk and into my body. My inner self is being serenaded by the interior of a tree, and I'm only smoking a cigar.

This must be the transformative power that the prophets describe as revelation. It reminds me again how important it is to get outside and bear witness to the awesome. The majesty of these places is how the invisible becomes visible and audible.

2000...IT'S GONNA BE GOOD – 12/27/99

Just before I left for Israel, Nelson Fernandez, my friend and brother, died. It was not unexpected. He'd been on dialysis three times a week for his failing kidneys for the last three years. He'd been close to death at least three times but always seemed to rally. Five months ago, he had coronary artery surgery because they said it would help him breathe more easily. He loved life and was living it every day. His favorite phrase was, "It's all good."

Even when things were bad, he would say, "It's only bad until it gets good again, and it's gonna be good." Even when I was facing my back surgeries, he found a way to make it good and said, "This will make you look at something you don't want to see." He wasn't always easy to get along with. He was opinionated, contentious, and frustrating. We teased each other mercilessly. My sons-in-law looked up to him as the exemplar of to what they hoped to aspire in teasing 'the old man.'

He attributed this strength and ability to recover to eating peyote. Nelson was a road man, or spiritual leader, in the Native American Church. I've known him for 25 years--he was my brother and co-founder of the Turtle Island Project, a foundation we incorporated to bring the concept of mind-body-spirit healing to healthcare professionals and patients.

I went to his funeral the day before I left for Israel. Nelson was cremated in traditional Mohave style. His casket was open for viewing in the cry house, a large, one-room building next to the cemetery. The body is viewed through the night until dawn. It is the custom for friends and relatives to stand up and speak about him and return mementos to him such as clothing, photographs, games, feathers, religious objects--anything with the imprint of his spirit on it is given back to him. I gave him back a drumstick and rattle he made for me. It is believed that this is how we accompany him on his journey to the spirit world. Customarily, people cry all night because when the service is complete, one stops crying. Too many tears weigh his spirit down as it makes its journey into the after life.

At dawn I walked with seven other pallbearers carrying his casket to the funeral pyre. Colored ribbons and cloth were wrapped around the wood pile with all the objects deposited through the night placed in it and on top of it. Everything is consumed, and the pile collapses into a hole in the ground and fills it.

As the pyre burned, we danced in a slow circle to the drumbeat; as my feet moved, the ashes sprinkled down from the sky, and I felt my brother's presence again, and I heard him whisper, "It's all good."

Farewell, my brother.

RING, RING IN THE NEW YEAR – 1/10/00

In 1876 Alexander Graham Bell patented the miraculous device called the telephone. His first words to his assistant, Thomas Watson, were, "Mr. Watson, come here. I want you." Those first words spawned an industry and now a state of mind. Instantaneous communication is today a universal phenomenon whose pinnacle may have been reached in Israel. I have just returned from the Holy Land and can report that no one in Israel is without a cellular phone. Every car is equipped with microphones because it's against the law to pick it up and hold it to your ear--that caused too many accidents. Voices can be heard from the front and back of the car, and everyone is talking at once. In restaurants, diners first place their phones on the table and then pick up their napkins. Any conversation at the table is halted when a phone rings or its musical equivalent announces, "I want you."

The Israeli military recently outlawed the use of cellular phones by its soldiers because they were dialing home from the front lines, reporting enemy fire and their own movements and terror. This apparently invited a host of mothers to call the brass, trying to get their children out. The telephone has become the most used instrument since flush toilets. There is no place in this tiny country where the phone cannot reach you. It's virtually impossible to be any place without being interrupted.

On the eve of the New Year, I was at Judaism's most sacred site, the Wailing Wall. This is the last surviving remnant of the ancient temple in Jerusalem and is the focal point for Jewish expressions of faith. I was next to an Orthodox Jew in his wide-brimmed hat, curls, and caftan who was praying at the Wall when he was interrupted by his cellular phone ringing in his coat pocket. He picked it up and moved away from the Wall.

When the telephone can interrupt prayers, we have finally elevated Mr. Bell's invention and his fateful words, "Come here. I want you," to a place of holiness. Our telephones may have a greater pull than our connection to God.

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA: WHAT NEW MILLENNIUM? – 1/17/00

I am in an incredible expansive desert in Jordan called Wadi Ram where Lawrence of Arabia roamed on camels with Bedouin tribesmen and fell in love with this extraordinary place. We are on our way to the Nabatean ruins at Petra. Those desert nomads were spice merchants who plied their trade from the Far East to the Mediterranean Sea, finding their way through these shifting sands by celestial navigation.

We've gotten here by Land Rover over sand dunes in uncharted desert. The sandstone formations are a swirl of the colors of rainbows, which are etched like bas-relief murals from the endless desert winds and periodic downpours. The formations are spectacularly beautiful, now visited only by Bedouins whose goats and camels have grazed here for who knows how many thousands of years.

We are camped under a sheer sandstone cliff whose colors are so surreal that, if they were painted, you would not believe them. The night sky is brilliantly illuminated by the constellations; Cassiopeia, Sirius, Orion the Hunter, the planets Saturn and Jupiter--all reach out to embrace me. Through the bushes and Acacia trees, the desert wind whistles what must be the loneliest melody in the world.

Being surrounded by this timeless magnificence makes me wonder what this millennial hoopla is all about. Time is a singularly human contrivance. When did its start? When does it end? Did it really begin 2000 years ago? Ridiculous, isn't it. These magnificent sandstone structures have been here for hundreds of thousands of years. The Jews believe this is the year 5760; the Islamic calendar says 1420; the Chinese, 4698. Among Native peoples in the Americas, there is no date at all because they have no concept of linear time. For them, seasons come and go, revolving like a carousel. The years promise to continue as long as each season is serenaded by the calliope of tribal songs and drumbeats.

Still it's hard to deny the emotional power of these millennial times. I loved watching CNN transmit the New Year from isolated South Pacific islands where an old man and a young boy greeted it with fire in their canoe...then to Aborigines in Australia...to Japan and the ringing bells...to Jerusalem and South Africa with Nelson Mandela lighting a candle in the prison cell where he spent so many years. The rituals and ceremonies moved me. What is the fascination? Part of it is the fact that this numerical rollover is not just a once in a lifetime occurrence; it's a once-in-fifty-generations happening. New Years have always had a certain mystical quality to them. There is the ritual of the New Year's resolution and its promises, more often made than kept.

Since there seems to be a greater significance this year, I suggest we use it to come together in a new way. Let's embrace with greater reverence our relationships to each other and with this gorgeous planet whose ancient stones remind us that all history is not just of our own time.

PASSOVER/EASTER WEEK – 5/1/00

Easter and Passover are springtime festivals of freedom and rebirth, and every culture has such ceremonies proclaiming the glory of renewal.

I am the first-born son of Holocaust survivors, raised in a traditional Jewish home, who learned how to pray in Indian country. When I say prayer, I mean praying straight from the heart, without thinking about it first.

So when Passover comes around, I welcome this season with a sweat lodge ceremony. This sacred Native American ceremony always opens my heart. Jews are asked to imagine they personally had escaped from Egypt, which means that in every generation you want to look at whatever chains enslave you. Look what's keeping you stuck and move on; that's the work of this season. It's easiest for me in the sweat lodge, although I still do the traditional Seder with my family around the table, reciting the ancient words and ritual.

