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VISION from the EARTH

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MOTHER GOD -
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MEINRAD CRAIGHEAD

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BRINGERS OF LIFE
Hopi kachinas
Hummingbird healing





WALKING WITH THE WHEEL

Annie Spencer
shares the beauty
of the Medicine Way

The author and shamanic teacher Sandra Ingerman was recently asked how practitioners can help others in a modern world.

She replied: "Shamanic practitioners can perform some of the classic healing methods that will help people today... but performing shamanic healings for people today, although important, is not enough. For shamans see that illness comes from living a life that is out of balance and disharmonious. One of the greatest gifts shamanic practitioners can give people is to help them learn how to change their lives so that harmony returns. And we must also help people live a life of honour and respect for nature and the rest of life. In this way harmony and health can return to the planet again..."

that - come into balance with themselves and with all of life, presented in a form in which our spiritual practices can be connected to our everyday living, our social and political lives.

It has been said that the Native American peoples are the ones who hold the protection of living beings as their responsibility at a deep spiritual level. Certainly, the 'medicine teachings' that they have managed to retain over thousands of years are perhaps what we most desperately need today.

If we are to work with these traditions in a holistic and integrated way, then we need to remember the history of these teachings. We need to honour those who have held them in continuous life for us.

While earth-based spiritual teachings were once common throughout the world, they have been brutally repressed in many places, and especially in Europe. As a result, many remain only in fragments of myths, folk customs, and as references in old chronicles. Some people are doing a fine job of

painstakingly picking up these torn fragments from Europe's pre-Christian past, and sewing them together to revive our old ways; but other people are finding that they can also honour the teachings of the peoples of the Americas, who in many cases never let go of their traditional ways.

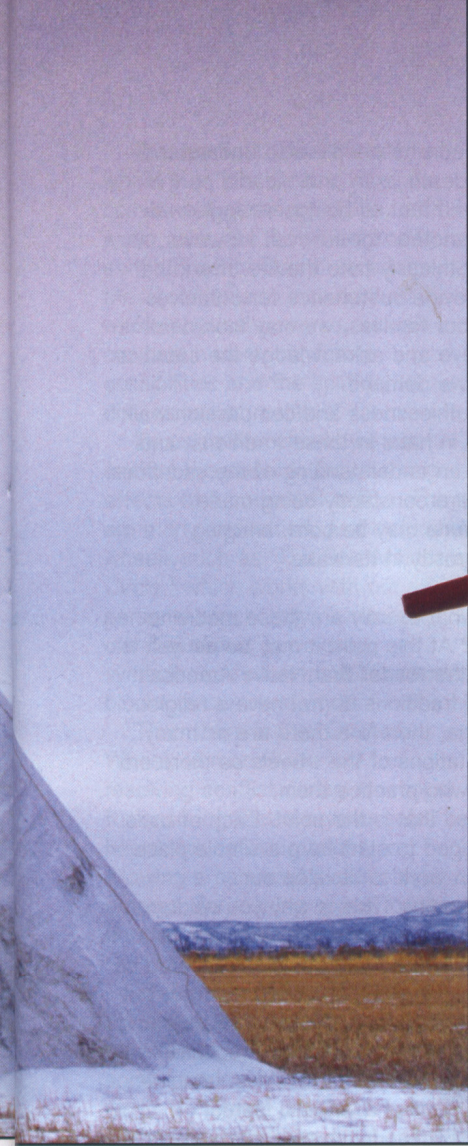
Many of these Native American 'wisdom keepers' went underground, sewed their teachings into *wampum* belts, melted away into places such as the highlands of Guatemala and the swamps of Florida; or who - like the Aztecs - came out into the cities and stood quietly in sacred places - now busy thoroughfares - and went through great complicated ceremonies in their minds and with tiny physical gestures, year after year so that the traditions might not be lost.

It is only now, exhausted by the endless proselytising of Christian missionaries, the temptations of modern western culture (especially of alcohol), and by a continued repression that finds wisdom keepers being abused, murdered and generally put lower on the

