

Peyote Night

Written by Humphry Osmond

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The Native American Church is a religious movement which originated among the Indians of the Southwestern United States. Its main features involve the use of peyote, a psychedelic, or mind-manifester, drug obtained from the dried tops of a cactus that contains mescaline, in a ceremony combining Indian religious motifs with certain Christian themes. The drug and the ceremony are fused together in a manner acceptable to many Indians today. My interest in this church was a professional one, springing from my researches into psychedelics, the vision-producing drugs the Indians use in a group setting. So far as our research group could make out, the Indians were the first people who used these substances together with certain aspects of Christianity. We had heard about them in different ways. Religious people who wanted this sect suppressed had published complaints in various newspapers. In my country, Canada, there had been questions and statements from a Minister in the House of Commons at Ottawa. A police report we read suggested that peyote was both a dangerous poison and a drug of addiction. Professor Charles Seevers of Ann Arbor, one of the world's leading authorities on both peyote and mescaline, one of its active principles, has frequently stated that it was of low toxicity and that he had no evidence of anyone becoming addicted to it. The U. S. Public Health Service Narcotics Section at Fort Leavenworth have never treated a peyote addict.

One of the clearest and kindest accounts of them and their religion came from the late Professor J. S. Slotkin of the University of Chicago. He had visited the Canadian branches of the Native American Church of North America in the summer of 1956. He told us they were being persecuted, not very obviously, thoroughly or determinedly, but although it was mild and intermittent, it was persecution all the same. Some of these persecutors did not deserve the label, for they were good people genuinely concerned about the Indians, who had been misinformed about the nature of the peyote rite. They were naturally worried by reports that the Indians were obtaining a dangerous and addictive substance and engaging in wild orgies. There was reason to be concerned after the damage liquor has done to some Indians in the past. Along with these people who had a real interest in the Indians, there were others who never lose an opportunity to meddle in other people's affairs. There is not too much scope for this hobby in western Canada today, but the Indians, being government wards and a special minority group, are particularly susceptible to this sort of interference. As the scholarly Slotkin explained to us, "Their conditions are wretched. They are demoralized. Many of them hate and despise farming. The Native American Church is something of their own, born of their misfortunes and developed from their pre-Columbian traditions. It has grown and flourished in spite of white men, and this makes it even more precious to the Indians."

Slotkin thought we could do no harm by attending one of their services, and we might help. It would at least show them that all white men were not hostile. Their services have been described as orgies only by those who have never attended them. It is curious that the early

Peyote Night

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Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

Christians had much the same accusations leveled at them by the Romans, whose staid, formalized, official religion had become little more than an annex to politics, devoid of enthusiasm and feeling. Any young religion (Quakers in Fox's day or the Methodists in Wesley's are examples) usually manages to offend longer-established churches, just as young lovers are something of a reproach to long-wed people, for they reflect a vision of love that time has more or less dimmed. Long-married people in whom time does not produce this dimming can be embarrassing to their more habituated contemporaries.

We corresponded in a desultory way with the Indians of the Red Pheasant Band, from among whose members most of the congregation of the Native American Church of Canada was drawn. The Church had been duly registered as a religious body and so was safe from direct persecution. But the supply of peyote, their ceremonial cactus, came from the United States, and this made them vulnerable to administrative pressure, as later events have shown.

In September 1956, we learned that Mr. Frank Takes Gun, President of the Native American Church of North America, was planning to come north from his home in Montana to see how his fellow church members were faring in Canada. Shortly after this, we were invited to North Battleford. We drove north, picking up Dr. Abram Hoffer in Saskatoon, armed with a tape recorder, blankets, and lots of notebooks. Two members of the Saskatoon Star Phoenix staff traveled with us. It was a glowing early fall day, and the stubble was still live enough to give the land a blond, crew-cut look. We arrived in North Battleford late in the afternoon of the sixth of October, 1956. Mr. Takes Gun and his companion, Mr. Russell, came to see us in our hotel. They had had a harassing time getting the hard-pressed Red Pheasant Band to organize the ceremony. They are poor Indians. Mr. Takes Gun had helped them to get permission to pitch a tepee for the meeting in the grounds of old Fort Battleford. He was also inquiring into the legal help the Indians were getting in Canada. The Indians' way of conducting business is still not very like that of the white man, and there is much misunderstanding.

