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Worldviews And The American West

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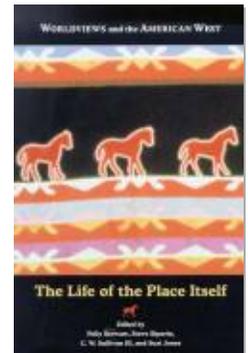
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Faith of Our Fathers

George Venn

To a boy entering Theodore Roosevelt Grade School in 1949, there was no history, racism, justice, or culture in Burlington, Washington. For first graders, the town seemed to be magically defined by Burlington Hill, which rose above the flat Skagit Valley like a wooded turtle shell—just across the railroad tracks, just north of the school, just north of our home in the Presbyterian manse. No one lived on Burlington Hill. After school, my brother and I and our grade school friends would scabble up the rocky trails and play for hours. Under the green and shadowy canopy of alder, fir, maple, moss, cedar, snag, and fern, we explored mysterious crisscross trails. One switchback led to the Burlington “B,” a yellow, thirty-foot concrete letter embedded in the south slope. For children learning the alphabet, this huge capital letter was a mystery of mysteries. We would walk the B, study the peeling yellow paint, and wonder and wonder. Hidden in the hilltop underbrush and trees we found rusting antennae, abandoned concrete foundations. Another switchback led to a dry concrete water reservoir, a hundred-by-two-hundred-foot rectangle. Wide jagged cracks faulted its walls and floor, as though it had been fractured by some beanstalk giant. To us, that hill seemed like another civilization, a private children’s wilderness. Deer, squirrels, weasels, hawks, wrens—so many wild things we never could see for long. Adults did not ascend.

Sitting on Burlington Hill, we could see the flat Skagit Valley connecting the Cascade Mountains to the Pacific: the Skagit River shining gray through the cottonwood trees; the serpentine curve of dikes; fields of berries, peas, and hay; green blocks of pasture; black and white herds of dairy cows; stores along Fairhaven Avenue. From the hill, we could also see our other escapes from adults: the brown Presbyterian Church with its crawlspace where we played doctor with neighbor girls, the English walnut tree where my brother and I had built a treehouse so we could read comic books that were always taboo in our Presbyterian manse. Immediately below, there was the cream-color-painted rectangle refuge of Roosevelt Grade School, where twice a day sweet cold milk came in half-pint glass bottles sealed with paper

lids. Lifting the paper tab, we licked fresh cream from the backside of the lids, then drank through paper straws. There, Mrs. Strong and Mrs. Nattress and Mrs. Bumgardner and Mrs. Norris taught us all to read and write with thick green pencils and black and white cursive charts arrayed around the room. We could see the evergreen grove at Burlington Park where big kids picked on Alfred Weymouth during baseball season, shouting “Burn Weymouth out, burn Weymouth out” as they threw baseballs to him, trying to hurt his hand inside his thin leather mitt. Why they were trying to hurt Alfred Weymouth, I didn’t know. There was the playground where marbles became our dirt-knuckled, dirt-kneed passion, where flying balsa-and-paper kites became a compelling art in the always afternoon sea breeze. From Burlington Hill, we could also see the boxy buildings of the Darigold Creamery and its high, black-stained smoking stack. Every afternoon at five o’clock, the Darigold horn blatted so loudly from that gigantic column that it sounded like an industrial muzzein calling to everyone in town, “Time to quit, time to go home, time to eat.”

In this world where innocent play was our delight and retreat from adults seemed possible and desirable, my stepfather, the new minister at the Presbyterian Church, first introduced me to the word *Indians*. After dinner one evening, he announced that he was going out to “preach to the Indians.” As a child, I had no idea what that sentence might mean. In the fall or spring, I sometimes heard my parents say they were going “to buy salmon from the Indians” on Lummi Island, or they would report that someone brought us a salmon they got “from the Indians.” In those years, so much fresh salmon was available “from the Indians” that my parents bought a Burpee processing system, and my mother canned many king salmon to eat all winter. (I can still see the white bones of those pressure-cooked salmon and taste how their dangerous ribs and jointed spines had been turned to soft white paste in the metal can.) The only other adult use I heard of the word *Indians* was in reference to a miniature Kwakiutl totem pole, a typical tourist curio which stood on a living room bookcase. It was referred to as “from the Indians.” No one said more about it.

