

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#739 - In The Native Way

December 05, 2001

by Tom Goldtooth* National Director, Indigenous Environmental Network

Spirituality plays a very important role in the work our network does in environmental protection. It frames who we are. I believe that as Native people, we are the land and the land is us. Those of us in the environmental justice movement have started to educate the larger environmental movement that our work protecting the environment is spiritual work.

When we talk about the environment, very often we are talking about sacred elements. We're talking about air, which is a gift from the Creator. From the day that we're born, we take that first gasp of air and that's the life giver. Some day that breath of life is going to leave our body, thus completing its cycle.

Water is a sacred element. From the time the unborn is swimming around in the womb of its mother, we need water to sustain us. Throughout our lifetime, that water that flows through the veins of our Mother Earth remains connected to all life throughout the world.

The soil, the earth itself, that skin of Mother Earth is also one of the sacred elements.

And we have the sun that comes up in the morning every day that gives us warmth, that gives us the understanding. That's the fire, and fire is very sacred.

Some of the prophecies of our various tribes talk about a time when technology and development will be so far out of balance that it may affect the future of our planet. The Six Nations in the eastern Great Lakes area have prophecies about the time when the trees will start dying from the top down, and I understand that's happening. We've got glaciers in the Andes that are receding. We've got thinning ice in Alaska that is affecting the subsistence culture of the Alaska Natives. I hear that aquifers are starting to dry out. Climate change and global warming are impacting our people.

Our elders talk about the spiritual battle that's been going on for a long time. Industrialization has always wanted to control the land, control the people. That's going on today. I believe that globalization is part of that. Globalization places no value in people, no value in religious and spiritual principles, no value in the protection of the commons. Spiritual values tie us to the importance of protecting the Mother Earth, the plants, all animate and inanimate things. When we lose that understanding, industry, development, and globalization can do what they want to do, because there are no values behind their structures. Globalization has created a system of corporate ownership above the importance of plants, living things, and humans.

Back in the Old World -- Europe -- there were Crusades and Inquisitions, which did away with Earth-based religions. This practice rewrote history. Industrialization further killed off the Old World tribes, their identification, their traditional form of governance and replaced them with kingdoms and peasants. They've lost their connections to the land and who they are.

That's why I've always believed it's very important to carry on our traditions and our culture as Native peoples, to make sure our children know who they are and have that identification with the sacredness of our Mother Earth. Native peoples, especially those who are trying to practice ways that have been given to them since time immemorial, are an endangered species. Acculturation and assimilation -- which are products of colonization -- have been very effective. As Native peoples, we're still trying to hang on to what little we have left, our language, so we can practice our ceremonies, and our sacred areas. Western forms of development have gradually destroyed many of those sacred places.

The elders tell us that we're a tribal society of givers living in a society of takers. They say, "Go and do what you can to talk to

people, try and educate them about these things." In the Native way, we respect people's own spirits. They have to come through their own self-realization to take responsibility for their actions.

A meeting of the tribes

Unfortunately, non-Native peoples no longer have traditional tribal systems, so we can't meet with them tribe to tribe. That was how we used to meet to deal with these kinds of issues. There were always ceremonial leaders, woman leaders, mechanisms for approaching these things. But that's not there anymore. Tribalism has been killed off.

As a practitioner of our traditional ways, I've been taught to put prayer first, to put the sacred Pipe first. These teachings provide me with the discipline to put the Creator first in everything I do. When I don't put the Creator first, then I start getting into trouble. I was taught that we're given a mind and a heart, and when we start to use the mind too much we get out of balance. We have to maintain a balance. Anytime I put prayer aside and try to do paperwork or do politics too much, I get myself in trouble.

In our traditional societies, we had political leaders, but political leaders maintained a balance with the spiritual leadership in the village. Various tribes had clan mothers or matrilineal clan systems that kept the menfolk in check. Our connection to the sacredness of the female creative principle of Mother Earth really means a lot, and that's something a lot of people don't understand. We always say that Mother Earth is sacred. She's the creative principle that allows life to go on, and that's why in our traditional values as Native peoples we have the most respect and reverence for the female. We're taught to take care of the Mother Earth and to take care of our women, our mothers, our aunts, our grandmothers, our sisters, our daughters in the same way we take care of the Earth.

I need to say that there are many different tribes and many different ways, but there are many similarities when I talk about the sacredness of Mother Earth and our relationship to the woman. Any time we start to lose that understanding, that's when we start getting into trouble as men.

