

Oren Lyons Testimonial
80th Birthday Celebration – New York City – June 17, 2010

Today we honor a great leader – a unique leader who has world-wide impact. A leader whose moral authority and impact places him among a handful of Nelson Mandella-types. He commands a room, not because of ego but because of moral integrity that radiates. He is grounded – grounded in an ancient worldview that says human beings are caretakers not exploiters of the world and each other. While that view has been overtaken by shameless exploiters it is still there, spotty and sometimes underground but still there. Oren represents it at it's best; it is his strength. But there are others who are holdouts for values we have lost, and they don't have his impact. Why? Because we can only scratch the surface in determining qualities that define people. Mysteries can only be celebrated. Lee Lyons, Oren's brother, once said to me, Oren has a small head, I don't see how it can hold so much intelligence and information. Neither do I, but it does, and we're all beneficiaries.

Oren's impact has been felt widely but his influence in the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth is among his greatest. The Circle is a continuation of ancient tradition of consultation among traditional/spiritual leaders throughout Indian country interrupted by Europeans. It was begun again on a sustained basis at the Missouri Headwaters in Montana in 1977. Spiritual leaders from the four directions gathered there and the Traditional Circle of Indian Elders and Youth was born.

The core of the Circle is about 50 leaders from the four directions who hold gatherings called Councils each year in a different part of Indian country in North America. In each place they meet with between three and five hundred or more people so over the years the number associated with the Circle, while not quantifiable, is huge. Their mission is to sustain and build the moral base that has sustained their people over time, and through which the heritage will survive. Their gatherings are by invitation, and deal with ways to overcome adversity through ancient spirit; spirit so strong that in the end everyone is reluctant to leave. Everyone, guests, hosts, less isolated, more connected, stronger, more optimistic, renewed, confident for having spent a week in the world for which they were created and in which their survival lies. The Circle provides the spark that says we are in this together; we come from the four directions; we embrace you and will take your spirit to strengthen us and leave ours to support you. This is the gift we share, and with it we will prevail. That is what the Circle does wherever it goes, and why, in my opinion, it is an indispensable agent of change and renewal in Indian country of North America.

Any Indian is welcome in the Traditional Circle but if they have a personal agenda, or group agenda, they don't fit and they don't stay. The Circle is not a political group, it is spiritual – fundamental – basic . Oren is the most equal among equals. I have a picture of the first

gathering at the Missouri Headwaters. Beautiful area; isolated; timber along the confluence of three rivers forming the Missouri; eagles nesting nearby; antelope and rattlesnakes in the empty hills. My photograph shows Elders seated in a circle on cottonwood logs with a fire in the center; tipis in the background. Oren is standing and speaking; slim, tobacco pouch at his side, long hair down his back, his arm raised. I don't remember the words but I know their effect. He speaks of the beauty and strength of the indigenous heritage, how it holds keys to the welfare of all life, how generations past and generations coming up are counting on them to hold on, to not let it go down. How those sitting around the fire need to use their joint strength to keep their communities strong, to carry the message to all those wavering and bending under the weight of foreign pressure, and to be a lifeline to those adrift in the current of alcohol and drugs. They needed each other in the struggle and they needed to consider seriously the hand that was being offered to them by their brother's circle.

Time has been the great vindicator. The Elders Circle grew into the Elders and Youth Circle and has worked its magic in Indian country from the Arctic to the border of Mexico, with extension as far south as Guatemala. The American Indian institute is the administrative agency and support source for the Elders Circle. The hands extended across a five hundred year chasm have become locked.

The Two Circles have become a beacon, a guide in a world darkened by racial and ethnic calamities. Our little spaceship, earth, is threatened by forces out of control. Forces that feed on power, greed and racial and ethnic antagonism along with their kindred emotions of guilt, hate and fear. Sanity says survival over time will depend on overcoming these destructive, out-of-control faculties, and the Two Circles are proof that it can be done. Miracles have happened under the combined skills and talents of this collaboration, and more are waiting to be born. We need the support of like-minded people in their birth.

I close with congratulations, gratitude and affection to Oren, who most of all I am pleased to call friend and brother.

Bob Staffanson
June 17, 2010

