Podcast #70 Lessons from The Soul of an Indian

If you are looking for some authentic writing to help you see the life and traditions of a Native-American, I suggest taking a look at the writings of Charles Eastman. He was the first Native-American to write an autobiography and to talk of their way of life from a first-person point of view.

When he was born in 1858, he was named Hakadah, meaning pitiful last. His beautiful mother died not long after giving birth to him, her fifth baby. As a young boy, there was a massacre of his village and his 60 year old grandmother and uncle whisked him away to safety where they took care of him for the next ten years. Later in life, he wrote of his boyhood experiences to share with young people in a book called Indian Boyhood which became a huge bestseller and was translated into many languages. I highly recommend it to you, but be warned–there is a chapter on his First offering in which he is to make a sacrifice of his most beloved possession. He has a little dog he loves dearly–I had a hard time making it through that one.

His grandmother's name was 'Stands Sacred' and she was strong and brave. At one point she had to swim across a river with Hakadah on her back. As we are always on the lookout for lessons on being better mothers, let me share some of his thoughts of the role of mother and grandmother in his culture.

"It has been said that the position of woman is the test of civilization, and that of our women was secure. In them was vested our standard of morals and the purity of our blood. . . She was to us a tower of moral and spiritual strength, until the coming of the border white man, the soldier and trader, who with strong drink overthrew the honor of the man, and through his power over a worthless husband purchased the virtue of his wife or his daughter. When she fell, the whole race fell with her.

"Before this calamity came upon us, you could not find anywhere a happier home than that created by the Indian woman. ...Her early and consistent training, the definiteness of her vocation, and, above all, her profoundly religious attitude gave her a strength and poise that could not be overcome by ordinary misfortune.

"A woman's name usually suggested something about the home, often with the adjective "pretty' or 'good' and a feminine termination.

"The American Indian was an individualist . . . he had neither a national army nor an organized church. There was no priest to assume responsibility for another's soul. That is, we believed, the supreme duty of the parent...since it is his creative and protecting power which alone approaches the solemn function of Deity.

"The Indian was a religious man from his mother's womb. From the moment of her recognition of the fact of conception to the end of the second year of life, it was supposed by us that the mother's spiritual influence counted for most. Her attitude and secret meditations must be such as to instill into the receptive soul of the unborn child the love of the "Great Mystery" and a

sense of brotherhood with all creatures. Silence and isolation are the rule of life for the expectant mother. She wanders prayerful in the stillness of the great woods...and to her poetic mind the immanent birth of her child prefigures the advent of a master-man–a hero, or the mother of heroes–

"And when the day of days in her life dawns–the day in which there is to be a new life, the miracle of whose making has been intrusted to her, she seeks no human aid. She has been trained and prepared in body and mind for this her holiest duty, ever since she can remember. The ordeal is best met alone,...where all nature says to her spirit: "Tis love! 'Tis love! The fulfilling of life!" When a sacred voice comes to her out of the silence, and a pair of eyes open upon her in the wilderness, she knows with joy that she has borne well her part in the great song of creation!

"Presently she returns to the camp, carrying the mysterious, the holy, the dearest bundle! She feels the endearing warmth of it and hears its soft breathing. It is still a part of herself, since both are nourished by the same mouthful, and no look of a lover could be sweeter than its deep, trusting gaze.

"She continues her spiritual teaching, at first silently–a mere pointing of the index finger to nature; then in whispered songs, bird-like, at morning and evening. To her and to the child, the birds are real people, who live very close to the 'Great Mystery;' the murmuring trees breathe His presence; the falling waters chant His praise.

"If the child should chance to be fretful, the mother raises her hand. "Hush! Hush!" she cautions it tenderly. She bids it be still and listen–listen to the silver voice of the aspen, or the clashing cymbals of the birch; and at night she points to the heavenly, blazed trail, through nature's galaxy of splendor to nature's God. Silence, love, reverence–this is the trinity of first lessons; and to these she later adds generosity, courage and chastity.

"In the old days, our mothers were single-eyed to the trust imposed upon them; and as a noted chief of our people was wont to say: "Men may slay one another, but they can never overcome the woman, for in the quietude of her lap lies the child! ...a gift of the Great Good to the race, in which man is only an accomplice."

"This wild mother has not only the experience of her mother and grandmother, and the accepted rules of her people for a guide, but she humbly seeks to learn a lesson from ants, bees, spiders, beavers, and badgers. She studies the family life of the birds, so exquisite in its emotional intensity and its patient devotion, until she seems to feel the universal mother-heart beating in her own breast. In due time the child takes of his own accord the attitude of prayer, and speaks reverently of the Powers.

