

"The Way Of Poetry: An Ancient Wisdom"

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The African Novelist and self taught Cultural Anthropologist Bessie Head once wrote of the native African, "His whole world is his religion and he is a religious man." She was paraphrasing John S. Mbiti and went on in her essay to quote from his book, *African Religion and Philosophy*:

*Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony... In traditional religions there are no creeds to be recited; instead, the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each one is himself a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes Africans so religious: religion is in their whole system of being.*¹

Bessie Head was trying to emphasize the "spirituality" latent in everyday life, which is everywhere accessible to those peoples who are in accord with it. And what is spiritually accessed by indigenous peoples around the world seems lost to the civilized except through storyteller-poets who have somehow retained a mystical understanding of the world:

'Who are you?' people asked.

'I am the dreamer and storyteller,' they replied. 'I have seen life. I am drunk with the magical enchantment of human relationships. I laughed often. The big, wide free world is full of innocence...'

¹ Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. qtd. in. Head, Bessie. "African Religions." *A Woman Alone*. Oxford: Heinmann Educational Publishers, 1950. 51, 53.

*But what happens to the dreamer and storyteller when he is born into a dead world of such extreme cruelties that no comment or statement of love can alter them?...Where is that wedge of innocence and laughter that resolves so many human ills?... For largeness of heart is what we need for a civilization and big, big, eyes, wide enough to drink in all the knowledge of the heavens and earth.*²

Bessie Head re-lives the words of William Blake, "As man is so he sees." The poet sees the beauty and innocence of the world around and lives within that sacred center. This allows the poet to access the sacred within life and thereby become and live the sacred—"drunk with the magical enchantment." Such is the potential reality of life. Such is the poet's Vision.

But there are those indigenous and native peoples around the world who can still see poetically and experience the sacred as an everyday reality. The Indigenous "heart" bespeaks a ceremonial belief built of strong emotional bonds to the material world, which unites the application of a methodological system with the practical concerns of everyday life, and produces a purposeful sense of personal/communal survival working within the larger pattern of Life. This is the essential nature of any true "Way" of life. Tribal rituals and stories have preserved this ancient Vision, which expresses in the Nuu-chah-nulth language Hishuk "Tsawalk", "everything is one; everything is connected."³ But this Vision, to the eyes of those who do not see spiritually, seems but a fancy or a metaphysical illusion. William Blake once wrote, "The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the Eyes of others only a Green thing that stands in the way."⁴

² Head, Bessie. "Epiologue: An African Story." & "God and teh Underdog." *Ibid.* 101, 50.

³ Happynook, Tom. "Securing Food, Health and Traditional Values through the Sustainable Use of Marine Resources." Speech given at Oregon State University on April 11, 2001

⁴ Blake, William. "Letter to Rev. Dr. Trusler: Aug. 23 1799." *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*.

The Western world, and Western Science in particular (as it has become the dominant ideology driving Western society), has become that type who sees the natural universe as just a "thing," and in its technological "progress" has lost sight of that Visionary essence, which moves unseen behind all life: "Any damn fool can treat a living thing as if it were a machine."⁵ And thus there is a "difference,"

Tom Happynook believes, "between knowledge and information."⁶ Western science has always gone afte piece-meal "information" instead of a more holistic "knowledge." Vine Deloria, Jr., in concurrence with the proposition of this di-chotomy writes, "the white man has ideas, the Indian has visions."⁷ Vision being a holistic approach to life. Vision being a holistic "knowledge." Vision being what is necessary to apprehend the complex reality, which is the phenomenon and event called Life.

Oregon State Philosophy Professor Kathleen Dean Moore learned early in her career from a "misguided professor" that Western philosophy, heavily influenced by Aristotelian analytics and "scientific" rationalism, "is not about life. Philosophy is about ideas. Life and ideas are not the same."

