On money...

The Green Frog Skin – that's what I call the dollar bill. In our attitude towards it lies the biggest difference between the Indians and the whites. My grandparents grew up in an Indian world without money. Just before the Custer battle the white soldiers had received their pay. Their pockets were full of green paper and they had no place to spend it. What were their last thoughts as an Indian bullet or arrow hit them? I guess they were thinking of all that money going to waste, of not having had a chance to enjoy it, of a bunch of dumb savages getting their paws on that hard-earned pay. That must have hurt them more than the arrow between their ribs.

The close hand-to-hand fighting, with a thousand horses gally-hooting all over the place, had covered the battlefield with an enormous cloud of dust, and in it the green frog skins of the soldiers were whirling around like snowflakes in a blizzard. Now, what did the Indians do with all that money? They gave it to their children to play with, to fold those strange bits of coloured paper into all kinds of shapes, making into toy buffalo and horses. Somebody was enjoying that money after all.

The books tell of one soldier who survived. He got away, but he went crazy and some women watched him from a distance as he killed himself. The writers always say that he must have been afraid of being captured and tortured, but that's all wrong.

Can't you see it? There he is, bellied down in a gully, watching what is going on. He sees the kids playing with the money, tearing it up, the women using it to fire up some dried buffalo chips to cook on, the men lighting their pipes with green frog skins, but mostly all those beautiful dollar bills floating away with the dust and the wind. It's this sight that drove the poor soldier crazy. He's clutching his head, hollering, 'Goddam, Jesus Christ Almighty, look at them dumb, stupid, red sons of bitches wasting all that dough!' He watches till he can't stand it any longer, and then he blows his brains out with a six-shooter.

It would make a great scene in a movie, but it would take an Indian mind to get the point.

On consumerism...

The Sioux have a name for white men. They call them wasicun – fat-takers. It is a good name, because you have taken the fat of the land. But it does not seem to have agreed with you. Right now you don't look so healthy - overweight, yes, but not healthy. Americans are bred like stuffed geese – to be consumers, not human beings. The moment they stop consuming and buying, this green frog-skin world has no use for them. They have become frogs themselves. Some cruel child had stuffed a cigar into their mouths and they have to keep puffing and puffing until they explode.

Fat-taking is a bad thing, even for the taker. It is especially bad for Indians who are forced to live in the frog-skin world which they did not make and for which they have no use.

Artists are the Indians of the white world. They are called dreamers who live in the clouds, improvident people who can't hold on to their money, people who don't want to face 'reality'. They say the same things about Indians. How the hell do these frog-skin people know what reality is? The world in which you paint a picture in your mind, a picture which shows things different from hat your eyes see, that is the world from which I get my visions. I tell you this is the only real world, not the Green Frog Skin World. That's only a bad dream, a streamlined, smog-filled nightmare.

Because we refuse to step out of our reality into this frog-skin illusion we are called dumb, lazy, improvident, immature, other-worldly. It makes me happy to be called 'other-worldly', and it should make you so. It's a good thing our reality is different from theirs.

On criminal justice...

Before our white brothers came to civilize us we had no jails. Therefore we had no criminals. You can't have criminals without a jail. We had no locks or keys, and so we had no thieves. If a man was so poor that he had no horse, tipi or blanket, someone gave him these things. We were too uncivilized to set much value on personal belongings. We wanted to have things only in order to give them away. We had no money, and therefore a man's worth couldn't be measured by it. We had no written law, no attorney or politicians, therefore we couldn't cheat. We were in a really bad way before the white man
I've been there in my vision, and it makes me shudder to think about it. The highway which they themselves bulldoze and make smooth so they can get faster to the big, empty hole which they'll find at the end, waiting to swallow them up. It's a quick, comfortable superhighway, but I know where it leads to. I have seen it.

On good clean living...

