

# Chapter 9: An Introduction to Native American Spirituality

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There were over one thousand different tribal peoples<sup>1</sup> indigenous to the North American continent when Europeans first arrived in that territory. Each tribe had its own set of festivals, rituals, and spiritual beliefs, therefore to write of 'Native American spirituality' as one entity would be erroneous. However, common features are apparent across tribal peoples, pointing to some of the assumptions which inform the spiritual beliefs and practices of those indigenous to the North American continent<sup>2</sup>. Spirituality played a central role in the lives of many of these peoples, for as Angie Debo writes:

he [the Indian] was deeply religious. The familiar shapes of earth, the changing sky, the wild animals he knew, were joined with his own spirit in mystical communion. The powers of nature, the personal quest of the soul, the acts of daily life, the solidarity of the tribe -- all were religious, and were sustained by dance and ritual.<sup>3</sup>

This piece attempts to highlight some of the key aspects which Native American peoples share in terms of their spirituality. There is much that has been written in this area, and the brief list of suggested books I offer may provide a starting point for those wishing to pursue this area further.

## *Land-Based Spirituality*

Above all else, Native American spirituality is a land-based spirituality. The relationship between the land and the people was one of mystical inter-dependence. Perhaps this is best expressed by Geronimo, the Apache leader when he says:

For each tribe of men Usen created He also made a home. In the land for any particular tribe He placed whatever would be best for the welfare of that tribe...thus it was in the beginning: the Apaches and their homes each created for the other by Usen Himself. When they are taken from these homes they sicken and die.<sup>4</sup>

This quote provides a clue to the reason why there should be a proliferation of so many different festivals, rituals and rites among Native American tribes. Each tribe's rituals were tied to the specific qualities of the land the tribe called 'home'. For example, Great Plains Indians such as the Sioux and the Apache celebrated elaborate festivals worshipping the sun and the great sky they experienced in their daily lives. Native Americans who were agriculturalists worshipped the corn god, and for those peoples who relied upon the buffalo for their food, clothing, shelter and implements, the buffalo played a central role in their cosmology.

One of the difficult aspects of this relationship with the land to understand for Westerners is the literalness of the connection between the Native Americans and their land. Debo suggests, for instance,

When Garry, of the Spokanes of eastern Washington said, 'I was born by these waters. The earth here is my mother,' he is not using

a poetic figure of speech; he was stating what he felt to be the literal truth.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps a place to start in developing an understanding for this interconnection between the Native American and the land, is to consider his mythology around Creation, and how it is human beings and the land first came to know one another.

### ***Native American Creation Mythology***

Although many differences can be seen between the creation myths of different tribes, two similarities stand out in sharp contrast to those of us who grew up with Judeo-Christian creation mythology: 1) there is no concept of original sin, no initial wrongdoing by humans which has resulted in our being cast out of the place we truly belong, the Earth home, and 2) there is no 'Kingdom of Heaven' awaiting us which is our true spiritual home, with time on Earth to be used as a 'testing ground.'

In his book, *The Earth Shall Weep*, James Wilson expands on this point:

Yet for all their range and variety, these stories often have a similar feel to them. When you set them alongside the biblical Genesis, the common features suddenly appear in sharp relief; they seem to glow with the newness and immediacy of creation, offering vivid explanations for the behaviour of an animal, the shape of a rock or a mountain, which you can still encounter in the here and now. Many tribes and nations call themselves, in their own languages, 'the first people', the 'original people', or the 'real people', and their stories place them firmly in a place of special power and significance...Far from

telling them that they are locked out of Eden, the Indians' myths confirm that (unless they have been displaced by European contact and settlement) they still live in the place for which they were made; either the site of their own emergence or creation, or a 'Promised Land' which they have attained through long migration.<sup>6</sup>

Critically, as opposed to those of us who grew up influenced by the Western Christian tradition, the Native American experienced earth as HOME. The Earth is perfectly adapted to all of our requirements as human beings. The implications of this are huge in the way in which the Native American treated the Earth from day to day. First of all, the 'Kingdom of Heaven' is actually happening here and now, not in some mythical place in the future. It also means the earth is definitely NOT a dumping ground, a way-station on our way somewhere 'better.'

Native Americans' creation myths also portray a different understanding about the place humans occupy vis-à-vis their animal, plant and mineral co-inhabitants of the earth. Rather than being given 'dominion' over all other creatures, the animals, plants and minerals are companions to learn from and live with. The stories stress the mutuality and interdependence between people and other forms of life. There is a mutual respectfulness required when interacting with trees, birds, and plants, and also natural forces such as the wind and the rain.

Finally, these myths inform us that creation itself is an ongoing process. All that is, is part of an ongoing Creation Story, it didn't just happen millions of years ago and end there. Most importantly, the Spirit that first infused the world is still with us now, and can be experienced as 'immanence', spirit which imbues all things.

