

Thoughts on Consciousness,  
Relationship and Community

by

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In the Native paradigm, knowledge belongs to the people as a collective. It is our legacy and is gathered, shared and contributed for the good of all. So I begin with thanks and gratitude to all my relations for their knowledge, wisdom and their generosity in sharing the beauty of their thoughts.

There is a dual challenge in speaking about consciousness in English. They are the speaking and the English. For I am attempting to translate into a noun-based language a world learned, known and experienced as a process, expressed in process-based languages, and commonly shared without words. To speak about consciousness is an experience a friend described as like talking about talking.

The thoughts I will share do not follow a linear progression but circle. Elements appear, disappear and reappear showing themselves in different dress. In the center of the circle is relationship, because it is relationship that lies at the heart of the Indigenous worldview, and it is relationship from which our consciousness comes. Relationship defines our way of seeing, knowing and being in the world. As you read, if you listen for relationship you'll begin to hear the song and feel the harmony of what is appearing.

For some this may be a long journey from your accustomed way of viewing the world. It is important to understand that there is no expectation that you agree with or subscribe to what I am saying. Only that for a short time, you suspend your beliefs so that you may entertain a

different view. There is no challenge involved, no response required because in the Indigenous world, we accept as equal many different views and explore them for complementarities, resonance and dissonance. One reason we've developed the art of consensus is the value found in diverse perspectives. My hope is that we will walk the circle of these thoughts together, in a way that makes visible my views of consciousness and that these words will be heard not as metaphor but as lived experience.

Often when Native people speak about occurrences in realms of consciousness that are not visible in the day to day western world, using words like ceremony, song and dream, they are thought of as magical, but what is magic other than a simple shifting of consciousness and perception? In an animate universe, where time is not linear, where space is perceived as a chaotic wholeness existing within and around us, we humans have duties and responsibilities to maintain and renew balance and harmony. When you live as part of the process of life you are in intimate relationship and constant communication with the forms of life that surround you. Communications come in different languages: the sounds in the wind, the direction of a bird's flight, your attention caught by a stone, a leaf, or lost keys.

The universe to which I belong is conscious, animate and interactive. Time is movement. It is an unending shifting of patterns that appear and disappear in multiple layers of rhythms. Concepts of a linear and finite time are foreign and are superimposed over an innate experience of time. Space is a constantly transforming flux. From this view of the world, "relationship" best describes the origin of consciousness. It is relationship to place that lies at the heart of learning, and where we discover the pleasures, obligations, kindnesses and duties of self in kinship. In an exploration of relationship and interdependence we immerse our sensibilities, integrate wordless knowing and within the spontaneous patterns of time, create and share our expressions of what we have come to know and how we have come to know it.

The voices of consciousness are heard through our senses. Through feeling, they make themselves known. In a purely intellectual

perception of reality, one that suppresses or dismisses feeling, it is a simple step to isolate or limit meaning from thought, choice from action, and to feed spiraling levels of excess that starve the spirit. Human creativity confined to such slender channels and aspects of reality shape a malnourished society. It is this malnourishment that sustains the many loops of addiction.

To live in relationship with an animate world is to embody the art of listening. It is in the internal world of the senses where we find the connection to the creation and to that which created it. That internal place of connection is the place from which we listen. It is not possible to have a good relationship without permitting the intimacy of hearing what is being spoken in whatever languages are used. What is heard and how it is heard, if perceived as belonging only to the intellect, will deliver too narrow an understanding to allow full comprehension.

Through nourishing the internal connection the voices of the creation can meet the senses. Then, using the physical world as teacher, the communications are heard, understood and interacted with. Through these interactions one is formed as a person of community. It is the same as the way water forms the land, or the wind forms the feather, bringing intelligence, meaning, shape and function. The English words "person" and "community" infer separate worlds, an inference unique to the Eurocentric paradigm, and it is in this language of dividing and holding in place where fragmentation lives. Inversely, this noun language also fuels the desire for connection and wholeness, but the journey to wholeness is confusing, dangerous and lonely when feeling and meaning are left at the side of the path.

Developing oneself, in good relationship with life, is the first responsibility of a person of community. It is through our contributions that the dance of relationship is learned. Living as kin, in an animate reality, reveals the place of humans in the creation. Our place is equal, neither more than nor less than all other life forms. All forms are equal, yet each has its unique expression. Humans have their duties to maintain the creation as do the plants, insects, stones, winds and darkness. The concept of

hierarchy and "other-ness" are intellectual/social constructs devised by humans to create and further a reality based on notions of power.

