

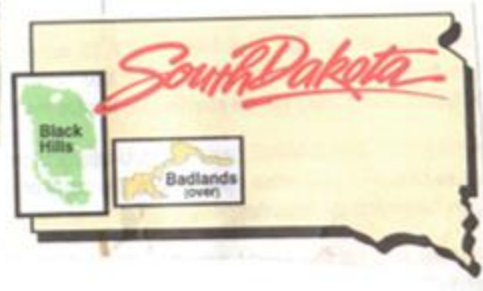
SUNDANCE



JAMPA DORJE

SUNDANCING
on the Pine Ridge Reservation
August, 2005

A Denner Family Trip
to the



SUNDANCE
Jampa Dorje

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Something to sleep on, that's a good place to begin. We spend a third of our life in bed, so having a good mattress is important when you're camping. I'm always using used stuff. I had a thin, camping mattress I'd inherited from a friend, and I took it with me to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota and blew it up, and the air went right out of it, and I looked at it, and it had half a dozen patches, and I thought, "Oh, that was silly of me." We had to go to town the next morning, so I bought a new air mattress, which I could inflate with a pump plugged into the car's cigarette lighter.

I set my tent on a slight slope and had to prop the mattress up with stuff out of my pack. It was like being on a waterbed, only it was an airbed, jiggled, but I did get a good night's sleep. The Sundancers had their tents in a separate area, near the sweat lodge. My son, Theo, had plans to dance. I helped Melissa and Kyle, his wife and son, get their tent set up down the road from the arbor and the dance circle. Theo made his camp in the area reserved for the dancers.

Next, we had to cut a tree for the ceremony. First, we went to the wrong spot. We followed a car that went to the area where a tree had been cut the year before, and we looked around, and then we drove back to Eric's, the medicine man's, house. We had driven around for an hour, and just as we pulled up and parked, Eric walked out, got in his pickup, and everyone got in their vehicles and followed him, along with another pickup towing a long flatbed, out his driveway and down a reservation road. We drove back to where we'd been. Eric and his helpers climbed down the side of a hill to the cottonwood that had been chosen.

There's a young girl, who plays the role of White Buffalo Calf Woman. In some ceremonies, there are four girls, but in this case there was just Brittany, the adopted daughter of Don and Kathy, from Ellensburg, Washington, and she took a brand new ax and made a mark on the tree in each of the four directions. Then, a man shimmied up and ropes were thrown to him. The ropes come from the guys that are going to pierce. They have to have their ropes ready. It's part of their gear. They have to be prepared. They have their pipe and their skirt and their rope. Their pipe has to be wrapped with sage, and they make anklets and bracelets and a crown of sage. They mark their ropes in a special way, and there were bits of colored cloth tied to the ropes, this one with red, this one with a strip of red and blue, and so forth. Eleven men tied onto the tree, the Tree of Life.

We were parked along the road. People drove by and stopped. Little groups of people, family, connected to the dancers. People looking at one another, checking each other out. I'm a Tibetan Buddhist monk, but I wasn't wearing my robes. I wore my jeans because I wanted to help with the tree, which had to be caught. It can't touch the ground. All the ropes were attached, and a man took the ax and whacked the tree, and it fell, and while some of us used our hands to steady the tree, others steadied it with their ropes.

This cottonwood didn't seem so big, down in the gully, but after we caught it and carried it up to the road to the trailer it was more impressive. A chainsaw was called for, and some smaller trees with forked limbs were cut to support the tree on the trailer, so that the branches wouldn't drag on the ground. A few leaves touched the roadway, but the bulk of the tree was propped up

and tied down, and then the caravan set off for the Sacred Circle. It was dramatic, the cars following the tree along the road across the prairie at sunset. People driving the opposite direction stopped their cars, showing respect. They knew it was a Sundance Tree. They knew these dancers were going to dance for the people.

The arbor for the Sundance was tucked behind a low hill. You couldn't see the arbor coming up the road until you were right on it. The arbor was about forty feet in diameter. Small forked trees covered with pine boughs for shade. Inside the arbor in another circle there were tiny prayer sticks with a tobacco ties at the top. Different colors for each direction. Four gates with larger prayer sticks. Yellow in the east, red in the west, green in the north and blue in the south. At the red end was an altar for the pipes and the Tanka, the buffalo skull. In the center, a pit had been dug for the tree.

By the time we arrived, it was getting dark, and people bustled around. The ropes were removed and the lower limbs were trimmed off the trunk. And, then, there was the ceremonial process of taking the tree into the center of the Sacred Hoop. There were four stops, and we had to hold the tree above the ground. I counted forty of us, and the tree must've been forty-two feet tall. We could have used two more people. It was that heavy. At each stop, the Buffalo Girl proffered the pipe to a direction, and the medicine man chanted. To the north, to the east, to the south, to the west, and we held the tree off the ground.

