

**TO BE A
WATER
PROTECTOR**

THE RISE OF THE WIINDIGOO SLAYERS

WINONA LADUKE

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION / 1

PART 1 – OMAA AKIING: HERE ON EARTH / 9

WINTER COUNT / 10

HOW TO BE BETTER ANCESTORS / 13

THE HOLY LAND IS HERE / 17

THE MONTH YOU REMEMBER ME / 21

PART 2: RELATIVES / 25

SEEDS OF HOPE: MINO GITIGAANING / 26

OMAAKAAKII: IN PRAISE OF FROGS / 30

I MISS YOU / 33

FREE THE SNAKE / 35

HOW DO WE GRIEVE THE DEATH OF A RIVER? / 39

AMAZON SHOULD SAVE THE AMAZON / 44

VIVA MEXICO / 50

BORINQUÉN: A REBIRTH / 53

THANKSGIVING IS TIME FOR REPARATIONS / 58

THE TELESCOPE AND THE MAUNA / 62

PART 3: MNÍ WICONI / 75

FROM BUFFALO TO BLACK SNAKE / 76

THE DEEP NORTH / 82

THE SEVENTH GENERATION / 88

THE RISE OF THE WATER PROTECTOR / 93

THE SIEGE AT RIVER'S EDGE / 104

THE ART OF INDIGENOUS RESISTANCE / 113

HOW THE DUST SETTLES / 117

SPREADING THE SACRED FIRE / 126

PART 4: THE LAST TAR SANDS PIPELINE / 131

A PIPELINE RUNS THROUGH IT / 132

SANDPIPER TIMELINE / 150

NOT MINNESOTA NICE / 155

PALISADE: LET'S BE GOOD NEIGHBORS / 170

THE NECESSITY DEFENSE / 176

WHISPERING DIRTY SECRETS: ENBRIDGE AND

THAT INDIGENOUS PEOPLES POLICY / 180

SEXUAL VIOLENCE, FOSSIL FUELS AND ENBRIDGE / 188

THERE CAN ONLY BE ONE / 193

WHEN THE PARTY'S OVER: STARVING THE WIINDIGO / 205

WELCOME TO THE KILL ZONE: THE SHADOW OF HUSKY / 219

WHEN THE BAT CHALLENGED THE WIINDIGO / 223

PART 5: EIGHTH FIRE / 229

TURNING ON A DIME / 230

REALLY FINLAND, MUST YOU? / 236

THE NEW IRON HORSE / 238

HOW SWEET IT IS / 242

THE RENAISSANCE OF CANNABIS / 245

LIFTING HEARTS — POETRY AND THE UN DECLARATION / 255

ONE DISH ONE SPOON / 258

BEYOND RECONCILIATION, JUST TRANSITION / 261

NOTES / 279

INTRODUCTION

Water is Life. I live at the headwaters of the Ottertail River. I live at the place where Round Lake meets the Ottertail River. This river is clean; swans, geese and eagles greet you. I live in the place where the wild things are. When the river leaves my beloved lake, it is clear and clean. This water travels down to the Red River, joining there with many other tributaries until its final destination, Hudson Bay and the Arctic Ocean. By the time this river is there, this same water to which I pray is not so clean or so full of good life. That's what I know.

It is the time of the Water Protectors. It has always been. *It's also the time of the Wiindigoo.* I am writing and editing this book at a time when the world stands still, quarantined with COVID-19, a virus. It is an amazing time. I'm grateful to be here and to share these stories of Water Protectors. Or as Isaac Murdoch tells us,

In the future, our descendants will be sitting around a fire in their lodges telling this story of when the two legged tried to destroy the earth. We are no doubt in a sacred legend that will be told for thousands of years. For whatever reasons, we have been specifically placed here on earth to participate in this incredibly sacred time. We need to believe in what our heart tells us and to find the strength to follow it. This sacred story needs heroes and we are the chosen ones. Rise strong and never stop believing in the great power of this earth. We are completely surrounded by our ancestors.¹

I am not the first Water Protector, nor the last. And as I write this beginning, I want to acknowledge the Water Protectors I have known — great role models and leaders. There are many, they are young and old.

I remember riding a train with the great Creek leader Phillip Deere. The year was 1977. I had seen 18 winters, and we'd just finished the UN Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous Peoples and the Land. Thirty years later, that historic gathering would have launched three decades of international work to recognize and protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples. That was the beginning of what, 30 years later, would

2 TO BE A WATER PROTECTOR

result in the passage of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Phillip Deere and I are on a grand adventure. We are sitting on a train, and he said to me, “One day, water will be more expensive than oil.” And, I didn’t really understand what he meant. I thought that sounded strange, but now I understand. The world needs water, not oil; that’s the basics. And, as a liter of Fiji Water, having traveled 8000 miles so I can pick it up, costs \$7, we see that water costs more than oil. What that’s really about is that Water is Life, and oil is not.

Indeed, as Mohawk Chief Sakokwenonkwas (Thomas Parker) told a Harvard University audience in 1972, “Someday President Nixon and the other world leaders are going to find out that once they catch the last fish, once they cut down the last tree, they won’t be able to eat all the money they have in the banks.”² He would know, as the Akwesasne Reserve was heavily contaminated by a set of industries, and their water quality severely impacted.

