

Keeping Heart on Pine Ridge

Cruise down the back roads of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in this bold anthology of real-life stories. Creative writer Vic Glover lays bare the challenges, history, bonds, and rich traditions that infuse the stark reality of life on the "rez." Glover introduces readers to his friends, family, and neighbors, inviting us into his private world with a trace of amusement and a poignant honesty that grabs you from the opening line and never lets go.



"'Keeping Heart' is as true a book as good writing can produce. Vic Glover has the perfect tone—compassionate cynicism—for knowing Pine Ridge and for describing a wide slice of life from one corner of that well-known American Indian community. Glover nails reality just the way it is—funny as hell and sad as hell. I hope Glover keeps writing."

Jose Barreiro, PhD, Senior Editorialist
"Indian Country Today"

"An unprecedented look into the lives of contemporary American Indian people on one of the poorest reservations in North America. Through birth and death, ceremony and survival, Vic Glover generously gifts his readers with the humor, sadness, courage, generosity, and sacrifice that is Indian Country in the 21st Century."

Gary Rhine, Producer
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Vic Glover



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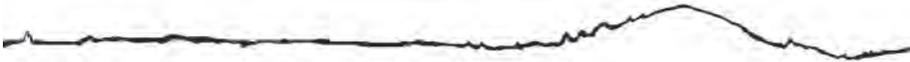


family ties, warrior culture
commodity foods, rez dogs
and the Sacred



Vic Glover

About This Food Thing



Everybody eats somebody else. Some life form's gotta die. At least, here on this table, that seems to be one of the primary functions and motivations to sustain life. The most basic of physiological drives.

Gotta eat.

Just what we eat seems to depend heavily upon where we live. In Africa, you might be eating insects. In Asia, street vendors serve up fried grasshoppers on large, flat trays. In England, folks have gone vegetarian, en masse, overnight. In California, the diet is much different from, say Nebraska, or here on the rez.

Pretty much everyone in Nebraska is overweight. Up here on Pine Ridge, where diabetes hits half the population over forty-five, The People eat government commodities from black and white generic cans. Lots of sodium and sugar. And as a result, coupled with the lethargy of unemployment and the welfare-state mentality, a lot of The People are obese. Many of The People believe the government is still trying to exterminate them through the food.

So, the way we look, given a certain genetic predisposition, is a function of what we eat, how much we eat, and our attitude about it.

That aside, until we learn differently, our attitudes about food may be shaped by cultural or family values. Growing up near the banks of the Wabash River, I learned that when somebody showed up at dinnertime, they were an inconvenient pain in the ass.

That attitude about food got reshaped here, where a feast-or-famine mentality prevails. You share whatever you've got. If someone shows up right at

dinnertime, you set out another plate. Give 'em some coffee. "The Creator sent that person to your door, so you feed them," Loretta said. "The Creator's looking down, and he sees this house feeding The People, and that's where The People go, so he makes sure this house always has lots of food."

"These people over here," she said, motioning toward the floor with a shake of her hand, "they never put anything out for people, so sometimes their cupboards are empty."

Late one night in a house full of The People, she also said to her husband, "Honey, maybe we should go to bed. These people might want to go home."

The poorest people will make you eat when you stop by. And you can't just jump up . . . in and out. You have to drink a pot of coffee. You can't say, "Sorry, I don't care for any of the artery-blocking, triple-bypass tanega (cow intestines) soup," or whatever. You gotta eat.

My neighbor over there across the road, Sandy, feeds multitudes. Seems to delight in making muffins, cakes, pies, soups, and everything. Even delivers it. Seems to be especially challenged by groups over twenty. "Creative cooking with commodities," she calls it.

At ceremony feeds and feasts, The People bring watecha buckets—containers for leftovers, usually consisting of several large Tupperware containers and one-pound coffee cans.

All of the huge amounts of food are meant to be taken home, so that food and all those blessings get spread out far among the families.

The hosts, or sponsors, don't expect anything to be left over. The People take it all. Even if you don't attend the ceremony, you are often asked to come and eat, and so people do . . . all the time . . . just show up for the meal.

Once during a winter blizzard, Tom and I stopped at Sam and Angie Loud Hawk's on the way home. Sam and Angie, who were later both murdered by their troubled son following a dispute over car keys, had us sit down at their prepared dinner table—big plate of deer meat, mashed potatoes, gravy, and vegetables. The whole family was just ready to sit down, but Angie made the kids go into the TV room until Tom and I ate and finished drinking a pot of coffee with their dad. Then she made us eat seconds.

I looked around. Pictures of the kids and grandkids on the wall. A girl with a cap and gown and diploma.

Sam and Angie's cupboards were full.

After the Ceremony



You should have seen that old man holding that soup. After ceremony they asked him to pray, since he was the oldest there and a spiritual man. They fixed a "spirit plate," with a little pinch of everything they were having, and gave it to him.

It was a long time before he said anything at all, while all those assembled for the feast settled down to a few murmurs, then absolute silence. He was looking at the food, and there were tears in his eyes.

He began with an emotional appeal to the Creator and the Universe, coming to you as a poor, humble, common man, praying for his relatives. He thanked everybody. He prayed for everybody. He remembered everybody.

He thanked Grandmother Earth, and the Sky, and the Four Directions, and all the animals and plants and living things. He thanked the rain, and the Sun, and the wind. He thanked by name each of those plants and animals we were about to eat. He remembered everything. Everything.

The prayer grew long. People were looking up and glancing around. He prayed for the departed. He prayed for those in hospitals and jails. He prayed for the handicapped. He prayed for the homeless. He prayed for the hungry. He prayed for the leaders of the world . . .

Someone would say later, "AAAAIIIEEE . . . Long one. I was hungry, man. I was waiting for him to WRAP IT UP!"

