

The Spirit of the Sacred Hoop

A Story by Stefan Pasti

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Many years ago there was a sun that warmed up a sphere made of rocks, and created some water where only rocks had been before. As the warmth of the sun continued, some of this water evaporated and became air. The sphere of rocks then seemed to soften, and continued to change, as climate patterns developed, and daily and seasonal variations in the weather occurred. By this process what was once just a sphere made of rocks became an earth—with a sky full of air, a wonderful assortment of land forms, and water cycling through its process of evaporating into the air, falling on the land, and collecting together again to flow towards the sea. Then the sun and the earth discovered that they were in love.

A long courtship followed, and the love between the sun and the earth grew in ways that can only be described, but never understood. Water continued to evaporate into the air, and then fall on the land—and streams and rivers were created which flowed through the thick dark forests in the mountains, and the bright golden prairies in the plains, to again become a part of the sea. Ever so gradually, over a mystical span of timelessness, the love between the sun and the earth evolved into the realm of what is profound and eternal. From that time on, it seemed as if love was efflorescing from the very source and origin of the Universal Spirit of Love—and the spontaneous creation, growth, and flowering of spiritual beings became an ever-present and ongoing part of the earth's spiritual destiny. Many of these spiritual beings remained a part of the earth for some time, and thus became known by specific names and forms. Some of the spiritual beings became known as people.

Where I was, the people saw that the earth was filled with all the necessary requirements for a peaceful and happy way of life; so they formed a tribe, and built a village, and became a part of the earth. There the people discovered that if they lived in accordance with the spiritual gifts they had been given, the earth nurtured, supported, and sustained their peaceful and happy way of life. As thanks for this great understanding, the people held ceremonies of recognition, during which they identified the immediate sources of their support and sustenance, and expressed their gratitude for the gifts they had received.

All this I learned from being a bird. As a bird, I used to sit on the branches of a tree in the village and sing.

Many years have passed since then, and as they did I experienced many changes in the nature of my form. One of the different forms I eventually became was a root of a tree. A few years later I moved up the trunk of the tree and through some of its branches, to become a piece of fruit, and I was eaten by one of the people. When I was eaten, the family I entered into held a ceremony of recognition for the fruit tree I had come from, and that is how I became a part of the tribe.

Once I became a part of the tribe, I experienced something I had not experienced as a bird or as a piece of fruit. I experienced a community in crisis. The climate was becoming colder, and this made the growing season shorter. Trees, bushes, grasses, and plants were providing less food, and animals both large and small seemed to be vanishing from the landscape. The people became concerned, and for some time tried to find a remedy for anything and everything which even *seemed to be* out of accord with their spiritual tradition. But each year, the seasonal weather patterns seemed colder than the year before. Then the people became afraid. They were afraid that their peaceful and happy way of life was coming to an end.

During this time of fear, I was part of the heart of a young woman in love. She was very much in love with a young man in the tribe, and he was very much in love with her. All the tribe saw this, and knew that their marriage would give the young couple and the rest of the tribe much happiness. But the marriage was not allowed. No marriages were allowed until the time of fear had passed. All the strength of the tribe was to be devoted to meeting and overcoming the time of fear.

The changes in the weather became very severe however, and there seemed little hope that the people of the tribe would outlast this challenge to their existence. But whereas the challenge of the time of fear seemed to wear down the faith of most of the people in the tribe, the young woman I was a part of felt more faith than before, and she became more and more determined to help the tribe overcome the challenge of the times. But how could she help?

She did not know, but one day she became so overwhelmed with the misfortune of her tribe that she could not stay in the village any longer. She needed to be by herself. She chose to walk up into the nearby mountains, and climb to the top of the highest mountain.

