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Wo'kikso'ye!: Live and Remember. Reflections on Akicita Cik'ila, Little Soldier, Alex Lunderman (1929-2000)

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***Wo'kikso'ye!:* Live and Remember. Reflections on *Akicita Cik'ila*, Little Soldier, Alex Lunderman (1929-2000)**

Richard William Voss and Joel R. Ambelang

Abstract: It isn't often that one gets to meet someone like Alex J. Lunderman, Sr. His Lakota name was Akicita Cik'ala (Little Soldier). The co-authors of this reflection worked closely with Alex over the years in different ways. Richard Voss, who is the speaker in this narrative, met Alex (Little Soldier) in his personal spiritual journey that eventually linked to his research interests in a number of collaborations with Alex (Little Soldier) and other Lakota Elders (Voss, R. W., Douville, V., Little Soldier, A., & White Hat, Sr., 1999a; Voss, Douville, Little Soldier, & Twiss, 1999b). Joel Ambelang followed this research closely and became interested in conducting his own study of Alex's leadership style. Joel discussed this interest with Richard, who introduced him to Alex Lunderman whom he eventually interviewed, including excerpts in his dissertation: *Zuya: A Journey of Understanding Lakota Leadership through the life of Little Soldier* (Ambelang, 2003).

Keywords: Lakota Sioux Tribe, tribal elder and leader, traditional ways of help and healing, Indigenous social work

How I met Alex Lunderman on my Spiritual Journey

I met Alex in an Inipi (Sweatlodge) Ceremony during the summer of 1992. I invited him to come and speak at a small college where I was teaching in order to talk about Indian affairs, specifically a Statement by the U.S. Bishops entitled: *1992: A Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People*. Alex showed up on the day of the program to my complete surprise. While I had invited him to speak, I had not heard from him to formally confirm his attendance. He arrived at the program on time and at his own expense. I remember him saying that whenever he promises to do something, he has to do it. He quipped, "If I say I'm going to punch you, I've got to do it!" This is when I discovered the power and intensity of this man. Alex had a lot to say during this panel discussion which made some people very uncomfortable. But Alex was not about making white people feel comfortable when talking about his experiences growing up in an Indian Boarding School.

As Alex spoke about the plight of Indians on the reservation during his remarks you could have heard a pin drop. This was also the time I, a non-Indian, learned some of the mechanics of academic oppression, colonization and the ways racism crushes people. He talked about how Indian people have resisted and transcended these forces and promoted counter-forces through cultural practices

that build resilience across generations. Alex was a picture of transcendent resilience – living up to his name, *Akicita Cik'ila*, Little Soldier, he was a fighter and a warrior, which is what he used to say social work was all about for him – "protecting and helping the people [nation]." Alex was six credits short of completing his B.A. from Sinte Gleska University the year before he passed on (Ambelang, 2003). He was a life-long learner and teacher. In my mind he was a practical social worker and educator. In the obituary that appeared in the *Rapid City Journal*, R. White Feather noted, "He [Little Soldier] was instrumental in setting up those organizations in South Dakota to help Indian people...he was an astute defender of tribal sovereignty and tribal jurisdiction" (2000).

Context of this Reflection: Personal Vantage Point

Alex J. Lunderman, Sr., (Little Soldier) was born October 26, 1929 and passed on to the Spirit world on December 5, 2000. He was a member of the *Sicangu* Lakota Tribe. Little Soldier was elected vice chairman of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in October 1999. He was Tribal President from 1985-89 and 1991-93. He served many terms on the tribal council and as a public defender with the tribal court system. He took a leadership role as an executive with the American Indian Relief Council and the Native American Heritage Association. He was an elder, a pipe carrier, and medicine man. He was a father, a husband, a grandpa, and a friend to many. Besides these roles Alex was also my mentor and the co-author of two articles we co-published about traditional methods of

helping and healing (Voss, Douville, Little Soldier, & White Hat, 1999a; Voss, Douville, Little Soldier, & Twiss, 1999b).

