

CHAPTER ONE

N. Scott Momaday, poet, novelist, painter,
and UNESCO Artist for Peace



N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa/Cherokee) likes to describe himself as a storyteller. As Charles L. Woodard has noted in *Ancestral Voice*, N. Scott Momaday's voice is "naturally, conversationally, the voice of his writings."¹ Conversations with him have a "literate resonance." Over the years our conversations have occurred in various places: Jemez, the family house, where his mother Natachee spent the last years of her life and where he felt in tune with the most minute nuances of the environment, but also Santa Fe, sometimes with his wife Barbara, and often in Paris, at UNESCO or in the Latin Quarter.

This interview is based upon many precious moments shared with him and his family. Over the years N. Scott Momaday has become, for many of his readers, collectors, and publishers, more than a famous writer. A "wordwalker," as he likes to say, a "word sender" as Black Elk called John Neihardt. But also a patriarch, a fatherly figure, an emissary of Native wisdom.²

In the spirit of hope

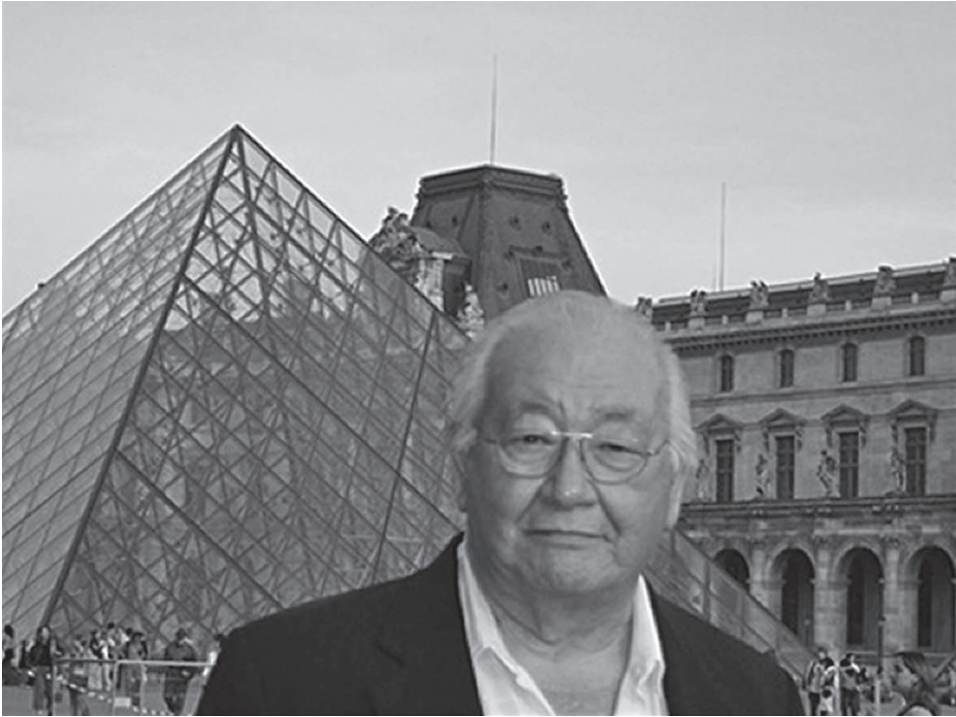
. . . We are present in our words

We are alive in our words

We are immortal in our words

—Oklahoma City National Memorial, April 19, 2005

Joëlle Rostkowski: You have expressed your creativity in many different fields, mostly literary but also artistic and diplomatic. You have received the Pulitzer Prize for your novel *House Made of Dawn*, at a very early stage in your career, attracting attention to the literary creativity of Native Americans, paving the way for several generations of Native American novelists and poets. For many years you have been



N. Scott Momaday in Paris (*Photo by Nicolas Rostkowski*)

a professor of English and American Literature. Simultaneously you have become a painter whose work has been exhibited both in the United States and abroad (recently in Paris). In 2004 you were named Artist for Peace by UNESCO. Looking back at all those distinctions, how do you define yourself?

N. Scott Momaday: First and foremost, as a writer. And as an American Indian. My Indian background has been influential in all my endeavors. My identity—for me being Indian has been good—has been the foundation of my work. Already at a very early age I enjoyed playing with words, with the oral and the written language. My identity as a painter came later. My father was an artist and art was present in my life throughout my childhood. But I was already forty years old—I was then visiting the Soviet Union—when, suddenly, everything my father had taught me came to the surface.

I always enjoyed teaching. Teaching and writing strengthen each other. Exchanges with the students have kept my mind alive, and I always found dialogue with them very rewarding. I am associated with a number of educational organizations and I am still an active member on several educational boards, in particular the board of the School of Advanced Research. I am also delighted to have been appointed Artist for Peace by UNESCO. I have worked with Indigenous peoples in Siberia, Alaska, as well as in my own Kiowa community. I worked with my wife Barbara, a lawyer, who was very



N. Scott Momaday in Paris (UNESCO). Nomination ceremony as Artist for Peace (May 2004) with Koïchiro Matsuura (Director General) and Louise V. Oliver, US Representative to UNESCO. (Courtesy of UNESCO/Michel Ravassard)

supportive of my activities on the international scene, on a UNESCO project dealing with the transmission of knowledge at Rainy Mountain, the recording of oral tradition for the young generation. Being involved with activities concerning Indigenous peoples over the world has allowed me to share my knowledge and to broaden my perspective.

