SELU

Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom

Marilou Awiakta

Illustrations by Mary Adair

Fulcrum Publishing
Golden, Colorado
1993

Selu Is Always Singing

Every month
somewhere in the world
a crop of corn
comes ripe.
Every day
somewhere in the world
Selu sings
of survival.

Wilma Mankiller says,
"We must expand our concept
of home and family
to include our environment
and our people.
We must trust
our own thinking.
Trust where we're going.
And get the job done."
The Principal Chief,
Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma,
says this.

Somewhere in the world
Selu is always singing ...

INTRODUCTION

"Write a straightforward introduction," my editor says. "Tell your readers what the book is about, how it's organized and what they can gain from reading it."

I smile. "Up in Appalachia where I'm from, we never do that when a story's afoot. And this one about Selu is long and winding."

Being from a storytelling culture herself, she laughs. But she holds firm. "Most of your readers are rushing through the high-tech world. They're used to literal language. They want the facts—fast!

"Like a TV commercial?"

"Or better yet, like a fax."

"My mind to theirs, right? Concise, quick, personal. ... Fax is a good idea—akin to poetry, in fact. I'll do it."

your
gain
hen a
holds
world.
good

FAX

To: The Reader
Fax No.: Wherever you are

From: Awiakta
Fax No.: East Tennessee mountains

NOTE: If there is a question or problem concerning the information transmitted, please read *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom.*

REMARKS

Subject: Corn, Mother of Us All
Ginitsi Selu (Cherokee name)

Content: Her survival wisdoms (time tested)
and other seed-thoughts.

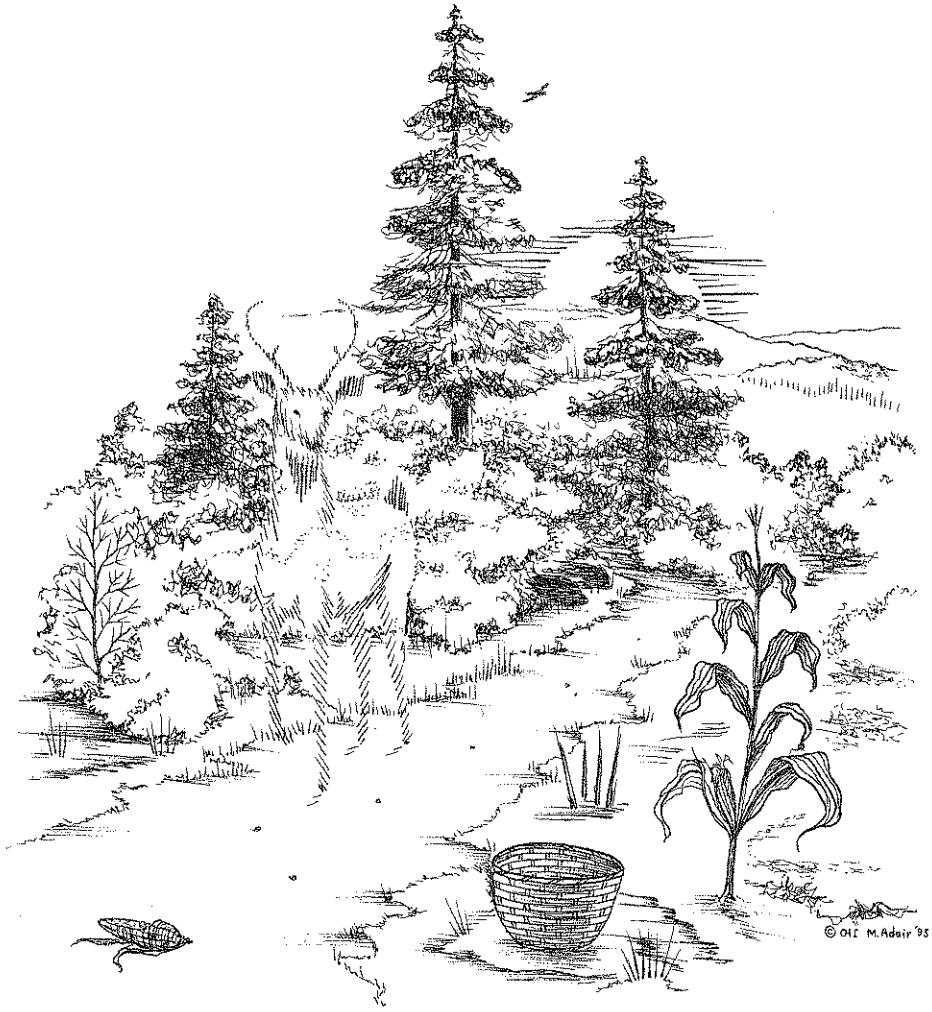
Organization: Doublewoven basket (Cherokee-style)
Essays/stories/poems interweave in a pattern. Outer side of basket is a path to Selu. Inner side is Selu herself. We walk the path together, gather thoughts, then contemplate Selu's wisdoms as presented by Native Americans who have preserved them. We consider applications of wisdoms to life, government and the general good.