Indeed, for decades Indigenous Peoples have been saying this and putting our bodies on the line for our water. People have opposed mega dam projects ranging from those on the Klamath River to those on the Columbia. Dams like the Dalles (Celilo Falls), Kinzua (Seneca Territory), to the battles against the dams in James Bay, in northern Ontario, and throughout the Amazon. People who live with water still understand that Water is Life. The teaching is old, and it’s profound.

That narrative is subsumed by corporate advertising and mythology, where, for instance, Enbridge Energy uses the moniker “Life Needs Energy.” People’s relationship with water has changed dramatically — ocean dumping, oceanic nuclear testing in the Pacific, overfishing, more plastic in the ocean than fish, the list goes on. After consuming a lifetime of Pepsi products, a good lot of people become consumed by Wiindigoo Economics, or perhaps become Wiindigoos themselves. In a way, this book is a calling out to that. And a reminder to be sensible people, to do things which make good sense.

To begin this book, I want to acknowledge those who I remember first saying “Water is Life,” and reminded us all of that. John Trudell, in the early 1980s, began this Water is Life set of concerts, music and awareness. Working with musicians like Jackson Browne, Jesse Ed Davis, Bonnie Raitt, Kris Kristofferson and others, Trudell traveled up and down the west coast with that message. He understood fully.

We remember
the water is our beginning
choosing life before profit
the water is our relative
The water loves us
Telling us her power is real

I hear the ocean
Singing her song
Water for Life³

Trudell long ago spoke of the rights of Mother Earth. More than just civil rights or human rights, it is Natural Rights. I am grateful to him for his teachings. I knew Trudell through five decades of my life. He was a friend and mentor, and his commitment to life, art and protecting Mother Earth was an inspiration to so many of us. A Santee man, born in Nebraska, he became politicized after he returned from the military in 1968. The Liberation of Alcatraz was the moment for John, like many young Native people on the west coast, and nationally, as Native people demanded the rematriation of the former military prison, something which is provided for under federal law.

Trudell used his skill set to establish Radio Free Alcatraz and served as chair of the American Indian Movement for most of the 1970s. That's when I met Trudell. A profound thinker and orator, Trudell's influence was significant. As the power of the movement grew, so did the repression, as COINTELPRO and other federal intelligence, police and military programs moved into the reservations and Indian Country. After his pregnant wife, Tina Manning, and his three children and mother-in-law died in 1979 in a suspicious house fire, John's life turned to more music and he ranged further and further. His poetry, music and acting lit up a generation of youth, with spoken word and political insight. In 2012, he formed Project Hempstead, with Willie Nelson, to co-create the hemp economy. His words live on in books, film and music, with Bad Dog. John crossed boundaries. He crossed that final boundary to the spirit world in December of 2015. Or as John would say, "I caught my ride." I had visited him two days before.

John Trudell.
I raise my hands to you.

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#### 4 TO BE A WATER PROTECTOR

I sing praises for the Water Protectors. I sing praises in these words. Josephine Mandamin, a Water Warrior, is also one of those whom I look to for guidance, as a living being and as a spirit woman.

We have known for a long time that water is alive. Water can hear you. Water can sense what you are saying and what you are feeling. There's a place I put tobacco in the water where the water is so still. It was dead. I prayed for it, I put my tobacco in the water and it started floating around. So the water was alive, it heard my prayers. It heard the song. So, I know it listened. I know that if you pay attention to it, it can come alive. Give it respect and it can come alive.... Give it love.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, the Japanese scientist Masaru Emoto in his *NYT* bestseller *The Hidden Messages in Water*, documented the same knowledge in a scientific form. Emoto would freeze water into crystals from different locations, some polluted and some pristine. The water crystals were all different, but the polluted water was highly deformed. He found that water crystals from clear springs and crystals that were exposed to loving words were complex, brilliant and colorful. His scientific research created a new awareness of the possibility of good intent and practices to heal water and ourselves.

I came to know Josephine Mandamin in the Three Fires Midewin Society, where she too prayed with the Anishinaabeg for the good life and healing. An Anishinaabe from Fort Williams Reserve, Josephine had grown up in the shadow of the Thunder Bay Smelters, where acid rain and mining projects, from gold to uranium, plagued the waters of her territory, as well as mercury poisoning at Grassy Narrows. Josephine became a Water Walker, a leader of this movement and an inspiration to thousands of people for her commitment to the Great Lakes. She walked around the Great Lakes, in prayer and with companions.

At the Three Fires Midewiwin Society, spiritual leaders told of a time when “water will cost as much as gold.” That time was the year 2030. The responsibility to care for the water is with Ojibwe women. We are entrusted with water ceremonies and songs. That movement and traditional way was really revitalized and brought back in a strong way by Josephine. In 2003, she began her first walk, walking the perimeter of Lake Superior, carrying a copper bucket and praying for the water. That was the beginning of many walks, and more walks inspired by other Three Fires Lodge members like Sharon Day, another Water Walker. The movement has grown and

continues the prayers for the water. It is estimated that Josephine walked more than 25,000 kilometers during her lifetime for the water. Josephine completed her final sacred walk in 2017, passing over the next year.<sup>5</sup>

Josephine Mandamin  
I raise my hands to you.

