

“Native Wisdom and Stories”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Letter of Chief Seattle of the Suwamish Tribe: To the President of the United States of America, Franklin Pierce, 1854.

The great chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The great chief also sends us words of friendship and good will. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer. For we know that if we do not sell, the white man may come with guns and take our land.

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land, he asks much of us.

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the people of the earth. People do not weave the web of life; they are merely a strand in it. Whatever they do to the web, they do to themselves. But we will consider your offer to go to the reservation you have for my people. We will live apart, and in peace.

It matters little where we spend the rest of our days. Our children have seen their fathers humbled in defeat. Our warriors have felt shame and after defeat they turn their days in idleness and contaminate their bodies with sweet foods and strong drinks. It matters little where we spend the rest of our days. They are not many. A few more hours, a few more winters, and none of the great tribes that once lived on this earth or that roam now in small bands in the woods will be left to mourn the graves of a people once as powerful and hopeful as yours. But why would I mourn the passion of my people? Tribes are made of people, nothing more. People come and go, like the waves of the sea. Even the white man, whose God walks and talks with him as a friend, cannot be exempt from the common destiny.

One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover, our God is the same God. You may think you know that you own him as you wish to own our land: but you cannot. He is the God of all people; and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This earth is precious to him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on its Creator. The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste.

But in your perishing you will shine brightly, fired by the strength of the God who brought you to this land and for some special purpose gave you dominion over this land and over the red man. That destiny is a mystery to us, for we do not understand when the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses are tamed, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires. Where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is it to say goodbye to the swift pony and the hunt? So we will consider your offer to buy the land.

If we agree, it will be to secure the reservation you have promised. There perhaps, we may live out our brief days as we wish. When the last red man has vanished from this earth and his memory is only the shadow of a cloud moving across the prairie, these shores and forests will still hold the spirits of my people. For they love this earth as a newborn loves its mother's heartbeat. So, if we sell our land, love it as we've loved it. Care for it as we've cared for it. Hold

in your mind the memory of the land as it is when you take it. And with all your strength, with all your mind, with all your heart, preserve it for your children, and love it as God loves us all. One thing we know, our God is the same God. This earth is precious to him. Even the white man cannot be exempt from the common destiny. We may be brothers after all. We shall see...

In 1492 Christopher Columbus and his crew, lost, battered and stricken with dysentery were helped ashore by a people he described as “neither black nor white...fairly tall, good looking and well proportioned.” Believing he had landed in the East Indies, he called these people Indians. The story that follows until the 1900’s is one of the many tragic stories of our human family. With all the differences between the tribes that lived for centuries on North America at the time of Columbus, they all shared a common belief; that the earth is a spiritual presence that must be honored, not mastered. Unfortunately, western Europeans who came to these shores had not only a contrary belief, but guns to assure that their way of domination would stick. To these Europeans, the entire American continent was a beautiful savage land that was not only their right, but their duty to tame as they saw fit. The stories of salvation that the Indians gave to those who came this land are quite life affirming. How the Indians were treated in turn, is a blight on the American story that can never be erased or forgiven. Do we simply hang our heads in pain and sadness or do we begin to reach out a hand of gracious thanksgiving to a people who are, today desperately striving to continue their way of life?

As the 21st century is upon us, Western civilization is confronting the inevitable results of this European-American philosophy of dominance, and as a result, we are way out of balance with our earth, and the very future of our planet now depends on our capacity to restore that balance. Many have begun to see and are crying out for wisdom, for a grounding in the truth of nature, for words of wisdom. Part of that wisdom is here I believe in the words of the native peoples of the Americas. But these people speak quietly. Their words are often simple and their voices softer than we are used to. Many have not heard them because it takes time to listen and understand with new eyes. Perhaps now the time is right for us to open our ears and hearts to the words they have to say to us.