Reason for Making Our Journey:
So we won't die.
Neither will Mother Earth.

10/7/93 4:00 pages: 1 usage time: 00'27

WEAVING I

A Path to Selu


©OLI M.Adair '95

SECTION I

TRAILHEAD
Where Path and Stories Begin

The spirit always finds a pathway. ... If you
find a deer trail and follow that trail,
it's going to lead you to medicines and
waterholes and a shelter.

—Wallace Black Elk
The Sacred Ways of a Lakota

To take shape ,
a journey must have
fixed bearings,
as a basket has ribs
and a book its themes.

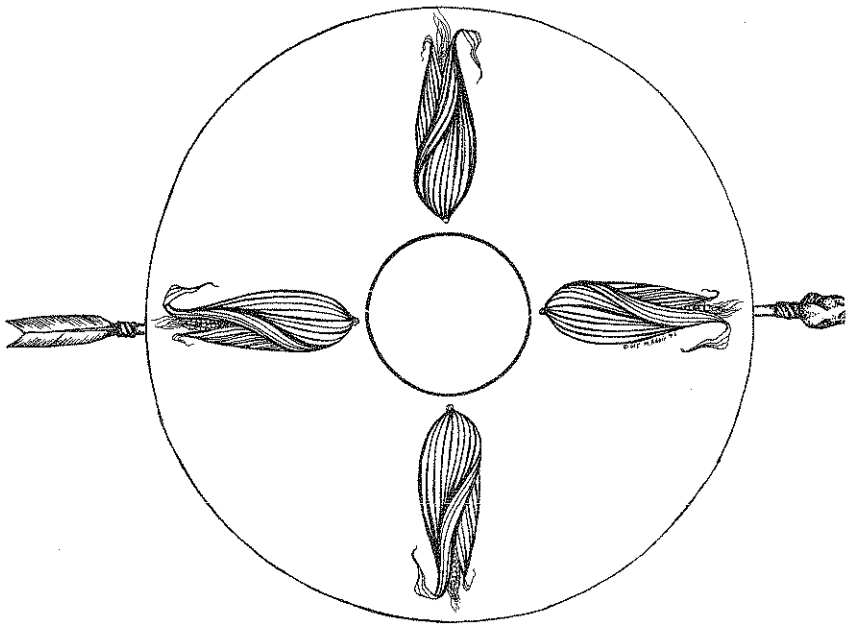
—Awiakta

Take your bearings at the trailhead
or you'll wind up lost.

—Appalachian Mountain Maxim

HEADING EAST BY WAY OF FOUR DIRECTIONS

Wounds ✣ Mother Earth ✣ Healing ✣ Selu



Dying Back

On the mountain
the standing people are dying back—
hemlock, spruce and pine
turn brown in the head.
The hardwood shrivels in new leaf.
Unnatural death
from acid greed
that takes the form of rain
and fog and cloud.

In the valley
the walking people are blank-eyed.
Elders mouth vacant thought.
Youth grow spindly, wan
from sap too drugged to rise.
Pushers drain it off—
sap is gold to them.
The walking people are dying back
as all species do
that kill their own seed.

When Earth Becomes an "It"

When the people call Earth "Mother,"
they take with love
and with love give back
so that all may live.

When the people call Earth "it,"
they use her
consume her strength.
Then the people die.

Already the sun is hot
out of season.
Our Mother's breast
is going dry.
She is taking all green
into her heart
and will not turn back
until we call her
by her name.

