



Can Adopting a Complementary Indigenous Perspective Save Us?

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"The grim prognosis for life on this planet is the consequence of a few centuries of forgetting what traditional Indigenous societies knew and the surviving ones still recognize." — Noam Chomsky

As we move into mid-December and recognize the only month designated to honor Native American Heritage has passed, we must acknowledge that an Indigenous perspective needs to be considered not just every November, but every month of the year.

Indigenous cultures have known for thousands of years that a human-centered perspective always leads to dangerous imbalance. Without earnest reflection that seeks complementarity between this Indigenous worldview precept and the anthropocentrism of the dominant worldview, we will continue our death march.

Traditional, nonhierarchical Indigenous approaches to learning about life skills and values hold the idea of being intimately related to nonhuman life forms as paramount. Honoring and learning from animals, plants, bodies of water and the organisms that dwell in them remains inseparable from any learning experience and from any ultimate application of learning. Moreover, an Indigenous perspective sees humans as the younger brothers and sisters of the nonhuman elders of creation, and the nonhuman elders as our teachers.

When one lives in such a way as to see a tree as a relative rather than a resource, diversity and inclusion, as relates to fellow human beings, follows. Couple this with the concept of Earth as our "Mother," as with matrilineal cultures, and we can understand why most pre-contact cultures were organized along more egalitarian lines. The scholars who contributed to Heide Göttner-Abendroth's edited volume, *Societies of Peace*, reveal that such societies were also nonviolent and practiced great respect for all living creatures, without exploiting humans, animals or their environment.

Re-embracing a nonanthropocentric worldview and respect for diversity thus requires re-learning a new level of respect for nonhuman life. This requires living according to an Indigenous worldview that understands complementary duality, in contrast to Western models that see opposites as incompatible and result in antagonistic or competitive behaviors. This idea is foundational to the

Indigenous worldview that guided us for most of human history, one that understood how all forms of nature have varying degrees and kinds of sentience. The time for reflecting on worldview as the source of our problems is now, instead of continuing to ignore or dismiss the one that guided us for most of human history, and which still guides Indigenous cultures that protect 80 percent of the biodiversity that remains on our planet.

Such worldview comparisons are crucial. Even the current rise of authoritarianism begins with a human-over-nature hierarchy that leads to domination of others. As Leroy Little Bear writes, “Understanding the differences in Aboriginal and Eurocentric worldviews gives us a starting point for understanding the paradoxes that colonialism poses for social control.” Internalizing this new way of learning requires critical thinking, planning, implementation of resultant choices and reflection to assure the right path is being followed. It also requires an understanding of the foundational worldview guiding such cognitive work. It does not come from following the hypnosis of authoritarian mandates.

For example, recently, the Republican-led House Rules Committee voted to advance the “Manage Our Wolves Act,” which would remove gray wolves from the endangered species list. The Rules Committee waived all points of order against the bill and voted to advance it to the floor. They also inserted language to block a floor vote on whether to direct President Donald Trump to end US involvement in the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen. This authoritarian action that bypassed democratic discussion and blocked the floor vote worked because human antipathy against nature — in this case, wolves — played such a strong card for the Republicans. Any Republican who might have otherwise voted to end US involvement knew they would lose votes for protecting the wolves, so they went ahead and let it pass. In this case, I propose that anthropocentrism directly led to continuation of bombings that are killing innocent human beings.

Such reflection can shift our fear-based focus to an appreciation for what is good. For instance, a Navajo belief is that a good life resides in every angle of the morning light, with a promising sense of beauty, hope and determination for every individual. They understand that, with a sense of the complementary and the supplementary, an individual will feel beauty above, below, around and behind — from every angle. This perspective stems from the natural surroundings: plants, animals, rivers, mountains, sky, etc. These are what bring forth the energy of spirit that aligns with the purpose of life, i.e., to keep in balance, harmony and respect with the natural order.

The only true authority for living life well comes from such spiritual energy, although wise elders who still remember the old ways can help with their knowledge of songs, prayers, ceremonies and

oral storytelling of the Navajo Creation Story, which uses twin hero myths in which solar and lunar twins always work in harmony to fight the monsters. Contrast this to Western twin hero myths, in which the solar twin dominates or even kills the lunar brother. Ultimately, however, the Navajo epistemology comes from the womb of Mother Earth, Father Sky, sacred mountains, darkness and day, white and yellow corn, Corn Pollen Boy, Beetle Girl, Changing Woman, First Man and Woman, fire, water and air. It comes from realizing that every aspect of life is an integral part of the whole that includes tiny insects, rivers, trees, mountains and canyons — all of which are part of the elements that complete the natural order of the universe.

One of the consequences of our uninvestigated dominant worldview is developing hierarchy, forgetting complementarity, disrespecting diversity and restricting inclusion. When taking animals and plants for food, the Indigenous model includes stories about the wisdom of each life-giver and ceremonies to remind us of our oneness with them, and to give deep gratitude for the sacrifice made. For example, the Pueblo Indians' stories teach that each animal has a spirit village. When hunted and killed, their spirits return to it and tell about how they were treated by the hunter. If treated inappropriately, the village might decide to stop giving themselves to humans.

The Hopi, with a deep understanding of the corn plant and its spiritual power, practiced elaborate, artful ceremonies to honor each stage of planting and harvesting. Whether killing a deer, harvesting corn, picking berries, digging up roots or killing any other of our nonhuman relatives, traditional Indigenous cultures prioritize thinking about ways of consuming that is full of sacred respect and careful consideration. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her amazing book on Indigenous wisdom and scientific knowledge, expresses the idea beautifully when talking about gathering wild berries:

Such Indigenous perspectives are not new. They refer to how we lived for 99% of human history. They remain in our DNA. Behavioral epigenetics explains how we might have taken a wrong turn long ago, but it also tells us that we can reverse direction within a single lifetime. What intentional actions can we do now to start this process that can help us to live in ways that truly see how Indigenous understandings of biodiversity create social systems that reflect great respect for human diversity and inclusion?

Replacing hierarchical structures and authoritarianism with the traditional wisdom of complementary duality and respect for the power of diversity in all of its forms is a vital project. It

calls for more than radical resistance alone, and certainly requires more commitment than one month of federal lip-service. Without questioning such fundamental authoritarian assumptions underlying civilization and replacing it with our original nature-based worldview, individuals develop into what human development scholar Darcia Narvaez [refers to as](#) “self-regarding shadows of our potential selves, exhibiting threat-reactive moral mindsets that promote unjust treatment of other humans and nonhumans.”

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