

## Chapter 1 - 0:55

### Introduction

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**Announcer:** N. Scott Momaday, internationally acclaimed poet, novelist, playwright, storyteller, artist and teacher was born in Lawton, Oklahoma. He grew up in various communities in the Southwest as his teacher parents moved among reservations schools. He is enrolled in the Kiowa Tribe in Oklahoma, but also has Cherokee heritage from his mother. He received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his novel *House Made of Dawn*, which led to a writing renaissance for Native American literature. He is also the author of *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Names: A Memoir* and *In The Bear's House* among many others and holds a Ph. D. from Stanford University. Dr. Momaday was awarded the 2007 National Medal of Arts by former President George W. Bush and is the Oklahoma Centennial Poet Laureate. We thank our underwriters and founding sponsors for making this oral history story available on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).

## Chapter 2 - 5:26

### Ancestry

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**John Erling:** My name is John Erling. Today's date is December 21st 2010. Scott, would you state your full name please?

**N. Scott Momaday:** Navarre Scott Momaday.

**JE:** Your date of birth?

**NSM:** February 27, 1934.

**JE:** And that makes your present age?

**NSM:** 75.

**JE:** Where are we recording this interview?

**NSM:** At my condominium in Santa Fe, New Mexico in the compound called Zocalo on the north side of the city.

**JE:** Where were you born?

**NSM:** I was born in Lawton, Oklahoma at the Kiowa Comanche Hospital I think.

**JE:** Your father was?

**NSM:** Alfred Morris Momaday “Mammedaty” (Kiowa pronunciation) he was full-blood Kiowa.

**JE:** And your mother?

**NSM:** Natachee Scott Momaday, she was basically English, Irish, French and some degree of Cherokee.

**JE:** And as we will find out later on, she really embraced Cherokee.

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** You refer to yourself and others as Indians?

**NSM:** Yes,

**JE:** So the issue of Native America, is that important to you or to other Indians?

**NSM:** Oh, I think it's important and I think that the two terms, American Indian and Native American, are both acceptable. I say American Indian because both my father did, and his father did, and so out of respect for them I use that term.

**JE:** Your ancestry has been traced back to about 1850 in Kentucky?

**NSM:** Yes, my mother was born in Kentucky and my grandfather, her father, was born there as well. I knew him and then I didn't know the parentage before that but a good part of it is in Kentucky.

**JE:** Then your grandfather Mammedaty married your grandmother and her name was?

**NSM:** Aho, that's the only Kiowa name as far as I know.

**JE:** Did she maintain that name?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** Were you able to know them at all?

**NSM:** My paternal grandfather died the year before I was born. But I knew my grandmother quite well. She lived up until the 1960s. I used to visit her a good deal.

**JE:** Wasn't there a story about your grandfather building a house for himself and his wife and children?

**NSM:** My father was born on the site. The house was under construction and he was born near the arbor of the house. That was in 1913. A frame building with screens all around and a dirt floor, it was a very cool and comfortable place in the summer.

**JE:** Your father's Indian name was?

**NSM:** Huan Toa War Lance?

**JE:** And then he was christened as?

**NSM:** Alfred Morris Momaday.

**JE:** What did your father do early on that you know about?

**NSM:** My grandfather was a farmer. He raised cotton. My father of course worked for him in the cotton fields. He grew up in that way and became interested in art very early on, so began that career when he was quite young. He took art very seriously and he was very good at it.

**JE:** He became a student at Bacone College?

**NSM:** He was a student at Bacone for a time, yes.

**JE:** So your father may have learned about painting there?

**NSM:** He may have learned something about art there. He roomed with an artist I know, a painter, so I think probably they were exchanging information and techniques and so on.

**JE:** Your mother was born where?

**NSM:** She was born in Fairview, Kentucky, in the western part of the state.

**JE:** How did they come here to Oklahoma?

**NSM:** Well, my mother went to Haskell College in Lawrence, Kansas. A close friend there was a Kiowa girl and invited my mother to Mountain View, Oklahoma where my father lived, introduced them and they fell in love and married.

**JE:** There was a point where you father called you by your last name Momaday as from Mammadaty?

**NSM:** Yes, Mammadaty. Yes, that was the family name and that was my grandfather's only name. It became the surname of the family and my father abbreviated it for some reason.

**JE:** So your parents were married in 1933 and you lived in the place you made famous, Mountain View.

**NSM:** They lived there for a time, but it was during the Depression and they were looking for work and so they found it in New Mexico and moved here when I was very young.

**JE:** Where is Mountain View?

**NSM:** It's in southwestern Oklahoma.

**JE:** You were born in the Kiowa Comanche Indian Hospital in Lawton and you were an only child?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** Some of your earliest, earliest memories?

**NSM:** I guess my earliest memories are of Mountain View and my grandmother and other members of the family. Then next is New Mexico. I remember certain things about Shiprock where we lived for a time and so on.

**JE:** Your first languages, what were they?

**NSM:** English has always been my first and only language. Kiowa I heard when I was very young, but I didn't learn it because I wasn't there long enough to really learn it. So English is the one language that I really have possession of, though I have smatterings of several other languages.

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**Chapter 3 - 5:31****Jemez, New Mexico**

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**John Erling:** In your early years you lived in Gallup, New Mexico?

**N. Scott Momaday:** That's where my parents went when they came to New Mexico, they went to Gallup. That's where they found work with the Indian Service.

**JE:** You did a lot of moving in that time period from 1936 to the early 1940s?

**NSM:** Yes, I moved around quite a bit, even as a child my parents and I were moving about the country.

**JE:** Was that job related?

**NSM:** Yes, with the Indian Service but with various jobs under that (inaudible).

**JE:** This became a school issue for you no doubt?

**NSM:** Yes, I went to several schools when I was very young. I lived in several places on the Navajo. The first place we lived was Shiprock, a Navajo reservation and also we lived at Chinle and Tuba City (AZ). I was in different schools of course along the way and it seems that I was always going to another school when I was growing up.

**JE:** How did that affect you?

**NSM:** I have no idea what effect that might have had. I do know that very frequently I was the only student in my class who spoke unbroken English, so I had an advantage of a kind and probably not much of a challenge. I was not challenged a great deal when I was in the early grades.

**JE:** Because the students were speaking mostly what?

**NSM:** Well, their first language was Native. Navajo at first and I lived at Jemez Pueblo and I lived at Jicarilla, so they were speaking Pueblo languages.

**JE:** So you were the star of the class?

**NSM:** I had little difficulty in those days.

**JE:** You were able to get along with all of these students? You were learning to be very social at an early age.

**NSM:** Yes, I got along quite well with my peers. I still have friends who I remember from those days.

**JE:** 1941 on December 7th, you would have been about 7 years old, do you have any recollection of that announcement? (Pearl Harbor Day)

**NSM:** I don't know whether I remember the day or whether I remember being told about it.

**JE:** Did the war affect your family? Do you remember the rationing?

**NSM:** Oh yes. In fact, my family took a break as it were at that time from the Indian Service

and they went to work, I like to say, for the war effort. My dad was an artist of course and he was an excellent draftsman. He got work with oil companies. I think he was with Conoco for some time. We moved to Hobbs, New Mexico in the southeastern part of the state. There was an Army Air Base there and my mother worked at the Air Base. We lived there for several years and then went to Jemez.

