Why I Am a Pagan

Zitkala-Ša (1902)

Zitkala-Ša, also known as Gertrude Simmons, was an early 20th-century indigenous activist. Born to a Yankton Sioux mother and a white father, Zitkala-Ša spent her early childhood being raised by her mother on a reservation in South Dakota. She was educated at a missionary boarding school in Indiana, run by Quakers; she herself taught for a time at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School in Pennsylvania. Zitkala-Ša first won national attention for autobiographical essays, short stories, and editorials she published in northeastern magazines and newspapers. In these early writings, she criticized efforts by US officials and educators to suppress indigenous peoples' cultures in the name of assimilation. The essay presented here, published in the Atlantic Monthly*, she wrote after leaving Carlisle and returning to the Yankton reservation where she had lived as a child. Zitkala-Ša went on, in the 1920s, to found the National Council of American Indians, an organization that lobbied for indigenous rights.*

When the spirit swells my breast, I love to roam leisurely among the green hills; or sometimes, sitting on the brink of the murmuring Missouri, I marvel at the great blue overhead. With half-closed eyes, I watch the huge cloud shadows in their noiseless play upon the high bluffs opposite me, while into my ear ripple the sweet, soft cadences of the river's song. Folded hands lie in my lap, for the time forgot. My heart and I lie small upon the earth like a grain of throbbing sand. Drifting clouds and tinkling waters, together with the warmth of a genial summer day, bespeak with eloquence the loving Mystery round about us. [...]

At length retracing the uncertain footpath scaling the precipitous embankment, I seek the level lands where grow the wild prairie flowers. And they, the lovely little folk, soothe my soul with their perfumed breath. Their quaint round faces of varied hue convince the heart, which leaps with glad surprise, that they, too, are living symbols of omnipotent thought. With a child's eager eye, I drink in the myriad star shapes wrought in luxuriant color upon the green. Beautiful is the spiritual essence they embody. I leave them nodding in the breeze but take along with me their impress upon my heart.

I pause to rest me upon a rock embedded on the side of a foothill facing the low river bottom. Here the Stone Boy, of whom the American aborigine tells, frolics about, shooting his baby arrows and shouting aloud with glee at the tiny shafts of lightning that flash from the flying arrow-beaks. What an ideal warrior he became, baffling the siege of the pests of all the land till he triumphed over their united attack. And here he lay—Inyan, our great-great-grandfather, older than the hill he rested on, older than the race of men who love to tell of his wonderful career. Interwoven with the thread of this Indian legend of the rock, I fain would trace a subtle knowledge of the native folk which enabled them to recognize a kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe.

By the leading of an ancient trail, I move toward the Indian village. With the strong, happy sense that both great and small are so surely enfolded in His magnitude that, without a miss, each has his allotted individual ground of opportunities, I am buoyant with good nature. Yellow Breast, swaying upon the slender stem of a wild sunflower, warbles a sweet assurance of this as I pass

nearby. Breaking off the clear crystal song, he turns his wee head from side to side, eyeing me wisely as slowly I plod with moccasined feet. Then again he yields himself to his song of joy. Flit, flit, hither and yon, he fills the summer sky with his swift, sweet melody. And truly does it seem his vigorous freedom lies more in his little spirit than in his wing.

With these thoughts, I reach the log cabin whither I am strongly drawn by the tie of a child to an aged mother. Out bounds my four-footed friend to meet me, frisking about my path with unmistakable delight. Chän is a black shaggy dog, “a thoroughbred little mongrel,” of whom I am very fond. Chän seems to understand many words in Sioux and will go to her mat even when I whisper the word, though generally I think she is guided by the tone of the voice. [...] In both my hands, I hold her shaggy head and gaze into her large brown eyes. At once the dilated pupils contract into tiny black dots, as if the roguish spirit within would evade my questioning.

Finally resuming the chair at my desk, I feel in keen sympathy with my fellow creatures, for I seem to see clearly again that all are akin. The racial lines, which once were bitterly real, now serve nothing more than marking out a living mosaic of human beings. And even here, men of the same color are like the ivory keys of one instrument, where each resembles all the rest yet varies from them in pitch and quality of voice. And those creatures who are, for a time, mere echoes of another’s note are not unlike the fable of the thin sick man whose distorted shadow, dressed like a real creature, came to the old master to make him follow as a shadow.

Thus, with a compassion for all echoes in human guise, I greet the solemn-faced “native preacher” whom I find awaiting me. I listen with respect for God’s creature, though he mouth most strangely the jangling phrases of a bigoted creed.

As our tribe is one large family, where every person is related to all the others, he addressed me: “Cousin, I came from the morning church service to talk with you.”

“Yes?” I said interrogatively, as he paused for some word from me.

Shifting uneasily about in the straight-backed chair he sat upon, he began: “Every holy day (Sunday), I look about our little God’s house, and, not seeing you there, I am disappointed. This is why I come today. Cousin, as I watch you from afar, I see no unbecoming behavior and hear only good reports of you, which all the more burns me with the wish that you were a church member.

“Cousin, I was taught long years ago, by kind missionaries, to read the holy book. These godly men taught me also the folly of our old beliefs. There is one God, who gives reward or punishment to the race of dead men. In the upper region, the Christian dead are gathered in unceasing song and prayer. In the deep pit below, the sinful ones dance in torturing flames. Think upon these things, my cousin, and choose now to avoid the after-doom of hellfire!”

Then followed a long silence, in which he clasped tighter and unclasped again his interlocked fingers.

Like instantaneous lightning flashes came pictures of my own mother’s making, for she, too, is now a follower of the new superstition:

"Knocking out the chinking of our log cabin, some evil hand thrust in a burning taper of braided dry grass but failed of his intent, for the fire died out, and the half-burned brand fell inward to the floor. Directly above it, on a shelf, lay the holy book. This is what we found after our return from a several days' visit. Surely some great power is hid in the sacred book!"

Brushing away from my eyes many like pictures, I offered midday meal to the converted Indian sitting wordless and with downcast face. No sooner had he risen from the table with "Cousin, I have relished it," than the church bell rang. Thither he hurried forth with his afternoon sermon. I watched him as he hastened along, his eyes bent fast upon the dusty road till he disappeared at the end of a quarter of a mile.

The little incident recalled to mind the copy of a missionary paper brought to my notice a few days ago, in which a "Christian" pugilist commented upon a recent article of mine, grossly perverting the spirit of my pen.[a] Still, I would not forget that the pale-faced missionary and the hoodooed aborigine are both God's creatures, though small indeed their own conceptions of Infinite Love. A wee child toddling in a wonder world, I prefer to their dogma my excursions into the natural gardens where the voice of the Great Spirit is heard in the twittering of birds, the rippling of mighty waters, and the sweet breathing of flowers. If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a Pagan.

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[a] *According to biographer Tadeusz Lewandowski, Zitkala-Ša is alluding here to a mission newspaper's hostile review of a short story she had published, about a Sioux convert to Christianity who comes to a tragic end.*

Tadeusz Lewandowski, Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša *(Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 51-52, 63. The hostile review was "The Soft Hearted Sioux,"* The Word Carrier*, February-March 1901, 1; available online from the Minnesota Digital Newspaper Hub, https://newspapers.mnhs.org.*

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