

## Wisdom of the Elders

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Several years ago, at the beginning of spring after a severe winter in Canada, I participated in a sweat lodge ceremony with respected elders from the Ojibwa, Dene, and Mohawk First Nations. It took place in a remote part of Ontario and we camped close to the newly constructed *inipi*, specially built for this sweat lodge ceremony. Inside the lodge the prayers offered were very moving. We made deeply personal and collective commitments to serve the Earth Mother, to do all that we could to heal her and ourselves. At the end of the final round of the ceremony we emerged into the pristine beauty of a late snowfall under a clear, star-studded sky. There had been a two-inch snowfall while the sweat lodge was in progress. We walked barefoot in silence to where we were camping. Quiet smiles, not thinking too much. My smile grew immense when looking back at our footprints in the snow. I gestured to my companions to stop and look. Words were not appropriate. We all smiled with the same recognition and looked at one another with new eyes. It was as though these were the first footprints witnessed on Mother Earth. Such a vision strengthened our commitment and resolve; business as usual was no longer possible for us.

Sacred Ecology is not a term that indigenous elders would likely use. They quietly assume that the proper relationship between human beings and the earth *is* a deeply spiritual one. An elder is recognized as a holder of wisdom, the repository of a precise, well-articulated earth

science. Such wisdom is based on extensive investigation of how the threads of world order are woven together into one single brilliant tapestry. It may be understood only through the eyes of intrinsic humility and reverence for all of life. The knowledge passed on by elders about how to live a good life arose from that essential spiritual relationship between a person, the earth, and the cosmos. This venture was encouraged by a worldview that every item in the tapestry of life interconnects with everything else. The wisdom of the elders, expressed through ceremony and myth, provided the guiding means to care for the sacred balance that held earth, humanity, and cosmos in harmony. The world view of the elders also encouraged a vision of looking ahead seven generations into the future by taking good care of these intricate inter-relationships NOW—in this moment. Lifeways evolved that were anchored in a sense of thankfulness for the garden bequeathed to us. Hunting and horticultural patterns relied on sophisticated and intimate knowledge of animal and plant interactions with habitat and humans. Respect and empathy were shown for the slain animals through rituals of thanksgiving that did not portray the hunter and horticulturalist as superior to the life form taken. Such an ethos of gratitude fostered care for a sustainable eco-system that was enough; the hunter and the hunted, the horticulturalist and habitat shared a mutual awareness in the landscape that nature provided. The astonishing similarity of this wisdom across cultures was brought together by Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki in their 1992 book “Wisdom of the Elders.”<sup>1</sup> The threads and premises of traditional ecological knowledge across geographical and cultural boundaries were due to the embodiment of a mythic landscape by elders located in different indigenous cultures worldwide. Knudtson and Suzuki drew on accounts by elders from Native America, Amazonia, the Australian Aborigines, Malaysia, Africa, Sarawak, Vietnam, and Mesoamerica. The collective wisdom about Mother Earth as a living system expressed uniquely by elders in different cultures provides the framework for understanding and balance that we should listen to very carefully.

In contrast, our modern world has to a great extent abandoned all humility and sense of interconnectedness. With respect to a relationship with nature we have refashioned Reverential into Referential, journeying from mythological space to the relentless drive of ego. Even if we have cultivated a respectful awareness, we still manage to smash through the threads of cosmic order as innocently as children running through cobwebs—simply because we do not know what is there. We remain unaware of the natural epiphany that is waiting. If we are lucky

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki. *Wisdom of the Elders* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1992).

enough to somehow experience the epiphany there is no world-view by which we can understand its significance. It is just marked down as an un-natural high! It is obvious that we need to create new ceremonies of respect for the earth mother. It is at great cost to ourselves and to the Earth Mother that we have ignored the repository of Earth Science from the Elders. In the twenty-first century we cannot replicate the conditions of indigenous culture, yet there is much we can learn about regenerating a commitment to planetary renewal from aboriginal ceremonies that unify peoples with their ecological insight. What can guide us? We can use instruments of mindfulness with their effect of freeing the human mind from suffering. Another way is to remember the Wisdom of the Elders and what our myths have been telling us from time immemorial.

