

Living in the Now.

There is nothing like travelling to help put things into perspective. When you see how others are forced to live, you can then truly appreciate how blessed we really are. Our dramas become so insignificant that you wonder why you would waste so much time and energy on such trivial matters. You begin to see the bigger picture and with that comes realisation on what is important in life.

I arrived in Rapid City U.S.A after 3 flights and 38 hours with no sleep, to be greeted by a Lakota Indian Woman and her friend. Though my body was tired, the excitement of entering the unknown and a new adventure ahead kept me awake.

I was very blessed to be invited to The Sun Dance Ceremony. This ceremony is held once a year by the Lakota people in South Dakota. It is a sacred ceremony requiring preparation. We had a few days before we had to head out. I was staying with a family who would be deeply involved with the ceremony. The lady of the house taught Indigenous teachings at the local college. She was incredibly generous in sharing these teachings with me. I cannot go into the details of the actual ceremony as it is not my place and it is up to the Lakota people if they want to share the details of the ceremony. However I would like to share with you my personal experience in being part of such a ceremony.

Prior to the ceremony I found myself becoming profoundly emotional and angry at the injustice of the past and the harsh reality of the treatment of these once very proud and honourable people. I was taken aback by how some live today.

The more I learnt the more frustrated I became. A great sadness swept over me. I got lost in the past and disheartened, as so many people are, by the lies and deceptions that we term 'history'.

A prime and current deception is the facade that you see in Hollywood of the Indians scalping. In actual fact the government initiated scalping by putting a price on all Indian heads - men, women and children. A reward was offered for each scalp. Commonly, soldiers would wait until the fighting men had left camp and then go in and massacre everybody - women, children and the elderly.

In the Lakota's case, there was also the heartbreaking enforced march, hundreds of miles from their lush traditional tribal hunting grounds to the desert that had little to no water or food suitable for sustaining life. Thousands of people died.

The same was done to the Navaho nation. They were marched for over 300 miles to a fort where the drinking water made everyone sick (due to minerals in the river) and the desert soil made it impossible to grow food. This occurred to many of the Indian tribes and some call it "The long walk of tears." Incredibly, in New Mexico slave labour was not abolished until the early 1900's.

For me it was the same story of all indigenous people around the world; one of pain and suffering brought on by white man's greed and desperate need to own and control everything. A story of injustice and great cruelty that still continues today. This once great nation, bowed and beaten by years of abuse, today has an extremely high suicide rate amongst its youth, while many of the adults are consumed by alcohol and gambling. I saw no unity, only disconnection and anger. That is, until I went to the Sun Dance.

The Sun Dance.

The Sun Dance is the most sacred of Lakota spiritual practices.

In the 1880's the United States government took it upon themselves to outlaw it, as it was deemed uncivilised and barbaric. How ironic, considering the countless numbers of Indians who were murdered since white invasion, the thousands of children taken from their families to be put in boarding schools where they were severely abused and, lets also not forget, the treatment of the Native Indians today. But the government of the time, being so much more 'civilised', refused to see the Sun Dance for what it is. A symbolic act of sacrifice, to give of one self. It wasn't until 1978 that the Lakota people were free to practice their traditions when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed.

The ceremony I attended was held on a vast property surrounded by rich green hills and a river that weaves itself around the land below. Sage grows everywhere. No buildings are in sight and it is so picturesque you feel as if you've been transported to another time. When the sun gently rises over the hills it is a spectacular vision.

The ceremony lasts for five days. In total, we were there for six days. The people gather the day before to set up camp and prepare. We camped in a circular formation as is the tradition, and the ceremony was held in the centre.

The sun dancers - both men and women -sacrifice so much of themselves in order to bring healing to the tribes and the earth mother. It is a test of great endurance. A time of renewal, both of the tribes and of the earth. The dancers look at the sun as they dance, and the men blow on eagle bone whistles. Breaks are allowed but no food or drink can be taken. This part of the dance goes on for 4 days. The final dance happens in the evening under the full moon. A very powerful time for all.

