



www.plantsandhealers.org

Becoming Indigenous

Edited and Published by Plants and Healers International 2013

Written by Frank Cook
August 2001

What does it mean to be indigenous? When the word *indigenous* is used I see images of dancing Native Americans, wandering naked aborigines, and chanting Tibetans. *Websters* defines *indigenous* as having originated in a particular region or environment. (Latin: *indigenus*: native). For me this word connotes a sense of dying off, of curiosity, of ancientness, and of deep connection to earthly ways.

I have seen attempts to save the indigenous by rallying awareness behind their rights for land, knowledge, culture. But with these efforts I am often left bewildered. I see these indigenous cultures doomed to extinction if we persist with our modern culture. For instance, South American shamen have for decades had their knowledge of the plant medicines mined by scientists who hope to find plants with active compounds that can be synthesized, patented, and distributed to treat disease. The shamen are compensated with maybe a rifle and some clothes while the companies stand to make millions. It's an old story in many ways--wasn't Manhattan "bought" for a handful of shells? In recent years some efforts have been made to establish intellectual property rights for the shamen, allowing them a cut of profits. Is a person still an indigenous indian shaman if he has a bank account with a million dollars?

There is a fallacy in our cultural definition of indigenousness as an old, unapproachable, vulnerable, primitive way that collapses in the presence of modern life. There is an assumption that modern life and its ways are evolved and improved over indigenous life. This view will move the cultures and people involved to extinction as more and more focus is placed on studying (and exploiting) those who are deemed indigenous. It's a definition that guarantees the end of indigenous peoples over time.

The image comes to me of some rare, flightless bird whose nesting area is slowly being encroached upon by some neighboring town. There is no way to stop the growth of the town (progress is Progress!) and each year there are less birds, until one day they are no more.

I have been disenchanted with many aspects of our modern culture for some time now. I am a botanical explorer who has journeyed around this country and the world meeting plants and healers. I have seen the effects of this modern world upon the human cultures and plant/animal ecosystems. These experiences have caused me to question some of our modern ways, goals, and beliefs. This past spring I embarked on a month-long walk across

North Carolina from the Pamlico Sound to Max Patch. For these 400 miles I mostly walked backcountry roads, slowing down to fourteen miles a day as the human world zoomed by at a mile a minute. I wanted to see what everyday NC was like outside the protected forests and gardens with which I was familiar.

I learned a lot about myself. As I walked I studied the plants--finding over 500 species (and eating 70 of them). I had a lot of time for reflection and contemplation. One realization I came to is that indigenouness is more than a bloodline or cultural membership; it is a way of life, an approach to life. I realized that rather than watching the indigenous peoples go extinct (along with the native plants and animals) I was empowered to question the wisdom of modern life and to pursue my own path of becoming indigenous.

Though I grew up as a military brat in various places around the world, my family largely brought our culture with us. In many respects I was raised as a suburban, middle-class, white boy. To me the woods, though full of wonder, were largely a green wall. I was taught that indians were a savage, primitive people who fought us in some distant time and lost. As I grew older I learned some truths about our history which filled me with guilt and depression. I felt I had a hole inside my chest. And worse I understood that the exploitation was still happening all over the planet.

Years later I was told a story of how we came to be, from the Cherokee perspective. According to their stories we are the youngest of the beings on earth. First there were the rocks, then the plants, then the beings that swim and fly, followed by the four-leggeds. Finally we, the two-leggeds, came along (coming from the belly of a black bird that had landed on Max Patch).

As the story goes, every species is given a talent to share for the good of all. Two-leggeds were given a cerebral cortex, the brain, to help serve the web of life. At first everything flowed well and the beings of the earth lived in harmony. But after a time more and more reports were heard of two-leggeds acting out atrocities. Finally a council of the animals was called. It was determined that the two-leggeds had gone astray. They had taken their minds and turned them inward becoming self-absorbed. Like mirrors bent too far, their beings were split in halves. Where their heart had been, there was a dark hole.

The council of the animals, for their own protection, decided to back off from relations with the two-leggeds. The insects were so angry they declared war. When the plants heard of the animals' decision, they announced that they would stand by the two-leggeds and assist in their healing if possible.

The way through our times is to devote energy each day to caretaking the earth. By following our earthly purpose we will mend our hearts and grow from two-leggeds to Hue(light)-Manifested Beings with a global consciousness.

I have come to see the term *Indigenous* as a way of being. A word to remind me of the path to becoming human. A path of interconnection that opens the channel between the roots of the earth and the light of the universe.

Rather than assume our modern culture has evolved and become superior to past ways, I see it as an experiment that has become disconnected from its roots. I see our species as struggling to reach global awareness and responsibility. I am not an advocate of going back, of trying to untravel where we have gone. I have travelled enough to see that the old ways are not necessarily the best ways. I am not (only) a wild mountain man, but also a

modern being. I acknowledge that there are many wonders and achievements in our modern world, but in this dash to modernness we have lost our spirit. We have been enchanted by technology and synthetics, losing our heart and soul.

As I see it, becoming indigenous is a path of trusting the earth to provide by combining the wisdom of the ancients with the ingenuity of the present. As I walk in the woods with hundreds of people each season, I am amazed by what we have given up for this modern label. Somehow in this last 100 years, the lessons of our elders were discredited and lost. We have become dependent on stores and doctors for our health. Modern people eat around 25 species of plants in their diet compared to over 200 species eaten by people in the last couple hundred years. Let us find ways to reintroduce wild food into our diets. Study the plants around you. Learn to nibble and make teas. Many of the plants that grow in abundance (the weeds) are edible and delicious. Knowing the plants around you is taking steps toward becoming indigenous.

For me I will live each day walking this path toward being a human. Learning as I go. Remaining connected, but not stuck. Loving but not possessing. I hope to meet many of you along the way. Where would we be without community? We need each other to relearn and remember. Each of us carries a part of the story. Follow your calling and let us all learn from your walk. One of the wonders of my walk is that I am never alone. Wherever I wake up there are plant friends about. They teach me a lot about being indigenous. The strand we weave is sacred. Let us never again forget our connection to the web of life.

By taking on the responsibility of becoming indigenous, we will become better caretakers of the planet. We are all indigenous to the Earth! We two-leggeds need to choose our path. How will we go?