

## **Preface**

### **The Plant & Animal Nations**

The Indian prefers the soft sound of the wind darting over the face of the pond, the smell of the wind itself cleansed by a midday rain. . . . The air is precious to the red man, for all things are the same breath - the animals, the trees, the man.

**-Chief Seattle**

**Suquamish 1786–1866**

Traditional Native Americans speak of the plant and animal “nations” because it gives respect to plants and animals, by recognizing their sovereignty. Each plant, each animal, has its own being, its own life and its own purpose in the scheme of Creation, is loved by Creator and has Creator within it, the spark of life, or “good medicine” that makes it so. The classes of plants and animals all have their rights and responsibilities, their reasons for being and their authority to be here.

This understanding of nature is quite different from the Western view where we speak of man vs. nature, or “the environment,” as if it was something separate from us.

In a balanced view of the world, we do not have “dominion” over plants and animals; we coexist with them. We are related to them; and we honor and respect the sacredness of their lives and being, as we honor our own life and being. We acknowledge that we cannot live upon this Earth without them – for our food, shelter, clothing, medicines – and never lose sight of this important relationship especially when we must kill them. We are all Children of Earth & Sky; to lose sight of this fact diminishes our own sacredness.

It is in exploring this sacredness that we learn to heal -- to make whole, and in harmony. That is the basis of healing. In learning to live with the plant

and animal nations, in harmony, in dialogue, where we each give and receive, we find wholeness, healing. Finding this dialogue, this connection, a way of balance and harmony, is the purpose of this book. We have much to learn from both the plant and animal nations and the peoples who have come before us.

The plants and animals of the Earth freely give of themselves so that we may live. If you learn to dialogue with plants and animals, you will find that they don't mind sacrificing themselves so that we may eat, have shelter or clothing; only that we gather them with respect, responsibly, so that they may continue to thrive. In the balance of nature, they do the same. It is all part of the chances and choices of survival, balancing the one against the other, for the sake of all. We can learn much from the indigenous peoples who trod this same ground before us breathing the same air, specifically in their relationships with plants and animals. In Native way, when consuming plants or animals for food, we give thanks – heartfelt prayers of gratitude for their sacrifice. The act of giving such thanks blesses the food energetically so that it may become “one” with us, for health, growth, and nurturing.<sup>1</sup>

This respectful attitude, and way of living in balance and harmony with the plant and animal nations, called living in “right relation,” is vital for today, if we are to sustain the planet. The Native American peoples, and other indigenous cultures throughout the world provide us with both spiritual and practical lessons in living in right relation.

For example, in a practical way, when the first Europeans came to the Americas, they were amazed at the park-like qualities of the forests. Native Americans routinely practiced controlled burning to keep brush down and prevent the devastating forest fires from deadwood that would kill animals and destroy villages. They kept meadows and fields open by burning, as well; but they didn't slash and burn as did Europeans, but rather used a process called

slash and char. Early Americans didn't completely burn the vegetable matter, but scorched it to make charcoal and then stirred the charcoal into the soil, creating what's called *terra preta* throughout the Americas. This process used low intensity fires – reportedly so cool they could be walked through -- that would improve the soil and make better, more efficient use of the carbon in the plants. As a result of this carefully cultivated low-biomass fire-making, the soil was left with more plant-available phosphorus, calcium, sulphur and nitrogen – often with rich, black, fertile soil layer upon layer six feet deep. They also worked in turtle, fish and animal bones, building fertile humus. In contrast, conventional modern growing methods destroy humus, so it has to be constantly replaced and amended with chemicals. The Native American's process also didn't release as much carbon into the atmosphere, a key cause of our current climate change.<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans were remarkable bioengineers, as well, and their most noted produce, corn or maize, is unique to the Americas; there is nothing like it anywhere else on Earth. Agronomists are amazed that indigenous peoples of the Americas could cultivate it, for in its original form, it was a relatively rare mountain plant with small fruit and a tough husk that required considerable knowledge and patience to develop. They were expert nutritionists, as well: with squash and beans, maize provided a nutritionally complete, balanced diet that was centuries ahead of the nutritional standards of the Europeans.<sup>3</sup>

Agronomists have determined there are at least 50,000 potential variants of maize, with hundreds of varieties once cultivated, from hand-sized cobs of a single color, to two-foot cobs of many colors, each with a different use and method of preparation. With maize came the Native way of planting in the *milpa*, or plot set aside for each strain. The Three Sisters--corn, beans and squash--were planted so that the runners could go up the corn stalk and find sunlight and the legumes could at the same time enrich the soil with nitrogen.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, fields would never go barren, with continuous crops on the same fields for centuries and yields-per-acre actually increasing as these fields were used. When the first Europeans exported maize, those who grew it didn't follow the *milpa* method, and hence received sustenance but not the balanced diet that squash and beans gave, resulting in pellagra and fields that grew barren.

This short-sighted agricultural practice continues today at an accelerated pace. American corporations export only a handful of corn seeds, hybrids that produce only one type, size and color; and require the chemical support of fertilizers, fungicides and pesticides throughout the growing period. The hybrids cannot reproduce, so they must be ordered from the manufacturer each year. These unnatural monocultures are uniquely fragile; with no natural immunity to insects or pathogens. As such, they require increasingly strong/toxic chemical protection that further diminishes the soil and pollutes the air and water, upsetting the ecosystem in a domino-like effect in ways that are far too complex and far-reaching for scientists to predict. In both soil conservation and natural propagation of species, there literally is no "seed corn" for future generations.

