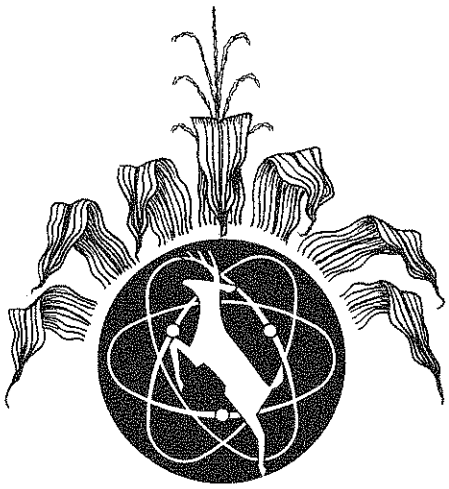
SELU AND KANATI

Genesis of Human Balance



In all versions of the compass-story, respect between genders is an implicit wisdom. Casting the relationship in familial terms—grandmother and grandsons or mother and sons—keeps the focus off "the battle of the sexes" and *on* the basic issue: Humanity has two genders. Sexual orientation is a separate issue. To preserve the balance, the genders must cooperate and get along, for themselves, for the sake of the community and the environment. Perhaps one reason versions of this story are still often told is that they so well express the Cherokee philosophy of harmony, which begins in the tangible world with Mother Earth. Selu and Kanati model this harmony between genders.

There is another story that is more specific to the relationship between man and woman. Selu's husband, Kanati the hunter, is the mythic father of humankind and the bringer of hunting and woodlore to the people. There are many stories in which he is central. To those who know them, the mere mention of Kanati's name calls up a powerful and important presence who

is associated with the deer. Kanati and Selu are sometimes called First Man and First Woman. There is a traditional story about their meeting.

My version of it derives from one told by the renowned storyteller Mary Chiltoskey, of the Eastern Band of Cherokees in North Carolina. (Her version appears on pages 296–98 and is called "The Legend of the First Woman.") Like the compass-story, this one about Selu's birth and marriage runs through my mind all the time—a clear melody that takes on different accompaniment, according to the times I'm living through, which are now very much out of balance. The present adversarial relationship between genders is indicative of our societal and ecologic dilemma.

Especially orally, storytellers may vary language and add amplifications adapted to a specific audience and specific circumstances, but they cannot change the story's basic elements. My poetic version is designed with the themes of this book in mind and for general audiences. There is also one phrase that carries special intensity in the South (and perhaps elsewhere): "Sick and tired." It means that you've been pushed to the limit of endurance. Something's got to give. And you'll consult the highest power to see that it does. I think the animals in the story had reached that point.

The Birth of Selu

Selu came into the world singing. From the top of a cornstalk she came—strong, ripe, tender. A grown woman.

Kanati, the First Man, heard the song. At first he didn't know where it was coming from, but he was glad to hear it. It sounded like company.

Kanati was lonely. Bored. As a hunter, mostly of deer, he'd always had plenty to do. That was the problem—he did too much. He killed too many of the animals, more than he needed. It seemed all he could think about was hunting—and sleeping in the sun.

The animals got sick and tired of his ways. *Sick and tired.* They met in council and decided to ask the Creator's help. "Kanati is killing too many of us," they said. "If he keeps on going like he is, there soon won't be any of us left." The Creator pondered the situation, then sought out Kanati, who was sleeping in the sun, and caused a corn plant to grow up beside him, near his heart.

The stalk was tall and straight, the leaves curved and gleaming green. From the top of the stalk rose a beautiful brown, black-haired woman, the First Woman. From the top of the cornstalk she came—strong, ripe, tender. And singing …

Kanati woke up, looked around. Then he saw Selu …

Kanati had been lonely for such a long time that he might have been rude and in a rush. But he remembered the original courtesy—the sweetness of his own heart—that the Creator had given him. Respectfully, he asked Selu to come down and held up his hand to help her.

She smiled, but signaled him to wait …

Politely, Kanati waited while she reached behind her for an ear of corn, for Selu knew you must always take your heritage with you, wherever you go.

Then she gave Kanati her hand and stepped down. They went home together.

Selu took the corn and went into the kitchen. Soon the kettle was bubbling and Kanati smelled the most delicious aroma he'd ever known—the sweet heart of the corn. Maybe it reminded him that the pollen from the tassel has a similar aroma, equally sweet.

