

Burnt Face

as told by Tom Yellowtail, June 1993

The edited segments of Tom Yellowtail's telling of Burnt Face included here highlight the journey of a young boy. Tom Yellowtail's telling is presented here in Arial font, based upon a transcription of the 1993 audio recording of the story. To better reflect a sense of oral nuances and dynamic rhythm of the storytelling, I have italicized Tom's voiced inflections and stresses, and added a series of dot ellipses to mark his pauses, from brief (two dot) to longer (three dot and four dot). Paragraph demarcation reflects the critical segments selected for this presentation. For a complete text version of the original story, see Frey 1995: 108-122.

In the *days* when they *still* . . . move about the country . . . the *territory* where the Crow Indians . . . roam . . . about . . . moving from one place to another . . . is this area . . . comprising . . . the rivers . . . the Little Bighorn . . . the Bighorn . . . the Yellowstone River . . . *and the* Missouri River . . . and the Indians . . . would follow some of these rivers . . . move about every few *days*, *from way down there* next to the North Dakota border line . . . on up this way toward these Bighorn Mountains

In the evening . . . in the camp . . . the children . . . would play . . . build a bonfire or something like that . . . and play . . . and this one night they *did* build a bonfire . . . and they were chasing each other around playing games and a young lad of about the age of this boy here now . . . I'd say the lad was probably . . . was probably about ten years old they were all playing around this bonfire . . . chasing each other . . . and while they were playing like that . . . chasing each other . . . some were standing back and others would be chasing around each other . . . or *somebody* gave a push to this one boy as he was going . . . the fire over here and when he got pushed he *fell into* that . . . into that bonfire which burned him pretty bad . . . before they rescued him . . . pulled him out . . . but he was burned already . . . pretty bad . . . into the bonfire . . . the *big fire* he fell into and . . . that accident happened so the . . . the other children all quit playing . . . for one of them got hurt . . . and . . . the child was taken to his . . . camp . . . his parent's camp . . . and they took care of him . . . and the next few days . . . the *sores* started from that *burn* . . . on his *face* and he was *burned* so . . . so much that . . . his face had to . . . sores were on and finally come to . . . to *heal* as *scabs* and . . . he would still try to play with his other friends . . . yet . . . but his face was *disfigured then* after these . . . sores had healed . . . and tightened up and his face was . . . *disfigured* . . . and the other kids would make fun of him . . . "Ahh . . . look at him . . . look at

his funny . . . ugly face!" . . . and all that . . . and that made the boy . . . *ashamed* . . . he felt ashamed the way the other kids would make fun of him . . . an ugly face . . .

So . . . he didn't like that and he wanted to leave camp . . . be away from . . . staying in camp . . . so . . . he . . . he got bedding and . . . and things to stay away from the camp *when the camp move about* . . . he'd travel along the side of them . . . I'd say probably a half a mile away from them or so . . . and he doesn't come into camp for he is *ashamed* . . . of what the other kids would make fun of him . . . when they look at him and . . . so he stayed that way his parents would try to bring him back and he won't do it he has his bedding . . . he stays there and they bring food for him . . . and he's sad and he doesn't come back into the camp . . . to play with the other . . . his friends . . . other children

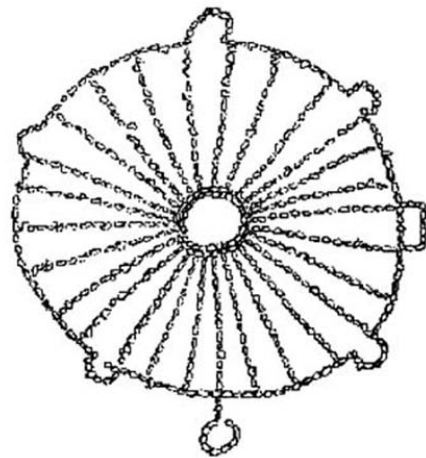
And . . . *as the camp move about* . . . moving about . . . toward the Bighorn Mountains and he . . . he had in mind . . . as they were approaching the Bighorn Mountains . . . he thought to himself . . . "Now when we get to this Bighorn Mountains . . . I'll . . . I'll quit staying alone . . . with my people . . . with my parents . . . my parents are among the group in the camp *I'll leave* them when we get to these mountains . . . and take the mountains . . . and go up somewhere and fast" . . . So . . . he told his parents to make him several pairs of moccasins . . . and to prepare when the men to *hunting* and making jerky . . . to save up . . . plenty of jerky . . . to take with him when he leaves . . . when they get to the mountains . . . and quite a few extra pairs of moccasins . . . and enough . . . enough clothing to . . . to leave the camp . . . the camp could go on and he'd take to the mountains . . . and fast somewhere "I'll go to that . . . if I return . . . if I'm lucky to do my fasting . . . and I may return to my people if not . . . if something happens to me . . . why that . . . that'll be it . . . that'll be alright" he knew those conditions . . . but he decided he's going to *leave* the camp . . . they can go on . . . and he would . . . he would *leave* the camp and take the mountains and fast somewhere