**JE:** And in this time period your father was a great storyteller?

**NSM:** Yes he knew a lot of oral traditions from the Kiowa. He was a good storyteller.

**JE:** As a young child, were you taken with that? Were you interested in it or did you just think these are old stories my father is telling me?

**NSM:** I was greatly interested. They were wonderful stories. I took them for granted of course, until much later in my life when I realized that they were very fragile and on the verge of extinction. But yes, I remember him telling me stories at bedtime and I would frequently ask him to tell a certain story. I would ask him to tell some stories again and again and again. So yes, that was a rich part of my boyhood. My mother also told stories. Not from the Indian tradition so much, but stories she just made up to tell. She was a good storyteller as well.

**JE:** And that led to you being a good storyteller?

**NSM:** Yes, I had that in my background fortunately. I am very fortunate.

**JE:** This was a Kiowa home you were growing up in, through all of this moving you had to maintain a certain identity or was that confusing to you?

**NSM:** You know, I didn't think so much about the tribal identity when I was moving around as a young child. I knew that I was Indian and that identity was the principal one. I didn't think of myself as a Kiowa in those days so much as an Indian.

**JE:** In 1946 you made a move to the Pueblos?

**NSM:** Yes, from Hobbs my mother had found work as a teacher at Jemez. She agreed to take the job if my father could join her. So she went first to Jemez and then my father and I, a little bit later, joined her there. My parents became the two teachers at the two-teacher day school at Jemez. He was the principal and my mother was the teacher. She taught the first three grades and he taught the second three grades.

**JE:** So would Jemez be the best home of your childhood?

**NSM:** It was certainly a place that was influential in my boyhood. I think I lived there during my most impressionable years and I loved the place. I still do. I think it was an ideal kind of childhood I had there.

**JE:** Because your experience there in Jemez is seen in your work?

**NSM:** Yes, I've written about Jemez and it remains a vital part of my experience, a place that I will always find friendly and comfortable and secure.

**JE:** Jemez in New Mexico, just exactly where is that?

**NSM:** Jemez Pueblo is north and west of Albuquerque about 65 miles.

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**Chapter 4 - 5:52****The Poet**

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**John Erling:** Although it seems you and your parents grew close to the people of the Pueblo, is it true that you still were perhaps outsiders because you really weren't New Mexico Indian?

**N. Scott Momaday:** I think anybody that goes to a Pueblo is going to be an outsider in the sense that there is so much secret activity in the tribe. So my parents were excluded from secret ceremonies of course, but they were welcomed as Indian. I think I had a much closer relationship with the Pueblo in a way because of my age. I was going to school with my peers and they were Pueblo and I was not. But it didn't matter much because we were all in the same boat, studying the same things and learning about each other.

**JE:** Would New Mexico Indians consider, let's say Indians from Oklahoma as not really Indian?

**NSM:** No, no, they considered them Indian and they still had very close relationships with Indians from outside.

**JE:** When do you remember consciously writing anything of substance?

**NSM:** I guess during my high school years. When I got into college, I was very much determined to be a poet and I was writing what I thought was poetry. I was entering contests and that sort of thing and that's really where I think the writing career began.

**JE:** So it wasn't until high school that you began writing?

**NSM:** Well, I was probably doing some things before that, but they didn't amount to much and I don't remember them particularly.

**JE:** So going into high school, would you have thought, you know, I am thinking I like writing so much that...

**NSM:** Well, it's because my mother was a writer and so I grew up in a creative household. My father was a painter and my mother was a writer. I am sure by osmosis I got a lot of things. But yes, I thought of being a writer when I was quite young. It seemed to be a very romantic idea and something I would like to do. I didn't do it until I was in college really and I started writing poetry.

**JE:** As we've said, many of the events in Jemez made their way into House Made of Dawn for example, like the Feast of San Diego?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** What is the Feast of San Diego?

**NSM:** Well, each of the Pueblos has a feast day and we have a Patron Saint and San Diego is the Patron Saint of Jemez, so his feast day is November 12th and that is the principal feast day at Jemez.

**JE:** And then the chicken pull, what was that?

**NSM:** That was a game and it had religious significance. It is a Spanish tradition and it happened at Jemez of course once or twice a year. It was very, very thrilling to watch. You had to be an excellent horseman to take part in the game. So I saw that a number of times while I was living there. It was very exciting to see. Then I think through the years it deteriorated and it became something for the children rather than for the men in their prime. I don't know how it is observed today if it is at all.

**JE:** Also something you drew on was the killing of the goose that also provides the subject for Angle of Geese?

**NSM:** That's a poem, yes. I based that on an incident in which I went with my father and one of his friends hunting and we found geese on the river in Jemez. One of the men, I still don't know which one, shot and killed a goose and I had to go and retrieve it from the river and carry it and it died in my arms. It made a great impression upon me and I wrote about it.

**JE:** Do you think to yourself how this was all meant to be? How you ended up in New Mexico and all this and then you used all of those experiences forever and ever? It's just amazing isn't it?

**NSM:** Yes, yes it is and I do feel that very keenly.

**JE:** You spent your final year of high school in a military school in Virginia, why a military school?

**NSM:** Well, I had gone to so many schools. I went to four different high schools as a matter of fact. I had gone to all of those schools on the reservations when I was little. So as I was approaching college age, I thought, I don't really have any preparation for college. So I talked to my parents about this and we decided I would spend my senior year in prep school. My mother had a rich tradition of southern life coming from Kentucky, so I had a romantic idea of Virginia and its very rich history. So we sent for catalogs and I chose Augusta Military Academy in Fort Defiance, Virginia and that's where I spent my senior year.

**JE:** So overall that was a good experience for you?

**NSM:** Yeah, it was a good experience.

**JE:** The rigidness of a military academy, was that something you had to deal with?

**NSM:** Yes and I didn't mind at the time. I thought I might, but I fell right into the groove and it turned out to be a fine year for me, an interesting year. A lot was compressed into that year.

**JE:** You were able to work on your writing skills?

**NSM:** No, not particularly my writing skills. I remember that I entered a speaking contest in Baltimore and represented the school there and I think took third place or something. But I wasn't writing at that time, I was too busy with the schoolwork, and so on.

**JE:** Was this a surprise to you that all of a sudden you realize, hey, I can get up in front and I can speak or was it difficult for you or you had to gain confidence to do that?

**NSM:** Yes, I had had some experience I think in one summer before my senior year I took part in a forensic, not a contest so much as a kind of seminar at the University of New Mexico. I got interested in speaking and I found that I could do it pretty well. I had a little experience before.

