Leaves, Fruit and Trees:
Spiritual Messages of A Pow Wow

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"We seek to discover the soul in the ordinary,
The everyday, and the otherwise obvious;
We are on a quest for the clues to some greater mystery,
Some evolving, perhaps even final,
Pattern in communication that yields
'a sacred unity.'"
(Goodall, 1998)

During the 2001 National Communication Association Conference in Atlanta, Georgia, I took a Saturday hiatus from the schedule and traveled to Stone Mountain, Georgia to attend an authentic Native American Pow Wow. The term Pow Wow has become synonymous with the celebration of Native American culture and often features Native American drums, chanting, dancing, and displays of artistic, hand-made crafts. A colleague had noticed an announcement about the Pow Wow and, knowing my deep interest in Native American culture, suggested, “I go to the mountain.” Admittedly, I needed some freedom from the academic jargon and confinement of the conference. I have always been an outdoors person, and being indoors for long periods of time seems to drain my spiritual well being. My spirit needed to soar, and the idea of attending a Pow Wow appealed to my soul and spirit. The following is an ethnographic account of my adventures on that day.

Roots

On most research adventures, I can remember the names, stories, feelings, and the events encountered. Today, as I walk toward the woods ahead, I check to make certain my pen and small notebook are secure. As I move through the huge evergreens, my lungs are refreshed with the scent of green pine. I anticipate a spiritually moving day. Native American cultural events offer a connection to Mother Earth. As I pass through the
fenced off area, a grassy open field known as the meadow, the light fragrance of sweet grass, wood smoke, and desert sage now mingles with the pungent pine scent. I feel I am passing back in time and into another dimension as I move into the space of the Native American.

All around me, Native Americans move with purpose, setting up hand crafted artifacts reminiscent of another time. Warriors of this generation exchange soft laughter and courteous greetings. Quiet conversation floats like fall leaves on the morning air as they continue with their morning chores. The Pow Wow will soon begin.

I stand in the shadows of Georgia Pines looking upward to the bald, imposing granite face of Stone Mountain. How interesting and how ironic that, today, the Native Americans have retaken the meadow near the Plantation House at Stone Mountain. I decide to walk around the booths to absorb everything. I see a Native American smudging his booth, his family members and, in turn, himself. The pungent aroma of the smoke from his traditional smudge calls me from a world of intellectual competitive exercises to a sense of deep woods and open sky. The smudge smoke beckons me to a place of spiritual freedom. I walk to him. I am acting on impulse now. I feel drawn to this moment in time, like some supernatural force draws my person to him.

“My brother,” I say, “would you smudge me, please?” He looks at me through a long space of time, smiles and says, “You can smudge yourself, I think.” “Yes,” I say as I consider his suggestion, “I suppose that would be better.” That would be proper. I know smudging as an act of cleansing, of dedication, and an act of sanctification. Like the many other people groups and cultures that burn incense in their spiritual ceremonies, the burning of a Native American smudge holds similar meanings. The smudge smoke holds a sacred significance. The rising smoke represents prayers to the Great Creator. Native Americans use seashells, terrapin, or turtle shells to hold the fragrant smudge mix. Some use clay or wooden containers (Howard, 1981). In this case, however, Red Man offers me a smudging stick. The smudge stick contains cedar, sage and sweet grass wrapped tightly by red and black cord. I take the smudge stick in my hand, drop to my knees facing south and waft the pungent smoke over my head and around my shoulders. I turn to the east, now north, and then to the west, and then back to the south, each time repeating the ritual. My universe reconfigures as the smudging ceremony liberates my mind, soul, and spirit.

I stand and say, “Thank you my brother, I feel much better now.” “You are welcome, my friend,” and then he adds, “you are better now!” Yes, I think to myself, I am better now. I am better for knowing these people, their ways, and their faith. I am better for being here on this bright, glorious morning. I continue my walk along
the rows of buckskin leggings, ribbon shirts, moccasins, craft demonstrations, and artesian displays.