After these stops, we took the tree through the East Gate, and again held the tree, while women tied prayer ties in the upper branches, along with special objects. A bundle of wild cherry branches. The skin of a buffalo, cut in the shape of a buffalo, with the hair in tact. And a cardboard cutout of a man with a hoop in one hand and a pipe in the other, which was tied in the branches above the buffalo. While the women worked, we held the tree. Standing there, I heard a crackling, buzzing, crunching sound, and I turned, and above the East Gate, a meteor was burning up in the atmosphere. Crackling and blowing up.

There's a character in the Lakota lore called Fallen Star, so a falling star seemed appropriate and a good omen for the Sundance. Then, all the dancers that had plans to pierce tied their ropes onto the tree for a second time. At this point, the ropes were used to raise the tree, and everyone huffed and puffed and pulled and pushed. The men with the ropes spaced out around the circle and steadied the tree, while some packed the earth around the base. The tree is considered to be alive at this time. It represents the axis of the world and is a symbol of rejuvenation, of renewal. The medicine man, who is known as the Interceptor, and his helpers did their ceremonial thing. The ropes were rolled up, and we went to bed. The ropes dangled from the tree, ready for the time when the piercing would begin.

Piercing is the most dramatic part of the Sundance, but it is not the biggest part. It happens near the end, but before then, there is a lot of dancing. There are different sides to this dance: a physical side, an emotional side, an intellectual side, and a spiritual side. These correlate with levels of interpretation. A literal level, the dance, the sun, the heat. Then, there's the emotional pressure on staying the course. The metaphorical or allegorical side is revealed in the stories behind the ceremonies. The flesh sacrifice that mirrors the Lakota tale of Inyan, where the first creation was accomplished through giving blood, giving life force. And, there's the spiritual part. The dancing for the people. The sacrifice of something that is yours alone to give. To renew, to purify and heal, like the Chöd practice, in Tibetan Buddhism, where we symbolically cut ourselves up into small pieces with a knife and feed our demons.

The women don't pierce. But they cut pieces of flesh from their arms. They can cut one piece or one hundred pieces. Not big pieces, just big enough so they bleed. There are different reasons to give flesh offerings. It's part of the myth of rejuvenation. This is the offering that connects you with the totality, to propitiate the cosmos. It may be you do it for your grandmother, who is ill, and at the same time you do it for the people as a whole. And then, you do it for yourself, for the vision, for the courage, for the honor, for fortitude. To return to the roots of your personality. A solar return.

The dancers don't always have extensive knowledge about the symbolic qualities of the dance; some have more, the medicine man and his helpers; but for most it is enough to know what they are doing is good for the people. It's natural for there to be a macho attitude, but I've heard that there are Sundances where a person who is just into body piercing can go and pay money and pierce. The Lakota consider this a desecration of their tradition.

Again, the piercing is not the main part of the Sundance. It comes near the end. The main part of the dance is dance. The drummers drum; the singers sing; and the dancers dance. There are pipes to be smoked and prayers to be offered up to the Great Spirit, Wakan Tanka.

I was there to help Melissa and Kyle and to support my son. The Lakota culture has a division of labor. There's men's work and there's women's work. Old men were traditionally left in the camp with the women and children, while the young men went off to hunt. Old Buddhist monks fall into another category, as I will tell later. As an elder, you get a lot of perks. Like you can wear moccasins if you dance.

Entering the Badlands



Buffalo Gap Grasslands





The town of Scenic, South Dakota



The road to the Sundance



SONGS UNO AFTER
RAISING THE TREE
(THE TREE SPEAKS)

Sacred
I stand.
Behold me,
was said
to me.



No
Camp
Pass
This
Point



And then, a windstorm came along. Blew tents over. Blew tarps away. Blew about 18 hours straight. Kept everyone awake all night. So, after getting the tree set up and a day of dancing, everyone had an exhausting night of sleep. The dancers get nothing to eat or drink. No food or water. Four days dancing in 100 degrees of heat. But the prairie was still green. There had been a thunderstorm just before we arrived. The year before it had gotten up to 107° and the ground was scorched. This year it stayed in the high 90s with a sweet zephyr, so it was tolerable in the shade. Still, with the sun beating down, I could see that Don was getting second degree burns. Theo, who has tattoos covering his back and shoulders, lucked out, because they covered his

tattoos with a paste made from finely-ground pipe stone, most likely so there wouldn't be a conflict of religious symbols. This saved him from severe burns. Theo said the dancers found some sun screen, and they used it, although they weren't supposed to, but they did because it was there, because when you're at higher altitudes, the air is rarified and the sun burns ever so more deeply.

