LISTENING TO INDIANS

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DONALD KERNS, Cherokee-Sioux

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Sam Myers:
This is the second part of our conversation with Donald Kerns, part Cherokee, who was adopted into the family of Oliver Red Cloud, chief of the Oglala Sioux. Don, have you paid very much attention to this situation that developed in Wisconsin a few weeks ago over that monastery at Gresham, Wisconsin?

Donald Kerns:
I was watching most of it on television, and things like this. I've heard rumors from some of the Indian people that I know—they're wanting the monastery back.

SM: The Indian people want it back?

DK: Yes. But what they're wanting it for is a hospital, and all they want is for it to be turned into a hospital. Well, now that they got it, nobody will give them any kind of funds to turn it into a hospital.

SM: In fact, I got both versions as much as possible. Brother Maurice of the Alexian Order sent me his part of it too. They were negotiating at the time when the Warrior Society got impatient and moved in. And then the other groups, including Brando, showed up, and, when it was finally settled, they didn't give it to the Warrior Society, nor did they give it to AIM, but they offered to give it to the tribe itself.

DK: Right.

SM: I heard that Ada Deer, who had led the Menominee people in that attempted restoration which is just about now completed, was against the taking of the monastery, saying she wouldn't have her name on that thing. Do you remember anything about that?
DK: Yes. She wasn't aware, she's what they call a grass roots Indian, which dates back into the time element again. She believes in the old ways, and did not understand what the mission was going to be used for. Most of your grass roots people don't trust white hospitals anyway, and they did want to use it for a hospital; and the white man's version of healing is by far different than that of the Indian's way of healing. And in some ways, the Indian's way is superior to the white man's.

SM: Before the non-Indians came to this continent, the healing ratio was very high among Indian healers. One reason, of course, was, while they had great use of psychosomatic medicine, they also did not have the killer diseases that the Europeans brought over here.

DK: That's right. The non-Indians brought with them the coughing diseases, whooping cough; measles was unknown to them; tuberculosis.

SM: Smallpox.

DK: Smallpox, all of these different things they did not know anything about.

SM: They didn't have them.

DK: No.

SM: You said something about the Indians not always trusting the white man's hospital. Among the Navajos, when someone died in a hogan, they traditionally abandoned it, so we can understand their reluctance to go to the hospital where people had died.

DK: That's true.

SM: Is that same attitude prevalent among the Northern Plains Tribes?
DK: Well, the largest thing that they distrust is the white man's way of healing.

SM: It's not the building itself?

DK: It's not the building itself so much. It's just their distrust of the whites. The white man says, "Well, I'll give you a shot, and this is going to cure you," and they don't understand how one little old tiny vial of medicine is going to do such a miraculous thing. However, they, in their own healing ceremonies, do the same thing. There is a novocaine that was used and is used during the Sun Dance. This is why I say that it is not quite as vicious as people seem to think it is. It's a type of novocaine that the medicine man will spread upon the man's chest before going through the sun ceremony.

SM: Is this some kind of herb that deadens the skin?

DK: Right.

SM: Do you know what it is?

DK: No, I don't. And, in fact, the white people have been trying to find out for years, and they won't give it to them. It's handed down from one person to one person, and only the medicine man knows.

SM: Some people claim there are as many as 57 different healing herbs we've learned to use from the Indians, including cocaine and things like that.

DK: That's right. That's very true.

SM: Before we leave the Menominees and the situation up in Wisconsin--
after this take-over of the monastery by the Warrior Society, and the eventual settlement of it with the National Guard moving in to keep the two sides from shooting each other, I heard or read how some of the white townspeople and farmers in the area were circling the whole place on their snowmobiles armed with deer rifles.

DK: This is true.

SM: They accomplished getting the people madder than ever?

DK: This is very true. They aggravated people more than anything else, and, well for instance, you can put a wig on yourself, a black wig, that would resemble the long, black hair of the Indian, and put berry juice on your skin so that you would have the color, and you could drive through that particular town, and you'd end up being shot at just for the pure fact that you were resembling an Indian. In fact, they mistakenly fired upon their own . . . one man fired upon one of his own children, not recognizing the car. So this is part of the tragedy that comes upon prejudice and things of this nature.

SM: And, unfortunately, this particular method of taking it over aggravated that. Someone said that if they had simply asked for it, they probably could have got it for nothing.

DK: More than likely if they had gone to the proper authorities and said, 'Look, we want this particular piece of property which, it doesn't belong to you anyway, it is ours, but we would like the building so that we could have a hospital," they more than likely might have ended up with it without all the hullabaloo.

SM: In fact, again, as one source said, they were in the process of negotiating for it when the whole thing began.
DK: That's true. Then came your militants moving in and, well, they caused a big stir over really something that didn't concern them. The Warrior Society is, again, a militant organization, such as AIM, the American Indian Movement, and there's various other societies around, and the majority of your militant societies like that, half of the people involved in them are white. Like, for instance, Marlon Brando, Jane Fonda, people of this type, not necessarily that notoriety, but people of this type, that are trying to make a name for themselves; they end up exploiting the Indian, which is something that the Indian is catching on to this type of thing.

SM: The Indians have also caught on to the idea that the confrontations produce publicity, and publicity sometimes gets results, even though it might be bad here, good there, but it does get results.

DK: Right.

