



## ***Kinship, Community & Elders:***

### ***A Collective Foundation***

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The following article is an excerpt taken from an upcoming book entitled,

### **The Native American Experience**

***Looking Through Indigenous Eyes:***

***American Indian Studies***

***Native Worldview & Philosophy &***

***Traditional Teaching Methodologies***

## ***A Collective Ethos***

Indigeneity assumes a spiritual interconnectedness between all aspects of creation and affirms that everything created not only has the right to exist, but also has the right to be able to make a positive contribution to the larger whole. Therefore, all peoples have a right to exist, and it is imperative to our coexistence, to our ability to live together, that each group find their own self-determined ways to share and contribute their communal wisdom to global society. Complementary coexistence relies on the ability of all peoples' voices to be heard, and to be heard equally. The pursuit of this type of coexistence entails continuously recreating a harmonic balance. This pursuit stands in opposition to the pursuit of dominance, exclusion and exploitation (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 494).

La Donna Harris and Jane Wasilewski forcefully lay down the gauntlet in describing the philosophy of the egalitarian ***Native Community***, which is directly in opposition to the mainstream culture in its perspective and constituency. For thousands of years, ***Indigenous People*** have bound themselves together as a ***Community*** for many reasons, but survival has always been the preeminent factor, and that dynamic, generation after generation, has held the key to shaping cultural behavior and Tradition. Organizing themselves into ***Families, Clans, Bands, Tribes*** and ***Nations***, they have sought, and continue to seek, to connect themselves to not only the group as a whole but their surroundings as well. ***Extended family***, as this large group is perceived, is common and vital to Native life, keeping everyone connected to and participating in the ongoing life of ***Community***, members caring for each other, and even at times in death taking over the functions of relatives. In this ***"cultural relativism,"*** as described by anthropologists, the ***Community*** lives up to certain cultural traits or patterns that are relevant only to their own group, practicing an innate quality of seeing and understanding relationships and connections in order to preserve the ***Community*** unit. It is built upon Spirituality and a sense of ***"communitism,"*** where there is an awareness of ***Community*** tied together by familial relations and the families' commitment to it. Indians have been shown repeatedly to exhibit an innate quality of seeing and trying to understand relationships and connections in order to preserve the ***Community*** and ***Tribe***, achieving a form of natural democracy.

This collectivism of ***Indigenous People*** is a cultural norm and expected behavior that plays a significant role in maintaining not just the connectedness of the people to themselves but with everything else that exists as well. ***Harmony*** and ***Balance*** are maintained with

everyone and everything, and sickness is construed to be a result of things falling out of this collective homeostasis.

It was the “natural order of things” (Fixico, 2003, p. 52). As a result, the value system unpretentiously evolved based on the ethical question, “What is good for all?” For the individual, it was a long life, good health, increasing Wisdom and fulfilling happiness achieved by remaining in the proper relationships to all people, all Creations, and maintaining **Harmony** which entails fulfilling one’s responsibilities to the **Community**.

From birth, the Spirits are beseeched to help establish the **Family** context around the child through relations, the **Clan** and the **Tribe**. There was never a time when the individual Indian, young and old, was not a part of the cooperative activities of others. People are considered the sum total of their relationships.

In Indian reality, man is not an isolated and self-sufficient unit of existence. Man is a group being and dependent, not only on others but on Earth. Survival depends not on competition but on cooperation. Man is not in opposition to nature but part of it. Nature gives him his subsistence; the group gives him his identity. Just as man owes something to his fellows, he feels indebted to the Earth. Earth is the context of his being. He and the context in which he lives are one – there is no existence for man outside of that context (Cordova, 2007, p. 122).

Children from the youngest age are enculturated to understand this essential truth for their particular group: Adults do not represent authority beyond question, one’s actions affect others, all members are equal, and the guidance of the young is the responsibility of all. The generational passing of approved behaviors, cultural values, language, Ceremony, and Spiritual practices inculcates the individual with a sense of being part of the greater whole.