Various booths feature cooking demonstrations, ancient hunting weapons, and handmade regalia. Flint knappers hide tanners, and storytellers all capture the attention of various visitors, now filing into the meadow. This is like a trip back in time. Curious visitors stare at the Native Americans and their way of living, but this time the onlookers cast no shame.

In the shade, I meet a Native American with a chiseled face and weathered brow. He smiles and shows a mouth full of beautifully sculptured, white teeth. His highly placed cheekbones offer a unique profile. He holds his chin upward and seems content to be himself. I speak a greeting, and he returns one. We chat. I like him.

Soon we are deep in philosophical conversation about September 11th, the economy, and Native American topics. I hit upon his button. He takes off on a path of discourse that I am more than delighted to follow. He is a storyteller, so the path, blazed with colorful words, leads me to the inside of Second Son’s native heart and soul. Through his bright smile, eyes of experience, and well-chosen words, I receive a vision of ancient truth.

“My brother, I tell you of a truth that few have the heart to consider. Yet, you are one who seeks the knowledge from the elders and the ancient ones, so I will tell you. Listen now as I tell you. We are all like trees. Even the white man’s Bible tells the story of one seeing men like trees walking. And so we are…all people are trees walking.

“We are trees rooted in a place, traditions, and time. Sometimes education feeds us, faithfulness to family waters the roots of our souls, and faith prunes the dead limbs of indecision and apathy. We have different colored bark, you and I, and we grow on different mountains, but we are the same. We are all just trees in the forest of the Great Creator.”

He looks intently in my face and deeply into my eyes and he senses, or sees my uncertainty. Where, I wonder, is this conversation going? He shifts his weight on the cushion of pine needles and his blanket, rediscovers the path of his thought, and continues his narrative.

“Yes, my brother, we are trees, you and I. And I tell you that the leaves of the tree hang like words, but our deeds drop like fruit.”

The old man stops to make sure I heard and understood and then he repeats the phrase like a graduate school professor making a point, “Words fall like leaves, deeds taste like fruit, and we grow as the trees.”

The impromptu seminar ends. He has others standing near wanting to visit, and I have taken up my share
of time. My spirit yearns to linger and partake more of the honey-coated voice of the Native American storyteller, but others yearn also. Mostly out of courtesy to the others waiting, I move on along the row of booths.

Yes, I move physically but I remain with him emotionally and spiritually. I think about trees. Somehow, at this moment, something about this vision seems so very profound. I wonder if my colleagues at the communication conference would care. I question how the Native American storyteller’s words might fit into the world of academia, and I smile to think about academia fitting into his world. If this moment, phrase, or this chance meeting has so moved me, I wonder how I could convey these powerful observations to others.

I contemplate the power and meaning in the words I have heard. They carry layered meanings, yet I understand the deliberate message. On this warm, Saturday afternoon in Georgia, I ponder the potency of these words and their meanings for tomorrow. Will I remember them tomorrow? I think I will. I stop. In front of me, as if placed by an unseen spiritual guide, I see a sliver of cedar bark curiously displayed on the ground before me. The cedar bark is significant to me. I know from previous discoveries that cedar holds sacred meaning to the Shawnee Native Americans. Besides, I like the smell of cedar. I pick up the cedar shaving in my hand, instinctively hold it to my nose, and draw a long breath, the cedar filling my senses with a euphoric sense of peace.

I have my pen and small notebook. I pull out my pen and write his words…the storyteller’s words on the cedar. Now I know they will last. Now I know that they will be potent tomorrow. I have recorded them, as a true ethnographer should. I think about the small ink symbols on the sliver of cedar. Words live on cedar. The Shawnee like to say, “as long as there is cedar there will be Shawnee. The cedar has heart just like Shawnee” (Standing Bear, 2000). The full impact of the moment thunders in my mind. The words will last forever, inscribed on cedar, the only wood with heart…Native American heart. The words have gone full circle and now my universe seems complete.