The medicine man decides what medicine they need. One day they got a plum. Theo said it was the best plum he ever tasted. One day there were lemons. They sucked them and ate the peels. But they didn't get much sustenance. And then, they smoke. Tobacco. It's the Indian thing. Maybe not *Marlboros*, and they didn't pay attention to the Surgeon General's warning. Theo, who chews, started smoking during his breaks because he couldn't spit on the ground inside the Sacred Hoop. They smoked and they sweat. They went from sweating from their dancing in the sun to sweating in a sweat lodge. Cooler when they came out. Rigorous.

Nobody failed. Well, one dancer had a close call, nearly passed out, but he was pierced deeply. In the Spielberg TV series, *Into the West*, the young medicine man, Beloved of the Buffalo, pierces and dances from sunrise to sunset, but he was seeking a particular vision. The Sundance on Eric's land began later than sunrise, but it still had to do with ritual time. There were so many rounds that needed to be completed each day.

The first day, I wanted to see the dancers get started. I wasn't sure of the etiquette. I had heard all kind of things. No shoes, no jewelry. No photography. But I'd read some. I'd plowed through a copy of Maile's *Sundancing on the Pine Ridge Reservation* and a copy of Black Elk's *Sacred Pipe*, which Theo bought when we stopped at Battleground National Monument in Wyoming. It was important to tune into this battle scene. I overheard a man ask a young Sioux clerk at the museum if she had any more the Custer's Last Stand T-shirts, and she made an interesting Freudian slip. "No," she said, "we ran over them."

At the Sundance site, Kyle and I took folding chairs and went to the arbor. We found a place to sit near the entrance. The drummer and singers began on a cue. The dancers walked in procession, led by the Interceptor and White Buffalo Calf Woman, around the outside of the arbor and entered the East Gate. They took their places in the circle. This is where they would dance and where they would eventually pierce. Theo was on the far side. Number two, low on the totem pole because this was his first Sundance. Last year he had been a helper. Now, he was prepared for the real thing. On his right, Wade, one of the dancers who, the year previous had split before the dance was completed. Cordel was on Theo's left. Cordel is a friend of Theo's from Ellensburg, and he too is a dancer who had broken ranks the year before. Therefore, Wade and Cordel had dues to pay. Theo said that he was put next to Cordel to lend him support. A controversy rages around the issue of Wasichus (Whites) dancing in the Sundance. I heard a Lakota say they must try and keep the purity of their tradition, so that their children and their children's children will survive and prosper in the sacred manner intended by the Great Spirit. I heard another Lakota say that anyone interested in learning the Lakota way is welcome, and that this has always been the way.

At any rate, we were there, and we entered the arbor. The grass under the arbor was sharp because they had mowed it. The grasslands in general are beautiful, lush, an ocean of grass. The prairie, so many grasses. I looked them up: big bluestem, little bluestem, switchgrass, Indian grass, prairie sandreed, prairie cordgrass, western wheatgrass, green needle grass, blue grama, side-oat grama, ricegrass, dotted greyfeather, buffalo grass.

Imagine tens of thousands of buffalo. Imagine wagon trains waiting two or three days for a herd to pass. The Sundance has to be conceived in this context. The grasses, the buffalo, the

dancers dancing for the people who follow the buffalo.

Kyle and I found a place to dance. I danced in my robes. When a round of the song was finished, the dancers raised their arms to the sky. This is called a *pushup*. There might be twenty pushups to a dance. And at the end of each dance, the dancers lined up at the South Gate and presented their pipes, two or three at a time, to people picked from under the arbor by the helpers. By the end of the day, all the pipes had to be smoked. The pipe is presented four times, and on the fourth presentation, you take the pipe back to your group and share it with your friends and the people in the group next to yours. This allows people to meet one another. The pipe is passed, and the expression, "Mitakuye oyasin" is said after you have taken a few tokes on the cherry bark mix in the pipe. The expression translates as "to all my relatives." The word "Lakota" means an alliance of friends.

The dancers dance in place. They are given a place and they dance there. They dance to the beat of drum. The step can be to every beat or to every other beat, so some dancers dance faster than others. Some dance higher; some dance with their feet closer to the ground. Wade danced high. Theo danced lower, but Theo had a double step. I saw only one other dancer use this step. He touched his heel and the ball of his foot to the ground, a double-action two-step. Don said he thought this step was more complicated than was needed, but he said it was important to find a step that worked for you, because you were going to have to use it day in and day out for four days. The ground gets hot. You dance, and the grass is gone, and you have to dance on the bare ground. You have to have a step that works for you.

While the dancers dance, they blow a flute made from the bone of an eagle's wing. Some don't like to blow the flute, because it takes extra energy, so they forget their flute. Theo looked for one. He asked at Prairie Edge, a store in Rapid City that sells Indian regalia, but they didn't have one, so he was able to say he tried. Most dancers blow the flute, which has a tinny sound when you hear it from a distance. The combination of the regular beat of the drum and the randomness of the high-pitched flute is eerie and other-worldly.

