

## **Learning to live with heart in this most brutal of worlds – the politics of spirituality**

### **Introduction**

The interview that follows was conducted towards the end of a period of time my friend (topi) and I spent with Naomi Archer, an indigenous rights activist, community organizer, and teacher of indigenous European life-ways, and this introduction serves to contextualise much of what is said in the interview. Naomi and her partner hosted the two of us for a month, and during that period we had many discussions about finding a spiritual pathway whilst dealing with the politics of spirituality. To give some background to these discussions: I had come to the United States to do a course on herbal medicine. It was in no way a conventional course, as the entire emphasis of the course was on developing the emotional/intuitive part of ourselves, which is so often entirely dominated by rationalistic, cerebral ways of thinking, due to the way in which Western society has developed. The course had two main aims: firstly to learn to understand intuitively what the ailment of a person might be, and secondly to engage in a process of learning to read the natural world in a way that indigenous people have always done (and which people who continue to live in those traditional ways still do), thus finding plants that could be used as medicine. However, when I began the course there were some things that I intuitively felt very uncomfortable about, although at the time I couldn't describe why. Topi put me in contact with her friend Naomi, who made the time to talk to me fairly extensively about my misgivings about the course. "You should never charge for spiritual learning", was one of the things she told me. I decided not to continue with the course, and instead, Naomi, topi and I all met up so that we could work on unravelling some of the complexities intrinsic to trying to develop our spirituality in a good way. Towards the end of this time, topi and I interviewed Naomi so that we could consolidate, record, and pass on much of what we had learnt (not having the astonishing memories and capacity for oral tradition of indigenous people who have not learned to read, it felt necessary to use modern technology to do this). Naomi essentially acted as a kind of mentor to us over the course of that time. It seems necessary to state that I in no way took every word uttered in these conversations to be an absolute truth or something that I should believe in religiously, and nor should anyone reading this; it is always necessary to remain critical (without becoming cynical). At times, for example, we criticised Naomi for being too critical of others who were trying to find their spiritual path as always doing the wrong thing; for being concrete about all the things that are wrong and often rather abstract about how to do things in a good way. Of course in the end I need to do the hard work myself, to work out my own truths, but what I learnt in my time with Naomi provided the "cairns", the mounds of stones along the pathway to keep me going in the right direction.

The foundations of the spirituality that we spent our time discussing is in taking a long view of where we came from as human beings. We are each descendants of different indigenous cultures which had ways of understanding the world around them and ways of relating to it that were

particular to the context in which they were living. A sense of balance with our surroundings is an intrinsic aspect of this kind of spirituality. According to European archaeological evidence that Naomi has studied, there is the suggestion that at least 40,000 years in the past, human beings had found a good way to live in balance with the natural world, with the land and the other living relatives that they occupied all the time acting as their teacher. This knowledge and wisdom developed by living and interacting with the world around was passed down as a living history through oral traditions such as songs and stories that could be added to as more was learned. Although the idea is initially obscure to Western ways of thinking, which has an overly heavy emphasis on science-based, empirical, rationalistic ways of understanding the world, traditional indigenous people have always directly communicated with the world around them using the language of the birds, the animals, the plants or the land itself. In the book "The Spell of the Sensuous," David Abram manages to break through this block to understanding how this could be so by drawing a parallel between how Western literate people read words and how traditional indigenous people read the world around them. As we look at written words that come from our own language, although they are but silent symbols on a piece of paper, they form both sounds and images in our mind's eye. This only happens because we speak the language of those written words, without which the symbols would just be meaningless squiggles. For indigenous people immersed in the world around them, sounds and images also form in their mind's eye as they observe and learn from the world around them, but this is because they understand the language of the place that they live in. Indigenous people tend to see the plant people, bird people, or animal people as understanding the nature of the world better than we humans do, and as those beings having the desire to teach human people, either through direct communication, or passively, through example.

From this perspective, the world around us is a world of meaning, not just an ongoing series of mechanical actions and reactions. The night-frogs sing their song, and if we tune ourselves to it for long enough, we will begin to understand what that song is about. The birds speak their language, and although it's been so long since we talked with the bird people, it's still possible for us to learn it, even to communicate with them. And it is in the honouring of our other living relatives, in giving thanks to them, in protecting them as they protect us, in leaving them offerings, that we create powerful links that help us stay on the path of life, help us live in a balanced way with the world around us. Intrinsic to this is the need to find a place that we belong and to get to know it, to use all of our senses to observe it and come to know it, listening, watching, smelling, touching, tasting; feeling what is happening in our hearts, listening to our dreams, following the rhythms of nature, and slowing right down, slowing our minds down, so that we can tune into things that don't move as fast as we do. "If you want to talk to plants", Naomi once said to me, "you've got to spend time with the plants".

Naomi takes the stance that to try to make your way back to these understandings that came from your own personal roots, it is crucial to develop an understanding of who you are, where you came

from, and what your place is in the world. This is particularly problematic, though not exclusively so, for people of European descent, who it seems were the first to break with ancient traditions of living in relationship with the world and become disconnected from the land in which they lived<sup>1</sup>. Over time the relationships people had previously had with many different aspects of the natural world – the animals, plants, birds, rocks, wind, water – changed from equal relationships in which other beings were regarded as older brothers and sisters, as other kinds of people from which human people learnt, to more exploitative relationships in which the natural world became ever more commodified. The change in the way that humans related to the world around them (including each other) resulted in a loss of communication and understanding with other life-forms. The effects of this are multiple. As Europeans, we no longer have any sense of where we come from; much of our history and knowledge was destroyed. Crucially, we also became colonised by Cartesian and Enlightenment ways of thinking; the mind-body split that put cerebral intelligence above all else, that separated us from understanding the world through our many different senses, through our intuition. Of course, this colonisation was exported around the world, but it seems to be that for those of European descent, a particularly large spiritual hole has been left, in which the world has no meaning any more...life itself has no meaning save for a set of commodified relationships; spirituality doesn't exist except for a god we are told about that resides somewhere on high that will eventually send us to heaven or hell.