Kanati felt in harmony with all that lives.

Strength and tenderness.
Tenderness and strength.
Balance
in the human dimension …

for the individual, regardless of gender. And for the community, where traditionally the Cherokee, like many other Native peoples, have applied the principle of gender balance to all levels of their society, from family to ceremonies to government. Woman and man represent cardinal balances in nature. Among these balances are:

- the balance of forces—continuance in the midst of change;
- the balance of food—vegetables and meat;
- the balance of relationships—taking and giving back with respect.

Regardless of the era in which this ancient story of Selu is told, one of the unchanging elements is that a basic imbalance, a lack of respect, between

genders disturbs the balance in the environment, just as imbalance in an individual invades the web of his or her life and affects all relationships. Or as a basket's rib that is out of kilter will throw the whole weaving awry.

One of the most sustaining elements common to all of the Selu stories is healing. Even a break in the cardinal balance may be restored to wholeness and harmony. Broken strands in the web of life may be repaired, as a basket out of kilter may be returned to balance if one unweaves it back to the original error, corrects it and reweaves from there. Hope strengthens the will to survive. Determination and work make survival possible.

As we set out to seek the Corn-Mother's wisdoms, our compass-story will keep us on the path. It will help us hear Selu singing of strength, respect, balance and harmony. Of adaptability, cooperation, unity in diversity. And through the teachings of Native speakers and tradition, we may realize, if we think purposefully, that *Ginitsi Selu* has been in our midst for longer than we ever supposed.

FOLLOWING THE DEER TRAIL

Although Selu's story was implanted in my childhood, I only recently became aware that it has grown and matured with me. Looking back I see that for more than a decade Selu has increasingly influenced my life and work, singing and weaving through them.

I should have realized all along what was happening. During the latter part of the 1970s, I'd had (and am still having) a similar experience with the spirit of another Cherokee traditional story. He is *Awi Usdi*, Little Deer—Selu's counterpart, a teacher of the sacred law of respect to hunters and other people as well. It's important for you to know him because in Native ceremony, art and thought, as in nature, the deer and the corn are usually companions. They signify balance and harmony in nature, as well as in human gender—male and female. Understanding Little Deer is important also because, by a long and circuitous route, he led me through the 1980s to Selu.

As Wallace Black Elk says, "The spirit always finds a pathway." Before retracing mine, you'll want a landmark map that gives an idea of what to expect along the way and at our destination. The path weaves and spirals through the years of the past decade in the same way a trail moves through the mountains (or reeds through the ribs of a basket). The terrain of my life itself shaped the path (and the form of this book). Whether for deer or human, a mountain trail rarely runs straight-on for long. You've probably already sensed its circular, weaving motion: over ... under ... over ... under, round and round, each time going a little higher.

Our heading is East—toward the Corn-Mother and her wisdoms—by way of Four Directions: Wounds, Mother Earth, Healing, Selu. In some places the going is steep and rough. In others, it smooths out and overlooks vistas of harmony and peace. We move in the natural continuum of past, present and future—time flowing back on itself, as Albert Einstein theorized and Native tradition has always held to be true. And as many other people have experienced, especially when moving through the vast expanses of nature. Our destination is a spiraling meditation on the wisdoms of *Ginitsi Selu*—Corn, Mother of Us All. In this era, when we "teeter on the turning point" and struggle for balance, what can we learn from her? Contemporary Native speakers give traditional paradigms for perceiving and applying her wisdoms, which are appropriate for the individual and society alike. Our journey must be made with respect. Part of that respect is patient and careful preparation; we should not and must not *plunge* into the presence of *Ginitsi Selu*. (Also, "plunging" in the mountains can get you killed—or snakebit.)

National balance begins with the individual. That's why this book of thoughts is our personal journey together as well as a contemplation of issues, events, places and people. An individual's life intertwines with the whole; it is a strand of the web. In each of us, as we weave our lives, there's a thread, a path, that goes back to the beginning. My balance as a person and as a poet and writer began in the summer of 1977, when I first encountered Little Deer as a living spirit—and in a most scientific place. He centered my life and later showed me the path to Selu, experiences as real as if I'd laid my hand on his antlers.

