

Vine Deloria

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REFLECTION AND REVELATION

Knowing Land, Places and Ourselves

The increasing interest in land, ecology, the living Earth, and our responsibility toward other forms of life comes none too soon, considering the conditions we find developing on our planet. The end of organic life is now clearly possible, if present trends of exploitation and pollution continue. Therefore it behooves us to find in our history and ourselves some ways to reverse ecological destruction and bring environmental stability to the places in which we live.

When the nearly terminal condition of the planet is discussed, many people say that American Indian religious traditions offer a good understanding of land and life and may provide the larger society with conceptual tools to rescue itself from its own destruction. American Indians have thus become one of the previously neglected peoples to whom others will listen—albeit for the moment—to find the answers they seek. But what exactly is it that non-Indians want from Indians? Here the situation is not clear, and until Indians can get some kind of guidance about what non-Indians seek, we cannot offer much help.

Non-Indian interest seems to focus on the sacredness of land, the perception that Indians understand land much more profoundly than other peoples, and on the possibility of adopting or transferring that kind of relationship to the larger social whole. I believe there is some truth in this perception. However, I also believe that this assertion is being made by people who do not really think deeply about what land and sacredness are, and by people who would be content to receive the simple poetic admonitions and aphorisms that pass as knowledge in the American intellectual cafeteria.

Intellectually, tribal wisdom is not much different from insights a

person with some degree of sensitivity and awareness about the world could discover upon serious reflection. But there is a nuance here that bears examination. Tribal wisdom is the distilled experiences of the community, and not the aesthetic conclusions of sensitive individuals or the poetic conclusions of personal preferences. Tribal insights have been subjected to the erosions of time; they have been tested by uncounted generations, and they have been applied in a bewildering variety of settings in which they have proven reliable. That is to say, tribal wisdom is *communal* wisdom; it is part of the tribal definition of what it is to be a human being in a social setting. Therefore, tribal wisdom differs considerably from the slogans and beliefs of the networks of concerned people that pass for communities in the modern world.

Within tribal traditions there is a real apprehension of and appreciation for the sacredness of land, and more specifically, for the sacred nature of places; the two ideas are but different expressions of the underlying relationship of humans with the world around them. It is possible to dissect this knowledge for the purpose of discussion, but the discussion should follow a particular sequence. It should not rely wholly on the goodwill of the listener. We can analyze what constitutes sacredness, but we must also recognize that some of what we say can be understood only by experience. Our task is to live in such a way that the information we receive through analysis becomes—over the passage of time and through grace and good fortune—our experience also.

The sacredness of land is first and foremost an emotional experience. It is that feeling of unity with a place that is complete, whatever specific feelings it may engender in an individual. There are two fundamental categories of emotional responses to sacred places: reflective and revelatory. The vast number of experiences we have with land, and in particular with places, are of a reflective kind. We experience the uniqueness of places and survey the majesty of lands. There we begin to meditate on who we are, what our society is, where we came from, quite possibly where we are going, and what it all means. Lands somehow call forth from us these questions and give us a feeling of being within something larger and more powerful than ourselves. We are able to reflect upon what we know, and in reflection we see a different arrangement, perhaps a different interpretation, of what life can mean. A wise person might be able to discern the intellectual content of these reflective experiences by intense thought, but his or her conclusion would be only a logical proposition and would lack the intensity of the emotion which lands and places evoke. Land has the ability to short-circuit logical processes; it enables us to apprehend underlying unities we did not suspect.

Revelatory experiences are another thing altogether. They tell us

things we cannot possibly know in any other way. Moses approaches the burning bush, is told that it is a holy place, learns the name of God, and is given a vocational task to perform on behalf of his community. With this information come directions through which a new future is possible. Encountering a holy place always involves the manifestation of a personal spirit of immense and unmeasured power, a real spirit of place with which our species must have communion thereafter. Holy places exist in all countries and form the sacred configuration of the land. These places speak of the ultimate holiness of creation. They give a meaningful context to the reflective locations.

This distinction between reflective and revelatory places is not intended to downgrade the validity of reflective experiences of lands. It is the ability to reflect that creates the awareness and sensitivity of peoples to the qualitative intensity of revelatory places. But the distinction is necessary because revelatory places are known only through the experience of prolonged occupation of land, and they cannot be set aside because of the aesthetic or emotional appeal of particular places.

The most common experience of Indian tribes today is that of reflective places. One must suspect that common knowledge of lands among Indians always featured a high percentage of reflective places throughout Indian occupation of this continent. Tribal histories, for the most part, are land-centered. That is to say, every feature of a landscape has stories attached to it. If a tribal group is very large or has lived on a particular piece of land for many generations, some natural features will have many stories attached to them. I know some places in the Dakotas about which at least a dozen stories are told. These stories relate both secular events such as tales of hunting and warfare and sacred events such as personal or tribal religious experiences.

Each family within a tribe has its own tradition of stories about tribal ancestral lands. In theory it would be possible to gather from the people of the tribe all the stories that relate to every feature of the landscape. If these stories were then arranged chronologically, the result would be a history of the people somewhat similar to what whites mean by history. But the history would be considered artificial by most Indians because the intensity of the original experience—which was a function of the place and important in explaining the incident or event—would have been abandoned in favor of the chronology.

When non-Indians admire or try to emulate the Indian love of the land, they generally think of the reflective emotions that Indians have about lands and places. Unfortunately, most whites lack the historical perspective of places simply because they have not lived on the land long enough. In addition, few whites preserve stories about the land, and

very little is passed down which helps people identify the special aspect of places.