So . . . the parents prepared all those extra pairs of moccasins for him . . . *things he would need* for him to get along with . . . and the jerky . . . for the food . . . so he could spend quite a few days . . . quite awhile . . . before he . . . would return to his people he wanted to do that fasting so . . . *alright* . . . he was determined to do that fasting

So . . . they got to the mountains . . . and he bid his folks goodbye for awhile . . . other friends . . . "Now you folks go on and I'll . . . I'll take these mountains and I'll find a place where I'll fast . . . for quite awhile so he left the camp and he took to the mountains and went south . . . along the mountain

range . . . kept on . . . traveling . . . into Wyoming . . . kept traveling south and finally he come to a place . . .
"I believe this is a good place" . . . where the present Medicine Wheel is now he come to that place . . .
 look things over the country . . . *"Right here is where I will . . . fast!"*

So he did . . . he started fasting there . . . right where the Medicine . . . Wheel is now he fasted
 there and *during the day* . . . where he fasted . . . a lot of the place is just rocky . . . formations of rocks . . . all
 around him *so during the day* . . . he would gather . . . he rocks . . . and he started forming . . . a circle . . .
 representing the Lodge . . . the Lodge you seen nowadays
 that comprise . . . the Sundance Lodge . . . *he built* . . . that
 large circle . . . everyday he'd pile up rocks on top of . . . to
 form a circle . . . and a the doorway toward the rising Sun
 to the east *he made it big* and everyday he
 works . . . and the *spokes* that lead to the *center* . . . he piles
 up rocks leading to the center what you see now on
 a . . . Sundance Lodge . . . it is round . . . with a doorway
 leading towards the Sun . . . to the east where the Sun rises
 *and he built* that according to the . . . to the form of a
 Sundance Lodge . . . built it according to the Sundance



Lodge *and* . . . no telling how many . . . he must of stayed there a month or so and he fasted . . .
 fasted there . . . everyday says his prayers . . . he has tobacco . . . with him . . . and a good supply of tobacco . . .
 . . . and he'd fill up his pipe and offer smokes . . . to the Great Spirit . . . and he went that way on all these
 days of fasting

And right by are the cliffs . . . *caves* . . . where . . . you hear about the Little People *they are*
there . . . and they're there yet today *finally* . . . the Little People come out . . . they'd been watching
 him . . . they come out . . . and they . . . they said "Young man . . . you have been here for awhile . . . we've
 been watching you . . . you're fasting . . . you've said your prayers . . . and you've spent enough time here . . .
 . . . and you've built this . . . representing a Sundance Lodge . . . *it is good* . . . *now we want to adopt you* . . .
we want to give you medicine . . . *we want you to quit your fasting and you go back to your people*
 your people are at that place . . . your parents and the rest of them you get back . . . back to your
 people . . . don't stay away from them we'll take those scars away from you so you'll look . . . look

decent . . . so you won't be ashamed to get back into your people and . . . the *medicine things* we will give you . . . you will have them and . . . you pray for people . . . doctor people . . . when you are back home you'll have the power we are giving you . . . all these powers so . . . you exercise . . . using your medicines when you get back to your people and you will be a medicine man among your people and eventually become *a chief* . . . of your tribe"

"So . . . alright . . . I will leave . . . I'll go back" so he started back the way he came . . . and went to the place where the Little People had told him where he will find . . . your people . . . probably several days to travel . . . he's a foot so one day . . . here he come into camp he asked for the chief's camp . . . and they told him . . . "There's the chief's camp" . . . and he told him the chief looked at him . . . he's grown up already he was a young lad when he left them . . . he's a young man now and he didn't recognize him so . . . the young man explained to the chief . . . "I am the boy that got my face burned . . . and I stayed away from the camp and I'm . . . I'm the boy . . . I've grown up now I've fasted . . . like I wanted to . . . I received my medicine . . . and here . . . I as asked to return to my people and here I am I've come back . . . my parents are here somewhere" . . .