There are many white-skinned people<sup>2</sup> that have for some decades (mainly since the 1970s) been working to try to reclaim spirituality in a way that relates it back to the natural world. To the best of my knowledge, this has taken two main forms, which bear overlap with one another. The first is in looking to indigenous cultures which are still living close to their roots and adopting the traditions of those cultures, which also may involve making money through the performing of indigenous traditions; and the second is in the modern pagan movement, which takes a wide variety of forms. We had many discussions about why each was problematic. The adoption of indigenous culture by white-skinned people who don the traditions of cultures outside of their own, adapting things such as rituals and clothing to their own ends is described as cultural appropriation. It was obvious to me as to why some forms of this appropriation were pernicious, but it took me much longer to understand why other forms could be seen as damaging to a culture. Firstly, it is easy for white Western people to elevate themselves to a status that they have not actually earned and would therefore not have within a traditional indigenous culture. Many white Western people have taken

1 Of course there are other examples of Indigenous people who lost their way before or at the same time as Europeans did – however the ongoing destruction that has come about because of this loss has obviously wrought much greater consequences globally and through time in the European example.

2 This article refers mainly to white people; people of European descent, not because people of colour do not encounter some of the same problems, but because white-skinned people remain at the top of the race hierarchy, and are therefore by definition usually clueless as to their (our) privilege, whilst at the same time being unaware of the effect of their inevitable dominance on people who fall lower down this socially-constructed hierarchy, even when they have intentions to change things for the better. It should also be made clear that in talking about “white spirituality movements” we are not referring to groups that aim to have only white-skinned members, but that, due to a range of factors, end up as being very much dominated by middle-class white people, although they may not be exclusively white.

to viewing themselves as shamans with some kind of special spiritual power, and often charge people money for the privilege of coming into contact with them. The notion of what “shaman” means has been overused and varies across cultures, but in an indigenous sense, a shaman is often described as someone who commits to an entire life process of mediating between the community in which they live and the spiritual world, who knows deeply and intimately the context they come from, and who can be called upon at any time to serve their community; to be able to do whatever they are called upon to do by the community itself or the spirit world, no matter how tough a challenge it may seem. In short, the term “shaman” is not a term to be used lightly. As Westerners who have had little contact with their spirituality and are searching for something, it is easy to deify those who appear to have some kind of spiritual power, to the exclusion of the recognition that everybody has a place in a culture. This means that while everyone can have a deep spiritual life, not everybody is supposed to be a “spiritual person”, as there are many roles that need fulfilling, and each of those roles is special and essential to the whole community. It also doesn't mean that only the “shaman” has any access to spirituality, but that a true shaman is a person who has chosen to make a huge commitment that others may not wish to make. In fact, anybody who takes their spirituality seriously will find they have some kind of calling to do things that they find really tough. This is the nature of spiritual work, and as we have grown up in a culture that is spiritually very lazy, it is all the more difficult to do.

Cultural appropriation can also be construed as a form of theft. In much the same way as indigenous people have been deprived of the land with which they have had a connection over millennia because they did not have the European concept of deeds to the land, so are the traditions and rituals of indigenous people taken and used by white-skinned people because they have not been Trade Marked or Copyrighted. And nor should they ever have to be; those traditions did not evolve to be commodified, and it has been understood in most indigenous cultures as an offence to charge for spiritual teaching or experiences such as sweat lodges. It is also essential to those traditions that they are practised in the culture in which they evolved. They are reflective of understandings of the world that have been gained in that place; it could be said that they complete the ecology of the place from which they emerge. Oftentimes white-skinned people do not understand all the different aspects of those traditions or all the meanings implicit in the symbolism. Because those traditions come from an indigenous culture, they are seen as being naturally special in some way, or as exotic and interesting, especially because Westerners feel their own culture to be so empty of sacred meanings.

It was, however, this aspect of cultural appropriation that I struggled with. Western culture has been appropriating from other cultures for so long that it seems near-impossible to extrapolate oneself from the post-modern world in which we live, in which we have created our pick-and-mix identities by taking things from all over the place and putting them together as we see fit. Numerous things that may once have been considered sacred to a culture have been mass produced and the meaning taken away from them, whilst at the same time we attribute a meaning

to those things to try and say something about our own identity. Things that were once sacred to a culture such as food, clothing, musical instruments and much more have been made profane. However, the understanding that I have come to in how to move forward and out of a state of continually culturally appropriating is to treat with much greater seriousness and much more profound levels of questioning where things come from and what they mean. Didgeridoos come from Australia; we know that, but where in Australia? Which groups played them? And why? What does it mean if we make a didgeridoo out of bamboo that comes from China and play it in a band in France to make money from it? The point isn't to try and make all cultures separate and distinct from each other, to make them "pure" in some way; indigenous cultures have always shared with each other and evolved through that process. The point is two-fold. Firstly to get over the desire to consume meaning whenever we feel like it, (which is what we are used to doing in Western culture) and instead to wait until another culture wants to share something should we come into contact with it, before just taking from it without asking. Secondly, there is a need for us to focus on our own path. Where do we come from? How did we come to be in the place we are in now? Who used to live on the land where we now live? What dwellings did people use to live in there? Where did our own ancestors use to live? What did they do there?

Nevertheless, I've found the idea of tracing our bloodlines back to particular indigenous clans or tribes to be problematic on several different levels. Firstly, we have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, sixteen great-great-grandparents, and so on, until at some point in time we are related to a plethora of ancestors that must have come from all sorts of different groups. How could we then say that we come from a particular clan or tribe? Naomi's response to this was to give the analogy that we are like rivers composed of many different streams, but that some of those streams that run into us are more important for us than others on a spiritual level. If we look back at our ancestry, what *feels* most important; what part of that river does our intuition tell us we should follow? Where do we feel like we belong? My second misgiving is that it is so difficult to trace our ancestry back. How can we rely on our dreams, visions or intuition? Naomi pointed out that she had used both intuitive ways of understanding her past, as well as doing a lot of research, looking at archaeological records, and piecing things together to try and build up an idea of the past. She also spent a long time learning to trust herself, and to know when a dream or her intuition were really trying to tell her something. Most important to this, she said, is that she learned to understand and is still learning to understand how a Native lifeway works – and how by looking at the world through this understanding – it further changes her understanding of what she learns from the past. Our past will never make sense to us –beyond some archeologists interpretation – unless we can learn to change the way we think about it. Only then will its true and sacred meanings become evident or available to us.

