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Embracing Fry Bread

Roger Welsch

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Additional praise for *Embracing Fry Bread*

“We can all enjoy the wit and humor of my long-time friend and Native rights colleague Roger Welsch. He presents an important message, as we strive to live together as one great people joined together on the same land by a common heritage.”—Walter R. Echo-Hawk, author of *In the Courts of the Conqueror: The Ten Worst Indian Law Cases Ever Decided*

“A self-described wannabe, Roger Welsch has over many years absorbed a deep knowledge and appreciation of the Indian tribes of the Northern Plains. His writing, sincere and often humorous, reveals a personality that many Indian people and even one tribal council have come to trust, love, and adopt into their circles.”—Charles Trimble, Oglala Lakota journalist and author

“Once again my Heyoke friend, Roger Welsch, has captured the true essence of being a ‘wannabe,’ not afraid to take risks, staying close to the fire but not too close. Like our people, he understands what it means to live in two worlds. He does so with humor, gusto, and fearless dignity.”—Judi M. gaiashkibos (Ponca), executive director of the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs

“*Embracing Fry Bread* is quintessential Welsch. Roger hooks the readers with a title about a tantalizing culinary delight, then reels 'em in to the deeper heart of the book. This is a watchful, thoughtful man's memoirs of how he has been drawn into three Indigenous families and communities through no particular volition of his own. This is the story for anyone who wakes up one morning and realizes he or she has somehow become something beyond what nature and nurture had

originally provided . . . and is the better human for it. Welsch writes a compelling personal account that can resonate with us all. As Welsch would say, it is not so much about being a WANNABE as a GOTTAbe.”—
Mark Awakuni-Swetland, author of *Dance Lodges of the Omaha People*

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EMBRACING FRY BREAD

Confessions of a Wannabe

Roger Welsch

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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*For Alfred “Buddy” Gilpin Jr., Francis Morris, and Charles Trimble,
three men of dignity, accomplishment, and strength who have blessed
my life by calling me friend and brother.*

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It would be impossible for me to list the names of all the people who have been a part of my long travel though the journey of becoming a Wannabe, or perhaps more correctly, confessing that somewhere along the line I did become a Wannabe. The list contains not only the living but also those who have gone, as the Omahas have it, "over that fourth hill." There are many white people—some Wannabes, some not. Some, like Carlos Castaneda and the *Born to Run* author, I haven't even met. Most are Indians of many tribes. All have been helpful. I could perhaps double the list by including those who have helped me by making my path a difficult one; sometimes in their example of the worst of ways they helped me see more clearly those who take the best of ways. I have listed these names in no particular order and have omitted, I know and regret, many. But as I read over the list myself I take enormous pride in being able to say honestly, these have been my friends. As I have grown older I have resolved to clean out my life, discarding people whom I cannot respect or honor and those who

clearly do not respect or honor me. Many of the people in this list are among those who are left, the very people whom I respect and honor and those who respect and honor me. I feel the list is impressive and the people on it are beloved. (Of course there are other, larger lists of people who are positive elements in my life but not an element in this particular part of it. They are equally distinguished and beloved in my life.) If we are, as my father told me on several occasions, judged by our friends, then it looks to me like I've done just fine in my lifetime. And my enemies are pretty impressive, too, if I may say so.

Edgar Red Cloud; Earl Dyer; Alfred "Buddy" Jr. and Naomi Gilpin; Frank, Clyde, and Lillian Sheridan and their children and families; Oliver Saunsoci, Sr. and Jr.; Benny Butler; Calvin Ironshell; Ronnie GoodEagle; Jess, Colleen, and Michael Flores; Bill and Alberta Canby; Joseph Marshall; Elmer Blackbird; Frank LaMere; John Turner; Nicky Solomon; Shirley Cayou; Francine and Francillia Philips; Carrol and Karma Stabler; Charles and Elizabeth Stabler; Russell Parker; Ago Sheridan; Dorrin Morris; Felix and Rufus White; Clydia and Reeves Nawooks; Francis Morris; Charles Trimble; Louie LaRose; Nancy Gillis; Judi gaiashkibos; Dawn Adams; Jimmy Horn; Bill and Clem Howell; Alice Alexander; John Mangan; Mark Awakuni-Swetland; Mick Maun; Kristen Friesen; Pat Wendt; Walter Echo-Hawk; St. Elmo Wilde; Ron Rice; Rob Bozell; Deborah Echo-Hawk; Ronnie O'Brien; Gale Pemberton; Peggy Lang; Margot Liberty; Dorothy Howard; Jim Gibson; John Carter; Art May; Mert Moore; Paul Olson; Alan Dundes; Phyllis Stone; Francis LaFlesche; Reuben Delgado; Barre Toelken; Jean Lukesh; Liz Deer; Pat Leading Fox; Marshall Gover; Vance Spotted Horse Chief.

