



The Sanctity of Land – An Indigenous Perspective

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***Identity Is Built Upon a Reciprocal, Respect of Land &
Dependence on the Earth***

Two articles written by

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The land viewed by the Euro-American is seen as an object, a commodity to be owned, and viewed as an investment for profit; it is there to develop and commercialize for financial gain. [To] Indigenous people, land is sacred, holy. There is a strong interdependent relational bond between land and people. Land is Mother Earth. We came to be from within the womb of Mother Earth. [She] is home for all living beings: human people, animal people, plant people, everything in the universe. Therefore, Mother Earth, as an interdependent sustainer of life, is not to be stripped, taken apart, or desecrated nor should boundaries of property be placed upon her. To understand us ... one must first understand our spiritual relationship, our connection with the land, with Mother Earth. If non-Natives can understand our spiritual relationship with the land ... then one can better understand our people, our culture, and our traditional beliefs (Waters, 2004, p. 134).

Land is yet another issue that blurs the distinction between “Is it an issue?” or “Is it a worldview perspective?” It is really both.

Of all the Native issues that were, and continue to be, misunderstood by the mainstream culture, **Land** and how it is perceived and embraced by Indians is the preeminent. There are commonalities shared by most Native people. “**Indigeneity**” is one of them. “**Indigenous**” means “born of the land,” and the **Indigenous perspective** is created from that **Land** base, having been shaped and molded over millennia. The environment nurtures the people and implants within them intellectual, physical, emotional and Spiritual relationships that are deeply rooted in their own specific locale. It speaks to them, it gives them their responsibilities, and it prescribes the eternal relationship that continues in perpetuity. If one cannot grasp this simple truth, then one cannot understand the Native experience through their eyes.

Dr. Vine Deloria, Jr., the late revered Lakota scholar, explained:

The structure of their Indian traditions is taken directly from the world around them, from their relationships with other forms of life. Context is therefore all-important for both practice and the understanding of reality. The places where revelations were experienced were remembered and set aside as locations where, through ritual and ceremonials, the people could once again communicate with the spirits. It was not what people believed to be true that was important but what they experienced to be true (Norton-Smith, 2010, location 2381).

American Indians are not an ethnic minority per se. Ethnicity in America (national origin, race, religion, or other symbolic terms that direct everyone away from describing differences)

has to do with “outsiders” who are becoming (or who have become) “insiders” through the function of immigration, in one form or another. However, this distinction for Natives does not include immigration in any form and does not take into account the essential ancestral connection that is at the heart of tribal identity. To say that **Indigenous People** are ethnic societies omits that they maintain long, established historical blood relationships to one another as well as their unique political status of nation-to-nation treaty cosigners with the United States government. Unlike other distinguishable groups in this country, American Indians hold firmly to **Indigenous Cultures**, Communities, self-government, and, most importantly, **Land**. A great deal of Community effort and tribal government action is dedicated to protecting those long-held tribal assets, Traditions, Culture and Powers of Indian Self-Determination.

It has been estimated that perhaps 100,000,000 **Indigenous People** lived in the Western Hemisphere when Columbus arrived, and within a mere hundred years, the population declined by 70% or more. In some cases, local populations declined much more rapidly or became virtually extinct within a few years, especially where they had repeated or continual contact with their new overlords (paraphrased De la Casas, 2010). On the continent of North America alone, Dr. Russell Thornton “suggests that 80 million Indigenous people were killed through colonization in fewer than a hundred years” (Cook-Lynn, 2007, p. 153). Though the population has diminished in staggering numbers, “**Indigenoussness**” still perseveres.

We have seen how **Indigenous People** are in awe of this sacred relationship, holding this reverence in the highest regard and referring to the reservation as the “homeland.” There is little conjecture as to why Indians have fiercely fought over the past four centuries to retain their specific territory and the relationship with which it exists. **Indigenoussness** transcends the colloquial question, “So, where are you from?” and delves deeper, supplanting it with the more probing inquiry, “So, where are your roots?” to some an indistinguishable similarity, but to Natives a critical distinction. It is why I carry with me no matter where I travel, four stones taken from the road in front of the house where my father was born on the White Earth Reservation.

Given this scenario, there is a cultural mooring, if you will, having to do with specific geography and the stories of that particular place. Consequently, the **Native Narratives** are intimately intertwined and embedded in the **Land**, and the **Land**, in turn, is dependent upon the

stories to reveal its significance and importance to the people. This legacy has been socially transferred from one generation to the next, securing this *place-specific identity* and situating the identity of people in a Community that shares a *place-specific worldview*. This sense of place, one's homeland, has a pertinent bearing of how she views the Universe and helps to maintain the Balance of self and the world, caring for oneself in mind, body, and Spirit and maintaining the correct path with all relationships. Understanding this intricate, intimate relationship clearly helps in revealing the reasoning of Native people in their approach to the events of the last five centuries.

