



Parasites on the Great Spirit

by Frank Dunne, MSPE

(photograph of the Badlands, South Dakota, by Kathy Kendrick)

Consciousness emerged early in the universe. If awareness, the very essence of existence, is what defines being, then it can be said that life's fire ignited soon after the Big Bang's inferno quenched.

The forces of nature split apart, yet never completely autonomous of each other, as space could not exist without all four in perfect harmony. Gravity was the first to leave, ubiquitous, sheer as a dream, filling the continuum as thoughts fill a philosopher's head. Soon it was followed by the weak and strong forces, locked in their own pressure-cooker worlds, no time to rest, no room for error, lest instant annihilation. Where these forces get their energy from is impossible to say. The strong force must channel something from somewhere to maintain its infinite grip on atomic nuclei, but that answer may never be known.

Electromagnetism is different; able to exist in so many places, yet it needs a source. It can travel great distances, depending on the strength of its wellspring, but forever in need of sustenance. Electromagnetism is both a force and a being, a quasi-biological entity, more at home on a planet, a perpetual energy-generator, than in the void of deep space.

Energy beings have always existed on earth, but not pure negative electricity. That would be too much power to contain. Ions were the thing. It started simply, just as carbon-based life would later commence. First, thin wisps of ions began to coordinate movements, and then elementary thoughts and ideas began to coalesce within these nascent beings. It was easy in the early days, because fuel could be grazed from the environment. There wasn't much of it; very sparse, so ionic life forms remained primitive. Then came tangible life, and things changed for the ionics—the

incorporeals. The corporeals had density, and density meant lots of atoms, and atoms meant ionic nourishment—just what the incorporeals needed.

The incorporeals learned to use the somatics for food. At first, single-celled life provided some nutrition, but it wasn't much. Breaching cell membranes at that time was easy, because membranes were so permeable. Cell walls were stubborn, and incorporeal evolution was slowed. Animal life was manna, because there were so many cell entries for the ionic beings to penetrate. Animals and ionic organisms then evolved in tandem.

It's no wonder that animism became a belief. Living bodies, no matter what the species, can appear possessed when the incorporeals invade to feed. Sometimes the invaders just take a little and leave. Incorporeal feedings are mistaken for anything from mild colds to cancers, and even mental diseases. Behavioral disorders often manifest, initiating substance abuses. Sometimes the ionics don't know when to quit and kill the host. In any case, they can cause such an imbalance that the host may actually develop a fatal malady. Modern societies lost contact with the primitives, along with their animism and shamanism, but it's still around for those who observe. The cosmopolitans, though in the light of day denying ghosts and demons, know they're out there. The non-believers contract a multitude of illnesses; the believers get possessed by demons. Take your choice.

This parasitic relationship has existed for hundreds of millions of years, and despite the suffering to humans, it's not so bad. Incorporeals were flourishing and most humans followed suit—but not all . . .

Father Gerry Heyoka was a Roman Catholic priest who was born and raised on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. It was run by the Jesuits, who really did what they could, but despair hung over the land like a miasma. Alcoholism probably affected

everybody in some way. It seemed that the majority of the Lakota inhabitants were always bombed out of their skulls. Father Gerry's own parents, of what he can recall, were both fall-down drunks. They both died when Gerry was young, and he was left an orphan. There were aunts and uncles, and a few bullying cousins, but Gerry never felt a bond. The shame and frustration pushed Gerry hard; so hard that he never drank a drop.

That alone made Gerry different, but it wasn't the only thing, and his Jesuit teachers were quick to notice. Gerry possessed an intellect that set him apart from the ordinary. He plowed through schoolwork and textbooks like a chainsaw cutting through dead tree branches. Gerry consumed knowledge in the same way his hapless classmates consumed booze. And he couldn't stop himself, either. Gerry soon became the talk of the parish; the boy who would be something, the prototype, the shining example for the rest.

Gerry was proud of his budding stature in the community, but that was coupled with modesty and levelheadedness. Egotism was never an issue. From early on, he gravitated toward the Jesuits and felt a sense of belonging among the Order. They welcomed him and guided him, never losing sight of his tremendous intellectual gifts. As soon as Gerry received his high school diploma from the Red Cloud School, the diocese proudly packed him up and sent him to Harvard University—Special Delivery!

