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REALIZING THE SACRED HOOP

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The Native American grasp of the "solidarity of life" is an expression of kinship and not a conviction of unity. The "sympathetic undertone" of the relationship of primal peoples to the world around them is ritualised in both empirical and mystical forms.... One vivid expression of the tribal sense of centeredness is perfectly expressed in the Plains Indian ceremonies involving communal smoking. At the conclusion of the pipe ceremony the participants murmured "We are all related." The act of smoking is a ritual of communion with everything in creation, with every possibility of being--what lies before us and also what lies beyond our understanding and knowledge.... The tribal relationship of Indians is therefore never based on the tolerance of others, but the experience of the self as part of others. "We are all related."

Jamaka Highwater (1981)
The Primal Mind

Struggling to learn, when all you must do is remember.

American Indian poem

When Black Elk was a boy before the time of the Battle of Little Big Horn he had a vision where he was taken up into a rainbow covered lodge, the lodge of the six Grandparents--the powers of the four directions along with Mother Earth and Father Sky.

The first Grandparent, the Power of the West, gave him a cup of water, the power to sustain life, and then handed him a bow and told him he would also have the power to destroy. The second Grandparent, the Power of the North, gave him a white wing and a sacred herb of sage. The wing, like the northern snow, signified cleansing, endurance and courage.

The third Grandparent, the Power of the red dawn rising in the East, gave him a sacred pipe, the power of peace. The day break star appeared and he was told he would have the power to awaken others. In addition, it was said that a powerful knowledge would come to his land and peace would come through that knowledge and wisdom. The fourth Grandparent, the Power of the South, gave him a bright red stick sprouting leaves. The Grandfather said that a tree would grow in the center of a nation. A yellow hoop appeared, symbolizing in its color, growth and physical healing and in its circle the unity of all things.

The fifth Grandparent, the Spirit of the Sky, became an eagle and spoke, saying that all things of the sky, the winged ones, the winds and stars would be as relatives and come back to Black Elk and help him. The sixth Grandparent was Mother Earth. The Earth Spirit took him outside and told him that the Earth Power would be with him. She said that the two leggeds would desperately need her help in time.

Next he saw a time of pain and separation of his people, and a time of death. Then a red man appeared among the people and transformed into a buffalo which represented a time of plenty. He was given a sacred herb which he cast down into the center of the hoop. The herb became four flowers, four blossoms on a single stem. The four rayed herb then grew and became a budding tree that represented the four races of the earth. He then saw his own hoop join with
several other hoops to make one great hoop, and in the middle were several peoples and
nations gathered under the tree growing there.

At the end of his vision two Spirit men gave him the day-break-star of understanding. He
dropped it down to the world below and it flowered spreading its power into the whole world.
In time he was promised that his people would be free and would spread this power of peace
and understanding throughout the Earth. (McGaa, 1990, pp 13-16).

The main concern of this paper is to explore and clarify the question—What is this power of
peace and understanding to be spread throughout the earth? Perhaps it is the understanding
which many pre-colonized Native peoples shared, and still do share, within their deep inner
circles. At the heart of this Native understanding is the realization that one must love Mother
Earth because she is the parent who provides for and nourishes us and gives our life meaning;
and that one must love the Sky because he circulates the four winds and brings forth the
waters that heal the cracked, dry Earth and sustain all life. Or perhaps it is the understanding
that we, as a people—the reds, yellows, blacks and whites—realize when we recognize that we
are all brothers and sisters together on this small planet called earth.

We are all on a small, blue island floating in the vast darkness of space in the corner of an
insignificant galaxy in the far reaches of the universe circling an average sun. Even though
we exist in this vastness and great emptiness together, we have yet to realize that we make
up one family who will either flourish or pass into extinction together. Every tree, rock, leaf
and animal is a part of one large family and has to be respected as such.

