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ECO-SPIRITUALITY IN NATIVE AMERICAN PRAYER

". . . Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people. We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood which courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the juices in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man, belong to the same family.

The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. Each ghostly reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give to the rivers the kindness you would give any brother . . .

This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

In this eloquent statement of Chief Seattle one finds an expression of the ecological spirituality common to all Native American peoples. This spirituality rests upon the experience of the sacredness of all living and non-living members of the earth community. This sense of wonder and awe elicits attitudes of respect and reverence. These primordial attitudes then express themselves in a variety of cultural forms.

In this issue we explore several prayers or addresses of Native peoples to demonstrate their ecocentric orientation towards life. The recovery of such a basic spirituality within the contemporary context is essential for the future of the earth. This means that we desperately need to listen to the message of Native Americans and allow it to transform our inner depths.

--Don St. John

KNOWLEDGE OF THE COSMOS IN TWO AMERICAN INDIAN PRAYERS

By John A. Grim

Most people consider prayer to be a basic part of all religions. This, indeed, is the case, and in most religions prayer is linked with the stories that recall the great creative acts which brought the earth and the cosmos into existence. These complex creation myths and cosmologies usually portray a gulf between the perfect "higher" spiritual order and the limited ambiguous human realm. Prayer becomes a means for bridging this gap. (Sam Gill, "Prayer," in The Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade, ed., Macmillan and Free Press, 1986).

Prayer, therefore, both reflects a peoples' knowledge of the cosmos and manifests their subjective state. This subjective dimension of prayer provides us with insights into the act of self-realization in a particular culture. Transmitted in emotional tones and filled with the intuitive feelings of a personal relationship with the sacred, prayer communicates deep insight into the values of both self and society.

Descriptions of Native Americans in sixteenth century Hispanic and later northern European records of the seventeenth century contain numerous examples of American Indian prayer. Usually the accompanying textual interpretation by the Europeans was quite critical. Indian prayers were seen as diabolic at worst or simply as the rhetorical device of deluded creatures unaware of the true god behind their clouded religion. However, by the late nineteenth century when Indian people were confined on reservations, the authenticity of their prayer life was apparent to many sympathetic Euro-Americans. But even when Indian prayer was appreciated for its aesthetic or rhetorical power the larger whole to which that prayer life belonged remained inaccessible to most friends of the Indian. Indeed, Indian prayer was cited as evidence to support the reservation policy by many

well wishers since it was evidence of the kind of rational thought which proved that Indians could be "civilized" (Bowden, American Indians and Christian Missions. Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

Europeans and American Indians differed in their understanding of prayer. Europeans largely considered prayer to be a verbal supplement to or commentary on a Biblical text. True, spontaneous prayer had found favor among some Protestants, but the Biblical text itself set the tone and style as well as the parameters of improvisation. Indian prayer, on the other hand, was oral in origin and transmission. In addition, oral prayer was primarily evocative -- seeking to make present the cosmic forces that were being named. In this sense, prayer was a performative act whose dramatic qualities were more important than its creedal statements. Yet Indian oral prayer did adhere to a traditional form and did transmit a traditional wisdom or "knowledge of the cosmos."

The first prayer we shall consider is from the Omaha people. These Siouan language speakers began to migrate from the Ohio-Wabash region in the 1500's and by the late 1800's were confined to a reservation in Nebraska. Eventually the common reservation land was split up into individual lots. In the ensuing push to civilize these people their tribal identity was almost lost. The current Omaha reservation has some thirteen hundred residents some of whom still practice the traditional ways. The prayer below is recited as a child is held up to the powers which created and sustain the cosmos.

Introduction of the Child to the Cosmos (Omaha Peoples)

Ho! Ye Sun, Moon, Stars, All Ye that move
in the heavens, I bid you hear me!
Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent ye, I implore!
Make its path smooth, that it may reach the
brow of the first hill!