Words As Leaves

Wood smoke fills the air and cooking smells lightly touch my consciousness. Indian fry bread, corn cakes and beans cooked for hours call out to the hungry. I want to eat, but the need to feel this experience is more urgent. Consuming food at this juncture seems more like a chore, and I decide to continue enjoying the power of the celebration. Yet, Second Son’s words kept haunting me. Having spent the past week in conference sessions dealing with communication, I think about Second Son’s assertions regarding words, deeds and people, and a possible
connection with communication theory.

Although an estimated one hundred seventy-five (175) indigenous languages are spoken within the boundaries of the United States, experts estimate that approximately twenty (20) are being actively taught to the children of these indigenous groups. Linguists estimate that within two generations, most of these languages will disappear altogether (Thornton, 1998). This scenario demonstrates Second Son’s point that words are fleeting like leaves in the fall. Many times, spoken words seem to have little lasting impact. Yet, in some instances, the spoken word seems to enhance the power and influence of some personalities.

An examination of the Shawnee warrior Tecumseh (1768-1813) may lend support to the assertions of Second Son. Although Tecumseh had a magnetic personality, remarkable military strategic skills, unusual bravery and a humane sense of ethics, one of the most outstanding qualities of this well-known Native American leader was his oratory skill. Tecumseh is remembered as one of the great, moving speakers of his time (Edmunds, 1984). He spent most of his adult life trying to persuade the Six Nations to ally themselves with the other Native American tribes in Ohio and Indiana to stop the encroachment of the white man. He spoke with the rhetorical power of a statesman and leader. Because of his immense talent and ability, the British commissioned Tecumseh as a brigadier general in the forces of Canada (Nerburn, 1999).

Tecumseh attempted to forge a powerful pan-Indian confederacy through personal appearances and a relentless speaking campaign that rivals any contemporary political campaign effort. Though he always spoke in Shawnee, and few of his speeches were recorded or translated, Tecumseh has been consistently recognized as a powerful orator (Edmunds, 1984). Edmunds writes that, “he spoke with force and eloquence” (p. 84). William Henry Harrison, at the time serving as the governor of Indiana Territory, called Tecumseh the “Moses of the Red family” because of his great rhetorical skills (Edmunds). Harrison also wrote:

For four years he has been in constant motion. Today on the Wabash River, tomorrow on the shores of Lake Erie or Lake Michigan and wherever he goes he makes an impression favorable for his purpose. In another time or place, he could be an ambassador for a great country or build an empire like that of the Aztecs in Mexico or Incas in Peru (Edmunds, 154).

Some Native American words remain a remembrance and thunder through the souls of persons who stop and listen. Tecumseh said:

“The whites only take from Mother Earth, they give nothing back to Her.”
The Great Spirit gave this island to the Red Children. We are required to protect this great gift. The Great Spirit intended this to be the property of all the tribes, nor can it sold without the consent of us all.

The white man had no knowledge of this land when they first came here. They could not live here until they received the knowledge of the Red Man. Then, after they received the knowledge, they took the land also.

How is it that you think that you can buy or sell the earth? Would you sell your mother’s bosom? Can you capture the air, the lightening or clouds in order to sell them? I think the Red Man’s way is better. Living with the Great Spirit and in harmony with Mother Earth.

As for us, our lives are in the hands of the Great Spirit. We are determined to defend our lands, and if it be the will of the Great Spirit, we will leave our bones on these lands as we defend them! (Edmunds, 189).

As I walk through the meadow, I look up at the trees and notice the leaves. When I was a boy, I collected leaves for a biology class. By collecting, pressing and drying the leaves, they took on a more permanent status…they became more than just fleeting memories. The leaf collection allowed me to revisit the leaf samples time after time and investigate their properties, construction and similarities to other leaves. Like my old biology leaf collection, we have a few samples of Tecumseh’s words and we continue to revisit his speeches. We can hear faint echoes of Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Chief Logan, Leatherlips, Geronimo, and others. We strain to hear and we strive to listen!

