

## Indigenous Knowledge and Gift Giving by Jeanette Armstrong

I would like to share my language with you, and give you greetings from all of my family and my community and my people, the Syilx. I give thanks that I am able to share some words with you.

I'm from an oral culture, and so that's how in this article, I share some of my ideas about giving—the concept of gift—and some ideas about my own people's understanding of giving, in terms of land, community and family, as well as the individual, because I believe something is really wrong in the world today. The only thing that I can offer is my thinking. How it might be put to work, how it might be incorporated, or how it might be thought of in terms of the change that needs to happen, is all up to those who hear and read these words.

I come from a small community in the southern interior part of British Columbia, about 200 miles inland and parallel to Vancouver. My people are sometimes referred to as the Okanagan people, but the Okanagan is actually the geographic valley that we live in. We are the Syilx people, and that is how I refer to myself.

The area that I come from has a lot to do with what I'm going to talk about. It is one of the only areas in Canada that is considered to be a desert. It means we have very little rainfall. This is because of the two mountain systems on both sides of our valley. The ecology is very harsh and dry in the summertime, and therefore the learning that our people have had to accomplish and achieve over many generations, in order to survive, has a lot to do with scarcity. In a land where there is not a lot of abundance, where the fragility of the eco-system requires absolute knowledge and understanding that there must be care not to overextend our use of it because it can impact on how much we have to eat the following year, or years after in terms of your coming generations, we have developed a practice, a philosophy and a governance systems are based on our understanding that we need to be always vigilant and aware of not over-using, not over-consuming the resources of our land, and that we must always be mindful of the importance of sharing and giving.

We must also be aware in everything that we are doing that the same possibilities must be available to our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren, and so it is an immense responsibility. I think of it in terms of our direct connection to how the land operates, how the land gives life, and how, as human beings, we are a part of that. I think losing that connection has a lot to do with some things Living in Community that are wrong today in the world. From my perspective, the land is a body that gives continuously, and we as human beings are an integral part of that body.

What Indigenous means to me is that everything that exists on the Earth is interdependent, an interdependence that must be understood. As an Indigenous person, I

must have knowledge about it and I must be able to cooperate with all the other living things on the planet, on this land, so as not to make any one of them extinct or remove any one of them for my own need. In other words, to cooperate and to collaborate with every living thing so that they can live and I can live at the same level of health. To cooperate so that they can continue giving to me and to my children and my children's children, the health that they deserve, in being a life form of the land. Indigenous, to me, means you can't be without that knowledge and that level of cooperation with the land. Without this cooperation, you cannot call yourself Indigenous. For example, a plant we may have in our home is indigenous to somewhere because it could live there on its own in an interdependent relationship with its climate, within its land and its topography. But once removed from there, we have to do all kinds of other things to allow this plant to live in our environment. All kinds of energy and work has to be expended to help it live, as this plant, in its pot, is no longer indigenous in a room in anyone's house. If we took it out of the house and put it in the desert, where we live, this plant would not survive a day.

I think of Indigenoussness in that way. I think of the paradigm shift that's required to recover the ability for human beings to live on the land without the immensity of destructive support systems that are required for the plant, for us, to live. I think of it in terms of the way that all the systems have been changed in my community in a forced way.

When I think about my life, I think about how the land gave me my life. Without the Okanagan land, without the Syilx people and all the relatives that live and lived on this land, without every single thing that sustains my people such as food, medicine, clothing and shelter, without all of those things that surround us, surround me, I would not be. I can only express in my language the meaning this has for me, and for me to be unable to protect the land, unable to stand between those things becoming extinguished from the land and the depth of love and understanding that's required for us to continue to receive that gift and to continue to honour and respect that gift, is profoundly significant. It's like family members being assaulted while your hands are tied. It is the same feeling with community, and it is the same with all of the generations of relatives that have sustained each other, interacted with each other, in really specific ways to be able to continue life.