This year, on the night following the Seder, my children took me to an evening of yoga chanting. The singer, Krishna Das (someone whose tapes I have listened to during my yoga practice), turns out to be a decidedly non-Indian looking, middle-aged white man of average height, with a short stubby beard and glasses.

Sitting in the lotus position, in front of a crowd of a 160 people packed into a 20x26 room, Krishna Das tells his story. A Jewish boy from Long Island, he went to India in 1970, planning never to return. He learned to pray from the heart in an ashram, with ancient Sanskrit chants and ceremonies. He then introduced his 97-year-old grandmother who had never heard her grandson perform. He told her these were not the tunes he learned as a boy in the synagogue, but they were prayers that allowed him to talk to God. The audience applauded her, and she, in turn, applauded her grandson.

I found myself wondering if my grandfather would have come into the sweat lodge with me and similarly found joy in the many ways there are to celebrate the spirit. I hope so.

THE SUN DANCE – 8/7/00

The Sun Dance is among the most sacred ceremonies of the Plains Indians. For four days, warriors fast, dance, and pierce their skin. They Sun Dance because it fulfills a promise they made to the Creator: if they participate every year, the Great Spirit will sustain them as a tribe, a nation, and a planet.

In the old days, the skin and pectoral muscles were pierced, using an eagle's talon. Nowadays the incisions are made with a scalpel, just through the skin and subcutaneous tissue. A wooden peg is inserted under the skin, and its ends are tied to the dancer's rope which is attached to the tree at the center of the Sun Dancers--the most sacred totem.

They sacrifice flesh because it is the only thing they have to give the Great Spirit that belongs to them. For years the government banned the practice, saying it was barbaric. But it never died; it was practiced in secret, and now it's experiencing a remarkable resurgence. Native people are dancing, and not just from the Plains tribes--the Navajo, Pima, Seminoles, Mic-Mac, Inuit, a host of mixed-bloods, even some white people are dancing. The tribes of the Plains are teaching it to the others. They are teaching their philosophy about the coming together of people, the colors of the four directions, healing the earth, and teaching their songs, dances, preparation, costumes, and the piercing ritual too.

I just got back from a Sun Dance in southern Colorado; it's been a while since I've participated. It's in a mountain valley of flower-filled fields among mounds of cow manure, surrounded by 14,000-foot peaks. We are a community of about 200 people: computer programmers, teachers, healers, carpenters, tile-cutters, tattoo artists, doctors, mothers, and children who come from Europe, Canada, Mexico, and all over the United States. We represent every race and creed. There are about 35 dancers, all of whom have been well prepared for it. They have participated in vision quests, gathered the feathers, created their costumes, participated in sweat lodges, and learned the songs. For the next four days, these dancers will abstain from food or water (except for an inch of chokecherry juice in a Dixie cup on the third day); they will burn in the midday sun...freeze at night--we will come together to celebrate this soul-releasing ceremony.

The night before the dance, the dancers serve dinner to the community to thank us for our support. We acknowledge each other and the sacrifices to be made in this liberation of the spirit.

I just about finish my morning coffee when we are called to the sacred circle by the blast of an eagle bone whistle at daybreak. A covered arbor surrounds the Tree of Life in the center with a gap at the eastern end that allows the sun an uninterrupted path. The whole day is spent dancing with occasional breaks. I participate in this community because this ceremony touches me with authentic spirituality. At the soul level, we are all indigenous people, desperate to resonate with the core of our being in some way. At Sun Dance, I look around the circle and experience the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. There will come a time

when people the color of the four directions--Red, Black, Yellow, and White--will come together to celebrate life. We share a sacred pipe, a ritual in which all our life's breath is offered up in smoke so that our prayers can be carried skyward.

This place touches my soul and fills me with hope.

THE HEALING POWER OF FAITH – 8/14/00

Note: This Schlag Byte is the second part of "The Sun Dance", Schlag Byte from 8-7-2000 above.

By the second day of the Sun Dance, the combination of sun and starvation has taken their toll. I am especially concerned about one fair-skinned man who is seriously burned and staggering. I think he is going to drop from stroke or heart attack, so I seek out an official to share my concerns. I tell him I'm a doctor and available if needed. He goes back to doing his thing, and the dancer keeps shuffling until he can no longer stand; then he is taken to the base of the sacred tree where he holds on for dear life. He is fanned by eagle wings and sage smoke; after a while, he gets up and goes back to dancing.

I never get called, and it dawns on me that this is why I'm here. I'm a doctor who sees a sun-intoxicated man who is severely electrolyte-depleted and might die. But I want to come from that place of faith the dancer has...faith that whatever happens is going to teach him something he needs to know. Coming from a place of greater faith is what I yearn for, but my head always gets in the way.

In medical school, I was taught that, if you went without food or water, your kidneys would shut down in three days. These dancers go four days without food or water, dancing all day and going into a sweat lodge a couple of times too, but they do not go into renal shutdown. Apparently something happens to the body when it is surrounded by drums, ceremony, supporters, and sacred totems; they all create a powerful energy that you can feel.

In the middle of the third day, there is a healing round. All the supporters are invited into the inner circle to be touched by the feathers and sage bundles held by each of the dancers. It is believed that by this time the dancers have moved into the spirit world. Their sacrifice and survival are a living testament that they have direct contact with the spirit. The Sun Dancers become powerful intermediaries between mortals and the Creator, and, when they touch me, it sends chills up my spine. We are into the round for about an hour, and I'm feeling weak, even though I have been eating and drinking. Suddenly an eagle appears overhead; this is the only one I ever saw, and there isn't a person unaware of its symbolic message. Our intentions and prayers will be lifted on the wings of an eagle to touch the ear of God. I remember from the Book of Isaiah, "They that wait upon the Lord...shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as the eagles." I no longer feel weak.

There is enormous power in belief and ritual. At a soul level, we are all indigenous people who need to have ritual and ceremony in our lives. They are the vehicles that connect us to things other than ourselves. The Sun Dance is testimony to the healing power of faith.

THE SABBATH CANDLES – 9/4/00

I'm in California, visiting my blessed mother. She lets me know I could come more often but adds that, of course, she understands how busy I am. It never fails to elicit a twinge of guilt. It reminds me of how Don Rickles used to close his nightclub act; "Don't forget your mother because she'll never forget you."

It's Friday night when we celebrate the Sabbath. For the Sabbath, my 86- year-old Kosher Momma prepares a festive meal. Tonight, some of my favorites...matzo ball soup, flanken, root celery salad with white asparagus and fresh mushrooms. She has baked her specialty, plum cake, for dessert. Before we eat, she lights the Sabbath candles.

When she performs this ritual, she covers her eyes to recite the prayers. As a little boy, I thought she was crying and hiding her tears from me, because I knew this weekly ritual always brought memories of her family whom she hadn't seen since her escape from Nazi Germany.

I once asked her if she covered up because she didn't want me to see her crying. "No," she said, "I cover them up because I do not want to be blinded by the light of the Messiah. Tonight," she whispered conspiratorially, "could be the night the Messiah will come."