Unlike many religious traditions we may be used to, the spiritual wisdom of the native American is not found in a set of scriptural material or books. It is and always has been a part of the fabric of the daily life and the experience of the tribe. One of the most poignant reflections of their spiritual message is found in their tradition of the importance put on the oral story. For example: An Abenaki Legend... *The Great Spirit, in a time not known to us, looked about and saw nothing. No colors, no beauty. Time was silent in darkness. There was not sound. Nothing could be seen or felt. The Great Spirit decided to fill this space with light and life. From his great power he commanded the sparks of creation. He ordered Tolba, the Great Turtle to come from the waters and become the land. The Great Spirit molded the mountains, and the valleys on turtle’s back. He put white clouds into the blue skies. He was very happy. He said, “Everything is ready now. I will fill this place with the happy movement of life.” He thought and thought about what kind of creatures he would make. Where would they live? What would they do? What would their purpose be? He wanted a perfect plan. He thought so hard he became very tired and fell asleep. His sleep was filled with dreams of his creation. He saw strange things in his dream. He saw animals crawling on four legs, some on two. Some creatures flew with wings, some swam with fins. There were plants of all colors, covering the ground everywhere. Insects buzzed around, dogs barked, birds sang and human beings called to each other. Everything seemed out of place. The Great Spirit thought he was having a bad dream. He thought, nothing could be this imperfect. When the Great Spirit awakened, he saw a beaver nibbling on a branch. He realized the world of his dream had become his creation. Everything he dreamed about came true. When he saw the beaver make his home, and a dam to provide a pond for this family to swim in, he then knew ever thing was in its place and purpose in the time to come. It has been told among our people from generation to generation, we must not question our dreams. They are our very creation.*

Stories taught the people how to be, who to be and what to do in a difficult situation. Read some of them and you will find a wealth of wisdom, humor and ways of dealing with life. As with the beaver, as with the fox, as with the eagle, as with the mountain, so it is with us.

Traditionally Indians did not carry on dialogues or debates when discussing important matters. Rather, each person listened attentively until his or her turn came to speak, and then he or she rose and spoke without interruption about the heart of the matter under consideration. This tradition produced a measured eloquence of speech and thought that is almost unmatched for its clarity and simplicity. Indian reasoning about governmental and social affairs was also carried on with same uncompromising purity of insight and expression, but was met with frustration and anger when the Indian did not negotiate or even want to settle disputes or decisions as the whites demanded they do. Unfortunately, except for a few movies over the last 25 years, history has given us a false picture of what really happened. Because those dealing with the First Peoples often did not, or would not understand a very different culture and ways of doing things. The skewed picture we have today of treaties, long death marches, wars with the Indians and Western movies, is all most of us have to judge the reality of the situation.

I will admit as a teenager in the 1960's cheering as the Cavalry came charging in the Westerns. And like millions of others I cheered when the Indians arrived in the movie, "Dances With Wolves." The challenges today for our modern Indian tribes are so huge many despair. The casinos have not been a salvation for native peoples, rather more of the same human flaw of exploitation and greed. And although the Indian shamans have decided to share with us some of their most sacred rites and rituals, there too has been exploitation and abuse. Their children have a difficult time finding a place either in the tribe or in American society. For many, the old ways are obsolete and not practical ways to live. And yet Indian teenagers are faced with the difficult challenges of learning to play the ancient drum beats and the dance steps and what music to download in their IPODs.

As many of us are sympathetic with their plight, and have read books that have broken our hearts as those were broken at Wounded Knee, there is so much we can learn from their ancient wisdom. Take the gift of silence...From Chief Luther Standing Bear, a Teton Sioux, we are told, *Silence was meaningful with the Lakota, and his granting a space of silence before talking was done in the practice of true politeness and regard for the rule that thought comes before speech. And in the midst of sorrow, sickness, death or misfortune of any kind, and in the presence of the notable and great, silence was the mark of respect. More powerful than words was silence with Lakota. His strict observance of this tenet of good behavior was the reason, no doubt, for his being given the false characterization of the white man of being a stoic. He has been judged to be dumb, stupid, indifferent and unfeeling. As a matter of truth, he was the most sympathetic of men, but his emotions of depth and sincerity were tempered with control. Silence meant to the Lakota what it meant to Disraeli when he said, 'Silence is the mother of truth,' for the silent man was ever to be trusted, while the man ever ready with speech was never taken seriously.*

