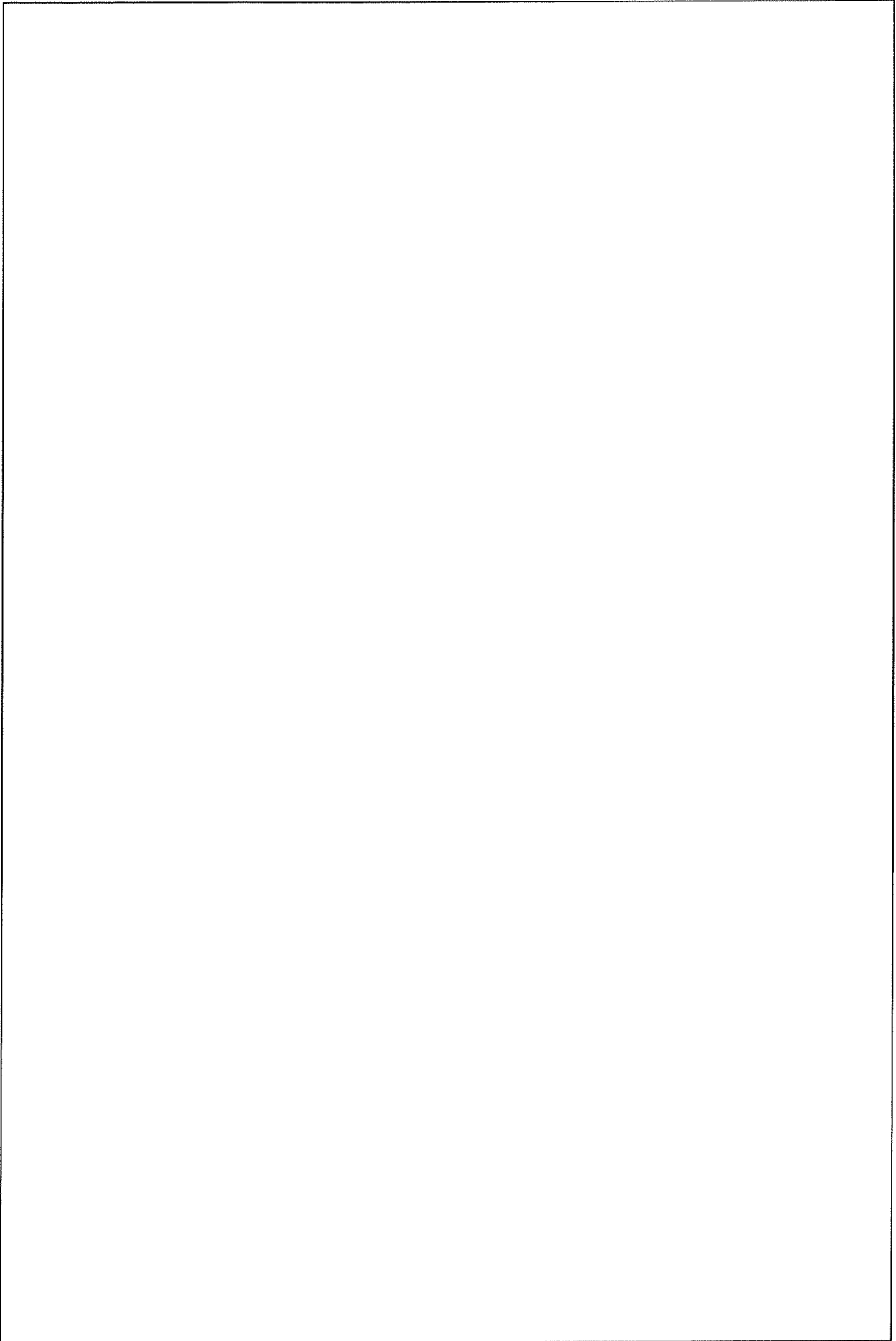


{PART 4}

## **The Basket Travels: Testimonials of Awakening and Next Steps**

Each person is valuable and can make an essential contribution to the protection of the natural environment and preservation of Indigenous knowledge. Like pieces of a puzzle, we must work collectively as a whole. As such, this section addresses sovereignty, education, and action.



{CHAPTER 18}

## Letter to a Young Native: Sovereignty is Action

*Shaunna Oteka McCovey*

Ai yu kwee' Young Native,

*I BEGIN THIS LETTER WITH A HARD TRUTH.* One that is not sugar-coated or dressed in niceties to soften the blow because you do not deserve that. You deserve to know, upfront, the reality of our situation, so you will be well armed when the day comes and you must stand up for your people and for your tribal nations. So here it is: Tribal governments in our present time are not truly sovereign governments. Native American nations and tribes have not been true sovereigns since before the white intrusion.

