

Chief Seathl's Testament c. 1855

This presentation is brought to the attention of the visitors to this web site by Chris Day, since it says so much (albeit some of it in archaic terms which may seem anachronistic) about the way in which we should live and move on this Earth and in our land. So much of what is said is true of our present world, only more so. It is lifted directly, with introduction intact, from the booklet 'The Great Chief Sends Word', published in 1977 and reprinted in 1994, by the Saint Bernard Press, Mount Saint Bernard Abbey, Coalville, Leicester LE6 3UL - England. The 1994 reprint admits that it seems likely that this is not a direct transcript of Seathl's speech but that it contains fragments and sentiments from that great man's speech. Read it with love and inspiration.

Introduction

The Red Indians of North America have captured the imaginations of the young - and the not so young - for generations. Their bravery in war, and their savagery too, have formed the plot for many thrilling stories. The names of the Cherokee, Iroquois, Sioux and many other tribes are well known. However the author of the address printed here was the chief of a less well known tribe, the Suquamish, from the north west United States; and he is remembered not for his bravery as a warrior, but for his attempts, which were largely successful, to live peacefully alongside the "Bostons" - the white settlers from the eastern United States.

As a small boy Chief Seathl had seen Captain Vancouver sail up Puget Sound. His imagination was captured by this white man whose orders were promptly obeyed by his men, and the ambition to live in peaceful harmony with the white man was born. It was strengthened by the ta-man-a-wis (or vision) that he had as a young man in the form of a white seagull. The gull was a symbol of peace to the Suquamish, and as it was white, it indicated that his mission was to seek peace with the white men.

At the age of twenty-two (1808) Seathl became the Chief of the Suquamish and its allied tribes. He must have been a successful chief, for 43 years later, when the first permanent settlement was made on the eastern shores of Puget Sound, he was still chief. Soon after the settlement was made he persuaded Dr. David S. Maynard to move his trading post there from the southern end of the sound. Maynard soon became the first Justice of the Peace of Duwamps, Thurston County, Oregon Territory. He didn't like the name "Duwamps" and it was suggested by Arthur Denny, one of the Commissioners, that the settlement be named after Seathl, the man who was chiefly responsible for it. Seathl was at first horrified by the idea, but Maynard persuaded him to accept it. As the Indian "Seathl" was hard to pronounce, it was changed to Seattle, which today is the largest city of the North West.

The Chief's "testament" was an address given to the tribal confederation, probably at the time when the first Governor of the new Washington Territory, Major Isaac Stevens, was annexing Indian lands - mainly by exterminating the Red Man. The "great chief" in Washington D.C. was President Franklin Pierce (1853-57) part of whose Home Policy was to open up the North West. There is a wisdom in Chief Seathl's words which is timeless. Many of the things he feared would come about are with us today, and his words have a great relevance to our modern situation.

Today a statue of Chief Seathl stands at the junction of Fifth and Denny Streets in Seattle, Washington, and the name of his tribe is perhaps preserved in the Skokomish Indian Reservation.

The Great Chief Sends Word

that he wishes to buy our land.

The Great Chief also sends words of friendship and goodwill.

This is kind of him since we know he has little need

of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer.

For we know that if we do not sell,

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.

If we do not own

the freshness of the air

and the sparkle of the water,

how can you buy them?

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.

The sap which courses through the trees

carries the memories of the red man.

The white man's dead forget the country of their birth

when they go to walk among the stars.

Our dead never forget this beautiful earth,

for it is the mother of the red man.

We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

The perfumed flowers are our sisters; the deer,

the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers.

*The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat
of the pony and man - all belong to the same family.*

*So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word
that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us.*

*The Great Chief sends word he will reserve us a place
so that we can live comfortably to ourselves.*

He will be our father and we will be his children.

So we will consider your offer to buy our land.

But it will not be easy for this land is sacred to us.

*This shining water that moves in the
streams and the rivers is not just*

water but the blood of our ancestors.

