

Native Spirituality, Past, Present, and Future

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“This, said the holy people, is where God talks to us; where we can dance with our spirit; where we can go into our past, present, and future; where we can be in touch with our loved ones far away.”

QUTSAME is known to many as Leonard George. He is the youngest son of the late Chief Dan George. Leonard graduated from Notre Dame High School and then studied drama at Vancouver College for two years. He worked in theatre and movies until 1970, then as a labourer before becoming involved in native community work at the Vancouver Indian Centre. He established the Chief Dan George Memorial Foundation to train and develop native people in the film industry. For the past ten years Leonard has conducted workshops and seminars on native culture. He is currently the chief of the Burard band and with his wife Susan is the proud parent of four sons.

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Nature has many ways of creating balance and harmony. All living things have their place in the spectrum of life, and all living things have their own roles and functions. There is no confusion: genetic imprinting has made it very clear to all creatures who they are and what they must do in their life. The relationships among the creatures are also clearly defined, and it is a never-ending source of wonder to observers to see how well the creatures of the forest and other environments cohabit and contribute to the well-being of their worlds.

The only exception in nature is we human creatures, for we do not have a particular place and function in the life cycle. We have been given the great gift of conscious minds to determine and choose our directions in life. Because we aren't set in definite roles, we must construct our own relationships with the others in our environment. When we do not have a clear knowledge of what contributions can be made by each other, then we can encroach upon and duplicate each other's roles while leaving other necessary roles unfilled.

I believe that most of us share the vision of a balanced and harmonious life in a healthy world. To achieve this we must utilize all the strengths and capabilities of every human creature and we must develop our roles

and relationships. This can only happen through the kind of deep understanding that results from serious dialogue and sharing. When we understand our differences and the things we have in common, then we may grow and survive together.

The aboriginal people of North America had a system in place that allowed them to live in this land for thousands of years. This system was based on spirituality. In this paper I will briefly describe the spirituality of aboriginal people, yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

To start I offer my personal definition of spirituality. Spirituality is the bringing together of those things that are essential to our becoming human beings. The human part of us is our body, and the being part is the spirit. Our purpose in life is to bring these together in the best possible way, as our Creator intended. The relationship between the body and the spirit is what makes us whole — all the other things we do are secondary to becoming the best possible human beings.

Past

Native North America was governed by spirituality prior to contact with the European in that all the leaders of the tribes and nations from east coast to west coast were holy people. These were people who regarded themselves as instruments of the Creator's work. To become an instrument, it was necessary to become humble like the water: always seeking the lowest places on earth, running around and beneath all things and yet remaining relentless in its efforts, always ongoing, never stopping yet when necessary having the power to move a mountain. When a person achieved this level of consciousness, that person was then a servant of mankind — a lover of mankind and thus a leader of people.

A leader has to assist people with their needs. But for this system to work, the individual people must live with the same values as the leader. For aboriginal people this meant the spiritual values which came from their relationship with the Great Spirit which said that your purpose in life was to become the best possible human being you could in your lifetime so that you could enter into an eternal life with the Creator.

The leaders taught that all the gifts we are born with are the tools that the Great Spirit has given us to succeed in life. We are born highly intelligent, loving, kind, generous, caring, sharing and honest. The leaders believed that if one embraced those qualities, he or she had everything needed to succeed in life. However, if one moved away and was selfish, uncaring, and dishonest, he or she would not achieve life's purpose.

The leaders also taught that to remain tuned and in the proper relationship, people must follow the Wheel of Life. This is the symbolic circle of the universe which holds all together in relationship to one another, with everything having a purpose and a balance to offset the other. It is fashioned after the world itself, being balanced by the four directions, the four races, and four human characteristics.

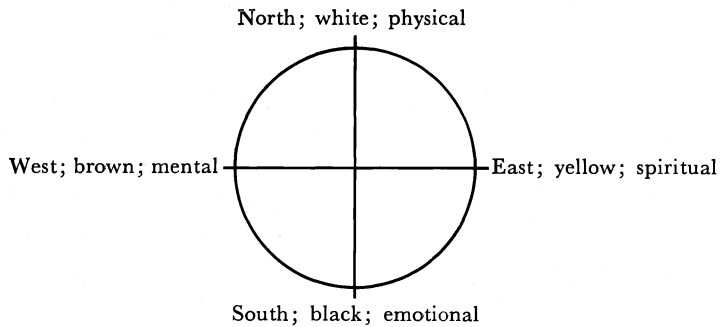


FIGURE 1
Wheel of Life

All the facets of the Wheel are related and in balance to each other, beginning with our personal wheel, which includes the respect for all the other parts of the Wheel.

