

Native American Thought-Ways that Have Moved Me
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CALL TO WORSHIP

Wake now my senses! The consciousness of our natural world begins with our senses. Today I'm pleased to be sharing our worship leadership with Dr. Alanna Brown as we share Native American thought-ways that have moved us. We frame it this way to be sure to convey our humility in our presentation – as white people, we wish to take care in how we speak for Native Americans. It is not our tradition, it is their tradition, and all we can own of it is our own experience. The term “thought-ways” refers to how you think influences how you live.

And now, for the Call to Worship, the words are by my favorite hero of all time, Crazy Horse, of the Oglala Lakota nation. He said,

The Red Nation shall rise again and it shall be a blessing for a sick world; a world filled with broken promises, selfishness and separations; a world longing for light again.

I see a time of Seven Generations when all the colors of mankind will gather under the Sacred Tree of Life and the whole Earth will become one circle again.

In that day, there will be those among the Lakota who will carry knowledge and understanding of unity among all living things and the young white ones will come to those of my people and ask for this wisdom.

I salute the light within your eyes where the whole Universe dwells. For when you are at that center within you and I am that place within me, we shall be one.

SERMON

Another time, I will do a sermon mostly about Crazy Horse, because his thought-way of a leadership of humility has moved me greatly, and influenced my leadership style. The best leaders are humble leaders who don't mind who gets the credit. But that's for another time. I will, however, pick up one of the phrases I quoted from him in the Call to Worship. He said, “the young white ones” will ask for the wisdom of the native people. Of course to ask for anything, let alone sacred wisdom, takes humility. As you know, our country is now led by a man who emulates humility only when it serves him. And so he, like so many Americans (white or not) is one of “the young ones.” What Crazy Horse meant by “young” is that Native Americans have always looked at our spirituality and grasp of true wisdom as one that is immature and undeveloped.

I see that as an interesting challenge for us, for we long for a spirituality that is not superficial, but mature and wise. I have always been attracted to Native American

thought-ways because I trust them. I trust any spirituality that seeks to be in harmony with the earth – a thought-way that we desperately need to bring to the mainstream at this juncture. There is wonderful literature about Native Americans that either Dr. Alanna or I would be happy to suggest to you. For we all wish to bring about that day Crazy Horse speaks of when *all the colors of mankind will gather under the Sacred Tree of Life*. I'll be bringing up the Tree of Life again in a minute, and want to point out that this church has a lovely depiction of the Tree of Life right here in our Sanctuary over there.

Today I want to home in on one of the most moving Native American thought-ways to me, which is that, in the original languages, they have no word for “evil.” There are only those actions which sustain life or destroy life. Thus you cannot destroy evil with evil, only banish those whose behaviors are corrupting the whole.

While we don't have the power to banish our country's leaders whom we fear are leading us down a path of harmful actions, we do very much have power of another kind: we have free will over the state of our minds and the state of our spirituality. As we move more deeply into a time of uncertainty and intolerance, we find that we can't live our lives angry or fearful all the time – we discover that doing so is only to do violence to ourselves.

It's not unlike the predicament of wishing ill on someone who has harmed us. No matter how many revenge fantasies we might spin in our minds, the world goes on spinning, and we've only wasted emotional, mental time and energy. We discover, with chagrin, that the person is still harming us because we are allowing the dynamic to continue.

And so whether it's existing under a leader who is remote to us, or existing with an enemy that is nearer to us, at some point we have to wake up to the damage such emotions can inflict on us, and choose a different thought-way that creates a different way to live.

This isn't about forgiveness, though restorative justice is another Native American thought-way. It's about a different world-view, one that is quite different from our Western world-view, which was quite quick to embrace a dichotomous world. A world where Eve was bad because she listened to the evil snake that told her to eat from the Tree of Life, and Adam was good because he did not. The Bible depicts much retribution on the part of God, much vengeance - even of the petty variety.

No, the worldview of Native Americans doesn't begin with a story about a lost garden of Eden, or a paradigm of human dominance over nature. It begins with a vast web of life that includes all creatures, big and small. It is a resilient web in some ways – despite the damage that has been done over the centuries since Cortez and Columbus arrived in the so-called New World, and especially since the Industrial Revolution, nevertheless, our natural world persists in caring for us – at least, we the lucky ones, who have enough to eat. People like us live in a time of

plenty that, down the road, may be looked back upon with regret that so much went wasted.

In other ways that Dr. Alanna elucidated, the web is terribly fragile. The oceans can take only so much pollution and temperature rise before they will be unable to sustain the life they have for millions of years. It's one reason why some people – usually women - believe the Earth is female – the Earth started as one big ocean, or a one gigantic womb of amniotic fluid. If you've seen the wonderful children's movie Moana, it was a man who raised the islands from the sea, the demi-God Maui, who is, like, totally hot by the way, even as a cartoon. But I digress.

Our soils that grow food can only take so much acidity before they can't grow food anymore. Our waterways can only take so much, and so on. The great web is fragile.

The web of life includes our international relations and societal systems of governance. A healthy democracy is like a fragile web of life – it can only take so much corrosion before authoritarianism and a volatile nationalism sets in.

And so, we first have to take stock of the fact that the web is wounded. Our Mother Earth does Her best to sustain life, but she is wounded. Our democracy still functions, though, only for some. From the beginning it failed Native Americans, to say the least, and it has disenfranchised thousands of Black Americans in perhaps every election. Our democracy is a web not spun well.

But we are deprived of web-healing language. As good as it felt to identify our new president as a fascist a few weeks ago, this does little, if much of anything, to heal the web. Identifying a problem is important, but then we need to move on.