JR: Looking back at what you have achieved, do you feel that you have gone beyond your childhood dreams?

NSM: I feel I have exceeded my dreams. I wanted—first and foremost—to be a writer. It’s a great satisfaction to have done it and to have achieved some recognition. I was the only child of educator parents. Looking back at my family, I remember my mother writing and my father painting. During my childhood I didn’t keep my dreams secret. I shared them with my mother, who was very close to me and encouraged me. Actually both my parents trusted me and gave me great confidence. This is why nobody could ever make me feel inferior.

Beyond family influence, some teachers have been influential in my life, but not until I was in college and probably more in graduate school. I remember Yvor Winters, poet, critic, and professor of English literature at Stanford University, where I was a graduate student. He was a man of letters, and a bright star of his time (he died in 1968). He held a famous and influential position at the university and became a teacher to many poets of several generations. I used to show him my poems and we talked about them. He gave me some good advice and, thanks to him, I learned a lot about traditional forms in English and about American literary history.

JR: Do you remember when and how you decided to write your first novel?

NSM: It was a happy and creative period in my life. I remember clearly that I wrote the first part of *House Made of Dawn* in Jemez, in our family home. I wrote it rather confidently, with serenity, although I knew I would conjure up rather dramatic events in that story. At that time I had been sharing my time between teaching at Stanford and writing poetry.

I felt the need to expand myself, to extend the scope of my literary work. I think that, as a teenager, I was very deeply moved by the destiny of some of the veterans I came across at Jemez Pueblo. I somehow felt bound to write about them. *House Made of Dawn* was based upon painful memories of the people I encountered, desperate young men who slowly destroyed themselves through violence or alcohol or simply committed suicide.

I think that *House Made of Dawn* can be considered as the portrait of a lost generation. It is centered upon Pueblo culture but deals with historical events that have affected various tribes. Abel, my hero, is a broken man when he returns from the war. He has lost his sense of tribal identity and has experienced violence, discrimination, and spiritual emptiness in mainstream society. The novel's title comes from an old Navajo healing song: "House made of dawn, house made of evening light, house made of dark cloud." The story is also about healing. It's based upon the healing power of the environment and upon recollections of the beautiful, striking, and occasionally violent rituals that impressed me so deeply as a young man because I felt the power in them. Ceremonies reiterate personal and collective history, allowing participants to circle back to their origins and to restore themselves.

JR: In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, a pilgrimage that takes you on the footsteps of your Kiowa ancestors, you explore Native history and embark on a spiritual journey. In *The Names* you conjure up the story of your family, Cherokee on your mother's side, Kiowa on your father's side. You evoke your happy childhood, deeply rooted in family traditions, but mostly spent on reservations away from Indians of your own tribes. You seem to have kept a delicate balance between remaining faithful to your tribal roots (you are still an active member of a Kiowa warrior society) and extending your concerns and your experience beyond the limits of a specific community and a specific country. You also seem to have mastered many different forms of written literature (fiction, poetry, theater), often referring to the power of words explicitly acknowledged in the oral tradition.

NSM: I believe in the power of words. For me words are intrinsically powerful. One should use words carefully. Traditional rituals remind us that words can be sent as visionary spirits, as medicine. Traditional storytellers and singers know that words can rid the body of sickness, capture the heart of a lover, subdue an enemy. And I consider myself a storyteller as well as a novelist or a poet because I know that when you tell a story, it comes alive. There are many ways to communicate with the audience: voice, rhythm, and silences in which words are anticipated or held on to.

As far as roots are concerned I always felt that I could remain faithful to my family history and the memory of older generations while broadening my knowledge

and my experience through traveling, exploring new grounds. I am also an explorer. I have traveled extensively to Russia, Central Asia, onto the foothills of the Himalayas. I always enjoyed discovering other worlds, other ways, and different qualities of light, new angles of vision.

JR: Where there some important factors, unexpected key elements that you still remember as having had a strong influence in your life?

NSM: The time I spent in Russia was very important. I remember that I found a lot of energy for writing and drawing while I was there. Generally speaking the time that I spent abroad—whether it be Spain, Italy, France, to mention only some of my favorite European countries—has been deeply memorable. As for Central Asia, it has been the most exotic place I have visited and images of that part of the world remain as something strong, unforgettable.

JR: How do you view your literary career and the development of Native American literature during the last decades?

