



C h e l l i s
G l e n d i n n i n g

Yours Truly from Indian Country

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(This letter was originally contracted to be published by New Age Journal, but when the editors saw its finished content, they fled. Rick Fields at Yoga Journal then fearlessly took it on, and it appeared in the January-February 1995 issue. John Mohawk at the Native newspaper Daybreak reprinted it that same year.)

Dear Friends and Fellow Seekers,

We have to talk. I'm feeling the need something fierce because the problem at hand is critical to us all. I want to talk about the use of Native spiritual practice, knowledge, and ceremony by non-Native people.

I am bi lagá'ana: white person in the Dine' (Navajo) language. I live in the Río Grande Valley, the original home of indigenous peoples going back some 20,000 or 30,000, maybe 50,000 years. From my small village in this valley, couched among Indian nations and pueblos, I can tell you that at this very moment, you are being talked about in Indian Country -- and there's pain on the face of the person talking.

I was alerted to the emotional intensity many Native people bring to the issue, not by National Public Radio or the *New York Times*, not even by tales of threatened retaliation directed toward certain Native spiritual teachers -- but at Chinle High School in Chinle, Arizona. There I am, leaning against the stairwell in the dimly lit hallway -- one of very few Euro- Americans in attendance at the 1992 Navajo Earth Summit -- when this stocky man in black braids steps across the linoleum, halting square in front of me. There we stand, cowboy boot to cowboy boot -- and his first words are: "I had quite a Halloween costume last year."

"Really," I answer, wondering why I am the beneficiary of this tale.

"Yup. I put on my fur leggings, wore a bone choker, braided my hair with ribbons, carried my bow -- and I painted my face all nii- ice and whiiite. Then I painted a big red hand across my cheek and jaw. Can you guess what I was?"

My mind races for some hint other than, well, the obvious: an Indian in face paint? I am blank.

"I was a New Age 'wannabe' from Santa Fe," he chuckles confidently. "And I met up with a ree-eal Indian who smashes me in the face!"

I am the beneficiary of this tale for the benefit of us all; this man really wants the bi la gá'ana to hear his outrage about what, in these parts, is openly called "New Age robbery."

The problem is actually quite complex. Here's the gist of it: Many traditional peoples and activists for religious freedom rights are opposed to non-Indian people practicing Native cultures. "We're highly resentful of the fact that for hundreds of years, Native American spirituality has been oppressed," says Rene Attean, a Penobscot elder. "Now all of a sudden it's acceptable because it's a money-making scam." Adds her daughter-in-law Esther Attean: "The New Age is the same as the old age. Before they were taking our land, now it's our spirituality."

Their sentiments are part of a growing movement. In 1982 and again in 1984, the American Indian Movement (AIM) issued resolutions condemning non-Native use of Indian spirituality, and in 1991 journalist Avis Little Eagle wrote a 10-part expose on the subject for *The Lakota Times* (now *Indian Country Today*). In December 1993 writer Judith Fein became the second person in history to be banned from New Mexico's eight northern pueblos for the invasive disrespect pueblo leaders saw in her book, *Indian Time*. That same month the National Congress of American Indians approved a Lakota-initiated "declaration of war" against "non-Indian 'wannabes,' hucksters, cultists, commercial profiteers and self-styled New Age shamans." In 1994 Keres storyteller Larry Littlebird (Laguna/Santo Domingo Pueblos) upbraided a hair products company called Anasazi New Wisdom for appropriating pueblo artifacts into such commercial fare as "Kiva Scalp Massage" -- while Native activists in South Dakota protested non-Native worshipers despoiling the traditional Lakota sacred grounds at Bear Butte.

The controversy is complicated by the fact that Native people themselves are, in many cases, the ones who invite non-Natives to learn and practice indigenous religions. Often impassioned by a call guided by visions from the spirit world, these folks bold-facedly teach Indian ways to non-Indian people -- and often charge money for the teachings. Sun Bear was one of them. From 1970 until his death in 1993, this Anishinabeg medicine man shared Native wisdom with thousands of tuition-paying non-Natives through his Bear Tribe Medicine

Society. His inspiration came from a series of visions. In *Walk in Balance* he explains, "I saw a time when we would all live together as brother and sister, Indian and non-Indian alike. I saw the Earth Mother being healed as people began to show a love for the land. But first I saw the possibility of a time of great desolation, a time of hunger, drought, and illness. From my visions I knew I must teach people to be self-reliant, to heal themselves and this planet, our Earth Mother."

Ed McGaa is another dedicated teacher. An Oglala Lakota and the author of *Mother Earth Spirituality*, McGaa defends "New Age" seekers as "sincere tolerant people" and claims, "The real enemies were the whites who took our land, the Christian missionaries who put us in boarding schools, told our youth that we were pagans and heathens." He adds: "If we want the white man to change, we have to teach him."

