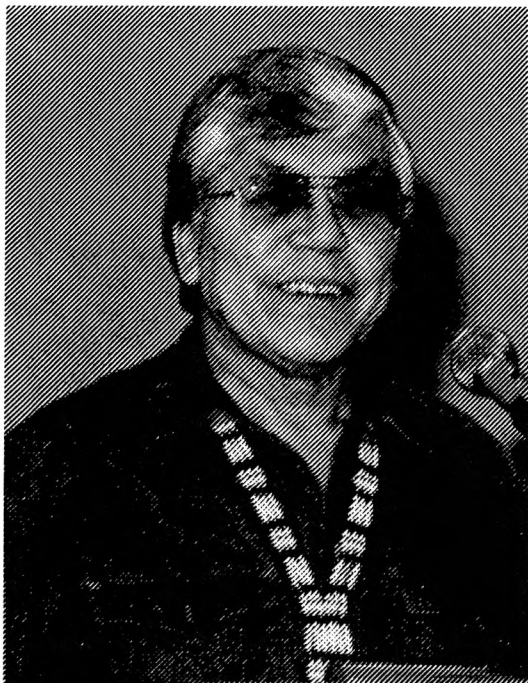


7 Honoring Spiritual Knowledge

Stan Wilson

Stan Wilson is Cree from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation at The Pas, Manitoba. Stan grew up on the trapline with his parents and his extended family of 11. He attended residential school at a time when Indian children were not welcome in the public school system in The Pas. Stan received his doctorate from the University of California in Santa Barbara. He has been director of education for his home reserve and for the Prince Albert Chiefs. He has taught school at all levels and has been a principal and a professor in Alaska, Sacramento, and now at the University of Alberta.



Tansi, n'too tem tik. Kih ta tum skatina waw miyow teh heh winik isi. I greeted you in my own language, Cree, and what I said was, "Greetings my friends. I'm greeting you with a good heart." What I want to do this morning is to take a few minutes to think about how, or if, we can honor traditional spirituality in an academic institution. I am not doing this because I think I know how. I am doing this because I want us to think about how to do it if it is at all possible. The way that I am thinking and talking with you people who, I realize, know about honoring traditional spirituality in an academic setting is the only the way that I know to do it right now. As the Elder was telling us this morning, we are all in some ways like children learning to play hockey. Some of us have just learned to put our skates on and we keep falling down. Some of us know how to skate and play the game a little better. Others are like professionals. Like Wayne Gretzky, we play the game beautifully. I'm like one of those learners who is just beginning. I keep falling down. But falling down should not stop us from trying. If we try with a good heart, and the

intention to do good is there, then it is OK if we make mistakes and fall down.

What I'm going to say I will say with a good heart, so that when I'm finished I hope no one is offended by my remarks. I don't mean to be offensive. However, I want to share with you what I think is the state of our Native people's relationships with the rest of society. The other speakers have been doing this, and each of them has talked about it in his own way, just as Carlos did yesterday. I was really excited with what he was saying and his analysis of how the Western style of education is producing a certain type of individual who is compulsive and obsessive. I understand what he said, and through this understanding I feel alive. I feel welcome, right here in this place. So I stayed here for a while, lingering and enjoying the feeling.

I am going to relate to you an experience I had several years ago when I went to a conference in the United States in Georgia. Peggy and I had left the conference area to go for a walk. It was a beautiful January day, and we were enjoying the warm weather, which was so different from the wind and cold that we had left behind in Regina. And as I walked I had an overwhelming feeling of being welcomed in a powerful way. Yet at the same time, there was a sadness, almost a melancholy feeling. It was a wistful feeling and yet I knew that I was being welcomed. As I told Peggy about the feeling, we were both left in awe of our surroundings. Later that night an image came to me. I don't know if it was a dream I had while I was sleeping or if it was a vision that came to me as I was waking up. Whatever it was, it woke me up with start. The image was clear and remains clear to this day.

The image was of a person who was very emaciated, I guess you would say all skin and bones. This person was walking along in a very desolate area where there was nothing growing. But this person had been clever enough to not eat all the provisions that he was carrying with him in a little bag. Nor had he drunk all the water that he had brought with him. He knew he had to ration his supplies. As he went along, he kept peering out into the horizon. He had barely enough energy to walk and kept himself walking by leaning his body forward so that the weight of his body would give him the momentum he needed to keep going. He was exhausted and dragged his feet.