Purification and sacrifice. That's the path. I had arrived thinking the dancers danced day and night after they pierced, for four days, without food or water. So, I was relieved to find out they only danced during the day without food or water, that they pierced near the end, and that they got to sleep at night. This is surely a painful religion, but it is a religion of thanksgiving, a religion of rebirth, renewal, and healing.

To some extent, the flesh offering resembles the Crucifixion of Jesus. The tree with the cherry branches attached is the cross. The Sun Dance. The Son of God. So, there are crossovers in symbolism, and many of the dancers are Christians. However, the Sundance has its place in a tradition separate from Christianity. The dance was given to the Sioux by White Buffalo Calf Woman maybe a thousand years before Christ or maybe 500 years ago. Where were the Sioux a thousand years ago? This was before the horse. They would have used dogs to haul their belonging. Driven buffalo off cliffs and speared them. Ethnologists say the Sioux came from North Carolina, were pushed up to Minnesota, and then came a great migration in the 17th century, and with this was the fusion of the horse, the bow and the buffalo that made the rise of the Sioux Nation on the prairie possible. But it is also possible that some of the people were already on the plains, that they had been practicing their theology around the Black Hills from time immemorial. Certain archeoastronomical aspects of their religion indicate that this is so, and the Lakota would like to believe it.

Man mirrors the universe. This is the anagogical side of the dance. *As above, so below*. The human reflects the divine. Again, the Sundance is one rite given by White Buffalo Calf Woman. She was a maiden. Two warriors saw her in a mist. She was naked. One of the warriors had lustful thoughts, and he tried to rape her. She turned him into a nest of snakes. The other warrior was humble, and she revealed the seven

ceremonies to him. Then, she turned herself into the white buffalo. The ceremonies on earth unite the people to the ceremonies that are being performed in the heavens.

Among these rites is the Pipe Ceremony. The smoking of the pipe begins with loading tobacco, or other substances, into a pipe and then acknowledging the four directions, as well as Mother Earth and Father Sky, and ends with a final offering to the Great Spirit, Wankan Tanka. The pipe is held by the bowl with the stem pointed outward while it is smoked, and in the last step the pipe is held with its stem pointed straight upward, out into the center of the universe. This is how your spirit is unified with the spirit of the Great Mystery. It acts as an interface between you and the divine. Not to be disrespectful, but in this respect the pipe is Jesus Christ. Black Elk said, "You killed your Jesus Christ, but we never killed our pipe."

In another way, this is very Buddhist. Wankan Tanka is like the Dharmakaya, that which is beyond quantification. Then, there are Superior Gods, like the great Bodhisattvas of the Sambhogakaya. Inyan had no beginning, since he was there before any other. His spirit was Wankan Tanka, and he was the first god. Inyan felt a need to exercise his power, so he spread himself around in a great disc, which he named Maka. To create Maka, Inyan opened his veins and bled. His blood was blue and made the waters and the sky. At first, Inyan was like a soft cloud, but after giving his life force to create the world, he became hard, like the rock.

It is said Wankan Tanka gave the buffalo to man. The entire industry of the Lakota was the buffalo. Hides for clothes and shelter, bones for tools, meat for food. And to follow the migration of the buffalo and renew the cycle, the Lakota had a very time-factored lifestyle. They had to be in the right spot at the right time doing the right thing. There was a strict ceremonial sequence to be followed. The stars, to the Lakota, are the language of the spirit world, and what was happening on Earth had to coincide with what was happening in the heavens. Therefore, the Lakota followed the sun and imitated the story in the stars as they journeyed through the Black Hills. On the vernal equinox of spring, it was their practice to collect their tobacco for ceremonies and to prepare for their journey. From their winter camps they moved to Bear Butte and from Bear Butte to the Devil's Peak for the Sundance on the Summer Solstice. Every step of the way, a star symbol showed them the path. All things are related, and each part represents the whole, the same as in the tradition of Hermetic Philosophy.

There's a Sacred Hoop that surrounds the Black Hills which is mirrored in the constellations. The Hoop is the path of a great race run between the four-legged creatures and the two-legged creatures. The Black Hills reside on both sides of the border between South Dakota and Wyoming and stretch from southern Montana to Nebraska. The whole panorama is multi-dimensional. The stories relate to the stars, and the stars mirror geographical locations on the ground. But they are not fixed. For example, the stars in the constellation of the Hand relate to the story of the Chief who lost his arm (stars which are part of the constellation of Orion). In another context these same stars are the backbone of the constellation of the Buffalo.