So we start with our own physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional being. Each of these aspects contributes to the wholesomeness of the next. If you are happy and healthy in your physical self, you can love yourself. People were taught to keep in shape, eat the right foods, and respect their bodies, not hurting them in any way. The people knew that this gave the best chance for the rest of your wheel to work. Because the native people knew this, every one of their rituals, customs, and traditions complemented each other and were enhanced by this holistic approach to life. Directions for these practices came from the Creator and from the human leaders and teachers, and the practices were all simple. The simplicity prevented a myriad of complications within the body and spirit. It started with eating pure, good food in adequate quantities to nourish, not stuff. The other activities included running, fasting, meditation, singing, dancing, sweat-lodge participation, pipe ceremonies, and cold water baths. Along with keeping a healthy body, one tried to stay in balance with the environment by rising when the sun came up, working and playing in the day, and resting when the sun went down: all simple processes which kept the people well. This is strongly illustrated when one looks back at decades of native

lifestyles and sees the physical differences in the early pictures of the strong, noble native. It is also notable that at first contact, the life expectancy for European men was between 35 and 40 years, whereas among the native peoples there were often five generations living together, headed up by the aged great-grandparents. Unfortunately, this is not true today because, like most North Americans, aboriginal people have moved from good natural nutrition and exercise to poisoning their bodies with chemicals like sugar, alcohol, and drugs.

To return to the Wheel, you can see that if one is healthy physically, one also tends to be in good health mentally. Now all of the activities or, more appropriately, rituals mentioned in relation to the physical are also imperative to the well-being of the mental state. The mind is unlimited in potential to hold on to positive and negative information — wonderful philosophy or hazardous hurt. Each must be expressed in order to be wholesome.

We have been taught that the brain is divided in two interesting ways. The first is a division of right- and left-brain thinking. The right is our intuitive and dream half, which allows us a relationship with the mystical and the things we feel — those things we know but can't explain. The left is the logical and calculated planning side, where order is maintained and we plan our 1, 2, 3 approaches to keeping life regulated. Like all other things that are right in life, there is a balance in the brain functions. That is why it is important for all people to do activities that use both sides of the brain.

The holy people also taught that there are three levels of thinking and communicating. There is the conscious level, the one we are most familiar with. This is where we use our will deliberately to direct our thoughts and actions. There is the unconscious level, where we are aware of what we are doing but perhaps not aware that we chose to do it. This is when you find yourself involved in something but you are not sure why you are doing it. The third level is the subconscious — this is the level few people ever become familiar with because it requires intense meditation and listening over long periods of time before you start to consciously receive the messages from this level.

The holy people said that the answers to life are in the second and third levels of our mind, and they spent the majority of their lives trying to reach those levels because it is believed that this is where God talks to us. The rituals mentioned earlier — such as singing, dancing, swimming, sweats, meditation, pipe ceremonies, fasting, and long-distance running — are all activities that bring us to a physical state where it is much easier for us to reach our unconscious and subconscious minds. This, said the holy people,

is where God talks to us; where we can dance with our spirit; where we can go into our past, present, and future; where we can be in touch with our loved ones far away.

These are the positives that result from using the power of the unconscious and subconscious person. The negative aspects are that we retain hurt, pain, worry, anger, revenge, and grief in these levels because all that comes at us is evaluated, registered, and stored as information until it is needed in our lives. If we store more negative than positive information, this causes major illness. All other conscious actions cease, the hurt prevents us from physically caring, we have no control of our emotions, and there is a lack of "will" to do or to talk to God. Also, this hurt stops new information from entering. Once again, this is where the tried and true rituals of the past assisted in maintaining health. They helped us to express our pain, sorrow, anger, or whatever. When we sing, we cannot help but sing with what we are feeling. It will come out on its own. It will be expressed and, once expressed, it will not burden us any longer and we will be relieved of that negative. We are not meant to hold all our feelings inside; we have a great need to express in order to stay whole. A good example is our babies; when they are hungry or hurt they cry, when they are happy they laugh, when the need comes they scream. In the man remains the boy and in the woman remains the girl, and no matter how old we get the child in us still needs to be nourished with love, understanding, caring, and encouragement.

