

Burnt Face

as told by Tom Yellowtail, June 1993

The edited segments of Tom Yellowtail's telling of Burnt Face included here highlight the journey of a young boy. Tom Yellowtail's telling is presented here in Arial font, based upon a transcription of the 1993 audio recording of the story. To better reflect a sense of oral nuances and dynamic rhythm of the storytelling, I have italicized Tom's voiced inflections and stresses, and added a series of dot ellipses to mark his pauses, from brief (two dot) to longer (three dot and four dot). Paragraph demarcation reflects the critical segments selected for this presentation. For a complete text revision of the original story, see Frey 1995: 108-122.

In the *days* when they *still* . . . move about the country . . . the *territory* where the Crow Indians . . . roam . . . about . . . moving from one place to another . . . is this area . . . comprising . . . the rivers . . . the Little Bighorn . . . the Bighorn . . . the Yellowstone River . . . *and the* Missouri River . . . and the Indians . . . would follow some of these rivers . . . move about every few days, *from way down there* next to the North Dakota border line . . . on up this way toward these Bighorn Mountains

In the evening . . . in the camp . . . the children . . . would play . . . build a bonfire or something like that . . . and play . . . and this one night they *did* build a bonfire . . . and they were chasing each other around playing games and a young lad of about the age of this boy here now . . . I'd say the lad was probably . . . was probably about ten years old . . . they were all playing around this bonfire . . . chasing each other . . . and while they were playing like that . . . chasing each other . . . some were standing back and others would be chasing around each other . . . or *somebody* gave a push to this one boy as he was going . . . the fire over here . . . and when he got pushed he *fell into* that . . . into that bonfire which burned him pretty bad . . . before they rescued him . . . pulled him out . . . but he was burned already . . . pretty bad . . . into the bonfire . . . the *big fire* he fell into and . . . that accident happened so the . . . the other children all quit playing . . . for one of them got hurt . . . and . . . the child was taken to his . . . camp . . . his parent's camp . . . and they took care of him . . . and the next few days . . . the *sores* started from that *burn* . . . on his *face* and he was *burned* so . . . so much that . . . his face had to . . . sores were on and finally come to . . . to *heal as scabs* and . . . he would still try to play with his other friends . . . yet . . . but

his face was *disfigured then* after these . . sores had healed . . and tightened up and his face was . . *disfigured* . . . and the other kids would make fun of him . . “*Ahh . . look at him . . look at his funny . . ugly face!*” . . . and all that and that made the boy . . . *ashamed* . . . he felt ashamed the way the other kids would make fun of him . . . an ugly face

So . . he didn't like that and he wanted to leave camp . . be away from . . staying in camp . . . so . . . he . . he got bedding and . . and things to stay away from the camp *when the camp move about* . . he'd travel along the side of them . . I'd say probably a half a mile away from them or so . . . and he doesn't come into camp for he is *ashamed* . . of what the other kids would make fun of him . . when they look at him and . . so he stayed that way his parents would try to bring him back and he won't do it he has his bedding . . he stays there and they bring food for him . . . and he's sad and he doesn't come back into the camp . . to play with the other . . his friends . . other children

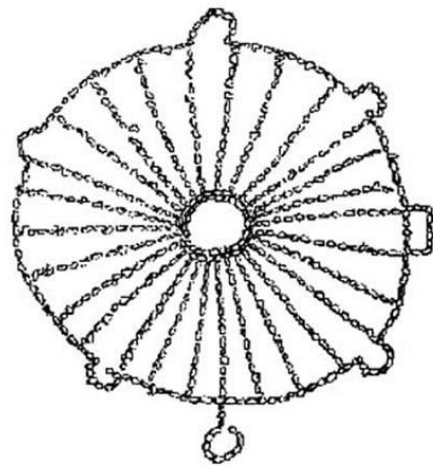
And . . *as the camp move about* . . . moving about . . toward the Bighorn Mountains and he . . he had in mind . . . as they were approaching the Bighorn Mountains . . he thought to himself . . “*Now when we get to this Bighorn Mountains . . I'll . . I'll quit staying alone . . with my people . . with my parents . . . my parents are among the group in the camp I'll leave them when we get to these mountains . . and take the mountains . . and go up somewhere and fast*” So . . he told his parents to make him several pairs of moccasins . . and to prepare when the men to *hunting* and making jerky . . . to save up . . plenty of jerky . . to take with him when he leaves . . when they get to the mountains . . . and quite a few extra pairs of moccasins . . and enough . . enough clothing to . . to leave the camp . . the camp could go on and he'd take to the mountains . . and fast somewhere “*I'll go to that . . if I return . . if I'm lucky to do my fasting . . and I may return to my people if not . . if something happens to me . . why that . . that'll be it . . that'll be alright*” he knew those conditions . . . but he decided he's going to *leave* the camp . . they can go on . . and he would . . he would *leave* the camp and take the mountains and fast somewhere