So like most Whites who’ve grown up in the Pacific Northwest, I was taught almost nothing by my family about the Indian people who lived the Skagit River valley with us. The people who Vi Hilbert calls the “Looshootseed” in *Haboo*; the people who June Collins names the “Upper Skagit” in *Valley of the Spirits*; the people who called themselves *bastùlk*, “people of the river”; the people who Martin Sampson in *Indians of Skagit County* divides into eleven historic tribes of more than a thousand individuals; the people who had lived for centuries in the Skagit River watershed; the people whose ancient Noo-qua-cha-mish village site lay just outside Burlington; the people who had signed the Point Elliott Treaty in 1855 but whose land was taken without treaty for twenty years; the people who

enjoyed their own history, religion, and culture; the people whose language and mythology is so complex that most Whites still have trouble learning and understanding it—these people were barely visible from Burlington Hill, or anywhere else, as far as my family taught me. Our neighbors, whose king salmon my parents relished for their larder, were implicitly presented to me as “heathen savages” to be converted to Christianity.

Only once in the early 1950s did Burlington schools have anything formal or memorable to say about Native Americans. In the fourth grade, we were asked to perform in a pageant at Burlington High School. With my classmates, I had to memorize words, music, and dance steps to what may have been part of a Navajo ceremony: “*No eh hi-yo / hi-yo wich-e nigh-yo / hi-yo, hi-yo wich-e nigh-yo.*” We practiced and practiced dancing to that unforgettable song for my fourth-grade music teacher, and I can still see the red-dyed turkey feather headdress which my reluctant parents bought at Younger’s Drugstore and which I wore for the performance—with some red face paint, no less. While it is tempting to believe that this school pageant was, at least, a start on authentic knowledge of Native Americans, the pageant was teaching one more dubious lesson: “all those Indians in war bonnets are the same.” In fact, the feather headdress is Plains Indians regalia that had been spread everywhere, including the Washington coast, by popular media and the Pan-Indian movement. As Collins and others make clear, no traditional Upper Skagit, or any Northwest coast peoples, ever wore a headdress of eagle feathers formed into a war bonnet.

Had traditional Upper Skagit dress disappeared from Skagit County in the 1950s? No. Had traditional Noo-qua-cha-mish singing and dancing disappeared from Skagit Valley? No. Was it possible to find Upper Skagit people who would share traditional stories? Yes. One woman, Emma Conrad, was living just outside Burlington. Were the Upper Skagit willing to talk with Anglo-Americans? Yes. During the 1940s and 50s, Thom Hess, June Collins, and Sally Snyder, among others, were recording Upper Skagit oral literature up and down the river. Were any Noo-qua-cha-mish individuals ever invited to my classrooms at Roosevelt Grade School? No.

So what was a boy to conclude from that void of information: Indians in Skagit County, who actually numbered about a thousand people, who were selling fresh abundant salmon to my parents, who were listening politely to my stepfather’s Protestant sales talks—these people had apparently vanished.

With neither school nor family providing any accurate images of native people, a boy was left to make his own discoveries in popular culture—which usually markets juicy stereotypes for profit. Throughout grade school, my brother and I listened faithfully to *Straight Arrow* on the radio. Though I cannot remember now any of this noble red man’s adventures, his magic gold ring, which opened a secret cave whenever he needed to be rescued, enchanted me so much that, in first grade, I sent away for a Straight Arrow

ring. As an adopted stepson, I needed that power. When my ring came in the mail, I took my golden amulet to school, where I lost it immediately.