On this night when she covers her eyes and recites the blessings, she is breathing heavily and has to stop several times to catch her breath. When she finishes, she announces that she often gets short of breath, but not to worry; "short is still breathing." Laughing, she comes over and places her hands on my head to bestow the mother's blessing. I feel the same joy tonight that inspired me as a boy; tonight is the night the Messiah may come.

A JEWISH NEO-PAGAN – 12/18/00

My son-in-law suggested I look at an interesting website (Speakout.com) that evaluates your spiritual belief system. He has always wondered whether Native American Church meetings and sweat lodges weren't a little bit far removed from my traditional upbringing.

I was raised Jewish; my parents, grandparents and bloodlines for at least 300 years are all Jews. My children were raised in that tradition, and they are raising their own kids that way, so when I logged on, I thought that's what I was.

The Religion Selector invites you to answer a list of questions: Do you believe in God? What are your thoughts on the origins of the universe or the meaning of evil? Do you believe in life after death? There were also some contemporary issues like abortion, the role of women, and homosexuality. I answered them all and then asked for the printout. I discovered I was a Neo-Pagan, scoring 100 percent in that category; the next closest was Mahayana Buddhist where I scored 90 percent. As a Jew, I scored 25 percent (the same as for Atheist, Christian Scientist, Scientologist, and Sikh); only slightly lower were Islam, Jehovah's Witness, and Latter Day Saints.

What is a Neo-Pagan? I wondered about that too. The printout said Neo-Pagan is a diverse community of faiths who bring ancient pagan and magical traditions to the modern age. They include Wicca, Druidism, Asatru, and Native American among others, all of whom share these elements in common. They all believe in a Supreme Being, that there are countless spirit beings in all of nature, and that God is within all. Neo-Pagans believe that one's salvation comes from living in spiritual harmony with each other and with nature. They all participate in ceremonies like singing, chanting, dancing, praying, and meditating. Neo-Pagans believe one is rewarded in this life and also after this lifetime, for the choices they make. They all share an ethic of morality that says, "Do not intentionally cause harm, and stay connected in community."

This all sounds good to me so when the printout also said there was no incongruence between practicing neo-paganism along with adherence to other faiths such as Christianity and Judaism, I decided that I am a Jewish Neo-Pagan. This leads me to this seasonal thought. It doesn't matter what we call our paths; they all reach the same destination. Whatever our tribes, the important thing is that we come to each other and to the earth in a good way to celebrate our humanity. I wish you peace, joy, and health in this season of renewal and say this to all my relations,

A great holiday season to you all.

Mi takuye oyacin.

WISE MAN VISITS AT CHRISTMAS – 12/25/00

'Tis the season of miraculous birth and visits by wise men...I got one last week. An 83-year-old man who has two artificial hips and walks with two canes traveled from France to Arizona to see a medicine man. A friend had called me and asked if I could arrange for this man to see a medicine man. This man had a dream in which Indians were talking to him. He wasn't sure of what they were saying, but he thinks it was a message that might heal him. I don't refer people to medicine men, but after much prodding, I agreed to see him myself.

When he arrived at the office, the first thing he said when he saw me was that my face is the same face he saw on one of the Indians in his dream. Then he told me his grandfather's name is Carlo, and his wife's name is Carla. It was clear to him that I was the person he needed to see and told me his story. He could trace his family history back to the crusaders; his roots go back to Palestine for a thousand years. His forebearers were multilingual traders, courtiers, diplomats, and emissaries. He himself was the nephew of a Syrian sheik and the mayor of Jerusalem. He spoke five languages. While talking, he took out pictures and documents from his briefcase to corroborate his story. One of them was a wax-sealed document written in Hebrew and Italian that declares him a 'righteous gentile.' (These were Christians who saved Jews during the Nazi occupation.)

"That's interesting," I say, "because I am the son of Holocaust survivors."

And, so we talked at length, and I was entranced by Sandro Gherardi. He didn't get around much anymore--too painful--but he knew the dream held such significance for him that he left his ailing wife in France to come to Arizona to ask an Indian medicine man about it.

"Tell me about the dream," I said.

"The Indians were speaking, but I couldn't hear them. I went closer; their mouths were open and lips moving, but I still couldn't hear the words," he said.

I asked him what he made of it. He shrugged and said, "That's why I came here."

I asked him whether his children and grandchildren knew all his stories. He said all of them knew some, but none of them knew all. In Indian country, I told him, all history was transmitted in the oral tradition. Native people say, if they tell their stories for seven generations, then their tribe will survive.

"You have the stories of 50 generations," I said, "and you have not yet shared that legacy. I think this is what the dream is about; your mouth is open, but the words have not yet come out. You have to tell your stories. You don't have to write; you could talk it into a tape recorder," I said. His son imme-

diately said that he would transcribe it.

Sandro sat for awhile and finally said, "You save my life, and now we have saved each other. That is why I came here." We hugged when he left, and then he wanted to pay me, but I told him he already had.

This is what 'paying it forward' is all about. This is my New Year's blessing to you: may somebody pay it forward to you in this coming year, and may you pay it forward to somebody else. We are here to save each other.

NO RULES FOR HEROES – 3/5/01

We have been deluged by the media in recent weeks with stories about collegiate and professional athletes who have committed a variety of criminal offenses. After acknowledging an assortment of sexual improprieties, spousal abuse, and drug violations, these athletes are generally welcomed back on the playing field with standing ovations. What does this say about them and about us?

It says that we tolerate escalating expressions of violence and that we are setting new standards about what our children can expect from their heroes. Charles Barkley may not like it that he is a role model, but he is. We have to come together and establish what we can hope to expect from each other and what is acceptable. We can't expect more from our athletes than we expect of ourselves, so we ought not to be pointing fingers.

As a society, we declare student/athletes as outside the usual rules for getting into college. Too many of them have special arrangements made for them to get into school. Once in school, special arrangements are made for them to get through. Linda Densel-Myers is a rhetoric professor at the University of Tennessee. She has become the target of enormous animosity from her college community because she blew the whistle on student/athletes' academic performances. She found that compositions turned in by athletes weren't written by them and were frequently recycled. Semester after semester, other student/athletes would submit the same papers; when she called the question, she became the target of boos.

College administrations tolerate this kind of cheating because it's clear to everyone that what student/athletes learn is less important than whether they fill stadiums. Universities understand the business of college sports. Administrators understand that shoe companies and clothing manufacturers subsidize coaches who would otherwise be lost to competing schools. We teach student/athletes that the ordinary rules don't apply to them, and we also rob them of a chance to get the education we promised them.

If we can expect our heroes to follow some moral compass, we have to find ours. Let's tell the truth: if you come to college, you're going to get an education. Otherwise, let's call our student/athletes what they are which are athletes. Then we can hire them to subsidize academic programs and start paying them up front. Make colleges the minor leagues for the NFL. Or we get back to what being in college once was all about and a student/athlete meant being a student first.

We all have to be setting better examples for our children. We are their heroes.