"At the age of about eight years, if he is a boy, she turns him over to his father for more training. If a girl, she is from this time much under the guardianship of her grandmother, who is considered the most dignified protector of the maiden. Indeed, the distinctive work of both grandparents is that of acquainting the youth with the national traditions and beliefs. It is

reserved for them to repeat the time-hallowed tales with dignity and authority, so as to lead him into his inheritance in the stored-up wisdom and experience of the race. The old are dedicated to the service of the young, as their teachers and advisers, and the young in turn regard them with love and reverence.

“The expectant parents conjointly bent all their efforts to the task of giving the new-comer the best they could gather from a long line of ancestors. A pregnant woman would often choose one of the greatest characters of her family and tribe as a model for her child. This hero was daily called to mind. She would gather from tradition all of his noted deeds and daring exploits, rehearsing them to herself when alone. In order that the impression might be more distinct, she avoided company. She isolated herself as much as possible, and wandered in solitude, not thoughtlessly, but with an eye to the impress given by grand and beautiful scenery.

“Those ideas which so fully occupied his mother’s mind before his birth are not put into words... .He is called the future defender of his people, whose lives may depend upon his courage and skill. If the child is a girl, she is at once addressed as the future mother of a noble race.

“Very early, the Indian boy assumed the task of preserving and transmitting the legends of his ancestors and his race. Almost every evening a myth, or a true story of some deed done in the past, was narrated by one of the parents or grandparents, while the boy listened with parted lips and glistening eyes. On the following evening, he was usually required to repeat it. ..The household became his audience, by which he was alternately criticized and applauded.

“This sort of teaching at once enlightens the boy’s mind and stimulates his ambition. His conception of his own future career becomes a vivid and irresistible force. Whatever there is for him to learn must be learned; whatever qualifications are necessary to a truly great man he must seek at any expense of danger and hardship.

“...our manners and morals were not neglected. I was made to respect the adults and especially the aged . . . We were taught generosity to the poor and reverence for the “Great Mystery”. Religion was the basis of all Indian training. ...”Be strong of heart...” my grandmother used to say.

It was supposed that Hakadah’s father and siblings had been killed in the massacre, but imagine the joy when some ten years later, his father and brother reappeared. His father had been imprisoned and sentenced to be executed for his role in the uprising, but Abraham Lincoln pardoned him. In his confinement, he had become a Christian. In time, Hakadah also converted and adopted a Christian name, Charles Eastman.

One of the last books Eastman wrote was ‘The Soul of the Indian’ where he describes in great detail the religion of his people, which he said was the same as the Christian. Only when the Christian priests came to convert them, the manner of their lives was a huge obstacle. Charles recalled an old battle scarred warrior who sat among the young preachers and exclaimed,”

“Why, we have followed this law you speak of for untold ages! We owned nothing, because

everything is from Him. Food was free, land free as sunshine and rain. Who has changed all this? The white man, and yet he is the believer in God! He does not seem to inherit any of the traits of his Father, nor does he follow the example set by his brother Christ."

They were puzzled that the white man showed neither respect for nature nor reverence toward God. They would take His name in vain. Everything was about money and material possessions. They gave them fire water that ruined their lives. They didn't honor their promises.

In the Foreward to Eastman's book, he opened with a quote by the great Seneca orator, Red Jacket: "We also have a religion which was given to our forefathers, and has been handed down to us their children. It teaches us to be thankful, to be united, and to love one another! We never quarrel about religion."

He then said this book was an attempt to paint the religious life of the typical American Indian as it was before he knew the white man.

"The original attitude of the American Indian toward the Eternal, the 'Great Mystery' that surrounds and embraces us, was as simple as it was exalted. To him it was the supreme conception, bringing with it the fullest measure of joy and satisfaction possible in this life.

"The worship of the "Great Mystery" was silent, solitary, free from all self-seeking. It was silent, because all speech is of necessity feeble and imperfect...It was solitary, because they believed that He is nearer to us in solitude, and there were no priests authorized to come between a man and his Maker...Among us all men were created sons of God and stood erect, as conscious of their divinity. . .

"There were no temples or shrines among us save those of nature...He needs no lesser cathedral!

"That solitary communion with the Unseen which was the highest expression of our religious life is partly described by the word babeday, literally 'mysterious feeling'. It may better be interpreted as 'consciousness of the divine."

