

# Spiritual Lessons

## from Carolina Indians

by Judi Burton



“**B**oom, boom, boom,” the drum reverberates across the stage and soars out to the green mountains behind it. “Weh-ha-hey-oh-vey” sings Bo Taylor with his strong tenor voice. His face is painted from the brow to the bridge of his nose with red ochre. He wears a long shirt and a breechcloth showing off muscular legs. A red sash is tied around his waist and his hair is pulled to the back of his head with turkey feathers sprouting from it. A line of warriors, dressed much like him, hold their wooden war clubs high up above their heads as they end the dance with a high-pitched “yeee.” There is a round of applause from the tourists who fill up the stadium seats in appreciation of the dance of the warriors of the Eastern Band of Cherokees. It is the Festival of Native Peoples in Cherokee, NC, an exhibition of seven nations and their dances from across North America and Mexico.

### Old Traditions, New Energy

I pulled Bo aside when he was done with his performance and asked him for an interview. He obliged and showed me to a tent with folding chairs underneath. Several other war-

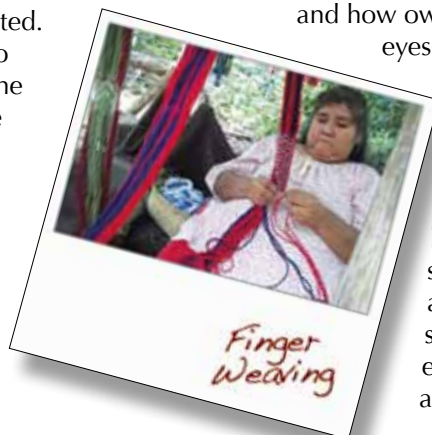
riors sat with us, their solemn painted faces were quite intimidating. I told him that when I first drove into town I was a bit mystified as to the amount of touristy shops that lined the streets. “Names like the Little Indian Princess Motel, the Tomahawk Mini Mall, the Live Bears Exhibit, and the teepees on the streets that said, ‘Real Indian Dancers Tonight’, made me kind of cringe,” I said to him. Bo smiled and said, “It’s kind of hokey, isn’t it?” I nodded nervously. “That all started back in the ‘30s when Western movies were popular and people wanted to come see the Indians. People were expecting the Western Indians of the Plains, so that is what we gave them. It’s not what people want now. They want the truth, the real culture, and because of that, we have been strengthening our own traditions and trying to weed out the old carnival-type shops and attractions. We didn’t use to dance the dances you just saw us perform on the stage for visitors. We used to just do the popular fancy dance and the shawl dance because that is what people expected. Now, we are proud to do the Bear Dance, the Horse Dance and the Quail Dance. These are the dances of our people. They are meant to give respect to the animals that we love.” He went on to talk about the Cherokee Museum,

which he manages. “It used to be just the Trail of Tears, and it was so sad. It seemed as if the Trail of Tears defined us somehow as a broken and defeated people. There is 11,000 years worth of history that we can tell, why just tell that one moment?”

### Memories Speak with Two Tongues

I visited the museum and learned that the Cherokee had such a rich history and culture. The most famous of all Cherokees was Sequoyah. He was the first man in 5,000 years to invent an alphabet, or syllabary, without ever actually knowing how to read any other language. His mark was imprinted all over the reservation. Every sign, whether street sign or billboard, had both English and Sequoyah written on it. Later that night, I sat down on a stray stump at the village bonfire next to the Oconaluftee River where Mike Crowe was teaching old Cherokee stories of how the skunk got its stripes and how owls got their big, wide eyes. After the stories,

I asked him a few questions. “If you were at a gas station and knew the clerk spoke Cherokee, what language would you speak?” He paused and said, “We would speak Cherokee to each other.” I thought about my Irish roots



and imagined all of the Irish descendants in America still speaking Gaelic to one another and chuckled to myself. "So, why do you do this? I mean, you talk to all of these tourists in your warrior garb on a Friday night for free; what's in it for you?" He smiled at this, softening his striking warrior look. "We want everyone to know our culture and traditions so they will understand us. We are proud of who we are, and want to share it."

