
THE VITRUVIAN MAN AND BEYOND: SPIRIT IMPERATIVE IN THE LIFE AND POETRY OF RALPH SALISBURY

INGRID WENDT

Ralph Salisbury, my brilliant, passionate, and deeply-spiritual Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish-American husband, began his every day, just after sunrise, by going outdoors to say his morning prayers — acknowledging and offering gratitude to the spirit presences inherent in earth's Creation.¹ Standing upright, feet firmly planted, with arms at his sides, he'd start by facing East, for two or three minutes, silently praying to the Great Spirit of All and then, feet unmoving, he'd pray to the Spirit of the East, bringer of Sun, on whom re-birth depends. At the conclusion of these opening words — which were constant from day to day, and sacred, not to be written down — he'd raise his arms parallel to the ground (envision Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man"²) and pivot, at the waist, his entire torso 90 degrees: first, to the right, then back to center, then to the left, and back to center again, where he'd lower his arms and turn his whole body to face and pray to another Spirit of the Four Directions; and again, at prayer's conclusion, he'd raise his arms, pivot, and repeat the same pattern, until each Spirit had been addressed. Turning again to face the East, he'd conclude with prayers to the Spirit of the Sky and to the Spirit of the Earth, "from which growth comes, in which my loved ones lie."³

Whether it was on our East-facing balcony, with the city of Eugene, Oregon, spreading across the valley far below our hillside yard and the large vegetable garden we planted every Spring; or wherever his writing and his teaching took him, be it the landscaped grounds of the Villa Serbelloni, high above Lake Como; or the Autumn tundras of Norway and Finland, 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle; or gazing at one of

countless other vistas that spread before him, he silently, humbly, prayed, expressing the hope that through his respectful attention and the attention of other Indigenous people around the world, Creation may continue to sustain us.

Like the "Vitruvian Man," who stood perfectly centered in the fusion of a circle and a square, Ralph stood fully present in the fusion of both a dual and a non-dual world — the place where opposites dissolve — where spirit is fused with the physical, where subject and object, self and other, as well as past and present, form an inseparable unity into which one's own being is an integrated whole, immersed in the Sacred Reality of the universe. This place of fusion also represents where Ralph stood with regard to identity. When asked to which of his people he paid primary allegiance, Native American or Caucasian, Ralph's answer was often to paraphrase a passage from Luigi Pirandello's short story "War,"⁴ in which a bereaved father says that he "does not give half of his love to one child, half to another, he gives all his love to each of his children. I am a Cherokee-Shawnee-English-Irish person, not part this part that but all everything, whatever it is."⁵ In conversation, he'd often say "I would give all of my love to my Indian people, and all of my love to my white people. I am not part Indian, part white, but wholly both." Thus, Indian *and* white, Ralph stood in his own physical and spiritual space at the center of the overlapping circle and square. This inner space, which defies categorization, was the space from which Ralph drew courage and the motivation to bear witness for all people, especially the victims of injustice.

That sense of oneness, of inter-connectedness, which infuses all of Ralph's work, stemmed from his belief that Divinity is "imminent" within each element of Creation. And here I tread carefully, and as respectfully as possible. Ralph seldom spoke directly of his beliefs, and I — neither theologian nor scholar of Indigenous Studies— come from a family and a cultural heritage very different from his own. What I have pieced together

comes from many years of closely reading Ralph's poetry and from what I know of his intentions; from deep conversations not only with him, but with other Indigenous writers, in which I participated; from my own wide readings; and from conversations with scholars of Native American literature and religions. If this essay speaks wrongly of Ralph's beliefs, and/or the beliefs of his Cherokee and other Indigenous people, I take full responsibility, and I apologize, in advance, to whomever these words might offend.

To the best of my understanding, and as this essay will, throughout, elucidate with reference to specific poems, Ralph believed that Spirit is not separate from Creation. Spirit is "Immanence," not "Transcendence." The "God of All," to whom Ralph prayed, was not the God of Western theology who created the heavens and the earth, while remaining separate from them.⁶ God did not create the world and then admire His creation from an outside vantage point. In Indigenous theologies, God *remains within* all earthly beings; every rock, every tree, every pool of water, every animal — every element of nature is "sensate" and aware of our presence, just as we are aware of *its* presence. In the words of ecological philosopher David Abram:

For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationship with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied — whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of moods.⁷

When hunting deer, for example, the animal Ralph saw was not "a" deer, but "Deer" — the proper name of a relative — the embodiment of an inexplicable life force, which must be acknowledged and thanked. Ralph's "negotiated relationship," this "exchange" between animals and himself, as he was hunting and fishing, consisted of a wordless awareness, a "shift" of consciousness, of "mood," rather than ritual speech; but we see in his poems its verbal equivalent. In his poems Ralph asks forgiveness from the animals he's killed for food (he never killed for sport); he asks forgiveness from all beings he may ever have harmed, for he was "one with them." "By naming others, whether they be human or more than human," says Professor John Baumann, scholar of religious studies, "you are acknowledging their existence, you are acknowledging the 'sensate intelligence' of something that senses you, as you sense it, in the same way, whether Past or Future or Present. Every time you name something you're bringing it into existence, you're acknowledging it, it acknowledges you, and now you're forming this reciprocal relationship with your world. That reciprocity is at the core of Indigenous thought."⁸

And it isn't only the "living, animate" that is "sensate," it's also what the Western mindset terms "the inanimate": stones, rocks, mountains, water, minerals, and the like. I'm reminded of a deeply spiritual moment Ralph and I once shared, when the renowned Sámi poet, visual artist, and musician Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, at his home on the Finnish tundra, carefully handed to each of us, in turn, a very large stone. "Hold it," he said, "in your hands. It will breathe."⁹ It did. We felt it. I am still without words to describe it.

In addition to his belief in the "sensate" oneness of all Creation, Ralph also felt that every aspect of our world is in a state of constant change, constant flux, its future existence dependent on the continuation of "right practices" (also referred to as "right

actions”) and the attention, gratitude, and respect to which he — in line with tradition and in harmony with Indigenous people around the world — committed himself to observing.¹⁰ Seen in this context, Ralph’s morning prayers were also a form of “right action.” By acknowledging and addressing the sacred deities, he was not only giving thanks and speaking words of supplication; he was, with his words, doing his part to keep Creation intact and viable. Only on one, very special occasion, at the south rim of the Grand Canyon, when our daughter Martina was nine, did Ralph speak his prayers aloud and in our presence. Every other morning, as long as he was physically able, he chose to be alone and out of doors, no matter where his travels took him, and to silently repeat the same verbal sequence: his own words interwoven with the language of ritual he’d discovered many years before, during his readings of James Mooney’s collection of *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (1891), and Mooney’s comprehensive publication of Cherokee history, myths, and legends, published in 1900.¹¹ Ralph especially appreciated the works of Belgian-born Frans (sometimes spelled Franz) Olbrechts, who lived among the Cherokee people and completed, edited, and published Mooney’s second book of sacred texts in 1932.¹²

Ralph did, however, offer his readers — in the introduction to his sixth book of poems, *Rainbows of Stone* — the words with which his daily prayers concluded: “I thank the Creator for my small place in the immensity, power, glory, and beauty of Creation. I pray that I may be worthy of my Medicine Path and live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny.”¹³ In *Rainbows of Stone* he also included a poem titled “Six Prayers,”¹⁴ which follows the same sequence and contains the essence as his morning prayers but uses different words. “Six Prayers” is more of an *approximation*: a consciously crafted poem that stands on its own, with literary turns of phrase and images that echo throughout his entire *oeuvre*. In the poem, Ralph begins by addressing the Cherokee

god of Thunder, who once, during a fierce storm, when Ralph was 15, struck him with lightning as he was climbing through a wire fence, during harvest time, far out in the fields of his Iowa family's farm.