Suddenly, he could see in the distance something beautiful. He saw lush vegetation. He opened his eyes wider and quickened his pace. He leaned forward a little more so he could hurry. As he came closer he could see the beauty and the bounty of this place. He could see all the lush vegetation, the fruit, and lots of natural foods to eat. So he used up his remaining energy and rushed into this place and began grabbing for this and that. He vigorously satisfied his prolonged hunger because he had been keeping himself just above starvation for such a long time. As he was

doing this, he didn't pay any attention to the people that were there. He reached over them and pushed them off balance. They didn't fall over though, but they were pushed off balance. He also was off balance because he was extending his reach to gather as much as he could. This was the image I saw at three in the morning.

We finished the conference and caught the plane back to Regina. While we were on the plane, I napped as I usually do. When I awoke, we were somewhere between Minneapolis and Regina. As I looked down at the prairie I imagined what it would have been like if I could have seen it from up here 200, 300, or 500 years ago. I could see moving carpets of buffalo. I could see the camps of our ancestors here and there. And as I thought about these images, I remembered an experience of several summers before. I was walking around in a field somewhere in Saskatchewan. It was a beautiful sunny day in the fall. I imagined what it would have been like there on that particular spot 300 years before. I imagined that there would be many buffalo on the plains. In those clumps of willows or in the bush, there would be deer. There would also be prairie chickens all over the place, and the sky would be full of geese and other fowl on their annual fall migration. Perhaps on the bluff over there, there would be a camp. My ancestors would have lived there.

In midstep, it occurred to me that if my ancestors had lived here for thousands of years—for they were nomadic and traveled here, there, and all over—some of them might have even lived and died right here, right on the spot where I was going to place my next footstep. I stopped and thought, If that is the case, I'm walking on sacred ground. If my ancestors died here, their remains would be in the soil. Their remains would have become part of the soil, enriching it in the process. The grass that's growing here would be getting its nourishment from the soil and from their remains, and so my ancestors are in the grass. My ancestors are likewise in the trees, in the worm that lives on the leaf of the tree, in the bird that eats the worm. This is what our Elder meant yesterday when he said that when you go by yourself into the woods, you are not alone. You are there with the birds. You are there with the trees. You are there with the grass. You are there with your ancestors. That is how I felt when I was growing up on the trapline. Even when I was by myself, I never felt alone. The Elder's prayer reminded us of that this morning. Thank you for reminding me of that.

When I got back to Regina, I was anxious to tell my story to someone who would listen. I have some good friends there who will listen to whatever manner of things I have to tell. George, here, is one of them. I was eager to tell my experience to my friends. I think the first one I found was Eber. I told him that I had to tell him something, something exciting that had happened to me, but I didn't know what to do with it. We went for coffee and I told him the story about the experience that I had in

Georgia. He kept looking at me in a funny way as I was talking and I couldn't figure out why. After I finished my story he said, "I understand. I had a similar experience."

Eber told me that when he was at Harvard he had to go out every once in a while to get away from the university and away from the city. He used to go to a little valley that he found in New England. He felt at home there and would go there to pray. One day, he noticed a little construction site starting up in the valley. He said the first time he found this place he felt at home. He felt as if the ancient ones and his ancestors were there. That is why he used to pray and burn sweetgrass in that little valley in New England.

A couple of months had passed since the last time he was there. He was in his office and there was a knock on the door. He invited the person to enter—an old man with some long paper rolled up under his arm. The old man said that he was with a group of people who wanted to build a meditation center, who had then realized that they were getting ahead of themselves. The old man explained that they had forgotten to ask permission from Native Americans first because they were foreigners. Because they came from other countries, they needed permission from the original inhabitants of the area. Eber asked him where the place was. The old man unrolled a map and showed him the location. It happened to be exactly the same spot that Eber had been going to. Eber told the old man, "I've already done that, I've already prayed there." They prayed together and the old man went away.

I was happy that to find someone who understood my Georgia experience. When Eber shared his own experience, I began to realize that my experience was not an extraordinary experience but an ordinary experience. I started to feel good about it and I wanted to share it with others. I next found and spoke to Lionel Kinunwa, a Minnicunjo from South Dakota who was in Regina at that time. I told him about my sad, yet welcomed feelings, and about the vision. As I spoke, he kept nodding his head. When I finished, he looked at me and he said, "You've had a ten thousand-year-old experience." I thought, "I'm only fifty years old. How can I have a ten thousand-year-old experience?"

Lionel said, "Think. What was here ten thousand years ago in this place where we're sitting." I said, "Well, they tell us it was a big sheet of ice here a mile high."

"Yes, well, where do you think your ancestors were?"

"I guess they would have left when they saw this ice coming, right?"

"And where would they have gone?"

"Well, I don't think they would go to the desert, because they wouldn't be used to living in a desert."

"Well, where would they go?"

"Well, I guess they'd go where there was lots of good stuff to eat and where they would be able to live easily."