## Chapter 5 - 5:10

### Yvor Winters

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**John Erling:** So then you go on to the University of New Mexico?

**N. Scott Momaday:** Yes.

**JE:** You also did a stint at the University of Virginia where you met a gentleman by the name of William Faulkner?

**NSM:** Yes, I met William Faulkner.

**JE:** American novelist and short-story writer, to put him into perspective, he was one of the writers of southern literature along with Mark Twain, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O'Connor. He was of pretty good stature.

**NSM:** Yes. (Laughter) He was quite widely recognized at that time.

**JE:** He obviously had an influence on you. Let's talk about that.

**NSM:** Yeah, I think he must have. I know that one of my most successful poems was based upon his short story The Bear. I have read widely in Faulkner and I admire his writing so I am sure he was an influence but I can't say how and in what way exactly.

**JE:** Some osmosis going on here?

**NSM:** I think so, yes. But he came to speak at the University of Virginia while I was there. I think he had a daughter in school there and she prevailed upon him to visit and he did. John Dos Passos came at the same time so I was fortunate enough to meet both of them but that's about as far as they acquaintanceship went.

**JE:** Okay so he didn't know of your work?

**NSM:** No.

**JE:** But you were obviously taken with him?

**NSM:** Yeah, I admired him very much.

**JE:** One of the defining moments in your life would be when you won a scholarship in creative writing to attend Stanford.

**NSM:** Yes, that was a very important event in my life. I had graduated from the University of New Mexico and I had taken a job teaching on the Jicarilla-Apache Reservation in Dulce New Mexico. I spent a very happy year there, single and independent. During the course of that year I applied for a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford and I won it so I began my graduate career that way. I went to Stanford. I had the notion that I would go there for a year, the term of my fellowship and then come back to my job in Dulce. But as it is, I fell into the routine of graduate work at Stanford and I stayed there for my master's and doctorate.

**JE:** As I understand it, you were selected for that award by someone whom you came to admire?

**NSM:** Yes, Yvor Winters was the man in poetry. He was a poet and a critic and a wonderful man who chose me out of a group of applicants. I was the only poet that year at Stanford in the Stegner Fellowship. That's really I think where my career as a poet began.

**JE:** He had a very long interest in Indian poetry.

**NSM:** He had an interest in all kinds of poetry. He was wonderfully erudite and he knew a great deal about English traditional forms for example, so I learned a lot from him in the four years I was there.

**JE:** What kind of a person was he?

**NSM:** He was a sweet man, but he had a terrible reputation as a critic because he suffered no fools. He was very straightforward about his opinions of literature. So he came down hard on certain people like Emerson and Whitman. This of course put him in some area of (laughter) scrutiny. But he was right I think. He stuck by his guts. He had the strength of his convictions. He became an important man in my life.

**JE:** Was he quite critical at times of your work?

**NSM:** Well, he could be. He was at the beginning especially. Then as we got to know each other he became less critical and more supportive.

**JE:** He influenced your work, especially your early work, a period of time referred to as Post-Symbolist.

**NSM:** Well, he thought that there was a kind of writing that succeeded the Symbolist Movement. He was very much interested in that, more interested than I was, but that was one of the things that he was known for.

**JE:** Would the poem that would be Post Symbolist be Angle of Geese from your first published collection?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** "How shall we adorn  
Recognition with our speech?—  
Now the dead firstborn

Will lag in the wake of words.”

The poem describes two events.

**NSM:** Yes, exactly. Well, I had a close friend in high school. I spent my sophomore year at St. Mary's High School in Albuquerque. There, I became good friends with a boy who later committed suicide. But he had a child, an only child, who died in a terrible accident, so that informs the first part of that poem. And then the second, in obvious ways, related the story of the goose that I carried in my arms.

## Chapter 6 - 4:30

### The Journey of Tai-me

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**John Erling:** It occurs to me that I suppose all of us have very interesting things that happen in our life. It's not just Scott Momaday. However, it takes a certain mind to take those experiences and to write about them. Most of us, we just don't do it. Is that true because it sounds like you have this interesting life—well there are a lot of people that have interesting lives.

**N. Scott Momaday:** That's right, and I don't know why. You know, I think writers are compelled to write and they have to write out of their experience because it's all they have. So that makes for a crucial difference in people that are driven to write and people that aren't.

**JE:** All the material that is wasted then, huh?

**NSM:** Yeah, (Laughter) who knows what stories there may be out there. (Laughter)

**JE:** You received your doctorate from Stanford in 1963 and then joined the English Department at the University of California–Santa Barbara. There you designed a course in American Indian Studies that I would like for you to talk about.

**NSM:** Well, I had this great interest in Native American oral tradition. So yes, I developed a course in that subject. I taught it for a great many years and I took it with me to Berkeley, then again I went back to Stanford to be on the faculty after a time. Then to the University of Arizona where I ended my teaching career. I taught American Indian oral tradition in all of those schools almost every year that I was on duty, so I have a rich background in oral tradition.

**JE:** When you say you taught it, what were you teaching?

**NSM:** We were looking at examples of oral tradition stories and songs in American Indian tradition talking about how they were formed and composed. Emotionally how they compare to what we call poetry in English.

**JE:** This all had to be recalled because it wasn't written down.

**NSM:** That's right. Some of it of course had been transcribed. When I wrote *The Way To Rainy Mountain* for example, that became an introduction to oral tradition but we were using a book, so we had a first-hand experience of the oral and written tradition. That's really how I formulated my course, we would talk about the two traditions and how they related to each other and the advantages that each had over the other.

**JE:** While you were there you compiled a collection of traditional Kiowa stories.

**NSM:** Yes, I had collected a number of these things, mostly from my father. Two of my colleagues in Santa Barbara and I decided to make a book and my collection of Kiowa oral tales became the text of the book.

**JE:** And the name of that was?

**NSM:** *The Journey of Tai-me*.

**JE:** What is Tai-me?

**NSM:** Tai-me is the Sun Dance fetish and most powerful medicine in the Kiowa tribe. It was a sacred fetish, which was exposed during the Sun Dance and then only.

**JE:** Tai-me was kept in a rawhide bundle?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** And had not been displayed?

**NSM:** No, not in a number of years. 1887 was the last Kiowa Sun Dance. In 1889, there was one planned but it was prohibited. Yeah, so it must have been secreted all that time. I did see the bundle, but not the fetish within it.

**JE:** Fetish, what is that?

**NSM:** I think it's a doll. No one really knows. We think it's a wooden stick-like figure adorned with feathers and other objects, but no one can say. No one alive today has seen it.

**JE:** You viewed the bundle?

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** Describe that feeling for you knowing that you were viewing something that goes back so many years.

**NSM:** It was a deeply religious experience for me. I went with my father to the place where the bundle was kept. We were allowed to go into the room where it was hanging in a closet from a tree. We made an offering to it. That was the customary way you approached the bundle and it was very moving. My grandmother was with me, and my father, and she prayed in Kiowa to the bundle and it was just...I can't tell you how moving it was. It meant a great deal to me.