Ho! Ye Winds, Clouds, Rain, Midst, All ye
that move in the air, I bid you hear me!

Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent ye, I implore!
Make its path smooth, that it may reach the
brow of the second hill!

Ho! Ye Hills, Valleys, Rivers, Lakes,
Trees, Grasses,
All ye of the earth,
I bid you hear me!

Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent yet, I implore!
Make its path smooth, that it may reach the
brow of the third hill!

Ho! Ye Birds, great and small, that fly in
the air,

Ho! Ye Animals, great and small, that
dwell in the forest,

Ho! Ye Insects, that creep among the
grasses and burrow in the ground -
I bid you hear me!

Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent ye, I implore!
Make its path smooth, that it may reach the
brow of the fourth hill!

Ho! All ye of the heavens, all ye of the
air, all ye of the earth;
I bid you all to hear me!

Into your midst has come a new life.
Consent ye, consent ye all, I implore!
Make its path smooth - then shall it travel
beyond the four hills!

The cosmos that it pictured here is three-layered, namely, the heavens of the celestial bodies; the air of atmospheric conditions and raptorial birds; and the earth of plant and animal life. The knowledge presented in these words appears to associate movement in human life with four hills which are themselves linked with the three cosmic regions. The fullness of life is imaged in four hills, a number akin to the four directions and one of the oldest known symbols among Indian peoples. The life that is sought for this child is presented as a lived mediation on a tripartite view of the world. It is in relation to the powers of these three cosmic regions that an Omaha Indian sought the means with which to live.

The most apparent knowledge which can be linked with human life and local cosmic environment is subsistence activity. The traditional Omaha were hunters-gatherers and limited agriculturalists. Knowledge of these life skills depended upon repetitive teaching from elders and upon spiritual blessings. The dedication prayer situates these activities and the foods they provided not in the context of commodities but as the shared giving of an interwoven community of all life forms.

Self-knowledge is portrayed in this prayer as the passage through the four hills of life. Self-realization is not undertaken apart from the community presented in this prayer as the cosmic forces of the three realms. One finds self-knowledge by interweaving individual effort with those cosmic persons. Thus, the dedication to the cosmos presents the expectation that the child will become a cosmic person. That is, someone in right relation to creative power in the cosmos.

Finally, this dedicatory prayer was not an isolated speech but was performed as part of a ritual. This prayer is more appropriately studied as a performative act than as a textual recitation. As a prayer-act it is believed by the Omaha to evoke the knowledge and the cosmic presences that are named. The child is welcomed into life in this tribal context, to find its identity in walking in the source of life. This is an identity which is itself performed in human activity throughout life. The words of the prayer reaffirm the Omaha wisdom that human life develops in kinship to all forms of life in the cosmos.

Like the Omaha prayer, the Navajo prayer from the Beautyway Chant provides insight into these peoples' understanding of universe. The Navajo are an Athabaskan people who moved with the Apache from the Canadian north probably during the 14th century. They gradually migrated into the southwestern regions and encountered the pueblo people of the Colorado Plateau. Raiders, hunters and agriculturalists, the Navajo underwent a traumatizing military conquest at the hands of American armies led

by Kit Carson in the 1860's. Eventually they were allowed to return to their traditional lands and given a large reservation centered in Arizona but also reaching into New Mexico and Utah.

Navajo religion is extremely varied. Its central features are associated with a chantway system that is used for individual healing and community welfare. A chantway is a complex nine-day ceremonial in which prayer-songs and extensive narrations from the origin mythology are recited by a singer. These prayers and narrations are accompanied by elaborate paintings on the floor of the traditional Navajo house, or hogan. These drypaintings of sand, pollen, soil, flowers and other materials are a traditional art that is wholly religious. Like the prayers, the drypaintings are supposed to be reproduced in the exact manner in which the traditional hero or heroine received them from the spiritual world (Reichard, Navaho Religion. Princeton Press, 1950).