Anyway, back to the dance. Once I found out elders get lots of perks, and I'm an elder by the fact of my age, I relaxed. I had my own practices to do, but I was fascinated by the dance. I got a good step going, and since there is a Refuge Tree in my tradition, I did my refuge mantras to the beat of the drum and danced and did my mantras all day long.

So, I supported my son, got my work done, and at the same time made a spectacle of myself. Who is this monk? The natives were curious. I got some interesting looks. A little girl, named Megan, crawled twenty feet from her mother across the prickly grass, climbed up into my lap,

and began to finger my mala. I guess she was a little tulku, a reincarnated lama, who recognized those beads. The young men wanted to know what I was about, what religion I was. I told them stories. I made comparisons between our two traditions, not suggesting the Tibetans were directly related to the Sioux genealogically, although there is anthropological evidence that the Native American culture has roots in the Asian migrations over the Bering Sea, but that the rituals contained similar elements. The idea of the flesh offering and the nature of “cutting through” in Chöd particularly interested them.

Among the dancers there is rivalry. A lot of gallows humor goes on. Someone might say, “Tomorrow, you’ll be hanging” or “I’ll see you hanging.” The dancer next to Theo, Wade, had dues to pay from the previous year. He had to high-step it. He had to dance like mad. For four days he was Lance Armstrong on steroids. Dance, dance, dance, dance. Beautiful. And the guy on the other side of Theo, Cordel, an old rock-n-roller who’s played with many of the rock bands in the Pacific Northwest, kind of a tough guy, kind of a boozier, but at his core, he’s a brave heart. He, too, had cut out the year before, and he was making amends, showing that he had it together this year. I was proud of Theo. He danced steady. He told me later that he had his moments of doubt, but he didn’t show it. None showed weakness. There were some older guys, who wore moccasins, and there was a woman, but they all danced every round.

Then, there was the young girl, Brittany, who had the role of White Buffalo Calf Woman. She’s a Lakota, the adopted daughter of Don and Cathy. Part of the adoption agreement Don and Cathy made was that Brittany would stay involved in the Lakota Way of Life, but Brittany is a modern teenager, and she would like to not. She thought she could get out of the role she had been cast into. She put up a fight. She had attitude.

Another man had brought his daughter, Shannon, and she supported Brittany’s rebellion. She might have gotten into the spirit of the ceremony and danced in support of her friend, like Kyle did in support of his dad. Instead, she sat around all day looking bored. But I’ll hand it to Brittany; she stayed the course, even though her snootiness got her dad a few demerits, which he paid for in flesh. Teenagers. Drama.

Lots of politics, too. Eric, who leads the dance had inherited this Sundance from his father, Vernon. The year before there had been a schism in the group. A dancer named Pauly, Eric’s second-in-command, had a vision to do his own Sundance, and he had pulled out this year, and it left the dancers in a quandary as to who they were going to follow. Theo felt that since he had committed with Eric he should stay this year. He likes Pauly, but he felt he should be loyal to the group. He had been a helper for Eric and was invited to dance this year. So, he was there to dance.

Eric is married to his second wife, Angie, and she has still to prove herself competent as the medicine man’s wife. Some of the older women don’t think she’s up to snuff, and there’s gossip. There’s always gossip. On the second day, she asked Melissa and Kathy if they would cook a lunch. And the girls made an arrangement to have the food delivered early in the morning.

Melissa is a trifle skittish. She’s studying to be a psychologist, and I bet she’ll make a good counselor. She’s the mother of four. She’s a grandmother. But she is still in her 30s, which is young for a grandmother. She’s a strong homemaker, takes great care of her brood, gets perfect grades in school, but she’s susceptible to getting stressed out. Surprise. And her friend, Kathy, I love her, too. She’s got a sense of humor. However, she can suddenly take off in an unpredictable direction. Get in her car, drive around, looking for lost Indians who need a ride home. She has heart and soul. But, I could see this cooking lunch for fifty or sixty people might go askew.

So, we discussed the project with Don's wife, Cathy, who has had more experience, and she suggested Melissa and Kathy take the food that's delivered in the morning and get started, while she and I go over to Brittany's grandmother's place and prepare the rest. We'd go to a city called Sioux Nation and shop. Next morning, I met Cathy and we drove to a house trailer with about twenty junked cars scattered about, and dogs, and debris, no grass, a creek bed filled with garbage. Let's not judge it, but it was not a pristine site.

There was a car with a pair of bare legs sticking out from under it and a guy sitting on the fender talking to whomever was under the car. A group of young children were playing a game in the dusty driveway. One little girl asked another, "Are you a boy or a girl?" The other girl replied, "A boy," and the first girl said, "Well, boys run backwards, and girls run forward." That's it, I thought, now I know how it works.