Harvard was a place, and a fantasy, that Gerry still has a hard time comprehending, even many years after his introduction. The place was an intellectual candy store, or more like an intellectual candy factory, where ideas and theories could be discussed to their profound depths. Add to that all the cutting-edge technology to test the thought experiments, and you were in thinker's paradise. Gerry's main focus was on chemistry, and he received his undergrad degree and immediately enrolled in the medical school.

He never forgot who he was or where he came from. The plan always was to return to the reservation and do what he could to improve the lives of his people. Gerry took a different approach, and rather than become a surgeon or obstetrician or any other hands-on physician, he chose psychiatry. Gerry wanted to change the way the tribe thought about itself, and maybe that would be the start of a long, slow redevelopment. First he had to find out what made his people tick, and who but a board-certified Oglala shrink would have the best chance of success?

Gerry did his internship and residency in the Dakotas, working very long hours in the psychiatric wards of the hospitals scattered throughout the prairie. Through it all, he never abandoned his tribal roots, or his Catholic faith. Something came over Gerry during this time, maybe it was the stress, or maybe loneliness. Maybe it was something he was destined for, but it was just after residency that Gerry entered the seminary and, a few years later, was ordained a priest. He never stopped his medical rounds, but his rotating shifts allowed him the time to do both. And then he returned home to his old reservation.

Things didn't change much in the ways of poverty and self-destructiveness among the people. Gerry wondered if he could really do any good. Would he just end up a dead, dried-up shell of a man, less than a footnote to the history of the once great but now broken tribe?

But things weren't all bad, and, in fact, there was a spark of life left. Father Crow Eagle was now Monsignor Crow Eagle, and he was one of just a few people that Gerry could relate to, and talk to. He preferred to be addressed as simply "Crow Eagle." Many a night they spent discussing tribal history, the present mess, and its uncertain future. Spoken, too, but in hushed tones, were the old beliefs of the people, what's still called *Wakan Tanka*, the Lakota religion. Talks of spirits and ghosts that embodied all living beings, and also the

non-living, had to be considered. It was the way of the Lakota. It never surprised anyone that Catholicism seemed to mirror the beliefs of the People in many fundamental ways. It's no doubt that that was the reason why the Roman Catholic Church was such a natural fit within Native American communities.

Take, for example, exorcism. It seems illogical, almost ludicrous, that a modern, socially inclusive order would still believe in demonic possession and that which went along with it. It's barbaric, especially to a denomination that prides itself on intellectualism, yet here it stands. Is the ritual an obsolete vestige, not yet discarded, or is it something else? Could it be that the clergy knows something that they don't want the rest of the world to know? Could demonic possession be a reality? Both the Catholics and the Wakan Tanka seem to think so. And a highly educated, battle-hardened psychiatrist was beginning to think so, too.

Gerry had his suspicions long before he climbed the intellectual ladder. Even during his elementary school years, he knew that the millennia-old stories of the Oglala had to have some truth to them. More importantly, why did the spirits abandon his people? Did the tribe lose favor? Or maybe there was a change. Maybe the spirits were different; a new order had arrived, not in the tribe's best interest. Gerry's well-trained mind momentarily questioned his thinking. He wondered if a psychiatrist should rationalize spirits and ghosts. He also wondered if he was doing the tribe an injustice by looking for a mystical answer to its problems, instead of following the empirical guidelines established by Western medicine. After agonizing about it, Gerry decided that both approaches could be melded, and it was time to talk to Crow Eagle.

A special meeting was assembled at the rectory of Holy Rosary Church at the request of Father Gerry. He sent personal invitations to a small, select group of confidants that he

could rely on. And *rely* meant not only on their loyalty, but also on their sound thinking.

Summer was coming to an end in the Black Hills, and that usually meant unpredictable temperature swings. One day could be blazing hot, and the next might be frosty. The nights were always cool in these regions, and the sight of the bird migrations made it feel as though the guests were leaving the party; a little relief and a little sadness. Soon the deafening cawing and honking would be replaced by primeval silence. Just before that, a thin film of ice would form on the ponds and lakes.