Good point.

To complicate matters further, there are non-Indian teachers who, having been initiated into Native religions by Natives themselves, take up the pipe and set up shop. Indeed many are sincere people acting out of passion for the spiritual and ecological wisdom of nature-based religion. Some are ego maniacs and hucksters. Whatever, they are the designated "commercial profiteers and New Age shamans" the National Congress of American Indians has declared war against.

Then there's a lesser-known force in the fray: Indian people who teach members of the dominant culture nature-based ways out of sheer desperation.

Just as I was setting Blackfeet Indian Earth Pencil to recycled paper to write this letter, a Lenni Lenape (Shawnee) man knocked on my door. In the brief 24 hours I knew this man, I stood cheek by jowl with an all-too-prevalent economic predicament among Indian people. He never knew from day to day where he would sleep the next night. He tried to barter his beaded moccasins to me for \$100. He offered to do a blessing ceremony for \$200. He begged me to accompany him to Sedona, Arizona, where he claimed we could pick up \$600 by giving a workshop.

Last, we cannot forget that it's not just that sweat lodges are being thrust upon us; *we want these things*. Deep in our hearts, we non-indigenous people long for reconnection with the community of people, creatures, and spirits that Native religions offer. And well we should. No matter how vital or responsive today's indoor, human-centered religions may be, human beings were built by evolution for the textures and passions, the connectedness and rootedness of Earth-based spirituality.

Over the course of three million years we were shaped in relation to the forces and cycles of the natural world; we are in our most essential being mirrors and dreams of the Earth.

Only in recent times have humans known the alienation that comes of mass society, urban development, and the mechanistic paradigm. Yet through the centuries an irrepressible fascination with Native ways has persisted. We see it in perpetual cultural longings for times past (the Romantics, Ralph Lauren, Santa Fe Style); in renaissances of pagan movements (Isadora Duncan, hippies, Wicca, and women's spirituality); in our passion for ecological restoration (Teddy Roosevelt, conservation, deep ecology); in the romanticism we so often attach to tribal peoples (Gauguin, Edward Curtis, *Dances with Wolves*). Our psychic roots run deep; for those of us who have come to know life solely in the technological world, the longing can be agonizing.

Do you see? Pain underlies each of these broken fragments of experience. Hasn't the time come that we non-Natives gather our thoughts about this issue? The news stories covering the controversy are decidedly short on conclusions: Mostly they just lay out the conflicting perspectives. Some Native people are so mad they no longer speak to whites. Other Indians ply their ceremonial wares on the non-Native workshop circuit with solemn purpose. Some Euro-Americans are busy building stone kivas -- while others, initiated into the pipe ceremony in the 1970s, have since put their pipes away out of respect for the growing tensions.

The question that keeps grabbing me is this. Is it our sorry lot in today's world to be paralyzed by unresolvable shreds of fractured experience? Or can we sift through the fragments, somehow avoiding fatal stabbing by their sharp edges, to assemble a coherent and responsible philosophy of action?

Whether Native or non-Native, we all exist in the fractured midst of an immense historical clash. This is the clash between the indigenous ways that humans have known for over 99 percent of our existence -- and this more recent, completely unprecedented configuration. Call it technological civilization. Call it capitalism. Call it postmodern globalism. Call it the patriarchy or the dominant society. The point is that this system is bigger than you or me, and bigger than AIM or the Bear Tribe Medicine Society. Because of its predominance, the archetypal clash of our time -- that between self-sustaining indigenous ways and expansive technological organization -- is being played out in the most intimate realm of our lives: in our spirituality.

So where might we place ourselves in the midst of these overarching forces? I believe there are a number of factors that can help us craft a worthy perspective. One is historical and political. I am sure I do not have to regale you with a recitation of the horrific atrocities, injustices, and manipulations that define the history of the non-Native relationship to indigenous peoples. These

atrocities and manipulations continue today -- we stand in the midst of them -- and the way things are going, they promise only to intensify as global economic forces (such as the ascendancy of multinational corporations through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and technological development (such as biotechnology) aim to complete the eradication of indigenous knowledge and livelihood. As economist Paul Hawken puts it, " Given current corporate practices, not one wildlife reserve, wilderness, or indigenous culture will survive the global market economy."

Any decisions you and I make concerning Native culture, whether personal or political, reside in the starkness of this context. The urgency that claws at my heart is this: Are we destined to become yet another generation of non-Natives blindly participating in the demise of indigenous dignity? If I were to look at our predicament solely from a historical-political perspective, I would propose that we honor the wishes of those Natives working for the protection and integrity of indigenous cultures.

