

Reclaiming the Indigenous Soul

By Malidoma Somé & Francis Weller

From OPEN EXCHANGE MAGAZINE, July-September, 2000

There is a growing interest in the "old ways" of traditional cultures. This interest reflects a deep longing to connect meaningfully with one another through ritual, community and the sacred; experiences that are often all too shallow in our culture, or completely absent in many cases.

At root, the value that these ancient cultures offer is one of inclusion, belonging to a sacred cosmos. It has become clear that many of the troubles we face in this culture stem from a feeling that we do not belong. While traditional societies have developed elaborate "technologies of belonging" we have rallied behind the flag of individualism. Now, after several centuries of loyalty to this banner, the fissures are appearing and the rich memories of another way of living are rising from the earth.

In truth, we all come from this heritage. If we go back far enough, each one of us comes from a culture of the earth, of community and a knowing of the world as richly imbued with a sacred presence. Now, at this time, the core of our work is to restore the fabric of remembrance and reclaim the indigenous soul. It is the indigenous soul that carries the memory of this time and the ways of living that were in keeping with the sacredness of Life. But it also contains what is emergent in this time and place. We are being challenged with the awesome task of recreating the village, of remembering how to bring forth our "deep story" while all about us we are being encouraged to be good consumers.

The further task that we are each being called to is to go deep into the ancestral pool, into the haven of the imagination and revise our collective response to violence, meaninglessness and isolation. We cannot simply mimic another culture, cannot simply adopt their patterns of ritual to find our answers. We must create the new forms in order to heal the tears in the tissue of our land. We must become indigenous ourselves, come to know and love this place and learn its stories, moods, and myths. We must come to learn the rhythm of the rivers, hills, fox and salmon. We must gather together all that has been made not sacred. This is the challenge of the new millennium.

Our survival depends on seeing in one another our healing. We must move beyond fantasies of private salvation and into a communal celebration of mutual dependency that will open the heart of gratitude.

Malidoma on "What it Means to Be Indigenous"

(reprinted from the Ask Malidoma column of our March 2011 newsletter)

The advent of the New Age has ushered into focus a kind of spiritual renaissance in Western Culture that has in turn benefited indigenous cultures. Once dismissed and suppressed as archaic and irrelevant to the manifest destiny of modern man, these cultures have all of a sudden made a comeback at the hand of the same culture that once vowed to terminate them. Part of this was directly the result of a gradual collapse of organized religions that left many people hungry for something deep to hang on to. Because indigenous spirituality and culture were never really dogmatized and because of their nature-based structure, their

appeal became evident, particularly after these cultures were formulated in ways accessible to the linear Western mind by people who grew up in them. Doing so made their spirituality non-threatening, accessible, popular and, at times, quite fashionable. Westerners everywhere embraced indigenous ways of life sometimes with so much devotion that they surpassed the natives! In doing so, they made it look like the very culture that their ancestors destroyed has been coming back alive in them, and this much to the suspicion and sometimes objection of some natives. Consequently, it is relevant to raise the question as to what all this loving of the indigenous really means.

The term "indigenous" in this context signals the presence of, and calls attention to, and intrinsic core energy signature present in every human that mirrors the basic primordial and cosmological elements that predate humanity. In other words, if you look at the indigenous the way you look at genetics, it makes sense to say that one of these genes called indigenous is the gene that defines humanity. It is the one that carries the memory of a world in which human beings were once upon a time in harmony with everything on Earth. Harmony then meant the capacity to tune into the frequencies of all that is in such a way as to feel part of the organicity of existence---something similar to the universe depicted in the film Avatar. So, to be indigenous means to live like you remember your oneness with all that is, and with everyone else. Indigenous does not just mean native of a place. It implies a different kind of consciousness, an awareness of our unity, of what connects us together. Modernity has mutated away from such ways at great cost to its people and now to the entire world. This is why its people are increasingly drawn to indigenous cultures and have no problem absorbing any practice as long as it is nature based.

So indigenous is a kind of connection that makes us one with Nature, Fire, Water, Earth, Mineral, and the Ancestors. Inside such a connection is a being that shows deep respect and reverence to all that is. Once upon a time, a time prior to Newtonian time and the Industrial time that ushered in consumer societies along with isolation, individualism, materialism, etc., there was the indigenous who could smell the scent of the Earth and Nature, feel into the animal, and see the being that looks like trees. There was an open channel to the animal wherein humans could converse with them and other consciousness. There was a feeling of connectedness, and unity that forbid the sense of isolation, loss, and illness. Losing this today is a sad thing! Hence the call to reconnect with that part of us that used to take all this in as a way of living. This is why being indigenous today is "cool" to an increasing number of Westerners.

Now the great questions arise: how do you do that in the Concrete Jungle? At first it feels like you don't because you can't. The Metropolis is the expression of the absence of Nature. It doesn't foster connection with the basic elements. Instead it cultivates stress and isolation. Western structure is clearly anti-nature. Its mechanistic commitment distances it from the core element. Should we abandon modernity and return to the old way or can we do that while uniting modernity with the indigenous? I think the answer is challenging us to a higher level of imagination in which we are expected to dwell more on connection possibilities and unity than on considerations that deepens the gap between modern and indigenous. The indigenous in everyone looks for harmony and unity in the cracks of divisions, tensions, and disconnections. This implies being willing to take a stand, to be militant in the protection of human values by refusing to uphold dangerous aspects of our own culture.

In doing so, we are showing our indigenous. Because the indigenous mind thinks cosmologically and is mythological in essence, it has a way of knowing deep down that Alice in Wonderland has a reality frequency that can be tapped into. It knows that there is a spirit in the Mountain, in the River, and that everything has life worthy of respect and reverence. It feels the echo of the spirit in the Water and feels the chills of being watched by an old tree. Such a mind is not linear, Cartesian. When everything is an emanation of spirit, even technological marvels are an expression of the same spirit.

This is what it means to be indigenous. In fact, the issue is not about becoming indigenous; rather, it is about honoring the indigenous in us. In a world that is suffering from increasing decay, the indigenous may be the way to the stability we all long for.

Ashé!