I was tired and a little apprehensive on at least two counts. My colleagues and I had decided that, while they would watch and record the ceremony, I should take part in it, and observe from the inside, as it were. I did not wholly enjoy the idea of taking peyote, although I have used a variety of mind-changing substances in the past few years. These have included taking harmala, the seeds of Syrian rue, which has a disgusting taste; kava-kava, the roots and leaves of a South Sea Island pepper plant; ololiuqui, the seeds of *Rivea corymbosa*, a vine-like plant from Mexico, once the chief and sacred narcotic of the Aztecs. I had also taken chemically pure mescaline, one active principle of peyote, and the immensely powerful Lysergic Acid Diethylamide, both derived from plants. In addition, we had worked with a new group of substances derived from adrenalin, whose use in this field had been discovered in Saskatchewan. I had, however, never taken peyote before. I found its dried, shriveled, and furry appearance uninviting, and reports said it frequently produced nausea and vomiting. I did not relish the idea of vomiting in public. My second worry was a more serious one. I had much sympathy for the Indians and wanted to assist their cause, but as an honest observer I would have to report everything that happened. I was concerned lest the service should be ill-conducted.

Mr. Takes Gun was clearly worried about me. He told me repeatedly that they would have good, clean city water and that the cups would be personal and hygienic. The peyote, he assured me, would not be difficult to take, but would be made soft with a coffee grinder and wrapped individually in Kleenex. He is of medium height and very solidly built, of that almost pure mesomorphy that one finds often among the Plains Indians. His face might have been

Peyote Night

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Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

carved from old, oiled, highly polished teakwood. He glistened in the afternoon sun-for he was nervous. His eyes and hair were black. He had the longest ears I have ever seen. His face was impassive. This made one notice the eloquence of his hands all the more (one finger was missing from the left one); his gestures were as expressive as a Latin's.

Mr. Takes Gun left us to make the final preparations for the ceremony. We agreed to be at North Battleford a little after sundown, and, before he left, he gave me a final reassurance about the purity of the water. We crossed the golden valley of the South Saskatchewan River and drove up the hillside to the old fort. They had set the teepee on the short grass inside the stockade. It was small and pale, its ventilator flapping in the breeze. The clear night sky with the stars appearing and the faint swirl of northern lights seemed about to engulf us. Outside the teepee there was a great stack of small logs.

The ceremonial fire in the center of the teepee was ready for lighting. It was between the horns of the low, crescent-moon altar shaped from molded earth. Only the fire tender occupied this middle space. The rest of us, eight observers, including two journalists, and fourteen Indian worshipers, were ranged around the circumference of the teepee. Apart from Mr. Takes Gun, and Mr. Russell, who had driven up from Montana, our hosts came from Saskatchewan, mostly from the Red Pheasant Band, though a few had driven over from Alberta. The elders of this group were Mr. Nicotine and Mr. Stone. There were several younger men and two Indian ladies. All looked spruce and neat. They had clearly put on their best clothes for the service. I sat on Mr. Takes Gun's left so that I could learn about the ceremony from him. He was the leader, and Mr. Russell, on his right, was his drummer.

In a teepee, one sits with one's back slightly bent and one's head forward. However one places the legs, they get stiff, the long hamstring muscles in particular. Cramping pains can be a nuisance. Mr. Russell played the fire taps on his drum, and the fire tender lit the prepared wood. Sparks rose up and fluttered in the darkness above us before vanishing. The teepee was filled with the pleasant, acrid smell of sage, thyme, and burning logs. Mr. Takes Gun put a single leaf and then a large peyote button on the moon altar. The rest of us remained seated, and he was silent. He consulted his watch from time to time. At eight-thirty he began to read a written address he had with him. He asked for "Religious freedom for the Indian form of Christianity." He quoted the Declaration of Independence with its inalienable rights, which include religious freedom and the pursuit of happiness. The long Indian faces, dark in the fire glow, expressed melancholy, dolor, tragedy. "We want to be let alone to worship our God as we wish." He then addressed the observers directly: "I trust you will tell the truth and nothing but the truth so help us God." It is no easy matter even to observe accurately enough to be sure what the truth might be, and having done this, how should one convey the truth so that it will mean something to someone else? I wondered how I would be able to communicate the solemnity of that frail teepee. It was like being inside a lighted Japanese lantern, suspended in eternity.