SM: Don, down at Webster College they were having something called "The White Roots of Peace." Can you enlighten me any on this?

DK: The organization, in fact, I guess they're calling themselves "The White Roots of Peace," the actual white root of peace is just exactly what the name denotes—it is a root taken from a plant similar to a carrot, only it is white and it is very, very snow white, and it is a tranquilizer type of thing. It does not drug you or anything like this, but it will, oh, like a mill town or something of this nature, it will relax you and soothe you and, without being habit-forming, relax you, and that's why they call it the white root of peace.

SM: Because it makes you feel more peaceful?

DK: Right.

SM: Isn't it more than that? Isn't it a whole movement?
DK: Yes, it's a part of the religion. They take this when they want to "go up into the mountains," to meditate, prayer and things of this nature, then they take this white root of peace, and they take it with them, and, no Indian uses drugs per se. They think too much of their bodies. For an Indian to use something like heroin or something like that is almost unheard of; they don't like it. They don't respect those that do; for one thing, it damages the body, and this they have no respect for at all. Anytime someone damages their body, the Indian loses interest in that person then and there--they think him a fool.

SM: Like the drinker--the alcoholic?

DK: Right. There is a number of alcoholic Indians. However, when you take a person's land away from them; you take all of their customs away from them; you give them absolutely nothing to do, they have turned to alcoholism and things of this nature, the firewater from the white man. The white man introduced them to the firewater, and have used it as a pry bar so to speak to get his land, his jewelry, his beadwork and his pottery, and things of this nature, to get it away from him. Even back in the Buffalo Bill days . . . they sent an awful lot of buffalo robes and things of this nature that the Indians had cured, and they wanted a very high price even then--they cost like $1,500 for a buffalo robe in New York, and it was very rare that you saw one that was of good quality, because the Indians kept these.

SM: The white roots of peace, that is peculiar to the Mohawks though, of New York, isn't it?

DK: Yes, it's the root, from what I understand--and you have to understand that my knowledge of the white root of peace is limited--but the white root of peace is grown completely in the eastern states, the northeastern
states, up in the New York area and places up there. From what I understand--I might be corrected on this--it does not grow in the Southwest or in the Dakotas or anyplace like this. As to what the actual root is, I don't honestly know. I have seen a portion of it, but I have never seen it growing.

SM: Down at Webster College, I gathered from the information they sent me, that they had a tepee which they set up on the ground. They have to have a place to build a fire so that they can have the ceremonies, and then they invite the people. And it isn't a show, it's not an entertainment, it's an educational process more than anything else, and then they would welcome invitations from the various instructors to have members of the group go into the classes to explain things, and so this would be sort of centered around the tepee and the ceremonial fire, informing those who are interested what they are doing, and carrying out the idea of the White Roots of Peace Movement.

DK: Well, what they're doing is explaining what the dances were, why they were. There you're getting into the religion, because the Indians did no dance without a religious meaning. All of their dances were of a religious nature--the Buffalo Dance, it was more of a prayer of thanks for the buffalo, because that was their livelihood; different animals--they had a Deer Dance; they had an Eagle Dance; all of these things were prayers of thanksgiving to the Great Spirit. They worshipped no animals at any time. They showed only the highest of respect for them, because the animals were their livelihood, for their clothing, their food, their weapons, and everything prior to the white man's coming, so they respected them highly.

SM: Now the idea of the religion--the worship of animals, this is difficult to explain, and it is difficult to ferret out of books. How did the animals figure in the Indians' religious practices? On the
plains, for example, they had a great respect and admiration for and dependence on the buffalo?

DK: That is true.

SM: But as to worshipping the buffalo, while they had Buffalo Dances, and they had ceremonies to attract the buffalo, and to thank him, still they didn't actually worship him as a spirit or god?

DK: No. They had one god and one god only—the name of the god varies from tribe to tribe. Wan-tan-ka, the Great Spirit.

SM: That's the Sioux word for God?

DK: That's as close as I can come to the spelling anyway. This is their word for God, or Great Spirit.

SM: Great Spirit is sort of a non-Indian translation, isn't it?

DK: Correct. Correct.

SM: And it's a little too simplified, really, isn't it?

DK: In a way, yes it is.

SM: It would be more like the Great Mystery, wouldn't it, or the Cosmic Force that controls all?

DK: No...oo, they look at Him as a god. The Great Spirit, they think, brought the Sioux in His giant quiver to this land, and deposited them here for reproduction, much the same as what we believe God created Adam and eve to start the world. So really their religion is not that far off from ours, and it is not as primitive as a lot of
whites seem to think it is. They, at no time, make a farce of their religion. Their religion is very, very deeply imbedded in their everyday lives. They, at no time, used their religion for exploitation or anything like this. Their religion was lived seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, and they, at no time, made a farce of this, and anyone who would try to make a farce out of this religion—well, he was signing his death warrant, because they did not allow it. They just would not allow any particular person to exploit their religion—it's a secretive religion, they explained very little, if any, to the white man, because an awful lot of white people have tried to find out what all the religion was about, and therefore your misconceptions. The Indians would give him bits and pieces, and then the white men filled in the loop holes, whereas, unbeknownst to the Indian that this was happening, otherwise he might have explained it a little bit more fully. But their religion is a seven day a week, fifty-two week a year thing, and at no time would they allow an animal to come before them or their families, whereas the Great Spirit came before everything. And they, like I say, lived their religion seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, and it was something that was very, very close to them. It was part of their daily lives, not just . . . well, the white man's version, he goes to church on Sunday, and Monday he's drunk and cussing. Whereas the Indian is unique. In the Indian and in the Indian language there is no such thing as a curse word in any of the Indian languages. There is no foul-mouth language in the Indian language. The worst thing they could call you would be a dog—well, the worst thing really that they would call you would be a white woman, because they would be denouncing your manhood, and at the same time, they'd be calling you "white" which they didn't think was as good as "red," so they were very proud of this, you know, that the white man could go out, and he'd just get blistered all to the devil in the sun, and the Indian could go out and lay in it and never bother him.
SM: The symbolism on their tepees, on their clothing, the painting of the faces, all these things had important meanings, did they not?