At the top of the highest mountain there was a flat rock. When she stepped up onto that flat rock, she felt a tingling sensation in the back of her mind. Then something happened which was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

When she came down from the mountains, she went directly to the tribal leaders. She told them that she had been to the top of the highest mountain, and there she had had a dream while she was wide awake. In her dream she saw an earth—as if it was something she could see only in her mind... an earth which was as beautiful as their earth had ever been.... And then a bird landed on a rock quite near to where she was standing, and spoke to her. The bird said this:

You must all leave where you are, and travel to a place far away. There you will find an earth which is filled with all the necessary requirements for a peaceful and happy way of life; and, if you live in accordance with the spiritual gifts you will be given there, the earth will nurture, support, and sustain your peaceful and happy way of life. This is the spirit of the sacred hoop, and you have seen it work. It is working even now as you are listening to me speak.

The journey to this far away place will be difficult. Many times you will think that you will never find it. But listen to what I say. You must look for the tree at the center of the sacred hoop. You will know when you have found this tree when you hear birds singing on the branches of a tree, and you understand their song. There will be the end of your search, and another beginning of the peaceful and happy way of life.

But you must not forget about the singing birds. As long as they remain, and you understand their song, you are at the center of the sacred hoop. But if they leave, the sacred hoop has been damaged, and the center lost. Misfortune will follow.

Go now, and tell your tribal leaders all I have said.

Then the bird disappeared. That was the end of the dream.

The tribal leaders immediately recognized that the bird's message was of great importance to the tribe. The people of the tribe were in a time of fear, trying to overcome not only challenges which were wearing down their faith, but challenges which were threatening their very existence. And the bird's message seemed to offer some hope where there had been none before. So the tribal leaders quickly agreed that they should share this message with the rest of the people in the tribe.

But while there was hope in the bird's message, there was also something else... something that worried the tribal leaders, and something that made them unsure about how the tribe would react when they heard the message. Because of this uncertainty, the tribal leaders allowed some time to carefully consider *how* they would share the bird's message with the rest of the tribe.

Two days went by before the tribal leaders were finished with their decision-making process. On the third day, the tribal leaders called everyone in the tribe together for a great meeting. Then-- by sending messengers to designated sections of the gathering-- a brief description of the young woman's experience, and a precise recitation of the bird's message, were given to the rest of the tribe, so that all learned of the bird's message at about the same time. And then the tribal leaders waited....

The people of this tribe had become accustomed to receiving spiritual gifts in strange ways; but even so, they were amazed by the unusual clarity of the dream. Then, suddenly, there was a rush of silence... as the people began to experience an unexpected and extraordinary sequence of collective realizations. First, they realized that in all the ceremonies of recognition they had held (during which they expressed their gratitude for the gifts they had received), they had never held a ceremony for the birds that sang on the branches of a tree in the center of the village. Then, they looked around the village, and they were shocked—as if by a harsh truth which they could no longer avoid believing—for they realized that all the singing birds were gone... and that they had left without even being missed. The tree in which they used to sing had lost its leaves, and seemed to be slowly dying. At this moment, it was as if a tidal wave of grief was poised and ready to sweep over the whole tribe. But the tidal wave of grief never came. In almost the same moment, and as if by a flash of light, the people were filled with hope and love; because they realized that the bird's message—conveyed to them through the young woman's dream—was clearly a good sign.... All at once, and irreversibly, the people perceived the bird's message as yet another gift to the tribe—yet another way that the earth was providing support and sustenance... and thus yet another affirmation of the great understanding, which the tribe had treasured as sacred wisdom ever since they had received it. Having such a dramatic affirmation of their

sacred wisdom at this critical moment in their history touched the people deeply—it was as if a light had suddenly and completely replaced the darkness of struggle and despair; and the people realized that they were being rescued from the challenge of the time of fear. And yet that was not all: it was also clear that the singing birds wanted the people to find them again. Since this sequence of collective realizations had such a hopeful conclusion, the shock and grief the people had experienced, only moments before (at the beginning of the sequence), were soon entirely forgotten. Everyone felt certain that when they found the singing birds again, they would understand their song. In this way the people became willing to leave the earth that was their home.