This last point relates to the modern pagan movement, which is a mixture of following ancient

traditions, such as full-moon rituals and celebrating points on the solar calendar, and new traditions that have been made up over the last few decades. Naomi sees ancient traditions as being much more powerful than things such as rituals that have been made up on the spot to fill a hole in our lives, because the old ways come directly from the land and from having relationships with living relatives. For myself, I do not want to rubbish the entire pagan movement, partly because it is so diverse and people do all sorts of things within it – some of them for better, some of them for worse, and partly because I think we are better off with it than without it, people otherwise having little outlet for an earth-based spirituality. However, the contact that I have had with pagan rituals and ceremonies has suggested to me that much of the activity of the pagan movement is actually in connecting people to one another, rather than connecting to the natural world. This happens for a brief period of time, often with fairly high levels of alcohol and drug consumption, before people then run back to their busy modern lifestyles. Of course, in capitalist society people are not faced with a whole lot of choice in terms of how much time they get to spend with nature, but in terms of how deep people are willing to go with their spirituality, the point remains the same. “Spirituality is a path, not a point”, Naomi often reminded me. This is to say that ceremonies and rituals, although important, do not represent everything that is sacred; there is no dichotomy between sacred and profane, with the ritual times being sacred and everything else we do being profane. In our spirituality we walk a path in our daily lives; we see the whole of life as being sacred. At times we will wander from the path, but we can always find our way back again.

To many Westerners, reading this article may seem too “far out there”. Many Western people do not engage in their own spirituality precisely because they intuitively feel there is something strange about New Age spiritualism, hippyish concepts of “energy”, and other related forms of spirituality, and probably rightly so. The idea of talking with animals, or plants, the possibility of rocks and clouds being as alive as we are, or of communing with our ancestors might therefore seem to also be total nonsense. It is a shame not to engage in our spirituality just because a lot of people are doing things that are fairly spurious. Even if the ideas in this text remain entirely alien, there are some sound principles in this viewpoint that it remains difficult to argue with. Becoming really grounded in ourselves and in the place that we live, and learning to observe and understand the world through engaging all of our senses, including our intuition, are valid pursuits in and of themselves. If we want to work with other cultures, developing our own sense of place and our own identity that is rooted in the past, is important if we are going to be able to give traditional cultures the respect they deserve without appropriating from them. Not writing off indigenous cultures as having archaic and non-sensical ways of understanding the universe is highly important to getting over our white, Western, science-based sense of superiority. Whoever we are, and whatever spiritual path we decide to walk, these things are essential to building our way out of colonialism, be it internal or external. For myself, I've been feeling colonised by a dominant culture for a long time now. Even after I turned off the television eleven years ago, even after I dropped out of a lot of things in mainstream culture, even after I went to live in the countryside, I still felt a strong

disconnect between myself and the world around me; I didn't feel like I was part of it. I see myself as engaged in an ongoing struggle to decolonise myself and to find a way to live with meaning, instead of running around like a headless chicken, which I am generally prone to doing for lack of having an idea of a path that I have in life. It takes a lot of trust in yourself to be able to do this I suppose I'm starting to find that trust. It's strange to me that I came to one of the most colonised places on earth (the United States) to find out how I needed to start to decolonise. In any case, I now feel that I have the tools I need to help me continue with this work.

Oct. 2010.

### Interview with Naomi Archer, September 2010.

#### **How can we develop our spirituality in a “decolonized way”, where we work on decolonising ourselves without allowing this to result in the colonization of other cultures?**

There are two challenges that come with that. The first challenge is that as “modern Western people” we have a tendency to marginalise voices or perspectives that we consider to be “primitive” or not as modern as we are. This leads to the idea that “indigenous science<sup>3</sup>”, or indigenous understandings of how we are connected and interconnected within the world are not as valid as modern, Western empirical science. So I think the first step in decolonizing is creating a mentality or an understanding that allows indigenous knowledge to be viewed as something that is just as valid, even if it doesn't seem as scientifically understandable or proven as Western science is. And then I think the second challenge, which comes from that, is then not elevating indigenous knowledge to such a place that we feel like we can never access it, not even our own indigenous knowledge. Or, that it becomes something so coveted that we are willing to steal it or appropriate it, because we feel like we have to have that knowledge, or that we deserve it.

So I think those are the two main problems, and the decolonisation of yourself and of other cultures address both of those. I think the main lesson of decolonization is getting to know yourself, and then getting to know yourself in the context of a line of ancestry going back as long as it needs to go back. The generations that are in front of you then become relevant to this process, and you can start to ask, what are you learning from your ancestors, and what are you then giving to future

<sup>3</sup> “Indigenous science” is a phrase coined to challenge people who are still trapped in the racist belief that indigenous understandings and knowledge are not as valid as modern Western science. “Indigenous knowledge” or “Indigenous understandings” are equivalent phrases, but referring to their knowledge and understandings as “science” may cause people to reconsider their biases. Indigenous people can be viewed as having put forward a hypothesis for how to live, how to create balance with nature, and the spiritual aspect of life, after which this hypothesis has been tested for thousands of years, thus providing a lot more “evidence” than most modern theories or ideas.

generations? Once someone is decolonized, then this way of understanding the past, present and future becomes something that's really important. And because this becomes so important, you then have the desire to define who you are and where you come from. And you can start to ask, what did my ancestors know? What special relationship did they have with the place that they lived? And what can I learn from that? How does that make my life, and the lives of others and our ecology on earth better? How can I reclaim that? That's what decolonization is all about. The product of that is then being able to go into spaces where there are other indigenous people and being able to work with them as equals with respect for who they are, for their culture and their protocols.

**Can you describe some of the ways that you've managed to access knowledge about your ancestry?**

The beginning of accessing that knowledge was in the realization that it was important to access it. That sounds ridiculous in its simplicity but it carries a very essential truth. Because comparatively few will ever make the decision that the deep understandings of their Ancestors are worth pursuing. And those that may want to access it, will struggle with understanding how to do it authentically and within a larger inter-generational context. To address some of these challenges, I am working on a completely free book/audio/video project called "Awakening the Horse People" that will talk about those things - why the process is important, how I have gone about this process, and the understandings I have learned by undertaking this process. I am working so the project will be available in spring of 2011.

So the beginning of my accessing knowledge about my Ancestry was naturally to look around and see what people with a similar instinct were doing – and in my case – that meant paganism or neo-paganism. I think that many Western white-skinned people have gravitated towards paganism. Because I have been an activist, the work that the activist pagan cluster – Living River, Starhawk and that whole group – was doing at political actions was absolutely attractive for me, and despite my different path many of those people are still friends. However, for me it's really important to be authentic, and as I started to explore paganism, there were parts of modern paganism that didn't feel authentic to me. Primarily there was an over-emphasis on the goddess, and even from my rudimentary understanding of indigenous knowledge at the time, I knew there needed to be a balance between genders. That's just one example of things that didn't feel true to me. I also felt like people were grasping for things, and there were a lot of superficial generalisations about "the goddess" and other things that I knew had to have deeper meanings, and I wanted to know for myself what they were and why. I also saw a large amount of cultural appropriation and random

adoption of other cultures' deities or practices, and that felt really uncomfortable to me. I wanted to learn about my Ancestors and their ways of living and doing things – not something from another culture.

