

# Native American Spirituality

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Tuesday an estimated twenty thousand Native Americans from all across our country will gather on the Mall. In ceremonial dress they will join in a Native Nations Procession to celebrate the opening at 1 p.m. of the National Museum of the American Indian. It will be the largest gathering of Native American people in modern history. One estimate is that fifty thousand people will line up to watch the procession. The museum will stay open all night to accommodate the crowds.

This new museum represents a new chapter in the relationship between American Indians and European Americans. The roots of this new museum go back at least to 1867. In that year George Otis, the curator of the Army Medical Museum in Washington, issued a call to field physicians for Indian specimens. In 1868 the Army Surgeon General directed army doctors to collect Indian skulls. Otis arranged to give the Smithsonian Institution any burial goods found with those skulls. Military men collected skulls from battlefields, and sometimes from graves and sent them to the U.S. Army Medical Museum for study. The Army Museum eventually sent the bones to the Museum of Natural History.

Meanwhile, unrelated to the collection of bones, in 1897, a New York oil millionaire named George Gustav Heye (pronounced Hi) started to collect Indian artifacts. In 1916 Heye established the Museum of the American Indian in New York City and he continued to add to his collection until his death in 1957. The Heye collection became one of the world's largest and most comprehensive collections of Indian artifacts.

Then in 1986, a group of Southern Cheyenne people discovered that the Museum of Natural History was storing the remains of some of their Cheyenne ancestors. The museum refused to return the bones, so the Cheyenne tribe appealed to Congress. In May 1989 Senator Daniel Inouye, joined by then Rep. Ben Nighthorse Campbell of Colorado, introduced legislation which Congress passed in November fifteen years ago. First, the law directed Smithsonian officials to return the Native American bones to the appropriate tribal groups. Second, it assigned the Smithsonian to take charge of the Heye collection. Third, it mandated the Smithsonian to construct a National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall. To help pay for the museum, three tribes, each operators of lucrative casinos, donated \$10 million apiece. Overall, the museum raised \$100 million privately and the government contributed \$119 million.

I grew up visiting the Heard Museum in Phoenix. In the 1950s it displayed Indian skeletons taken from grave sites. When I lived in the Chicago area in the 1980s, I visited the Field Museum of Natural History. It displayed dinosaurs and dioramas of Indians with spears hunting deer. In Chicago the Museum of Science and Industry tells the history of European settlers.

Here in Washington we tell the history of European settlers in the American History Museum and the Air and Space Museum. Until recently, the Museum of Natural History displayed dioramas with mannequins of Indians in sparse hunting gear. This was in the same building that displayed mammals, fish, insects and gems. The message this communicates is that Native Americans are not fully human. Until now.

The new museum located between the Air and Space Museum and the Capitol declares to our nation that Native Americans are fully human. It says that their culture is as important as the culture of immigrants from Europe. I love the outside of the completed building, which was designed primarily by a Native American architect from Canada, Douglas Cardinal. To quote a reviewer in the Post this week, the building “creates a strong, tension-filled dialogue with its setting, and it carries it off with amazing grace.” I look forward to going inside, after the crowds of the first few days decrease.

Today, the Sunday before the opening of this exciting new museum, I want to look at the spiritual beliefs of the first people to live on this continent. Of course, Native Americans do not practice a single, uniform religion throughout North America. A rich diversity exists among the different Indian nations. Furthermore, a large amount of variation exists within each group and changes over time. Yet, in spite of all this diversity, scholars report that many North American Indians share a similar world view.

*God and Spirits:* While the European American religion focuses on a monotheist God, Native Americans, although they have the notion of a supreme being, all emphasize an abundance of many spirits. A heavenly God rules over the sky. Several spirits control the atmospheric powers. Many spirits influence human life on earth. Some spirits, including Mother Earth, roam the under world. Often Native Americans conceive of these spirits, or most of them, as a unity. This unity may consist of a collection of spirits or of a Supreme Being (usually the sky god) supervising or taking on the functions of various spiritual powers.

When Indians perceive the universe as a unit, whole and indivisible, the figure of the single God stands in focus. When their attention is drawn to the particular acts of the divine, such as thunder, food giving, and healing, Indians put individual spirits in the forefront. They place the Supreme Being in the background. The spirits interact freely with humans, especially in dreams.

*How the Universe Is Constructed:* Native Americans usually divide the universe into three levels—heaven, earth, and underworld. However, some variations exist in this world picture. One tribe in British Columbia divides the universe into five worlds of which ours is the middle one. Pueblo peoples of Arizona and New Mexico believe in the existence of four under worlds and four upper worlds. Navajos believe in four subterranean levels. These various worlds are often united through a World Tree. The World Tree has its roots in the underworld, stretches through the world of humans and animals, and has its crown in the sky world.

