

4. The Thoughts of Mary Crow Dog

In February of 1973, some Sioux Indians occupied the site of Wounded Knee Creek, where hundreds of their people had been killed a few days after Christmas in 1890, and declared an independent Oglala Sioux nation. Members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) had recently met with a positive reception among many young people on the Lakota reservations and had led several protests, culminating in the decision to go to Wounded Knee. The federal government sent troops to surround the area. The siege lasted 71 days. Two Indians were killed and several others wounded. When the participants agreed to end the occupation and return to their homes, it was on condition that the government investigate their grievances.

One young woman named Mary Brave Bird gave birth to a baby during the siege. Afterwards, she married Leonard Crow Dog, a noted spiritual leader who had also been present at the occupation. Years later, she looked back on her experiences, explaining at the same time why she thought so many young Indians turned to alcohol and why a social movement like AIM seemed so full of promise.

I am Mary Brave Bird. After I had my baby during the siege of Wounded Knee they gave me a special name – Ohitika Win, Brave Woman, and fastened an eagle plume in my hair, singing brave-heart songs for me. I am a woman of the Red nation, a Sioux woman. That is not easy.

I had my first baby during a firefight, with the bullets crashing through one wall and coming out through the other. When my newborn son was only a day old and the marshals really opened up upon us I wrapped him up in a blanket and ran for it. We had to hit the dirt a couple of times, I shielding the baby with my body, praying, "It's all right if I die, but please let him live."

When I came out of Wounded Knee I was not even healed up, but they put me in jail at Pine Ridge and took my baby away. I could not nurse. My breasts swelled up and grew hard as rocks, hurting badly. In 1975 the feds put the muzzles of their M-16s against my head, threatening to blow me away. It's hard being an Indian woman.

My best friend was Annie Mae Aquash, a young, strong-hearted woman from the Micmac Tribe with beautiful children. It is not always wise for an Indian woman to come on too strong. Annie Mae was found dead in the snow at the bottom of a ravine on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The police said that she had died of exposure, but there was a .38-caliber slug in her head. The FBI cut off her hands and sent them to Washington for fingerprint identification, hands that had helped my baby come into the world.

My sister-in-law, Delphine, a good woman who had lived a hard life, was also found dead in the snow, the tears frozen on her face. A drunken man

had beaten her, breaking one of her arms and legs leaving her helpless in a blizzard to die.

My sister Barbara went to the government hospital in Rosebud to have her baby and when she came out of anesthesia found that she had been sterilized against her will. The baby lived only for two hours, and she had wanted so much to have children. No, it isn't easy.

When I was a small girl at the St. Francis Boarding School, the Catholic sisters would take a buggy whip to us for what they called "disobedience." At age ten I could drink and hold a pint of whiskey. At age twelve the nuns beat me for "being too free with my body." All I had been doing was holding hands with a boy. At age fifteen I was raped. If you plan to be born, make sure you are born white and male.

It is not the big, dramatic things so much that get us down, but just being Indian, trying to hang on to our way of life, language, and values while being surrounded by an alien, more powerful culture. It is being an *iyeska*, a half-blood, being looked down upon by whites and full-bloods alike. It is being a backwoods girl living in a city having to rip off stores in order to survive. Most of all it is being a woman. Among Plains tribes, some men think that all a woman is good for is to crawl into the sack with them and mind the children. It compensates for what white society has done to them. They were famous warriors and hunters once, but the buffalo is gone and there is not much rep in putting a can of spam or an occasional rabbit on the table.

As for being warriors, the only way some men can count coup nowadays is knocking out another skin's teeth during a barroom fight. In the old days a man made a name for himself by being generous and wise, but now he has nothing to be generous with, no jobs, no money; and as far as our traditional wisdom is concerned, our men are being told by the white missionaries, teachers and employers that it is a merely savage superstition they should get rid of if they want to make it in this world. Men are forced to live away from their children, so that the family can get ADC – Aid to Dependent Children. So some warriors come home drunk and beat on their old ladies in order to work off their frustration. I know where they are coming from. I feel sorry for them, but I feel even sorer for their women.

To start from the beginning, I am a Sioux from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. I belong to the "Burned Thigh," the Brulé Tribe, the Sicangu in our language . . . I wish I could tell about the big deeds of some ancestors of mine who fought at the Little Big Horn, or the Rosebud counting coup during the Grattan or Fetterman battle, but little is known of my family's history before 1880. I hope that some of my great-grandfathers counted coup on Custer's men, I like to imagine it, but I just do not know. Our Rosebud people did not play a big part in the battles against generals Cook or Custer. This was due to the policy of Spotted Tail, the all-powerful chief at the time. Spotted Tail had earned his eagle feathers as a warrior, but had been taken East as a

prisoner and put in jail. Coming back years later, he said that he had seen the cities of the whites and that a single one of them contained more people than could be found in all the Plains tribes put together, and that every one of the wasiçuns' factories could turn out more rifles and bullets in one day than were owned by all the Indians in the country. It was useless, he said, to try to resist the wasiçuns. During the critical year of 1876 he had his Indian police keep most of the young men on the reservation, preventing them from joining Sitting Bull, Gall, and Crazy Horse. Some of the young bucks, a few Brave Birds among them managed to sneak out trying to get to Montana, but nothing much is known. After having been forced into reservations, it was not thought wise to recall such things . . .

Our land itself is a legend, especially the area around Grass Mountain where I am living now. The fight for our land is at the core of our existence, as it has been for the last two hundred years. Once the land is gone, then we are gone too. The Sioux used to keep winter counts, picture writings on buffalo skin, which told our people's story from year to year. Well, the whole country is one vast winter count. You can't walk a mile without coming to some family's sacred vision hill, to an ancient Sun Dance circle, an old battle ground, a place where something worth remembering happened. Mostly a death, a proud death or a drunken death. We are a great people for dying. "It's a good day to die!" that's our old battle cry. But the land with its tar paper shacks and outdoor privies, not one of them straight, but all leaning this way or that way, is also a land to live on, a land for good times and telling jokes and talking of great deeds done in the past. But you can't live forever off the deeds of Sitting Bull or Crazy Hose. You can't wear their eagle feathers, freeload off their legends. You have to make your own legends now. It isn't easy.

Source: Mary Crow Dog with Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 3-11.

Study: Paul Chaat Smith and Robert Allen Warrior, *Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee* (New Press, 1996). Another way to approach this text is as an example of modern native women's writing. See Inés Hernández-Avila, ed., *Reading Native American Women: Critical/Creative Representations* (Altamira, 2005).

Further exploration: Mary Crow Dog's book is a rich source on a variety of subjects. It is worth reading more than once, asking yourself different questions each time. Russell Means was a leader at Wounded Knee, and he, too, has written of his experiences. See Russel Means with Marvin J. Wolf, *Where White Men Fear to Tread: The Autobiography of Russell Means* (St. Martin's, 1995).

¹ This is the term for "whites" in Lakota.