

Essays by Robert Peters

September

The Medicine Fire

We lit the Medicine Fire for ten years. There was medicine in the thoughts and events that made us decide to light the first one. I traveled to Mashpee to talk it over with different people in the tribe. Everyone agreed that it was a good idea but they all seemed unusually troubled too. First, I stopped to see Lenny, a Tribal Member. He was distant and didn't say much at all but nodded to the idea of lighting the fire. When I visited Cousin Ramona, she sighed and said she was sad, and also troubled because she couldn't say why she was sad. In spite of her sadness - perhaps because of it - she also supported the idea of lighting a fire.

Then, I went to the tribal council meeting and discussed lighting the fire, with several people there. They also liked the idea of lighting the fire; a few people even agreed to be fire keepers. The consensus was yes, but everyone there also seemed more quiet, sad and distant. I returned to Boston with us having established that for nine days, in November, we would keep a fire lit from the first quarter moon to the full moon. I was happy for what was accomplished, but worried a bit about the sadness in the air.

The following night, I climbed into bed with plenty of time to get a good night sleep before going to my job operating subway trains. After only a few minutes in bed, with no thought at all, I picked up the phone and called in sick. I had no reason to do this; I knew I would get in trouble for doing so, but there was no way I was going into work, every fiber of my being said no.

In the morning I woke up in good spirits, happy with my decision not to go to work. I picked up the phone and invited Chris Banks over for coffee; and, I went back to sleep.

Repeated ringing of the doorbell woke me up. Chris was outside yelling, "WE'RE BEING ATTACKED! WE'RE BEING ATTACKED!" When I opened the door, he rushed me up the stairs still yelling, "QUICK TURN ON THE TV, A PASSENGER JET JUST HIT THE WORLD TRADE CENTER! WE'RE BEING ATTACKED!"

The TV came on to show one of the World Trade Center towers smoking from a gaping hole in the upper floors. As we watched - in stunned amazement and horror - a second plane ripped through the other tower. The explosion caused a stream of fire to shoot out of the far side of that building.

We watched the towers burning, people waving out of broken windows. We tensed up in horror when they climbed into the window frames and jumped to certain death, resolute about their decision to die.

Our hearts stopped beating when the first tower collapsed into itself and neatly crumbled to the ground, not like an elevator, but like a fist pulverizing everything in its violent path. We watched the people running to escape the billowing plume of smoke and debris that pushed out in all directions overcoming everything. We watched people emerge from the settling plume covered whitely with ash and dust like ghosts emerging from a nightmare.

I sat on the couch for the next three days, and did nothing but watch.

My trip to Mashpee was on my mind too. It seemed as if we all knew something was about to happen. No one could say what it was, but we felt it coming.

A thought on "The Warm Day"

These people are my people
They have our faces and our mannerisms
They walk like us, run like us and fight like us
They share our vision
They love the land just like we do
Because they are us.

October

“The Honor Beat”

“The Honor Beat” was inspired by three things; The first inspiration came when I sat and practiced drumming with a new drum group called Eastern Sun in 2001. It was their custom to charge a dollar every time a drummer missed a beat; so, after I lost enough money and my dollar bills were tied all over their drum, I backed my chair up and just watched. The way they worked their voices made me feel that their vocal cords would come right out of their necks. After studying this for a long time, I decided that the drum was a good subject to paint.

At first, I worked quickly and made good progress, but the second inspiration to “The Honor Beat” caused a creative impasse that made me stop working. In the spring of 2001, I visited the site of the Great Swamp Massacre where Pometacomet and his warriors were defeated. We walked around the dirt road that circled crudely cut granite pillars, that marked the scene of the defeat for my people. It was a moving experience to stand there, having heard stories of the attack, and what it meant to my people. We decided to make an offering to our fallen ancestors. We had sage to burn, but no matches to light the sage. It was getting dark and the surrounding swamp was alive with unseen animals beyond the thickness of impenetrable trees and plant life. Sadly, we started to leave without burning sage or tobacco, but on the way out at the top of the circle, a book of matches was on the ground. It was as if we were not supposed to leave without making that offering after all.

When I went home, I discovered that a spirit must have hitched a ride. In the middle of the night, I opened my eyes and he was two inches in front of my face. This was the only time I can actually say, I saw a spirit. I was amazed but, remained calm and felt no fear. When the spirit realized my eyes were opened, it became frightened, bugged out and flew right through me and through the back of my house.

About a week later, I took my children to a memorial for my Uncle John, or as you might remember, Slow Turtle - beloved Supreme Medicine Man for the Wampanoag Nation. I must have accidentally taken a picture while I was still at home. When I developed the film, one of the pictures revealed two spirits. The spirit that came with me in the foreground speeding through the den. While in the background, the face of an elder spirit fills the pantry window. Apparently, the elder spirit came to bring the mischievous one back to the Great Swamp.

