

4b – “Let Me Be A Free Man”

In 1877, Chief Joseph led a four-month battle against U.S. troops who tried to force his tribe, the Nez Perce, from their homeland in the Pacific Northwest's Wallowa Valley onto a reservation. The Nez Perce were ultimately overpowered and removed to Indian Territory, but Chief Joseph continued to fight for American Indian rights until his death in 1904. In 1879, he traveled to Washington, D.C., where he exhorted U.S. leaders to treat Indians more justly.

Words do not pay for my dead people. They do not pay for my country, now overrun by white men. They do not protect my father's grave. They do not pay for all my horses and cattle. Good words will not give me back my children. ... Good words will not give my people good health and stop them from dying. Good words will not get my people a home where they can live in peace and take care of themselves. I am tired of talk that comes to nothing.

... If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian he can live in peace. There need be no trouble. Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it. ... I have asked some of the great white chiefs where they get their authority to say to the Indian that he shall stay in one place, while he sees white men going where they please. They cannot tell me.

I only ask of the government to be treated as all other men are treated. ... Let me be a free man - free to travel, free to stop, free to work, free to trade where I choose, free to choose my own teachers, free to follow the religion of my fathers, free to think and talk and act for myself - and I will obey every law, or submit to the penalty.

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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