*If we sell you land, you must
remember that it is sacred, and you
must teach your children that it is
sacred and that each ghostly
reflection in the clear water of
the lakes tells of events and
memories in the life of my people.
The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.
The rivers are our brothers, they
quench our thirst. The rivers carry
our canoes and feed our children.
If we sell you our land you must
remember, and teach your children,
that the rivers are our brothers,
and yours, and you must henceforth
give the rivers the kindness
you would give any brother.*

*The red man has always retreated before the advancing white
man, as the mist of the mountain runs before the morning sun.
But the ashes of our fathers are sacred.
Their graves are holy ground, and so these hills, these trees,
this portion of the earth is consecrated to us.
We know that the white man does not understand our ways.
One portion of 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.
He leaves his father's graves behind, and he does not care.
He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care.
His father's graves and his children's birthright are
forgotten. He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother,
the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold like sheep
or bright beads. His appetite will devour the earth
and leave behind only a desert.
I do not know. Our ways are different from your ways.
The sight of your cities pains the eye of the red man.*

*But perhaps it is because the red man is a savage
and does not understand.
There is no quiet place in the white man's cities.
No place to hear the unfurling leaves in the spring
or hear the rustle of insect's wings.
But perhaps it is 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 lonely cry*

*of the whippoorwill or the arguments of the frogs
around the pond at night? I am a red man and do not understand.
The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind
darting over the face of the pond,
and the smell of the wind itself,
cleansed with the midday rain,
or scented with the pinon pine.*

*The air is precious to the red man, for all things share
the same breath - the beast, the tree, the man, they all share
the same breath. The white man does not seem to notice
the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days,
he is numb to the stench. But if we sell you our land,
you must remember that the air is precious to us,
that the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.
The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath
also receives his last sigh. And the wind must also give
our children the spirit of life. And if we sell you our
land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where even
the white man can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by
the meadow's flowers.*

*So we will consider your offer to buy our land.
If we decide to accept, I will make one condition;
the white man must treat the beasts of this land
as his brothers.*

*I am a savage and do not understand any other way.
I have seen a thousand rotting buffaloes on the prairie,
left by the white man who shot them from a passing train.
I am a savage and do not understand how
the smoking iron horse can be more important
than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive.
What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone,
men would die from a great loneliness of spirit.
For whatever happens to the beasts, soon happens to man.
All things are connected.*

*You must teach your children that the ground beneath their
feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will
respect the land, tell your children that the land is rich
with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have
taught our children, that the earth is our mother.*

*Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth.
If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves.
This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs
to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like*

*the blood which unites one family. All things are connected.
Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.
Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it.
Whatever he does to the web he does to himself.*

*But we will consider your offer to go to the reservation
you have for my people. We will live apart, and in peace.
It matters little where we spend the rest of our days.
Our children have seen their fathers humbled in defeat.
Our warriors have felt shame, and after defeat they turn
their days in idleness and contaminate their bodies
with sweet foods and strong drink. It matters little
where we spend the rest of our days. They are not many.
A few more hours, a few more winters, and none of the
children of the great tribes that once lived on this
earth or that roam now in small bands in the woods
will be left to mourn the graves of a people
once as powerful and hopeful as yours.
But why should I mourn the passing of my people?
Tribes are made of men, nothing more.
Men come and go, like the waves of the sea.
Even the white man, whose God walks and talks with him
as friend to friend, cannot be exempt from common destiny.
We may be brothers after all;
we shall see.*

*One thing we know,
which the white man may one day discover -
our God is the same God. You may think now that you own Him
as you wish to own our land; but you cannot.
He is the God of man, 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 all other tribes.
Continue to contaminate your bed,
and you will one night
suffocate in your own waste.*

*But in your perishing you will shine brightly,
fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land
and for some special purpose gave you dominion over
this land and over the red man. The destiny is a
mystery to us, for we do not understand when the
buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses are
tamed, the secret corners of the forest are heavy with
the scent of many men, and the view of the hills*

*blotted out by talking wires. Where is the thicket?
Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to
say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? The end of
living and the beginning of survival.*

*So we will consider your offer to buy our land.
If we agree it will be to secure the
reservation you have promised. There, perhaps,
we may live out our brief days as we wish.
When the last red man has vanished from this
earth, and his memory is only the shadow of a
cloud moving across the prairie, these shores
and forests will still hold the spirit of my
people. For they love this earth as the
newborn loves its mother's heartbeat.
So if we sell you our land, love it as we've
loved it. Care for it as we've 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 mind, with all your
heart, preserve it for your children,
and love it ... As God loves us.
One thing we know. Our God is the same God.
This earth is precious to Him.*

*Even the white man cannot be exempt from
the common destiny.
We may be brothers after all.
We shall see.*