

My People, the Indians

Chief Dan George



Was it only yesterday that men first sailed around the moon? You and I marvel that men should travel so far and so fast. Yet if they have traveled far, then I have traveled farther; and if they have traveled fast, then I faster, for I was born as if it were a thousand years ago, born in a culture of bows and arrows. But within the span of half a life, I was flung across the ages to the culture of the atom bomb, and from the bows and arrows to atom bombs is a distance far beyond a flight to the moon.

I was born in an age that loved the things of nature and gave them beautiful names like Tes-wall-u-wit, instead of dried-up names like Stanley Park.

I was born when people loved all nature and spoke to it as though it had a soul. I can remember going up Indian River with my father when I was very young. I can remember his watching the sun light fires of brilliance on Mount Pay-nay-ray as it rose above its peak. I can remember his singing thanks to it, as he often did, singing the Indian word “thanks” so very, very softly.

And then the people came. More and more people came. Like a crushing, rushing wave they came, hurling the years aside. And suddenly I found myself a young man in the midst of the twentieth century. I found myself and my people adrift in this new age, not part of it.

We were engulfed by its rushing tide, but only as a captive eddy, going round and round. On little reservations, on plots of land, we floated in a kind of gray unreality, ashamed of our culture that you ridiculed, unsure of who we were or where we were going, uncertain of our grip on the present, weak in our hope of the future. And that is where we pretty well stand today.

I had a glimpse of something better than this. For a few brief years, I knew my people when we lived the old life. I knew them when there was un-

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spoken confidence in the home and certain knowledge of the path we walked upon. But we were living in a dying culture that was slowly losing its forward thrust.

I think it was the suddenness of it all that hurt us so. We did not have time to adjust to the startling upheaval around us. We seemed to have lost what we had without a replacement for it. We did not have the time to take your twentieth-century progress and eat it little by little and digest it. It was forced feeding from the start, and our stomachs turned sick, and we vomited.

Do you know what it is like to be without mooring? Do you know what it is like to live in surroundings that are ugly and everywhere you look you see strange and ugly things? It depresses man, for man must be surrounded by the beautiful if his soul is to grow.

What did we see in the new surroundings you brought us? Laughing faces, pitying faces, sneering faces, conniving faces. Faces that ridiculed. Faces that stole from us. It is no wonder we turned to the only people who did not steal and who did not sneer, who came with love. They were the Christian missionaries; they came with love, and I, for one, will ever return that love.

Do you know what it is like to feel that you are of no value to society and those around you? To know that people came to help you but not to work with you, for you knew that they knew you had nothing to offer?

Do you know what it is like to have your race belittled and to come to learn that you are only a burden to the country? Maybe we did not have the skills to make a meaningful contribution, but no one would wait for us to catch up. We were shoved aside as if we were dumb and could never learn.

Do you know what it is like to be without pride in your race, pride in your family, pride and confidence in yourself? Do you know what it is like? You don't know, for you have never tasted its bitterness.

I shall tell you what it is. It is not caring about tomorrow, for what does tomorrow matter? It is having a reserve that looks like a junkyard because the beauty in the soul is dead, and why should the soul express an external beauty that does not match it? It is getting drunk and, for a few brief moments, escaping from ugly reality and feeling a sense of importance. It is, most of all, awaking next morning to the guilt of betrayal. For the alcohol did not fill the emptiness, but only dug it deeper.

And now you hold out your hand and you beckon to me to come across the street. Come and integrate, you say. But how can I come? I am naked and ashamed. How can I come in dignity? I have no presents. I have no gifts. What is there in my culture you value? My poor treasures you only scorn.

Am I then to come as a beggar and receive all from your omnipotent hand? Somehow I must wait. I must delay. I must find myself. I must find my treasure. I must wait until you want something of me, until you need something that is me. Then I can raise my head and say to my wife and family, "Listen, they are calling. They need me. I must go."

Then I can walk across the street and hold my head high, for I will meet you as an equal. I will not scorn you for your seeming gifts, and you will not receive me in pity. Pity I can do without; my manhood I cannot.

I can only come as Chief Slaholt came to Captain Vancouver — as one sure of his authority, certain of his worth, master of his house, leader of his people. I shall not come as a cringing object of your pity. I shall come in dignity or I shall not come at all.

Society today talks big words of integration. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is integration of hearts and minds. Unless you have this, you have only a physical presence, and the walls are as high as the mountain range.

I know you must be saying, "Tell us what you want." What do we want? We want first of all to be respected and to feel we are people of worth. We want an equal opportunity to succeed in life, but we cannot succeed on your terms; we cannot raise ourselves on your norms. We need specialized help in education, specialized help in the formative years, special courses in English. We need counseling, we need equal job opportunities for our graduates; otherwise our students will lose courage and ask, what is the use of it all.

Let no one forget it — we are a people with special rights guaranteed by promises and treaties. We do not beg for these rights nor do we thank you; we do not thank you for them because we paid for them, and the great God knows that the price we paid was exorbitant. We paid with our culture, our dignity, and with our self-respect. We paid and paid and paid, until we became a beaten race, poverty-stricken and conquered.

But you have been kind to listen to me. I know that in your heart you wish you could help. I wonder if there is much you can do, and yet there is a lot you can do. When you meet my children, respect each one for what he is: a child of our Father in Heaven and your brother. I think it all boils down to just that.

I would like to say a prayer that once was spoken, with little differences in wording, all across North America by the tribes of our people. This was long before the white men came.

Oh, Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds, whose breath gives life to the world, hear me. I come to you as one of your many children. I am small and weak; I need your strength and wisdom. May I walk in beauty. Make my eyes ever behold the red and purple sunset. Make my hands respect the things that you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise so that I may know the things you have taught your children, the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. Make me strong, not to be superior to my brothers but to be able to fight my greatest enemy, myself. Make me ever ready to come to you with straight eyes, so that when life fades as the fading sunset, my spirit will come to you without shame.