

The Great Mystery: An Interview with Kent Nerburn by Joe Grindon

A man emerges from his lodge at the first light of day. Silently, he pauses and acknowledges Wakan Tanka, the Creator, the Great Mystery. He walks to the nearby stream, splashes water on his face, and is mindful of the mystery of the water, the monumental forces of the land and the sky, and the myriad of plants and creatures, great and small: insects crawling and flying, the birds, and four-legged animals. In a whisper he says, “Mitakuye oyasin”—“to all my relations.” In his or her own way and always alone, each member of his group will repeat this process as he or she starts the day. This is not a ceremony or ritual repeated just once a week or once each day. It is a way of life.

In the Native American culture, everything from the ordinary to the monumental is sacred. Rather than everything being an expression of God, the perception is that everything contains the presence of God. Everything is part of the Great Circle. Human beings are part of creation and nature, not at the top of it. Everywhere, everything, and every moment is a church. Every moment contains a prayer. A Lakota saying teaches, “Things always work out if you keep your prayer in front of you.”

Student and Artist

The humble reverence for all of life expressed by Native Americans resonates deeply with writer and scholar Kent Nerburn, who holds a double PhD in Religion and Art. He is an accomplished sculptor, educator, editor, and award-winning writer whose work has, rightly, received high acclaim. He has written more than ten books and edited several others. Among his works are two powerful books about the Lakota, or Sioux, entitled *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* and *The Wolf at Twilight*. He is currently at work on a third book in this series. He combines rigorous research with a deep reverence for the sacred in all things, and he has a wonderful knack for poignant storytelling. Reading his works is time well spent. Nerburn grew up in the Minneapolis/St. Paul area of Minnesota, and he sometimes refers to Minnesota as “Indian Country” because of the large number of reservations in the state. He first took an interest in Native Americans in the early 1980s. In the later 'eighties, he began working with the Ojibwe people of the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota, where he directed an award-winning oral history project that has produced two books. Before he began his work with the Lakota, he researched and authored a book on Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce.

A Way of Life

“The reason why I gravitate toward the Native traditions is that [those who practice those traditions] don’t have an arbitrary distinction between the sacred and the mundane,” explains Nerburn. “The spiritual dimension of life pervades every moment and every action. They can be living the most venal and tawdry reality, but they are always aware that they are living in the presence of the Creator. As one Dakotah man said, ‘We do not

understand devoting one day of the week to God, because to us all time and all things are holy.' This fosters an attitude of mindfulness and puts a prayer at life's heart. And if life has a prayer at its heart, that is spiritual living. "Spirituality appears in many colors. I respect any tradition where people are kind to each other, treat the elderly with honor and the children with reverence, and do not use their ideologies to quarrel with those of differing beliefs. I just find that at this point in my life, the Native traditions, with their belief in the power of nature and the value of silence, where each person must seek the Creator alone, nourish me more fully than other paths."

Humility, Many Teachers

"The older I get, the more the mystery of life overwhelms me. I think I am lucky in that, by sheer force of circumstance, I saw a very big world as a child, and it made me humble in the face of that world. It made me try to honor the common humanity while honoring the differences. One of the reasons I love the Native traditions is that for them, everything—every moment, every encounter, every leaf, every tree—is a teacher, and you best stand humble before it or you will miss what it has to offer. Bend your knee, bow your head, prostrate yourself, or raise your hands in praise, but be humble in the face of life's Mystery."

Clarifying Experiences

"My times with the Ojibwe and the Lakota were clarifying experiences for me. I have a deep commitment to honoring the truth and spiritual genius at the heart of every belief system, and I try to practice this in my work and my life. I was raised Catholic. I spent time in a graduate program in comparative religions at Stanford, but ultimately left that program because it felt too analytical—too far from the fire of actual belief. I then studied various religious traditions at Graduate Theological Union and U.C. Berkeley, where my focus turned to the creation of religious sculptures that embodied spiritual states and made them manifest in imagery. "I felt that if I could enter into a spiritual belief system enough to embody it in a three-dimensional image, I could honor that belief and help others see its unique spiritual genius. I really believe that we are 'believing' creatures, and honoring the heartbeat of other people's beliefs increases both our understanding and our own fundamental humanity. Writing is just another modality for sharing the richness of human belief."

