

The 'Protection' of Ceremonies

By Jim Ewing (Blueskywaters)

Osiyo, Greetings!

These thoughts are offered only as a personal belief, and carry no weight except for a personal view. I speak for no one but myself; one human being who has walked this Earth 52 years.

On March 8th and 9th, 2003, Spiritual Leaders and Bundle Keepers of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Nation, Cheyenne Nation and Arapahoe Nation were called together to discuss the protection from the abuse and exploitation of their ceremonies. The meeting was held at the Cultural Center in Eagle Butte, South Dakota, hosted by the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe.

A statement was issued that essentially said that the peoples and tribes represented wanted others to cease practicing any Native ceremonies they claimed as their own, including vision quest and sweat lodge, that ceremonial objects, such as the eagle feather, be carried only by Native peoples designated by them, insinuated that all sacred pipes (canupa) be "returned," that only enrolled tribal members of Native descent be allowed to perform or attend ceremonies, that all ceremonies be conducted in the Sioux language and only by people speaking the language, and entertained having the federal government intervene to ensure that only these tribes, their leaders and their designees be entitled to practice traditional sacred ceremonies as they defined them.

This caused quite a stir in Indian country, and among non-Indians who are associated with various practices and belong to various organizations that follow ancient ways. Some very prominent Native American spiritual leaders took issue and spoke eloquently against excluding non-Indians from sacred, traditional ceremonies. They cited ancestors and honored former leaders who had adopted the practice and encouraged it, so as to ensure the survival of Native spiritual beliefs and practices. This was particularly necessary since the federal government had banned all Native religious spiritual practices since the 1870s and had only allowed their practice with the Native American Religious Freedom Act of 1977.

The matter seemed to have been dropped.

For a full treatment of this, and various responses and news stories, see:

http://www.wambliho.com/WambliHoReport_Apr2003.html

Issue Has Revived

That would have been the end of it, for me, but I am credibly told that the move for "protection" of ceremonies has not ceased, and has only gone "underground" to effect it via the force of federal law with a few individuals seeking to control who should practice what and how.

Previously, I had refrained from publicly commenting. If the Protection debate is about Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc., among Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc., it is between them. I'm not of the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc. Also:

-- Although I practice some similar activities, the pipe does not belong to the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc., only their _expression and lineage of it (Buffalo Calf Woman); nor does the medicine wheel, nor the vision quest, nor even the sweat lodge, though the Inipi ceremony itself as outlined by the Buffalo Calf Woman (Sioux) is clearly prescribed.

-- The sacred site of Pipestone (Minn.), where the soapstone is found that is used to fashion the Plains and some Southeastern pipes, was used by many tribes, and was accessible to all throughout history though controlled by one tribe. Archeologists have found pipes throughout the Southeast thousands of years old made of various substances including soapstone from there.

-- The medicine wheel is multi-cultural, including ancient Buddhist (eight directions) and Celtic (witness the cairns across Great Britain, Stonehenge among them); the sweat was a sacred ceremony even among Northern Europeans (seen in the sauna of today from Nordic peoples, though the ceremonies attached have been largely lost).

So to claim ownership of these things is on its face false and provably false.

But now, if this path is still being pursued by certain individuals, we must ensure that practices that do not

belong to them are not coopted by them, taken from us, or other people.

For example, my pipe is not Lakota, nor was it granted or conferred by a Lakota so I felt no obligation to "return it" as was insinuated by the Protection of Ceremonies proclamation. My personal pipe was made by a Cherokee; the ceremonial pipe by a Metis.

In the Cherokee (Ani-Yvwiya, Principle People), the sacred pipe was given by Uktena, "The Keen-Eyed," a great serpent, not the Buffalo Calf Woman. Am I to tell this terrible Spirit, so powerful that to simply gaze upon it means instant death, that I should not use this sacred gift because the Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc., told me I could not?

The Bear Lodge (Inipi among the Sioux) is the birthright of the Tachi Yokuts Tribe, as they are descended from the Bear. Would they deny what Spirit has breathed into their bodies and carry in their blood because certain Plains tribes' leaders tell them it belongs to them? Or that the clan should not have a Medicine Society because the Plains tribes do not sanction the Bear Dance?