We of the West haven't really "advanced" what was taught by the ancestors of this land. We have practiced a different way and called it progress. We are however, beginning to understand we must reconnect with the plant and animal nations for ourselves, our world, and future generations. And here is where the practical marries with the spiritual. Native Americans did not separate the material world from the spiritual world. Indeed, in Native way, the physical world springs from the spiritual; in effect, the spiritual is "more real" than the "real" world – a giant departure from the modern view of the world. This is probably the greatest lesson we might learn: bringing the nations – plant, animal, human -- together through right relationship.

While science – which divorces the physical from the spiritual -- has increased yields per acre substantially, we have paid a price in our spiritual relationships with the land, the plant and animal nations, our planet and ourselves. We live in a world out of balance that must be changed now, if we are to survive. The imbalanced state of the world can be seen as a reflection of our own dis-connect with nature, and the change must come from within. It starts with living in balance with all our relations as individuals and as a culture: respecting ourselves, our plant and animal relations and Earth herself.

Modern life is not intrinsically averse to living in balance with the plant nations; far from it. Native America has shown us that the technology of sustainable living by honoring Earth and the plant nations can be a more efficient, scientifically valid way of life that has physical, spiritual, emotional and psychological benefits. Human beings actually feel their loss of connection with nature. The term “biophilia” was coined by Pulitzer Prize winning author and Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson in 1984 as the title of a book by the same name.<sup>5</sup> He argued that this feeling of loss with “the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life” is determined by a biological need cultivated over millennia that is not merely a physical bond, but a psychological and spiritual bond, as well. This hypothesis was bolstered by a 2001 article in *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* by Howard Frumkin, MD, an associate professor and chairman of environmental and occupational health at Emory University, who cited studies regarding health and proximity to plants and animals—even if the proximity were only a prison cell window facing a field.<sup>6</sup> The need for oneness – for spiritual and physical connection -- among all beings is intrinsic to the human condition.

The ancestors showed us that right relationship is a symbiosis of respect for the land, the people and all beings, demonstrated in the physical and spiritual

worlds, for they are one. Right relationship between the human, plant and animal nations is desperately needed in bringing balance to the Earth today. Each one of us can help fulfill this need by recognizing the need for change and supporting organizations and activities that promote sustainable agriculture and through rejecting as much as possible modern food "processing," which dehumanizes the plant/ animal/human relationship and despoils our planet.

On a more personal level, listen to your body. It feels the loss through lack of well-being, physical imbalance and stress caused by pesticides, chemicals, added hormones and genetically engineered species that do not "speak" to our bodies and hold a healing dialogue. No matter how diligently and prayerfully we cultivate our inner space for healing, balance, wholeness and beauty, if we do not take personal responsibility for our behavior in the outer world, with respect and even sacrifice, then all our efforts will be for naught. We each have a part to play in The Sacred Hoop of Life.

We must expand our horizons as human beings – the five-fingered tribe – to join with the other beings of the Earth to save what we have, balancing our left-brained scientific and moralistic views and beliefs. Despite our extensive behavior as namers of things in science, the real world operates differently than can be described. Plants and animals exist in a world that is intimately connected with nature and cannot be disassociated from it. Left-brained thinking divorces us from the real world – the really real world that encompasses the spiritual as well as the physical qualities of all things. No plant or animal thinks "I am separate from God" – or exists or behaves that way. Every thing upon the Earth, whether human, rock, bird, has Creator's light within it. To reject Creator is to reject self. And not only self, but that which animates, which creates, life itself. From a traditional Native American perspective, by simply thinking in the Western way, we kill the world. It becomes lifeless in our eyes and, hence,

unlamented when life is destroyed, with the rationale: It is separate from us, why should we care?

We are inextricably linked with All That Is, and all beings. We must learn to listen, to see, to be. This way of allowing the right brain – the Feminine Power – to come forward is an Eastern way of thought, just as the dominance of the male, rational way is Western. The Western way, while powerful and good for creating technology, has its limitations in matters of Spirit – and is even worsening with the seeming battle for the soul of the planet between Christianity and Islam. Both are “Western,” as both stem from the Judaic tradition. Both are patriarchal, left-brained applications of right-brained activities: talking with Creator. This chasm may seem too great to cross, much less find a way to unite as our world wars along a path of destruction. But all along, we have had an open pathway, with strong traditions, great insights and incredible power that can unite the disparate ways of thought: Native American spirituality. The late Mad Bear Anderson, an Iroquois medicine man, saw this yearning in the 1970s. And he saw the essential role the American Indian could play in creating a new and better world. He said: “The Eastern religions represent spirituality that looks inward. The Western religions represent spirituality that tends to look outward. We are the people whose spirituality is of the middle. We stand for the sacrality of Nature, for the sacred ways of the Earth. Therefore, we can be mediators between East and West, reminding the others that Nature is holy and full of the Great Spirit.”<sup>8</sup>

It is all about learning to hear what is being said to us by the plant and animal nations who share this Earth, learning to see how the invisible world of Spirit pervades our physical world, and being mindful of spirit in all we believe, think and do.

In healing plants and animals, we heal ourselves.

