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Hopiland to the Rainforest Action Network

From West Virginia to Hopiland

In the contemporary world of my youth, religion and nature were separate, though both were a part of my life. From birth to age eight I grew up enjoying the four seasons and the forests of West Virginia. At year eight, we moved to Central Florida where the swamps became the playgrounds of my explorations and adventures. My great-grandmother deeply influenced these outdoor reveries. She was half Blackfoot Indian and wonderful to me. With childlike wonder I often pranced through these forests and swamps pondering what it would have been like to be Indian. As a "half-breed" in white dominated society, she didn't talk much about her Indian heritage. Still, my West Virginia family was somewhat clanlike, even tribal. Mystery and intuition seemed to permeate my youth. The mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmother of our family would often state who was calling on the phone before anyone had a chance to answer it. They were usually right. They often declared the gender of the upcoming baby. This was before modern methods of testing. My religious upbringing was protestant, the First Christian Church. I went most Sundays as a kid and enjoyed it. However, I don't recall any significant references to nature or to god's earthly creations. In church, sacred was a term that had little meaning for me. What I do remember is looking out the church window a lot and seeing the beautiful and mysterious Spanish moss hanging from the scrub-oak trees. The natural world moved me, and although I thought church interesting, it held no spirit for me. Much later, after college, I moved west, spending time over the next ten years with the Elders of Hopi Nation. At that time, sacred came to mean something that was both pragmatic and profound. This redefinition of sacred has influenced all my work since then, whether in the world's tropical rainforests, or in the corporate boardrooms where I negotiate on behalf of Mother Earth as the President of the Rainforest Action Network.

In college (1968-1973) there were many classes, of course, but college life in these years was also about sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Yet, there was an additional element to those times – cosmic consciousness. Janis Joplin and others sang about it. And we read a great deal about it in the popular works about native people like Black Elk, Lame Deer, and Don Juan. I did well in school learning the usual things, but by my senior year I was questing for a more spiritual connection. A college friend suggested I go to a poetry reading by Gary Snyder. I did and became enamored with the California/beat movement. Snyder knew a lot about things I cared about.

Soon after this encounter, after a Yoga class my instructor told me, "I see you going west and working with the Indians." I don't know if he was prophetic or if I just liked the idea but I soon went west and landed in the former beat enclave, and now artist/tourist town, of Sausalito.

In California I took a yoga class from the teacher of my teacher. There I met a likable yoga student named Tom Styles, who in a way stereotypically Californian, later became Swami Mukunda. Styles had been researching a college thesis on cross-cultural prophecies, and when he invited me to go with him to some Indian land near the Grand Canyon, I was happy to go. I did

not at the time know the name of the tribe, but he led me to my unique and rewarding decade with the Hopi elders.

The Hopi

The Hopi have lived for at least ten thousand years (they say a lot more) on Black Mesa, the Colorado Plateau of the Southwestern United States, in an area the size of the state of West Virginia. The Hopi villages are just north of the Painted Desert and east of the Grand Canyon at the south end of Black Mesa. I was not an understudy to any spiritual leader or medicine person but worked more as secretary and driver for the elders. From them and the high desert of Hopiland I learned much. The elders would often say that white people have tribal wisdom if they would just go back in their own histories. They put the onus of discovery right back on me. It was probably a way to not have to answer too many stupid questions, but nevertheless, I leaned many lessons, including, that the laws of nature are final and have absolute authority governing this earth. Natural laws will prevail regardless of man-made laws or governments. When we disturb the cycles of nature by interfering with the natural elements, destroying species of life, or changing species of life, the consequences may be immediate, or may fall upon our children, or our children's children, but we will suffer and pay for our mistakes.

Hopis say that we human beings are charged with the responsibility of working for the continuation of all life. Our fate is intertwined with one another; what affects one affects all. Euro-American domination and destruction of nature as well as indigenous ways continues. To alter this course westerners would do well to seek advice from and cooperate with indigenous people.

