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Preface

The Spirit of Indian Women provides a glimpse into the sacred world of the nomadic American Indian women of the nineteenth century. Photographs of women who actually lived the nomadic life combine with words of olden-day Indian leaders to present the feminine cultural ideal.[1] This book is an elegy for the women of this irreplaceable world, who were the perfect complement to the great chiefs and warriors. Indian women are sometimes thought of as subservient to the men, in part because of the very diffi cult circumstances that were imposed upon women in the early reservation era. The words of these olden-day leaders correct these mis-impressions and demonstrate the essential feminine role in their ancestral lifeway, with an emphasis on their traditional spirituality. Their own words and their own faces eloquently and poignantly communicate the wisdom, the strength, and the beauty of soul that characterized traditional American Indian women. While all of the American Indians presented here have passed from this earth, the heroic ideal that they represent stands as a model for all people.[2]

Many of these photographs have never before been published, so how have they been selected? Most of these photographs are taken from several thousand photographs that we have collected over the past thirty years. The majority of the photographs in our collection are the result of research in the Library of Congress in 1974. All of the photographs ever submitted for copyright protection are in that facility, and at that time it was still possible to roam freely through the stacks and to easily obtain copies of those photographs whose copyright protection had expired. We limited our selection of photographs to only women who were raised during the pre-reservation era.[3]

We are also grateful to include photographs from the collection of the late philosopher, Frithjof Schuon, compiled by him over a period of some fi fty years. Although well known among scholars of comparative religion, many readers will not be familiar with Schuon. From his youth, Schuon had a profound and, what was to become, a lifelong interest in and affi nity with the Plains Indians of North America.[4] In a career that spanned more than fi fty years, Schuon wrote over twen-ty- fi ve books that touched on diverse aspects of all the world's great religions, including that of the Plains Indians. He corresponded with many American Indian leaders and received photographs from many sources. For several of the photo-graphs in the Schuon collection, the identity of both woman and photographer are unknown,[5] as they were gifts to Schuon and the information was not provided to him.

Our research on American Indian oratory and writings started in 1970 when Michael was the graduate teaching assistant in the course "Religious Traditions of the North American Indians" at Indiana University taught by Joseph Epes Brown.[6] It was through Dr. Brown that we met both Thomas and Susie Yellowtail and Benjamin Black Elk, the son of the revered Sioux holy man. From that time we both studied the American Indians, particularly the Plains Indians, and Michael continuously sought out the oratory and writings that concerned the spiritual traditions of the pre-reservation nomads.

The traditional world of the American Indians had no written language, so written documentation of this wisdom starts with the coming of the white man. This greatly limits the overall time period for the direct recording of the words of the pre-reservation American Indians.[7] In addition to the words of the nomadic elders, we have added selected writings from the generation taught directly by these traditional nomads. All of the education of the youth was through the oral teaching of the elders. This storytelling was the basis of the transmittal of the tribal wisdom from one generation to the next, or more precisely from the generation of the grandparents to the grandchildren, because the children spent countless hours under the tutelage of the grandparents while the parents provided for the material needs of the family. This process was an integral part of the children's education and in this way each third generation provided a vital link to the ancestral tribal traditions. Plains Indian youth born around the turn of the nineteenth century still had the benefit of an integral education directly from the "old timers," as many American Indians affectionately refer to the last generation that lived in the nomadic era of the Plains Indian culture. That generation is the last direct living link to the nomadic pre-reservation era, and most of them are no longer with us. While there is not a precise time that defines this generation, we have chosen to only include writings or oratory from the elders born before 1910.[8]

In order to present an accurate picture of the women's spirituality, we have divided the book into four distinct sections. The first section, entitled "The Role of Indian Women," presents both tribal statements and observations of male leaders about the role of women.[9] The next section, "Celestial Femininity," presents traditional tribal stories that illustrate the important role played by divine femininity in establishing their sacred culture.[10] The third section, "Intercessors with the Sacred," sets forth a few of the many tribal legends and history in which women were important intercessors who brought sacred teachings or sacred power to various tribes.[11] The last and largest section, "Women's Voices," presents the words of many esteemed women elders who have passed on to the "other side camp." An

extensive annotated bibliography of autobiographies of American Indian women has been posted on the publisher's Internet site for further study.[12]

The women's traditional social role is as the owner and guardian of the home, including the education of all children until the age of eight or nine years. Women and grandparents are held in particularly high esteem because they are primarily responsible for safeguarding and transmitting the traditional spiritual values to the next generations. The women's focus on the home and the children is the perfect complement to traditional man's function of family protector in his role as hunter and warrior. We believe that these writings demonstrate that the social roles of men and the women were different, but complementary, and that every woman was the spiritual equal of her husband.