**JE:** How old were you?

**NSM:** I was well into my adulthood. I was a grown man.

**JE:** That was unusual to have someone view the bundle.

**NSM:** Particularly for me, because I had not grown up in the tribe with the traditions of the tribe, yes, that was very unusual.

## Chapter 7 - 4:40

### House Made of Dawn

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**John Erling:** One thing always leads to another because in writing the Journey of Tai-me, that then expanded into The Way To Rainy Mountain?

**N. Scott Momaday:** Exactly.

**JE:** And then on into House Made of Dawn and The Ancient Child.

**NSM:** It came just after House Made of Dawn.

**JE:** House Made of Dawn, was another moment in your life that was life changing I think, because you won a Pulitzer Prize for it in 1969. It was your first literary success. Let's talk about that for a moment. We can back up to even before. When you were in the midst of this work, did you realize, I have something going here?

**NSM:** Yes, in a sense I did. I knew I had a story and I had lived that time of my life at Jemez Pueblo, which was the setting of House Made of Dawn and I knew people who had returned from the Second World War and they were a particular generation of misfits. They had seen the world outside of the traditional one and it had a strong effect on them. They returned to the traditional world having been uprooted and they had a hard time getting back into it and that's basically the subject of House Made of Dawn.

**JE:** House Made of Dawn, how did that title come about?

**NSM:** It's the beginning line of a song in Navajo ceremony. The ceremony is called the Night Chant and the song begins "House made of dawn, house made of evening light," and so on.

**JE:** The book centers around Abel, an Indian veteran, right?

**NSM:** Right.

**JE:** And then the problems you've already referred to in WWII. His name, is there a biblical link here, because you don't give him a last name?

**NSM:** Only in a very superficial sense, I actually knew a man at Jemez named Abel and I was thinking of him when I wrote this character. But the biblical reference was also there, but not important I think.

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**Chapter 8 - 4:50****Writing Renaissance**

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**John Erling:** House Made of Dawn actually kicked off the American Indian literary renaissance.

That must make you feel good, because before that book, six Indian authors had published a total of nine novels. Then by the early 1990s, more than 30 Indians had published novels. So publishers said, Wow, here's where the money is, let's go after that.

**N. Scott Momaday:** (Laughter) Yes. I do feel good about being a part of that movement. I think there are two books that were very influential in bringing to light the possibility of an American Indian Literature. One was House Made of Dawn and the other was Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, which was a wonderful history of a 30-year period in American history. They were both successful and I think made a difference. They convinced the publishing world that here is something we overlooked and we can give this some emphasis.

**JE:** I am sure that as you look back on your life this has to be a period that you put your head down on the pillow at night and say, that was good.

**NSM:** (Laughter) Yes. That's right. You are right about that. I have been fortunate enough to have several such experiences of having done something that made a difference.

**JE:** House Made of Dawn, but then your next book, The Way To Rainy Mountain that had combined stories you had published before in House Made of Dawn?

**NSM:** Yes, The Way to Rainy Mountain is simply an elongation of The Journey of Tai-me. The Journey of Tai-me was done, as I mentioned, at the University of California-Santa Barbara and it was a research project. We made that book, the three of us, my two colleagues and I, one being an art professor who specialized in etchings. He made a series of etchings for The Journey of Tai-me and the other partner was a typographer who designed a typeface. We made the book. You know, we gathered the materials and printed the book on our own Washington Hand Press from the University art department. That became a collector's item. We printed 100 copies and divided them three ways and most of them have ended up in collections and libraries. That was the prototype of The Way to Rainy Mountain. I added commentaries to those stories and my father illustrated The Way to Rainy Mountain, so that's sort of an interesting diversion into bookmaking. That's really what The Journey of Tai-me was and is. Now there's a new edition of it just out through the University of New Mexico Press.

**JE:** Oh really? It had to be a thrill to have your father illustrate your books?

**NSM:** Very, very much a thrill. He was such a good artist. These are all pen and ink drawings in The Way to Rainy Mountain. They add a very important dimension to the book.

**JE:** It's interesting that you would make a habit of using the same material time and again.

I mean, other writers would repeat maybe, themes or symbols, but you would use the same events and stories over and over again. There might be some people that think, oh, I have already done that. I need fresh new material. They are going to think that I am just repeating. Did you think about what you were doing? You took the themes and made them deeper. But as a reader, as they went from one work to another it was also, oh, I've read about this before.

**NSM:** Yes, the simple answer to that is I have expressed the idea, my conviction, that there is only one story in the world. There are many stories in the one, but we all take part in that one story. We have our part to play, and so it seems perfectly natural to me that we retell stories and they work in different contexts and they shed light upon different situations, but they are all part of the same thing.

**JE:** So then as you would think and get deeper and deeper into them, you saw things that you never could when you first started?

**NSM:** Yes, I am sure that's true.

**JE:** The Way to Rainy Mountain is a series or shall we say fragments of poems, essays, myths and that type of thing.

**NSM:** These are all stories. Commentaries, of course, are a different dimension. But the structure of The Way to Rainy Mountain is something that I am proud of. Because I discovered that by going from myth, that is, the original oral tale, into history, which is a commentary, then into memoir, which is the personal reminiscence, those are the three voices that inform The Way to Rainy Mountain and they constitute a wheel that seems to me is organic and indispensable to storytelling. That rotation is a never-ending wheel and I think that's a wonderful thing to work with.

## Chapter 9 - 6:12

### Bear

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**John Erling:** The theme then is the development and then the decline of the Kiowa culture.

**N. Scott Momaday:** Yes.

**JE:** You also point out in the book that change didn't happen to the Kiowas, they changed themselves. Do you have a comment on that?

**NSM:** Well, yeah. I think change is in the order of things. It can be very dramatic and it can be a story itself. How do you change? I could talk for a long time about how the Kiowas came out of their, what I called somewhere the cellular memory of hopelessness. About the turn of the century, the Kiowas were defeated, depressed and hopeless. The death

rate had begun to exceed the birth rate. Things couldn't have been worse, but they changed. They brought about their own survival. That's a big story. It's not only the Kiowa story of course—it's the Indian story.

**JE:** And *The Way to Rainy Mountain* concludes...

**NSM:** "But indeed the Golden Age of the Kiowas had been short-lived. Ninety or 100 years say from about 1740, the culture would persist for a while in decline until about 1875 and then they would be gone and there would be very little material evidence that it had ever been."

**JE:** When you read your work, like that, you probably haven't read this for some time.

**NSM:** No, I haven't. You're right.

**JE:** And so, is it almost like you are reading somebody else's work?

**NSM:** Yeah.

**JE:** And you can't imagine where your mind was that brought you to those words?

**NSM:** You write a book and then you put it behind you and people ask you questions about it and you sometimes have a hard time remembering. It's funny how that happens and I have fun with it sometimes. People come up to me sometimes and say, "Dr. Momaday, here in *The Names* on p. 142, you wrote this and did you mean to be ironic or is this a symbol?" You know I think about for a little bit and then I say, "Of course. How can you doubt it?" (Laughter) And they know the passage better than I do.