For about a month after the spirit and I intersected; when I slept, I was in cool blue light like the first light filtering through trees and morning mist. The light was in my dreams, or half dreams, because I always seemed to be half awake. I was aware of my dreams and seemed to be able to enter and exit dreams at will. When I opened my eyes and looked around the dark room, I could still feel the soothing cool blue light. When I closed my eyes, I was back in my half dream, blue light, like mist, all around me.

Somehow the blue light was connected to my painting. I could not continue work on it until I understood how they were related. So, “The Honor Beat” sat untouched for three years.

The third inspiration came when I was a fire keeper at the 2004 Medicine Fire at 55 Acres in Mashpee. The moon was full and it was very warm and windy. This was strange because people called me on their devices, and complained how it was very cold where they were in the surrounding towns. The cold air meeting the warm must have created the strong winds. I could hear wind coming from a long way off before it blew past, and trailed off into the distance.

After a while, I began to notice that on the tail end of the wind, I heard singing. At first I thought I was hearing distant voices. But then listening more carefully, I realized the singing could only be heard trailing the wind or other sounds, like distant cars or planes. It was as if the voices were riding the wind, as if they could not exist on their own. I observed this for a long time; it continued for nearly an hour with every gust of wind joined with far off singing. It was like the wind opened a window to the spirit world allowing the voices to pass through.

I was keeping the fire all alone, and am sad that no one experienced this with me. I think the ancestors let their voices be heard, because we honored them by keeping the fire, our prayers and making offerings of sage, tobacco, cedar, and sweet grass.

The spirit world sang out to me. It was a blessing.

About a month later, I started painting again; there were no more impasses.

All of the drummers are spirits. The drum is the universe.

The four hands in the middle are the four directions of the Medicine Wheel.

The hand at the bottom is the spirit world.

The drummer with his beater above his head is about to deliver - The Honor Beat.

Footnote on The Blue Light

When I was in the blue light, I experienced strange and wonderful things that are too numerous to mention in this context, but there is one thing I should mention. One night, I was awakened by the thought of something I wrote when I was a transit Union Steward, years earlier. These words surfaced in my mind and wouldn't go away, "Politics, Politics, Politics!" I couldn't remember anything else but this word three times. It was urgent for me to find out why it was so important. In the middle of the night I got up, went into the attic and started sifting through a pile of small notebooks, all bent from being carried in my back pocket when I was the Union Steward. I flipped through the pages of book after book, back through time until I found what I was looking for. It was an unfinished thought that I had written in my notes and forgot about. It read:

Politics, politics, politics, there are politics of nations,
politics of religion and finance and politics of the human spirit.

Although I didn't mean it that way when I wrote it, in this reality while I was in the blue light, that phrase only had one meaning. There are politics in the spirit world, just like we have politics in our own world. Evidently, these politics sometimes intersect and carry forward.

When the blue light finally faded and went away, I was exhausted and experienced withdrawal. It took a great deal of energy to walk in our world, and the spirit world at the same time.

November

Wampanoag Medicine Fire, November 2006, Hassamessit Reservation.

The Medicine Fire in 2006 was a punishing fire, punishing rain, punishing wind and punishing smoke. The rain came with us at first light; at first the rain was light, then it became steady, then it was heavy and never stopped being a downpour after that. The wind came and increased throughout the day. We had the lodge for shelter but, the fire in the lodge got restless and wouldn't keep still. We adjusted the door and the smoke hatch, but after a long battle that lasted into the night, the smoke and rain prevailed and we were driven from the lodge.

Outside, the wind made the Medicine Fire into a furnace that constantly needed to be fed to battle the wind and rain. The largest, soggiest, unsplit logs went into the fire defiantly but after just seconds in the inferno, burst into flames.

Just before midnight the winds died down and I moved to my car. Tired and weak, I broke my fast sooner than I intended. My eyes burned; my hands were chapped and dry. I couldn't see to drive. When someone drove me, we found no stores open to buy eye drops to ease my aching eyes.

Rain stopped around 2 AM; I could see stars in the sky. I was too weak and tired to say a prayer and too fearful of the idea of more painful smoke getting into my eyes - to enter the lodge - to get my tobacco, so I couldn't make an offering. To be truthful, at that moment I had nothing to offer.

At first light, the fire was a pile of red coals and unburnt ends of logs that I pulled together and rekindled. I burnt sage and smudged the circle and the lodge. The fire in the lodge appeared to be completely out, but I found one ember smaller than a penny, took a fist full of twigs, blew on the ember and rekindled that fire too. I found the smallest log in the wood stack because the fire was still tiny. But when I tried to split that little log, it gave me a hard time. Demonstrating how the smallest thing can give you the most trouble. This made me think about us, that little log was like us. The white man was done with us a long time ago, but look around, we are still here.

A day earlier, at first light, the smudge stick wouldn't light. The ends were loose and spread apart like fingers. I found a piece of hemp and used it to pull the loose strands of sage together and tied them into a tight bundle. The smudge stick lit after that and I realized the smudge stick was also like us: Our fire won't burn unless we come together.