So . . the parents prepared all those extra pairs of moccasins for him . . . *things he would need* for him to get along with . . . and the jerky . . for the food . . so he could spend quite a few days . . quite awhile . . before he . . would return to his people he wanted

to do that fasting so . . . *alright* . . . he was determined to do that fasting

So . . . they got to the mountains .. and he bid his folks goodbye for awhile . . . other friends . . . “Now you folks go on and I’ll . . . I’ll take these mountains and I’ll find a place where I’ll fast . . . for quite awhile so he left the camp and he took to the mountains and went south . . . along the mountain range . . . kept on . . . traveling . . . into Wyoming . . . kept traveling south and finally he come to a place . . . “*I believe this is a good place*” . . . where the present Medicine Wheel is now he come to that place . . . look things over the country . . . “*Right here is where I will . . . fast!*”

So he did . . . he started fasting there . . . right where the Medicine . . . Wheel is now he fasted there and *during the day* . . . where he fasted . . . a lot of the place is just rocky . . . formations of rocks . . . all around him so *during the day* . . . he would gather . . . he rocks . . . and he started forming . . . a circle . . . representing the Lodge . . . the Lodge you seen nowadays that comprise . . . the Sundance Lodge . . . *he built* . . . that large circle . . . everyday he’d pile up rocks on



top of . . . to form a circle . . . and a the doorway toward the rising Sun to the east *he made it big* . . . and everyday he works . . . and the *spokes* that lead to the *center* . . . he piles up rocks leading to the center what you see now on a . . . Sundance Lodge . . . it is round . . . with a doorway leading towards the Sun . . . to the east where the Sun rises *and he built* that according to the . . . to the form of a Sundance Lodge . . . built it according to the Sundance Lodge *and* . . . no telling how many . . . he must of stayed there a month or so and he fasted . . . fasted there . . . everyday says his prayers . . . he has tobacco . . . with him . . . and a good supply of tobacco . . . and he’d fill up his pipe and offer smokes . . . to the Great Spirit . . . and he went that way on all these days of fasting

And right by are the cliffs . . . caves . . . where . . . you hear about the Little People *they are there* . . . and they’re there yet today *finally* . . . the Little People come out . . . they’d been watching him . . . they come out . . . and they . . . they said “Young man . . . you

have been here for awhile . . . we've been watching you . . . you're fasting . . . you've said your prayers . . . and you've spent enough time here . . . and you've built this . . . representing a Sundance Lodge . . . *it is good . . . now we want to adopt you . . . we want to give you medicine . . . we want you to quit your fasting and you go back to your people . . . your people are at that place . . . your parents and the rest of them . . . you get back . . . back to your people . . . don't stay away from them . . . we'll take those scars away from you so you'll look . . . look decent . . . so you won't be ashamed to get back into your people . . . and . . . the medicine things we will give you . . . you will have them . . . and . . . you pray for people . . . doctor people . . . when you are back home you'll have the power we are giving you . . . all these powers . . . so . . . you exercise . . . using your medicines when you get back to your people . . . and you will be a medicine man among your people and eventually become a chief . . . of your tribe*

“So . . . alright . . . I will leave . . . I'll go back” so he started back the way he came . . . and went to the place where the Little People had told him where he will find . . . your people . . . probably several days to travel . . . he's a foot . . . so one day . . . here he come into camp he asked for the chief's camp . . . and they told him . . . “There's the chief's camp” . . . and he told him . . . the chief looked at him . . . he's grown up already he was a young lad when he left them . . . he's a young man now and he didn't recognize him . . . so . . . the young man explained to the chief . . . “I am the boy that got my face burned . . . and I stayed away from the camp and I'm . . . I'm the boy . . . I've grown up now . . . I've fasted . . . like I wanted to . . . I received my medicine . . . and here . . . I as asked to return to my people and here I am . . . I've come back . . . my parents are here somewhere” . . .

So the chief said . . . “Okay . . . alright . . . come on in” . . . and he call his announcer . . . a herald we call them . . . the man who goes around camp making announcements . . . the chief called the herald . . . to come and told him the story . . . “Go around camp and tell the different chiefs to come to together and come to my camp . . . and we'll have a smoke . . . we have this young man who has returned to us . . . we will hear his story . . . we will ask him to tell his story to us” . . . so the heard went around camp . . .