WE ARE ALL RELATED – 4/16/01

Genetic research is making it possible for us to track our common ancestry. From our prehistoric genetic forebearer Lucy, discovered in Africa, we have learned that all humans carry virtually all the same genetic code. Whenever I see the manifestations of how we are all connected, it makes me gasp in awe.

Felipe Gonzalez is a physician in Phoenix, Arizona. Several years ago Felipe developed leukemia that was treated with chemotherapy and went into remission. It returned in 1999; his only hope was a bone marrow transplant. A community-wide appeal for suitable donors was circulated in the local media, and 1,200 volunteers came forward. Unfortunately, none were a match for him.

Thirteen hundred miles away lived David Hoy, a cartographer for the US Fish and Wildlife Service who was listed as a donor on a national list. David had already donated to an Oregon woman so he never imagined he'd be asked again. But he was a perfect match for Felipe. Felipe was born in Columbia of Basque descent; he is short, dark-complexioned, and frail. David is a fair-skinned, strapping six footer of Dutch descent. It is quite unusual for non-Hispanics to match with Hispanics—unexplainable, actually.

Felipe and David met each other for the first time a couple of weeks ago in Phoenix where they were introduced to each other at a community gathering at Good Samaritan Hospital. When they met, they hugged each other for a long time, the intensity overwhelming. Finally Felipe said, "You are my brother forever." There was not a dry eye in the audience.

The specialists couldn't explain the genetics of their match; they said it was some kind of fluke. Felipe said it was a miracle that reinforced this ancient wisdom; God's children had no ethnic and racial lines. "We are all more related than we think," he concluded.

Makes the Lakota words "mi takuye oyacin (to all my relations)" become a universal prayer.

CRAZY HORSE LIVES – 5/21/01

Crazy Horse was the great Oglala Lakota warrior who led the defeat of General George Custer and his 7th Cavalry in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. He is revered among his people.

The descendants of Crazy Horse recently filed a lawsuit against the makers of a beer called Crazy Horse Malt Liquor. They said it was an affront to their ancestor, made a mockery of his name, and promoted drunkenness. This was no small matter to the Lakota people since alcoholism is rampant on the reservation. The late Frank Fools Crow, an Oglala traditionalist and medicine man, said, "Alcohol is the bitterest curse we have, and it has done more to weaken and destroy us than anything else. We had no strong drink--no such thing as whiskey--before the white men came to our country. We didn't need it then, and we don't need or want it now."

Seth Big Crow, the chief of the estate, sued John Stroh III, chairman of SBC Holdings who owned the distillery--not for money but for an apology. For the descendants, this was about honor in the warrior tradition. In the last week of April 2001, John Stroh III apologized to them, discontinued production, gave them seven horses, 32 blankets, tobacco, and sweet grass, and the case was settled.

This may be making lawyers sweat a little, because 30 percent of that kind of settlement can't be good for business. John Stroh III may also be thinking he got off cheap, but the lesson here is so much more profound.

Before guns, when Lakota war parties battled other tribes, no deed of war was more honored than the act of counting coup. Counting coup meant to touch an armed enemy in full possession of his powers with a coup stick. The touch was not a blow; it just served as indication of how close to the enemy you came. Counting coup was regarded as greater than killing an enemy in single-handed combat, greater than taking a scalp or any prize. It was like playing touch tag to its most daring extreme. Victory was not about bloodshed; it was about respect.

The Big Crows will tell this story to their grandchildren. They will speak around the campfire of how they honored their warrior tradition and had their enemies kneel before them, acknowledging defeat. They will tell this story just as their great-grandparents told them their warrior stories; in so doing, their culture will survive. It's not about money; honor is what's most important in the conduct of your life.

WEEKEND CEREMONIES – 5/28/01

One weekend last month I had the opportunity to participate in three different ceremonies. On Friday night, a healing ceremony was held for a friend who had just completed her fourth round of chemotherapy. With friends and colleagues from around the world, we sat together in a healing circle to celebrate her life. It was a profoundly moving experience.

The next day, I participated in a wedding ceremony that brought together a couple whose blood lines included Filipinos, Germans, Native Americans, and Jews. The wedding guests included people from many nations. It brought together multi-cultural rituals and foods that were presented in an unending experiential feast. During the reception, I met an outreach worker who worked with pre-delinquent kids. Len was raised a black inner city kid whose family knew of his Indian blood but rarely spoke to him about it. In the last several years, he has become very involved with his Indian heritage. He participated in powwows, drum-circles, and healing ceremonies. Len said the power he found in this part of his identity has helped him in his work with kids.

Before we said goodbye, Len said he wanted to gift me with something he thought I could use in my work. He reached into the bag and pulled out a crocheted shawl that he made. He had incorporated stones, feathers, and amulets into it. Next to a crucifix, he had added a Jewish star and the Ten Commandments. The shawl was filled with his own prayers and blessings and those of many others. It was good medicine, he said.

On Sunday evening I put Len's crocheted neckpiece over my own shawl and performed a placenta burying ceremony for my fifth grandchild. In the Native American tradition, the placenta that connected mother and child is now given to the Earth Mother who will now sustain the child in this life. When Native people come back to the place their belly buttons are buried, they will roll around in the dirt to feel it on their bodies. This is how they say thank-you for their lives. This is how they acknowledge that, if you love the earth enough, you will know the divine mystery.

That evening I wrapped my grandchildren in my prayer shawls and blessed each one under their own tree. And then we planted one for Zachary and welcomed my new grandson into this world.

[Click here to view the images for this Schlag Byte.](#)

CREATING SACRED SPACE – 10/1/01

I recently spent a week at a Jewish Renewal Retreat Center in upstate New York, where I was participating in a healing week. This gathering brought together rabbis, Talmudic scholars, kabbalists, liturgical dancers, yogis, drummers, and me, a Jewish psychiatrist who has worked a lifetime with American Indians, an experience which transformed me from doctor to healer.

I was speaking about the importance of rituals and ceremonies as powerful promoters of the healing process. As part of the workshop I intended to conduct a sweat lodge ceremony. Knowing they had previously built one, I asked the retreat center staff if they could build the lodge. They said they could do it.

The first thing I did when I arrived was ask to see it. I was taken to the baseball field where, in the furthest part of the outfield, was a rectangular structure made out of wood trimming-lattice that resembled a small quonset hut. This structure was covered with a single layer of canvas and open on both ends. Inside...no pit for the hot stones, and the closest water was half a mile away.

I looked at it with open-mouth incredulity. Seeing my shock, my friend said, "The maintenance man figured it out." He assumed it would take about two square feet per person so 15 people would require about 30 square feet and that structure was designed to hold them comfortably.

I knew I couldn't use it. What was I thinking? I thought they would build me a lodge of bent willow frame surrounding a central fire pit. Maybe close to a stream where we could take a dip between rounds and nestled in a beautiful setting in the forest--that's what I imagined. I wanted them to build my holy space, and the maintenance man built a place. What's the difference between a place and a sacred space? Sacred space is created by an investment of soul. The power of what happens in it intensifies with the intention of those who use it.

I thought I'd save the hours it would take to build the lodge so that I could cover all the other important things I wanted to say. After I saw the quonset hut lodge, it became clear that building of the space was the only important thing I had to teach.