Native people generally recognize a kinship among all Native peoples which is fundamentally spiritual in nature. In today’s world, where strangers dominate, a Native person traveling in a large city far from home may find himself staring intently in the crowd wondering if the person [next to him] is a Native person ... asking if he is Indian. This universal sense of kinship among Native Americans may reflect the communal nature of the spiritual traditions of the respective tribes (Kidwell et al., 2005, p. 145).

A major component of the socialization process is learning to balance the needs and desires of the individual to those of the larger society. La Donna Harris cuts to the quick, citing

the **Reciprocal Nature** of Native life: “My Comanche relatives demonstrated to me that a strong person strengthens the whole community, and ... a strong community strengthens each person” (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 491). Historically, the Indian recognized that individuals who had no loyalty to anyone else were exceedingly dangerous to have around. Consequently, banishment from the unit became the ultimate form of punishment for acts that jeopardized the integrity of the **Community**. Individuality existed, but it was subsumed in collective values which were mobilized to insure that all individual activities upheld the collective agenda.

One may actively strive for individual self-fulfillment but not at the expense of the group. Being competitive and putting oneself in advantage over another is not condoned in the **Native Community**. It goes without saying that flexibility and adaptability are important considerations, where one must adjust to the contours of the **Community** as well as the environment, daily life, and circumstances in general. Each member, young and old, helps the culture to survive and prosper, exhibiting unyielding loyalty to the **Family, Clan** and **Community**. It is a practice as old as the Narratives themselves and one which has sustained the people and allowed them to achieve common needs and goals and ultimately to survive.

Inherent to that process are the concepts of Harmony and Balance, where it is the responsibility of the entire group to see that these fundamental tenets are upheld among the various aspects of life. A certain level of social Harmony kept everyone’s energy focused where it needed to be focused: on the continuation of the **Community** into the future. When one does not follow the norm, falling out of Harmony and Balance results in what is considered to be “sickness” or “dis-ease” which must be remedied for the good of not only the individual but the **Community** as well. Indigenous people are motivated to work towards making a contribution back to the society, not to achieve personal gain.

This is where one of the most prominent chasms of thought occurs between the dominant culture and the **Indigenous Community**. The Western-influenced philosophy concentrates heavily on the “rugged individual” to the exclusion of the group. In most fundamental functions of the mainstream, such as philosophy, law, economics and religion, the starting point and center of attention begin with the individual. In a society like the United States, the individual often feels that the group threatens his individuality. There is a fear that he may just become an anonymous number submerged in the masses. The “I’s” are at war with every other individual in a perpetual state of competition for a limited supply of the essentials

for survival. Individuals are separated from other individuals through their adherence to beliefs, and they come (when necessary) to the group to make alliances between believers against non-believers. One can easily fill in the blanks here. The existence of affiliated groups must be explained or justified.

A sense of oneself as a part of a greater whole does not lead to a loss of a sense of self. There is no such thing as a “herd mentality”; instead, there is a greater sense of oneself as a responsible human being. The consequences of an individual’s actions carry much more weight in small groups ... One can never claim ‘rights’ that demand that others exercise responsibility. *I* must be responsible – for myself and to others (Cordova, 2007, p. 157).

As Viola Cordova contends above, in the group-oriented society like Natives, the individual is never anonymous and is always part of something greater than himself, a **Family**, a **Clan**, a **Tribe**, or a **Nation**. As was noted previously, this individualistic type of thinking, where there is no loyalty to anyone else other than themselves, was recognized as a dangerous threat to the well-being of all; consequently, from birth, children were gradually brought into the fold of the **Community Ethos**. Even the youngest member was always a part of the cooperative activities of all.

He [the child] must be taught what it is to be a *human* being in a very specific group ... the group, will give him an identity according to their definition of what it is to be human. The primary lesson that is taught is that the individual’s actions have consequences for himself, for others, for the world. The newcomer’s *humanness* is measured according to how he comes to recognize that his actions have consequences (Cordova, 2007, p. 177-178).