That spirit power turned, now, into ally — for he came to believe, later in life, that this event "marked" him to carry out a mission¹⁵ — Ralph asks for help in shaping the poem he will write that day, its subject usually unknown to him until he put pencil to paper: a poem which he hopes will nourish the spirits of his people, just as rain has always made possible the growing of beans, pumpkins, and yams to nourish their bodies. In stanza two, Ralph's prayer, again, is not for himself alone, but for the earthly renewal which only the Spirit of the East can bring, as seen in the images of sun, to awaken the birds and melt the mountain snows, thereby ensuring the ongoing supply of water upon which life depends. In stanzas three and four, he prays that his words might help humankind to connect with each other, to live in harmony, as Creation intended us to do. Stanza five returns us to the request of stanza one — aid with his writing — but this time, Ralph prays his words may help readers of the future, in whose world "the green of even the tallest pine/ is wolf tooth white" (a reference, I believe, to nuclear winter) — a future when growing food (metaphorically, providing hope, providing color) may be next to impossible.¹⁶ Stanza six brings in a bittersweet awareness: the Sacred Earth holds Ralph's loved ones (father, mother, brothers, aunt); yet earth's "black loam"¹⁷ (Ralph's often-used metaphor for the sacred soil of creativity) contains seeds/words that he trusts will grow, after the warmth of his hand turns snow (paper) to life-giving water (the catalyst which allows his words to flow).

Thus, a poem which has edged toward darkness — as does much of Ralph's work — ends on a note of light, of optimism. Humankind has, yes, wreaked havoc upon itself and upon our world, and will do so again and again. Yet, as demonstrated here and

elsewhere in his work, Ralph never lost hope that life on this planet, as we know it, may endure.

Six Prayers

Thunderer God of the turbulent sky may
my turbulent mind shape
for my people
rain clouds
beans
pumpkins
and yams.

East Spirit
Dawn Spirit may
birds awaken in
the forest of teeth
whose river your color must say
frozen mountains'
prayer that you
will loosen them.

Spirit of the North
whose star is our
white mark

like the blaze we chop in black bark
where the trail home
divides
even in
our homes
we need
you to guide.

Spirit of the Sunset West
may gray clouds
hiding friends from me
glow
like yours
that we grope
toward each other through
a vivid rose.

Spirit of the South
direction of
warm wind
warm rain
and the winter sun
like a pale painting of a morning glory
help me Spirit that in my mind humble things

a man may give to his child may grow

the blue of berry
orange of squash
crimson of radish
yellow of corn
when the green of even the tallest pine
is wolf tooth white.

Spirit of the Earth
keeper of Mother Father
Sister Brother
loved ones all
once praying
as I pray
or in some other way
Spirit the black dirt
is like the black cover of
a book whose words
are black ink I can
not read
but I place my brown hand
on snow
and pray that more than snow
may melt.

Ralph's existential understanding of Creation, which came from many sources — among them, the earth-wisdom of his parents, amplified by his near-death experience with lightning, together with his commitment to honoring friends who died in World War II,¹⁸ and, later, with finding an Olbrechts' photograph of the Cherokee Medicine Man Jukiah, to whom Ralph bore uncanny resemblance — gradually led him to the full realization that he was being called upon to dedicate his life, his teaching, and his writing to a complex "spirit imperative": a sense of sacred duty, which he referred to (by turns) as his Medicine Path, his Spirit Path, his Destiny. This sacred duty was, quite simply, to use his love of language and his gift with words "to heal" and "to save," though as he once so humbly stated, "If I am in any sense a medicine man, my ceremonies are my fiction and my poems."¹⁹

Indeed, the words "to save" appear throughout Ralph's many books of poems.²⁰ One of their earliest appearances is in a poem titled "Their Lives and the Lives": "My life maybe bettered but not lengthened / *by lives I have tried to save in words...*(italics mine).²¹ In "An Indian War, Possibly Not the Last," a poem written for his younger brother Rex (who made the Air Force his career, rising to the rank of Colonel), Ralph wrote, "I fight an Indian war/ again, not hand to hand,/ but hand to pen,/ taking a stab at/ making less meaningless/ a page's white skin, // *To try to save a future for generations...*"²² The imperative to save appears also in "This Is My Death Dream," a poem about a fever-vision he had as a three-year-old child: the enormous family barn was balanced on his thumb, holding (he realized, in retrospect) all the animals "terrified/ I'll drop them/ to smash amid kindling./ How can they know/that fever from/ the heavens will burn/ their home before I'm grown, and/ *the only way they'll be saved/ is for me to survive/ lightning and war/ and remember them....*"²³ In the poem "Green Smoke," which retells an event that happened during Air Force training (Ralph corralled

and tied down a bomb which had rolled loose from its moorings) he writes: "And yes, eighteen, I saved eight men,/ Nine if I count myself, ... *and now I'm a poet And try to save everything/ I love.*"²⁴

Ralph's commitment "to heal and to save" is also revealed in the very titles of poems written *not* as re-creations of original Cherokee sacred formulas, but as poems intended

to keep his own sometimes-flagging spirit alive, as well as the spirits of his readers — poems with sometimes whimsical, sometimes serious, titles: "A Cherokee Secular Formula to Cure Egoism," for example, and "A Defense Against the Evil Without and the Evil Within," "A Ritual for Approaching My Death," "A Ritual Not to Feel Alone." "War in the Genes, a Reveille for Mustering the Dead." "Death Song, My Own." "A Prophecy, Wish, Hope or Prayer." "A Medicine Man, His Natural Perspective." "Cherokee Manhood-Vigil Vision." "A Cherokee Ars Poetica." "A Ritual Seeking a Voice." And many more: telling the truth, but telling it "slant."²⁵

Titles of other poems reveal Ralph's commitment to go beyond the limits of felt experience. Words by Columbian novelist Laura Restrepo — "The duty of the writer in violent times is to keep history alive" — serve as epigraph for Ralph's poem "Potato-Planting, a Native History," which includes a reference to the genocide of his people by those who "skinned men" as we now skin potatoes.²⁶ In "These Sacred Names," Ralph's felt duty to passing along (saving) the history of his people extended also to keeping alive, through naming, the spirits of respected Cherokee elders: Chief Guwisguwi (John Ross), Tsali (Charlie), Sequoia (George Guest, Guess, or Gist), Tagwandahi (Catawba-Killer), Itagunahi (John Ax), and Ayunini (Swimmer).