We knocked on the door of the house trailer, and it opened and we entered. Inside, there were maybe three or four bedrooms. I didn't go back to look. A bathroom on the right, off the entryway, a living room with a curved couch. TV. Kitchen with a sink full of dishes. Kitchen table next to the wall. Three teenage girls, looking very hung over, sat on the couch with a baby and a toddler. The grandmother, sitting at the kitchen table with coffee and cigarettes. Two hulking men, one with a crew cut, dressed as a gangbanger, the other with a pitted complexion and long hair. I'm introduced to the grandmother, Sandy, but as I was standing over her right shoulder, I reached around and shook her hand in reverse fashion. When I was introduced to the gangbanger, he gave me a high five and we went through a hand jive routine. The longhair gave me a conventional, albeit limp, handshake. I was introduced to Sandy's husband, Junior, and was told he was a priest in the Native American Church. The Native American Church is not the Lakota religion, comes from the Southwest. Junior was into peyote, and there was a decidedly hallucinatory vibe to him. Right away, he wanted to tell me about a special medicine he knew of that would keep the bullets from penetrating my robes.

Sandy snapped at one of the girls on the couch, "Wake up. You can't be watching that baby if you're asleep. That'll teach you to stay out all night." The men excused themselves and went outside, and I was offered coffee and cigarettes, which I declined. Said I was fasting, and Sandy said she understood.

I excused myself, and I went to the bathroom. I lifted the lid on the toilet, and the seat fell off. The faucet was dripping, and I could see that the grout was missing from the tiles around the sink. Obviously, there wasn't a handyman in this household. I went back to the kitchen, where I was introduced to another member of the family. A young man in his late teens, named Curtis. Crew cut, cowboy shirt and boots, silver and gold rodeo buckle. Bright eyes. Had an aura about him. I was told later that he has a mental disorder, has a problem with directions. Has to be told what to do. He does what he's told until he's told to do something else. Childhood abuse. Still, this boy had charisma.

The day before had been Cathy's birthday, and Sandy asked Curtis to sing "Happy Birthday." Curtis sang a truly heart-rending version of this song. Right up there with the one by Marilyn Monroe. It came from deep within him, like he was channeling the song from another dimension, like there was an ancient songster singing through him. Changed the whole dynamic of the gathering.

Then, we talked about the lunch for the Sundance, said we would buy some potato salad at the grocery store, but Sandy wouldn't hear of it. "No," she said, "that's not the right way. There's

no spirit in that kind of food.”

I said, “But we have to have this meal ready by 2:00, and it's past 10. I'll be glad to help.” But Sandy said they could do it, that I couldn't help because it was the women's responsibility to prepare the meal. So, we headed for Sioux Nation in her SUV. There was a monitor on the speedometer that beeped when we exceeded 65 mph, and the beeper beeped steadily, as we sailed down the road.

At the Sioux Nation Supermarket, I again asked if I could help, and I was again told it was women's work, so I wandered over to a section of the store that had books and bought a copy of Ronald Goodman's monograph, *Lakota Star Knowledge*, which has helped me in understanding a little of the steller theology connected to the Sundance.

A Sioux lady came up, while I was reading, and asked me what I was. I told her I'm a Tibetan Buddhist monk. “Where's that?” she asked. I told her I'm living in California caregiving my elderly mother but that my home is in the Four Corners area of Colorado, at Tara Mandala Retreat Center. “What are you doing here?” I said I was at a Sundance, that I was waiting for some women to buy groceries, that they wouldn't let me help. She said, “Well, that's not the Lakota way. If you offer to help, they should let you help.” I thanked her for this information.

We bought \$192 worth of supplies. Chopped ham. Cheese. Chips. Hotdogs. Buns. Mustard. Ketchup. Mayonnaise. Pickles. Potatoes. Flour. Onions. Gatorade. Bottled water. Ice. Lard. There's a saying around there: “If it uses lard, it's good.” Outside, getting the groceries in the SUV, we were approached by a young man wanting money for gas. Sandy railed at him, “Get a job. I've worked every day of my life. You don't have to beg.”

Begging is endemic on the reservation. When we first arrived on Eric's land, there was a car stalled in the middle of the road, and one of the men asked if he could have \$20 to buy a part to fix the car. A hose was blown. He had a piece of the hose in his hand. He said he was one of the singers for the dance. As I knew I was going to give something to the singers at the end of the ceremony, I decided to give it to them in advance. I knew it was a scam. The car started up, after they had their money. He knew I was an easy touch. His name was Sam, and I gave him another \$5 for cough drops later.

We drove back to the trailer lickedy-split. I told Sandy that a monk is really neither male or female. I told her what the girl in the supermarket had said about accepting my help, so she put me to work chopping pickles. Sandy made fry bread, and Cathy boiled potatoes. When the pickles were chopped, we peeled the cooked potatoes, twenty pounds of them, and cut them into small squares.

