

Chapter 1

THE QUEST

On a cold autumn morning in 1973 I went out onto the roof of the apartment building where I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which was student housing at the seminary I attended. It was an old brick building, four or five stories high, sitting in the midst of Harvard University. I walked out onto the flat roof and looked up at the gray New England sky. Dark clouds drifted by. The city was quiet, just waking up for the start of another day.

I took a small box of cornmeal that I had bought at the local grocery store, opened it, and slowly poured it out into a circle around me. I stood in this circle and began to pray. I turned to acknowledge the four sacred directions, calling on the spirit of each one to surround me. I prayed to the Creator above me and the Earth below me to hold me in a spiritual equilibrium. I spread my arms and asked my ancestors to hear me and come to support me in any way they could. I called on the name of Jesus.

I did all of these things because I was deeply troubled. I was a young, twenty-something Native American attending a Christian seminary to become a priest. I had chosen to do so because I felt I was called by God to a religious vocation. I believed in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and I wanted to follow him. But now I was having doubts.

My doubts came from a book by Vine Deloria, Jr. called *God Is Red*.¹ Deloria, a Native American author from South Dakota, took the position that Christianity was not the religion for Native American people. Later in life, I met Vine and we became friends. I even knew his father, a very well respected Episcopal priest and Lakota elder who served the church in South Dakota. But in these early years,

when his book had just come out, I only knew Vine Deloria by the words he wrote and those words shook my world.

Vine told a familiar, but painful story. He wrote about Christianity coming to the Americas as part of the colonial expansion of Europeans. He described the abuses of the Christian missionaries against the indigenous people of this hemisphere. He deconstructed many of the basic theological positions of Christianity, such as the doctrine of original sin, and argued that Native American traditional religion was far more humane and rational. He described Christianity as a deeply flawed religion. In Vine's estimation, Christianity had been largely responsible for the destruction of Native culture. It was a tool of Western imperialism. It was a sham religion forced onto Native people by a cynical and callous colonial system. In the end, he created a spiritual crossroads for Native people: choose Christianity and adopt the religion of the oppressor or choose Native tradition and stand with the oppressed.

As a much older, and hopefully wiser, person today I can look back and see that the crossroads that Vine created was artificial. It is predicated on the assumption that everything he wrote about Christianity in the Native American context was accurate, but at the time, as a young Native person just starting theological training, it was real enough to take me out onto the roof at dawn. I had never faced this dilemma before. I was raised in a Native American family from rural Oklahoma. Like Vine, I came from a family with a history of ordained service in the Christian church. My great-grandfather and my grandfather had both been ordained pastors in the Presbyterian Church.

That Christian tradition developed among my people, the Choctaw Nation, in the early 1800s.² The Choctaw community had invited Presbyterian missionaries to come to our nation, which in that period of American history comprised what is now Mississippi and parts of Alabama and Louisiana. These missionaries were not imposed upon us, but came in response to our invitation. The Choctaw Nation was a large, well organized sovereign nation that had a long history with Europeans. We had known the Spanish, the French, and the

English before interacting with the white people who called themselves Americans. In fact, we had been allies of the United States, fighting alongside American soldiers in the War of 1812.

As a confident and intellectually curious people, we wanted to learn more about the religious practices of the Europeans, by whatever name they called themselves. After considering the different denominations we began to ask Christian pastors to come into the Choctaw Nation, not only to share their religious views, but also to help us in establishing an educational system to continue our investigations into Western culture and technology. Because so much of Christian theology resonated with our own religious traditions, we quickly adopted Protestantism and began building churches. The Bible was translated into Choctaw; hymns were written in Choctaw; Choctaws began leading Christian worship services. The origins of our Christian heritage, therefore, did not follow the pattern Vine described. We were not forced to accept Jesus at the point of a gun, but evolved into a Christian nation as an expression of our own culture. Missionaries were not the problem for me as a Choctaw. It was, however, Vine's analysis of what happened to Native American nations, Christian or otherwise, that began to unravel my faith.