The prayer included here is from Beautyway and is often used in this isolated form for shorter ritual occasions such as blessing a new business or at a wedding. Part of its literary force is in its repetitive quality but for the Navajo its spiritual power is in its ability to impart transformative knowledge.

Beautyway from the Navajo Night Chant
Ceremonial

Tsegihi. House made of dawn,
House made of evening light,
House made of dark cloud,
House made of male rain,
House made of dark mist,
House made of female rain,
House made of pollen,
House made of grasshoppers,
Dark cloud is at the door.
The trail out of it is dark cloud.
The zigzag lightning stands high
upon it.
Male deity!
Your offering I make.
I have prepared a smoke for you.
Restore my feet for me,

Restore my legs for me,
Restore my body for me,
Restore my mind for me,
Restore my voice for me.
This very day take out your spell
for me.
Your spell remove for me.
You have taken it away for me;
Far off it has gone.
Happily I recover.
Happily my interior becomes cool.
Happily I go forth.
My interior feeling cool, may I
walk.
No longer sore, may I walk.
Impervious to pain, may I walk.
With lively feelings, may I walk.
As it used to be long ago, may I
walk.
Happily may I walk.
Happily, with abundant dark
clouds, may I walk.
Happily, with abundant showers, may
I walk.
Happily, with abundant plants, may
I walk.
Happily, on a trail of pollen, may
I walk.
Happily may I walk.
Being as it used to be long ago,
may I walk.
May it be beautiful before me,
May it be beautiful behind me,
May it be beautiful below me,
May it be beautiful above me,
May it be beautiful around me,
In beauty it is finished.

The image with which this prayer opens is that of the cosmos as a hogan. It derives from the Navajo creation story in which the Holy People built the world in the same manner in which a traditional Navajo house is assembled. Just as the beams of the hogan support each other in a balanced relation, so also the male and female forces of the earth and sky balance each other. This balance is seen as beautiful, hoozhoni, as the Navajo say. Knowledge of this harmonious relationship constitutes the beginning of wisdom, say the Navajo, and prayer serves to identify the human with the beauty of cosmic balance.

While movement in the Omaha world provided an interpretive frame for the dedication prayer, here movement is part of the problem. The beauty of the cosmos is its exquisite balance into which the human must move, and in moving we bring upon ourselves unknown dangers, i.e. the spells which we must evoke or remove. The restoration of human beauty, then, is in acquiring knowledge of transformation. One must know how to transform oneself into the Holy People, who in the primal time of the myths incorporated the cosmic powers into the many forms of the earth. The knowledge that transforms is the knowledge of the inner happiness and beauty of the cosmos especially as expressed in the earth. The inner form, then, of the earth is evoked in this prayer-act of Beautyway.

The effect of this transformative prayer is to image oneself into an identity with the inner form or soul of the earth. This inner form of the earth is called "long-life/happiness." While this prayer is more general in its descriptions, the chantways in their nine-day ceremonials build elaborate and very specific identities between those treated for illness and the local landscape. More specifically the drypaintings used in the chantways are the focus for performative healing. The patient sits in the center of the drypainting while the singer chants the myth which identifies the patient with the hero or heroine of that myth. The movement of the myth is described in terms of the local environment. Thus, the patient is urged to identify the drypainting as the cosmic landscape of the myths which is also the local environment. The patient is rubbed with parts of the sandpainting which link the patients body with locales in the region. The symbolic healing that is promoted, then, is one which is directly related to this peoples' psychic commitment to their land. In the ecology of animal-plant-land is a beauty of balance called hoozhoni. Establishing this beauty through identification with the inner form of the earth is the intention of this prayer-act among the Navajo.

These considerations of two American Indian prayers give some indication of the

richness of thought in these traditions. American Indians have been able to endure because of the strength provided by their cultural heritage. As their languages weaken, however, the traditional knowledge diminishes, because these insights depend upon oral transmission and oral evocation.

