

REQUIEM OF THE HUMAN SOUL

EXCERPT: PERCEPTION

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Perception

I was making my way to Jerry McHadden's house filled with excitement and anticipation, all tinged with fear. I'd just turned eighteen and it was my Vision Day. Jerry was my Spirit Guide who was going to lead me through my journey on Perception. This was supposed to be the most important day of my life. What would happen? What would it be like? Most of all, I just hoped it would be something meaningful. My biggest fear was that it would be a flop, that I'd finish the day disappointed, saying to myself "What was that all about?"

I thought back to that other milestone of life in our community – Initiation Day. At thirteen years old, everything had seemed so special. That day, in front of all the people of Tuckers Corner, I'd prayed to *Wakan Tanka* in my Ancestor language, the ancient language of the Nez Perce Indians, known as *Nimipuutimpt*. In my own little voice, first in the original language and then translated in English, I'd uttered the words of Chief Joseph as he surrendered to the U.S. army after months of leading hundreds of Nez Perce on a haunted march for freedom ahead of thousands of American soldiers hunting them down.

"I am tired of fighting," Chief Joseph had said. *"Our chiefs are killed. Looking Glass is dead. Toohoolhoolzote is dead. It is cold and we have no blankets. The little children are freezing to death. Hear me, my chiefs! I am*

tired. My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever."

That day, I'd become part of my Humanist community. I'd felt so special, in touch with Chief Joseph from hundreds of years ago; in touch with everyone around me. Even at that age, Sarah had been special to me and I'd looked around at the audience until I'd seen her eyes filling me with encouragement, with pride.

Today, Sarah was thousands of miles away. It was her Year Away and she was staying with our sister Humanist community in Wales. I had to go through my Vision Day without the person most important to me. How would I do it? What would it mean to me without Sarah?

Jerry's wife was at work; his children were at school. There was no-one in his house but him and me. He gave me one tiny pill of Perception. Within fifteen minutes of nervously swallowing it, things started changing. I'd been told about this, the period of transformation while neural pathways that were usually blocked were gradually opening up. I started seeing strange patterns in the walls along with other continually changing visual hallucinations. Jerry was sitting there with me in his living room, but his face started changing shape and looking weird. Still, I was already glad he was there.

Before too long, the transformation was over, the neural pathways were open, and the hallucinations went away. I was seeing in a way I had never seen before. I looked at Jerry, a face I'd seen literally thousands of times. But I had never *really* seen his face before. It was as though I was looking at an X-ray of his soul. As he looked back at me with a steady gaze, I saw the face of Encouragement. Then, moments later, it morphed. I saw the pain of his life. I saw a hardness in the lines around his face, in the way the edge of his lips curved. I knew in a flash he was having difficulties with his wife. I'd seen those signs for years, but never realized what they meant. Then, without any warning, his

face morphed again. I saw in his eyes his struggle to reach Serenity; how he used his craftsmanship with wood to achieve an inner peace. I saw his warmth and how he tried so hard to live a decent life. Then, everything went even deeper. As he watched me watch him, with his steady gaze, I saw my Spirit Guide, I understood that he was ahead of me exploring an unmapped wilderness, looking back at me, waving me on to catch up with him. All this happened without a word passing between us.

Now I was in Jerry's backyard. I'd been there hundreds of times, but this was the first time I'd ever experienced it. It was a warm day in early summer. I found myself getting to know a friendly oak tree in the yard. I hugged it and felt its strength and inner calm. I felt its roots locking it in place and pulling up nutrients from the soil. I sat on the lawn and watched the grass grow. Literally. I saw each blade quivering with life, basking in the rays of the sun, sucking up the moisture in the earth. I watched the afternoon storm clouds begin to gather and move in towards us. I felt the grandeur of the weather. As I did so, some thunder roared out its warning. As I experienced its greatness, something came into my mind. It was the name of Chief Joseph, whose words I had spoken years ago on my Initiation Day. In Nez Perce his name was *Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt*, or Thunder Rolling in the Mountains. I thought of him dying of a broken heart after sixty years of resisting the white man, exiled forever from the land of his ancestors. I'd read and thought about him so many times before, but for the first time in my life, my heart broke with his.

Sitting there, in Jerry's little backyard, I felt the generations of lives that had lived in the cycles of nature, I felt the heartbreak of their loss at the hands of the white man. I thought of the reality out there, beyond our little enclave of Tuckers Corner, the freeways criss-crossing the land in every direction, the planes overhead, the satellites monitoring every movement of everybody, the once wild lands that had

become genetically engineered farmlands, the digital signals that controlled the whole world. I felt the loss of so much, I couldn't bear it. I started sobbing uncontrollably. With each heave of my chest, it seemed like the earth was sobbing with me. In the middle of my sobs, I noticed my Spirit Guide, Jerry, sitting in front of me, watching me. I cried out to him, "Where has it all gone?" He slowly nodded his head in response, silently telling me that he himself had gone through this terrible path of despair, and come out the other side.

Tears came dripping out of my eyes. The thunder clouds were now above us and started shedding their warm rain drops on both of us. I kept sobbing there in the rain, as my clothes absorbed the water and clung against my skin. I knew that the earth was weeping with me. It was sharing its grief with mine. Then, gradually, the rain drops slowed and turned into a gentle drizzle. Something began to change in me. I realized, in a moment of awareness, that the ancient spirits of the land were telling me something as the soft drizzle enveloped me. They were saying that "*Life goes on!*" They were all around me. They *were* the gentle rain drizzling on me.

I found myself back in Jerry's living room, warming up from the rain. Gradually, the state of Perception was beginning to fade. I could feel the building blocks of my consciousness getting ready to re-assemble themselves. Only this time, I could shape how they would reconfigure. I could seal them together with my own meaning. I began talking, slowly, to Jerry, with words that seemed to fill the whole room with resonance. As I did so, a famous saying of Chief Joseph filled my mind: "*It does not require many words to speak the Truth*". My words were few. I spoke to Jerry of the beauty of the world, the wonder of life, the despair of what has been taken from our world. As I did so, I realized that the ancient spirits had given me a role to play. I could do something to keep their memories alive. I could teach others of their lives and their sacred activities. It was at that moment, talking to Jerry

of what I had experienced, that I realized I would spend my life as a teacher of history to others, so that the great wonders of the past would not be forgotten.

As Jerry saw my mind was beginning to re-assemble itself, he told me it was time to choose my totem. Your totem can be anything that exists in the natural world that is non-human: an animal, a tree, a mountain, a rock. It's something that has a spirit akin to your own. You choose your totem at the end of your Vision Day, as a reminder of the experiences you've had. In future years, when you're uncertain of what to do, of who you are, it's our tradition to remember your totem, to use that memory as a lifeline to your inner consciousness, connecting your own spirit with the strength of the external spirit world.

At that moment, it was easy. I didn't need to think about it. I had known it all along but it needed Jerry's question for it to hit my consciousness. The friendly oak tree was my totem. Its roots took life from the earth; its leaves took energy from the sun; its branches bent with the wind; its trunk remained solid. It gave me the strength to make it through my life.

I returned to a normal state, with my new consciousness sealed in place. In my heart, I found myself thanking Dr. Julius Schumacher for creating Perception, for allowing me to partake of this experience, and Jessica Goodrich for making Vision Day part of our community's life. I felt there was a meaning to my life that I'd never dreamed about before that day.

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