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Remembering the Future: Tom Heidlebaugh & the Rebirth of the Great Canoes

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"Join in the circle, carry the song
In this wild world, we all belong.
We're part of the story; we know from the start
That everyone counts if you open your heart."
--Tom Heidlebaugh, from his song "One With The Watershed"

In February 1997, I took a ferry from Seattle to Bainbridge Island, on my way to the Suquamish Nation's ceremonial smokehouse. The Suquamish, whose tribal name means "place of clear salt water," are the people of Chief Seattle. I had been invited to an honoring ceremony for a great man who, though not Suquamish, was loved by First Peoples throughout the Northwest. It was the kind of ceremony usually reserved for the departed. But we all knew that Tom "Laughing Bear" Heidlebaugh was close to the end of his journey, and in the words of Chief Seattle, it would be good to "weep tears of compassion" together. Tom passed on one month later.

Hundreds of Native American/First Nations people, including many chiefs and spiritual leaders, converged on that day. With cedar smoke, prayers, songs, masked dances, stories, and feasting, we celebrated a life well lived. It is hard to believe how many years have passed. Great people, like great deeds, are outside of time. It is not, as some have proclaimed, that they are eternal. Rather, they are as much yesterday, as today, or tomorrow. Through their example we touch something that does not conform to clocks or maps or to the dimensions of human thought.



Tom Heidlebaugh (February 1, 1942- March 26, 1997) was a storyteller, poet, musician, songwriter, author, and adventurer. He was also my close friend, medicine brother, and honorary family member, certainly a mentor to my daughter on whom he made a lasting impression. The story of his life that I have pieced together is just that, a story. I never asked him for a consistent biography; after all, we assume that our friends will live forever.

Tom was of mixed Lenape, Amish, and Irish background. He was the great-grandson of the Lenape medicine man Yellow Lark, author of the popular Native American prayer:

"Oh Great Spirit, whose voice I hear in the winds and whose breath gives life to all the world, hear me. I am small and weak. I need your strength and wisdom. Let me walk in the beauty of your sunset. Make my hands respectful of the things you have made and my ears sharp to hear your voice. Make me wise so I may understand the things you have taught my people. Let me learn the lessons you have hidden in every leaf and rock. I seek not to be greater than my brothers but to fight my greatest enemy--myself. Make me always ready to come to you with clean hands and straight eyes so when life fades, as the sun sets, may my spirit come to you without shame."*

Tom played the Native American flute. He played it with spirit, not that muzak imitated by a thousand wannabe flutists, all of them sounding basically the same. Early in his life, Tom met the Comanche spiritual leader Doc Tate Nevaquaya (1932-1996), best known as a master Native American flute player, and one of the first to both perform and record it (1979, Smithsonian Folkways). Doc sponsored Tom on a Vision Quest, because only if the spirit of the wind and the wood spoke to him would he be ready to learn the flute. The flute and the ability to play it is a gift from spirit. Because Tom's vision confirmed this gift, Doc Tate agreed to teach him.

Tom traveled the Four Winds spiritually and physically to explore the common root shared by all First Peoples. He lived in Kenya, Africa in 1965 at first as a Peace Corps volunteer, and for the next two years as a resident. Tom learned to speak the Swahili language fluently. Under the

pseudonym "Mr. Onion", he became a well-known poet in that language and authored six books through the East Africa Publishing House. He exchanged stories with the Tugen, Masai, and other nations.

"The Tugen had a beautiful way of greeting each other in the morning. Hold a person's hand between your two and ask, 'Are you healthy? Are you happy? What is in your heart?' If the person replies with an expression of sorrow or pain, say to him or her, 'Give it to the sun.'"

And I hold precious an unusual teaching from the Masai that links with my own Jewish ancestry. "The son of King Solomon is buried under Mount Kenya. When each person learns to sing their own song, he will awaken and bring peace to the world."

I believe that Tom's ability to fit in, to adapt to different tribal cultures was not simply because he was Native himself, but because he had a flexible and courageous spirit, willing to adjust or even give up his view of who he was in response to new information or new experiences. Nowhere is this more evident than in his initiation among the Masai. They warned him that if he wished to write about their culture, he needed to live it and to take the same warrior's test expected of boys becoming men. He needed to hunt a lion with a spear!

On the appointed day, a group of men led Tom deep into the bush until he came to a clearing, with a giant, old tree near its center. They told him to wait there in readiness, spear in hand, as they searched for the lion. Sweat poured down Tom's face. "What an absurdity," he probably thought. Tom knew how to use a rifle against prey that is likely to run away from humans, but he had never hunted with a spear! An hour later, there was a stirring in the grasses as his warrior friends beat pots and pans and then the ground with switches. The lion was approaching. Suddenly, silence. It was surely Tom's last moment on earth. He scanned the savannah back and forth, looking for a sign. And then, from all directions at once came the sound of laughter. The warriors emerged in a circle surrounding Tom. He had passed the test. They were not going to make the "white man" (Tom had fair skin) hunt a lion. But he certainly had the bravery!

