



Aboriginal Spirituality

My Church

*When I pray
I go to the forest
I go to a place
that no man
could have created,
only God.
The forest is the only cathedral
I know.*

By Rose (Ojibwa)

Steal My Rage: New Native Voices;
Douglas & McIntyre; ed. Maki, Joel, T., 1995 (p. 38)

Background Information

The Natural World & Spirituality

Aboriginal Peoples across the Americas had/have a common value system and a commonality of spiritual concepts, without religious warfare - coinciding with the preservation of the natural and bountiful beauty of the Earth. It is acknowledged - to this very day- that humans have been, and always will be, totally dependant upon the natural and animal worlds for survival. This is a characteristic of all Indigenous peoples. This

respect for the natural environment enabled the First Nations to exist for thousands of years without need of migration. When and if migration occurred, it was due to natural phenomenon and not because of a social system that favored some (the wealthy) and constrained others (the poor) as found throughout European history.

It is perplexing, frustrating and distressing for many Aboriginal individuals, organizations, councils and communities to witness behaviours indicative of anything less than reverence towards humankind's very source of sustenance: the environment, the ecology, the Earth - humankind's Life Force. The ethics of non-interference, balance, harmony and respect all come into play and form the basis of Aboriginal Spirituality.

The Ethic of Relatedness

For traditional Aboriginal Peoples, the union of Nature, Human, and the Spirit World are the three realms of inter-connected existence. Until recent history, Aboriginal Peoples co-existed with the natural world thus developed a profound understanding of the harmony and fragility found within it. Air, fire, earth, water, trees, mountains, animals, birds, plants, insects, fish, etc. are interrelated and interdependent; therefore, essential to our human survival. We need Nature. Nature does not need us. For the modern human being to tamper with the fragile eco-system is to tamper with the very existence of Humankind. This ethic of Relatedness is an awareness residing at the forefront of Aboriginal spiritual consciousness.

Independent of nature is the cosmos, the universe: the stars, the sun, the moon, the planets, the galaxies, the Earth. Indigenous Peoples keenly observed the patterns and cycles of the night skies and the interconnectedness of these celestial elements enough to know there was a Great Mystery at work. The Aboriginal Peoples knew, long before the European "discovered", that the Earth was round. This phenomenon was demonstrated in the cosmos and reflected in nature itself i.e. birds build their nests in a perfect circle. The trunk of a tree is round. The great eagle circles the sky. The seasons go round and round, human life is a cycle, and so on and so forth. Everything within traditional Aboriginal culture celebrates this natural phenomenon: the Medicine Wheel, the patterns of ceremonial dance and ritual, the configuration of the encampment, lodging and council architecture, the drum, the Talking Circle, etc. Traditional clothing, footwear, and objects of daily use are marked with design that remind all of the interconnectedness of the three realms. For thousands of years, indigenous peoples highly revered everything found within nature and the universe and were inherently conscious of humankind's connection to all. This respect is evident in tribal song, dance, ritual, and ceremony.

Recognizing the human being as just one intricate part of creation indicates why the virtue of Humility permeates Aboriginal spiritual awareness. If one recognizes the immensity of the universe, that the Earth is dependant on the Sun, the plant and animal worlds are dependant on both the Sun and the Earth, and we are dependant on the plant and animal worlds, all is part of one Great Mystery. As everything is interrelated and co-existent then, according to Aboriginal spiritual beliefs, an animal can have spiritual significance, a human can have animal traits - as the clan system represents - and the

spirit world can commune with the human world. Traditional Peoples walked/walk with this knowledge as a fundamental part of their daily existence.

Through the process of Christianization, some Aboriginal individuals and communities have, as a result, suffered a disconnect to the ancient value of honoring the Land as an exercise in Humility and Gratitude. Yet, as an inherent philosophy, many will combine Christian faith while still relating strongly to cultural symbols. Some communities still exist in a culture of shame in regards to their Indigenous beliefs and practices. Many continue to live with the “Fear of God” as imposed by the Christian missionaries. Others are attuned to the ancient belief system; there is an ever-increasing movement to reclaim inherent Aboriginal Spirituality.

Teaching Unit

Aboriginal Spirituality does not exist as a separate entity from the whole person. It is an equal aspect of the physical, the intellectual, and the emotional components of the human being. In order to understand the concept, one must understand the importance of all components. Once understood, one’s journey is spent nurturing, developing, honoring and respecting all four components of our human existence. In doing so, it is said, one accomplishes a balanced well being, a healthy consciousness, harmonious living, and a respectful relationship with self and others.

