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The Power of Return

We've seen what you've done, America. We know what you are doing and we've seen you turn to face it. Perhaps for the first time.

For the 150th anniversary of the statehood of Nebraska, the Smithsonian returned, on loan, 'items' or belongings which were picked from the bodies following General Harney 'The Butcher's' punitive attack on Little Thunder's peaceful village in the autumn of 1855, before 'Nebraska' was even a 'state'. Official sanitised reports claim 86 people killed, half of them women and children, when 600 cavalry descended upon a village of 250 at five in the morning. Today there are archaeologists who estimate that closer to 160 people, civilian non-combatants, were slain. Many people had run from their beds to find themselves surrounded in a 'pincer' manoeuvre and hid in caves along the Blue Water Creek. Dragoons fired into the caves and Harney ordered them collapsed. This butchery went on for hours. Survivors, some mortally wounded, were marched by their aggressors and captors ten miles South to Harney's staging post at Ash Hollow.

Places like the Great Plains, where the earth and the sky meet at the edge of the world, bring an expansiveness to the mind. The ocean and the desert also bring that infinite, peripheral look to the eye.

On a hot and sunny afternoon during the summer of 2017, Phil Little Thunder stood in full traditional regalia – feathers, bones and beads, black and white face and mirror shades – on a low stage with a microphone and a small PA at the bottom of some low cliffs, lush with tall ash trees, some of which were strong and young in 1855. He spoke and imagined General William S. Harney standing on the top of those same cliffs, cliffs which made Ash Hollow a popular oasis for the US Cavalry and for settlers following the Oregon Trail to enjoy the respite of water and shade from the unrelenting Nebraska summer and shelter from the solid-ice winds of the Great Plains. Now a popular State Park with a

fancy visitor centre. Phil imagined Harney looking out over the rolling plains towards his grandfather's village, tipis pitched by the meandering Blue Water Creek ten miles away, and plotting his punitive dawn attack all those years ago.

We had met Uncle Phil at the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) resistance camps at Standing Rock that previous autumn. We had been guided to contact his nephew, a Lakota speaker and singer and carrier of the sweat lodge all winter. Donny Little Thunder welcomed and invited us and was a big influence on our staying as he was camping with his family at the Sicangu/Rosebud camp on the south side of the Cannonball River. Early settlers named the Cannonball because of the shape of the rocks formed in the currents when she was a lively tributary to the Great Missouri. She is currently a wide, slow-moving and brown nitrate- and pesticide-polluted extension to Lake Oahe, stopped up by the dam further south, which, in the 1950s, inundated thousands of acres of prime village spots beside the life-giving waters. You look at a map of the USA and you see many of those flooded and dammed rivers are on 'Indian' reservations. It's a way of claiming millions of acres and displacing native peoples from prime living range.

We came to Standing Rock with much trepidation after hearing about the escalation of repression and resistance. We're a family of seven who live in and make tipis. We had been travelling around central and north-eastern Oregon in our converted 1988 Chevy Bluebird school bus, lacking purpose, and started to think, 'Could we actually go there to that epic land of connected indigenous people? Let's just go there and see if we can pitch the shop and make tipis.' Then the journey became more magical for us as we stepped into Turtle Island. We kept east in Nimiipu or 'Nez Perce' country and into Idaho as the summer was full grown, and learned about some of the heroes of these people like Chief Joseph and Looking Glass during the time of settler invasion. About seven generations ago these families evaded and outpaced the US cavalry for four months and 1,200 miles. The hardships and death they endured because they were unable and unwilling to be forced into a reservation. They were declared hostile and hunted.

So we happened to be following the trail, roughly, of the 'Flight of

the Nez Perce', Highway 12, which is a National Historic Highway with many interpretive and informational signs telling of events like the Burning of the Cache, when the US cavalry, hounding the Nimiipu, burned the stored food that had been gathered for winter. Camas, acorns, pemmican. It's the same highway that was the ancient trade route followed by Lewis and Clarke a few decades earlier when the Nimiipu rescued their expedition.