Thus, "for many Native people the ground beneath them and the Earth in general are viewed as sacred and a continued source of Wisdom and power" (Gill, 2003, p. 68). Because of this close connection, they are in touch with the rhythms of Nature and are born, live, and die like all other Creatures. And Earth, as the life source for all Creatures, cannot "belong" to anyone. This idea of "*mindspace*" is about belonging to a *specific geography*. It is formative to all, that is being Indian in thought and deed. It is about being attuned to the sights, sounds, and smells of that space where our ancestors lived and is fundamental to our Indian identity.

This sense of belonging to a small, bounded portion of ground also extends to the whole Earth, and thus we are connected to the *Other* folks who occupy *Other* spaces on the planet. Boundaries arise from the recognition that all people have a right to a specific homeland, and their story will be a different one from ours. They were created for one specific part of the planet and will have their own perspective and truths. Being bound to a certain area creates a conservationist perspective that necessitates an incentive to use one's surroundings and resources with care and to maintain a sustainable population with a sense of stability, Balance and Harmony, and ultimately a more equitable, healthy world.

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For American Indians, our tribes live in and through us. American Indian identity and worldview, a history of place consciousness, preserved through oral history, manifests discrete geographical place symbols within consciousness that provide a conceptual framework of identity as place. American Indian consciousness, and hence American Indian identity, is cognitively of, and interdependent with, our land base (Waters, 2004, p. 155).

The American Indian proposes, what would it be like to exist in a world that we considered as a living Being, a mother if you will? That conceptualization is mind-boggling as we consider the treatment she is subjected to at this time primarily from the industrialized nations. What does it mean to treat Earth as a mother? **Indigenous People** come the closest to living that reality as we shall see. The definition of what it is to be Human, that is the Native identity, is grounded in that definition as well.

To the Indian, **Mother Earth** (Mooshokamikwe – Ojibwe) is as old as our Stories, and our Stories are as old as she. There is a cultural connection having to do with a geographical place, an environment, and the stories that corroborate and validate that intimate connection. Stories of emergence, origin, Creation and appearance are group specific and place explicit; consequently, each group possesses a different **Narrative**, since they each occupy a different niche, and each group is seen as meaningful in a distinct place for a particular reason. “All Natives share some commonalities: Political, spiritual, social, and stories of the Creation are similarly bound to the Earth” (Waters, 2004, p. 134).

Frequently, Native Narratives reflect journeys from a place that is difficult, dangerous, and “Supernatural,” and because of this forbidding nature, these places become **Sacred Grounds** that hold powerful significance in the tribal culture. It follows that this holiness associated with the specific ground beneath them is felt for the Earth in general as well. The **Land**, therefore, becomes a strong source of Knowledge, Wisdom and Power for the culture. This metaphysical relationship between the Earth and the dwellers of all kinds upon her recognizes the creative forces that are inherent in the planet. It includes all the forces that exist inside, outside and apart from the planet as well. Indigenous people believe that there is an ultimate **Creative Power** that underlies our belief in the Earth as Mother. This energy is

dynamic and in motion; consequently, Native people equate motion with life. Thus, the Earth has motion and is therefore alive (paraphrased Cordova, 2007, p. 114).

The energy possessed by Mother Earth has no beginning and no end, and it manifests itself in innumerable ways. When these “life” forces are infused by the Earth into her many Creations, Earth becomes Mother, much as a Human mother gives birth to her children, and as such, she continues to nurture and sustain those progeny in a ***Reciprocal Relationship***. From this intimate connection, Humans learn to understand and respect her and the intricate, interrelated web of which they are only a small, equivalent part. They learn the importance of treating her with respect to insure that she continues to sustain them. This phenomenon gives rise to a collective mentality that recognizes that it is the responsibility of every member to be deeply involved in this process. A philosophy of communal living arises: We are among all life in the Universe; not above it and not below it. We are no better or no worse than any of our relations, because the metaphysical interdependency sustains an egalitarian existence which must be treated with respect.

The sense of place derived from the relationship described above has a pertinent bearing on how one views the world. It helps us to maintain a Balance of self and our environment, as illustrated in the use of the Medicine Wheel. With the Earth as our foundation, we seek to care for ourselves and Balance mind, body, and Spirit, and to maintain right, Harmonious relationships with our family, Community, and the Animate and Inanimate Beings within our sphere of influence, respecting and honoring their existence. This “***mindspace***” is about belonging to a place; it being part of us, and we as part of it. It is clearly a recognizable piece of our culture, and we are attuned to the sights, sounds, and smells of that place where our ancestors lived and prospered. Our identity is one and the same. To understand “Indian,” one must comprehend this fundamental premise. Anne Waters speaks of her mixed-blood grandmother with deep roots to the Five Civilized Tribes of the South:

The South was part of our blood running through our veins, and part of our breath bringing oxygen to our blood. The South was in the food we ate, in the smells of the home, and in our stories of everyday. This South was us, just as surely as the blood and bones of our grandparents in the ground, the air, the plants, trees, flowers, and in all creation in that place where our people still live. We were told we were part of that land, and that that land, in the Southeast, that land and no other, was part of us from which we grew to be who we were (Waters, 2004, p. 164).