The primary relationship from which we learn about the creation of life is the relationship between the male and female principles as they engage one another in nature. If I speak about the Sun as an embodiment of the male principle and the Earth as an embodiment of the female principle then it is easy to see how the meeting of these two forces and the quality of their meeting determines that which emerges from their coming together. The warmth of the sun, attracted to the dark fecundity of a receptive Earth, travels to her and in their meeting activates her power to give life. Learning the qualities of the female and male principles as they are expressed throughout the natural world brings us to the essence of these principles and the opportunity to re-discover knowings and meanings, boundaries and purposes that are inherent in them. The heart of a conscious world comes alive in dancing the balance that brings these two principles into harmony over and over and over again. By appreciating, sustaining, enjoying and renewing them we attract a creative relationship that connects the living universe and the person, the couple, the family, the community and the society. By living in awareness that we are of the Earth, we come to recognize and respect our interdependence.

Learning the essence and expressions of these two principles is a life-long journey. We must understand both, of course, since both the male and female live inside us. I explore the consciousness of the feminine, its interplay and expressions, as one of my duties as a woman. In a matriarchal society, such as the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois Confederacy, one of the primary expressions of the feminine principle is to animate, model, guide and influence ethical social conduct. This is done in many ways, one of them is the preservation of culture and traditions, which promote harmony among the people, and serve and defend life. This confederacy, founded on the Great Law of Peace in about 1000 AD, ended war among the Mohawk, Onondaga, Oneida, Seneca, Cayuga and later the Tuscarora tribes. It has continued unbroken to the present day. In modern times it is still the responsibility of the Clan Mothers to select or remove the fifty

co-equal chiefs that make up the Grand Council of the Confederacy<sup>1</sup> as well as the moderator, (Tadodaho), who presides over them.

The female principle with its power to attract is intended to influence and provide structure to the potent force of the male principle. The strength of the feminine capacity for receptivity, vision, intuition and the realms of the senses provide guidance and protection to our societies as well as inspiration and innovation. The masculine principle, the energy that fertilizes, initiates, and implements, has the power to arouse and to penetrate. In its mature expression there is the ability to expand beyond the narrow viewpoints fed by desire and ambition and to cultivate discernment and wisdom. It is difficult to speak about these matters in an environment where the words "feminine" and "masculine" are often politicized, pathologized, commoditized, and distorted. Nevertheless, in a world that is conscious, distortions fall away and deeper, richer and wiser understandings of the feminine and masculine return to view. Essential dignities, meanings and purpose are respected as gifts, skills, and abilities and recognized as sacred components for the continuance of life.

When something is innately equal, struggling to prove that it is so creates a dynamic that includes dependence on the oppression against which one is struggling. The need to be heard, to be visible and respected as a valued part of life is a basic need and originates in what is called by some the "Great Mystery" or "That Which Creates" or in the I Ching, "The Creative."

Authenticity and a sense of validity emerge from the internal world to be reflected in the external world. In a society that is unbalanced or dominated by a single worldview, the act of "proving" becomes rooted in an assumption that only what is defined as rational within that worldview can be real. But if you look to the Earth, you see that what manifests remains invisible until it is birthed from the internal into a temporal reality. From an internal place of learning, proof of equity is seen in the embodiment and animation of principles congruent with the natural laws of harmony and balance. Expressions of equality

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<sup>1</sup> *Wisdomkeepers*, S.Hall & H.Arden, 1990. Interview with Leon Shenandoah, p.102

generated from an internal knowing carry a refinement that comes from reflection and exploration. These expressions strengthen and broaden the experience of relationship. They feed the ability to generate harmony and cultivate perseverance, respect, humor and humility.

When the feminine and masculine principles are out of balance in an individual, they convey that imbalance into our communities, institutions and across the culture. Imbalance is the central element of oppression. Not oppression of the feminine, but oppression of the masculine as well because you cannot oppress one without distorting both. Oppression does not discriminate. It oppresses all. Its invisible and pervasive force deadens the senses, suppresses the spirit and censors creativity. Oppression stimulates oppositional thinking and actions. But there are subtler consequences that go unnoticed. In the battle to prove equity, one engages the energies of the oppressor and they may become integrated in our persons, camouflaging one's own essence. It is like stirring a drop of vibrant color into a clear, viscous substance, slowly it merges and changes the appearance.

