

# Process Thought and Indigenous Worldviews

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Last year I was here in Claremont participating in a planning session for this track, which was being held at John Cobb Jr.'s residence, and while we were waiting for John to join us someone asked me how I got involved. I told them John had contacted me shortly after I defended my Ph.D dissertation because my work focused on a comparison between Indigenous worldviews and ways-of-knowing, and Whiteheadian process philosophy. I also told them a story relating how my wife Jaki was writing her second book at the same time I was writing and researching my dissertation. Our usual methodology was to read and edit each other's writing so, as was our habit, we exchanged manuscripts for review. It was at that point that it struck home to me what, I was actually doing. I was philosophically explaining the same relational worldview that my wife was writing about experiencing. About 12 years earlier she had a particularly moving and seemingly inexplicable encounter with nature which she had detailed in her first book. It led to a quest to understand and participate in this new way of experiencing the world. Her second book discussed coming to terms with the new perspective and how it had changed her life and healing practice, as well as details about her new relational way of viewing and living in the world. She will be speaking more about that tomorrow. But what became clear was that without any real prior plan or discussion, my dissertation had become a process philosophical analysis of those experiences and ways of coming-to-know, with almost a point by point correspondence. In other words, in the manner I had defined it, what she was talking about was how she was *becoming* more indigenous.

By this time John Cobb had entered the room and stood listening as I finished. After a short thoughtful pause as the room fell silent, John said, with his elegant Southern drawl:

“It is clear to me that Jaki is exactly the kind of person we need at this conference. And it is also clear to me that you need to tell that story in your track introduction.”

So here I am telling the story, and Jaki is here ready to tell us her story tomorrow.

The point I want to stress from that, however, is that **learning to think and live from a relational and experiential perspective is the key to moving toward an ecological civilization.**

That is what it is all about. And I think that is one of the most important things that our Indigenous peoples can teach us. But it is also more complex and harder to do than it appears on the surface. Superficially, one could say that is what ecology actually means; that the natural world is externally interrelated in a complex way that fundamentally relies on the relationships between each facet for a healthy environment; that ecological systems cannot exist or survive without that interdependence. We know that. That is, after all, what our biologists have been telling us for some time now. We also know that not being fully aware of that ecological interdependence, or not putting it ahead of personal and corporate interests, is what has brought us to the brink of environmental disaster. While that is true, it is merely the tip of the iceberg of what it actually means and, I think, why things have progressed so rapidly. We continue to insist on understanding it from the dominant Western perspective that has gotten us into this mess, and is increasingly proven inadequate in getting us out of it. As my father used to say, no matter how many times I cut this 2x4 it's still too short. So when our Indigenous peoples share their wisdom with us about how we are all related, and when Elders like hereditary chief E. Richard Atleo speak about the “oneness” of the world, we inevitably think of such statements as simplistic and

naïve (Atleo 2004, 118) . But that is only because we don't understand the depth of what they are trying to tell us.

I have stated that I believe our best approach moving forward is to learn to think and live from a relational perspective and this may be the most important thing traditional Indigenous peoples can teach us. I have also said this worldview and ways-of-knowing have strong parallels in Whiteheadian process thought. In this presentation I want to illustrate what I mean using two common First Nations phrases that often translate to “All our Relations,” or sometimes “We are all related,” and “The seven generations that come before and the seven generations that come after.” Although it may well be that these phrases are not universally expressed by all Indigenous peoples I think the concepts behind them may be.

The phrase “All our relations” is often used as a ceremonial prayer or benediction, although I hesitate to use such Western concepts as comparisons. On the surface it could be understood as a simple statement of acknowledgement, respect, and reverence for one's relations, but it would be a mistake to make the common Western assumption that it is merely referring to biological relatives. It would even be a mistake to extend the concept of “relatives” to just include all biologically living beings. In fact “All my relations” includes all of creation—past, present, and even future. This would include, but not be limited to, one's present relatives and past ancestors, and all other forms of creation including Grandfather/Grandmother Mountain, Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Sun, the wing-ed ones, the four legged, the finned, the Thunder Beings, and the rooted ones.