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It was a long time back that I came to meet Milton Born With A Tooth. He was a Water Protector. A Peigan leader of the Lone Fighters Society, Milton's battle was with the Oldman Dam on the Three River, a dam project not unlike the Kinzua Dam. "I was born by that river," Milton would tell me. Born in a small house to a large family that made their life in that world of the Old Man River.

When the Alberta government proposed a new dam on the river, this one for both electricity and to provide flood control for agricultural interests in the region, Born With A Tooth restored the Pikani Lone Fighters Society, an ancient medicine society, to protect the river. In the 1990s, when I came to know him, Milton spoke of a dream about a beaver, noting, as others have, that "beavers are the only ones allowed to make dams in our territory." Inspired by the beaver, Born With A Tooth, who argued that the Pikani owned the rights to the water in the river and that the dam would result in the flooding of sacred places, resorted to a beaver-like action. That's to say, Born With A Tooth borrowed an excavator on the construction site and redirected the river into a canal bed. This action ended in a shootout with the RCMP and jail time for Born With A Tooth. Legal challenges continued and the dam was built, but the commitment of a man to a river remained. Since 2003, a 32 megawatt hydroelectric plant has operated, providing 114 gigawatt hours per year. That hydro plant is 25% owned by the Pikani Nation. Milton Born With A Tooth passed away in 2019.

"Change will never be peaceful. It's like a nice beautiful day that changes into a thunderstorm, or a snowstorm — that's how change is going to be."

Milton Born With A Tooth.
I raise my hands to you.

~~~

Berta Caceras is another Water Protector. She too has passed on, though in her case it was a bullet, not cancer, that ended her life. Hers is the story of Indigenous water and land protectors everywhere, as hundreds of us are killed by corrupt governments and corporate goons. A Lenca

## 6 TO BE A WATER PROTECTOR

Indigenous leader from Honduras, Cáceres also faced a dam project, Agua Zarca, another dam that supported rich interests in a corrupt country. In 1993, she co-founded an Indigenous Honduran organization, Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras (COPINH, Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras), which is committed to the protection of Indigenous Peoples and the environment, particularly the Lenca people in Intibucá. The organization's 2004 history recalls that the Lenca "began to discover their indigenous face, a face of resistance and national identity."<sup>6</sup> *That is a story everywhere, from the Zapatista Movement to the movement of Water Protectors.*

The organization was known for mobilizing masses. In 1994, COPINH marched on the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa, with multiple demands. Among other things, they demanded self-government, a moratorium on logging and investigation into violence against Indigenous Peoples. In response to the protest, the Honduran government signed a 48-point agreement.<sup>7</sup> In another action, on October 12, 1997, the anniversary of the Spanish arrival in the Americas, about 150 protestors knocked down a statue of Christopher Columbus in Tegucigalpa. Arguing that they were protesting a history of exploitation of Indigenous Peoples, one of the leaders arrested for this action, Salvador Zuniga, declared, "It would seem that in this country clay leaders matter more than the real problems faced by indigenous people. If there is justice, we will be released, but we are not sorry for the act of dignity carried out on October 12."<sup>8</sup>

Berta Cáceres was a leader in the movement opposing the Aqua Zarca hydroelectric project. She was assassinated in her home on March 3, 2016. A few weeks later, another Indigenous leader, Nelson García, was also assassinated. While Cáceres' assassins were later convicted, Honduras remains a place where Water Protectors are always in danger. A 2016 survey conducted by Global Witness found that 185 water and land protectors in 16 countries were killed in 2015 alone. Eight of those were in Honduras.<sup>9</sup>

Yet sometimes those deaths stop projects. The Aqua Zarca project had received \$17 million, or just under 40% of the necessary funding from its three major European funders, when an employee of the company building the dam was charged with Cáceres' murder. Amidst international outrage at the murder and other human rights violations, the banks divested. "The bank is no longer funding the project. Nor is there any intention to further invest in the project. Each bank is going to have their own exit

strategy. Our bank stopped all disbursements,” said a spokesperson for the largest investor, The Cabei.<sup>10</sup>

*Berta, I raise my hands to you and to other Water Protectors and Friends of the Butterflies who are killed by the Wiindigoos.*

*There are many more Water Protectors, and as the younger generation emerges, like Clayton Thomas Muller, Gitz Crazy Boy Eriel Deranger, Dawn Goodwin, Kimberly Smith, Tara Houska and Melina Lubicon, they continue the work to protect the waters of the north. I raise my hands and put them to my heart. You are loved.*

This book is written in the spirit of acknowledging that Water is Life. This book is a testimony to the resistance and defeat of the Wiindigoo. The term “Water Protector” became mainstream under a hail of rubber bullets at Standing Rock. This book is about that spirit, and that spirit is forever.

Excerpt