



## What Can Be Gained by Sitting Down, Shutting Up, and Listening

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Article Summary: “Indians . . . to a remarkable degree remain invisible today,” said Roger Welsch at the Eighth Annual Chief Standing Bear Breakfast earlier this year. His keynote address—a call for non-Indians to enrich their own lives through contact with Native Americans and their history and culture—is reprinted here.

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# WHAT CAN BE GAINED

## *by Sitting Down, Shutting Up, and Listening*

BY ROGER WELSCH

*Editor's note: From time to time Nebraska History publishes essays that reflect on some aspect of our state's history, and which seek to broaden our perspective or help us question underlying assumptions. On May 10, 2013, author, humorist, and folklorist Roger Welsch delivered the keynote address at the Eighth Annual Chief Standing Bear Breakfast, held in La Vista, Nebraska. "Indians . . . to a remarkable degree remain invisible today," he said, and argued that this represents a missed opportunity for non-Indians to enrich their own lives. The text of his speech is reproduced here:*

I thank my son Jeff Gilpin for his good words, in which I hear the voice of his father, my brother, Buddy Gilpin. Buddy once told me that every moment of life should be a prayer of gratitude and on a beautiful morning like this, surrounded by so many friends and relatives, it's easy to have a heart full of gratitude.

I once spoke to a large international organization to which my parents belonged—fancy meal like this, in a ballroom, huge crowd, \$50 a plate. I presumed my folks would be there to see their son in his moment of glory. I stopped by their house before heading to the banquet and there was my

father in his lounge chair, feet propped up, reading the newspaper. I said, "Gee, Dad, I thought you and Mom would be coming to hear me speak tonight." Without looking up from his paper, Dad said, "Rog, all your life I've told you to shut up. And now I should pay to hear you talk?"

As I look around this room, I see a lot of others who must have thought the same thing now and then, and after all, in my book I say it's time for the white man to sit down, shut up, and listen. But here I am, ready to give it one more try.

Thirty years ago I went to a conference in Jamestown, North Dakota. I flew in, spent a day

in meetings, and went out to the tiny Jamestown airport to return home the third day. The airport wasn't much bigger than our living room, one gate for incoming and outgoing flights, one guy at one check-in counter.

I stepped up to the desk and gave the man my ticket. He looked at it and said, "Sorry, Mr. Welsch, but we've cancelled your seat on this flight." I was stunned. "Why did you cancel my flight?"

He said, "If a passenger doesn't take one leg of a flight, the remaining portions are cancelled. Since you didn't come into Jamestown on your ticket, we cancelled the return."

"But I did come in on the first flight," I said. "Two days ago. Into this airport. That's how I got here."

"Sorry, but according to our records, you didn't come in on that flight so your reservation on this flight been cancelled."

"If I didn't fly into Jamestown Wednesday, how do you think I got here?"

"I have no idea, sir, but since you didn't get here, we can't fly you out."

To my bewilderment, I was faced with the absurdity of proving my own existence. Considering my size, you wouldn't think that would be a problem, but you'd be surprised. French philosopher Rene Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." Descartes obviously never flew out of Jamestown, North Dakota; when a ticket agent in Jamestown says you're not there, you have one heck of a time proving otherwise.

In a *very* small way that day, I faced what Standing Bear did when he stood before Judge Elmer Dundy in April 1879, raised his right hand, and said, "This hand is not the color of yours, but if I prick it, the blood will flow, and I shall feel pain. The blood is of the same color as yours. God made me, and I am a man." He wasn't just asking for a legal decision. He was demanding that his existence be acknowledged.

Judge Dundy's eventual, famous conclusion that Standing Bear, and thus every Indian, is indeed a "person within the meaning of the law" seems self-evident today. Of course. What else could Dundy have decided? There stood this man. There could be no denying that. The matter was settled. Standing Bear was a human being, not just in the meaning of the law but in every other meaning too, right?

Well, not quite. Sunday, January 6, 2013, a couple months ago, George Will, political writer, wrote

a column that I read in the Lincoln newspaper under the headline, "Homestead Act [1862] was door-opener to America." Will wrote that the region of the Great Plains was "at the time identified on maps as the Great American Desert" and that under the Homestead Act "more than 270 million acres were *privatized*." Privatized. You know, taken out of government ownership and put into the hands of hardy, courageous pioneers who would conquer the Plains, subdue the wilderness, win the West, tame the untamed, make *something* out of *nothing*.

George Will didn't mention the people who already lived here, for whom this geography was a nurturing mother, whose cities and nations prospered here and who considered the "emptiness" to be sacred, a gardenland of unspeakable generosity. Indians? No problem. WHAT Indians? Standing Bear and Judge Dundy notwithstanding, Indians were invisible then and to a remarkable degree remain invisible today.

I was having lunch with Pat Leading Fox a couple years ago and was telling him that I had just read a book in which the author said that little could be learned about the Skidi Pawnee because, the writer said, the Skidi had been extinct for years. Pat Leading Fox, chief of the Skidi Band, laughed that off, but sometimes slights like that aren't so easily dismissed.