At that time I was spending a lot of quiet time by myself. I was either meditating or just sitting in the yard watching the birds and the plants. This was when I was living in Miami, Florida, and I started going to the Everglades<sup>4</sup> and just walking for hours and hours; all day long, and then spending the evenings watching the sunset and the moon rise. Really spending the time with nature, with all our living relatives, and just watching and listening and letting the earth do its magic on me. I always talk about that time when I would go walking. This is south Florida, sun and humidity and everything; it was like this modern way of looking at things was being baked out of me, and I would always come back from there feeling much more grounded in nature, feeling one with it. And I think as a part of that alone time and being a good listener, being observant, and being open to what was happening around me, I felt that I started to understand...it was like someone was tapping me on the shoulder and saying, "Hey! There's something else! There's more here!" And I'd see little glimpses of it, little things that seemed to be a part of some pattern that I could sense but couldn't actually identify. And so I started to reach out to my ancestors, because I was starting to have these really vivid dreams, which I call "dream-visions". They were real when they were happening, and I started to see my ancestors. I wanted to get to know them more because I was learning a lot; being with them, or being in a village with them, or seeing a part of their daily life, or seeing animals and plants and the place in Europe where I'm from. I wanted to understand and be a part of that. Because as I was searching for my spirituality and the culture that comes with that, it felt there was deep authenticity there. And this started the next phase, which was really becoming aware of the intuitive information that was coming to me. And then, as I would get information, I would write everything down, because I was afraid I would forget it; my mind's not really trained, it's not like I was trained to do this as a child. And if there were things I didn't recognise I might do research, look for archaeology or symbols, desperately trying to find my language and the remains of something in Europe that would make sense of these things that I had seen in my dreams, and that started to happen.

I now understand myself to be an "Iladurrak", which were an ancient people *in* North-Western Europe. For me, the process of decolonization, anti-racism, getting to know myself – all key components to the work I now do – led me to wanting to know and understand my Ancestors - not just the ones I can find through genealogical research but my original Ancestors, who were themselves Indigenous to their place in Europe. For Indigenous people, knowing this history of your Ancestors is very important for so many reasons. It's sort of the chicken/egg argument too. I was already feeling like someone was trying to get my attention from a spiritual place - and as the

4 The Everglades refers to a large subtropical swamp in southern Florida that is noted for its wildlife.

dreams and experiences expanded - they led me to the place of getting to know my Ancestors. So that was happening simultaneously with me feeling the need to work with Indigenous people to support their causes. And as I came in contact with more Native people, including Elders, then I began to see my experiences and the process I was/am in as something very traditional – it's the way things have always happened in Indigenous societies. And so I felt very honored and humbled that I was doing things in a good way to help regain this knowledge which also belongs to my people. It feels like I was being led through an entire process in order to be given the tools I need to have, in order to realize what it traditionally means to be “esnatuat” - that is to awaken other people from this deep, disturbed sleep we have been in for a very long time, and which is killing Mother Earth and the living things that find her home. For me, to be Iladurrak means that I continue to honor this amazing path that I have been set upon by learning and sharing with integrity and love. And it means to continue to honor my responsibilities as “esnatuat” and to be “Owl Clan” (Extekoak Ontz). It also means to communicate to others as best I can the process of this traditional reawakening, the knowledge that comes with it (where appropriate), and the importance of other people undergoing a similar process.

**Continuing with the theme of white people in a process of decolonising, can you talk about the work you've done around the issue of bringing balance to “white groups”, such as the anti-racist work that you do, and dealing with the imbalance caused by cultural appropriation in “white spirituality movements”?**

Sure. I'm glad you put it in that way, as “white spirituality movements”. Because I think that even when we're not talking about spiritual things, everything's connected and everything's spiritual in some way, so it's good to refer to issues of race and privilege in that way. So why is this anti-racism work, this decolonization work, important? Well from a traditional perspective, if you go back thousands of years, two-thousand years, maybe three thousand or four thousand... in any case, at some point, people on the European continent – not everybody, but most of those people – lost their sense of place. They lost their connection with their land and with the living relatives that were around them. So even if they still lived on their land, they stopped understanding the plants and the animals and the other living things that were around them; they stopped seeing them as brothers and sisters, and started seeing them as things they could use, commodify, produce, or mass produce. And this created a big spiritual hole in our hearts. When you look around today you see so many people trying to find spirituality, looking for something to fill that hole. They know that they're not connected in the way that they could be; they've sensed that. There's this deep understanding somewhere inside, they think, “there's more than this”, but they're still trying to fill that empty place. An understanding that comes from talking with other Indigenous nations is that life is like a giant circle, and white-skinned people are one part of that circle. When we lost the

sacred things that kept us healthy and balanced, the circle was broken. And then we started exporting our misery and our disconnection to other peoples, making them miserable and disconnected. So in order for this circle to be healed, we have to be the ones to heal our part of the circle first. From a traditional and spiritual perspective, there's a lot of very deep motivation to do this work, because until we heal our part of the circle, the rest is going to be broken. Whenever I'm talking about these things I really try to stress that, because I see a lot of people – not everybody but a lot of people – dabbling superficially in their spirituality, even if they are trying to reclaim something from Europe, whether it's witch-craft or whatever they call it, and for me there's more. And not only is there more, but the need to find that more, really find it, and grab it, and own it, and hold it, and nurture it, and grow it, is what has to happen for this circle to be healed up. If we don't, it's always going to be broken and we'll continue to export our misery to other people, no matter how "green" or "ecological" or "advanced" we become. Our disconnection isn't just cognitive – it can't be solved through greater technology – it must be solved by healing our hearts. This understanding lies at the basis of a lot of my anti-racism and decolonisation work. And also the understanding that I know that people who I consider brothers and sisters and relatives, indigenous people, are suffering because of what my people have done.

