

Reawakening Indigenous Sensibilities

By Tayria Ward, Ph.D.

It is impossible to go directly on from our cultural state of today if we do not receive increments of strength from our primitive roots. These latter, however, we receive only if in a certain sense we go back behind our present stage of culture to give the suppressed primitive in us an opportunity to develop itself. How that is to happen is a question in itself.

-Carl Jung

After the event of the tsunami in the south seas, stories began to surface regarding huge populations of animals and entire tribes of indigenous peoples who had sensed the impending disaster before it hit and were able to relocate to high ground in time to survive without harm. Our billion dollar technologies and great scientific minds were incompetent and incapable of foretelling what these animals and indigenous peoples instinctively knew. An article I read in the New York Times describes the fact that scientists who had dismissed these people as primitive, superstitious and uneducated were suddenly respectful and interested in learning more about their ways of knowing. Ah. My heart felt happy to read this news.

Like innocent Persephone who was playing happily in the fields picking flowers when Hades suddenly abducted her into the world below, sometime during the early 90's I was happily going about the work of my religious life as an ordained minister, preparing a talk on the subject of ritual, when I happened to read a notice announcing that Malidoma Somé would be speaking that evening in a local bookstore about his new book on ritual. Little did I know that reading that notice was the tremor of the earth which would soon open up to swallow me into an underworld of initiation, awakening the sleeping indigenous person inside. The journey ultimately took me out of religion, over to Africa, into a PhD program in depth psychology, through a disintegration of nearly every aspect of life as I had known it, and seems to have plopped me onto a mountain top in North Carolina with the intention of committing myself to the work of reviving indigenous awareness in the western psyche.

Eco-theologian Thomas Berry writes of our species that we have tragically become autistic, listening and speaking only to ourselves, that we have lost "the great conversation" with the river, mountain, plant, bird, wind, water, fire. The rest of life is carrying on in vibrant communication, but humans have lost the senses that would hear and make of ourselves integral participants in the dialogue. In the thrust toward modernization, a severe condition of anthropomorphic hubris seems to have developed, and humans in general have stopped believing that plants or trees or the non-human world have much of anything useful to say to us. The needs of the human took precedence over those of every other planetary system, and our concerns became the only ones that ultimately mattered. We began to devalue, and let atrophy, those aspects of the human self that could hear or care about the cries of nature as we imperialistically marched forward under the banner of progress. The silencing of our vital capability to participate in the great conversation, I believe, is what allows us to unconsciously

disturb the balance of nature, cut down rain forests, dump poisons into the air and the rivers, allow unrecoverable top soil to wash away into the waters, deplete earth resources necessary for our own survival and continue in this pathological trajectory without a clue that it is not only murderous but also suicidal. As a whole, we have become like the good Dr. Jekyll of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel who believes himself to be civilized, caring and compassionate, while remaining completely unconscious of his other aspect, Mr. Hyde – a part that is actively engaged in heinous murder and destruction.

I have learned that a reunion with the indigenous self is a journey of recovery of wondrous senses, sensations of aliveness and engagement in an on-going and fascinating conversation with kingdoms and realms that humans have generally lost touch with. Like programs in a computer that are completely available if one only understands that they are there, what they can do, and how to boot them up, these senses await our attention and willingness to revive them. However the effort requires a strong commitment to the necessity of the awakening, and the processes it activates. The shadow of who we have become must be faced and individually owned before these innate capabilities can be reinvigorated. Like Love itself, because in the end it is Love itself, the process asks for everything. But it gives everything in return.

Among other signs of the times, the tsunami may be a strong warning that our survival as a species depends upon the human's attention to this challenge. But where do we begin?

Like any great work, it begins with the individual. One, one, one at a time. We cannot wait for presidents and collective bodies to create change. Change begins when one person commits to the processes of change. Socrates is quoted as saying, "If you would move the world, first move yourself." Laurens van der Post proclaims his belief in the power held by the individual in his book, *The Dark Eye in Africa*. He states:

It is, for me, no idle coincidence that the most significant discovery in the physical world of this age has been the fact that the greatest and most unimaginable power resides in the smallest possible organization of matter. The force which threatens to blow the world asunder resides not in the clouds or mountains but in the invisible heart of the atom. The inner force, too, which, like the power of the atom, can either remake or shatter civilization resides in the smallest unit of society, the individual.

The holographic model of the universe demonstrates that the tremendous strengths and capabilities of those we most admire are not only "out there", in that other, but are also "in here", inside each individual, awaiting confident awakening and empowerment. But so too does it reveal that the worst qualities that most disgust us, all of the Mr. Hyde behaviors, are just as much "in here", inside every one of us, awaiting honest recognition and personal committed effort to recover. It is challenging, rigorous work, and no one can do it for the individual. And the individual cannot wait for a larger collective body to wake up and accomplish the task because it simply won't happen until the *individuals* do the work, one by one.