The Hopi tribe did not just survive for thousands of years as desert farmers. They developed a high culture and one that can help us with issues of ecological sustainability and peace. I'm honored to stand in solidarity with nature based on the Hopi tribal perspective. It is work to maintain their land and the natural ways of life. Hopi, as well as other tribal cultures, would often say that their work is to help hold the world in balance. That phrase means something I do not fully understand, but I know it relates to an annual set of ceremonies.

Hopiland as my seed time

It was in 1973 that Tom Styles and I left Sausalito around midnight one evening and made it to the south rim of the Grand Canyon around sunset. The descending sun cast shadows over red rock walls. We drove into the Hopi Nation to the village of Old Oraibi. A dirt road heads south to Oraibi off of the only paved road in Hopiland. Oraibi is the oldest continually inhabited village in North America. Just outside of Oraibi we came to a sign that said essentially, "Warning white man. Because you cannot obey your own laws, let alone ours, you are hereby prohibited from entering this village." The night was upon us and we camped next to the sign along the road. We did yoga atop nearby rocks and hoped some Indian blasting by in a pickup truck would invite us in. The Milky Way was stellar and we could hear the drum beat from a ceremony going on in this forbidden village. We were left in the dust that night, but the next day was a different story.

Somehow Yoga Tom knew the names of several of the elders. We were soon at the next village of Kyakotsmovi knocking on the door of Thomas Banyacya's adobe and cinderblock house. Thomas, I was to learn, was not a medicine man, but he was from the Coyote Clan.

Coyotes are barkers. His role was one of spreading the word about Hopi relationship with nature and their message of peace. Fermina Banyacya, a Bear Clan woman, answered the door. She was gracious regarding our many undoubtedly naïve questions. I was 23 years old, and spellbound by her singsong voice, beauty, and what she had to say about nature and future and purpose. Her demeanor harkened back to my great-grandmother. Eventually, she invited us in. To this day she remains a friend. From Fermina and many other Hopi I came to my deeper understanding of Sacred.

When the Hopi talked about the Great Spirit or the many spirits in nature it had a ring of authenticity that I did not experience in the First Christian Church. I would stay for weeks at Hopi, often shuttling elders around to community meetings. The meetings were often about the government trying to put electricity lines in some of the villages or about coal and uranium mining on their ancestral lands. These were the lands they had been charged with protecting. They had the responsibility of maintaining the cycles and fecundity of nature. It was a difficult time for them, and they still struggle with these imposed conflicts. I was going back and forth to California from Hopiland, many times a year at this point, a pattern I repeated for an entire decade. The Hopi Elders with whom I worked eventually realized I was earnest about wanting to help the earth and support native peoples.

After many years there, one rather common looking old man revealed to me that he was a Snake Priest. He spoke of how the snake was a communicator between the minerals in the earth's crust and the climate-making aspects of the atmosphere. Snakes are often painted as lightening strikes in Hopi art, traveling between the sky and the land. The Snake Priest explained to me, though I doubted him at the time, that lightening strikes not just from the sky to the earth, but from the earth to the sky.

At such times I could sense the importance of their oral traditions. Their method of learning included one of trial and error experimentation, just as we do in western science. Learning occurs while living in the same desert home over generations, and is transmitted over thousands of years. This is why they know so much about the ways of the plants and animals, and the land and sky.

The medicine person, it seemed to me, was more of a scientist then a magician. The Hopi Snake Priest stood amidst a library and lineage of teachers. That is not to say that one doesn't learn through intuition. At Hopi, I believe, everyone is intuitive and something of a medicine person. Some are better at it than others or have a sub-set of special gifts, but in Hopi Culture, the line between science and intuition are relatively indistinguishable.

Some lessons seep into your soul slowly and expressing them in words is difficult, but I'll try. When a plant, insect, or animal is killed or perhaps the entire species goes extinct, this is tragic. But, that loss is more than the loss of a sentient being or species. Its function in the web of life is lost as well. Certain species or certain aspects of nature have a special function in the web, and the loss of that function weakens the Whole, subsequently reducing Earth's resilience to the human onslaught on destruction. The following example is mundane, but in our Euro-American culture we know about the special function of the canary in the coal mine. When the canary dies the air is so foul that you had better vacate or make some change fast. The functionality of many things in nature can be very specific and can relate to life and death issues. These special functional places or aspects might be a certain mountaintop, a water spring, or a rattlesnake in an electrical storm. It can even be something invisible to us like a line of energy running through a village like Hotevilla just east of Old Oraibi. These are sacred sites or sacred animals to the Hopi and to many indigenous peoples including those in the Amazon rainforests. Knowledge about the