And what about the term Indian-giver? There too has been a gross misinterpretation of what some white people thought they were observing. As we celebrate the Great Give Away here at the church each year we have learned from the Sioux people how to share from what we already own, rather than having to buy new all the time. As all the possessions were brought out at a specific time of year and placed on a blanket each member of the tribe was allowed to take what they needed of the possessions. Therefore everyone had what they needed and it was a reminder to everyone that what they owned could also be shared.

The wisdom of the arrow: The arrow to the Indian was a symbol of their idea of prayer. The shape was thought as traveling toward a divine destination. So, too, the arrow is tied to the back of the bear statue in fetishes of the Zuni and other Pueblo people; as if the two, arrow and animal were in spiritual union, dependent upon one another for life and death. The roundness of the

bow kept the hunter true to his word as the animals' keeper and friend-but like the bow he must learn to bend. *"From the sun tree he carved an incredible bow that would bend round as the seasons of the sun. From the moon tree he waved a flexible arrow that would glow quick as the curve of the moon."* So it was that people, animals and deities were brought together in the dream of the hunt, the dream of flight, the dream of connection with spirit, the wisdom of the arrow.

The Wisdom of the Bead: There were beads of animal derivation, quill, shell, bone, horn, tooth, claw and tusk. There were vegetable beads of seed, nut, stem root and plant. Mineral beads of copper, hematite, quartz, serpentine, slate, soapstone and turquoise abounded. Beads were money as the Cherokee word for bead and money are the same. Tied into the hair, worn singly on strings, dangling from the wrist, waist and lower limb, the bead made the wearer proud. It celebrated animals and their gifts, it told stories and prophesied power. The bead, like the basket is round, and like the old tribal culture, a single part of many other parts. The string of beads, the blazon of beads told a story in which the single bead was necessary to link to all others for greater beauty and strength in numbers and as a link to others in the tribe. One and the many; the meaning of the tribe. Together there is strength, unity. The tribal man or woman was as strong as the tribe from which he or she came. And the tribe naturally got its strength from the single bead, the gem, the individual man or woman.

The Wisdom of the Eagle: Of all birds that figure in native American mythology, the most important is the eagle. The solitary mystery and power of this bird, as perceived by the Indian, was also immediately grasped by the emerging nation of the United States and used for its emblem. The eagle is an endangered species. Yet, as ever, the Indians must suffer, having now to dye goose feathers to look like eagle plumes for sacred ceremonies, because the Americans that killed the eagle off now desperately wants it back.

Naturally, like the buffalos, the eagle was used by the Indian for a myriad of things. The wing bones were made into whistles, carried by warriors and used in ceremonies. Medicine men also used eagle bone as "sucking tubes" to draw out illness or disease. The talons were used for amulets, fetishes and necklaces. A poem from Loren Straight Eagle Plume reads:

His right wing opened to the West, Feathers pointed to the North, Wind from the east over the dunes from the steadfast mountains making his feathers wrap around his sandy face like human hair over a goddess's cheek. The deep blue of evening captured in the sheen of feathers, made this turquoise wing cradle his white head and yellow beak as he spoke to me..."

Our UU 7th principle is a direct link of our religious tradition to that of the Indian. If given time these people can give new meaning to the ordinary; the feather, the juniper, the mask, the name, the shell, the tobacco, the turkey and the beloved wolf. Take some time to read their words and be inspired by old truths come to life again.

Let us end with the words of George Copeway, an Ojibwa who sings of his love of the earth; *"I was born in nature's wide domain! The trees were all that sheltered my infant limbs, the blue heavens all that covered me. I am one of nature's children. I have always admired her. She shall be my glory: her feathers, her robes, and the wreath about her brow, the seasons, her stately oaks, and the evergreen-her ringlets over the earth-all contribute to my enduring love of her."*