So the chief said . . . "Okay . . . alright . . . come on in" . . . and he call his announcer . . . a herald we call them . . . the man who goes around camp making announcements . . . the chief called the herald . . . to come and told him the story . . . "Go around camp and tell the different chiefs to come to together and come to my camp . . . and we'll have a smoke . . . we have this young man who has returned to us . . . we will hear his story . . . we will ask him to tell his story to us" . . . so the heard went around camp . . .

And there it's a big tipi and there they come in . . . the chief sits here and they have the boy there they come and take their places . . . and they . . . they have a ceremony . . . they . . . they filled up their pipes and smoke . . . make incense . . . prayers . . . and after doing that they say . . . "Alright . . . young man . . . we are now ready to hear your story . . . tell us" . . .

So the young man . . . says "I am the boy . . . that when . . . quite awhile back . . . when we were . . . moving up . . . from *way down there* . . . way down the Missouri headed this way up the Bighorn . . . River . . . when we got to the mountain . . . were I left . . . you people . . . and I . . . I went to the mountains . . . and I went on south from there . . . quite aways down and come to a place where I fasted and stayed in one place I spent all my time there . . . and finally the *Little People* there around close by . . . come to me . . . and visit with me and talk with me . . . and they advise me to leave that place and come back to . . . back

to my parents and all of you . . . and I'm a member of your group and according to what I received they call me Burnt Face . . . and I was disfigured but those Little People took those . . . took those . . . disfigurements off my face and make me look different . . . *so here I am* . . . I'm the boy who left your camp" . . .

"*Ahhh . . . ahhh . . . ahh . . . hay! That's great*" . . . the chief said . . . "*Alright . . . we will . . . welcome you back to our camp you will be with us now . . . stay with us . . . we'll travel on*" . . . *so* . . . they accepted him back . . . they announce . . . throughout the camp "*The young man is back with us . . . he is back to his parents . . . he is with us now from now on . . . we will depend on him . . . when some of you get sick . . . call on him . . . he's been given the power to work and doctor you and make you get well he'll be the man we'll call on . . . as our doctor . . . among this group*" . . .

So . . . sure enough . . . camp went on . . . people respect him . . . anyone that get sick they would call on him . . . and he'd . . . pray for them . . . doctor them and they get well . . . *and they respect him* . . . "*Oh . . . this man had the power . . . we must respect him . . . we can't make fun of him no more . . . no way . . . anymore*" . . . so as time went on he finally become a chief . . . and a great chief from that time on . . . and his name was . . . Burnt Face . . .

For Tom and so many other elders, the way of the world is as a "great circle." It has no beginning, nor an end, for time is as a circle, always repeating itself. The life of any four-legged or two-legged is as a circle, from birth, to maturity, to old age, and back to where one came. The sun, the moon, the stars and the earth are as circles and move in circles as well. The great winds move in circles, move around the stones, trees and flowers that are all rounded as the circle. The birds make their nests as circles and their young are born out of the circles of eggs.

This we all see with the circles of our eyes and come to know in our hearts. This we live by. Our lodges were once round as the nests of birds; now we are reminded of this when we set up our tepees each August at Crow Fair. Throughout our land our ancestors built great circles of rock, which we now call medicine wheels. At our pow wows at New Year's and

during Crow Fair we dance the round dance. We give prayer and clean ourselves from the inside out each time we enter the circle of our sweat lodges. When the medicine bundles are opened, we sit in a prayer circle and watch the smoke circle from our cigarettes, carrying our prayers with it. Each summer, when we build and give of ourselves within the circle of our Sun Dance lodge, we are reminded of the great circle of life and of the world.

Our lives and the lives of all the peoples make up a "great wagon wheel." Though the non-Indian came to this land traveling on them, we've always had the "wheel." Ours can be seen in the rock "Medicine Wheel" of the Bighorn Mountains and in the Sundance Lodges. Each spoke of the great wheel is as a particular religion, a particular people – the Sun Dance, the Christian, the Muslim, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Indian, the non-Indian, the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, the wingeds. Each is unique, with its own language and traditions. But all are of equal worth; all are of the same length. To shorten or even remove one of the spokes would only cause the wheel to wobble and fall. All are needed. Nevertheless, all the spokes are linked to the same hub, the same God. Though each of us may address it differently, each with our own way of praying, it is the same God, uniting all the peoples. To live is to live in the circle, as a part of the great wheel.

Works Cited.

Frey, Rodney, with Lawrence Aripa, Tom Yellowtail and other Elders

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