Along with the maxim of "Take your bearings at the trailhead," mountaineering wisdom says, "Make sure your guide is trustworthy." I'll leave myself to your judgment, but via his story, Little Deer (and Selu as

well) has been afoot in my native mountains as long as the Cherokee themselves—about twenty-five hundred years. His step is sure and time-tested. To this day, Little Deer is well known among the Cherokee in the Eastern Band of North Carolina and in the Nation of Oklahoma. To give you a feeling for the contemporary Cherokee's relationship to Little Deer, we listen to conversations between Anna G. Kilpatrick and two leaders, Asudi and Dôi in *Friends of Thunder*. Asudi shows how naturally one may come upon *Ahw'usti* (this is the precise Cherokee translation of his name; the more familiar spelling of "Awi Usdi" is phonetic). Dôi touches on Little Deer's tutelary role in the confirmation of Ahw'usti's being a *lar* (cherished guardian spirit) who lived in the house:

A.K.: What about Ahw'usti that they tell about?

Asudi: He's still living. Up there on the hill, straight through here, there is a salt spring. In Asuwosg' Precinct, a long time ago, I was walking by there, hunting horses. There was a little trail that went down the hill (nowadays there is a big highway on that hill up there), and farther up on the flat the road divided. Beyond that, in the valley near Ayohli Amayi, hunting horses early in the morning, I was walking there in the valley when I saw them walking, and I stopped in amazement.

They were [a foot] high and had horns. The first one was just this high, and he had horns. They were beautiful, and they were going in that direction. There were no houses there. It was in the forest, and I wondered where they were going. Several in number, they were all walking. He [Ahw'usti] was going first, just this high, and he had horns. His horns were just as my hands are shaped—five. *Five points*, they call them five points. That's the way it was. Just this high, and so beautiful! And there was a second one, third one, fourth one. The fifth one was a huge one, and he also had horns with five points.

They stopped awhile, and they watched me. I was so afraid of the large ones! They were turning back, looking at me. They were pawing with their feet, and I was truly afraid then! They were showing their anger then. First they would go right and then left and go: "Ti! Ti! Ti! Ti!" They kept looking at me and pawing, and I just stood still.

They started again and disappeared away off, and I wondered where they went. I heard my horses over there, and I went there as quickly as I could. I caught me a horse and took the others home.

There was a man named Tseg' Ahl'tadef', and when I arrived there, he asked me, "What was it that you learned today?"

"I saw an amazing thing down there," I told him.

"What was it?"

"A deer. He was just this high, and he had horns like this, and he was walking in front. ...

"It was Ahw'usti," he said.

A.K.: Did you ever hear of Ahw'usti?

Dôi: I have ...

A.K.: I wonder what he was like. ["The old people"] claim that they fed him.

Dôi: Yes, they did.

A.K.: Was he like a man, like a dog, or like a deer?

Dôi: He was a deer, very small deer.

A.K.: He lived in the house, didn't he?

Dôi: Yes, he was a small creature [indicating a foot and one-half or so].

A.K.: He was small, a small creature, wasn't he? They used to tell about [spirit animals] a long time ago, didn't they?

Dôi: Yes, they did ...

A.K.: And this Ahw'usti—did you say that they "used" him for [ritual] "medicine"?

Dôi: The old people who lived long ago used to "use" him. And they loved him.

A.K.: That's true.

Dôi: Yes ... They knew a lot, those people who lived long ago.

The essence of Little Deer's story is this: Long, long ago the hunters were killing too many animals (imbalance is apparently an immemorial problem for Homo sapiens). Meeting in council, the animals discussed ways of resolving their dilemma. Awi Usdi, the chief of the deer, came up with the solution.

"I see what we must do," he said. "We cannot stop the humans from hunting animals. That is the way it was meant to be. However, the humans are not doing things in the right way. If they do not respect us and hunt us only when there is real need, they may kill us all. I shall go now and tell the hunters what they must do. Whenever they wish to kill a deer, they must prepare in a ceremonial way. They must ask me for permission to kill one of us. Then, after they kill a deer, they must show respect to its spirit and ask for pardon. If the hunters do not do this, then I shall track them down. With my magic I will make their limbs crippled. Then they will no longer be able to walk or shoot a bow and arrow." Then Awi Usdi, Little Deer, did as he said.[5]

This is the essence of the story as it is told in the Eastern Band (as recorded in Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac's *Keepers of the Earth*) and in the Nation of Oklahoma. Its essence does not change. The sacred law is eternal and immutable. You must take and give back with respect.