The Medicine Wheel is a visual teaching tool which aids in comprehending the indigenous philosophy of Life and daily living ideals.

Exercise 1 – Divide the class into four groups – avoid using numbers to identify each group, since mainstream culture is conditioned to think #1 is better than # 4 - Use the colours of the Medicine Wheel: Red; Black; White; Yellow OR the four cardinal directions OR the four stages of Life OR the four seasons, etc.

Each group is given one of the four aspects of the self to:

- brainstorm a definition;
- find examples of how one nurtures, develops, or expresses this quality within the human species.

Each group will be asked to share their work.

Exercise 2 – Teacher draws a large circle on the board, divided equally into four and labeled with the components of the self: Spiritual; Intellectual; Emotional; Physical; As each group shares their findings, the teacher will record information in the appropriate quadrant, add clarification, and discuss with the entire group.

Conclusion of Exercise: Examples should reveal how many from each category overlap and compliment each other. For example: Emotions can be expressed through the arts e.g. painting – which becomes a physical item, and may serve as a symbol or icon; Spirituality may be an intellectual process through research and study of doctrine; The

Physical (natural) environment may produce a spiritual sensation; Intellectual discovery may be achieved through our emotional relationships with others, etc.

Focus: The Spiritual Direction, from an Aboriginal Perspective may include:

- the inexplicable; an awareness of the Great Mystery of Creation;
- a sensation of the existence of non-physical energies; a belief in an afterlife;
- an ability to communicate with spirit guides or ancestors; an insight to dreams, wise interpretations of visions;
- an appreciation of being connected to “the present”; striving healthily towards the future; giving thanks for all bestowed upon us;
- being grateful for Life;
- conscious of how we are able to survive as a species, how we are sustained;
- aware of our co-existence with every other living organism;
- practicing prayer and/or meditation; acknowledging that our bodies will come to an end;
 - feeling secure in solitude; appreciation of what is not made by man; practicing what you preach (“walking the red road”);
- an organic rather than an intellectual approach to religion; an awareness that our actions influence and affect others;
- the permeation of wise teachings or codes of conduct into your very being; thorough, daily practice (attitude) from “sunrise to sunset”;
- respecting every given situation;
- participating in ritual and ceremony to help awaken or celebrate values and beliefs;
- acknowledging the importance of balancing the whole person and acting upon it.

Activity – Using the Medicine Wheel (MW) as a Tool of Self-Reflection

Step 1 - Background

Have students briefly describe, in writing, a typical “Day in the Life”. You may want them to do one, typical a week day as well as a typical, uneventful day on the weekend.

Step 2 - Stimulus

Have you ever felt “out of sorts”, down, blue, irritable, lethargic, etc. for no apparent reason?

Step 3 - Instruction

Draw your own Medicine Wheel and contemplate how much time & energy you are giving to each direction. Teacher should model their own Wheel as an example.

Please Note: Most students will have the intellectual & emotional aspects of their selves outweighing the physical and spiritual directions.

Determine what can be done in order to help swing wheels into balance, e.g., go to bed earlier; eat healthier (less junk food!); exercise; fresh air; water; sunshine; solitude; spending time in natural setting outdoors, honouring roles & responsibilities, etc.

Step 4 - Talking Circle

students will be asked to explain their wheel within the context of a sacred circle i.e. confidential, respectful, and following all traditional protocols*

Application – Reconstruct

In writing, the *ideal* day (a weekday & on the weekend) based on the Medicine Wheel Teachings of Balance, Harmony & Happiness.

Conclusion

Teacher must remind students that their Wheels of Balance may shift many times during the day, week, month, year and Lifetime. There are times when one's directions will be naturally outweighed e.g., during exams; when grieving; training for sports competition, etc. These are temporary conditions that one may rationalize; however, if one remains in a state of imbalance, one will feel detrimental effects that will eventually require attention or even assistance in striving to regain the natural order of being.

Creative, Visual Application Project

Instruct students to artistically design their own personal medicine wheel that serves to define their current life & practices.

Notes re further development:

- include another example of MW exercise (text book p. 15) -include composite of medicine wheel
- include websites for further exploration of Aboriginal Spirituality/MW Teachings
- introduce the spiritual ethics/codes of behaviour of different nations (Respect as common denominator) see handout*
- include quotes from *Touch the Earth* i.e., traditional perspectives, observations & commentaries re “white man’s religion”