Out of Ashes Peace Will Rise

Our courage
is our memory.

Out of ashes
peace will rise,
if the people
are resolute.
If we are not
resolute,
we will vanish.
And out of ashes
peace will rise.

In the Four Directions ...
Out of ashes peace will rise.
Out of ashes peace will rise.
Out of ashes peace will rise.
Out of ashes peace will rise.

Our courage
is our memory.

I Offer You a Gift

Still of the night ...
    moon on the wane
    sun deep in sleep.
Cricket, bird and wind lay low
as rhythms of earth and sky
    suspend
    prepare to turn.

Awake in the dark
    you know
    I know
We may not make it.
Mother Earth may not make it.
    We teeter
on the turning point.

Against the downward pull,
against the falter
of your heart and mine,
I offer you a gift
a seed to greet the sunrise—
    Ginitsi Selu
Corn, Mother of Us All.
    Her story.

COMPASS FOR OUR JOURNEY

SELU, A Rare Portrait

"SELU ... *Say-loo ... Selu ... Say-loooo ...*"

Her name echoes through the centuries. But who is Selu? Knowing just her name is not enough.

She will speak for herself in the following traditional Cherokee story. Like Siquanid', who tells it, from my childhood I have found this story interesting.

For thousands of years, indigenous peoples of the Americas have formally recognized corn as a teacher of wisdom, the spirit inseparable from the grain. Through corn's natural ways of growing and being, the spirit sings of strength, respect, balance, harmony. Of adaptability, cooperation, unity in diversity. Songs of survival.

As a link to the spirit, many tribes long ago composed an Origin of Corn story, which they tell to this day. They designed the story to create a synapse in the mind, a lens in the eye, a drum in the ear, a rhythm in the heart. Listeners take the story in, think it through and, when the need arises, apply its wisdoms to life. Although the stories vary in content from tribe to tribe, they have a spiritual base in common, which began when the People first cultivated maize from a wild grass. They perceived corn as a gift from the All-Mystery, the Creator, the Provider. In telling Selu's story to a general audience recently, a Cherokee medicine man established its spiritual base immediately. "In the beginning, the Creator made our Mother Earth. Then came Selu, Grandmother Corn."

Used in this ritual sense, "Grandmother" connotes "Mother of Us All," a spirit being who is eternally wise. And if the medicine man had been speaking his native tongue instead of English, the indivisibility of grain and spirit would have been apparent, for both are spelled s-e-l-u. Saying one evokes the other. In the Smoky Mountains of my homeland, the Cherokee pronounce the word "say-loo." In Oklahoma they pronounce it another way but with the same meaning.

Especially during the past decade, I've been seeking deeper understanding of Selu's wisdoms and ways of applying them to contemporary life,

including my own. I invite you to share my path of thought to the place it has led me in the early 1990s—the cusp of the millennium, a time of upheaval and change for us all. Our compass for the journey is Selu's traditional story *and its cultural context*. To be accurate and useful, a Native American story, like a compass needle, must have its direction points.

The following version of Selu's story, thought to be very old, is rare in other ways. During the mid-twentieth century, Siquanid', an elder who lived in the lonely hills east of Tenkiller Lake in Oklahoma, told it to Jack and Anna Kilpatrick, distinguished Cherokee scholars, who spoke, read and wrote their native language. Included in their book *Friends of Thunder*, this story, unlike many published versions that appear to be retellings from the English, was translated directly from the verbal text. Told in the unaffected, friendly manner in which the older Cherokee talk, it provides a word-portrait of Selu. To make a story relevant to listeners, details are sometimes altered. For example, Siquanid' substitutes guns for bows and arrows. Because Native American cultures relate wisdom to age, it is significant that Selu is a "very old woman."

THE ORIGIN OF CORN

At one time there was a very old woman who had two grandsons. These two grandsons were always hunting. They hunted deer and wild turkeys. They always had plenty to eat.

Later on, after many hunting trips, when they got ready to go hunting early in the morning, they were cleaning their guns. When their grandmother noticed that they were ready to go, she thought to herself, "They are getting ready to go hunting," so she went to them where they were cleaning their guns, outside the fenced-in yard.

When the grandmother came to them, they were busily cleaning their guns. She said to them, "I see that you are getting ready to go hunting," and they replied, "Yes. We are going to hunt deer today."