A lot of the time we have to give ourselves the opportunity to recognize which one of these needs requires our help. Here again, the rituals do this: they allow us to cry, scream, laugh or whatever. It is like a tune-up for a car: when we are cleaned physically and mentally we are able to control ourselves emotionally. The expression of emotion balances our feelings: if it was not good to laugh, it would not be good to cry. Anger balances happiness. We must, however, guide our feelings through the process until we are back to normal. Anger is a good emotion, but if not controlled it can be damaging to oneself and to whomever one may be dealing with. This damage is exactly what we need to avoid. So, it was taught, emotion is highly important and the traditional rituals central to allowing people to express emotion.

Understanding the importance of expressing emotion is particularly important for men today. There is so much emphasis on being macho that it prevents normal human acts like crying. Boys and men feel they have to be strong, that crying is not manly, which is so wrong (the old ones said, if it wasn't good to cry, it wouldn't be good to laugh). Men die early of heart

attacks from holding on to what is meant to be expressed. Crying, laughing, anger, sorrow, loneliness, depression, fear and doubt are all emotions that need the opportunity to be expressed or released in various ways. When they are properly released, then the physical and mental emotions are healthy and we are much more likely to think of ourselves in a spiritual manner. Again, the rituals help because all of these activities and practices were answers to prayers to God on how to deal with the burdens and joys of being human. The holy people stressed that it was necessary to keep all things in balance because our purpose is to become the best possible human being in our lifetime so that we can enter into our eternal life with the Great Spirit.

At the height of the old system of life was a structure that was referred to as the Great Turtle. The native peoples of North America viewed their lands as Turtle Island, not because North America was shaped like a turtle but because it was considered the system upon which native people govern themselves, in that at the seven vital points of the turtle was a holy person who looked to the needs of the people and the land. The points were the head, right and left front legs, right and left hind legs, the tail and the heart. These positions from East to West and North to South of North America were held by holy people who provided spiritual guidance and leadership to their people, based upon a common set of values held by all the nations. The world and life of that time was by no means perfect, but there was a simple and effective system of helping humans in their struggles to be human beings which helped them and their environment survive for thousands of years.

Present

What happened, and why did this system stop? Largely it stopped because Europeans brought with them a system based on materialism. On "contact" with North America, this new system based on greed and power was introduced to the people living in North America. In order to give credibility to this system of material values, the native value system based on spiritual values had to be discredited and the people declared incompetent. In hindsight, we can easily say that the native people of North America were oppressed by three major forces. These were government, religion, and Hollywood.

Government first proclaimed that the natives were savage and followed pagan practices, which of course had to be stopped for the good of all. The first phase of the conquering and exploiting of the new land was to battle

and exterminate the people to extinction if possible or, if not, at least to the point of control. So the new leaders began their quest to remove the Indian people from the way of progress. They killed off tribes of people and herds of animals, destroyed miles and miles of forests, contaminated water, burned vegetation, and made laws against speaking the native languages and practising the native traditions. Finally, the native rights to live with and move freely through the land were removed. Once these new conquerors had completed their task of killing and corralling natives, they established a number of institutions and procedures to ensure they maintained control over the lives of the aboriginal people. These included residential schools, reserves, and agencies like the Department of Indian Affairs, the failures of which have been very topical.

In retrospect it was not so much that native people were hated or not liked, it was just that they were in the way because they occupied the areas where virtually every major city in North America is now built. These were and are the most practical and best sites with water, trails, seas, rivers all at hand. To build the new cities and make them available for the new citizens, the businessmen and governments had to extinguish the rights and privileges of the aboriginal landholders. This was done first by war and then by assimilation. It should be remembered that Geronimo, Sitting Bull, Seattle, Walking Buffalo, Chief Sophie Pierre, Chief Dan George, Chief Joe Mathias and so on through history were not stoic chiefs, warmongers or savage; they were merely people fighting for their right to be human, to govern their people and maintain jurisdiction over their land.

The second oppressor is religion. This involves not so much Christians who are trying to live out their belief in God through religion but the dogma itself — the rules and regulations, the inability to recognize that there are many ways to talk to God and many rituals to bring people closer to God and to develop and enhance spirituality. The missionaries who ran the boarding schools had good intentions but were acting on false and un-studied information about natives. One of the biggest confusions for native people was the notion of the Fear of God — the concept of eternal punishment. In their own system, the Creator was the source where people had always gone for grace, guidance and strength.

The residential schools had a devastating impact. Families were separated, life skills lost, and family units dismantled, and loneliness and insecurity began to be harvested among children. Elders lost parenting skills, and children returned as strangers with different languages and values and no place to use the educations they had received. Because of the changed way of life, there was no longer a way for natives to make a living.