The smoke started the ceremony proper. The Indians are masters of symbolism; a few eagle feathers, a pinch of sweet herbs, a little water drum, a gourd rattle, a fire, and little more, are all the aids they need for worship. For them, everything that is, is holy. They have no written prayers, but as among the Quakers, everyone prays according to his conscience. So a cigarette made from cornhusks symbolizes for them the purification and dedication of the human spirit to a greater spirit. The tobacco was handed around in a soft leather pouch. It was runny, with many small grains. I am not a smoker. I fashioned my cigarette clumsily and the tobacco leaked out, and the result was rather emaciated. A glowing brand was passed around for lighting the cigarettes. Shortly after mine was lit, I choked. The fire felt very hot on my face, almost

Peyote Night

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Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

scorching, while behind I was chilly. It did not seem a good start for the evening.

While Mr. Russell beat the drum, Mr. Takes Gun chanted and shook the rattle. Sometimes he used English and sometimes his own tongue. The wind noises were lost in the chanting and the drumming. His voice rose effortlessly from a firm baritone to a high, clear falsetto.

Dear Heavenly Father,

We are representing our folks under this teepee.

Dear Heavenly Father, Dear Heavenly Father

Bless these men that are observers here.

Dear Heavenly Father,

These poor people surrendered all their lands

To the Government of Canada-their conditions

Are pitiful.

Dear Heavenly Father-bless my people back home.

Then he continued in his own tongue, which seemed made for rhetoric, for declamation, and his voice rose in searching falsetto. The Indians maintained a low background of song in their three different languages. The faces of his fellow worshipers were angry, resigned, supplicating, shifting with the changes of rhythm and the flickering fire. The chorus ceased from time to time and the leader continued alone, his voice cascading and dying away, the song of a bird fluttering against a great storm. The fire glowed. An Indian wept. We placed our cigarettes around the base of the moon altar.

At about 9 P.M. the peyote was brought in. It was carried in a little white cloth sack, which was handed from person to person. Mine came separately; it had been macerated in a coffee grinder and each button wrapped in a white tissue, so courteous are the Indians. They themselves crunched the hard, dry, furry cactus tops determinedly, as one cracks nuts with one's teeth. I nibbled cautiously at my soft, damp residue. It has a sharp taste, which lingers in the mouth. It is bitter and sour on the stomach. It repeats on one. It is not as bad as ololiuqui, and is pleasant compared with the sour, oily, rancid seed of the Syrian rue. Mr. Takes Gun belched a little after swallowing his. Peyote takers, making a virtue of necessity, sometimes allege there is something especially valuable about the nausea it induces in some people. As in other religions, rationalizations are always ready to help out anything unpalatable. I was glad when I swallowed the last bit of peyote. My apprehensions about vomiting were unnecessary.

The drumming and singing continued. The water drum is made of blackened iron covered with hide. Seven knobs on the side represent the dipper stars. Behind the singing there is always drumming and rattling. The drum beat in the brain and wearied me; every drummer seemed much the same. The fire tender moved the ashes into the space between the horns of the moon, so that it gradually filled up with fine wood ashes. I had respect for the ceremony. It was reverent and well conducted. But I was still not of the group, even though I was among them. I scribbled away at my note pad and often watched my observing colleagues, who were at the other side of the teepee.

At about nine-fifteen I wrote, "The young man with the superb face, puzzled by his fate-he has a kingly face," and again, "if feeling gets to God, this must." By nine forty-five there was a ghost of brilliant color in my eye grounds when I closed my lids. I felt remote and slightly depressed.

Peyote Night

Written by Humphry Osmond

Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

The roof flap fluttered like a lost soul. The teepee is a microcosm, a tiny mirror of the universe. The fire glowed red and smokeless; the fire tender handed around a smoldering brand for those who wanted to smoke. Mr. Takes Gun recited prayers in his language-as he smoked, his hands moved with extraordinary delicacy. It was an unorgiastic orgy. The Indians sing without opening their mouths much, and often they hardly move their lips. They sing with their sound box and chest, while we use our lips, tongue, and sound box. I was never quite sure where the singing was coming from, and it was sometimes almost impossible to decide who was singing and who was not.