In the 1830s the Choctaw people were the first of many Native American nations to be forced to take the Trail of Tears.³ Bullied and cheated by the American government, we were forced out of our homeland and made to take the long walk from the southern United States to Oklahoma, the sanctuary for displaced Native nations. Thousands of our people died. The white Americans we thought of as allies betrayed us. Even though we were Christians, other Christians turned to look the other way as we were despoiled. Like vultures, they swooped in to take our land.

The Trail of Tears is a bitter legacy, one shared by many Native nations whose homelands were east of the Mississippi. And yet, as a Choctaw, I had been raised to believe that our Christian faith was part of this experience. On the long walk into exile, I had been told that our Christian faith sustained us. It spoke to us about survival through an Exodus and about God's love for the dispossessed. Like

the African slaves who took our place on the land in the American South, we found Christianity to be the one thing to which we could cling when the times we endured were so harsh.

When I encountered *God is Red* the memories of the Trail of Tears came back to haunt me. It planted a seed of doubt. Had my ancestors made a mistake? Had they accepted a false religion and paid the price? The story that Vine Deloria told was not something I could dismiss. In fact, it was not something I wanted to dismiss because I was so acutely aware of what had been done to my own people. The Trail of Tears is an historical memory no Choctaw will ever forget. The loss of land, culture, language, and freedom: these are the facts of life for any Native American community. Therefore, Vine's argument spoke to a truth I already knew. It was as if John the Baptist had appeared before me, calling me to wake up and smell the coffee, repent from my devotion to the conqueror's faith, and return to the ancient heritage of a pre-colonial Native America.

The impact his writing had on me as a young man may seem hard for people to understand who did not live through the 1960s and early 1970s; these years were a hinge of history when Civil Rights and liberation movements were at high tide. The anti-war struggles against the Vietnam War had reshaped American society. Women's rights and feminism were gaining momentum. The LGBT community was emerging. And in the midst of this era of turmoil and transition, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was making headlines as it demonstrated for Native sovereignty and treaty rights.⁴

AIM was founded in 1968 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It began as a local community organizing effort among the many urban Native communities in the Twin Cities, but it grew quickly to national prominence. I remember standing out in the snow in those years listening to one of AIM's founders, Dennis Banks, call on all of us who were Native American to unite to reclaim our heritage. In 1971, I supported AIM's "Trail of Broken Treaties" demonstration in Washington, DC; in 1973 I supported the stand-off at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. Both were pivotal confrontations between Native American activists and the Federal government. In 1978

I took part in the “Longest Walk,” a demonstration that began on Alcatraz Island in San Francisco, and carried the sacred pipe across the United States to the Washington Monument. I walked on the culmination of this journey with tribal elders; I stood in the July heat with thousands of other Native people when we reached the Capitol to uphold Native sovereignty.

In more ways than one, I had not only talked the talk of Native rights, but quite literally walked the walk. Therefore, the confusion I felt had nothing to do with a lack of political awareness, social consciousness, or historical knowledge. I was not confused about which “side” I was on.⁵ I was not uncertain about my own radicalism, or about my solidarity with all those who shared my political convictions as a Native American. I felt “Indian” all the way through on the core concerns of my generation. My problem was strictly spiritual. My fear was that I did not have a firm center in the one place where it counted most: in my religion. In my faith.

As any Native elder will tell you, everything grows from the spirit. The political, social, and economic parts of our lives are inextricably interwoven with our spiritual being. None of my commitments to any of the causes of Native American identity, no matter how sincere, could be genuine if it did not arise from a deep spiritual source. If I was conflicted in my faith as a Native American, I was lost. Unless and until I could resolve my religious identity, the rest would only be shouting into the wind.

