

Indigenous Wisdom: Humility, Abundance, Generosity
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READING

An op-ed was published yesterday in the LA Times, titled “Why LA is Right to Replace Columbus Day with Indigenous People’s Day.” It’s written by Steven W. Hackel who is a professor of history at UC Riverside. In it he says,

“Even though California was among the last regions to be colonized by Spain, the shadow cast by Columbus reached all the way to our shores.

Columbus’ landfall ushered in one of the greatest injustices in human history: the wholesale transfer of wealth and lands from native peoples to Europeans; the unprecedented depopulation of vast swaths of the Americas as European diseases reduced native populations by 90%; and the violent oppression of indigenous culture and beliefs.

That the colonization of the Americas made possible by Columbus was both cruel and tragic is not a matter of debate. The history is settled.

This is why, since 1992, municipalities large and small across the country have been stepping back from their public commemorations of Columbus. It’s why, in July 2015, Pope Francis asked for forgiveness on behalf of the Catholic Church “for crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America.” And it’s why the LA City Council and Board of Supervisors voted to change the holiday in his honor.

Before Spanish colonization, the regions that make up modern California were home to the largest and most densely settled population of indigenous people north of the Valley of Mexico. Some 350,000 people lived here before Spanish missionaries and soldiers arrived in 1769. By the 1830s, the Franciscans had baptized more than 80,000 Natives, but 60,000 of them had died in the missions, and nearly 25,000 of the dead were children under 10.

It’s fitting to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day because Natives from California, and indigenous people who immigrated here from other regions, played a crucial role in the early history of Los Angeles.

These indigenous newcomers built the pueblo that would become Los Angeles, establishing farms, ranches and commercial networks. A newer indigenous L.A. grew up alongside the survival of an older one.

But after the U.S. acquired California from Mexico in 1848, the Gold Rush drew a tidal wave of Anglo Americans from the U.S., who brought with them a murderous racism that worked to oppress indigenous people and render them all but invisible.

Nevertheless, indigenous people — those native to California and those who had settled here — persisted in Southern California, and many more continued to move here from all corners of the Americas. **In fact, according to recent census information, no county in the country has a higher percentage of indigenous people than L.A. County.**

Indigenous Peoples Day correctly celebrates and honors their place in L.A.'s past, present and future.”

So in today's often discouraging landscape of bad news, I wanted to take this opportunity to focus on this good news. That not only can humanity take some measure of responsibility for its misdeeds, we can also change the narrative, change the culture, correct the history of who we are.

What truly inspires me, though, and is a passion of mine, is taking this further than just a new holiday, as powerful a symbol as it may be, in the decades to come.

We take it further by asking, what about all that wisdom and culture that was brutally snuffed out, in the name of western religion and unbridled capitalist impulses. The incredible thing is so much of it has survived – it is recorded; there are medicine men and women who still know the ceremonies, who have passed on the flame, the burning embers of these traditions, and have written books for people like me and you to possibly figure out how such thought-ways can shape our lives. That's the thing with wisdom – it survives because it's strong and powerful in its own right.

I believe it survives because we still desperately need it. So today I am very happy to reflect with you on some concepts of native wisdom and how they might inform our ethics and spirituality, and I'm focusing particularly on the Aborigines in Australia, and the great Lakota nation that is now located on reservations in the Dakotas. I have two wonderful books to recommend, beginning with this one, “Mutant Message Down Under” by Marlo Morgan. Who all is familiar with this book?

The author says it's a work of fiction to protect the natives, but it reads like a true story. Morgan is asked by an Aboriginal tribe to receive an award for some great volunteer work she did in Australia that benefitted their people, so she flies to a far away corner of the country, and is picked up at her hotel by a man named Ooota, who drives her four hours into the Outback. She arrives, and long story short, she is asked to dispossess all her belongings. They are burned in a fire – camera, jewelry, shoes, even all her clothes, everything – and is told she has been selected as a worthy participant to go on walk-about with this tribe of 14 people. Having little choice, she goes – and is gone for many months. Ooota becomes her translator. The book describes her adventure of living as the natives do, eating all manner of things, and surviving the harsh desert climate. Most

importantly, she learns some timeless wisdom and beliefs about the nature of life, and what human beings are capable of.

