

# The Lakota Way of Strength and Courage

Lessons in Resilience  
from the Bow and Arrow

Joseph M. Marshall III



**SOUNDS TRUE**

Boulder, Colorado

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## Introduction

# Child of the Moon, Child of the Sun

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THERE WAS A TIME when Lakota boys looked at a new bow and arrows the way any modern teenager gazes at an iPod, a cell phone, or the latest version of a video game—longingly and lovingly. There was one basic difference, however. Lakota boys eventually learned how to make their own bows and arrows and learned the life lessons associated with them.

Bows and arrows have been around for thousands of years and, as weapons for hunting and warfare, were critical to the survival of cultures all over the world. They were frequently and literally the difference between starvation and plenty and very often between life and death.

Although I heard about the bow (*itazipa*) and the arrow (*wahinkpe*) in stories told by both of my maternal grandparents, I never actually saw the real thing until my grandfather made a set in 1950. The bow was of ash wood, and the arrows were thin chokecherry stalks. Like countless Lakota boys before me, I was immediately drawn to them. The feeling was somewhat like meeting an old friend. More than likely, I felt an inherent cultural connection with them. My lifelong fascination began the moment my grandfather placed the arrows, one at a time,

on the bowstring and shot them into the air. As I watched those feathered shafts arc gracefully through the sky, I knew they would be part of my life for as long as I lived.

When I asked where the bow came from, it was my grandmother who replied.

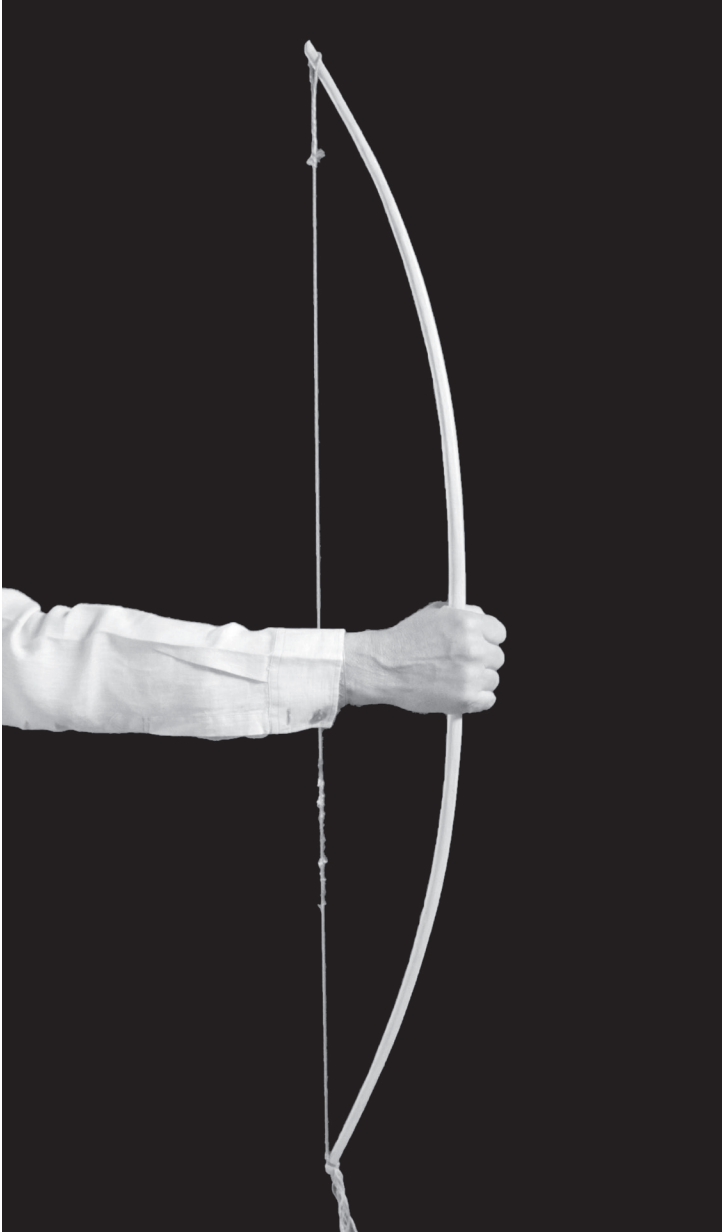
“From the moon,” she said.

She explained that the moon was a woman, and it was she who gave us Lakota the bow. I accepted what she said without question. Several evenings later, she showed me the sliver of a new moon hanging in the sky. The thin, silver crescent looked exactly like my grandfather’s bow when he drew it back to shoot an arrow.