In these the people (The Aniyunwiya) come
back against bayonets, against extinction,

rejoining kin, beneath the clay, beneath the rivers of
The Carolinas, Kentucky, Tennessee and Georgia, to join
in a sacred dance, in Echota, the holy city, the maiden
whose death dooms us all,
the beautiful daughter of the sun."²⁷

In the poem "'Katoohah,' We Say," Ralph imagines "how it was, / the lighter women taken, and the darker, / more fertile, land. // ... But Yunwiya now call each other 'Cherokee,' / the Choctaw insult name 'Cave Men,' / altered by White contempt, that verbal victor. // 'Katoohah,' I repeat / for pleasure of sound — ... // and hear 'The U.S.,' on / a Russian or Asian or Arab's / contemptuous tongue."²⁸

Ralph's multi-faceted imperative to heal the spirits of those still living and those to come, and to save — through speaking them into existence — the ways, beliefs, names, histories, and customs of his Cherokee forebears, is *not*, however, to be found only within these (and many more) specific poems, within his daily prayers, and within book titles based on Cherokee myths (*Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage*, *Spirit Beast Chant*, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, *A White Rainbow*, and *Rainbows of Stone*). Nor was his mission to save only his Cherokee people and their heritage; Ralph wished, as well, to acknowledge, honor, and preserve the memories of those 90% of all tribal peoples in the Americas whose lives and cultures were decimated by invading Europeans.²⁹ Among many such poems are "Canyon de Chelley," "Montezuma's Castle — Cliff Dwelling — Arizona," and "A Costal Temple Ruin, 1992," written during one of our many trips to Mexico. Another dimension of Ralph's commitment to other Indigenous people can be seen in poems declaring kinship and a spiritual connection with the living descendants of those tribes which *did* survive —

"Medicine-Meeting, Hoopa, 1994," for example; "For My Swinomish Brother Drumming Across the Water"; and "For Octavio Paz," the Mexican Nobel Laureate, whose Indigenous ancestry figures prominently in his writing.

One might even go so far as to say that Ralph's two-fold imperative — "to heal" and "to save" — is manifest, one way or another, in almost every poem he wrote: poems to preserve the names, stories, and story-telling voices of his immediate and extended family; poems which speak into "continuous being" the sacred world around him; poems expressing a sense of mineral, vegetable, animal, and human kinship that extended to all people, everywhere in the world; poems that praise and celebrate, and in so doing, attempt to save all that is beautiful and true, while protesting all that is not. Taken together, these various manifestations of Ralph's spirit imperative to save "all he loved," were nothing less than a wish to save the world.

And he said as much, in his final years, often declaring that his life and his writing were dedicated to the Tribe of the World, the Human Tribe. "Though I have lived and worked among the intelligentsia of many nations, my writing comes from having lived as a questing, mixed-race, working-class individual in a violent world, and my work is offered to the spirit of human goodness, which unites all people in the eternal struggle against evil, a struggle to prevail against global extinction."³⁰ As Choctaw/Cherokee scholar and novelist Louis Owens once wrote of Ralph's poetry, "every line is something like prayer."³¹

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What led a boy of mixed-race ancestry — born and raised on an Iowa farm, in a house that, until he was fifteen, had no electricity or indoor plumbing; a boy whose elementary education, through the eighth grade, was in a one-room, country school — what early influences were strong enough to keep Ralph going steadily forward, through a lifetime

of challenge, to the place of deep wisdom in which he quietly strove to unite all people in the struggle "against global extinction"?

As objectively as possible, I suggest that Ralph's goodness and steady optimism were inborn, were part of his very DNA, of who he was. Although he'd be first to say that he was not perfect, one need only look at family photos taken during the Great Depression of the 1930s and during World War II — in which Ralph is, almost without fail, the only one smiling — to see the inner radiance that was there from the very beginning. Nourished and given direction by the teachings of both parents, Ralph's love of life was deepened and expanded by his intimate relationship with the land, with land's creatures, and with the cycles of birth, growth, death, and regeneration, which he experienced first-hand, as "givens."

Growing up the middle child of the five who survived infancy, Ralph was not formally introduced to any organized religion. His family belonged to no church. He did, however, as do many children, incorporate into his vocabulary the random, isolated words from the Christian lexicon that were spoken at school and in town; words he encountered in the school's encyclopedia (which he read all the way through) and in whatever novels he could find. His family did not celebrate religious holidays, there were no Christmas presents, no tree, though his father did, on occasion, cut a Christmas tree for the school from the tip of a large, side branch of a farmyard pine. Yet, Ralph often credited each parent with having instilled in him a deep awareness of an order to the world, of things that existed "beyond our knowing" and were important to recognize and respect.

Rachel Carson, world-renowned naturalist and early environmentalist, has said, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in."³² That person was Ralph's Irish-American mother, who'd been

asked to stop attending her third-grade Sunday School class at the Methodist Church because she asked too many questions. She formed ideas of her own, however, and years later taught her son what he, as an adult, often said was “something like Pantheism.” On more than one occasion his mother told him that God was to be found in all living things—the flowers, the trees, the birds and other animals—a belief he accepted without question, for it made sense that everything he already loved was sacred. Who or what God was, his mother didn’t say, nor did she teach him to pray. But their shared belief in “God-in-Nature” is evident throughout his every book.

Does this make Ralph a “nature poet,” as one commonly uses this term? I offer a very qualified “yes,” and suggest that his work might better be described as “Ecopoetry,” long before that term came into fashion. For, although a love of nature infuses much of his work, that love is almost always coupled with an awareness that our Sacred World, as we know it, is at all times (and never more so than today) on the verge of destruction, its harmony offset by human intrusions ranging from small and almost-inconsequential, to the enormous and irreversible. I cannot count the times, beginning with our first long car trip together, he spontaneously quoted, in full, Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “God’s Grandeur,” which begins with joyful images of a glorious world, and quickly moves to lines of despair. “Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;/ And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;/ And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil/ Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.”³³

Ralph’s poems praising the beauty of nature likewise, quite frequently, make similar leaps into a darker awareness. Lines expressing delight at seeing a hummingbird at the feeder might jump to an image of bombers; a poem about the conical top of a

deodar cedar, tossing in the wind, moves (via surprising associations) into a memory of Hiroshima's destruction near the end of World War II.