"Well, when you come back, I'll have the most delicious of dinners ready. I'm going to cook all of the old meat, and I'm going to put into it something they call corn and we're going to drink the broth from it," she said to the young men.

"All right," said the young men.

When they got to the forest, they wondered about the word *corn* that she had used. They didn't know what that was, and they wondered where she got it.

"I wonder where corn comes from?" they asked each other. "When we get home, we'll find out," they said. They killed a deer, shouldered it and went home.

When they got home, they saw the large pot bubbling. They noticed that with the meat, corn in small ground-up pieces was boiling in there. (If anyone had ever seen it before, he would have known what it was; but then these boys had never seen it before.)

They asked their grandmother, "What is that that you have in the pot?"

"It is called grits."

They didn't ask her where she got it.

When they ate their dinner, the young men had the most delicious meal that they had ever had. After dinner they told their grandmother what a superb meal she had cooked. The grandmother was pleased.

"Well, tomorrow at noon we will have some more delicious food."

The next day they went hunting again, but they already had some dried turkeys. So the grandmother cooked these dried turkeys and cooked grits with them.

When they returned home that evening with their bag of turkeys, dinner was announced. With this meat were these grits, and the young men said, "This is the best meal that we have ever had." They thanked their grandmother again and told her that her food was delicious.

The grandmother was very pleased and said, "I'm so happy that you said what you did."

Next day they again went to the forest. While they were in the forest, one of them kept thinking about the corn. "This thing she calls corn ... she said that today about noon she is going to start cooking again," said one to the other; and the other said, "Yes, that's what she said."

"I'll go hide around somewhere and see where she gets it if you want me to," said one.

"All right," said the other. "You had better go before she begins cooking."

So one of them went. This thing called corn was troubling this young man; so he hid behind the smokehouse and watched for his grandmother.

Later on the grandmother came carrying a large pan and went into the smokehouse. The young man peeped through a small hole. When the grandmother got into the smokehouse, she put the pan under where she was standing. Then she struck both of her sides, and when she hit her sides grits fell from every part of her body. They fell until the pan became full. When she came out of the smokehouse, she carried this pan of grits, dumped them into the pot, and began cooking them.

That's what the young man learned, and he went back to his brother and told him about it. When he arrived where his brother was, his brother asked him what he had learned.

He said to his brother, "This delicious food of Grandmother's that we have been eating comes from her body. She shakes it off from all over her body. She puts a pan under her. She strikes her sides, and it falls off her body and falls into the pan until it is full, and that is what we have been eating," he told his brother.

His brother said, "We really eat an unsavory thing, don't we!" So they decided that they would not eat any more of it when they got home.

When they arrived home, their grandmother had dinner ready. Again she had the same kind of food. They both didn't eat much.

"What's wrong? You're not eating very much. Don't you like me?" said their grandmother.

The young men said, "No. We're just too tired from walking so much in our hunting."

"But I think that you don't like me," she said. "Or maybe you learned something somewhere, and that's the reason that you don't want to eat," they were told.

At that moment the grandmother became ill. She knew that they had found out [her secret]. The grandmother took to bed, and she began to talk to them about what they should do.

"Now that I'm in bed, I'm going to die." (She told them all about what was going to happen in the future.) "When you bury me, you must put a large fence around me and bury me just right out there. Something will grow from right in the middle of my grave. This thing will grow up to be tall. It will flower at the top, and in the lower part will come out beautiful tassels, and inside of them will be kernels. It will bear two or three ears of corn with corn silk on them.

"You must leave the ears alone and take care of the plant. Put a fence around it. They [the ears] will dry; they will be very white; the shuck will be brown and crisp; and the silk will be dark brown. That is when you gather it.

"This thing they call corn is I. This corn will have its origin in me.

"You must take the kernels off the cob and plant them. Store them away until spring. When spring comes, make spaced-out holes in the ground and put about two of the kernels in each hole. By doing this you will increase your supply—and it is surpassingly good food—and when it sprouts, it will go through the various stages of growth that you will have seen in this one of mine.

"Then it will bear corn that you can use, either to boil (boiled corn is very good to eat all summer long, while it is green) or in winter you can use it to make meal.

"I will be the Corn-Mother," said the old woman (a long time ago, they said).