DK: Right. Right. The painting of the faces was, in a way, to scare the daylights out of their enemy, which, if you've ever seen some of the old Western pictures, they would show an Indian popping up, and he'd have his eyes painted completely yellow, totally around his eyes, and maybe his mouth painted all black across his chin, or something of this nature, and a woman would let out a blood-curdling yell, and, in reality, this would scare the daylights out of the Indian too, because his women didn't scream and holler like that--they were very quiet, and they finally got used to the idea that the white women were, well, to put it the Indian way, they were "big mouths." They don't understand the white women's ways of telling their men, "Don't do this" or "Don't do that," because an Indian woman would not dare do such a thing. Like I said once before, the Society for Betterment of Women, and Women's Lib, and things of this nature, just does not exist on an Indian reservation. Women's lib just does have no place there. They are treated with the highest and the utmost of respect, but they are also told that they will keep their place, and they will at no time contradict the head of the house, which is the man, and they won't veer from that in any way, shape or form.

SM: Even yet? This still holds now?

DK: Yes, it sure does. I saw children--I say children, they were older than I was--there was one fellow that was 38 years old, Oliver Red Cloud, when they were here in St. Louis a few years back for the Indian Exposition at Northland Shopping Center, which is where my adoption was started, the last night they were here they were out on the lower level of the shopping center, and they were eating spaghetti and meatballs and salad, which to them, this was great, because they hadn't hardly ever had any of this, and they were told
prior to this that they had a room in the Medical Building, that the
women had to clean this up, because they were getting ready to leave,
and they wanted to leave it as was, as they found it. So Red Cloud,
upon his changing of clothes and everything, his daughter came up and
retrieved all of the trunks and things like this, and she took them
down and put them on the bus. His daughter's in her 30's. And then
she went on out to the parking lot where they were eating, and every­
thing like this, and pretty soon Red Cloud went down and he checked
this other room where the women were supposed to be changing clothes
and things like this. He made sure there was nobody in the room,
and then he went in and he found it pretty much of a mess. So from
walking out to the parking lot he walked over to his daughter and a
couple of other girls who were in a distant way, one way or the
other related to Red Cloud, and he said, "The room is not clean." 
With this the older girls never questioned him, took the food, laid
it on the stage where there had been dancing for the last ten days,
went to clean up the room, with never a question, never a word. And
these are "children" in their 30's, and this will tell you how much
power the head of the house has, and with him as also chief of the
tribe, it would not have done their health any good at all for them to
question him. If he says, "This is what I want done," it gets done
very quickly, and it's never questioned or doubted.

SM: You said that your adoption began there at this ceremonial at Northland
Shopping Center. They did part of it there, and then when did they do
the rest of it?

DK: Well, the rest of it was done in South Dakota.

SM: Can you explain anything about that which took place here, and then
tell us about what happened over there in South Dakota?

DK: When I was here I was called up on the stage. In the first place,
during the ceremony, they had been going for about five days putting on four shows a day, shows lasting approximately an hour, and one evening some of the Indians were talking to me, and I guess they were feeling me out. They asked me, "Don, what would you say if we wanted to adopt you?" And I just kind of looked at them, kind of dumbfounded, because I had, in the wildest of my imaginations, no idea that they thought this much of me, and I knew that it was a great honor, and I said, "Well, I would think it was just that, a great honor. Why do you ask?" They said, "Well, maybe we'll adopt you." I said, "Well, that's entirely up to you." They said, "Well, would you accept it?" And I said, "I would never insult anyone in your family nor in your tribe." To refuse adoption is one of the highest insults you could hand them. Then I told them that I knew this, and that there was no way that I would ever insult those people. So they just kind of smiled, and I forgot it. And about two days later, Oliver Red Cloud, in full dress, walked up on the stage alone. Well, this had not been part of the program, and I knew the program backwards, and I asked Eva Nichols, who was the announcer. She's a very intelligent and very well-educated and very, very sweet lady. She holds a very high spot in my heart. At any rate, she's head of the Inter-tribal Indian Association. I asked her, I said, "Eva, what's he doing up there alone?" She turned around and she said, "Be quiet." And I said, "All right." You know, far be it for me to answer back, so he mumbled something to one of the other Indian men who was there, but he did it in Sioux, which I don't understand the language completely, I'm in the process of learning it, and I asked, you know, what was going on. She said, "Just be quiet and sit still." I said, "O.K." And so she proceeded to explain that prior to the flood that they had had a great response from the St. Louis area as far as clothing.