The mother of the teenage girls, who'd been putting a fuel pump on the car, came in and headed for the shower. She reappeared in flashy clothes with hair slicked back, dress tight on her ample hips, cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, nodded at me, and went out without a word. A lot of woman.

I cut thin slices of chopped ham off the block, and Cathy slapped on a sheet of cheese and made forty sandwiches. We had two tubs of potato salad, a pan full of sandwiches, and a whopping good-size container of fry bread. We jumped back in the car and headed for the Sundance, arriving just on time. Melissa and Kathy were relieved to see us. Everyone ate happily, while paper plates, styrofoam cups, and napkins blew about in the wind. These people are doing what they have always done. They're a nomadic people, camping out in house trailers, getting together with their extended family to feast, leaving their garbage where it lies. The thing is,

modern garbage is not biodegradable, and the people are not moving on. For the most part, they've never learned the trades of plumbing, carpentry, and electrical work. Their houses fall down around them. It's a repair man's dream come true.

Junior showed me a little repair he had done in the kitchen of his trailer. He had nailed a strip of cherrywood around the edge of the counter, where a piece of the original trim had fallen off. It was neat enough, gave the counter a rustic look, but he must have put the wood on while it was still green, and it had shrunk, and a quarter inch of the plywood behind the strip showed through. I told him it was nice.

These are sociological judgements, and I am not a historian of the reservation. But I listened. An elder, known as Uncle Eli, told me he was skeptical of the politicians, given their history of broken promises. The federal government has acknowledged it has completely screwed up the bookkeeping on the money it has collected since the 1880s, when it leased the Lakota land to timber, mining and oil interests. It owes Natives Americans billions of dollars, but the whole issue is tied up in court.

Meanwhile, on the Pine Ridge Reservation, there are three and four families living in run-down trailers or sleeping in junked cars. Something like ninety percent of the people are unemployed. Alcoholism is rampant, without there being a treatment center. Uncle Eli, who is in his 70s and has recently recovered from quadruple bi-pass surgery, is luckier than most. He and his wife, Caroline, run a tipi bed and breakfast. But they have their problems. Recently, one of Uncle Eli's eight sons died, and now they are caring for thirteen underage grandchildren.

I met a man who worked for the housing authority. He was at cross purposes with himself because it was his duty to kick people out of their homes if they aren't keeping them up, but his Lakota way isn't to make poor people homeless. He said, "It's like we're living in a third world country. Like a concentration camp. POWs after the Battle of Little Big Horn. We are still paying for that one. In my opinion, it's a Custer fuck by a bunch of circle jerks."

I heard another bitter saying: "The Cheyenne did the fighting. The Sioux got the glory. The Crow got the land." I drove through the Crow reservation, down through the Crazy Mountains. Things looked more prosperous there. One thing I discovered: the Lakota are a fierce, friendly, fickle and forgiving people. They are like the French in that they are proud of their language and culture. Their language holds them together as a people. They do things the way they do them, and they aren't going to be coerced into doing anything differently.

The Sundance continued, round after round. Kyle did his best to imitate his father's step, and I danced by his side. We stood with the sun on us, so we suffered, too. The idea of the suffering is that you are doing it so the people may live. A ritual for past favors granted. A rite that draws down divine power into the pledges, the dancer being a channel for the Great Spirit. Theo could see us. We danced to support him and the others.

I saw different kinds of piercing. There's the piercing of the skin on the breast. There's a team with a scalpel. I saw one of the scalpels stuck in a tree. It was a medical instrument, but not exactly antiseptic. The patient lies down on a buffalo skin laid out at the base of the tree. The Interceptor and his lieutenants talk with the dancer who is to pierce. They draw a circle on his chest where they are going to cut, rub a bit of dirt on the spot, make two incisions, and insert a wooden peg. If the guy being pierced has had forethought, he has sanded the rough edges off his pegs. A short piece of rope is tied to each peg, and that piece of rope is tied to the longer rope which in turn is tied to the tree. After you're done, and you've popped off, they plug the hole

with a mushroom. I've heard there are cases of infection, but Theo has done this twice, and he has had no problem healing, so the mushrooms must have some power. The wound heals and leaves a small scar, about the size of the tip of your little finger. This is not exactly a science, more of an art, I would say, in the sense that there are a number of factors that determine a piercing.

It sounds grotesque, but it is really beautiful. There is a humor about the whole process. The dancers tease one another. They psych themselves up, and if you don't like being teased, it's not the place to be. One side of the experience is to be prepared for the physical pain, and another side is about prayer. The spirit moves in mysterious ways when you are in an altered state. The dancers look for their visions. It's individualistic. Everyone is doing their own thing. There's no dogma. If you listen to five different people on the subject, you get five different takes. So, you have to piece your answers together and put it to use as best you can.

