



Indigenous Sustainable Wisdom: First-Nation Know-how for Global Flourishing

Book Summary

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BOOK SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

What has become clear not only over recent centuries, but especially over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st, is that the dominant culture of the earth, largely driven by economically-advanced nations in the northern hemisphere, is putting at risk all life on the planet (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007, 2013). The dominant worldview has emphasized economic wealth at the expense of social and environmental health. Although the 21st century has seen the growth of a staggering amount of economic wealth around the world, inequality is increasing, and signs of wellbeing among ecosystems, biodiversity, plant and animal life are deteriorating (Kolbert, 2014; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Even human health in advanced nations like the USA is worsening (American Psychological Association, 2012; National Research Council, 2013; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009) despite overall vast economic wealth. Western science and scholarship laments ill health (mental and physical) and environmental destruction (“tragedy of the commons”) but all too often considers them “the human condition.” Others point to blind and destructive “Western progress” as the cause, as stated, for example, in the 2015 papal encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, “in various parts of the world, pressure is being put on [indigenous communities] to abandon their homelands to make room for agricultural or mining projects which are undertaken without regard for the degradation of nature and culture. Authentic development includes efforts to bring about an integral improvement in the quality of human life, and this entails considering the setting in which people live their lives” (paragraphs 146 and 147).

The displacement of people and alteration of “settings in which people live their lives” is the story of civilization since its beginnings, a story, until recently, of continued progress, but one which masked its real underlying costs. As physical anthropologist Clark Spencer Larsen stated: “Although agriculture provided the economic basis for the rise of states and development of civilizations, the change in diet and acquisition of food resulted in a decline in quality of life for most human populations in the last 10,000 years” (Clark Spencer Larsen, “The Agricultural Revolution as Environmental Catastrophe: Implications for health and lifestyle in the Holocene,” *Quaternary International* 150, 1 (2006), 12-20). It has also resulted in unsustainable ways of living, in great contrast to non-civilizational cultures which thrived for thousands of years before being displaced.

What accounts for the differences between dominant global modern culture and the cultures of successful, sustainable indigenous communities that existed for tens of thousands of years? First, there appear to be opposing worldviews: indigenous communities typically display a *philosophy of the earth*, an orientation to respectful, reciprocal, co-existence, whereas dominant global modern culture promotes a *philosophy of escape from the earth*. (Halton, 2007). It is a philosophy that is homo centric and easily casts off the existence of other life forms as collateral damage to the pursuit of wealth through the trope of “substitutes” used in its most revered episteme of justification – economics. In the last centuries the dominant Western culture has

assumed human separation from and superiority to Nature, removed "personhood" from all but humans, and taken up attitudes of commodifying nature for human interests (Merchant, 2003; Turner, 1994). Second, from their growth beginning in the 16th century, Western science, technology, and economics have led to extreme abstracting (Latour, 2013; Mumford, 1970). They have advocated detachment from the earth, breaking the bonds of relational responsibility to nonhumans, and studied them as objects. At the same time, detachment from relational commitment to the wellbeing of the natural world has led to sophisticated technologies, some helpful and some destructive. The technologies that emerged from this type of detached science, in part because of its philosophy of separation and control, have led to great comforts for a minority. Western expansionism and global control of most areas of the earth have impaired capacities to perceive alternatives to the current pathway of increased control of nature and of cultures that do not conform to the dominant system. Yet, most societies in the history of the world consider individual "self-interest," assumed to be normal human nature in most of the West, to be a sign of insanity and profoundly destructive (Sahlins, 2008).