Another time I was with a group of distinguished Pawnee, among them a prominent lawyer, a religious leader, a teacher, a scholar, a warrior who survived the Bataan Death March, a president of the Pawnee Nation, and other equally distinguished members of the tribe. We went to a Lincoln restaurant for lunch. We went in, sat down, and continued our conversation while we waited for someone to take our orders. We waited. And we waited. People who came after us took seats and were served their meals.

Eventually, we realized we weren't going to be served. It's not as if anyone insulted us. No one said anything to us. We simply weren't there. Indians? What Indians? We may have been persons in the meaning of the *law* but at that moment, in that restaurant, we weren't persons in the meaning of soup and sandwiches.

It's nothing new. I live on the Loup River, named for the Loup or Wolf Pawnee, near the village of Dannebrog. In April 1861 a couple dozen Danes crossed the river, right where I now live, to establish what they hoped would be a New Denmark.

Pioneer accounts briefly mention that 300 Pawnee were camped just over the hill on what is now again Pawnee property, on the river the Pawnee called Plenty Potatoes because of the abundance of food there. By December there were 500 Pawnee, enjoying nature's bounty. All while the Danes struggled and starved, insistently refusing to learn from the Pawnee. Three years later, there were no Pawnee in Nebraska, and the settlers remained forever oblivious to whatever they might have learned.

Vikings starved because they refused to learn from the Inuit. Pilgrims ignored the experience and knowledge of Indians they encountered, choosing instead to rob and kill. Conquistadors burned Aztec and Mayan libraries, unimaginable treasuries of knowledge mindlessly destroyed.

But Indians don't need me to tell them what it means to be Indian. Nor is it up to me to tell *non-Indians* what it means to be Indian. Oglala journalist Charles Trimble cautions his kinsmen not to live in a culture of victimhood, not to indulge themselves in anger and resentment, and he's right. So, I'm not here to offer up a litany of wrongs done to Indians. But as a white man whose life has been changed, always for the better, by six decades of associations with Indians, I *can* tell my *white* friends and relatives what can yet be gained by sitting down, shutting up, and listening. And remembering. And thinking.

How many, like George Will, celebrate homesteading without a thought about whose land was being given away? How many Nebraska families accept congratulations for farming the same ground for a century, forgetting who farmed it five centuries before them?

I'm a selfish man. I enjoy good food and good company, good humor and generosity. I have a scoring system in my life: I give myself one point when I learn something new, two when I learn something that contradicts what I thought I knew but was wrong about. I figure I have one life and I want it to be as full as I can make it. I have found that satisfaction in my associations with Indians. And I like to share good things with people I know and love. So I talk to others about the good things in my life. Like Indians.

I know that can be annoying. At the University of Nebraska, after the faculty grades students, students grade their teachers. I was once reviewing my class evaluations and a student wrote, "Being in Welsch's class is more like being in an audience

than a class." I was puzzled about that so I asked a couple other students what they thought. Were my classes really more like performances than instruction? One student said, "Rog, being in your class isn't like being in a class OR an audience. It's like being in a congregation." I know I can be preachy. But I want to share my good fortune. From my earliest associations with Omahas fifty years ago to my relationships with the Pawnee and Lakota today, my life has been enriched by those associations and I see no reason to keep the benefits to myself.

I'm not alone. In this room I see other non-Indians who have found a blessing in their lives through associations with Native friends—Mick, Gale, Peggy, Ronnie, Anita, Dale and Connie. With this book and my words today I want to tell my *non-Indian* friends that it is *our* loss if we accept even the least trivialization of the Indian role not just in our history but in our lives today, and in our future. Native contributions are too large to remain unacknowledged. We cannot accept omissions like George Will's. Those for whom Indians remain invisible are squandering what could be one of the most rewarding parts of their lives.

Standing Bear's eloquence and courage benefit all of us, not just himself, or the Ponca, or even Indians. So it is with culture. By embracing others, we enrich ourselves. We all still have much to learn and now is not the time to close our eyes and ears to either old or new wisdom. With events like this breakfast we acknowledge the historical contributions of courageous people like Chief Standing Bear, but equally important it gives me, and all of us, a chance to acknowledge again people who give our lives meaning today: Louie LaRose, Judi gaiashkibos, Charles Trimble, Jeff Gilpin, Lance Morgan, Karla KnifeChief, Skidi, Phyllis Stone, and those too who are gone and yet are still with us. I never forget Buddy Gilpin's words: "Every moment of life should be a prayer of gratitude." Today I am grateful above all for my Indian friends and relatives from whom there is still much to learn, and who, remarkably, still warmly welcome a world that has too long ignored them.

For these gifts I say, Ideeway . . . Wiblahon . . . Thank you. 🙏

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Roger Welsch is the author of more than forty books, including *Embracing Fry Bread: Confessions of a Wannabe* (University of Nebraska Press, 2012).