### *Immanence*

According to Native American spirituality, everything is imbued with spirit. Furthermore, there is a constant dialogue between all of these manifestations of creation. In order to survive, human beings must understand this dialogue, and they must be careful not to insult the spirits of the wind, or the earth. Everything is seen to have its own volition, and spirit. Consciousness is also not just the province of human beings in this world view. Winona LaDuke articulates this belief when she writes:

According to our way of looking, the world is animate. This is reflected in our language, in which most nouns are animate...Natural things are alive, they have a spirit. Therefore, when we harvest wild rice on our reservation we always offer tobacco to the earth because, when you take something, you must always give thanks to its spirit for giving itself to you.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps John Mohawk most eloquently expresses the indigenous relationship to creation when he writes:

The natural world is our bible. We don't have chapters and verses; we have trees and fish and animals. The creation is the manifestation of energy through matter. Because the universe is made up of manifestations of energy, the options for that manifestation are infinite. But we have to admit that the way it has manifested itself is organised. In fact, it is the most intricate organisation. We can't know how we impact on its law; we can talk only about how its law impacts upon us. We can make no judgement about nature.

The Indian sense of natural law is that nature informs us and it is our obligation to read nature as you would a book, to feel nature as you would a poem, to touch nature as you would yourself, to be a part of that and step into its cycles as much as you can.<sup>8</sup>

Although within the indigenous cosmology everything is endowed with spirit, it is also recognised that certain landscapes, land formations, and types of matter embody a special quality of sacredness. Native American cultures are full of stories about the particular significance of certain rocks or hills, and these are often used in key rituals and rites of passage. These places, especially mountaintops or isolated areas of wilderness, are where, in indigenous cultures, initiation ceremonies take place, people go to fast and pray, and visionary dreams are revealed. Unfortunately, this kind of sensibility is lost on modern peoples, who consider such beliefs to be nothing more than 'superstitions'.

Arthur Versluis, in his book, *Sacred Earth*, challenges us 'moderns' to think again, when he tells the story of a huge water tank being built in the Shunganunga Bluff, overlooking Topeka, Kansas,

A sacred high place, where for ages people have gone to fast and be alone with the spirits - a point at which above and below meet - must not be dug into and damaged, for it is charged with spiritual power. When a sacred place is desecrated -- which is what the great disk-like water tank gouged in the side of the hill entails -- one can expect that there will be consequences. One can feel the disturbed energy in the air around the water tower; there is wild

graffiti completely encircling the tank, and everywhere around that bluff one feels the sense of desecration.<sup>9</sup>

Which brings us full-circle, back to the basis of Native American spirituality, which is the relationship between human beings, the land, and all of Creation. To end, I'd like to offer this quote from Weatenatenamy, Young Chief of the Cayuse nation, which seems to encapsulate this feeling which is at the heart of Native American spirituality:

I wonder if the ground has anything to say: I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said...the earth says, God has placed me here. The Earth says, that God tells me to take care of the Indians on the earth; the Earth says to the Indians that stop on the Earth feed them right. God named the roots that he should feed the Indians on; the water speaks the same way ... the grass says the same thing... The Earth and water and grass say God has given our names and we are told those names; neither the Indians nor the Whites have a right to change those names, the Earth says, God has placed me here to produce all that grows upon me, the trees, fruit, etc. The same way the Earth says, it was from her man was made. God, on placing them on the Earth, desired them to take good care of the earth do each other no harm. God said.<sup>10</sup>

### **Suggestions for Further Reading:**

(In addition to those references which are footnoted, the following would be of interest to those who would like to pursue this area further:

Jane Alison (Ed.). *Native Nations, Journeys in American Photography* (Barbican Art Gallery, London: 1999).

Richard Erdoes & Alfonso Ortiz (Eds.). *American Indian Myths & Legends* (Pimlico, 1984).

Vine Deloria, Jr. *God is Red: A Native View of Religion* (Fulcrum Publishing, 1994).

Alice Marriott & Carol Rachlin (Eds.). *American Indian Mythology* (Mentor Books, 1968).

Carol Lee Sanchez. *Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral*. In Carol J Adams (Ed.). *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (Continuum, 1999), pp. 207-228.

Steve Wall. *Wisdom's Daughters: Conversations with Women Elders of Native America* (HarperPerennial, 1993).

### **Notes**

1. Angie Debo, (*op cit*, below) estimates there were over two hundred and fifty different tribes in what is now the state of California, alone.
2. Although 'Native Americans' existed on North, Central and South American territories, this piece uses as its basis those peoples of the North American continent.
3. Angie Debo. *The History of the Indians of the United States* (Pimlico, 1995), p.4.
4. Lee Miller, (ed.). *From the Heart, Voices of the American Indian* (Pimlico, 1997).
5. Debo, *op cit*, p.4.
6. James Wilson. *The Earth Shall Weep* (Picador, 1998), pp8-9.
7. Winona LaDuke. *Resurgence*, Sept/Oct, Issue 178, p.8.
8. John Mohawk. *Resurgence*, Sept/Oct, Issue 178, p11.
9. Arthur Versluis. *Sacred Earth; The Spiritual Landscape of Native America* (Inner Traditions, 1992).
10. Miller, *op cit*, p.333.