A lot of people get mired in white guilt and they use that white guilt as an excuse to not actually go out and change things or do something. For me, I acknowledge what white people have done, but the way that I'm really going to deal with that is to go out and change it, not mire in "Oh, I'm such a bad person," or, "White people are so bad because they've done this." Yes, they are, but enough of that, let's solve our problem, let's heal ourselves so that we're not doing it any more. People who want to work with indigenous communities or other communities of colour that don't identify as indigenous often bring their white privilege, racism and colonization into those communities. It's really challenging to find white allies who can work in indigenous communities, because white people often don't have the skill-set to do it in a good way, in a balanced and equal way. It's not only trying to heal what belongs to me, but also to make sure that when people like me, with my skin colour and my heritage go into indigenous communities they can do it in a good way. And I think one of the things that makes the training that I do – anti-racism, decolonisation work – maybe extra powerful or really significant, is because I've done my work; I've done my journey to know who I am and where I come from, learning my language, understanding my culture, and then working with other indigenous people after that. Because of that, Duane<sup>5</sup> doesn't treat me as a white person that he's friends with; I'm his little sister and I hear everything from a Native perspective. I hear the stories about what white people have done to his culture. And I don't get offended. I just take it in and realise how I can use this knowledge among other non-native or white-skinned people who aren't indigenous identified, to change the dynamic that's causing the

<sup>5</sup>Duane Martin Senior is a leader and organizer of the Lakota who live in South Dakota. Naomi works with him very closely in the work she does.

misery in Native communities, really trying to use my own understandings of the dynamics that exist between indigenous and non-indigenous communities to change those conditions.

### **How did your spiritual experiences lead you to become connected to the Lakota?**

I left Miami and moved to Asheville in North Carolina. At that time I really wanted to expand on all this connectivity that I was starting to feel; seeing my ancestors and feeling that I was a part of a pattern that I couldn't necessarily touch or identify but was clearly there. I felt connected to something much bigger than me and I really wanted to expand on that. I knew that as someone who identifies as intersex<sup>6</sup>, in an indigenous sense I'm a "two-spirit person"<sup>7</sup>. I knew there was a history of people like me having important roles, such as acting as a bridge between different parts of community. I felt like I wanted to honour that also, and part of me getting to know who I am is really trying to honour that. So I moved to North Carolina and made some mistakes as I tried to make this pathway my life, without understanding that in a decolonized sense, making your spiritual pathway your life doesn't mean turning it into a job that you make money from. I think a lot of white-skinned, modern people lose that idea or don't have that sense. In Western culture, everything is something to make a living from, and I realised pretty quickly this wasn't something I could do. It would be dishonouring to what I had learnt, because I could feel it didn't belong to me, I was just borrowing it in some way. It was like a gift being given to me and it wasn't mine to hold and be miserly about; it was something to share freely and to nurture and grow and give away so that it could carry on down the generations.

A friend had sent an email about a "World peace and prayer day event" that was happening out in South Dakota and I knew I really needed to go. And it was funny because maybe a year before that, I'd had this crazy dream about being out in the mid-West and seeing Indigenous people where the plains meet the mountains. So then I got that invitation, which was to go out where the plains meet the mountains, I thought, "Wow, I gotta go there, it's making sense!" And so I got involved and did some things there to help some of the indigenous elders. Even though I understand the event differently now, at the time it seemed really a great event as it would bring both indigenous and non-indigenous people together, and it would bring elders together to do a ceremony to honour our universal connection with each other and to ask for a better world. So I went out there and volunteered to help out with whatever they needed and I started helping out

6 A dictionary definition of intersex is "one having both male and female sexual characteristics and organs; at birth an unambiguous assignment of male or female cannot be made". Usually a doctor will decide at this early stage to perform surgery that will assign a gender to the baby.

7 A "two-spirited" person is a translation from the Ojibwe Native American language of a traditional way of understanding people who are not consigned to a female or male gender, but embody aspects of them both, and therefore may have understandings that people of a single gender do not.

and making the event happen. Just little things, and little things got bigger.

When indigenous people have events like that they tend to have warrior societies come and do security, and there were two warrior societies working on that, the "Tokala" society, and "Cante Tenza". Both are warrior societies of the Lakota. So there were these tough-looking native guys riding around keeping order and making sure that white people didn't gatecrash, because there was evidence of racism right outside the event. It's still like the Wild West out there in a lot of ways. Unfortunately some of the people organizing the event flaked out; they just fell apart and left, and it ended up being a small group of both native people and non-native identified people who got together with the warrior societies to make sure that the elders were taken care of and make sure that the ceremonies happened in a good way and that the details of what all the visitors needed and the food and everything was taken care of. And I got pretty involved in that, because as an organizer I had skills that were applicable, and along the way somehow I earned the trust of a leader of Cante Tenza named Canupa Gluha Mani (Duane Martin Sr), who is a civil rights activist for the Lakota and other native people. He had a lot of charisma and he also knew what he was doing, so by the end of the event we were sort of allies. I made mistakes at that event too, I was still learning how indigenous culture works and how to be involved in that in a good way, but I was willing to learn from my mistakes, and by the end of the event Duane knew I was an activist. And then over the years of us working together and me building trust with him, I became an honorary Cante Tenza member for a little while, then he adopted me as his little sister, and now I'm a full member of Cante Tenza. We do a lot of work together.

### **Describe more about your activism with the Lakota**

I was one of the people working in Louisiana in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, where we developed 'Four Directions,' which eventually became 'Four Directions Solidarity Network<sup>8</sup>.' As our project in Louisiana wrapped up we started trying to make ourselves available to help other indigenous communities, and the longer Duane and I worked together, the more we found a lot of synergy working with each other. Then I started doing a lot of Cante Tenza work, and we helped each other out on various projects. One of these projects is helping to bring resources to the blockade of White Clay<sup>9</sup> in Nebraska, which is in its eleventh year now. Raising money and

8 The Four Directions Solidarity Network brings native and non-native people together to work respectfully with Indigenous communities to solve problems and preserve culture through times of hardship and change.

9 White Clay is a village on the border of the state of Nebraska and the state of South Dakota. It lies on the edge of the Pine Ridge Reservation, which is the second largest Indian reservation in the United States, and is home to up to 40,000 Oglala Sioux Native Americans. Within Pine Ridge, the sale and consumption of alcohol is illegal; however there remain 4 liquor stores in White Clay, which lie outside the limits of the reservation. The presence of the liquor stores has the effect of ravaging the community, which has been crippled by poverty and alcohol abuse, as sales of cans of beer total 11,000 per day. The battle for White Clay is a struggle being fought against the US government to get these liquor stores shut down. See <http://battleforwhiteclay.org/>

resources so for “Operation Footcare” which distributes shoes, coats, clothes, and school materials has also been important. Just little things to help Cante Tenza to do their work to help the people out. And then at the end of 2007 Duane called me up and asked me to help out a delegation of Lakota that was going to Washington DC to withdraw the Lakota from their treaties with the United States government<sup>10</sup>. By that time my own indigenous identity and my own relationship with my ancestors and who I was as an Iladurrak person was very firm, so I felt very strongly about using the tools I had as a white-skinned activist to help the Lakota withdraw from their treaties and get that word out. So I went to DC with them in December 2007, and we withdrew the Lakota from their treaties with the United States. So that's been going on since 2007 and this little nascent independence movement has really managed to get free of U.S. control and it's starting to grow and it's really exciting.

