

Moving Toward the Light

Contemporary people sometimes travel great distances both inwardly and outwardly to find a point of sanctuary. Members of tribal cultures honoring tradition do the same, yet they do not have to search far for the oneness of the universe. They simply gaze in all four directions and give thanks.

Communal and personal rituals touch upon every aspect of daily life. Some cultures recommend praying upon waking and sleeping and several times in between, during rites of passage, before planting and even during hunting. They recognize the importance of ecological balance to the point where the hunter cannot take a life without making

peace with the animal and explaining why it must sacrifice its life, and then taking full responsibility for the act.

An Assiniboiné Indian named Morey, writing in 1970 in a book called *The Sacred*, defined worship as a way of giving thanks and centering oneself in the world:

...We're thankful that we're on this Mother Earth. That's the first thing when we wake up in the mornings is to be thankful to the Great Spirit for the Mother Earth; how we live, what it produces, what keeps everything alive. I know my old father died about twenty years ago, almost a hundred years old—he never neglected his thanks early in

the morning when he'd be out and the sun came up, shining—that's the eye of the Great Spirit...No matter what he's doing, certain times, he looked up, just before it got into the middle of...the sky—that's the throne of the Great Spirit. When the sun got about there, noon, he stopped, just for a few seconds, gave thanks to the Great Spirit and asked to be blessed. Then again when the sun was going down, he watched that until it got out of sight. Those are the things I always think are wonderful when we're talking about our Indian life.

In light of this practice, every trail walked consciously becomes a place of worship, every crested hill a

shrine on which a sacred sun will set. Even when markings by shamans do not designate it sacred, the motivations people bring to it bless the spot.

Closeness to nature arouses curiosity about its origin and that magical combination of acceptance and wonder that give life meaning at any age.

Children of the current millennium apply their curiosity to electronic amusements, but nature deprivation still may leave their sense of wonderment unplaced.

Children of traditional cultures, however, learned to listen, to observe, to give thanks for miracles more expansive than even the marvels of computer chips, as Brave Buffalo, a medicine man of the Standing

Rock reservation, explained in 1918, quoted by Beck and Walters on p. 19 in *The Sacred*.

"When I was ten years of age, I looked at the land and the rivers, the sky above, and the animals around me, and could not fail to realize that they were made by some great power. I was so anxious to understand this power that I questioned the trees and the bushes. It seemed as though the flowers were staring at me, and I wanted to ask them, 'Who made you?' I looked at the moss-covered stones; some of them seemed to have the features of a man, but they would not answer me. Then I had a dream, and in my dream, one of these small round stones

appeared to me and told me that the maker of all was Wakan'tanka, [the Creator] and that in order to honor him I must honor his works in nature.

Students of life still engage in such honor, whether instinctively as children, as spiritual seekers, or as adult students of archeology and spiritual archetypes.

Indigenous art forms capture the designs in creation and depict its symbols without the distraction of modern architecture. Shapes and forms constructed by human hands, however, rarely match the beauty, the simplicity or even the complexity of the real object in nature. They can never approach

its authenticity. Instead of trying to coax the natural world into conformity with human designs and rationale, humans can earn a sense of freedom and serenity by quietly observing the patterns in nature and reflecting on the eternal themes they suggest.

"It won't rain until tonight," a child reported on a cloudy day.

"How do you know?" Someone asked.

"An Indian told me. He listened to the owls."

The Luiseño he described may have learned such information from observing how the hoot of an owl predicts a change in weather, but to the child, it didn't matter whether the sign sprang from scientific

or spiritual knowledge. He had faith in the process of listening to nature.

Listening on that level requires silence. Silence always maintains great importance in the spiritual life of almost all indigenous cultures. By carefully listening, people hear messages from the earth itself and often messages from ancestors speaking to living hearts through the silence. Most often, these messages urge them to seek balance, for the ancestors devoted their lives to maintaining the balance of the universe. One shaman described a creator who speaks to humanity "not through common words, but by storm and snow and rain and the fury of the sea...by sunlight and the calm of the sea, and little children

innocently at play, themselves understanding nothing."

Spiritual teachers from most California peoples do not emphasize good and evil nor reward and punishment, in the traditional sense, but instead revere a concept of reverence and concern for the interrelatedness of all things. In this light, one may define evils as excesses which disrupt balance and harmony, but which one can correct; and goodness as respect for other entities, human or non-human. Taoism and other Eastern philosophies mirror this perspective so prevalent among cultures close to nature.