By about ten I had become more aware of what was happening, and recognized that peyote was starting to affect me. My sight was sharper and my hearing more acute. Looking around the teepee, it struck me that we white men, outnumbered in this tiny world, were an even smaller fraction of the larger one. I found it hard to write and did so reluctantly because, as I noted, "... it broke the chain of feeling." I got nothing down on my pad for the next hour and a half. Visual changes continued and increased during this time. They never became very marked, but at times the Indians seemed hostile. Their faces became distorted with anger. I realized that this was probably the effect of peyote and so did not become panicky. I felt that I was an intruder whom the Indians did not trust-they had no special reason to. I did not seem close to them. Peyote works slowly and subtly. It is well suited for a gathering of this sort, where people of differing temperaments, who do not necessarily share a common language, worship together and explore reality without the cushion of words and supported mainly by ritual.

A photographer took some flash pictures at about ten or fifteen minutes before midnight, and then I started writing again. The Indians chanted, drummed, and used the gourd rattle. Only their faces were impassive. The ceremonial swept me along with it.

At midnight, water was brought in. This was the pure city water Mr. Takes Gun had promised me earlier. It was in a new, white enamel pail with a swan transfer on the outside. It was passed around, and we drank from individual paper cups. It could have been depressingly hygienic, but the intention was a generous one to put me at ease. He then said, "Pray to God and ask him to bless the water." He explained that the Indians held their services at night, while the white man sleeps, because God would have time to spare for his Indian friends. He urged his fellow Indians to bring up their children to be intelligent and progressive, adding, "We are representing our lives here." Then he left us and, walking around the outside of the teepee, blew piercing blasts on an eagle's-bone whistle at the four compass points. The sound shrilled through aeons of space and corridors of time. It echoed to eternity. When he came back to us, he prayed, "... that the Universe may prevail."

Shortly after this my fellow observers left for what must have been twenty minutes or so, but it could have been as many centuries. I stayed behind with the Indians, and I became part of the worshipers. I entered their world, where for generation upon generation they had hunted the buffalo. They had lived with and on the buffalo. They were of one piece. They were the buffalo. Their lives were part of those shaggy lumbering herd beasts whose myriads roamed the great plains. On these wide prairies, where trees and hills are almost equally scarce, sound often conveyed as much as sight. So the Indians call up their past with song, with drum, and with rattle. For them, minute alterations of rhythm and pace evoke ever-changing images. Because we cannot hear as they do, the drumming and rattling seem endlessly repetitive to us. The drumming was the steady running of a man with his dog padding beside him. It was the pawing and thudding of buffalo hooves crescendoing in thunder. It was the gentle crumpling of dung falling or the soft plop of a calf dropping on turf, soundless, yet heard by the hunter. The gourd

Peyote Night

Written by Humphry Osmond

Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

evoked the endlessly sifting wind, catching at scrub and grass as it passed. It was the hissing of an arrow as it leaves the bow or snakes by one's head in battle. It was the sizzling of buffalo meat grilling on the campfire and the creak of a hide teepee as the blizzard twists and whirls around it. The drumming was life and death, scarlet blood spurting from a stricken buffalo or from a fallen warrior. Yet it was also the first fluttering of a child inside its mother. As he sang, a young man wept, and Frank Takes Gun said, "Shed tears on mother earth that the Universal God may take pity on him."

When my friends returned, I felt that the Indians and I were one and that, for a little time, or more accurately, a different sort of time, I was of their world rather than that of my colleagues, their conquerors. It was not simply that I realized they had a point of view I could respect, but that I felt in my bones as they felt in theirs. Looking back, I do not believe that this was an illusion, for I continued to be much more aware of their way of looking at things. But how could one prove such an opinion-without fine instruments for measuring a man's system of values.

The women did not drum, sing or use the gourd rattle, but they smoked, took peyote, and played a large part in the morning ceremony. They also prepared the feast for the next day. Women only very rarely enjoy their highest status among nomadic people.

The Indians must have begun to filter down from Siberia about ten thousand years ago, and as they reached the great central plains they spread out in the wake of the buffalo. For some mysterious reason, horses, which had once lived in America, died out long before man arrived. So the newcomers hunted on foot. Unlike our forebears, who were harassed and pushed west by waves of horsemen from Central Asia, many tiny Indian societies grew up far apart from each other, isolated by vast distances. There were occasionally brief, savage, and ceremonious wars on the prairies, in which little groups of men raided the enemies. In these, courage counted more than killing. Apart from this, their whole lives, their very existence, was at the heels of those heavy monsters. Pursuing them, they had endured drought and cold, furious rainstorms and blinding blizzards. For a very short time, a few generations only, they had horses, which, escaping from the Spaniards, bred splendidly on the grasslands. Few people accept an innovation so quickly and successfully as the Indians took to the horse. They were centaurs. The drumming told of that age of glory when, to the beat of horses' hooves, they swept across the prairies like wildfire and hunted with a splendor never surpassed. Then the white settlers invaded the prairies, and the unequal struggle between hunting peoples who lived in space without time, and the season-bound rapacity of the cultivators of the soil, began. The hunting grounds were eroded. Finally the buffalo were slaughtered wantonly by the million. With that holocaust, their traditions, their way of life, their world, their universe collapsed, and the veil of their souls was rent. Braves became bums, for there was nothing manly left to do. Their women mourned for them.