SM: This was the flood at Rapid City?

DK: Right. That prior to this flood they had had a great response from
the St. Louis people, and thousands and thousands of pounds of clothing and canned goods and things had come up earmarked for the Indian people, and that, however, they couldn't honor everyone like this; they did want to pick out one particular man and honor him for his part in this, and by this they would adopt this man into the Sioux Nation, and then she turned around and looked at me and she said, "Don Kerns, would you please join the Chief of the Oglala Sioux on stage?"

SM: Eva said this?

DK: Yes. And I just kind of looked at her, and then it dawned on me what she was talking about—that they were going to adopt me into the Sioux Nation, and I just turned pale white. . . .

SM: You weren't very red then, were you?

DK: No, I wasn't. In fact, it was a joke amongst them. They said that the whole time that Oliver Red Cloud was speaking in Sioux, and telling me what he was naming me and everything, which it has to be done in the Sioux language, that he said that I just . . . you could watch the blood drain from my face; I just turned white, just snow white; I was just in awe of all of this, you know. And they took his grandfather's war bonnet and placed it on my head, which I still have, and they put an owl feather bustle on me, and they gave me a pair of moccasins and a few other things—headband and a few other things that I wear from day to day. But it was just a very aweing experience, and they named me La-ko-ta Ok-shu-la— it's just a rasping sound in the throat, it's a guttural type thing.

SM: La-ko-ta Ok-shu-la. That's your name, your tribal name?

DK: Right. And this means "Indian boy", which, I didn't think much,
you know, about this, except that it had the word "Indian" in, which Lakota means in the Sioux language.

SM: It means you belong to the people.

DK: Yes, you're one of us now. And he explained to me that it was very hard to be Indian. This was part of the ceremony which had to be translated.

SM: Kind of a warning?

DK: No, it was, well, I guess you could call it a warning. It was more of a way of life—he was trying to explain the Indian way of life; that the Indian way of life is not easy, and it in fact is not.

SM: Now does he mean that it is not easy in this dominant non-Indian society, or that it never was easy?

DK: That it never was easy.

SM: Even before the advent of the new Americans, the non-Indians, it was still difficult to be a good Indian person?

DK: Yes, right, as opposed to a bad Indian person. And from now on your people are our people, and ours are yours, making me one of them.

SM: In other words, you have to be trying to be your best almost all the time. The Plains Indian people used to wear symbols on their clothing, on their face, or whatever; these symbols were as reminders, like a good Catholic would wear a crucifix; they were reminders to try to live up to the highest standards of their culture?

DK: That is correct. Some of the things that they wore, like if you had
a belt that was in the peace pipe design, I believe you've read The Sacred Peace Pipe, the book--they don't worship the peace pipe, but it's like the crucifix to the Catholics--it's a symbol of their religion.

SM: It's also a device or a tool, like the Hopis say, a tube through which the spirit reaches you.

DK: Correct. Correct. Very good definition of it. I would never have thought of that.

SM: The Hopis use that more. Well, then, here in St. Louis, or over at Northland Shopping Center, you were taken into the tribe itself with the Name La-ko-ta Ok-shu-la, which means "Indian boy." But that was only the beginning?

DK: That's correct. The adoption ceremony--if you're to be adopted into a family--must be done on Indian ground. Therefore, I had to go to South Dakota, and I didn't know at the time I was going to be adopted into a family, let alone the Red Cloud family. But when I got up there--I took gifts and things like this that I thought they needed and would want and would like to keep, so I took a saddle and some bridles and things of this nature up to them that I knew they'd enjoy, and some food that I knew that they needed, and things that they could use, you know, not trinkets or something like this, but things that they could use. And after I was up there, they wanted to know if I would accept adoption into their family.

SM: They asked you?

DK: Yes. They have to ask. If you ask them you'll never get it. If they ask you, they have honored you very highly, and I told them that I didn't think I deserved it, but, yes, I would accept adoption into
their family. And they said, "Well, we already have the feast and the giveaway planned."

SM: The giveaway?

DK: The giveaway. It's just what the name denotes. They give away. People come from all over the area, and they give the person being adopted gifts. He sits at the right hand of his newly-adopted father; the feast comes first; he is given meat and soup and fry bread and things of this nature. You're sitting there, the women will bring you meat--the meat cannot have any bone in it, because this they would consider an insult to the person that they gave the meat to--soup, fry bread; and the soup incidentally resembles our vegetable soup, and the fry bread is between our bread and our doughnuts--it's a sweet bread, but yet it's very light and airy and it's very delicious. In fact, I could get very, very fat on it.

SM: Is this fried in deep fat?

DK: Yes, it is. It's fried in the open fire, and it's, like I say, very delicious. I ate and ate and ate. I had venison steak that was as thick as my wrist, and I cut it with a fork, which I thought was ironic 'cause I've never had a steak in the finest restaurant in town that...

SM: It had been aged just about right?

DK: Apparently they had been working for weeks preparing all this meal, unbeknownst to me. I guess they just assumed I was going to accept. Well, for one thing, they knew I wasn't going to insult them. They're not fools by any means. After the feast the giveaway comes. The people who come to the feast, which almost everyone in the surrounding area did, they bring you gifts, and before they can give you the gift,
it must first pass the inspection of Red Cloud, or whoever is adopting the person.