The misunderstandings of history extend to the Americas. In the last half millennium, the dominant Western view (still propagated by mainstream media today) was that the Americas were a wilderness brought under proper control by European settlers. Through a selective re-telling of history, it came to be believed that those who lived in the Americas before European settlement either were savage (and evil), spiritually "primitive," or undeserving of the land because they did not control Nature in the proper, European, way (control and enslavement of nonhumans for human ends) (Turner, 1994). At the same time, US history books tend to discuss first nations as relics or extinct (O'Brien, 2013, "firsting and lasting"), "wiped out" by the progressive wave from European expansion. However, in fact North America was not a wilderness but an inhabited, nourished and enhanced by small-scale ingenious innovations with a limited but partially cultivated landscape (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014). Many North American first nation peoples still exist (and flourish) today continuing longstanding relations in the environments they have inhabited for thousands of years. In fact, much of Western scholarship has ignored the vast numbers of societies and perspectives that fall outside of dominant Western notions of human life, societies that lived sustainably for thousands if not tens of thousands of years.

Non-industrialized, first-nation, indigenous societies around the world have a very different worldviews from common Western assumptions about human superiority and separation from Nature. These societies display a whole different awareness of humanity's place walking *with* the earth, not simply on it, and walking in its relational grasp (Cooper, 1998; Ingold, 1999). Many first nations peoples around the world come from cultures that lived sustainably and relatively peacefully (Fry, 2006) for tens of thousands of years. What accounts for both the sustainability and flourishing of first nations societies? The epigenetic and developmental neurobiological causes of this different way of being are being delineated by scholars (McGilchrist, 2009; Narvaez, 2014; Shepard, 1998). It may have to do with the processes of childrearing and social support which appear to foster greater wisdom, morality and flourishing (Narvaez & Gleason, 2013; Narvaez, Gleason et al., 2013). For example, several scholars have noted the power of early life experience on neurobiological and social capacities as well as worldview (Panksepp, 2001; Prescott, 1996; Schore, 2001; Tomkins, 1965). Most recently, Narvaez (2014) has suggested that the missing evolved developmental niche plays a large role in undermining sense and sensibility in adulthood including cultural assumptions about the natural world. In many Western societies, there has been a divorce between adult behavior

and the development of wellbeing in children--with a blindness about the immaturity of humans at full-term birth, humans as dynamic systems who require the evolved developmental niche to foster species-typical development, and lengthy, intensive support to reach maturity (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005; Hrdy, 2009; Konner, 2005, 2010). When this species-typical niche or nest is missing, individuals are misdeveloped in the ways widespread in advanced nations—restless and unattached to the local nonhumans and landscape, focused on economic self-interest at the expense of future generations (Narvaez, 2014).

OBJECTIVES AND NEED

Detachment from close connection (parents to children, family to family member; human to non-humans) is now built into USA institutions and systems (Derber, 2013). The received view is that it is just human nature to be competitive and selfish with collateral destruction. But nature is cooperative “all the way down” (e.g., to cell function, microbiome within every human body) with competition a minor component (e.g., most is conserved generation to generation; Margulis, 1998). Dominant Western beliefs in individualism, human superiority and separation from nature and their resulting practices are odd, rare and even aberrant when considered from the perspective of the whole of human cultures (Sahlins, 2008). As noted, Western economics and other dominant Western paradigms have been built on shutting out responsible relations with the natural world. The type of Western culture that dominates influential institutions (business, industry, military, education, politics, religion) continues to show the attitudes of objectified Nature and hegemonic destruction of biocultural diversity around the world. Globalized culture often seems unable to perceive an alternative to the current pathway of increased control and domination of nature and cultures that do not conform to the globalized format.

Societies that live like 99% of human genus history provide evidence for an alternative course for human development and humanity’s relationship with the rest of Nature (Fry, 2006; Ingold, 1999). Many first-nations peoples of the earth have lived well and kindly with the earth for generations. Their companionship orientation-- to raising children, to living with humans and nonhumans-- fosters enduring wisdom, morality and flourishing (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Deloria, 2006).

