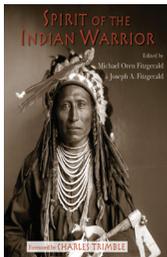


Book Review



SPIRIT OF THE INDIAN WARRIOR

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Reviewed by
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SINCE THE MOST REMOTE TIMES, the warrior can be found across the diverse societies and civilizations of the world as serving a sacred function. Some examples of the warrior can be found in the warrior caste of the *Kshatriya* of India, in the military religious orders of medieval Europe such as the Knights of Templar, or the warrior caste of the Samurai in Japan. The warrior is also found within the First Peoples religious and shamanic traditions the world over. For the warrior, the only reward desired was, in Thayendanega's words, "the consciousness of having served his nation." So central was risking one's life on the battlefield that it is a vital dimension for indigenous people's identity. "That is what makes a man: to fight and to be brave," as Lone Chief was told at a young age by his mother. Without embodying the courage and heroic virtues that are required to risk one's life on the battlefield, it was believed by many traditional peoples that this was a sign of individual and societal degeneration. Through rigorous training the warrior learns to bring balance and integration to both the inner and outer dimensions of what it means to be a human being. Contrary to the contemporary mindset, the warrior is not an advocate of aggression and violence, but out of compassion and peace.

"We are people of peace," adds an unidentified Hopi; however, if attacked they will respond: "But we do this only in self-defense."

There is an essential symbolic and metaphysical aspect of war that escapes common interpretations. Ultimately, the real battle is a spiritual warfare that is waged within the human heart, which is symbolic of the battlefield of terrestrial existence. This is explicitly found within the Islamic tradition when the prophet Muhammad refers to two different types of jihad or "holy war." The one more commonly known yet no less misunderstood and abused is that of the "lesser holy war" (*al-jihād al-asghar*), which seeks to protect the lovers of God through social or military efforts. The second is the "greater holy war" (*al-jihād al-akbar*), which was considered to be the highest form of spiritual warfare, one that takes place on the battlefield of the seeker's heart. It is significant that since the earliest times spiritual warfare has been made use of, as can be seen within the shamanic or primordial religion of the First Peoples. Medicine man and Sun Dance chief Thomas Yellowtail explains:

[T]he sun dancer and the Sun Dance itself will bless all of the tribe and all creation through the inner, spiritual warfare.... The warrior fights an enemy who is on the outside; the sun dancer wages a war on an enemy within himself. Each of us must fight a continuing battle to keep to the spiritual values that represent our traditional heritage. If we fail to be continually alert in our prayers and our attitudes and to use good sense in all that we do, then we will fail in our interior war. In olden days, this interior warfare had the support of the whole tribe, and our life itself helped to guide us in our personal struggle. Nowadays, we must follow the Sun Dance way all the more carefully, because it contains the key to our sacred warfare.¹

This strikingly designed volume,

SPIRIT OF THE INDIAN WARRIOR, depicts through carefully selected quotes, beautiful photographs, and paintings the sacred dimension of the American Indian warriors and tribal leaders. Some twenty-nine Native American tribes are represented in this work, which depicts an intimate window into their cultural values that speak in unison of the importance of courage, loyalty, and generosity not only for the warrior but of all people.

The contemporary mind appears to be convinced that an easy or stress-free life is the most desirable life. As a consequence of this, leisure is deemed as an end unto itself and not as a pause from activity to deepen the human connection with the sacred. A Tohono O'odham or Papago song speaks to this and suggests otherwise:

Is it for me to eat what food I have
And all day sit idle?
Is it for me to drink the sweet water
poured out
And all day sit idle?
Is it for me to gaze upon my wife
And all day sit idle?
Is it for me to hold my child in my arms
And all day sit idle?

On the contrary, the First Nations peoples taught the value and importance of struggle, as James Kaywaykla explains:

Grandfather impressed upon me that every struggle, whether won or lost, strengthens us for the next to come. It is not good for people to have an easy life. They become weak and inefficient when they cease to struggle. Some need a series

of defeats before developing the strength and courage to win a victory.

Charity and regard for all people, especially the elderly and those less fortunate, was not only a part of the ethos of First Peoples but also of its warriors. As the mother of Lone Chief points out, “Take pity on people who are poor, because we have been poor and people have taken pity on us.” This concern for others is again conveyed here by the Lakota holy man Hehaka Sapa, more commonly known as Black Elk:

A warrior who had more than he needed would make a feast. He went around and invited the old and needy.... The man who could thank the food—some worthy old medicine man or warrior—said “... look to the old, they are worthy of old age; they have seen their days and proven themselves. With the help of the Great Spirit, they have attained a ripe old age. At this age the old can predict or give knowledge or wisdom, whatever it is; it is so....”