Prior to contact, being a sovereign meant the right to self-govern, and not just the right but the inherent right. "Inherent" means we were born sovereign and that our sovereignty was not granted to us by the United States Government. Each tribe, village, nation, band, pueblo, etc. had its own way of governing its people, its own tribal laws, and its own way of protecting and taking care of tribal homelands. For the sake of clarity, I will call inherent sovereignty *true sovereignty* for the remainder of this letter.

Tribal government today exists because the United States Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (IRA), which allowed us

to form replicated versions of the U.S. Government. Mini-governments, constitutions and all (and you should know that those tribal constitutions were not written by tribal people). Maybe it was a good thing—to let people who were traditionally self-governing govern themselves. Then again, maybe it wasn't. The structure of government that was required by the IRA completely ignored our traditional ways of living and being as distinct and sovereign peoples. All of this begs the question: if we are not true sovereign nations, what are we? I'll attempt to explain.

We are quasi-sovereign. "Quasi" means *apparently, but not really* or—*kind of*. This is, unfortunately, the official definition of tribal sovereignty that we are stuck with—sovereign, but not *really* sovereign. Quasi-sovereignty allows tribes to regulate their people in various ways. Tribes can determine membership, make laws and ordinances that apply only to tribal people, have some limited jurisdiction over lands, and have other powers similar to states. While there are some aspects of sovereignty interlaced into the everyday workings of tribal government, those aspects are given by the U.S., and what the U.S. is giving to tribes is the ability to act as smaller Federal governments within the larger Federal Government structure; hence my previous reference to mini governments. That is not true sovereignty. Tribal governments function because Federal funding is passed through to tribes, and that funding rarely increases. Each year Congress passes an appropriations (money) bill that gives a specific amount to each Tribal government. The funding is used to run programs like, education, social services, etc. So, Tribal government operations are dependent on funding from the Federal Government. That is not true sovereignty. A tribe does not exist in the eyes of the Federal Government without federal recognition, without the U.S. Government saying it exists. That is not true sovereignty. You may argue that tribal nations are owed this funding and federal recognition because of treaty rights, because tribal lands were given up, because federal Indian case law dictates it, and you would not be wrong. Many tribal people feel this way, but again, this is not true sovereignty.

The most frightening aspect of quasi-sovereignty is that the United States Congress can take away our right to govern ourselves with the stroke of a pen. It is as easy as passing legislation that shrinks our reservations, or terminates entire tribes, or attempts to exterminate our culture by relocating us to urban areas or sending our children away to boarding schools. All of this has been done in the past, and the past is brutal. It should never be repeated.

Now that we have established that the Federal Government sees us as quasi-sovereign, I wholeheartedly believe that now is the time in the course of our history (and this letter) for us to think about sovereignty differently. While we must acknowledge the characterization and try to understand this view (because we are stuck with it), it is our responsibility to make the word “sovereignty” meaningful to us. We can make sovereignty mean what we want it to through *action*. How do we do this? We do it every day in the way we navigate the world. We do it through our actions as individuals, as human beings in the very unique situation of being blessed to be Native to this land. We do it because we fiercely believe that we are special and that we are powerful. When we, both individually and collectively, express these attributes, we create our destiny. The world is ours to make and remake. It always has been. We just got a little sidetracked.

You see, sovereignty much more about perspective. I understand this may be a bit confusing because we often hear about our tribal governments “asserting their sovereignty” in different political arenas. When we “assert” our sovereignty, we feel empowered and our perception is that we’ve been heard by the Federal Government. This, however, is not always the case. Sometimes when we “assert” our sovereignty, nothing happens. We are told by the Federal Government that we are sovereign, so many of us mimic the words without really having a true understanding of what that sovereignty means to us and to those who call us sovereign. Our perspective of our own sovereignty and another’s perspective of our sovereignty can be very opposing. I want you to know there is a clear difference between *assertions of sovereignty* and *exercising one’s sovereignty*. An assertion is simply using words to say we are sovereign, but exercising sovereignty is done through action. And as we all learned in middle school, actions speak louder than words. I want you to think of true sovereignty as a muscle. You simply cannot tell it to grow. You must exercise the muscle if you want to see the growth.

Now I want to explore ways in which true sovereignty means action.  
***Sovereignty in Action Means Leadership.***

*I am a red man. If the Great Spirit had desired me to be a white man he would have made me so in the first place...It is not necessary for Eagles to be Crows.—Sitting Bull (Hunkpapa Lakota)*

You are an eagle. You were born with sovereign wings and white tail

feathers to steer you in the four directions and in the directions of the river: up the river, across the river, down the river. Sitting Bull wasn't from the rivers, he didn't eat salmon and eels like we do, but he was a great leader and he had the right idea. He speaks a profound truth: we were born Native for a reason and we were born to think and act for ourselves. We had our own ways of being, our own languages and lands, our own distinct societies practicing religious and spiritual traditions that were completely unique to us. That is true sovereignty. I use the quote from Sitting Bull as an example of exercising individual true sovereignty, which is what a leader must always do. When he made this address in the mid-1800s, he stood as a leader of his people, tall and proud to be a unique person from a distinct culture. He was proud to be different, to have different values and a different way of looking at the world than the white men he addressed. And, if you notice, he made a slight dig at the white men by calling them crows, which are clearly not as majestic or as powerful as eagles. His action was to stand and claim his Native heritage, and at the same time tell the white men gathered there that he was not going to be like them, and neither were his people.

