



Chief Seattle of the Coast Salish

(c.1780-1866)

Authentic Text of Chief Seattle's Treaty Oration

"Chief Seattle's 1854 Oration"--ver. 1

The Suquamish Tribe, Port Madison Indian Reservation, WA

Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion upon my people for centuries untold, and which to us appears changeless and eternal, may change. Today is fair. Tomorrow it may be overcast with clouds. My words are like the stars that never change. Whatever Seattle says, the great chief at Washington can rely upon with as much certainty as he can upon the return of the sun or the seasons. The white chief says that Big Chief at Washington sends us greetings of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him for we know he has little need of our friendship in return. His people are many. They are like the grass that covers vast prairies. My people are few. They resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain. The great, and I presume--good, White Chief sends us word that he wishes to buy our land but is willing to allow us enough to live comfortably. This indeed appears just, even generous, for the Red Man no longer has rights that he need respect, and the offer may be wise, also, as we are no longer in need of an extensive country.

There was a time when our people covered the land as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea cover its shell-paved floor, but that time long since passed away with the greatness of tribes that are now but a mournful memory. I will not dwell on, nor mourn over, our untimely decay, nor reproach my paleface brothers with hastening it, as we too may have been somewhat to blame.

Youth is impulsive. When our young men grow angry at some real or imaginary wrong, and disfigure their faces with black paint, it denotes that their hearts are black, and that they are often cruel and relentless, and our old men and old women are unable to restrain them. Thus it has ever been. Thus it was when the white man began to push our forefathers ever westward. But let us hope that the hostilities between us may never return. We would have everything to lose and nothing to gain. Revenge by young men is considered gain, even at the cost of their own lives, but old men who stay at home in times of war, and mothers who have sons to lose, know better.

Our good father in Washington--for I presume he is now our father as well as yours, since King George has moved his boundaries further north--our great and good father, I say, sends us word that if we do as he

desires he will protect us. His brave warriors will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his wonderful ships of war will fill our harbors, so that our ancient enemies far to the northward--the Haidas and Tsimshians--will cease to frighten our women, children, and old men. Then in reality he will be our father and we his children. But can that ever be? Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! He folds his strong protecting arms lovingly about the paleface and leads him by the hand as a father leads an infant son. But, He has forsaken His Red children, if they really are His.

Our God, the Great Spirit, seems also to have forsaken us. Your God makes your people wax stronger every day. Soon they will fill all the land. Our people are ebbing away like a rapidly receding tide that will never return. The white man's God cannot love our people or He would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. How then can we be brothers? How can your God become our God and renew our prosperity and awaken in us dreams of returning greatness? If we have a common Heavenly Father He must be partial, for He came to His paleface children. We never saw Him. He gave you laws but had no word for His red children whose teeming multitudes once filled this vast continent as stars fill the firmament. No; we are two distinct races with separate origins and separate destinies. There is little in common between us.

To us the ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their resting place is hallowed ground. You wander far from the graves of your ancestors and seemingly without regret. Your religion was written upon tablets of stone by the iron finger of your God so that you could not forget. The Red Man could never comprehend or remember it. Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors--the dreams of our old men, given them in solemn hours of the night by the Great Spirit; and the visions of our sachems, and is written in the hearts of our people.

Your dead cease to love you and the land of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb and wander away beyond the stars. They are soon forgotten and never return. Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains, sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender fond affection over the lonely hearted living, and often return from the happy hunting ground to visit, guide, console, and comfort them.

Day and night cannot dwell together. The Red Man has ever fled the approach of the White Man, as the morning mist flees before the morning sun. However, your proposition seems fair and I think that my people will accept it and will retire to the reservation you offer them. Then we will dwell apart in peace, for the words of the Great White Chief seem to be the words of nature speaking to my people out of dense darkness.

It matters little where we pass the remnant of our days. They will not be many. The Indian's night promises to be dark. Not a single star of hope hovers above his horizon. Sad-voiced winds moan in the distance. Grim fate seems to be on the Red Man's trail, and wherever he will hear the approaching footsteps of his fell destroyer and prepare stolidly to meet his doom, as does the wounded doe that hears the approaching footsteps of the hunter.

A few more moons, a few more winters, and not one of the descendants of the mighty hosts that once moved over this broad land or lived in happy homes, protected by the Great Spirit, will remain to mourn over the graves of a people once more powerful and hopeful than yours. But why should I mourn at the untimely fate of my people? Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless. Your time of decay may be distant, but it will surely come, for even the White Man whose God walked and talked with him as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We will see.

We will ponder your proposition and when we decide we will let you know. But should we accept it, I here and now make this condition that we will not be denied the privilege without molestation of visiting at any time the tombs of our ancestors, friends, and children. Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as the swelter in the sun

along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.

Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy hearted maidens, and even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these somber solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits. And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone.

Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.

