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INTRODUCTION

The Greatest of the Greatest: A Treatise on Wisdom

Toss a pebble into a pond and the waves flow outward in ever-growing circles. That is a physical reality.

In the Lakota encampments of old, the biggest and tallest lodge stood in the very center of the encampment. There the elders met.

The oldest men in the village formed the council of elders. There was one basic requirement: Obviously, one had to be old.

Try to imagine the number of years of experience represented by the village council. Depending on the size of the village, this could vary from hundreds to thousands of years. Yet, the council had no authority. As a matter of fact, there really is no word for *authority* in the Lakota language. So, how did the council of elders fulfill its responsibility?

The council of elders fulfilled its responsibility through the power of the influence of their wisdom.

Various matters of concern and importance were brought to the council—from everyday life issues to matters of war. Every issue was discussed at length, sometimes for several days and nights. At the end, the council didn't issue ultimatums or edicts. They simply informed the people what they thought. That opinion, or opinions, was the basis for action because of the depth of the council's wisdom.

The Lakota consider fortitude, generosity, bravery, and wisdom to be the four greatest virtues. In any discussion or mention of these virtues, wisdom is invariably the last to be named. However intentional or unintentional that may be, it is entirely appropriate because wisdom is not only the greatest of the four greatest, it is also the most difficult to achieve. Furthermore, wisdom is associated with old age, and that, too, is entirely appropriate because wisdom cannot be had in ten easy lessons. One has to live a long life to gain wisdom, and it is regarded as life's gift by some who finally achieve it. It is, many also realize, a gift they cannot keep to themselves. It must be given back to life.

What, then, *is* wisdom?

Just as knowledge is derived from information, wisdom begins with knowledge, grows with experience, and is empowered by discernment.

On the other hand, wisdom is one of those realities of life that is best perceived by the effect it has, like the wind. Wind cannot be seen, but its movement is visible when an entire hillside of grass bends in the same direction. It cannot be touched, but anyone who feels it stir on a hot day can feel the relief it brings. Wind does not speak, but it can give whispery voice to the branches of a red cedar tree. Therefore, we know wind exists. Hence, we know wisdom exists. We know it is an ancient virtue, but at times it seems difficult to see its effect on our society and our world. Sometimes its absence seems more evident.

Someone said, “The greatest arrogance of the present is to forget the intelligence of the past.” The author of that statement obviously understood that we contemporary humans, especially in American society, think that all that matters is the present. We forget, or just plain don’t know, how we got where we are today, intellectually, morally, philosophically, and technologically. We live in a world that moves at cyber speed, craves instant gratification, and revels in technology. Consequently, we are so impressed with the

current version of ourselves that we aren't aware that our ancestors contributed to what we are and what we do and how we think. For example, as we ride in our sedans and SUVs, some of us may have some inkling that automobiles were invented within the past 120 years. But fewer of us probably know that the wheel was invented hundreds of years before that. Fewer still would realize that the wheel enabled the invention of carts, wagons, buggies, and other wheeled conveyances that are the forerunners of our automobiles.

Astonishingly, there is a mind-set that technology of the past was crude and imprecise. Those who think so would be startled to discover that modern-day surveyors have learned that mind-set to be a fallacy. A few years ago, survey coordinates done in the days of George Washington were checked by surveyors using satellite-aided global positioning instruments. They were surprised to learn that the surveyors of the mid-1700s were off in their measurements—when they were off at all—by no more than six inches.

If we sometimes disdain the mechanical or technological abilities of our ancestors, we also have a tendency to turn up our noses at their beliefs and philosophies, describing them as “quaint” or “archaic.” The spiritual

views of some northern Plains tribes in regard to *death serving life* are a case in point.

Many primitive cultures all over the world believe that death separates the spirit (or the soul) from the body and that the spirit and the body each serve a different purpose thereafter. Among many indigenous societies in North America, a special ceremony was usually conducted to release the spirit of a person who died so it could go on to the next life. In the meantime, burial practices enabled the body to return to the Earth, practically speaking.

Among the tribes of the northern Plains, the deceased was enclosed in a hide and placed atop a wooden scaffold (a platform supported by poles) or sometimes in a large tree. After several years, when it was obvious that the body had shrunk inside the hide encasement from decomposition, it was taken down and buried in the ground. Thereafter, the process of decomposition was completed, and the remains became part of the Earth. We now know, biologically, that organic material is reduced to basic components—such as carbon—as decomposition occurs, and these compounds become nutrients on which new plant life feeds. The “quaint” and “archaic” belief of death serving life is a reality.

Modern technology and the astounding tasks that gadgets can perform have effectively blinded us to the intelligence of our ancestors. We've become arrogant as a society and as a nation. And if we look with disdain on one aspect of the past, we have a strong tendency to assume that our ancestors were somehow lacking across the board. We then characterize everything about the past as "quaint" and "archaic," and we forget the value and power of wisdom. Of all the mistakes we could make, that is arguably the worst.

And if anything in our society should be synonymous with wisdom, it should unequivocally be leadership.

Here, once again, the intelligence of the past offers some insights and perhaps some lessons as well, depending on how arrogant and self-absorbed we are.