According to the mother of Lone Chief, the warrior had to “Be brave, and face whatever danger may meet [him].” Upon entering the battlefield, states White Footprint, “The warrior does not fight out of compulsion [but of] personal bravery.” Red Bird points out that the entire tribe benefits from the selflessness of the warrior as, “The warriors went on the warpath for the protection of the tribe and its hunting grounds.” An unidentified Paiute conveys, “My soul said to me in a dream: ‘I shall never kill anyone; but in self-defense I will fight it out to the finish.’” While the warrior sought glory, and may boast of this

glory obtained on the battlefield, Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman) points out that “it was the degree of risk that brought honor rather than the number slain.” At the same time, there was a recognition and discernment between senseless aggression and violence, and interventions that were required. In this regard, Wahunsenacawh makes an important point by way of a provocative question: “Why will you take by force what you may have quietly by love? ... What can you get by war?”

At the center of all First Nations peoples’ lives was the reverence for the sacred. There was in fact nothing that was or is divorced from the transcendent or Divine. Tecumseh affirms, “we must love the Great Spirit: he is for us,” or as the mother of Lone Chief shares, “You must trust always in Tirawa. He made us, and through Him we live.” Red Fox points out, “Wakan Tanka [Great Spirit] has but one path. No matter how or where you die you must go by that path. Let us stand together and fight.”

In view of the flux and impermanence of terrestrial existence, the warrior was always ready to face his or her mortality. As a death song recalls, “Nothing lives long, except the earth and the mountains.” Or as Little Bear expressed to a young Iron Hawk: “Take courage, boy! The earth is all that lasts!” Plenty Coups remembers, “The old men have told us that nothing here can last forever.” The continual mindfulness of the impermanence of all things was balanced with the perpetual remembrance that the Great Spirit is all there is whether in this world or in the world to come. It is this spiritual disposition that instilled fearlessness in the face of death. As Plenty Coups recalls, “let us make our hearts sing

because our friend died unafraid.” Ohiyesa elaborates on this idea: “The attitude of the Indian toward death, the test and background of life, is entirely consistent with his character and philosophy. Death has no terror for him; he meets it with simplicity and perfect calm, seeking only an honorable end as his last gift to his family and descendants.” This is again confirmed here, “If Coacoochee is to die, he can die like a man. It is not my heart that shakes; no, it never trembles.... The sun shines bright today, the day is clear; so let your hearts be: the Great Spirit will guide you.” Awareness and concentration on the present moment was and is paramount to the First Nations peoples because it allows for the doorway to the Eternal to open, which is none other than the entrance to the spirit world itself.

Wooden Leg makes an interesting note about the meaning of clothing on the battlefield:

All of the best clothing was taken along with him when any warrior set out upon a search for conflict. If a battle seemed about to occur, the warrior’s first important preparatory act was to jerk off all his ordinary clothing. He then hurriedly got out his fine garments. If he had time to do so he rebranded his hair, painted his face in his own particular way, did everything needful to prepare himself for presenting the most splendid personal appearance. That is, he got himself ready to die. The idea of full dress in preparation for a battle comes not from a belief that it will add to the fighting ability. The preparation is for death, in case that should be the result of the conflict. Every Indian wants to look his best when he goes to meet the Great Spirit....

He continues by speaking to the meaning of naked warriors on the battlefield:

The naked fighters, among the Cheyennes and Sioux, were such warriors as specially fortified themselves by prayer and other devotional exercises. They had special instruction from medicine men. Their naked bodies were painted in peculiar ways, each according to the direction of his favorite spiritual guide, and each had his own medicine charm given to him by this guide. A warrior thus made ready for battle was supposed to be proof against the weapons of the enemy. He placed himself in the forefront of the attack or the defenses. His thought was: “I am so protected by my medicine that I do not need to dress for death. No bullet nor arrow can harm me now.”

The steadfast faith and connection to the natural world is inseparable from the First Peoples religion and shamanic traditions. As Red Cloud observes, “The Great Spirit made us...and gave us this land.... I shall soon lie down to rise no more. While my spirit is with my body the smoke of my breath shall be towards the Sun for he knows all things and knows that I am still true to him.”

Apache chief and medicine man Geronimo details at length the rigorous preparation of a young person to become a warrior:

To be admitted as a warrior a youth must have gone with the warriors of his tribe four separate times on the warpath.... On each of these expeditions he acts as servant, cares for the horses, cooks the food, and does whatever duties he should do without being told. He knows what things are to be done, and without waiting to be told is to do them. He is not allowed to speak to any warrior

except in answer to questions or when told to speak. During these four wars he is expected to learn the sacred names of everything used in war, for after the tribe enters upon the warpath no common names are used in referring to anything appertaining to war in any way. War is a solemn religious matter.

If, after four expeditions, all the warriors are satisfied that the youth has been industrious, has not spoken out of order, has been discreet in all things, has shown courage in battle, has borne all hardships uncomplainingly, and has exhibited no color of cowardice, or weakness of any kind, he may, by vote of the council, be admitted as a warrior; but if any warrior objects to him upon any account he will be subjected to further tests, and if he meets these courageously, his name may again be proposed.