In studying these religious forms we can encounter some of the most provocative and stimulating insights of different cultures. These prayers can develop the ability of each person to identify with the ecological wisdom imparted by other cultures. Ideally this effort of imagination will be balanced with the more critical effort needed to read these texts.

This act provides a crucial talent needed in our own contemporary period. Critical thought and imagination must be welded together if we are to evoke the cosmic story of our time, too. Just as American Indians knew that healing or religion depended upon cosmic awareness, so we also are beginning to realize that our deepest awareness of ourselves begins in the fiery furnaces of the stars. Awareness of this scientific story of the universe is such an exciting discovery because it brings us into a new knowledge of ourselves. Prayer in the American Indian world evoked a knowledge of the cosmos that provided identity for individuals and groups. Will future generations be able to say the same of us?

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THE IROQUOIS THANKSGIVING ADDRESS
by Donald P. St. John

The purpose of the Iroquois Thanksgiving Address is to express gratitude for and to the most important spirit-beings on the earth, in the sky and beyond the sky. Longhouse ritual leaders may differ slightly in how they group these beings but they all proceed according to a three-tiered hierarchical cosmos. Those beings which are above spatially are more important because they exercise "duties" that affect the lives of those under them. For example, the Thunderers are important for the health and growth of all plants and animals beneath them; while the Creator, last in the Address, who dwells beyond the sky, is even more influential since he assigned duties and oversees all spirit-beings.

Each section of the Address is made up of three segments:

- (1) Determination Segment. This includes the Creator's "decisions" regarding the particular spirit-force...
- (2) Report Segment. This includes the people's report on the appearance of the item, the fact that it was "seen"...
- (3) Performative Segment. This includes an expression of gratitude for the spirit force (if it is terrestrial) or to the spirit force (if it is extra-terrestrial).¹

The Creator establishes the beings and structures of the cosmos and fills them with spiritual power (orenda). It is the duty of each spirit-being to function in accordance with the directives of the Creator and it is the duty of humans to give thanks for these beings.

The speaker begins each section by placing himself in mythic time when the Creator was pondering and planning each creative act. The speaker makes that time present again by reciting the words of the Creator in the first person singular. Those assembled place themselves in the Creator's

presence. Subsequently with each report segment they experience the presence of the spirit-force(s). Finally, the community and speaker give thanks. Ideally, moving through the Thanksgiving Address should expand the heart until it fills the whole cosmos.

On the Earth

The Address itself begins with a section recalling the importance of community to Iroquois spiritual life. All of those gathered are reminded that the Creator instructed them to greet each other with thanks both for their existence and for the beauty and dynamism of the spirit-forces.

And therefore let there be gratitude; we are always going to be grateful, we who remain, we who claim to be happy. And give it your thought: The first thing for us to do is to be thankful for each other.² And our minds will continue to be so.

After this introductory thanksgiving, the speaker recites the deeds of the Creator. One Creator decided first to create the earth and instructed the people to call her "our mother, who supports our feet." He instructed the earth to support humans when they move about. The people observe that she still does this and still brings forth those things which make for happiness. Thus they respond, "We now give thanks for that which supports our feet. And our minds will continue to be so."

The Creator next provided plants for the people. And so when the warmth of spring returns each year and the plants bloom, people recall the kindness of the Creator:

And give it your thought, that with one mind we may give thanks for all the plants, our medicines. And our minds will continue to be so.

No life can flourish without water, and so the Creator fashioned springs, brooks, ponds, rivers, lakes and the falling rain.

"We now give thanks for the springs, the brooks, the flowing rivers, and the ponds and lakes. And our minds will continue to be so."

Directing their minds upward from the ground, the Iroquois take note of and give thanks for the creation of trees. They note that these trees give them firewood in times of chill, medicines in times of illness and maple syrup at the first hint of spring. "And therefore again let there be gratitude," they say, "We now give thanks for the forests growing on the earth."

