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TITLE AND HE TOOK AWAY THEIR WINGS

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# "And he took away their wings":

## *Story and History in American Folk Traditions*

"And he took away their wings"—a provocative phrase from a Native American story. It stimulates our curiosity, invites our attention. Despite such phrases that pervade Native American story traditions, we have yet to pay much attention, to attribute much significance, to the story traditions of aboriginal and folk Americans. The Native American teller of the story from which this phrase is taken would have understood our failings, for, you see, in his story, it was *our* non-native wings that were taken away.

In this chapter I will consider two story situations. Both European-Americans and Native Americans were involved in these situations. My objective is to investigate the dynamics, the efficacy, of the story genre, of the storytelling event, of the spoken word, and especially the interrelationships between story and history. I wish to move beyond the naïve and ill-informed notions that stories are merely entertainment or fanciful fantasies. I hope to move beyond the more elevated attributes of "myth" as charters for society and as educating devices. I do not deny that stories are and do these things. But it seems to me that in looking at stories from such a ground-level vantage, we miss the vitality and creativity of stories we might see had we the wings to gain an elevated view.

The story situations for our present concern are ones of encounter. They are two of the thousands of clashes that composed a disharmonic symphony of incongruity that played its way westward across the United States during the period of American history. Its echoes can be heard still, but now more softly. The brutality, the inhumanity, the bloody raw ugliness of these encounters are now muted and sometimes made harmonic by the stories of the encounters, the stories by which these encounters have endured.

### *Tecumseh and General Harrison*

The first story focuses on the early-nineteenth-century encounter of two powerful figures—General William Henry Harrison, then governor of the Indiana Territory, and the Shawnee warrior and native spokesman and leader Tecumseh.<sup>1</sup> The political and historical background to their meeting is long and complicated, but the issue that divided them, yet brought them to encounter, may be summarized in a single word—land. Land had been the central issue since the time the first European placed his foot firmly and irretrievably upon this continent. Story after story might be told to document the shift of land from Native Americans to European-Americans, and in the early nineteenth century the land story came to focus on the real estate bordering the Wabash River in what we now know as Indiana. By treaty with various Indian chiefs in 1805 prime land along the river was opened to settlement. Tecumseh, who was not a part of these treaty negotiations, insisted on his right to the land under the principle he so often and so clearly stated: that the land belonged to no single Indian or tribe, but rather, if it could be said to be owned at all, it belonged in common to all Indian peoples and therefore could not be sold without the consent of all Indian peoples. Throughout the first decade of the nineteenth century Tecumseh traveled constantly and widely among the tribes in an attempt to form an alliance among them to repel the advancement of American settlement. The Wabash was the last stand east of the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes.

Harrison was an ambitious man. Indeed, his ambitions led him to the presidency. As governor of the territory and administrator of Indian Affairs, he was personally involved in treaty negotiations for lands. Tecumseh's refusal to vacate the land and the threat of the alliance that he was forming disturbed Harrison. In his efforts to resolve the matter, Harrison invited Tecumseh to meet with him in Vincennes, the territorial capital. The meeting was set for mid-August, 1810.

Accompanied by three hundred painted warriors floating down the river in eighty canoes, Tecumseh made a grand entrance at Vincennes. He camped just outside the town and spent several days preparing for the meeting with the governor. Meanwhile, Harrison,

who had built a governor's mansion called Grouseland, prepared it for the meetings. He arranged seating on the portico of the mansion and invited dignitaries to be present during the meetings. On August 14 Tecumseh, accompanied by a number of armed warriors, approached the mansion. After some negotiations regarding the physical arrangements for the meeting, opening speeches were made by Tecumseh and Harrison. They continued to meet until August 21.

No agreements were made. Harrison and Tecumseh not only spoke different languages, they lived in different worlds. They held conceptions of land and land use whose only point in common was the physical land itself. This meeting, though colorful, was unremarkable and would not seem to be of interest to us now. But the meeting became the setting for a story; a story that appeared in several versions; a story that was told widely throughout a good portion of the nineteenth century; a story that has played a surprising role in the history of scholarship; a story that has made its mark on the history of Native American religions. I'll get to these things, but first the story.