Indigenous people based their codes of conduct on the notion that Humans are social by nature, and they want to remain in the group (Waters, 2004, p. 176). Rewards and punishment were put in place to gently nurture adherence to the norm, and to a group that defines the individual as a social Being, ostracism or banishment was seen as the ultimate form of disciplinary action. The message that rang loud and clear was an individual’s actions have consequences for self, others, and the world. Ergo, **Humanness** is then measured according to how well one comes to recognize and practice this reality. This “**respectful individualism**,” if you will, allows the tribal member to enjoy a great deal of freedom in self-expression, because it is recognized by the society that individuals take into consideration and act on the needs of the **Community** as opposed to acting on self-interest alone.

Some would argue that mainstream laws are external artificial constraints on one's behavior that often do not have direct correlations to the social infraction and are enforced through the use of punishment. Conversely, internal forms of retribution, such as ostracism to a social Being, make the internalization of proper social behavior a clear, understandable standard by which to live. Abstraction in the law has no place in the **group-oriented Community**.

**Oral Tradition** is considered an essential, intuitive institution that holds the group together by conveying the importance of lessons in Human behavior, ethical actions, and cultural practices – in short, what was deemed important by the people of the past and what needs to be observed in the present. The preeminent importance of **Storytelling** is as an intuitive institution. Those **Native Narratives** establish the basis of Indigenous thought from a Spiritual and metaphysical perspective. It is through that esoteric connection with Mother Earth (*Mooshokamikwe*) and all her Creations that Indigenous people are able to ground their philosophy of **communal living** among all life in the Cosmos. As the **Oral Histories** built a common past, people felt connected to each other as well as an affinity to the Earth and her Creations, and a collective identity evolved which became the central theme for all relationships.

Most often, **Elders**, those with **Wisdom** gleaned from years of experience in **Tribal Ways**, are the central purveyors of such Knowledge through not only **Narratives** but **Ritual** and **Ceremony** as well. Their depictions of the Human and the Non-Human worlds give **Tribal** members, especially children, a strong sense of what is acceptable to the group and why it was so. From such a background, a **Community Ethos** was thusly established and literally held the people together by the voices of antiquity. These deep attachments are crucial to the Indigenous identity and still thrive today.

“To be Indian, one must participate in the tribal ceremonial life ... performances and practices that sustain both relationships and Spiritual Ceremonies ... connecting with the culture and sharing ... reconnecting with clan brothers and sisters ... listening to stories, sharing, and remembering” (Norton-Smith, 2010, location 1902). This ubiquitous, extensive kinship holds the key that unlocks the dynamics of the culture, paving the way to guide individual and group behavior. Knowledge of the **Community's Traditions** and belief systems are essential to a proper and prosperous life.

Natives organize themselves into **Clans** and keep track of **Family** relationships that extend through time, generation after generation. Members of **Clans**, even those blood unrelated, consider themselves to be **Family**. Within the **Community, Clan** structure affects many things from housing placement to labor to who lives with whom. The nature of the importance of **Clan** structure to all relationships is reflected in its nomenclature, which in most **Tribes** stems from the close kinship with the **Animal World**. Personally, I am from the Bear Clan (*Makwa Doodem*), something of which I am very proud! **Extended Family** is still common and crucial in Native life, and **Family** keeps everyone connected to and participating in the ongoing life of the **Community**, members caring for each other.

Given the importance of the group identity and the dependence on **Elders** to shape the essence of the **Clan, Tribe, or Nation, a Community Decision-Making Model** evolved over time that was devoid of any power-wielding structure, non-coercive, egalitarian in nature, and that insured that **Harmony** and **Balance** were maintained in reaching a consensus on issues that was best for all affected. Leadership involved taking responsibility, not control. The major task, even today, is to orchestrate the energy towards insuring that each Person contributes effectively to the whole. “If someone has a better idea that does not conflict with our basic integrity, then we will use it” becomes the modus operandi. The sustaining of social **Harmony** keeps conflict at a low level and allows everyone’s focus to be aimed directly on what is the most important: the continuation of an effective **Community** into the future. The manifestation of such a culturally inclusive and relational belief system is not to eliminate diverse elements but to create relationships among them and to reiterate to every Person that their value is important.

