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Joseph Epes Brown
Teaching Spirits

Understanding Native American
Religious Traditions

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JOSEPH EPES BROWN

with Emily Cousins

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FOREWORD

How You Speak Could Change the World

I AM A CHIPPEWA-CREE from the Rocky Boy Reservation. I am forty-two years old. My dad, John Gilbert Meyers, was born in 1932 and pretty much was raised traditional. He raised us eleven kids with the old traditional style of living, of showing respect, of not being too boastful, of taking things real slow, and of respecting the things that we don't understand.

Meeting Joe was a really good experience for me. It was during the seventies when Indian people, especially my generation, were going through what you would call an identity crisis. Many of us were pushed off the reservations to seek better education and higher learning, but there was a sacrifice we had to make for this. The sacrifice, which I made partially to be in a place of higher learning, was to put aside our traditional upbringing and our traditional beliefs. We had to become aggressive and boisterous, become like the non-Indian who runs the system. We had been led to believe ever since kindergarten that the old ways were done for, that they had no meaning, no monetary or economic value. All the way up until graduation from high school, we were told that the traditional way wasn't of any consequence and that we were something that had to be turned around and remade. That had a tremendous effect on our self-esteem; that's where our identity crisis began.

When I first met Joe, I felt like I was going down a wrong road. I was kind of like a fake, a carbon copy. I guess I was shooting for that ultimate goal of being a WASP. That was unrealistic, but that was what my dad and other people wanted for us. They didn't really want



us to be WASPs, but they wanted a better life for their children. My mother, my dad, their relatives, they grew up in an age of terrible poverty when the Depression was going full blast. Their grandparents were alive at a time when the U.S. government outlawed their religion and their language. They grew up in an era when it was frightening to be Indian, to be traditional. It was a matter of life and death for them.

x But Joe made me and my generation realize that there was something valuable in our old traditions. We thought our traditional religion was something to be ashamed of, something we had to do on the sly. Joe made it okay; he made it seem like it was our basic human right. I guess Joe was a catalyst for us. We were jumping from one world to another world, but there was no bridge. So Joe became the bridge that made the connection. Suddenly we were whole again. It was good.

I was trying to figure out these two worlds when I met Joe. I had to choose what classes to take, and, as I was looking through the University of Montana catalogue, I saw that there was a Native American religion course being offered by this Joseph Epes Brown. I asked around about him, and people said they really enjoyed his classes and got a lot out of them. At first some of the Native American students were offended that here was this white man talking about Indian religion. They wondered what he knew about Indians, but, once they took the class and participated in his classroom, their attitudes changed dramatically. They realized that his approach was different, the way he handled students was different; it was more humane. He made us feel like we were the teachers and that he was there to learn from us.

So I made a point to go visit him in his office. The reception I got was overwhelming to me, because he treated me so well, so warmly. I was never treated like that by other instructors. They didn't treat me like a human being; they treated me like a number. But Joe told me to sit down, and he brought me a cup of tea. When he got me all comfortable and situated, then he asked, "What tribe are you? What's your name?" It was so unusual, because I was used to a type of structured interview. He wanted to forget that for a while and get to know each other on a human basis; then we could do the required thing at the end. He showed me his office, showed me his buffalo skull and paintings by his student, Arthur Amiotte. He showed me everything, and

it made me feel like a special person. I thought, "This man radiates kindness." So, right then and there I decided I would take his class.

When I went to his first class, I was surprised that there were more non-Indians than there were Indians. Some of the non-Indians were antagonistic and close-minded. Some of them were trying to make him stumble over his knowledge of Native Americans and his experiences with Black Elk. They were after the power situation. They wanted to know if Joe had any of the spiritual power that Black Elk had, which is so superficial. That's not why Joe was with Black Elk. He was there for the knowledge that could be shared with the coming generations, but they didn't see it that way; they saw it in terms of what was in it for them. Joe never got offended, though. He would give a straight answer, an answer from the heart, and it satisfied them because they wouldn't ask the same question again. He always made them feel that it was okay to have such questions.

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His classes guided some of the Indian people in the gray area who chose to be in the plastic world. He guided them back and made them realize, "Hey, there's beauty in your way. There's beauty in your traditions; there's beauty in your culture. Don't throw it away." I remember him saying in class, "You have a beautiful way about you, you have a beautiful background behind you. People in your tribe years ago, they had a social structure that was so humane, so democratic, so pure that it couldn't be improved upon, because it gave everybody equal right, equal opportunities for women, for children, for old people. It was so great," he said. "Hang on to that. That's going to be more valuable to you than these books, than money, than credit cards." And it's so true. He gave us so much value, so much to look forward to. He gave us hope.