Americans want to have everything sanitized. No smells! Not even good, natural man and woman smell. Take away the smell from under the armpits, from your skin. Rub it out, and then spray or dab some nonhuman odor on yourself, stuff you can spend a lot of money on, ten dollars an ounce, so you know this has to smell good. ‘B.O.’, bad breath, ‘intimate female odor spray’, I see it all on TV. Soon you'll breed people without body openings.

I think white people are so afraid of the world they created that they don't want to see, feel, smell or hear it. The feeling of rain and snow on your face, being numbed by an icy wind and thawing out before a smoking fire, coming out of a hot sweat bath and plunging into a cold stream, these things make you feel alive, but you don't want them any more. Living in boxes which shut out the heat of the summer and the chill of the winter, living inside a body that no longer has a scent, hearing noise from the hi-fi instead of listening to the sounds of nature, watching some actor on TV having a make-believe experience when you no longer experience anything for yourself, eating food without taste – that's your way. It's no good.

On sacrifice and the sun dance...

Staring open-eyed at the blazing sun, the blinding rays burning deep into your skull, filling it with unbearable brightness... blowing an eagle-bone whistle clenched between your teeth until its shrill sound becomes the only sound in the world... dancing dancing dancing from morning to night without food or water until you are close to dropping in a dead faint... pulling pulling away at a rawhide thing which is fastened to a skewer embedded deeply in your flesh, until your skin stretches and rips apart as you finally break free with the blood streaming down your chest... this is what some of us must endure in the sun dance.

Many people do not understand why we do this. They call the sun dance barbarous, savage, a bloody superstition. The way I look at it, our body is the only thing which truly belongs to us. What we Indians give of our flesh, our bodies, we are giving of the only thing which is ours alone. It is only our own flesh which is a real sacrifice – a real giving of ourselves. How can we give anything less?

Some white men shudder when I tell them these things. Yet the idea of enduring pain so that others may live should not strike you as strange. Do you not in your churches pray to one who is 'pierced', nailed to a cross for the sake of his people? No Indian ever called a white man uncivilised for his beliefs or forbade him to worship as he pleased.

The difference between us and the white man is this: You believe in the redeeming powers of suffering, if this suffering was done by someone else, far away, two thousand years ago. We believe that it is up to every one of us to help each other, even through the pain of our bodies. Pain to us is not ‘abstract’ but very real. We do not lay this burden onto our god, nor do we want to miss being face to face with the spirit power. It is when we are fasting on the hilltop, or tearing our flesh at the sun dance, that we experience the sudden insight, come closest to the mind of the Great Spirit. Insight does not come cheaply, and we want no angel or saint to gain it for us and give it to us second-hand.

On natural diversity...

Even animals of the same kind – two deer, two owls – will behave differently from each other. I have studied many plants. The leaves of one plant, on the same stem – none is exactly alike. On all the earth there is not one leaf that is exactly like another. The Great Spirit, Wakan Tanka, likes it that way. He only sketches out the path of life roughly for all the creatures on earth, shows them where to go, where to arrive at, but leaves them to find their own way to get there. He wants them to act independently according to their own nature, to the urges in each of them.

If Wakan Tanka likes the plants, the animals, even little mice and bugs, to do this, how much more will he abhor people being alike, doing the same things, getting up at the same time, putting on the same kind of store-bought clothes, riding the same subway, working in the same office at the same job with their eyes on the same clock and, worst of all, thinking alike all the time.

All creatures exist for a purpose. Even an ant knows what that purpose is – not with its brain, but somehow it knows. Only human beings have come to a point where they no longer know why they exist. They don't use their brains and have forgotten the secret knowledge of their bodies, their senses, or their dreams. They don't use the knowledge the spirit has put into every one of them; they are not even aware of this, and so they stumble along blindly on the road to nowhere – a paved highway which they themselves bulldoze and make smooth so they can get faster to the big, empty hole which they'll find at the end, waiting to swallow them up. It's a quick, comfortable superhighway, but I know where it leads to. I have seen it. I've been there in my vision, and it makes me shudder to think about it.