While there was controversy about non-Indians writing about Indian topics, Alex always encouraged me to be “single minded” or focused on doing the right thing which meant always “putting the sacred pipe in front of you” [being guided by prayer]. I know that he would send spiritual help to me and all of his family when we needed it, which was pretty much all the time. Alex loaded my pipe and “put me up” three times for a traditional *Hanbleceya* or Crying for a Vision ceremony. It was after this that Alex gave me my Indian name, *Ohitika Wicasa* – he translated as “Keeps his word.” My Oglala relatives translated this name as “Tough Man.” They would tease me and say, go tell that Oglala guy over there your Indian name. If he laughs, it’s not a good name for you! I did this a few times and felt good when no one laughed. So it is from this personal relational vantage point I am sharing this reflection on Alex.

Alex: The Man & Visionary

Alex never minced his words. During his talk on his Indian boarding school experience he noted how the priests at the Indian boarding school used to abuse him and the other Indian kids. When he would see those same priests as a tribal leader, he would shake their hands and extend to them respect, understanding, and forgiveness. He would always say, “I know how things work...” He was profoundly aware of systems dynamics. He understood the mechanics of oppression but never blamed anyone, although he would often question, “who’s benefitting from it?” He also had a way of being disarmingly personal. In one breath, he would recall the abuse he experienced as a student in Indian boarding school; in the second breath he would kid, saying, “hey Father...it’s my turn now...!” [my turn to punch you]. Alex would assume the boxer’s stance that he learned as a champion U.S. Air Force boxer and show his winning smile. He had forgiven the priests who abused him. This was a delicate balance. Alex was a big man with a gentle heart. His “punch” was only verbal and always done in a teasing way.

The *Tios’paye* Project

Alex was both a realist and a visionary. I remember him talking with enthusiasm about the *Tios’paye* Project, a federal initiative that took place in the 1970s to support and restore Indian cultural life on the reservation. The program encouraged the collecting of stories from elders and medicine men, learning and preserving traditional skills, and chronicling accounts by elders on traditional Lakota life and culture. A set of videotapes of these interviews is archived at Sinte Gleska University, Mission, South Dakota. The films chronicle the wisdom of many medicine men and elders, as well as how to cut and hew native pine logs and build a log home. Alex participated in this initiative and as part of this project built three log octagon buildings. Two of them were constructed at his Ring Thunder home and the other was constructed at Green Grass, South Dakota.

Inspired by the Sacred Pipe, Alex’s vision was to create a Lakota community returning to traditional ways, crafts, skills, and cultural practices. His vision was partially realized. The community at Ring Thunder became a center for visitors from around the world to learn Lakota knowledge and approaches to things. Alex had an open door policy. If you were sincere and genuinely interested in learning, you’d be welcomed. I remember conversations that went into the nighttime, interspersed with times to eat!

Interactions with Alex always left me doing an “examination of conscience” as we Catholics would say. But he never held back from telling about his experiences with the Catholic Church while simultaneously holding his past teachers in high respect – “what doesn’t kill us, makes us strong,” he used to say. He understood his Indian values and lived them out in his everyday life. He never hurt anyone intentionally. Even when he was giving out some criticism, he would couch it in such a way that you could hear it and take it in or sometimes you might understand it a month or year later. He would do the same when giving a complement. He had a way of balancing things out. Alex was a complex man. He was a tough man. He always warned me not to be “double-minded,” and to keep my primary focus on the spiritual. Often when speaking to me, Alex would not look at me. Initially this felt very awkward. One time I asked him “why didn’t you look at me when speaking?” He answered very directly, “then I might

get distracted from your words...”

Alex Little Soldier's Story

Alex was pretty open about telling his story. He shared the following with Joel:

My folks lived in a tent along Rosebud Creek. That's how I grew up. I lived in a tent until I started school when I was nine years old. That was good. Like most Lakota, my parents were poor. I was orphaned when I was fourteen. I went to school [St. Francis Mission School through grade 10]. But I lived all over in the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] days. I lived all over this reservation, Milks Camp, Spring Creek, He Dog, wherever we built dams, we would live there. I left the reservation in 1947, when I was seventeen years old, because there were no jobs here. No work and I didn't understand the politics. I was gone thirty years (Ambelang, 2003).