The rectory was a small brick building just behind the church. Crow Eagle lived there along with the other parish priests. That evening, six people gathered in the rustic living room, and that included Gerry and the monsignor. A tongue-and-groove spruce ceiling spread above them, and the floor was the same. In between were white plaster walls decorated with Lakota artwork. A stone fireplace stretched to the ceiling, but it wasn't needed tonight. Coffee was served, and each sat comfortably around a low, oak table.

Crow Eagle was in his mid-60s and filled a leather easy chair with his bulk. He was short and fat, the obvious recipient of a lifetime of fried foods and sweets. In all ways, he looked like the human equivalent of a bulldog. Heavy, bow-legged, jowly, and lacking a neck, Crow Eagle deftly incorporated Oglala spiritualism and Roman Catholicism. It was his logic, open-mindedness, and patience that he brought to the meeting.

To his left sat Sisters Dixie Red Willow and Maggie Iron Cloud. They were both licensed social workers and both teachers in the school district. Dixie was in her late 20s, and despite no makeup or any adornments, was a black-haired, black-eyed beauty. The same could be said of Maggie, who was about ten years older. Both were reed thin.

The old man of the group, Father Derek Thunder, sat to the right of Crow Eagle. Father Thunder was a radical, probably from birth, and will be probably right up until his death. The good Father Thunder believed that Catholicism was the European version of the Wakan Tanka religion of the Lakota. He often said, "Just think of all the saints and their various jobs. Is it any different than the Lakota theism? Wakan Tanka traveled the world since mankind's emergence. It took the form of Jesus Christ to the whites, and Buddha in the East. The Great Spirit manifested itself to the various earthly people in various forms since time began."

Father Thunder was an Oglala and made sure everybody knew it. His radicalism was toward his own people. He thought that the answers to his people's problems lie in their return to the old ways. He never wanted to rise above the parish priest rank, and fear of his rabble-raising kept the diocese from promoting him. He was well into his 80s and lean as a ferret, and showed no signs of slowing down.

The last member of the coterie was White Horse, Gerry's childhood friend. White Horse was every bit as smart as Gerry, but lacked motivation, to put it kindly. He started off as a juvenile delinquent, and it went down from there. High school dropout, heavy drinker, divorced, unemployed, and the list goes on. Yet, he had the power to move mountains with his intellect, a power hardly realized. When Gerry needed advice, or guidance, or just a sounding board, he always went to White Horse. And there they sat: six people who had their right feet planted in the ancient world, and their left feet in the Western tradition. Could they find an answer for the tribe's salvation?

"Our tribe has been in decline for over two centuries," Crow Eagle stated. "You think the cause is evil spirits? We sent you to Harvard Medical School for that diagnosis?!"

Gerry grinned sheepishly. "Look," he said, "there's a lot of mental illness to go

around, and I'm not saying that we're not experiencing it here on the reservation, but I see signs of something else going on. It's as if the tribe has been collectively poisoned over the centuries. It's something the white men brought over from Europe that we natives are allergic to, or negatively influenced by . . . "

"We're negatively influenced by European culture," spouted Father Thunder, "and this disease won't stop until we're in oblivion."

"Maybe," Gerry replied, "but my point is that maybe the Europeans brought over some sort of spiritual disease that's killing us from the inside out." The other five understood, and all eyes at once sharpened to focus.

Sister Iron Cloud was the first to react verbally: "I have been cognizant of something odd with our people—something missing, or something amiss. And yes, it's not purely organic. I'd say that the Great Spirit is not guiding them. Not totally gone, but not totally there, either."

Sister Red Willow concurred. "Yes, like someone is driving our people, but they don't know the rules of the road—or something like that."

White Horse sat quietly; his eyes were like buffalo knives. It was as if all sounds and words were devoured by those dark eyes, cosmic black holes, and nothing got past him. He placed his coffee mug on the table and sat back. The room quieted, and then he began to speak. The other five stared in anticipation. Every word from White Horse carried the weight of an anvil.