To understand the depth of meaning in the phrase “All our Relations” we must reject the notion that we are individual “beings” that are in relation to other individual “beings.” Unlike the

materialistic and mechanistic Western concept that reality consists of isolated “things” or “substances” that endure through time and space as individual objects, a relational worldview understands reality, including ourselves, as *constituted by relations*. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson states: “Rather than viewing ourselves as being *in* relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are part of (Wilson 2008, 80).” Lakota Elder Black Elk has been quoted by Atleo as saying: “The chief proposition of the universe is relationality (Atleo 2004, 30).” When comparing the worldview of the dominant society to that of southeast Asian Indigenous people anthropologist Nurit Bird-David has said that: “Against materialistic framing of the environment as discrete things stands relationally framing the environment as nested relatedness (Bird-David 1999, 77).”

These quotes illustrate the parallels between Indigenous worldviews and a Whiteheadian metaphysic. They could just as easily be said by Whitehead himself. Both worldviews are fundamentally relational in that *there are no “things” which have relationships, things are constituted BY relationships*. Such an understanding changes what can be considered possible and what is merely fanciful, and gives us a different perspective on many of the ancient practices of Indigenous peoples. Vine Deloria Jr. also stated that for the Native American the substance of the world is relationships (Deloria Jr 2006, 201). He says a central tenet of Native worldviews is that: “everything in the natural world has relationships with every other thing and the total set of relationships makes up the natural world as we experience it” (Deloria Jr 1999, 34). Like many process philosophers, and Whitehead himself, Deloria argues that a relational metaphysic is better able to accommodate a post-modern scientific understanding as well as a wider diversity of human experiences, as does celebrated quantum physicist F. David Peat in his book *Blackfoot Physics* (Peat 2005). But Deloria also says that many of the out-of-the-ordinary events attributed

to ancient medicine men are considered fantasy only because they are evaluated from the narrow materialistic framework of the Euro-American culture (Deloria Jr 2006, 194). He suggests that rather than this non-substantist, relational mind/energy/quantum view being the culmination of philosophical and scientific inquiry, as it is in Euro-American historical thought, it was the beginning from which the Native daily life stemmed. He states:

**We have already seen that tribal peoples observed the world around them and quickly concluded that it represented an energetic mind undergirding the physical world, its motions, and provided energy and life in everything that existed. This belief, as we have seen, is the starting point, not the conclusion.(Deloria Jr 2006, 197)**

As an example, Deloria describes a particular experience of Black Elk's in which he was caught out in a storm while hunting (Deloria Jr 2006, 111). During the night he heard a coyote howl in the distance and understood the howl as communication informing him of an old man and boy who were also caught in the storm, and the location of a bison that could serve as food while they were stranded. Once the storm abated somewhat he was quickly able to find the man and boy as well as the bison that was trapped in the snow and easy to kill for food. Although Black Elk described it in a way that suggested he understood the coyote howl linguistically, Deloria says that **the transmission of accurate information at that level of profound internal relatedness does not depend on language, but simply heightened awareness or alertness.** The information, therefore, might be perceived as visual images, language, or just an intuitive knowing, but it is the internal relationships one holds with the world that allows the transference.

From an Indigenous perspective this is a fairly typical way in which Indigenous people are able to gain information about the world through the relationships with the natural world that have been forged and maintained. From a typical Euro-American perspective this is a fanciful story involving dreamt hallucinations and lucky coincidences. The only other explanation, as far

as Western society is concerned, would be that somehow Black Elk must have unconsciously merged a complex set of environmental cues which allowed him to locate the people and bison.

In another such story told by Eliot Cowan in his book *Plant Spirit Medicine*, Cowan describes how Indigenous specialists can become cognitively aware of the distant past, not only of themselves, but of others. Cowan describes an ethnographic account he studied as an anthropology student that is consistent with the Indigenous understanding of the efficacy of knowledge gained from such internal reflection. In the story an ethnographer had spent some time among the aboriginal people of Australia and heard about the skills of a particularly proficient tracker that were apparently so incredible they appeared fraudulent. Cowan relates:

When he finally met the tracker, he challenged him to follow the trail of a long trek he [the anthropologist] had made with another aborigine years before. He was certain this was impossible and that no trail could remain after such a long time. The tracker was happy to take up the challenge, though, and the moment he was shown the starting point, he took off at a trot and ran the whole course of the journey without even pausing to examine the spoor. The anthropologist was humbled and apologetic. He asked the aborigine how he had accomplished this feat. "It was easy," the tracker replied. "I just went back to the time you made the journey and I ran alongside you." (Cowan 1995, 53)

To the Indigenous specialist accessing information from another person's past was no more difficult than 'remembering' what had happened a few moments ago to himself. In fact, he did not track the anthropologist at all but simply became cognitively aware of his objective past and followed alongside.