This coupling of the beautiful and sacred with its opposite (or the threat of it) appears throughout Ralph's work, beginning with his first published book, *Ghost Grapefruit*. "Beyond the Road Taken" invites the reader to "Draw close; / Between these feet ... / is a crocus I would save from browsing deer / save for you the small beauty the sun / and snow left me, yellow petals low like myself / in tall green, which lumbermen will find , / one day, a good investment." (italics mine)³⁴ Another early poem recalls a verbal exchange between an unseen mother and child, in the back yard of the house next to ours in Fresno, California, where we lived 1969-1971. In this poem the "impatient mother" of the title (so different from his own), wreaks — in one small moment — havoc on the spirit of her child, rejecting and stifling not only her child's delight and wonder but also the child's love offering.

**Too Small to Break the Roots, She Offers Her Impatient Mother
A Flower Potted in the Whole Earth**

"I found it for you

I found it for you

I found it for you."

"Oh,

shut up

"But I

found it I

found it I

found it."³⁵

Ralph's father's spiritual influences were of a different order, consisting in great measure of teaching-demonstrations of "correct action": namely, the farming and hunting practices he'd, himself, learned while growing up "mixed blood" in the Kentucky hills, a hardscrabble life in which he'd had but two years of formal schooling, a life in which some Cherokee traditions survived, though unnamed and (presumably) unrecognized as such, and many more were lost through intermarriage with whites.

Though Ralph's father never told his children of his Cherokee heritage (a fact they learned, as adults, at his funeral, from his darkest-skinned, Kentucky-raised brother) — with possibly some Shawnee thrown in (a theory based on Ralph's great-grandmother's "given" Shawnee name, "Chicabob"³⁶) — in his memoir Ralph writes, "Dad essentially lived as Cherokees had lived for centuries."³⁷ His father planted according to phases of the moon, "raised his sons to follow a traditional Cherokee hunter and warrior ethic, and to farm, following Cherokee traditions, the [way] now called ecological or organic."³⁸ This way of farming involved returning to earth — plowing into the earth — what today's city gardeners call compost but on the farm was called barnyard waste. Implicit, of course, in this instruction, was the Indigenous concept of "sacred reciprocity."³⁹

The barnyard waste on Ralph's parents' farm included not only vegetable waste, but the by-products of butchered farm animals and of the wild game (rabbits, squirrel, duck, deer, fox, weasel, and pheasant) that Ralph learned to trap and to hunt—first with a bow and arrow his father helped him fashion "out of a willow or a maple branch.... lamenting that he did not have hickory, as he'd have had in Kentucky...."⁴⁰ and later, with a gun, for food to keep the family alive during the Great Depression of the 1930s: a time when many family meals consisted solely of cornbread and milk, or potatoes with

white-flour gravy, or bread spread with lard, for flavor and for whatever protein it might contain.

His father also initiated him into several ceremonial rites of manhood. Ralph was "blooded" when his father helped him kill his first animal: an ill chicken, a mercy killing, described in a poem titled "First Kill, 4th Year." " ... his son his future — Dad/ has fitted my finger, thin/ as the sick chicken's claw,/ around trigger curved like the beak of hawk."⁴¹ Yet Ralph's "real bleeding," he says, "came at age twelve, [the traditional Cherokee age, he said, for rites of manhood] when I first hunted alone and brought back meat, two pheasants...."⁴² "Adrenalin still high, I felt proud, but ... I also felt a humility, which merged with a larger humility, the humility of knowing that I had taken a life to sustain my life and the lives of my family. My family's Cherokee prayers for the life taken had vanished as Cherokee lives had been taken, generation after generation, but the feeling, the awareness would live in me and would live in other humans as long as there was human life to sustain itself by feeding on other life."⁴³

Though his father said no prayers upon the taking of life, he *did* instill in his son a recognition that the animals he killed had spirits of their own, which must be respected. His father taught him to think as the hunted think, something Ralph talked about often. "My father told hunting stories, in which animals were real characters. You understood that he'd thought a lot about the animals in order to be able to hunt them successfully, and you understood that what the animals *were* had become a part of my father's life—not just their meat becoming a part of his body. ..."⁴⁴ "I have tried to get some sense of my father's spirit life—and my own—onto the page."⁴⁵

These early teachings recur, in a variety of forms, in poems of hunting and/or fishing that, together, form a strong subject-thread that runs throughout Ralph's work. In "Their Lives and the Lives"⁴⁶ — a poem mentioned earlier in this essay — the physical

lives of the trout, and even of the worms Ralph used to catch the trout, have become (physically) part of his body. His waist, his personal "equator," has been growing. But more than physical enlargement, Ralph's spirit has grown larger, as well, by taking these animals' spirits into his own. In keeping with Indigenous tradition, he asks forgiveness from both trout and worms, a ritual grown from respect, humility, and gratitude.

Returning us to the main theme of this essay, "Their Lives and the Lives" also illustrates two distinct components of Ralph's overarching spirit imperative "to save": one, that his hope that his words will save the (inner) lives of his readers; and two, his *unstated* wishes to save and pass along to future generations the stories and myths of his Cherokee people, to call these stories "into being" and into *our own* awareness. In this case it's the (not particularly pleasing) myth of "Raven Mocker" (which Ralph reprinted, in full, as epigraph), who tears hearts from living creatures to lengthen his own "growsome" [sic] one.⁴⁷

Their Lives and the Lives

Having sacrificed four worms
and torn four lives from river
and fed somewhat a world
and slightly increased my own equator, the cry
of a raven falling with dusk down mountain, I think
of Raven Mockers plunging meteor teeth into hearts
and adding men's years to their own "growsome" lives.

My life maybe bettered but not lengthened
by lives I have tried to save in words, I pray

for forgiveness from four rainbow trout,
their scales as brilliant as dawn river's torrents,
their lives and the lives
of some worms,
which knew earth well,
now part of my own.

Another clear sense of his father's spirit appears in the poem "For My Swinomish Brother Drumming Across the Water," mentioned earlier in the context of declaring kinship with other tribal peoples.⁴⁸ Here the son-become-poet lets his Swinomish "brother" know that he has, also, followed the paths of "right action" and "reciprocity" by using as much of the deer as he could, returning to earth, "our common home," that which he cannot use.

I am both brother and killer of Deer,
whose hide I will strip from my family's meat
and offer all not needed back
to the Earth, our common home.

Yet also, in this poem, another important spirit awareness tiptoes in, one I believe Ralph came to on his own: the recognition that, because he and Deer are "one," when he speaks it is through Deer's lips; the words (the blossoms) Deer grazes among will spread — as blossoms will grow and seed and spread — and in so doing, they will convey, in poems, what Ralph feels.