The Aboriginals call themselves “Real People”, and all others are known to them as mutants, because they are not, from their view, whole people who understand the nature of the universe. Hence the title, “Mutant Message Down Under.”

READING

The Humility of Crazy Horse – by Joseph Marshall III from book “The Lakota Way”

We Lakota don’t remember Crazy Horse primarily because he defeated Crook or Custer; we remember him because – in spite of his larger-than-life achievements on the field of battle – he was a humble man.

Crazy Horse was born to be a warrior and a leader. He was known far and wide for his daring and recklessness in combat, but also for his ability to make good tactical decisions. If anyone earned the right to participate in the waktoglaka ceremony – when warriors recount their wins in battle in public – it was he. But according to all the stories handed down about him, he never did.

For all his life Crazy Horse was painfully shy and probably spoke in public only twice. Though he was entitled to wear the symbols of his many achievements on the battlefield – eagle feathers – he was known to dress plainly.

His refusal to do what was expected of all accomplished warriors – recount his exploits in combat – raised more than a few eyebrows because he was bucking tradition, but it also endeared him to many. Those exploits are the basis for the legend of Crazy Horse; but sadly, they overshadow the real man – the man, the stories say, who would walk through camp with his head down in humility when he had every right to strut with arrogance.

Crazy Horse didn’t ask or volunteer to be a leader. Men came to him, especially during that critical period following the Battle of Little Bighorn when the U.S. Army stepped up its campaign against him. Because of his reputation and the humility with which he always conducted himself, over 900 people followed him. Only a few more than a 100 were fighting men. The rest were old people, women, and children, and they all endured hardship and uncertainty. But all of the fighting men and most, if not all, of the others would have continued to fight against the whites to the last man, or woman, or child if Crazy Horse had chosen that as the best course of action. But he chose otherwise. As a true testament of their loyalty, Crazy Horse’s people followed him into an uncertain future when – for the welfare of his noncombatants – he finally surrendered to the United States. He was the last Lakota leader to do so.

Humility was a virtue that the Lakota of old expected their leaders to possess. A quiet, humble person, we believed, was aware of other people and other things. An arrogant,

boastful man was only aware of himself. Interestingly, our methods of selecting leaders today seem to favor the arrogant and boastful.

The process that we, as a nation, endure every four years is the same that many Native American tribes or nations seem to mimic on a more frequent basis. In Lakota society of the not-too-distant past, however, it was the people who approached the man who possessed the qualities of leadership. One of those qualities was humility.

If humility was a virtue important for everyone to practice, it was absolutely necessary for a leader. Humility can provide clarity where arrogance makes a cloud. The last thing the people wanted was someone whose judgment and actions were clouded by arrogance.

SERMON

I realized after reading both of these books that there was food for writing several sermons on core spiritual or ethical subjects – on humility alone, or abundance and gratitude, perseverance, the value of having little or no material attachments, or several more topics. Personally, I've always been attracted to native values and beliefs, because I sense they are pure, and that I can trust them. For thousands of years, the first peoples lived in harmony with the earth, if not always in harmony with each other. Even when there were rivalries and battles between different tribes, it was much more about honor and bravery than about killing, or wiping out great numbers of people.

In our modern and increasingly uncertain world, such core principles of living not only can serve as a salve for our anxieties, but if we were to integrate them with intention into our daily lives, we ourselves can become living beacons of hope: through our actions, through our demonstrations of integrity and steadfastness. With our strong character we give hope and well-being to our closest family members, to our friends, and the larger communities in which we work and worship.

There is immense diversity among the hundreds of native nations that still survive, but the tribes hold much in common, especially the worldview that nature is sacred and is the basis of all being on this earth - that we are not above nature, we are part of it. And what we do to nature and to each other, we do to ourselves.