Men have big egos. Men can easily lead religions and societies into warfare. That's why we always have to take direction from our women, from our matrilineal clan systems, because they understand the importance of that relationship. That was always the balance.

The men's role is also very important. The man is the protector of our villages and our women. I think that the men's and women's roles are out of balance in the same way that life is out of balance right now. I believe that men have to somehow find out what our role is in the modern world. The woman still carries forth the children, still understands that creative principle, still has that connection to the Earth and the powers of the moon. Their role is more easily defined. But I find a lot of brothers, no matter what race, are out of balance, searching to find out who they are as a man. We must not forget that Father Sky and Mother Earth need one another as part of the creative principle.

That goes back to the work that we do with the environment. When I talk to white environmentalists about the importance of the spiritual aspects of their work, they have no understanding of that -- especially the men. The women seem to have a better understanding. Very often, the closest the non-Natives can understand about the sacredness of the Earth is the concept of stewardship -- which is good but still has ownership attached to it. But we can work with stewardship as a beginning.

Sharing ceremonies

A lot of the prophecies of the various tribes have said the time will come when the younger brother and the younger sister who have come from across the ocean will start to look towards the Native

peoples for direction. But in my younger years, I was very resistant to the new agers coming into our lands and into our ceremonies.

My youth led me into Native activism -- what we called Red Power. I was one of those foot soldiers demanding the recognition of our treaty rights with my fists in the air, demanding justice. I talked to my grandmother once, and she said, "You've got a lot of anger in you. What's wrong?" So I started talking about what was going on, about people being killed. She said, "You need to go into ceremony. You've got a lot of anger."

As the years went on, I started to see more non-Native people, basically white people, coming to our ceremonies looking for answers, and I struggled with that. It seemed to me they were continuing the same old practice of taking things away from us without giving back. Now it was our ceremony and knowledge.

An uncle on the Dakota Reservation in Prairie Island, Minnesota, asked me to help him in the sweat lodge in the mid-1980s. He had a dream that the four colors of man would be coming to his ceremonies. Sure enough, soon people started coming down from the Twin Cities on Friday nights, carloads of them, and there I was helping him with all these people. I wouldn't have done it if he hadn't asked. But he needed help; he was getting tired. I really had to work this out for myself, because I couldn't take my anger into the sweat lodge. I started to learn about compassion.

I feel people in this country as well as in Europe are searching. I've been to a German sweat lodge, which was given to them by a full-blood Cherokee man in the '70s. In 2000 in Germany I was sitting in the sweat lodge with these German people. They said they had lost their ways from the Crusades a long time ago, and this Native sweat lodge was all they had to help them make their way back to who they were. I saw they had respect and humility about these spiritual ways. They demonstrated compassion for each other, love, and faith in the Higher Power -- they have everything that we need to live and survive. Who's to say that what they're doing is wrong? I started to see that this spiritual understanding is to be shared with all people, regardless of race.

Back in the 1980s, I met some people with the Rainbow tribe. The Rainbow tribe is mostly white folks, but there are some black people, Latinos, and Asians. I had my own stereotypes about the Rainbow tribe -- basically hippie-type folks who smoked marijuana, partied, and tried to have a connection with the Earth. I thought there was something out of balance, and I usually stayed away from the Rainbow gatherings. But I met some elders who came to the ceremonies that my uncle was running at the Prairie Island Dakota reservation. I sat down and talked with them. I learned they didn't want to be disrespectful to Native peoples or our ways. I talked about the importance of keeping things in context and not mixing things up. They understood. They said there was no structure in the Rainbow tribe to address this. They do the best they can -- basically they allow different people to do what they want to do.

I started to pray about that. An understanding came to me that God is very compassionate and loving to everyone. When people come together searching for answers for themselves, like the Rainbow tribe, if they are sincere and have patience, a way will come to them that is for them. It may not be Native as we define it, but it is something that comes in a sacred manner and it will be for them. That is the power of this Creation working through all people of all races and all tribes.

It is my prayer that when all humans go through this transformation, it will help them to re-identify their relationship to the sacredness of the land, Mother Earth. When this comes, we will have peace and a clean and safe future for our future generations.

=====

* Tom B. K. Goldtooth (Dine' and Mdewakanton Dakota) is the national director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, P.O. Box 485, Bemidji, MN 56619; Phone: (218) 751-4967; Web: <http://www.ienearth.org>.

Reprinted with permission from YES! A JOURNAL OF POSITIVE FUTURES (Winter 2002), P.O. Box 10818, Bainbridge Island, WA 98110. Subscriptions: (800) 937-4451 Web: <http://www.yesmagazine.org>.