The Creator then created the animals, large and small, for pleasure and for food. It remains so and the Iroquois give thanks. Not only animals that move on the ground did the Creator make, but all kinds of birds who "spread their wings from just above the earth (and) go all the way into the clouds." Some migrate to the warm climates in the winter but return to the joy of all in the spring.

With all their voices they will sing once more their beautiful songs. And it will lift the minds of all who remain when the small birds return. ...We now give thanks for the birds with outspread wings. And our minds will continue to do so.

The first part of the Address concludes with a remembrance of the Creation of "the Sisters, our sustenance." This is a reference to corn, beans and squash, the three foods grown traditionally by Iroquois women.

In the Sky

Thanksgiving now moves to the atmosphere and thanks is given to the wind which "indeed strengthens our breath, for us who move about on the earth. Associated with the winds that strengthen are the Thunderers, "our grandparents." They come from the west bringing fresh water, life and contentment. Thus were they instructed to do by the Creator,

And they are performing their obligation, moving about all through

the summer among the clouds, making fresh water, rivers, ponds, and lakes. And give it your thought, that we may do it properly: We now give thanks for them, our grandparents, the Thunderers. And our minds will continue to be so.

The Iroquois are now enjoined to raise their minds to the heavens. There dwells their elder brother, the sun. He brings daylight and warmth so that all things might flourish. He is also a helper to humans who move about on the earth below. Thanks is given to "our elder brother, the sun." Complementing the guidance and light-giving task of the sun during the day is "our grandmother, the moon." The Creator not only set the moon in the night sky as guide and light-giver, but also made her the measurer of time and a power linked with human fertility. Children come not only from their biological mothers but also from the moon, both from "our mothers" and "our grandmother." And so they give thanks.

The Creator also made the stars and assigned them certain tasks, such as being indicators of the seasons, guides for the traveller and the cause of nighttime moisture that, like the rains of day, help the plants to grow.

And we believe that they are performing their obligation, the responsibility that they too have. And give it your thought, that we may do it properly: We now give thanks for them, the stars arrayed in the sky. And our minds will continue to be so.

Beyond the Sky

In the earliest recorded Thanksgiving Address, that by Henry Lewis Morgan in the 1840s, the next ones to receive thanks are the Ho-no-che-no-keh, or subordinate spirits and the Creator himself. Later versions such as that of Parker recorded in 1906 and the present one by Chafe, recorded in 1959, give thanks to the Four Protectors, the prophet Handsome Lake and finally the Creator. This change reflects the increasing influence of the Longhouse

Religion which was just beginning to crystallize in the 1840s and which bases its doctrine and practices on the reforms of Handsome Lake (1735-1815).

The Address ends with the reminder that they have done what the Creator intended.

This is what he intended. "The people moving about on the earth will have love; they will simply be thankful. They will begin on the earth, giving thanks for all they see. They will carry it upward ending where I dwell." ...And give it your thought, that with one mind we may not give thanks for him, Our Creator. And our minds will continue to be so.

The spatial sequence of thanksgiving which characterizes the Address is paralleled by the temporal sequence of ceremonies that moves through the year. To understand this better one can look at the Midwinter or New Years Festival and especially its Tobacco Invocation. The Tobacco Invocation, like the Thanksgiving Address, is a hierarchic ritual, moving from the earth to beyond the sky. The difference, however, is that the Tobacco Invocation is supplicatory in nature. It does not thank the Creator for what he has done but asks the Creator to do again in the year ahead what he had done and promised to continue to do since creation. It is a summons to the Creator to respond to the Word of his people by bringing about the change of seasons, the appearance of fruits and plants, the return of migrating birds, the growth of planted corn, beans and squash, the warmth of the sun, and so on.

