

# Red Roots of Native Yoga

Kanucas follows the Sun.

By Sam Slovick

*An ancient Oak bears witness as a cluster of hearty men of varied ethnicities raise two large tipis in the clearing of a cloistered bucolic expanse somewhere in Oregon's outback. It's still early but people are starting to gather as the sun burns off the last of the morning mist. There's a sense of exhilaration and an enhanced energy in anticipation of tonight's meeting of the Native American Church.*

*The ceremonial aspect of the Native yoga embodied in the tipi meeting of the indigenous American peyote church is a way of praying that's a way of living and a way of being.*

*It's realized in four realities: the spiritual, the mental, the physical and the emotional. It's manifested in the balance achieved when thinking, action and speech align.*

*Tonight's healing was summoned by the ceremony's two sponsors: one seeking the cure for her assumed cause of at-risk Native youth in Oklahoma struggling with crystal meth and other contemporary demons; for the other, a more personal challenge.*

KENNY LITTLEFISH IS SUBSTANTIAL. You can feel it on approach. He brings a strong but gentle patriarchal presence that elevates the collective simply by his being there. He's an enlightened young elder grounded in a practical compassion rooted in Native yoga. Steady as the old Oak overseeing the proceedings, Littlefish is an anchor.

An experienced roadman of the Native American Church (NAC), he carries the physical characteristics of a childhood bout with polio and the soul of Native American oppression. It's a weighty incarnation, but his spiritual path has rendered him a man of love and light, his gaze firmly fixed on the future.

"A roadman is somebody who conducts the NAC prayer services to help people who need help," says Littlefish, an NAC member since '69 who ran his first service for the church in '86.

Incorporated in 1918, the Native American Church uses peyote, a psychoactive or entheogenic cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*) as its sacrament. The practice dates back thousands of years to tribes in Mexico. The NAC also incorporates Christian elements in its ceremonies. Its membership exceeds an estimated 250,000 today.

Kenny walks with a cane. He affects a precarious gait yet possesses an undeniable balance. He shoulders the relentless awareness of the American government's refusal to acknowledge the devastation and continued oppression of the New World's first people, while walking in the light.

"The philosophy of this Native American Church was faith, hope, love and charity," he says. "Faith that we know where we've been, where we want to go to and how we're gonna get there. With that faith

we want to give hope to those people who do not have a way of life. In that hope, we do that with unconditional love in a charitable way.”

Much wind in his sails, his back to the shadows, Kanucas, a name given to him by an uncle, meaning *follows the sun*, leaves all that behind when he steps into the tipi. It’s a forward vision in the form of a prayer that precedes him. It’s a prayer that encompasses his life and his work...the two are synonymous at this point.

The sun is now set as the day’s heat dissipates, the warm Saturday afternoon giving way to a cool evening breeze. The tipi fills with members of the church and the few invited guests, some white. Roadman Littlefish faces East behind the *medecine* at the head of a crescent shaped half-moon altar of raised dirt around a fire pit. An eagle’s head on a carved wood staff, feather fan, whistle, rattle and water drum are before him. The cedarman throws cedar on the maliciously maintained fire, purifying anyone who enters after the ceremony proper has begun. The doorkeeper holds constant vigil at the entrance / exit. Each detail of the sacred protocol is carried out under the watchful eye of the roadman.

The sacrament, peyote as tea, a sort of mush as well as the green buttons, are passed around the circle. The first of many of the night’s prayers as songs begin to the rhythm of the water drum. Relentlessly memorizing, the portal is now open to commune with the spirit. If you’ve come correct it’s a delightful divine purification wherein time seems suspended. If you don’t, it’s gonna be a long night.

“Ask that *medecine* to sit in your stomach the way it sits in that bowl on the altar,” Littlefish advised before we entered the tipi. “Admit that you don’t know anything about yourself and ask that *medecine* to show what you need to see,” he says giving specific attention to his words. I take full measure, understanding that it’s important to approach with humility.

A registered member of the Chippewa tribe of the Annishnabe Nation who belong to the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Algonkin peoples of North America, Kenny Littlefish also has the distinction of membership in the Turtle Clan.

“Many different tribes have the Turtle Clan within them, the clan of eternal friendship. We call this North American continent the Turtle Island. It’s what we live on. It’s our friend. We’re born here, we live here, we die here, our spirits are here and the spirits of our ancestors going back to the beginning,” he says, imparting the underpinning of an indigenous philosophy that has been assimilated by more than a few new age doctrines.

“We’re a star nation people,” Kenny says about the Chippewa legacy he received through blood from his mother. “It means that we come from a constellation of stars that are no longer there that brought us to this Earth. The woman who gave birth to our people came from beyond this planet.”

Littlefish is street legal, sanctioned by the U.S. government to carry the cactus. A sort of elder statesman among roadmen, he articulates a carefully considered, almost professorial oration. Specific word choices, juxtaposed tenses, are all carefully placed as self-styled prose. His liberty with the language is initially hard to follow till the framework comes into focus. You just have to listen with the right ears.

“We live in four realities. The reality of the spiritual, the reality of the

mental, the reality of the physical and the reality of the emotional in the physical body. We think and talk and act all one way. If we don’t think and act and talk all one way then we’re out of balance to who we are in this physical body...in the spiritual, in the mind, in the body. And so, we’re given a way of life. We choose the way of life after we’re of an age that we’re able to make decisions for ourselves.”