Up to the reservation era, wisdom was an inherent part of the leadership in Lakota society. Wisdom was more important than authority. As a matter of fact, there was no authority. As another matter of fact, there was no concept of authority.

Euro-American thinking forces non-Indians to assume that without "law and order," societies cannot be governed. Contrary to such assumptions, indigenous societies of North America did "govern" themselves, although there

were no written laws or codes or rules as such. Indigenous societies did have expectations and rules for behavior, but just as important, they looked to the wisdom of the elders among them.

Many tribes had a process that had worked for many generations, and some were more structured than others. The Cheyenne, for example, had (and still have) the Council of Forty-Four. For most tribes, however, the hierarchy of government was informal, and at the core—in terms of influence—was usually a council of elderly men. In Lakota, they were called, as a group, *wica omniciyapi*, or the “council of (complete) men”—with *complete men* meaning men who had experienced and accomplished much in their lives and who were unselfish, humble, and wise. Another term for them was *woglaka wicasa*, meaning “the men who speak (for the people).” This label was not given as a sort of job description for the men of the council to follow. Rather, it described them, because their first concern was for the welfare of the people and they would address or speak to that issue first and foremost.

The council of elders did not pass legislation or issue edicts. Their primary purpose was to discuss each and every issue, concern, and problem at length. After discussion, the council would usually arrive at an opinion

regarding the issue or question at hand. That opinion was revealed to the people, who accepted it as advice and counsel, rather than as a directive or an order. But the people understood that the council's opinion had the weight of several hundred years of life experiences and the wisdom the council possessed individually and collectively. Therefore, much more often than not, the advice of the council was followed.

While the *wica omniciyapi* was the overall deliberative body for each community, there were also other leaders who could generally be categorized as civilian or military. In either case, individuals selected as leaders were chosen on the basis of their common sense, a sound record of achievement and good judgment, and compassion. Now and then, men who excelled as battlefield leaders were also called upon to lead in civilian life. To be sure, there were men who aspired to be leaders primarily because of the prestige, but many served because they sincerely cared about the welfare of the people. To keep a position of leadership, a man had to put the needs of the people before his own and make good decisions. There were no terms of office. If a man did his job well, the people continued to follow him. If he was a poor leader, the people simply stopped following. It was not unusual for such a

poor leader to wake up one morning and find that the people had moved away from him during the night. The will of the people, as it were. The ousted leader couldn't cry foul because of a technicality or a glitch in the voting process. And there was no supreme court in the land that could overturn or interfere with that vote.

One leader who enjoyed the loyalty and confidence of the people until the moment of his death was Sitting Bull, the Hunkpapa Lakota. At the height of his influence as a leader, he called for a gathering of all the Lakota groups. At the time, the total population was around 20,000. They began gathering in May of that year, and by the end of June, 8,000 people had come together to discuss issues of national concern—mainly, the encroachment of Euro-Americans into Lakota territory and its undesirable consequences. During that gathering, Lakota fighting men fought to a standstill or outright defeated two separate units of the U.S. Army. The year was 1876, and the last of the two battles was fought at the Little Bighorn River against the U.S. Seventh Cavalry.

The worth of a leader is measured, or should be measured, by the depth of true loyalty and respect exhibited for him (or her) by the people. How many other leaders, past or present, on this continent can state

unequivocally that nearly half of the nation answered their call? Perhaps a better question is, Why? Why did 8,000 out of 20,000 respond to Sitting Bull's call to gather in the summer of 1876?

By 1876, Sitting Bull was at the pinnacle of his influence as a leader. He had, or demonstrated, all the requisite qualities. His record of achievements as a warrior was considerable. As a medicine man, he exemplified selflessness and compassion, but he was also an astute politician and a skilled orator. It would have been easy for him to assume the mantle of arrogance and make himself more important than his family, his community, and his nation. But he knew that the true worth of a man was measured by what he did for the people.

Sitting Bull's actions were motivated foremost by his concern for the good of the nation, hence the people, and not by a need to keep his job or to keep an eye on his popularity ratings. The people knew that Sitting Bull was a wise man, not so much because he could draw on his own wisdom, but because he didn't hesitate to seek it from *his elders*.

Sitting Bull could join the other elders in the center of the village. Where, today, are our elders? Have we placed them in the center of the village so that their experi-

ence and insight, their wisdom, can flow outward? Look around and see for yourself where our elders are.

What happens to those of us who do not seek or heed the wisdom of the elders?

LONG AGO—a very long time ago—a group of Lakota were traveling across the prairie. They were walking because it was the time before horses. Household goods were carried by dogs pulling drag poles and in backpacks carried by strong young men and women. On the flanks of the column were the warriors as the first line of defense. Leading the column was the old man leader and an old medicine man.

A shout came from one of the warriors in the rear. Everyone turned to see smoke and flames coming from behind. A prairie fire, one of the most frightening and devastating forces on the northern Plains, was coming. The people panicked; the flames were tall and moving swiftly. Instinctively, everyone ran.

Soon it was obvious that the flames were coming much too fast. The people looked for water, a creek or a small lake they could jump into, but there was nothing close by. Backpacks were tossed aside, and dogs were freed from their burdens so they could run freely. The stronger men