Duane and I also go into other indigenous communities that invite us in. Duane will sing traditional songs, trying to stimulate a real appreciation of Native traditions and a desire for these indigenous communities to find and reclaim their own traditional ways. Because one thing that I've noticed is that the harder an indigenous nation, tribe or community fights for their traditional ways, the harder they fight for their sovereignty. In a spiritual sense, those traditional ways signify their power as a people. Once those ways are gone, then that power is gone, and once that power is gone, the easier it becomes to succumb to colonialism. And so there's a real connection in trying to free people from the US colonial government and in helping them to find their past. Or if they still have it, inspiring people to learn their language, to learn their culture and their customs, to seek out their elders, all these things that can make them strong.

### **What was your involvement in the relief effort in the state of Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina in 2005?**

I think that people who are connected to the earth in good ways sort of sense when things are happening. I had a dream about some really powerful spirits coming ashore and flooding things and I just had this sense that something was happening. When the storms formed out in the Atlantic and came through the Gulf of Mexico, it felt like something that had a lot of meaning to it. So by the time Katrina hit the Gulf coast I felt like I was ready to go; I knew I needed to be there.

10 The following notes were added later by Naomi: “The US government has *never* honoured a single treaty that they have made with Indigenous peoples. Rather, these treaties are used as a tool of subjugation under the yolk of being “American”. This leads to the assimilation of Native people, loss of traditions and language, and years of misery and death. When Native activists say, “we have no choice but to withdraw”, they are saying, “we must save our people, and what you have imposed upon us is killing us”. And it means to cast off the yolk of Americanism, consumerism, capitalism, materialism, and reclaim your natural right to be free, to be sovereign both in your own heart and as a part of your people - and to re-establish the traditional ways of your people which have kept you and others of your nation in balance and free for thousands of years before the white man came”.

Then I started hearing news and appeals for help from a neighbourhood in New Orleans called Algiers, and what was becoming the Common Ground Collective<sup>11</sup> at the time. And so me and Suncere Ali Shakur, an activist from Asheville, got supplies and a truck together and drove down to a camp outside of New Orleans. We ended up with a giant caravan and we made it through the military checkpoints and moved over into Common Ground.

I worked with Common Ground for a month, helping organise food distribution, helping to get the medical clinic up and running, doing PR, reaching out to the outside world and asking for things or arranging interviews, organizing the morning meetings and facilitating those, whatever needed to be done...it was a good month. But as our capacity grew, we were starting to reach out into the bayous<sup>12</sup> further south and south-west, and as we came across native communities there, and I knew that it was there that I needed to be. And so after that month, I helped form the “Four Directions Relief Project,” and started working slowly with the five native tribes in that area and doing real solidarity work. And so we were there for almost a year in some form doing house repair or food distribution, free stores, whatever needed doing. And for me as a white-skinned person on my own path to reclaiming an indigenous identity, it was also more good experience about what real solidarity meant, what being anti-racist meant, what working with indigenous people could be like; of the really joyful things and also the dysfunction that is in their communities because of colonization and I really tried to learn from that. But one of the great things about our project was that we weren't just bringing food into the bayous, but also other Native leaders and groups so that they could not only see what was happening but make connections with those native communities who in the past had not had that much connection with other indigenous groups outside their region. I'm really proud that we were able to do that, to connect people like that. So that's the summary about Katrina.

### **In your anti-colonialism workshops, what advice do you give to people trying to do their spiritual work or solidarity work?**

The first thing is to know yourself. The second thing is to get rid of the idea that “because I'm such a great activist, because I've had these great experiences, I can save the world, be the great Indian- saviour; go into these communities and change them because of all the great tools I have – the great understandings and the great political ideologies that I hold.” That's one of the things that I explain in a lot of detail; that Western political ideologies have evolved in a colonial mindset, no

11 The Common Ground Collective is an autonomous, decentralised network of health workers that was formed in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The first aid workers to arrive in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina were from Common Ground, as government agencies and the Red Cross were slow to arrive. The collective continues to this day in the form of a health clinic for New Orleans residents.

12 A “bayou” is a swampy arm or slow-moving outlet of a lake (term used mainly in Mississippi and Louisiana).

matter what they are, whether it's socialism, communism, capitalism, anarchism; they have all evolved in a colonial mindset. And so while some of these or even all of these might have little bits of things that can be helpful, the fact is that there is no Western ideology that is going to solve indigenous problems. What's going to solve indigenous problems is for those people to reclaim their language, to reclaim their traditions, and be strong, so that they can be sovereign and work in a self-determined way. White-skinned activists have a tendency to want to express their ideologies, or their amazing skill-sets. I made that mistake when I was out in South Dakota for the first time at the World Peace and Prayer Day. I was facilitating a group of Native people and non-Native people. I had asked to facilitate the group because our meetings weren't really going anywhere and there was a lot of chaos and chaotic energy happening. I facilitated the group like I would an anti-authoritarian or anarchist group, and we got a lot done. But I offended some of the Native people there, and someone said to me, "you know what, we got a lot done, but that's not the way we do things". And so that's a place where if I had been more knowledgeable I would have stepped back and seen what they were doing, and if I thought of something that could be helpful, offering it in a way that wasn't taking over. People who have those [dominant] behaviours are not always going to find someone who's receptive and they might get asked to leave. The first thing is go in to a community in a very humble way, and if you've been invited in, make yourself available, but don't expect to teach and don't expect to learn. Just make yourself available, and then when you're asked to do something, do what you say you're going to do, and do it well. Don't bring in your drugs or your alcohol. Don't bring in parts of your culture, because it's not about you; it's about the communities you are working for, and they don't need your garbage. The last thing that you should be bringing in is your own garbage. If you can't cope without drugs or alcohol, then maybe working in indigenous communities isn't where you should be, because their communities have been ravaged by those things. What you're then doing is perpetuating the dysfunction. I've seen that happen with Four Directions; every so often it would happen and we'd have to correct it, bring things back into balance. And then the second thing is to make sure that you're coming in in an equal way and not expecting to be taught by "this Noble Savage" who's connected to the earth in ways that we can never hope to gain and they're going to teach us all their spiritual ways.