In the pre-industrial society of the Cherokee, the primary physical consequences of breaking the law were clear: Overkilling the deer would cause depletion of the herds and hunger for the people. But how could such a story apply to life in the mid-1970s?

The synapse in my mind that could have made the connection was inactive. I'd grown up during the 1940s on a government reservation—for atoms, not Indians. It was the atomic frontier, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a city that was part of the secret Manhattan Project. Seventy-five thousand people from many regions of America had converged there for a purpose unknown to most: to split the atom. With the exception of native mountain people and a few others, Oak Ridge was a science-oriented, literal-minded society. Anyone who spoke in images usually was labeled "backward," or most damaging from a scientific point of view, "romantic."

In the Oak Ridge schools and later at the University of Tennessee, I received an excellent Western education, with a double major in English and French and a minor in European and American history. I had three dreams: to write, to go to France and to have a life-partner/family. Declining a scholarship to the Sorbonne, I chose to marry Paul, who promised he would support my two other dreams. Seven years later, when we were twenty-eight years old and had two toddler daughters, he joined the U.S. Air Force, and we moved to a reconnaissance base in Laon, France. Laon is situated on a northern route used by invading armies eighty-seven times since the days of Julius Caesar. Vestiges of Caesar's camp are still visible. For two and a half years I worked as a translator and social liasion officer for the Air Force during the NATO withdrawal.

I learned that Machiavelli is alive and well and living wherever power and politics mix, which is to say, *everywhere*. In general, the French viewed Americans as romantics who've not yet lost their illusions. They said, "When Americans come to Europe, they fall among the Old Foxes." Gallic shrugs evoked flurries of bloody chicken feathers.

"But your Benjamin Franklin was a different type entirely," they said,

as if he'd just left Paris. "He was shrewd. Very shrewd. A philosopher in a coonskin hat! *Formidable!*"

I felt at home. The French spoke in images. They were realists. And their concept of time was familiar, too: the past informing the present, influencing the future. They burnished the raw edges of life with their sense of ceremony, style, art and ironic humor. Appalachian mountain people think this way, the Cherokee, the Europeans (primarily Celts) and the Africans, who came much later. The ways of the fox are well known among us, as well as the ways of the formidable raccoon. Shrewd Franklin. The French took one look at his hat and saw a worthy adversary. In the same century, many French in the American South came to know the Cherokee leader and master diplomat, Attakullakulla. They embraced him as a chief among Old Foxes. His wily diplomacy, especially in negotiating treaties, is still legendary. From the Tellico area in East Tennessee, he was often at Chota, the Cherokee capital on the Little Tennessee River, which was formerly called the Cherokee River. Tellico is about fifty miles as the crow flies from my childhood home. East Tennessee was part of the Cherokee Nation for many centuries.

Living in France made me think deeply about who I was, about the value of my heritage, and about the necessity of working out harmonies with peoples from different cultures. By the time I returned to America, I knew that I was a Cherokee/Appalachian poet. I was determined to sing my song. ...

But it turned out to be excruciatingly difficult. Backlash to civil rights was closing doors to many ethnic groups. The women's movement had not yet changed the general concept of "woman's place." Technology was getting bigger, language more literal and technically oriented. Pollution of the environment was a growing concern. This outer turmoil exacerbated my inner one as I tried to make a harmony from my three heritages: Cherokee, Appalachian and scientific. The atom, after all, had been the companion of my childhood and youth. It was part of me, too. And high technology is a culture, with its own worldview, value system and language. I was immeshed in a tangled skein. Like a wire vine, it was shutting me up and shutting me down. Neither I nor my work had a center.

I had no idea that Little Deer's story was lying dormant in my mind, waiting for the right climatic conditions to germinate. One afternoon in 1977,

I went to the Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge. For a long time I stood in front of a giant model of an atom—an enormous, translucent blue ball with tiny lights whirling inside, representing the cloud of electrons. Stars whirling … whirling … whirling … drew me into an altered state of consciousness.

Suddenly I saw Little Deer leaping in the heart of the atom.