According to my grandfather, someone in the distant past saw that same sliver of a new moon and related it to the function of a bow. A bow works by reacting to being drawn, or bent, when the archer pulls back on the string. When the string is released, the reflexive action launches the arrow. Anyone who is familiar with how a bow works, and especially anyone who has constructed primitive bows, knows that the bow must be designed to withstand the stress of being drawn or bent. Bad design or poor craftsmanship will cause one or both of the limbs to work improperly or even break under stress.

If nothing else, a primitive Lakota bow is the epitome of simplicity. When strung—that is, when the string is attached to both tips—it resembles a narrow capital *D*. It is widest in the middle, the point where the archer holds it. The length from below this handle to the tip is the bottom limb, or wing. Above the handle is the top limb. In order for the bow to function smoothly time after time, both limbs have to bend uniformly. In other words, the stress has to be equal on both limbs.

The thinnest sliver of a new moon also is widest in the middle and gradually tapers to both ends. As my grandfather said, some archer in the distant past realized that he (or she)



Lakota ashwood bow with sinew string

was looking at a design wherein the limbs of a bow would flex, or bend, evenly. Therefore, practically, as well as spiritually, the moon did give us the bow.

Sooner or later, I asked the next obvious question: if the bow came from the moon, where did the arrow come from?

“From the sun,” was my grandfather’s reply.

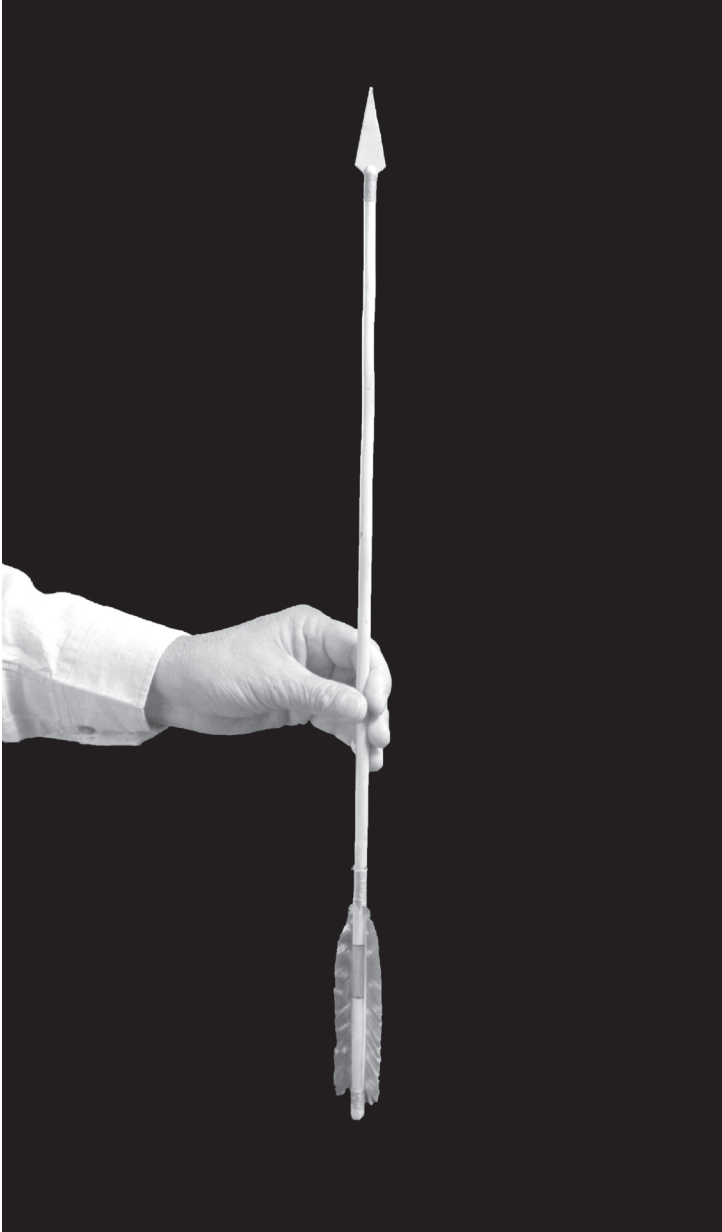
I already knew that the sun was considered a man, so I deduced—correctly, as it turned out—that the arrow must be male. One late afternoon, when the sun’s rays were shafts of light descending through a broken bank of clouds, my grandfather pointed to them. Those were the arrows of the sun. While the bow was a graceful curve, the arrow was absolutely as straight as straight could be.

