

The Myth of Chief Seattle

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As the world faces increasing environmental challenges, people have sought wisdom and inspiration from a variety of sources. One of those sources is the speech which Chief Seattle delivered nearly 150 years ago. Seattle was a Suquamish Indian from the American northwest who delivered a speech in 1854 to Isaac Williams, the Territorial Governor of Washington, as Williams negotiated with him for the sale of land that was to become the city of Seattle (named in the chiefs honor). The speech has been revered by many people for the inspirational message it provides and for the respect for the environment it displays. Below is a short excerpt of that speech as it appeared in vice-president Al Gores book, *Earth in Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit*:

How can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people...

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell you our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, a place where man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the sons of the earth.

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

One thing we know: Our God is also your God. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator.

(Gore 1992, 159)

The above quote was taken from the larger 1200-word speech generally attributed to Chief Seattle. This speech has become popular not only because it illustrates for many Seattle's poetic appreciation of nature and his deeply spiritual understanding of the interconnectedness of all living

things, but also because it epitomizes the ancient wisdom that is widely believed to be contained within Native American cultures generally — a wisdom that many view as lost in the highly technical and materially oriented urban industrial societies of the late 20th century.

For these reasons, Chief Seattle's Speech has been duplicated and disseminated throughout Europe and the U.S. It has been used by the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in London and by the Woman's Day World of Prayer (Kaiser 1987, 498). Portions of the speech have been published in such diverse publications as *Passages* (Northwest Airlines in-flight magazine), *Environmental Action*, Sierra Club editorials, Canada's "Green Plan" and NASA's "Mission to Planet Earth" (see Kaiser 1987, 498-500; Adams 1994, 52). Joseph Campbell even included the chief's speech in his book, *The Power of Myth*, with Bill Moyers (1988) and later read from the speech in his video series, *Transformation of Myth through Time*. In addition, not only have excerpts from the chiefs speech appeared on T-shirts, buttons and other items, but they have even found their way into scholarly works on American Indians (c.f., Thornton 1987, 225) and on the environment (c.f., Collard 1989 and Dobson 1995). There is, however, a fundamental problem with this rather uncritical dissemination of Chief Seattle's speech; the words attributed to Chief Seattle were never spoken by him, nor could they have been.

Critical Considerations

A critical evaluation of the full 1200-word modern text of Chief Seattle's speech reveals its inauthenticity. Just prior to the section of the speech that is quoted in Gores book, Seattle states, "I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie left by the white man who shot them from a passing train," (Kaiser 1987, 527). Seattle could not have made such a statement. To begin with, a single person could not have witnessed one individual shoot anywhere near one thousand buffalo from a passing train, given the speed of a train combined with the time that would have been needed to reload and fire a rifle used in 1854 (Not even Amtrak moves that slowly!). There also were no buffalo at the Puget Sound where Seattle lived. Seattle lived over a thousand miles from the Great Plains, and there is no evidence that he ever traveled to the plains. Finally, the transcontinental railroad was not completed until 1869, and the Euro-American bison slaughter did not begin until the 1870s. Seattle gave his

speech in 1854, a full 15 years before the railroad was completed and nearly 20 years before whites began to slaughter the remaining buffalo in large numbers. He, therefore, could not possibly have commented on it in his speech. Finally, Seattle died in 1866 (Kaiser 1987, 502), making it quite difficult — to say the least! — for him to have witnessed an event that occurred a full decade after his death.

The modern version of Seattle's speech also contains the quote, "What is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a whippoorwill?" (Kaiser 1987, 527). Since the whippoorwill is also not native to the Northwest, Seattle could not likely have known of its existence either. Similarly, the modern text of Seattle's speech contains a reference by Seattle to the white man's urban pollution. However, since his speech was made as part of the negotiations for the initial purchase by whites of Suquamish and Duamish land, Seattle could not have commented on developments that were to follow by many years the very land transfer he was negotiating.

The reality is that the current version of Chief Seattle's speech represents but the latest rendition of an evolving work of fiction. The original text of Seattle's speech was written by Dr. Henry A. Smith and published in the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887 (Kaiser 1987, 503). Smith claimed that the text he published was a direct copy of a speech given by Seattle in 1854 during treaty negotiations with Isaac Williams. However, there are several problems associated with the Smith's version of the speech that raise serious doubts about its authenticity. First of all, Smith's text was published a full 33 years after Seattle gave his original speech. This time lapse alone raises serious questions regarding its accuracy and reliability.

In addition, Seattle spoke no English. His speech was given in Lushotseed, his native tongue, and was then translated into Chinook Jargon, a regional trading language containing a mixture of French, English and local Indian words. As a trading language, Chinook Jargon contained a limited vocabulary and has been described as "barely suitable for bartering" (Adams 1994, 53). It is highly unlikely, therefore, that Chinook Jargon could express many of the conceptual images contained in Smith's version of Seattle's speech, including such statements as "Yonder sky that had wept tears of compassion upon our fathers for centuries untold ..." (see Kaiser 1987, 503).

Finally, the scene set by Smith in his account of Seattle's speech was described in too melodramatic a form to represent an objective historical account. For example, Smith wrote that "Chief Seattle arose with all the dignity of a senator who carries the responsibility of a great nation on his shoulders" (*ibid.*). Indeed, Kaiser, who has done perhaps the most exhaustive review of the history of Chief Seattle's speech, has shown that substantial differences exist between

the original Smith text and two short treaty speeches attributed to Seattle in the National Archives. He concludes that "the selection of the material and the formulation of the — (Smith) — text is (*sic*) possibly as much Dr. Smith's as Seattle's" (*ibid.* 506).