Words can be delightful, like a big pile of leaves in autumn. Each fall, people rake leaves into a huge pile. When children see the red, yellow, and brown mountains of leaves, they squeal with delight and jump directly into the middle. Those of us, who study words and their power, collect them much like biology students collect leaves. We catalogue words, study them, dissect them, watch them working in their phrases and ponder their various contextual meanings. In a sense, like children, we collect words and jump in the middle of them with squeals of delight.

Sequoyah is another example of a Native American who understood the value of words. “Sequoyah is celebrated as an illiterate Indian genius who, solely from the resources of his mind, endowed a whole tribe (the Cherokee) with learning. Sequoyah was the only man in 5,000 years to conceive and perfect in its entirety a syllabary” (King, 1984). Sequoyah saw samples of the white man’s writing and often called it “magic.” In fact, after
examining several samples of the writing, he began to call the mysterious pages the “talking leaves” (King, 1984).

Sequoyah decided that the Cherokee should have the ability to use talking leaves in their own language, so he began to make an alphabet for his people. After twelve long years, “he completed his syllabary, composed of eighty-five symbols, each representing a sound in the Cherokee spoken language. The simplicity of the syllabary, its easy adaptability to the speech and thought of the Cherokees, enabled many of his people to master the plan in a few days. The Cherokee nation was practically made literate in a few months” (King, 1984).

Today, I am moving through a predominantly Native American crowd of people thinking about leaves, words and ethnic heroes of the past. I see Cherokee, Lakota, Dakota, Shawnee and Ojibwa. I smile and decide that these people are the cultural and ethnic heroes of today. I move toward the dance arena and search for a seat. The announcer over the intercom informs us that the dancing will soon begin. I find a place and sit down. Let the dancing begin!

Deeds As Fruit

The drums rumble through the meadow. Dancers move rhythmically through the dance arena. Each move represents feelings, prayers and wishes of the dancer. Earlier, I asked Black Eagle why he danced. He said, “Because I can.” I am still thinking about that answer. I suppose he means that some can’t do these dances, or they don’t know how. Maybe he means that his health allows him to dance, so therefore he does. Maybe he feels the dance or hears the Great Spirit telling him to dance. Maybe he means all of those things. Possibly, each person should ponder the message and decide on the meaning.

Of all the activities preserved by native cultures, the dance seems to be one art form that characterizes and typifies the history, tradition, and custom of each particular tribe. Native Americans say that the drum is the heart beat of the tribe. The dance gives evidence that the heart is still beating (Howard, 1981). In this Pow Wow, the little children dance, the young people dance, the men dance, and the women dance. When you are with Native Americans, you literally see the beat of the drum in the dance.

The actions, or deeds observed during a Pow Wow, certainly help define the new role of the Native American in mainstream, modern culture. The dancing, regalia, celebration, and other activities call mainstream America back to nature, creation, and to a balanced consciousness. I observe the audience smile, laugh, and glow with evident admiration as they watch the various dancers and presenters work their magic. The audience reacts
with great enthusiasm and intense respect.

I questioned, at first, if this were nothing more than a cheap merchandising opportunity, or mere commercialization of Native culture. I kept watching. I soon realized that the Native Americans teach the onlookers about their culture, their beliefs, and their hopes through this event. The Pow Wow emerges as a showcase of artistic skills, musical abilities, and narrative expression. Also, the weekend meeting serves as a reunion for all of the participants. This series of deeds operates as a connection between the past, the present, and the future.

Burke described people managing their social situations through the use of language and symbolic acts (Burke, 1978). Burke and William Shakespeare contend that people are actors on a stage, players in a global theater (Burke, 1967). As Burke (1970) predicted, an audience responds and follows the message of the *Pow Wow*. Meaning emerges as the audience and presenters exchange symbolic acts.

Symbols are evident everywhere in the *Pow Wow*. The master of ceremonies calls on the dancers to line up in front of the “eastern gate” of the dance arena. Here, all of the Native American dancers enter and exit this “gate,” which represents the lighted portal of the world (arena). Eagle feathers, carefully placed on regalia, represent power, bravery, and renowned actions (deeds). The Native Americans coordinate their lives by creating special social realities through their symbols.