We found the flowing stream, one with deep pools for dipping and a flat place nearby enshrouded by a dense forest canopy. All around us were maple saplings that we could use to frame the lodge. We sang, prayed, made offerings, spoke to the trees, and then built the sacred space. Here in this symbolic womb of Mother Earth, we would sit cramped and sweating to pray for ourselves, our families, and our world.

The ceremony took place at the end of the week on the eve of the Sabbath. It turned out to be one of those rare transcendent experiences in which you touch the face of God and feel at one with the Spirit. I was still floating two days later.

We need to be building more sacred places--in the woods, in our homes, and even our offices. Make your work an expression of your spiritual path--a space filled with sacramental reminders of your connection to something other than yourself. Spend time in this place when you're feeling small or big, when you're sick or well; go there whenever you need to remind yourself that it's not all up to you; something else is helping you out along the way. Create sacred space.

[To view the images that accompany this Schlag Byte, please visit [here](#).]

MERRY CHRISTMAS – 12/24/01

I met Mischa Zimmerman several weeks ago at this year's National Caring Awards where he was an honored recipient. Mischa is an 18-year-old college student who, at the age of 13, was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. One day, he was a most popular student at school who excelled in academics and sports; the next he was a quadriplegic unable to move or speak. Mischa spent more than a year in a hospital, most of it in soul-numbing isolation. Immobilized and physically disfigured, he discovered he could cure his loneliness by interacting with other children.

As his speech and mobility improved, he was motivated to create a program to help other kids survive catastrophic illnesses. Mischa started an organization called Kids Helping Kids, a nonprofit voluntary organization run by teens for teens. The kids--many disabled themselves--talk to patients, participate in recreation programs with them, make music, and become friends. Kids Helping Kids is growing nationally. This exceptional young man recognized that, through his personal suffering, he could ease the pain of others in similar situations.

I met him the evening prior to the awards ceremony, at a reception for current and previous honorees. Mischa moved past me on his motorized scooter, and he said something to me that I couldn't hear. I sat down and said, "I couldn't hear you," to which he responded, "That's because you can't hear through your knees."

"Happens to me all the time," I said. "I'm so tall, I don't hear a lot of what's going on below. What is it like being down there?" With a straight face, this Hall of Fame Caring American said, "Down here you get to smell a lot of farts." First I gasped; then the Merlot started dribbling through my nose as I exploded in laughter.

Mischa told me he got through it all because he never lost his sense of humor. Here is a kid who had endured incredible suffering and who reached inside himself and found a reservoir of spirit and humor and a way to share his gift of joy.

Seems to me that this is what the Christmas spirit is all about, miracles that move us beyond our limitations to help making life worthwhile for others.

CHILD POET – 1/1/02

It is rare for a poet to have a book appear on the New York Times best-seller list. For an 11-year-old poet to ride to such a wave of recognition is unheard of.

Mattie Stepanek writes poems that are poignant, upbeat, and philosophical, and he's been doing it since he was a preschooler. He also has a rare form of Muscular Dystrophy called Dysautonomic Mitochondrial Myopathy. He uses a wheelchair; it has a tracheotomy tube attached to a ventilator and is attended to by his mother who also suffers from the disease and is also in a wheelchair. Mattie is the only child left of four children, all of whom died from the same inherited disorder.

Within the last six months, Mattie was so sick that doctors had given him just two to days to live. He was asked if there was a wish he wanted granted before he died, and he said that he wanted to publish his poems. He wanted to tell his story so that others might find the strength and resolve that he had found.

A mom-and-pop publishing company decided to honor his request and published several hundred copies, and the rest is history. He has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show, Good Morning, America, and the Jerry Lewis Labor Day telethon. He has been appointed an ambassador by the Muscular Dystrophy Association, and his story has been chronicled in newspapers and magazines. Mattie has just signed a multi-book deal to write more of his Heartsongs.

Since its first publication, Mattie has gotten stronger and was discharged from the hospital. He is now looking good at his appearances; the color has returned to his face, and he's bobbing up and down in his wheelchair as he tells his audiences his story. He says his ventilator keeps his body alive, but his spirit has been sustained by his poems.

Mattie discovered his gift for writing when he was three years old. At first he didn't even think they were poems. "I was just writing because it was a beautiful way to express my feelings, happy or sad." He harbors no illusions about his prognosis; it may be days or years, he says, but he doesn't think of himself as dying; he sees himself as living his story. This is his poem:

December Prayer
No matter who you are,
Say a prayer this season.
No matter what your faith,
Say a prayer this season.
No matter how you celebrate,
Say a prayer this season.

There are so many ways
To celebrate faiths,
There are so many faiths,
To celebrate life.
No matter who,
No matter what,
You pray.
Let's say a prayer
This season,
Together, for peace.

Let Mattie's spirit lift us into the New Year and remind us that we can mobilize our inner resources and sustain ourselves and our world in peace.

Happy New Year!

CORPORATE GREED: OUR CREED – 1/21/02

We will have to look long and hard to find a more egregious example of corporate greed and treachery than the recent Enron Corporation debacle. Enron is the giant energy trading company (once the seventh largest corporation in America) that went belly-up in a matter of months. It is the biggest bankruptcy filing in United States history.

Turns out that Enron executives knew a year before its collapse that the company was in big trouble. Their CEO, Kenneth Lay, called his many contacts in Washington to seek relief. He had every reason to expect a sensitive audience. The Enron Corporation had made political contributions of almost one million dollars, most of it to Republicans. He has a personal relationship with the President, had donated thousands of dollars to Attorney General Ashcroft's Senate campaign, and the Vice-President (in charge of the national energy policy) once headed an Enron-connected energy production company.

While Enron was collapsing, its executives and directors unloaded \$1,100,000,000 worth of stock, the most massive insider bailout in history. At the same time, Enron employees, who were heavily invested in its stock through their retirement plans, were unable to sell their shares. As the stock plunged from \$90 a share to less than \$1, employees watched helplessly as their retirement funds vanished.

When the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission issued subpoenas for Enron's financial records from the accounting firm Arthur Andersen (among the world's big financiers who had contributed more money to the Bush administration than even Enron), they were told an auditor had deleted the electronic files and shredded the paper ones. Does this sound like a John Grisham novel?

This is a case study in corporate greed and influence peddling. Enron's collapse will trigger worldwide woes. Once an overseas empire, there will be a mad scramble by energy customers to find new sources; of course, the old people whose retirement savings have been lost may not be able to afford their heating oil bills.

You can be sure the politicians will point the finger of blame, the accountants will offer up a scapegoat, the directors will plead ignorance, and they will all walk away to their offshore, tax-sheltered fortunes. (Did you know that Enron paid no income tax in four of the last five years?)

Beyond the human face of this tragedy is the one we pay as a culture. Far greater than millions in lost savings is that such greed erodes our souls. We are a culture whose sense of values is becoming undermined.

THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT – 2/18/02

I am always moved by the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. The spirit of these Winter Games in Salt Lake City especially touched me. I loved the Indians on horseback, the drumming and dancing. When they lit the Olympic flame, it gave me the shivers. The passing of the torch reminded me of what has been the most significant moment of these Winter Games for me. The moment the Olympic spirit became real for me actually occurred a month before the games began.