SM: In this case it was Oliver Red Cloud.

DK: In this case it was Oliver Red Cloud. They handed him the gift; he would look at it; if it satisfied him, then he would hand it to me, and then it became mine. And they have a very, very wild custom, by our nature and everything, that if you walk into an Indian's home as their guest, and if you would admire a clock on the wall—no matter what it is, no matter how badly they needed it or anything else—before you left that home if you had openly admired it, in words, it must belong to you.

SM: They'd give it to you. This is one of the causes of trouble between whites and Indians down through all the centuries, isn't it?

DK: Because the white man was used to taking.

SM: Yes, and he was not used to giving and sharing like this, whereas the Indian lived in a sort of communal society where everything was shared except one's most personal possessions, like the bow and arrow, for example.

DK: And even then, if someone came in and admired it openly, he would give it to them. The word "selfish" was not part of their life.

SM: They didn't have any swear words in their language, and they didn't have a word for selfishness? And you're in the process of learning the language now. Let's not forget the rest of the ceremony there. Have we covered it pretty well?

DK: Well, the sweat lodge.
SM: Did you go through the sweat lodge too?

DK: Yes, I did. That's a four-hour process.

SM: Were you alone or with others?

DK: No, I was with Oliver Red Cloud, the medicine man, a religious man, and two of my newly-adopted brothers.

SM: Five or six of you in the sweat lodge?

DK: Right. And the medicine man and the religious leader there--incidentally the religious leader is separate from the medicine man--it's just like a priest.

SM: The priest and the doctor--the healer?

DK: Right. They were both in there, and they were both in their 80's, and they went through it fair, and I could just barely walk after I got out of there.

SM: Maybe they were a little more used to it.

DK: Quite obviously. They had gone through it many times. And the rocks that are brought in from the Black Hills are, I guess, the size of maybe a big softball, were white-hot. Yes, they're white-hot, and no light nor air can come through this wickup. That's my name for it, it's a sweat lodge, but it's very, very hot. By comparison the steam rooms around St. Louis, or the steam baths, they're air-conditioned by comparison.

SM: Have you ever been in a Finnish sauna?
DK: Yes, I have.

SM: Is it hotter than that?

DK: Much hotter.

SM: Of course you can make them hotter if you keep on working them.

DK: Well, with these, there's still steam within them, because they open the flaps of the sweat lodge once an hour, and you're given a very small bit of water. You take a sip out of it, only a sip, and the rest you pour on hot rocks, which creates steam.

SM: More steam. And that's where the heat comes from?

DK: Correct. And then they add more rocks to it, and they close the flaps again for another hour.

SM: The reasoning behind opening the flaps was to let out ignorance and to let in wisdom?

DK: That's very true. Even doctors today will tell you that they would much rather you sweat this out of your system. It was . . . well, I was . . . you go into the sweat lodge in the buff—you're totally nude. No woman is allowed near the sweat lodge.

SM: Sometimes they hand in the water or the stones, don't they?

DK: No. Not in the Sioux Nation anyway. I'm unfamiliar with the rest of them, but I know in the Sioux Nation she's not allowed to go near the sweat lodge, unless she herself is going through the purification ceremony in preparation for death. They will have you sweating, and I took a towel in with me that I just sat on, and it was at the
suggestion of Oliver that I do this, and he said, "Are you sure that you can go through the sweat lodge, it gets quite warm?" And I said, "Yes, I will go through it." And he said, "All right." And he gave me a little half-grin, which is about the biggest expression you can get out of him—they're not too flamboyant with their expressions and everything. With this I thought, well, this is one of the tests, you know, you either go through it or you don't. And by the time that four hours was over with, I was awful glad to see the end come, I'll tell you. It was very, very warm. I lost 31 pounds in four hours time.

SM: Thirty-one pounds! You could sell that and make a million for reducing.

DK: Yeah, but there isn't a woman in the country that'd go through it.

SM: It's too rigorous?

DK: The towel that I was sitting upon—I smoke, and I didn't know that that much nicotine could get in a person's system. But the towel was yellow.

SM: The towel was yellow with nicotine from perspiration?

DK: That's right. It was just plain yellow. It's a very remarkable thing.

SM: You lost 31 pounds?

DK: I lost 31 pounds in that four hours.

SM: Did you feel weak after that?
DK: Very. In fact, coming out of the sweat lodge, it was getting dark, and they were preparing for the Yuwipi (pronounced Eu-we-pe) which is the religious ceremony.

SM: Now that follows the purification of the sweat lodge?

DK: Right. And I could just barely get up—partially due to weakness, but also partially due to a back injury that I had gotten from work.

SM: And then you'd been sitting cramped for four hours too, with your legs folded and sitting on the ground?

DK: Right. You could stretch your legs out. You couldn't stand up because the wickiup for the sweat lodge is only about three foot high.

SM: Yes, it would have to be, to keep that steam down around you.

DK: Right. And it's, like I say, very, very warm. But I had had a back injury at work, and I had been treated for three and a half, four, four and a half years. Most of the doctors here . . . one of them wanted to operate on my back. He said that was the only way, and I said "no," and the rest of them wanted to give me all kinds of treatments and everything like this, but virtually told me that I was going to have to learn to live with it. And Oliver Red Cloud's mother, my full-Grandma, walked up, and she said, "Does your back hurt?" I said, "yes," and I didn't tell her where.

