

"My Very Dear Good Friends"

By Chief Dan George

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My very good dear friends, was it only yesterday that men sailed around the moon and it is today they stand upon its barren surface? You and I marvel that men should travel so far and so fast, but if they have travelled far, then I farther. If they have travelled fast, then I faster. For I was born a thousand years ago, born in the culture of bows and arrows. Yet within the space of half a life time I was flown across the ages to the culture of the atom bomb; and from bows and arrows to atom bomb is a distance far beyond a flight to the moon.

I was born in an age that loved the things of nature and called it beautiful names like "Teslelwhat" instead of dried up names like "Burrard Inlet." I was born in an age when people loved the things of nature and spoke to it as though it has a soul. I can remember going up the north arm to Indian River with my dad when I was very small. I can remember him watching the sun light fires on Mt. Penany as it rose to its peak. I can remember him saying his thanks to it as he often did, saying the Indian word, "hey-mus-hey-snocum." And then the people came. More and more people came. Like a crushing, rushing wave they came, hurling the years aside and suddenly I found myself a young man in the midst of the 20th century.

I found myself and my people adrift in this new age, but not a part of it. Engulfed by its rushing tide but only as a captive eddy, round and round. On little reserves, on plots of land we floated in a kind of gray unreality, unsure of who we were or where we were going, uncertain of our grip in the present, weak in our hope for the future. And that is where we pretty well stand today.

I had a glimpse of something better than this. I knew my people when they lived the old way. I knew them when there was still a dignity in our lives, and a feeling of worth in our outlook. I knew them when there was unspoken confidence in the home, a certain knowledge of the path we walked upon. But we were living on the dying energy of a dying culture—a culture which was slowly losing its forward thrust.

I think it was the suddenness of it all that hurt us so. We did not have time to adjust to the startling upheaval around us. We seemed to have lost what we had without a replacement of it. We did not have time to take this 20th-century progress and eat it little by little and digest it. It was forced feeding from the start, and our stomach turned sick.

Do you know what it is like to be without moorings? Do you know what it is like to be in a surrounding that is strange, and all around you, you see strange things? It depresses man, for man must live among the beautiful if his soul is to grow.

Do you know what it's like to have your race belittled, and to come to learn that you are only a burden to the country? Maybe we did not have the skills to make a meaningful contribution, but nobody would wait for us. We were shoved aside, because we were dumb and could not learn.

Do you know what it is like to be without pride in your race, pride in your family, pride and confidence in yourself? What is it like? You do not know. You have never tasted its bitterness.

I shall tell you what it is like. It is like not caring for tomorrow, because what does tomorrow matter? It is like having a reserve that looks like a junk yard, because the beauty of the soul is dead and why should the soul express an external beauty that does not match it? It is like getting drunk, and for a few brief moments escaping from the ugly reality and feeling a sense of importance. It is most of all like awakening the next morning to the guilt of betrayal because the alcohol did not fill the emptiness, but only dug it deeper.

And now you hold out your hand and you beckon to me to come across the street. But how can I come? I am naked and ashamed. How can I come in dignity? I have no treasures, I have no gifts. What is there in my culture that you value? My poor treasures you can only scorn. Am I then to come as a beggar and receive all from your omnipotent hand?

No! Somehow I must wait. I must delay. I must find myself, I must find my treasure. Then I can say to my wife and to my family, "Listen: they are calling me; they need me. I must come." Then I can walk across the street and I will hold my head high for I can meet you as an equal. I will not scorn you for your demon gifts and you will not receive me in pity. Pity I can do without. My manhood I cannot do without. I can only come as Chief Capalano came to Captain Vancouver: one sure of his authority, certain of his worth, master of his house, leader of his people.

I shall not come as a cringing object of your pity. I shall come in dignity, or I shall not come at all. And now you talk big words of integration. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration? Unless there is integration in hearts and minds, you only have a physical presence and the walls are as high as the mountain tops. Come with me to the playgrounds of an integrated high school. See how ugly and flat the blacktop is. Now listen. The bell rings; it is recess time. The doors open, and the students pour out of the doors. Soon over there is a group of white students, and over there by the fence is a group of native students. But now look; the blacktop is no longer there.

Mountain ranges rising, valleys falling and a great chasm is opening up between the two groups: yours and mine. And no one seems to be capable of crossing over. Why? God in Heaven, why? Why?

I know what you must be saying, "Tell us, what do you want?" Yes, what do we want? We want first of all to be respected and to feel that we are people of worth. We want equal job opportunities for our students. We want guidance and counseling. We want to feel that we are a people of worth.

Let no one forget this: we are a people with special rights guaranteed to us by promises and treaties. We do not beg for these rights, nor do we thank you. We do not thank you because we paid for them. God help us, the price we paid was exorbitant. We paid for them with our culture, pride, and self respect. We paid, we paid, and we paid until we became a beaten race, poverty stricken and conquered. But you have been kind to listen to me, and I know that in your hearts you wish you could help.

I wonder if there is much you can do, and yet there is a lot you can do. When you meet my children in your classrooms, respect each one for what he is: a child of our Father in heaven and your brother. Maybe it boils down to just that.