

# Windshield Cracks, How the Light Gets In

By Diane Joy Schmidt

I recently tuned in to “Native America Calling.” What I heard, it was like a light came on, it broke open my heart. I found a new spiritual insight listening to that radio show. And I was having a very dark day.

The guest was musician Keith Secola (Ojibwa), from Minnesota, best known for his song NDN Kars. The recorded program can be found online at <https://soundcloud.com/native-america-calling>, 10-28-2020, “A Conversation with Keith Secola.”

Radio host Tara Gatewood (Isleta) asked Secola to talk about NDN Kars. He said, “The song originally started as a graffiti on a bathroom wall in Winton, MN, they carved it a little derogatory. I wanted to turn it around, the spelling, back in the early 80’s when I wrote this song, N-D-N, with the spelling phonetically, changed it to something that would give you strength or power, that richness of something that you couldn’t see, that belongs to all of us. People would say, ‘Did you write that song about my uncle’s car, or my sister’s car, or my dad’s car?’ In many ways, the song becomes metaphysical...”

The song has become a national anthem



Keith Secola



Leonard Cohen

for Native peoples, the most requested song on Native radio in the U.S. and Canada for almost three decades.

Secola explained what he was doing, saying, “There’s a lot of irony we’re using in oppressor’s language to un-oppress ourselves, to give humanity back to ourselves. I think humor is a portal, is a key, to pass through, because you have to reach a higher level of understanding. This is our special humor, like (callers) said, it belongs to us.

“When I wrote ‘Put an Indian Power sticker on his bumper, that’s what holds the car together,’ something that’s as metaphorical as that, something that we understand, a code, but it’s something that just doesn’t belong to any person or anybody, so it’s a beautiful thing—when I hear non-Native bands cover that song too, it’s really quite

beautiful.”

As Secola talked friends started to call in, from Minnesota to Gallup to South Dakota to Shiprock. One caller told him how she was driving along looking at the cracks in her windshield when the song came on the radio, and hearing the song made her proud.

An Indian car comes to be, when there is no money to fix it up. Later, it ends up in the yard getting cannibalized for parts, and enjoys a second life as a vehicle of the imagination. That’s a strong image, and it’s something no way a white person is going to be able culturally appropriate, this image of a broken down Indian car—something so beloved, loved, in and for its humanity.

Still, when this woman called in and talked about her cracked windshield, this white listener made a connection, with something in my own experience, and I think that’s important when two peoples might see something, hear each other. I was suddenly reminded of the song “Anthem,” by Leonard Cohen. It has a similar irony and strength in brokenness. Cohen sang:

*Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.*

It’s not exactly the same thing they’re talking about, but in a way it is. Secola sings:

*My car is dented  
The radiator steams  
One headlight don’t work  
The radio can scream  
I got a sticker  
It says “Indian Power”  
I stuck it on my bumper  
That’s what holds my car together  
We’re on the circuit of an Indian dream  
We don’t get old  
We just get younger  
When we’re flying down the highway  
Riding in our Indian Cars.*

Secola’s words speak with a soaring poetic genius and wit, when he sings, ‘Indian Power—that’s what holds my car together.’ Next to that, Cohen almost sounds prosaic, “that’s how the light gets in.” Both address spirituality, with Cohen’s words drawn from the Kabbalah. Both Secola and Cohen wrote their songs in the early ’80’s, neither song was produced until 1992, and both are anthems, one for Natives, the other for many Jewish people in North America.

Why I’m thinking that connecting these two poets is so important is because they both achieve a breakthrough—they break through the oppressive thinking of what has over centuries come to be some kind of religious fanaticism that has taken hold of our world, in the Abrahamic religions, because, if you look back, it really wasn’t there in the original—it got layered on.

And then, it happened, on that radio show, Keith shared a few bars of a new song he just wrote: “Everybody’s moving. Everybody’s moving to a different situation.”

That week’s Torah portion, Lech L’cha, Genesis 12:1–17:27, is about the same thing. In the Jewish tradition, each week a portion of the Five Books of Moses is studied in synagogues over the course of a year. God tells Abram, “Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father’s house, to the land that I will show you.”

These texts have different commentaries going back centuries. “Go forth,” speaks to the divine calling us. Rabbi Menachem Feldman writes that the Kabbalah teaches, “that the soul reaches greater heights than it would if it had never embarked on the journey.” God doesn’t tell Abram where he’s going, just, to a new situation.

There are still ways for us all to get humble. Maybe, we could find peace while driving with a cracked windshield listening to NDN Kars on the radio.



By Rafa Ferro, submitted for UN Global Call Out to Creatives, help stop the spread of Covid-19