One version of the story appeared in Henry Rowe Schoolcraft's *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley*. Describing the character of Tecumseh, Schoolcraft recounted the story.

The spirit and fearless energy of this man's character shone throughout his actions. In one of the councils held by General Harrison with the Indians at Vincennes, previous to the commencement of hostilities in 1811, in which Tecumseh was present, this chief, on concluding a long and animated speech, found himself unprovided with a seat. When this neglect was observed, General Harrison directed a chair to be placed for him, and requested him to sit down. "Your father," said the interpreter, "requests you to take a chair." "My father!" replied the haughty chief, "the *Sun* is my father, and the *Earth* is my mother, and on *her* bosom I will repose." So saying he sat down suddenly, in the Indian manner.<sup>2</sup>

I have located nearly thirty published and manuscript accounts of this story. They may be sorted into several clearly distinguishable versions. All, however, contain a statement attributed to Tecumseh and presented as an exact quotation: "The earth is my mother and on her bosom I will repose."

I want to consider this story in light of what we can document as history so that we might understand more fully the dynamic interrelationship of story and history. Important to our consideration is that the story is not an Indian story; it is a story about an Indian.

Notably, the first published appearance of the story was in 1821 in the *National Recorder*, followed by the account published by Schoolcraft in 1825. Evidence suggests the story was widely told in Indiana when Schoolcraft visited there in 1821. When the eyewitness and historical accounts of the meeting are considered, those that appear before the 1830s do not make the slightest allusion to the famed statement of Tecumseh. Even after that date there is commonly only a brief reference to the statement among the historical accounts. In the histories the basic concern with the initial meeting at Vincennes is with the negotiation and political maneuvering of the parties present. The published stories of Tecumseh's remark to Harrison reflect and evidence what I would call a folkloric strain. These story accounts do not consider to any extent the historical details of the meeting, yet they invariably cite the meeting as the historical setting for the story. They invariably tell the story to demonstrate the character of Tecumseh.

Weighing all available materials, I have concluded that there is absolutely no documentation of any kind for Tecumseh having made the statement about his desire to repose upon the bosom of his mother, the earth. Upon a careful review of the many speeches of Tecumseh that have survived and of what is known of Shawnee religion and culture at the time, I have further concluded that there is very little possibility that Tecumseh would have held the notion of earth-sky parentage either in a theological or metaphorical sense. Nothing remotely associated with it can be found in any of these historical materials.

What then accounts for the genesis of the story? What was the function and significance of the story? We need consider more about Tecumseh and the history of the Indian-white affair.

After Tecumseh met with Harrison in 1810, he immediately left for a long journey among southeastern tribes to continue his efforts at developing an Indian alliance. Harrison, doubtless encouraged by Tecumseh's absence, engaged the Indians at Tippecanoe in the battle for which he became so famous. Upon his return Tecumseh saw

that the Indian cause was lost unless, through alliance with the British, the Indians could recover the territory from the Americans. Therefore, Tecumseh and other Indians played an active role in the War of 1812. During these many campaigns, Tecumseh proved his character, his military genius, his skill at leadership, his courage and bravery in battle.

In 1813, in battle against his old adversary Harrison, Tecumseh was killed. His body was never found. The mystery of his death accented a fascination that grew around Tecumseh. He was quickly and widely lauded as a noble Indian, a great leader and eloquent spokesman for peoples who had become landless and downtrodden.

At this particular moment in this history of conflict we glimpse something vital to human life: the dynamic process in which history engages the imagination driven toward the creation of meaning through the formation of story, a story expressible by that most magical of all human capacities, the power of the spoken word. The story of Tecumseh is an American story, and examining the interrelationships between history and story reveals to us something of our own character.