Alex the Warrior

Alex enlisted in the U.S. Air Force and fought on the Air Force boxing team. He said:

I think I was in shock when I went to Amarillo, Texas. I was headed for Texas for basic training. I got on the train and moved to the back with my bags. I was sitting there and this conductor comes over, he's Black, and he says 'you don't belong back here.' I said, 'Why not?' He said 'you don't belong back here, you belong up front, that's for white people.' I said, 'I'm not white.' He said, 'you belong up there.' So I went up in front, out there with the white people. And it was a shock. That isn't what they told me in school, St. Francis Mission. "Everybody is loving and God died for you, Jesus died for you." And I thought that is the way it was, and it isn't. It was segregation, even in the military back then. So that woke me up, too. I went in the service and stayed there for four years. When I got out I had bad nightmares.

Now I understand what that's about. I was in a bomb group...back in 1950 and '51. And when I got discharged I had some nightmares. Bombers would be coming. They were in a beautiful

formation. They'd open their bomb bay doors and then they'd be bombing me. I'd go nuts. My aunt [Eunice Hale] would wake me up. I had nightmares like that for two years. I drank for two years, and one day they went away. Maybe I got too drunk or something but they went away (Ambelang, 2003).

Alex used all of his personal assets to serve his tribe. He taught through interpersonal connections and experience. I recall my first visit to the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. He told me to meet him in town. I recall feeling a little anxious about this, since “in town” seemed pretty vague. I put aside my anxiety and made my way to Mission, South Dakota (from West Chester, PA) and recall wondering: “what am I doing here?” I remember standing on the corner – an obvious newcomer to the Rez, and before I knew it Alex was calling my name, “RICHARD VOSS!” emphasizing the first letter of my first and last name. It felt very endearing.

I realized that Alex spent most of his time driving around the Rez in his beat-up pickup truck, finding out who needed help, and he would help them in concrete terms, giving cash to buy heating oil or gas or delivering food to elders who could not get out to shop. To Alex, a “warrior” was someone who actively protected the people. This was his view of what social workers did. He said that, “in the old days, the warriors WERE the social workers!” He had great respect for social workers.

One of the most defining moments in Alex's tribal leadership was his response to Judge Porter's order of 1988 that allowed the State Patrol onto the Rosebud Sioux Indian Reservation. Alex said, “like hell would they come onto this reservation,” and he stood in the middle of the main road to the Rez and blocked the State Patrol from entering, virtually kicking them off the reservation. He explained to the Patrol that the Eighth Circuit Court threw out Judge Porter's order and backed up our right to sovereignty (personal communication, 1999; see also Doll, 1994, p. 32).

Alex: A Bicultural Man

Alex was truly a “bi-cultural” man. He attended St. Francis Indian School in the 30's, where he learned the basic skills and knowledge that he would need in the larger non-Indian world. In addition to his military service, Alex also was a successful businessman in the

painting business and settled down as an “urban Indian” in his young adulthood. He commented that:

I went to Chicago, joined the painters union. And I was much happier there for the next twenty some years. I did some high work. There aren't too many people do high work in my union so I did that. Then I moved back in 1977, back to the Reservation, out to Ring Thunder. I had some land out there, so I moved back... [that] helped me to know about me, helped my kids and my family know about themselves. It's individuality is what it is. It's not, it's a group but you are all individuals. It becomes understandable after awhile. So I've been doing what I've been doing since 1977. Then I became involved in Hanbleceyapi [Crying of a Vision or Vision Quest] ceremonies, going on the hill and praying. I'd been told a vision, and that's how it started. That's how I get my answers. I had a vision in June of 1979 (Ambelang, 2003).

