

When Worlds Collide
by Rev. Martin Woulfe
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One week ago, I was in Virginia. The travel from here to there required driving 12 hours, straight through. I drove past many rivers, many towns, through the mountains. I noticed their names. Many of their names are ancient. It has been said that the oldest names of any country are the names of the rivers and of the mountains. The names I encountered as I drove those 12 hours spoke of the names of peoples who long ago inhabited this continent. The names of the states themselves: Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, all echoed back to those people.

I remembered how, when I was younger, 18, I drove out west and had a similar experience, encountering many names of peoples in a tongue that we honored by keeping, of a people that had passed before. On that trip, I drove to Texas, then on to Colorado, visited the Grand Canyon, then on to California. I came to a small canyon. I took a break and sat on the edge of the canyon. There, in the cliffs, were small caves where people, hundreds of years ago, had lived, native Americans. The canyon was silent except for the occasional lizard. The sun was setting. I thought to myself, "Who were these people? What were their hopes, their dreams? Where are their children today?"

Tomorrow, as you know, is the day that is celebrated, or observed, as some would say, as Columbus Day. Historically it was a day when people on this continent - white people - celebrated the discovery of America by Europeans. The descendants of the people who were then living on this continent would beg to differ. They would say, "No, he did not discover this continent. We knew it was here. We were here." It was no more of a discovery than someone walking up to your house, knocking on the door, and saying, "Look what I found! This is now mine." For many people, the descendants of those original settlers, tomorrow is the anniversary of the invasion of the Europeans and the white people.

Entire communities become extinct in the course of several generations after first contact with those Europeans, some due to war; more due to pestilence, to the diseases that were brought inadvertently by these Europeans. When Cortez arrived in Mexico, he benefited from the fact that the Aztecs had a myth that a god would come from across the seas, a white god, who would bring in a new era. The emperor of the Aztecs, Montezuma, thought perhaps this man, Cortez, would be that white god. Cortez, when he learned about that myth, played it to the hilt. After a few battles, the Aztecs discovered their mistake. But at that point an epidemic broke out among the Aztec people and it's estimated that hundreds of thousands, if not upwards of a million, Aztecs died within several weeks, of the disease, which was perhaps smallpox or chickenpox, against which the natives had no immunity.

Imagine in the space of 2 weeks, a city's population destroyed. We use the word 'decimated', but that means 1 in 10. Imagine if half of an entire community - a thriving

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community - was suddenly wiped out. To the Aztecs, this represented great power, magic. They heard their tales about the god who came with these Europeans and they considered this must be a powerful god. The Europeans who came also considered this to be an act of god. How else, but by the hand of god almighty, could so few subjugate such a powerful nation? It worked well, to the advantage of the conquistadors who followed. They looted the Aztecs, the Mayans and the native peoples of their gold. They took their treasures back to Europe. They made Europe very powerful. The gold from the Americas financed many wars in Europe, and other expeditions to find more gold - cities of gold, it was rumored, perhaps even a fountain of youth.

It's a trait among many people, especially among those of European descent, but not exclusively, that they come looking to loot, to extract all that they can from a people, from the earth, be it gold or in our present day, oil. It's a long theme in our human race, and a sad, shameful theme.

The people today who can trace their ancestry back to the native Americans have dwindled in numbers, but they exert a powerful influence on our imagination. Many of us, when we have studied other religions, have looked and studied the native Americans. We have learned about such things as vision quests, their chants, their music. We have found them to be beautiful. We have listened to it and in some instances, mimicked it. In some cases, we have done this respectfully; in others, less so. I'll talk more about that later.

The native Americans were very diverse people and they are still so, today. You may know that on the national mall in Washington, D.C., very recently, a new museum has opened up, the Museum of the Native American. I read about this in the Smithsonian. One of the remarks that jumped out at me was as they were collecting artifacts and different things to put on display, the people who contributed these artifacts said, "Don't you dare make this museum a memorial: we are still very much alive. Our faith is still alive; our people are still alive. It is not a museum of things that have been, but of things that are and shall be."