That's the injunction that the young men were taught to carry out. They thought about this deeply as they were burying her after she died. After they buried her, they made the fence; and all that summer [the corn plant] grew and bore corn just as she told them it would do, and when the corn became dry, they gathered it and took the kernels off the cobs.

Then again next spring they planted it. Then the two young men said, "It would be better if we each had a wife."

One of the young men said, "Let's just one of us get a wife. You get a wife, and I'll be a bachelor and live with you."

The other said, "All right," and left to search for a wife.

The young man said to the one who left to get a wife, "Just walk some distance over there, blow into your hands, and there will be a girl run to you."

So he arrived away off into the forest near a house, I believe. In that house was an old couple with a large number of young women. These young women were all outside playing. Some of these young women were frolicking about, and others were laughing and making a lot of noise.

The young man came quite near, blew into his hands, and whistled. One of the young women who was playing stopped and said, "I'm going to stop playing because someone is whistling for me," and left the group.

She ran directly to the young man. The young man said to her, "We'll marry, if it's all right with you."

She said, "All right." So they went to his home.

The young man told her that in the spring they would plant corn, and each year they would plant more and more of it. So when spring came, they used their hoes to make holes so that they could plant corn. They hoed and hoed and had a very large field of corn, and that was the beginning of there being so much corn. And they remembered what the old woman had said to them, "I will be the Corn-Mother," she had said. "Don't ever forget where I am buried," she had told them when she talked to them.

From this beginning there became so much corn that everyone in the world had some. They say that corn had its beginning from a human being, that the plant called corn started from a woman, and that when this man took a wife, they had such a huge field that they had much corn and much food to eat.

That's what I know, and that's the end of it: that's all.[1]

Making the Compass-Story "User Friendly"

Undoubtedly with a twinkle in his eye, Siquanid' tells the story in perfect harmony with its design to entertain, instruct and inspire. Subtle as sunlight playing through forest leaves, humor backlights the depth of the Corn-Mother and her teachings—especially the law of respect—and makes them familial, accessible. Unavoidable. Run as fast as you can to any corner of the universe and the Law will be there waiting for you.

Even as a child I understood this lesson because the elders kept the story's direction points firmly in place. Throughout our mountain county, my grandfather was known to "have a way with corn," meaning he grew it exceptionally well. Early one morning I was helping him pick green corn for lunch. My grandmother had told us when to go, because she was doing the cooking. To keep its best flavor, she said, the corn had to be pulled before the sun warmed it—and cooked the same day. Making a good meal is hard work, so when she'd said "Go," we hopped to it. Since I was too short to reach the ears, I held the basket. A question had been on my mind and I broached it through the familiar story.

"Papa, was Grandmother Selu mad at the boys for spying on her?"

"She wasn't mad or mean-spirited. She just told them how it is. Way back in the beginning of time, the Creator put the Law in Mother Earth and all she gives us. If you take from her, you have to give back respect and thankfulness. If you don't do that, why then she quits giving. So when the boys were disrespectful, Selu had to leave. That's the Law."

Circling the conversation closer to the mark, I said, "But the boys didn't mean to hurt her. They just wanted to know ..."

From Papa's smile, I knew he had caught my drift. We'd just reached the bare spot in the corn row where several weeks earlier he'd caught me digging up germinating seeds to see if they were growing. He'd explained why the seed had to die, by showing me the tiny taproots broken off and the hair-fine ones that were also damaged. "You can't spy on a corn seed—or any other seed—when it's doing its private work," he'd said, calling up Selu's whole story with that one word "spy." "And Selu gave her grandsons another chance. She told them how to show their respect by taking care of her. Then she changed to her other self and came back as a corn plant to see if they would do it. When they did, there was plenty of corn for everybody. They were smart boys. They didn't have to be told but once." His glance said, "A word to the wise is sufficient."

And that was my unspoken question as Papa and I gathered the corn together. Had he noticed that I'd learned my lesson? As we moved on down the row, Papa said, "Yessir, this corn looks real good. There'll be plenty for everybody." Knowing he was answering the question I was thinking as well as the one I was asking made me feel good, like the rich earth on my bare feet and the scent of hot sun on the plump, milky-sweet ears I laid in the basket. In natural ways like this, the elders plant a story such as Selu's in young minds, where one day—maybe years later—it will bear fruit.