In contrast, the rise of the modern world, rooted in domination of Nature and technological progress, has increasingly revealed its shortcomings and unsustainability through human-caused cultural, ecological and biodiversity destruction (IPCC, 2007, 2013; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). In order to save the human species and many others with it, this needs to change. Though the modern outlook, through science, has been coming around to better appreciate the sustainable outlooks of “first ways” in terms of sustainable practices better rooted in an ecological mindset and the importance of landscape and cultural diversity, there remains a disconnect when it comes to the possibilities of sustainable wisdom. Native American peoples are reinvigorating traditional practices and can provide insight into sustainable, respectful human cultures that have profound import for the contemporary world. (e.g., Kimmerer, 2013). The technological mindset of the modern world needs to integrate the wise ways and sustainable, relational lifestyles of indigenous peoples (Pio et al., 2013).

The book brings together an interdisciplinary set of scholars ready to disseminate first-nation wisdom in order that it might be integrated with mainstream contemporary understandings in order to move toward a flourishing planet. We take Paul Shepard’s words as a guide:

A journey to our primal world may bring answers to our ecological dilemmas... White European/Americans cannot become Hopis or Kalahari Bushmen or Magdalenian bison hunters, but elements in those cultures can be recovered or re-created because they fit the heritage and predilection of the human genome everywhere, a genome tracing back to a common ancestor that Anglos share with Hopis and Bushmen and all the rest of Homo sapiens. The social, ecological, and ideological characteristics natural to our humanity are to be found in the lives of foragers.

Must we build a new twenty-first-century society corresponding to a hunting/gathering culture? Of course not; humans do not consciously make cultures. What we can do is single out those many things, large and small, that characterized the social and cultural life of our ancestors—the terms under which our genome itself was shaped—and incorporate them as best we can by creating a modern life around them. We take our cues from primal cultures, the best wisdom of the deep desires of the genome. We humans are instinctive culture makers; given the pieces, the culture will reshape itself. (Coming Home to the Pleistocene, 1998)

How can we integrate the best of modern technology and capacities with the wisdom of first nations? The book looks deeply into the mindsets, practices and wisdom of first nation peoples across multiple disciplines. The goals of the book are to (a) Increase understanding of “first” ways; (b) Demonstrate how indigenous cultures foster wisdom, morality and flourishing; (c) Find commonalities among different indigenous societies in fostering these outcomes; (d) Develop synergistic approaches to shifting human imagination towards “first ways.” We expect that the symposium will help us envision ways to move toward integrating helpful modern advances with first ways into a new encompassing viewpoint—where the greater community of life (diverse human and nonhuman entities) are included in conceptions of wellbeing and practices that lead to flourishing.

In this academic book we propose to bring together an interdisciplinary set of scholars to consider indigenous wisdom from multiple disciplines and to integrate this wisdom with modern knowhow. The contributors to the academic volume were selected for their specialty areas which range from science, history, education, psychology, and anthropology. The purpose of the book is to bring to a wider audience an awareness of “first ways,” what we know about their effects on flourishing and how to integrate them into modern life for global flourishing.

Chapter 1: “First Ways for a Flourishing Planet” By the Editors

However one measures inclusive wellbeing, the human species as we know it could be headed for extinction as it continues to behave suicidally in lifestyle decisions and actions. The warning signs of a planet in distress have brought out the Cogi People of Colombia, who have lived in seclusion for centuries. They contacted the BBC in 1990 to convey a message to the “younger brother,” Western civilization, to stop destroying the earth. They could discern from their mountain-top living that the natural world was in peril. Their ethics come from the land itself: “The Great Mother taught us right and wrong. Now they are digging up the Mother’s heart, and her eyes and ears. Stop digging and dinging. Do not cut down trees—they hurt, like cutting off your own leg.” (Eliare, 1990) (quoted on p. 98, Cooper). “If crops aren’t properly blessed, they dry up...that’s how it is” (Eliare, 1990). “If we act well, the earth will survive. If we do not, it

will not” (Callicott, 1989, p. 90). More recently, such indigenous wisdom has also found form in the emerging scientific concept of the “Anthropocene” since 2000, of significant human-influenced impacts on global ecosystems, and a potential sixth major period of major extinctions already underway.

