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The Wind Is My Mother



THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF A
NATIVE AMERICAN SHAMAN

Bear Heart

WITH MOLLY LARKIN

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BERKLEY BOOKS, NEW YORK

*This book is lovingly dedicated to my personal hero,
who died in the Philippines on May 11, 1964, while in the
service of our country—my son, Marc Nathan Williams.*

B. H.

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THE WIND IS MY MOTHER

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"As a child I was taught, 'Chebon, the way to attain the beauty in life is through harmony. Be in harmony with all things, but most important, be in harmony with yourself first. A lot will go on in your life, some good, some bad—people may argue and some will try to take control of your life—but that one word, *harmony*, will neutralize any problems and help your life to become beautiful.'

"Years later, I have people from all walks of life writing to me, and many of them end up saying, 'Walk in beauty.' I had that early in life, when I first started out. Our people walked in beauty."

"Inspiring . . . Bear Heart weaves together anecdotes and philosophy demonstrating that traditional Native American wisdom can be applied in today's world to live a peaceful, balanced life. A charismatic storyteller, Bear Heart's autobiography is rich not only with the amazing accomplishments and wisdom of his life as a medicine man but also with the ages-old legends of his people." —*Evolving Woman*

"Captivating . . . it is as entertaining as the best novel, replete with stories both humorous and heartwarming, along with some fascinating revelations about Native American child-rearing, history and the world of the shaman." —*Body, Mind, Spirit*

"Bear Heart, a Muskogee Creek Indian medicine man, tells his story, including his insights about receiving the power of the Great Spirit through fasting, chanting, and vision quests." —*St. Petersburg Times*

Bear Heart is both a healer and a "road man" of the Native American Church. In great demand as a public speaker, he has made numerous television and radio appearances. Bear Heart has an honorary degree in the Humanities from St. John's University in Louisiana and is an adjunct consultant to Memorial Psychiatric Hospital in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Bear Heart lives in Albuquerque.

Molly Larkin is a writer whose in-depth tutelage and spiritual practice under Native American elders have given her unique access to Native American perspectives and teachings. Molly lives in Los Angeles, California.

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IN THE YEARS THAT I'VE BEEN ALLOWED TO LIVE ON THIS planet, I've been most fortunate to have accumulated knowledge from various academic institutions as well as Native American teachings from individuals of various tribes. I also owe much of my knowledge to professional and nonprofessional individuals who are not Native American. If I were to list all the people who I would like to acknowledge, it would take up many pages of this book and I would regret omitting, overlooking, or forgetting someone who has helped me in my endeavors. For this reason, I mention only my immediate family: my wife, Edna; my daughter, Mari; and my five grandchildren, Robert, Stephanie, Angela, Caitlin, and Michelle, whose love and devotion continue to provide the inspiration that keeps me going on in this life. To all my relatives and friends, blood-kin as well as members of my extended family, please accept my love and gratitude for being a part of my life.

Mah-doh! [Thank you!]

B.H.

No goal in life is ever achieved alone. Even an endeavor as solitary as writing is accomplished only with much encouragement and guidance along the way.

First I thank my family for their unconditional love and support, especially during all the side roads I took to get here.

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And last, but far from least, thank you to Bear Heart and his elders before him for teaching me how to live.

M.L.

INTRODUCTION

BY MOLLY LARKIN

IN 1987, I WAS READY TO DIE. IN A TWELVE-MONTH PERIOD, I had lost my business to an unscrupulous partner, filed for personal bankruptcy, my lover committed suicide, and, after rebounding into a relationship with an old boyfriend, I was left for a nineteen-year-old receptionist. My life was at its darkest point, and I had gone so far as to make a plan to end it. Then I met Bear Heart.

His words gave me hope, and my work with him since then has dramatically changed my life. It seemed only natural that a book on his teachings could inspire countless others just as he has helped and inspired me.

Looking back, I see my life as one long spiritual quest. My journey began with my wanting to be a nun in the eighth grade and changed course as I declared myself an atheist by my senior year of high school. I experimented with drugs in college, which was followed by twelve years of practicing meditation—two of them in an ashram. But neither chemicals nor Eastern religion brought me real peace of mind.

I gradually noticed, however, that when I was out in nature I felt a sense of serenity that years of struggling with meditation never gave me. Since Native American “religion” is

based on a relationship with the earth and all living things, finding a Native American teacher willing to work with non-Indians—with me—seemed the clearest answer to finding peace and balance in my life.

Not long after my search for a Native teacher began, I met Cougar, a man of both white and Native American heritage, who I came to love very deeply. His suicide in 1987 was a devastating blow to me, but, as is often the case with tragedies, it proved to be a significant turning point in my life. Three weeks after Cougar's death, I traveled to Washington State for his memorial service and it was there that I met Bear Heart. Many people were grieving for Cougar, yet Bear Heart consoled them all with great warmth, depth, humor, and compassion—his ability to lift up our spirits seemed boundless.

Within a few months after I returned home to California, Bear Heart came to Los Angeles to conduct ceremonies and workshops. I attended them all and a friend, knowing of my deep depression, suggested I meet privately with him. I had no idea of what to expect, but something inside—perhaps intuition, or simply desperation—told me it was a good idea.

I spoke with Bear Heart about the past year and of my thoughts about wanting to end my life. During the thirty minutes I spent with him, he said one thing I'll never forget: "There are many kinds of death. It isn't necessary to leave the physical body in order to let a part of you die that doesn't serve you any longer. When you allow that to happen, you can be reborn into a new and better life." He also said he would like to put me on a vision quest, which I have since learned is in itself a form of spiritual rebirth.

