

Chief Seattle's Speech

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By Walt Crowley, June 28, 1999

In addition to his namesake city, Chief Seattle (178?-1866) is best remembered for a speech given, according to pioneer Dr. Henry Smith, on the occasion of an 1854 visit to Seattle of Isaac Stevens (1818-1862). Stevens was governor and Commissioner of Indian Affairs of Washington Territory. He visited in January and again in March 1854. Chief Seattle's speech went unnoted in the written record until October 29, 1887, when the *Seattle Sunday Star* published a text reconstructed from admittedly incomplete notes by Dr. Smith.

Smith rendered his memory of Chief Seattle's speech in the rather ornate (to modern ears) English of Victorian oratory. Chief Seattle would have given the speech in the Lushootseed language, which then would have been translated into Chinook Indian trade language, and then into English. Smith's text is a necessarily filtered version of the speech and was certainly embellished by him.

Smith's reconstruction lacks corroboration in the written record, but it is far from implausible. Seattle was well respected among his own people and settlers as a powerful and eloquent orator in his native tongue. It is likely that he was present to meet Governor Stevens in January 1854. Stevens' assistant George Gibbs noted his presence during the March 11, 1854 meeting. Also, there are several accounts in pioneer records of Chief Seattle giving speeches to large crowds.

Frederick James Grant included Smith's text in his 1891 *History of Seattle, Washington* and Clarence B. Bagley reprinted a slightly altered version in his 1929 *History of King County, Washington* (Vol. I, pp. 114-116). Most significantly, Bagley appended a new close without explanation or attribution: "Dead -- I say? There is no death. Only a change of worlds."

Bagley's version was reprinted in Roberta Frye Watt's 1931 memoir, *Four Wagons West*. That same year, John M. Rich used the Bagley text in a popular pamphlet, *Chief Seattle's Unanswered Challenge*. The speech was revived in the 1960s, notably in articles by William Arrowsmith and Ted Perry (who introduced entirely new material), and these fabricated versions became something of a manifesto for human rights and environmental activists. The evolution of Henry Smith's text is analyzed in detail by Albert Furtwangler in *Answering Chief Seattle*, published in 1997.

The words themselves remain a powerful, bittersweet plea for respect of Native American rights and environmental values. The version below duplicates Dr. Smith's text as published by the *Seattle Sunday Star* on October 29, 1887, and as reprinted in Grant's 1891 *History of Seattle, Washington*. Furtwangler has merged the two texts since the sole copy of the extant newspaper version is damaged. (It now resides in Special Collections at the University of Washington Library.) The

speech, along with Henry Smith's account of it, is reproduced here with all original punctuation and spelling.

Henry Smith's Account of Chief Seattle's Speech

“When Governor Stevens first arrived in Seattle and told the natives he had been appointed commissioner of Indian affairs for Washington Territory, they gave him a demonstrative reception in front of Dr. Maynard's office, near the waterfront on Main street. The Bay swarmed with canoes and the shore was lined with a living mass of swaying, writhing, dusky humanity, until old Chief Seattle's trumpet-toned voice rolled over the immense multitude like the startling reveille of a bass drum, when silence became as instantaneous and perfect as that which follows a clap of thunder from a clear sky.

“The governor was then introduced to the native multitude by Dr. Maynard, and at once commenced in a conversational, plain and straightforward style, an explanation of his mission among them, which is too well understood to require recapitulation.

“When he sat down, Chief Seattle arose with all the dignity of a senator who carries the responsibilities of a great nation on his shoulders. Placing one hand on the governor's head, and slowly pointing heavenward with the index finger of the other, he commenced his memorable address in solemn and impressive tones.”

[Note: Native Americans believed that Washington was still alive and that King George was the ruler of England.]

Chief Seattle's Speech

"Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion on our fathers for centuries untold, and which, to us, looks eternal, may change. Today it is fair, tomorrow it may be overcast with clouds. My words are like the stars that never set. What Seattle says, the great chief, Washington ... can rely upon, with as much certainty as our pale-face brothers can rely upon the return of the seasons.

"The son [a reference to Terr. Gov. Stevens] of the White Chief says his father sends us greetings of friendship and good will. This is kind, for we know he has little need of our friendship in return, because his people are many. They are like the grass that covers the vast prairies, while my people are few, and resemble the scattering trees of a storm-swept plain.

"The great, and I presume also good, white chief sends us word that he wants to buy our lands but is willing to allow us to reserve enough to live on comfortably. This indeed appears generous, for the red man no longer has rights that he need respect, and the offer may be wise, also, for we are no longer in need of a great country.

There Was A Time

"When our people covered the whole land, as the waves of a wind-ruffled sea cover its shell-paved floor. But that time has long since passed away with the greatness of tribes now almost forgotten. I will not mourn over our untimely decay, nor reproach my pale-face brothers for hastening it, for we, too, may have been somewhat to blame.

"When our young men grow angry at some real or imaginary wrong, and disfigure their faces with black paint, their hearts, also, are disfigured and turn black, and then their cruelty is relentless and knows no bounds, and our old men are not able to restrain them.