In order to change course, several key aspects of living must change. Indigenous wisdom provide a grounding for insights into living in sustainable, peaceful and respectful ways with earth biodiversity. This book will discuss many of these insights. However, the modern world has advanced human technology, theory and practice in unprecedented ways, some of which may be useful in rethinking ways to life respectfully and sustainably. And some which have not. This book attempts to offer indigenous wisdom and reflection about better understanding what we should take with us and what we should leave behind. This book also aims to integrate modern and first ways.

SECTION 1: UNDERSTANDING HUMANITY’S PAST

Chapter 2: “The deep past: What can ancient hunter-gatherers tell us about human nature?” by Penny Spikins

Discussions about human nature, and about whether humans are innately competitive or collaborative are often driven by our experience of society *today*. We all too easily see ourselves as some pinnacle of achievement and moreover assume that the key features which seem to define us - competition and a certain mastery over nature - drove human success. Yet modern western industrialised societies stand out as a recent, unusual and even rather bizarre phenomenon when we take the perspective of the deep past of evolving human societies. Here Spikins will consider what the archaeological evidence for our deep past as human and pre-human hunter-gatherers living thousands and even millions of years ago can tell us about human success. Spikins questions why extensive evidence for collaboration and compassion has been ignored or misrepresented to fit into a narrative of selfish competition.

Chapter 3. “Indigenous Bodies, Civilized Selves, and the Escape from the Earth” by Eugene Halton

Civilization can be understood as a progressive regression, beginning with the development of anthropocentric mind, contracting from long term evolutionary attunement to the informing properties of wild nature to a human centered outlook progressively dependent on human constructions of domesticated settlement. Later, through the turn toward more reflective consciousness in the moral revolution/axial age period centered roughly around 600 BCE, civilization was enabled to take another step further from the wild, though not as progress. And in the modern era the process continued through the elevation of the machine, involving progress in precision, coupled with a progressive regression from a sustainable worldview. Far from controlling nature, humans have been consuming it in an unsustainable Malthusian-like trajectory whose limits are being reached in our time. The contraction to anthropocentric mind, with the development of civilization and its later phase of the moral revolution/axial age, and further contraction to mechanico-centric mind in the modern era, unnecessarily denied the enduring and ultimately sustainable conditions implied by that legacy, tempered into the human body.

Chapter 4: “‘Woman Is the Mother of All’: Rising from the Earth” by Barbara Mann

Although Western anthropology has finally if begrudgingly acknowledged the existence of Indigenous American matriarchies as a modern (not a “pre-industrial”) organizing principle of culture, it lags in recognizing that matriarchies also developed a strong economic system in the gift economy. Western orthodoxy aside, gifting is not basic bartering necessarily preliminary to greed-based exchange economies. Instead, the Indigenous gift economy is independent of, and forms the best alternative to, the overweening Western exchange economy of capitalism, a system that evolved from the economics of European raiding cultures. Indeed, capitalism is parasitic on the underlying gift economy, which although weakened, still sustains all exchange, although Mother Earth can stand no more of capitalism’s rip-and-run raids on her assets.

Premised on the gifting posture of a mother toward her child, which in turn stimulates a gifting ethos in the child, Indigenous gift economies come from a matriarchal production basis that deliberately takes as little as possible, yet enough sufficient easily to satisfy, needs. In this managed balance, needs” are not construed as pertaining solely to human two-leggeds, for every aspect of life, including the spirit lives of rocks, water, and air, are considered. Like the plants, insects, and other animals, humans have a responsibility to replenish the supply of that which was taken while nurturing that which exists, engendering the conservation tillage of mound agriculture by women (copied from the imagery of suckling a mother’s breast) and the forest husbandry of game preserves managed by men. Regular gifting festivals ensure that all the children of Mother Earth shared equally in her loving bounty and, historically, care was taken to create such things as ceremonial mounds, to remind Mother Earth of the rituals that occurred there to ensure the continuing gifts of all to each other.