Even though the way I've said it is very dramatic and extreme, it comes out in little ways that are really destructive. Just a little bit of that sort of "worship" or adoring or whatever it is can be really destructive. Now if you know who you are and where you come from, then you won't do that because you don't need anything from them. And this part is actually, I think, the most challenging because I see it a lot that people want to come into indigenous communities because they are searching for something, and they think that by going in there something will rub off on them, that they'll find peace or enlightenment or a spiritual path. And if that's the place you're coming from then maybe you shouldn't be working in indigenous communities either. Take the time to know who you are and where you come from. That's one of the reasons I'm so successful working with

Lakota: I don't want anything from them. They don't have anything I want. I've got my own culture, my own way of doing things, my own language, my own spirituality. When I'm offered to do ceremonies, I politely say "thank you, but I've got my own way." Or if I don't know my own way, I say, "thank you, but I'd rather spend that energy learning my own way first before I step in and do something that belongs to you". And that creates integrity, and that's another thing about coming into indigenous communities: I already said it, but do what you say you're going to do and do it with integrity. If you lie, if you're not honest, they'll know it and it's not good.

**Something we touched on earlier was about making money out of spirituality. Can you talk some more about that?**

Sure, so "plastic shamans" are fake shamans, or people who exaggerate their abilities, or think they are something that they're not. One thing that we have in Western colonised culture is in being really eager to be on top of the pyramid of hierarchy, even if that's a spiritual hierarchy; we're eager to be on top, we're eager to be special. Within the whole phenomenon of individualism that happens in colonised culture, we want to do something that no-one else has done. And so I think it's very easy for someone, even a good-intentioned person, to have an experience, such as a dream or a vision, that would be considered normal for a traditional Indigenous person, but because we haven't experienced something like that before and it's not normal to us, it becomes something that carries a lot of importance and weight in our own egos. Maybe if a couple of those things happen, we're then ready to proclaim ourselves as something that we may not actually be. Or maybe we take a workshop and learn techniques that some people use to create an altered state of understanding, thinking or being. But just because you know how to do something, it doesn't mean that you should be doing it or that you know what you're doing. There's a lot of egotism involved; we think that we're in control, we think that we know what's happening, we think that nothing bad can happen, without realising that we're part of a huge, interconnected cosmos. And we don't know what's happening in that huge interconnected cosmos when we start poking around it. These are all reasons why Native people are so down on white shamans and white spiritual people, because in their communities, at least in traditional communities, before colonisation and dysfunction hit them, a person doesn't proclaim themselves to be something – they earn it, and it's a title that's given to them by the community, not by themselves. So I think that addresses the "plastic" or "astroturf" shamans as they're sometimes called.

An extension of this is the commodification of spirituality that we see in Western culture, where everything can be bottled or booked or work-shopped, and that creates its commodification. The way that we're sitting here and talking is a traditional way. We're not trying to make it into a

workshop. It might be reproduced, but hopefully in a good way. But we're not trying to turn it into something that it's not and then benefit from it, make money from it. For about a month I made the mistake of thinking I could turn my spiritual life into my work life, my make-a-living life. But very quickly it felt bad, it just felt wrong to me. Later I had a chance to talk to indigenous people and understand exactly how bad it is. Because the things that I learn and the experiences that I have that teach me things are not mine to own, I can't sell those things. Especially things that are spiritual and sacred, even if I learn a certain way of doing something that might benefit someone else if I taught them. What could possibly possess me to think that I own those things? That I somehow had a right to do something with them? I have responsibility for those things, which consists of honouring what I have learned, and if appropriate, passing them on to the next generation so that they can benefit from my experiences and the things that I learned. I think as colonised people, we really need to stop and think about the ways that we communicate information, and be creative about the ways that we communicate. If you feel really strongly that you need to create something in writing, if it's really important to you because you can transmit it to a lot of different people and a lot of people can be exposed to it to create change, that's fine, but don't take it to a publisher where you have to sell a book to make your money. Find a way to communicate it freely, because that information belongs to everybody, it belongs to our relatives and to the universe, it doesn't belong to us. The fact is that I should be incredibly humbled that I learnt it. And I am – I am so humbled that I learned these things and that I'm still learning them. I make mistakes, but I learn from them, and I try not to make them again. But I'm really humble about it. I want everyone to have what I have, I want them to know what I've learned, and the things that I've seen and the experiences that I've had. But hoarding it and selling it is not the way to do that. And if you call yourself a healer, for the people that do call themselves healers, and you're willing to sell your healing to other people, then you really need to step back and think about that, because you obviously don't really care about healing other people, not unless they can meet you on your own terms. And as far as I'm concerned, that goes for modern doctors as well. That's not to say that a community doesn't support its healers, doesn't support the people who are doing things on its behalf or for it, because traditionally it does, but in this modern culture we've distorted that so much that we've created the have's and the have-not's, and spiritually or even healing-wise, that's perpetuated and it's not a good thing. There's blow-back from it. We have to ask ourselves, if this is working so well, why are we in such dire straits right now? It's not working. And unfortunately, Native people have been trying to warn us for decades and decades and decades...for hundreds of years, they've been trying to warn us about what we are doing and the way we're doing it. So I really honour the fact that there are groups of people who are trying to stop perpetuating the same things or do things differently. And the place that I feel I can be helpful is letting them know that there's something deeper there that is accessible to all of us, and it just takes hard work and commitment. But we can find something deeper. It belongs to us. It wants to return, it prays for its return. We just need to give it the space to do that.

**One problem with exploring our spirituality in the way that you've been describing is that we don't tend to live in communities where there are "elders", and so we don't have anywhere to go to make sense of things that we are experiencing. If we manage to discover what our own traditions are, then we won't necessarily have other people to do things like rituals and ceremonies with. How can we overcome that problem?**

What you've just described is something I've thought about a lot, and there was a time when I felt really anxious because being a "bridge" and learning all these things, I then wanted to change things and have other people go through this process and accept it and understand it. I realised that I was being too impatient, and instead I needed to step back and think about things in a traditional way, which is to see that we're in a process – the Earth is in its own process right now. From a traditional standpoint it's in its cleansing mode, it's in its bringing-things-back-to-balance mode. I found I need to understand myself as connected to that process and to realise that there's a lot of work to be done, and it's not all going to be done in my lifetime. I assume and I hope that there's other people doing things like I'm doing. It may not look exactly the same but hopefully their doing it with as much integrity and as much authenticity as I'm committing to it. What I would like to do is make sure that what I'm learning gets passed on to the next generation. Maybe it's in the next generation that things become more cohesive. Maybe it's the generation after that, I don't know. We don't know what's about to happen with this world. We have ideas and we see the writing on the wall, but we don't know. There might be something about to happen that we can't even imagine, and that might shift people's attention so that they deal with things with much more urgency than they do now. Who knows?