The collision, as I call it, of these 2 cultures was powerful. The ramifications were immediately obvious to both Europeans and the native Americans in their day. Those consequences still reverberate through the generations. The earliest Europeans opened their Bibles, and they read stories of how the Israelites had conquered the land of Canaan, had slaughtered and enslaved people, and looted. That pretty much provided the text for what they did. As I mentioned, they saw the hand of god, they saw destiny at work, and that has very much filtered through the generations when talked about in American history, Manifest Destiny, about how the children of settlers will spread out over this continent. How we have a faith in one god, in god we trust, and what we do is justified by that faith, that god smiles on what we do, because might makes right. God is on the side that ultimately is victorious. It's a very old mentality that stretches back thousands of years through western civilization. It's still very much with us today. I will suggest to you that it is a savage mentality.

From time to time, people in the west, whether it's on this continent or in Europe, look about them and they feel rather disenchanted with what they see. They don't like their culture. They feel it's too materialistic. They feel something is missing, that there is no spiritual depth. So, they look and they study the native Americans. It's nothing new. Many people today do it, but they did it hundreds of years ago. One of the most famous examples is from Jean Jacques Rousseau, who wrote stories and entreaties on the 'noble savage'. People, hundreds of years ago, who were disheartened by their civilization, who felt they didn't have much meaning, turned away from their own religious traditions, which they felt were empty. They studied the 'noble savage'. In our own media, you will see, from time to time, how various movies will play up on that - the whole Tarzan franchise, *Dances with Wolves*, *Windtalkers*, just to name a few. There's a whole genre of movies that will lift up the native American spirit as something much more pure, simplistic, in tune with nature, and as an ideal we can learn from.

In many ways, that's very simplistic. The people who inhabited this country were not always peaceful. Some had wars. Some had empires. They had slaves, but not all. Contrary to the European experience, they did not have wars of extermination, such as we have experienced. Much more than we, they learned how to live with the rhythms of nature, to respect it, to respect life, to respect all nature. The greatest discovery of the 20th century, as far as I'm concerned, was by Albert Schweitzer, who proposed that there needs to be a new ethic, a reverence for life. It's a brilliant ethic. It's a pithy statement, but it gets to the heart of spirituality of the 20th century and perhaps this new 21st century. What Schweitzer was trying to express is something the native Americans knew very well: that life is sacred, all is interconnected, and we are part and parcel of nature. We are not masters of nature. We must learn to live in harmony with it.

It's a tall order. It's a difficult lesson to learn. Ours is a civilization which is driven by excess and consumption. We are consumers and we're very good at it, to our own detriment. Unlike the native American people, we don't ask the question, "Where did this come from? What are the consequences to myself? What are the consequences to our children?" We are learning, but we buy coffee that has been - well, the kind of coffee available here. We need to make very wise choices on how we spend our money and how we spend our time. Meanwhile, people are saying, "We need to simplify! We need to simplify!" The words 'feng shui' are probably very familiar.

People from our civilization feel themselves burdened by so much clutter. So we look at stories from the native Americans and we say, "How is it that our lives are so cluttered, and we really don't have time to enjoy life? We're caught in this constant pursuit for more." Yet, the native Americans have a tradition where they rejected many material goods. There are stories that, to show their disdain for materialism, some chiefs would burn all their material goods or give it all away, just to show these things were not burdens on themselves. We look at that and we find inspiration there. We say, "I don't want to burn everything I own. I don't necessarily want to give it

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away, everything I have. But I want to learn to be more generous in my spirit and more humble, perhaps.”

Some of us have studied native American traditions. Some of us borrow freely from a living tradition. Those of us who do study and do incorporate aspects of their tradition, I would ask you to be cautious and to be gracious. As I mentioned earlier, this is a living tradition. These are living peoples. If we take and use, we are not much better than the conquistadors who came and plundered the gold. They have lost their land. They have lost their resources. They have lost much. They were forced to learn our language. They are very particular about their religious traditions.