**JE:** Well, in *The Names: An Autobiography*, explain the title.

**NSM:** Well, names and naming is so important in Indian tradition. Names are like flags and coats of arms, identities. People have to live up to their names and that can sometimes be a very strong challenge. To name something is to confer being on it. So, if you think about it in that sense you see how important the name giving ceremony is.

**JE:** A major theme of the book would be development of your Indian-ness or what it consists of and what ways you are part of the Indian heritage.

**NSM:** Yes, my Indian name is "Tsoai-talee" "rock tree boy". There is a story about Devil's Tower, Wyoming, which the Kiowas called "Tsoai" (meaning) rock tree. I was taken there when I was an infant. It's a very important, sacred place to the Kiowas. So when I returned to Oklahoma with my parents, a man in the tribe came and gave me the name "rock tree boy" to commemorate my having been taken to this place. The story about Tsoai involves a boy who turns into a bear. I have always identified with that boy and I have bear power, so it's very important to me.

**JE:** When you say you have bear power, what does that mean?

**NSM:** I identify with the bear and I have ties with the bear. The bear is somehow in my disposition and my makeup. It's the most important totem in my life. That's not unusual

for Indian people, but the story of the bear and the boy who turns into the bear is very meaningful to me.

**JE:** This is actually what you said when you were a child in grade school and a teacher asked you about being Indian.

**NSM:** “Oh I feel so dumb I can’t answer all these questions. I don’t know how to be a Kiowa Indian. My grandmother lives in a house. It’s like your house Miss Marshall, only it doesn’t have lights and light switches and the toilet is outside, but that isn’t what makes it Indian. It’s my grandma, the way she is and looks and her hair braids to the (inaudible). Well, I don’t know why it’s an Indian house because there are pictures of Indians on the walls. Photographs of people with long braids and particular dress I suppose.” That’s a stream of consciousness section in *The Names*.

**JE:** In *The Way to Rainy Mountain* I was struck where you wrote, “Before there were horses, the Kiowas had need of dogs. That was a long time ago when dogs could talk.” It jumped out at me that in your Inaugural Poem for Governor Henry, you used that phrase, “when dogs could talk”.

**NSM:** That’s a fairly common expression in Kiowa used to indicate something that is far back in time. This happened a long time ago when dogs could talk. I picked up on it because I like the notion of dogs talking and I like that expression.

**JE:** And you write “there were always dogs about my grandmother’s house.”

**NSM:** Yeah. Dogs are pre-mortal they go back as far as anyone knows. We do know that when the people were crossing the Bering Strait they had dogs, beasts of burden. So, the relationship between man and dog goes way back.

**JE:** Did you become a dog lover yourself because of that?

**NSM:** Yes, probably because of that. Yes.

**JE:** Because we have a little one that’s walking around sniffing at our feet right now. (Laughter)

**NSM:** Oh, yeah.

**JE:** A Chihuahua I guess it is.

**NSM:** It is. It’s Consuelo’s dog. He thinks he is a miniature Doberman.

**Chapter 10 - 6:17****Billy the Kidd**

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**John Erling:** This Rainy Mountain Cemetery from the book *The Way to Rainy Mountain...*

**N. Scott Momaday:**

“Rainy Mountain Cemetery”

Most is your name the name of this dark stone. Deranged in death, the mind to be  
inheres

Forever in the nominal audible he hears

Who listens here and now to hear your name.

The early sun, red as a hunter’s moon,

Runs in the plain. The mountain burns and shines;

And silence is the long approach of noon

Upon the shadow that your name defines -

And death this cold, black density of stone.

**JE:** Do you read that now that you haven’t read that in many, many years as wow, I must have been a pretty good writer? (Laughter) But it’s new to you now, isn’t it?

**NSM:** Yes, some of it certainly. There’s a whole revolution of things that go round and round and what swings out swings back and so on.

**JE:** In *Names*, you make issue of horsemanship. This comes from your childhood because you rode horses at Jemez.

**NSM:** Yes, at about the age of 12, when I moved to Jemez, my parents gave me a horse and I spent a large part of my life on the back of that horse for the next few years. I got to be a pretty good rider. It pleases me that I had that opportunity because of the horsemanship of my ancestors. They were tremendous horse people and I got to claim that part of my heritage in a real way and that meant a lot to me too.

**JE:** Here’s what you wrote about on the back of a horse...

**NSM:** “On the back of my horse I had a different view of the world, I could see more of it, how it reached away beyond all of the horizons I had ever seen and yet it was more concentrated in its appearance too, and more accessible to my mind, my imagination. My mind loomed upon the farthest edges of the earth. There I could feel the full force of the planet whirling into space.”

**JE:** What kind of horse were you riding?

**NSM:** My parents gave me a roan gelding, a strawberry roan as they are called. It was a quarter horse, probably less than 1,000 pounds, but a wonderful animal. It was gentle. It was very fast and competitive.

**JE:** So you were good in races?

**NSM:** Yeah, I was very good. To put it more accurately my horse was very good. I used to race a lot and I rarely lost.

**JE:** The horse's name?

**NSM:** Pecos.

**JE:** So this riding experience was an exercise of the mind to use your words. A phrase you use when writing about Billy The Kidd in *The Ancient Child*, why Billy The Kidd?

**NSM:** Well, Billy The Kidd is an icon and particularly well-known and well-regarded I think in New Mexico where he lived most of his life. When I was a kid in New Mexico, I knew about Billy The Kidd. People talked about him. I read the saga of Billy The Kidd when I was quite young, so he became an important imaginary character in my mind. I used to play games in which he and I would ride out, we rode the range together, so he has been important to me in my life and very controversial now.

**JE:** As a matter of fact, today that we are talking about Billy The Kidd, USA Today December 20th, 2010 edition, the headline is: "Billy The Kidd, writing history or rewriting it?" It says, "Governor Bill Richardson of New Mexico was trying to reach back more than 130 years to decide whether to pardon Billy The Kidd, whom historians believe killed as many as nine men." What's the issue here?

**NSM:** The issue is really whether he was pardoned or whether he was promised a pardon by Governor Lew Wallace who was the governor of the territory when Billy was around. There are a great many people who think that that promise should be honored. Of course, there are a great many people who think that Billy The Kidd was a cold-blooded killer who deserves nothing. The story may lie somewhere in between. I think Billy The Kidd was a lost soul in the sense that he was alone and led an interesting, exemplary life in some ways. He was very loyal. He liked people. He liked having fun. He was a kid, but he was deadly. It makes him very romantic, quite a figure.

**JE:** Billy The Kidd was an alias for William Bonney.

**NSM:** Which was an alias for Henry McCarty.

**JE:** The promise was that the governor would annul Bonney's indictment in the murder of Sheriff William Brady in return for testimony against three men in the slaying of an innocent one-armed lawyer.