I have lived so many seasons of venison I feel
that, in uttering what I feel,
it is Deer who grazes, mouth

plucking whatever will blossom and wither and seed
pastures of air,

which I would share
with others forever or as far
as pastures have anything to give to sky.

Again, we see Ralph's optimism, as well as his sapience: his words, "which [he] would share/with others," will endure "forever or as far/ as pastures have anything to give to sky" — hopefully, as long as there are eyes and ears to read and hear it, which may (or may not be) forever.

This ebullient poem consists of an overlay of image upon image: metaphors which, taken together, create an invisible, conceptual reality impossible to apprehend through our five human senses. And it leads us to another consideration, of just *where* this interaction — this putting of feelings into word-blossoms — takes place. Where else but in "pastures of air....", before they are transcribed onto the page — for Ralph considered his poems, like the stories he heard as a child, part of an oral tradition; his hope was that they be heard, if possible, before being seen on the page, and he was conscious, at all times, of cadence, of rhythm, of the pulse of his language.

And here, with the mention of "air," lies subtle but strong evidence of Ralph's awareness of another Indigenous concept, its inclusion in this poem stemming from what I believe was Ralph's intuitive, inner knowledge of what has always been part of ancient belief systems: that "breath" is inextricable from "spirit." As Baumann confirms, "The etymology of 'psyche,' the term we use for that sense of who we are or what we belong to, in Greek means 'soul,' it means 'mind,' it means 'breath' or 'gust of wind.'

'Pneuma' in Greek, which meant 'spirit,' was also the word for 'wind,' 'air,' 'breath.' The Latin term 'anima' which we've defined as 'spirit' or 'soul,' is derived from the Greek term 'animus,' which meant 'wind.' In Sanskrit, 'Atman,' the very core, that piece of Brahman which is independent of, yet totally part of, Brahman, means 'soul,' but it also means 'air' and 'breath'. We see this through all cultures."⁴⁹ In similar fashion, the words "to inspire" and "inspiration" also take on new meaning. "In-spire": *in-* 'into' + *spirare* 'breathe': from the Middle English *enspire*, from Old French *enspirer*, from Latin *inspirare* 'breathe or blow into': originally used to refer to a divine or supernatural being imparting an idea or truth."⁵⁰

Referring to the book *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy*, by James McNeley,⁵¹ Baumann continues. "This concept of 'air/breath' being inseparable from 'soul,' at some point took on the meaning of an immaterial, spiritual presence, and that's where ... 'God' or 'deity-like' creatures arose in Western religions and in Eastern religions. But in Native spirituality, [Spirit] stays as air, it stays as wind, it stays rooted in the physical world."⁵²

A vast number of recurring images in Ralph's poems can be viewed through this lens, starting with the title poem which opens his first book, *Ghost Grapefruit*, a poem acknowledging his kinship with, and indebtedness to, William Shakespeare, which begins, "My poems are filed in grapefruit crates,/ whose cardboard spacers shape air/ — which Shakespeare also shaped —/ like grapefruit segments for/ ghost Hamlets...."⁵³ Perhaps someone, someday, will focus on the many times Ralph uses the words "air" and "breath," as well as the words "words" and the "tongue" which "shapes" (or "spades") them, the "ear" which hears them, the "nostrils" which carry "air/Spirit" to the brain's recognition; to examine the often-linked image of blossoms to some of these words; to examine the myriad of contexts in which these images are used; and to relate

out of his brain to raise
her coffin to blaze like a meteor,
her Cherokee-Shawnee braid
loosed at last
to spread black sunshine
on a snow horizon.⁵⁷

The acts of calling into being, of saving, all that Ralph loves, reaches new heights in one of his most exuberant poems, "A Fancy Dancer, Ascending Among Mountain Flowers,"⁵⁸ a poem singular in its adherence to one particular (though complex), dream-like vision. Here, the entire poem not only speaks into being the elements of Creation (in which Ralph imaginatively, joyfully, dances) it also celebrates his deeply felt sense of connection with members of other tribes. In this poem, Ralph places himself within the ongoing pan-tribal, Native American "fancy dance" movement that began in the 1920s and 1930s, originally created in response to, and in defiance of, the 1883 government-imposed ban on Native American religious ceremonies, tribal dances, and the practices of medicine men.⁵⁹ One might again notice images we've seen in poems already cited, plus other, related, images which are sprinkled throughout Ralph's body of work: "sun," "gene," "blossoms," "petals," "breath," "air," "season," "step," "words," "poetry," "molecule."

A Fancy Dancer, Ascending Among Mountain Flowers

I am dancing to bees' zither rhythms, and, with
their gracious or drunkenly heedless permission,
am dancing with the scent
of centuries of millions of beautiful women with

each breath each step
through blossoms toward clouds
imperceptibly thins.

Without missing a molecule of more
and more ethereal air,
I'm dancing with timberline pines, which shrink, degree
by chilling degree, cone after generation of cone,
their sweet, sun after sun, season on season, growth,
as Pygmy Mammoths, my fellow mammals, gene
on gene, grew smaller, to survive,
as has, century after century, word
after compressed word, our poetry.

Particles of mineral syllables beneath
each foot's sole's eloquent cells,
I am dancing, with giddy expectation, on
stone only glaciers have carved, when,
out of some utterly beyond me lexicon,
dawn wind, a fancy dancer, from every tribe,
whirls petals faster than any man,
thought by exuberant thought jiggling, toward summit and
exhaustion's rhapsodic anticipation of fulfillment, can.

Parenthetically, this poem might bring to mind words of Walt Whitman, whose rhapsodic "Song of Myself" begins, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. // My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air..."⁶⁰ Ralph calls it "molecule," Whitman calls it "atom." The science is a bit different, but the concept is the same — as is the image of tongue, the pulse, the rhythm, the tone of giddy inclusivity, the unbridled love of Sacred Earth. I suggest, however, that unlike Whitman, Ralph's *underlying* intention and belief was that his poem, his exuberant words, would — like the words of his morning prayers — help keep the cycles of the universe in flux, in a state of constant creation.

Several other word clusters in "Fancy Dancer" demonstrate one more key element in Ralph's personal belief system: the concept of "simultaneity." The moments in which the Fancy Dancer makes his way to the mountaintop are moments in which "cone after generation of cone," "sun after sun," "season on season," "gene on gene," "century after century" are embedded. The past is not past but exists within every present moment we live. A snippet of another poem, "A Declaration, Not of Independence," also demonstrates the concept of simultaneity. Within the meat of quail lie, compounded, the past lives of countless other lives.

. . . while hunting my family's food,
 I thought what the hunted think,
 so that I ate, not only meat
 but the days of wild animals fed by the days
 of plants whose roots are earth's
 past lives, all fed by the sun,
 rising and falling, as quail,
 hurtling through sky⁶¹

Just as, “century after century,” “gene on gene,” “sun after sun” is present in the mountain landscape through which the dancer ascends, so, too, the quail contains within itself a great chain of past lives, all of them fed by “earth’s past lives,” as earth has been (and continues to be) fed throughout all time “by the sun.”