A leader must have integrity. A leader must be strong enough to stand against the tide of uncertainty. A leader must be smart enough to know when to act and when to strategize. A leader must look at the whole picture. A leader is a visionary who has the best interest of the people at heart. Most importantly, a true leader must be humble. Humility allows a leader to be open and willing to listen to everyone's input. Real leaders do not make decisions by themselves.

The sad truth is, we are lacking this in Indian Country. There are many good leaders who are working to find new ways to exercise sovereignty, to lead their tribal governments in the right direction. There are even more good leaders out there who are not working for their tribal governments, but elsewhere in Indian Country, and the private sector. And there are just as many (if not more) leaders embezzling money from their tribes, misappropriating funds, or abusing their positions of power for personal and familial gain. Every week brings a news article telling the same story: the Tribal Chairman or Council Member or Board Director or even the Head Start Program Manager took money from the tribal coffers to benefit his or her family or personal business. These people are not true leaders. Instead, they exemplify exactly what a leader should not be. When you steal from your tribal government, you steal from your tribal people. That is never okay. Yet it happens all

too frequently.

You must remember that leadership is a gift given to you by your people. It comes from your community. Whether it is given via traditional means because of your place in ceremony, or given in non-traditional means related to the job you do or by a vote of the people, leadership is not something to be taken lightly. Good leaders will always *act* in ways that express true sovereignty. ***Sovereignty in Action Means Responsibility.***

As a young Native person, you were born into a world of great responsibility. You are asked to move through this life as a representation and reflection of the beauty of your people. You are responsible for the health, welfare, and well-being of your family, your people, your community, and your tribal government. You are responsible for being a good citizen and for being someone who contributes to your tribe, your community, and to society as a whole. This may seem like a lot of responsibility, and some of you might argue that this is too much to ask, but I say to you this is true sovereignty in action. I implore you to do the very best you can to be responsible and to act responsibly because your people will be better for it. They will be stronger for it.

If you are a dance person or attend ceremonies, for example, it is your responsibility to be part of remaking the world, putting it back into balance through song and prayer. You do this not only for your own people, but for every living being—person, plant, animal, etc.—who occupies space on this Earth. This is the most unselfish act imaginable. And you are unselfish when you exercise your true sovereign right to practice your traditions and strengthen your culture.

I wish to point out, however, that responsibility does not rest solely upon your growing shoulders. It should be alive in every decision made by your tribal government and those whose job it is to represent you. Responsibility means that in the face of adversity, tribes must act in whatever way necessary to prevent the worst from happening. But more importantly, it means that all tribal people, as individuals, act in ways to protect those things that need protecting. To exercise our true sovereignty is our individual responsibility as well as our tribal government's responsibility.

Being responsible means being a good tribal member. It means being a good human being. It means participating in tribal government or other governmental and community arenas. It means using your voice when change is needed. It means not necessarily relying on your elected representative to represent you—because they often will not. Their views

may differ from yours on certain issues, which is why you need to be your own voice. Or, form a collective voice of tribal members with the same concerns. Exercising true sovereignty means making choices. And we must always choose responsibility over everything else. *Sovereignty in Action Means Taking Care of the Earth.*

We humans have screwed things up. We have not taken our responsibilities seriously, and many of us who have grown up in poverty think that we do not have to recycle! You do have to recycle. It may be a silly example, but it is a significant one. It is your duty no matter the financial or other circumstances you find yourself in to take care of our planet. Taking care of the Earth means tending to it, protecting it. It means giving back all of the blessing the Earth gives so that something remains for the future. It means being thankful for what is provided. It means standing up to those who would assault the very thing that sustains you. The prolific Native scholar Vine Deloria said, way back in 1973, "In this land God is Red." What he meant was that our traditions, our ceremonies, and our religious practices originate from this land, from our sacred places. In order to remain distinct cultural people, we must protect those places, for they give us the power, the medicine, the songs, and the prayers to continue. And this, dear young person, holds true for every tribal person in every tribal nation—collectively, we must all take care of the earth. I give you two examples, now, of true sovereignty in action.