Joseph Campbell in *The Hero's Journey*<sup>2</sup> was adamant about the redundancy of the great religions of the world for the hero's task of transforming the planet and the world social order. The great religions are all complicit in the partisan fracturing of the modern world with outmoded expressions of cultural nationalism. The vigorous propagation of any fundamentalist religious form as an exclusive "Way" is totally inappropriate for our modern times. Their "monkey holiness" is not the stuff that can aid the hero. Cultural nationalism is a redundant force in the twenty-first century—an impediment to the task of transforming the social and ecological order of the world. However, the religious right in America and their identical twin—the Taliban in Afghanistan—and other religious groups like them refuse to recognize that they are obsolete, still appealing to the ignorant and fearful. The Jesus Camps run by the religious right in America and the *madrassa* schools organised by the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan have too much in common to ignore their similar intent in creating hatred and destruction towards all unbelievers in their distorted vision of faith.

Fortunately, the hero does have the "all" within him, within her, and it is essential for humanity to wake up to that. Transforming the fabric of the entire social order asks world citizens to do the work of becoming spiritually responsible, rather than remaining spiritual captives. This is to enable the revealed knowledge and wisdom gained from the Hero's adventure to be applied to society and the environment. Hero's are certainly needed. The hero's task in the modern era can be ominous and lonely. Campbell, in the last paragraph of his classic, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*,<sup>3</sup> states:

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Campbell, Phil Cousineau, and Stuart L. Brown. *The Hero's Journey: Joseph Campbell on His Life and Work* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949).

The modern hero . . . cannot, indeed must not, wait for his community to cast off its slough of pride, of fear, rationalized advise, and sanctified misunderstanding . . . It is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse. And so every one of us shares the supreme ordeal—carries the cross of the redeemer—not in the bright moments of his tribe's great victories, but in the silences of his personal despair.

That is, until a critical mass of concerned and active citizens heed the call and change their mindsets. Then the task becomes less lonely. The call is to the adventure of changing the existing world order by arriving at a deep spiritual understanding of what needs to be done. The hero's mantle is cast on all of us, as Joseph Campbell asks everyone to be a modern hero and heroine for our time.

Understand the challenge

Accept the challenge

Listen to Nietzsche and live as though the day were here.

I have always had an intuitive sense that myths carry the wisdom of the ages and I find solace, courage, and guidance in them. To me the world's mythologies are highly complex narrative forms that have kept alive the realities of creation and the manner in which light and life came to humankind. They also provide graphic insights into the way light and life can be lost. In a highly coded way, these cultural accounts document the placement of humankind within the universe and upon the planet. The aboriginal shamans and seers I have worked with for over thirty years are myth-keepers and are called upon to be intermediaries between humans, the earth, and the universe. Their task is to maintain a balance between the multi-dimensional levels of reality known to them, by ensuring that these levels can be experienced and integrated with respect. There is a body of myths worldwide that deal directly with environmental issues. The Tree of Life myths connect the planet, the universe, and human beings in a template that is repeated with astonishing similarity in culture after culture. The constancy by which these sacred stories narrate the lessons of being, creation, and transformation, provides overwhelming evidence that the distinctive style of these accounts is not a haphazard accident. These narratives lie outside of time and space, providing symbolic guidelines for an inner journey of personal transformation. In doing so, they provide insights about the interconnectedness of levels that can take care of the planet. This takes us full circle back to the wisdom of the elders. The elders are the source of such wisdom as well as being the keepers of it. If one understands the myths from the inside, as they do, and can discern the guidelines for the inner journey, one then knows what steps to take and what steps to refrain from.