The Olympic torch came through Phoenix one evening when I happened to be on the road. Did you realize that there were 11,520 torchbearers who carried the flame across 46 states, including riverboats and canoes? The flame was handed person to person until it was passed over 13,500 miles on a journey that took 65 days. Each runner proudly held the 33 inch, three and a half pound, butane-fired torch, and each one had his or her own stories. They were cancer survivors, handicapped people, young, old. A high-schooler ran in front of his school, wearing the shoes of his brother who had been killed at that spot a week earlier.

The torchbearer I stopped to watch happened to be an ex-Phoenix police officer named Jason Schechterle. Jason held up the flame in his severely damaged hand. Almost a year ago, a taxi traveling more than 100 miles an hour slammed into Jason's parked police car, turning it into an inferno. He was burned over most of his body and not expected to make it through that first night. But he did, and the night after that as well, until the days became weeks. Lying in a drug-induced stupor...wrapped like a mummy for a month, slowly he began to move. Then he got up, and amazingly, after months, he began to walk.

Severely disfigured, maimed, and still looking at lots of reconstructive surgery, he held the torch high above his head while his wife ran around him with a camcorder. They were both laughing; as we watched them together, the crowd erupted into cheers.

This is what the Olympics are all about--participating in the race of your life with others who are equally committed to it. This is the glory of sport, the fellowship of participants cheered on by crowds who know that every participant is a winner.

TOLERATING DISHONESTY – 2/25/02

A few weeks ago in Piper, Missouri (20 miles west of Kansas City), Christine Pelton, a high school biology teacher, resigned in mid-semester. She quit because the school board ordered her to go easy on students who had plagiarized their semester reports. At the beginning of the school year, students signed the course syllabus which included the consequences of cheating and plagiarism. When she discovered that nearly a fifth of her students took the reports directly from the Internet, she failed 28 sophomores. Her principal and superintendent stood behind her, but the students' parents complained to the school board. The board ordered Ms. Pelton to give the students partial credit and to decrease the project's importance in determining the final grade.

Pelton resigned, saying the message was quite clear--that students no longer had to listen to what she said because they knew if they didn't like something in her classroom from here on out, they could complain to the school board. Not only does it tell teachers that boards and parents will not support them; it reinforces student perceptions that there are no consequences to cheating. It actually encourages those who don't cheat to try it because if others do it to get high grades and are not punished, they have an unfair advantage.

Our culture now features a growing tolerance of dishonesty. We can hardly blame our children when they are treated to a daily parade of their parents and grandparents behaving dishonorably. Let's go back to the days when, if you got caught cheating, you paid the price and learned that it mattered when you did something wrong. Support and respect teachers like Christine Pelton--they are the heroes in our society.

MORE THAN A GOLD MEDAL – 3/4/02

The Olympics are over. We were treated to Hollywood extravaganza, unbridled national pride, and, of course, scandals. The most enduring Olympic moment for me was the tear running down Michelle Kwan's cheek as she stood on the bronze medal platform. This three-time Olympian stood as a model of athleticism and classy sportsmanship--she filled me with admiration.

The Olympic gold medal was the only skating prize that had eluded her in her career. She led the competition after the short program; it was hers to win. But from the outset of her long program, you could sense her tentativeness. She was not her usual flowing self, and then she fell. I gasped along with millions of others. She left the door open for 16-year-old, first-timer Sarah Hughes who skated a magnificent performance and catapulted into the gold medal.

When Sarah got the news backstage, we watched her hit the ground in disbelief. Interviewed while still gasping in amazement, she told the world she was just skating to have fun. She didn't figure she had much of a chance coming into the program in fourth place. She felt she had nothing to lose and just wanted to have fun in the experience. There is enormous freedom in having nothing to lose.

Michelle, on the other hand, had everything to lose. This was her last chance, and she skated, not wanting to make a mistake. Not wanting to fail is no way to have fun.

Michelle stood at the medal ceremony--not on the top platform--but she still held her hands high and waved, congratulated the others with a generosity of spirit, and then bowed to her adoring fans.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote, "The very best you can do in your life is to figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope...not admire it from the distance, but live right in it, under its roof."

That night Michelle Kwan lived under it and brought the roof down. She stood as a champion, which is more than a gold medal winner.

Do not live a hoped-for life. Go out, live life, and have fun doing it because you have nothing to lose.

MOBY DICK – 5/6/02

It's been almost a year and a half since I was with the Flyboys on their twice-a-year fishing trip to the Pere Marquette River in northern Michigan...much too long. The Flyboys are a brotherhood of fly-fishers who represent diverse political views, tastes in music, and religious affiliations, all of which become inconsequential during the spring steelhead and autumn salmon runs. We stand, all in the middle of a pristine river, surrounded by a forest filled with deer, beaver, muskrat, and skies with soaring eagles and watch these great sporting fish rise to the lure of an artificial fly.

The Great Lakes steelhead are magnificent fighting fish, weighing 30 pounds or more; when they take the fly, they take off like torpedoes. Catching them on light tackle is not just a matter of reeling in a hooked fish. The steelhead will play with you only long enough to remind you that it is they who have the upper hand. Most of the time, they'll snap your line as if it were sewing thread.

In these crystal clear waters, I can see these huge sea-going trout on the bottom lined up like soldiers in formation. If I can drift my fly right in front of their noses, they may--just for a moment--forget their reason for being here and take my bait. It is the thrill of landing one of these great creatures that keeps Flyboys together everywhere.

It was late on the second evening--the sun almost down and the unseasonably warm air beginning to chill--when I hooked a big fish, and the race was on. I was barely able to hold onto the reel as the line whistled away. I chased after the fish--running downstream, ducking under low-hanging branches, stumbling over submerged trees, slipping on rocks, and finally dropping into a deep hole that was higher than my waders. At that moment I fantasized that I was Ahab, and this was Moby Dick. If I drowned, they'd find me trussed up in my own line, but there was never a question in my mind that I would let go. Even if this great fish killed me and they found me in rigor mortis, I'd still be clutching the fly rod in my fist.

It took me an hour until I landed the huge, brilliantly-colored male. It was the thrill of a lifetime. Before releasing him, I cradled him in my arms and kissed him. Then he swam away to complete his great mysterious life cycle.

To Jim Castle, who welcomes me to this sacred place, and to all my Flyboy brothers, I say, "Thank you for sharing this time where the spirit breathes, and you can see the face of God."

To see the photos that accompany this Schlag Byte, click here <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytephotos/050602.html>

ARIZONA IN FLAMES – 7/15/02

Over a two-week period, just days ago, fires destroyed more than 46,000 acres of eastern Arizona's White Mountains. This is an area about the size of Greater Los Angeles and the largest forest fire that Arizona has ever seen. It has annihilated hundreds of homes, barns, summer camps, and many people's dreams and livelihoods. The cost of fighting this fire has already reached \$20 million, and nobody knows what the final estimate will be in terms of its ultimate economic devastation.