And there it's a big tipi and there they come in . . . the chief sits here and they have the boy there they come and take their places . . . and they . . . they have a ceremony

. . they . . they filled up their pipes and smoke . . make incense . . prayers . . . and after doing that they say . . “*Alright . . young man . . we are now ready to hear your story . . tell us*” . .

So the young man . . says “I am the boy . . that when . . quite awhile back . . when we were . . moving up . . from *way down there* . . way down the Missouri headed this way up the Bighorn . . River . . . when we got to the mountain . . were I left . . you people . . and I . . I went to the mountains . . and I went on south from there . . quite away down and come to a place where I fasted and stayed in one place I spent all my time there . . . and finally the *Little People* there around close by . . come to me . . and visit with me and talk with me . . . and they advise me to leave that place and come back to . . back to my parents and all of you . . and I’m a member of your group and according to what I received they call me *Burnt Face* . . and I was disfigured but those *Little People* took those . . . took those . . disfigurations off my face and make me look different . . . so *here I am* . . . I’m the boy who left your camp” . . .

“*Ahhh . . ahhh . . ahh . . hay! That’s great*” . . the chief said . . . “*Alright . . we will . . welcome you back to our camp you will be with us now . . stay with us . . . we’ll travel on*” . . . so . . they accepted him back . . they announce . . throughout the camp “*The young man is back with us . . he is back to his parents . . . he is with us now from now on . . . we will depend on him . . when some of you get sick . . call on him . . . he’s been given the power to work and doctor you and make you get well he’ll be the man we’ll call on . . as our doctor . . among this group*” . .

So . . *sure enough* . . camp went on . . people respect him . . . anyone that get sick they would call on him . . and he’d . . pray for them . . doctor them and they get well . . . and *they respect him* . . “*Oh . . this man had the power . . . we must respect him . . . we can’t make fun of him no more . . no way . . anymore*” . . . so as time went on he finally become a chief . . and a great chief from that time on . . . and his name was . . *Burnt Face* . . .

As Black Elk, the great Lakota elder, once said, the way of the world is as a “great circle.” It has no beginning, nor an end, for time is as a circle, always repeating itself. The life of any

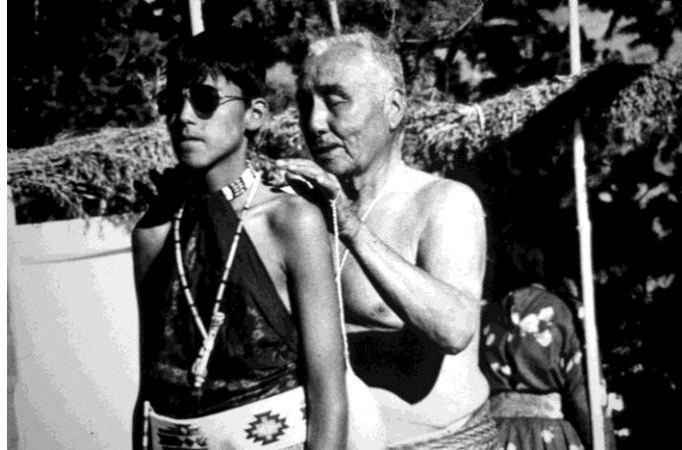
four-legged (e.g., buffalo) or two-legged (e.g., bear or human) is as a circle, from birth, to maturity, to old age, and back to where one came. The sun, the moon, the stars and the earth are as circles and move in circles as well. The great winds move in circles, move around the stones, trees and flowers that are all rounded as the circle. The birds make their nests as circles and their young are born out of the circles of eggs.

As elders would say, this we all see with the circles of our eyes and come to know in our hearts. This we live by. Our lodges were once round as the nests of birds; now we are reminded of this when we set up our tepees each August at Crow Fair. Throughout our land our ancestors built great circles of rock, which we now call medicine wheels. At our powwows at New Year's and during Crow Fair we dance the round dance. We give prayer and clean ourselves from the inside out each time we enter the circle of our sweat lodges. When the medicine bundles are opened, we sit in a prayer circle and watch the smoke circle from our cigarettes, carrying our prayers with it. Each summer, when we build and give of ourselves within the circle of our Sun Dance lodge, we are reminded of the great circle of life and of the world.