Most important of all, my beloved wife, Linda, who sure didn't bargain on this when we were married thirty years ago but who has become a full partner in the adventure.

Embracing Fry Bread

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I. *First, a Story*

Coyote lived at the edge of the village in a deep lodge with his blind grandmother. One day he told her he was going to go out and look around a bit so she warned him, “Whatever you do, Grandson, go anywhere you want but do *not* go over the hill on the other side of the river where that big bull buffalo has his herd. He is one mean fellow and you certainly don’t want to cross trails with him.”

Well, you know Coyote, and you know what a warning like that means to Coyote. From the moment he left the lodge all he could think of was going over that hill and going to take a look at that big bull buffalo. So that’s what he did. Just over the top of the hill he stopped and lay down in the shade of a plum bush to watch the big bull and his herd. And oh, what a beauty that great bull buffalo was. Coyote thought of his own humble life, living in the cramped, damp, dark lodge under the ground with his grandmother, eating whatever scraps others left or whatever carrion he could find on the plains and in the hills. He lived in fear of everything and everyone. He was always running away from something . . . hunters, bears, buffalo, mountain lions, and storms. But Big Bull Buffalo down there, grand and proud, was afraid of nothing. He ate constantly without hunger, for grass was everywhere and he could go wherever he wanted. When storms came, Coyote covered in his lodge with his grandmother or shivered, wet

and cold, in the open, but Big Bull Buffalo stood strong and warm in his thick hide, facing into the storm, marching on almost defiantly.

Oh, to live a life like that! thought Coyote.

His fear dulled by wonder, Coyote crept closer and closer to the big bull until he was close enough to smell the buffalo's breath and close enough that the bull turned his huge head to look at Coyote and pierce him with his deep-set eyes. His thunderous voice came from his mouth, held close to the ground, lowered to be near Coyote, now flat on the ground. And he said, "What do you want? Why have you come so close to me? Don't you know the danger you are inviting by daring to approach me like this?"

Coyote was startled because he hadn't noticed, in his awe, how close he had come to Tenugagahi, Big Bull Buffalo, and now he wasn't quite sure how to recover. So, uncharacteristically, he just blurted out the truth:

"Sir, Tenugagahi, I am sorry I insulted you by coming so close without a warning or greeting but I was just admiring you and your herd and wishing I had had the good fortune to have such a fortunate birthright. You see, I live in a small lodge at the edge of the village over the hill here with my blind grandmother. We eat carrion and garbage. I am afraid of everything. We are alone. We suffer terribly from the weather. I look at you and I can see what could be. You are surrounded by your herd. You eat grass, and what else is the prairie but grass? You never go hungry. You fear nothing. You laugh at storms and blizzards."

"What you say is true," Tenugagahi said.

"Is there any way I might become like you?" asked Coyote. "I would give anything to be like you and not what I am."

"Well, yes, there is a way. But you're not going to like it," Big Bull Buffalo said. "It is not easy."

"Master Tenugagahi, I am prepared for anything if you would be so kind as to turn me into a great, bold beast like you," cried Coyote piteously.

"You must do as I say, then," said Big Bull Buffalo. "Stand right here and don't move. No matter what I do, you must stay here as still as you can be."

With new hope, Coyote agreed and steeled himself for what might come. Big Bull Buffalo stepped away twenty or thirty steps and put his head low to the ground. Then he started running straight at Coyote. Coyote was afraid but he did everything he could to stand firm as the giant bull charged straight at him, but at the last moment his courage melted and he jumped back as the buffalo rushed by.

“I told you that you must stand still,” snorted Big Bull Buffalo. “You cannot become a bull buffalo like me if you jump back like that.”

“Oh, my friend, I was so startled when I saw you running right at me that even though I tried to stand firm, I had to jump back at the last instant because I was sure I would die if I stayed standing in front of you. Please, great Buffalo, give me another chance. I promise you that this time I will not move a muscle.”

Big Bull Buffalo went back many more steps this time. He put his head down. He raised his tail into the air as buffalo bulls do before they charge, and again he rushed directly at Coyote. Coyote shook and whimpered as he saw the bull coming at him and he held his ground longer than before, but finally he had to jump away at the last moment, this time feeling the rush of air go by as Big Bull Buffalo passed.