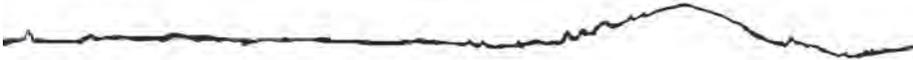
He thanked the spirits, and the people who prepared the food and all their helpers, and all those people who helped bring that food to our table . . . “Thank you for everything, Tunkasila . . . Wo-pila . . . Mitakuye Oyasin.”

Amen.

Everybody said, “Aho,” and started getting in the serving line. Elders first, then the kids. Someone took the spirit plate outside.

Next ceremony, they asked that same old man to pray.

Sun Dance Fever



Everybody chuckled sort of nervously when one of our overseeing elders, Dave American Horse, told the assembled men in the men dancers' sweat lodge the morning of the first day, "You don't ever quit Sun Dancing."

As the person who conducted, or "ran" the lodge, Dave sat in the eleven-o'clock position, relative to the door. He said he'd been at it for something like twenty-seven years, I think, and told us, "You just can't quit. It's a way of life."

And it's a way of life for thousands of Lakotas in this season of Sun Dancing, roughly June though August.

The season of Sun Dancing and vision questing. It's hot. Really hot. A suffocating Moab, dry-wind hot. We're glad, in these days of temperatures topping out at a blistering 115 degrees in the shade, that we finished our Dance in the canyon by mid-June solstice when our worst day was only 103.

It's hard to describe the Sun Dance to someone who has never attended one, and sometimes up here in Indian Country where the Dance is the center of Indian lives, prayers, and culture, we lose sight of the fact that what we practice is an extreme and marginal form of worship about which most of America hasn't the vaguest idea. "Sun Dance?" they sometimes ask. "Can you show me a few steps?"

One could talk about the color, and the pageantry, and the power of the songs and drum. One could describe the choreography and the magical, spiritual high of the Dance. You could talk about the sacred tree and the beauty of all the

prayer ties and flags that adorn it. One could relate the incredible, heart-wrenching, individual sacrifices being offered within the arbor. But still, without being there, it would be difficult to capture the power and the entirety of the event.

The four-day Sun Dance is the most sacred and central of the seven sacred rites of the Oglala Lakota.

Comparatively speaking, it is Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter all rolled into one. It is the time of year when all the relatives gather to celebrate life and offer up sacrifices of one form or another. People will fast and go without water for four days, pull skulls, hang from the tree, or simply dance under the blazing sun.

People in attendance can go to support the Dance in various forms. Work around camp, cut wood, work in the kitchen, help out, or show direct support to the dancers and the singers by being present under the arbor.

Of the estimated fifty-plus Sun Dances held annually across the reservation, people around here will generally ask, "Where?" "How many dancers?" or, "Who's running it?"

Some of the more renowned Dances attract hundreds of dancers from around the world, drawing yellow, black, and white people, as well as red.

"So and so's having a Dance over near Porcupine," they'll say. "Over a hundred dancers."

The Lakota claim ownership of the Sun Dance, although other tribes across the North American continent are said to have practiced it. The Lakota say it was theirs, and perhaps rightly so, for here, the language and ceremonies and customs remained intact when others were snuffed out and paved over by American culture.

Here, it was never lost. The Dance went underground with the traditional ways and the Native American Church from 1882 to 1934, when the non-Indian culture-at-large was at its most repressive, trying to stamp out the language, the religion, and the influence of the medicine men, and replace the buffalo with a gardening hoe.

Perhaps that's why some traditionally-minded people wish to restrict the religious ways of the people to Indians only. "Whites have taken everything," they'll say. "And now they want to take our religion."

Such views are understandable, given the nation's history. Those holding this perspective believe they are protecting The People and view themselves as guardians of the culture by keeping it pure. They claim the pipe was given to the red man, which no one seems to dispute. "We don't want to see it get watered down," said an Oglala friend.

Beyond that, others will openly invite anyone to participate and pray with us. "I see white brothers and sisters out there shedding their flesh and blood," said Milo Yellow Hair one day during a discussion on the topic of white participation. "Inside that arbor, the Creator doesn't recognize color."

That's comforting to many whites who take part in Indian ceremonies, and to those who conduct ceremonies inclusive of whites, but others see the sweat lodge and the Sun Dance as exclusively Indian and forbid white participation. Others even wish to prevent other tribes from performing the Dance, including Hopis and Navajos. "They never did have the Dance until the Lakota brought it to them," said one Indian writer in an opinion article.

Nevertheless, one will see Lakota songs and ceremonies practiced by Indians across the country. One can find Lakotas conducting ceremonies in nearly every major U.S. city, and in foreign countries, particularly European.

So, there's also controversy surrounding the Dance, despite its being sacred and holy. Just last week, they say a Dance over at Porcupine got busted by the BIA (federal Bureau of Indian Affairs) cops for whites dancing with eagle feathers, a no-no among the feds and many Indians.

And in our own Dance over in the canyon, off the reservation, there's about a fifty-fifty mix of Indians and whites. The people got along fine, and there was a positive atmosphere of spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood throughout the four days. Everyone abided in their higher self.

When we returned home to the reservation, exhausted and dehydrated from the four-day ordeal, we relaxed on the deck and entertained guests who had traveled across the country to attend or participate in the Dance. We were finished, for another year. At a thank-you sweat lodge shortly after our return, someone said, "We've only got 361 days till next Dance. Better start getting ready."

And floating up the river was the sound of a drum. It was 109 degrees. Our neighbors to the north, a few miles away, were on their fourth day, about to wrap it up.

Up in Porcupine, over in Allen, up at Wounded Knee, and over in the badlands at "The Fortress," they were about to begin.