I think the first steps from a community standpoint are finding people with like minds who feel that same desire, and are willing to go through an ethical process of starting to create a community again. And when I say "ethical process", what I mean is being willing to come together in a group, and ferret out what is bullshit and what actually has a foundation that's coming from the land. The land wants to teach us. There's a great way of saying it: "We're living prayers of our ancestors". They're there and they want us to learn, they want us to remember them, they want to teach us. The animals and plants and the living relatives around us, they know us, they remember us, they want to teach us. And so if we can come together in groups and communities and ferret out what are the real teachings that are coming, do the research and find out where those things fit in to things that have happened in the past, then we can start to rebuild our traditions. But part of that is being willing to sit around in a circle and the group saying things like, "You know, I respect that, but it's way out in left field...it doesn't fit". It doesn't mean to say that it's not valid for that person, but it doesn't fit in the bigger picture. This is what elders do, and we have to re-establish that tradition. If

we don't have elders, then we need to do the hard work as youngsters to make ourselves elders when the time comes. If we just sit around and whine because we don't have elders, it's not going to do us a damn bit of good. But if we do the hard work that it takes, and for some of us that's thirty or forty years, until we become elders...can you imagine working on this stuff for thirty or forty years? But by the time we're there...think of that...can you imagine? A group of people doing that work for thirty years? And then sharing it with the generation that comes after...then you've got a community, you've got elders who can say, "Hey, you know, we've heard that before, you can see it even in the archaeological record, what you've just described to us, what you've dreamed about or what you saw in the forest or on the beach, or in a river...what you saw was described way back in a cave painting or in a piece of art or in what they ate and how they worshipped". We can see what things look like in the past because we know what to look for. Our minds change, and we start to understand things in an indigenous way, rather than in a colonised way. And then we can incorporate the new things, the things that are being taught to us right now.

That's the thing about indigenous/traditional knowledge; it's living, it's alive, it's not stagnant. Because we live in a Western society and we have books that have a beginning and an end...the end right at the end, we think that that's the way the world works, that's the way that knowledge is kept...in rectangular containers with hard edges. But that's not the way the world is. The world is a giant circle, always revolving and rotating. And so, if we can think of knowledge and our learning of knowledge in that way, we can reclaim our indigenous identity, and then when we look back at the archaeology and back into language and back into the things that we found from the past, they start to make a whole lot more sense. We don't just think, "Well gee, we'll never know what that cave painting meant". If we don't understand it, then this group of elders who's been working for thirty years can get together and dream about it, or whatever, wait for that message to come through about its meaning, ask for it, and it'll come. But we have to stop being spiritually lazy, we have to be willing to undergo those processes, we have to be willing to find the people who are willing to do that with us. That's the hard part, but no-one said it was going to be easy. The other part is communicating with people who are earnestly trying to find something...maybe they're looking at old European traditions and trying to piece together a pagan belief system out of that or witch-craft or whatever. And what we need to be able to communicate to people is that we don't need to bush-whack a new spirituality. There's an old one that was practised for forty-thousand years, uninterrupted. It's all back there for us. Instead of spending our time bush-whacking and coming up with new things, what we need to do is figure out how we can go back to the land and go back to our relatives and find that there is already a path that is all worn and connected and was used until a few thousand years ago. To us, three thousands years sounds like such a long time. But in the grand scheme of things, it's nothing. Our ancestors are still here. The earth is still alive. Our animals are still there. The wolves are coming back to Europe, they're starting to take over again. We can find it. We just have to do the hard work. And all that energy we would spend bush-

whacking ourselves into a new spirituality...if we put that energy into actually doing things in a traditional way, and really honing in on who our ancestors are and what they know, we can be miles further ahead at the end. And we'd understand just how powerful and mysterious the world is. And that's something I've caught glimpses of, sometimes even more than glimpses. Indigenous people will tell stories about powerful things that have happened and amazing events where you think, wow, that's incredible but it can't possibly be true. But then as we start to get connected to our history, and we start to get plugged into the world that's around us, our relatives, then we start to catch little glimpses of how powerful that is and how much love and beauty exists in that place. My Lakota brother Duane fights so hard for his people and their place because he loves it so much, because he knows the stories, he knows his language, he knows the power that exists in all of that, and he's willing to lay down his life for it. And for myself I've felt pieces of that from my own ancestry and my own culture and it's amazing.

**In terms of going back to traditional ways of doing things, it can be said that we can't go back, we have to go forwards, and part of that is because people don't want to go back to doing things in traditional ways because those ways were in some ways oppressive. For the sake of argument, you could say that Western civilisation has provided some freedoms for people, such as gay liberation or women's rights. What's your perspective on that?**

So let's talk about it from the beginning...we were helpless beings in a world of relatives and we learnt how to live in our place in a good and balanced way. And right away, one of the things that we learnt was that everything is sacred, everyone is sacred, everyone has a gift, everyone has a place, everyone's equal. Is the mouse greater than the eagle? Is the eagle greater than the bear? Is a tree greater than a rock? No. Each of them is a sacred being unto themselves. Each of them is special. This is one of the truths at the heart of the world. Now as humans, we have a lot of foibles, we have a lot of imperfections, and so for us it's really easy to lose that balance that I just described where we see everything as connected and equal and sacred, and as we have our problems and issues and dysfunctions it becomes easy to make some people less and some people more. So I think as people trying to reclaim a past, even if we perceive that there have been inequalities in the past, all we have to do is go to that basic truth that lies at the heart of everything, and that is, we all have a place, we're all equal, we're all sacred. We don't need to be saved to be sacred, we don't need to be baptised to be sacred, we're born as sacred beings. And so if we can remember that and reclaim that, then we can't make the same mistake again in committing these injustices that we might observe in the past. We're healing ourselves. As white-skinned people, we're healing ourselves, and even for people of colour who have lost their way, it's the same process. We're healing ourselves from all this pain and disconnection and dysfunction. And if we look back in the past through these eyes, we're going to see that, and we may not be able to see

far enough back yet to see the time when everything was in balance, even our communities were in balance. But we can do that. We know at one time it was like that. We just need to remember these universal truths that guided our ancestors then and bring them back for now.

Ultimately, people will do what they are going to do. Some people will not give up a colonized life. Some people will continue neo-paganism. Some people will invent new spiritualities. Some people will continue to exploit Native people and their ways. But others will choose to do something different. Each of us has a choice to remember who we are and where we come from. Each of us can make the choice to help reawaken the powerful understandings that helped our Ancestors live in their place in a good way, for so long. And we can also use our wisdom to not make the same mistakes they made – to learn from their lives for the benefit of others and our Earth Mother.