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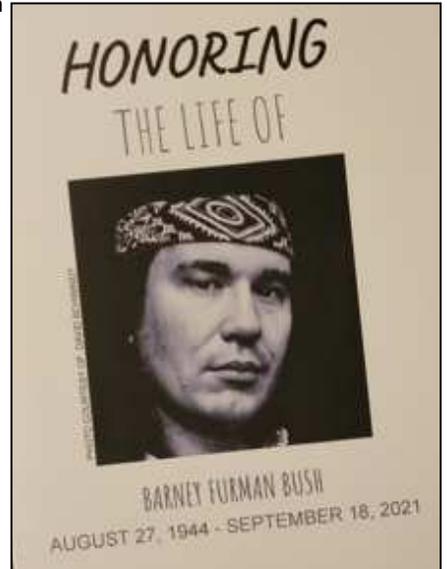
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# In Memoriam: Barney Bush

by Braze T. Smith

The evening I first met Barney Bush, I had received an invitation from a mutual friend to a small impromptu poetry reading at a place called the Vinyard Indian Settlement in southern Illinois. A dear lifelong friend of Barney's was at the settlement stopping over from his international travels, and I was a part of 12 or so people at this gathering, some of whom were regular fixtures at the settlement and others (like myself) attending for the first time. Barney exited the front office as a shadow backlit by bright porch lights. Upon being introduced to Barney towering over us, illuminated in shadow while standing on his front porch, I said, "I am glad to meet you, your reputation precedes you," to which he instantly retorted, "What have you heard?! Whatever it is, I didn't do it and it probably isn't true." This was Barney's fashion, as I came to learn: humor couched in sarcasm, a challenge to a newcomer to test their resolve. I replied that in all sincerity, I had heard of his work having lived in Union County for the last few years and followed his work with the anti-fracking movement. To which he replied in an even more challenging and harder tone, "Are you trying to suck up?" I was a bit aghast; I had never received such a challenge in a friendly exchange. I vowed my sincerity and thought that conversation had escalated rather quickly, but parted with him saying, "I already like you, but we will see." An enjoyable evening followed with poetry from Lance Henson and a relevant-to-the-times discussion ranging from colonialism to history, naturalism, and the state of the human condition.



This experience was my first impression of Barney — and the start of a friendship that would last until the end of his life, about 11 years later. But really, first impressions of people I have always found to be so telling of my experience to come in so many cases. The little nuances foretelling of character and the gait of a person's animus. In this case, I walked away seeing a man of great personal power; a man who was outspoken, challenging the authenticity of a person's positions; and a man of great stature, both physically and metaphorically. Barney had a way of seeing into each one of us, measuring our quality, and then taking the time to interact with each one of us on our own terms, giving encouragement and wisdom along the path. This was my first impression of Barney. If I had only known how deep that well had gone.

In the ensuing years, I moved from Union County to Pope County, about 13 miles from the settlement, after which I became a regular face at the settlement. My contribution there was primarily as a maintenance and repair person, and Barney was always in some need of my services. He always thanked me for my efforts, saying that he and technology "never got along" and that he could "shoe a horse or clean a rabbit" but could never understand how the technician did their work. I was always thanked with a rich, home-cooked meal and an evening's conversation. He had a unique way of cooking, combining his Appalachian upbringing with a southwestern flair; no matter what Barney prepared, you could always count on it being really good and always being offered seconds or thirds after you had had enough to the point of too much. And there was always a box of food to take home, oftentimes being of great benefit to me. I have often thought that food and the act of sharing food at a community table was an expression of both culture and love; Barney was never in short supply of either ingredient. This was an expression of his indigenous cultural tradition of hospitality. As a matter of fact, it was really quite impossible to stop by for a small piece of business or a quick hello without being offered a full gourmet meal, at the very least; if you didn't accept a drink of some sort, you risked giving offense. His conversation after dinner was always engaging, sharing history and lore not written in any book but passed to him by his elders and ancestors. He had a unique take on history and knew of the many truths obscured by the colonial empire in the history books.

In his career he was an artist and an educator, instructing in language and language arts, always focusing on Native youth and the Native Peoples of the Americas and beyond. He spoke many indigenous and European languages fluently and was well-versed in the Algonquin family of languages, which contained his ancestral language of Showdin Shawnee. He could competently get a "pass," as he put it, on languages like Hopi and Navajo (non-Algonquin languages). I can't tell you the countless times I was there, and he was on an hours-long call with a relative or distant relation, going on in a language that I had no understanding for meaning, but sounded like poetry or verse in the musical way in which it flowed. Barney loved language and what language is and what language means. He was a contemplative man who was always pondering the layers of meaning that words can convey, always tuning each word to provide many layers of depth to meaning. He was incredibly disciplined in his use of words, as a master blacksmith pounding and refining each composition with expert strikes imparting form. His compositions were mainly of his feeling for his homeland, and expressing the range of feelings that the colonial machine prompted in a world of culture wars, the genocide of his people being fresh and ongoing in his ancestral and cultural envelope. His devotion to the ancestors and those people who were here before was deep and unwavering. His fearlessness and outspokenness provoked by design every emotion. Over the years of knowing him, I had attended many of his readings and presentations. His presence always filled the room and everyone in attendance hung on his every word. I could only imagine what it was like to be in his classroom; without a shred of doubt, Barney was one of those teachers who touched those students in a way that changed their lives. Even at the time of his passing, he was in touch with prior students who sat in

his classroom 40 years past. His special magic was in reaching out to at-risk youth with thick veils of reluctance, breaking down those barriers with real dialogue, creating a connection, and tending to that connection as a gardener tends green space. It was that way with literally thousands of people, and this was Barney's true and special gift to the world: the fact that he actively cultivated each of those relationships, inspiring deep love and loyalty that will last beyond his lifetime.