Our spirituality is very much at stake here, for the spiritually enlightened person knows that she can't fight hate with hate. She or he has to make choices. We can't fight vitriol with vitriol, and if evil is not a thing, if only actions that sustain or destroy life are things, then that is exactly what we must go for – those actions that heal the wounded web.

We are faced with such choices everyday, and it gets to the heart of why we call ourselves Unitarian Universalists, for UUs are primarily concerned with what it means to live well, to live a life that is loving, a life that gives more than it harms.

As spiritual beings, the most challenging thing is to live a loving life – especially in a worldview that values competition and personal achievement. Especially in a capitalistic culture that creates a lot of stress. The people who get ahead are often ruthless and sacrifice relationships for status. Remember, we have a saying for it, “nice guys finish last.” And so being mean isn't looked down upon so much. Ignoring regulations that protect the Earth but raises profits is acceptable to many. How do we live well in this kind of world, in a way that powerfully defies such destructive thought-ways, but also strengthens and heals the web?

We have to know who we are – we have to nurture the kind of self-awareness that Crazy Horse had. A wisdom that understands which actions will hurt the web or ourselves and others, and those actions that will do the opposite, that will mend our fragile bonds.

For starters, we might find some acceptance. This is the world as it is. This is the President as he is. How shall we respond? The Buddhists ask this question all the time – in fact, they believe the key to contentment is to accept what is. And then, much like Native Americans, they believe in right action, that our actions matter, that how we choose to respond matters.

For many, there is the temptation to escape, whether we do so with television, or consumerism, drinking or drugging. Such activities help us move through anxiety or stress. But they do nothing to heal the web. When the purchasing is over, when the program ends, when sobriety returns, the web is no healthier because you are no healthier. It's no wonder self-destruction is one of America's favorite past-times, for our worldview is so often destructive.

Peace in the world begins with ourselves and our closest relationships. Peace begins with how we respond to those structures that prefer violence and oppression.

Perhaps a collective response of right action that is loving and healing will not allow this new fascist agenda to get traction. Without traction, it will self-destruct. We must remember that the fragile ego of our new president absolutely feeds on our anger – he loves to get us riled up – our anger and dismay titillates him. Much like our anger and hate titillates our worst enemy.

So instead of being angry, let's be positive, let's be pro-active. What wonderful ways the people are coming together, what amazing potential for right action on a scale we've not seen before is in sight.

Rather than destroy fascism, let's frame it as healing democracy, for we didn't have a healthy democracy to begin with. Think of this: we don't *have* to sit back with our first woman president and do little to improve the world. Instead we get to participate more fully than ever before in healing the world, healing our democracy. We don't have to sit back in smug self-congratulation, we *get* to affirm who we are and what we believe in as never before, much more powerfully ensuring that the world is how it should be for our children to inherit. And their children, and their children, and so on.

This isn't about making lemonade. It's about having a mature spirituality that transcends our ego and our individual righteousness. It's about understanding more deeply how connected we indeed are, despite the generations of conditioning

that say otherwise, that say we exist for me and mine. This crisis of leadership is an opportunity for collective spiritual growth.

In a way, I'm seeking to give you permission – you don't have to be angry all the time. You don't have to be afraid. In the meetings for social action that help heal the broken strands of the web, you'll find there is comfort there, there is some laughter. There is camaraderie and healing there for our worried hearts.

Our self-expression may take on a new life we didn't know we had before. It will open doors for us. Remember we as individuals are part of the web, so what we do to heal ourselves also heals the web.

As I've learned from Dr. Alanna, Native Americans will joke a lot with non-Natives and make fun of them, in order to help them see their ego means nothing. They laugh at ego! Much, again, as the Buddhists do. I want to end with a short story from my childhood. A story that involves Christianity, evil, and Unitarianism.

Having grown up UU, I am pleased to say that, looking back, I intuited early on that evil actually wasn't a thing. There was a Christian youth group in high school called Young Life, and I went because my friends went, and I happily translated all the Christology in the songs as we sang them. But one night, one of the youth leaders, a college student, sat with me in my car for nearly two hours, badgering me to accept Christ as my Lord and Savior. I kept explaining that I believe in all the values that Jesus espoused, but that my Unitarian faith assured me accepting Christ was not necessary to emulate Jesus. He finally gave up, but I was emotionally shredded by the conversation – I was a Senior in High School.

My parents were worried sick by the time I got home. We then talked for another couple hours about what Unitarians believed, that we didn't buy into this talk of original sin and so forth. Around this time, I joined an inter-mural basketball team – yes, believe it or not, I'm a good basketball player; I challenge any of you to a game of HORSE. The name of our team was "Pigs in Zen" – yes, borrowed from the Jane's Addiction song. On the back of our jerseys we wrote in marker our nicknames. I nicknamed myself in a jaunty font, "THE EVIL UNITARIAN."

It was my way of saying that evil is a joke – that no one can call me evil, because an evil person is not a thing. The closest we can get to evil existing is in the actions that harm life. And if this is true, then all of us have done so, in ways we are more conscious of than others. We Unitarian Universalists believe all humans are born with a mixed bag traits – and that it's up to ourselves and our communities to shape our traits for the better. In Christian language, we hate the sin and not the sinner. For hating people only does violence to ourselves and the web of life.

Think about it. It may sound too weak and Pollyanna to you, but therein lies the wise paradox. We are powerful in our peacefulness. We are resilient in our non-violent protest. We are happier in our healing than we are in our harming. Let us all

think about the ways we can harm the web less, and heal the web more. Let us think about what Crazy Horse saw and shared with us – a time when we would be one, and *“the whole Earth will become one circle again.”*

May it be so.