I was drenched in that world of sound, of singing, drumming, and the subtly changing rhythms of drum, rattle, and voice. We are a more visual people than the Indians, and this is perhaps why they seem impassive to us. We watch, in particular, for changes in facial expression and do not notice the auditory signals with which the Indians communicate their feelings. Those long silences during which they let the unspoken flow between people simply make us tense, embarrassed, uneasy, and ready to burst into nervous chattering.

The blue-shirted young man who had been weeping said, "Frank, can I have some more medicine?" and the little sack was passed along to him. He crunched two more buttons and began to sing and use the gourd rattle while his companion drummed. His song rose above the drumming, was drowned by it, and rose again and again, faltering but struggling still. It was an

Peyote Night

Written by Humphry Osmond

Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

agony. The drumbeats were strides of fate. Life must go on, pain or no pain. There could be no concessions. The young man wept and sang for himself, for his people, for every human being who has ever quailed before the harshness of life. After singing, he was easier, and the rhythm of his drumming reflected this. There was in it a little of that cosmic beat of Tchaikowsky's great Second Movement of the Fifth Symphony, when, for a brief while, he heard and transcribed what must surely be the pulsing of the galaxies. I watched the young man, and I think I experienced some of the queasiness that peyote induced in him. Like most young men, he longed for a life that meant something—a life of action, danger, pain, defeat, torture, and death at the hands of his enemies if necessary. A life like that of his ancestors who lived on the prairies for centuries before. Anything rather than the humiliating meaninglessness of the present. But the drumming told him, "You cannot go back. You can go forward. It will be rough, but it can be done." It is sad to be a warrior from generations of warriors with nothing warlike to do—an Achilles without Troy, staying at home among his mother's spinning women.

The fire tender kept the hearth meticulously, and the moon altar, which had started as a thin crescent, filled up steadily. When a singer had sung his song, the Indians sat in silence and absorbed it. They applauded with a low guttural noise that might be a hum. They were polite, sensitive, and seemed very courteous and alert toward each other and to their guests. By now it was almost three in the morning, and most of the observers were asleep; one snored loudly and had to be prodded by his neighbor. The visual imagery I usually experience with psychedelic substances was much reduced in this setting, and the auditory imagery very much increased. I responded to every nuance of their drumming. They use a tiny range of sound with which to express themselves, and this is saturated with emotion.

The sparks spangled the upper darkness of the teepee every time the fire was stoked. The teepee was the universe. It had not increased in size nor changed its shape, but the sound had expanded it beyond thought. The young man still cannot bear his fate. All the warrior in him is assailed by it and revolts against it. But he must listen to the voice of the music, which is greater than man. He sings again, this time in high falsetto. There is a note of triumph in it, and perhaps peyote has dissolved the aching in his heart—for a little while.

The teepee smelled of wood and wood smoke, burning herbs, sweat. I noticed the tanginess of the smoke, like in a kippering room. It clung to my hair and clothes for days afterward. The Indians are creatures of sound and smell, with auditory symbolism predominating. We are creatures of sight and sound, with visual imagery predominating. Every drum tap has a meaning for them.

Through the small hours they sang of fleet horses and tireless riders, of unwearying runners and faithful dogs padding beside them. The stories are woven into the drum rhythms. They fanned themselves with a few eagle's feathers, evoking arrow, war bonnet, and battle club—endless parleys, powwows, and ceremonial meetings. They had few songs of war, and they returned always to the death of the buffalo, their banishment from the prairies, and so their unmaning and loss of their warrior status. The buffalo hoofbeats are in them as the sound of the sea is in me from generations of seafarers. The Indians may be poor and defeated, but they are not contemptible. They reveal themselves to each other with peyote in humility, but also in pride. For although they revere the Universal Spirit, they do not cringe. They are not ashamed of being men, for so they were created. They do not ascribe their misfortunes to sin, and are thus saved from much futile self-blame.