So I created a personal ritual. I took what I understood about how to pray in a traditional Native way, adapted that to my circumstances, and began to practice an intimate form of prayer. For more days than I can now remember, I went out at dawn on a rooftop as if it were my own high and lonely place. I drew a circle of cornmeal around me. I stood alone beneath brightening skies or rainy weather, determined to find out if Vine Deloria was right, determined to discover if God was different than what I had been raised to believe.

I did this as a lament, a confession of my own spiritual confusion. I did it because I took my spiritual self seriously. I went seeking some answers to my dilemma, searching for the right path to follow

to religious integrity. In short, standing up there on the windswept roof, in the least likely place as the least likely seeker, I began a vision quest.

But was it “a vision quest”? Does what I describe from my own experience qualify as such? How do we define a vision quest? How do we understand it?

In 1890, the same year as the infamous massacre at Wounded Knee (see Chapter Four), James George Frazer published his landmark book, *The Golden Bough*.⁶ Frazer, a Scottish anthropologist, pioneered the study of comparative religion and myth as a scientific project. He collated and contrasted religious stories, identifying common themes. In so doing, he set in motion generations of European and American scholarship. He was followed in his research by figures such as Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade, Claude Levi-Strauss, and perhaps most notably, Joseph Campbell, author of *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.⁷

Among the lines of research all four followed was the question of how human beings search for and obtain spiritual knowledge. These academics sought to trace the origin and nature of the “quest” in human mythology. They studied thousands of stories through scores of cultures. Their conclusions vary, but there is a thread that runs through much of their analysis. A hint of that thread is contained in the title to Campbell’s book: the quest made by a heroic figure.

Unpacking the combined academic legacy of anthropologists and psychologists like Jung and Campbell is more than I will attempt to do here, but I will highlight that notion of the quest as being heroic because I believe it opens a door into the difference from the “vision quest” as it is understood by European and Native American cultures.

From the European tradition, we may think of the medieval knight, the Arthurian hero, setting out to seek the Holy Grail. This romantic image speaks to a spiritual psyche of long standing in the West. The story of the valiant spiritual seeker, facing danger and temptation, searching for an elusive prize is a powerful spiritual metaphor for European-based cultures. It is certainly one that is shared by other world communities, but it is a hallmark of Western story-telling.

The Grail legends are classic examples of this understanding. They have long roots in the tribal cultures that created European civilization and their popularity in the many variations on the King Arthur saga indicate how strongly the myth of the hero is present in this shared history. I also suggest that they blend into European interpretations of Christianity. The “hero” narrative associated with a “quest” borrows from the Bible. Galahad and Jesus have similar attributes and associations.

The hero must be pure in heart. The hero must face temptations. The hero must discover what no one else can find. In the religious context of the Europeans, the quest becomes more and more the territory of the special person. Not just anyone can decide to go looking for the Holy Grail. Not just anyone can perform a true vision quest. Only people like Jesus or Galahad may be “good enough” to take this epic journey.

I highlight this tendency in Western spirituality not as a definitive statement about the European experience in myth, but as a point of comparison to Native American concepts of a “quest.” Like Europeans, Native communities could interpret the quest as a specialized endeavor. Some nations understood it as a shamanic quest, although not with the same emphasis on the nobility of such a person. However, far more Native nations understood the quest to be something almost every person could pursue.

This is significant because it changes the way we think about a “quest.” To capture the Native American understanding of a vision quest, it is necessary to let go of some of the European interpretations attached to that term. Even more importantly, unless we can separate Galahad and Jesus in our minds, we may miss the Native perspective on who Jesus was, what he experienced, and what he taught as a Native messiah.

To understand the Native American concept of a sacred quest, we can pick up where the Western scholars have left off: from Gilgamesh to Frodo, the quest is the process, defined by every culture, by which human beings search for the holy. The object of that search may be God, or wisdom, or a Holy Grail. Each religious tradition sets

the destination for those who believe, and each tradition creates a roadmap for how to get there. Some quests require physical endurance, some require mental concentration. Some can last for days, some for a lifetime. The definitions are as varied as the destinations.