When the dancer is pierced the frontal way, and the rope extends to the tree, the Sundancer doesn't want the rope to be loose. He wants it taut, so he leans back while he dances. He dances awhile, and then he moves up to the tree, where he prays. He does this four times, and the fourth time, he pulls back and pops the pegs out of his flesh. Or he tries to. Theo did it without any problem. Pulled his shoulders back and freed himself. Others had more difficulty.

There seems to be three variables. One, how thick-skinned you are, your physiology. Two, how deep the Interceptor cuts you. And three, how the spirit or randomness enters the equation. Mark, Kathy's husband, only hung from his right side because the cut on his left side was imperfect, so he was somewhat imbalanced, hanging from one side only. And the year before, he broke free on one side but not the other, and Kathy pulled him off. So, for two years running, he had an odd experience with his piercings.

Wade tried to pull himself free three times without success, and the Eric pulled him off. This may have been to humiliate him in some way because of his earlier performance. The same with Cordel. He's a big man, but he couldn't pull free. Some say this is good. The longer you hang and the longer you suffer, the better for you and the people. Two dancers charged across the circle to Cordel and made a linebacker tackle to free him. Afterwards he said, "Now, I feel like a real Sundancer."

Another way of piercing is to pierce on the back and haul seven buffalo skulls tied in tandem around the perimeter of the circle, maybe fifty yards. Buffalo skulls are bigger than cow skulls. One of the dancers I saw do this was dancing for his grandmother, who was ill. She limped behind him on a cane. I suppose he wanted to be pierced deep, so he could drag the skulls a long way. And he did. He drug them around four times, and then he tried to break loose, but he couldn't. A couple of the dancers sat on the skulls, and he tried again, and again. Still, he couldn't free himself. So, the Interceptor made a couple of precision cuts, and with a good tug, the dancer broke loose. People were crying, as he jogged around the circle a last time, carrying two staffs with eagle feathers attached.

Wade pierced again, on the back this time, and they brought a rope which was thrown over a fork in the tree and attached it to him, and he stood on a two-by-four, which two men lifted, while his family held onto the other end of the rope. He was given eagle feather fans, one for each hand. These he held out away from his body, and when the two-by-four was removed, he was left hanging in the air, flapping his arms like wings. He didn't break loose, and you could hear sobs coming from the audience. Then, the Interceptor and a helper yanked him down. I saw blood gush. Wade fell to his knees and held onto the trunk of the tree. Then, he collapsed, and they

layed him on the buffalo skin, and his family gathered around him. I couldn't hear what was said, but I am sure they were thanking him for his sacrifice, his bravery, his fortitude. He had redeemed himself.

When Don drug the skulls, he broke loose after about thirty feet. So, it's hard to know how much is punishment and how much is the way the spirit moves. Don pierced on the last day. Some dancers psych themselves up and want to pierce sooner. Some wait until the ordeal is nearly over. On the fourth and final day, there was extra ceremony. A healing ceremony and a teasing ceremony. In the teasing ceremony, a painted clown splashed water on the dancers. She guzzled water in front of them, but they ignored her antics.

After the final dance rounds, after the Interceptor had pierced, all the dancers walked around the arbor and shook hands with the onlookers. One thing that I had been warned about early on was that no one was supposed to walk across the East Gate. And just as everything was winding down, a couple of little kids ran across that space. One ran back, and everyone said, "No, no," and then he ran across again, and I thought maybe the dancers would all have to pierce again or go to the sweat lodge, but Don caught the kids and took them back to their parents, and all was forgiven. Their timing was excellent, right at the end, like they wanted to jinx the whole ceremony.

Then, we feasted. The dancers hadn't had much sustenance, a plum, some lemons, a splash of water. But now they were offered a full banquet. Beef stew, sandwiches, salads. They chowed down, but it didn't take long for them to fill up. People hugged. They congratulated one another. They wanted to talk about their experiences, or not. They were exhausted but ecstatic.

The next day, we took the boughs off the arbor and picked up a mound trash. Then, we loaded our gear in our car and took the extra food over to Eric's. He was just getting up, and there were a pile of kids on the front room floor under blankets. We talked awhile. Said how much we appreciated everything. I told him a little about Buddhism. Asked him if it was ok that I danced in my robes. He assured me it was, and he asked if I would attend next year. I said I'd try.

Before leaving, I saw Uncle Eli. "Who is it says the Lakota way is in jeopardy? It's the ones who leave the reservation and come back and think they can improve things by doing it the white man's way, the New Ager's." He paused, and then he continued, "Did you feel that wind? That's how the Spirit moves. It can see you, but you can't see it."



CHÖD ON THE RANGE