Mr. Russell's drumming was splendid. Frank sang of the long winter nights and their hopes of endless buffalo herds. He sang, too, of that brief time when they tamed horses, molding

Peyote Night

Written by Humphry Osmond

Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

long-maned and long-tailed wildings to their will. This reminded me that the Trojan hero Hector, tamer of horses, was exercising with his chariots on the windy plain of Ilium when their ancestors were hunting the buffalo on foot, over these same prairies. The service was very simple and drew the participants into it. Once I lost my fear and unsureness, the Indians accepted me with dignity, as an equal. I was impressed by their economy of gesture, the faultless taste of their religious art; like a very dry sherry, it is not for every palate. The prairies have molded them over the centuries-they are a people of the open spaces; their God is an open one of the wide earth and the limitless sky-not a shadowy, hidden god of the forests and thickets. Their Universal Spirit is mysterious in its immensity and omnipresence. Man's problem is not to find God, for it is impossible not to be aware of Him, but to relate oneself to Him in the best possible way.

By four-thirty I was becoming more aware of my hosts as individuals. We had experienced something together that cannot be contained in language. Poetry or music would come closer, but I am not a poet or a composer. The wind fretted around the teepee. The singing was like voices calling in the dark, calling for dawn to come, for winter to go, for the buffalo to return, for a child to be born.

Mr. Russell had the black drum passed to him. He sucked a little water from it, tautened the hide, and smoothed it with a caress. Frank Takes Gun explained the next part of the ceremony. "You have only seen three last night-the leader, the drummer, and the fireman. Now you will see the fourth. Thank God we have lived to see another day. We represent our lives: we don't imitate anything. The foundations of human life rest with our mothers who delivered us into this world." The Mother stepped into the teepee through the door flap, announced by the shrilling of the eagle's-bone whistle. She sat down by the white enamel waterpot. The teepee was dim, the fire was low, but some wisps of smoke rising from it seemed to surround her. She had a red blanket around her shoulders, a blue dress, smooth black hair, and her face seemed very broad. She was greeted by a song of welcome with voices, drum, and rattle. With the singing, she became superb mother earth, mother prairie, grass, cow buffalo, mare, and doe, the epitome of motherhood. The drum beating was not restful or sleep inducing. It was the fecund pulsing of sex, passion, generation, and death, sung without guilt and without self-consciousness. The mother was weary, patient, tender, but enduring. She stood behind all the men-drummer, fire tender, leader. In front of her were the waters of life and death.

Frank addressed her in the highest falsetto, a tearing, almost noiseless scream, the cry of the tiniest baby or of an old man breathing his last. It was unbearable. The mother could have been any age-maid, mother, or crone, from sixteen to a hundred sixteen.

"You have been good to us while we were here. You worked hard and made this possible. God knows we worship Him. God knows we respect the mothers of our children."

Mr. Dave Stone, the oldest man present, spoke to the mother in his high, light voice. His voice was very clear and would carry over great distances. The wind had risen, and the day was being born with a storm. The old man called upon the mother and sprinkled dried Sage on the fire, sweetening the air in her honor. She took a cigarette and lit it from the fire tender's brand. The smoke she exhales is the life she gives. Above her head, the dawn lightened the teepee flap. The fire was low. She drew on a cigarette. Its glowing tip was as evanescent as a man's life, almost aflame one moment, out the next. She prayed and smoked.

This is the mother who bears the baby, who nurses and cossets the infant, who rears the child and watches him grow into a young warrior, drummer, fire tender, or leader, who is possessed by him and who laments him when he dies. She is indomitable. Warriors die, but the mother,

Peyote Night

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Thursday, 07 January 2010 21:23 - Last Updated Monday, 20 December 2010 20:42

slave or matriarch, she is always there. Her voice was low and clear. She dominated the teepee-the mother who bears and the mother who buries her children. Her prayers were followed by rumbles of agreement. She reaffirmed the will to endure, to live on. The worshipers were deeply moved. Frank whispered to me, "That is how much they respect their mothers." But it was more than respect. It was awe. She conveyed the sorrow of a woman's lot in a destitute people. The dawn caught the pointed top of the teepee, but below where we were sitting, the fire was so low that I could hardly see to write.

