

# A Chance to Heal

by Natalia Mbadu, age 16, Portland

*I never thought that we'd get here,* I thought to myself, sitting on the mountaintop hill looking down at the Native American Sioux Nation. With the scorching heat, I had to take a break, it was sizzling. No, seriously. It felt like the world was ablaze. The Sioux were working on a way to keep cool, while everyone back in the states was panicking. People were dying, and they were dying rapidly. As a young boy from a small town in New Jersey, I wanted to see how the effects of climate change were affecting one of the only nations of people that somehow managed to withstand it. These days I've been more in tune with the news broadcast. They were talking about the last ever living bison located alongside a nation of Native Americans. Here I was, at a place that used to flourish with trees that almost reached the skies, where birds would entertain the Sioux nation with their harmonic melodies, and where the morning skies were always a pastel blue.

With all the strength that I had, I got up, treading my way down the mountaintop hill, trying my best not to trip. Three of the elders had noticed me treading my way down and waved up to me with excitement. I thought about how to greet them in a way that wasn't disrespectful. I was sure that the elders had a particular greeting, so when I got there, I bowed my head. I didn't think the old-fashioned American handshake would do it.

"Get up," I heard a voice. I raised my head slowly as one of the elders noticed the tears streaming, representing the despair, the hurt I was holding deep within, the disappointment, and our ignorance to silence Native American voices. The frustration I felt in our collective ignorance, instead of silencing Native American voices while they struggled to fight for planet Earth desperately, and the fear that once all animals were gone humans would be too, the human species. The tears filled my eyes, making it harder to make him out. He pulled me in a hug and kept me there for a while, singing me a tune. We both understood; it was something we

could both share: the hurt. It was something that we could relate to, something that we found in common. Sadly, it had to affect them before it affected myself and many other Americans.

“Am I late?” I asked. He chuckled.

“No ... certainly not young boy, you’re quite early in fact,” he had a very welcoming personality. His wrinkles showed how long he had been roaming the Earth, gaining knowledge from his ancestors and passing it down to the new generations. I was thrilled to share this emotional ceremony with them. They were covered in fine garments of all different sorts of colors— some were blue, some in white and some in all colors with feathers all around them. What did I know about this ceremony? I knew nothing of it. Nothing at all.

A woman greets me with delight. Her eyes were a fierce rose gold, and her hair, a dark ebony, was far-reaching, almost touching her knees. We walked together through the village. I noticed the well designed huts, some covered by bison skin. I learned that the community has recently returned to their traditional building methods, using natural materials as a way to be more in harmony with the Earth.

“Come here Oscar,” the old man said. I looked behind me to try to spot him, but it was hard finding him in the crowd of Native Americans with colorful regalia designs. He eventually grabbed me and took me somewhere quiet, where we both sat across from each other.

“The Bison has been a part of our culture for nomadic Native Americans for the longest time,” he started to speak, and I quickly grabbed my journal and pen from my tote bag. “We had different uses for the bison from using them for clothing and shelter, to food, and we even used their bones to make tools and for weaponry.” *How could one animal, like a bison, provide so much for a group of people?* I thought to myself.

He paused, looking me in the eyes as if to gauge my understanding. “The bison were integral to our survival, but they were also sacred to us. They were a symbol of life and abundance. When the settlers came, they hunted the bison nearly to extinction. It is not just the loss of a resource; it is the loss of a part of our identity.”

I nodded, absorbing the gravity of his words. The pain of their history was palpable, and I felt a deep sense of respect for their resilience. I scribbled notes furiously, wanting to capture every word, every emotion.

“But we have endured,” he continued. “We have adapted. Just as we adapt to the changes brought by climate.” He gestured around us. “Our people have learned to live with the Earth, not against it. This is why we survive.”

A drumbeat started in the distance, and I could hear the faint sounds of singing and chanting. The ceremony was beginning. The old man stood up and motioned for me to follow. As we walked back towards the gathering, he spoke again.

“Today, we celebrate not just our survival but our unity with nature. This ceremony is a reminder of our connection to the Earth and to each other. It is a reminder that we must take care of both.”

We arrived at the center of the village, where a circle had formed. People were dancing, their colorful regalia swaying with their movements. The drums grew louder, their rhythm echoing through the hills. The woman with the rose-gold eyes approached me again. “This is a Sundance,” she explained. “It is one of our most important ceremonies. We dance to pray for healing, for our people and for the Earth.”

I watched in awe as the dancers moved with grace and power, their faces full of emotion. The energy in the air was electric, filled with hope and determination. As the sun began to set, the old man turned to me one last time. “Remember, Oscar,” he said. “We are all part of the same circle of life. What affects one of us, affects all of us. It is our duty to protect and cherish this Earth, for it is the only home we have.” I felt a profound sense of responsibility. This journey had opened my eyes to the deep wisdom and strength of the Sioux Nation. They had taught me that despite the challenges we face, there is always hope if we stand together. I left the mountaintop village that evening with a heart full of gratitude and a promise to honor the lessons

I had learned. The world was changing, but so could we. And maybe, just maybe, there was still a chance to heal.