SM: Now this is after the sweat lodge?

DK: After the sweat lodge. She said, "Tonight we will heal your back." And I just kind of looked at her, and I said, "All right, Grandma." She said, "Do you believe that we can?" I said, "You've never lied
to me, so I have no reason to disbelieve you." This was my way of saying, "I'm not sure," and I wasn't going to tell her that I didn't believe her, which I wasn't too sure, because I'd seen some very amazing things. But I came out of the Yuwipi that night, and I still had the backache, and she asked me, she said, "How is your back?" I said, "Grandma, I won't lie to you, it still hurts." She said, "Tomorrow morning when you wake up, you won't have a backache, and you won't have it again." And I told her that, "Well, if I wake up tomorrow morning without a backache it will be the first time in about four and a half years that I woke up without one, but, we'll see what happens." I woke up the next day without a backache, and I haven't woke up with one since.

SM: It's been permanent?

DK: Yes.

SM: Now there's a small miracle right there.

DK: And I can't describe it either.

SM: You don't know what happened, but it did.

DK: Well, I know the ceremony that I went through and everything, but once you're inside the Yuwipi, what happens in there stays in there.

SM: After you came out of the sweat lodge, that wasn't the end. You went on to the Yuwipi?

DK: We went to the Yuwipi, which is a religious ceremony.

SM: And that's secret; you're not going to tell about that?
DK: I can tell you portions of it.

SM: O.K. Anything you can tell us.

DK: All right. The prayers and things like this, and things that were said, I cannot tell you. But they had me stand up and face what they said was west, and it was totally dark. There can be no light; there can be no foreign articles or anything else. And the religious leader was standing clear across the room, and the room was maybe 50 feet long, and I could hear him, he was chanting his prayers, and I could hear him and, from the distance, I knew he was far, far out of reach from me, and there was one of the Red Cloud boys sitting on one side of me, and Oliver was sitting on the other side of me, and they asked me to stand up. En-su, the religious leader, asked me to stand up and face west. Well, I didn't even know where I was, let alone where west was, and so I told one of the Red Cloud boys, and he said, "Stand up and we'll face you that way." So I stood up and he turned me, and they turned my back to the medicine man, to the religious leader, and I had not told them where my back hurt, nor why. I had told them that I hurt it at work, but as to how, or any of the details, I had not told them, not even as to where the pain was located. So I faced west, and, all of a sudden, while the religious leader and the medicine man were singing and the drums going and everything, I felt a small hand—what felt like a small hand anyway—it was maybe about this long, but a fully mature hand, but only about this long, about two and a half inches long—I felt this strange thing going down my back and stop right where the pain was. And I thought, "I don't know how he's doing it, but I guess it's all right, it doesn't hurt," you know, and that went away, and I felt then what appeared to be . . . feel like anyway, a powder-puff type thing that did the very same thing. It started at my neck and my shoulders there, and went straight down and stopped right where the pain was, which was almost at the base of my spine; and that went away, and they told me
to turn around and sit down, and I did. And I thought, "Well, if that's healing me, it don't feel good," you know, and I was still in pain, and I was still having pain, because of the sitting and all that, and then I came out of the Yuwipi, and from there on, I've already reiterated what happened then. She told me, "Well, tomorrow you will wake up without pain."

SM: That was when the grandma told you...?

DK: That was when Grandma told me that I wouldn't have pain from there on. And I haven't had. And I've had doctors here for four and a half years trying to cure that.

SM: It's a miraculous cure, isn't it?

DK: I don't know exactly how or what.

SM: Do you think there's something psychosomatic--the faith that you had in what they were doing?

DK: I don't honestly know.

SM: You were honest enough not to say that you had faith--before you did.

DK: Right. I wasn't going to tell them, "Well, look the age of miracles is gone," and I fully expected the next day to wake up with a backache.

SM: But you haven't since.

DK: But I haven't had one since.

SM: How long ago was that now?
DK: That was the same year that they were here, that was four years ago. They were down here in July, and I went up there in August.

SM: 1971, I guess. And then your back has been good since?

DK: It has. And I've never had a problem with a doctor since. I fell here a while back, and I injured my right side along my rib cage, and I thought I broke a couple of ribs, but I didn't.

SM: But that didn't hurt your back any more?

DK: No.

SM: So your back, so far as you know, is in a sound condition?

DK: It's something that I don't understand.

SM: It's a testimonial to what they can do, or what can be done.

DK: I have yet to figure out how this little hand and this little powder puff got to me, because everybody else was on the other side of the room, but I don't question it. I have complete faith in them--you might call it blind faith, you know. Why gripe about success, you know.

SM: If blind faith works, then it's a good thing?

DK: That's right.

SM: You have kind of a pragmatic approach to it, and still you're not going to spoof it or question it.

DK: They've proved themselves to me, as far as I was concerned, because
I was a doubting Thomas. I thought, "Well, all right, I'll go along with it, but I don't think it will help, but I'll go along with it." This is what was going through my head when she mentioned it to me.

SM: All the more credence to the thing if you were actually doubting it.

SK: I was very much in doubt, and yet, I wouldn't have insulted them by telling them this, but when this did happen, well, it was such a miracle to me, such a relief to me. I didn't really understand what was going on, but I accepted it as was.