Mr. Russell whispered to me, "Praying with the smoke-something good-something lasting forever." The Plains Indians were a Dionysian, an apocalyptic people, frugal but generous; no middle way existed for them-conquerors or conquered, no in-between, no compromise. The smoke breath was caught up with the warm air over the fire and twisted up into dawnlight. It struck me that with another turn of the wheel of history we Caucasians who, by means of gunpowder and printing, have gained so much authority in the world, might find ourselves subject to peoples who possess skills we do not have. No one who had been with the Indians as I had been could feel superior to them. The blue-shirted warrior is almost reconciled to living an unheroic, undionysiac life. It is against his whole being. But the drumming, the singing, and peyote have worked their magic. The buffalo are no more; the dawn is coming; there is a life to face now.

The observed were awake and alert, the observers mostly sleeping. At six, dawn came to us as the teepee flap was opened. We had wrestled with the angel. We had grappled with the Heavenly Father.

Water was poured into the hygienic cups again, and a little more was put into the drum. I was asked to say a few words, the stranger whom they had made welcome and allowed to enter into their mystery. I thanked them for their kindness to me and told them that I would do my best to tell people about their worship clearly and honestly. I also said that it would be no easy matter to convey to those who had not shared our experience and who do not have the Indian sense of oneness with life.

A child had come into the world again. Dawn lit the stockade, and the wind was chilly. Life had begun again and must be faced. The voice of the singers rose clear and high-a child's cry of delight at buffalo hooves thundering far away. The fire flared a little as if trying to hold back the morning, but it failed. The center of the tent floor was covered by a great, grayish-white half-moon of charred wood ashes. The mother left us. The barrier of everyday life began to return.

Aftermath

The sun was just coming up when we left them at about half past six. We felt that our Indian hosts would be easier if they could have their morning feast without us. There were handshakes and promises that we would do our best to tell our people about their religion. As I left the tent, I took a last look at the whitish-gray expanse of the moon altar: the three young men, including blue-shirt, were singing and drumming together by the door flap. They were very blithe. Outside,

Peyote Night

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Mr. Nicotine and Mr. Stone stood by the mother and waved to us as we left. The teepee seemed too small and frail to have contained so much, but the drumbeats surged out of it as evidence of the extraordinary power concentrated there. I slept a little and thought much when I returned to the hotel. I felt relaxed and happy. I felt that I had seen the Indians, and what I had seen had cheered me. I wrote at this time, only a few hours after the ceremony, "We cannot ape them, but we can learn from them and perhaps gradually adapt their religion to our needs, as they have adapted ours-feel tired, at peace, an enlarging of the spirit." A little later, on my way back from North Battleford, I noted, "Peyote simply reveals what is the potential in all of us. The Indians, whose gifts have for so long been run down by the whites, have found that in spite of being poor Indians, the spirit of God is still with them. This is an immense advance. It is a new hope, a new humility, a new pride."

A day later I wrote, "Indian singing is incomprehensible to most white men simply because they have never learnt the fine discrimination of the Indian in matters of sound. Clearly a people who have lived in an almost soundless country (and the prairies are almost soundless to the city ear even now) would learn to pick up a different range of sounds and would use these sounds in their music. Grasses, grasshoppers, dust sifting, the wavelets on little rivers splashing, the shushing of wind among low bushes, and wind sounds infinitely varied with the seasons. Then, in great contrast, the very loud sounds-the sounds inside one, the heart thudding, etc., particularly loud when one is surrounded by great stillness; hooves stamping or clopping regularly; the drubbing stampede of the buffalo-again infinitely varied by terrain and weather, and the crash of thunder reverberating over the endless prairies. Birds few in number compared with the space, and therefore all the more memorable. Color on the prairies in great general masses with very small changes. The Indians would be used to the very large and the very small. Also the effect of six months or so of snow."

Then there was the matter of the resemblance between liquor and peyote that has been raised so often in the press. I made a special note about this: "Alcohol and peyote (psychedelics generally) are antithetical. Alcohol produces a downward transcendence, peyote an upward one-the difference between leveling up and leveling down. Alcohol allows one to relate to others by being more sure of one's self. This, in small doses, is much better than not being able to relate at all, but it is a very precarious business, and selfishness may soon end in brawling and ill temper. Peyote acts not by emphasizing one's own self but by expanding it into the selves of others, with a deepening empathy or in-feeling. The self is dissolved and, in being dissolved, enriched. It becomes aware of the nobility of other selves and so of itself."