I went looking for a discipline where the essential value was clarity. I found it in western philosophy... Everything I wrote was clear to the point of vanishing. Objective, abstract, precise, and never, ever about life... the range of possible subjects narrowed: the easiest things to write clearly about are the simplest, and nothing in real life is simple... Many of the ideas that remained were reduced by isolation—unrecognizable, fractured from the lives of real people. In the end, they didn't matter.⁸

⁵ Deloria Jr., Vine. *Spirit and Reason*. Golden Fulcrum Publishing. 1999. 13.

⁶ "Securing Food, Health and Traditional Values..." Ibid.

⁷ *Spirit and Reason*. Ibid. 15.

⁸ Moore, Kathleen Dean. *Riverwalking*. Lyons & Burford, 1995. 141, 142, 144.

The "white man's ideas"—Western Science and Philosophy—seems starkly inadequate set against the complex reality which is called Life. "Indians believed," as Deloria, Jr. wrote, "that everything that humans experience has value and instructs us in some aspect of life...we cannot 'misexperience' anything; we can only misinterpret what we experience...so we must be alert and try not to classify things too quickly."⁹ This "knowledge" of experience exists as the Native American "science of wholeness"¹⁰ or "science of relations."¹¹ It is a Visionary way of seeing and understanding the world, which Western Science has heretofore rejected. But it is a Vision the Western world "badly needs"¹² if this earth is to sustain its balance.

The Native American "science of wholeness" or "science of relations" is a "world view shaped by reciprocity and spatiality."¹³ It is a world view, which sees the environment as "not a place of divisions but a place of relations, a place where cultural diversity and bio-diversity are not separate, but are in fact interdependent... the natural world is a complex web."¹⁴ The Native American world view arranges its knowledge in a "circular format, which is to say, there [are] no ultimate terms

or constituents of their universe, only sets of relationships."¹⁵ And every relationship was "established" upon "personal relationships between and among other forms of life."¹⁶ The human being was no more important than the wolf or the fish or the tree or the mountain: all had their place, their meaning and role to fulfill, and as a unity where considered "family."

⁹ *Spirit and Reason*. Ibid. 46.

¹⁰ Ibid. 40

¹¹ Happynook, Tom. "Securing Food, Health and Traditional..." Ibid.

¹² Deloria, Jr. *Spirit and Reason*. 16.

¹³ Tinker, George E. "An American Indian Response to Ecojustice." *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Justice*. Ed. Jace Weaver. Orbis Books, 1996. 163.

¹⁴ Happynook, Tom. "Securing food, Health, and Traditional..." Ibid.

¹⁵ Deloria Jr., *Spirit and Reason*. 48.

¹⁶ Ibid. 54

Western science, however, works within a "severely restricted" and impersonal "arena" and therefore does not ask "complete questions of nature"—"may not even be asking relevant questions."¹⁷ And Western science seems to often jump to conclusions about what it finds within its narrow searches of irrelevant questions:

*Western science prematurely derives its scientific "laws" and assumes that the products of its own mind are inherent in the structure of the universe. But American Indians allow the process to continue, recognizing that premature analysis will produce anomalies and give incomplete understanding.*¹⁸

A root concept of "dominion" and "control" is inherent within these localized questions asked of nature manifested in the very heart of Western science, which is founded upon the "acts of naming:"¹⁹

*Naming nature is the special business of science. Theories, models, and descriptions are elaborated names. In these acts of naming, the scientist simultaneously constructs and contains nature—"according to the relation and perspective he chooses."*²⁰

Western science derived an inherited process found in the Book of Genesis whereby dominion over the natural world comes through the naming of its multifaceted parts:

*When dealing with the ordering of complex natures (representations in general, as they are given in experience), one has to constitute a taxinomia, and to do that one has to establish a system of signs... taxinomia... treats of identities and differences; it is the science of articulations and classifications; it is the knowledge of beings.*²¹

¹⁷ Deloria Jr., *Spirit and Reason*. 45, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 14.

¹⁹ Tinker, George E. "An American Indian Theological Response to Ecojustice." *Ibid.* 159.