"There has been something going on for a long time," White Horse stated, "and it's insidious. I have a theory that's worth hearing, although I think Gerry is beginning to see it for himself. It's more than a theory for me, but I know it lacks hard evidence. My thinking is that when Europeans came to our lands, they brought over more than smallpox and gunpowder. Traditionally, all living things

possess spiritual energy, the same as any other energy. In other words, a spirit inhabits each of us. When we die, it may go back to the Great Spirit or linger awhile on the earth. Europeans have their own spirits and their own diseases. Our people were infected by both. The diseases attacked us physically, but the foreign spirits infected our souls, and we've been, for lack of a better term, self-destructive ever since."

Gerry nodded slightly as he stared at White Horse. Then Gerry looked at the other four. "What are your thoughts, Crow Eagle?" Gerry asked.

Crow Eagle was as unmoving as a boulder. For a minute, he sat with his hand under his chin. Then he said, "I think we all said the same thing. Does anybody in this room not believe White Horse's assessment?" Nobody disagreed.

"What can anybody do about it?" asked Sister Iron Cloud. "I'll help in any way I can."

"To help is why we're here," Crow Eagle stated. "Father Thunder, tell us about your idea."

"It's not my idea," Father Thunder corrected. "I'll simply explain a hypothesis that's been bantered around for longer than you can imagine. According to some medicine men, a powerful demon dwells in the Badlands. This evil spirit originally hitched a ride within a European settler. This spirit was weak, but once the settler died, it escaped to infect our people. It grew to be powerful and ever hungry for more souls. From its lair, it extends its tentacles throughout our people. And if we ever want to break free of this monster, we'll have to go to its secluded fortress and kill it; if that's even possible."

"So, what's the plan?" asked White Horse. "The tribe needs a second chance, and so do I. Whatever it is, I'll do."

Ideas and theories were bantered about throughout the evening. White Horse, Father Thunder, and Crow Eagle were the most vocal, at times yelling at each other. Sister Iron Cloud served as the mediator, pointing out strong points and flaws of the various arguments. Sister Red Willow was a silent observer, as was Gerry. Gerry absorbed everything that was said, trying to separate reason from the irrational. All the time he was assessing a plan of action. Red Willow sat robotically, without emotion. Gerry couldn't figure her out. He just dismissed her lack of emotion to youthful timidity.

At last, in the early morning hours, a plan of action was hatched. Four of them would trek into the Badlands, armed with ancient, ceremonial incantations, and try to exorcise and destroy the root demon, whom the Oglala still call *Unktehila*. There's a burial ground hidden among the countless hoodoos of the Badlands that legend tells is where Unktehila resides. It's not a very old gravesite, as Oglala gravesites go—only a few hundred years. It is, though, where this ultimate demon reigns. The old chiefs and medicine men hoped the fiend would stay put, but it didn't. It struck out from its nest and wreaked its destruction ever since. The burial ground was kept secret since that time, with only a few tribal leaders informed of its location. Crow Eagle knew its location.

It was decided that Gerry, White Horse, and Sisters Iron Cloud and Red Willow would make the journey. Father Thunder was too old for the mission, and Crow Eagle's weight and diabetes wouldn't permit his inclusion. They all knew the incantations—part of being spiritual leaders in two worlds. White Horse knew the sacred words as an obligation to his heritage. Life might have dealt him dirt, but he would, nonetheless, live it as a culturally enriched Oglala.

Over the next few days, the four assembled the supplies they needed. No one knew how long the mission would take, but they were all seasoned survivalists, capable of living off

the barren lands, probably indefinitely. Still, tents, sleeping bags, and a week's worth of dried foods were included. Portable water filters were added, but no water. Their pride didn't permit that luxury. They would find the precious liquid throughout their trek. Ritual icons and ceremonial clothing topped the list of supplies. Then Crow Eagle drove the four spirit hunters north and eventually through an inconspicuous entrance into Badlands National Park. He continued deep into the inhospitable land. The four-wheel-drive truck stayed true, and at last they halted.

Grainy hoodoos towered on all sides of the intrepid band. These otherworldly structures were wind-carved sandstone ziggurats, with each geological layer a different tone. Crow Eagle stopped near the bank of a large stream that wound through the forbidding megaliths. Everyone got out and stretched.

"You know," White Horse commented, "I thought I knew every inch of the Badlands, but I never saw this place."

"Me, either;" Gerry agreed, "I was never in this part of the park. I didn't even know there was an entrance over here."