So how does this all fit with a Whiteheadian process philosophy? Alfred North Whitehead was a Cambridge mathematical physicist who moved to the US in the 1920's and became a philosophy professor at Harvard. I like to think of Whitehead's philosophical writings as a reaction to the new physics that was developing at the time. He realized that if what these

new physicists were saying was true we had to conceive of reality in a totally different way in order to accommodate both the new physics and our own experience of the world. The earlier modernist model, championed by the likes of Rene Descartes and Sir Isaac Newton, that mechanistically envisioned reality as individual substances enduring through time and space, was no longer adequate and needed to be rejected. Unfortunately, that model has proved extremely difficult to shake and is the main contributor to the environmental problems we now face.

As I mentioned earlier, Whitehead, and current Whiteheadians, understand reality as being constituted *by* relationships. Rather than things enduring unchanged through time and space, reality is conceived as a series of events in continuous process of coming to be. In order for there to be continuity each entity that is in process of becoming, whether as tiny as a subatomic particle or as complex as a human being, must take account of and incorporate their entire past world. As the anthropic principle tells us, the only reason why things are the way they are NOW is because of exactly what has happened in the past. For there to be change, each entity must then incorporate relevant, novel possibilities that determine what will then be included in the next event, thereby contributing to the creative advance of the world. Reality, therefore, can be understood as a serial process of events that take account of the entire past, contribute novel possibilities in the present, which then project into the future. With this in mind we begin to see how the seemingly fanciful non-ordinary abilities Vine Doloria Jr. was talking about could be accommodated. Although in the normal course of our lives we are usually just aware of our own relevant immediate past, if we are constituted by relationships with the entire world it is not impossible to become cognitively aware of, and gain knowledge from, any aspect of the world, independent of time and space. David Ray Griffin, who we will hear from on Sunday at the banquet, has written extensively on this possibility from a process perspective, which he

considers a form of action-at-a-distance (Griffin 1997, 155–56). Like Deloria, he feels that many of the seemingly inexplicable human experiences that have been reported throughout history which seem impossible from the dominant mechanistic viewpoint, can be understood if viewed from such a relational perspective. If we are mostly, although not completely, constituted by the perception of the entirety of our past relevant world, then it is possible that under certain circumstances we could become aware of aspects of the world that are not available to our normal sense perception. As I stated in this morning’s address, if we are constituted by our relationship with our entire past and present world, it is possible to gain knowledge *about the world through* those relationships, rather than merely through our external senses

This way of understanding, and the reason why Whiteheadians like John Cobb Jr. have become so concerned about and focused on ecological issues, also leads to the obvious conclusion that all decisions we make and actions we take, no matter how large or small, have pervasive consequences to the world and each other, now and in the future. We are NOT separate “things” objectively isolated from each other. It is NOT just a metaphorical model, it is an ontological reality. And with that relational understanding the deeper meaning of “the seven generations before and the generations after” begins to come clear. For Whiteheadians, the choices in each moment are intimately related to both the past and future. The past has determined the potentials that are relevant in the moment and the choices made in the present provide the vector to the future. Each moment is at the crux of what has been and what could be. And from an Indigenous perspective all decisions, thoughts, choices, and actions, must take account of, and be responsible to, the past seven generations of relations, and the knowledge and wisdom they have contributed, and the consequences and responsibility to the seven generations of relations that will come after. As it is in Whiteheadian thought, every decision and action is



balancing between the wisdom of the past and the consequences for the future. When relations are understood in this context as involving all of creation at all times, there is no greater wisdom for moving toward an ecological civilization. If in every decision we make, whether personal, public, or corporate, we understand ourselves as responsible to all our relations in the past, and all our relations in the future, it will change not only the decisions themselves, but the entire decision making process. By necessity it would become more honouring, more inclusive, further reaching, and more progressive. If we truly understood and incorporated the perspective “We are All Related,” in a way that reflected that paradigm as a primordial ontological reality, we would fundamentally understand what it meant to have sacred places that should not be disturbed; or languages, beliefs and practices that the world, let alone the individual communities, cannot afford to lose.