Of course, as soon as it was decided that the whole tribe was to begin a great journey, the question arose: in which direction do we all go? When the young woman who had the dream was asked she said she did not know, and this was felt by all as an unexpected and immediate setback. Almost in desperation, the people carefully re-examined the bird's message; but, one by one, they reluctantly had to admit that the message they had marveled at earlier—for its unusual clarity—provided no indication of which direction the tribe should go in to begin their search. The question was a difficult one; and, the more they thought about it, the less confident they felt about resolving it... until the people's feeling of being rescued from the darkness of struggle and despair seemed to completely disappear—like a leaf blown away by a gust of wind....

At this point—although the people's circumstances were improved by their belief that the singing birds wanted the people to find them again—the thought of surviving another long cold season, the anticipation of more struggle and despair, and the frustration of being burdened with yet another difficulty seemed to fall heavily on their wavering spirits, all at the same time... and the result was further difficulties. Many people became adversely affected by the pressures and challenges of the times... their judgment, and their customary capacity for kindness and courtesy became impaired.... And suddenly, it seemed as if each person in the tribe had a different set of ideas and suggestions for which direction the tribe should go in to begin their search... and—I am sorry to have to say—there were many

discussions and disagreements which were not in accordance with the wisdom of the tribe's spiritual tradition, and which did not in any way affirm the tribe's great understanding. In fact, it seemed like the great journey was becoming a great disaster even before the journey had begun.

The spiritual destiny of this particular tribe was, however, not to be fulfilled by a great disaster. The issue was settled by the young man who was so much in love with the young woman who had the dream. One day, while he was on a quiet walk beside a nearby river, he saw a bird like those which had once sang from the branches of—what was now, to everyone in the tribe—"the sacred tree". The bird was flying south. Seeing this, the young man experienced a flash of insight, and realized that all the tribe had to do was keep sighting the birds, and follow the birds wherever they went. When he shared his experience with the tribal leaders, they called everyone in the tribe together for a great meeting, and the great problem was settled to everyone's satisfaction—and relief. Only then did the people begin to pack their belongings. Bird sighters were sent in the general direction indicated by the last bird sighting, and instructed to look for the birds by deliberately traveling on different paths or routes, so as to increase the tribes' chances of bird sightings. In this way the great journey began.

During the time of the great journey the tribe suffered the trials of "a way of life in transition", as they did not stay in any one place long enough to call that place home. Rarely did the earth provide the necessary requirements for all the people in the tribe to experience the peaceful and happy way of life. But the time of fear had passed, and marriages were allowed, and many young couples in the tribe were married—including the young woman who had the dream and the young man who helped settle the "great problem"... and there was much joy in the beginnings of many new families. So when the bird sighters did not sight any birds for months in a row, the people did not despair. They were a tribe that had—collectively, as a whole—experienced an extraordinary affirmation of their spiritual tradition. They believed the singing birds wanted their tribe to find them again... and they felt it was their spiritual destiny to live once again at the center of the sacred hoop. So they

just kept on looking for the tree at the center of the sacred hoop by persevering in their search for the birds, and continuing to listen carefully for sounds of birds singing. In this way the people of the tribe I was a part of were able to continue the great journey and never lose hope.

As for myself—whereas before, in the earth that was once home, I had changed into many different forms—now I just changed from being a part of one person to being a part of another person. From the young woman I went to her son, and from him I went to his daughter. In this way I remained a part of the tribe. And so it was that I experienced the same joy that all the others did when we at last discovered the singing birds again.

It was on the edge of a meadow, in a small grove of fruit trees, that the singing birds were finally found. They were found by one of the bird sighters. The bird sighter was so accustomed to seeing a single bird but hearing no singing that the sound of the singing birds overwhelmed him with happiness, and he cried tears of joy. While crying and listening to the birds sing the bird sighter became aware that he knew what the song of the singing birds was, and he instinctively slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand and sat down, gazing around in amazement. Then he cried again, this time for thinking of the joy the rest of the tribe was soon to feel.