As the ancient idea of the quest spread around the world different communities developed their own understanding of not only how the quest should be undertaken, but who could attempt it. In some cultures the quest increasingly became the realm of religious specialists and the type of person who practiced the vision quest narrowed: shamans, mystics, saints, knights of valor. In Native America, however, the door remained much more open. Prior to 1492, the vision quest was a threshold accessible to millions of Native people.

While there are variations on the theme of a quest in the many different traditions of Native America, there are some basic elements that are constant and appear over and over again.

First, there is a time of preparation. The quest is intentional. It is a planned movement toward the sacred. Therefore, the person must be ready for this journey. There is always a spiritual prelude to the quest, a time of prayer and purification. These acts cleanse the person both physically and mentally, making him or her ready to come into the presence of the holy in a respectful way.

Among the most common practices of preparation is the sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is a form of communal worship and prayer. It takes place in a small structure (the lodge) usually made from bent saplings tied together into a dome-like shape. They were covered with animal hides in the past and, more commonly now, in canvas. Within this lodge a small circle is shaped in the earth at the center of the structure where hot stones are placed from a fire outside the lodge which is tended by a ceremonial helper.

Once the participants in the service have entered the lodge by a single opening, that opening is covered and water is poured over the stones. In the womb-like environment, the person designated to lead the service begins a series of chants and prayers that are joined by all of those in the lodge. The experience is intimate and intense. The men or women in the sweat lodge (traditionally participating in their

own separate lodges) are naked in the darkness, aware of being with others, but also confined by the darkness into their own physicality. The cleansing of the sweat lodge is not only the release of toxins from the body, but a deep focus on healing prayer. When people complete a sweat lodge cycle of prayer, they traditionally bathe in clean water, emerging refreshed as if they were newborn into a spiritual world. The sweat lodge is an integral part of preparation for the Native American quest. Other disciplines are used as well such as periods of fasting, celibacy, and meditation. Together these intentional practices underscore the importance of preparation for a Native quest.

The second element common to any Native American quest is the presence of others. Any man or woman setting out on a quest in the Native American tradition would have at least one other person and often a circle of family and friends helping them. They would be under the care of an elder, usually a respected “medicine” man or woman, i.e., a recognized spiritual teacher of the people. These supporters would join in the rituals of purification. They would be a base of prayer to sustain the good intentions of the quester. One or more would even accompany the person to the site chosen for the quest and remain nearby to help through ongoing prayers and songs.

This kind of help is important because the third element of a Native American quest is the nature of it as a challenge. The quest is not an easy experience to undergo. It is not unknown for a traditional Native vision quest to last up to four days without food or water. During that time the person stays awake, remaining in one sacred space, usually a lonely place in the natural world where he or she is exposed to the elements. The vision quest is not for the faint of heart and it is not something to be taken lightly. There is a physical dimension to it, a test of a person’s endurance and resolve. Preparation and support are crucial because the quest is demanding. Over time, other cultures lost the expectation that members of the faith community would be willing to undergo a physical challenge to

embody their faith. The Native American tradition retains this value in its understanding of the vision quest.

The fourth aspect of the Native quest is difficult to translate from the original, but perhaps the best term for it would be the nature of the quest as a lament. In some Native languages, the quest is described as a time of “crying.” Psychology and theology within Native American culture merge in the relationship between human beings and God. The quest begins in a recognition that human beings are in need of help. The birth-like experience of the sweat lodge is mirrored in the quest where a helpless person cries out to the Parent-God for support and understanding. The quest is nurture. It is humility. It is not a test of how strong and brave a person can be, but rather, how vulnerable she or he can be.

These four basic components describe the classic Native American vision quest: preparation, community, challenge, and lament. While the idea of a quest, a search for deeper meaning, was part of the spiritual heritage of almost every human society through history, it took this basic form in pre-Columbian North America.