We might compare this view of the universe to that of poet William Blake, who saw a “World in a Grain of Sand ... a Heaven in a Wild Flower, ... And Eternity in an hour.” Unique to *Ralph’s own* vision, however, as we see in *other* lines of “A Declaration...” and in other poems, is his recognition of *past human innovations* and *human contributions* that have gone into improving and benefitting our lives today. In “Fancy Dancer,” it’s the contributions of poets and poetry which have survived — though diminished in size, perhaps a reference to epic poetry — to inform our ways of looking at the world. In “A Declaration...,” Ralph lets us know that the quail hunter’s success *also* depends on *the lives of other humans*, a dependence that crosses national boundaries as well as those of time. Had humans not, centuries past, invented gunpowder, the quail would not come “hurtling through sky, // [felled by] gun-powder, come— / as the First Americans came— / from Asia.”⁶²

Ralph’s sense of history and of connectedness to other humans around the world is closely linked with gratitude: not only for the inventors among them, but for the labors of working-class people with whom he never stopped identifying, even after years of teaching at the university level at home and abroad. The poem “After Heart-Bypass Surgery, Another Ritual for Continuing Struggle” offers another example. Here it is the raw materials from overseas and centuries of human labor, that allow Ralph’s foot to be “shod with soft/ rubber—from trees French Legionnaires ordered planted/ by Indo-

Chinese, tapped now by Vietnamese,/ supplying an American corporation named, for victory, Nike. "⁶³

A more recent, and a very short, poem — written after receiving a (remarkably-now-possible) phone call while camping in the mountains — illustrates Ralph's gratitude for a moment's delight which would not have happened, were it not for human labor (implied in the making of cell phones) and, farther back, for the Mesozoic Age — from which, after all that lived and died was compressed into oil, has come the plastic components of cell phones — and for the eons of ancestors, whose genetic mutations resulted in the formation of his own ear, allowing him to hear, over thousands of miles, New York to Oregon, his granddaughter's voice.

Awakened by Cell Phone

Awakening, beneath pines
where a border of earth
the river dried from
gives thanks to rain,

I hear the lovely and loving chatter
my daughter's year-old daughter sends
through silicon crystals
transmitted into eons of green
metamorphosed into petroleum
reborn as plastic, and, yes, into the centuries
of families which formed my ear.⁶⁴

The word “eons” plays a major role in this poem, as it does in many others.⁶⁵ “Eons”: a word more sweeping in its inclusiveness than decades, or centuries, or even millennia. Ralph’s pleasure in small things and his belief that small moments were everywhere, just waiting to be found, was intrinsically linked to his inborn optimism and an ever-present awareness of simultaneity: of the “eons” residing within each moment, that have led to each moment, but are hidden as the pit of peach is hidden, in the indescribable juiciness of each and every passing day.

A poem very different in content (though it also revolves around the image of petroleum/oil and the word “eons”) is “Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill.”⁶⁶ Here, Ralph’s view of a universe in constant creation takes us into the future. Through great compression of image and metaphor — a visual comparison of globules of spilled oil to space capsules (which will go into the atmosphere via the nostrils of Arctic terns) — we see a universe always in flux: a universe in which a tern (having unwittingly inhaled oil) will someday return to earth, to decompose and end up being part of ongoing creation. Even Ralph’s own “cells may return” as something else.

Different, also, *in tone* from “Awakened by Cell Phone,” “Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil Spill” carries forth Ralph’s belief of God-in-Nature, instilled by his mother, and is one of his clearest, strongest, and most direct rebukes of humans who would sacrifice the harmony of nature for material gain, and a declaration of what “the sacred” truly is. Here, as well (as in earlier poems, but now with an all-inclusive vision), he speaks into being, with the all the “breath [his] mind can hold”: nothing less than the *holiness of all Creation*, in all of its connectedness, all of its cycles.

Around the Sun, the Alaskan Oil-Spill

Space-capsule-shape globules of oil
re-entering the atmosphere
in the nostrils of terns,

an ocean of air between words'
furthest surges and home,
I say a tern may return,
eons from its final breath,
and smother some other creature—

and I say my cells may return,
eons from poems:

which say each tern is sacred,
its flesh to become new life,
to go on sustaining lives;

which say that oil—
formed from the dead—is sacred,
not to be wasted or used
to gratify greed;

which say, with all the breath a mind can hold,
each moment of life is sacred,
and Timelessness and Death.

Perhaps the most comprehensive, wide-ranging, and joyful declarations of Ralph's love of life, his sense of gratitude, and his sense of mission, is the "Epilogue" which concludes his prize-winning autobiographical memoir, *So Far, So Good* (and which will conclude this essay, as well). Written when Ralph was 82, the Epilogue can be seen as a long, radiant, prose poem — or a teaching demonstration of what I, in the language of literary analysis, have abstracted into such words as "multi-faceted and multi-dimensional ... spirit imperative." Here we have it — a paean, a psalm, a tapestry of thanksgiving for his own long life, a love song for the universe, in all of its seamlessly interwoven, wondrous and simultaneous, past and present elements — written in a style deliberately elliptical, as Ralph's poems, his images, were elliptical embodiments, through language, of his sense of standing, like The Vitruvian Man at the center of so many interconnections, so many overlays, so many memories — a prose poem that is, in style and content, the essence of the word with which the epilogue begins: "simultaneity."

Here Ralph recalls his youthful pursuit of enlightenment: his reading about human development, about the aboriginal Senoi "dream peoples" of Malaysia, about Eastern religions; reading Freud; reading whatever he could find, that might help him on his Spirit Quest, to fathom the mysteries of the universe and of the human mind. Here we have his life-long condemnation of war, and the awareness that beauty and goodness is always threatened by violence, as he experienced it often, in his childhood, in the social environment of the Great Depression, during military training, and as it occurs throughout every lifetime, every century. Here we have example after example of his personal resilience, of his determination to find the best that each day offers, to live as full a life as possible while, at the same time, following — as long as possible — his

Spirit Path, His Medicine Path, his Destiny, his spirit imperative to save not only his ancestral heritage, not only moments in history and memories he brings to the page, not only the beauty of any given day, but the very future of our world: to protect future generations from "those whose love of power threatens to destroy our children's children's children and render humans extinct."⁶⁷ And still, through it all, to rejoice in the splendor of each given day.

Epilogue

Simultaneity. Access to one's entire life in any moment. To see or to feel the universe in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour. To live, not by the calendar, so useful in sentencing criminals. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. ... what went on for generations of adaptation goes on in each new child — and human embryos still have gills and tails in the womb.