This same holographic concept can also be extended to qualities beyond what we think of as "human", to those of angels and animals, rocks and jellyfish. These are also inside the individual awaiting discovery, activation and integration. Science is learning that the brain only picks up and registers what it has a concept for. In some ways our senses only

see or hear what we expect, what we have a concept for. There is work to do on our concepts, on re-imagining and re-discovering what it means to be human, and what our appropriate and creative place is in the general scheme of things.

One morning I was teaching a class about the recovery of the indigenous mind, asking participants to imagine, and realize, that our cells have eyes, ears, smell, taste and touch – the five senses are indicators for capabilities that humans also have at a cellular level. During our break, a woman approached me to tell a story she said she had never had the courage or a context for telling before. One day she had been in a public restroom stall and watched a woman come into the stall next to her. She observed the woman going about her activities, then flush the toilet using her foot, presumably to avoid germ contact with her hands. Noticing this she thought, “Oh, that’s a good idea.” Only then did it hit her, she had just watched this whole scene through the divider that separated them! A little shaken, she went out to wash her hands, and there was the woman, exactly as she had seen her – hair, face, clothing just as she had observed “seeing” through the wall.

Once I went into the woods to observe a ten-day solitary retreat, camping under a tree. It was a desperate effort to try to heal and center myself during radical changes taking place in my life. About the third day in this wilderness spot, as I watched some hawks soar overhead, I suddenly heard a voice that spoke to me just as audibly as one hears words in a dream. I was hearing with the same kind of hearing capability that we utilize in dreams. The voice said, “Can you get this off? It is irritating me.” Strange message, I thought. I gazed about the area with wonder. My eyes were drawn to a dead branch that had fallen from the top of the tree, now draped awkwardly around a lower branch. I knew immediately that these words had been the tree’s, asking me to remove this uncomfortable appendage. With great effort it was removed, and then the tree spoke again, just as audibly, with a powerful sigh saying, “Thank you!” My mind or imagination could never have conceived of such a strange story. This tree had broken through my autism and communicated with me.

Some months later I visited this spot again, and remembering our conversation I asked the tree, “What can I do for you?” My eyes were drawn very quickly to something and I took care of it lovingly and gratefully. Later that night I was sleeping outdoors about a mile from the tree when a fog rolled in thicker than pea soup, as they say. I couldn’t even see the hands at the end of my arms. I awakened and felt pulled, as if I were on the other end of a rubber band. I couldn’t get my boots on fast enough before I began walking, in black darkness and thick fog, over wild, bushy and uneven terrain, like in a dream, but completely awake in every sense. I heard wild animals hiss as I passed them, irritated by my brazen movement through their territory, yet not even a shiver of fear went through me. I could have, should have, tripped on rocks, run into trees or bushes, or fallen off of ridges, but I walked safely on as completely “other” senses were in charge of my journey. Suddenly I arrived at the base of my tree, miraculously knowing exactly where I was. The tree then spoke to me saying, firmly and sweetly, “What can *I* do for *you*?” There was an urgent prayer weighing on my heart so I blurted it out to the tree as I wept, feeling more touched and truly seen than maybe I ever have felt in my entire life.

I remember hearing Brian Swimme marvel in his lovely talks on the tape set entitled *Canticle to the Cosmos* that jellyfish migrate thousands of miles, without eyes and without a brain, arriving precisely at their destination, no problem. My experience in the

middle of that night being pulled toward my tree causes me to believe that humans have similar senses to those of the jellyfish. I arrived at my destination without eyes, and apparently without the use of my brain, no problem. Something operating at a cellular level seemed to be in charge, and somehow I trusted it implicitly.

It is my belief that the human's next evolutionary challenge will be to revive such innate and astounding sensibilities and to follow their powerful lead, without throwing out or losing what we have gained through painful effort and sacrifice over the last centuries of human exploration and development. We cannot and should not go back to what we were before these advances, nor can we afford to ignore any longer the parts of ourselves that were shut off in order to proceed as we have. The human's psychological life, emotional life, spiritual life and the earth itself can no longer sustain the effects of the autism that has developed.

One person at a time will begin to deeply listen, set the intention, open awareness, and commit. The journey of discovery and transformation begins with a desire to no longer be involved in the collective pathology, but to awaken to old and new potentials, and previously unimagined possibilities. Any pain experienced during the processes is soothed by the knowledge that we labor in a colossal project of renewal for the health of all systems on this gorgeous planet. What else is there to do?