Later that day, the bird sighter returned to the tribe, but on his arrival he did not speak about what he had seen and heard. Nor did he reveal in any way what he felt in his heart about what he had experienced. This was because in the bird's message to the tribe, the bird had said, "You must look for the tree at the center of the sacred hoop. You will know when you have found this tree when you hear birds singing on the branches of a tree, and you understand their song." The tribal leaders had often thought of this part of the birds' message, during the many years of the great journey. They had proposed—and the rest of the tribe had agreed—that when a bird sighter heard singing birds, the bird sighter was not to tell the whole tribe, as the general excitement might compel the tribe to believe they understood the song of the singing birds when they really did not. Instead, as a precautionary measure, the bird sighter would tell only the tribal leaders—and they would go

to the tree, and listen and see if they could understand the song. If they could understand the song, they would tell the rest of the tribe. If they could not, they would tell no one, and would conclude that the tree the birds were singing in was not the tree at the center of the sacred hoop.

And so it was only the tribal leaders who followed the bird sighter to the tree where he had heard the singing birds. The bird sighter felt that he understood the birds' song, and was sure that the tribal leaders would too—but he remained silent, so as not to disturb the moment of discovery for the tribal leaders. The tribal leaders were silent too. All they could think of was ceremony... what kind of ceremony of recognition would be appropriate for the spiritual gift they were about to receive here? They approached the tree slowly as if they did not want to get near it. Then they heard the birds singing on the branches of the tree. What did it mean? How should they know what birds mean by singing? All they could be sure of was what they saw and heard—which was birds singing on the branches of a tree. Who could ever know what they were singing about? The tribal leaders were confused. The bird sighter was dazed—how could they not feel what he had felt, in such a moment as this? He tried to explain, but the tribal leaders did not understand what he was talking about. The bird sighter was horrified. According to duty, he must remain silent if the leaders did not become certain of the songs meaning. Maybe he was wrong... maybe this was not the tree at the center of the sacred hoop....

Suddenly, a little girl from the tribe appeared on the other side of the meadow, and ran towards the bird sighter and the tribal leaders. Why? She had been picking berries [singing a little song (she had just made up) to herself as she went along: "... and if events should bring *us*/ together again/ our love will again/ grow out *of* the in it was in...."] and had, in a moment of looking up from the berry bushes, recognized her father in the distance. It was a very fine sunny day and she was glad in her heart. As she got nearer the tree, she heard the birds singing—*for the first time in her life*—and she stopped moving, held her breath in wonder, and then exclaimed "Oh! Love Spirits... singing! Father, where are they? Can I *see* them?" The girls' father rushed to her, picked her up, and hugged her, and cried tears of happiness. The other tribal leaders cried too. They all knew.

Many years passed. The beautiful earth that was now home was filled with all the necessary requirements for a peaceful and happy way of life. The people of the tribe lived in accordance with the spiritual gifts they were given; and the earth nurtured, supported, and sustained their peaceful and happy way of life. As thanks for this great understanding, the people continued to hold ceremonies of recognition, during which they identified the immediate sources of their support and sustenance, and expressed their gratitude for the gifts they had received. In this way, people of all ages were continually being a part of the very current that sustained the community of spiritual beings at the center of the sacred hoop.

Over time, the people developed deep feelings of love and affection for what they perceived to be the source and origin of all the spiritual gifts that nurtured, supported, and sustained their peaceful and happy way of life. In accordance with their need to fully experience these deep feelings of love and affection together, as a community, the people created special ceremonies, at intervals throughout the year. One of the special ceremonies which became established as a tradition by these people was at the end of the harvest season. At that time of year, the people re-lived the most memorable spiritual gifts in the history of their tribe—through a variety of ceremonial events—and thereby renewed their desire to be as much a part of the creation, growth, and flowering of spiritual gifts as possible, while they were still a part of the earth.

In this way the people lived, and every morning when the sun rose, it shined on an earth filled with spiritual gifts.