## ANALYSIS

from "The Real Chief Seattle," *Salishan* (2007)

Michael Hollister

In cities and universities, many affluent white people who worshipped Nature were comparing themselves to Indians, and one of their most celebrated exemplars was the coast Salish chief Seattle. A noble statue of the chief stood tall downtown near the Space Needle, a mythic equivalent of the chief on the old buffalo nickel. He became a leader of the Suquamish tribe by suppressing the militant Cowiche tribe on Vancouver Island, by attacking the Chemakum and S'Klallam tribes from the Olympic Peninsula, by ambushing raiders from other tribes in the Cascade foothills and by fighting off the more powerful Yakimas and Klickitats from the other side of the mountains, leading and participating in more raids than any other chief in the region of Puget Sound. He had eight slaves and he freed them in response to President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. After he befriended white settlers and protected them from attacks by other Indians, they expressed their gratitude by naming their village after him.

Seattle became an icon because of a speech he made in 1854 to about a thousand of his people on the beach just north of the present Kingdome, accepting a treaty that sold the remaining lands of the coast Salish to the United States. Witnesses agreed that the speech lasted about half an hour and that throughout, the tall Indian kept one hand on the head of the short white territorial governor Isaac Stevens. Sitting there in the pew beside Shona, during the sermon Daniel pulled a copy of the speech from the breast pocket of his suit, its edges ragged from being torn out of a magazine. He reviewed it discretely in his lap.

There was no verbatim transcript of the actual speech. Over thirty years afterward, one witness, the early white settler and Victorian poet Dr. Henry A. Smith published a version of it in a Seattle newspaper, rendered from the notes he took at the time, including words, rhetorical flourishes and concepts that it is unlikely could have been expressed in the language spoken by Seattle, who did not speak English. Smith did not understand the chief's Suquamish dialect of the central Puget Sound Salish language, Lushootseed. No one knows whether anyone present at the time orally translated the speech into Chinook jargon, a simple trading language. Hence it is possible that Smith made up his entire version.

A few decades later, two sentences were added to the end of Smith's rendition by the historian A. C. Ballard. Another white poet, William Arrowsmith, rewrote Smith's version in the 1960s, changing the style to sound less Victorian and more Indian. Then a professor named Ted Perry wrote a fraudulent version in a script for a film about ecology produced in 1972, changing the content and turning the speech into a letter to President Franklin Pierce. This fraudulent version casts Chief Seattle in the role of an ecological visionary, an environmental pantheist who refers to buffalo as if they were native to his region and sounds

like the founder of the Sierra Club. Still another version, the fourth, shortened the fraudulent speech in the movie script and was presented as a verbatim quotation in an exhibit at Expo '74 in Spokane, Washington.

In the years that followed that day in church, Daniel was repeatedly amazed and pointed out to Shona the continuing reinforcements of the myth. Sophie Fullmoon thought it was hilarious and told all her friends on the reservation. The movie script fraud replaced the original version of the speech and was quoted as historical truth by the first President Bush, by the popularizer of myths Joseph Campbell, by the public television broadcaster Bill Moyers, by Vice President Al Gore in a book in 1992, and by the author of a book for grade school children. *Publishers Weekly* called it a speech that had “stood the test of time.” Beginning in 1991, a year before Gore’s book, the fraud was widely exposed to the public in articles with titles such as “Sorry, But Chief Seattle Didn’t Speak in Bumper Sticker” and “Noble Savage Speaks with Forked Tongue.”

As originally rendered by Dr. Smith, the speech does express love of the land, but it contains no reference to conservation. Seattle says the land is sacred because every part of it “has been rendered hallowed by some sad or happy event.” The white Chief “sends us word that he wishes to buy our land but is willing to allow us enough to live comfortably. This indeed appears just, even generous, for the Red Man no longer has rights that he need respect, and the offer may be wise, also, as we are no longer in need of an extensive country... I will not dwell on, nor mourn over, our untimely decay, nor reproach my paleface brothers with hastening it, as we too may have been somewhat to blame... Tribe follows tribe, and nation follows nation, like the waves of the sea. It is the order of nature, and regret is useless.”

Daniel thought Chief Seattle was a visionary in recognizing the futility of warfare against the whites and the advantages of acquiring their firearms, their goods, their protection from his Indian enemies, and even their God. According to Smith, the chief declared that God was on the side of the whites. Six years *before* his famous speech, he was baptized into the Roman Catholic Church. His children also were baptized and raised in that faith. The noble icon of environmentalism was not the pantheist invented by white secularists, he was a Christian. He identified himself with the beliefs that Marxists later would blame for contributing to capitalist exploitation and “raping the environment.”

The best known photograph of Chief Seattle, as an old man, had been altered repeatedly, like his speech. In the original photo, his eyes were closed. Later his eyes were retouched to look open. Some versions of the photo show him with a cane, others do not. In one, his head has been grafted onto the body of another man. Sophie Fullmoon could not stop laughing.

Michael Hollister  
*Salishan* (2007)