Alex understood how business worked and could relate to a wide range of people across racial lines, which was remarkable in many ways. Returning to Rosebud, Alex was recognized for his political skills and was identified as an up and coming leader. He noted:

In July, Robert Stead was our councilman. He called a meeting and said, “I'm tired. We need someone younger. You be our councilman.” They talked me into it, so I ran and became a councilman, vice president. I became president for four years...never forgetting the vision and how I got here. That's my road. I'm a man of vision. I got to help people. I don't worry about pettiness in politics. That's nothing compared to the vision I had, and I'll carry it on. I've had other visions, but that was the first, most significant one. The rest are just giving me directions for certain things. I guess I'm an example. That isn't what I wanted to be, but it appears that's what I am. I don't drink – it's sober leadership. The hardest virtue is being truthful. But I have always said I want to do that to the best of my ability. That's my goal (Ambelang, 2003).

“Once you pick up the Pipe, there's no putting it down”

One of the first stories I heard from Alex was when he picked up the sacred pipe. I think it was when he

learned about “single-mindedness” and not turning back. Of course, he always spoke in relational terms; as he recalled his life experiences, he was teaching others as well – he did so with humor, wit, and purpose. Alex recalled the following:

One day I went to a ceremony, and that changed my whole picture. In my house, in a suburb of Omaha [Nebraska], I had a bar in the basement, and I had a pipe, a peace pipe, above my bar [The pipe was given to Alex by his wife's grandfather, Charlie Red Cloud]. I could always say I was an Indian. All my drunken buddies...[could say] “He's the Chief,” not understanding that, hey, one day...anyway, I mixed my usual – it was New Year's Day, 1975 – I mixed my usual drink. Raw egg, tomato sauce, double vodka, Tabasco sauce, and I was sitting there. Had it [the drink] on the coffee table looking at my bar...I put on a Hank Williams record – the next record was Kitty Wells – everything, every song he sang...see I met him way back in 1947 in Kansas. I'm a hillbilly. So they were playing and then I cried thinking way back in my whole life how I went to synagogues and whatever, joined a church because of a pretty woman and stuff like that. I was young...

But then, I didn't take the drink. I looked up and I saw the peace pipe. And I said, ‘Hey, I've heard about you; I know about you. But I really don't know anything. I grew up with you, but that was 1938, and then I was gone.’ So anyway I took it down. Said, ‘I don't know anything about you.’ I prayed when I was overseas in some kind of difficulty or danger. I prayed to God, but nothing happened. There's something wrong somewhere and I prayed to Mom saying, ‘Hey, help me Mom.’ I got help. There's something here. So I took the pipe and I said, ‘I don't know how to use you.’ I took a cigarette, broke it up, put it in there and prayed to the four directions. And I heard singing. I was crying. Couldn't take that drink. I quit everything after that, quit smoking and partying. [It] changed my life (Ambelang, 2003).

Closing Thoughts

When I visited Alex he would usually put me up in his log cabin with a dirt floor, a little ways down from the house. There was neither electricity nor plumbing in the cabin, but there was a wood stove, a sofa, and

chairs. Lighting was by a camp lantern and candles. Many of our conversations took place in this simple space with the fresh smell of wood smoke and burning sage. It was a great place for me to go to absorb conversations and observations I made while visiting Rosebud. While it has been many years since I've visited Alex's cabin, I retained a poem he wrote about it, and now believe that Alex Little Soldier was speaking of himself as the cabin in his handwritten "Medicine spirit" poem:

Medicine spirit

I live in a wooden castle in the land where
thunder rolls.
And a circle appears in the sky with a silver
afterglow.
Old Horn Chips built this cabin, so many years
ago.
And filled the holes with mud to keep out Iya's
cold.
With drum, song and rattle blanket wrapped and
tied
He called upon the Spirits before the sick ones
died.
He saw into the future and understood the past.
He also taught our young men how to do the
Vision Fast.
His Spirit still lingers in this old wood house of
mine.
I have heard his voice and saw him pass
Through the doorway from time to time
I have heard his songs and whisper prayers,
Saw his buffalo robe shine.
As his spirit moves in a kindly way,
Through this old house of mine.
Mitakuye Oyas'in, We are all related.

- Akicita Cik'ala (Little Soldier)

I hope this reflection helps the reader understand a little about this remarkable Lakota elder whose spirit

and legacy lives on today in all those he touched.
Wopila tanka! (Thank you!).

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