Personal worship reinforces bonds and becomes, in essence, a personal commitment to the sources of life. Thus, while shamanism plays a major role in the tribal life of the most complex Southwestern religions, each individual bears a personal responsibility for making peace with his or her surroundings, and the community obliges itself to support this process, individually and collectively.

Mystical rituals such as sweats, wanderings and vision quests formalize the task. Indigenous religionists seek insight from transformational processes that influence their life's course and create a guiding vision.

Some of the transfiguring moments come in a period of reflection and aloneness, which become "all-oneness." Remembrance and reenactment of these moments takes place continually in community ceremonies and individual rituals, which serve to revitalize the guiding vision. Versluis explained that this vision inspired de Angulo to write of a California tribe, in 1926: "...the life of these Indians is nothing but a continuous religious experience...To them, the essence of religion is...the 'spirit of wonder'...the recognition of life as power, as a mysterious, concentrated form of non-material energy, of something loose about the world and contained in a more or less condensed degree by every object..."

The spiritualism of America's indigenous people inspires study and imitation, although this spirit of wonder is not confined to culture alone. Seekers and sages throughout history, whether their paths led through the wilderness of Asia, Palestine, Mt. Sinai or Kurdistan, have sought essentially the same sense of connectedness with the earth's spiritual core that the Amerindians learn from childhood. Most found it by walking to a place made sacred by their own reverent acknowledgement of a creator, reflected in earth's creations.

This reverence resonates with people of many cultures who no longer wrestle with nature's systems as a force to dominate—for our domination has

already contributed to the devastation of climate change, pollution, extinction, and erosion--but rather as a mystery to fathom. Harold Bell writing in *The Eyes of the World*, as early as 1914, observed: "The mountains... are not seen by those who would visit them with a rattle and clatter and rush and roar—as one would visit the cities of men. They are to be seen only by those who have the grace to go quietly; who have the understanding to go thoughtfully; the heart to go lovingly; and the spirit to go worshipfully." A Sioux holy leader explained that the earth lives under the protection of something which at times becomes visible to the eye. "One would think this would be at the center of the earth, but its representations

appear everywhere, in large and small forms—they are the sacred stones."

This archetype calls to mind Versluis's admonition to "listen to the stones" instead of one journalist's reference to "teaching the stones to talk." If the divine exhibits itself in all things, we have nothing to teach nature, but much to listen to and learn from, particularly about balance and harmonious living.

Innate oneness has not always protected people from the elements, nor did it preclude violence or always produce universal wisdom, but some would say it has imposed a collective cultural awe for life and a collective pursuit of integrity—environmental, moral and spiritual. For instance,

when a young person violated the patterns of balanced, harmonious living, rather than removing him from the positive influences in society as the U.S. penal code does, traditionally, community members would gather to play a role in illustrating the natural consequences of the act. Tribal elders would also advise the youth.

The same spirit of communal responsibility prevails in more positive ventures. Young children engage in the sweat ceremonies alongside their parent of the same gender, even though the sweats often produce intensely mystical experiences that might disturb an urban child sheltered from spiritual pursuits. Likewise, when a tribal member embarked

on a vision quest, alone and deprived of provisions, shelter and clothing, the entire village would pray for the successful quest of the individual. They knew that the whole tribe would benefit from the enlightenment and serenity of one member. The escape to nature did not isolate people or classify them as antisocial but, rather, enhanced their ability to contribute to the cache of collective wisdom. Similarly, in neighboring Arizona, the Navajo people walk the Beauty Way, with children going through rites of passage at each age to make the spiritually-driven sacrifices to prepare to themselves as lifelong contributors.

Detached from personal ego and transcendent of mortal weakness in search of a higher spiritual

plane, adherents of the tribal value system take full advantage of the spiritual edification nature offers. Just as art heals individuals and defines social values, seeing the art in all creation imbues a cleansing effect on those tribes, families or individuals who through a lifetime of seeking sacred places, accept healing from its beauty and bask in its vibrancy.

This instinct can overpower even the very young. My Navajo friend offered her daughter a consequence of running toward the sun each morning that she wouldn't get up for school on time. Her door faced the east, and the little girl would wait and watch the beautiful sunrise, then purposely arise

late and go out to run toward the sun. She became a marathon runner by age seven.

Rather than prescribe any particular method of introspection, such as running to the sun at dawn, this collective of pathways leads to places where, on a good day, serenity might prevail.

However you choose to invoke serenity, follow your own path, but do take time to listen to the stones and the restorative nature of life whispering in the stones all around you. If you like, occasionally, run toward the sun.



Char Cathell: Tribes of the Southwest