“[N]ot only men, but all things and all beings pray to Him (Wakan Tanka—the Great Spirit) continually in differing ways.”
–Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk)

As contemporary life becomes more and more fragmented and unsustainable, many individuals are left perplexed and searching for more complete and sustainable models to understand themselves and their place in the world around them. It is the spiritual crisis brought about by a desacralized worldview that began in the modern West with the emergence of the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment that has created an existential and ontological void and uprooted the centrality of the sacred in the lives of the human collectivity.

Very few would question or challenge the reality of climate change and the perilous situation of the present day, yet it is often overlooked that indigenous communities have in many cases been impacted the hardest by the environmental crisis and have been on the frontline of the struggle to protect the earth, as witnessed most recently by the events at the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. The First Peoples of the world provide an integral vision as to how human beings can live in balance and harmony within themselves and simultaneously with the world around them. It needs to be remembered that it was not until relatively recently that the religion and shamanic traditions of the First Peoples—with all their diversity—were viewed to be one of the world’s religions itself. The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, passed and put into law in 1978, allowed indigenous peoples to freely practice their traditional religion without fear of persecution.

The timeless wisdom of the diverse cultures of the world speaks in a singular voice on the nature of the Absolute or Spirit, which is often referred to as the perennial philosophy (philosophia perennis). Joseph Epes Brown, renowned scholar of the Native American Traditions and World Religions, writes:

It has long been necessary to situate correctly the so-called primitive religions in the context of the world’s historical religions, and in so doing to recognize that in spite of many elements unfamiliar to the outsider, Native American traditions, at least where there has not been excessive compromise to the modern world, are in no sense inferior, but indeed are legitimate expressions of the philosophia perennis.
Mitakuye oyasin—“we are all related”—is a well-known Sioux phrase, often voiced at the end of a prayer. It is with this affirmation of the interconnectedness of all things, and no less respect for all things, that this collection Spirit of the Earth of Indian voices sets forth. This book is comprised of authenticated quotations from men and women of some fifty North American tribes, which are placed alongside striking historical photographs of the American Indians, depicting their diversity and illustrating the timeless message of this sacred tradition.

From the earliest times, it was understood that the visible world implied the existence of an invisible world, where everything was infused with the supernatural and the felt sense of the sacred. Thomas Yellowtail expressed: “A man’s attitude toward the nature around him, and the animals in nature, is of special importance, because as we respect our created world, so also do we show respect for the real world that we cannot see.” Through the traditional wisdom of American Indians we learn that there are ways of knowing that are obtained through the earth that allow human beings to listen and learn directly from the Great Spirit. Tatanka-mani (Walking Buffalo) emphasizes that the earth is a living being and that human beings can learn from even the trees:

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they’ll talk to you if you listen.... I have learned a lot from trees: sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.

With regard to the taking of life or killing, it is often overlooked that while indigenous peoples primarily relied on hunting, they had a profound understanding and reverence for life itself. It needs to be remembered that in the pre-reservation era, Native peoples had no modern conveniences such as supermarkets or refrigerators separating them from nature. Ohiyesa (Charles Eastman) writes about how American Indians cultivate right relationship with all of life, and the deep bond that exists between animals and humans: “The animals long ago agreed to sacrifice their lives for ours, when we are in need of food or of skins for garments, but we are forbidden to kill for sport alone.” Mourning Dove (Christine Quintasket) describes how the primordial religion of the First Peoples teaches that nothing exists without purpose: “[E]verything on the earth has a purpose, every disease an herb to cure it, and every person a mission. This is the Indian theory of existence.”

That consciousness not only existed but permeated the world of manifestation for the First Peoples is evident in the Navajo Song of the Creation:

The earth is looking at me; she is looking up at me
I am looking down on her
I am happy, she is looking at me
I am happy, I am looking at her.

The sun is looking at me; he is looking down on me
I am looking up at him
I am happy, he is looking at me
I am happy, I am looking at him.

The black sky is looking at me; he is looking down on me
I am looking up at him
I am happy, he is looking at me
I am happy, I am looking at him.