What is important is how the Harrison-Tecumseh story functions in the context of history. It reflects and effects a change in the image held of Indians, a change from an image of them as a savage people so void of rights and brains that their lands may be taken from them for a token payment or by military force, to an image of them as noble people of natural dignity, honor, courage, leadership, and eloquence. The story reflects, and doubtless helped to effect, a change in attitude toward native peoples; a change easily made once these peoples were either dead or without any claims to the coveted American lands. To appreciate the nobility of Indians by lauding the characters of a few outstanding leaders and figures was widespread in America in oral traditions widely told after the War of 1812, and in literary accounts beginning in the third decade of the nineteenth century and persisting for decades.

The story is told as history by its association with a historical event and historical figures, and therefore it is validated and authenticated. Yet, knowing that the story is not historically factual, we may see that the story actually serves to interpret history. The story corrects history by attuning past events to perceptions and sensitivi-

ties current to the time of the storytelling. The story makes history by presenting a new and different image of Indians, authenticated by its documentation in a past event. No longer bloodthirsty savages murdering innocent settler families, the Indians become figures capable of nobility, dignity, intelligence, and humanity, traits based on a simple and natural primitiveness, traits that flow from the bosom of the earth. A more surprising impact I believe this story has had must await our consideration of the second story situation.

### *Smohalla*

In Tecumseh's time, the early nineteenth century, the Indiana territory was part of the Northwest Territory of the United States. Little more than half a century later, despite a civil war, the symphony of incongruity had played across the continent all the way to the territories of Washington and Oregon, the new Northwest Territory. This movement west was remarkably fast and decisive for American and Native American history.

With marked resemblance to the plight of Tecumseh in this new northwest area there is the famed story of young Chief Joseph, who led his people on a failed flight to freedom. We know well the stories of Joseph and his peoples, his famous utterances, and less so the brutality of the encounter. We scarcely are aware of the pathetic end of his life in Oklahoma. Joseph was not permitted to return to his homeland. While there are stories here for us to pursue, Joseph is not my present concern. Rather, I wish to consider another Indian figure in this territory, Smohalla, a Wanapum man, who led a few followers in the defiance of the government's effort to confine Native Americans in the Washington-Oregon area to reservations so that settlement of their aboriginal lands might proceed.<sup>3</sup> Smohalla was not simply a renegade leader; he was a religious leader. The movement he led was known as "the dreamers." It was millenarian in character, anticipating the catastrophic end of the world; an end when all Americans of European descent would be eliminated and the ancient ways of the native peoples would be restored along with the lands that had been taken from them. Perhaps, had it not been for the potential military aspect of this movement, the government might have made no effort to resolve the

incongruity it posed. But in the mid-1880s Major J. W. MacMurray was sent to attempt to persuade Smohalla and his people either to go onto reservations or to take up settlements of land.

MacMurray was courteously received by Smohalla and his people, who invited him to observe the rituals of the dreamers. Finally, given his turn, MacMurray produced a checkerboard as a visual aid in describing the settlement plan and how the government wanted the land divided. He urged the Native Americans to apply for land and to settle it on the pattern of European-Americans. Smohalla responded that he could not accept this and proceeded to tell his story of the creation of the world. It is this story of Smohalla's that I wish to consider more fully. As MacMurray reported it, the story goes this way:

Once the world was all water, and God lived alone; he was lonesome, he had no place to put his foot; so he scratched the sand up from the bottom, and made the land and he made rocks, and he made trees, and he made man, and the man was winged and could go anywhere. The man was lonesome, and God made a woman. They ate fish from the water, and God made the deer and other animals, and he sent the man to hunt, and told the woman to cook the meat and to dress the skins. Many more men and women grew up and they lived on the banks of the great river whose waters were full of salmon. The mountains contained much game, and there were buffalo on the plains. There were so many people that the stronger ones sometimes oppressed the weak and drove them from the best fisheries, which they claimed as their own. They fought, and nearly all were killed, and their bones are to be seen in the sand hills yet. God was very angry and he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them. That they were never to be marked off or divided, but that the people should enjoy the fruits that God planted in the land and the animals that lived upon it, and the fishes in the water. God said he was the father, and the earth was the mother of mankind; that nature was the law; that the animals and fish and plants obeyed nature, and that man only was sinful. This is the old law.<sup>4</sup>