I came across a story a while back:

There was a television crew that traveled up the Amazon. They wanted to document the effects of all the lumbering crews, and how the land was being taken away for the lumber, and how the native peoples who lived up the Amazon were in danger of extinction. So they filmed the effects of all the work crews. They visited several tribes. They asked one of the elders, “May we videotape you? We would like to record your culture, your people, and present it to the world as a case, to show the world who you are so people will be aware of you, so people will stand up and defend you.”

The elder said, “No.”

“No! How can you tell us no? I just explained we’re coming here to help you! We’re going to videotape your culture. We’re going to show it to the world so all people will know who you are, and we’ll stand up for you.”

The elder again said no.

“How can you be saying no to us? We’re here to help you!”

“Well,” said the elder, “these others have come and they have just taken. They never asked permission. You are the first to ask permission. That gives us the power to say no.”

I had a similar experience several years ago when I was in seminary at Meadville-Lombard. We had a winter institute which is in Madison every February. One particular institute was focused on native American spirituality. Imagine if you will, a room about this size, filled with religious educators and ministers, all good religious liberals, eager to learn what these people might be able to share with us. There was a small group, maybe 4 or 5 people, men and women from tribes from the Wisconsin area who had been invited to share with us, to share their stories, their rituals.

What we discovered was they didn’t trust us. We were white people. We were there to steal their rituals, their stories. So it took several days for them to trust us. After several days, they began to realize we weren’t there to steal. We weren’t there to mimic what they do. We weren’t going to pride ourselves on now being native Americans or in touch with their spirituality. They realized we had an honest, inquisitive nature and we wished to share, not to take. That made a profound

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difference with them, and so they did perform several rituals on the final day. They opened up. It was a lesson to me and to the other good, liberal religious educators there, that we come not just as ourselves, but we are representative of a larger culture, which has excelled at taking. It was a humbling experience.

Another story that they shared highlighted some of their concerns. One of the men told a story about a great eagle.

It was a very proud eagle, a very greedy eagle. It plundered the land. It took whatever it wanted. It flew wherever it wanted to go. It was completely indifferent to all of the suffering it was causing to the other animals. Then it landed on a river, on a branch and rested. While it rested, winter came. It froze the water. It froze the talons of the eagle to the branch. It became colder and colder. The eagle began to shriek out, "Save me! Someone save me!" But the remaining animals saw that eagle, remembered what it had done, turned their backs to it and let it perish.

The man who told the story said, "I want you to know you are like that eagle. You have plundered this land. You have plundered my people and now you scream for help. You ask for help from us. We will have to think on this."

I don't want you to think everything western is evil or ugly. There is much in common with the mysticism of the west and the spirituality of the native Americans. There is much in common, which is why we can sit down, converse and share. We don't need to convert one another. There is precedence in history. I read somewhere about 150 years ago, the Unitarians financed a mission to the native Americans. They sent one man out west. He lived on a reservation. It was his job, at least from the Boston point of view, to convert the Indians. When he arrived though, he surveyed the scene. He got to know these people. He realized these people didn't need converting. They were well enough alone. So Boston sent money. He built himself a shack on the edge of the reservation. He used the money to buy medicine and food for his parish. This continued for several years until the good folks in Boston discovered what was going on and they recalled him.

It's a precedent that we should be aware of and it's a precedent that might be useful in our own day. We don't need to convert people. We need to converse. We have much from our own tradition which is good and beautiful, and which we can share with them. They, hopefully, will share likewise with us. There is much possibility. There is much potential. When cultures come together it doesn't always need to be a collision in which one side wins and exploits to the hilt, and the other side is decimated. There can be an honest and unique sharing. That is the challenge before us in this coming century, for this generation and generations to come.