

Chews Ridge Ceremony

by Teah Strozer

Zen Mountain Center Director Teah Strozer attended a meeting of the Four Winds Council, which includes the New Camaldoli Catholic Hermitage, the Esalen Institute, the Native American Esselen tribe's "Window to the West," and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. All four centers are located in or near the Ventana wilderness and the Los Padres National Forest. The Navy has proposed to house a star-gazing interferometer on the peak of Chew's Ridge Mountain. The Navy needs this technical instrument to help ships navigate better on the sea. It would no doubt bring further development to the area. The council met with representatives from the US Navy and the US Forest Service at the Esselen tribe's local ceremonial grounds.

We gathered in the Round House, a covered amphitheater dug into the ground. We sat on dirt benches molded out of earthen walls. Four huge tree trunks placed in a square in the center held up wooden beams, like an earthen tee-pee, the center hole open to the sky. Under the open sky in the middle of the four huge timbers was a large ceremonial fire. There we all sat and waited.

Tommy Little Bear, Chief of the Esselen tribe, welcomed and purified us all with sage incense. He then reached for the Two-Faced-Talking-Stick, one side a smiling mask, painted white, with feathers and ribbons, the other side a sorrowful face, painted black with strips of leather and beads. He explained that whoever was holding the Talking Stick could speak uninterruptedly and be heard. There were many speeches that day, all of them heart-felt expressions, asking to leave the mountain untouched. Each speaker was interesting, but the room got smoky from the fire and the day was getting long. I was wondering if anything being said was having any effect.

Off and on during the talking I noticed an elderly Native American man and his son slowly and methodically putting on their tribal dress. Quietly the father adjusted the son's feathered headdress. The son helped his father with the belt and skirt. Later, when I looked across the room, they had removed their shirts to put on arm bracelets and paint. Meanwhile, the Talking Stick was making its way around the room. I became increasingly interested in what they might have to say, but I was tired and uncomfortable in the smoky room and ready to take a break.



Then, the father reached out his hand and took the Talking Stick. He turned and looked long at his son who by then was fully dressed, painted, and sitting quietly, holding ceremonial objects in his hands as they rested on his knees. The father turned and walked slowly to the fire, looked at the fire, and then looked at each person in the circle. There he stood in his native dress, a feather fan in one hand, the Talking Stick in the other, and said, clearly and distinctly, "I think all white people should be killed." He had our attention. Then he shared with us a dream that all white people were put on ships and sent back to Europe, their land taken from them, the animals killed, and sickness and death spread through their people. He talked about how life was for his ancestors before white people came with their guns and greed. He said that everybody thinks the first atomic bomb fell on the Japanese, but in reality it fell on the Native Americans who were down wind in New Mexico. Their land was poisoned. They suffer even now from high rates of cancer and illness.

He wanted us to understand how much he hated what had been done, how hard he struggled trying to understand the white culture's insatiable need to control and subdue the land his ancestors lived with in harmony, and to know that this selfishness continues. The suffering of his people, the desecration of the land, was getting difficult to listen to. But as he spoke, his voice—sometimes quiet and timid, sometimes loud and strong—was magnetic. His comportment was confident, his stance proud as he walked round and round the fire chanting this litany of sorrow and rage. He was taking us on a tour of his own psyche, and we felt every emotional rise and fall. He suggested that there is a pattern whereby the whites in power simply take whatever they want, and that protesting probably wouldn't do any good.

But he also said he still believed that we were all one people, that we needed to listen to each other and the Great Spirit. In a humble way he asked the Great Spirit if he could offer his pain and the pain of his people, the pain of all people, the pain of all living beings, in a prayer that we could hear each other, and learn from the earth how to live in harmony.

Then he asked his son to come to his side and he asked another man who had a drum to stand behind him. The drum began a steady, slow, hypnotic beat, BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, like the background beating of my own heart. It sent shivers throughout my body: "What is happening?" As the drum beat the father explained that he was going to chant a song expressing an offering and a prayer. As the drum continued, the father turned toward the fire, held his arm up to the heavens and began to chant. As he did this, the son unwrapped some objects from a ceremonial pouch. One I could clearly see; it was a scalpel. With the utmost sensitivity and care, he began to cut a piece of flesh from his father's arm, near the shoulder. The father never missed a word of the chant as his son cut into him. I felt the only way to stay in the room was to witness what was happening. I made myself watch as the blood ran down his arm. Time stopped. I wanted this to be over. It hurt to watch. Halfway through the cutting the father looked at the son with a calm and completely open face. The son looked up into his father's eyes. At that moment it seemed to me that I could see an ancient, unbroken human lineage, as far back as could be imagined. I saw a man pass on to his son the truth of the suffering of this life, and teach that one could stand there in that pain—still and open, with perfect equanimity and grace. When the son finally finished, I felt limp, clear, and empty, both physically and emotionally. At that moment I would have given them anything.

The father motioned for the son to sit down and the drum to stop. He began again to circle the fire, this time letting his blood drip into it as he began to pray. He prayed for the well-being of all of us, for the earth, trees, grass, and pebbles. He prayed for understanding of the interconnectedness of everything, and for the return of balance. As he gave his flesh to the fire, he left us feeling that the fulfillment of such a prayer was possible. When he stopped, the room was silent and still.

I'm sure the buildings the Navy wants to build on top of Chew's Ridge would not be built if the vote had been taken right then. But I could see as I looked around the room that people were already putting themselves together. They were insulating themselves from the pain and reason returned. It was only a small development on top of a mountain, not of any real importance to anyone. The connection we felt in the room dissipated, the suffering we witnessed wasn't really our own.

As of August 15, the money for the Navy project has been taken out of the budget 'til at least 1997, if then.