It espouses a decidedly ethical pathology that is a big part of what is attractive about the enigmatic roadman. He walks his talk.



Photo: Sam Slovick

The tipi meeting is a long, sometimes painful, beautiful journey. It’s a 12 plus hour, sit-up ceremony with only essential bathroom breaks. The glowing embers of the blazing fire predominate in the center of the tipi masterfully sculpted into the form of a huge eagle by the Fire Man as the long night transpires.

In addition to practicing *this Peyote way* through the Native American Church, Littlefish also participates in Sweat Lodge; Midewiwin

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services, a seclusive religion of the Turtle Island aboriginals and Sun Dance, a summer solstice ritual of regeneration. The common elements meld to make up a cohesive practice...a Native yogic regime.

"Because they're similar in philosophy I'm able to participate in them all because through all of them runs this prayer," he says. "This prayer we're involved in is a ceremony of life. And for myself, life is a ceremony. It starts from the time you're able to make [adult] decisions. You're given the ability of cognitive thinking. You're also capable of taking a thought and putting it into words. In understanding that our ancestors way, way back in time, when the spirit gave to us the ability of cognitive thinking, they made conditions with the spirit. The commitment was to take care of the Earth through the ceremony, and the spirit thought that was good. Because we had just been given the ability of cognitive thinking, the spirit took pity on us and gave us a ceremony and the first ceremony that the spirit gave to us was the Sweat Lodge."

After that they received other ceremonies as well as commitments contingent upon the receipt of the gift. One commitment was to educate their children specifically with regard to the use of the four elements, as well as educating them on the ability of procreation... "because life doesn't just happen. There's an interaction then life happens. So we educate our children in these ceremonies in the use of these four elements through the changing of the seasons for the purpose of procreation so that they're understanding is how to take care of the things that were given in creation."

Prayer as song is the thread woven through the ceremony. Particular attention is paid to respect the women's full voice in the ceremony. Native American society is discernibly matriarchal, but the roadman is the boss, and the spirit of the medicine is decidedly male. Though gentle with me on this, my maiden voyage, it is a powerful masculine sacrament.

"Good morning, relatives." Kenny voices the familiar call, the sun now risen as we exit the vortex, the last of the songs sung as Kenny's wife Nancy, who has been at his right side all night, carries in a bucket of water and embarks on an all-inclusive prayer to Grandfather, signaling the near end of the ceremony.

"She was praying over the water," he tells me later, "the prayer that she did was because at that time of the morning we remember our loved ones, mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, nieces and nephews, brothers and sisters, cousins, dear friends, grandmas and grandpas, husbands and wives and sons and daughters...she put all of that into the water, that prayer. She prayed for the sweetness of that water, so that the water would be sweet for everybody that partook, even those that weren't there. When they use that water in the morning, she prayed that that water would benefit them."

I ask Kenny a novice's question. To whom is Nancy praying when she says Grandfather? Is it the spirit of the medicine? Is it God?

"There's only one real spirit," he says. "There's only one God, that's the creator. I call God a spirit. He exists in everything because it's his creation. The image of that tree is God, the image of that four-legged is God and on and on. So when I pray about life I'm praying about all creation, and I'm asking God that's in all of this creation to make

me mindful of whenever I go through His creation to treat it the way I would want to be treated...with respect, with dignity. I pray into the future that everything is going to continue to be good."

Kenny reiterates his *mantra*, a vision for the future, but when pressed, he reveals another dimension to his forward philosophy.

"I don't concern myself with the past. It doesn't mean I don't have issues that relate to the past. It means that I'm not going to concern myself with that inside that tipi. I'm in there at that time for the prayer that's being said."

His primary focus on the future is in the here and now of the Native American Church, but it isn't without addressing some realities of the recent past and present.

"I'm only concerned about the Native American Church for those people into the future who need the services of the Native American Church. The NAC has helped a lot of Indian people out who have lost their way of life. It has given them back their identities. In that struggle, I need this government to step up to the plate and say 'We apologize to you Indian people for the oppression and the continued oppression that we are putting upon you, have put upon you to make things difficult for you to live under one God...one Nation'."

I wonder if Kenny's expectations are realistic as my mind races through scenes of our country's current bloodbath in the Middle East. The ceaseless parade of human collateral damage, the unconscionable brutality...the arrogance...the president...I wonder...

"Let me put it to you like this," Kenny says with the conviction of a visionary, "If I didn't believe it was possible, I wouldn't continue with this prayer."

And his certainty allows me to consider his vision as prophetic reality after the night of revelation I just spent with him in his church.

"What I do by opening that door to non-Native people is showing them the beauty and the kindness that our people gave to the people who first came here and can still be given if we can make this change together," he says. "At some point in time maybe one of those people may work their way into a position in this government to commit that change."

Kenny's words before the tipi meeting were spot on. Fearing the worst, I surrendered to the teaching and learned that I could sit up with the big boys all night and hold my own. His church imbued me with a sense of myself as more substantial than I knew, a peek at the cultural imprint of cynicism I carry as well as a clear visual line into his sanguine sight. His prayer opened my heart and widened my myopic lens to include his perspective of the past and vision for the future.

Meanwhile, back to the shadows, with an occasional glance over his shoulder for continuity...Kanucas follows the sun.

*Kenny Littlefish lost his arm in an industrial accident at US Steel, received a million dollars then gave it away with the help of a philanthropic lawyer when he became disenchanted with his material experience after a dehumanizing dance with alcohol in Chicago.*

**LAYOGA**

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