This excerpt is from *Living in Two Worlds: The American Indian Experience* (ISBN: 978-1-933316-76-5), written by Charles Eastman (Ohiyesa) and edited by Michael Fitzgerald. The book is fully illustrated throughout. © 2010 World Wisdom, Inc.

THE INDIAN MOTHER

The Indian woman has always been the silent but telling power behind life's activities. At the same time she shared equally with her mate in the arduous duties of primitive society. Possessed of true feminine dignity and modesty, she was expected to be his equal in physical endurance and skill, but his superior in spiritual insight. She was looked to for the endowment of her child with nature's gifts and powers, and no woman of any race has ever come closer to universal motherhood.

The Indian was religious from his mother's womb. From the moment of her recognition of the fact of conception to the end of the second year of life, which was the ordinary duration of lactation, it was supposed by us that the mother's spiritual influence counted for most. Her attitude and secret meditations must be such as to instill into the receptive soul of the unborn child the love of the "Great Mystery" and a sense of brotherhood with all creation. Silence and isolation are the rule of life for the expectant mother. She wanders prayerful in the stillness of great woods, or on the bosom of the vast prairie, and to her poetic mind the immanent birth of her child prefigures the advent of a master-man—a hero, or the mother of heroes—a thought conceived in the virgin breast of primeval nature, and dreamed out in a hush that is only broken by the sighing of the pine tree or the thrilling orchestra of a distant waterfall.

And when the day of days in her life dawns—the day in which there is to be a new life, the miracle of whose making has been entrusted to her, she seeks no human aid. She has been trained and prepared in body and mind for this her holiest duty, ever since she can remember. The ordeal is best met alone, where no curious or pitying eyes embarrass her; where all nature says to her spirit: "'Tis love! 'tis love! the fulfilling of life!" When a sacred voice comes to her out of the silence, and a pair of eyes open upon her in the wilderness, she knows with joy that she has borne well her part in the great song of creation!

Presently she returns to the camp, carrying the mysterious, the holy, the dearest bundle! She feels the endearing warmth of it and hears its soft breathing. It is still a part of herself, since both are nourished by the same mouthful, and no look of a lover could be sweeter than its deep, trusting gaze.

She continues her spiritual teaching, at first silently—a mere pointing of the index finger to nature; then in whispered songs, bird-like, at morning and evening. To her and to the child the birds are real people, who live very close to the "Great Mystery"; the murmuring trees breathe His presence; the falling waters chant His praise.

If the child should chance to be fretful, the mother raises her hand. "Hush! hush!" she cautions it tenderly, "the spirits may be disturbed!" She bids it be still and listen to the silver voice of the aspen, or the clashing cymbals of the birch; and at night she points to the heavenly, blazed trail, through nature's galaxy of splendor to nature's God. Silence, love, reverence—this is the trinity of first lessons; and to these she later adds generosity, courage, and chastity.

In the old days, our mothers were single-minded to the trust imposed upon them. A noted chief of our people said:

Daughter of American Horse, Oglala Lakota

"Men may slay one another, but they can never overcome the woman, for in the quiet of her lap lies the child! You may destroy him once and again, but he issues as often from that same gentle lap—a gift of the Great Good to the race, in which man is only an accomplice!"

Many Horses (daughter of Sitting Bull), with son, Hunkpapa Lakota tribe

GRANDMOTHER'S TEACHINGS

The Dakota women were obliged to cut and bring their fuel from the woods and, in fact, to perform most of the drudgery of the camp. This of necessity fell to their lot, because the men must hunt the game during the day. Very often my grandmother carried me with her on these excursions; and while she worked it was her habit to suspend me from a wild grape vine or a springy bough so that the least breeze would swing the cradle to and fro.

After I left my cradle, my grandmother then began calling my attention to natural objects. Whenever I heard the song of a bird, she would tell me what bird it came from, something after this fashion:

"Hakadah, listen to *Shechoka* (the robin) calling his mate. He says he has just found something good to eat." Or "Listen to *Oopehanska* (the thrush); he is singing for his little wife. He will sing his best."

Indian children were trained so that they hardly ever cried much in the night This was very expedient and necessary in their exposed life. In my infancy it was my grandmother's custom to put me to sleep as she said, with the birds, and to waken me with them, until it became a habit. She did this with an object in view. An Indian must always rise early. In the first place, as a hunter, he finds his game best at daybreak. Secondly, other tribes, when on the warpath, usually make their attack very earl in the morning. Even when our people are

A winter day, Apsaroke

Unknown family, Southern Cheyenne

moving about leisurely, we like to rise before daybreak, in order to travel when the air is cool, and unobserved, perchance, by our enemies.

As a little child, it was instilled into me to be silent and slow to speak. This was one of the most important traits to form in the character of the Indian. As a hunter and warrior it was considered absolutely necessary to him, and was thought to lay the foundations of patience and self-control. There are times when boisterous mirth is indulged in by our people, but the rule is gravity and decorum.

After all, my babyhood was full of interest and the beginnings of life's realities. The spirit of daring was already whispered into my ears.

EARLY HARDSHIPS

The travois consisted of a set of rawhide strips securely lashed to the tent-poles which were harnessed to the sides of the animal as if he stood between shafts, while the free ends were allowed to drag on the ground. Both ponies and large dogs were used as beasts of burden, and they carried in this way the smaller children as well as the baggage.