The reservations became North America's first ghettos, with poverty, disease, and abuse rampant. Both boarding schools and reserves pushed assimilation by fostering the idea that there was a much better life outside the traditional native community. The end result of all the efforts was a people who lost much of their language, their self-sufficiency, culture, traditions, land, family, and faith.

To add to this, along came the third oppressor — Hollywood. This means any kind of media or press, beginning with the early journalists and progressing through to film. The media established in people's minds an image of Indians so powerful and controlling that even today it is hard to rise above it. First, there is the romantic picture of feathers, beads, and noble warriors with supernatural powers and skills. Then there is the other image of ignorant, animal-like creatures that were dirty, cunning, unreliable, bloodthirsty beings that terrorized the plains, killing men, women and children, with no scruples whatsoever. As time passed, Indians came to be portrayed as drunken, lazy misfits. Always, they were portrayed as stereotypes, not as individuals. When you place human beings in a role category, you dehumanize them. That is what has been done by the media, and for a long time it was reinforced in educational books.

After years of oppression, it is no wonder that spiritual values have suffered and native people are low in spirit. But it is not only native people who have suffered a loss of spirit through oppression. It is all humans: white, black, yellow, and brown alike. The priority has become the processing of resources to make money, and human needs have become secondary. Native people have always believed that any nation's greatest asset is its people.

The future of spirituality is dependent on all of us, just as it was in the beginning. We all must take the individual responsibility to go back and restore our spiritual values. Before this can happen in North America, we must have a healing between native and non-native peoples. First, however, each of the races will have to heal itself. Here in North America we have a better opportunity than anywhere else in the world because we have the freedom to work for change.

The first step is to tell you that before contact with the Europeans had ever taken place, it was prophesied that a great healing would take place, starting with the heart of the turtle, which is the Hopi people in Arizona. The prophecy said, "A huge wave of white people will come and with their coming the native spirit will be wiped out to almost nothing, but when it hits its lowest point the Indian spirit would start to rise up again and out of this new rising would come not only strong brown Indians but white

Indians. The beginning of this new rising would be signified by the eagle landing on the moon." In 1969, when the first spacecraft landed on the moon, the first words spoken were "the Eagle has landed." This coincided with a number of other social and political events that started the unchaining of native spirit. This momentous achievement also seemed to stimulate a lot of reflection on lifestyles and direction among the non-natives. This kind of reflection starts people on their Wheel of Life. The past twenty years have seen enormous changes in the way people eat, care for themselves, and seek spiritual enlightenment.

The very first realization we must make is that the spiritual can balance the material and that neither has to be a burden. Second, we as people have to acknowledge that some very real things have happened in history to weaken us. But having acknowledged that, we must not continue to use our hurt as an excuse for inaction. We must use our past experiences as good reasons to succeed. We must learn to become hunters of the city, in the way our ancestors were hunters of the forest: by approaching everyone and everything with respect, never taking more than we need, always giving back something, and always being thankful. Successful hunters of the past brought home their take, took what they required, and shared the rest with the less fortunate. If we apply this in the city, it changes our attitude, because if we only seek what we need, selfishness and greed are removed, and the frustration of expecting more is eliminated.

Material values don't have to control us. We can find the strength to stand up for our human rights and needs. By loving, caring, and sharing, with honesty and by listening to our heart and mind, we can know what is right. We must stop living in criticism of one another as humans and stop alienating one another. Although we are different races, we share many things spiritually and materialistically. In our spirit we fear and are brave, we laugh and we cry, we mourn and rejoice. On the material plane, we worry about hydro bills, car payments, and our children's needs. There are so many ways we are bound by common concerns. These should keep us together, working for the common good of our earth, water, and air and, most importantly, our future generations of humans.

First we must love ourselves, then we can love each other; respect ourselves so we can respect each other. Within every woman remains the girl, and within every man remains the boy who must be nourished, encouraged, and understood. Each of us must take responsibility for making changes and using his or her spiritual values. Once more, as in the beginning, we must be wise enough to follow the teachings of the Holy People and be healed. Then the balance so needed for life will be restored.

Telling

We long for a new reading of history.
We wax nostalgic.
We wish the newsreels of history
Could be rewound, run backwards
Before our eyes.

Warriors would drop their rifles.
Constructed residential schools
Could be deconstructed.
Dying languages would find
Our throats once more.
The Indian Act would be unwritten.

Perhaps our worth would be known,
Our intellect revealed and
Recognized as needed.
We long for a new telling of history.

Such a story would remain our own,
A fire ashore at night.
Gentle and honest and telling,
Before all eyes.