"There isn't," Crow Eagle answered, "at least not a public entrance. We're in a section of the Badlands that nobody is allowed to go, except chosen medicine men, and it was never made public knowledge. It's a peculiar place. Just take a look at this stream. Unusual to have one out here, don't you think? It's fed by an odd, underground aquifer."

Old, tortured foxtail pines stood fitfully along the banks for as far as could be seen. Purple sage grew low to the ground. Nothing else could live in the depleted soil. The trees themselves looked like demons. Crow Eagle walked over to a large patch of bushes and pulled out two fiberglass canoes.

"They're not bull boats, but they'll do," Crow Eagle joked. "These were put here yesterday. You'll travel in pairs, paddling until you get

to the gravesite. When you get there, you'll have to summon Unktehila with the sacred words. Once you do that, use the Great Prayer to destroy it. After that, use the satellite phone to contact me. If I don't hear from you, I'm not coming to get you. We'll figure that you're monster stew and there's nothing left of you. *Tókhi wániphika ní!*"

Crow Eagle drove away while the team loaded their supplies into the canoes. Then they pushed the boats into the slow-moving stream and paddled toward their destination. Iron Cloud sat in the front of one canoe while White Horse took the stern. The other watercraft had Red Willow in the bow as Gerry steered from behind. In a couple of hours, it was twilight, and they pulled ashore to camp for the night. The cooking fire reflected off the twisted trees and hoodoos to cast weird and strange shadows. This was a supernatural place, a land of ghosts and phantoms that not even a Harvard-educated psychiatrist could rationalize.

Dawn broke, and after a cold breakfast, they were on the water. It was a chilly autumn morning. Migrating birds flew above in the cloudless sky. A steady breeze pushed against the boats, but not enough to slow their progress. Deformed trees leaned like agonized souls, silently watching the travelers pass, and the eroded stone columns formed a maze that only the stream could solve. It was truly an uncanny place.

They stopped to rest several times, eating and rehearsing the plan for when they arrived at the sacred cemetery. Tensions were high. White Horse seemed to grow strong, filled with a focus and direction that Gerry never saw in him. Maybe the crisis was the thing White Horse needed to become the person he always should have been. Maybe his determination had momentarily subdued his evil spirit. The coming battle would tell.

As her name indicated, Sister Iron Cloud was like iron—unemotional, focused on the

task, with a confidence in herself that people were drawn to. She had the charisma that comes from inner strength. Her partner, Sister Red Willow, continued her stoic silence but showed no fear. Gerry knew of White Horse's great intellect since their childhood days, and Iron Cloud seemed his equal. However, Gerry barely knew Dixie Red Willow. Although Oglala, she wasn't from the reservation. She said she originally came from the north, but was whisked away as an orphan to some out-of-state convent at an early age. Then, just a few months ago, she showed up at Pine Ridge. For what it was worth, both women were up for the mission at hand.

Just before the gloom of night, the demon hunters caught sight of grave markers. On the left bank, arranged rings of fist-sized stones encircled bare, clay mounds. Some plots were modest, but others included tribal ornaments. The cemetery had an irregular shape, owing to the rough terrain, yet it carved out almost an acre of land. Old wooden shields and spears dangled off partially collapsed burial scaffolds. Skulls and ribs and hand bones could be seen on the elevated platforms. Sunset glowed red and bathed the hoodoos, gnarled evergreens, and sacred ground in a palpable melancholy. All at once, Gerry felt the past greatness of his people and the emptiness of what was left. The canoes touched the bank, and the team stepped onto land.

"I feel sad," Gerry said.

"Sad for what we're doing," Iron Cloud asked, "or depressed?"

"Depressed," Gerry answered.

"I feel it, too," White Horse said, "We all feel it, because we're close to the archdemon—Unktehila. If we don't do what we have to do now, we never will. The great devil will suck the willpower and life out of us!"

Each member quickly dressed in ritualistic shaman attire. The men carried willow-wood



(illustration by Holly McClanahan)

shields. It was growing dark, and no one wanted to get caught in a paranormal demon fight in the pitch of night. They hurried to a clearing in the center of the graveyard and stood as a square, back-to-back, with each spirit hunter facing a different direction.