I don't know how long Tom would have remained in Kenya if not for one of his books, a thinly disguised work of historical fiction, in which the villain was obviously the president of the country. The president was encouraging the theft of indigenous lands and resources. Not long after the book was released, a warrant was issued for Tom's arrest. When the police couldn't locate him, the army joined the chase. Tom escaped on foot until he reached Ethiopia to the north. It was there that he met and married his beautiful wife Patricia, mother of their children.

Returning to North America, Tom lived for a time among the Diné and the Zuni people and served as program director for the National Indian Youth Council. He eventually settled in Tacoma, Washington, learning and sharing spiritual ways with the Quileute, Makah, Lummi, and other Nations. He was a spirit dancer, trained under the guidance of the Lummi elder Joe Washington, a fact he shared with me but never admitted publicly during his lifetime, lest he create jealousy. During that time, he also counted among his friends and beloved elders Mary McQuillen (Makah, 1932-2007), Bruce Subiyay Miller (Skokomish, 1944-2005), and David Forlines (a spiritual leader among the Puyallup and Quileute Nations, 1946-1991). For four years Tom served as storyteller for Quileute Elders Days, a traditional four-day event to honor elders of all Indian nations. Tom's original song-compositions, published in the Laughing Bear Album, Kokopelli Calling, and Salmon Says-- are popular among Northwest Indian communities. Several of his English language compositions have been translated into Indian languages and are sung at traditional Feasts and Potlatches. His songs received more public acclaim in the concerts of Buffy Sainte-Marie and Harold Littlebird (the outstanding Pueblo poet, potter, and singer).



In the late 1980s Tom, with the support of his friend Philip Red Eagle (Dakota-Salish), presented a respectful challenge to leaders and chiefs in the Northwest: bring back culture by bringing back ocean-worthy cedar canoes. Elder David Forlines carved one of the first canoes designed specifically for the upcoming journeys. He also encouraged the 1989 Paddle to Seattle, a 150-mile journey of nine cedar dug-out canoes from La Push, Washington to the Port of Seattle. One of the "pullers", Frank Brown of the Heiltsuk First Nation, Bella Bella, British Columbia (Canada) invited them try a longer journey of 1200 miles, all the way to his community, in four years. In 1993, Tom's songs and good humor inspired the Canoe Nation people as he pulled with them during their historic paddle from Washington State to Bella Bella. Twenty-three canoes participated, but only two did the entire round trip. Of course Tom was on one of those two. He also created a series of rules for the journey, protocols such as "follow the skipper; don't argue; avoid drugs, alcohol, and violence," that are still the basis for the now yearly Canoe Journeys. What started as a few canoes and fifty people soon expanded to over 100 canoes and 6,000 participants. The renaissance of canoe wisdom is described and documented with beautiful photography in David Neel's *The Great Canoes*, which includes an afterword by Tom, and in an outstanding film dedicated to Tom, "Canoe Way: The Sacred Journey" (www.canoeway.org).

Image: Ko-kwal-awoot, "The Maiden of Deception Pass," a guiding and protecting spirit of the Samish people. She looks out over Deception Pass on Whidbey Island, Washington, a place of dangerous currents, waves, and whirlpools that challenged the skill of the canoe pullers on their way to Bella Bella. The 23 foot pole was carved from red cedar by Tracy W. Powell of Anacortes, Washington. Photo By Ken Cohen

Everywhere Tom went he gathered and lived stories, looking for common threads of wisdom. These threads were distilled and presented at the various storytelling conferences he organized: four Cedar Tree Conferences with Indian elders of the Northwest, two Northwest Native Writers Conferences (the first of their kind), and Hama-Ha, a major storytelling conference in the Southwest. Tom founded the Cedar Tree Institute to research and share stories among indigenous peoples

throughout the world.

Tom put the healing power of story to honorable and practical use. He taught high school equivalency in the prisons. "I was really helping them reconnect with the better human beings they already were." He later became a teacher for the Department of Corrections Tacoma Pre-Release Program. He wrote to me, "My new job is marvelous. I get to spend hours each day intensely working with beaten men, feeding spirit and supporting a return to the world. I get to move anger aside and listen to deep frustration and find ways to easily overcome fear as wide as a valley of nails." Wanting to pray in places where prayers were most needed, he preferred ghettos to churches and felt a special affinity with poor urban youth. When asked to help find a solution to the high level of violent crime in a Tacoma neighborhood, Tom organized a day of drumming, singing, praying, and marching led by African American and Native American spiritual leaders. The power of those prayers really worked. Crime decreased dramatically and never returned to previous levels.

Yet Tom's concerns always moved beyond the local and immediate. He practiced "remembering the future," as he was fond of saying. Our actions should provide for not only our own generation, but for the generations to come. When the residents of Seattle and other Puget Sound cities needed a driver to transport a semi-truck of food, clothing, and other goods to the people of Nicaragua, Tom volunteered. During this pilgrimage, Tom stopped at cafés throughout Central America to jam with local musicians and share songs, stories, and poetry in Spanish, another language he spoke fluently.