Chapter 5. “Original Practices for Becoming and Being Human” by Darcia Narvaez

Every animal has a nest that matches up with the maturational schedule of the offspring. Human infants are highly immature at birth with most of the brain developing in the first years after birth in response to the care provided. As social mammals who emerged over 30 million years ago with intensive parenting, the human nest includes soothing perinatal experiences, responsiveness to needs to keep young children from extended distress, nearly constant touch or physical presence, years of on-request breastfeeding, self-directed free play, multiple adult caregivers, and positive social support. Converging evidence from social sciences show their importance. For example, in societies that provide the early nest, small-band hunter gatherers (long studied by anthropologists), the adults have similar calm, generous, and communal personalities. The early nest is correlated empirically with compassionate morality and its absence with self-protectionist morality.

SECTION 2: WAYS OF DOING SCIENCE AND RELATING TO NATURE

Chapter 6: “Science Education as Moral Education” by Greg Cajete (Tewa)

The presentation decolonizes the Eurocentric approach to science while revealing how Indigenous ecological knowledge, experience and understanding science is grounded in relationships that connect all forms of life. Native science is a way of coming to know rightful relationships that support life and includes building a sustainable Indigenous community. It is a

form of storytelling for understanding all relationships in the natural world. With references to astronomy, psychology, arts, games and practical biological insights, this knowledge may be essential for overcoming a dysfunctional cosmology that can no longer sustain us at any level.

Chapter 7: “Mother Earth vs. Mother Lode: Native Environmental Ethos, Sustainability, and Human Survival” by Bruce Johansen

The development of an environmental ethos in modern times reflects Native wisdom and values, as well as a recognition that traditional capitalism is a suicide pact (as Edward Abbey said decades ago, “the ideology of the cancer cell.”) I will trace the development of this ethos and its adaptation in non-Native society as necessary for human survival. My primary exhibit of this adaptation will be increasing awareness of global warming and its intensifying perils for coming generations. I examine alternative views of Native American Peoples.

SECTION 3: WAYS OF BEING HUMAN

Chapter 8: “Spiritual Connections, Relations and Obligations: The Necessary Transmission of Tlingit Existential Principles and Practices” by Steve J. Langdon

The Tlingit cosmos is filled with spiritual presence, essences and powers that exist both within and beyond direct experience. Tlingit life is fundamentally relational in that interactions with other spirits establishes the basis for existence and welfare. All spiritual forms are attentive, sentient, and volitional and positive relations based on moral requirements are essential to the maintenance of existence. These necessary relations must be based on respect and violation of the principle of respect can threaten existence at many levels. Pedagogy and morality are interwoven in the transmission of principles and practices across generations. It is through the continuous circulation of respect – in thought, speech and deed – exhibited in connections and fulfillment of obligations in various socially and ritually prescribed ways that Tlingit pursue a morality that seeks to insure the continuity of existence. The Tlingit cosmos is founded on the principle of relational sustainability and the through morally binding respectful relations, the continuity of existence is maintained.

Chapter 9: “Indigenous Spirituality: A Matter of Significance” by Four Arrows (aka Dr. Don Trent Jacobs; Cherokee)

Four Arrows will describe the essence of spirituality that permeates across the great variety of Indigenous cultural beliefs and traditions. He will incorporate ideas relating to embracing the unknown and unknowable; giving significance to all life forms; embracing an authentic “oneness” concept of reality; believing in other-than-human teachers in both the visible and invisible worlds that surround us; and understanding life and death as two sides of the same coin.