The story is set in primordial times and we would, therefore, call it myth, yet we cannot help but recognize Christian elements in the

story and undeniable echoes of the native experience of oppression at the hands of white settlers. We cannot overlook how strongly the story pronounces judgment upon the oppressors and how punishment levied is linked to a policy about land use and ownership that could have come from the mouth of Tecumseh, a half century earlier. "And he took away their wings and commanded that the lands and fisheries should be common to all who lived upon them."

How does this story function in the context of history? Like the story about Tecumseh, this story interprets history. Smohalla and his followers had lived for decades with the experience of being buffeted by the tide of acculturation that had carried away most of the native peoples. This bleak, hopelessly irresolvable situation was woven into the story of creation. All the suffering of Smohalla and his people at the hands of the settlers, their loss of land, their loss of life, their loss of culture—these things are not denied in the story; rather they are affirmed, yet given meaning. Smohalla and his dreamers were living out a sacred history, and the story that gave direction and authority to their history gave them courage, dignity, strength, and hope. Further, the base of meaning is the firmest and most unquestionable of all, for this is the story of the creation, the story of the way God created the world and has participated in its history. God created the world, and the land, and he created plants, animals, and fish to feed the peoples. He created the people with winged freedom that they might move about the earth. But the strong oppressed the weak, and in his anger at the destruction this brought about, he took away their wings and commanded that land be held in common by all who lived upon it. This story not only reinterprets a history of suffered oppression, it establishes with divine and primordial authority a course of action, a way of living. It states an old law by which to give life meaning even upon radical change and in the face of suffering oppression and loss.

#### *The Power of Story*

We have then two stories. One was created by European-Americans about the encounter between themselves and Native Ameri-

cans. The other was created by Native Americans about the encounter between themselves and European-Americans. Both reinterpret history so as to give it meaning. Both serve to create history not only in the reinterpretation of the past, but in the sense of providing a base, an authority, a course for the actions that open to the future. Both stories seek an unquestionable base for their validity and authority. For the European-American story this base is history itself. For the Native American story the base is the primordium and the creator, what we might call the authority of myth. This difference is fundamental, and through it we may learn much about Americans with European ancestry and about Native Americans.

In the past we have tended to make much of the distinction between history and myth or story, a difference parallel to literate and nonliterate, civilized and primitive. We have tended to take history seriously, to see it as our connection with reality and with our true past. We have tended to take story as fictive, imaginative, nonhistorical, and therefore not to be taken seriously, especially if it is the story of the folk. Our brief consideration of these two stories suggests that the careful distinction between history and story is fundamental and essential. Neither the story of Tecumseh nor the creation story told by Smohalla is historical, but history is behind and within both and it is essential that we identify the historical elements. Our examples show us that we cannot continue to make a host of assumptions on the basis of a genre distinction alone. We have found an important interdependence between story and history. Indeed, we might suggest that story is a manifestation of the power of the word to render history, and consequently human life, meaningful. History lacks meaning without story. Story lacks substance and relevance without history.

There is some sympathy and harmony between these two story situations, I feel, and it would not surprise me that if we knew more about the history of these two situations and the history of the development of Native American conceptions of the land, we might not discern some historical connection between Tecumseh and Smohalla. I am not the first to notice some connection between them, and that notice becomes the focus for yet another level of consideration of these two story situations.

First, however, to establish the basis for this further consideration we must take the Smohalla encounter with Major MacMurray just a bit further. After Smohalla had told his story of creation to MacMurray, thereby establishing the "old law," he went on to comment on the course of action that was open to him and his followers based upon this law. As reported by MacMurray, Smohalla said:

Those who cut up the lands or sign papers for lands will be defrauded of their rights, and will be punished by God's anger. . . . It is not a good law that would take my people away from me to make them sin against the laws of God. You ask me to plough the ground! Shall I take a knife and tear my mother's bosom? Then when I die she will not take me to her bosom to rest.