**NSM:** The story becomes richer and richer as you get under the surface. Billy did shoot at Brady. There were several men who ambushed Brady and he fell. He probably was dead before he hit the ground. He had nine bullet holes in him. We don't now whether Billy really killed him. More likely several people killed him.

**JE:** He was the only one identified of at least six participants in the ambush.

**NSM:** Right.

**JE:** And so eventually the federal government tired of the slaying and a new Governor Wallace, who later wrote the book Ben Hur.

**NSM:** Yes. Having nothing to do with Billy The Kidd I trust. (Laughter)

**JE:** Right. So here we have Governor Richardson in modern day time, December 20th, 2010 asking the public to weigh in on this because there are those who say yes, Billy The Kidd should be pardoned, and then family members of the Sheriff are saying no, he should not be. So it's a live argument today.

**NSM:** Exactly.

**JE:** Where do you come down on this issue?

**NSM:** I think he should be pardoned. I think Billy The Kidd has been given a bum deal in some ways. He had his good features and of course he was a very dangerous and romantic man, so I like the idea of keeping the legend alive and pardoning him would be one way in which to do it.

**JE:** Maybe it will show up in a future writing, who knows?

**NSM:** Who knows.

## Chapter 11 - 4:13

### Painting

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**John Erling:** But after The Names, you didn't publish anything for about 12 years. In that period of time, painting then became important to you?

**N. Scott Momaday:** Yes, painting became important to me in the '70s. I was in Russia. I had watched my father paint without myself becoming terribly interested in becoming a painter. But when I was in Russia, all of this osmosis...all of the days I had watched my father became something that I began to develop. So that's the beginning of my painting career. I started drawing and then I went on to painting and printmaking.

**JE:** Wasn't that a thrill to start drawing and realize that, wow that's good stuff, because others had to reaffirm probably.

**NSM:** You know the challenge of creativity is very strong. It hit me there pretty hard and I started drawing and have progressed from that point.

**JE:** And then the fact that the Kiowas have a long tradition of painting...

**NSM:** Yes, that's true.

**JE:** Do you enjoy painting to this day?

**NSM:** Yes, I do. I'm sporadic about it. I'm more consistent with my writing but I do love to paint and draw and I love to make prints.

**JE:** You became aware of the correspondence between painting and writing?

**NSM:** Well, yes. The two things for me go together pretty well. I like to break away from writing because it takes such concentration. You really give yourself over to writing and you can't do much else when you are writing. With painting, it's not quite the same way. It's not as concentrated. I can listen to a ballgame or music or something while I am painting, but with writing, no. So it's a kind of relief to go from writing to painting.

**JE:** You are working on inspiration both in writing and in painting.

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** And you don't get up every morning and say, well I have to start writing today.

**NSM:** I like the idea of keeping a strong...or a very orderly kind of routine, but I don't have the kind of discipline who can work a 9 to 5 day. I have to be more sporadic about it.

**JE:** So one day you could work 8 or 9 hours at it and the next day maybe nothing.

**NSM:** That's true, quite true.

**JE:** Writer's block, has it hit you?

**NSM:** I don't believe in writer's block. Maybe I ought to. I know that some people really do, but I don't think that there is such a thing. I think that the mind works in such a way that it produces in a creative gear as it were, and then it needs some kind of change or relief and so you stop. You stop writing and you wait until the inspiration comes again and it always does. But to talk about that relief as writer's block, I don't quite see that.

**JE:** The brain just gets tired sometimes eh?

**NSM:** It gets tired and it gets bored. Doing the same thing all of the time is probably a way to run down. You need to change the pace.

**JE:** Talking about your painting now, one of your first exhibitions in 1979 at the University of North Dakota Art Gallery, I take special note of that because that's my hometown, Grand Forks, North Dakota, where the University of North Dakota is. You had a collection of paintings of Indian War Shields there.

**NSM:** That was my first exhibit, Shields. I still am fascinated with the idea of shields, what they are and what they mean.

**JE:** You planned a book of shields, did you do that book?

**NSM:** Well, it's a part of *In the Presence of the Sun*, I have a whole section on shields with illustrations. I've drawn shields.

**JE:** Then you have a series of paintings on Indian dolls?

**NSM:** Yes I did. I haven't kept that together, so I don't know what has become of it, but I got very much interested in dolls and I painted a series of Indian dolls.

**JE:** It's thought that some of your more impressive paintings are the watercolor series on Billy The Kidd.

**NSM:** Yes, (Laughter) I did that some years ago. It turned out well as far as I was concerned.

## Chapter 12 - 3:23

### God-Bear Dialogues

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**John Erling:** A bit about The Ancient Child. Here's where we have the bear come into play. The Ancient Child, he changes into a bear and chases his sisters up a tree. You have been as you say fascinated with the figure of the bear throughout your life.

**N. Scott Momaday:** I am the boy who turned into the bear, the incarnation of that.

**JE:** While we are talking about bears, In the Bear's House.

**NSM:** Well a part of the book is called The Bear God Dialogues, conversations between God and the original bear.

**JE:** And the original bear is named Urset.

**NSM:** Yes.

**JE:** And then God is named?

**NSM:** Yahweh.

**JE:** This section here is where Urset says, "I've been thinking that I would like to pray, but I don't know how." You and I can play the parts here.

**NSM:** Okay.

**JE:** So Urset says, "I have been thinking that I would like to pray, but I don't know how."

**NSM:** "Why that's nonsense, of course you know how to pray. You knew from the day you were born, I saw to that. It is a thing that I give to all of my creatures."

**JE:** "But I don't know what prayer is. How can I know how to pray? Tell me please. What is prayer?"

**NSM:** "It's talking to God, Urset. Simply that. And it's the silence from which your words proceed."

**JE:** "Am I praying now Great Mystery?"

**NSM:** "Even as we speak."

**JE:** "Do you pray may I ask?"

**NSM:** "Devoutly, unceasingly, it's what I do, it's what I am."

**JE:** "Would you be so kind as to make a prayer for me, just now, for me?"

**NSM:** "I pray that you are kept safe throughout this day, that you live as holy as you can, that you see things as you have not seen them before, that more of them are beautiful than

not, more of them delightful than not. I pray that you hold easily in your hands the balance of the earth and sky. That you laugh and cry know freedom and restraint, some joy, some sorrow, pleasure and pain, much of life and a little of death. I pray that you are grateful for the gift of your being and I pray that you celebrate your life in the proper way with grace and humility, wonder and contentment in the strong, deep current of your spirit's voice. I pray that you are happily in love in the dawn and that you are more deeply in love in the dusk. Amen."

**JE:** "Amen."

**NSM:** "Early this morning Urset, when you walked along Frijoles Creek, what was it I heard you say?"

**JE:** "I said the morning is crisp and bright. I expect something to define the air momentarily, perhaps the shrill of a rabbit or a wren. The water of Frijoles Creek runs southward through splendors of sunlight and patterns of shade. It runs without urgency as I walk. It keeps the faster pace and I proceed steadily like the Pilgrims of Chimayo and in one nature to the edge of the world I hear among the stony churns of the creek words that I heard from an old man when I was young.