I want to give you some idea of how our community thinks of itself and how it thinks about what community is. To us, our community is a living system. Like the land, it's a living diversity of beings and that diversity is immensely necessary, like the diversity on the land is immensely necessary. There's not one thing on the land that isn't necessary, there's not one person within community that isn't necessary, in our understanding of it. It would be like saying I don't need my fingernails and gift giving or toes just because I don't use them every day. Each person in the community fulfills a part of the community that may not be understood, in their generation or in the next generations. Like each diverse being on the land, we have no way of determining which is more important or which is less important. We have an understanding in our community that no person is superior to another.

I look at how society outside of our traditional community operates with the understanding that some people have more rights than others, that some people have more of a priority to things than others, and that some people not only are born with priority, but are born with the control over who has priority. They live and die within that idea of privilege, control and exclusion of others. I think that part has always been, for me, a very difficult thing. I relate to people in a really different way because it is how my community relates. I can't recognize hierarchies. I don't recognize hierarchies. People are people in terms of how they relate to me. I notice it on an everyday level when I go into

the community that I live next to. Depending on how much money you've got, and how much money you're going to spend, the amount of respect—and I don't like to use that word because that's a problem for me, but I will use the word anyway—the amount of respect paid is really related not to the person, but to their money, their power and to their ability to spend. This is so false and so inhuman and so against community and so very different from our understanding of what respect is within community.

In my community the chief—we do have chiefs in our community, women and men—the idea of “chief” has to do with how well that person hears everyone, and how well that person understands what is going on that might be wrong, that might cause conflict, and so might cause danger to the people. Our word for chief means to be able to take the many strands that are moving outward and twine them into one strand. One strand meaning one people and unification and a re-balancing with the land. It means that person must have an immense ability to feel what the community is saying, an immense ability to listen to the things that have been said, and to know the things that are happening, and to put it all together and say it back to the people. So it's about communication, and it's about being able to listen and being able to put it together so everyone understands and says, “Yeah, that's it!” It's not about telling people what to do, or leading people, or forcing people; it's being able to verbalize and communicate what everybody feels and knows and understands and remembers, and being able to put that together to create a movement forward. So our system relies on that kind of inter-relationship and communication in our community.

There is a process that I am just going to describe to you, briefly, as an example. I helped to establish an educational program to recover our traditional practices on the land within our community and within our families, called En'owkin. I've been working at it for 25 years. The idea for En'owkin comes from Enowkinwixw, a word that comes from our language. It is a word that describes how communities should operate, in terms of deep communication as a community process. In our minds, the way communities should operate is to be able to include everyone. The concept of Enowkinwixw is that it is an inclusion-seeking process. Rather than exclude minorities, we actually try to find ways to help the minority articulate what they are saying, because minorities usually are saying something really different from everybody else. They are the ones who are experiencing something that really differs from others' experience in the community. Whenever there's an issue or a problem, it's that voice that's most needed, and it's the understanding of that voice that's most necessary towards resolution of conflict. If that voice can't find a way to articulate what the issue is, it can't be heard and can't be listened to, so then the whole community is in trouble. The minority voice is, therefore, a really an important factor in terms of how our community communicates and listens. Listening is the biggest part, and with that, finding ways to bring forward the ideas expressed by that minority voice.

Enowkinwixw describes that process within our community. It describes a process that makes that happen. We use it in our governance process and we now use it in our community dialogues. We use it in our family circles and our extended family meetings. The idea isn't to make decisions, the idea is to hear all of the different aspects, all of the different views, but in Enowkinwixw, we actually set up a dynamic in which decisions can happen. It is a dynamic in which we understand that there are always polarities in community, because there is diversity. We try to take the polarities in their larger sense and we give them context in the community. We give the polarities authority in terms of their context within the community, authority which can't be usurped by any other area of community. There are four general polarities we utilize in our community to create a dialogue.

The first of these polarities can be described in our language as something similar to the idea of elders, although that term is not really a correct in our language. It is a word that really refers to those who have had long experience. It doesn't mean in years; it really means to have teachings from generations and generations past. You could therefore be a part of this group even if you are 20 or 30 years old. It's about the knowledge that has been passed on to you and that you express and stand for that makes you an "elder" in our language. As an elder, your thinking and your concerns and your responsibilities are directed toward making sure that everything is remembered that is necessary to make things continue on in a healthy way. This group is usually directly polarized against a group that can be described as the youth, or the young people. We think of these in our language as people that have a really great urge for innovation and creativity, new ideas and new concepts. This is a dynamic that is always needed in any community and any society, and encouraged, just as the elders, in their bringing forward of all their teachings and immense knowledge, is encouraged. But these are two aspects of society that usually are a source of oppositional dynamics. So one part of our Enowkinwixw is to create a very clear process in which the people in those two groups speak to and listen to each other to inform each other, and to clarify for each other, their views.