In that instant, as if irradiated, his story sprouted, shot up and bore fruit. The synapse in my mind electrified. With my whole being I made a quantum leap and connected Little Deer to the web of my life—at the center. The vision was clear.

But what did it mean? That night, I drew what I'd seen: a white stag leaping at the heart of three orbits. To signify the electrons, I put a tiny star in each orbit. And I wrote these lines:

From the heart of the mountain he comes
with his head held high in the wind.
Like the spirit of light he comes
the small white chief of the deer.

I understood that he embodied the sacred law of taking and giving back with respect, the Sacred Circle of Life. I was certain that Little Deer and his story would reveal ways to make harmony in my own life and in the world around me. But deepening my understanding took time and work.

Slowly I began to combine facts and images into poems and prose that fused past, present and future. With Little Deer as the unifying theme, I wrote about the Cherokee, the Celts, the atom; about the earth, about men, women and children; about the interconnection of all that lives and the need for reverence for all. The resulting book, *Abiding Appalachia: Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, was published in 1978 by St. Luke's Press (now by Iris Press). *Abiding* raised the question: Do humans have enough reverence for life to cope with the atom? Is the spirit of Awi Usdi still with us? Shortly after publication came the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island, and several years later, the one at Chernobyl.

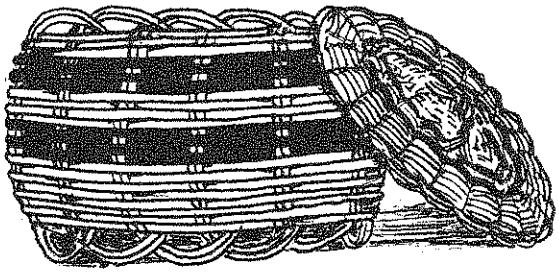
Abiding is the "eye" of my mature life and work. The vision of Little Deer changed all my relationships—with my husband, with my children, with other people and with the turmoils of contemporary life that confront us all. Primarily, it changed my relationship with myself. I understood who I was and the meaning of my middle name which I had never used in print: *Awiakta*, a derivation of the Cherokee word for "eye of the deer." To bring my inside in harmony with my outside and also to mark the mature season of my life, I would, in time—and after consulting with my family—choose to be known by this name. From this center, my work expanded.

I'm speaking literally when I say that Little Deer was my guide along the path to Selu during the next decade. But while he came like a lightning bolt, Selu arrived as what the Navajo call a "she-rain"—gentle, steady, long-term and deeply permeating. And the cycles of deer and corn overlapped, as seasons do. As I came to the end of my path and to Selu herself, I realized that Little Deer truly had led me to "medicines and waterholes and a shelter."

Selu holds my writings of a decade in balance, as the hometone of the dulcimer holds the notes of a melody. As we go along the path, you will hear her voice weave in and out, gradually growing stronger. With Selu's compass-story in mind, you will sense her presence more easily than I did the first time I traveled this way. Now, we must take some immovable points of reference and understand how they relate to the whole. Otherwise, we still may "wind up lost."

FIXED BEARINGS

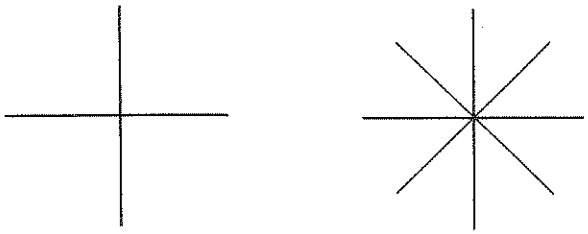
The Doublewoven Basket



How can a book have the form of a basket? The same way a bowl can be shaped like a shell, a net like a web. Or as a flute takes up the song of a bird. The forms transpose through a basic affinity.

A round, doublewoven basket in the Oklahoma Cherokee style is this book's natural form, arising from the thoughts themselves. As I worked with the poems, essays and stories, I saw they shared a common base—the sacred law of taking and giving back with respect, of maintaining balance. From there they wove around four themes, gradually assuming a double-sided pattern—one outer, one inner—distinct, yet interconnected in a whole. The outer side became my path to Selu, the inner one was the Corn-Mother herself. The basket image conveys the principle of composition quickly. Reading will be easy if you keep the weaving mode in mind: Over ... under ... over ... under. A round basket never runs "straight-on."

