



## *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*

Charles A. Eastman

*(Events described: 1873)*

*The Native American author who became known as Charles Eastman grew up with the name Ohiyesa. He was born in what is now Minnesota, to a biracial but culturally Dakota mother who had the English name Mary Nancy Eastman and a Dakota father named Ite Wakanhdi Ota. Mary Nancy died shortly after Ohiyesa was born, so he was raised by his paternal grandmother, whose name is not recorded. Wakanhdi Ota fought in the US–Dakota War (a.k.a. the Sioux Outbreak) of 1862 and was taken prisoner by the US military; while imprisoned, he converted to Christianity in response to a Presbyterian ministry and took the name Jacob Eastman. Meanwhile, young Ohiyesa was carried by his grandmother and other Dakota relatives farther west and north, ending up in southern Manitoba. In 1873, Jacob reunited with his son, as described in this selection from an autobiography that Charles Eastman published in 1916.*

*Under his father’s influence, the teenaged Ohiyesa also became Protestant and took the English name Charles. Charles went on to attend Dartmouth College, followed by medical school. His career included periods working for the US government as a physician on reservations and helping the YMCA develop indigenous ministries. Additionally, on a freelance basis, he wrote and lectured on indigenous culture. He helped create the Society of American Indians, the first organization lobbying for Native American rights that was run by Native Americans. Although Charles Eastman exemplified and advocated an assimilationist trajectory for indigenous people, he also emphasized what he saw as commonalities between Christianity and the values of his indigenous upbringing.*

*[“Trained to be a warrior and a hunter”]*

From childhood, I was [...] trained to be a warrior and a hunter, and not to care for money or possessions, but to be, in the broadest sense, a public servant. After arriving at a reverent sense of the pervading presence of the Spirit and Giver of Life and a deep consciousness of the brotherhood of man, the first thing for me to accomplish was to adapt myself perfectly to natural things—in other words, to harmonize myself with nature. To this end, I was made to build a body both symmetrical and enduring—a house for the soul to live in—a sturdy house, defying the elements. I must have faith and patience; I must learn self-control and be able to maintain silence. I must do with as little as possible and start with nothing most of the time, because a true Indian always shares whatever he may possess.

I felt no hatred for our tribal foes. I looked upon them more as the college athlete regards his rivals from another college. There was no thought of destroying a nation, taking away their country, or reducing the people to servitude, for my race rather honored and bestowed gifts upon their enemies at the next peaceful meeting, until they had adopted the usages of the white man’s warfare for spoliation and conquest. There was one unfortunate thing about my early training, however; that is, I was taught never to spare a citizen of the United States, although we were on friendly terms with the Canadian white men. The explanation is simple. My people had been turned out of some of the finest country in the world, now forming the great states of Minnesota and Iowa. The Americans pretended to buy the land at ten cents an acre but never paid the price; the debt stands unpaid to this day. Because they did not pay, the Sioux protested; finally came

the outbreak of 1862 in Minnesota, when many settlers were killed, and forthwith our people, such as were left alive, were driven by the troops into exile.

My father, who was among the fugitives in Canada, had been betrayed by a half-breed across the United States line, near what is now the city of Winnipeg. Some of the party were hanged at Fort Snelling, near St. Paul. We supposed—and, in fact, we were informed—that all were hanged. This was why my uncle, in whose family I lived, had taught me never to spare a white man from the United States. [...]

*[“The way of the white man”]*

I had attained the age of fifteen years and was about to enter into and realize a man’s life, as we Indians understood it, when the change came. One fine September morning, as I returned from the daily hunt, there seemed to be an unusual stir and excitement as I approached our camp. My faithful grandmother was on the watch and met me to break the news. “Your father has come—he whom we thought dead at the hands of the white men,” she said. [...]

It was, perhaps, because he was my honored father that I lent my bewildered ear to his eloquent exposition of the so-called civilized life, or the way of the white man. I could not doubt my own father, so mysteriously come back to us, as it were, from the spirit land; yet there was a voice within saying to me, “A false life! a treacherous life!” [...]

My father had been converted by Protestant missionaries, and he gave me a totally new vision of the white man, as a religious man and a kindly. [...] “Our own life, I will admit, is the best in a world of our own, such as we have enjoyed for ages,” said my father. “But here is a race which has learned to weigh and measure everything—time, and labor, and the results of labor—and has learned to accumulate and preserve both wealth and the records of experience for future generations. You yourselves know and use some of the wonderful inventions of the white man, such as guns and gunpowder, knives and hatchets, garments of every description, and there are thousands of other things both beautiful and useful.

