

For those who would like to understand Native American spirituality, here is a chapter from my book, “The Way of the Sacred Pipe” which describes the differences between native thought and non-native thought.

Chapter 2 The Native Mind

What is the Native Mind?

Before I continue, I need to say that to truly understand the Pipe and all that it means, one must learn of it through what my Grandmother Lillie referred to as a “Native Mind”. Conversely, it has been said by the Elders that to understand the Pipe *is* to understand the “Native Mind”.

There is more than one way to perceive things. One way is not necessarily better than the other. It is like two men looking at a big tree from different sides. One sees a scar from a lightning strike; the other sees only a perfectly formed tree. They can argue all day about who has the correct perception of what the tree looks like. Both are correct, just seeing it from a different perspective. It seems as if none of us are able to see the whole “tree” on our own. This promotes healthy *interdependence*, if we are willing to put our ego in its proper place.

If I wanted to learn how to throw a boomerang, it only makes sense to learn it from the ones who use it daily rather than to have it explained to me by a physics professor. The professor may be able to tell me all kinds of facts about its design, etc., but he has probably never hunted with one and couldn’t tell me what it feels like to depend on one to provide food.

Likewise, understanding what the Pipe is has a lot to do with your perspective. In order to truly understand any part of Native American spirituality, it is helpful to perceive it through a Native viewpoint rather than that of a non-Native. Please keep in mind I am not saying the non-Native viewpoint is invalid. It is just a poor platform from which to understand what I am going to share with you about the Pipe. The concepts of the Native mind are different than that of the non-Native mind and somewhat difficult to describe, but I will try to through some examples.

Relationships

The first example of the different ways to see things is in regards to relatives. In Native traditions there is what is called a “chosen relative” or a relative by choice. The Lakota call it your “*Hunka*” brother, father, sister, etc. To the Native mind, there is absolutely no difference between a blood relative and someone who you have “adopted” through choice *and* ceremony.

I have a “*Hunka*” sister who used to be my sister-in-law. When she and my biological brother got divorced, she and I decided that our being relatives should not stop. We chose to continue to be brother and sister. In my mind she was just as related to me as my brother. Every aspect of how I think of her is truly as being my life-long blood sister.

Now this may seem easy to grasp but here is what makes my mind a Native mind verses a non-Native mind. The concept that she is my “adopted” sister does not even *exist* in my mind. My every thought and action towards her is that of a physically related sister. As an example, when necessity bids that we shed cloths, such as crossing a river or bathing while camping or rafting (things we do together often), I have no desire to look at her as a naked woman but instead am adverse to the thought, just as one would never even think of looking at one’s own blood sister in that way.

For the non-Native mind, the thought is not that way. Possibly it would say, “I must not look on her in that way because it is improper” but in the Native mind it is an automatic, *natural* reaction not to look. It actually is repulsive to look, just as it would be with my sister from the same physical mother. However, to the non-Native mind, there is the understanding that she *is* my sister, but always with the word “adopted” tagged to it.

Here is another example. I have a good friend who is a black man. He and I played softball on the same team, went out to dinner with our wives, etc. He eventually got a job working at the same company with me. One day I was talking to another employee who mentioned that I was a friend of the new guy. He referred to him as “that black guy”. I was shocked to realize that I had not even been conscience of his skin color. Yes, every time I looked at him my eyes could see it, but that his skin was darker than mine never had been present in my thoughts. In the same way, my *Hunka* sister is just that, my sister.

Spirits

So, now when you try to understand a concept like a Pipe has a Spirit just as you do, you can’t grasp the concept until you think like a Native American. To the Native American way of thinking, *everything* has a Spirit, even inanimate objects. Perhaps a better way to say it, ***there is Spirit in everything.***

It is hard for those raised in a differing mindset to think anything but a two legged (human) has a spirit. They have been brought up believing that when their dog dies, it is just gone, it has no spirit. We who are Native know that when our dog dies, his Spirit leaves to be joined with the Great Mystery just as our own spirit will. Many indigenous cultures bury their loved ones with their horse, their dog, their tools or weapons as well as other things to be with them on the other side. How can a horse or Pipe cross over to the spirit realm unless they have a spirit? It is obvious that the physical horse stays with the physical body of the deceased, but if everything has a spirit, then it is not hard to understand that the Spirit of the horse, as well as a Pipe or bow, etc., goes with the person to the other side/dimension.