The original Smith text has over time been supplanted by increasingly modified versions of the Seattle speech (c.f. Bagley 1931; Rich 1932; Arrowsmith 1969). The most radical revision of Seattle's speech was created in 1971 by Ted Perry, a Texas scriptwriter. Perry composed a radically altered and enlarged version of the previously evolving Seattle speech to accompany a program on ecology produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. Perry's script departed sharply from all previous versions of Seattle's speech (see Kaiser 1987) and soon generated its own offspring (see Abruzzi 1999), including: (1) a version of the speech distributed at the 1974 Spokane Expo; (2) an anonymous booklet titled *The Decidedly Unforked Message of Chief Seattle*; (3) an anonymous 1991 revision of the 1974 Spokane text titled "This Earth is Precious" and (4) a poetic adaptation of the original Perry script published in the *Midwest Quarterly* in 1992 under the title, "Chief Seattle Reflects on the Future of America, 1855" (see Low 1995, 410).

Perry's script also provided the text for a children's book titled *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky* produced in 1991 by Susan Jeffers. Jeffers took credit only for the illustrations which she produced in the book, attributing the text itself to Seattle. Ironically, Jeffers' book, which sold over 250,000 copies, ranked fifth on the *New York Times* bestsellers list for *nonfiction* in 1992 (Bordewich 1996, 132). That same year, The Nature Company advertised a small book in its Christmas Catalogue titled *Chief Seattle's 1854 Speech* (see Low 1995, 407).

Needless to say, all modern versions of Chief Seattle's speech are inauthentic. Indeed, given the fictional nature of Perry's 1971 script and the fact that all modern versions of Seattle's speech derive from his original text, the latter are all, by definition, themselves works of fiction.

Would the Real Chief Seattle Please Stand Up

Through time and repeated textual revision, Chief Seattle has been completely removed from the nineteenth century social and political context within which he lived. He has, instead, been fashioned and refashioned into successive, politically correct versions of the white man's Indian. Inasmuch as Seattle presented his speech during treaty negotiations with Isaac Williams, the significance of the speech must be understood within that context.

Seattle's speech was made as part of an argument for the right of the Suquamish and Duamish peoples to continue to

visit their traditional burial grounds following the sale of that land to white settlers. This specific land was sacred to Seattle and his people because his ancestors were buried there, not because land as an abstract concept was sacred to all Indians.

The very fact that Seattle was chosen by the U.S. Government to represent his people in treaty negotiations raises critical questions. Who was Seattle and why was he and not someone else chosen by the Americans to negotiate for the local population? The Northwest native peoples were organized into a variety of clans and possessed no centralized leadership or political structure. As in other situations where colonial governments encountered land occupied by tribal societies, the United States Government needed friendly leaders to serve as representatives for the various indigenous peoples of this region. Chief Seattle was one of the local leaders chosen for that purpose. Seattle was likely selected because he demonstrated allegiance rather than opposition to whites. He had, in fact, converted to Roman Catholicism around 1830 (Kaiser 1987, 503) and was favorably disposed towards white settlement. Seattle never fought a war against the Americans and even sided with them during one Indian uprising (Adams 1994, 52-53). He was, significantly, the first Indian to sign the 1855 treaty.

Seattle was not, however, simply a pawn of the U.S. Government. He needed whites to protect and advance his own economic and political interests. Seattle was commercially allied with a Dr. David Maynard in the curing and packing of salmon (Adams 1994, 53) and needed whites to help him in his conflict with other native leaders for control over the fishing rights that were essential to his newly developing commercial venture. In one of the original treaty speeches preserved in the National Archives, Seattle refers to the U.S. Army as a "bristling wall of strength" which will assure that "ancient enemies will no longer frighten his people" (*ibid.*). He was, thus, likely using whites to protect and advance his own interests, just as they were using him to advance theirs.

Discussion

Chief Seattle has emerged as one of the premiere icons of Native American values for many whites seeking an alternate ecological perspective. Unfortunately, however, the Chief Seattle known to most people is mostly fictional, a fabrication by whites for whites. This creation of a false Indian stereotype is hardly new. Throughout American history, whites have fabricated Indians into images that served their own interests. During the nineteenth century, when the Euro-American population of the United States competed for land with Native Americans, Indians were popularly viewed as savages who needed to be tamed, settled and civilized. Later, defeated and placed on reservations, Indians were viewed

nationally as children in need of white supervision. More recently, with the growth of large environmental and counter-cultural new age movements, a new Indian image has emerged. Native Americans have become the repositories of a traditional wisdom to those challenging institutionalized beliefs and practices in contemporary industrial societies. However, this latter-day Indian stereotype represents yet another white fiction serving the interests of those who believe in it. Significantly, each new incarnation of Seattle's speech, beginning with the original Smith text and ending with the latest adaptation of Ted Perry's script, has been created entirely by non-Indians. Not one native peoples has translated Seattle's speech into their own indigenous language (Low 1995, 416).

This brief essay has been offered as a cautionary tale. One goal of human ecology is to understand and explain historical and contemporary human environmental relations objectively and on the basis of solid empirical research. It is only through such research that viable and sustainable development programs can be proposed. Inasmuch as an extensive body of ecological research exists which demonstrates that Native American populations have responded to environmental circumstances in the same manner as have other human populations, environmentalists and human ecologists need to adopt a more critical approach to the study of indigenous peoples ecology than has been demonstrated by those who have uncritically accepted and promoted the Chief Seattle myth.

Endnote

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