Our process for discussion in Enowkinwixw is simple. We start with the concept that if there is a problem or a crisis, or something that we are trying to resolve and gift giving that we don't understand, if anybody already has the answers and already knows it all, they should have resolved it. So, why haven't they? Therefore, it means, that nobody has the answers and no one person should be arguing for their view, their position, their rightness. What it means is that each should be listening to try to understand what the other is saying, and to try to incorporate into the overall solution what each person is saying, so that what is brought together will make more sense than what one person is saying. Obviously, it means that as an individual, if I didn't resolve it, then what I'm saying isn't important by itself, it is important only in the context of the rest of the community.

The premise is to begin in a way that creates "dialogue." We tell people: "You're not here to debate or to enforce your own agenda. You're not here to convince me of what you think. You're here to listen, and to hear the most diverse and opposite view to yours, and to understand where it's coming from and why it's there, and why that opinion is important in terms of how we find a solution. You are responsible for doing that. You are responsible for hearing what is the most opposite to your opinion, and finding a way to try to incorporate the other's diversity, the other's difference, and embrace that in terms of what we collectively come up with as a solution, so the difference will no longer be a difference, it becomes part of what we are and who we are."

In terms of the other two polarities that exists in community, there is a word for one of these in our language that means "maleness." In our language, in our pronoun structure, we don't use words like "he" or "she" that are used in English. It is quite a difficult thing to think in the English language, because everything is gender-based in that way. I talked with my mother about it, and my Aunt Jeanette, whom I am named after, and both are medicine women, and I said, "How come we don't have that idea?" And my aunt looked at me and she said, "Well, it has to do with being a person." I asked, "What does it have to do with being a person?" She replied, "If you were to say 'he' or 'she' in our language, you would have to point to their genitals, you would have to point to what's between the legs, and why would you talk about a person and point between their legs?" She said, "It doesn't make any sense." And it doesn't—people are what they do and who they relate to and how they relate to the world. It has nothing to do with gender, except that there are males and females. So there are words like "maleness and femaleness."

The word “maleness” actually has to do with our understanding in our philosophy about how things work in the world—the cosmology of things. The way the word is constructed for “male” is about the spreading outward of our life form as human, the spreading outward of the diversity of life on the land. The meaning of the word “male” has to do with the idea of humans being able to dream and be able to spread outward in the life form of the human. And so the aspect or idea of procreation as “male,” and the energy behind that, is understood as “maleness.” The word for “femaleness” is a really an interesting word in our language. The idea of separating part of the skin of the community, as a separation into family, is contained in our word for “femaleness.” The understanding of “femaleness” means “a separating out from within the covering which is community” or “the skin of the community,” that is, from the whole of the people into family systems. So when family systems, represented by the dynamics of “femaleness” and “male-ness”, together representing how the land operates, intersect as community, work has to be done to create balance, to make sure that there is clear understanding between those two dynamics.

How the people in the family are related to each other is based on how they feel about each other, how they treat each other. Society is really about feeling. It is about how we care for one another, how we love another, and how we protect one another. How we need to make sure there is food for everyone, that everyone has warmth and shelter, how everyone is nurtured emotionally and how people are made to feel good, and how to celebrate—all these things are what is understood and expressed by the word/concept of “femaleness.”

Another aspect of Enowkinwixw is the understanding that all of the things that we need, to make shelter, to give food, and to develop in all kinds of ways, requires organizing. Doing so is really about “how” things get done. In other words, it takes actions. That’s why “spreading out” is in that word of the “maleness” aspect of society. Everything becomes an action that is to be undertaken and when actions are undertaken there are consequences. In other words, what we do always impacts people. If we do things without thinking and without understanding or knowing how it impacts people, we can and will do a lot of things that are destructive, even though we may think that we are doing these things in the name of good, or in the name of providing, or in the name of prosperity.