The moon is looking at me; he is looking down on me
I am looking up at him
I am happy, he is looking at me
I am happy, I am looking at him.

The role of the four directions and expressing gratitude is instrumental to the First People’s way of life. The four directions are not static, but alive and provide a direct means to communicate with the spirit world. Charlie Elkhair states:

We are thankful to the East because everyone feels good in the morning when they awake, and sees the bright light coming from the East, and when the Sun goes down in the West we feel good and glad we are well; then we are thankful to the West. And we are thankful to the North, because when the cold winds come we are glad to have lived to see the leaves fall again; and to the South, for when the south wind blows and everything is coming up in the spring, we are glad to live to see the grass growing and everything green again. We thank the Thunders, for they are the spirits (manitous) that bring the rain, which the Creator has given them power to rule over. And we thank our mother, the Earth, whom we claim as mother because the Earth carries us and everything we need. When we eat and drink and look around, we know it is Our Creator that makes us feel good that way. He gives us the purest thoughts that can be had. We should pray to Him every morning.

The powerful symbol of the circle dominates the indigenous people’s sense of reality rather than that of linear causality. The cyclical pattern within the web of life occurs in the human being through his or her development and within the natural world. This is summarized by Hehaka Sapa (Black Elk):

Everything the power of the world does is done in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirs, birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round.

Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves. Our tipis were round like the nests of birds and these were always set in a circle, the nation’s hoop, a nest of many nests where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.

Ohiyesa describes the transcendent and immanent facets of the Spirit that pervade the whole web of life: “The Great Mystery is everywhere. He is in the earth and the water,
heat and cold, rocks and trees, sun and sky; and he is also in us. There are wonders all about us, and within, but if we are quiet and obedient to the voices of the spirit, sometimes we may understand these mysteries!” Again, for the Native American Indian, the natural world is a theophany, a crystallization of the Spirit where it is viewed to be the abode for prayer as Walking Bear (Susie Yellowtail) expresses:

With the Indian Way, you don’t have to go to church in order to pray. You can step outside, anytime. I can sit under my pine trees here and offer my prayers, and my prayers are answered. I don’t have to go into a church or cathedral just on Sunday. I can go out two or three times a day. If something bothers me, I can go out there and pray and I’m sure I’m being heard. It’s a portable church. As far as I’m concerned, there is no better church here on this place except under these pine trees.

American Indians, like all First Peoples recognized being both of the earth and of the Spirit, which is to say that human beings are geomorphic and also theomorphic. Luther Standing Bear writes: “The American Indian is of the soil, whether it be the region of forests, plains, pueblos, or mesas. He fits into the landscape, for the hand that fashioned the continent also fashioned the man for his surroundings. He once grew as naturally as the wild sunflowers; he belongs just as the buffalo belonged.”

As growing discontent with the paradigmatic tenets of the modern or even post-modern West escalate and give way to hopelessness and confusion, the timeless wisdom of the First Peoples’ vision of reality becomes ever more relevant and necessary. The contrast between this desacralized worldview of the present-day and that of the sacred that pervades all facets of the Native American Indian way of life is striking and is almost like an abyss that divides these two radically differing interpretations on reality. The soul of the contemporary individual nevertheless longs for the sacred and is left floundering in a secular wasteland due to the vacuum created in its absence. It is vital to living in a pluralistic era that individuals deepen and revitalize their own understanding of their religion, whatever form it may take, through other traditions such as the Native American religion.

This volume provides readers with a powerful glimpse into the traditional world of the indigenous peoples of North America, bringing together diverse voices from North American tribes complemented with a stunning series of photographs. The timeless wisdom and beauty contained in this small book provides an antidote to the nihilism and confusion by returning the human being to a spiritual frame of reference that is inseparable from the sacredness of the earth. We are reminded of the Sioux medicine man, Tatanka-ohitika (Brave Buffalo), who had an important realization when he was a boy that “the maker of all was Wakan Tanka [the Great Spirit], and...in order to honor him I must honor his works in nature.”

Notes

2 The phrase mitakuye oyasin can also be translated as “all my relatives” or “all my relations.”