It is only now that we are beginning to realize that we are part of an interdependent web of
life in which one thing’s existence closely relates to that of another. Growing concern about
air pollution, lack of ozone, contaminated water and the alleged green house effect, calls
attention to this more and more each day. I believe we are now at that point of Black Elk’s
vision where we need Mother Earth to help us salvage that which we are so rapidly
destroying.

Mother Earth, of course, cannot restore our planet all by herself. For this to happen she will
need our co-operation and assistance. To do this, many of us will have to alter our
consciousness and reverse our roles; and instead of being competitive exploiters of land, sea
and air, become co-creators of a global community environment. To begin doing this we shall
have to ask and contemplate the question posed by M.C. Richards in a contemporary poem,
"How shall we love, before we have lost everything?...Love is not readymade, it is an act of
the will" (Lesser, 1992, p. 31). The message is glaringly clear. We shall either learn to love
the earth and those on it before it is too late or we shall lose it. Beginnings are already being
made by some amongst us. O’Reilly reports (The Philadelphia Inquirer, March 7, 1993, pp
L3,6) that representatives of Catholic, Jewish, Evangelical and Protestant denominations have
been meeting for two years to plan a three year campaign aimed at making the health of the
earth a religious concern for about 100 million Americans. The campaign was launched in
the summer of 1993. It acknowledges that we are in a period of eco-crisis—one created by
human beings who took the Biblical notion of human dominion over the earth too literally.
It integrates new findings and ideas from the sciences and seeks to establish a new sense of
living, in the words of Father Thomas Berry, "for the good of the sacred community of
creation". The extent to which this and other caring for creation concerns will bear fruit
depends on how well the members of differing socio-cultural groups such as these can join
together to make a loving act of will to live in partnership with the earth and to transform our
presently abused and dying planet into a "sacred community of creation".

The time has come to gain a fuller understanding both of Black Elk’s vision and of Native
American peoples. When I began writing this paper, I thought of the few Native American
people with whom I have had some degree of personal contact. My grandmother on my
father’s side was a full-blooded Cree, but she died even before I was born. I often wish that
I had had a chance to know more both about her and my Native ancestry. My only hope is that I did learn something about traditional Native values through my father, who along with seven siblings, was raised by her alone in the early 1900's. The closest I came to knowing a Native American personally was in meeting a United Church of Canada minister who had served on a Cree reservation and was adopted into the Cree Nation after beginning a journey in Native Spirituality.

I remember the way he talked about the Native people, and how different their culture was from ours. They were a people who lived their religion—a live vibrant, earthy religion that issued forth from the people and the land. He observed that they saw the beauty of the divine in the sunrise and sunset, in the face of the pearly glow of Sister moon floating through a black star-streaked sky, and in every flower, stone and animal. Every leaf of every tree was sacred and was treated as such. So was every individual. Their religious celebrations celebrated life and community. Individualism was not an issue for them since they loved each other enough for his/her individuality to be readily accepted and encouraged.

Sometimes the UCC minister and I talked into the late hours of the night. He told me that the whole Cree Nation seemed like one family. All of the older people were called grandmother or grandfather and all of the adults were seen as uncles and aunts.

He also said that no separation of men and women existed in the life of the community. One example he gave was the sweat lodge where men and women sat side by side and shoulder to shoulder. The people were so family-oriented in sharing their lives with each other all the time that they couldn't comprehend our idea of separating men from women. This is probably because the main thrust of their society was built on kinship. All of the work, play, teaching and entertainment was built around family and relationships. The Cree Nation differs radically, then, from our society, in which life revolves around the workplace or the economic environment.

Can you imagine caring enough about other people to build one's life around relationships with them instead of the Gross National product? Or would you be willing to give top priority to your relationships and not follow jobs all over the country from one city to the next? It's hard even to imagine that these days. Can you imagine a system in which there was no separation between men and women? I can't, not in our current culture. It's hard for me to imagine no battle of the sexes and no fighting for equality, no sexism or racism and no poverty. It's also likely that the Native peoples didn't need anyone like the macho archetypic hero found in Clint Eastwood's Lone Ranger characters, because their society had very little in common with ours.