When I tell Selu's story to a general audience, some people are disturbed because Siquanid' says the grandsons used guns. How can the story be authentically old if modern weapons are in it?

This inquiry is usually earnest and respectfully asked. I've gradually realized that it signifies a basic cultural difference. American society (and Western society as a whole) is so oriented toward science, technology and legality that a discrepancy in a fact calls the validity of what is being said into question. If the facts are wrong, how can the statement be true? But the arts are not about facts. They are about creating images and mental connections.

I'm always glad when the subject of guns comes up because it underlines the necessity of keeping the story's cultural context—its direction points—in place. Revealing spiritual truth, not facts, is the purpose of Selu's story, which the storyteller keeps alive and current by adapting details such as guns to the times. Long ago the grandsons may have been sharpening arrowheads or restringing bows. Locations are varied also. Sometimes Selu goes into a smokehouse, other times into a hut. In one oftentold version of the story, Selu lives with her husband, Kanati the Lucky Hunter, and the boys are their sons—one by blood, one by adoption. What cannot be changed are the spiritual base and the spine of the story, which include Selu's identity, the grandsons' (or sons') disrespect, the consequences of it, and Selu's teaching of how they can restore harmony for their own good and the good of the people. Used as it was originally designed, the story is a timeless and reliable compass to right relationships with Mother Earth, with the human family and with oneself.

Take away its cultural context, cut out its spiritual heart—as many people do who are unaware or unmindful of Native storytelling tradition—and instead of a compass, you have an archaic legend of "How Corn Came to the World." A literary play-pretty in which an old woman, quaintly calling herself the Corn-Mother, teaches her grandsons a lesson in respect. A thoughtful person might draw some interpersonal wisdoms from the story, such as "respect your elders" or "share good things with others" or, perhaps, "you must take care of seeds to make them grow." Important lessons certainly, but it wouldn't take years to grasp them. The surface mind can do it. And a legend carries no spiritual imperative to change one's behavior. It simply suggests a lesson one might take to heart.

With extraordinary precision, the Cherokee medicine man sets the story to its fixed point, the constant to which all other points relate and from which all life and wisdom flow: "*In the beginning the Creator ...* " Through this source all that exists is connected in one family. Traditionally, the philosophic magnetic direction is East, the direction of triumph and the deep red light that immediately precedes the rising of the sun, which the Cherokee say is "impregnated with miraculous creative power." East is the heading for hope and determination and life.

The story of *Ginitsi Selu*, Corn, Mother of Us All, faces East. What does the story mean?

"Think it through," the elders advise, but they mean a special kind of thinking. And this is a crucial cultural difference. In Western culture, thought is a function of the mind; feeling a function of the heart. Rational thought is generally considered superior to feeling (emotion), which may deceive. The soul is a third entity.

In *Walk in Your Soul*, Jack and Anna Kilpatrick emphasize that the word they translate as "soul" could just as fittingly be rendered "mind" or "heart." All derive from the verb stem *da:n(v)dh* ("to think purposefully"). The soul is conceived to be in the heart. To "walk in your soul" is to think purposefully from the center of your whole being.[2] It is this kind of thinking, not intellect, that perceives wisdom. Through the centuries, sages of many cultures have taught a similar principle, and, in their search for balance and wisdom, people of many races have communed with nature. For indigenous people, this communion has also been a study, for nature contains the Original Instructions, the laws.

To think from the center of one's being has always been easier in the solitude of mountain, plain, desert or sea. To do it on the freeway is a different matter. Or in the subway, airport, train station or shopping mall. At the office telephones ring, computers click, the fax machine rolls relentlessly. These machines are in many of our homes also, along with the inexorable voice of television, which at regular news intervals spins us "around the world in thirty minutes." Although technology undeniably helps us, it also drives us, creates a feeling of being whirled faster and faster until we fear we'll be flung off into space.

How remote Selu seems in this world. How inaccessible her singing.

And yet, corn is almost everywhere in America—in our fields, in our food. Through its byproducts, it is even in many machines. And where corn is, the Corn-Mother is also. "This thing they call corn is I," she said. Through her story, which creates a spiritual dimension of mind, eye, ear and heart, we can perceive the Corn-Mother and her wisdoms. She teaches by precept and example. One wisdom immediately apparent is strength. *Ginitsi Selu* faces life as it is.

