

Remembering Lekshi John

Lekshi John Around Him died two months ago. He was an Oglala Lakota elder and spiritual leader who taught Lakota language and culture for many years at Little Wound High School and Oglala Lakota College in Kyle, South Dakota on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Uncle John, as he was known to many people on and off the Rez, died of cancer in his home near Last Horse Creek surrounded by his children and grandchildren. During his lifetime he taught me, and many other people, the Lakota sweat lodge songs, and his 1982 recordings of the songs are still the best comprehensive record of the traditional form of the Lakota inipi songs. I wanted to write an informal eulogy for Lekshi John to try to get at the significance of both his life and his death.

Uncle John was part of a generation of Lakota who were forced into BIA boarding schools at a very early age and forbidden to speak their native language. As a result, he and many others grew up in a schizophrenic world. They lived their school years at boarding schools speaking English, learning Christianity, and being trained to assimilate under brutal conditions. "Kill the Indian; save the man," was still a guiding philosophy of education. Meanwhile they lived their vacations in rural camps surrounded by their tiyospaye, their extended family unit, hunting, riding horse, practicing traditional spiritual ceremonies. Many members of that generation still suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome as a result of their time at the boarding schools. Many of them can no longer speak their first language. Many of them suffer from adrenal disorders, thought to be linked to intense early life emotional trauma. Many of them are dying in their early 60s.

Uncle John was a native Lakota speaker and he never stopped speaking the language. As a young man he enlisted in the Army and was sent to Vietnam, where he suffered a severe shrapnel wound in his stomach that nearly killed him. After the war, he came back to the Reservation and struggled to find his direction. Like many fellow veterans he battled alcoholism, using the bottle to cope with an overwhelmingly confused world with almost no employment opportunities. These days it's pretty easy to forget what it was like to be Native in those days. Everyone likes Indians now (except in States where they live.) At that time the Reservation was a prison, surrounded by hostile white ranching communities and hostile local police forces and a non-existent local economy. It's not that much different today, but the isolation there is not what it once was.

Uncle John found his way out of alcoholism and out of confusion by returning to his roots and remembering the spiritual teachings of his own father and grandfather. Uncle John took on the role of hoka wicasa, a type of spiritual custodian of sacred ceremonial songs. The English does not do justice to that title. A hoka wicasa is someone who hears the songs at a spiritual level, knows their applications and origins, and has the ability to hear new songs when they want to come into being. The role is something like a monastic scribe, a Greek cantor, and a country pastor all rolled into one person and with the Lakota understanding that there are no categories when it comes to the One Being. In the 1970s some of the great spiritual leaders of the Lakota were still around, men like Frank Fools Crow and Henry Crow Dog. These men had grown up with first-hand accounts of Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee. They were taught to be medicine men by other medicine men and the stories about them still exist, stories about wizardry, shape-shifting, future-telling. But the continuity of their teaching was threatened by a generation gap, and when they died in the 1980s it was men like Uncle John who took on the mantle of preserving the traditional way of the Lakota, the ikce wicasa ta wolakota.

Uncle John started a sundance ceremony and he ran that sundance until this past summer when he appointed his oldest son Milton Around Him to succeed him as sundance leader. The sundance is the central annual ceremony of the Lakota spiritual calendar and takes place four days in mid-summer. Uncle John's sundance became a home to many people—they were married there, memorialized there, they met there. Sundances are almost always run by medicine men, men who run a prayer altar that has been recognized by other medicine men. This was not true in Uncle John's case and I think that fact is emblematic of Lekshi John's life and the role he played in his community. He always wanted an altar but he never had a dream to claim it and so he waited his whole life for it patiently and it never came.

These days it would be very easy for a man like Uncle John to claim an altar. He was highly respected by all of the recognized medicine men around. Besides, legitimacy is no longer a unanimous proposition on the reservation. The traditions are murky, the lineages contested, the hierarchy of spiritual leaders muddled. Perhaps it was always that way.

But Uncle John knew somehow in his heart that he had not been given an altar and he was content to play his role as hoka wicasa until the time was right for him.

Uncle John embodied the best qualities of the his community, the ones he taught in his classroom, the seven central values. He also embodied the contradictions of his time. He was a marine. He was a sundance leader. He marched the colors for the legion. He sang the Lakota flag song at basketball games. Uncle John was a family man. He was a public symbol of the Lakota language movement.

In my time knowing Uncle John, I knew him as a teaching mentor, a community elder, a sundance leader. I saw his different faces. He was not a saint. He was a leader. He was a spiritual teacher. He was a man of many levels, and he used his complexity to maintain his simplicity.

Uncle John's most lasting legacy will be the way he taught his children to know and respect the songs. He left us all an example of what it means to live the way of the spiritual common man, the ikce wicasa ta wolakota. At a time when all of us look around and outside for spiritual authority, Uncle John was an example of a man who earned it and claimed it little by little by accepting the responsibilities and burdens placed at his feet. There are other men like Uncle John in his generation, but not so many that they shouldn't be eulogized properly.

I know his family is full of grief right now, and my heart goes out to them. They should know that Uncle John marked many of us with his teaching, his gentleness. I remember driving in a truck with him. He pointed at a treeline and said he had not felt comfortable around them since the war. He lit up a Bull Durham, laughed and shook his head.