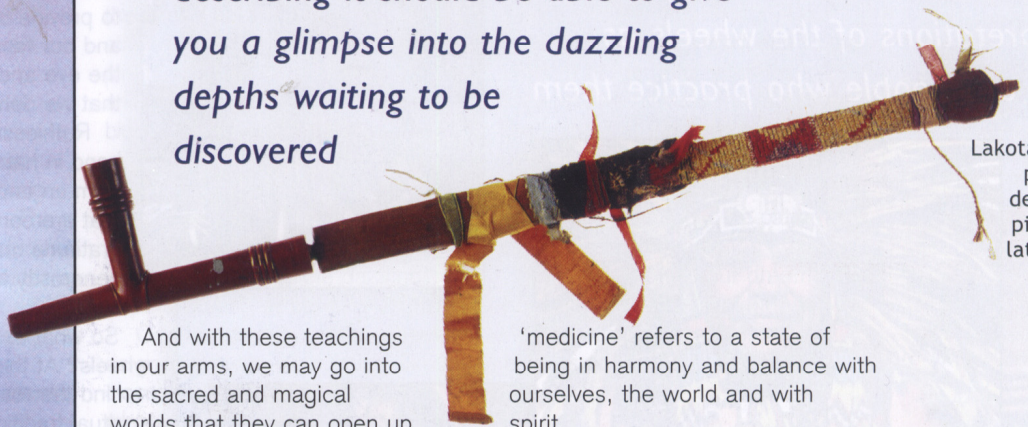


Northern Cheyenne eagle feather flat fan. C1890

This is where the teachings of the Native American 'medicine wheels' come into their own; for these teachings give clear and beautiful descriptions, stories and maps to help people do just



If you are taught well, then each place on the wheel is a gateway, and the person describing it should be able to give you a glimpse into the dazzling depths waiting to be discovered



Lakota sacred pipe and decorated pipe stem late C19th

And with these teachings in our arms, we may go into the sacred and magical worlds that they can open up for us. For some of us the holding of these precious teachings will be a calling - a way that we cannot deny. And for many others, the medicine wheel teachings will whisper to us to become earth stewards once more; to take up the task of caring for this earth, and to give our all to change the way our culture operates, so that we may all have a chance of survival.

Through these teachings, we will relearn how subtle are the many connections and the fine threads of the 'web of life' upon which we hang like raindrops.

We will realise that if we throw a small stone into a lake, the ripples will spread to the other side and then return, their pattern slightly changed. We will start to remember the subtleties of reaction on many different levels to our every gesture and word, to each breath that we take.

The term 'medicine wheel' describes an ancient system developed in the Americas that encompasses spirituality, philosophy, ecology, and social and personal development.

The term

'medicine' refers to a state of being in harmony and balance with ourselves, the world and with spirit.

Teachings are held and given out in terms of 'wheels' or 'circles', as these teachings understand the cyclic nature of life and honours diversity and difference; one that values equality over hierarchy.

At their core is a constant reminder that it is essential for us to find a lifestyle that allows us to live in harmony and balance with the rest of our world.

When medicine people talk about the ecology of the earth they often remind us that we are an integral part of all that is, they say that the other inhabitants of this earth are all, in some way, related to us, and therefore should be honoured and acknowledged, and to have an equal right to life.

Understanding that all the plants and animals are as much our relations as are all the other humans, we are brought to care about the thousands of other beings threatened with extinction by so many of our careless actions.

We become aware that our safety and survival depends more upon regaining an ecological balance in nature than on large bank

balances and insurance policies. We remember that material

possessions are seldom the cause of our times of deep happiness.



Eagle wing fan
Sauk people
(Oklahoma)
C1900

scale of things than Negroes have historically been in the USA, that many of these wisdom keepers are letting go and losing their old ways at an alarming rate.

So now it is our time to pick these ancient teachings up, while honouring those 'wisdom keepers' who held them as long as they could. With an understanding as we do so that we are - to borrow a phrase from the great wordsmith Martin Prechtel - 'stumbling amnesiacs'.

And with these precious gifts in our arms, we may gently, and with humility, try to find our way back from the perilous state of imbalance with the Earth on whom we depend.

And in truth we do depend on her, for every last screw that holds together our iPods, our cars, our washing machines, our central heating boilers, the trucks that bring us our food, our nuclear power stations, our water pipes... all of these are part of the Earth.



Left: Cheyenne wheel-shaped hair decoration late C19th

Native American spiritual traditions do not have a religion or dogma, therefore there are as many interpretations of the wheels as there are people who practice them



Medicine people also understand that death is an unavoidable part of life and that all beings struggle with one another for survival. However, as we ruthlessly take the life of another to provide sustenance for ourselves and our families, we may look death in the eye and acknowledge the sacrifice that we demand.

Ruthlessness and compassion walk hand in hand in these traditions, and from an understanding of the sacrifices that are constantly being made, gratitude may be born, bringing generosity in its wake.

So what exactly are these medicine wheels? At this point it may be as well to remind the reader that Native American spiritual traditions do not have a religion or dogma, therefore there are as many interpretations of the wheels as there are people who practice them.

Indeed that is the point. Each of us is encouraged to start from a simple place and then work to develop our understanding. This is why you seldom find wheels written down, although lists could be written and qualities allocated so that a map would emerge, but the map would be so poor and so lifeless that it would be worse than useless. Imagine what a written, factual description of a tree would tell you if you'd never met a tree.

Everything about them, including what qualities are ascribed to which direction [the wheels are divided up into the points of the compass - each point having a different attribute], can change depending on which teachings are handed down. Thus I have been told that on the 'Four Directions' wheel, where the basic components of our life are laid out, the earth is placed in the west of the wheel, and also that the earth is placed at the north of the wheel.