I realize that, given the assumptions that underlie and give texture to our daily lives, such a perspective may be difficult to accept -- or perhaps even impossible to grasp. I made a journey to a spiritual bookstore in Santa Fe to explore its validity. There, amid wooden footsie rollers, Hindu incense, and Tibetan prayer flags, I placed myself squarely in front of the Native American section. Sure enough, my hunger ran wild. There before me was this fascinating anthropological text on female puberty rites among the Dine', another on the ghost dance of the 1800s, a third on Zuni fetishes In the context of the mass marketplace we are led to believe that it is our basic right to get anything so long as we have the means to put it in the store, the passion to devour it, and the cash to buy it. The marketplace, with its incessant buying and selling, packaging and persuading, is the world you and I know; it is where we have learned our assumptions about how the world works and from which we make our judgments about possibility and even morality. In it, access to the deepest-held traditions of Native people seems completely normal.

But maybe, in the vast scheme of human experience, our assumptions are not as normal as we think. Shift to Kawaika: Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, as it's called in the English-speaking world. Here, in the upland village of Pagate, things look very different from the view at the bookstore. Here on the silent mesas, the juniper rustles wildly against the red earth as the wind stings by -- and the world you and I assume slips away. Here the dances have been danced for generations in resonance with these mountains, these valleys, and their unseen guardians. Here the corn has been planted and praised, the deer listened to and hunted. Here the people are complete in and of themselves. The arrival of the non-Native world -- whether by conquistador, anthropologist, uranium mine, or New Age seeker -- is a violation. This world runs on different

assumptions, assumptions that have to do with continuity, sacredness, integrity. It is not appropriate to violate these assumptions now, and it never was.

Such a view bucks an entire system, challenging the perception of the access we members of the dominant society have long defended as a basic right, even threatening to reroute an entire industry based on non-Native sales of Native "products" and "services." But there is a deeper reason for considering such a view, and it is philosophical. Let me tell you about a Dine' educator named Larry Emerson whose insight into the nature of indigenous culture caused me to rearrange my entire sense of human responsibility -- and possibility.

In 1991 Emerson participated in a public dialogue between Native and non-Native thinkers and activists. After a presentation that explored and revealed Native American challenges and strengths, a Euro-American woman rose from the audience to ask a question. What about white people's pagan roots? she wanted to know. What about Stonehenge? The caves of Laussel? The Goddess? A sense of angst lay like a stone over the audience as she spoke. Emerson jumped down from his perch in the bleachers at the back of the small auditorium. "You can learn a great deal from reclaiming your European ancestral roots," Emerson called out, his raspy voice echoing inside his throat. "You can learn about ceremony, you can learn to respect yourself as a woman or a man, you can explore the meaning of community. But there's an inherent limitation to this approach. You see, the cultures you are talking about were created by those people, over there, back then." He was pointing east. Following the direction of his finger, we could practically see Europe, Scandinavia, Russia, and the Fertile Crescent from our seats. "To create an authentic Earth-based culture, we must communicate with the rocks and trees and birds. Here. Now."

Native culture is not a file to be stored in a computer. It is not a weekend workshop to consume at summer solstice or a bag of corn pollen to carry through city streets. *It is a way of life* -- complete and whole within itself. Ceremonies and dreaming patterns, knowledge of local plants, reverence for the ancestors, affinity for the land, the very shape of the languages -- these are all of a piece, inseparable from each other. To import a single disembodied fragment from Lummi culture -- say, an initiation ceremony -- to New Orleans or New York City not only constitutes the worst example of the postmodern urge to incoherence. It is a violation of the Creator's sense of order; it isn't real.

On top of this, Native spirituality can never be a means to gain individual actualization in the western sense; it is a communal tradition created over generations and generations for the vitalization of a people's relationship to Creation. To reroute its practices for attaining the individualistic goals of our word -- say, financial abundance or self-esteem -- is to warp its integrity.

Last, we must not forget that ancient ceremonial practices are potent forces whose effects we may not understand. "With our tribes and our religious people, there's some information you just do not share," explains Gloria Emerson, Dine' educator and director of the Center for Research and Cultural Exchange at the Institute for American Indian Arts. "There's a lot of information that's sacred, that's so powerful and profound that if you tamper with it you're tampering with some forces that you might unleash unwittingly, that could be destructive."

When we non-Natives grasp the implications of these insights, we stand face to face with the magnitude of the challenge before us. Are we surprised that this challenge is so formidable? Didn't we understand it to be when we first set out to fight for racial justice? End the war in Vietnam? Stop environmental destruction? Cleanse our bodies of toxic chemicals? Build community in the midst of mass society? The challenge is no less formidable now. Through the passing decades and varied shards of our experiences, it has merely become clearer to us: to reinvent an Earth-honoring way of living, not just to answer the spiritual cry within, but to heal the terrible social and ecological fissures in our sad world.