Today let's focus on some key concepts. Let's start with humility, abundance, and generosity, for these are related, but I fear that in today's world, we are forgetting that, at our peril. Today it would seem that the road to success and abundance must entail aggressiveness, maybe even ruthlessness, and great wallops of ego. But as we heard in the piece about Crazy Horse, it was quite the opposite that defined Crazy Horse's success and honored place among the pantheon of true American heroes.

When we have humility, not only are we not clouded by ego, but we are also more likely to practice gratitude. We see with clear eyes that all that we have is not merely a result of our own individual efforts, but of those around us, and some whom we don't even know

– such as the people who pick our fruits and vegetables, or the workers who manufacture our many mobile devices.

One of the first things I loved in “Mutant Message Down Under” was the ritual the tribe did together every single morning before they set off walking. In a semi-circle they would face east, and offer their gratitude for the food and water that would faithfully appear each day. Marlo Morgan writes,

These people believe everything exists on the planet for a reason. Everything has a purpose. So each morning the tribe sends out a thought or message to the animals and plants in front of us. They say, ‘We are walking your way. We are coming to honor your purpose for existence.’ The Real People tribe never go without food. Always, the universe responds to their mind-talk. They believe the world is a place of abundance... I learned that the appearance of food was not taken for granted. It was first requested, always expected to appear, and did appear, but was gratefully received and genuine gratitude always given.

If this tribe had a concept of God it was called “Oneness.” As Marlo Morgan describes it, the tribe begins each day by saying thank you not only to the food they will eat that day, but also to Oneness, and for themselves, their friends, the world. “They sometimes ask for specifics,” she writes, “but it is always phrased, ‘if it is in my highest good *and* the highest good for all life everywhere.” *Italics are mine.*

As I read this book, I thought that a name or term for God that I am comfortable using is “Merciful Oneness.” I am of the Pagan persuasion when it comes to spiritual beliefs, and while I once thought of God as Nature Herself, or the Great Mother, I’ve expanded my vision to include the heavens and the cosmos, all of existence of which we are a part - our 7th Principle, yes - but also a vision that is not limited to a gender, but is in fact limitless, and all utterly connected, all One.

For me, this captures the idea that God is all encompassing, and importantly, *merciful* and *generous* in its abundance. Again, the practice of remembering this on a regular basis – especially daily – is a strong salve for anxiety. It reminds me of one of my favorite messages by Jesus of Nazareth, in the Books of Matthew and Luke. Jesus said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear . . . who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? . . . Consider the lilies of the field. They do not labor or spin . . . if this is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown in the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”

It’s wonderful when we come upon native wisdom that overlaps with the Judeo-Christian tradition, which lend to these ideas of Oneness, mercy, and abundance. Abundance, by the way, is our Worship Theme of the Month this November.

When we are aware of the great abundance in our life through our gratitude, we ourselves are also more likely to be generous, and abundance-giving. This was also a great lesson

from “The Lakota Way.” The Earth is generous and so must we be. Joseph Marshall writes, “One of the sacred ceremonies of the Pipe brought to us and taught by White Buffalo Calf Maiden is the *Hunka*, which means ‘to forever move.’ The Earth tells us, ‘I shall forever be, or move as, your mother.’ We are given assurance that no matter how good or bad we are, no matter how happy or miserable, because we are children of the Earth she will always love us and provide for us. Therefore, our concept and practice of generosity comes from the Earth itself.”

It’s all a part of having faith that the Earth will care for us, and as part of that promise, or covenant if you will, is that we in turn promise to care for each other.

Now, if we were to get very adept and supple at honoring these key values in our lives – humility, abundance, and generosity, it creates a strong foundation for another key spiritual concept that, again, many religions share, but that some of the first peoples seemed to be especially good at – especially the Aborigines. There is some fascinating research out there that indicates they likely were some of the first human beings to survive into the modern age. Their history goes way back thousands and thousands of years, long, long, long before the white man came to Australia.

Like many Native American tribes, everything they were given by the Earth was never put to waste. Uses were found for every plant harvested, and every part of animals who give their lives for humans’ sustenance. Along with this ethic came something else – a lack of attachment to material objects. This was especially vital on walk-about, when you had to travel light. One of the scenes Marlo Morgan describes is when the tribe has a joyful night of music – they are able to find all their instruments in nature, from plants and rocks and wood, and when the night is over, these items were all returned where they found them.