It was a process that most, if not all, young people were expected to undertake. It was an experience that a person could repeat more than once in life. It was a quest that was visionary, but it was also something more. The Native American quest was pragmatic, designed to produce transformation. It was not a private esoteric experience, but a way in which the community prepared, supported and developed functioning members of society. The quest was a tool, a method for seeding back into the community persons who understood both the spiritual nature of life and their role in it.

This is why traditional Native people would often receive a name change after returning from a vision quest. They would go out into the wilderness to encounter God with one name, but they would return with another. The name change implied the transformation. It announced that the person had become someone new, someone with a renewed skill and purpose in life. The community would acknowledge and adopt the name as a sign of spiritual transformation, drawing

in both the individual and his or her vision into the daily life of the nation.

So, did I deserve a name change after my experience on the roof all those years ago? Had I undertaken the quest as my ancestors understood it? Was I transformed?

Yes and no.

No, my rooftop experience was not a classic vision quest by traditional Native American standards. I did not have the benefit of purification rituals, community support, or a ceremony of return. My name stayed the same.

Yes, it was a quest in the spirit of the quest as my culture understands it. My reading of Vine Deloria's book was a time of preparation. It cleansed me of many of my old assumptions. It forced me into a new place of awareness. It set me on my course to confront myself and to learn more about the God I said I wanted to serve.

Yes, it was a challenge in a lonely place, not just physically, but emotionally. Standing on that roof I felt exposed to more than weather. I felt the loneliness of confusion. Doubt is an isolating feeling, it forces a person into a narrow space, a hidden space, and denies the easy comforts of trust that cushion us in our religious pieties. When we are unsure about what we believe, we truly stand naked before God, stripped of those dogmas that we wear like denominational clothing to give us a sense of security. So, yes, it was hard to be alone on the roof. It was hard to face the possibility I was a betrayer of my own people, a sell-out to a foreign ideology, a false prophet of a false god.

Finally, yes, it was a quest my ancestors would have understood because I believe it was a time of transformation. I did discover something up on the roof. I was not alone. I did receive a vision. And I was changed. My name may have been the same, but the person using it was not. In the next chapter I will tell you about my vision, but for now I want to stay focused on the process by which I received it. I do so to honor the Native tradition of the quest before I talk about the vision.

I believe we live in an age when the idea of a quest has been cheapened. This is a time when "spirituality" has been so commercialized it

has become a commodity. Native American traditions have been stripped to supply the window dressing for pseudo-religious practices. Self-proclaimed “shamans” abound. Self-styled “medicine men” and “medicine women” are abundant. They offer sweat lodges and vision quests for people to experience for a price. They promise to give their disciples “power animals” and “spirit guides.” They use drumming as a hypnotic tool to make their hybrid rituals seem authentic.

When I walked out onto the roof alone, I was only a young man looking for meaning. I was not attempting to design some fast track system of spirituality for others to follow. I was not imagining that what I was doing was a genuine esoteric practice from Native American tradition. I would not, could not, buy, package or sell what I experienced. My quest was my quest, not a formula for anyone else to follow. It was a step out into the unknown, a longing of the heart, a willingness to risk being foolish for the sake of an encounter that cannot be explained, much less sold.

I do not want to hurry on to the subject of spiritual vision because I believe people in our postmodern culture are in far too much of a hurry as it is. We want instant spirituality, instant visions, instant meaning. The vision quest is not a form of Google. It is not a formula that can be bought. It is not a kind of magic into which a person can be instructed or inducted. Rather, from the traditional view of Native America, it is a gradual, difficult, intentional effort to engage what we cannot buy or sell, define or control: mystery. The mystery of who we are, why we are, and what we are to become.

Without mystery there is no quest. That is the first principle and the second is like unto it: the purpose of the quest itself is not to solve the mystery, but to deepen it. In the current rush to enlightenment, many people of this age assume they can use Native American tradition as a shortcut to the answers that elude them. They invest in the vision quest as magic because they believe it will reveal something hidden to them, give them the secret knowledge they desire, offer them a sense of control over their lives as spiritual beings.