“Come forth, Unktehila, come forth!” Gerry boomed.

“*Hiyo wo!*” White Horse shouted, “*Hiyo wo Unktehila!*”

The ground rumbled as if irritated by a prodding spear. Scaffolding crumbled, and bare bones rattled down to the hard earth. Something had come to life in this place of the dead. Then the skeletons began to stand.

Iron Cloud and Red Willow raised their palms into the air and began to chant Lakota incantations. It enraged whatever dwelled

below, and more skeletons rose and walked toward the four. Cracks in the dry soil formed, and fleshless hands emerged. Gerry and White Horse trained their focus on this immediate crisis and shouted powerful mantras.

“*Wóasnikiye até!*”

“*Ištíŋmá até!*”

“*Wičhátá wóšiče!*”

It was working, and some of the skeletal abominations were collapsing and turning to dust. The Sisters did not rest and continued chanting. White Horse and Gerry used their shields to beat back any advancing skeletons.

The ground beneath their feet heaved as if breaking its binding chains. A hand from a nightmare reached out and grabbed the soil—a hooked claw on each thick finger. The brute emerged slowly, part human, part reptilian: the

embodiment of evil. Horns sprouted from its forehead, and its red eyes pierced the hunters like arrows. Unktehila had surfaced.

For a moment, the group stood silently—awestruck. All at once, they faced their utmost enemy, the most destructive force on earth, and everything rested with these four mortals. The Sisters resumed chanting. Gerry and White Horse shouted the Great Prayer at the creature, but nothing could stop it or even slow its pace toward them. Spiked fangs gleamed in its grotesque maw. If these spiritual leaders were killed, the last hope of the Lakota would die with them.

Red Willow stopped chanting, turned, and stared into the beast's baleful eyes. The others turned and looked at the Sister. "Step aside," Red Willow roared. The other three were startled, but did as ordered. Nothing else moved.

Despite the dark, moonless night, Red Willow was becoming visible, as if she were glowing from within. A few seconds later, it was apparent that she was becoming luminescent. Unktehila growled and moved forward, approaching Red Willow. She replied with her own growl. The Sister then took a wide stance and extended her arms toward the monster. Her hands were clenched. "*Nitháwa wičhátA ktA kíčičau Oglala wičhóni!*" Red Willow bellowed as lightning bolts discharged from both fists, hitting Unktehila squarely in its chest.

The blast was deafening. The light burst temporarily blinded the others. When his sight returned, Gerry lit a lantern. The four stood alone. The skeletons lay scattered and Unktehila was gone. No more. An odor of ozone permeated the air, but so did a sense of tranquility.

Red Willow returned to normal. Then she glanced at White Horse. "How's your outlook on life?" she asked, panting.

He had a puzzled gaze. "Oddly, it's like I won a million dollars and was made chief all at the same time," he replied.

"Thought so."

"May we please have an explanation, young lady?" Iron Cloud inquired, confused but not afraid.

"Of course," Red Willow replied. "I am an Oglala Sister, but I'm not quite human, either. The existence of other highly intelligent beings on earth has been known since antiquity. We have just had a confrontation with a member of the Edimmu. The Edimmu are a parasitic life form that was first discovered by the Sumerians, and hence named by them. Usually they're not very harmful, because they are species-specific. In other words, racial and ethnic groups become tolerant of the endemic Edimmu subtypes. Unfortunately, when Edimmu switch ethnic groups for feeding, the hosts develop a certain type of incompatibility with them; sometimes with terrible consequences. That's what happened when European Edimmu invaded Native American tribes. The foreign Edimmu eradicated the native Edimmu. They brought us to the brink of physical, mental, and emotional death."

"The Vatican knew about the Edimmu for over a thousand years because of the effects of world-wide colonizations. It took awhile, but Vatican geneticists, inspired by Gregor Mendel, developed a small group of us that can generate electrical fields that can kill the Edimmu. Just like electric eels. This was one small battle in a war that may have no end."

"That doesn't explain the appearance of Unktehila," Gerry stated. "What of Unktehila?"

Red Willow looked at Gerry. Her mouth formed a coy smile. "The Pine Ridge Oglala are now liberated," she replied. "It's time to move on."

~The End~