The clearest way to understand how this book, and our journey through it, is organized is to look at a *single* woven basket's basic design in its simplest form. First, two splits or reeds are centered, like the cardinal points of a compass. Then two more splits of equal size and length are added. These are the ribs of the basket:



Weaving begins at the center. The base is tightly woven to hold the ribs in balance. The weaving may become slightly more relaxed as the basket takes shape ... over ... under ... over ... under ... until it is finished. From the simplest basket to the most complex of the doublewoven ones, this principle is the same: *The ribs must be centered and held in balance.* In a sense, they are the fixed bearings that guide the rhythm of the weaving.

Similarly, in the very beginning of this book, the themes are presented as poems, one poem for each of the Four Directions: Wounds, Mother Earth, Healing, Selu. With these themes fixed in your mind, you will see how my thoughts weave over and under them, first tightly at the base (the trailhead), then slightly more relaxed as the work progresses up the outer side. This is "Weaving I: A Path to Selu."

In the *doublewoven* basket style, buckbrush vines, called "runners," are used instead of reeds. At a certain point, the ribs are turned down and weaving begins again, back toward the base.[6] In a similar manner, about halfway through the book, my thoughts and themes become "Weaving II: Selu, Spirit of Survival." The two sides are distinct, yet interconnected, and they reconverge in the basic law of respect and balance.

The ribs of Wounds, Mother Earth, Healing and Selu hold the book, as well as each section's individual pieces, in shape. The four parts, whose titles are derived from the poems of the Four Directions at the beginning, are "Killing Our Own Seed," "When the People Call Earth 'Mother,'" "Our Courage Is Our Memory," and "Selu, Spirit of Survival." Essays, poems and stories are grouped according to theme, as in most varieties of corn kernels of the same color range onto one ear—yellow, white, red, black (deepest indigo shading to blue). Of course, since corn has "jumping genes," a few red kernels may pop up on another ear, but that's considered lucky hereabouts.

SISTERS AND SEED-THOUGHTS

The numbers four and seven appear often in my writing, as well as in Mary Adair's art, because they are traditionally sacred to the Cherokee and are used in ceremony, ritual, art, social organization and government. Four has direct relation to the cardinal points of direction and balance. One significance of seven is as the mystical number of renewal and return. The terms "Seven Clans" and "Seven Clan Districts" are commonly employed in Cherokee magic as figures of speech to signify the whole of the Cherokee people. They are sometimes used as a symbol for the entire world,[7] which is important to know in contemplating Mary's final drawing, "The Future Unfolding."

You might wonder, "Did you and Mary get together and work this harmony of art and text out in an elaborate plan?"

We didn't. And that's the magical part of our collaboration. We've met physically for only a few minutes: once at the Cherokee National holiday in 1986 and again at the National Women's Symposium in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, in 1989. But at the Reunion of the Cherokee Councils at Red Clay in 1984, I'd bought a print of Mary's painting *Nanyehi (Nancy Ward) Ancient Mother of Many.* I was powerfully drawn to it, and the print has been on the shelf by my round writing table ever since—at eye level. Mary is a descendant of Nancy Ward.

When I began working on the Selu manuscript in the fall of 1990, I called Mary in Oklahoma and asked if she'd like to do some drawings for it. Our conversation was brief. I said, "I'm working on a book called *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom.* It's about Selu at work in the contemporary world." I read her the poem "I Offer You a Gift," as well as a one-page introduction to the Selu section.

"I think I could do that," she said. Soon I received the title picture and all of the others except those for "Trailhead" and "Killing Our Own Seed." Without reading a word of the text, she had drawn the perfect pictures! In fact, her pictures helped me organize the book. I said, "Mary, how can this be?"

She chuckled. "Well, I know the story."

The power of culture, of roots, is a mysterious phenomenon. Mary's ancestors also lived in the southern Appalachians. Our families' paths may have crossed then also. Mary's strong, beautiful work is a great gift. It keeps constantly before me not only the value of the Cherokee heritage, but the value of others' heritages as well. All people in America—and especially the children—should be able to sing their songs, be proud of their roots and be received in a society that values their heritages. Red, black, yellow, white—in a circle, as Grandmother Corn exemplifies in her calico variety, which is commonly called Indian corn. America seems to be moving slowly in the direction of a truer democracy. I believe in that movement with my whole heart. And that is why in the fax at the beginning I called the path to Selu "our journey." Inasfar as technology (print and paper) can make interaction possible, I want this to be a book in which you and I are companions, especially as we gather what I call seed-thoughts about Selu's survival wisdoms.