In fact, the purpose of the vision quest is to do none of these things. The focus of the quest is mystery; the process of the quest is

mystery; the outcome of the quest is mystery. The reason is simple: since the purpose of the quest is to encounter God, the source of the mystery, the nature of the quest must be in mystery from start to finish. In essence, because the quest is the human search for God, there is no point at which the human ceases to function as human, or at which God ceases to be God. Therefore, the limited, finite nature of the human being undertaking the quest is always just that: limited and finite. We are beings conditioned by mystery, defined by mystery, because we can never truly know the full mind of God. We cannot work our magic to steal a bit of the power of God or the wisdom of God.

Not that we have not tried over the centuries. Many spiritual traditions throughout history that we call “mystery religions” promised human beings a chance to escape their reality and magically become inducted into the secret knowledge of the immortal gods. Ironically, the goal of these mystery cults was to do away with mystery. And it was not only a few unusual spiritual communities that have tried to evade mystery; I believe there is a thread of that desire that runs through most human religions. The shaman consuming an hallucinogen to fly to an alternate reality believes that he or she can transcend the bonds of human reality; but, to be fair, so do many of us who invest ourselves in a particular religious truth claim. There is at least some notion of overcoming mystery implicit in our faith. Whether we follow Jesus or Muhammad or the Buddha, we believe we have found the answer, the path that leads out of the finite terrain of our everyday existence. Like the shaman, we seek transcendence, that mystical step over the threshold of the finite into the hidden dimension of the infinite. We may not think that this transition will occur instantly, we may not imagine that we can control its happening in any way at all, but we still place some part of our faith in the hope of knowing. We believe we have found in this dimension a hint of the dimension to come. Not only will what we believe permit us a small taste of the next reality, eventually it may allow us to pass beyond the mystery to see the truth face to face.

And yet, while we may have a deep longing to finally know and understand what we hold sacred, the vision quest has nothing to do

with fulfilling that longing because it has nothing to do with transcendence. Despite what Arthurian legend may have suggested, despite what mystery cults may have promised, and even despite our own personal level of longing to peek behind the curtain of meaning, the quest is not an answer. It is a deeper question.

I realize that my opinion about the nature and role of the vision quest is a little counter-intuitive for many people, including many Native Americans. After all, if the quest is not going to give us some answers, then what good is it? That's a fair question. My reply is that the quest is not about transcendence, but transformation. And transformation is not necessarily transcendence. In fact, it can be just the opposite. Transformation can mean a grounding into reality, a deepening into the finite. Transformation is a process of forming a human life from the substance of that life itself. Seen in this context, the quest is not an escape from reality, but a passage into an even deeper reality. It is not designed to reveal something hidden, but to alert us to something in plain sight. It does not give us a secret wisdom, but makes us reconsider what we have always known. The quest is an invitation to go deeper.

When I first went out on my rooftop I was looking for answers. I wanted the bigger picture of my life, some experience that would show me what I thought I could not see. I hoped that I could transcend my limited reality and be shown the path to follow to make me the disciple I wanted to be. My intention in this way was not very different from countless other human beings who have sought a transcendent moment. Such moments are possible. Transcendence can occur. People can have the scales fall from their eyes, be swept up in a rapture divine, be given a glimpse of eternity. The only problem is: we have no formula for making that happen. Transcendent experience, from my perspective, is wholly at the initiative of God. It is not something we can obtain through our own diligence or by virtue of our own deserving.

The quest is not a tool of transcendence. It is a method of transformation. It begins very much with our own initiative. It truly is a case of our going out to find God, not God coming to find us. It

is humble in expectation, an experience truly bounded by our finite nature and located in our earthy reality, which is why it is our lament. Looking back, my choice of an urban rooftop for my first quest was more than appropriate because fewer places could be more mundane. I did not go up to Sinai to find my God. I went up to the roof of my house.