The Jewish mystics, the Kabbalists, have the sefirotic Tree of Life central to their conceptions about creation. The divine tree, as the intermediary between the world of human beings and God, is composed of ascending levels of consciousness that sustain a balanced life with all of creation—planetary and universal. This same inexhaustible metaphor of levels appears in the Norse myth of the Universal Tree: *Yggdrasil*. The mighty ash, *Yggdrasil*, is centred as the *axis mundi* and connects the planet, humans, and the universe, as long as human beings, represented as Gods, choose to locate at the centre within themselves. Otherwise chaos and destruction ensue. All the cycles of existence are played out and orchestrated within *Yggdrasil's* domain. For the Lakota Sioux, the central pole of the Sun Dance lodge is known as the sacred tree, the centre of everything, the connector, the Great Spirit. This kind of symbolism is found in every myth about the Tree of Life. What is it telling us?

Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on the Tree of Life, placed at the centre of the world and the universe. The four directions of the cross connect the earth, humanity, and the universe in the most powerful symbol of our times. On this Tree of Life, Christ provided human beings with an example of boundless consciousness that speaks to every human heart, irrespective of particular religious tradition. Moyra Caldecott collected these and many other myths in her remarkable 1993 book, *Myths of the Sacred Tree*,<sup>4</sup> yet the one that catches my attention more than any other is her account of Siddhartha Gautama and the Bodhi Tree:

At Bodh-Gaya he sat under a tree and did not move from there for forty-nine days. Time passed and did not pass. He could feel the great tree drawing nourishment and energy from the earth. He could feel it drawing nourishment and energy from the air and sun. He began to feel the same energy pumping in his heart. He began to feel there was no distinction between the tree and himself. He was the tree. The tree was him. The earth and sky were also part of the tree and hence of him. When his companions came that way again they found him so shining and radiant they could hardly look at him directly... He could have said, "There is no distinction. There is no suffering once one experiences the wholeness of things. There is only suffering if we think in terms of separation: I and Thou, this and that, before and after, here and there. There is only suffering if we desire what we think is outside ourselves, not realizing that we have everything because everything is contained within the "I"..... He took a leaf from the tree and looked at it. In it was the whole essence of the universe. He

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<sup>4</sup> Moyra Caldecott. *Myths of the Sacred Tree* (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions International, 1993).

held it out to his disciples. They saw it glowing with the same radiance that he saw.

The Tree of Life in mythology is usually referred to as a sacred, symbolic vehicle of communication representing the Cosmic Axis, the centre of the Universe. The esoteric traditions of the East use the Tree of Life to describe the *sushumna*, the central energy channel in the human body, the experience of which takes the devotee to higher levels of consciousness. It is the metaphor through which human beings connect to all worlds and dimensions—universal and planetary. The underlying motif views humankind as being physically grounded within the synchronistic heartbeat of Mother Earth, for it is through this planetary vascular system that humanity connects to the experiences of life-sustaining forces: seasons, growth, nurturing, and creativity. On their own each of these qualities remains unfulfilled. It is the conjunction of the Universe (through humans) with Mother Earth that permits the harvesting of fruit on the sacred Tree of Life. Trees in their majesty and beauty are used as metaphors for this state of being in our language and art. The Tree of Life is inside every being, grounded through the legs into the earth from the heart. The conjunction between the Universe and the planet is made through men and women who feel the metaphor of the Tree of Life within them as real and rooted. The Tree of Life motif is ever present in a simple message that the world's mythologies have delivered over and over again. It is the human choice and commitment to be at the centre of one's being that creates balance between humanity, Mother Earth, and the Universe. The Tree of Life myths also graphically represent the alternatives—chaos, destruction and breakdown—yet they always hold out the possibility of re-creation given the same human choice to locate at the centre of being. Our global twenty-first-century civilization is mired in chaos, destruction and breakdown. The ancient Tree of Life myths are fresh and current, for they speak to us directly: guiding us to return to our centre of being in order to transform the current mess.

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