The White Mountains are a place of spectacular beauty. They are loaded with trout-filled streams and lakes; the forests are full of trophy elk, mountain lion, bear, and eagle. It is also home to the White Mountain Apache tribe, whose 12,000 members and ancestors have lived there ever since time began, they say. The tribe has been held up as a model of economic diversity. The White Mountain Apache run a profitable ski area, logging operation, and a casino, all of which provide employment and benefits to the tribe. One million dollars a year goes to college scholarships, and more and more graduates are coming back to the reservation to help the community out of its cycle of poverty.

In spite of its business successes, 60 percent of Apache men are still unemployed. The median per capita income is only \$18,903 as compared to a statewide average of \$40,558. About half the households don't have a telephone; a quarter don't have a car. More than 45 percent of Apache adults over the age of 25 have not graduated from high school.

The person who started this fire is a twenty-nine year old, unemployed White Mountain Apache man who never graduated high school. He worked as a firefighter--a good job for someone with strong hands and no education. Apache firefighters are famous, not only for their ability but also for their immediate availability. With rampant unemployment, there is always someone around to fight fires. This man had no previous criminal history; he just needed the money. So, he set what he thought would be a small blaze requiring his unit's attention. Instead, this fire eliminated 50 percent of the White Mountain Apache's harvestable lumber--destroyed wildlife, archeological sites, sacred springs, and plants. This fire will cripple the tribe economically; it has already been crippled psychologically.

The last 125 years have not been kind to the wandering nomadic warrior tribes. Locked on reservations...unable to pursue a traditional life...succeeding generations lost their connection to a credible history of meaning and grandeur. They became dependent on a federal neocolonial structure, which wrought devastating consequences. I worked with the Apaches for many years and saw first-hand the consequences of long-standing disenfranchisement and poverty. They include widespread alcohol abuse, violence, spousal abuse, family disintegration, and suicide rates many times the national average.

The fact that this young Apache arsonist set a fire in a tinder dry forest to make a buck disgusts me. But

let us not forget that what fueled this blaze was not just an Indian with a match, but the tinder of neglect that accompanies powerlessness, defeat, and cultural dissolution.

The Apaches aren't shopping in border towns nowadays because finger-pointing and racism have again reared their ugly head. They are staying home, and there are some who see another side to this devastation. My friend, Edgar Perry, an Apache elder and founding director of the Apache Tribal Museum, believes this disaster is divine retribution for sin. This horror is the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy. If his people no longer followed their traditional teachings, their spirits would wither. First the land would be laid waste; then the game would disappear; the rivers would dry up, and finally, the people would disappear.

Edgar says, "This is a message that we have been doing something wrong," but adds that there is hope. He says, "If we will still perform Sunrise dances, pray in our language, gather eagle feathers, and tell the stories that sustained our peoples' spirit, then we may once again recapture it."

I pray it may be so.

RED BOYS INITIATION – 9/9/02

I took my eight-year-old grandson, the Red Boy, to his first Native American Church meeting. He knows we're Jewish and that we practice our tradition, but he also knows that the tipi is a place his Papa comes to pray. He has already experienced a sweat lodge ceremony so participating in these practices is not new to him.

This is the season of the Jewish high holidays, the Days of Awe--a time to look at your life and make constructive changes. It is also the first anniversary of 9/11, a good time to pray together. I asked his parents if I could take him to the meeting with me, and they left the decision up to him. The Red Boy thought it sounded interesting, loved the idea of being able to stay up all night, and understood the ground rules. If he chose to come, he had to stay by my side. He wanted to know if he could get up and go to the bathroom; I told him as long as long as he let me know beforehand so I could ask permission for him to leave. If he got tired, he knew he could go to sleep on a blanket right behind me.

We were on the Gila River Indian Reservation at the foot of the San Tan Mountains, isolated in the desert's 100 degree heat. This setting is a far cry from our Phoenix neighborhood. He followed me around the tipi, watched me shake hands with others already seated, and followed suit. We put down our cushions, blankets, and paraphernalia and waited for the meeting to begin. He was mesmerized by the elaborate ritual and asked lots of questions:

"What is that stuff he's burning?"

"It's cedar; smell it. That sweet smoke will carry our prayers up out through the top of the tipi and rise up to touch the ear of God."

"What is that dirt mound in the middle shaped like a half-moon?"

"That's the altar, and that round plant he's putting on it is the Father Peyote; it's like our Torah. It holds the answers for a good life. Watch, and it will become clearer what's happening."

For a kid who is not always focused, he was paying attention. He jiggled, moved around, laid down, then got up, but he was right there. After midnight, it was time to take a potty break, and he went outside. Seeing some kids he'd met earlier in the evening playing ball, he joined in. When it became clear he was not returning, I was sent to fetch him.

He was in the middle of the game as I approached and said it was time to come back in. He said he didn't want to, but I gave him no choice, said we had an agreement, and this was the procedure. He had to come back; he could sleep if he wanted to. He followed me in, sat down looking grim, glared at me with

tears in his eyes, and soon fell asleep. It was after 3 am.

He slept, and I kept seeing that look as I sat through those early morning hours. Had I asked too much of him? Was this more than he could handle? Was it my thing more than his? I wondered if this was an ego trip for me; it was true that I imagined he might join me in singing my songs, and now I feared he'd regret ever coming and would not want to come back.

He slept through the rest of the night and walked out of the tipi an hour after the meeting was over. When he rejoined us, participants congratulated him, told him he did a good job to stay all night and that he honored his grandfather by coming with him. He took it all in, played with the kids, and participated in the morning feast.

Later, when we were driving home, he said, "I'm glad you took me; maybe I'll do it again." It made my heart sing and my chest swell with pride. But it was not about ego; it was about setting limits and creating sacred space. Awe is the mechanism by which we tame the ego.

In this time of reflection and remembrance, I pray we can find a way to find the time and space to set some limits on our egocentric selves to become our noblest selves.

NOTICE YOU'RE ALIVE – 9/30/02

Jews all over the world have just celebrated their holiest days: Rosh Hashanah, the New Year; and Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The ten days between these two holidays are called the Days of Awe. During this time, you are asked to reflect on your life and purpose. Are you walking a spiritual path? Is your life an example of what you say you value? This annual review allows you to choose to make changes and get things right. At the end of these ten days, when the sun sets on Yom Kippur, it is said that God passes final judgment. At that moment, your name is inscribed in the Book of Life and your fate is sealed. It is written who shall live and who shall die--who by drowning and who by fire, who by lightning and who by act of terror.

On this solemn day, Orthodox men wear a white shroud called a kittel. This is the same garment they will wear when they are buried. It gets you used to the idea that there is an end coming. If you want to live a spiritual life, the task is to do it now. A portion of the Yom Kippur ritual is called Yizkor. This is a memorial service for those who have passed on. Jews are obligated to attend this service to remember their dead relatives. Even if you are not a member of a congregation, the doors are open; no one is ever turned away from performing this holy task of honoring one's relatives. (You can understand the enormous security concerns synagogues had this year with talk of terror, retribution, and war).

Just days before the Yizkor service, I happened to read a newspaper interview with Warren Zevon. He is a singer/songwriter with a piercing wit and dark humor. Warren had just been diagnosed with an inoperable lung cancer. In the interview, he said he was not expecting a miracle, "It's been made abundantly clear to me that the recovery statistic of what I have is zero." A 30-year smoker, Warren said bitterness and regret had no role in his current thinking. He did acknowledge that he'd rather have been told he had the flu. He also said that he'd certainly like to tell someone, "Look, if you don't want to die at 55, you might not want to smoke for 30 years, but this is my life, and these were my choices." He hoped his kids would make better ones.