Was there authentic magic among the Upper Skagit? Yes. Traditionally the Squa-de-lich, as Collins explains, was believed to be a spirit that animated objects: cedar boards, vine maple boughs, painted ducks, and goat hair. In one story, Martin Sampson tells how the cedar-boards Squa-de-lich came from the bottom of Big Lake. A young Noo-qua-cha-mish man was seeking knowledge by fasting and diving in the lake. In deep water, he contacted powerful spirits who rewarded him for his quest by giving him magic cedar boards to help his people—healing, finding lost objects, divining. Doesn't any boy or girl need to know such a story?

My brother and I also listened faithfully to *The Lone Ranger* and his Native American partner, Tonto. Every night for four or five years, we huddled together in front of the glowing Admiral radio to listen to these programs, not knowing that we were absorbing the notion of the Indian as the faithful but ignorant, illiterate, inarticulate companion of the White man. Tonto, “stupid” in Spanish, had a three-word vocabulary, at best, and couldn't form English sentences.

One night, I found a hardbound copy of *The Last of the Mohicans* packed away in Coke boxes of old books belonging to my parents. Chingachgook was painted on the cover of Cooper's novel—red, muscular, ferocious. I remember staying up after midnight to read Cooper and shocking my parents when they found me, a fourth grader, wide-eyed and reading a novel when they thought I was asleep. However, Cooper's impact on me had nothing to do with understanding the Upper Skagit. At that time, I had a child's passion for making boats, so instead of considering Cooper's noble savages or the friendship and equality between Leatherstocking and Chingachgook, I only took from Cooper every detail about making birchbark canoes. During hikes on Burlington Hill or in the woods, I began to cut rectangles of bark from white birch trees for my miniature Delaware canoes.

Were there canoe builders among the Upper Skagit at this time? Yes. While river canoes were disappearing, there were still people living within twenty miles of our Presbyterian manse who knew the ancient, complex skills for carving cedar. And were there friendships I might have learned about between the Upper Skagit and Anglo-Americans? Yes. Sampson, Collins, and Hilbert give many great stories: Upper Skagit befriending settlers, settlers befriending Upper Skagit. Sampson confirms that early relations were amicable, with lives saved in childbirth, sickness, and starvation. One Noo-qua-cha-mish man piggybacked a sick Anglo schoolteacher sixteen miles to a doctor.

There is only one exception to this picture of my growing up learning that everyone had melted into White American stew. Someone in my family, probably my mother, must have become curious about local tribal life

(perhaps her conscience began to move her toward the need for some authentic understanding). From somewhere, a blue, hardback book with spectacular whale-hunting drawings appeared. The story told about a Haida or Tlingit boy who is initially too young to go whale hunting on the saltchuck, but who finally grows old enough to participate. I was captured by the coming-of-age story: men paddling a great cedar canoe, the whale harpooned, inflated sealskin floats flying out, the canoe tied to the harpooned monster, the whale sounding, the canoe cut loose, the row of floats marking the surface, the whale's death, the gift of food for everyone again. That narrative was my only source of knowledge of traditional Indian life on the Northwest Coast. However, that story had almost nothing to do with the Skagit peoples immediately around me, who tended not to hunt whales but were better known for salmon fishing and deer and mountain goat hunting.

So, like most northwest children around the age of ten, I had been unwittingly invited into the fortress of racist stereotypes that Whites had created about Indians. This formidable structure was not visible from Burlington Hill. Those stereotypes had perfectly obscured the authentic lives of every Indian around me in the Skagit Valley—racism at its best. This leaves out the playing of cowboys and Indians, that traditional-enemy ritual that, as children, we perpetuated without any adult assistance.

How could this happen? In a “good Christian home”? In a “good public school”? In a “nice little town”? In the 1950s?

Such an education is easy to acquire because, from the outside, the fortress looks like a normal candy castle. It's fun, free, quick, common, electric, and, most of all, easy. Inside, however, anyone can see that the rooms are all locked and guarded with adult ignorance; unexamined stereotypes; popular culture's anesthesia; adult failure to provide any accurate, humane, or concrete information to children; and no significant cross-cultural or peer experience.

Racist education is also a traditional blind spot. Both my parents had graduated from Washington universities and my stepfather held a graduate degree in theology, but neither had an interest in or awareness of culture. Both had grown up in coastal Washington where Native American tribes were and still are numerous, influential, visible. Like my grade school teachers, both would have considered themselves well informed, civilized, polite, religious, and thoughtful. Every Sunday morning, they taught me about Biblical tribes. Many Sunday evenings, visiting missionaries gave slide shows on saving the tribes in Latin America and Africa. They taught me to love God and to love my neighbors, but “neighbors” did not include the Upper Skagit—who only existed as “heathens” who sold king salmon.

Of course, my devout parents would have never called such a vacuum racism. Not being students of culture, they would not have even called their de facto racism ethnocentrism. They would have called it righteousness.

The spiritual exclusivity of their Christianity, its imperial absolutist rhetoric, its “one true God,” would have walled out any doubt. My stepfather would probably not have ever read what Vi Hilbert makes plain in *Haboo*, that there were immense similarities between traditional Anglo-American and Upper Skagit values—including the work ethic. He would not have known that the Indian Shaker Church—incorporated at Mud Bay, Washington, in 1910, and the church to which many Upper Skagit belonged—had blended Catholic doctrine, Protestant organization and singing, and Native American rituals and traditions into a single sacred service in much the same way that historical Christianity had been blended from Judaism, the Oriental mystery cults, and late Greek philosophy. While a common love for fresh salmon could be accepted, a common love for religious ideas could not.

All of these images constructed for me by sincere, literate, and devout people were forever fractured, like that dry and broken reservoir on Burlington Hill, by an event that occurred when I was ten, the year before we left the Skagit Valley. To arrive at that event, however, it takes a strawberry picking detour.

The summer of 1953 my parents decided that my brother and I should not spend our school vacation with our maternal grandparents, as we usually did. My parents were going to try—once—to keep us two adopted boys from my mother’s first marriage together with the two younger children from her second marriage. This, of course, presented the problem of “keeping the big boys busy.” By checking with Burlington church members who owned berry farms, my parents discovered that my brother and I were old enough, at ages eleven and ten, respectively, to become real strawberry pickers, as long as we only picked for half days. My parents were delighted.

So one bright June morning, my brother and I, a fifth grader and a fourth grader, were sent forth to work. The strawberry fields lay below the high dikes along the Skagit River, and they were ripe for harvest. Like good feisty brothers, we quarreled and teased and played the mile to the fields, where we had to start picking by eight o’clock. The field boss, an ogre under our bridge, demanded that we pick “two carriers by ten o’clock A.M.”—if we wanted to keep our jobs. Crawling on hands and knees, pushing along a carrier of empty strawberry baskets, picking only the ripe berries, hoping for clusters of plump ones, soaking hands and knees, getting jeans muddy, staining fingers brown with berry juice, learning back pain, dangling a manila ticket from a sunburning neck, watching for the field boss, and feeling like a slave—those berry boxes just never seemed to fill up. At noon, twenty-five cents richer, my brother and I quarreled and teased and played all the way home again.

About half past nine the third morning, a rotten strawberry hit me in the ear. I stopped and looked up from my row, but, of course, no obvious attacker was in sight. Close to me, Burlington high-school girls in wide,

straw sunhats were picking berries to earn money for new saddle shoes and pleated skirts. Farther away, a few dedicated White women from town bent among the green rows in order to buy that new refrigerator or stove. These women seemed to enjoy visiting with each other as much as picking. Still farther away, a group of lank, tanned, tough migrant women picked, shouted, cursed. Following the harvest, these families camped in the trees along the river dike and around the fields. Smoke from their cooking fires rose into the cottonwoods. Sometimes their husbands were drunk.

Across the acres of green strawberry rows, way over by the dike, I could see a group of women and girls with colorful handkerchiefs wrapped around their heads. There were always a lot of little kids with them. That group would always be picking together, and the field boss never assigned me to rows where they were working. As I learned later from June Collins, the Upper Skagit picked berries and hops for Whites during those summers. Such seasonal moves fit their oldest pattern: in summer, Indian families followed the ripening wild berries to the Cascade mountain burns and followed the spawning salmon upriver to creeks, falls, and pools. After Whites planted acres of domestic berries, Upper Skagit would come each summer, camp on the farms, visit with relatives, meet friends from distant villages. And the growers paid them to pick these strange new fruits and eventually built cabins for them. I never saw men picking there. I imagined the women and girls would go through the fields first, since they were the best pickers. All the rest of us came along a week or so after they had been through. We got the seconds off the vines.

The rotten strawberry juice ran down my cheek and neck, and as I dug the strawberry out of my ringing ear, the sun began to dry the juice. Who had heaved this rot at me? It had to be my brother, Doug. He usually picked berries just a few rows away, and his smug prankster grin was now buried deep in the green screen of strawberry leaves. I cleaned myself off as best I could and started picking again, looking for a rain-rotted berry of my own so I could return the favor. We called this entertainment “brotherly love.”

Over the next few days, berry-fighting became more compelling than obeying that immortal commandment—“two carriers by ten o’clock or you’re fired.” To quell his own boredom, my brother started throwing rotten berries at the son of the owner, at several kids at once, at anyone he could hit from his row, and eventually the air was a strawberry crossfire. This riot brought the field boss shouting, red-faced, glowering, and warning us all that someone would be asked not to come back the next day and who started this anyway.

On Friday, my brother got fired for berry-fighting with the boss’s son. I thought it was funny and carved birch bark off a tree for another miniature Delaware canoe. If my big brother wasn’t going back, I wasn’t either and who wanted to pick strawberries anyway? After a last wrestling match

with the owner's son, my brother started walking toward Burlington. I had gone ahead. He tried to catch me, but I ran and climbed a tree and got away from him, then I walked back to Burlington alone. The hot tar from that Skagit Valley road stuck to the soles of my shoes, and gravel stuck to the tar. I sounded like a giant coming down the road—all my swift Delaware subtlety gone.

After my brother was fired, our stepfather had to think of work for us to do. So, after dinner one June evening, my stepfather announced he was going to “preach to the Indians,” and he told me to go to the church and get about thirty spiral-bound songbooks. I was to assist him. Picking up his Bible and accordion, he started for the new gray Chevrolet.

The Skagit Valley evening was palpable, a bowl of soft gold light. From the North Cascades a cooling land breeze flowed easy down river. The air smelled of cream, ripe peas, dairy cows, new-mown lawn. Everything seemed muted and quiet—the log train chuffing toward Sedro Woolley, the dog sleeping in the street, our neighbor Grant washing his boat, Johnny Martin's logging truck rattling home empty, one cheeseblock missing. Chunks of orange fir bark fell quietly before our manse at 316 North Regent Street. In the alley, kids played hide-and-seek or kick-the-can. Bats, nighthawks, herons, ducks, geese—toward Burlington Hill, the whole sky seemed to be flying.

My stepfather crossed the dike and drove south from Burlington on almost the same tarbaby road that my brother and I had walked during our infamous strawberry picking week. At a large white farmhouse, he slowed down, and I saw—for the first time—a group of real Upper Skagit people sitting in rows on the green lawn. My stepfather turned in the gravel driveway and parked in the shade of some cottonwoods. Out my window, I saw children running and playing on the lawn, and behind them, quiet adults seemed to be waiting for us. There must have been a group of about thirty people there. In front, women and older children—washed, dressed, quiet—sat on the grass in several rows, and behind them stood a row of men of all ages: black hair recently washed, combed, gleaming. I could see the stained fingers of the women and girls. Strawberry pickers. I identified with them. I had been one of them in the fields, however briefly. They were going to listen to my stepfather preach, which I always pretended to do but never did. Except for his music, he was boring and he could be dangerous, especially at meals. Still, there was a formal feeling in that yard—like getting ready for a school picture. The Upper Skagit were all poised, quiet, ready for something. I didn't know what. They were expecting us. They seemed organized. One or two men in the back row seemed to be watching us intently.

“Come along now, George, and pass out the songbooks,” my stepfather ordered. I sat still. Reverend Venn went to the trunk of his polished gray Chevrolet and took his accordion out of its black patent leather case. I

thought that instrument was like him somehow. Heavy, awkward, strapped, difficult—he seemed to slip it on as though an accordion were breastplate armor. Peering over the door of the car, I could see everyone watching him now. Some women were whispering to each other. One man pushed his hands back and forth to signal accordion. Behind the car, my stepfather adjusted the leather straps on his instrument, then summoned me again. “Get to it now, like I asked you. Pass out the songbooks, George.”

Carrying the stack of spiral-bound, yellow-red-white songbooks with smiling White children’s faces on the cover and “He Owns the Cattle on a Thousand Hills” all over the back, I walked down the front row and gave one to each child. They all took them very carefully, more carefully than I ever did. They stared at them as though they might have been gifts, and, in their culture, they might well have been gifts. At the end of the second row, I gave the woman a stack and did the same for the men’s row. They all seemed eager to get a songbook. When I finished, I didn’t know where to go, whether to stand or sit or get back in the car. I knew I didn’t want to be up front with my stepfather.

So as Reverend Frank A. Venn introduced himself and said, “Let us turn to ‘Heavenly Sunshine,’” I sat down on the grass by a girl my size. She seemed beautiful to me—quiet, serene, alert—and I realized that I had seen her briefly one morning when my brother and I were walking by this house. She’d been drinking out of the water standpipe in the yard. I looked down at her hands and saw her fingers were berry-stained—that reddish brown which will not wash out. I held mine up to show her, and she laughed quietly.

My stepfather started playing his accordion. It sounded whining, thin, out of place, but he started singing in his usual drone, and a few Upper Skagit attempted to sing along, but it was obvious that “Heavenly Sunshine” was not their song or even in their repertoire. Distance between my stepfather and his audience was not new to me, but here was a group of people who were just not singing with him at all. That was a surprise.

Reverend Venn chose another song and sang it largely by himself again, though he nodded his head at me vigorously, by which he intended to encourage me to sing loudly with him, so the Upper Skagit could hear me singing too. Something was happening. I didn’t know what it was. People were looking at me. I was embarrassed now, and I did not want to identify with this stepfather of mine. I sensed something strange was happening, something I did not understand, something that had never happened to me before. There was silence, there was waiting. There was polite but explicit non-participation.

I did not sing loudly enough for anyone to hear me. I pulled up grass, stared at the sky, watched the cottonwood leaves clittering in the late gold light across the road. When a brown dog came from the cabins behind the house and began to sniff and amble around the way dogs do, I was extremely grateful. When the dog lifted his leg and peed on the mailbox post behind

my stepfather, I saw several women put their hands over their smiles. One of the men, however, called the dog with a word I had never heard before; the dog came to him, and he led him away behind the main house again.

After three or four attempts to get the Upper Skagit to sing his hymns, my stepfather stopped, snapped his accordion shut, slipped it back in its stiff patent leather case, and picked up his black, leather-bound, gold-lettered, gilt-edged Bible. "Let us pray," he said, and then there was the usual flurry of "thees" and "thous" and "Our Fathers" and "look downs." After the prayer he read some Biblical passage to these polite and quiet people, who were obviously being respectful toward him. His strategy was about the same as St. Paul's: there's this perfect God and just when you think you're good, you're really evil, and there's nothing you can do about it; your lower nature will always win out, and, no matter what you do, you're helpless in your own destruction unless, well, there is one way—outside help, from Jesus the son of this perfect God. My stepfather just happened to know personally this Jesus and this God. He would explain what God wanted, quote some supporting texts, read some more, explain some more of why God killed his son, and so on. I was always terrified when he told why God killed his son, but my stepfather's story never changed. As the sunset light came down, the scattering clouds over us became brilliant orange fish scales, and I knew that we were now headed toward the last song and final prayer of the service.

My stepfather once more strapped on his accordion and asked again if anyone would like to choose a song. It was obvious now that the Upper Skagit were not on his side. Some huge differences charged the silence now, differences not bridged at all. By this time, I was wanting to leave or hide or become invisible. However, a preacher's stepson has only the right to move around, so I had taken up a new seat—away from everyone by a stack of new empty strawberry crates. So, when my stepfather made this last invitation, I was astounded to see a younger Upper Skagit man in the back row put up his hand and say, "Yes, please. Page seventeen, please." My stepfather seemed visibly shocked and surprised, then I thought he looked relieved. He turned the pages in his hymn book and began to play an introduction to "Faith of our Fathers." He knew all the music from memory.

As my stepfather began to sing, so did all of the Upper Skagit. They *knew* this music, these words, and they knew them well. Men, women, and children all sang and their unison voices drowned my stepfather out completely from the very first words. "Faith of our fathers living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword."

The men's voices were rich and deep, the women's tremulous and strong. My face flushed and my heart started to beat faster. Something was happening. I didn't know what. Was there something wrong? Had they been fooling him all along? "Oh how our hearts beat high with joy, when e'er we hear that glorious word."

Was this their joke? I studied the Upper Skagit faces and they were all happily singing and seemed to be singing at my stepfather whose eel-like face never flinched from its usual stolid self. “Faith of our fathers, holy faith. We will be true to thee ‘til death.”

And the rest of the stanzas followed, as they must, since my stepfather always believed in singing the entire song:

*Our fathers chained in prisons dark
Were still in heart and conscience free;
How sweet would be their children's fate
If they, like them, could die for thee!*

*Faith of our fathers we will love
Both friend and foe in all our strife:
And preach thee, too, as love knows how
By kindly words and virtuous life.*

When the Upper Skagit stopped singing, I saw all the men in the back row looking at my stepfather, waiting for him to say something more, but he said nothing now. In silence, he shut the golden bellows of his wheezing accordion and snapped the latches. Silence. Everywhere. No one moved. Greater silence. Then, far away in one of the cabins where the pickers stayed, I could hear a baby crying. There was something more going on. When I picked up the songbooks, everyone was still silent. I didn't know what had happened. A huge question mark formed over this moment.

On the way home, my stepfather said nothing to me about it.

I have never forgotten this evening the Upper Skagit sang “Faith of our Fathers.” Their singing created some powerful unspoken feeling, but it took me twenty years to recognize what might have been going on. They were a captive audience. They'd been forced to accept this meeting because they were picking berries for a member of the Presbyterian Church and they were Indians. But, at least one Upper Skagit man in that captive audience wanted to enlighten my stepfather. After all, the Noo-qua-cha-mish had their fathers, Ch-la-ben, Spik-cum, Be-bash-chad, Scha-ha-lab-ki, and their fathers had their own faith—the guardian spirit tradition—and their own mythic texts, including the beautiful Star Child myth, their creation narrative. Maybe that Upper Skagit man had seen how “Faith of Our Fathers” protested—for everyone everywhere—religious persecution. Maybe he'd learned how American persecution of the Upper Skagit during the invasion of western Washington was similar to papist persecution of Protestants in seventeenth-century Europe. Could Reverend Venn see that shared heritage? Could he recognize who the Upper Skagit were? Their history, beliefs, customs, culture? It is impossible to know how much that man intended that night. One

thing, however, is clear: the Protestant hymn had lost its sectarian content. Someone among the Upper Skagit had recognized the universality within Frederick Faber's lyrics and the song had crossed from one religious and cultural tradition to another—without changing a word.

I still see that Upper Skagit man in the back row raising his hand. With a gesture, he opened the fortress of racism that night, with a song, and I walked out a lucky boy. Here, I finally can thank him. I hope that somewhere, his heart and the hearts of his people are still high with their own kind of joy.