In the years since World War II, with the continued flow of women in large numbers into the worlds of the academe, science and commerce, we find ourselves at a place in the process where there has been an on-going cultivation of masculine energy. It has been a critical learning process that women needed to enter the world and weaken the oppression against them. However, without sustaining and honoring the feminine principle, we cannot restore harmony, health or beauty to a Creation that is taking stronger and stronger actions to balance itself. As we exhaust ourselves by exceeding the natural limits given to us by our senses, they shut down and we cannot easily or naturally access the wisdom of the feminine principle. There is sleight of hand at work in the co-opting and commoditization of female strength, intelligence and loyalty. It is not a conspiracy of one group against another so much as a surrender of will and the gift of choice. It leaves all, female and male, and sadly, our young, adrift confused, overwhelmed and following self-images provided by an unconscious media.

Many women have absorbed the wounds that are the price of dissolving a history of submission. Many men have allowed themselves to be changed

and have examined for themselves what it means to be male in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. They have allowed their sense of justice to move them to be champions for the changes that were and are needed.

What has still to emerge in the world is overt recognition and valuing of the feminine principle. By its nature, the feminine is subtle and mysterious and though its expressions are myriad, full and rich, most often it is known as an inexorable influence that does not trumpet its presence. There is a conundrum here. Qualities associated with the feminine such as nurturing and sensitivity are subtle. Subtleties do not thrive in the glare of attention, though they flourish with appreciation. Recognition of the importance of the feminine principle will not lend itself to advocacy, argument or absolutes. Its recognition is much the same as when we sing an honoring song or dance the name of a loved one who has passed into the other world. There is a depth of meaning in the appreciation that calls forth a response of shared feeling.

This is an invitation to an on-going conversation with one another and with ourselves to deepen our understanding and expression of the spirit of the feminine and masculine that lives within each of us and to be conscious of its expression and effect in the material world. It is my belief that in these difficult times life needs us to explore these principles in the context of renewing a creation that is endangered from an overabundance of masculine force often generated by both sexes.

And what of the potent force of the masculine? It seems that the material world is intent on exploiting the male drive, encouraging and demanding that men work themselves to the limits of their endurance, narrowing their lives and confining them within unexamined codes of behavior that ignore their sensitivity, their creativity, and their dignity. Attempts to explore authenticity are discouraged using ridicule and the politics of masculinity. However, none of these social forces are sufficient to suppress the masculine in its great beauty and strength. Exploring the masculine principle requires encouragement and commitment along with a ready sense of humor. A man I consider to be wise once advised me not to fear humiliation, he said to "cultivate a taste for it". In his human rights work he had often

been the person on the margins, the one who held views that challenged people and institutions to examine their words and actions. What he meant was that when you no longer fear being humiliated, you are free to recognize and honor your own truth as well as the truth of others.

How to explore the feminine and masculine principles? Perhaps we first consider that the senses are the guide that leads us to the harmony from which form emerges. The natural world is consciousness and harmony in form. So are humans, and our cells hold the memory of the harmony that birthed us. In Carol Anthony's re-visioning of the I Ching,<sup>2</sup> she speaks about the senses: "The senses include a person's five physical senses and the metaphorical senses"— what can be called the deeper senses, such as the sense of fairness or the sense of belonging. The senses inform immediately as in, "Something doesn't feel right about this." When all those senses are in alignment, you have what Anthony calls, "inner truth," or consensus. This is an alignment of all the senses in resonance with the memory of the harmony from which life is conceived. The more the senses are appreciated and recognized, the greater the clarity. Those who explore the realms of consciousness through meditation and in other ways cultivate discernment, and the ability to differentiate between social constructs, individual fears and desires and what you know as true.

Receptivity is understood as a quality of the feminine, but what does it mean to be receptive? Isn't it the gift of feeling? As images precede words, feeling precedes emotion. The feminine strength to dream and to vision has served Indigenous societies for uncounted millennia. Whether the tribe was matriarchal or patriarchal, the masculine has always turned to the feminine for the guidance of their vision. The Women's Lodge, where women went during their moon time, was a place where they were free of responsibility during heightened sensitivity. They were free to dream and create unaffected by the intensity of masculine energy. The moon time was recognized as a time of heightened powers and it was respected. Women were not cast out of

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<sup>2</sup> "I Ching, The Oracle of the Cosmic Way," Carol K. Anthony, Hanna Moog, *I Chingbooks*, 2002, Anthony Publishing Company. Carol Anthony, respected I Ching scholar has published an interpretation of the I Ching describing the creation in terms of harmonics. Her writings have a resonance with Indigenous understandings of the processes of creation and transformation as well as the world of the quantum.



