Traditional cultures "are what shaped us and caused us to be what we are now," writes Jared Diamond in *The World Until Yesterday.* All the necessities of modern living—electricity, store-bought food, pharmaceuticals, cars and planes—are relatively new. But much of yesterday is still with us, and we might take a lesson from those traditional cultures that remain indigenous to relearn how to live harmoniously with each other and the natural environment of which we are a part.

Since human societies have been traditional far longer than modern, could looking back provide clues for the future? What can we learn from our living ancestors that will help promote sustainability, health, and happiness? As we develop awareness of our common wealth, wouldn’t it be wise to take a lesson from those who long ago found a way to make society work?

**A Reciprocal Mindset Fosters Balance**

Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs), in *Critical Neurophilosophy and Indigenous Wisdom,* talks about "a returning in kind in order to maintain balance in the universe." To be human is humbling and at the same time carries the greatest responsibility. This self-awareness requires of us to be conscious of our role in nature and our place in the universe. That necessitates mutual generosity—a reciprocal mindset.

To traditional people, life has meaning through family, community, and nature. But there is more. The reciprocal mindset that fostered sustainability over many millennia necessitated something other than people and land. The ability to abide for thousands of years demanded a deep understanding of the natural world and an unwavering commitment to universal, self-evident principles that originate from one central idea. From where does this understanding of an original idea originate?

In the West, knowledge is acquired in institutions of higher learning and wisdom is associated with experience, time, and age. Knowledge is an acquisition of information, much as is the accumulation of money, property, and goods. Wisdom garnered from lifelong learning is relative, a comparative process that provides perspective on past knowledge. But there are other kinds of wisdom. Innate intelligence is not one-dimensional, nor can it be easily learned. There is also wisdom that comes from oneness with nature, life, and the universe.

Among indigenous people, learning is passed down and passed on, and instructed mostly through example. Knowledge is not acquired; it is transmitted. In the indigenous mindset, pure knowledge is imparted though direct experience with the source of life—Nature and the Universe. An individual may embody wisdom, but its source is ancestral.

In the often quoted address of 1848, Chief Seattle of the Suquamish people in what is now central Puget Sound in Washington state, alleged: “Every part of the earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap that courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. This we know: the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth.”

Chief Seattle informed us that all things are connected, deeply rooted, ingrained with wisdom, and therefore sacred. Because we are children of the Earth, connected to each other locally and regionally—and more than ever as planetary citizens now—we are linked in one great planetary web of life. Indigenous people revere the Earth as the great mother who births all creatures and things. They see links and networks in nature as holy: trees are temples...
Ayni requires of us remembrance for our place in the universe. It fosters humility, instills reverence, cultivates resilience. Like a kind of spiritual gravity, Ayni keeps things in their rightful place and assures that our children will have the same, if not better, opportunities than we have. During hard times, Ayni keeps things together. It reminds us of the responsibility we have, personal and planetary, to all dimensions of our lives, familial and universal. It promotes sustainability and healthy interdependence. In its purest form, Ayni is a state of mind. When the mind is attuned to the principle of reciprocity, it promotes happiness for oneself and others—the mind is at peace and the heart calm.

The Q’ero teach that Ayni is innate in the universe—a living principle that is intrinsic to life and springs from within us. In all my interactions and experiences with the Q’ero and other indigenous peoples, I found this to be the common theme. A golden compass, Ayni can guide our evolution. Can we learn to also use Ayni to better navigate our way to a sustainable, cooperative society?

More than reciprocity, Ayni also implies reverence and universal responsibility. Fundamentally, reciprocity requires healthy interactions. You give to me and I receive from you; later I give you something that you need. This is direct reciprocity. Indirect reciprocity is I give to you and to someone else, then someone else gives to you, and eventually someone gives to me. While the first type of reciprocity involves just you and me and is a common inter-communal practice among tribal people, the second type supports the evolution of cooperation within larger groups.

The Q’ero teach that Ayni resides within the human heart, an embodiment of an empathetic connection with nature and all creatures. Ayni occurs directly and indirectly between people and within groups, but also between humans and nature. We might do better if we were to introduce an entire new generation to the idea of an encompassing reciprocity that embraces universal responsibility and respect for all things, including every animal and the natural environment as well as the whole Earth.

Appreciating all living creatures as their relations, Native Americans believe that nature supports and sustains life. Shamans and medicine men maintain a two-way link between nature and humans through ritual acts of reciprocity; they have a unique affinity for communicating with the natural world. By ceremonial offerings of reciprocity, they assure balance between humans and nature. For example, the great mother that the Q’ero call Pachamama helps keep their alpaca healthy and herds large, makes birthing easier, brings rain at the right season, and promotes a healthy soil for abundant crops.