I've danced with my Bear totem since I was born; am I to stop seeing Spirit, or communicating with my guardian, protector and guide because certain men say that my prayers are not my own, my visions don't belong to me, or the guidance Spirit offers is not valid because I do not carry Lakota, Dakota, etc., blood in my veins or speak their language?

The Medicine Wheel we honor here is patterned after the Mayan and includes influences from many cultures, primarily Native American – but also Siberian, South American and African influences. Our ceremonies are open to all peoples, all tribes, all colors. How can I stop practicing or believing in something that is Spirit led and expressed in so many cultures? Why would I turn anyone away from Spirit, or from practicing their own beliefs, in harmony with all, bringing their unique lights to the Medicine Wheel? Are we not all the five-fingered tribe? All colors, all peoples – red, black, white, yellow – reflected in the Sacred Hoop of Life? Is it not the Creator's way, reflected in the world The Great Mystery created to be as one?

I gathered the grandfathers for the Medicine Wheel here, and each volunteered for it. Did the Earthly Mother demand I return them? No. Did the Grandfathers demand it? No. Surely, these Plains tribal leaders would not command what the Earthly Mother herself does not withhold, or have the federal government tell me who can or cannot pray with me. Or that the land I walk cannot have sacred ceremony performed upon it, in respect for all beings – including those who would prevent it.

Can they prevent me from practicing Us'ste'lisk (Cherokee: vision quest), from fasting, or seeking a vision, to find wisdom, guidance, clarity and wholeness? I think not.

Even if the government broke down my door at these people's insistence and took my drum away, they could not prevent the drumbeat of my heart, or the prayers that attend to it. For that, they would have to kill me. And, even then, my spirit would live on.

Spirit cannot die, or be controlled or contained or "owned." Those who attempt to try it make mockery of the human spirit. It is not a source of anger to view such things, only sadness and, ultimately, laughter. Spirit is like water; it seeps through many cracks; it endures even after the human vessel is gone. One may as well tell the rain not to fall or the rivers not to run. This moment, we may succeed; but overall, humans are pitiful beings, circumscribed by time.

The Path Of Spirit

Generally, people of good mind, even with sharp disagreements, can come to consensus if given the chance. But if the government becomes involved, all will surely suffer, and that should be plainly seen given the history of the federal government's involvement in Native affairs.

It would be better to resolve this matter in Spirit, through seeking peace and understanding, than through law, or conflict resolved through force of law.

The move toward "protection" of ceremonies is fueled by fear, and control. People generally react in fear when they believe they are about to lose something of value; the natural inclination is to try to control the situation to

prevent what is perceived as being lost. But we are taught in Spirit that nothing belongs to us; all is owned by the Creator. When we react out of fear, the response is usually divisive – anger, jealousy, mistrust. It stems from a belief that all is finite, and thus limited or scarce; whereas the nature of Spirit is abundance, infinite, ever flowing.

If we act out of scarcity and mistrust, we "buy into" giving away our power to outside authority – in this instance, the federal government. But if we give away our power to retain what we believe is being lost, and give it to outside authority, we lose what we seek to retain.

No one "owns" Spirit. It is a sad thing that anyone would try to claim _expression of Spirit through ceremony, though some of the motivations are understandable (false or dangerous activities that risk legitimate, sincere gatherings and practices). I am also mindful that today, it seems, everyone wants to "own" Spirit (witness the registered trademarking of even common and universal words/practices). Because so many people are searching for spiritual truth, everyone seems to be trying to "corner the market," to try to control who can practice certain ceremonies, and how, and charge for them and have authority over them and their practitioners.

So this "protection" movement is sadly understandable; my heart comprehends the sincere concern of some of these people, though the way of doing it is false and dangerous and actually mirrors what it seeks to prevent.

At heart, it regards human beings' perception of Spirit/Religion; two faces of one. Spirit is the motivating force, the Source, of the Divine; religion is its outward _expression, its codes and context. Confusing the two is common but not the whole truth. Religion, without the balance of Spirit, is the Inquisition (or the Protection of Ceremonies); Spirit without an outward form is self-absorption, fatalism, inaction. Spirit must have an outward form to be meaningful to individuals and uplift the people as a whole.