When we have a meal, we make up a “Spirit plate” for the Spirits and our ancestors to join us. After we are done, the physical food on the plate remains but the food’s spiritual essence has been consumed by our “guests”. Another way to understand this is that everything in this dimension has a counterpart in a different dimension, the one we call the realm of spirit.

Time

There is a term often used to describe an aspect of the Native American mind. It is also used to be critical of this mindset viewing it as irresponsibility. The term is “Indian

time”. It is used when Native folks do not show up “on time” for something like the start of a Pow Wow or for an appointment.

To the non-Native mind, everything is governed by time. There are calendars, clocks, etc. that *seem* to be a universal law, much like gravity. This is very real to the non-Native mind, but to the Native mind, there is only the constant “now”.

For example, if you are on your way to a Pow Wow and meet someone who you feel you should talk with, it is far more important to obey your intuition and spend “time” with this person. Yes, you may be late for the grand entry, but then you would have missed whatever it was you were to get or do by running into this person.

In the Native mind, it is far more important to be fully present in the moment than to try to meet the demands of a future appointment which has not even arrived yet, and might never arrive. To be worried about something two hours from now robs you of what is happening right now. The same goes about worrying or living in/about the past. “Indian Time” is actually a philosophy of living, not an excuse for irresponsibility. The bumper sticker on my truck that says, “I’d rather be here now!” in contrast to “I’d rather be fishing” etc. I think it sums this thought up well.

Several years ago I was late for a class I was attending in Denver. As I rushed out of my hotel to get in my jeep, I heard a voice call out to me from the balcony above where I had parked. I looked up to see an old man with his morning cup of coffee looking down at me. He asked where I had gotten the medicine wheel I had hanging from my Jeep’s mirror and what did it represent. I explained that I had made it and that it represented the four cardinal directions.

As the conversation got more in depth about my spiritual path, I realized that this man was a tribal elder and I was faced with a choice. Do I rush off so I would be on time for the class or do I go with the flow and spend time with this man? My intuition told me this meeting was more than coincidence, so I chose to stay.

As things worked out, he eventually introduced himself to me. He said his name was Medicine Cloud. Later I found out he was a highly regarded Medicine man. When I gave him some tobacco to show my respect for him as an Elder, he in turn gave me a beautiful healing feather. He said I had earned it. If I had allowed myself to be governed by “time” and schedule, I would have missed out on a wonderful conversation full of bits of wisdom, as well as the special feather!

Marriage and Divorce

To the non-Native mind a marriage has to be “legal” to be real. To the Native mind marriage is the state of your relationship. If the love and commitment are real, then the marriage is real. If there is no love relationship, there is no marriage no matter what a piece of paper says. Most Native marriage ceremonies are very short and simple. Basically they are an acknowledgment to the village that the two of you wanted to be considered as mates or partners from that point on.

Divorce is also based on actual relationship. If the couple decides to no longer be together, they simply make a statement through recognized symbolism that they are no longer partners. In the non-Native society you are still married, even if you are living

with another partner, until you have a document to prove the end of your previous relationship.

Land Ownership

To the non-Native mind, if you have a deed, you own some land. To the Native mind, it is impossible to own any part of the earth as it is a living being, our Mother. To quote a wise man, "Can you sell your mother? Can you own the air?" The non-Native mind seems to be based on insecurity and mistrust and has a need for "guarantees". It needs assurances on paper in the form of deeds, licenses, copyrights, contracts, etc.

The Native mind assumes most folks walk with integrity (and they usually did) and security comes from the provision of a loving Creator who has established a system that keeps all things in a state of balance. It is understood that hardships are always followed by relief and anything negative is only part of the positive in life.

No matter what our perception - Native or non-Native - it is a truth that the Great Mystery has put into place a great cycle of balance. The time is at hand (the ***age of the Pipe***) when, as we say, the hoop will turn and all things will be brought back into balance.

So how do you get a Native mind? It isn't just a matter of genetics, but a way of thinking in which you are either brought up or develop. It is when you *know* there is a living Spirit in a Pipe, not just believe there is one. It takes trust to let your mind accept on faith the things presented here. I hope you can have the faith of a child and find that trust.