Sometimes I think that my great friend was a cross between Indiana Jones, Saint Francis, and Sitting Bull. Once while taking a late afternoon nap in a friend's boat in Baja, California, he awakened to a sudden storm, a "typhoon" as he called it, in which he was violently

thrown side to side, up and down. The boat had broken loose from its mooring and was already adrift so far at sea that he could barely see the land, which disappeared with each swell. He decided to take his chance swimming rather than waiting for the boat to be crushed or capsized. As soon as he jumped in the water, a pod of dolphins surrounded him and guided him to shore.

Another time Tom rode out on horseback into the Ethiopian desert. He didn't understand enough Ethiopian to realize that the rapid words and wild gesticulations of the villagers were warnings not to go in that direction! As he neared a rocky outcropping, a group of Ethiopians emerged on horseback, all heavily armed. Their leader, seeing that Tom was dressed in a long Ethiopian robe, but tied in the manner of a priest, laughed and said, as he pointed his rifle, "A white, Ethiopian priest." Tom did the unexpected (the only thing I could ever expect of him). He turned his horse around, removed the Native American flute from his saddle, and using all the power he could muster, played a slow, eerie melody. He then turned his head and said in Ethiopian, while nudging the horse on, "Not an ordinary priest, a devil priest, shoot me and you die!" They let him go.

Like many spiritual leaders Tom survived the dark night of disease, accident, and personal hardship, each time returning to life with renewed commitment to work for the good of the People. His intimate understanding of the transient and fragile nature of life gave his compositions a quality that is both earthy and transcendent. As an example, I was deeply touched and humbled when Tom sent me the following poem in 1993, written in my honor. The reference to "I'll never get to China" pokes fun at my then common complaint. Even if I could have afforded it--not likely on an income of \$7,000/year, I doubted that with my public stance against human rights violations, I would be let in (or let out).

Two old men,
beards white as stars,
throw the coins under the willow,
far beyond the end of the road.
For them, water is wine
and conversation like the flock of cranes
veering towards the hidden spring.

"I will never get to China."
says one, imitating the sprawl of an old cat.
"Not this time," says the other,
chuckling just as a pond ripples,
delicate as a breeze
with a big fish beneath it all.

Two ancients,
toes as gnarled as roots,
stand up, inebriate, moving unsteady
where clouds seem palaces
and a coven of crows
veers over black water.

As a child Tom swam in the Columbia River near Hanford, Washington, where radioactive uranium tailings were dumped during the early years of nuclear weapons development. Predictably, this led to a twelve-year battle with liposarcoma, a recurring cancer of the fat cells, requiring frequent life-threatening operations. No wonder, he had such passion when he exclaimed in the refrain to one of his songs, "Skookumchuck" (Chinook Jargon for, as Tom explained it, Clean Water, Pure Water, Powerful Water). When I first met Tom in the 1980s, he was recovering from an operation in which more than 30 pounds of tumors were removed from around and between his internal organs. He asked me for a Native American "doctoring" (traditional healing). During the ceremony, I saw --and Tom later corroborated-- various incidents that were likely the genetic/energetic triggers of the cancer. As I removed these toxic and intrusive forces, lightning flashed just outside, highly unusual weather for Seattle! Tom went into the longest remission since he had first been diagnosed with cancer.

In the summer of 1996 Tom decided to accept a friend's invitation to drive to South Dakota for a series of Sweat/Stone People Lodges and an all night Yuwipi healing ceremony. I spoke to Tom before the journey and advised against it. I felt that the benefits of these powerful ceremonies would be outweighed by the stress of the long journey and intense demands of all night vigils. Not long after returning, the cancer began to spread rapidly. Doctors pronounced it inoperable and untreatable.

Even in his final month, with an external bag (colostomy) to drain the contents of his intestines and bladder, with the cancer growing rapidly, and little relief from the pain, Tom was still contacting elders to discuss the next stage in the Canoe Nations' journey. When I visited in February 1997, a few days before the honoring ceremony at Suquamish, he insisted that I drive him to see one last time the magnificent bay near his home, where the canoes came to shore. I carry a precious final image of us standing hand-in-hand, offering tobacco as we looked out over the great Grandmother Ocean that he would soon be joining.



Footnote

*This prayer is almost always attributed to a Lakota Chief Yellow Lark who is claimed to have “translated” it in 1887. Yet, many websites state that the author is unknown. For example the prayer was published by Calvin College in 1995 as Chalice Hymnal #698 by an “anonymous Native American author.” See <http://www.hymnary.org/hymn/CH1995/698> (Accessed September 18, 2011) To make matters more confusing, the Boy Scouts of America attribute the prayer to Yellow Lark, “a Blackfoot Indian.” <http://usscouts.org/reverent/prayers.asp> (Accessed September 18, 2011). I contacted the Lenape Nation to see if they had information about this prayer or Yellow Lark, the Lenape. A Lenape elder kindly contacted me, resulting in a great conversation and new friendship, but sadly no knowledge of Yellow Lark. Unless I see contradictory evidence (which I welcome), I stand by the history shared with me by Tom Heidlebaugh.

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