This mode of traveling for children was possible only in the summer, and as the dogs were sometimes unreliable, the little ones were exposed to a certain amount of danger. For instance, whenever a train of dogs had been traveling for a long time almost perishing with the heat and their heavy loads, a glimpse of water would cause them to forget all their responsibilities Some of them, in spite of the screams of the women, would swim with their burdens into the cooling stream, and I was thus, on more than one occasion, made to partake of an unwilling bath.

Left: Atsina horse travois
Top right: Sioux dog travois
Bottom right: Cheyenne dog travois

Blackfeet horse travois

Piegan traveling on horse travois

FLIGHT TO CANADA

I was a little over four years old at the time of the "Sioux massacre" in Minnesota. In the general turmoil, we took flight into Canada, and the journey is still vividly remembered by all our family.

The summer after the "Minnesota massacre," General Sibley pursued our people

Above: Two Hidatsa women construct a bull boat b stretching the heavy, tough hide of a male buffalo over a willow grame
Left: Mandan bull boat
Below: Carl Bodmer, *Bull Boats*, c. 1840

across this river. Now the Missouri is considered one of the most treacherous rivers in the world. Even a good modern boat is not safe upon its uncertain current. We were forced to cross in buffalo-skin boats—as round as tubs!

The *Washechu* (white men) were coming in great numbers with their big guns, and while most of our men were fighting them to gain time, the women and the old men made and equipped the temporary boats, braced with ribs of willow. Some of these were towed by two or three women or men swimming in the water and some by ponies. It was not an easy matter to keep them right side up, with their helpless freight of little children and such goods as we possessed.

Now we were compelled to trespass upon the country of hostile tribes and were harassed by them almost daily and nightly. Only the strictest vigilance saved us.

THE INDIAN'S WILD LIFE

I was now an exile as well as motherless; yet I was not unhappy. Our wanderings from place to place afforded us many pleasant experiences and quite as many hardships and misfortunes. There were times of plenty and times of scarcity, and we had several narrow escapes from death. In savage life the early spring is the most trying time and almost all the famines occurred at this period of the year.

The Indians are a patient and a clannish people; their love for one another is stronger than that of any civilized people I know.

In times of famine, the adults often denied themselves in order to make the food last as long as possible for the children who were not able to bear hunger as well as the old. As a people, they can live without food much longer than any other nation.

I once passed through one of these hard springs when we had nothing to eat for several days. Soon after this, we came into a region where buffaloes were plenty and hunger and scarcity were forgotten

Such was the Indian's wild life! When game was to be had and the sun shone, they easily forgot the bitter experiences of the winter before. Little preparation was made for the future. They are children of Nature and occasionally she whips them with the

A Sioux woman scrapes an elk hide using a tool typically made from an elk horn

Jerking meat, Flathead

Crow summer camp

Apsaroke winter camp, c. 1908

lashes of experience, yet they are forgetful and careless.

During the summer, when Nature is at her best, and provides abundantly for the savage, it seems to me that no life is happier than his! Food is free—lodging free—everything free! All were alike rich in the summer, and, again, all were alike poor in the winter and early spring. However, their diseases were fewer and not so destructive as now, and the Indian's health was generally good. The Indian boy enjoyed such a life as almost all boys dream of and would choose for themselves if they were permitted to do so.

The frail teepee pitched anywhere, in the winter as well as in the summer, and was all the protection that we had against cold and storms. I can recall times when we were snowed in and it was very difficult to get fuel. We were once three days without much fire and all of this time it stormed violently. There seemed to be no special anxiety on the part of our people; they rather looked upon all this as a matter of course knowing that the storm would cease when the time came.

Even if there was plenty to eat, it was thought better for us to practice fasting sometimes; and hard exercise was kept up continually, both for the sake of health and to prepare the body for the extraordinary exertions that it might, at any moment, be required to undergo. In my own remembrance, my unde used often to bring home a deer on his shoulder. The distance was sometimes considerable; yet he did not consider it any sort of a feat.

Loss of My Father

The second winter after the massacre, my father and my two older brothers, with several others, were betrayed to the United States authorities. As I was then living with my uncle in another part of the country, I became separated from them for ten years. During all this time we believed that they had been killed by the whites, and I was taught that I must avenge their deaths as soon as I was able to go upon the war-path.

Unknown Lakota

With a carrying bag about her waist, this woman digs up the earth with a root stick

As a motherless child, I always regarded my good grandmother as the wisest of guides and the best of protectors. Her observations in practice were all preserved in her mind for reference, as systematicall as if they had been written upon the pages of a note-book.

I distinctly recall one occasion when she took me with her into the woods in search of certain medicinal roots.

"Why do you not use all kinds of roots for medicines?" said I.

"Because," she replied, in her quick, characteristic manner, "the Great Mystery does not will us to find things too easily. In that case everybody would be a medicine-giver, and Ohiyesa must learn that there are many secrets which the Great Mystery will disclose only to the most worthy. Only those who seek him fasting and in solitude will receive his signs."

With this and many similar explanations she wrought in my soul wonderful and lively conceptions of the "Great Mystery" and of the effects of prayer and solitude.

Woman using a woven seed beater to collect seeds into a burden basket

Wife of Yellowhair, Brule Lakota

Unknown, Oglala Lakota

Wife of Old Crow, Cheyenne

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