The Living, Conscious, Evolving Earth

By living among traditional indigenous people who embody the original idea,” it is clear to me that true sustainability requires a planetary ethic. Because it is a living wisdom, a whole planet ethic
cannot be reduced to rules, is more than direct or indirect
ciprocity, and is deeply rooted in empathy.

The Q’ero describe the natural world as a seamless interconnec-
tion between Pachamama and our bodies, and between the intel-
ligence of the Apus (the tutelary mountain spirits) and our mind.
Nature, wilderness, clean water, living oceans, and old growth-
forests are absolutely vital to heart, mind, and soul. Q’ero shamans
received the original knowledge of Pachamama directly from the
Apus and shared it with the people. Now they are sharing it with
us, making it a living tradition. Each generation renews itself by
direct contact with the spiritual energy of Pachamama and the
wisdom of the Apus. Every aspect of life is interwoven in one
seamless tapestry of cosmic order. With the Earth as the visible
realm of Pachamama, everything in life is sacred.

Our living planet is but one of the many manifestations of
Pachamama. The physical Earth is our biosphere, the envelope
of life. In the greater sense, Pachamama is the divine feminine,
the creative energy of the universe. We are part of a whole from
the Earth’s core to the biosphere, upward to the heavens as one
interconnected web of life and energy. All are part of this cosmic
web of intelligent, living energy—plants in their sprouting,
growing, and ripening; animals in their fertility cycles; weather
patterns, ocean currents, and the transit of moon and stars in
the night sky. Even human logic, emotion, and the unpre-
dictability of human behavior are interconnected parts of one
universal whole. From the calligraphy of clouds to bird song in
the trees, the hum of dragonflies, humans laboring in the fields,
and the stars overhead, it is all one hive of being and becoming.
This encompassing worldview takes in everything terrestrial and
celestial with humans playing an integral role between the micro-
scopic world and the macrocosm. Ever conscious of their place
between heaven and Earth, the Q’ero favor humility in their role
as custodians of Earth-based wisdom. They remind us that
humans practice acts of reciprocity to stay attuned with
Pachamama. For the Q’ero, Pachamama is the Universe: being
and becoming, known and unknown, time-bound as well as
transcendental. It is everything and nothing simultaneously. To
appreciate the concepts of Pachamama and Ayni is to understand
the indigenous worldview, the blending of time and life.

Emergence of Biospheric Consciousness

Over thousands of years, indigenous people came to a remarkable
understanding of the natural world and a method of how to live
harmoniously in it. Can we do the same?

Ishi, the last member of the Yahi tribe of the Sierra Nevada
foothills, turned himself in to authorities in Oroville, California
in 1911. Ishi was the last known American Indian to be raised
isolated from Western culture. Saxton Pope, the American doctor,
teacher, author, and outdoorsman who formed a close relation-
ship with Ishi, wrote: “Ishi looked upon us as sophisticated chil-
dren—smart, but not wise. We knew many things, and much that
was false. He knew nature, which is always true. His were the
qualities of character that last forever. He was kind; he had
courage and self-restraint, and though all had been taken from
him, there was no bitterness in his heart. His soul was that of a
child, his mind that of a philosopher.”

Global Systems Thinking

Global system change demands new thought, but planetary trans-
formation requires nothing short of a new ethic based on universal
responsibility and cooperation that is rooted in nature—a whole
planet ethic. What’s needed is pattern changing on a grand scale,
principle to connect them all, an agreement to find common
ground. We might begin with a fuzzy low pixel concept like reciprocity and the idea of a living Earth. It's useful to learn a new term like Ayni. But it's only a start. We have to proceed creatively and with keen observation, increasing the resolution of our vision until a singularity occurs. From time to time, a truly powerful idea emerges, and in a single clarifying moment, our thoughts and emotions crystalize into a perfect whole as if the puzzle solved itself.

We've brought the great problems of our times upon ourselves. Our problems are uniquely human. Animals would never disown other members of the same species or negate the status of other living animals. But we equate animals as non-human, having no rights. We commonly deny other people their humanity, which may be one of the biggest obstacles to a collaborative society.

Humans are the creators, producers, and consumers that have developed systems that greatly benefit a few and cause great harm to the many, including the biosphere. How will we get from the verge of catastrophic collapse to a saner, healthier, freer society that allows for the renewal of nature? Every journey needs a compass. We will soon leave behind known terrain and enter uncharted territory. When that happens, we'll need to be able to find a pole star by which to navigate the rest of the way.

Our future depends on a spirit of generosity, universal responsibility, and the commitment to do what's right for the planet, not just individual accumulation of capital, goods, and property. Our best option may be to learn directly from those who still embody the secret of living on the Earth with zero footprints. We might do well to look backward in order to lean forward.

We need exponential thinkers that can envision ahead not just fifteen or fifty years, but one hundred and fifty years into the future while looking back, holding to the original instructions. We need deeply heart-centered, compassionate leaders to teach us how to relearn how to live on this living Earth.


References

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