Understanding knowledge as a “coming-to-know” through establishing and maintaining relationships with the world, changes one’s perspective on traditional practices and ceremonies. Traditional Indigenous Knowledge would be recognized as something that cannot be separated from the people or the land without doing epistemic violence to that knowing. It cannot be categorized and organized into government or corporate databases and subsequently universalized as if such knowledge was a “thing” that did not change in different places or different times. For Whiteheadian this combines the fallacy of misplaced concreteness and simple location—mistaking something conceptual for something concrete and therefore expecting it not to change at different times and in different locations.

By accepting this alternative paradigm we would fully recognize and appreciate the true extent of the violence the dominant society has perpetuated, and continues to perpetuate, on our Indigenous peoples, and the social and personal upheaval such violence has caused. When

ontological identity, not only how one perceives oneself but one's fundamental constitution, primordially emerges out of one's relationships to each other and the land, to be torn from that land due to forced relocation and encroachment means complete destruction, not only of a way of life, but of the self-identity of a culture. This devastation inevitably includes every community and every individual in that community. The violence and oppression of such inconceivable acts as the abduction, relocation and forced acculturation of children, the residential boarding school programs, and the infamous Trail of Tears, take on a whole new perspective. From the mechanistic, substantive, Euro-American view these are things that can be rectified with time and money, and hopefully eventually forgotten. From an experiential relational worldview, the destruction is too complete and will continue to have repercussions generations into the future, never forgotten and perhaps never able to be fully resolved until those relations are restored.

Moving toward an Ecological Civilization, then, means recognizing, re-establishing, and maintaining the interconnected relationships that are there, but have been ignored in modern society. It does not mean conducting endless ecological impact studies to pay lip service to the fact that we are dependent on the natural world. We already know that. It means fully recognizing and understanding in every decision we make that we are all related. It means taking into account and being responsible to the seven generations before and the seven generations after. But it also means moving toward acknowledgement and reconciliation for violence and oppression toward our Indigenous peoples.

If we were to truly embody the concept that "We Are All Related" we would "get" why such relationships need to be cultivated and maintained. Humans are relational creatures. Our relationships matter to us, whether biological or social. Those persons we are in relation with matter more to us than strangers. We act differently with those we are related to than those we

are not. We go to extraordinary lengths sometimes to maintain those relations, and the closer the relation the more protective we become. If “We Are All Related” is taken as foundational, it changes how we view the world and how we understand the consequences of our actions and decisions. As it is understood in Whiteheadian philosophy, every decision and action, no matter how big or small, matters on a universal scale.

I believe this is what the Indigenous people can teach us if they are willing, and what we must learn in order for the human race to survive. We all have to re-establish our own ancient indigenous roots and recognize the kinship we have with all of creation. But taking that step also means recognizing the importance of, and helping to preserve, re-construct, and honour the languages, practices, identity, and rights of our current Indigenous cultures. If we don’t, the people and the wisdom they hold that the world so desperately needs will be lost, not only to them, but to all of us.

In the words of Cree Elder Pauline “Fishwoman” Johnson who was born and raised in a traditional way at Lesser Slave Lake in Northern Alberta:

Many Elders will say that we are related to everything on earth. Some people think that when we ask them to pray to the Grandmothers and Grandfathers that it is their biological ancestors we are talking about. We do acknowledge our Grandmothers and Grandfathers in our lineage. We put them in a place of respect and love. But the Grandmothers and Grandfathers are also everything here on earth. As I was growing up I was always told that all of these things that were here before me, that they are all Grandmothers and Grandfathers to me: Grandfather Sun, Grandmother Moon, Grandfather Stars, the thunder beings, the rock beings, the mountains. They are the old, old ones. They are in essence my Elders, my Teachers. And the Creator above all, who created all of those things to give me an essence of my spiritual life.

We recognize all things in life and that all things have life, and so that is why we call them beings. We are human beings, so they are plant beings, rooted beings, universe beings, sky beings, thunder beings. We are human beings on this planet and we are the two legged, but everything out there—we

acknowledge that they are part of us, part of our life, part of who we are, and we are part of them. (Traditional Cree Elder Pauline Johnson—Fishwoman) (Daniels 2014, 120)

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