The transformation of the quest begins in this celebration of the human. The fact that a fragile, finite creature would take the initiative to “find” God is the first stage of the quest’s transformative experience. It is the hinge point, the turning toward transformation. The quest begins with the mystery of our own self-awareness: we understand that we are fragile and limited creatures, and we also understand that there is something greater than ourselves. The spiritual audacity of a quest is that we want to connect the two. We are aware of our reality and the reality of the sacred; where the two come into contact is the location of the quest. Whether we physically choose to carry out our quest on a mountain top or a rooftop makes no difference. The real location is the nexus point of spiritual awareness. We do not leave the finite. We do not enter the infinite. We stand at the place of intersection. We do not transcend our own reality, much less the reality of the infinite, but we are positioned for transformation because when the mundane becomes a vehicle for the sacred, things change.

The quest is sacramental. It is the process by which the substance of our everyday reality becomes transformed. How this happens is a mystery. Why it happens is a mystery. But in effect, we take the initiative to place ourselves at this hinge point because we believe that something wonderful happens when the two are brought together. When I had my experience on the roof I did not outwardly appear any different, but by an inward working of grace, by a touch of the mystery of God, I was changed. My substance shifted. My spiritual location shifted, even if only by inches, pointing me to a new trajectory toward the sacred.

The quest, therefore, is the reverse of intentionally placing ourselves in harm’s way. It is an act of placing ourselves in grace’s way.

We are looking for that point of intersection where we think we are most likely to encounter God. These locations, which we sometimes call the thin places of our reality, are not defined by geography, but by intention. While I understand that there are many geographical locations that people revere, I do not believe that any of these places are magical portals to transformation. The key to the seeker's quest is not in finding just the right piece of holy real estate on which to stand, but rather in so preparing his or her awareness that any space he or she occupies can become thin through faith.

The quest is the sacrament of the seeker. It is the embodiment of, the celebration of, the ordinary in communion with the truly transcendent, the presence of the God who cannot be fully known much less manipulated. It is the numinous point of contact where transformation can occur because the initiative of the finite person meets the initiative of the infinite Person. The quest is the action of the seeker to move into this spiritual space. The shift to the location where the mind can be receptive to an encounter with God begins in the inner reality of the seeker. It begins in the interior landscape of perception, awareness, and consciousness. There is a mindset to the quest, an awareness that must be in place no matter what the physical location of the seeker may be.

Long ago The Buddha helped us to understand this aspect of the quest. He told us that no matter where we were in time and space, we could sit down, be quiet, and open our minds to a transformative level of awareness. The meditation that he taught is this internal form of the quest. In the same way Native American tradition says that we must purify our awareness if we are going out to seek the holy. The cleansing act of letting go of daily chatter, of distractions and desires, takes place in Zen meditation as surely as it does in the Native American sweat lodge. The first step of the quest begins inside. It begins in preparation. It is the seeker's intentional effort to enter into the real so deeply that he or she comes out on the other side.

The physical setting of the quest can be helpful to the seeker because it is conducive to this level of calm concentration, but there is no magic door through which he or she passes into transcendence.

There is only the mystery of communion, of that sacramental chemistry by which the mundane is transformed into the holy. It can happen with bread and wine. It can also happen with breath and blood, within the finite reality of the human body. When we place ourselves in the path of grace, when we open our minds and hearts to receive the presence of God, we are in the thin place of transformation. The quest becomes tangible because it becomes embodied. It is not a flight of the mind to imagine transcendence, but a movement of the very substance of human life to the place of meeting we can only describe as incarnation.

The Incarnation is God's vision quest.