SM: Well then, at the end of the ceremony in the building, and then after that when Grandma told you about how you were going to feel, was there any more, was that the end of the ceremony?

DK: No. I stayed up there for about a week after that, and we went deer hunting, and I might add that it was completely out of season, but they took me deer hunting for the first time since I was a very, very small boy--the one and only time I went deer hunting--and they have since taken me deer hunting quite a few times. They were very... oh I guess... gracious to me as a hunter, because I told them that, you know, it had been years since I had been deer hunting. So they took me out and I thought it was going to be a snipe hunt when I first got going. They're very, very good practical jokers, and they can do it with the most blunt face you've ever seen, and it tickles the daylights out of them to pull a joke on me. And the oldest Red Cloud boy is constantly trying to pull a joke on me or find something that he can get on me to tease me with or something, and yet he can do it with just the straightest face you've ever seen.

SM: I think it would be worthwhile to repeat that Red Cloud, who adopted you, has natural sons too.
DK: Yes, he sure does. All of his natural sons are younger than I.

SM: They're younger than you, but you are no threat to them because, having been adopted, you cannot follow as hereditary chief.

DK: No. no way.

SM: And there was one other thing you can't do?

DK: Go through the Sun Dance. You have to be full blooded to go through the Sun Dance in the Sioux Nation. In the Chippewa Nation you can go through it if you are at least half Indian. For instance, Dick Lees has gone through the Sun Dance.

SM: So that you, then, while you are adopted, and you are one of their brothers, these boys of Oliver Red Cloud, you don't offer them any threat so they don't have to resent you or anything like that?

DK: In no way, shape or form. In fact, they treat me like a very highly honored guest when I am there. They're just beautiful people, and even the children are extremely well behaved, and Harvey Red Cloud, who is, I guess he's 16, he's the youngest boy, and he's a very mixed-up young fellow, mostly because of the harassment from the schools and things like this, and there's very, very still, even on the reservation itself, some of the teachers there are very, very prejudiced against Indians.

SM: Do you mean the Anglo teachers?

DK: Right.

SM: Where does he go to school?
DK: The Red Cloud School on the reservation.

SM: On the Pine Ridge Reservation at the Red Cloud School. That is not a public school?

DK: It's a parochial school.

SM: Is it a Catholic operated school?

DK: Right. And even though the Red Cloud name is on the school. Red Cloud must pay to send his children to this school.

SM: Now, it's pretty hard living on the reservation where the land is pretty arid, unless you're raising livestock?

DK: Well, the Oglala Sioux don't have cattle and livestock and things like that. Very few of them do. They have some horses, and you'll see a few cattle spread throughout, but not very many.

SM: Do they do any farming or anything like that?

DK: The ground up there is very rolling and very dry and very rocky.

SM: It isn't good for too much except grazing, is it?

DK: You can't use it for anything except grazing. That's why there are so many ranches up in through there. It would be all right for ranching, but you'd have to have an awful lot of ground to even herd maybe 10 cattle; that would take maybe 1,000 acres for 10 cattle to feed off of.

SM: This is something that people back here can't realize, where you have the lush grass growing, and the humidity, and I think 36 to 48 inches
of rain a year. And out there, well, in Minnesota, western Minnesota, it's 24 inches, and then you get to western South Dakota it's getting down to below 20 inches a year. It's not a desert yet, but it's quite arid.

DK: It's almost a desert, with the exception of the snow and everything like this. They have lakes and things of this nature, but it's mostly rock, and a very hilly, mountainous area, where you couldn't possibly run a tractor over it, and you couldn't till it anyway because of the rock. The way they bleach their deerskin out, it's from a clay, and that's mostly what you find up there is clay. It's not good farm land at all, which for the most part, the Sioux are not what you'd call plowsharers anyway. They don't care too much for farming.

SM: They don't like it, they didn't like it to start with?

DK: No, they didn't.

SM: That's why the Dawes Act failed back in 1887?

DK: Right. They're hunters and things of this nature. They're not farm people.

SM: Is there any industry out there now? Are they getting something going?

DK: Not in Pine Ridge. On the other reservation, on Rosebud, there's a little bit. They're a little bit more prosperous in Rosebud than what Pine Ridge is. Why, I don't honestly know, but they've got the pottery factory and things of this nature.

SM: It's just a few miles east.

DK: Yeah, that's true.
SM: That gets closer to more rainfall, but not much different.

DK: Well, even on that one there's not much farming or anything like that that goes on, but they're a little bit more industrious. They've got a pottery factory that they sell pottery and things like this throughout the country. Most of your Indian pottery comes from that area. You get a lot of pottery, or the moccasins that you see in all your stores around St. Louis here, they'll say "Oglala Sioux Moccasins" on them, and they come from Pine Ridge.

SM: Are they made there by hand?

DK: They're constructed by hand--they're put together by hand--but they're cut out by machine.

SM: Like you'd have a pattern-maker in any garment shop.

DK: And a white man owns the factory.

SM: And then the Indian women mostly come in?

DK: The Indian women, they get paid by piecework. For instance, if she puts two pair of moccasins together, then she gets $2.00.

SM: And how many can she do in a day?