Chapter 10: “Listening to the Trees” by Tom McCallum (White Standing Buffalo) (Métis)

Tom McCallum seamlessly weaves the story of his transformative childhood vision into the great vision of balance in the spiral of life and the ceremony of the Sundance. He also gives an inside view from the original instructions, also later in its visionary language, and provides

examples of how to understand these ideas from outside of science, with evidence from *The Secret Life of Trees*, fractals, and other sources of data. The ideas of transformative spiritual energy as embedded in original instructions and encountered in vision and ceremony are not easy for the modern mind to accept or even understand. Yet this chapter does a wonderful job of stating the ideas themselves firsthand as well as providing contexts for them.

SECTION 4: INTEGRATED FUTURES

Chapter 11: “Nature Sense to Innate Wisdom: Effective Connection Modeling & Regenerating Human Beings” by Jon Young

Human beings are facing a great connection challenge. The history of people worldwide continues to have devastating effects on our very humanity. The prevailing worldview, based on many generations of ancestral trauma, has resulted in and perpetuates the current epidemic of separation. This separation has resulted in widespread repercussions to the body, mind, spirit, and the natural world. The process Young brings forward in these challenging times is to facilitate the learning of reconnection to oneself, to each other and to nature. The restoration of this connection is critical to the continuance of life itself. Based largely on the intergenerational transfer of skills and connection-based knowledge, Young has come to call this approach, *cultural mentoring and connection modeling*. This model results in “cultural repair”— as one of the primary functions of a culture is to provide for connection— and therefore aids in the reestablishment of a thriving, regenerative culture for future generations. Connection modeling has been successfully learned and applied in over three hundred communities around the world, providing measurable results and proof of concept. When connection modeling is understood and applied, and when the outcomes are measured in terms of connection, it results not only in nature connection, but in “deep nature connection”— a relational interconnectedness that transcends the separation of the self to nature. Deep nature connection results in measurable attributes that arise in the connected individual: happiness, vitality, unconditional listening capability, empathy, true initiative and helpfulness in service to people, nature and the future generations, a sense of awe, respect and wonder; compassion and love; a quiet mind and unbridled creativity—access to one’s unique genius.

Chapter 12: “Modern (Intellectual) Shamans and Wisdom for Sustainability” by Sandra Waddock

Ancient traditions of shamanism in the form of intellectual shamanism may be helpful in guiding our world towards sustainability. Intellectual shamanism is defined by three attributes: healing, connecting, and sensemaking in the service of a better world. Linked to the idea of wisdom, defined as the integration of moral imagination (the good), systems understanding (the true), and aesthetic sensibility (the beautiful) in the service of a better world, intellectual shamanism can, Waddock will argue, be a way for academics to make a difference in the world. In part, she believes that we need to bring a more shamanic perspective to the roles of business and economics in our world. Such a perspective would incorporate notions of wellbeing for all, where all in the shamanic sense, truly does mean humans, all other living beings, all aspects of nature, and the Earth itself considered as the living entity, Gaia. Incorporating what scholars Donaldson and Walsh (2015) have called collective value, such a shamanic approach

would accord dignity—inherent worth—to all of these aspects of our world and, by extension to the ways in which we humans through our business and other activities treat the world around us. Such an approach would make for a radically different approach to business and business school education.

Chapter 13: “For a Tattered Planet: Art and Tribal Continuance by Kimberly Blaeser

Poet Kim Blaeser provides us with deep hope as she tells us the story of some reasons Native people create art and gets to why she creates art through her words for her people, for all people. Blaeser writes, “Native spaces still exist in our everyday landscapes,” and goes on to say and show “how readily we can re-inhabit them.” This idea that all is not lost, but rather that we can re-inhabit the things that are special, important, and spiritual is fundamental to our human experience as we must believe that we have the opportunity and the ability to re-claim and re-inhabit. As Blaeser shows in this work Native artists are revered because as Paul Chaat Smit says they are asked “to lead the revolution.” Blaeser discusses this revolution and shows how it looks in the arms of beauty through her picto-poems she includes in this chapter.

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