

SAVAGE WISDOM—NO EXEMPTIONS UNDER NATURAL LAW

This letter was supposedly written to the President of the United States in 1855 by Chief Seathl of the Duwamish tribe of the State of Washington regarding the proposed purchase of the tribe's land.

It has been claimed by some historians that the letter is an anachronistic hoax that could not have been written by this person at that time. However, if this homily on the white man and the environment was not written by this Indian chief, it should have been.

"The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and goodwill. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer, for we know if we do not so, the white man may come with guns and take our land . . . "How can you buy or sell the land? The idea is strange to us. We do not own the freshness of the air or the sparkle of the water. How can you buy them from us? . . . Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people.

" . . . The white man does not understand our ways. One portion of the land is the same to him as the next, for he is a stranger who comes in the night and takes from the land whatever he needs. The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on. He leaves his father's graves behind and he does not care. He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care. His father's graves and his children's birthright are forgotten. His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert. The sight of your cities pains the eyes of the redman. But perhaps it is because the redman is a savage and does not understand . . .

"There is no quiet place in the white man's cities. No place to hear the leaves of spring or the rustle of insect's wings. But perhaps because I am a savage and do not understand—the clatter only seems to insult the ears. And what is there to life if a man cannot hear the lovely cry of a whipporwill or the arguments of the frogs around a pond at night? The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, and the smell of the wind cleansed by a mid-day rain, or scented with a pinyon pine. The air is precious to the redman. For all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, the man. The white man does not seem to notice the air he breathes. Like a man dying for many days, he is numb to the stench.

"If I decide to accept, I will make one condition. The whiteman must treat the beasts of this land as his brothers. I am a savage and I do not understand any other way. I have seen a thousand rotting buffalos on the prairies, left by the white man who shot them from a passing train. I am a savage and I do not understand how the smoking iron horse can be more important than the buffalo that we kill only to stay alive. What is man without the beasts? If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beast also happens to man. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth.

"Our children have seen their fathers humble in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame. And after defeat, they turn their days in idleness and contaminate their bodies with sweet food and strong drink. It matters little where we pass the rest of our days—they are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters, and none of the children of the great tribe that once lived on this earth, or that roamed in small bands in the woods, will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours.

"One thing we know which the white man may one day discover. Our God is the same God. You may think now that you own him as you wish to own our land. But you cannot. He is the God of man. And his compassion is equal for the redman and the white. This earth is precious to him. And to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its creator. The whites, too, shall pass—perhaps sooner than other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed and you will one night suffocate in your own waste. When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of many men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted . . . where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say good-bye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival.

"We might understand if we knew what it was the white man dreams, what hopes he describes to his children on long winter nights, what visions he burns into their minds, so that they will wish for tomorrow. But we are savages. The white man's dreams are hidden from us. And because they are hidden, we will go our own way. If we agree, it will be to secure our reservation you have promised. There, perhaps, we may live out our brief days as we wish. When the last redman has vanished from the earth, and the memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairies, these shores and forest will still hold the spirits of my people, for they love this earth as the newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. If we sell you our land, love it as we've loved it. Care of it, as we've cared for it. Hold in you mind the memory of the land, as it is when you take it, and with all your strength, with all your might, and with all your heart—preserve it for your children, and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know—our God is the same God. This earth is precious to him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny."