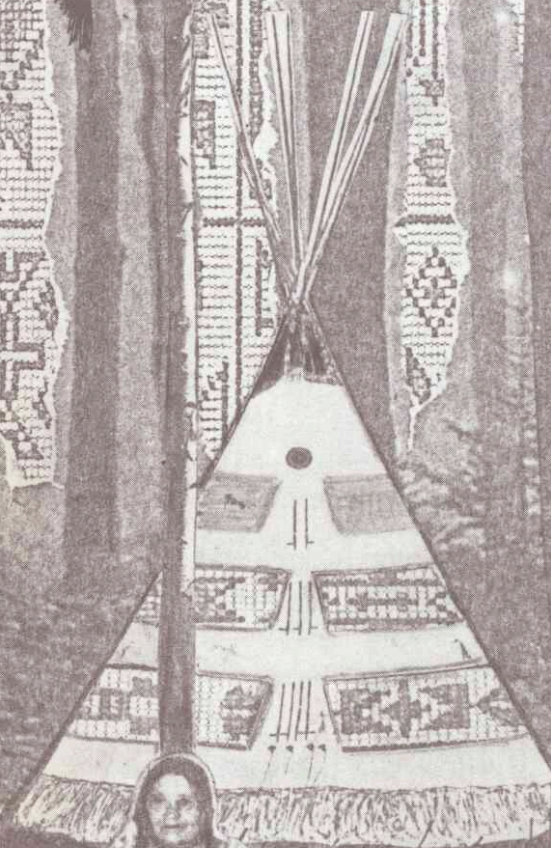


childhood  
memories  
of  
**Charles  
Eastman**



Each autobiography in this series presents one person's experience, lived and remembered in his or her own special way. While aspects of this person's life circumstances may be shared by others, each life is a unique combination of events, and should not be viewed as typical of any group.

Charles Eastman describes his early childhood in Sioux territories over a hundred years ago.

*Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman) was born in 1858 on the reservation of his tribe, the Santee Sioux, in Minnesota. The size of his tribe's reservation had been continually reduced by the U.S. government, and by the time of his birth very little remained. When Ohiyesa was four years old, there was an uprising of the Sioux. Government reprisals which followed caused many of the tribe, including what remained of Ohiyesa's family, to flee across the Canadian border. In Canada, Ohiyesa was raised by his grandmother and uncle in the traditions of his Indian heritage.*

## "I Give You This Boy"

I was so unfortunate as to be the youngest of five children who, soon after I was born, were left motherless. I had to bear the humiliating name Hakadah, meaning "the pitiful last," until I should earn a more dignified and appropriate name. I was regarded as little more than a plaything by the rest of the children.

My mother, who was known as the handsomest woman of all the Spirit Lake and Leaf Dweller Sioux, was dangerously ill, and one of the medicine men who attended her said, "Another medicine man has come into existence, but the mother must die. Therefore let him bear the name Mysterious Medicine." But one of the bystanders hastily interfered, saying that an uncle of the child already bore that name, so, for the time, I was only Hakadah.

My beautiful mother, sometimes called the Demi-Goddess of the Sioux, who tradition says had every feature of a Caucasian descent with the exception of her luxuriant black hair and deep black eyes, held me tightly to her bosom upon her deathbed, while she whispered a few words to her mother-in-law. She said, "I give you this boy for your own. I cannot trust my own mother with him; she

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will neglect him and he will surely die.”

The woman to whom these words were spoken was below the average in stature, remarkably active for her age (she was then fully sixty), and possessed of as much goodness as intelligence. My mother's judgment concerning her own mother was well founded, for soon after her death that old lady appeared and declared that Hakadah was too young to live without a mother. She offered to keep me until I died, and then she would put me in my mother's grave. Of course my other grandmother denounced the suggestion as a very wicked one and refused to give me up.

The babe was done up as usual in a movable cradle made from an oak board two and a half feet long and one and a half feet wide. On one side of it was nailed with brass-headed tacks the richly embroidered sack which was open in front and laced up and down with buckskin strings. Over the arms of the infant was a wooden bow, the ends of which were firmly attached to the board, so that if the cradle should fall the child's head and face would be protected. On this bow were hung curious playthings — strings of artistically carved bones and hoofs of deer which rattled when the little hands moved them.

In this upright cradle I lived, played and slept the greater part of the time during the first few months of my life. Whether I was made to lean against a lodgepole or was suspended from a bough of a tree while my grandmother cut wood, or whether I was carried on her back or conveniently balanced by another child in a similar cradle hung on the opposite side of a pony, I was still in my oaken bed.

This grandmother, who had already lived through sixty years of hardships, was a wonder to the young maidens of the tribe. She showed no less enthusiasm over

Hakadah than she had done when she held her firstborn, the boy's father, in her arms. Every little attention that is due to a loved child she performed with much skill and devotion. She made all my scanty garments and my tiny moccasins with a great deal of taste. It was said by all that I could not have had more attention had my mother been living....

Uncheedah (Grandmother) was a great singer. Sometimes, when Hakadah wakened too early in the morning, she would sing to him something like the following lullaby:

Sleep, sleep, my boy, the Chippewas  
Are far away — are far away.  
Sleep, sleep, my boy; prepare to meet  
The foe by day — the foe by day!  
The cowards will not dare to fight  
Till morning break — till morning break.  
Sleep, sleep, my child while still 'tis  
night;  
Then bravely wake — then bravely  
wake!

The Dakota women were wont to cut and bring their fuel from the woods and in fact to perform most of the drudgery of the camp. This of necessity fell to their lot because the men must follow the game during the day. Very often my grandmother carried me with her on these excursions; and while she worked it was her habit to suspend me from a wild grapevine or a springy bough so that the least breeze would swing the cradle to and fro.

She has told me that when I had grown old enough to take notice, I was apparently capable of holding extended conversations in an unknown dialect with birds and red squirrels . . . . It was a common thing for birds to alight on my cradle in the woods.

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After I left my cradle I almost walked away from it, she told me. She then began calling

my attention to natural objects. Whenever I heard the song of a bird, she would tell me what bird it came from, something after this fashion: "Hakadah, listen to Shechoka ("the robin") calling his mate. He says he has just found something good to eat." Or "Listen to Oopehanska ("the thrush"); he is singing for his little wife. He will sing his best." When in the evening the whippoorwill started his song with vim, no further than a stone's throw from our tent in the woods, she would say to me: "Hush! It may be an Ojibway scout!"

Again, when I waked at midnight, she would say: "Do not cry! Hinakaga ("the owl") is watching you from the treetop."

I usually covered up my head, for I had perfect faith in my grandmother's admonitions, and she had given me a dreadful idea of this bird. It was one of her legends that a little boy was once standing just outside of the teepee (tent), crying vigorously for his mother, when Hinakaga swooped down in the darkness and carried the poor little fellow up into the trees. It was well known that the hoot of the owl was commonly imitated by Indian scouts when on the warpath. There had been dreadful massacres immediately following this call. Therefore it was deemed wise to impress the sound early upon the mind of the child.

Indian children were trained so that they hardly ever cried much in the night. This was very expedient and necessary in their exposed life. In my infancy it was my grandmother's custom to put me to sleep, as she said, with the birds, and to waken me with them until it became a habit. She did this with an object in view. An Indian must always rise early. In the first place, as a hunter he finds his game best at daybreak. Secondly, other tribes when on the warpath usually make their attack very early in the morning. Even when our people are moving about leisurely, we like to rise before day-

break in order to travel when the air is cool, and unobserved, perchance, by our enemies.

As a little child it was instilled into me to be silent and reticent. This was one of the most important traits to form in the character of the Indian. As a hunter and warrior it was considered absolutely necessary to him, and was thought to lay the foundations of patience and self-control. There are times when boisterous mirth is indulged in by our people, but the rule is gravity and decorum.

After all, my babyhood was full of interest and the beginnings of life's realities. The spirit of daring was already whispered into my ears. The value of the eagle feather as worn by the warrior had caught my eye. One day when I was left alone, at scarcely two years of age, I took my uncle's war bonnet and plucked out all its eagle feathers to decorate my dog and myself. So soon the life that was about me had made its impress, and already I desired intensely to comply with all of its demands.

## Escape to Canada

I was a little over four years old at the time of the Sioux Massacre in Minnesota. In the general turmoil, we took flight into British Columbia, and the journey is still vividly remembered by all our family. A yoke of oxen and a lumber wagon were taken from some white farmer and brought home for our conveyance.

How delighted I was when I learned that we were to ride behind those wise-looking animals and in that gorgeously painted wagon! It seemed almost like a living creature to me, this new vehicle with four legs, and the more so when we got out of axle grease and the wheels went along squealing like pigs!

The boys found a great deal of innocent fun in jumping from the high wagon while the oxen were leisurely moving along. My elder brothers soon became experts. At last I mustered up courage enough to join them in this sport. I was sure they stepped on the wheel so I cautiously placed my moccasined foot upon it. Alas! Before I could realize what had happened, I was under the wheels, and had it not been for the neighbor immediately behind us I might have been run over by the next team as well.

This was my first experience with a civilized vehicle. I cried out all possible reproaches on the white man's team and concluded that a dog-travaux was good enough for me. I was reaily rejoiced that we were moving away from the people who made the wagon that had almost ended my life, and it did not occur to me that I alone was to blame. I could not be persuaded to ride in that wagon again and was glad when we finally left it beside the Missouri river.

The summer after the Minnesota Massacre, General Sibley pursued our people across this river. Now the Missouri is considered one of the most treacherous rivers in the world. Even a good modern boat is not safe upon its uncertain current. We were forced to cross in buffalo-skin boats — as round as tubs!

The Washechu (white men) were coming in great numbers with their big guns, and while most of our men were fighting them to gain time the women and the old men made and equipped the temporary boats braced with ribs of willow. Some of these were towed by two or three women or men swimming in the water and some by ponies. It was not an easy matter to keep them right side up with their helpless freight of little children and such goods as we possessed.

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The second winter after the massacre my father and my two older brothers, with

several others, were betrayed by a half-breed at Winnipeg to the United States authorities. As I was then living with my uncle in another part of the country, I became separated from them for ten years. During all this time we believed that they had been killed by the whites, and I was taught that I must avenge their deaths as soon as I was able to go upon the warpath.

I must say a word in regard to the character of this uncle, my father's brother, who was my adviser and teacher for many years. He was a man about six feet two inches in height, very erect and broad-shouldered. He was known at that time as one of the best hunters and bravest warriors among the Sioux in British America, where he still lives, for to this day we have failed to persuade him to return to the United States.

He is a typical Indian — not handsome, but truthful and brave. He had a few simple principles from which he hardly ever departed. Some of these I shall describe when I speak of my early training . . . .

The usual custom with us was to eat only two meals a day and these were served at each end of the day. This rule was not invariable, however, for if there should be any callers it was Indian etiquette to offer either tobacco or food, or both. The rule of two meals a day was more closely observed by the men — especially the younger men — than by the women and children. This was when the Indians recognized that a true manhood, one of physical activity and endurance, depends upon dieting and regular exercise.

## My Indian Grandmother

As a motherless child I always regarded my good grandmother as the wisest of guides and the best of protectors. It was not long

before I began to realize her superiority to most of her contemporaries. This idea was not gained entirely from my own observation but also from a knowledge of the high regard in which she was held by other women. Aside from her native talent and ingenuity she was endowed with a truly wonderful memory. No other midwife in her day and tribe could compete with her in skill and judgment. Her observations in practice were all preserved in her mind for reference as systematically as if they had been written upon the pages of a notebook.

I distinctly recall one occasion when she took me with her into the woods in search of certain medicinal roots.

"Why do you not use all kinds of roots for medicines?" said I.

"Because," she replied, in her quick, characteristic manner, "the Great Mystery does not will us to find things too easily. In that case everybody would be a medicine-giver, and Ohiyesa must learn that there are many secrets which the Great Mystery will disclose only to the most worthy. Only those who seek him fasting and in solitude will receive his signs."

With this and many similar explanations she wrought in my soul wonderful and lively conceptions of the Great Mystery and of the effects of prayer and solitude. . . .

Our native women gathered all the wild rice, roots, berries, and fruits which formed an important part of our food. This was distinctly a woman's work. Uncheedah (Grandmother) understood these matters perfectly, and it became a kind of instinct with her to know just where to look for each edible variety and at what season of the year. This sort of labor gave the Indian women every opportunity to observe and study nature after their fashion; and in this Uncheedah

was more acute than most of the men. The abilities of her boys were not all inherited from their father; indeed, the stronger family traits came obviously from her. She was a leader among the native women, and they came to her not only for medical aid but for advice in all their affairs.

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I was not more than five or six years old when the Indian soldiers came one day and destroyed our large buffalo-skin teepee. It was charged that my uncle had hunted alone a large herd of buffaloes. This was not exactly true. He had unfortunately frightened a large herd while shooting a deer in the edge of the woods. However, it was customary to punish such an act severely, even though the offense was accidental.

When we were attacked by the police I was playing in the teepee, and the only other person at home was Uncheedah. I had not noticed their approach, and when the war cry was given by thirty or forty Indians with strong lungs, I thought my little world was coming to an end. Instantly innumerable knives and tomahawks penetrated our frail home, while bullets went through the poles and tent fastenings above our heads.

I hardly know what I did, but I imagine it was just what any other little fellow would have done under like circumstances. My first clear realization of the situation was when Uncheedah had a dispute with the leader, claiming that the matter had not been properly investigated, and that none of the policemen had attained to a reputation in war which would justify them in touching her son's teepee. But alas! Our poor dwelling was already an unrecognizable ruin; even the poles were broken into splinters.

The Indian women after reaching middle age are usually heavy and lack agility, but my

grandmother was in this also an exception. She was fully sixty when I was born, and when I was seven years old she swam across a swift and wide stream carrying me on her back because she did not wish to expose me to accident in one of the clumsy round boats of bullhide which were rigged up to cross the rivers which impeded our way, especially in the springtime. Her strength and endurance were remarkable. Even after she had attained the age of eighty-two, she one day walked twenty-five miles without appearing much fatigued.

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## My Training

It is commonly supposed that there is no systematic education of their children among the aborigines of this country. Nothing could be farther from the truth. All the customs of this primitive people were held to be divinely instituted, and those in connection with the training of children were scrupulously adhered to and transmitted from one generation to another . . . .

Scarcely was the embryo warrior ushered into the world when he was met by lullabies that speak of wonderful exploits in hunting and war. Those ideas which so fully occupied his mother's mind before his birth are now put into words by all about the child, who is as yet quite unresponsive to their appeals to his honor and ambition. He is called the future defender of his people whose lives may depend upon his courage and skill. If the child is a girl she is at once addressed as the future mother of a noble race.

In hunting songs, the leading animals are introduced; they come to the boy to offer their bodies for the sustenance of his tribe. The animals are regarded as his friends and spoken of almost as tribes of people or as his cousins, grandfathers, and grandmothers.

The songs of wooing, adapted as lullabies, were equally imaginative, and the suitors were often animals personified while pretty maidens were represented by the mink and the doe.

Very early, the Indian boy assumed the task of preserving and transmitting the legends of his ancestors and his race. Almost every evening a myth or a true story of some deed done in the past was narrated by one of the parents or grandparents while the boy listened with parted lips and glistening eyes. On the following evening he was usually required to repeat it. If he was not an apt scholar, he struggled long with his task, but as a rule the Indian boy is a good listener and has a good memory so that the stories were tolerably well mastered. The household became his audience by which he was alternately criticized and applauded. . . .

It seems to be a popular idea that all the characteristic skill of the Indian is instinctive and hereditary. This is a mistake. All the stoicism and patience of the Indian are acquired traits, and continual practise alone makes him master of the art of woodcraft. Physical training and dieting were not neglected. I remember that I was not allowed to have beef soup or any warm drink. The soup was for the old men. General rules for the young were never to take their food very hot nor to drink much water.

My uncle, who educated me up to the age of fifteen years, was a strict disciplinarian and a good teacher. When I left the teepee in the morning he would say, "Hakadah, look closely to everything you see," and at evening, on my return, he used often to catechize me for an hour.

"On which side of the trees is the lighter-colored bark? On which side do they have most regular branches?"

It was his custom to let me name all the new birds that I had seen during the day. I would name them according to the color or the shape of the bill or their song or the appearance and locality of the nest — in fact, anything about the bird that impressed me as characteristic. I made many ridiculous errors, I must admit. He then usually informed me of the correct name. Occasionally I made a hit and this he would warmly commend.

He went much deeper into this science when I was a little older, that is, about the age of eight or nine years. He would say, for instance, "How do you know that there are fish in yonder lake?"

"Because they jump out of the water for flies at midday."

He would smile at my prompt but superficial reply.

"What do you think of the little pebbles grouped together under the shallow water? And what made the pretty curved marks in the sandy bottom and the little sandbanks? Where do you find the fish-eating birds? Have the inlet and the outlet of a lake anything to do with the question?"

He did not expect a correct reply at once to all the voluminous questions that he put to me on these occasions, but he meant to make me observant and a good student of nature.

"Hakadah," he would say to me, "you ought to follow the example of the *shunktokecha* ("wolf"). Even when he is surprised and runs for his life, he will pause to take one more look at you before he enters his final retreat. So you must take a second look at everything you see.

"It is better to view animals unobserved. I have been a witness to their courtships and their quarrels and have learned many of their

secrets in this way. I was once the unseen spectator of a thrilling battle between a pair of grizzly bears and three buffaloes — a rash act for the bears, for it was in the moon of strawberries, when the buffaloes sharpen and polish their horns for bloody contests among themselves.

"I advise you, my boy, never to approach a grizzly's den from the front, but to steal up behind and throw your blanket or a stone in front of the hole. He does not usually rush for it, but first puts his head out and listens and then comes out very indifferently and sits on his haunches on the mound in front of the hole before he makes any attack. While he is exposing himself in this fashion, aim at his heart. Always be as cool as the animal himself." Thus he armed me against the cunning of savage beasts by teaching me how to outwit them.

"In hunting," he would resume, "you will be guided by the habits of the animal you seek. Remember that a moose stays in swampy or low land or between high mountains near a spring or lake for thirty to sixty days at a time. Most large game moves about continually, except the doe in the spring; it is then a very easy matter to find her with the fawn. Conceal yourself in a convenient place as soon as you observe any signs of the presence of either, and then call with your birchen doe-caller.

"Whichever one hears you first will soon appear in your neighborhood. But you must be very watchful, or you may be made a fawn of by a large wildcat. They understand the characteristic call of the doe perfectly well.

"When you have any difficulty with a bear or a wildcat — that is, if the creature shows signs of attacking you — you must make him fully understand that you have seen him and are aware of his intentions. If you are not well equipped for a pitched battle, the only way to make him retreat is to take a long sharp-



pointed pole for a spear and rush toward him. No wild beast will face this unless he is cornered and already wounded. These fierce beasts are generally afraid of the common weapon of the larger animals — the horns, and if these are very long and sharp, they dare not risk an open fight.

“There is one exception to this rule— the gray wolf will attack fiercely when very hungry. But their courage depends upon their numbers; in this they are like white men. One wolf or two will never attack a man. They will stampede a herd of buffaloes in order to get at the calves; they will rush upon a herd of antelopes, for these are helpless; but they are always careful about attacking man.”

Of this nature were the instructions of my uncle, who was widely known at that time as among the greatest hunters of his tribe.

All boys were expected to endure hardship without complaint. In savage warfare a young man must, of course, be an athlete and used to undergoing all sorts of privations. He must be able to go without food and water for two or three days without displaying any weakness or to run for a day and a night without any rest. He must be able to traverse a pathless and wild country without losing his way either in the day or night time. He cannot refuse to do any of these things if he aspires to be a warrior.

Sometimes my uncle would waken me very early in the morning and challenge me to fast with him all day. I had to accept the challenge. We blackened our faces with charcoal so that every boy in the village would know that I was fasting for the day. Then the little tempters would make my life a misery until the merciful sun hid behind the western hills.

I can scarcely recall the time when my stern teacher began to give sudden war whoops over my head in the morning while I was sound asleep. He expected me to leap up with

perfect presence of mind, always ready to grasp a weapon of some sort and to give a shrill whoop in reply. If I was sleepy or startled and hardly knew what I was about, he would ridicule me and say that I need never expect to sell my scalp dear. Often he would vary these tactics by shooting off his gun just outside of the lodge while I was asleep at the same time giving bloodcurdling yells. After a time I became used to this.

When Indians went upon the warpath, it was their custom to try the new warriors thoroughly before coming to an engagement. For instance, when they were near a hostile camp they would select the novices to go after the water and make them do all sorts of things to prove their courage. In accordance with this idea my uncle used to send me off after water when we camped after dark in a strange place. Perhaps the country was full of wild beasts, and, for aught I knew, there might be scouts from hostile bands of Indians lurking in that very neighborhood.

Yet I never objected, for that would show cowardice. I picked my way through the woods, dipped my pail in the water and hurried back, always careful to make as little noise as a cat. Being only a boy my heart would leap at every crackling of a dry twig or distant hooting of an owl until at last I reached our teepee. Then my uncle would perhaps say: “Ah, Hakadah, you are a thorough warrior,” empty out the precious contents of the pail, and order me to go a second time.

Imagine how I felt! But I wished to be a brave man as much as a white boy desires to be a great lawyer or even President of the United States. Silently I would take a pail and endeavor to retrace my footsteps in the dark.

With all this, our manners and morals were not neglected. I was made to respect the adults and especially the aged. I was not

allowed to join in their discussions nor even to speak in their presence unless requested to do so. Indian etiquette was very strict, and among the requirements was that of avoiding the direct address. A term of relationship or some title of courtesy was commonly used instead of the personal name by those who wished to show respect. We were taught generosity to the poor and reverence for the Great Mystery. Religion was the basis of all Indian training....