

## Pure and Simple

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“Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492.” Most of us learned that ditty in school to help us remember the date and its important historical hero. What we did *not* learn, even in high school, was about the genocide, horrific torture, and slavery committed by Columbus and his fellow Spaniards there in Hispaniola, where the population dropped from 3,000,000 people to just 200 in forty years.

Fortunately, for the sake of history, we have a detailed account of those years from the diaries of the Jesuit priest Bartolome de las Casas, who accompanied Columbus on one of his voyages to bring Christianity to the natives. Las Casas described the natives as humble, intelligent, and meek people who lived simple lives, with few possessions and no desire for them. People who would be amenable to the saving grace of Christian doctrine. He wrote of Columbus and the Spaniards as acting like ravenous beasts, hungry for gold, enslaving the entire population and cutting off the hands of those who returned from their daily searches for gold emptyhanded. Las Casas documented how the natives were often strung up in groups of thirteen—in remembrance of Christ and his disciples—with fire to their feet, and burned alive for disobedience.

It is hard to believe that it took more than five hundred years for the truth to come to light. I know I was completely ignorant until five years ago, when I read the book *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen, in which he critiques the textbooks that whitewashed our American history. And sadly, we are witnessing efforts to erase such “wokeism” from our educational system yet again.

But today, thankfully, Columbus’s name is no longer honored, and October 12 is now Indigenous Peoples’ Day. Slowly, we are recognizing that Native Americans were also victims of genocide—the survivors cheated, mistreated, and shamefully stereotyped. As I was growing up, my impressions of American Indians came right from the Saturday morning cowboy shows—wild, whooping people who shot flaming arrows at the encircled wagon trains and scalped their victims. Oh yes, there was the occasional token “good” Indian, like Tonto—loyally subservient to Kemosabe, of course.

It wasn’t until someone loaned me a copy of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* that I became acutely aware of the horrific tragedy that unfolded in “how the West was won.” I was brought to tears reading about the final Trail of Tears; it made me heartsick. I fail to see why those who now oppose “wokeism” reason that we need to protect our children from learning about past injustices because it might make them feel bad. Should they not feel sadness at seeing the human suffering that comes from greed, bigotry, and power grabbing? Might it not teach them something?

On this Indigenous Peoples’ Sunday, in the spirit of acknowledging the dishonor that has been shown to Native Americans, I would like to take a look at their unique spirituality and see if perhaps Christian missionaries were a bit shortsighted in assuming these people needed “saving.”

Until the 1950s, it was commonly assumed that the religions of surviving Native Americans were nothing more than anachronisms—dying remnants of man’s primitive spiritual childhood. After all, they have no sacred texts, no fixed doctrine, no written moral codes, no holy book. The thought was that, like most indigenous people, they were simple people. And from that, it was concluded they must also be simpleminded—incapable of any deep thought about God.

To start, there is no such thing as a generic Native American religion. There is great diversity among the many tribal traditions and ceremonies, but there are common threads and values that run through their spirituality. For example, there is no word in any of their many languages that corresponds to the word *religion*. They find that whole concept impossible to translate. Why?

For Western religious thought, the ultimate authority is supernatural—that is, beyond human reason and nature. We have this duality of the sacred and the secular, heaven and earth. But indigenous tradition conceives of only the sacred and the more sacred. There is no division between the spiritual and real worlds. Even where traditions conceive of other invisible worlds, the boundaries between these realms are easily traversed in both directions.

The Great Spirit (*Wakan-Tanka*) is not viewed as a “heavenly father” or some anthropomorphic figure whose image we bear. Instead, the Great Spirit is a sacred Mystery, the force that exists in *all* living things. Humans, plants, animals, rocks, clouds, water, mountains—all are animate and imbued with spirit. And because this sacred Mystery dwells in *all* of creation, indigenous tradition demands respect for and a sense of ultimate oneness with all of creation. Pretty different from the Book of Genesis in which man gets to be the “big cheese” and is licensed to “subdue the earth and rule over every living thing on earth.”

To native Americans, participation is far more important than beliefs. They see little value in coming up with “religious” concepts about what they consider a Great Mystery. They are content to experience rather than define. Instead, they value participation in ceremonies and in the work of their community and devotion to the kin group. Instilling their values in their children and passing along their oral traditions has always been of utmost importance. So, how gut wrenching it must have been when their children were taken from them, along with their sacred lands.

A reading of the Thanksgiving Address created by the Iroquois Confederacy speaks volumes about Native American spirituality and values. It has been translated into more than forty languages and is read all over the world. The people were instructed to stand and offer these words before anything important was done or decided, and in Native American schools, children still recite it at the beginning and end of every school week.

It is far too long to share here, but this ancient address sets gratitude and reciprocity as the highest priorities. As the pledge goes forward, each element of the ecosystem is named, along with its function and the duty to be thankful and reciprocate its gift. For example, thanks is given to the waters for nurturing life, and its power is recognized along with the responsibility to use it wisely and keep it pure. The Address also reminds the community that their leaders must be rooted not in power and authority, but in service and wisdom. (Let’s run that concept up our congressional flagpole!)

So we see that the wisdom of Native Americans has actually run pretty deep. Their spirituality is not a religion—at least, not in our sense of the word—so much as a system of spirituality that permeates every aspect of their lives. It is integrated into everyday living rather than reserved for a Sabbath day or special occasion. Of course, they have ceremonies for births, deaths, marriage, harvests, and such, but their daily life was just as spiritually infused as any other. They were constantly connecting to the Source.

Looking at some of their common rites and ceremonies:

- Sweat lodges are about renewing yourself and forming a bond with the spirit world. The ceremony includes offerings, prayer, and the burning of sacred sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco with water poured over to create fragrant steam.
- The pipe ceremony. Like steam, the smoke of the pipe rises in the air and symbolizes the connection between earth and sky. Hollywood images of Indians smoking the peace pipe had no clue as to the spiritual significance of the act.
- Smudging. Again, the act of burning sacred herbs to produce smoke, symbolic of connection, to rise and cleanse a person or place.
- Vision quests, or going into the wild alone for many days seeking spiritual guidance and connection. (Sounds like something Jesus might do?)

And speaking of Jesus, where is the connection between today's Gospel reading and Native Americans? In Matthew, Jesus seems pretty disgusted with the people of Capernaum and Bethsaida. Most of his miracles took place, and yet his teachings seem to have mostly fallen on deaf ears there. Who does he denounce? Their "learned and wise," those who think they've read all the books and already know the answers. He goes on to thank his Father for hiding his truths from the learned and the wise and revealing them instead to the simple—those with open, accepting hearts. It's why he chose his disciples from the simple fishermen and farmers, and why I think he would honor the purity and simplicity of the native American spiritual practice.

Recently, Sarina shared with me her experience with a native American woman at our local nursing home. When Sarina approached the woman for the first time, she introduced herself and told her she was from our church and asked if she could offer a prayer. The woman flatly refused: "No Christian prayer!" Wisely and graciously, Sarina then asked her what would be meaningful to her. The woman told Sarina she had a wish to be outdoors, to beat a sacred drum and take in the smoke of smudged sweetgrass and cedar. That was how she connected to God, and Sarina honored her wishes on her next visit.

We have a few things to learn from our native American neighbors: how to soulfully sense God in every natural creation and therefore in each other, the importance of being constantly grateful and to always give back responsibly, and how to humbly see our small place in the Great Mystery. It's pure and simple.