To seek her we start where we are—in the midst of the high-tech age. There are many paths to Selu. We pick up the trailhead of one in a machine that has become almost as familiar as a wristwatch: the fax.

Fax/Facts

You may want the facts fast: "Can you explain the wisdoms now? Will they work for me? And who is Selu *exactly*?"

Your questions point in the right direction. They also tell me that we must be very clear about this path. It's my "thinking through"—one person's view—of Selu's story along with some practical applications of her wisdoms as, with the help of Native American traditions, I understand them so far. Since they've worked for Native people for thousands of years, it's likely they still work. As to who Selu is *exactly* ... our compass-story gives specific direction. When the Corn-Mother's grandsons spied on her, when they disrespectfully looked the Mystery in the face, they broke their relationship with her. We won't delve into Selu's secret or into tribal ceremonies or counsel that elders have given me in confidence. Only what Selu and Native people offer to the public will be considered. We'll stay on the path. But we need to stop here at the trailhead and take our bearings, or we'll wind up lost.

"Can't you just fax the bearings?" Your joke makes us both laugh. Here we are, living in a society so speed-driven that most of us hardly have time to think where we're going, and I'm inviting you to veer off onto a long, quiet path that obviously spirals into another country. Not only that, I'm asking you first to stop, be still and take bearings, the general ones first: Where we are. Where we're going. How we get there. Encounters along the way.

Before the twinkle fades from your eyes, I offer you something so small that my thumb and forefinger almost cover it. It's a communication that's faster than fax, more personal than poetry and more ancient than words. When you hold out your hand, I lay a deep red corn seed in your palm.

Seven thousand years of concentrated energy emanate from the seed. Instantly you know that it's alive, coded with ways of growing. Without human cooperation, without planting and care, the seed will keep its life to itself. This is the essence of corn's nature, wherever it grows in the world, and most people are familiar with it.

But your understanding is deeper because Selu's story (or a similar one, if you are Native American) is already at work in your mind. I know this from the expression in your eyes. From the way you listen when I say, "I

offer you a gift." From the openness of the palm you extend to me. We'll be good traveling companions.

All these communications transpire in the split second when the red kernel and the tip of my finger touch your skin. Energy to energy, life to life create a spark. And we make a quantum leap out of linear time and into a warm, wet place in Mexico where indigenous people are having a similar experience as, for the first time, they touch a certain wild grass. They perceive a presence sacred in matter and spirit, who they say is a gift from the All-Mystery, the Creator, the Provider. Over time, they contemplate the grain and work in harmony with the spirit manifested in its natural ways. They also ponder the meaning of the gift for their own lives. Under their reverent, patient care, the wild seed gradually relinquishes its protective husk and entrusts its reproductive life to human hands, a process that the People interpret according to their sacred law and covenant with Mother Earth: Respectful care brings abundance. Lack of care brings nothing. If you take, you must give back—return the gift.

The People keep the covenant. From the seed they develop infinite varieties of what is now called the "supreme achievement in plant domestication of all time": *Indian maize*, corn. Its capacity to adapt to climate, soil and altitude is extraordinary. So is its balance. The plant is strong, in both stalk and curving leaf. From the union of its male and female parts—the tassel and the nubbin of silks—comes the nutritious ear. Every other part of the plant can be used for the People's needs as well: stalk, shucks, cob and roots. According to the region where they grow, the plants and their ears vary greatly in size and the kernels in color. But the essence of corn remains the same.

From the spirit—the nature of corn—the People learn survival wisdoms, common-sense ways of living in harmony with their environment and with each other. To reverence the spirit and convey the wisdoms, each tribe, according to its custom, creates ceremonies, rituals, songs, art and stories. Each story is itself a seed, where the spirit of corn, as well as her basic teachings, is concentrated. Planted in a child's mind, the story matures along with the child, nourishing her or him to grow in wisdom and in stature. Story and life interweave. Like the grain, the stories vary from tribe to tribe, but the spirit is the same.