Dream recall. Meditation. Dianetics. Time travel all the way back through the faunal scale to the beginning of life. Science fiction. Religion. Simultaneity. Fascists shooting at my brother as he escapes prisoner of war camp while my brother is aiming a gun at my father and going to kill him if he doesn't stop abusing our mother, while someone is enduring a winter night to shoot the glass out of a window above my baby bed. Simultaneity. Simple mindedness. Why not.

...

Why am I not walking in the sunshine of my eighty-third spring, a spring I would not be seeing out this or any other window had not medical skill progressed to the ability to transplant a blood vessel from my ageing left leg to my ageing heart? My heart, receiver of stolen goods, thriving — leg still o.k., like any living thing robbed of anything short of life — why am I not walking, my eyes stealing the beauty others have labored to create, in front yards most will labor one third, approximately, of their lives to own? Why are my feet and my mind not tagging along with my gaze and my mind into the reality of this day's, this instant's inexpressible splendor?

My mind unites with the hand clutching this pen — same tool with which bored clerks were busily recording their century's piracy's booty and inhumane worship of wealth. Gloriously, transcendently "mad" William Blake experienced the world in a grain of sand, eternity in an hour. As mad as Blake, whether gloriously and transcendently so or not, I am trying to experience again and again at least some of my

past, in a computer chip, and to translate it into ink, in the hope that others may experience a tiny piece of a time I would like to call mine — a time I try to save from those whose love of power threatens to destroy our children's children's children and render humans extinct. I hope to feel myself fifteen again and again and afraid of death and trembling and trying to do what a son and a man, a man, should be expected to do, defend his home. I hope to sense again and again the fragrance of fallen maple leaves, the bouquet of a stranger's perfume, an island of impossible dreams in an arctic ocean of air, the brilliance of sun in daffodils, the daffodils I would give my wife, my complex, fascinating wife of 40 years, when, tired, and beautiful, utterly, unutterably beautiful, she returns from her work day — eight hours of William Blake's eternity. Unaware that I am trying to destine her to live the rest of her and William Blake's eternities in a computer chip — itself, so I understand, a grain of sand — she will suggest, I hope, a walk, a walk through sunlight finding fulfillment in forsythia — forsythia seething like terribly beautiful — and reassuringly distant — lightning, forsythia a molten thunderbolt hurtling toward sky and into two ageing lovers' delighted eyes.

So, enough of this purple poeticized prose, somebody, somebody with a body still as young as a newly created poem, may say, hurling youthful flesh — past my awed, admiring, aged eyes — toward no place else but bed.

"Forsythia," by God, I affirm, in my eighty-third spring's hours and hours of eternities. "Forsythia," yes, by God, "Forsythia," by God, and by chance or by hook or by crook or by a poet's warped way of looking at facts, but by God, whatever else, by God, by God, by God!

And wild ducks, yes, rain or shine, raincoat or t-shirt, hundreds and hundreds of wild ducks so numerous and varied I couldn't even begin to count the jewels the force of their landing will scatter across water shining like a silver platter, yes, ducks, wild ducks, mallards, like the ones I'd get soaked and shiver and shiver for hours to harvest from blue or gray sky for my family's often bare meat platter, wild ducks, bless their beauty, their forgiving, fearless and greedy gabbling enjoyment of life as intense as my hopefully equally forgiving own.

Trumpeter swans, for sure, straight lines of black-marked white flowers, growing in a blue or a gray sky garden, and trumpeting, yes, creating a music — presumably about arduous effort and anticipation of food and of mating — mating for life, I am told, for life —and whatever each swan may feel about death and ongoing life, is all, I believe, that Beethoven could express.

And now, again and again, snow geese, a great, white, incredibly beautiful

blizzard descending on the gray waters of the bay — a beautiful blizzard to these ageing eyes — soon, too soon, to close — a blizzard a beautiful reminder of winters gone and winters to come and to melt again into forsythia blossoms under egg yolk color sun.⁶⁸

Notes

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² The "Vitruvian Man" is a pen and ink drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, c. 1490. It shows a male nude standing within both a circle and a square and is said to represent the Renaissance "ideal" of human and mathematical proportion. Its title refers to notes da Vinci made, in the margins of his drawing, from his readings of the 1st-century Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio.

³ Ralph Salisbury, *So Far, So Good* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 251.

⁴ Luigi Pirandello, "War," from the 1925 Collection of short fiction *Raccolta Donna Mimma*, part of the 15-volume series of *Stories for a Year* (1922-1937). Pirandello's actual words, in translation, are, "Parental love is not like bread that can be broken to pieces and split amongst the children in equal shares. A father gives all his love to each one of his children without discrimination, whether it be one or ten, and if I am suffering now for my two sons, I am not suffering half for each of them but double..." [Pirandello's own two sons were captured during World War One.]

⁵ Salisbury, *op. cit.*, 242.

⁶ Ralph called this god by various names, including "God of All Creation," "Creator and God of All," "God Who Can Not Be Named," "God of the Universe," and others.

⁷ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2017 edn.), ix.

⁸ John Baumann, Ph.D. in Religious Studies, Independent Scholar, in conversation with the author, March 10, 2019.

⁹ Nils-Aslak Valkeapää, in conversation, at his home on the Finnish tundra, September 1994. The Sámi people, formerly called Laplanders, are the Indigenous people of northernmost Scandinavia and the northwesternmost part of Russia. Often referred to, by outsiders, as the "white Indians of the north," their culture, customs, language, and literature have survived centuries of Nordic oppression, at the hands of non-native peoples of all four countries. Valkeapää was, in his lifetime, a multi-media artist celebrated around the world.

¹⁰ Conversation with colleagues in Tromsø, Norway, led to the following lines from my poem, "Questions of Grace": "Ánde Somby, Sámi lawyer, son/ of reindeer herders descended from/ reindeer herders farther back than anyone/ knows, tells how when his

father had to kill/ one of his own he talked to it, petted it, 'Deer,/ I'm sorry you happened to be here just at this/ wrong time. Whose fault is it I do this?" Ingrid Wendt, in *Surgeonfish* (Cincinnati, OH: WordTech Editions, 2005), 43.

¹¹ James Mooney, *The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (7th Annual report, Bureau of American Ethnology, 1891), 302-97. James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*. (US Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897-8 Annual Report, 1902.)

¹² Frans Olbrechts completed, revised, and edited James Mooney's second collection of sacred formulas (which also included Cherokee history and myths), titled *The Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 99, 1932).

¹³ Ralph Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 2000), xii. Ralph wrote similar sentences in *So Far, So Good*. On page 262, he wrote "...I pray that the God of the Universe will allow me to live long enough and well enough to fulfill my Medicine Path, my destiny, in writing, in teaching -- in becoming as good a person as I can be." And on page 269: "'May I live well enough and long enough to fulfill my destiny,' is my prayer. May I fulfill my Medicine Dream. May I follow my Medicine Path to its end. And may I and may my loved ones live a life of beauty and happiness after death."