DK: She can do 20 or 30 a day if she really wants to, but it takes a lot of tedious work, and it's very hard on the eyes, and there's not much in the way of jobs and things like that out there.

SM: That's some beautiful beadwork you're wearing. Did you get that out there too?
DK: Yes. This is done on leather, and it's called a bolo tie.

SM: It's beads on leather?

DK: Yes. See, the leather's on the inside.

SM: It's like a row of leather with the beads sewn to it. Or is it sewn flat and then rolled?

DK: No. It's rolled and then sewn on.

SM: Now we've got you adopted into the tribe, Don, and you're going back out there, I imagine, at the first opportunity, judging from what you've said; so, when you do go, I imagine you'll have a good time visiting with your foster family out there. Is that true to say foster family, or do you just say "your family" now?

DK: I just say my family. I wouldn't say they were closer than my father and mother, but I would say they were as close. They haven't replaced my father and mother--no one will ever do that, of course--you can't replace blood with water, but, at the same time, they're as close to me as my mother and father, I would say.

SM: That must be a good feeling, to know that you can leave here and go out there and have that kind of reception among people you admire and respect, where you know they want to see you.

DK: Yes, it's not just a good feeling. You walk away from that place with such tranquility--it's quiet, it's peaceful, nobody rushes you; you just forget the world's behind you. You can go out there and totally relax. You eat when you're hungry, you sleep when you're tired. They're back to nature. The women there are very open-minded. If you're sleeping they wouldn't dare to wake you up. Not because
they're afraid of you or anything like this; they just figure that, well, you're tired, you're sleepy. They wouldn't disturb you. And if you were eating, they wouldn't bother you; you're hungry so you're eating. This is a way of life with them.

SM: Consideration for the other person?

DK: Correct. Correct. They're very, very polite with one another. However, they get angry, and when they do, well, as the old saying goes, "You kick a lying dog, you're liable to get bit." And they can be very vicious when they want to be, but they don't prefer to be.

SM: Your choker now that you're wearing. That looks more like an ancient piece.

DK: I don't know how old the bone is, but the eagle claw is fairly old; the eagle was fairly old when it was put on there.

SM: So that we'll have a description now about this--what is the choker made of?

DK: Hair bones.

SM: Or hair pipes. And they're made from?

DK: The foreleg of a deer.

SM: The little white bones are almost white, or off-white bones, and made from the foreleg of a deer, and then there are little red beads, what are they?

DK: They are called pony beads, sort of a plastic-type bead.
SM: They're trade beads, they get them from the trader store.

DK: Correct. And these are called the silver rosette beads.

SM: Oh, each one has a little rose on it. Do they make those, or do they buy them?

DK: They buy those also.

SM: From the trader?

DK: Right.

SM: And then you have a divider, that piece of leather there.

DK: Right. There's deerskin in between.

SM: And then you have these turquoise discs.

DK: These are flat turquoise discs—they're beads.

SM: They got those from the Southwest, I suppose?

DK: Or they traded for them, I don't know exactly how they got them. These they picked up from Minnesota.

SM: Those are pipestone?

DK: Right. That's what the peace pipes are made from. And then the eagle claw itself.

SM: Eagle heel claw in the center for a centerpiece. It's handsomely designed, and it's executed beautifully. That's quite a piece of
work. Is there any significance to wearing the choker, aside from a decoration?

DK: No. They used to wear the breastplate and the choker because it would defer, unless it was close fire, even a cavalry bullet. It would just bounce off, and you'd end up alive instead of with a hole in you.

SM: Well, I imagine they wore them before that.

DK: Oh yes, as decoration; they would give these things to people that they admire.

SM: Do the chiefs have more of a right to wear them, or can anyone wear them?

DK: No, anyone can wear them—the pipebone and things of this nature.

SM: Women, men?

DK: The men wore quite a bit more of them, the breastplate, the chokers.

SM: I've never heard of women wearing a breastplate.

DK: No, the women would wear usually like a 3-strand choker.

SM: This is a 4-strand choker.

DK: And the men can get all the way up to 8 and 10 strands for a choker.

SM: That would be a wide one, wouldn't it?

DK: Yes, it would be. My neck's not all that long, I don't think.
SM: You'd have quite a time with 8 strands.

DK: Yeah, I'd feel like I had a brace on my neck, or something, where I couldn't move, but this one is plenty wide, as far as I'm concerned. But it's a very beautiful piece.

SM: It's a handsome one, and it's all made by hand?

DK: Sewn with waxed thread—I don't know exactly what. It's a very thick piece of thread. At one time they used to sew this with sinew.

SM: And the sinew can be very fine like that.

DK: They can wet this and stretch it out and twist it to where it's finer than any of the silk thread that any woman ever picked up, and yet three times the strength. It's like a wire.

SM: Have you anything else you'd like to add to this? We can always make another if we do think of more things.

DK: Only that I feel very flattered that you asked me. You're a very patient listener.

SM: I think students will enjoy it, and a lot of other people will, not only enjoy, but learn things from it too. So then, I'm going to say thanks very much, Don, and we'll look forward to a chance to meet you again and talk to you again, and you're always welcome in our classes too, by the way.

DK: I'll teach you one Indian word that they say is the most important Indian word in their language, and it's called "pa-lo-mia" which means thank you.

SM: We've learned a new word, and pa-lo-mia to you.