Closer to the Fire

In developing the books *Neither Wolf Nor Dog* and *The Wolf at Twilight*, Nerburn spent time and developed significant relationships with the Lakota people, principally at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. By doing so, he allowed himself to be a student and observer and, perhaps more important, a participant. This provided him with not only things to report, but also stories to be told, which he has developed into compelling novels. "These are unique literary creations. They began as narrative nonfiction teaching stories. I had done my work with oral history and worked hard at learning to listen and be present to situations and voices. All of the conversations were, if not word for word, certainly reflective of everything that I had heard and been taught by Native American people. The characters were real. "By the time I got to *The Wolf at Twilight*, they had evolved to the point where they were operating as characters unto themselves. They moved from non-fiction to fiction in the presentation, but, ultimately, they remained real people placed in real settings speaking in real voices about their real feelings and real Native experiences."

Walking into the Native World

“By using myself as the narrator and a character in the narrative, I could walk the non-Native reader into the Native world, hand them over to the Native people, and allow the Native people to teach. The narratives themselves were formed from many actual experiences—some of mine, some of others. The result is books that are teaching stories and oral history wrapped in a constructed narrative of real people in a world that is absolutely authentic and faithful to Native experience, but which few non-Native people ever see. “I could actually footnote *The Wolf at Twilight*, but that would break the flow of the narrative and kill its power as story. And ‘story’ is the key to the Native American way of teaching. As one Ojibwe man put it, ‘People learn best by stories because stories lodge deep in the heart.’ “I wanted these books to touch the reader’s heart. I wanted people to believe them because I didn’t want them to move to an analytical distance. Instead, I wanted the stories to inhabit the reader in the way that only those things, truly believed, can do. “It was a difficult literary tightrope. But I had learned from the Gospel narratives and the teachings of the Buddha and even Kahlil Gibran’s work, where stories were used to present spiritual truth, and combined this technique with the Native tradition of teaching through storytelling. The fact that both Native and non-Native readers have embraced these books tells me that it has worked.”

Balance

Balance is the key to the Native American way of looking at life. There is the Father Spirit and the Mother Earth. There is the responsibility of following the individual path as well as the commitment to serve the communal good. There is respect for the ancestors and the elderly, and there is a commitment to the young and those not yet born. The words of *Sitting Bull* capture this communal spirit: “Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children.” “I know a very traditional Ojibwe man who looks at every situation of personal anger as a situation requiring him to bring things back into balance,” marvels Nerburn. “That’s the core of his whole spirituality, bringing all things into balance: personal relationships, nature, food, and lifestyle. He sees his actions as responsible not only to himself but also to his ancestors and the future seven generations.”

Our Time to Listen

“I think that we in the Western tradition are haunted, if only subconsciously, by the idea of salvation as an individual task. It makes us responsible for only ourselves. The idea of a communal responsibility isn’t at our core. We have to learn it, or, perhaps, relearn it.” Nerburn comments on the depth of this communal awareness: “We have this belief in the individuated self that courses through the Western intellectual and spiritual traditions. We start with the premise ‘I,’ and to get to ‘We’ is an effort. We have to make this effort, but there are cultures out there, language systems out there, where ‘We’ dominates over ‘I’ from the beginning. I admire those. I wish it came naturally to us, but it doesn’t. It may be our karmic challenge to make a meaningful ‘We’ out of the collective of ‘I’s’ that we have become as a culture. The world is too large and too interconnected to go on this way. Some of the best Native thinkers have said, ‘Our time is coming’ to help the non-Native people develop a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness. I believe they’re right. “In our culture, we tend to look at ourselves as being at the top of everything because we can stand outside of ourselves and look at ourselves, whereas the other creatures, other beings, and other life forms on earth merely live inside their own presence. I think this sense of separating ourselves is starting to haunt us, and we need to listen to the Native people. I hope they are right that our time of listening is coming, and I hope I can do my

part to help bring it about.”

What We Can Learn

Toward the end of *The Wolf at Twilight*, the Lakota elder, Dan, shares many insights into the Lakota way and many powerful nuggets of wisdom. Here are a few:

- “For us the world was a mystery to be honored, not a puzzle to be solved.”
- “We must stop looking at life as if we humans are at the top of everything. There’s spirit in everything, not just in people. If the Creator made it, there is spirit in it. And if it has spirit in it, it has a part to play in creation.”
- “You have spent too much time trying to learn about things and not enough time trying to learn from them. You have thought too much and honored too little.”
- “The greatest weakness of your people is that you do not know how to listen....The Creator has placed knowledge in all things.”
- Mitakuye oyasin—all my relations. “That means everything in the world—the plants, the animals, the sky, the trees, the rocks—everything. When you feel that everything is your relation, you feel that everything is connected.”

Through Kent Nerburn’s research and the development of relationships with Native Americans, he has discovered profound and coherent spiritual traditions unique to the Americas and as ancient as any in the world. These traditions share the same values and great truths with other great traditions—one creator, oneness, compassion, respect, and mindfulness of the Divine within each individual and all of creation. In our modern era, we, too, have much to learn from the indigenous traditions.