

Art Solomon's hopeful realism

*I cannot bring myself to believe
That God intended for any of His
children
To be locked in iron cages
Behind stone walls
Or shot and killed in cold blood by
prison guards
Or police.*

Being with Art Solomon, 78-year-old Ojibway spiritual elder and activist, is like being in the presence of an Old Testament prophet. It's not that he's removed from the modern world; that's what visitors to his rambling farmhouse south of Sudbury, Ont., talk about — the state of the world today.

It's just the way this thin, slightly stooped elder talks — it's reminiscent of Jeremiah or Isaiah, conferring with God, seeing the world clearly, and telling it like it is.

About 15 years ago, for example, he had a vision. "I came in the house from outside in the early fall, and I saw a set of old-fashioned scales. They were totally weighed down on the left-hand side, the negative side." But as he sat at his kitchen table, facing the sun, a human hand came and put something on the positive side. Then, "the hand of the Creator came and added more," and soon many human hands added more and more, so that the positive side became stronger and stronger.

"What I understood from that," he says, "is that this world is not going to be destroyed by the hands of fools no matter how important they are."

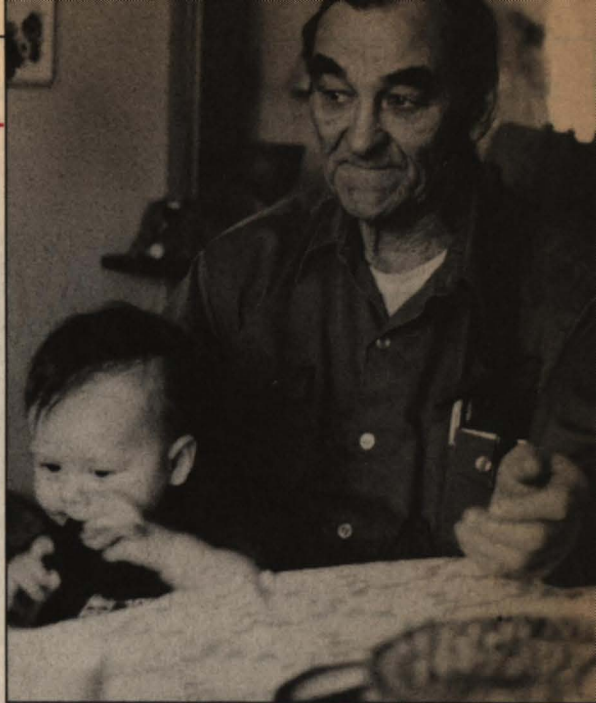
Propelled by that combination of hope and plain-speaking, Solomon is a powerful force among Native people in Canada and around the world. He has worked, for example, on behalf of American Native activist

Leonard Peltier, "17 years in prison, for a crime he didn't commit." (Peltier was convicted under questionable circumstances for the 1975 shooting of two FBI officers; a worldwide network of supporters continues to seek his release.) Solomon helped take his case to "a tribunal in Rotterdam, and the United States and Canada were both condemned. It's inevitable; he's going to come out."

Appalled by the damage the Canadian prison system does to Native people — they make up 3 percent of the Canadian population, but 10 percent of the people in jail — he worked for years to bring their sacred ceremonies to them. Queen's Theological College gave him an honorary doctorate in 1987, citing both his determined upholding of "native religious life," and his "role as native missionary to Christians."

Eileen Fleming, assistant to the principal at the college, and active with women prisoners herself, explains how "a Native woman in prison needs the sweetgrass when she has been in the hole for six weeks, when they take away even your reading material. It's his *goodness* that should be held up to all people."

Solomon managed, says Rev. Rod Carter, a prison chaplain in Kingston, Ont., "to build rapport and respect and provide education for CSC (Correctional Service of Canada) staff and administrators, teaching them what elders and medicine people and spiritual leaders are all about." That's because he is able — like the prophets — to say tough things in a way that people can hear, and the combination of his spirituality and deep passion disarms those who fear the smell of sweetgrass masks the scent of marijuana. "His dialogue is so spell-binding it doesn't repel politicians. It doesn't get their backs up." Native



Art Solomon with Richard Alan Smallboy.

spiritual leaders are now respected as chaplains, and their medicine bundles are not tampered with or X-rayed.

Not that Solomon has any use for the idea of jails in the first place. "We didn't need a system of guards and prisons, we took care of ourselves. We didn't have a criminal 'just-us' system." That was brought by Europeans; it discriminates wildly, he says, against the poor, "putting people in prison because they have nothing to eat. . . . The criminal 'just-us' system is that violent people need a violent means of control."

Going into prisons restores hope and identity, says Carter. A men's sweatlodge in Kingston, for example, found itself without a spiritual elder. "Art came in for an evening, and inspired them to hang in there, to run their own prayer circle."

In a way, he was doing the same thing he had done earlier, with his development of the Northern Ontario Craft Programme. His passion and pride for the traditional work of the people was liberating, "a creative kind of thing," in Solomon's words. "I helped the people do what they needed to do. I understood that all I was doing was opening the cages; birds can fly wherever they want."

*Oh God have pity,
But didn't you say once long ago
Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself?
I thought that's how you said it
But here on earth it doesn't show.*

Poetry quotations are from Arthur Solomon: *Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way* NC Press Limited, Toronto, 1990. Used by permission.