For the elders, "our lives and the lives of all the peoples make up a great Medicine Wheel." As seen in the rock "Medicine Wheel" of the Bighorn Mountains and in the Sundance Lodges, each spoke of the great Wheel is as a particular religion, a particular people – the Sun Dance, the Christian, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Indian, the non-Indian, the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the wingeds. Each is unique, with its own language and traditions. But all are of equal worth; all are of the same length. To shorten or even remove one of the spokes would only cause the wheel to wobble and fall. All are needed. Nevertheless, all the spokes are linked to the same hub, the same Creator, the same God. Though each of us may address it differently, each with our own way of praying, it is the same God, uniting all the peoples. To live is to live in the circle, as a part of the great wheel.

This ambidextrous ability to live a life of the "great medicine wheel" was wonderfully exemplified in the lives of [Tom and Susie Yellowtail](#), elders of the Crow (Apsáalooke) of Montana. Tom spoke of "the world as a great Wheel." Tom was an *akbaalíá*, a traditional healer, and the Sundance Chief for his people; and he was a devout Baptist. Susie danced alongside her husband in the Big Lodge and practiced Western biomedicine, in fact, was the first American Indian registered nurse in this country. On various occasions Susie was appointed to Presidential Councils, and traveled widely throughout the United States representing Indian peoples. While in the Sundance Lodge, Tom danced with the whistle and prayed to

Akbaatatdía, “the Maker of All Things First”; while in the “Little Brown” Baptist Church he read from the Good Book and prayed to Jesus Christ. While in the Sundance Lodge, Susie applied Indian medicine; while in the Indian Health Service Hospital she prescribed Western biomedicine. But the Bible and the stethoscope were never brought into the Sundance, or the Eagle-bone whistle never into the Church. And while the Eagle feathers of an *akbaalía* (literally, “one who doctors”) might be fanned over a patient in the hospital, the prayers and songs of the *akbaalía* are offered only in the privacy of the patient’s room, distinct from the care provided by the physician and nurse.



Tom Yellowtail offering a prayer at the Crow Sundance, 1974.

Each way of prayer and of healing, each way of behaving has its own path, distinct from the other, each with its own integrity. Yet all paths could be traveled, freely jumping between and on each of them, all leading to the same source. This powerful notion was appropriately symbolized when in October of 1993 in Chicago Tom, in Eagle-feather headdress and full regalia, shared the podium with some of the world’s foremost religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama, and offered words of prayer at the 100th anniversary of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions. Tom’s Apsáalooke prayer for world peace was so easily heard, mingling and merging with the over 8,000 other spokespeople from the world’s different religions – Christian, Muslim and Jew, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist, and American Indian.

* * *

He stands there, in Eagle-feather headdress and beaded buckskin regalia, with an Eagle-feather fan in hand, sharing the podium with some of the world’s foremost religious leaders, including the Dalai Lama. First speaking in his Apsáalooke language and then in English, he offers words of prayer for world peace and compassion for all. He is an *akbaalía*, “one who doctors others,” a medicine man, a Sundance Chief, and his words are readily received by the over 8,000 in attendance – Christian, Muslim and Jew, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist alike. Like many others from his own community in Montana, he demonstrates an uncanny ability to speak and travel multiple and distinct paths simultaneously, for him the ways of both the Sundance and of Christianity. While in the Sundance Lodge, he dances with Eagle-plumes, blows the Eagle-bone whistle and prays to

Akbaatatdía, “the Maker of All Things First.” While in the “Little Brown” Baptist Church he reads from the Good Book, partakes of the Lord’s Supper and prays to Jesus Christ. He is able, with competence, to effectively communicate and participate with others, indeed nurture and support others, from diverse communities, so distinct and seemingly mutually exclusive.

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Tom Yellowtail, who became one of my most prominent and enduring teachers, offered the following understanding of how to travel distinct ways of life. Using imagery he felt I could relate to, he spoke of the world as a great “Wheel.” Tom was intimately familiar with the Wheel, as reflected in the rock Medicine Wheel to the south of his Wyola home and as structured into the Sundance Lodge and the pattern of its dancers.

From its perch high atop the Big Horn Mountains of Wyoming, the rocks of the Medicine Wheel have endured since time immemorial, the recipient of countless pilgrimages and prayers. Its 28 spokes of rock were linked by an outer rim of rocks some eighty feet in diameter and a central rock cairn of some two feet in height. As Tom has told in his favorite oral tradition, it was Burnt Face, a young boy, horribly disfigured, deeply scarred, who first traveled so long ago to these mountains to fast and offer prayer, and who assembled these rocks as a gift to the *Awakkulé*, “Little People” who inhabited the area, seeking their help. It’s the image of the Wheel that was offered.