Despite the complexities and contradictions that shape our lives today, we are called to remake our own indigenous cultures. As Seneca educator John Mohawk lovingly advises, "I do not want people to adopt Indian rituals, because I want them to own their own rituals.... Then I'll come and celebrate with them." I have heard dozens of other Indian people express the same thought.

We are called to accomplish our task, in part, by excavating, researching, and remembering the caves and campfires of our own heritages, long broken by the march of progress and the crush of the Inquisition; in part, by searching into our family lineages and stories; in part, by revitalizing our communities; and most especially, by renewing communion with the rocks and trees and birds where we live. It is they who have always told humans how to live and, if we listen, will tell us now.

Some Native people though, critical of non-Native participation in any nature-based practices at all, may still challenge us, reiterating their worthy plea that non-Natives not use the practices of specific peoples -- but now adding that we not sit in circles, burn herbs, drum, or go on wilderness quests. I disagree. These are universal practices; they hark back to the ways of my ancestors and yours. We may not have access to the richness of generations and generations of ceremonies, stories, and spirits, but we do have these basic forms for initiating our rediscovery of them. You and I were born to this planet to be Earth-honoring people, which is why we have the capability of appreciating the practices of Native peoples in the first place. If we never buy a feathered spirit catcher or read about Dine' puberty rites, we still hold within our hearts the knowledge to heal ourselves back to the Earth.

O.K. A big question still nags: how then do we relate to indigenous peoples?

As a woman of Dutch ancestry, I look for guidance in the Gaswentah, or Two-Row Wampum. This treaty, agreed to in the early 1600s by the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and the Dutch, was made manifest in a beaded wampum belt with two rows of purple beads sewn side by side onto a background of white beads. According to Onondaga Faithkeeper Oren Lyons, "The two rows of purple beads represent the Red Man and the White Man living side by side in peace and friendship forever. The white background is a river. On that river of life you travel in your boat and we travel in our canoe. Each of us is responsible for our own government and religion and way of life. We don't interfere with each other. The rows are parallel. One row is not bigger. We're equal. We don't call each other 'Father' or 'Son,' we call each other 'Brother.' That's the way it's supposed to be between us 'for as long as the grass grows and water flows and the sun shines.' Those words come from this treaty. We still believe them. We're waiting for the White Man to live up to his side."

Living up to our side means that we enter into the kind of relationship that tribal peoples have always sought to build with each other. It does not mean we cannot be guests in Native communities. It does not mean we cannot accept an invitation to dance at a pow wow or attend a feast. It does not even mean that a few of us will not be taught Native healing practices. It means that, as individuals and as peoples, we agree not to interfere, steal, dominate, sell, or

disrupt the ways of our neighbors. It means that we approach our relationships with Indian people from a stance of neither domination nor neediness -- but from the integrity that comes of believing in our own ways.

At this moment in history, after over 500 years of both domination and neediness, we might also consider actions that could help to redress the imbalance. A point made by Comanche activist Paul Smith is worth our attention. During World War II, he says, Germans who cared about the fate of Jewish people did not take workshops on Jewish folklore, Yiddish songs, and the mysticism of the religion. Their mission was far more straightforward: it was to fight Hitler. Today Native people can use our support for any number of issues ranging from health care and uranium mining clean-up to sovereignty rights and "free" trade agreements. Perhaps most immediate to this discussion is Senator Daniel Inouye's bill, the Native American Cultural Protection and Free Exercise of Religion Act. This bill guarantees the protection of sacred religious sites, the religious use of eagle feathers and other plants and animals, and access of prisoners to traditional spiritual practices. The bill reflects over two years of focused work between the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, the Clinton Administration, the American Indian Religious Freedom Coalition, and hundreds of Native communities all over the United States.

The prophecy of the Two-Row Wampum has something to say about these political struggles and others that impinge upon us now. Way back in the 1600s, it foresaw that a breed of Two-Minded People would emerge -- people with one foot in the Red boat and one foot in the White boat. The story predicts that one day a mighty wind would howl across the river, the water would become inhumanly choppy, and the people stretched between the two rows would fall and drown.

This time has arrived. There are among us now Two-Minded People who keep a foot in each boat, and they are indeed having a rough time surviving. The rest of the world seems to be dividing itself between the White boat: those (Indian and non-Indian alike) betting on the ways that have led to our current spiritual, social, and ecological crises -- and the Red boat -- those (again, both Indian and non-Indian) who see a safe, sustainable future unfolding through Earth-based ways.

Dear friends, it is up to us to make our choice for the future. At this historic moment mimicking, buying, selling, or stealing fragments of Native American cultures is to break the conversant of the Two-Row Wampum -- and to block the possibility for going forth, side by side, toward the world we all want to celebrate.

Yours truly,

Chellis Glendinning