A week or two on the same road and hundreds of miles later we were coming over the hill on Highway 1806 in North Dakota to a breathtaking sight. It was like when you see those old pictures of the big encampment on the Greasy Grass – Little Bighorn, the one where Custer got his comeuppance. It was a glimpse of that and that's when the goosebumps started. The goosebumps returned daily, sometimes several times a day, for the time we were there, and not necessarily because of the cold.

We drove into the North Gate at the main camp, greeted by a guard at a security shack armed with a walkie-talkie and a firm but friendly welcome. We drove down Flag Row and looped around the tipis, tents, domes, yurts and makeshift whatever's of Oceti Sakowin, the nation of the seven council fires. It was the first big wind of that autumn, we were later told, and there were nylon tents blown high into trees. Equinox winds.

Phil brought the first tipi for repair after we'd pitched the shop. The shop is currently a 24-foot, seven-sided tensile tent held up with a central pole and three-inch ratchet buckles on each corner. It houses an industrial treadle sewing machine; an upholstery 'head' from the 1980s retro-fitted onto treadle irons from the 1890s. It's how we make shelter for ourselves to live in and it's one of the ways in which we make a livelihood. It's mobile and we can bring it to anywhere we can walk. Phil's tipi showed up with a bunch of holes and some of the front panel and smoke flaps torn. It is painted to commemorate the Blue Water Creek massacre. That's how we came to be aware of what happened. It was an honour to work on that tipi, a well-made one looking home-made rather than mass-produced. I kept getting moments of peripheral and expansive awareness, feeling like a small thread in a tapestry woven

with the likes of Little Thunder, Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull and there I could sit behind the machine and make some small repairs.

Often when we unload and pitch our lodge and the workshop we wonder how we'll get it all back on the bus. And then we wonder where home is for Free People in a land where freedom prevailed before settler arrival, when 'freedom' became 'invade and conquer', claim, own and exploit for personal gain and profit. We think about the Cascade-Siskiyou of Southern Oregon, the place of our genesis as a family and a small band of migratory families. We remember the pain of displacement, of how the Front Lines first came to meet us, how we resisted for the love and honour of Place, succumbed and were arrested. We came out of only a day in jail, my wife and I, but we were not allowed to go home to the remote woods where we were pitched and woven. So we find home wherever we are. And we miss home the same. We long for home and we found it there as part of a pipeline resistance camp where wood and water were imported and the winters were savage. It is not where I would've ordinarily brought my family for winter range. We found a dose of home after two years on the road being others' pets or pests. We looked around and saw tipis with people living in them, for real. We were ironically less vulnerable to the culture of settler descent with uniforms, badges and guns to come along and move us on a whim, even though there was an army of them to the north over the hill a ways. We had purpose and value and a mission with an intention for something greater than ourselves which brings us home to our indigenous nature, that of our home planet and the diversity of culture, song and language occurring everywhere.

Occasionally we are asked if we are independently wealthy to travel and live like we do. Mostly we're unburdened by the illusion of being *rent* or mort-gaged (*death-gripped*). We have little in the way of bills, and our needs are few, but real enough that we can take care of them, mostly, directly and with agency. Most of the income we generate comes from the shop but when we're on the road sometimes we'll be in town passing through and stand on the street and play music for the people, with a hat out. Other times, when the weather is inclement, we'll make

a big pot of chai and put a sign out saying 'Now Serving Organic Chai'. We used to put 'donations welcome' but decided even that has a poor aesthetic. Most people leave a couple of dollars and enjoy (or endure, depending on our mood for rhetoric) a visit in the bus and some itinerant news or stories. Some leave just a 'thank you,' others might leave a 20 or more.

We were at the resistance camps from September through the winter, where temperatures dropped to -30°F (-34°C), not including wind chill. Potatoes could be knocked together like stones, those of us with beards would grow icicles. We were simply carrying on with how we normally live as a family, making and repairing tipis and tents. We and others raised funds for canvas and materials and made three 23-foot and two 19-foot tipis all with linings and ozans and at least a dozen repairs of various magnitude. My work had never been so inspired, being a tiny part of a functioning whole where every part has a place of honour. I got to work without the inefficient burden of money – the greatest system of control ever devised. I had the good fortune to work with the currency of pure relationship empowerment, no enforced reciprocation, just unconditional service, without the banks or government getting a slice of my power to pay their executives to live opulent, ostentatious and unsustainable lifestyles.