NSM: We have come a long way. At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition is a deep belief in the efficacy of language. Now that we communicate through the written word and mostly in English, this belief remains as strong as ever. Language is sacred. The writer recreates the world in words. And now that we see an increasing number of Native writers achieving recognition, through prose or poetry, they express their identity and share their memory with non-Indian readers.

I strongly believe that one of the most important developments in contemporary American literary history has been the emergence of the Native voice. The Native American literary scene is burgeoning. In 1969 I was lucky enough to achieve success with *House Made of Dawn*, and it brought me—and other young writers who followed in my footsteps—a lot of encouragement. For me, at that time, the knowledge that I could be published was the key factor. The Pulitzer Prize came as an unexpected reward. From then on a growing body of work developed, prose and poetry being natural forms of expression complementing each other.

I was pleased to see other very good writers asserting themselves: James Welch's first novel, *Winter in the Blood*, has become a classic story of reservation life. He has written a couple of other novels that are notable. Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* is a very skillful treatment of the contemporary Pueblo world. Gerald Vizenor is a brilliant trickster figure, who, since the publication of *Darkness in Saint Louis: Bearheart*, his first novel, has been very prolific and appears as the supreme ironist among American Indian writers of the twentieth century. Louise Erdrich has written successful novels, which evoke life in the Northern Plains. I also admire the work of the poet Simon Ortiz, of Linda Hogan. I like the poetry of Luci Tapahonso and enjoy the provocative narratives of Sherman Alexie. Over the last twenty or thirty years, Native writers have broken down barriers, they have made their "entrée" into the larger world.

Young people have more opportunities to go to college and to graduate from good universities. The language barrier has been an obstacle for many years. Thirty

years ago students spoke broken English and now they can master communication, both in the literary field and on the political scene. Simultaneously there has been a movement toward safeguarding Native languages. Significant measures have been taken to teach languages still alive within the communities. Unfortunately some languages are lost beyond recovery but many are being revived. The Kiowa language, for example, is being taught at the University of Oklahoma.

JR: You seem to be quite optimistic about the future. Still you are very concerned with the new generation of Native Americans dropouts, estranged from their roots, cut off from the memory of older generations, too influenced by TV programs and dissatisfied with the materialism of mainstream America.

NSM: I am concerned about the transmission of knowledge. Very often, as I am aware through the observation of my own Kiowa community, there is poor communication between parents and children, because the parents are busy and tired, and also because television, in many homes, has replaced family communication. This is why I have created the Buffalo Trust, whose objective is to revive traditional culture, to reinforce the dialogue between generations; I want to foster the development of local archives where oral tradition could be preserved, native stories videotaped, and where young people could have access to computers, where they could listen to old tales told by elders and, in a very casual way, rediscover their roots.

American Indians are at a crossroads and I often feel discouraged when I see that we are still collectively and statistically well below standard in terms of health, income, and education. Alcohol and drugs destroy a lot of youngsters. The efforts to reinforce tribal values are varied and remarkable but they are inevitably diluted because of intermarriage. Even when two persons of different tribal backgrounds get married and have a family, it's difficult to transmit two traditions and to practice two Native languages while learning English at the same time.

Still the example of the Pequot Indians who managed successfully to restore their tribe, to reconstruct their genealogy and their history, is encouraging. They are prosperous because of the casino, but they have been able to build an interesting museum and they have established a system of scholarships for the young generation. Many people have been worrying about the casinos on Indian land. But it is also notable that in New Mexico, many pueblo tribes make use of them to organize art shows and support local artists.

JR: Your determination to reach out to the younger generation and to look beyond individual literary success seems to apply to your own family. You have four daughters, several grandchildren, and you are very close to them. Has your experience as a father been important for you?

NSM: I strongly believe it has been my greatest accomplishment. I have four beautiful and talented daughters and eight grandchildren. The relationship we have established over the years is very strong, although two of my daughters do not live in New Mexico. Family relationships are of utmost importance in my life. I consider them as my greatest success.

WORLD POETRY DAY

March 21st 2010

Theme:

“The Words of Nature, the Nature of Words”

Message sent by Scott Momaday, read at UNESCO (Paris) and at the
United Nations (New York)

As a UNESCO Artist for Peace, I am honored and delighted to participate in the celebration of World Poetry Day. I regard poetry as the highest expression of literature, and I am greatly pleased to know that it is so regarded around the world. Not only is a poem a statement concerning the human condition composed in verse, but at its best it is a profound statement, one that enables us to know who, and where, and what we are in relation to the storm of distraction that surrounds us. Poetry is ancient, perhaps as old as language itself, and it stands among the greatest achievements of the human mind and heart. It is our best legacy. It is our immortality.

I would like to share with you one of my recent poems:

THE SNOW MARE

In my dream, a blue mare loping,
Pewter on a porcelain field, away.
There are bursts of soft commotion
Where her hooves drive in the drifts,
And as dusk ebbs on the plane of night,
She shears the web of winter,
And on the far, blind side
She is no more. I behold nothing,
Wherein the mare dissolves in memory,
Beyond the burden of being.

—N. Scott Momaday