"But let us hope that hostilities between the red-man and his pale-face brothers may never return. We would have everything to lose and nothing to gain.

"True it is, that revenge, with our young braves, is considered gain, even at the cost of their own lives, but old men who stay at home in times of war, and old women, who have sons to lose, know better.

"Our great father Washington, for I presume he is now our father, as well as yours, since George [a reference to King George III, i.e., Great Britain] has moved his boundaries to the north; our great and good father, I say, sends us word by his son, who, no doubt, is a great chief among his people, that if we do as he desires, he will protect us. His brave armies will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his great ships of war will fill our harbors so that our ancient enemies far to the northward, the Simsiamis [Tsimshian] and Hydah [Haida], will no longer frighten our women and old men. Then he will be our father and we will be his children.

But Can This Ever Be?

"Your God loves your people and hates mine; he folds his strong arms lovingly around the white man and leads him as a father leads his infant son, but he has forsaken his red children; he makes your people wax strong every day, and soon they will fill the land; while my people are ebbing away like a fast-receding tide, that will never flow again. The white man's God cannot love his red children or he would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. How then can we become brothers? How can your father become our father and bring us prosperity and awaken in us dreams of returning greatness?

"Your God seems to us to be partial. He came to the white man. We never saw Him; never even heard His voice; He gave the white man laws but He had no word for His red children whose teeming millions filled this vast continent as the stars fill the firmament. No, we are two distinct races and must remain ever so. There is little in common between us. The ashes of our ancestors are sacred and their final restingplace is hallowed ground, while you wander away from the tombs of your fathers seemingly without regret.

"Your religion was written on tables of stone by the iron finger of an angry God, lest you might forget it. The red man could never remember nor comprehend it.

"Our religion is the traditions of our ancestors, the dreams of our old men, given them by the great Spirit, and the visions of our sachems, and is written in the hearts of our people.

"Your dead cease to love you and the homes of their nativity as soon as they pass the portals of the tomb. They wander far off beyond the stars, are soon forgotten, and never return. Our dead never forget the beautiful world that gave them being. They still love its winding rivers, its great mountains and its sequestered vales, and they ever yearn in tenderest affection over the lonely hearted living and often return to visit and comfort them.

"Day and night cannot dwell together. The red man has ever fled the approach of the white man, as the changing mists on the mountain side flee before the blazing morning sun.

"However, your proposition seems a just one, and I think my folks will accept it and will retire to the reservation you offer them, and we will dwell apart and in peace, for the words of the great white chief seem to be the voice of nature speaking to my people out of the thick darkness that is fast gathering around them like a dense fog floating inward from a midnight sea.

"It matters but little where we pass the remainder of our days.

They Are Not Many.

"The Indian's night promises to be dark. No bright star hovers above the horizon. Sad-voiced winds moan in the distance. Some grim Nemesis of our race is on the red man's trail, and wherever he goes he will still hear the sure approaching footsteps of the fell destroyer and prepare to meet his doom, as does the wounded doe that hears the approaching footsteps of the hunter. A few more moons, a few more winters, and not one of all the mighty hosts that once filled this broad land or that now roam in fragmentary bands through these vast solitudes will remain to weep over the tombs of a people once as powerful and as hopeful as your own.

"But why should we repine? Why should I murmur at the fate of my people? Tribes are made up of individuals and are no better than they. Men come and go like the waves of a sea. A tear, a tamanawus, a dirge, and they are gone from our longing eyes forever. Even the white man, whose God walked and talked with him, as friend to friend, is not exempt from the common destiny. We *may* be brothers after all. We shall see.

"We will ponder your proposition, and when we have decided we will tell you. But should we accept it, I here and now make this the first condition: That we will not be denied the privilege, without molestation, of visiting at will the graves of our ancestors and friends. Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hill-side, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe.

Even The Rocks

"That seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun along the silent seashore in solemn grandeur thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people, and the very dust under your feet responds more lovingly to our footsteps than to yours, because it is the ashes of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch, for the soil is rich with the life of our kindred.

"The sable braves, and fond mothers, and glad-hearted maidens, and the little children who lived and rejoiced here, and whose very names are now forgotten, still love these solitudes, and their deep fastnesses at eventide grow shadowy with the presence of dusky spirits. And when the last red man shall have perished from the earth and his memory among white men shall have become a myth, these shores shall swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children shall think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway or in the silence of the woods they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night, when the streets of your cities and villages shall be silent, and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled and still love this beautiful land. The white man will never be alone. Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not altogether powerless."

Governor Stevens' Reply

Smith's account continues:

"Other speakers followed, but I took no notes. Governor Stevens' reply was brief. He merely promised to meet them in general council on some future occasion to discuss the proposed treaty. Chief Seattle's promise to adhere to the treaty should one be ratified, was observed to the letter, for he was ever the unswerving and faithful friend of the white man. The above is but a fragment of his speech, and lacks all the charm lent by the grace and earnestness of the sable old orator, and the occasion."

Sources:

Albert Furtwangler, *Answering Chief Seattle* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 10-17; Clarence B. Bagley, *History of King County, Washington* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1929).