The people who gather to witness, pray. They pray for the sun dancers and for the healing and greater good of all, and they pray for all the tribes, not just their own. It is truly an amazing thing to witness and one that makes you feel very humble.

The Sun Dance is an opportunity for some to be adopted into a family and for others to receive their sacred name. It was incredible how I was welcomed into their circle without judgements or prejudice. I learnt that this ceremony brings out the truth, and whatever deceptions or lies you create, whatever pain you carry will be revealed for you to acknowledge.

Each day the individual camps take it in turn to cook for all who are there to witness the ceremony. It is a time of sharing, a time of prayer and a time to surrender your demons and to look past the self.

It is a time of coming together.

At the end of the ceremony gifts are offered. A different family takes it in turn every year to offer gifts to all who are there. Some families work the whole year to make enough to buy the gifts that are shared amongst the people. Such incredible generosity, it truly is a time of sharing.

Despite all the sadness and injustice that is happening to these people, the ceremony unites everyone and for that brief time, all worries are put aside. Nobody thinks about the past or worries

about tomorrow. During the Sun Dance you live in the now, reflecting on life and all that is offered to us by spirit and the earth mother.

For me it was a time of profound healing, an awakening of immense proportions. I witnessed and experienced great beauty in all of creation. It brought greater meaning to the teaching of Mikao Usui, the Master and creator of Reiki. I was shown the essence of the five mental rules, made more powerful than ever before.

- 1/ Just for today do not worry.
- 2/ Just for today do not get angry
- 3/ Just for today work honestly
- 4/ Just for today be compassionate to yourself and others
- 5/ Just for today be humble

The lesson that rang true the most for me was “just for today I will not worry.”

It became a mantra. It released me from such controlling emotions to be able to see beyond the principle and to come back into the present, an act we all can find difficult to achieve. It helped me to still my mind and take in the beauty that is life. It opened me up to see the whole picture.

So many of us get caught up in old emotions that we lose sight of the moment. How often do we trap ourselves in the past and constant doubt and fear? We allow ourselves to become so entangled by our emotions that we lose sight of the lesson. How impossible to then create a future!

Once I started living in the moment and stopped dwelling on the injustice of it all, life started flowing again. Though the truth can be painful, I no longer saw injustice. Instead I saw a great nation that has survived against all odds to still be with us today. These people were never conquered as we are lead to believe, because their culture, traditions and customs have withstood the greatest of tests. I also realised that we all have a choice and that it's truly time to learn from the past in order for us to create a better future.

The rage, sadness and betrayals seemed to disappear and in its place came hope. Soon many doors would open and with it greater understanding.

The magic began once I started living in the moment.

I flew to Santa Fe where I had the great honour of staying in a guest house that belonged to an amazing healer who had written books on the Native Indians. An inspiring lady, Jenny lived on the mountain with her husband. I went from rags to riches staying in her guest house on top of a mountain overlooking Santa Fe. It was a special place surrounded by rose quartz crystals, spectacular views and animals such as mountain tigers living in their natural habitat.

Never got to see the tigers on my early morning walks, but that is not a bad thing. I witnessed the most incredible sunsets and saw eagles flying at eye level, circling around me. The air was clean and fresh. I think my lungs went into shock. Life was exciting as I set off on another adventure.

I would spend my days visiting Santa Fe, hanging out in the square where I met Pueblo and Navaho Indians selling amazing jewellery, turquoise and art.

Jenny and I rented a car and as fate would have it, got upgraded to a brand new Cadillac as they had run out of small cars. The guy actually apologised. It was the best \$35 I had ever spent. Happy days.

We travelled to a place called Fort Sumer. It was where the Navaho were forced to march to when white man discovered gold in their mountains. The policy was to exterminate them. The soldiers would burn down their crops, peach trees, kill their live stock and poison their waters. Most Navaho were starved into submission. In the winter of 1863-64 the Navaho were rounded up and marched 300 miles which took 18 days, off their traditional land to Fort Sumer.