You ask me to dig for stone! Shall I dig under her skin for the bones? Then when I die I cannot enter her body to be born again.

You ask me to cut grass and make hay and sell it, and be rich like white men, but how dare I cut off my mother's hair?

It is a bad law and my people cannot obey it. I want my people to stay with me here. All the dead men will come to life again; their spirits will come to their bodies again. We must wait here, in the homes of our fathers, and be ready to meet them in the bosom of our mother.

These are the famous words for which Smohalla has been remembered. Still, we cannot understand their power or their meaning without comprehending the history of oppression and loss of land and without knowledge of his story of creation. Based in the old law of creation, this statement responds to the oppressive demands of European-Americans that Native Americans give up their cultural ways and take up farming and mining, that they participate in the division of the lands. Smohalla holds this to be sinful, that is, a violation of the laws of creation and the laws of God. He constructs his statement upon the metaphor of the motherhood of the earth.

Seemingly coincidentally, but perhaps not, both the story about Tecumseh—a story made by Americans, I remind you—and the statement attributed to Smohalla include the distinctive reference to the bosom of the earth. Given the histories, contexts, and functions of these two stories, it is surprising to learn that they have been

conjoined—we might say in the bosom of the earth—in yet another story.

As early as 1873, in his publication *Primitive Culture*, Edward B. Tylor cited the statement attributed to Tecumseh out of the story we have discussed as ethnographic documentation for his understanding that a belief in the motherhood of the earth was pervasive among the peoples of North America.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the statement of Smohalla was recorded, it was conjoined with the Tecumseh statement as evidence of this religious belief in the earth as mother. James Mooney, in his widely known study of the Ghost Dance movement of 1890, made much of Smohalla's statement and created the following theological story. In his monograph, following directly upon the quotation of Smohalla's statement, Mooney wrote:

The idea that the earth is the mother of all created things lies at the base, not only of the Smohalla religion, but of the theology of the Indian tribes generally and of primitive races all over the world. This explains Tecumseh's reply to Harrison: "The sun is my father and the earth is my mother. On her bosom I will rest." In the Indian mind the corn, fruits, and edible roots are the gifts which the earth-mother gives freely to her children. Lakes and ponds are her eyes, hills are her breasts, and streams are the milk flowing from her breasts. Earthquakes and underground noises are signs of her displeasure at the wrongdoings of her children. Especially are the malarial fevers, which often follow extensive disturbance of the surface by excavation or otherwise, held to be direct punishment for the crime of lacerating her bosom.<sup>6</sup>

The statements attributed to Smohalla and Tecumseh appear together as evidence for a theology of the native belief in the motherhood of the earth. Soon after the beginning of the twentieth century, corresponding roughly with Albrecht Dieterich's 1905 publication *Mother Earth*,<sup>7</sup> the goddess took on the formal title of Mother Earth and was widely compared with the earth goddesses of Western antiquity.

In a careful review of the ethnographies and studies of the religions of tribes all over North America, I have found evidence of many goddesses. Some are associated with the earth, associated in a

variety of ways; and I have also found many others that are not. The religion and cultures of the early-nineteenth-century Shawnees share little with the religion and cultures of the late-nineteenth-century Sahaptan peoples of the Plateau area. There is simply not a shred of evidence to support the commonly proposed statement of the ancient and universal belief in a mother earth goddess among tribal peoples in North America.