“Above all, they have their Great Teacher, whom they call Jesus, and he taught them to pass on their wisdom and knowledge to all other races. It is true that they have subdued and taught many peoples, and our own must eventually bow to this law; the sooner we accept their mode of life and follow their teaching, the better it will be for us all. I have thought much on this matter, and such is my conclusion.”

There was a mingling of admiration and indignation in my mind as I listened. My father’s two brothers were still far from being convinced; but filial duty and affection overweighed all my prejudices. I was bound to go back with him as he desired me to do, and my grandmother and her only daughter accompanied us [...]

One of the first things I observed was my father’s reading aloud from a book every morning and evening, followed by a very strange song and a prayer. Although all he said was in Indian, I did not understand it fully. He apparently talked aloud to the “Great Mystery,” asking for our safe guidance back to his home in the States. [...]

[*“Severed from his tribe”*]

It was a peaceful Indian summer day when we reached Flandreau, in Dakota Territory, the citizen Indian settlement [...] It was less than a month since I had been a rover and a hunter in the Manitoba wilderness, with no thoughts save those which concern the most free and natural life of an Indian. Now I found myself standing near a rude log cabin on the edge of a narrow strip of timber, overlooking the fertile basin of the Big Sioux River. [...]

My father’s farm of 160 acres, which he had taken up and improved under the United States homestead laws, lay along the north bank of the river. The nearest neighbor lived a mile away, and all had flourishing fields of wheat, Indian corn, and potatoes. Some two miles distant [...] rose the mission church and schoolhouse, the only frame building within forty miles.

[...My father] had been accustomed to the buffalo-skin teepee all his life, until he opposed the white man and was defeated and made a prisoner of war at Davenport, Iowa. It was because of his meditations during those four years in a military prison that he had severed himself from his tribe and taken up a homestead. He declared that he would never join in another Indian outbreak but would work with his hands for the rest of his life. [...]

To be sure, his beginnings in civilization had not been attended with all the success that he had hoped for. One year the crops had been devoured by grasshoppers, and another year ruined by drought. But he was still satisfied that there was no alternative for the Indian. He was now anxious to have his boys learn the English language and something about books, for he could see that these were the “bow and arrows” of the white man.

“O-hee-ye-sa!” called my father, and I obeyed the call. “It is time for you to go to school, my son,” he said with his usual air of decision. We had spoken of the matter more than once, yet it seemed hard when it came to the actual undertaking.

[...M]y old grandmother, who had taken especial pride in me as a promising young hunter [...], said then, “I never fully believed in these new manners! The Great Mystery cannot make a mistake. I say it is against our religion to change the customs that have been practiced by our people ages back—so far back that no one can remember it. Many of the schoolchildren have died, you have told me. It is not strange. You have offended Him, because you have made these children change the ways He has given us. I must know more about this matter before I give my consent.” Grandmother had opened her mind in unmistakable terms, and the whole family was listening to her in silence.

Then my hardheaded father broke the pause. “Here is one Sioux who will sacrifice everything to win the wisdom of the white man! We have now entered upon this life, and there is no going back. Besides, one would be like a hobbled pony without learning to live like those among whom we must live.”

During father’s speech, my eyes had been fixed upon the burning logs that stood on end in the huge mud chimney in a corner of the cabin. I didn’t want to go [...]; but father’s logic was too strong for me, and the next morning I had my long hair cut and started in to school in earnest.

**Source:** Charles A. Eastman, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1916), chaps. 1-2, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t0ht2gd52>. Public domain.

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The phonetic spelling of Charles Eastman's Dakota name as "O-hee-ye-sa," which appears in the selection from *From the Deep Woods to Civilization*, replicates that source. The spelling "Ohiyesa," used in the shaded headnote, replicates how the name appears on the title page of *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* as well as in an earlier autobiographical work of Eastman's, *Indian Boyhood*. For stylistic consistency, the spelling of Jacob Eastman's Dakota name in the shaded headnote has been derived from 19th-century US military court records, rather than rendering the name in a more modern Dakota orthography. In *Indian Boyhood*, Charles Eastman called his paternal grandmother "Uncheedah," which represents a Dakota term of endearment akin to "Granny"; some sketches of Eastman's biography mistakenly present this as his grandmother's name.

These edited excerpts from Eastman's 1916 autobiography are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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