If the male aspect of society gets its way that is what it will do. It will just keep doing that. That’s what, in this society, we think of as “patriarchy.” The patriarchal model is a model in which it does not matter that there are people starving, it does not matter that there are people hurting, it does not matter that there are minorities that are voiceless, that are not being included, that are being excluded. As long as this model is kept going, only some of the people can get good out of it and only some of the people can get privilege out of it, and that is really one of the dynamics that we’re talking about here.

The dynamic of the male and the female aspects of community must be balanced. The nurturing, caring and providing for “feelings,” for the well-being of the generations to come, must be part of the “doing” continuously, with clear understanding, cooperation and collaboration between both.

The dialogue we call Enowkinwixw means that we cannot sit down in our community and have any kind of rational decision, or any kind of rational action, unless we include all four aspects of community in dialogue, in a deep listening process. Without doing so, we are endangering the whole community. We are excluding parts of the community, and in doing so we are taking a vast risk for the next generations. I think that is something that

really resonates for me. We need to think about how we can continuously include our view, our diversity, our most opposite opinion, and having to listen to the “other,” and how we must be responsible in putting these together.

In terms of the family systems, there are two things that operate within community that I think are important to mention. One is the idea that a family system, and gift giving like community, is a living organism. We think of it as a body. The whole family system as one body that is incomplete if that whole family system isn't intact. The nuclear family isn't what I am talking about. Family means extended family. Three or four generations of aunts, uncles, cousins, grandmas, grandpas, great grandmas, great granddads, and so on, as the repository of many skills in terms of how to do community, how to be community, and how to be community on the land; in terms of how we treat the land and how we take care of it and how we take care of each other without destroying the land, and how we move that along.

Family systems have become fragmented into non-family systems, and in this society this system is now just a mother and father and children. But, even the mother, father and children don't stay together in this society. There is a diaspora of family because of the market economy. We have to move to get jobs, here and there, around and around, to the other end of the world, and so family really doesn't exist. It does not exist and there is a yearning for it and a hunger for it, and a need for it. A much deeper need than we think we know.

In terms of our Indigenous community, family is the basis of survival. We cannot operate community without family. Community does not exist without extended family systems. Otherwise community is just a collection of strangers. People that are not cooperating, not collaborating, not loving each other, not taking care of each other over generations and generations of learning how to do that on the land they occupy. So there are no communities either.

Our family systems in our communities are like clan systems, and each extended family system usually has a role in the work of the community, maybe something like the long-ago guilds in Europe, where you had the bakers, and the millers, and so on. Huge families passed down those skills and they used those skills to contribute to the whole community. In our system, extended families are the repositories of different kinds of skills. There are medicine families, there are healer families—medicine families and healer families usually are similar, but we could say that one are ethno-botanists, while the healer families are the psychologists or psychiatrists, and usually part of a chief's family belongs to these families, because they have to be psychologists and psychiatrists to do the work that is required of them. There are chiefs' families, hunter families, fishermen, basket-makers, and so on. All these families have people in them that are conversant with different tools that our community needs to continue on its life cycle.

In our tradition, gift giving in our society is very similar to the West Coast traditions in that we too have a huge number of feasts during the year. Feasts are held by extended families. As an example, my mother had a role similar to the West Coast Long House leader. A “winter dance leader” we call it in our community, because we don't have big cedars like the West Coast so we have short houses. We have winter dances in the wintertime. Winter dances, like the smokehouse, big house dances on the West Coast, are big give-aways.

I grew up with my uncle being a medicine man and my mother being a medicine woman and the winter house dance leader. Our extended family—cousins, aunts, uncles,

brothers, sisters, children, grandchildren—spent all year long gathering and making and putting aside things that are to be given away during that winter dance. And every year, during that winter dance, our mother gave away everything she owned, without question, without deciding how or to whom it is to be given; it is simply given in a ritual of dance. And I saw this giving all my life, and I was brought up this way all my life. We were told by my mother, my grandmother, my aunts, my uncles, that giving is the only way to be human, that if you don't know that giving is essential to survival, then you don't know how to be human yet.