I’m not suggesting you give everything away and start walking, owning nothing. But I’d like to share this beautiful quotation of Morgan’s:

“Born empty-handed,
Die empty-handed.
I witnessed life at its fullest,
Empty handed.”

I don’t need to convince you all of how cluttered our modern lives are, but I will testify. I’ve developed an attachment to Swatch watches – sometimes I’ll even wear two at a time like people did in the 1980’s. I think of it as my ironic, analogue fashion statement – nobody ever tells me my watches are cool, but I don’t care, because I think they’re cool, and the wearing gives me joy. It’s ironic because I’m no fashionista, but here I am attached to a materialistic fetish, one that delivers time, no less, which speaks to my complete compliance to schedule and the hustle and bustle of modern life.

Such hobbies take time and money, and the point is, the less we have, the less we spend our lives on the pursuit of acquisition and maintenance of items, the more time we have

for the things that are not things – like nurturing relationships or spiritual awakening, learning, volunteering and being of service, being an activist, learning a new skill or talent. These are more honorable things that not only enhance our living but also make us who we are and form our character, and when we die, are the things we'll be remembered by. When I die, I don't want someone eulogizing me to say, "she owned a lot of Swatch watches." That's like, so what? I want to be remembered for more than my whimsy. For what do you *not* want to be remembered? And for what do you really *want* to be remembered?

Finally, I'd like us to turn to the concept of truth. Again, in our modern world, one might conclude that truth no longer matters so much. The research is in: even when people know a politician is manipulating facts, they still cling to the principles of that manipulation, and discard the relevance of the truth. This happens on both sides of the political aisle. For these reasons and more, truth has lost its honored place in our minds and hearts, and even our souls. In this way, we should fight not only for our own souls, but the soul of our nation and our world. We may find ourselves needing, at times, to take a stand for truth. We may have to step apart from our crowd, so that we walk the Red Road, instead of the Black.

In the "Lakota Way," Joseph Marshall speaks of the Red Road, the road of integrity, honor, and truth, and the Black Road, where there is only the illusion of truth. Throughout our days, we are given the choice of which road to travel. He tells a great story about this:

*Two chieftains met on a plain while their two armies waited.
"I have ten thousand warriors, every one skilled with weapons and seasoned by battle.
Victory will be mine," said the first chieftain. "What do you have?"*

*"Only the truth," replied the second chieftain. "This war has decimated my people so I
face you now with an army of a thousand children. This truth will either destroy you or
glorify you."*

*The first chieftain returned to his camp, where his army of ten thousand stood ready for
battle. He ordered his army to put aside their weapons while he went into seclusion to
ponder the truth his enemy had spoken. With the new dawn he sent his chief aide with
gifts of food and an offer of peace to the army of a thousand children. The first chieftain
then returned to his homeland and stood to be judged before his countrymen, fully
expecting to be dishonored for his weakness. He was, instead, made a king.*

And so we often can't have truth work in service of the good without courage. The Lakota call it bravery. No, we're not always going to succeed, but the Aborigines say that the universe responds to our heartfelt intentions. It is often the sincerity of our *intent* that is more important than the result.

So, to bring this home, and literally down to Earth, and the truth, here is a final soliloquy of hope from Mutant Message Down Under. Let its transcendent message seep into your bones, giving you peace and courage.

Ooota, Morgan's translator says,

Mutants have many beliefs; they say your way is different from my way, your savior is not my savior, your forever is not my forever. But the truth is, all life is one life. There is only one game in progress. There is one race, many different shades. Mutants argue the name of God, what building, what day, what ritual . . . Truth is truth. If you hurt someone, you hurt self. If you help someone, you help self. Blood and bone is in all people. It's the heart and intent that is different. Mutants think about this one hundred years only, of self and separateness. Real People think about forever. It is all one, our ancestors, our unborn grandchildren, all of life everywhere.