Ritual structures such as a Sun Dance post represent the World Tree. Native Americans mark the three levels of the universe on the Sun Dance post: the eagle at its top manifests the sky world, the buffalo skull on its trunk or at its base is the world of animals and humans, and the offerings of tobacco and water on the earth close to the base, destined for the Earth, symbolize the relations to the underworld.

*Animals and Humans:* According to Native American myths of origin, in the beginning the Supreme Being created all beings on earth essentially humanly. However, a change took place that turned many of these first creatures into animals and birds. Only those who today are human beings retained their forms. Because of this genesis, a close relationship still exists today between people and animals. Indians do not make a strong distinction between humans and animals. We are sisters and brothers and our task is to respect and live in harmony with the animals.

The bond between animals and humans is expressed in ceremonial dress. For example, I suspect that this Tuesday some of the twenty thousand Indians on the Mall will wear feathers. In Native American religion the feathers suggest spiritual power.

This bond is also expressed in traditional dances when men imitate the movements of buffalo and wear their horns and skins. These are acts of supplication in which Indians, by imitating the wild, express their desires and expectations. Such a ritual tells us of the Indian's veneration for the active powers of the universe: the ceremonial dances are a prayer. In the procession Tuesday some Native Americans may dress in ceremonial buffalo skins.

A part of Native Americans' close kinship to the animals is the idea of spirits as animals. Dreams and visions have strengthened and perpetuated the belief in animal spirits. For example, in dreams some bears can talk or change forms. Such bears are considered mysterious spirits.

Objects of nature such as trees or mountains can also be powerful spirits. For example, the mythic world of the Navajo is situated among the four sacred mountains that enclose the central country of the Navajo people. Big Sheep Peak is in the north. Pelado Mountain is in the east. Mount Taylor is in the south. The San Francisco Peaks are in the west, near Flagstaff. Having driven through the Navajo nation and seen San Francisco Peaks rising over the red mesas, I understand the special power they hold.

*What Is Spirit and What Is Ordinary:* Although Native Americans believe in many spirits, they are not pantheists, who believe that God is in everything. They believe a dividing line exists between what belongs to the ordinary or natural world around us and what belongs to a spiritual world. Determining what is ordinary and what is spiritual can be difficult. It depends on the traditions of a particular tribe and the dreams of a particular individual. For example, to some tribes certain mountains are supernatural, to others they are not.

Having lived my life immersed in rational Unitarian Universalist religious thought, Native American Spirituality feels strange to my logical mind. Still, perhaps because it is so unfamiliar, I find myself attracted to Native American spirituality. What I like best about it is that in Native American spirituality we are never alone. Native Americans teach that we are part of a community that includes our family, our friends, our ancestors, the animals, the trees, the mountains, and the spirits. Perhaps this is what attracts European Americans to Native American spirituality.

A Mohawk woman told a story about being approached by members of a foundation who are dedicated to new age spirituality. They introduced themselves, described their various spiritual pursuits, and requested that this Mohawk woman facilitate their participation in some kind of American Indian ceremony. She told them:

This is what you do. First, you prepare a feast. Cook up lots and lots of food. As you are cooking it, think about the people you'll be inviting, about their lives, and about your own. Think about the ingredients also, where they come from, and who helped bring them to you. Everybody that comes, you feed them. And you listen to them, pay attention to their advice, their problems. Hold their hands, if that's what they need. If any of them needs to stay over, make a place for them. Then, next month, you do the same thing again. And again, four times, the same way. That is it! You have done an Indian ceremony! ("Spirituality for Sale," in *Native American Spirituality*, p 61.)

This is a description of a Mohawk Long House community ceremony. This woman is suggesting that we cannot experience an Indian religious ceremony by sitting among strangers at a Mohawk Long House ceremony. You cannot experience it in any other way than by becoming a member of a community that is enacting the ceremony. Native American spirituality takes place in a community. If our lives lack spiritual depth, the answer is to become part of a community.

Two days from now an estimated twenty thousand Native Americans from all across our country will join in a Native Nations Procession to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian. It will be the largest gathering of Native American people in modern history. One estimate is that fifty thousand people will line up to watch the procession of Native Americans. The museum will stay open all night to accommodate the crowds. This will be an exciting moment in our nation's history. May all who participate in the celebration feel connected in a very large community. And through that community may they feel connected to the spirit force that permeates the universe. May they feel connected to their ancestors, to the earth, to the sun, to the moon, to the planets, and to the stars. May they feel connected to the mountains, to the rivers, to the streams, to the plants and to the animals.

#### *Sources*

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Irwin, Lee, *Native American Spirituality, A Critical Reader*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2000.