That Medicine Fire was a punishing fire, but we kept it lit. It was a sign of punishing times to come. I was driven from the lodge to be shown that we cannot go back to the ancient ways, but we must keep them, we must use them, expand upon the knowledge the ancient ones have passed down through generations. Use the knowledge given to you in your dreams. Look for the things the Creator is trying to show us.

It's time for us to use the gifts that we have. The gift of spirit - that one can lose - but no one can take away. The gift of insight, we see things most people can't, but we often ignore what we are shown. The gift of Unity, we are fragmented but never stop wanting. After all this time, we still want to be our own people and live in a better world.

The gift of hope, the gift of prayer, and laughter and compassion are all things that we still have. Things we must use and share and let go of when it is time to pass our gifts on to the next generation. This is why we are here now, why we were here yesterday, and why we will be here tomorrow. With the gifts the Creator has given us, we are forever.

“The Wheelbarrow”, November 2006, Hassamessit Reservation.

As we conclude this meditation on indigenous life, it is necessary to add one more story. At Hassamessit, it rained so much on the first day that in the morning the wheelbarrow was filled to the rim with water. When I walked by, a spirit whispered to me, clear as day, “You need to empty that wheelbarrow.” I frowned at the wheelbarrow and refused the spirit’s advice, “No! That wheelbarrow isn’t hurting anyone.” Without another thought, I arrogantly continued along my way.

Later that afternoon, when the encounter was long forgotten, I entered a competition splitting logs. I set five logs upright, split them all one after the other, one strike each. Then I handed the ax to Randy Josephs, and I boasted about my feat, “See that, I split mine. Top that!”

Randy, excitedly took the ax into his grip, as I set six logs upright for him to split. Randy began swinging with such force that the logs flew apart, as the ax crashed through. Without pause, he raised the ax over his head and behind his back with each crushing stroke, causing me to reel back to get out of the way as he rolled out, at a quickening pace, in a widening arch with each log split. In turn, I rolled back and back and back until I fell backwards, directly into the wheelbarrow that was still filled to the rim with water. “Top that”, laughed Randy Josephs.”

I feel like Jesus, when I tell this story because I fell into the wheelbarrow, so you don’t have to.

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Walking with the Creator

Sometimes I smile outwardly
And laugh in fits of glee
When I know the Creator is smiling at me

I am thankful for my existence
And try to live out my purpose for existing
I am thankful for all of the lives
That I have - and will some day - intersect with

I thank the Creator for the lives that came before - I existed
I live my life in their footsteps and help prepare the world
For the ones who will walk in my shoes - after I exist

I want to do what I can to make sure
That our - future world - is a happy world

I want - and ask - the Creator of all things
To make our world a peaceful world
Where the highest virtues of existing are expressed

Our intellect, our interaction with the environment
Our responsibility to maintain the balance of things
Our ability to love, laugh and cry
Are all things that make the Creator take notice

Thoughts like this came to me when I walked with the Creator
Through the woods - down by the Mashpee River
On hundreds and hundreds of thought filled strolls

I walked with the Creator at 12 acres
We walked in the ceremonial circle - at 55 acres
We walked together in the great swamp
Where so many of our dreams were cut short
But some of those distant memories - still lingered –
and followed me through the dream world
In a haze of radiant blue light

The Creator was with me in the ceremonial circle at Assonet,
We walked together at Hassanamessit where it rained all day

I walked with him - on the day after that
Near the Great Oak tree - next to the council rock
And I knew - Pometacomet stood on that rock - long before I did

I imagine him vividly - standing on council rock
Looking out over hundreds and hundreds of Wampanoag warriors
Narragansett Warriors, Nipmuc warriors,
Pequot, Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet
And Shinnacock warriors, Abenaki, Mohegan, Mohawk, Mi'kmaq,
Montauk, Cree, Natick and Niantic warriors

The ancestors all came together to defend - OUR - dreams
Look around you now – we are still here!
I meditated in the Creator's presence countless times and still do
I argued with him, asked endless questions
I saw things - was shown things - and learned things

I was given answers - and sometimes - I couldn't understand
The meaning - of the answer - I was given
But I hold those - missed messages - in my mind
And still believe that one day
We will wake up - from this dream
and see our way
home.

For More Information:

["The Wampanoag Trading Post and Gallery is holding a temporary exhibit featuring tribal members' paintings as well as Native-themed films" from the Cape Cod Times](#)

[A Meditation On Indigenous Life](#)

WGBH Forum Network|Revolutionary Spaces

Poetry and visual art by Mashpee Wampanoag poet, artist, and author Robert Peters comes to life in an original, multi-media performance. This premiere performance features Peters' poetry/art collection "Thirteen Moons," which evolved through the artist's personal journey to reclaim traditional culture and to live in a way consistent with his traditional beliefs.

A choral reading of the "Thirteen Moons" poetry collection sets the stage for a conversation with Peters and other Indigenous artists. Topics considered include humans' relationship with the natural world, the meaning of "home" from a Native perspective, and the contributions of Indigenous voices to justice and democracy building today.