sacred/functional is passed on by the priests, or in the case of the Hopis, by certain people initiated into one of the many clans like the One Horn or Two Horn Kachina (nature spirit) Clans. Some of the knowledge can come directly from a person's sensitivity to nature and nature's ways. Even a sacred feather placed near a Kiva (underground ceremonial chamber) can be of great significance perhaps in helping keep the world in balance. As I was not an understudy I can say little more about these matters.

One doesn't necessarily need to know a lot about these things to know one should desire to protect the Natural world. And it isn't just sacred sites that must be protected. When asked once to draw a circle around a sacred site the Hopi just shook their heads and walked away. They told me later that such a line would convey that anything outside the circle was not sacred. An Isolated spot in the web of life cannot be saved without maintaining the entirety of it.

From Hopiland to the Rainforest Action Network

Such are the lessons of Hopi that I bring into my current work. The Rainforest Action Network, co-founded with the Earth First! hero Mike Roselle, is a forest protection group, but it is also a human rights group with a focus on the rights of native peoples. As we all know, the people in some governments and giant corporations are profiting at the expense of nature, Indigenous peoples, and future generations. The web of life we call the biosphere is being dangerously shredded. Climate change and what scientists now call extreme weather events mark a particularly precarious moment in human history. At Rainforest Action Network we call these extreme weather events "eco-spasms." The biosphere, Mother Earth, is becoming spastic. Ecological spasms show up as gigantic hurricanes of greater force then we have ever seen before. They include tornados occurring in places that have never seen them before. The forces degrading ancient forests and native peoples are many. They include industrial invasion of agribusiness, toxic waste, uranium mining, timber cutting, cattle ranching, and unfortunately, racism. But, individuals and movements have arisen to address and reverse such problems.

A clear set of principles and policies around which we can build a better world is emerging that starts with giving honor to the laws of nature. The new global movement gathers annually at the World Social Forum (WSF), among other places. That event started in year 2000. The WSF has had three annual gatherings in Puerto Alegre, Brazil. India will host the 2004 gathering. These efforts will continue to invite the widest possible participation.

The Hopi speak about a window of opportunity where the age of appropriate technology (the marriage of the circle and the cross, but that is another story) can come about. At Hopi there is a petroglyph on a sandstone rock that shows healthy corn plants in the future and the possibility of hope for all life. Hopi say this won't necessarily be our future, but it could be. It depends on what we all do to help shape that course. It is fair to ask the key question, can we rally to the task in time? Can we rally on a scale commensurate with the problem and the urgency?

Another lesson I learned at Hopi has to do with prophecy. Prophecy, I surmise, is what people of European heritage call what the Hopi elders see as supposition or projection based on a combination of human nature and probability or trend. As the elders often told me with a chuckle prophecy is far easier to declare after events have occurred. The marriage of religion (spirituality) and nature has not been completely lost. It can and must be restored. When you dedicate yourself to nature's needs, there is mystery and providence in the journey.

Though we may come from different cultural, economic, and racial backgrounds and though we will not agree on everything, we can cooperate, share honestly, and work with one another in

respect. Again, a broad based movement to protect nature, develop just societies, and halt the demise of native peoples exists. It is growing. At the Rainforest Action Network we know that we must be a part of these efforts and hope you will be as well.

Randy Hayes, Rainforest Action Network

Further Reading

Cavanagh, John, Jerry Mander, Randy Hayes, et al. Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World is Possible. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2002.

Randy Hayes also directed the award winning film The Four Corners, A National Sacrifice Area. The film won the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences award for "Best Student Documentary" in 1983. This epic film documents the tragic effects of uranium and coal mining on Hopi and Navajo tribal lands in the American Southwest.

See also: Beat Movement Poets; Black Mesa; Earth First! and the Earth Liberation Front; Greenpeace; Radical Environmentalism; Snyder, Gary.