



American Indian Institute

Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth

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Governing Council Members

November 3, 2009

Diane Brown
Haida

To - All who share our vision of unity and respect among human beings
From - Bob Staffanson, President, American Indian Institute
Re - A momentarily symbolic event largely unrecognized

Vickie Downey
Tewa

Freida Jacques
Onondaga

On August 12, 2009 Joe Medicine Crow, 95, Patriarch of the Crow Nation and one of the founding members of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth, received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama along with four other distinguished individuals. The event was televised. Indelibly etched in my mind is the picture of President Obama placing the medal around Joe Medicine Crow's neck. This is my reflection on a highly symbolic event.

Betty Laverdure
Ojibwe

Jose Lucero
Tewa

Oren Lyons
Onondaga

Joe Medicine Crow
Crow

Our planet is a small speck in an endless universe. We may be alone in our part or any part of space. We know that life on our little space ship is fragile and dependent upon delicately balanced elements that are both tenuous and finite. We also know that the actions of human beings can upset that balance and threaten life. Those factors, the miracle of our existence on a tiny space ship and our increasing threat to the elements that sustain us should bring all strata of humanity together to recognize our common destiny, to celebrate our commonalities as human beings and to work together in respect and harmony for the benefit of all, and the future of all. Given the stakes, cooperation and obeisance should be driving factors but history and our own experience testify that power and greed, racial hatred and prejudice have prevailed far too often and are a continuous threat.

Dana Mitchell
Penobscot

Consider our own history. Slavery ended only 150 years ago; lynching much later and discrimination is still alive although moderated by law. Indian wars ended not much more than a century ago. My grandfather helped move wounded soldiers from Montana's Big Hole battlefield where in 1877 Colonel Gibbon's men tried to stop Chief Joseph's Nez Perce, including women and children, from escaping to Canada. Two generations separation from infamous atrocities. Guilt, hate, fear and prejudice are powerful emotions acting on the spirit as cancer on the body. Our organization devoted to reconciliation of the races and to survival of the wisdom of Native Americans was met with open hostility in its early years, a condition now softened but not eliminated.

In the late fifties and sixties minority grass roots groups began demanding recognition, not condescendence; freedom, not oppression; a right to sit at the

The American Indian Institute's function is to serve the policy directives of the Traditional Circle.

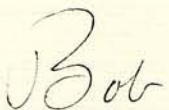
Reaffirmed at the 18th International Council of the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth, Hosted by the Crow Nation, July 1995

table of all races and ethnicities, not receive its scraps; a right to equal treatment under the law, not racial profiling. Periods of political and social change are filled with turmoil. Some, like Martin Luther King, Jr. used non-violence and the power of the spirit, others used repressed anger and vengeance to strike out violently, a counter-effective tool. Civil rights became the law of the land, and inch by inch a more equitable racial and ethnic relationship emerged affecting the most populous minorities but leaving Native Americans still mired in prejudice and anonymity because they didn't want a seat at our table, only to be let alone to live a life grounded differently from ours.

Joe Medicine Crow is my senior by eight years but we are of the same generation, having begun life in the early 20th century absorbing its mores and perspectives. To our generation, and those arriving before World War II, the idea of an African American President was as likely as the Missouri river changing direction, and the idea of a Native American receiving the nation's highest honor was equivalent to the Missouri flowing backward. But current political, professional and social leaders – baby boomers – grew up in the midst of societal change. While racial prejudice and hatred is still alive although less visible, society has become more tolerant and inclusive by many degrees.

The fact that Joe Medicine Crow's honor at the hands of an African American President got only cursory notice in the press is in one sense a good sign. It means that it was taken for granted by those who record events of the day. But it may also mean that today's generation has no clue regarding the depth of the chasm of prejudice, hate and guilt symbolically closed by that gesture. To my generation, and especially to me having dealt with the chasm of hate for much of a lifetime, it was a miracle we never expected in our lifetime or in any future time. We know that centuries of racial hatred and antagonism are not closed by one symbolic gesture or many gestures but we see light at the end of the tunnel and we are heartened and inspired to work harder.

We are pleased for Joe Medicine Crow, a colleague whom we love, but the stunning reality of the event has ramifications for all people.



Bob Staffanson