I walked away from that meeting feeling there was hope; and since that time, my own spiritual work, along with the

guidance and inspiration that Bear Heart has given me, has helped me to embrace life instead of run from it. I know I owe my life to the Great Spirit, but Bear Heart's gentle guidance led the way to that understanding.

There may be no culture within the United States as misunderstood as that of the Native American Indian. I have met people who thought Indians were extinct and others who assume all Native Americans are alcoholics living in poverty on reservations. Neither belief is correct. It is true that the population of today's Native American tribes is only a fraction of what it was before the Europeans claimed this continent and that 45 percent of all reservation Indians live below the poverty line. Life expectancy among reservation Indians is under fifty years of age and Native Americans have the highest infant-mortality rate of any group in the United States. And, for a variety of reasons both social and genetic, alcoholism is a great problem. Yet in spite of these obstacles, or perhaps because of them, many of the ceremonies and traditions practiced by Native Americans for centuries are still practiced today by their descendants.

The purpose of this book is not to encourage readers to seek out and participate in these ceremonies—the vast majority are neither available nor appropriate for most people. Much of Native American tradition has been lost forever and some is meant only to be passed from generation to generation of qualified medicine people. But there is much that we can still learn from Native American teachings, namely an approach to life and a way of relating to the earth and one another that is very different from that of Western society. Bear Heart is one of the few traditionally trained Native

American medicine men willing to share wisdom that we can all apply to our own lives.

Since our first meeting, I have sat in many ceremonies with Bear Heart, heard him speak innumerable times, and he has put me on five vision quests. The essence of his message, all of his words of wisdom that have so benefited me, are contained in the pages of this book.

The time I have spent absorbing these teachings and vision questing under Bear Heart's direction has helped me to know myself and my purpose. After growing up on advertisements, television shows, and movies designed to make me feel that I should be anyone except who I am, I no longer judge myself by my accomplishments, possessions, or by comparison to others. That very major transformation has brought me the serenity and peace of mind I had been seeking all my life, and it is my sincere hope that readers of this book will receive the same kind of inspiration from Bear Heart's words.

MOLLY LARKIN
Santa Monica, California

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B O O K I



Initiation

TO WALK IN BEAUTY

WHEN I WAS THREE DAYS OLD, MY MOTHER TOOK ME TO A hilltop near our home and introduced me to the elements. First she introduced me to the Four Directions—East, South, West, and North. “I’m asking special blessings for this child. You surround our lives and keep us going. Please protect him and bring balance into his life.”

Then she touched my tiny feet to this Mother Earth. “Dear Mother and Grandmother Earth, one day this child will walk, play, and run on you. I will try to teach him to have respect for you as he grows up. Wherever he may go, please be there supporting and taking care of him.”

I was introduced to the sun. “Grandfather Sun, shine upon this child as he grows. Let every portion of his body be normal and strong in every way, not only physically but mentally. Wherever he is, surround him with your warm, loving energy. We know that there will be cloudy days in his life, but you are always constant and shining—please shine through to this child and keep him safe at all times.”

She lifted me up to be embraced by the breeze as she spoke to the wind: “Please recognize this child. Sometimes you will blow strong, sometimes you’ll be very gentle, but let him grow up knowing the value of your presence at all times as he lives upon this planet.”

Next I was introduced to the water. "Water, we do not live without you. Water is life. I ask that this child never know thirst."

She put some ashes on my forehead, saying, "Fire, burn away the obstacles of life for this child. Make the way clear so that he will not stumble in walking a path of learning to love and respect all of life."

And that night, I was introduced to the full moon and the stars. These elements were to watch over me as I grew up, running around on the carpet of grass that my Mother and Grandmother Earth provided, breathing in the air that sustains life and flows within my body, taking away all the toxins as I exhaled.

I had a sense of belonging as I grew up because of my people's relationship with these elements, and I imagine that's why most of our people related to the environment so easily. We recognized a long time ago that there was life all around us—in the water, in the ground, in the vegetation. Children were introduced to the elements so that as we grew up, we were not looking down upon nature or looking up to nature. We felt a part of nature, on the same level. We respected each blade of grass, one leaf on a tree among many other leaves, everything.

My name is *Nokus Feke Ematha Tustanaki*—in your language it means "Bear Heart." I'm also known as Marcellus Williams and I was born in the state of Oklahoma in 1918.

My tribe is Muskogee, and we originally lived along the waterways of what is now Georgia and Alabama. The Europeans who eventually settled in that area didn't know of us as Muskogean; they simply referred to us by our habitat,

“the Indians who live by the creeks.” The name prevailed, so we are commonly known as Creek Indians, but in fact we are the Muskogee Nation.

In 1832, President Andrew Jackson signed an order to remove the native tribes from the southeastern United States, and it was then that the Muskogee were moved, along with the Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Cherokees. We walked all the way from our homes to “Indian Territory,” which later became *Oklahoma*—that’s a Choctaw word meaning “land of the red man.” History has recorded that removal, but never once have the emotions been included in that record—what our people felt, what they had to leave behind, the hardships they had to endure.

The removal was forced; we were given no choice about it. When our people refused to leave their homes, soldiers would wrench a little child from the arms of his mother and bash his head against a tree, saying, “Go or we’ll do likewise to all the children here.” It’s said that some of the soldiers took their sabers and slashed pregnant women down the front, cut them open. That’s how our people were forced from their homeland.

Our people walked the entire distance, from sunup to sundown, herded along by soldiers on horseback. When our old people died along the way, there was no time allowed to give them a decent burial. Many of our loved ones were left in ravines, their bodies covered with leaves and brush because our people were forced to go on. It was a long walk, people got very tired, and the young children could not keep up with the adults, so people would carry them, handing them back and forth. But they didn’t have the endurance to carry them all the time, so some children and their mothers had to be left behind. Those are just some of the hard-