Warren said he was grateful for everything he had and that his diagnosis reaffirmed his philosophy "Notice You're Alive." He said this was his life's message and what his songs were about--enjoy life, make the most of every word, every poem, and every flower. Warren noticed his aliveness now with an intensity he never appreciated before.

It seems to me that's what Yom Kippur and the kittel is all about. Take some time to ask yourself if your life accurately reflects your beliefs. Is your life an example of your message? The days go by too quickly; this is the time to notice how alive you are. Change that which keeps you from living your truth, and together we can change the world before the book is closed.

OKLAHOMA SPIRIT – 12/9/02

Another crew of astronauts returned to Earth last week after spending 11 days at the International Space Station. Among them was an Oklahoma Chickasaw Indian, John Herrington, who took along with him his tribe's flag, sweetgrass, and other sacred objects as blessings. Circling in orbit, Herrington said, required a hectic work schedule and didn't allow much time for looking over one's shoulder, but when he did, he was overwhelmed. The spiritual experience of being in the outer space was "more awesome than anything I ever dreamed."

At the time Herrington was awed in space, I was awed in Oklahoma on a day that featured one of its infamous ice storms. The freezing rain closed roads, shut down the power to 60,000 homes, filled emergency rooms with accident victims, and resulted in 42 counties being declared emergency disaster areas. But in every disaster there are moments of heroism, glory, and enlightenment. In Oklahoma City that night the scene was so spectacular, I decided to walk outside, even in the freezing cold. The bare trees were coated with ice. Every twig and pine needle was encased in its own crystalline straw, making the trees look like a glass Tinker Toy. In the evening lights, they became ice sculptures. I saw 1,000 illuminated snakes emerging from Medusa's head...then the electrified tentacles of a billion jellyfish...then an illuminated celestial crown declaring the awesome presence. I think that was probably close to the awesome power John Herrington experienced. So moved was I that I continued walking toward the Oklahoma City National Memorial. It would be the first time I returned to the site of the 1995 bombing of the Murrah federal building. As I approached, I saw that the street in front of the bomb site was now a reflecting pool that shimmered in the night light. On either end of the pool were two monumental twin gates; on one was carved the exact minute before the attack--9:01--and on the other the minute after--9:03. In between the towering gates was a grassy field with 168 empty chairs, some smaller than others representing the children who were murdered there. The chairs, made of bronze, were set on an illuminated glass base. In the freezing rain, their light created a steaming mist, and the chairs looked as if they were floating in mid-air.

I thought of that horrific moment at 9:02 am when, in a fiery explosion, America was introduced to the Age of Terror and understood that one bomb could not extinguish the light of 168 souls whose memory here was a living testimony to the spirit of a nation.

Oklahoma! Where the wind comes sweeping down the plains and where we are reminded that the land we belong to is grand; Oklahoma! Where space cowboys and rhinestone cowboys can touch the face of God and feel the power of the Awesome.

PEACE, GOODWILL AND PRAYERS – 12/23/02

I was speaking in Oklahoma a couple of weeks ago and arrived a few days before the engagement to visit relatives in Indian Country. My beloved sister Charlesetta took me to see her uncle, a Ponca spiritual leader. His name is Parrish Williams, and he may be the oldest practicing Native American church roadman in North America. On December 26, he will celebrate his 90th birthday by conducting a ceremony in which he will sit up all night. He has been doing this for 65 years, using the same sacred fireplace and instruments that were handed down to him directly from Quanah Parker, the Comanche founder of the Native American Church, 125 years ago.

I didn't know all this before I met him. I did know that he had read my book *The Dancing Healers*, because when Charlee told him that she was my sister, he said, "I've heard of him." Turned out his son-in-law had worked with me at the Phoenix Indian Hospital and given him the book ten years earlier. He told her he liked the book but that he'd given it away; Charlee said she'd send him an autographed copy.

When she knew I'd be visiting her in Oklahoma, she told Uncle Parish that she was going to bring a friend over but never mentioned me by name. He lives in Marland, Oklahoma, the heart of the Ponca Nation--alone, in the same house where he raised his nine children. Charlee introduced me at the door, "This is the friend I mentioned; his name is Carl Hammerschlag." The name certainly had no impact, as he responded, "That's a German name, right?" I nodded. He went on to say that there were lots of Germans who settled in Oklahoma. "Good farmers."

We sat down and talked in his memorabilia-cluttered, toasty-warm living room, and the discussion came around to the Native American Church. Uncle Parrish said he went to his first meeting when he was 25 years old and then only reluctantly. He'd heard the people who participated were 'drug fiends.' The missionaries derided them from the pulpit, describing the congregants the morning after their all-night meetings as 'drugged-out oafs who were lying around laughing.' His brother-in-law asked him to attend a Christmas Eve meeting, and his sister encouraged him to go. Since it happened to be the time of his birthday, he decided some celebrating might be good. At that meeting he saw the toughest, most feared men express themselves--even cry--as they humbled themselves in prayer. He knew he had something to learn here, and he returned again and again. One night he asked for tobacco to pray with; when he spoke, the tears came as well. He said he didn't know where they were coming from, but it felt good. "That holy medicine has the power to make you real," he said.

He apprenticed for a longtime with his mentor, Ed Packwood, who received his authority from Quanah Parker. When Packwood thought it was time for Parrish to conduct his own services, he gave him his symbol of authority, the sacred Father Peyote that was given to him by Quanah himself. He pointed it out to

me on the shelf by the front door. He said he kept it there because it watched over him, saw everybody who came in and whether their intentions were good.

That's when Charlee pointed to me and said to her uncle, "This is a good man over here and you know him." He looked surprised and asked me if we'd met before. I shook my head no, and then Charlee told him, "This is Dr. Carl Hammerschlag; this is the man who wrote and signed that book I gave you." He lit up and said, "I always wanted to meet you. You know what this medicine is about; you wrote about how it changed your attitude toward Germans. They told me that's how this holy medicine works; it brings people together and sure 'nuff, now I'm meeting you."

He motioned for me to get the Father Peyote from the shelf near the front door and bring it to him. He placed it gently on the table in front of him and then rolled tobacco into a cornhusk to make a cigarette. With that tobacco offering, he prayed and said thank you to the Creator for bringing us together and that he wanted to take me as his nephew. That making a new relative was the best birthday present he could imagine brought tears to my eyes. Then he handed me the smoke, and I prayed with it--told him and the Creator how proud I was to make this relationship and how I would honor it and then handed it to Charlee.

When we left, he said, "I'll pray for you at my birthday," and I said I'd pray for him too. Seems to me that's what this holy season is all about: peace, goodwill and remembering each other in our prayers as if we are all relatives.

Merry Christmas to all FROM MY FAMILY TO YOURS, and Happy Birthday to you, Uncle!

For photos that accompany this Schlag Byte please visit <http://www.healingdoc.com/bytphotos/122302.html>