Crow Sundance encampment and the Big Lodge, 1993

Imagine the Apsáalooke Sundance Lodge from the eye of a soaring Eagle. The Big Lodge is anchored by its cottonwood forked-tree, the Center Pole, from which twelve over-head poles radiate out to shorter posts to form the rim of the Lodge some seventy to eighty feet in diameter, all enclosed by cut trees and brush, its door open

to the rising morning Sun. For three and sometimes four days, the over one hundred participants would fast from food and water, and offer prayer and dance for loved ones. To the

beat of the drum and song, and with Eagle-bone whistles in their mouths and Eagle-plumes in hand, men and women charge the Center Pole, with its Buffalo head and Eagle suspended from its fork, and then dance back to their stalls, and then charge again, and again. Each dancer has made his or her own individual vow to the Creator to give of him or herself for a loved one in need, each dancer distinct in intentions and expression from the others. Nevertheless, all the dancers are united as one as they blow their Eagle-bone whistles to the beat of the drum, and as they stand before the Center Pole and offer burnt tobacco in prayer, or as they might receive a blessing or healing, or even a visit from perhaps the Buffalo, or Eagle, and be given a special gift, a “Medicine.”

The Apsáalooke name their Sundance Lodge is *Ashkísshe* – “imitation lodge” – in replication of the world, a microcosm of the greater macrocosm, a reflection, a mirror. Each of the unique spokes are dancing, among the many collective diverse spokes, all in unison, united by the ubiquitous spirit of whistle and drum, under the gaze of the Center Pole, of *Akbaatatdía*, the Creator, the axis mundi, anchoring and permeating the many spokes equally. The image of the Wheel is seen and danced and experienced, and brought forth.



Sundancers, blowing Eagle-bone whistles, charging the Center Pole, while two others offer prayer, mid-1970s

And Tom went on to say, “The spokes of the Wheel . . . are the various paths to the hub . . . the different religions . . . the different peoples of the world . . . each with their own ways . . . their own languages . . . their own traditions but each spoke is equally important . . . that Wheel just wouldn’t turn if some spokes were longer than others . . . if some were taken out altogether . . . all the spokes are needed if the Wheel is gonna to turn but all the spokes are linked to the same hub . . . the same Creator each religion . . . each spoke might call the Creator by a different name but the prayers of all religions are heard by the Creator if the Wheel is to turn.” Spokes unique, spokes collectively diverse; a hub and rim unifying, ubiquitous, universal.

For Tom and Susie, and so many others, there need not be investment solely in a single spoke, need not choose sides, but choice to travel the many spokes. For Tom and Susie Yellowtail they could effectively dance the varied paths, the many spokes, when acknowledging the indispensable and interdependent relationship of the many dances within the inexorable, greater

whole, the anchoring hub and encompassing rim, while at the same time distinguishing the unique integrity and the separate significance of each of the many dances, discerning on which path it is appropriate to dance this or that dance, each way of knowing and experiencing the world, each spoke. They can effectively dance when acknowledging the anchoring hub and distinguishing the many spokes. Without such, there would be little turning of the Wheel.

The Wheel metaphor has facilitated the separate integrity of each of the many while embedding them within an interdependency of the greater whole. The Wheel can thus provide a map for traveling the many paths without dilemma, without having to make an either-or choice. It's a map that can chart a course, a map that can create a path, when done with "competence." It's a map of the world, brought to life in deed and action, embedded by values of inclusion, of interconnection, of equality. Regardless of how seemingly irrevocably distinct from the other, the varied paths we encounter can be traveled without threat of their mutual exclusivity.

But it is a matter of knowing your map, of knowing its terrain. For Tom and Susie there was a critical competency in knowing which context and setting to be a devout Christian and a sincere Sundancer, a skilled nurse, and a spiritual healer. Knowing the map goes beyond just acknowledging or even just respecting the distinctions of the spokes; it's hard work, it takes effort. Tom and Susie repeatedly demonstrated their capacities to effectively converse and communicate with Baptist parishioners, with Sundancer participants, and with Indian Health Service practitioners alike, of applying the subtle etiquette, nuances and languages of each. While such distinct communities, Tom and Susie worked with the members of each so easily, always in collaboration, helping sustain their respective "Little Brown Church," Sundance Lodges, and Indian Health Service Hospital communities, without "mutual exclusivity." It's a competency in knowing that only when the spokes of the Wheel are kept distinct and strong in relation to the others does the Wheel turn.