He taught in such a manner that you came away feeling that you'd taught yourself. He let us find our own answers. It was as if he said, "Here are your questions, and here are your answers all around you." He never acted like an expert, a know-it-all, or a guru; he was a guide. A lot of times he would let me or another Native American student answer a question if it was directed to a specific tribe. If the student felt uncomfortable, he would answer. Some of us weren't able to express ourselves as well as he did, but he made us feel like a part of the class, like we had something to contribute to the teaching.

One time he gave us the assignment to do something in the old traditional manner. That sparked something I had forgotten since I

was a little kid. When Joe gave us that assignment, my wife and I were expecting our first child, Sweet Grass Man, so I decided to make an old traditional cradle board. I killed the deer, got the hide, and the meat, then I got a tree for the board and made the rawhide, buckskin ties. My grandmother on my mom's side, she helped me tan the hide. The only thing I used that wasn't traditional was the tacks for the back; I used brass tacks. I put it together, and I took it to my mom and asked her if it was correct. My mother, my grandmother, everybody had a hand in this little project that he gave us.

"Yeah," my mom said, "you only left one thing out." What I had forgotten was what you see nowadays called dream catchers. This was even before anyone knew what dream catchers were all about. My mom said, "You gotta get one of those and put it right where the baby's head is so nothing bad gets in. When they sleep at night, anything bad gets caught in that net." So I fixed it up. I took it back to her, and she said, "Yeah, that's good. Now you can paint the cradleboard." So I asked her what I should paint on it.

She said, "Well, what are the two things that we experience each day?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, what do you do when you go to bed?"

"I go to sleep."

"What is it then?"

"It's dark."

"Well, then dark and light," she said. "Put those together." So I got dark blue for one side of the cradle board and yellow for the other side, for day and night. This child within this cradle board will be protected day and night.

Then she said, "What kind of protection are you going to give this child?" I thought of the porcupine, because the porcupine is slow, but it gets where it wants to go. It is harmless, it doesn't bother, it doesn't attack, it's not aggressive. But, if you attack it, you get hurt pretty bad. So I used the quill and the hairs from the porcupine and tied it on to the cradle board, along with some figurines of horses and lightning. I wanted my son to be protected by the Thunders and by the horse spirit. The horse was important to me at that time, and still is, because the horse is strong, the horse chose to be with man, and the horse chose to work for man. That's why I put the horse on the cradle board.

I got it all complete and showed it to my mom again, and she said, “Yeah, that’s correct. But next time,” she said, “use the floral design of the old Cree style. That way you don’t get into the situation of what powers are around. The old floral design is a safe thing to do for children and cradle boards.”

I completed the project and brought it to class and turned it in to Joe. He looked at it, and he said, “That’s good. What was the question?” Right there I knew I answered it. It was so great. My eyes were opened, my mind was opened. A whole new door was opened up for me. That’s how he did it. That’s how he affected people. It was such a good experience because the whole family did it, from my grandmother, to my mother, to my dad, to me, to the kids. We all had a hand in it, and that was just one little project.

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It was like the old social order we used to have years ago, before we were forced to adopt this new style of life. We knew we were all connected. We all did things for each other, we all shared something. That’s how we were able to have those close-knit extended families. Even when we were alone, we were never alone. Maybe we had a shirt that our cousin had made or our auntie had made or our grandma had made for us, or moccasins some relative had made for us. That’s what we are losing now. We are losing that close-knit, extended family. I couldn’t really say we are losing it; it is just taking a different shape and form nowadays. It is more commercial than it used to be a long time ago when it was love and compassion we had for each other. Now it’s more like, “Well, we’ll do it for you, but it’s going to cost you.” We’re getting into that situation now.

Joe is a strong believer in the traditional ways. I remember his son, Sasha, lived with the Berber over in Morocco, and he brought back stuff for his dad. There was a whole set of knives—they were like daggers—made by the Berber; they made the steel and fashioned the blades. One of the knives reminded me of how my Grandma, like most of the old timers, used to cure headaches by cutting people’s temples. She would cut the skin, put some medicine in there, and close it back up. And people would stop having headaches. I told Joe about that and said a knife like that would be really handy. But, you see, in the old traditional ways, you don’t give people knives. It’s bad luck. What you do is throw the knife at their feet and say, “Oh, look. A knife.” I forgot all about that, but later, when I was getting ready

to leave, something landed at my feet and I said, “Hey look! A knife.” Joe respected the old ways to the point that he didn’t want to wish bad luck on me or anybody, so he did that. And I still have that knife.