Thousands of people died on this march, others were kidnapped and made into slaves. Many lives perished at this fort. This was "The long walk." It was not until 1868 that a treaty was made to allow them to return back to their sacred mountains.

It was quite an eerie place. We did ceremony and offered tobacco. Tobacco has such importance to the American Indian. It was never used the way it's used today and it certainly didn't have all the poisons that tobacco has today.

This is how the story was told to me. The story of White Buffalo Woman.

You see, a long time ago, long before white man's invasion, the tribes were at war. It was a time of hardship as the people had lost their way. White Buffalo Woman appeared and brought forth the sacred peace pipe to the Lakota.

The story as it was told to me goes something like this.

There were two young hunters who were out in search of game when they came across a very beautiful young woman. One of them thought to take advantage of her. As he went to take her a mist rolled down to cover him. His companion looked to see that his was nothing more than a skeleton. The young hunter saw that he was in the presence of something very powerful. He realised that she was sent from spirit so he took her to his tribe.

She asked them to build a lodge and invited all the elders. There she taught them ceremonies and pulled out from her bundle a sacred pipe. She stayed with them for a while and taught them how to use it. Then one day the people watched her walk towards the top of a hill where a white mist appeared. She walked into the mist and emerged on the other side as a white buffalo. The Indians believe that when the white buffalo appears once more then peace will come to the land.

Tobacco is used at a time of prayer and as an offering to the earth mother, the sun, to the great mystery, to creator, when you enter a sacred space or when you take something from the earth. You always give thanks and offer tobacco in gratitude.

Prior to the trip to the fort I had met Alex, a Navaho artist in the local square where the Indians sell their art. It was an instant connection. We sat in the park as he showed me his art. Incredible sand paintings and jewellery. He shared with me stories and teachings. It felt as if we knew each other, like he was a lost brother. Alex is an incredible man who endured great hardships. He found his way through connecting back with his ancestors, the old ways. The understanding and respect he had for the land was incredible.

I had dreamt of visiting a place called Window Rock in Arizona. For 3 years I had thought of this place. Upon my return from the fort I had caught up with Alex. I invited him over to the mountain for lunch with us. He was planning to go to the reservation to see his mum and before I knew it we

were on an adventure together. We were going to the reservation and then would head to Window Rock in Arizona where the Navaho Headquarters is located.

We left mid-afternoon in a rundown minivan. We travelled through incredible landscape mountains covered in rich red colours - spectacular variations as the sun came down. Crossing creeks and driving past deer, it was night before we arrived at the reservation. We stopped at the spot where the march started and for prayer, offering tobacco. So now I have travelled to where long walk began.

We stayed in a trailer home where there was no electricity or running water. You would be happy to know that now they finally have electricity. I woke up in the morning to find myself in a scene from a Mad Max movie. Desert all around, broken down rusty cars, tyres and the nearest trailer home a 15 minute walk. Everything was so still. Silence all around. Only space.

We left in the morning, got breakfast from locals in a pickup truck on the side of the road and away we went, travelling through the four sacred mountains and crossing the interstate into Arizona, to Window Rock – a very sacred space for the Navaho. We had arrived in the middle of a protest against the high suicide rate amongst youth. The protesters were all Indians on horseback. An amazing sight. I couldn't believe that I was finally here. Larger than life was this porthole. To see it is to believe.

From there we headed back over the border towards the reservation. We travelled into the mountains where Alex's mum was staying. The sun gets too hot on the reservation so she escapes the heat by staying in her traditional Navaho house called Hogans in the mountains during the summer months.

We had to go climbing through mountains to find creeks in search of water. It was the best water I have ever drunk. We visited for a while and then headed back to our trailer in the desert. We arrived just in time for a wind storm. We went from the fresh crisp air of a forest mountain to the heat of the desert. I was experiencing all seasons in one day. All we could see, breathe and taste was sand. Such an amazing contrast to where we were only 2 hours earlier.