²⁰ Keller, Evelyn Fox. *Reflections on Gender and Science*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. 17. Keller is critiquing the Western Science on the grounds of gender and within the complex of Western Science itself, yet she parallels the Native American Critiques on some key issues. Keller writes that "knowability and objectifiability need to be relinquished" and that the "concept of order" needs to replace the older, "coercive, hierarchical and centralizing" concept of "law." (149, 132)

²¹ Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books, 1970. 72, 74.

But as Spinoza pointed out in the 17th century, the "system of signs" (language) that Western minds created was incapable of truly apprehending reality because what could be represented through a "system of signs" (language) would be a 'negative' representation conveyed in terms of 'what it is not.' A positive definition ('what it is') could never be known or represented through language. A being could only be. Thus was "God" for Spinoza: the Ultimate, Un-definable Unity, which was 'Being' and 'Life.'

And such is what the indigenous and Native peoples around the globe—and what poets for centuries— have tried to make Western minds understand: you cannot "know" Life, you can only live Life. Thus "the old Indians," as Vine Deloria, Jr. wrote, "were interested in finding the proper moral and ethical road upon which human beings should walk. All knowledge, if it is to be useful, was directed toward that goal:"

The real interest of the old Indians was not to discover the abstract structure of physical reality but rather to find the proper road along which, for the duration of a person's life, individuals were supposed to walk. This colorful image of the road suggests that the universe is a moral universe. That is to say, there is a proper way to live in the universe: There is a content to every action, behavior, and belief. The sum total of our life experiences has a reality. There is a direction to the universe, empirically exemplified in the physical growth cycles of childhood, youth, and old age, with the corresponding responsibility of every entity to enjoy life, fulfill itself, and increase in wisdom and the spiritual development of personality. Nothing has incidental meaning and there are no coincidences.

The wise person will realize his or her own limitations and act with some degree of humility until he or she has sufficient knowledge to act with confidence. Every bit of information must be related to the general framework of moral interpretation as it is personal to them and their community. No body of knowledge exists for its own sake outside the moral framework of understanding. We are, in the truest sense possible, creators or co-creators with the highest powers, and what we do has immediate importance for the rest of the universe... In the moral universe all activities, events, and entities are related, and consequently it does not matter what kind of existence an entity enjoys, for the responsibility is always there for it to participate in the continuing creation of reality.²²

This is basis for the Native American "science of wholeness" or "science of relations:" reciprocity of identity and actions within a relative universe of equally autonomous, but inter-related parts. This idea, however, also has roots within the Western tradition, expressed most fully perhaps in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Martin Buber. Buber said, writing of "True community,"

All of them [the people] have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationships to one another... A community is built upon a living, reciprocal relationship, but the builder is the living, active center.²³

The "active center" for Native Americans is that 'sacred space' whereby the mystery of the world and the unity of Life is revealed and made manifest. The "active center" and the "sacred" are Life itself apprehended in its total unity.

²² *Spirit and Reason*. 43-44, 46-47.

²³ Buber, Martin. *Land Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Touchstone, 1970. 94.

And if the indigenous and Native universe is "moral or has a moral purpose" then it must be maintained that this moral universe "is alive." The universe itself is here seen as a living 'being,' and thus composes the heart of the "active center" of a people or of an individual. In this organic concept "all things are related" and so "responsibility for maintaining the harmony of life falls equally on all creatures:"²⁵

Life is better understood as a tapestry or symphony in which each player has a specific part or role to play. We must be in our proper place and we must play our role at the appropriate moment. Mutual respect in many ways is a function of a strong sense of personal and communal identity.²⁶

The essence of the underlying unity and reciprocity of Life is carried through the art and song of the people, danced through the various rituals, and lived as the sacred words (Logos - the Word) ever composing the unending poem, which is Life. Or as Walt Whitman characterized this essence, using a metaphor of a "powerful play:" "That you are here—that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."²⁷ Such is "knowledge" or indeed, "wisdom." And thus, such is "truth" (that which should not be forgotten). To the indigenous or Native mind—to the Visionary—to the poet—this is all one ever really "knows" of Life, and really needs to know.

²⁵ *Spirit and Reason*. 49.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 51.