According to Eagle Man (McGaa, 1990, pp. 28-31) in tribal communities there was no need to clean up the town, because there was little or no crime to be cleaned up. In fact, according to him, there were no prisons or wars in the sense that we know them. This is not to say that there was no crime or violence at all on the whole continent, prior to the time of colonization of the Americas. What is being said is that for the majority of Native American Nations these things just didn't exist, mainly because they had a sense of honor and wisdom that we as a nation have forgotten how to reflect in our practice of daily life. In many of our religions, social systems and constitutions the human spirit cries out for a harmonious and just society such as this; but we have yet to attain what the human soul so plaintively yearns for. My sense is that these Native peoples did realize just such a sense of spiritual community.

While in Connecticut in the summer of 1992 doing a chaplain's internship, I learned about Kolberg's theory of moral development. The last state is the one psychologists maintain very few people ever reach today. This is the stage when one does what is right or just, not because of any outward law or fear of retribution, but because of an internalized sense which enables one to honestly deduce what is right and wrong. Such a person would even be willing to break a law and suffer the consequences when in his/her heart he/she felt that what one was
doing was right. I remember thinking how strange it was that so very few reached this level.

From the time we were born, everyone in my family was taught to develop this stage of moral behavior as the norm. Perhaps this was the legacy, the passing down of a moral knowing, from my Cree grandmother through my father. I remember little things like my father telling me not to argue with people older than me. He said, "If they want you to do something and you don't feel like doing it just listen to them and don't argue with them--just don't do it." And then in Connecticut the minister, a member of the Cree Nation, told about the custom wherein an elder would tell you to do something when they felt that you were ready to do it. He said, "The youth should ask no questions. If you feel that you are ready to do it, then do it; if you feel that you aren't, you don't do it-but don't argue about it".

There were other strange things we did. For instance when some of us would go to restaurants, we would wipe down the table after we finished eating, not because we had to, but because we felt that leaving a mess would reflect on us, and the family. We also kept our voices low in public places so as not to disturb other people. Honesty to oneself and others was for us the most highly prized possession. Manipulation was seen as being more immoral than striking someone or cursing them. These were some of the things that filtered down from my Native heritage. For me they were passed down from the Spirit of the Native peoples, the essence of which is that one loves the earth and other people as brothers and sisters; and one loves oneself enough to be honest to oneself and take full responsibility for one's own actions.

One cannot really describe the Native Americans without describing their religion because their religion, and their lives are so intertwined. The religion issued from the people and was built around kinship and relationship. The religion is earth and sky, sun and rain, and relationship to all people and things. It is the appreciation of the green earth and the tall white capped mountains, and the love shared between a man and woman and a parent and child.

There were times when the community shared around the Sun Dance pole singing, praying and chanting with the young warriors as they took each heavy laden step around the tree in the hot afternoon sun, in order to enter into a true communion with the divine. There were other times when community sharing took place at celebrations around the campfires at night. At the heart of this sharing was the point that dancing, singing and relationships are what life is all about.

In looking back and examining the flow of our lives on this earth, we soon become aware that beyond all of the material possessions, the religions, the self-improvement books, and self actualization classes, the one thing that really matters is relationship. Here is meant the relationship to whatever we perceive as Goddess, God, Creation, or the Spirit of Life, relationship with other people and through communion and community relationship with one's self. The Native American people, the Sioux, Seminole, Cree, Creek, Navajo and various others realized relationship in this sense and struggled to hold onto it—they created a Kingdom of Heaven (or a Garden of Eden), or a community of love (a Sacred Hoop) on earth. When the colonizers saw what these people had, a few of them recognized it; but most of them couldn't comprehend that the nation they dreamed of building was already here. Thus, they set about demolishing the old and creating the new in the hope of achieving a nation where the core affirmation was life, love and spiritual fulfillment.