Waters makes it abundantly clear that the relationship with our **Land** is deep and **Sacred**, and for that reason, it is inconceivable that one could “own” or even want to own it. We can no more own the **Land** than the air that we breathe to survive or the rain that falls to nourish the planet. Earth is the life source of all Creatures and cannot belong to anyone. It is here that a chasm occurred centuries ago between the points of view of the colonialists and the Indian. It continues to this day. **Land** in the Western-European view is seen as an object, a commodity to be owned, an investment for profit to develop and commercialize. To not exploit the land is seen as a waste of it. The policy of the United States has always been built upon such a philosophy. **Manifest Destiny**, a classic example, was founded upon a “God-given” right to dominate the environment as a conquest, to control it to fit the needs and desires of people.

John Locke, English philosopher and a major contributor to the *Period of Enlightenment*, had some very unenlightened views in this Native writer’s perspective when it came to land:

The Earth itself is part of the common stock, and so, as much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property. Humanity was commanded by God to subdue the Earth, that is, to improve it for the benefit of human beings—for it needs improvement, given that nature and the earth furnished only the almost worthless materials as in themselves. Moreover ... land that is left wholly to nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, tillage, or planting, is called, as indeed it is, waste: and we shall find the benefit of it amount to little more than nothing, which motivates his implicit invitation to take the land in the Americas, because it remains unimproved and wasted (Norton-Smith, 2010, location 2141-2148).

It is very difficult for me as a Native Person, and I am sure many others as well, to understand such a worldview, having been raised with a Native perspective.

It is very ironic that a mainstream society that believes strongly in the idea of property possession and creating bounded spaces seems to have no conceptualization of the idea of bounded space. Westerners have no sense of land limitations for themselves. They have forgotten, or never learned, the niche that they, as Humans, occupy and thus have no responsibility towards the well-being of the Earth or her Creatures. Without a sense of limitation, there is no sacredness accorded to one’s own place, and consequently, there is a lack of attachment to the land. It is almost Freudian in that Freud advocated to understand pleasure, one must experience pain. Analogous, perhaps? When land becomes limited, we understand its significance. Westerners, therefore, do not recognize their own boundaries or those of others because of the transitory nature of land in their view. One can choose to move

on when it becomes expedient to do so. There is no deep connection, no reverence, and no identity with the soil beneath their feet. As we have learned in the discussion of the Medicine Wheel, the American Indian firmly stands at the center of his Universe, looking out onto definite boundaries that define and give him a sense of who he is, what his responsibilities are towards all of Creation, and how he must live to maintain Harmony and Balance. He understands his niche as an equal among all Creatures and his path in life is to maintain that homeostatic condition.

Vine Deloria, Jr. helps to clarify the contradiction:

American Indians hold their lands—places—as having the highest possible meaning, and all their statements are made with this reference point in mind. [Western European] Immigrants review the movement of their ancestors across the continent as a steady progression of basically good events and experiences, thereby placing history—time—in the best possible light. When one group is concerned with the philosophical problem of space and the other with the philosophical problem of time, then the statements of either group do not make much sense when transferred from one context to the other without the proper consideration of what is taking place (Deloria, 1994, p. 62-63).

It is Deloria's contention that almost all tribal religions have a **Sacred Geographic Feature** or place somewhere within its bounded space: a mountain, plateau, river, valley or other significant characteristic that helps Native people to bond themselves with respect to the **Land**. These places are permanent fixtures for them: **Sacred Places** in contrast to the Western sacred events. It is from these **Sacred Places** that the tribal culture establishes its identity. As well, it is often at these locations that the individual Native prays and seeks Visions to fulfill personal rites of passage, to acquire strength to face a predicament, or to seek guidance in following the right path. It is the recurrence of such events in these **Sacred Places** where Spiritual revelations are experienced over generations and remembered through Rituals and Ceremonies. Worldview thus becomes not what the people believed to be true but that which they experienced to be true in these **Sacred Locations**.

The late Dr. Viola Cordova adds a contemporary perspective to the mix:

All of our Native systems all derive from the heart of place. Even when we have been sent away from that place or have not learned our own languages, we still have it; from subtle gesture and learned ways of being, it is passed down to us. This is how it is. The knowledge is in the manner of being, even when the words are not spoken. Our philosophies come from being of a place and a community of knowing place and respecting its boundaries. In part, this is why we Native peoples persist in our identities (Cordova, 2007, p. ix).