

The Duality of All-Being: Native New England Spirituality

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UUSA

Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration

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This being our first *Indigenous Peoples Day Celebration* in Amherst, I thought it appropriate to speak to the underlying theme of Native New England spirituality as we have come to understand it. While each tribe had its own myths and particularities of belief, there was an underlying assumption among them all of the duality of all-being, where the spiritual and the natural blended in every aspect of life. For them, the spirits of their ancestors were ever present in the elements of the medicine wheel, and the world was an extension of divine intention.

While foreign eyes might have looked upon the indigenous peoples as living a sub-human, primitive, uneducated existence, the Indians sense of being and knowing and manner of engagement with the natural order was based upon a **relational experience with the earth, rather than a domination worldview**. This depth of interconnectedness instilled within them a **unique** knowledge, reverence and respect for the environment within which they lived. (Indeed, the first settlers would not have survived at all without the wisdom and aid of the native people who were already here.)

The local indigenous tribes lived in a symbiotic relationship with the earth. Theirs was a relational existence that saw the transcendent in everything. Living in this beautiful land of four seasons, metaphors I suspect did not elude them, either. **Although, I suspect that we are more inclined** to see cyclical patterns as metaphors for our own lives, while they would have identified their relationship with them in much more visceral terms. *The indigenous people of these hills and valleys experienced the entire created order as moving through its own birth, maturation, and death cycles, just as their own.* They saw themselves

on the same journey...not separate from but rather **a part of** the natural world that sustained them. And therein lies the rub.

To that end, they considered the notion that all created matter has a vital energy that some would call a soul. All manner of creatures, all plants, vegetables, nuts and fruits shared this vital energy with the people. Even the rocks shared their strength and the air shared its breath! **The vibration of the plants and animals that nourished them was sacred**, and the Indians witnessed how each generation was nurtured and brought into being by the one that preceded it. In that regard, *the spirits of the ancestors* (plant, animal, and human) were everywhere, and the great divide between physical life and spiritual ascension to the Great Spirit of all Creation was permeable. Time was not linear, but rather multi-dimensional.

If they had had the information and language to express it, their understanding of life would have neatly fit into the modern cosmology that we are connected thru mystery and miracle and DNA to the whole universe. Nevertheless, within the capacity of their sense of knowing, they chose to live their lives based upon need and not greed, protecting their environment for their families and for the generations to come. **They were able to recognize and accept their place in and responsibility to the web of life.**

That is not to say that they were perfect. Yet, it is not difficult to understand that because of their unique perspective, they did not comprehend, nor did they appreciate, the onslaught of settlers who brought with them disease, impinged upon the land, and had **a very different way of perceiving and living in the world**. You must imagine that for centuries, the predominant religious teaching of Christian Europeans was that God made man to take *dominion over the earth*. We only have to look around us to see how that directive has dramatically influenced how we as a species have left our imprint upon the natural order.

Today, as we recognize Indigenous Peoples Day, we offer our deepest apologies to those human ancestors of old who saw themselves, **not separate from** but rather **a part of** these lands that had birthed them... who desperately wanted to preserve their environment as well as their way of being and living in it, but who were summarily removed from this Creation that they loved and respected. **We also humbly offer them our deepest gratitude**, that the legacy of their oral traditions and their understanding of the web of life continues to teach us the ways of the medicine wheel...if only we are open to its wisdom. Our earth, our children, and the children of tomorrow depend upon it. May it be so.

I'd like to leave you with these words from Chief Seattle:

All things share the same breath - the beast, the tree, the man, ... the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports.

Man does not weave this web of life. He is merely a strand of it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Take only memories, leave nothing but footprints.

Amen and Blessed Be