I tried repeatedly in the next few months to organize my experience, but it would not be organized. I carried my notes around with me and made many drafts of papers that were never completed, because they did not seem to carry out my obligation to Frank Takes Gun and my fellow worshipers of that little band. It was not until three years later, when I was quite unexpectedly asked to give a short broadcast about the peyote ceremony, that I began to see how I might be able to convey something of that night in the teepee to people who had not been there and who had never taken peyote or other psychedelics.

How does it look three years later? Has the wonder and beauty of those astonishing ten and a half hours receded so that they now seem unreal? Did my difficulty in writing about the experience of that strange night arise from a growing feeling that my notes were muddled and that I was as muddled as they? I do not think so.

That night in the teepee has resulted in many studies by my colleagues and me. We have observed the effects of psychedelic substances on groups of people taking them together-for

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various reasons, we did not use peyote. The Indians have been very skillful in structuring their ceremony so that it best meets their needs. They are such masters of symbol, ceremony, and ritual, that this is hardly surprising. It would be unwise and impertinent to ape their religion, which developed from their agony when they lost their hunting grounds at the end of the nineteenth century. Our needs are very different from theirs. So we must follow a different route.

We have suggestive evidence that psychedelics, properly used, can increase communication and understanding between those who take them together, and this is not simply a drug-induced delusion. It seems to persist long after the effects of the chemical have disappeared. This has not yet been proved. Proof in such a matter is not easy, and so for the moment we have to rely on personal opinion. We have to find some way of showing these effects so that they can be easily understood. But we have to recognize that we are dealing with aspects of the human mind that are even more elusive and mysterious than the depths of space and time.

Due to the interest and generosity of Mrs. Eileen Garrett, President of the Parapsychology Foundation, several of us have taken part in two international conferences about psychedelics. One was held in New York in November 1958 and the other in Le Piol, France, in July 1959. Both these conferences were attended by scientists of international repute. At both of them there was general agreement that these experiences induced by psychedelics, which fall into the category of what William James called "unhabitual perception," call for sustained inquiry and research. It was encouraging that the impetus for these meetings, which drew contributors from many countries, arose in a frail teepee raised by members of the Native American Church, mostly from the Red Pheasant Band, above the South Saskatchewan River three years ago.

In one respect, however, we have failed, at least so far. We have not been able to help members of the Native American Church of Canada to obtain peyote, which is the sacrament of their faith. Its importation is banned by the federal government department concerned with these matters, by means of a legal technicality. So far as we know, this has never been disputed in a court of law or debated in Parliament. The attitude of government, "We are doing this for your own good; we can't explain why because you wouldn't understand," is infuriating, unwise, and unnecessary. Among its other objectives, we hope that this article will lead others to question seriously such well-meaning but arbitrary attempts to do good. The Native American Church and the religion its members practice, far from demoralizing them, is likely to help them in their struggle to adapt to a very unfamiliar world.

Surely we can be fair-minded enough to pay respectful attention to this bold attempt by the Indians to develop a new way of coming closer to the source of all things. They do not want to convert us to their ways. They do not claim that the peyote road is the only way of reaching out toward their Great Spirit and Heavenly Father. In Frank Takes Gun's words, "We just want to be let alone to worship our God as we wish." Must we obstruct and attempt to crush a new religion, which is beautiful and has never been shown to do any harm, simply because it is unfamiliar and because we can't imagine that it would work? Can we not let them tread their peyote road and see what happens-provided they conduct their services decorously and account properly for the peyote used? They would, I believe, welcome observers from time to time. Those observers could see and experience for themselves the form of worship that the aboriginal inhabitants of these lands developed when their world was tottering. The loss of the hunting grounds and the slaughter of the buffalo was for them an even greater catastrophe than that appalling event one early morning at Hiroshima in August 1945.

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I shall not forget my Indian hosts, who took me back to a life through which all mankind has passed. A harsh, fierce, dangerous, passionate life where hunter and hunted are one. A life rich in beauty and meaning. Little more than eighty years ago, this was their life and had been so beyond the memory of man. In a few short, terrible years it was torn from them, and they are still bewildered at the world in which we are clumsily trying to find a place for them. But then perhaps we share some of that bewilderment, for our new world is unimaginably strange. Should we not join them in their prayer that "... the Universe may prevail"