That sentence is the most concise way to express the doctrine of the Incarnation from the Native American viewpoint. The Incarnation has all of the classic elements of a quest. God experiences a time of preparation (the first vision quest of Jesus). God expresses a need for the support of community (the second vision quest of Jesus). God endures a test on behalf of all people (the third vision quest of Jesus). God makes a transforming lament that heals the world (the fourth vision quest of Jesus). From the perspective of Native American tradition, the idea that God would take human form to experience the vision quest makes sense. Jesus becomes one of the human family, the tribe of the human beings, in order to do the work of transformation that a quest is designed to do. For Native people, contact with God does not occur only in the abstractions of the mind, but in the everyday physical engagement of the body. The sweat lodge is physical. The vision quest is physical. The experience of God is physical. The Incarnation, therefore, is transformation made tangible.

The human quest is the risk of intimacy with God. It is going out to attempt to discover God and enter into communion with God. But without the Incarnation, that level of communion would remain as disembodied as relationships on the Internet. A message might be passed between us, a kind of cosmic photo of God shared on the digital screen of spirituality, but the flesh and blood intimacy of physical contact would elude us. God would remain a dream, not an experience. The graphic story of the gospels tells us how God lived through

the quest. It allows us to enter into God's own time of preparation. It lets us become among those friends who support God in this intention. It shows us how God does go out into "thin" places to seek a deeper reality. It describes what God sees and hears during the quest. It explains the nature of the sacrifice involved and it reveals the final outcome of the quest as the finite and the infinite merge into a vision beyond anything we might have imagined.

The New Testament is a vision quest story, an invitation to us to step into the vision quest of God. This quest is transformative. It is not the transcendent myth of a shaman far removed from human experience, doing things we could never hope to do, flying away from us into an ethereal realm reserved only for the few; instead, it is the earth-bound story of a flesh and blood seeker who lives in the midst of the mundane, using what is at hand to turn the common into the extraordinary. The quest is not an escape, but a rooting into reality: a celebration of the everyday, the physical, the sensual, and the experiential.

Because of God's vision quest, our quests can take on a deeper dimension. We can follow the story of the incarnate seeker to focus our own search into an interior geography of faith that can bring us closer to our goal, intimacy with God. No matter where we are, we can step into the space once occupied by Jesus and find a real presence there to speak to us. God's quest can transform us, not by lifting us out of ourselves but by grounding us into the joy and struggle of being human. Therefore, walking the way of Christ is walking the stations of the quest as much as those of the cross. We follow Jesus into the place of transformation.

As a young man I tried to find faith in the midst of doubt. I instinctively sought some way to transform my reality from a painful experience into a healing vision. I turned to the wisdom of my own ancestors to perform a quest in the spirit of Native American tradition. I tried to create a sacred space with the most mundane things I had at hand: a rooftop and a box of cornmeal. I did not know if my quest would take me away from my faith in Jesus. I did not know if I would discover myself to be a hypocrite, but I decided to take that

risk. I walked out to a lonely place to find intimacy with God. I experienced transformation by meeting transcendence. I joined the story of incarnation.

What follows in this book is a description of vision, the mystery at the heart of the quest, and of the visions of God as I have come to understand them as a Native American theologian. In sharing my thoughts I have no sense of having an experience that is rare or unique. As a Native person, I believe we are all called to make our own vision quests. We are called by our doubts or our hope. We are called by ancient myths or new mysteries. In answering that call, we each make our vision quest in our own way. We have our own traditions. And yet, we walk a similar path:

1. We prepare ourselves to answer the call to a quest.
2. We seek the support of friends and mentors.
3. We accept the discipline of our intentions.
4. We express our deepest longings.

These four sacred directions of the vision quest are the guidelines used by Native American people for centuries. They are so simple because they are so common. They are accessible to every person. We may be inspired by the romantic stories of the heroes of our traditions, but we are as called as they were to make our vision quest. Jesus is not Galahad. He was a person, a human being, just like you and me when he felt the call to make a quest. Four times he went out seeking the vision of God. Four times he followed the four simple steps of the Native American tradition. We can follow him. We can read the descriptions of his experience, see the visions through his eyes, and learn from him about intimacy with God. His quest and ours can be the same.