### *Greed Is the True Disease*

The Oconaluftee Village is where visitors can enjoy a guided tour of a living and working village that would have existed in the 18th century. Women making river reed baskets and finger weaving show off their talents while men in separate huts work on tool making and weapon working. The manager of the village and revered artist, Davy Arch, took some time to speak with me. I told him I had heard of a story about how medicine was made. The animals were upset with the humans for killing them for food, so they all got together and decided to give humans diseases. The plants felt sad for the humans because they were all dying, so they got together and gave humans cures for the diseases. "Yes, 500 years ago we could cure

anything, but a lot of the mountain medicine has died away with the epidemics that almost wiped us out. A lot of the old medicine has gone underground because there are just so many people that try to make money off of the knowledge, and we don't believe medicine should be sold. It should be given freely because it comes from the Creator." Davy went further with the story and told me about the origination of the word "buck" for dollar. "When you say 10 bucks, you are actually asking for 10 buckskins." I remembered seeing a poster in the museum on Indian and European trade currencies and noting that 10 buckskins wouldn't get you a whole lot. "When the Europeans came, they didn't just introduce diseases to us, they also infected us with greed. We had not known greed before then. We only took what we needed and used every part of the animal. We prayed over the animal before and after it was killed and revered it as our brother. But when the white man came, we began to kill animals without respect and disrupted the delicate balance between man and animal. It was greed that defeated our people." This made me think about how we are not respecting the planet or our animals right now. We seem to be heading into a deep emotional depression as well as becoming very unhealthy despite the advances in medical technology. It would be easy



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to correlate the rise in diseases like autism and cancer and E. coli break-outs to the increased pollution in our environment and animal neglect. Now, it's not the animals killing us; it's our own greed killing us.

### *Bad Medicine Makes for Bad Weather*

The next day, I met a woman named Paula Nelson who had a white tent set up with all of her family's artifacts splayed out for everyone to see. She had tribal tattoos on her face and



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was wearing traditional 18th century female attire. She is a poet, musician, writer and preservationist. Paula told me she believed that all of the earthquakes, fires, droughts, floods, and other weather conditions that seem to be picking up speed lately had a lot to do with our planetary mentality and not just the amount of CO2 in the atmosphere. She said the sadness and inequality, the disenfranchised and the hopeless are becoming a much larger population, and it is affecting the energy of the Earth itself. "We are intrinsically connected to the Earth, and if you don't feel that when you see a hawk fly or feel the cool water of the river on your skin, then you are disconnected somehow and need to find oneness with the Creator again." She mentioned the movie *Avatar* and how the natives were completely connected to their planet through their ancestors and through a collective consciousness. "That is how we are, but many of us are just too detached to understand the connection. It's bad medicine." As we spoke, Hurricane Irene was touching down on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, yet the sky was clear and beautiful in the western hills where we were. Her words resonated with me deeply. Paula sent me on a mini journey to go see the original village, Kituwah Mound (gi-du-wah), where the Cherokee can trace their ancestors back to their original hearth.

### *The Elk Calls at Sunset*

I reached Kituwah just as the sun was about to start its descent. A huge field was covered in a sea of golden corn and sunflowers that tickled the sky, glowing yellow in the setting sun. A small hut with an old campfire sat next to the river. I peeled off my shoes and socks and waded in



as yellow leaves floated past my ankles. I sat on a tree trunk in the water and just breathed. A flock of geese raced by, the tips of their wings skimming across the surface of the water. The haunting sound of an elk called in the distance and another called back as I watched the setting sun paint purples, oranges and red hues across the ripples of the water. I was beginning to understand what Paula had been saying about being intrinsically connected to the Earth. It was so beautiful and so peaceful and I felt oddly like I was at home in that little nook of the world. As I was climbing back up the bank, I saw a turkey feather lying on the ground. I picked it up and dusted it off. It was in perfect condition. For some reason, I sort of felt like that feather had been given to me ... so I kept it.



### *Purification and Prayer*

The next week, I visited Craig Talbot, the medicine man for eight tribes in South Carolina at OLLI (Osher Life Learning Institute) in Litchfield Beach to listen in on one of his Native American spirituality classes. Craig told me the turkey feather is the feather of the Cherokee people, and I had been given good medicine. He set up a medicine circle for me and smudged me with sage, tobacco and ash from the fires of a thousand years of prayers. Smudging is a ritual where you are purified and healed while offering your prayers to the Creator. He told me afterward that I would experience a whole lot of "aha" moments in the next few days, which I did. I will not relate them here though, as they are quite personal. But I will tell you they were very profound and have caused me to look deeper into my more spiritual nature, which I have not been close to in quite some time. The Cherokee have no word for "goodbye," only "until we meet again, whether it be in this life or the next." So, I say to you my friends, "De-da-da-ga-hoy-ya."

*For more info on Cherokee, NC, visit [Cherokee-NC.com](http://Cherokee-NC.com). To hear Bo Taylor's songs, search for him on iTunes. To watch a performance by Paula Nelson, visit [TeachersDomain.org/resource/natam.arts.music.chsinger/](http://TeachersDomain.org/resource/natam.arts.music.chsinger/). To attend classes with Craig Talbot at OLLI, call 843-349-6584.*