'Jobs' is the culture of the colonisers. It is also a system of control, one could even go so far as to say slavery. Prior to settler colonialism here on the Great Plains, there were no jobs. By all accounts the people lived a life of great abundance and luxury, but the kind of luxury that doesn't come from the simplicity of push-button convenience, rather the embracing of the complexity of epic living, the abundance that comes from the understanding of the generosity of a thriving planet dancing with a brilliant star.

The prairies of the central and northern plains, in their unmolested state, have a biodiversity on a par with rainforests. Where once buffalo teemed, far more numerous and sustainable than the current feed-lot GMO-corn-fed cattle industry, now we see oil donkeys. Where there used to be migratory villages and bands of free-roaming and ecologically connected societies with complex and dynamic trade and cultural

relationships, now there are families forced through obscure, complicated and convoluted government policy into dilapidated housing schemes, historically developed from reservation confinement – basically concentration camps. Migratory hunter-gatherer and nomadic cultures have been pushed out and oppressed in favour of jobs in the form of ‘man camps’, muddy ghettos of prefab buildings housing oil workers and pipeline builders, infamous in this region for sex trafficking (including children), powder substances and jobs. Because ‘jobs!’, they say. Jobs to pay the rent. Jobs to be rent. Some of us have too much work to be able to afford a job.

Days and nights were often busy and dynamic, planes flying dark and helicopter searchlights twitching like the Eye of Sauron, still not getting their fill. Terrified of some kind of uprising, probably. Terrified of our lack of fear, of our love. Terrified of not just what they’ve done but what they are doing. Tonight the bridge is still held. The situation is still escalating. Of course. We have 500 years of continuous and current injustice, mistreatment and downright abuse at the flip side of Manifest Destiny and the American Dream.

It can only be an honour to stand with a culture that stands its ground with bare hands and chests, buffalo drums and prayer song, ancestors and those to come, in the face of the most developed military machine on the planet. Real power against hard batons, toxic chemicals and ‘less lethal’ weapons and a constitution which guarantees the right to ‘property’ over and above the right of the people to the common elements for life. This billion-dollar corporation bought title to the land where the pipeline crosses when more people started to show up at the adjacent resistance camps, for \$18M. The CEO is a Texan and he’s probably never set foot on the land in question, land where these local boys ride their ponies.

We’ve had a lot of practice with eviction when life gets really close, and when the feeling of the world comes through with grace. On that occasion, when the National Guard – along with mercenary private security firm Tiger Swan, Morton County Sheriffs and law enforcement from all over the US – came to clear the resistance camps on a

snowy, late February morning, life was to stand with history, or Great Spirit or God. To stand in solidarity with my relatives in icy mud and steel and numb fingers on one set of tyre chains for two full-size school buses. The heart of a people sings and drums with a defiant now. Tears mingled with mud with those here before and those after.

At the powwow in Kyle, Pine Ridge, that following summer, the Stars came down to dance in glass beads and feathers and porcupine quills. And the drum sang with the force of ancient thunder held within old mountains who were once the ocean floor. And it's easy to blubber and cry in the presence of that culture intact. Because, as a newcomer, it seems that it was never supposed to be like that, when an external force came, a calamity – they said Blue Water Creek was the first on the Plains – and murdered in the name of 'progress' and 'freedom.' Men on horseback with sabres in dark blue uniforms, motivated by Caesar's imperial coin. Some say that is when a society goes from Brave to Warrior, I don't think for personal survival, but for the good of the collective. You have to be pretty brave to ride bareback into a herd of stampeding buffalo. By many accounts, pre-contact warfare was more ritual than bloody. People weren't trained and paid to efficiently hunt and kill other people. The apocalypse was happening to the first cultures of that time period, one doesn't have to look too deeply to understand the horrors of that time. The invaders came and murdered and mutilated and the people, thousands of people after decades of antagonism and desperation and despair, came around and gathered at the Greasy Grass they called Little Big Horn and, exasperated, knew that the cavalry all had to be Rubbed Out. That's when the government called in Custer, who had a reputation for extreme brutality.

