

RICHARD
WAGAMESE

ONE STORY,
ONE SONG



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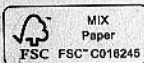
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*For Debra, the continuo
in the concerto of my life...*

Introduction

HERE IN THE mountains, summer has dwindled slowly. Paul Lake sits placid and calm, like a quicksilver slip of dream. It wasn't long ago that boats were churning through that water and we could hear the shouts of water skiers and wakeboarders all the way up on our deck. Along the shore there are urgent calls from shorebirds. They feel the change coming, the advancing chill. Soon they'll take to the air and leave us, and there will be no more loon calls as the sun sets in wild flares of colour behind the reddish jut of Gibraltar Rock. It's always awesome, the silence the land fades into. It seems to me sometimes that seasons leave us in the way people do, never just gone, but degree by degree, fading like the smell on a loved one's favourite sweater, until the vanishing one day evolves into memory. Winter arrives far sooner than the first twirl of snow in late October. It comes with alterations to the hue of things, deeper shadow, faded colours, the thinner ragged cry of coyotes on the ridges and the rich, deep mystery of the land itself in the pitch and beautiful dark. As the season shifts, you can feel that mystery approaching. Winter has always been the slumbering time, the season of reflection, of rest, of preparation for another season of growth that is

always promised, always fulfilled. For me, it means the Story Moons are coming. Legends, teaching tales and oral histories come alive around firelight and candle, and the great rolling voice of my people, sustained for thousands of generations, is heard again across the land.

We are all story. That's what my people say. From the moment we enter this physical reality to the moment we depart again as spirit, we are energy moving forward to the fullest possible expression of ourselves. All the intrepid spirits who come to this reality make that same journey. In this we are joined. We are one. We are, in the end, one story, one song, one spirit, one soul. This is what my people say.

I think about this as the dog and I walk the timber road up into the skirt of the back country. You can feel the land change when you step away from roads and buildings and noise. You become attuned to another rhythm. It's odd when it first happens. You stand there looking around expectantly, as if you'd heard a voice from the trees calling your name. The longer you hold to that moment, the more clarity you receive. It's not a physical voice you hear. It's a spiritual one. When you break the connection that binds you to money, time, obligations, expectations and concerns, the land enters you. It transports you. It takes you to a common human time in each of our cultural histories when the land was filled with magic and teachings. The land spoke to all of us then. It whispered. It told stories, and those who came to it most often learned to hear that voice through the closed skin of their eyes, the soles of their feet, the palms of their hands as they rested upon stone and tree and earth and water: the storytellers. They brought us the secrets of the world we call our home, taught us to invent, to create, to imagine the space around us. They are the ones who showed us that the

earth is alive, and we are joined to her by breath. The storytellers culled teachings from her mysteries. They discerned the truth that the planet we live on is but one small part of a greater, more marvellous creative energy that we are all part of as well. When we touch the earth, we touch ourselves, and the rhythms we discern are those of our own heartbeats, sounding in the context of the whole. Belonging. The articulation of who we are as a human family.

This is what I've rediscovered in the time that my wife, Debra, and I have lived here. Our home sits between mountains overlooking Paul Lake, twenty-five kilometres outside Kamloops, British Columbia. Mere steps away from our driveway the bush awaits, and the long upward slope of the land becomes a rolling peak a few miles off. There are fir, pine, birch and aspen amidst clutches of blackberry, wild strawberry, juniper and staunch mountain grasses that plunge suddenly into meadow. Getting out there has become a special part of my days. Morning walks, evening meditations on the deck and time just standing out on our plot of land make me feel properly framed. The longer we are here, the stronger that relationship gets and the deeper the truth sets within me: we are all spirit, all energy. That truth is built into the teaching stories of my people. It is part and parcel of ceremony, ritual and the principles that underlie those stories as their foundation. As with the land, the longer you spend with stories and teachings the more they become a part of you.

When we moved here, we knew it was right. The first time we stood in the middle of this half acre, both of us could feel it, hear it, sense it. We channelled our energies and desires towards making it ours. We bought this place in the late summer of 2005. For a time, we made the three-hour-plus

commute from Burnaby, just outside Vancouver, every other weekend. Eventually, we moved here full time. The land called us back. We know that for certain now.

We've worked hard to make this our home. We live in a rancher-style house with a deck and a garage that we have turned into an art studio and writing space. It isn't large or ostentatious. Our place is simple and rustic, and it will always be a cabin to me. There's an old wringer washer that's become a planter in the corner of the yard. A wagon wheel leans on a pine. We've painted our garden shed and woodshed the same red as the house, and we're content to let the yard stay the mountainside it is. We drive a rusted twenty-two-year-old Ford pickup truck named Hank. I own a chainsaw. Our water comes from a well. When night falls, we are enveloped in silence that fills us, shapes us and sustains us. The land infuses everything with calm, with truth, with meaning.

I am able to remember here. I remember how the teachings came to me during those years I lived in cities. I recall people. I return to circumstances and events that shaped me. But most importantly, when I walk out onto the land I remember that I am Ojibway. When I murmur a prayer at the shore of the lake in the soft, rolling syllables of that old language, I remember that I am a part of everything, that I belong, that my goal, according to the teachings of my people, is to learn to live a principled life. I remember that, like everything around me, I am part of a larger story.

In the end, we bear away exactly what we bore in: a soul, a spirit, a song. Creator asks us to work at discovering the fullest possible expression of ourselves. When we do that, when we embark on that most definitive of tasks, we become Creator's experience of life. Regardless of how we make the journey, we grant the idea of life back to its source: the infinite

power of the universe. That is also what my people say. Our story becomes part of the great grand story of Creation.

For many years, I travelled unaware of this immense responsibility. Like so many of us, I was preoccupied with the chores of life, the to-and-fro routines of getting, having and becoming. It takes a concentrated spiritual focus to realize why we are here—to live out the best possible story of our time on this earth.

You can't do that when your focus is on material security. You can't do that when your desire is to have. You can do it only when you realize that we all carry a common wish, a common hope. Love expresses itself most fully in community. So does spirituality. What binds us together as a human family is our collective yearning to belong, and we need to share our stories to achieve that. Stories build bridges to undiscovered countries—each other. A very wise man once told me, "No one ever pulled up to heaven with a U-Haul." What matters is what we bear away within us: the story, the song of our living.

The stories and reflections in this book spring from our time at Paul Lake. They are presented in four sections, based on the principles our traditional teachers sought to impart: humility, trust, introspection and wisdom. Those four principles are the cardinal points on the Medicine Wheel, and they represent the essential qualities each person needs to cultivate to live a principled life. These stories were written in the pale light of morning in our little house overlooking the lake. They are about the people, events and circumstances that have shaped the man I've become at fifty-four. They are about the magic I've found in being a member of this human family. Kin. A part of the one story, the one song we all create together.