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Joe had an impact not only on myself personally, but on a lot of the Native American people he met, because he shared his knowledge freely with us. Not once did he ask for anything in return. One time he said Black Elk was that way. Black Elk freely gave Joe knowledge of things that were important, things that maybe Joe didn’t understand right away but that later he grew to understand. When he had that understanding, he shared it with us, and that validated our traditional beliefs and ceremonies. It let us love one another, which is important because there is a lot of violence on the reservations, a lot of self-directed violence. Joe helped us see that ceremonies that make the connection among the earth, the Creator, and ourselves can center us. As Black Elk said, any place on the earth can be the center of the universe. Joe helped us realize that you can find the center anywhere as long as you are centered, as long as your heart, your mind, and your soul are centered. That is what matters.

I’ll admit there are a lot of Native American people my age who have slipped into that mode of denying who they are. They get lost in that plastic world, the fast-food world, where everything is instant gratification. The old traditions, the old way of life is difficult, but it is lasting. People say, “You want to go back to the old tipi, the old days, and wear breech cloth and feathers.” But no, that’s not what we want, that’s not what our generation is about. Our generation is finding out what’s important, what’s real, what the mores are that will help us survive as a people. Our choice is not to live in the tipi, not to ride horses and to wear buckskins, but to find something that’s lasting. We have to live in this modern world facing realities like radical extremists and diseases—both old diseases that are making a comeback and new diseases that are related to modern life. There are also the consequences that come from mining, from desecrating burial sites. We can’t put our heads in the sand. We want our kids, our next generation, to face the world head on, but to still retain the traditional background that they come from.

We especially want them to remember the old timers, the old people who made the sacrifices they did so that we have a place to live. Sure, we call them the reservations, that’s fine, but they’re home.

One of the realities our young people have to face is that at least the reservations are a stronghold for us, a base where we can always feel comfortable and practice our religion a lot more freely than we did fifty years ago. I was lucky enough to meet a lot of those old timers, and they said they used to hide their old religious articles, their bundles. They had to do their ceremonies in secret, because the government was so afraid that we were going to have another uprising. The government didn't want those kinds of religious activities to happen, even though those ceremonies were intended for mankind. When we pray, we pray not just for Native Americans, but for all mankind. At the time, I didn't understand, but now I do. It is heart wrenching, because I think, "Oh, if only our people could've practiced our religion, maybe things would be a little different today."

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But things are not different, and that's what we want our kids to realize. We have camps for the kids from Rocky Boy and neighboring tribes where they can learn about themselves, about the old traditional values. We are not encouraging young people to dress in buckskin and feathers. That's not the point. The point is to enhance the values—what's important to them as Indian people, such as honesty and hard work. We teach them the old traditional survival techniques, how to find water, set up camp, hunt, tan hides, cook, and share the duties with the women. We teach them about sweats—how the sweats tie into our survival. We make sure that when we hunt, we hunt in an appropriate manner, that we don't squander meat, we use everything that we kill, and we treat everything with respect.

I also go into teachers' classrooms around Rocky Boy and Havre to talk about the values our traditionals used to have, how they affect us today, and how they should be carried on. But what a lot of non-Indian teachers find hard to accept is that the mores and values we had are so connected with religion. They feel uncomfortable because of problems with the separation of church and state. But we say, "Hey, that's the way of life we had and still have. If you want me to talk about that or our personal beliefs, you are going to have to accept that." There is not distinction between religion and every day life in our way. We take that for granted. It's just the way of life we have. In the morning we get up, the first thing we do is offer thanks. In the evening before we go to bed, we offer thanks. We don't think that is religion; we just think that's the way it's supposed to be. That's the way we were taught to live, to respect creation, to respect ourselves.

That lack of distinction between religion and daily life is a problem for a lot of non-Indians.

xvi There are so many of these issues to face, it's no wonder our young people are confused, disoriented, don't know which path to take. I find it strange that now non-Indians are more interested in our old values than our young people. People are searching, because they've lost something through the emphasis on materialism. They are finding out that materials will not save their souls. It's ironic, because at one time we were thought of as devils and everything about us was evil. We are now just getting out of that shadow, in part because people like Joe validated our religion, said it was just as valid as Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity.

Our ancestors couldn't speak, so Joe spoke for them. Our old timers, they always admonished us, "Be careful how you talk. Choose your words carefully, because how you speak could change the world." It is true. Joe changed worlds. He changed our world. He brought some love and some light into this world, a world that to me and to our old people was full of darkness and uncertainty, full of hatred, full of hurt. Now, because of Joe's teaching and this book, there are some good things to look forward to, some good things, some powerful things.

Rocky Boy Reservation
Box Elder, Montana
April, 2000

Don Good Voice