

Message to the Modern World

by
an Indian Chief

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (Summer, 1976). © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

In 1855 President Franklin Pierce of the United States made a “request” to Chief Seathl¹ of the Suwamish tribe of Indians (who lived in what is now the State of Washington) to “sell” his land to the government. In reply, Chief Seathl sent the following letter to the President:

The great chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The great chief also sends us words of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him, since we know that he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer, for we know that if we do not do so, the white man may come with guns and take our land.

How can you buy or sell the sky—the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. Yet we do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know that the white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the red man. But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage and does not understand.

If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. The white man must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. What is man without beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of the spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts also happens to man.

One thing we know which the white man may one day discover: Our God is the same God. You may think that you own Him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the God of

¹ The Chief's name is perpetuated in the name of the city of Seattle in the State of Washington.

men. And His compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This earth is precious to Him. And to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffaloes are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the sacred corner of the forest heavy with the scent of men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wives, where is the thicket ? Where is the eagle? And what is it to say goodbye to the shift and the hunt? The end of living and the beginning of dying.

There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand—the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of the whippoorwill or the argument of the frogs around a pond at night? The Red Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind itself cleansed by the midday rain, or scented with a pine. The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the smell.

We might understand if we know what the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds, so that they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us.

And because they are hidden, we will go on our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure our reservation you have promised. There perhaps we may live out our brief days as we wish. When the last red man has vanished from the earth, and the memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we loved it, care for it as we have cared for it, hold in your mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it, and with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart, preserve it for your children, and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know—your God is the same God. The earth is precious to Him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny.

(Letter released by the United States Government as part of the Bicentenary celebrations).