Indigenous society because they were unclean, as some people have mistakenly presumed.

Perhaps the most interesting portal from which to view the question of the feminine and masculine principles is to answer the question: "How do you know?" How often when asked that question do we turn not to an assessment of our senses which are in actuality, a most precise and reliable path to knowing, but instead to quickly look for an answer translated (when possible) to the linear, the rational, the logical. We humans have become brilliant, strategic and adept in making answers in the language of logic. But those answers with all their value are limited in that they can only generate change; they cannot invite or attract transformation. However it is not a matter of one or the other, of senses or intellect, of logic or feeling. That would be oppositional or binary thinking. It is a matter of order. Rather than leading with the intellect, one first follows the senses, perceives, explores, discerns. The intellect, informed by the senses, becomes a means, like the nib of a fine pen used to articulate. When only the intellect is used it develops rationales, positions, point and counterpoint. It is stimulating, but in the end, very much like a dog chasing its tail, lots of fun, but are you really getting anywhere?

Transformation occurs in the deeper realms. Transformation is subject to and guided by the laws of creation and the harmonics that allow it. Accessing the realms where transformation occurs is the best we can do. We cannot control transformation, we can invite it, make a place for it; nurture the conditions that will allow it. The human is a participant with permeable walls through which energies and the influences of those energies relate and interrelate with the creation, forming the quality of our societies and communities. To live aware of relationship demands sensitivity, subtlety, and humility. It does not satisfy the ego, which feasts on activity. This way of living calls for close attention to our way of being in the world. It allows not for one way or another but always a multiplicity of ways. It allows for a full palette of colors and nuances, for the uncountable aspects of creativity that make an expression unique to each person, and harmonizes it with the whole. Is such a way of living possible? I

think that question is one that can only be asked of humans. Other life forms practice it as a matter of course.

When the focus of our attention animates balance and renewal, there is an endless breadth of possibilities that nourish heart, spirit and creativity. There is coherence in a process that encourages the sharing of different understandings that add to the body of knowledge and meaning in support of life. The profound aspects of the feminine and masculine principles are sensible in a conscious world. All is interconnected and the wheel of movement, process and performance continues its spin, coming together and moving apart, appearing and disappearing in the chaos of the flux.

I envision a balanced world evolving through the healing and restoration of the masculine and feminine to their place of symmetry and cohesion. And because they live within one another, I see this accomplished through the restoration of feminine ways of knowing to its place of reverence and respect. This is critical because of the existing dominance of the masculine and the imbalance that has been created. It is a task in which many people are deeply engaged, this recovery and revitalization of the essential powers of the feminine and masculine principles. The distortion of male power has abused men and the spirits of men, warping and enslaving their creative drive. It has brought loneliness to men, to women and to our children. And it has brought grief and suffering to the Earth. Men and women who have nurtured their knowledge of the female and male principles project an understanding of the sacredness of life and a deep commitment to the visible inclusion of the profoundly feminine into mundane life. With courage, these ones look into the face of ignorance, of greed and of the brutalities that have resulted from dominance and control. These ones act to learn what must be known to protect, renew and preserve life. It is said that we carry our wounds as medicine for the healing. These ones use their consciousness to hold the stillness while they stand, speak and act with reverence for life and for the compelling need for a humility that is consistent with our limited view as humans. These are the ones who monitor their ambitions, master their desires, and examine their weaknesses to find the way to wisdom and compassion. They explore their mistakes, recognizing them as learning, and use

their knowledge to devise inclusive strategies, demonstrate productive collaborations and construct questions to draw out deeper answers that have the potential to move all to health and renewal.

What kind of story, what legends will be told about the time when balance was restored to the world, when we birthed from within ourselves the knowledge that is at the heart of creation. It will be a story that enthralls, a story whose focus is not rights and privileges but the inexorable influence of the power of the gentle, the call and response that comes when wisdom is enacted. It will be the story of how we animated in one another the deep knowledge of harmony that we carry.

I offer you these thoughts with respect and the wish that they will bring beauty, strength and a smile to your heart.

All my relations,