**NSM:** "Muy bonita dia. It's a beautiful day."

**JE:** "Our laughter, his and mine rose upon the top of cliffs close-by. It is the first of all mornings and it is unspeakably old." And Yahweh said...

**NSM:** "Amen."

**JE:** "Amen."

## Chapter 13 - 5:42

### Epitaphs/Peyote

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**John Erling:** In the New Poems, you have a collection of epigrams.

**N. Scott Momaday:** Yes, there are epigrams and epitaphs. I am fond of writing those things.

They are sometimes funny and they're addictive. It's a bit like eating peanuts, you start writing epitaphs and you can't stop, so I do have a number of them among my poems.

**JE:** Our friend Robert Henry tells me that some of those would come to you, as you were swimming laps?

**NSM:** Yes, when I went to Tucson to begin my final teaching career at the University of Arizona, I was not used to the Tucson summers. When I went there, I wanted to find out how I could deal with the heat. And I decided that it was mandatory to have a swimming

pool. So I bought a house with a swimming pool and I began swimming laps. It's a very boring activity swimming laps, so I started composing epitaphs as I swam. So I have 2-lap epitaphs, 4-lap epitaphs and so on. Here's a two-lapper called The Death of Beauty: "She died the beauty of repute, her other virtues in dispute." And one on Chastity: "Here lies the lady sweet and chaste. Her lies the matter chaste makes waste."

**JE:** There are others, you call those two-lappers, are there four-lappers you can remember?

**NSM:** I had to give a speech to a group of ceramicists in Tempe, Arizona. So I went up there not knowing much about this organization, but they were very funny. They all wore little pottery nametags. There were more of them than I could have imagined and well organized, from all over the world. So when I got home I jumped in the pool and I started composing an epitaph that goes like this: "Here lies the potter Tim O'Day, who has himself become his clay. And lest his memory be forgot, recycle him into a pot." (Laughter)

**JE:** These just start flowing with you don't they? There's a rhythm to them and-

**NSM:** They are very well-crafted if I may say so myself. (Laughter)

**JE:** So you're a painter, a poet, a novelist, a professor and a cook, aren't you?

**NSM:** I have been in my day, yeah. I enjoy cooking and I like food, so I combine the two things.

**JE:** You enjoy being a member of the Kiowa-Gourd Dance Society?

**NSM:** Yes, that's very important to me. That's one of the chief societies in the tribe. I've been a member for quite a few years.

**JE:** That is a dance you did?

**NSM:** Yes, there is a gourd dance and this society does the dance in July every year.

**JE:** What is the meaning of that?

**NSM:** It's a soldier society and it commemorates the heyday of the tribe.

**JE:** I think this is interesting about Christianity and the American Indian Community, while Christianity meant nothing but good, do you think that as they came, maybe as missionaries, that they also didn't work to preserve the culture of the Indians, but there was a conversion process going on here if you converted to Christianity and maybe even to the white man's culture.

**NSM:** That is an old story, yes. I lived at Jemez when I was a boy 12 years old up until the time I was about 17. It was interesting to see how the Catholic Church existed there along with the tribal religion. The two have coexisted let's say for 400 years and they seem to do it successfully. I often wondered you know, in a crisis, which claims your greater loyalty? I don't know the answer to that. I know that the Indian religion is alive and well and very strong. Certainly the people at Jemez consider themselves Christians. They go to mass and they bury their dead in the Campo Santo. But they also have this older and other religion. How they keep the two things alive is perhaps a mystery.

**JE:** Well there was in the Indian religion, the use of peyote. There was a time where they

attempted to get it banned by federal law. As a matter of fact, in 1916, Representative Harry Gandy of South Dakota and Senator Thompson of Kansas introduced legislation to outlaw peyote. But it took a senator from Oklahoma, Senator Robert L. Owen to block and ultimately defeat that. That was a close call for the Indians, wasn't it?

**NSM:** Yes. Had it been outlawed I am not sure what difference it might have made, but I think it would have made a difference.

**JE:** Then they organized a Native American Church?

**NSM:** Yes. The original users of peyote were in the South, like the Kiowas and the Comanches in the Southern Plains because of the proximity of peyote in Mexico. But when the church was started it became widespread all over the nation, still the source of peyote remains in the South.

**JE:** What is peyote?

**NSM:** It's a hallucinogenic drug that grows in Mexico. You take it in various ways. You can smoke it, you can drink it as a tea and it produces visions. So for the Plains tribes, like the Kiowas and the Comanches, who were big on the vision quest, you know it seemed a natural way to go because of the hallucinatory effect.

**JE:** Have you smoked peyote?

**NSM:** I've tried it, yes, but I don't do it regularly, but I've had peyote.

**JE:** So they use it now as a sacrament of the church?

**NSM:** Yes, I guess you can call it that. I've never attended a Native American Church ceremony, but I have an idea of what it is based on an older ceremony.

**JE:** That's practiced even today then?

**NSM:** Oh, yes.

## Chapter 14 - 2:48

### Writing

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**John Erling:** How would you explain to someone who knows nothing about writing why it is so exciting and so important to you?

**N. Scott Momaday:** I think writers are driven to write. I think there is a compulsion that comes with the cells and the genes. If you have that compulsion, you can't resist it, you must write. So, I am such a person I believe and most of the writers I know are such people. You either have it or you don't, the urge and the ability. Those who have it have to be true to it.

**JE:** The road to success can take many turns. And there are certainly roadblocks and detours. I am sure you hit setbacks along the way. What did you learn from them? How did you deal with those setbacks?

**NSM:** I can't think of a setback. I think I have been fortunate to achieve a reputation as a writer. But that doesn't seem terribly important to me. I don't think I write for success, I write because I can. As William Gass once said when somebody asked him for whom he wrote...if I remember rightly, he said, "Well I don't write for myself, that would be self-serving. I don't write for an audience that would be pandering. I wrote for the thing that is trying to be born." And that's pretty much how I look at it. You know I have the creative ability to produce something and that's the main thing. If you do that, you have fulfilled your promise.

**JE:** You are sitting next to a computer here. How do you write today, on that computer?

**NSM:** Yes. I have an interesting history of writing. I started out longhand and then I went to a typewriter. When typewriters were ancient machines, I had a Smith Corona that is a museum relic. Then I went to these fancy typewriters like IBM, the ones that use the ball, I remember I was using that for a long time. Then I went to the computer. Basically, I write on a computer, but I always keep a pad and pencil nearby and I go back and forth.