The concept of seed-thoughts comes from one of my mother Wilma's maxims for life: "The seeds of one decade are the harvest of the next." This seems to hold true for most things, such as health, education, work, history, art, politics, issues, love or hate, relationships, marriage, family and most literally with children, who are "planted" in one decade and mature in the next. Mother says, "The reason the maxim holds true is that cycles are Mother Nature's way, and she *will* take her course, so you're well advised to work with her. 'The seeds of one decade are the harvest of the next' is an old saying and that's why it's old—the principle never changes. Even high-tech can't change Mother Nature."

This is Selu talking, the Eternal Wise Mother, Wisdom. And Wisdom speaks in all cultures. Whatever your ethnic roots, there is probably someone in your family or among your writers and poets who has passed along a similar maxim, a seed-thought for survival, which will bear fruit in its time, an investment for the future. (The term "seed money," so often used in America today, derives from this natural principle of deferred returns.)

In 1990, as I stood in a great singing cornfield and looked down my path winding through the past decade, I saw that the maxim holds true, for both my life and my work. It also holds true for issues. Not only are racism, sexism and disdain for Mother Earth coming to harvest in the 1990s, they also seem to be reseeding themselves. Thoughts and energy to counter them

are also coming to harvest and, hopefully, will reseed in an even stronger strain, so that the twenty-first century will begin a new era of peace and justice. I dream this not because I am a romantic, but because I come from survivor peoples who revere the sacred law.

Although this book contains my seed-thoughts about survival and the Corn-Mother, as you gather them up, please add your own. Contemplate the value of your heritage, remember the stories that are meaningful to you, underline, write responses in the margin, tuck between the pages clippings and notes of other survival wisdoms you've found. Make this *our* book.

By the trailhead, Mary Adair has set a Cherokee gather-basket, a singlewoven basket of split-oak, sturdy enough to hold seven ears of corn—and more! At the very end of the book, she has placed a smaller, doublewoven basket of the kind the Cherokee use to hold seeds. It is made of buckbrush vines, sturdy in sinew and beauty. It images the real basket that has sat on my desk during the writing of this book. I've studied its construction and held it often, drawing strength from it. Because of the spirit and love that must go into the weaving, a basket made by hand is, like the corn seed, reality itself ... a living poem ... a message instantly conveyed. For this reason it is said that, ideally, a basket should never be sold but always offered as a gift. And thus this one has passed, hand to hand, from the woman who made it to the cherished woman friend who gave it to me for my fiftieth birthday, and then to Mary via a photo and to you via paper and ink—creative technology bringing you a gift from the daughters of Selu and in her honor.

At the end of our journey, when we've gathered all the ears, we'll ease off beyond the confines of print and paper to a place that exists only in our minds. We'll sit down with the ears—shuck 'em, shell 'em. Then you can sort out the seed-thoughts you want to keep and put them in the basket. All the while, we'll chat, laugh and sing, as people have done from time immemorial in the presence of the Corn-Mother. Most of all, we will give back respect and gratitude for the gift of her birth so long ago—and for the indigenous people who received her into their care and shared her great bounty with others.

We also will give respect and thanks for the deer, the Corn-Mother's eternal companion and counterpart in the balance, and for those who have preserved his wisdom in ceremony and story. The deer, like Selu, is part of

the history of democracy in this land now called America. He will be with us on our path and of course, in the meditation on Selu herself.

A deep red corn seed lies in the palm of your hand. In the split second the shell first touched your skin, the tip of my finger touched you also. Energy to energy, life to life, an invitation to a journey …

I call your attention to a small sign by our path that distills a philosophy of all my mountain ancestors.

Trail Warning

Beauty is no threat to the wary
who treat the mountain in its way,
the copperhead in its way,
and the deer in its way,
knowing that nature is the human heart
made tangible.

I plunged past this sign without heeding its warning the first time I came this way. I also forgot what my parents have always advised, "If you meet a copperhead—snake or person—give 'em a wide berth. If you have to go in close, take a hoe."