Isn't that beautiful? The Native American is far from the savage, superstitious barbarian image created in later days.

Eastman went on to graduate from Dartmouth and received his training as a doctor at Boston University. He was the only physician on site to treat the survivors at the massacre at Wounded Knee. How I would have loved to see his methods of healing as he combined the traditions of his people with modern medicine. Let me take a minute to share what he wrote about that:

"I always regarded my good grandmother as the wisest of guides and the best of protectors . . .I distinctly recall one occasion when she took me with her into the woods in search of certain medicinal roots.

'Why do you not use all kinds of roots for medicines?" said I.

“Because,” she replied, in her quick, characteristic manner, “the Great Mystery does not will us to find things too easily. In that case every body would be a medicine-giver, and Ohiyesa must learn that there are many secrets which the Great Mystery will disclose only to the most worthy. Only those who seek him fasting and in solitude will receive his signs.”

With this and many similar explanations she wrought in my soul wonderful and lively conceptions of the ‘Great Mystery’ and of the effects of prayer and solitude. I continued my childish questioning.

“But why did you not dig those plants that we saw in the woods, of the same kind that you are digging now?”

“For the same reason that we do not like the berries we find in the shadow of deep woods as well as the ones which grow in sunny places. The latter have more sweetness and flavor. Those herbs which have medicinal virtues should be sought in a place that is neither too wet nor too dry, and where they have a generous amount of sunshine to maintain their vigor.

“Some day Ohiyesa will be old enough to know the secrets of medicine; then I will tell him all. But if you should grow up to be a bad man, I must withhold these treasure from you and give them to your brother, for a medicine man must be a good and wise man. I hope Ohiyesa will be a great medicine man when he grows up. To be a great warrior is a noble ambition; but to be a mighty medicine man is a nobler!”

She said these things so thoughtfully and impressively that I cannot but feel and remember them even to this day.

Elsewhere he wrote:

“There is no doubt that the Indian held medicine close to spiritual things, but in this also he has been much misunderstood; in fact, everything that he held sacred is indiscriminately called ‘medicine’. As a doctor, he was originally often successful. He employed only healing bark, roots, and leaves with whose properties he was familiar . . He could set a broken bone with fair success, but never practiced surgery in any form. In addition to all this, the medicine-man possessed much personal magnetism and authority, and in his treatment often sought to re-establish the equilibrium of the patient through mental or spiritual influences.

“The Sioux word for the healing art is ‘wah-pee-yah,” which literally means readjusting or making anew. “Pay-jee-hoo-tah,” literally root, means medicine, and ‘wakan’ signifies spirit or mystery. Thus the three ideas, while sometimes associated, were carefully distinguished.

“It is important to remember that in the old days the ‘medicine man’ received no payment for his services, which were of the nature of an honorable function or office. When the idea of payment and barter was introduced among us, and valuable presents or fees began to be demanded for treating the sick, the ensuing greed and rivalry led to many demoralizing practices, and in time to the rise of the modern ‘conjurer,’ who is generally a fraud and trickster of the grossest kind.”

Charles Eastman, in addition to being a writer, humanitarian and doctor, was instrumental in setting up 32 chapters of the YMCA for Native-Americans. He was a key player in the establishment of the Boys Scouts of America as well as the Campfire Girls and many of the original camp and nature experiences came from his upbringing.

I can well imagine why he resisted assimilation into the white man's world. In his declining years, he built a simple log cabin by a lake and spent his last days there.

I believe the Native American has yet a significant future role to play in our story. He has been sorely treated and dismissed, but among their people is a powerhouse of faith and lessons we desperately need. The final paragraph of Soul of the Indian reads:

"Such are the beliefs in which I was reared–the secret ideals which have nourished in the American Indian a unique character among the peoples of the earth. Its simplicity, its reverence, its bravery and uprightness must be left to make their own appeal to the American of today–who is the inheritor of our homes, our names, and our traditions. Since there is nothing left us but remembrance, at least let that remembrance be just!"

May we teach our children to learn and remember a forgotten heritage.

And now I'll close with a poem by Coleridge that Eastman included in the front of Soul of the Indian:

God! Sing ye meadow streams with gladsome voice!
Ye pine-groves, with your soft and soul-like sounds!
Ye eagles, playmates of the mountain storm!
Ye lightnings, the dread arrows of the clouds;
Ye signs and wonders of the elements,
Utter forth God, and fill the hills with praise! . .. .
Earth, with her thousand voices, praises GOD!