**Symbolic actions, or human deeds, are the fruit of our social interaction.** We judge others by the fruit they demonstrate. Our personalities, values, and character are measured by our own daily deeds. On this bright, warm Georgia Saturday, the smiles, gestures, and greetings of all Native Americans accompany their confident walk, precision dance, and the friendly overtures. Goodall suggests that all actions speak volumes about the culture of a people. Goodall (1998) writes,

“*Our lived experiences within a given cultural space form and define our exploratory boundaries. Our lived experiences situate our selves within a context of others.*” (364)

The people of the *Pow Wow* set the boundaries, generate the themes, announce the narratives, deliver the
messages, create the culture, and define the “somewhere” (Goodall, 1998). I move through their space, or the boundaries they have created. Once again I smile, so amused that hundreds of Native Americans dance these sacred grounds situated between a massive plantation house and a mountain of naked granite. As Goodall (1998) suggests,

> “Persons interact within real and imagined places, and what goes on in the imagination of relational partners is often as meaningful (if not more so) than what actually gets recorded in a behaviorally oriented transcript.” (364)

Moving through the space of this meadow, I look for the time machine. How else could I explain the vision now before me? Here dances a handsome indigenous American with bright yellow paint layered thickly against his cheek. His hair softly falls away from his shoulders as he aptly steps out the “men’s traditional straight dance” (Second Son, 2001). He carries a four foot-long dance stick, pointing out imaginary animal tracks and scaring away fictitious snakes. His clothing seems to have come from the hands of a Native American women’s circle dating back to the 1790’s.

How else could I be watching this event? I have been transported back in time by symbolic regalia, dance, artifacts, and cultural actions. The deeds of these cultural icons have recreated past times and spaces. Narratives are born and reborn. Observers open all sensory gates in order to take in the stimuli presented. We are participating in what I call a “sixth sensing” of the Pow Wow. In other words, we see, smell, hear, touch, taste and spiritually feel the presence of the ancients, the traditions, the voices, the heritage, and the culture of this group. Like a sports star, we have moved out of normalcy and into ‘the zone.’ We symbolically merge with the past and the future, transported metaphysically within the experience.

Deeds of a people provide clues to their personalities, character, and even motives. Observing these deeds keeps the ethnographer engaged in the culture under study. Deeds of a people are much like the fruit of a tree. Cursory glances can reveal color and size, but only close and methodical inspection reveals the texture, flavor, and quality of the fruit. For deep understanding, we must taste, and actually sample the fruit of any given culture (Klopf, 2001).

When I was young, living on our Indiana farm, my father took us to those fertile fields in search of watermelon during each fall harvest season. We always went to Boppy Burcham’s farm. I remember mountains of watermelon right there in his front yard. Dad liked to buy melons from Boppy because he would “plug” the melons. I can still see Boppy taking out his razor sharp pocketknife, cutting out a wedge from the chosen melon, and offer-
ing my dad a taste. Dad put that bright, red fruit sample in his mouth, swallowed slowly and then he would smile and say, “Oh, that is real. That is real!” Every actor in this little drama knew that was a watermelon. That fact was never in question. My dad wanted to know how the melon tasted, he needed to see the color, feel the texture and let his senses judge the fruit.

Ethnographers plug the fruit of culture. Through this means, we learn what is “real” to the culture under investigation. Ethnographers can carry the message, through thick description, to others. I taste the Native American “fry bread” and wish my dad could have some too. I enjoy studying the fruit of the Native American culture.

**People As Trees**

“And he looked up, and said, ‘I see men as trees, walking!’” (Mark 8:22) “We hear trees speaking. I asked the children, ‘have you ever heard a tree talk?’ They all shook their heads and said, ‘no, we have never heard a tree talk.’ I waited and then said, ‘Maybe you have never heard a tree talk because you have never listened’” (Second Son, 2001). Native Americans contend that trees, plants, animals, and people all have a place in the circle of life. All living creatures are important, needed entities in the universe. All living creatures, great or small, make up the living context.