Some of you may not remember the fish kill of 2002, but it is seared into the memory of those of us who fully experienced it. It was devastating. Low river flows combined with high water temperatures created the perfect climate for a disease called *Ich* to spread at an astonishing speed. Upwards of 65,000 salmon died (most tribal people believe the numbers were higher) in the lower Klamath, which means they did not have a chance to spawn. We suffered one of our greatest tribal losses. What did we do in response? We mourned the loss and then we *acted*. The Yurok, Karuk, and Hupa tribes began negotiations with federal agencies and other river stakeholders to remove four dams on the Klamath River. The dams held back the water needed in the river to prevent the fish kill. Tribal people protested. Tribes with past disagreements put them aside to come together for the river, for the salmon, and for the people.

Another example, and one which you most likely remember, is the tribal action at Standing Rock in North Dakota. Native people and their allies came together to protect the sacred waters of the Standing Rock



Sioux Tribe from an oil pipeline. In these two instances, we as tribal people chose to drop our shields and our arguments and join together to take care of what takes care of us. The people at Standing Rock stood, without arms, with only their bodies and their words, against a militarized police force and a giant corporation. That is what we, as people with sovereign hearts, must do in times when action calls us toward something greater than ourselves.

Now, young Native, you may have noticed that the dams still presently stand and the oil pipeline was built, but do not be discouraged. Taking care of the Earth is not a one-time occurrence. It is from birth to death, from daybreak to dawn—it is your life. What you have to understand is that things take time. Battles are won and lost. Patience is a requirement whether you want dams coming down or pipelines diverted. You have to be invested in the change you seek. You have to be willing to work hard for something that you may never see come to fruition. It is a tough thing to process—the idea that I may never see the end result of my actions—because the society we live in is instant. Information can be instantly accessed through our smart phones. Problems are solved in an instant on 30-minute television programs. We are all about immediate gratification, but real change takes time and work, and taking care of the earth is a forever job and an unending responsibility. Your responsibility. My responsibility. Our responsibility.

***Sovereignty in Action Means Preserving Your Culture.*** Cultural preservation is of utmost importance when it comes to exercising true sovereignty. You must act in ways that protect and preserve our heritage, our traditions, our language, our songs, our stories, and our natural environment. It is important that you remember everything that makes up our culture is interconnected. This knowledge allows you to see the world in its entirety and to see that you cannot protect and preserve just one aspect of our culture; you must preserve and protect it all. For example, if you are going to protect the salmon, you must protect the river. To protect the river, you must protect its headwaters and the watershed from which it is born. That watershed is part of a larger system of mountains and valleys, and they must be protected as well. Another example of interconnectedness is our language, which is connected to our songs, which are connected to our stories. These three woven together teach us about our history, but they also provide important lessons that we must apply today and take with us into the future. The loss of any one of these means we lose a huge part of our culture. And

that means we become less of who we are as Native people.

I also plead with you to recognize that cultures evolve and change, and truly sovereign people know when change is necessary. Nothing is static. We must all be willing to evolve as human beings and, at the same time, find ways to keep our culture intact. How do we do this? We find the balance. Balance, as you may already know, is essential to the preservation of our culture, and seeking balance every day is the work we must do.

The history of interaction between tribal nations and the United States is terrible. Awful. Repugnant. Unjust. Attempts to destroy our culture have caused tremendous dysfunction and pain in our communities. We sometimes call the pain created by the past “historical trauma,” which many of us have carried into the present day. But I want to say to you, young Native, we have to let go of that pain. We must never forget what was perpetrated against us as, but if we do not learn how to forgive, if we choose to remain angry and hobbled by our pain, we cannot move forward. You see, pain keeps you stuck. Pain will keep us stuck in the past, traumatized by our history, our hearts hardened. We do not want that anymore. We do not deserve it. Let us send their historical trauma right back into the past where it belongs. Let us make our sovereignty something different, make it something stronger, because we have the final say. We give ourselves our true names—we are The People. The People Upriver. The People Downriver. People of the Pines. True People. Principal People. Elk People. Strong People. Peaceful People. Mountain People. The ultimate truth is: we define us.

What we have been doing is making do. We are good at adapting to unnatural circumstances. It is why we are still here, why we have survived everything meant to kill us. We are also very good at our own self-destruction. We are good at being jealous of one another, of only looking out for our own immediate family and not our community and people as a whole. These are traits we have learned over time as a result of the breakdown of our traditional ways of living, of our culture.

Young Native, I could call you the future of our people, but what “people” would we be without our culture? And I could say the future depends on you, but what “future” do we have without our culture? What I am saying is, for us to be truly sovereign, we must act in ways that perpetuate our culture. If we do not do this we will disappear. We will drown in the dreaded melting pot where money is our God and all of our salmon come from farms in the ocean.

Your choice is really quite simple. You can make do or make change through *action*. Action that is guided by your true and sovereign heart. Now tell me, what will you choose?

Very Truly Yours,  
*SOMc*