It would seem to me that things that are Lakota, Dakota, etc., belong to them; how they practice is up to them and who they accept into their activities is up to them.

But the "protection" of ceremonies belongs to each individual who practices his/her own spiritual beliefs. That is spiritual law, and it is supposed to be the basic law of the state, too.

The free _expression of religion is central to individual liberty, and to try to exclusively "protect" religious ceremonies among one group or groups is precisely what the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution proscribing "the establishment of religion" was written to prevent. It sets one group above others with the force of law. For the government to intervene would be a clear violation of citizens' fundamental right to practice religion without government interference.

But would the federal government follow its own basic law? If history is a guide, regarding Native peoples, at least, probably not.

Thus, the path these people seek to take is insidious. Not only is it inimical to religious freedom on its face, but any attempt to "establish" a religion in such a manner would spur lawsuits and set tribe against tribe, disrupting unity and creating animosity where none should exist. At the same time, the government, which cares nothing about such things except exercising ever more control, would use it to keep Native peoples in their place by limiting their freedoms even more. It's an insane path: Why would anyone want to give any religious control to the government? Especially given the federal government's utterly destructive history with Native peoples?

Ugly Passions, Hateful Words Ignited

Adding to the frustration that this matter has not died a needful death is that the issue spurs ugly passions and hateful words, claims that are tinged with chauvinism (asserting and forcing one belief as superior) and racism (defining spiritual belief through race, i.e. blood quantum).

There is no place for either of these in discussing, much less practicing, ways of Spirit.

The Lakota are no greater than Cherokee, nor the Cheyenne higher than Choctaw – except, perhaps, among those who champion their own tribes. In the way of Spirit, each are children of the Earthly Mother, loved by the Creator, as one.

The issue of blood quantum is itself destructive to tribal unity – witness the influence of money in the casinos

causing tribes to oust even longstanding members via the quantum issue. Itself the result of federal government interference and control, it has its basis in slavery days, when the force of law determined human rights by classifying human beings as chattel, property, Indian or free. Is this the criteria by which Native peoples wish to judge their members? Are we not all human beings? And given by the Creator the blood we carry in our veins? Is this not even what the Hunkapi (Making of Relatives) ceremony given to the Lakota, Dakota, etc., by the Buffalo Calf Woman is all about? The true peace and power that binds human beings? Beyond blood?

The blood quantum issue raises difficult questions about all who are Native and follow Native ways today. Do we draw the line now and say our ancestors were wrong? That, indeed, in many instances, our blood, our kin, from whom we trace our lineage could not pass the tests we set today? And what of the clans that traditionally have recognized one another across tribal lines? Which of our brothers and sisters, our children and honored elders do we exclude and say they are no longer our relations and do not belong with us? Do we not retroactively exclude our own ancestors by drawing such distinctions? Then, who are we? Why are we here? What authority do we have to do anything?

Would this not only introduce a new form of social and cultural genocide by the federal government that would further diminish Native peoples? Does the "Protection" not in fact only further constrict Native beliefs and practices, even excluding those who hold true claim to them? Rather than strengthening traditional ways, they would destroy them, by constricting them, allowing them to die among an ever smaller pool. "Protecting" ceremonies in this way is to lose them and rob the people and their descendents of their birthright.

So how do people of right mind and good heart proceed?

If those who signed the proclamation wish to abide by their own edict, it seems a divisive act that will destroy them and all who follow it; and is not one to be followed. But it is their choice, and to be honored in its own way whatever one may think of it. We can lament their path, but not follow it. We peacefully accept their right to self-destruction.

That is the way of peace: With compassion, allow, accept, acknowledge and be grateful that this path is being followed by some so that all may clearly see what they cannot afford to lose. We see what we must protect by seeing those who are so willing to give it away under the delusion of holding it. They provide a mirror for truth and our preservation.

The right way is not to oppose these individuals. Then, we would only be creating more opposition and more dissension. If they do not see the wrongfulness of their ways, there is nothing we can do to dissuade them, but follow the right way. That way is to go forward toward protecting what belongs to everyone, even those who do not see it.