How far the subtleties of the teachings can be opened up depends on the development and true understanding of each teacher, for the wheels teach of matters that do not fit into rational or logical patterns, and are best described through metaphor and story, a glimpse that beckons, but reveals little. Then it is up to each one of us to ask, demand, question and call back these almost vanished treasures, which could perhaps lead western culture out of its rather dismal current cul-de-sac.

While the teachings contained in the wheels can sometimes seem quite simple, when they are applied, they teach us to look at a given situation in its own right and in considerable depth.



The simplest 'Four Directions' wheel puts into context all of the component elements of the natural world, whereas the wheel known as the 'Twenty Count' broadens these contexts to include the whole physical universe, as well as our past history, our future possibilities and the spiritual dimensions of reality.

By using the wheels we can explore the possible far-reaching effects of a course of action. They are many and varied, and include wheels such as 'The Star Maiden's Circle,' which works with our personal psychology, illuminating our prejudices, our closed symbols, and other possible mental blocks to our creativity.

Then there is the 'Council Wheel,' a marvellous tool for resolving conflict during meetings, for ensuring that everyone gets heard, for defusing anger, for allowing a balanced picture to emerge, for making space for the unusual inspirational moment.

These teachings are primarily for the individual, to enable us to understand how we belong in this sometimes mad, bad and crazy world. To remind us of our humanity and holiness and beauty when things are rough and we are lost, or tired, or angry, or feel betrayed.

They start with the present moment and their first task is orientation. They take the four points of the compass, which are called the 'Four Directions', and orient us with qualities that relate to the world as we perceive it.

For example, the sun rises in the east, so the east is the place to remember the sun, and all the qualities it holds.

Throughout all the wheels, symbolism mixes with material reality. Thus we go on to learn that the sun is our father-grandfather, and is the spark of our origins; that the east, where the sun sits, is the place of spirit, which we might experience as disembodied light. We also learn that the sun is the source of life in our material reality, and it is from the sun that the earth came - that we came. And the sun is part of the developing universe and itself was manifested out of cosmic dust and gases.

So while each teaching may sound esoteric and spiritual, it is also based on what we would call scientific fact. And for each

teaching, the more we learn, the more we discover there is more to learn.

This first wheel, the Four Directions Wheel, continues around the directions: in the west we learn about the earth, in the south, the plants, and in the north we meet the animals, reminding us of the building blocks of our world as we go.

If you are taught well, then each place on the wheel is a gateway, and the person describing it should be able to give you a glimpse into the dazzling depths waiting to be discovered.

One could envisage the wheels as great flowers, each sitting like a closed bud, with only the basic meanings of each direction visible. As we start to study and live their teachings, the bud opens to reveal a flower as complex as a rose, whose beautiful arrangement of petals draws us in to its sweet centre. So each direction of a wheel has a beauty of its own and draws us in to the central great mystery of life. The wheels enable us to make a journey of exploration and understanding, gaining wisdom as we go.

We begin with the Four Directions Wheel, which leads us to the other wheels. Through them we embark on a spiral journey like the great nebulas that spin in the heavens. We start with the spark of creation, the blinding light of the sun, and then are taken on a dance through all of matter in its many forms. Then out we go, into the further reaches of the universe

and beyond, to realms so mysterious that only the name Great Mystery will do.

On the way we encounter the richness of the animal and plant worlds and the great hosts of our ancestors. We are introduced to the wisdom of the great teaching lineages, we glimpse the '*kachinas*,' the holders of the patterns of this natural world, and the *chulamatadey*, the weavers of the fine threads that hold the patternings of our lives through all the ages.

We wander into our dreams of how life might be, and then we watch with awe the dreams that life has spun into possibility for each one of us.

When we embark on this journey of discovery, we realise that something that may have begun as a step in the dark - perhaps an attempt to change our personal life because it longer works for us - has become a most precious and extraordinary journey that will continue long after we have left this body behind.

If we offer them to the young, wrapped in glistening stories, the young will stop for a short while and listen, and as they listen, start to remember who they are.

These wheels tie us back into the great stories of the cosmos. They return meaning and beauty to our lives and remind us of our true purpose. They amaze us with the grandeur of this existence and hold us safe in the detail of a system that honours each blade of grass.

Annie Spencer is a ceremonialist and workshop leader with an Oxford MA and a diploma in Humanistic Psychology. She has been running groups and trainings for over 20 years. Her writing on earth mysteries, women's mysteries and ceremony can be regularly found in many major magazines.

She is currently involved in the establishment of 'Circle of Life Rediscovery', which is devoted to bringing earth based spiritual traditions to young people. Annie has worked in many spiritual traditions over the past 30 years. Introduced to Native American Medicine work in 1982, she was apprenticed in this tradition. She has undertaken ceremony at Macchu Picchu; sat in sweat lodge in North America with elders from the Mi'kmaq and Ho Chunk nations; and has been studying Guatemalan Mayan teachings for the past five years. www.hartwell.eu.com

Below: constructing a ceremonial stone medicine wheel