I remember in the early 1980's when my father was lying on his death bed dying of cancer. We had gathered all together in the hospital by the side of his bed. For the first time in almost eight years all of the siblings were there. Some came from as far away as Germany and Alaska; others no farther than from his own house. At the time I was working 14 hours a day trying to become a sales manager for a small company and hating my life. We all stood around the bed waiting for him to die and began to talk about the old days, just like we had so many times before and the dark mood began to lift. We even joked a little. That's when
my father began to struggle and his eyes opened for the first time since we had been there.

I also remember how he began to jerk his arm away from something and repeatedly said, "No, I'm not going anywhere, get away from me!" Everyone looked astonished and wondered if there was actually something invisible there in the room. In any event he lived a whole week longer than expected. The strange thing that truly touched and affected me was the fact that here he was struggling for life, even though for the most part he had had a very painful and sad life. Here he was struggling for something that I hated and that he should have hated as well. It was then that I realized what it was that he was struggling for—life!

The real life—the true life—was that which existed in our family. The small talk and communion that we took so much for granted was what he was fighting for and at that time I didn't even know enough to appreciate it. It was then that I promised myself to learn to appreciate the small things in life, the overlooked things...moments with friends...the laughter and tears relatives and good friends share together...and the pain and sorrows that we help pull each other through. Now I would take time to appreciate life, the precious gift given to all of us. I would learn from the creation of beauty or ugliness as well as from the experience of joys and sorrows. I recognized that life, energy and the opportunity to experience good and bad was the gift.

This is what the Native Americans celebrated and still do celebrate in their religious traditions. Moreover those Native Americans who have not been destroyed by the imposition of "The American Way" still celebrate their life in interaction with other people and other things in the universe. And this—the celebration of life within an ever unfolding community is the "Sacred Hoop", a familial web of life, representing the unity of all.

Let us hope then that we have stumbled into the age when Black Elk's vision (and Martin Luther King's dream) will come true. Let us hope that all peoples will gather together as one and remember the wisdom of a people who realized the truth and lived the truth for countless numbers of years before being "civilized". Let us actualize the understanding of what true unconditional love is—the open acceptance of all people regardless of race, sex, religion, or preference. Let us realize that life not only consists of the things that we can gather; it consists as well of those things that we can share like faith, hope and love. May we all find joy in the simple things of life, which are actually the greater; and may our small hoops of family and communal living one day join together and become integral parts of a great hoop—the Sacred Hoop—where love, justice and peace will abide with and in us always.

The choice always has been and still is ours! In this, the age of ethnic cleansing, holocausts, racism, nuclear devastation and Starwars technology (in another context a possible vehicle for the descending day-break-star of understanding) it is not too late to reconnect with the legacy of Native people's moral knowing. We can take steps to eliminate the distance we have placed between ourselves and Mother Earth by initiating a journey of the partnership way (Eisler and Loye, 1990) and willfully seeking solidarity, peace and understanding. Within ourselves we have the wisdom and the power to work together and co-create the Sacred rainbow-colored Hoop. All that is needed is to take the first step identified long ago by the Plains Indians. The time has come to join together to form diverse cultural family groups which will lift every voice and sing, as well as apply in daily living the ancient chant—WE ARE ALL RELATED/WE ARE ALL RELATED/WE ARE ALL RELATED....RELATED ARE WE, YOU AND I, ONE AND ALL....IN A SACRED COMMUNITY OF CREATION.

THE PARROTS

God, the Divine Imaginer,
Whose dreaming encompasses us all,
Thought one day of the birds, saying,
"Let there be a nightingale!"
"Let it sing at times to the moon",
But after the song was given,
Lest He gave it too much,
He gave it only russet brown feathers,
And a few that were white.
One day, God thought up the parrots,
"Let there be parrots!",
"Let there be lavished upon the parrots,
All the colours of the rainbow!"
But unless he gave them too much,
He gave the parrots no songs atall!
For who has heard of a parrot singing,
Or a parrots song?
God did throw to the Rosellas,
An occasional musical "ping".
But once He had created the thrushes,
There were no songs left at all.

JACK GEDDES