The old and wise ones knew the world would be in peril in seven generations, it was obvious as it is now in fruition. They are gone now but they knew and they killed, they fought for us. You can read that in the prophecies. It was hard like we have never known, but those Old Ones knew. Me, I'm here to honour that, hopefully I can pick up that continuing thread. We can pick up that gossamer thread, woven shimmering spirit. They knew what it would take for us and they took as

much of the burden as they could. Now we see, during the Grand Entry when the sky is bluest, before the sun is hottest and the people glitter and sparkle in primary colours, when all of the flags and all of the dancers file into the dance arena, the flag of the Seventh Cavalry dragged along the ground through the dust, around the circle. So those drums sing like they did before the switch from the Brave to the Warrior and how can one not cry for what is lost?

Epigenetics is a scientific way of studying historical and ancestral trauma, gene expression influenced by external biological and chemical conditions. Healing occurs for those victimised and for the victimisers, whose spirits also seek acknowledgment and truth. I stood with Englishman Peter Gibbs, ex-curator of the Native American exhibition at the British Museum and now archaeologist at the Tribal Historic Preservation Office in Rosebud, South Dakota. He looked up to the cliffs of Ash Hollow and, through a lot of 'bleedin', blimey and bloody', explained how the way the cliffs had collapsed and left a mass at their base, now thickly overgrown, did not occur naturally, is man made. With that archaeologist's eye, which can read a landscape, it looks like the cliffs above have been deliberately collapsed. Many of the survivors who had been marched back to the cavalry base would have been viciously wounded and would have died there, but there's no record of that. History is written by the victors, apparently. But 'Only the Earth Endures', and the tormented foundations of the USA are buried at the base of those cliffs. And not just those cliffs.

The living and the dead have an intimate pact. Settler-descended residents of the town of Lewellen, the closest town nearby, spoke to us of childhood memories of surprise at looking in the mirror and seeing pale skin and wondering where their long, dark braids were. They would hear other children playing across the creek when there were none. The land whispers and the strong, open and compassionate ones hear. After a life of unease they went to historical documents, diaries and private letters held at the West Point military base and read accounts from ordinary infantry and downtrodden foot soldiers and read about the horrors of Blue Water Creek. It wasn't a battle, it was

a massacre. They sought the descendants of Little Thunder, who was wounded and survived the massacre. A process of healing was initiated and a cache of dozens of taken 'artefacts' were remembered in a drawer in Washington DC.

Members of the Little Thunder family asked the Smithsonian Museum – where there is, apparently, a warehouse-sized basement full of plunder and intimate and precious belongings – to return what was taken. The request fell upon the ears of the compassionate and some of these items from that massacre were agreed to be returned on loan for the State of Nebraska's signature event and to be placed on display in a case in the museum at Ash Hollow. A doll taken from a little girl, a pair of moccasins, a bag... It was also agreed that these 'items' would be in ceremony before public display with involved families. I had the honour to be invited to and participate in this ceremony in a blacked-out room with song and drum in the visitor centre, but I never looked at the belongings, even though they were on display all weekend; I couldn't find my place in something which felt so intimate and raw. That could be my kids' doll. That is my kids' doll. Gawking feels inappropriate.

There is a Lakota word, *wokinktuza* (forgive the spelling), which means something like 'forgiveness'. I saw and heard descendants of Little Thunder with that power and I saw that as an example of a way to be human. Then I thought about the culture of America and how, after this unprecedented occasion, it is gathering the spiritual strength to have a good look at itself and its foundation. We can turn its military might into spiritual strength for a force for good in the world. The government will catch up but it's led by the people. We've seen how settler colonialism has laid waste to vast tracts of land, rendered rivers undrinkable, turned what was actually paradise into hell, all in the name of progress. But now it's going forward to our Indigenous Knowing, now we're remembering Original Instruction.

We are coming to the end, one way or another, of this cycle of violence. Spirits of bloodstained belongings of the past are finding peace and restitution in the present. The people dance and sing on the drum with

remembrance and celebration and we're reminded that those forgotten and lost can now, acknowledged, find a way home. Everything has to be, and will be, returned to where it's supposed to be. It begins with the return of family belongings and continues to place, land. Everything has to return. Everyone has to return.