¹⁴ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 103-104.

¹⁵ In his memoir Ralph recounts the time when "a thunderbolt, hurled by one of our principal spirits, Red Man, the Big Thunder, touched me but left me alive." *Op. cit.*, 266.

¹⁶The threat of "nuclear winter," as the result of multiple, massive firestorms that would follow in the wake of nuclear war, was a scientific concept that arose in the 1980s and was very much on Ralph's mind, as it was in the minds of us all. The theory suggested that fires could send so much ash and soot into the atmosphere, that sunlight could not enter, the globe would cool, and major agricultural losses would ensue. While it's tempting to think that Ralph, in this poem, was talking about climate change, "Six Prayers" appeared in the year 2000, six years before Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" announced to the world the devastation global warming will wreak, if left unaddressed.

¹⁷ Black soil — *truly* black soil, not a metaphor — is specific to the area of Iowa where Ralph was born and raised. This image appears throughout his work.

¹⁸ Ralph spoke often of his intention to honor the friends he lost during World War II, by writing poems and stories that would convey not only their personal experiences but the true realities of war, which he saw as hidden behind propaganda and the lies of politicians.

¹⁹ Ralph Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, eds. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987; 2005 edn. by Bison Books), 26.

²⁰ I am indebted to the scholarship of Arnold Krupat, who first called attention to this theme in his brilliant introduction to *Light from a Bullet Hole: poems new and selected 1950-2008* (Eugene, Oregon: Silverfish Review Press, 2009), 10.

²¹ Ralph Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow: Poems from a Cherokee Heritage* (Marvin, South Dakota: Blue Cloud Quarterly, 1980), 9; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 30.

²² Ralph Salisbury, *War in the Genes & other poems* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Communications, 2006), 76.

²³ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 123-124; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 119-120.

²⁴ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 28; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 93.

²⁵ "Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant," is the often-quoted first line of the Emily Dickinson's poem #1129.

²⁶ Salisbury, *War in the Genes*, 18.

²⁷ Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 14-15.

²⁸ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 60; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 106.

²⁹ The centuries-long genocide of the First Peoples of the Americas was officially sanctioned by Pope Alexander VI, in his Papal Bull "*Inter Caetera*," of 1493, also known as the "Doctrine of Discovery." This edict authorized Spain and Portugal to claim for their respective countries any lands "discovered" by explorers, to colonize them, and to dominate over their inhabitants, resulting in a global momentum of domination and dehumanization. The edict continued to be used by other governments, including the United States, as late as the nineteenth century, to justify the ongoing, systematic genocide of Native Americans. Recommended viewing: "The Doctrine of Discovery: Unmasking the Domination Code," a 2014 documentary film directed and produced by attorney/scholar Sheldon Peters Whitehorse.

³⁰ These precise words do not appear in any of Ralph's published works, but he included them often, in this exact form, in the biographical statements requested by publicists, during his later years.

³¹ Louis Owens, from the dust jacket endorsement of *Rainbows of Stone*.

³² Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 55.

³³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," written 1877, published posthumously in *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Robert Bridges, ed. (London: Humphrey Milford, 1918).

³⁴ Ralph Salisbury, *Ghost Grapefruit* (Ithaca, NY: Ithaca House, 1972), 41.

³⁵ Salisbury, *op. cit.*, 55. [An aside: Ralph's use of the word "short" is puzzling; perhaps he is referring to his height, for he was, all his life, painfully aware of being the shortest male (5'7") among his peers.]

³⁶ Geary Hobson, Arkansas Quapaw/Cherokee writer, professor, and friend, gave him this suggestion in personal correspondence sometime in the 1980s, long after Ralph had already conducted extensive research into Cherokee history and culture. Except to pay tribute to the possibility of Shawnee ancestry, Ralph's primary *felt*, Indigenous identity was Cherokee.

³⁷ Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 39.

³⁸ *Loc. cit.*

³⁹ The precept of "reciprocity" is at the heart of Indigenous practices around the world and is one of the recurring themes in Robin Wall Kimmerer's highly recommended book of essays, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013).

⁴⁰ Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, p. 39.

⁴¹ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 7.

⁴² Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," 24.

⁴³ Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 100.

⁴⁴ Salisbury, "Between Lightning and Thunder," 20.

⁴⁵ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁶ Salisbury, "Their Lives and the Lives," *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 9. A revised version appears in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 30.

⁴⁷ The spelling of "Grewsome" appears as Ralph found it, in James Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*.

⁴⁸ Ralph Salisbury, *Like the Sun in Storm* (Portland, Oregon: Habit of Rainy Nights Press, 2012), 10. This poem was written in the town of La Connor, Washington, on the shores of Puget Sound, where we were living for a month. The Swinomish Reservation was located just across the water, on Fidalgo Island.

⁴⁹ Baumann, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁰ This etymological tracing can be found in multiple sources.

⁵¹ James McNeley, *Holy Wind in Native Philosophy* (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1981).

⁵² John Baumann, *loc. cit.*

⁵³ Salisbury, *Ghost Grapefruit*, 3.

⁵⁴ The word "tongue" can also, of course, mean "language." It's possible that sometimes Ralph deliberately used this word as a double entendre, as in the poem "Katooh, ' We Say," where the country name "U.S." is spoken *on* (not *in*) a foreigner's

tongue. My sense is that, in most cases, Ralph was referring to the muscle that resides in the mouth.

⁵⁵ Ralph Salisbury, *Going to the Water: Poems of a Cherokee Heritage* (Eugene, Oregon: Pacific House Books, 1983), 54; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 68.

⁵⁶ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 116.

⁵⁷ Salisbury, *Pointing at the Rainbow*, 1; reprinted in *Light From a Bullet Hole*, 29.

⁵⁸ Ralph Salisbury, *Blind Pumper at the Well* (Cambridge, UK: Salt Publishing, 2008), 8.

⁵⁹ The Fancy Dance, a derivative of the war dance, is said to have been created by members of the Ponca tribe. It has now become part of Pow Wows held across the United States and around the world.

⁶⁰ Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," from *Leaves of Grass*, first edition 1855, self-published.

⁶¹ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 3; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 87.

⁶² *Ibid.* At the time the poem was written, the Bering Land Bridge Theory was more or less accepted and was not, as it is today (2019), the subject of some controversy and contention.

⁶³ Salisbury, *War in the Genes* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Cherry Grove Editions, WordTech Communications, 2006), 112; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 139.

⁶⁴ Salisbury, *Like the Sun in Storm*, 80.

⁶⁵ Close readers might discover that in earlier books, Ralph used the British spelling "aeons," Same word, same concept. Both spellings are correct.

⁶⁶ Salisbury, *Rainbows of Stone*, 68; reprinted in *Light from a Bullet Hole*, 109.

⁶⁷ Salisbury, *So Far, So Good*, 272.

⁶⁸ *Op. cit.*, 270-274.