What we must conclude from this consideration is, once again, the creative power of story. With the need for common categories of comparison, with certain primitivist assumptions being fostered in the post-Enlightenment, strongly evolutionist mood of the late nineteenth century, scholars interpreted the information they received relative to Native Americans and by means of the power of words bestowed meaning upon the data by rendering them in terms of a story. It is a story that has been told again and again in the scholarly community by such figures as Mircea Eliade and Åke Hulkrantz.<sup>8</sup>

The last twist should demonstrate finally the power of story and its interaction with history. As Native Americans began to lose their land base and thus their connection with the tribal histories and tribal identities, they had need, and desperately so, for some firm footing in a shared tradition. Taking on the name by which European-Americans had always called them, they began to call themselves, identifying their commonality, by the term *Indian*. They further accepted the story told by European-American scholars of their ancient universal goddess, Mother Earth, and in their acceptance she became a true goddess central to the Indian identity. She gave a religious grounding to an essentially political movement. Mother Earth as a goddess arising in the twentieth century nourishes and maintains a distinctively Indian heritage when physical lands are no longer available. She serves in many ways to make Indians clearly distinct from non-Native Americans. Here the story becomes history, and, ironically, a native story tradition of Mother Earth is practically nonexistent.<sup>9</sup>

In these examples we have histories that become stories—stories that interpret, even alter, the historical facts, yet become the basis for the unfolding of history. There are stories of history and histories of story. We must never blur or neglect the distinctions between story and history; rather, we must appreciate the dynamic interac-

tion and interdependence of story and history. Life experience, the past, oppression, incongruity, suffering, and joy all gain meaning, they take wing, through the power of story, through the magic of words.

## NOTES

1. For a full bibliography to the history of Tecumseh's encounter with Harrison as well as the story traditions that are associated with it, see Sam Gill, *Mother Earth: An American Story* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), chap. 2.
2. Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Travels in the Central Portions of the Mississippi Valley: Comprising Observations on Its Mineral, Geography, Internal Resources, Aboriginal Population* (New York: Collins & Hanney, 1825), pp. 144-45.
3. For a full bibliography to the dreamer movement led by Smohalla see Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 3.
4. J. W. MacMurray, "The 'Dreamers' of the Columbia River Valley, in Washington Territory," *Transactions of the Albany Institute* (Albany, 1887), pp. 247-48.
5. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (London: John Murray, 1873), 1: 326-27.
6. James Mooney, *The Ghost Dance Religion and the Sioux Outbreak of 1890*, Bureau of American Ethnology 14th Annual Report (Washington, D.C., 1896), p. 721.
7. Albrecht Dieterich, *Mutter Erde: Ein Versuch über Volksreligion* (Berlin-Leipzig, 1905).
8. See Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 6, for a full review of the scholarship on Mother Earth.
9. See Gill, *Mother Earth*, chap. 7, for an account of the history of Mother Earth as a goddess to Indian peoples.

# Prayer as Performance:

## *A Navajo Contribution to the Study of Prayer*

Frank Hamilton Cushing, ethnographer, lived at Zuni in the late nineteenth century. The Zuni accepted him and even made him a priest of the Bow society. A Zuni poem recalls the initiation of Cushing into the Bow priesthood.

Once they made a White man into a Priest of the Bow  
 he was out there with other Bow Priests  
 he had black stripes on his body  
 the others said their prayers from their hearts  
 but he read his from a piece of paper.

There is a double edge to the humor of this poem, for in Zuni language the term used for the written page is "that which is striped," so Cushing, with his white body painted as a Bow priest with black stripes, was literally a walking page of writing.<sup>1</sup>

I think this poem gets to the heart of the criticism that can be made of the academic study of prayer. It distinguishes between a heartfelt act of prayer and a prayer formally recited from a piece of paper. The difference has yet to be adequately appreciated. This failure is clear when we see that the study of prayer has hinged upon attempting to reconcile prayer as it appears in the form of texts with the ideas we have about prayer that have been developed on the basis of personal experience and common knowledge. The study of prayer has been based largely on the analysis of written texts and shows prayer to be a formulaic, repetitive, redundant, and even trite verbal act. This conflicts with the expectation that prayer be a spontaneous, creative, and extemporaneous conversation human beings have with God about their heartfelt concerns. In textual