Again Tenugagahi shook his head in disgust and told Coyote that he was doomed to be forever the wretched creature he was if he couldn't do something as small as standing still as instructed for this little ritual. And again Coyote begged and apologized and asked for one more chance. The big bull felt sorry for Coyote and so said yes, he would indeed give him one more chance. This time he went way off up the hill to a clump of plum brush. He snorted, lifted his tail, and pawed the ground and then again ran straight toward Coyote. Coyote closed his eyes and clenched his teeth but when he felt the ground shake beneath his feet from the buffalo's charge, he threw himself back and out of the way, just in time to feel the animal's horns brush the hair of his side.

“That's it,” snarled Big Bull Buffalo. “No more. You have worn out my patience.” And he started to wander off back to his herd. Now Coyote was really ashamed. He whined and cried and begged the buffalo for yet a fourth chance. [In the stories of Western culture, I should

perhaps note here, things always happen in threes. But within Native culture and narrative, everything occurs in fours!] Coyote promised and swore that he would stand still this time. He threw himself at the hooves of Tenugagahi and rolled in the dirt, belly up, to show how totally ready he was to put himself at the buffalo's mercy. And so Big Bull Buffalo said he would give Coyote one more chance. "But this is your *last* chance," he said, and Coyote could see that he meant it.

Big Bull Buffalo stepped to the top of the hill. With his horns he tore up a small cedar tree standing there. He pawed at the dirt and threw it into the air. He bellowed and roared, lowered his head, and raised his tail. And he ran straight at Coyote. The ground shook. Coyote closed his eyes and prayed. He sang his death song, "Kiyeeeye Aiiiyeeyee!" But this time he stood his ground. The buffalo's head slammed into him and threw him down the hill in a heap, apparently broken and shattered. But then he got up and shook himself off and there he was . . . a buffalo bull. Big Bull Buffalo had told the truth: he had the power to make Coyote a buffalo.

Coyote couldn't believe his good fortune! He wandered down toward the herd, happy at last not to suffer his birth fate of being a lowly coyote. He lowered his head and began to graze on the rich, soft grass of the prairies. Uh-oh . . . it was not what he expected. The grass tasted terrible. And it was dry and gritty. It rasped in his mouth. Well, okay, but still he was no longer lonely, and he stepped again toward the herd and all his new companions. But he was instantly confronted by a dozen of the other young bulls, who challenged him. They butted him and kicked him. They knocked him down and tramped on him with their sharp hooves. Startled, Coyote-Now-Buffalo jumped up and was about to ask why everyone was suddenly so unfriendly, but before he could speak, a dozen Indians ran over the hill with spears and arrows and began killing buffalo around him, even wounding Coyote-Now-Buffalo in his side, so he ran with the others until, utterly exhausted, they stopped at the edge of a river and tried to renew their energies. Again, before they could find any rest and peace, they were struck by a flash blizzard and began their customary walk into the face of the storm.

With the ice and snow in his eyes and ears, cold and lost, Coyote-Now-Bufferalo began to doubt the wisdom of his decision. He began to think of his grandmother's fish-head and dead rabbit soup, of their warm dark lodge, of the fact that no one threatened him because no one cared about him, about how he and other coyotes occasionally gathered on especially nice nights when the moon was full to sing their old songs.

So he made his way again to Tenugagahi, Big Bull Bufferalo. When he got close, Tenugagahi turned his massive head and fixed his angry eye on Coyote-Now-Bufferalo. "What do you want now?" he asked curtly.

"Well, sir," Coyote-Now-Bufferalo said uneasily, stuttering a little and lowering himself to show he certainly was not intending to challenge Big Bull Bufferalo's primacy in the herd. "I was, uh, well, wondering if maybe perhaps there would be some way . . . well, some way you could turn me back into a coyote."

"There is a way," sighed Big Bull Bufferalo, "but you're not going to like it."

You can guess the rest of the story. The buffalo charged Coyote-Now-Bufferalo four times. The first three times Coyote-Now-Bufferalo jumped back in fear, first feeling the air of the buffalo's passing, then the shaking of the earth under his hooves, and then his horns grazing along the hair of Coyote-Now-Bufferalo's side. The fourth time, however, Coyote-Now-Bufferalo closed his eyes and prayed; he sang his death song, "Kiyeyee Aiiiiyeyee!" The buffalo's head slammed into him and knocked him down the hill, and when he again stood up, sure enough, he had been again transformed and was . . . again . . . Coyote.

He made his way back over the hill to his blind grandmother's lodge, where he smelled her good fish head and dead rabbit soup cooking. As he came into the lodge she asked him, "Grandson Coyote, where have you been?"

"Nowhere," he said as usual.

"What have you been doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," he said, as was his custom.