The next morning we headed for the canyons. One after another and each with a story to tell. The stories of the Native Indian have withstood the test of time. You see, the Native Indians knowledge and history were passed on orally. Even though white man had tried to destroy their culture and beliefs it has withstood the test of time. Their knowledge has survived as it was passed on from generation to generation through story telling. Just like with the aboriginal people.

One of the sites we visited was an ancient city built below the canyon. Part of the canyon had collapsed upon it. The houses could still be seen underneath the rubble. Signs of where a river once flowed with abundance of water. Ancient spaces carved in circles where people once sat around. Perhaps a place of gathering or worship. I felt so alive, senses overloaded. There was so much mystery surrounding this sacred space. The energy and construction were reminiscent of Aztec temples of South America.

I couldn't imagine what the land must have looked like back then. Today it was all desert. You wonder how such a great city that once stood could destroy itself. Was it the same story throughout mans history. Ego – man's desperate need to control. I guess that's a lesson we have not yet learned.

We drove to find ourselves in a national park filled with more canyons, even more spectacular than then last. We came across the caves where hundreds of women, children and the old hid from the white men only to be found and brutally slaughtered. I was unable to walk into those caves. It would have been too heart-breaking knowing what had happened there.

We then drove to the other side of the canyons, with rich red rock formation. We came across a young man playing his flute on top of one of these canyons. Trying to sell his C.D's. It was so perfect. It transported me back to those times before white man, before the terror. Way back to a time where the people lived in peace, at one with the earth mother. Abundance everywhere where the earth flourished and there was harmony.

We hung out, sitting on top of the canyon, space for miles and miles, just nature and the flute playing in the background. Happy days....

Of course I bought his CD and headed off. A short drive later we arrived at another canyon. Rock formation on either side and below, a creek running between the canyons trees on either side, as it swirled through the canyon. My eyes followed the river going down and around when, to my amazement, across on the other side as the river turned was an ancient city built within the canyon. What I would've given to be able to go down and explore.

We drove past lakes and rivers, saw deers and eagles and stopped at Indians' canteens, eating local food as we made our way back to Santa Fe. Not sure if my stomach could deal with fried bread on a regular basis. We arrived back late at night and the next day I was flying out to San Francisco. I really didn't want to go.

This was the most incredible of journeys. My senses were on overload. I saw great magic, incredible landscapes, loving people who shared incredible wisdom with me. I was shown how to speak my truth and to stay disconnected from the emotions that can at times enslave us. I recognised that people are what they are and not to take betrayal personally - it is a mere projection of their own suffering.

Visiting with the Lakota, experiencing the Sun Dance, than staying with Jenny and meeting with the Navaho and Pueblo, I've learnt profoundly, again, that life is too short and we must embrace every moment of it. In doing so, we will always be open to see life in everything.

It wasn't until I let go of the past and started living in the moment that my world opened up. Would I have noticed Alex in the park if I was living in my head?

Once my head was cleared from all doubts, fears and judgement a new world opened up. One that was full of opportunities, teachings and understanding.

Inevitably, this leads me back to the basis of all teaching – that we have a choice in how we lead our lives.

The responsibility is yours to make and only you can make it. As the first law of shamanism states, "The world is what you think it is." This can be your heaven or it can be your hell. The choice is yours to make. The past is merely there to teach us the lessons. It is not to be used as an excuse to hold on to disabling emotions that keep us in a state of fear.

Again I am reminded of the teachings of Mikao Usui "Love is letting go of terror".

It's the little things that touch our soul and what we must always be grateful for. A smile from a stranger walking down the street, a butterfly flying in the wind, the breath of life, the wind gently touching your face or the waves breaking on the rocks. Walking in the rain, the rich orange colours of the canyons or lush green jungles of a rainforest. A child's laughter. Food on the table, good health and a roof over your head. There is so much to be grateful for, the simple things that most of us take for granted. It is through gratitude that we are able to create more abundance.

By Christina Christou

www.alkehela.com