Barney was not only a teacher and a poet, but he was also very much a warrior. As a warrior who stands between all harm and the people, with a selfless and spiritual dedication to their well-being and continuance, Barney took this calling in a very deep way. Worth more than his own well-being, Barney went on many metaphorical and literal warpaths of defense and retribution. He was a founding member of the Four Corners chapter of the American Indian Movement (AIM). Over the years he shared with me many deeds of having counted coup on his enemies. These went with him to his grave, and even after his passing will go with me to my grave. I will stand in the testament and paraphrase that extreme action is in response to extreme circumstances, and is justified in defiance ensuring the cultural continuation of his people, to which in one expression or another was the effort and meaning of his life. This was another important aspect of Barney's personality: He wasn't just words; he was also a man of action, risking life, limb, and liberty to fulfill his goals. In his estimation, there are times when creating offense to the colonial status quo was a morally correct action. A warrior neither seeks harm nor needlessly risks harm without cause. This is the regulator that so many activists today seem to forget, having a fatalistic dedication to a cause and too often finding those penalties without effective results. Barney was a hit-and-run kind of strategist, which is really the only valid tactic when opposing a superior-in-resources enemy. Barney, in other words, would fight but live today, to run away and fight another day. This is the way of the warrior he so nobly exemplified.

The standard memorial seems as though we always talk of those who have passed measuring their lives by their job, their children, their dedication to faith and community. In the case of Barney Bush, all of those things are a pale metric in the light of his life. Barney was a man of substance who, when he lost his cool, you really deserved it, usually. His intent was never to harm, but to help the subject of his temper become a better person. In his humility, these lessons were lost by many. He had a part of his personality that was as smooth as sand and went down like vinegar; this was the side of Barney that a lot of folks had issues with. He wasn't always agreeable and had a way of deflating the illusions we keep about ourselves. Those who could weather this storm learned and grew as a person, Barney being the humble universal messenger for these often uncomfortable truths. Some said he had no filter. I disagree — he had no clutch, he knew exactly what he was saying before he said it. He had an unfettered directness that challenged our preconceptions and invited us to reevaluate our truths, ending in a red carpet to change our mind — geared not, in particular, to agree with his way of thinking on any given subject, but an open invitation to learn HOW to think as opposed WHAT to think. The TRUTH was held high in his virtues, and I believe he especially esteemed those in whom he saw this same dedication.

There were a few notable times in my 11 years of friendship with Barney when I was in some sort of crisis. Barney was one of the very few people I knew I could trust to adequately listen to what I had to say and whom I could trust to make a judgment on what part I had to contribute to whatever crisis I had to face. He always had good words of assurance, which nearly always returned to two simple principles: "breathe" and "be in the moment" — reminders I will never forget and always treasure. Even with its trials and tribulations, facing the cultural trauma that every Native lives with on a daily and generational basis, Barney always had a smile and kind words for all those he met. His sense of humor sometimes took a dark turn, which was always a point of great amusement in our friendship.

The things I will miss most will be his surety, his infectious belly laugh, his irreverent humor, his sincere dedication to his living people and his culture, to the memory of the ancestors and to those who came before. He always said he loved his people and that any other person who wasn't from his tribe, who loved the earth, these people were also his allies. He, through our friendship, became fascinated by the concept of native northern European indigenous cultural reconstruction, which has distinct parallels to the struggle of his people and which accounted for

many hours of our conversations. The idea that what happened to his ancestors also happened to our European ancestors more than a thousand years before. I think this softened his view of Europeans in general and allowed him to see parallels between the struggle of our two peoples, and that even though our European ancestors became the strong arm of the empire after our various occupations and defeat, he came to more fully realize that there is an ancestral memory in all peoples where we were living in a healthy and indigenous way. Barney's wealth in this life transcended far beyond those things that glitter, as the true wealth of a genuine human being is in the lives that were touched and the people who will hold you in their heart for all of their time, for the rest of their lives. In this way, Barney will never be forgotten but his memory will live on in all of our hearts, and for the literally thousands of people who loved him all have become a family, as extended and as dysfunctional as we may be. I know he now sits at the tribal fire with all of his relations and the ancestors. We had spoken of his death many times over the twilight years of his life, and he repeatedly told me he was looking forward most to seeing his mother and being reunited with his dogs, his dogs for which he had infinite love and they in return had absolute loyalty.

Barney achieved the fulfillment of a life that so few achieve. He walked the path of a genuine human being. It was a life with dark corners overcome with patience, wisdom, and the love of life. He will be dearly missed, and the part of his culture he taught me that will live with me forever is the Shawnee word *ogona* (O-go-Na') which serves as both a greeting and a farewell, a signifier of both friendship and good blessings for those it was used with. Barney said that this word was never used with strangers and rarely outside the tribe, as its meaning was so special it was never used in a casual or an insincere way.

What can I do but continue to celebrate his life in my living memory, and wish my friend a good journey beyond?

I know now that you are walking along cool streams with good water and plenty of good green grass for your horse, a belly full of laughter, and a heart full of love for a life well-lived.

Ogona, my friend.

## BARNEY TAKES WING

The Crows Call Today  
A Resonating Lament  
A Warrior Flies Among Them

Soaring To New Heights Above The Clouds

Tear Drops Will Fall As Rain  
A Steady Downpour  
Until None Are Left  
To Moisten Our Faces

His Strength Must Be Taken In, Carried  
Forward, Proudly, Without Fear

His Honor Draped Across All Our Shoulders

His Words In Our Hearts Forever

*poem by Corina Lang*