La Donna Harris, Comanche activist, succinctly identifies the four “Rs” or **Core Values of Indigeneity** as they apply to a **group-oriented Community**. They reach across the chasm of generations:

- ❖ **Relationships** – Relationship is the kinship obligation, the profound sense that we human beings are related, not only to each other, but to all things, animals, plants, rocks—in fact, to the very stuff the stars are made of. Everyone/everything is related to us as if they were our blood relatives. We, thus, live in a family that includes all Creation, and everyone/everything in this extended family is valued and has a valued contribution to make. So, our societal task is to make sure that everyone feels included and feels that they can make their contribution to our common good. This is reason why we value making decisions by consensus because it allows everyone to make a contribution.

- ❖ **Responsibility** – Responsibility is the community obligation. This obligation rests on the understanding that we have a responsibility to care for all of our relatives. Our relatives include everything in our ecological niche, animals and plants, as well as humans, even the stones, since everything that exists is alive. Indigenous leadership arises from the assumption of responsibilities arising out of our relationships and the roles in society. These relationships engender, not from an ability to exercise force over others. Responsible Indigeneity is based on an ethos of care, not of coercion. The most important responsibility of a leader is to create the social space in which productive relationships can be established and take place.
  
- ❖ **Reciprocity** – Reciprocity is the cyclical obligation. It underscores the fact that in Nature things are circular and cyclical: for example, the cycle of the seasons and the cycle of life, as well as the dynamics between any two entities in relationship with each other. Once we have encountered another, we are in relationship with them. At any given moment, the exchanges going on in a relationship may be uneven. The Indigenous idea of reciprocity is based on very long relational dynamics in which we are all seen as ‘kin’ to each other.
  
- ❖ **Redistribution** – Redistribution is the sharing obligation. Its primary purpose is to balance and rebalance relationships – flatten society, socially, politically and economically. It had many, many ways of redistributing material and social goods. In principle, one should not own anything one is not willing to give away. Possessions do not own you. The point is not to acquire things. The point is to give them away. Generosity is the most highly valued human quality. The basic principle is to keep everything moving, to keep everything in circulation. This obligation means sharing; not only material wealth, but information, time, talent and energy, one’s total self. You can see how this kind of sharing, of giving away, contributed to each person in the community feeling that they were valued.  
(Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 492-493)

Instrumental to the relational politics of Indigeneity as delineated above by Harris is the understanding that the practice of ***creating relationships between diverse elements is the goal***, not eliminating them – again, a stretch for the dominant culture. The ***Native Community*** is culturally inclusive and relational in that it brings a sense of caring interconnectedness to the table and assumes the need for all things to coexist:

In fact, we can only be ourselves together. We can only be a ‘self’ in community. We are simultaneously both autonomous and connected. There are no private truths. We have to let the realities of others into our conceptual and emotional spaces and vice versa (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 495).

An admirable goal, indeed. In this paradigm, we must find ways to utilize effective interaction so that we can discover, share, and coordinate our mutual values. In this Indigenous system, leadership is neither coercive nor power-wielding. It is not based on individual triumph

over others, competitiveness, majority rule, or winners and losers, but it involves responsibility for doing what is right for the **Good of All**. The ultimate criterion is how will today's decision affect the future? The overall goal in this process is to harness the energy of each member so that they may contribute effectively to the whole. We must "create social spaces in which we can come to value each other" (Harris & Wasilewski, 2004, p. 497).

Once again, the late Dr. Viola Cordova informs us in a poignant talk right before her death and brings the discussion full circle:

Each of us occupies a world that is made by our predecessors. We are given "reality"; we do not *discover* it. We train our infants to see the world as we have been trained to see it. We, in turn, are trained to see the world by the greater conglomeration of the *WE*. There are no individual *realities*, only communal ones. The only true individual reality is that of the madman. Because his view is truly unique, we *know* that he must be insane (Cordova, 2007, p. 49).