"Yeah, and that's where they would have been, in the southeast part of the continent, somewhere around Georgia. They moved down there, they were born there, and they died there, for thousands of years." And then he said, "Your ancestors were happy to see you, and that's why you had that feeling. They were happy to see one of their own kind. They don't see Indian people there very often because Georgia is now populated by white people, right?"

As he was saying all this, I remembered reading a story in my psychology class about a researcher who tried the following experiment. He made a little wooden box, strung a number of fine wires through it, filled it with sand, and put some worms and food in the box. He then connected a bright light over the box and wired it so that whenever he turned the bright light on, it also turned on a small electrical current in the wires, which shocked the worms. He did this briefly and watched to see what the worms would do. He noticed that every time he turned the light on, the worms flinched from the shock. After a while, he disconnected the battery to the fine wires. When he turned the light on, the worms would still flinch, anticipating the shock. He tried this out a few more times and the worms kept doing the same thing. Then he took the worms out and put a new batch of worms into the box. He ground up the old worms and put their remains back into the box where they would be food for the new bunch of worms. After a while, when the new worms had sufficient time to have eaten the old worms, he watched as he flipped on the light. The new worms flinched. How did they know? How did they know to connect the light with the shock from the wires? He reasoned that by eating the previous worms, the new worms had also ingested the information the old worms gained from their experience with the electric shocks.

Lionel said, "We have memories. Our ancestral memories are in your blood, they're in your muscles, they're in your bones, they're in your hair, and those memories are there." He said that many of us do not pay attention to these memories because we are too busy paying attention to what's going on in the modern world. We don't pay attention to our historic memory. That is why when we hear the drum, our spirit is moved. This is because the vibrations of the drum stir old memories—our ancestral memories. These memories come out of the molecular structure of our being. This is also why when you hear someone speaking your own language, your molecular structure picks up those vibrations, because each language has its own peculiar patterns, and you feel good that somebody is speaking your language. "We human beings, we two-legged beings, we think we are all powerful, but we have limits to what we can do and limits to what we can see. We can't see everything and some animals see things that we can't see."

I believe he was saying that our vision is limited on the light spectrum. There are light frequencies that we are not able to perceive that other beings can perceive. At the high and low end of the spectrum there are some things that we cannot see. We cannot see microwaves. We cannot see radio waves. If we were able to see everything, we wouldn't be able to pay attention, to focus on one thing at a time. The same applies to our hearing. We cannot hear everything. We cannot hear the radio waves going through the air. We cannot hear the animals talking to each other. We can hear some of them, but some we can't, because our hearing is limited to a small spectrum of sound. Lionel said that our bodies are the same, the core body temperature stays within a narrow range. Sometimes, when our core body temperature goes above that range or below that range, our bodies release certain chemicals and we experience a non-ordinary event. It's a natural thing. It's not supernatural, but we are not used to it.

For instance when a person is freezing to death and his core body temperature falls below the usual, chemicals are released in the body and the person starts to feel at peace and falls asleep before freezing to death. On the other hand, if the core body temperature goes above the normal range, the opposite happens. Our bodies release certain chemicals that alter consciousness. That is what happens when we go to a sweat lodge. Those who have been in a sweat lodge know that some of those sweats get really hot.

Ralph and I were in a sweat over the weekend, and I couldn't finish the rounds. It was too hot and I had to stay out. That is what happens in a sweat. The core body temperature goes above the normal range and we may have these non-ordinary experiences. Lionel said, "In Lakota we have a word for the experience you had. We call it *wampli-ee-wan-yankapee*. In our language, that means people who have reached the stage of seeing or walking like the eagles." According to Lionel, we can all have these experiences. However, it is mostly older people that have them, which is why it is called reaching the age of walking with the eagles. When an eagle comes down on the ground, he has a hard time walking because of his long talons, and so he walks with a definite swagger. That is why old people walk that way. They have reached the age of walking with the eagles.

"Young people don't have those experiences because they are interested in other things," Lionel continued.

It is as if you were sitting in a parking lot at a football game where there are thousands of cars. You are sitting in the middle, in your car, trying to see past all the other cars. Because of the way they are parked, you can't see past more than one or two of them, by looking through the windows. However, if all these cars were lined up precisely, you could look through all the windows and see past the parking lot. Sometimes we have experiences where we can see things that we don't normally see because things are lined up in a certain way. That is the kind of experience that you had. You don't have to go on a vision quest to receive

these experiences. Some people are helped in having these experiences by going through a ceremony or a ritual.

I had to think about all of this for a long time. As I found more people to tell my story to, I had other ideas about it.