Neither the moon nor the sun told us what sort of material the bow and arrow were to be made of. However, given that my Lakota ancestors harvested from the natural environment everything they used, wore, lived in, and ate, they knew the characteristics of every kind of raw material. Hardwoods were used for bows because they were more flexible than softwoods, and both soft- and hardwood stalks were used for arrows.

In pre-reservation days, bows and arrows were absolute necessities for the Lakota hunter/warrior. He used that weapon set to procure the resources needed for food, shelter, and clothing, as well as to defend family, home, and community against enemies. Around the age of twelve, every boy began to learn to craft them. It was a skill refined and polished year after year. There were usually a few who were much more skilled than others. Nevertheless, every man in the village was a bow maker and arrow smith.

During the first years on the reservations, bows and arrows were still being made and used for hunting. Some were made to sell to whites, and several white collectors had been able to acquire some prior to the reservation era. There were still many





Lakota arrow with turkey feathers and iron point

men of my grandparents' generation, like my grandfather, who had the knowledge and skills to make bows and arrows. My father had a basic knowledge, but as far as I know, he never made or used them. Technically speaking, the Lakota primitive bow and arrow have not been lost to history, but they have only barely survived.

Various cultures look at the bow and arrow as more than weapons, as more than the physical objects they are. That was certainly true among my ancestors. Lakota archers, who individually crafted their own bows and arrows, looked at the *before* and *after*. They saw the bow and the arrow as a process. And in that process they found the connections to, and associations with, life. Over time, there emerged protocols and philosophies regarding the crafting and use of bows and arrows.

For example, when an oak, ash, or chokecherry tree was cut to make a bow, the bottom end of the tree was always marked. Therefore, the archer knew which end of the finished bow would be the bottom and which would be the top.

A single string notch was carved into the top tip, and two notches were carved into the bottom tip, one on each side. A bow was kept unstrung, the string detached from the top limb notch, until there was a reason to use it. Then the archer would string the bow and, for a moment, perhaps a heartbeat, touch the bottom of his bow to the earth. There was a simple but profound reason for that ritual. For that heartbeat in time, the bow was realigned with the earth to connect it to the life-giving force it had known when it was a living tree.

There were similar rituals for the arrow. Like the bow wood, a stalk selected to be an arrow was marked at the bottom or root end when cut. That end, the thickest part of the shaft, was the nock end, the end that was notched (usually in a vee) so that the finished arrow could be placed on the string. When an archer was about to shoot his first arrow, he placed, or nocked, the

arrow on the string. Then he lifted his bow to point the arrow vertically, in order to acknowledge the arrow's configuration when it was a living stalk. If the archer was on foot, as opposed to mounted on a horse, he touched the nock end of the arrow to the ground before he placed it on the string.

The reason for both the bow and arrow rituals was simple: the archer, who was also the craftsman, demonstrated respect for the objects, which were once living things, by briefly reconnecting or realigning them with the life force of Grandmother Earth.

Because of simple yet profound philosophies such as these, the basis for this book is the primitive version of the Lakota bow and arrow, used by my ancestors for hundreds of years before the Lakota people were forced to live on reservations. There were two basic kinds of bows and arrows: those used for hunting and those used for warfare. There were also the versions used before my ancestors acquired the horse, and those adapted or redesigned after the horse came. Whatever their historical origin, Lakota primitive bows and arrows were and are reflections of life, of the process that occurs from birth to death.

When, as a boy, I watched my grandfather shoot his bow, and when he made a bow and arrows for me and put them in my hand, little did I know my association with them would be lifelong. Over the years, I have owned and used many bows. But the strongest sense of connection I feel is with the bows and arrows I make, because they reach across time. My skill and the hours of labor I spend making those bows and arrows put me in the company of all the Lakota craftsmen and archers before me who did the same. It is a circle, starting with them and ending with me. The knowledge and ability to make a bow and an arrow came from them. And, like my ancestors, I have learned lessons from those simple objects.

The lessons were not simple, but were many and profound. I suspect there are more yet to come. A few have had a lasting

impact on me, as they have to do with issues that all of us encounter at some point in our lives, frequently more than once. For this book, I have selected five lessons:

- Transformation
- Simplicity
- Purpose
- Strength
- Resiliency

These five are not all there is to life, but they are the lessons from the bow and arrow that are most consistent for me. Of the five, one is a process, and the others are characteristics. All can be related directly to the art of making primitive bows and arrows, and to most things in life.