**JE:** How do you deal with criticism? Certainly there have been those who are critics of your work?

**NSM:** Well, I don't deal with it. I have been offended by reviews that are critical, but not much and not for very long. I think that people are entitled to their opinion and they can say what they want. But I also think the writer has the right to be judged by his peers, those who know what he is up to and what he is about and can really make an accurate judgment. There are a lot of critics who don't fill that bill. But I've learned to ignore most critics. I don't read reviews much and I don't pay attention to them when I do.

## Chapter 15 - 3:53

### Dead Matter/Living Matter

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**John Erling:** Any issues? Is there some idea or problem that holds your attention here in 2010?

**N. Scott Momaday:** I have fears for the world. I think that global warming is real and dangerous. I think that we have the capacity to make war, devastating war and we have the means I suppose to annihilate ourselves. So those things are important. I am not a pessimist. I think generally in a positive way about things, but there's a lot to worry about in our current lives.

**JE:** Environmentalists and Indians, are they viewing the Earth in the same manner?

**NSM:** To some degree, yes. The American Indian has been on this continent for many thousands of years. In that tenure he has learned a lot about how to live on harmonious terms with the Earth, so he has a lot to teach others. Those among the other society who are concerned about the health of the planet and the preservation of wilderness and so on, there's a lot they have in common.

**JE:** I read where so-called Western man thinks of Earth as dead matter and Indians think of Earth as living matter.

**NSM:** I think that's true, yes. To generalize, the Indian has a sense that the Earth is living matter as a spirit and by and large, Western civilization doesn't feel that way. Again to generalize, they think of it as dead matter and something that can be harvested. They don't pay attention to the welfare of future generations.

**JE:** Georgia O'Keefe, artist who spent much of her time here in New Mexico was inspired by what she saw in New Mexico. Did you have any kind of friendship or did you meet her?

**NSM:** Yes, I knew Georgia O'Keefe in the early '70s. She lived at Albuquerque at the time and I would go up and visit with her, take her to lunch and chat with her about different things. She was a wonderful person and a great artist I think.

**JE:** She was complimentary of your painting I would imagine?

**NSM:** I don't know that she knew much about my painting, but she knew about my writing. Yes, she was complimentary.

**JE:** In this series, I have interviewed Wilma Mankiller from the Cherokees. Did you ever know her?

**NSM:** Oh yes, yes, she was a dear friend.

**JE:** How did that come about?

**NSM:** I don't remember how we met, but no doubt it was at some function. You know she was with the Ford Foundation, so she knew about my application for a grant and I got it. I think she must have had something to do with it. I saw her on numerous other occasions. There was a major celebration at Tahlequah of the Cherokee Tribe and I was the guest of honor there and she was responsible for that too I think.

**JE:** Because you have a little bit of Cherokee in you through your mother?

**NSM:** Yes, I do, you're right.

**JE:** You received the National Medal of Arts in 2007 from George W. Bush. You went to the White House, was that an impressionable experience for you, being with the President there?

**NSM:** Yes, and with the other recipients. I met some people that are truly achievers, so it was a great honor, yes. I was moved to be a part of that occasion.

**JE:** Even as we sit here, December 21st, 2010, you have new work that's about to be published?

**NSM:** That's right, I've got a book of poems that is in press. I have finished the proofreading and so I think in February or March perhaps that book will be out. It's called *Again the Far Morning*. It has a number of poems and prose passages that I have written over the years. Since I submitted that for publication I have been working on a new book and I think I have almost enough to submit.

**JE:** So, here at 75 your imagination is still cooking then?

**NSM:** Still cooking.

**JE:** You have 20 more years at least of this, don't you?

**NSM:** Yes. (Laughter)

## Chapter 16 - 4:06

### Advice to Writers

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**John Erling:** Let's go back to the young person now who will listen to this because of our website [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com) and today's technology. What do you have to say to young people who want to be a writer?

**N. Scott Momaday:** I say if you have the motivation, if you have the temperament, if you think that you must write, then do it with all of your strength. Read people's whose work you admire and try to understand why you admire it. Write. There's no substitute for writing consistently. You don't have to write deftness prose or poetry every day, but you must strive for that. You want to do the best you can. You have to find your voice and once you've found it, you must be true to it. It's not easy. Writing can be very frustrating. You'll find that out if you go along the path, but it is worth it. I once heard a writer being interviewed on the radio. The interviewer asked him that question, which all interviewers must ask, "Is it hard to write? It is difficult to write?" The writer paused for a moment and he said, "Oh no, it's very easy. All you do is put a piece of paper in a machine and then look at it until beads of blood appear on your forehead." (Laughter) In a sense that's true. I've had the experience of putting a piece of paper in the machine and nothing happens over four hours, but that time you are ready to expire. If on the other hand you write a sentence or a paragraph and understand that it's the best that was in you...there's no satisfaction quite like that. It's worth everything.

**JE:** And that four of five hours was a good investment.

**NSM:** Yeah, it had to be made.

**JE:** As Poet Laureate of our state, Oklahoma, in 2007 you traveled to many of our schools and probably talked about what you just said.

**NSM:** Yes, that was a great experience too.

**JE:** I want to thank you for what you have done here. I would like for you to finish by reading from the Inaugural Poem, called the Oklahoma Centennial Poem, which you wrote for Governor Brad Henry. You have about three or four verses here that I'd like for you to read as we end our good time that we have had with you today.

**NSM:** Sure. Good. "From the ice where raven flies, from the north where silence lies, there came the people with dogs, long ago when dogs could talk. There came the people with fire, long ago when fire could freeze. There came the people with words, long ago when words were omnipotent. There came the people with words, and of the words they made a story, long ago. According to the story, the people followed the sun. The people prayed to the sun. The people danced to the sun. The people made a pilgrimage along the path of the sun. The pilgrimage came to this. The sun dancing came to this. The destiny of the people came to this. Oklahoma. Oklahoma is the name of the sun's house. Oklahoma is the name of an ancient quest. Oklahoma is the name of a great destiny."

**JE:** There is more to that, but that is the segment that I've asked you to read for us as we finish your interview. As we hear your voice and the way you speak, you've lent your voice to The Last Stand at Little Big Horn, an episode of the American Experience and The Disney Channel. You've voiced many exhibits, The Museum of the American Indian at The Smithsonian Institute. You are a frequent contributor to National Public Radio. You know, what I am saying Scott. How does one man have all of this talent in one body? You are indeed a fortunate man.

**NSM:** I understand that I am fortunate. I don't know the answer to that question except you outlive everything around you and eventually you make it. (Laughter)

**JE:** Well, thank you for this time.

**NSM:** You are welcome and I thank you John. It's been a pleasure.

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**Chapter 17 - 0:28****Conclusion**

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**Announcer:** Now that you have heard N. Scott Momaday tell his story, we encourage you to consult our Further Reading Section of the site and our Bookstore for more information. Please note an addendum on Chapter 9, Billy The Kidd. New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson denied Billy The Kidd a pardon. Once again we thank our Founding Sponsors for sharing our vision of preserving Oklahoma's Legacy one voice at a time on [VoicesofOklahoma.com](http://VoicesofOklahoma.com).