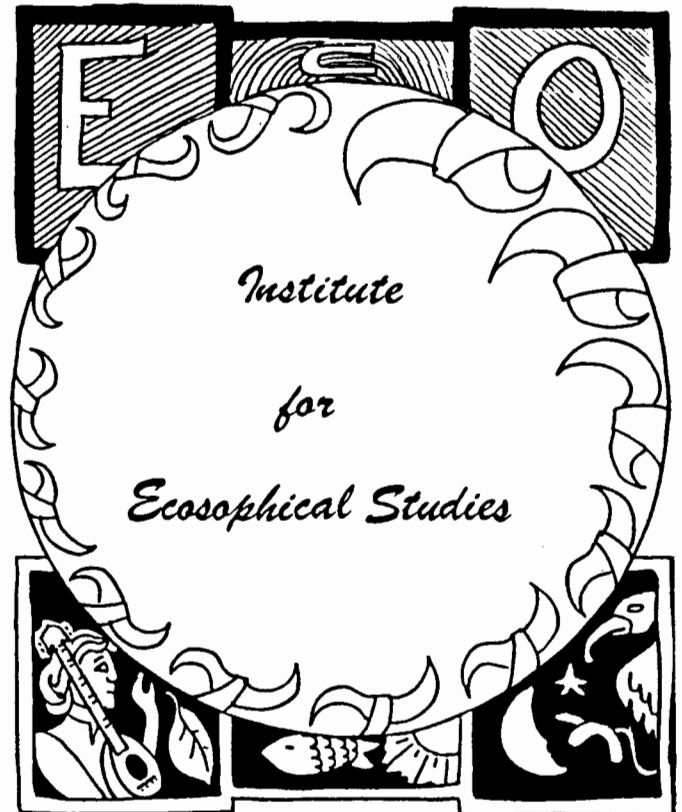
Each ceremony, therefore, whether Maple Sap or Strawberry or Green Corn or Harvest is a Thanksgiving response by the people to the faithful performance by the spirit-forces of their duties and to the Creator for his benevolence. The appearance or functioning of each entity is a hierophany and a confirmation of faith. The year is an unfolding act of creation and the world a place in which the human spirit can find meaning and response.

¹Michael A. Foster, From the Earth to Beyond the Sky: An Ethnographic Approach to Four Longhouse Iroquois Speech Events (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), pp. 136-137.

²Wallace L. Chafe, "Seneca Thanksgiving Rituals," Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 183 (1961): 17.

All excerpts from the Thanksgiving Address are from Chafe's translation of Corbett Sundown's performance.

A "thanks" to those who sent contributions to help us. Contributions from others will be much appreciated.



IN MEMORY OF LOREN EISELEY
Robert Welborn
Franktown, Colorado

I

He lived through aloneness into compassion,
Into the oneness of life and time
And the felt sanctity of living things.
He sensed life in the meander of a western stream
And love in the fox and the hawk and the sea gull.
His mind encircled the stars and the millennia.
He could look through the cell into the universe.

Quietly, uncovered bones speak.
The delicate moth in stone quivers.
Ancient fantasies are dreamed again
Under the thunder of a prairie sky.
Through tempestuous grass, through leavened soil,
He journeyed downward and pastward
To the still patterns of fertile life.

But his concern was present horrors:
The sterilization of life and death,
The desecration of natural process,
The plastic waste that won't decay,
The widening morass of unnatural suffering
Into which other living things
Are cast by man, the unnatural creature.

II

Death is the catalyst that Nature provides,
The nutrient of the future.
Woe to the civilization, our civilization,
That destroys death.
Thank God this Nebraska man escaped
Into death.

III

His words give meaning to despair.
Too few are left who are aware
Of what the sun can not repair.

If man has will that can be free,
This man has taught us what to be,
The evolutionary key:

Custodians of God's creation.
This is our single obligation
Requiring just complete compassion.

Thank you friend for telling all
So we could know from what we fall
And where we might have hope at all.

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