The Spirit of Indian Women introduces us to some of the foremost members of that tradition, in both photographs and words. We see the great emphasis the American Indians placed on moral character and their intimate contact with God's immeasurable, wild, and virgin Nature. It is evident that they strongly believe that the sacred spirit within every man and every woman is mysteriously linked to the Great Spirit, and that their collective vocation is to live in harmony with the teachings of the Great Spirit. Their entire culture was built upon these precepts. In today's technological world, we often lose our connection to anything of sacred value that can provide a balance for the disequilibriating factors that we encounter on a daily basis. It is our hope that the insights conveyed in *The Spirit of Indian Women* will help each of us to better understand the sacred spirit that dwells in every person.

Judith & Michael Oren Fitzgerald
Moose, Wyoming
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notes

1. This book is a companion volume to *Indian Spirit* (see "Other Books by Judith and Michael Fitzgerald"), which presented photographs and words of only men as an elegy to the great chiefs, and in an attempt to provide a glimpse into the sacred world of the American Indian.

2. *The Spirit of Indian Women* contains wisdom from many American Indian tribes, but it has a certain focus on the Plains Indians because they were the last area to succumb to the white encroachment and thus their wisdom and their photographs are the best preserved of all American Indian tribes. When considering Plains Indian spirituality, it is evident that the many variations among the tribes are too vast and diverse to create a definitive statement about what it entails, but few would deny that there are unifying themes, including the sacred quality of virgin Nature, the use of the Sacred Pipe, and above all the idea of a Supreme Being. This book focuses on those common themes. As with other civilizations, it is evident that not all American Indians lived up to the cultural ideal, but that ideal is nevertheless a reality.

3. Photographic technology was not widely available until the second part of the nineteenth century, so there are few records of the nomadic tribes of the Eastern part of the United States. We have therefore chosen only photographs of Western tribes, who still lived in virgin Nature during the first years of photography.

4. Schuon was formally adopted into the family of Chief James Red Cloud—a grandson of the great Sioux chief well known to history—in 1959 at Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and given the Sioux name Brave Eagle, Wambli Ohitika. Years later, he was adopted into the family of Thomas Yellowtail, the Crow medicine man and Sun Dance chief, who was one of the most admired American Indian spiritual leaders of the last century. The story of Yellowtail's life is revealed in *Yellowtail: Crow Medicine Man and Sun Dance Chief*, recorded and edited by Michael Oren Fitzgerald, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

5. We are very grateful to Mike Cowdrey, one of the foremost experts on Native American photography, who painstakingly reviewed both *Indian Spirit* and this book and provided us with many missing names. Cowdrey corrected several errors in the recorded names of the women who appear on these pages.

6. Joseph Epes Brown recorded and edited Black Elk's story of the seven sacred rites of the Oglala Sioux in *The Sacred Pipe*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1951.

7. As *The Spirit of Indian Women* only focuses on their sacred heritage, we have not included statements about the interaction with the dominant white culture unless there is a comparison of the sacred or moral values of the two races.

8. This does not deny that much of the wisdom of these old timers has been preserved in later generations, but the later generations did not have the benefit of learning directly from those who actually lived the traditional life of complete freedom in virgin Nature. The further one travels from the source, the more difficult it is to know the authenticity of the recorded words, owing to a wide variety of factors. We have tried to select writings that stay as close as possible to the source of the ancestral wisdom.

9. On the social plane, the men often spoke for the family and tribal groups; thus, relatively few of the words recorded in the earliest encounters with white society were by women, including the early reservation period. The first section therefore includes a selected number of comments by men about the role of women, and some of the tribal folklore and history was also recorded from men.

10. Many of the American Indian legends and myths are extremely long, making it difficult to present them in a succinct fashion. In order to provide this overview, we have edited many of the myths, while maintaining the precise recorded words. We have tried to preserve the essential teachings, while realizing that simplifications lose some of the overall character of the entire narrative.

11. There are two distinct ways in which women were intercessors: for the tribe and for the individual or family. We have combined both of these groups within the same category, with a certain emphasis on stories that have a broader tribal impact.

12. We are indebted to Gretchen Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands for creating a bibliography that served as an initial foundation for our bibliography.

Preface to The Spirit of Indian Women

Features in

The Spirit of Indian Women
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