We are told this, once we can understand it, when we are growing up. When we're two or three years old, the very first thing we are taught is to give. In our families, we are shown how to give. We learn that when we receive something that we really cherish and we really care about, that it is the first thing we should give up, because our community is to be cherished on that level. Our people and our land is be cherished on that level. And if we don't know how to give like that, we are poor. We are in poverty. We might hoard all the things that we think our family or our business needs, but we are poor.

We used to drive through some of the cities, and my mother would look around her and she would say, "Those poor rich people! Those poor, poor rich people!" And she meant it. She wasn't being ironic or sarcastic. She was pointing out what they were missing out on. She was pointing out what they were hungry for and what they were trying to find, in accumulating and hoarding and being selfish. She was pointing out what is really, really given to us when we reverse that, and what we feel when we give. We all know the feeling we have when we give out of purity. We all know how good it makes us feel. This is a natural feeling to us as humans. It is the real feeling of being human. And we all feel this when we give. For example, at Christmas time everybody is so excited about getting things and giving and giving—and some people go overboard. Where does this feeling come from? When we give to our loved ones (we're used to giving just to our favourite, chosen loved ones in this society), we sometimes do it without realizing that we would feel the same way whether we are giving to a direct blood relative or to a stranger, absolutely not known to you. The feeling is the same. In one of our laws we are told that when we start understanding that principle, and we start working with that principle, and we source that principle, we prosper.

In other words, if we lead our lives by giving continuously, never ever thinking about what we might get back from it or using it as an exchange for something that we want somebody to do for us (which, in fact, is not called "giving" in our language) our needs will never go unmet. In our language, giving to someone in order to get something back, is called something else. There is no word for "greed" in our language that I could find. What I found instead was a word which is used to describe a person that is expecting to get something back, or is expecting to have more than another, mostly desiring or expecting to eat more than another. We describe people that become this way with this particular word in our language. What this word means is "swallower or destroyer of giving."

In our traditions we found a way to describe this condition because it means and gift giving to stop the giving. To stop the giving you put an obstacle between the giving and yourself. And so we describe a person that way if they want more for themselves, or they want more for their family, or if they in some way act as an obstacle, by being selfish, that prevents everybody else in the community being given what is necessary and needed and deserved.

My language is one of the languages that are on the brink of extinction. I want to make

clear that these words that I am defining and describing for you are immensely important words that belong in the understanding of our humanity, and are necessary and needed in the understanding of what needs to be done to make change happen.

In our way we are always told not to ask for anything. We are always told in our community, as a practice, that when we have to start asking for something, that's when we're agreeing that people be irresponsible. Irresponsible in not understanding what we're needing, irresponsible in not seeing what's needed, and irresponsible in not having moved our resources and our actions to make sure that need isn't there, because this is the responsibility that we, and the people that surround us, mutually bear. So in our community we cannot go to a person and say, "I want you to do this for me." All we can do is clarify for them what is happening and what the consequences are for our family, or for our community, or for the land. We must clarify for them what needs to be done and how it needs to be done, and then it is up to them and if they fall short of that responsibility, at some point they will face the same need themselves.

We are told on a spiritual level that when we give freely without asking for anything back, whatever it might be, especially the things that are really difficult to give, that you receive back the equivalent of four times whatever it is that you gave.

The simple exercise my mother taught me was: "Whatever amount you work for, keep a small amount, enough to put food on the table, enough to get you back and forth to work, and give all the rest away. You make sure you continue to do that every year, and you'll never have to worry for finding work. You'll never have to worry about all the things that you need." And I never have. I do this every year of my life, all the time. I give to my community, to my people, to strangers; everything that I do is with this way of living in mind. This is something that is needed in terms of how we are doing things in the world today. And this is something that needs to be understood deeply at the personal level.

It comes down to each person embodying this concept and practicing it without letting-up. It comes down to each person being human in this way.

It is my hope that in sharing these thoughts, that I share with each of you a part of the gift that I was given through community, family, and the land that I am from. I wish to extend my gratitude to those whose ideas, work, and resources were given to the idea of a gift economy.

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