The People also give corn's spirit proper names. Round names that encompass all expressions of their reverent relationship. Some of the names

are "Our Mother," "She Who Sustains," "Our Life." Although I know the spirit by the Cherokee name of Selu, I usually refer to her as the "Corn-Mother" or "Grandmother Corn." There are two reasons. One is that knowledge of her wisdoms is shared among indigenous peoples. It is not exclusive to one tribe or individual. The other reason is that especially in a property-oriented society like America, where great debates arise even over whose idea is whose, it is crucial to remember the magnetic direction of our compass-story, which clearly points to the source of corn and the wisdom contained therein. "In the beginning, the Creator made our Mother Earth. Then came Selu, Grandmother Corn. ..."

In the faraway times of which we are speaking, the People acknowledged this source. And they came to know corn in two or more of these senses: mother, enabler, transformer, healer.[3] From time immemorial, wherever the People have migrated, in the Four Directions, they have taken Grandmother Corn with them, passing the whole corn—the grain and its story, its sacred meaning—from generation to generation.

Today in America corn is a national food. People of all races eat it daily in some form—fresh kernel, meal, syrup or oil. At an early age, schoolchildren learn that corn was "a gift from the Indians" and that early settlers would have starved without it. But the recipients of the gift have always written the official history of America. In the minds of most of their descendants—and therefore, in the national mind—corn remains a grain only, an "it" appropriated for their use. What about the Indians themselves as people? And who do they say is the donor of the gift? What about Grandmother Corn and the law of giving back?

General respect for Native Americans as well as for their skill and thought that developed this plant and other "gifts" is just beginning. Does this shift in consciousness indicate a willingness to accept the traditional teaching—still very much alive among Native people—that corn and all that lives are imbued with spirit and that a reciprocal relationship is crucial to survival? Will the concept of dominance over nature, so entrenched in Western thought, also shift enough to make this change possible? Will the shift occur in time?

Perhaps. Science has proven that the earth is one great ecosystem. That everything on the earth and in the sky above is interconnected. Principally

through television, the National Storyteller, even very young children are aware of damage to the environment. When I speak with first graders, for example, about Mother Earth, the Web of Life and how we are all one family, they take this concept for what it is—the literal truth. They tell me about endangered species, oil spills, the destruction of the Amazon forest, air pollution. "There won't be anything left when we grow up," they say. And they want to do something about it.

As the decade of the 1990s begins, times are hard in America. People are thinking about survival. A Memphis cab driver put it fax-style: "The country's going broke and the planet's dying out from under us. Prices and taxes are going up. People are losing their jobs. The homeless are everywhere. Crime is so bad that you don't feel safe—even locked up in your own house. And it's gonna get worse because a few people are getting richer and the rest of us are getting poorer. We're getting to be like Europe when the Pilgrims came over. If America's not careful, we're gonna eat ourselves alive."

The last sentence strikes home. Image is the quickest and most resonant way in speech or print to convey a concept. Combined with facts, it conveys the whole idea. "We're gonna eat ourselves alive!" When they are deeply moved, many people reach for an image, usually without realizing they are speaking poetry in its broadest sense. (Test this by listening to your own words for a day. Poetry may be as familiar to you as fax is.)

It is true that America is a high-tech, speed-driven, "Gimme-the-fax/facts-and-get-on-with-it" society. Few can escape this dynamic. But it's also true that most of us, down deep, yearn for relationship, connection and meaning. Facts alone are not enough—for communication or for survival. *Balance is the key*. And used creatively, technology can help us achieve it. Fax, for example, is akin to poetry. It is concise, quick, and requires a recipient who takes time to understand the message.

Poetry resembles the corn seed in that its energy is concentrated and evokes a reality beyond the surface. Again, understanding takes time. The seed, however, is reality itself ... a living poem ... a message instantly conveyed. But what does it mean? The human mind has spent seven thousand years in contemplation and has not yet plumbed the mystery.

In each traditional Native story, the people who originated it concentrated their understanding of the mystery. The story is alive. It creates that

path in the human mind and heart that conveys wisdom from the whole corn—the grain and its spirit—and this constitutes an even more profound achievement than the domestication of the plant. And it is just as practical for survival. As the storyteller explains in Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony*, traditional stories "are all we have left to fight off illness and death. ... There is life here for the people. ... In the belly of this story the rituals and the ceremony are still growing." Like the corn seed, the story is reality itself. There is no way to fax it. And understanding takes time, as experience has gradually taught me.