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Alcatraz Is Not an Island

LENNY FOSTER

The occupation of Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay on 14 November 1969 was one of the most significant events for American Indians in contemporary history. It spawned a movement that has touched the lives of many in the indigenous community and has resulted in many dramatic changes. The occupation has been called a defining moment in American Indian protest, heralding the beginning of the Red Power movement, but I personally believe it was more than that. It set the stage for the spiritual rebirth of the original peoples of this land, and it was the beginning of the reclaiming of pride and dignity for all Indian nations in the Western Hemisphere. Twenty-five years later, this movement has proven to be the catalyst that released the voices of indigenous people.

My spiritual journey to Alcatraz began three years before the occupation, when I was a student athlete at Window Rock High School in Fort Defiance, Arizona, on the Navajo Reservation. One of the high points of my youth was an invitation to participate in a major league baseball tryout camp conducted by the Los Angeles Dodgers in July 1966 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I was given very good ratings as a prospect to play professional baseball. For the next two years, 1967–69, I was a member of the Arizona Western College baseball team in Yuma and played in one of the toughest junior college baseball conferences in the country.

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In those early years, there were many protests about the conditions and treatment of disenfranchised people. The Vietnam War was at its height, as were the Black Panthers, the Poor People's Campaign, and general social unrest. I began to think about the position of Indian people in the United States. I had seen and been a victim of racism in Gallup, New Mexico; Flagstaff, Arizona; and Farmington, New Mexico, and it made me very angry and resentful. The rage our people felt was justified, and we had to stand up and challenge that type of treatment. I began to sense a spiritual vacuum deep inside myself; I did not know this feeling would lead to more than political awareness.

During the summers of 1968 and 1969, I served with the VISTA program, working with indigenous migrant workers in western Colorado and central Utah. I met many Chicano activists, such as Tomas Atencio, Len Avila, Luis Valerio, Cesar Chavez, and Corky Gonzalez, who were heavily involved with their people's struggle, and I wondered where Indian people stood on human rights issues. I attended a conference called United Front Against Fascism in mid-July 1969, in Oakland, California, which was sponsored by the Black Panther Party. I was very impressed with their movement and their community involvement.

It was also during this time that I heard about the American Indian Movement (AIM) Patrol in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and read about Clyde Bellecourt and Dennis Banks, cofounders of AIM. I wanted to meet these people; they seemed to possess qualities I had been searching for in myself. I met Clyde Bellecourt in November 1969 in Littleton, Colorado, at a protest against the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It was not until July 1970 that I met D.J. (Dennis Banks) and Leonard Crow Dog, who were dancing at the Sun Dance in Pine Ridge, South Dakota. I was very impressed with them and was immediately drawn into AIM.

I transferred from Arizona Western College to Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where I tried out for the fall baseball team in 1969. One of my teammates was Felix "Tippy" Martinez, who later joined the Baltimore Orioles and became one of the premiere relief pitchers in major league baseball. I was living in one world—a world in which some of my friends came to excel—but I was already beginning to move into another world that would become much more meaningful to me.

I met LaNada Means at a student conference in Fort Collins. She spoke of the Indian students at the University of California at Berkeley and San Francisco State University, whose growing

activism included demands not only for recruitment of more Indian students but also for Indian studies programs and courses. She also told me they were planning to occupy Alcatraz Island very soon and asked if I would be interested in supporting and participating in the occupation. Later, when I read in the *Rocky Mountain News* out of Denver, Colorado, that American Indians had taken over Alcatraz, I knew that was the place where I wanted to be, among Indian people who felt the same as I did.

In December 1969, I hitchhiked out to San Francisco through snowstorms in Laramie, Wyoming; Salt Lake City, Utah; and Donner Pass. After several days, I finally arrived in San Francisco and boarded the boat that the occupiers were running between the island and Fisherman's Wharf. The trip to the island was cold and windy. Under other circumstances, it might have been depressing, but our spirits were high. When I finally reached Alcatraz Island, I encountered an old friend, Patrick Geneeha of Holbrook, Arizona, and he introduced me to Joe Bill, Al Miller, and Richard Oakes. I met other very interesting people as well, such as John Cutnose, Lance Yellowhand, Jim Vaughn, Frank Chase, John Trudell, Ray Spang, and Ed Castillo. Of course, LaNada Means was there also. In addition, two young Navajo men from my hometown, Glen McLemore and Howard Nez, had left high school to come and support the occupation.

I stayed for three weeks in December and then returned in May 1970 to attend an American Indian studies program conference at the University of California, Berkeley. At this time, the U.S. had just invaded Cambodia, and there was much unrest in the Bay Area. In the fall of 1970, I joined the Denver chapter of the American Indian Movement, under the leadership of Vernon Bellecourt and Rod Skinadore. I went out to Alcatraz again in December, but that was my last time; in June 1971, federal marshals landed on the island and arrested the small group of people who remained after everyone else had left to go to the Pit River protest or to the Sun Dances in South Dakota.

One thing that impressed me about Alcatraz was that the people were all searching for something: a spiritual identity as Indian people. John Trudell named this group "Indians of All Tribes" because, although the people were from all parts of the country, a sense of unity and brotherhood was evolving. Alcatraz was a place where urban and reservation Indians were coming together and examining the U.S. government's failure to honor its treaties and its obligation to Indian people. We were becoming

Indian activists, and it was time to reclaim our Indian dignity. The Indian Nation had awakened.

The Indian rights movement was accelerating: Alcatraz; Pit River; AIM Patrol; the Northwest fishing rights struggle; Sun Dances; the Trail of Broken Treaties; protests and demonstrations in Gallup and Farmington, New Mexico, and Flagstaff, Arizona; Wounded Knee II; the incident at Oglala; and the Longest Walk. Indian people began to emerge as active participants in the struggle for human rights and environmental protection.

My participation in the American Indian Movement solidified my spirituality: I believe it was my fate to be part of this movement, and it was our destiny to go to Alcatraz in 1969. Wovoka did not choose to lead a movement, just as Crow Dog and Black Elk, Vernon and Clyde Bellecourt, Dennis Banks, Leonard Peltier, John Trudell, Wilma Mankiller, Janet McCloud, and Russell and Bill Means did not choose to be leaders but were chosen by the Great Spirit. The movement returned dignity and spirituality to Indian people. Beginning with Alcatraz on 14 November 1969, we got back our worth, our pride, our humanity; the prophecy was fulfilled that the Red Nation would occupy its rightful place as the caretaker of Mother Earth.

I have been Sun Dancing since July 1973 as the result of a vow I made during the seventy-three-day occupation of Wounded Knee. Since 1980, I have been working with native prisoners' rights groups to protect inmates' freedom of worship. Many people have had personal success because of the movement that began with Alcatraz. I testified in March 1994, in Washington, D.C., before the Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs, about native prisoners' religious rights and practices. On 15 January 1993, in Phoenix, Arizona, I received a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Award, but I think of it as a "human" rights award. I attribute all of this to the vision "Alcatraz is not an island."