When he has proven beyond question that he can bear hardships without complaint, and that he is a stranger to fear, he is admitted to the council of the warriors in the lowest rank. After this there is no formal test for promotions, but by common consent he assumes a station on the battlefield, and if that position is maintained with honor, he is allowed to keep it, and may be asked, or may volunteer, to take a higher station, but no warrior could presume to take a higher station unless he had assurance from the leaders of the tribe that his conduct in the first position was worthy of commendation.

The above passage presents the challenging trials and ordeals that go into developing an integral character.

The ethical duty of the warrior to live a noble life rooted in spiritual principles is conveyed in the potent words of Geronimo:

The Earth-Mother is listening to me and I hope that all may be so arranged that from now on there shall be no trouble and that we shall always have peace.... While living I want to live well. I know I have to die sometime, but even if the heavens were to fall on me, I want to do what is right....I never do wrong without a cause....We are all children of the one God. God is listening to me. The sun, the darkness, the winds, are all listening to what we now say.

The education of a warrior was inseparable from understanding the depths of the natural world and its spiritual dimensions. As Lone Man recalls,

When I was a young man I went to a medicine-man for advice concerning my future. The medicine-man said: "I have not much to tell you except to help you understand this earth on which you live. If a man is to succeed on the hunt or the warpath, he must not be governed by his inclination, but by an understanding of the ways of animals and of his natural surroundings, gained through close observation...." The medicine-man told me to observe my natural surroundings, and after my talk with him I observed them closely. I watched the changes of the weather, the habits of animals, and all the things by which I might be guided in the future, and I stored this knowledge in my mind.

The First Peoples' education made room for all types of learners and left none behind. An example of this is when a boy or girl "who might be less capable than others," or when they have "failed at any lesson got only more lessons, more care, until he [or she] went as far as he [or she] could go."

Some women also served the role

as warriors. Moving Robe, a Sioux female warrior, comments: "I was a woman, but I was not afraid.... I am a woman, but I fought for my people." A Winnebago song captures the nobility of the female warrior:

Greatly
She

Defending her children
The old woman
Fought for us all.

The old-time Indians remember the pre-reservation days and lament about the present-day life of Indians on the reservation, which marks an end to their traditional lifeways. Two Leggings echoes this sentiment when referring to the reservation era and its impact on their traditional way of life: "Nothing happened after that."

Sitting Bull, a Hunkpapa Lakota chief who was a powerful force in the resistance to United States government policies, exposes the hypocrisy in the way that the Native American peoples have been treated in this country: "What treaty that the whites have kept has the red man broken? Not one. What treaty that the whites ever made with us red men have they kept? Not one." Sadly, this destructive legacy has not ended but continues into the present-day as Native people are still struggling for their sovereignty and right to self-determination.

The warrior spirit and tradition is still alive today and is visible within the United States military and its veterans as indigenous peoples throughout Indian country have defended and continue to defend this nation. Native peoples have fought in every war that this nation has gone into battle with to protect

this nation, and see it an obligation and a duty to defend this nation and its peoples regardless of the injustice and harm that that this country inflicts on indigenous peoples. Although the Native American Indian's service to this nation has been greatly overlooked, the historical record is being corrected today for past generations, contemporaries, and future generations to come.

Despite the United States government's attempts to erase the identity of the First Nations peoples in this country and make them white, the irony is that they are some of the most patriotic people in this country. Contrary to non-Indian veterans who are often forgotten in this country and often end up as homeless with alcohol, substance use, and mental health issues without receiving the necessary support and treatment, Native American veterans are not only remembered as warriors but are deeply honored for their sacrifice and service within their indigenous communities. Plenty Coups recounts, "My heart sings with pride when I think of the fighting my people, the red men of all tribes, did in this last great war [World War I]; and if ever the hands of my own people hold the rope that keeps this country's flag high in the air, it will never come down while an Absarokee [Crow] warrior lives."

This book is an essential resource for understanding the First Peoples and the spiritual function of the warrior. In a world where the ascendancy of violence blindly defaults to a confused and futile strategy of resolving human conflicts through violence, the tradition of the warrior as found across the diverse cultures of the world teaches

otherwise. This work reminds us of the timeless wisdom found in the First Peoples' lifeways and the need to be in balance and harmony not only with other human beings but with the natural world and the entire web of life. This collection of voices from the First Peoples affirms our need to live life fully in the here-and-now with courage, dignity, and respect for all life. The warrior is permanently mindful of the present moment and its connection to the sacred. It is apt to recall that no matter how bleak a predicament we may find ourselves in, we must not feed the forces of despair and nihilism, for the Great Spirit will always provide guidance should we call upon it and willingly choose to live in accordance with its instructions. This is something that the First Peoples always knew and continue to model into the present-day. As Black Hawk upholds: "The path to glory is rough, and many gloomy hours obscure it. May the Great Spirit shed light on yours." ♦

¹ Thomas Yellowtail, quoted in Michael Oren Fitzgerald, *YELLOWTAIL, CROW MEDICINE MAN AND SUN DANCE CHIEF: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 139-140.

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