We must act as one to protect our own ceremonies and rights by being of one mind for religious freedom. That is the law and it is right, an inalienable right, a spiritual right, that no one has the authority to remove. It is not against any individual, but for all peoples.

Among the Iroquois, reflected in the great seal of the United States, the eagle holds a bundle of arrows. It was the vision of the Peacemaker, Deganawidah, that one arrow is easily broken, but a bundle tied closely together is nigh impossible to break. So it must be for us, all peoples. If these people wish to go it alone, they risk breaking their own integrity. But we only accept authority from another when it belongs to them and we agree.

It is a shame that some would withhold or try to take when they have so much to give.

In this time when the world is in so much need of balance, it seems imperative that all peoples "add to," not take away. So many Native peoples have lost their beliefs, mostly due to federal governmental interference which almost wiped out indigenous peoples entirely.

Remembering Forgotten Ways

The Western Plains tribes are truly blessed that the government's forced removal and eradication programs

were so delayed for them, unlike the Eastern and Western Seaboard and interior tribes which were so early decimated by disease and migration that they lost most of their teachings.

For many Native peoples, what is offered by the Western Plains tribes is the only connection to their own forgotten traditions, even if tenuous. To take that away, or cause doubt, or exclude them is to condemn them to no connection with who they are and have a right to be. And the power of the Western Plains beliefs is strong and worth emulating, indeed a model for the world.

What was the province of individual tribes, or ways of practice, have become adopted and adapted by many peoples as a path of Spirit. Belief and meaning cannot be undone from the human spirit, or from a yearning to "come home" to the way of ancestors. It is a shame that doors would be closed, not opened. We should be grateful for the greatness and perseverance of the Western Plains tribes and pray they will resolve their issues in peaceful manner.

The Lakota, Dakota, Nakota Oyate (People), etc., have themselves forgotten many important teachings that are in need of being remembered. What is seen and being promoted as traditional is itself incomplete and requires balance. For example, the showing of the sacred pipe at ceremonial gatherings, which has always been a powerful spiritual tool for keeping the people united, one, in Spirit is not being followed and, consequently, public acknowledgement, identity and belief – the authority of the pipe among people – is degraded. And the leadership of the tribes is now mostly male (all the signatories of the proclamation are male). If there were a true coming together of the original seven fires, or councils, then they would be made up of each nation picking senior pipe carriers, a man and woman from each, as was traditionally done, to make a decision such as this. Then, there would be unanimity in its belief and, consequently, great respect for the decision by all.

This balance of male and female is sorely lacking in tribal culture today, among all tribes, again the result of federal government removal of traditional ways, not Native at all. It should be remembered that tribes were matrilineal and tribal groups, moieties, bands, families, were of shared governance. And if there were such balance, of male and female leaders, pipe carriers all, given equal respect and honored, it's doubtful such a divisive policy as this "Protection" would be pursued, or would even have been entertained.

Women have always been caretakers of the children and the elderly and looked after the overall interests of the people; without that viewpoint, men are left to do what they do best: execution of action, in this case, without balance or considered judgment for the benefit of all. In the decision of the moment, who looks after the seven generations to follow? It was a woman, the Buffalo Calf Woman, after all, who gave the pipe to those who would circumscribe its use, and she said she would return. Now is the time of allowing, receiving, nurturing the Divine Feminine in all we do, keeping the Sky Paths of the Holy Ones Open. The need for hierarchy, domination and control over others is over; it is our duty to be recognizing, valuing and celebrating differences rather than trying to eliminate or control them. This is the way of balance, especially in these times, remembering the lessons of conscious, equal partnership to achieve balance and right relations. This is the true face of who we are.

It would be best if the people taking this course of action would see the wisdom of refraining from pursuing it; but should they not, it is a decision forced upon the rest of the tribal societies – and all who care about religious liberty and returning autonomy to Native peoples -- to "protect" what belongs to everyone.

It is my prayer that right relations, truth and good Spirits will prevail. Creator made us in many ways so that we could see wholeness from many directions; it is up to each of us to open our eyes to see as the Creator sees: out of many, one; one out of many.

We are each unique yet equal parts of the whole: one Sacred Hoop of Life.

Those are my thoughts.

Mitakuye Oyasin.

Wisatologi Nihi.

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