All this time, this vision, these images, wouldn't go away. They wouldn't leave me alone. I could understand how it was that I felt welcomed. I can understand that feeling now, but I couldn't understand it at the time. I could not understand what the melancholy or sadness was about, until I suddenly started remembering my history classes in university. When my ancestors were living in Georgia when the Europeans started to come in large numbers, Andrew Jackson was president. Some of the early Americans told Jackson they must be careful, that they must respect the Indian people. Another group, however, said that they were strong enough to take the land away from the Indians, and that they would move the Indians, giving them another piece of land in exchange. Jackson listened to this latter group and ordered the army to remove by force most of the Indian people who were living in that area. You have all heard of the Long March or the Trail of Tears. Our ancestors were forcibly removed from Georgia and moved to what they called the Indian territory in Oklahoma. Some escaped, and their descendants are apparently still living in the swamps of Florida. This forcible removal of my ancestors was what caused the feeling of sadness.

Next I started to wonder about how the vision of the emaciated person walking through the desert fit into all of this? At first I thought that that emaciated person was me—deprived spiritually and looking for something good. Although this is true, there was something more than a personal message in the dream. The vision presented an understanding of why the newcomers acted the way they did. I am not sure how helpful this understanding will be in trying to recover our collective balance. Perhaps knowing what is keeping us off balance will help us to do something about it.

I recalled reading about European history in my high school and university classes and how the European nations fought among themselves for centuries. Every country in Europe has been involved in reshaping its political boundaries many times over. Because of increasing city populations, agricultural production could not keep up. The ruling classes only aggravated the problem by skimming off the cream for their own uses. The average person was indeed in a deprived condition, as the power structure made certain that there was barely enough food to keep the masses of people working or fighting. The wars were about resources. Access to these resources meant a nation state could feed its own people.

The overpopulation drove adventurers to the so-called New World who returned with stories of bountiful riches for the taking. So began the outward migration of people from Europe to the rest of the world. Accord-

ing to this interpretation, the Europeans had experienced deprivation for generations and could not control their reaction. They were attempting to fill a centuries-old void in themselves. Their collective histories drove them to secure for their respective homelands as much of the new land and its resources as they could control, so that their fellow citizens at home in Europe would never again have to experience deprivation. In their eagerness to claim everything for themselves, they caught Indigenous peoples off guard and pushed them off balance.

For instance, according to some Elders, the Europeans grabbed our Indian libraries. The information that our ancient ancestors had was inscribed on gold plates and other artifacts in Central America. When the Spaniards came along, they didn't see the information; they just saw what to them was precious metal. They demanded that the Indians bring all the gold to them, and because the Indians were all suffering from the new diseases and experiencing great devastation, they could do little to resist (Sioui, 1992). The Spaniards melted the gold, and as they did so melted our libraries. They took our melted libraries to Spain and used the gold either to pay for more soldiers or to buy more trade goods. This is what is still happening today. Now they want to take the last fish from the ocean. They don't care if they take all the fish. They want to look after their people and they don't realize how short-sighted they are being.

Indigenous people all over the world are in similar situations. We Indigenous people are off balance and we need to regain our balance. It is not enough for us only to regain our own balance, because this big monster is keeping us off balance. As long as others are off balance, it will not work. We have to figure out how to help white people stand on their own two feet. Many people find it strange that I say this, because many people say that the Indian has to learn to stand on his own two feet. It is not only the Indian, though. Yes, we have to learn to stand on our own two feet too. But it is more important for the bigger person, the white man, to learn to stand on his own two feet. We are smaller, so we have to convince white people of this.

That is my story.

I have no suggestions about how we can do these things. We gather once in a while to talk and to try to figure out ways to regain our balance. We can't do it by ourselves, because we are interdependent. We live in relationships. We have to figure out how to say, firmly but with a good heart, to the white man, "You're leaning on me too much."

You have heard of the Nisga'a land claims. They have not been resolved yet, and the Nisga'a people took their case to the World Court in 1907. The white man still isn't listening. He still wants all that land to himself. He does not yet have the good heart to say, "We will in turn share this land with you." You see, Indian people are sharing people. Not far from Edmonton is a town called Wetaskiwin, which in the Cree language

means something like "Come and live on this land together." From listening to stories told by Crees who seem to know their history, I understand that the Crees and the Blackfeet used to fight over this territory because it was like a border between them. They battled between themselves until finally they made a treaty. That is why they called that place Wee-tas-kay-win. The name represents the treaty, the concept, and living together in this land in harmony with each other. Wetaskiwin does not mean *we own this land*. It means *you too can come in and live here in peace. We share this land together*.

We Indigenous peoples have been preoccupied for too long with what has kept us off balance. We need to shift our attention to what it was that kept our ancestors in harmony with their environment. We need to regain that perspective and make ourselves adjust to that regained perspective. Is this spiritual? Can we teach it? If we don't teach these things and if we don't acknowledge the work and the help of our ancestors in our writings and in our research, will we do any better than the white scholars who have forced us to hear only their side of the story for so long?

Reference

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