The roots of Native American dances, dress and traditions germinated long before the Europeans walked these lands. The roots of the Native American grow deeply into the context of nature and Mother Earth. Their knowledge of herbs, healing, animals, the environment, and the earth continues to amaze and mystify anthropologists.

As the dancing begins, the Native Americans organize a color guard that enters the “eastern gate” first. The color guard (three Native American men) carry the American flag, a flag of the Vietnam conflict, and the POW flag. Other men and women follow the color guard, dressed in their symbolic and special regalia, demonstrate to others that these people are proud to be Americans (Chipa Wolf, 2001). “We are not here today,” proclaims *Chipa Wolf*, organizer of the *Pow Wow*, “to judge or criticize anyone. We are not worrying about being politically correct. We have come here with you today in order to celebrate being Indian. You can call us Indian, American Indian, or Native American. We are not worried about titles. We know who we are!” I think that others can learn from this cultural self-assuredness.

“The practical theories that social scientists develop should investigate communication as the primary
form of experience, *within* which are created ways of thinking, cultures, institutions, relationships, forms of selfhood, feelings, technologies, and specific communication episodes” (Cronen, 1980). *Second Son* kept saying, after each dance ended, “There are good feelings out there…very good feelings.” He is right, of course. Children laugh, parents smile, and a retired couple shoot video in an effort to capture the good feelings. The grass dancers stomp and pounce through the arena as if they chase an unseen predator, biting at their moccasins. We all watch with wide-eyed wonderment.

All the while, I keep wishing I could dance. I want to dance like that. I want to be like a tree, dancing. I want deep cultural roots, colorful leaves that offer beauty and meaning to all who stop to enjoy them. I want fruit with excellent quality and texture. I want to stand tall and straight and know who I am and be content with that knowledge. I realize that I am in the right *place*, at the right *time* with the right *people*. This Pow Wow is my context and my reality. Now I understand. I can dance! Today, I have learned how. Here, between the plantation house and the granite mountain, I have looked back in time and witnessed the future. I know the directions of the universe, and my world is in balance.

**Trees as Forests**

Social scientists have long studied the concept of community (Minar and Greer, 1969). It is my contention that trees constitute a forest in the same way people constitute a community. Even a child knows that numerous trees constitute a forest, and we cannot see the forest without the trees. If people are the trees, the different types of trees express diversity making the forest beautiful. In similar fashion, I believe diversity strengthens a community (Klopf, 2001). In many respects, this cultural event has been a lesson in the arts, communication, sociology, and history.

I hiked through this particular forest with great anticipation, satisfaction, and contentment. I thought about the value of leaves, fruit, and trees in a forest. I recognize the power of words, for words persuade and carry meaning as the building blocks for communication. Yet, the spoken word seems to endure no longer than leaves blowing in the fall winds. We must be about more than merely words.

Deeds provide clues to culture, people’s personalities and the character of an entire nation. Ethnographers become inspectors of fruit by observing the texture, colors, quality, shapes, and sizes of the fruit under investigation. People may be likened to the trees of a forest, for “by their fruit you shall know them.” Leaves are repre-
sented by the words of symbolic communication, fruit by a history of human deeds, and roots by their potential for future growth and human development.

I leave the Pow Wow with a sense of peace and gratification. Today, I visited a new space and experienced a new reality. I have experienced time travel, at least in symbolic form. I am better because of my travel within the world of Native American culture. I have only plugged the fruit of Native American culture. I have been given only a taste, and it has helped me better determine who I am. As I begin my drive toward Atlanta, I know I can better appreciate my place in the forest.

I guide the car to the highway and head toward the National Communication Conference. I must return and take my place in the forest. I must return to my roots and share with others the talking leaves, so that the fruit of human deeds may grow into a strong, longstanding forest of awareness and acceptance.

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