A popular old story makes this point eloquently. A Crow chief, told that the government owned his land, said that they could not own it because the first several feet down consisted of the bones of his ancestors and the dust of the previous generations of Crow people. If the government wanted to claim anything, the chief continued, it would have to begin where the Crow people's contribution ended. This feeling of unity with the land can only come through the prolonged intimacy of living on the land.

Now, there is no question in my mind that a good many non-Indians have some of the same emotional attachment to land that most Indians do. For example, the land has impressed itself upon rural whites in Appalachia, the South, parts of the Great Plains, and other isolated areas, and made indelible changes in the way the people perceive themselves. One could not read *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Raintree County* without encountering such deep feelings. And critical to the recognition of this attachment is the family, the community, as functioning parts of the landscape. It is not too much to argue that without the *group* of people sharing a sense of history on the land, there can be nothing more for the individual than a tourist's aesthetic feeling of beauty, which is but a temporary reflection of the deeper emotion to be gained from the land.

The first dimension of Indian feeling about the land is therefore an admission that we are part and parcel of it physically. However, our physical contribution makes sense only because our memory of land is a memory of ourselves and our deeds and experiences. These memories and experiences are always particular. One thinks of Gettysburg and President Lincoln's magnificent speech recognizing that the sacrifice of so many lives hallowed the ground beyond our power to add or detract. When asked where his lands were, Crazy Horse replied that his lands were where his dead lay buried. He was not thinking of the general contribution of flesh made by generations of Sioux to the Great Plains, but of the immediate past deeds of his generation. These had imprinted on the land new stories and experiences that gave the Sioux a moral title to the lands. Luther Standing Bear once remarked that a people had to be born, reborn, and reborn again on a piece of land before beginning to come to grips with its rhythms. Thus, in addition to the general contribution of long occupation, comes the coincident requirement that people must have freely given of themselves to the land at specific places in order to understand it.

One major difficulty which non-Indians face in trying to make an imprint on the North American continent is the absence of any real or

lasting communities. Non-Indian Americans, not the Indians, are the real nomads. White Americans are rarely buried in the places they were born, and most of them migrate freely during their lifetimes, living in as many as a dozen places and having roots in and accepting responsibility for none of these locations. There is, consequently, no continuing community to which they can pass along stories and memories. Without a continuing community one comes from and returns to, land does not become personalized. The only feeling that can be generated is an aesthetic one. Few non-Indians find satisfaction in walking along a riverbank or on a bluff and realizing that their great-great-grandfathers once walked that very spot and had certain experiences. The feeling is one of lack of community and continuity.

When non-Indians live on a specific piece of land for a number of generations, they also begin to come into this reflective kind of relationship. The danger, however, is that non-Indian society as it is presently constituted encourages the abandonment of land and community. Further, it fails to provide a human context within which appreciation for and understanding of land can take place. A good deal of what constitutes present-day love of and appreciation for land is aesthetic, a momentary warm feeling that is invoked by the uniqueness of the place. This warmth does inspire the individual, but it does not sustain communities, and therefore a prolonged relationship with the land is forfeited.

When we discuss revelatory experiences we enter an entirely different realm of discourse. Holy places connected with revelation are exceedingly rare. If we carefully analyze Indian stories about religious experiences, we discover that many things we believed at first to be revelations are in fact reflections of or experiences directed by religious training and supervision. What then are revelatory experiences? Their first characteristic is that the old categories of space and time vanish. New realities take their places and suggest dimensions of life far beyond what we are normally able to discern and understand. Suddenly the everyday world does not exist because it is, in a fundamental sense, a predictable world which we can control. But in revelatory experience we find that we are objects within a place and no longer acting subjects capable of directing events. Some of the medicine men and women describe their feelings as intense dread and foreboding.

This feeling of dread cannot be emphasized too much, because it is this emotion that distinguishes reflection from revelation. A major error made today by people interested in Indian religion, and by Indians who purport to teach traditional ways, is the absence or avoidance of this dimension of the religious experience. The truly great medicine men and women who understood the nature of revelation did everything in

their power to avoid the experience. They fully understood that giving up their lives might be required, and that whatever happened, the experience would radically change every measure they used to gauge normal life. Because the experience was so fearful, the great medicine men and women would use the holy places very seldom. They preferred almost any other method to solve their problems, and it was only in times of extreme crisis that they returned to the sources of their own personal vocational revelation for guidance.

Knowledge of the holy places in a tribe's past was a closely guarded secret. Probably only one or two people in any generation actually knew these locations. Knowledge of the holy place was specific to individuals and families, and this produced some strange combinations of information. For example, a family might know a specific holy place but would not know what ceremonies were to be performed there. A medicine man or woman, in a time of tribal crisis, might be told during a ceremony to perform another ceremony at a specific location. He or she might be instructed to obtain directions to the holy place from a secular person. With such specific information spread widely through the tribal community, the tribe could not possibly develop an ecclesiastical hierarchy or priesthood that would dominate the community. Tribes that did have priesthoods were almost always sedentary groups that had long since made their peace with the surrounding lands. In these cases knowledge of the holy places was widespread, but only a few priests knew what ceremonies to use and what occasions necessitated their use.

Indians who know about these things find it extremely difficult to describe what they know. There seems to be an abiding spirit of place that inhibits anyone from trying to explain what has been experienced there. I have visited some of these places, and quite frankly found them terrifying to the casual visitor—and anyone is casual who does not have a specific purpose for coming there. The most prevalent phenomenon is sudden awareness that one is being watched and should not be there. I suggest that a place that has been the site of a revelatory experience always retains something of the intensity of that experience. It is very easy to find oneself disoriented as to direction and time in these places. Consequently Indians have always acted with the utmost respect when they realized they were in such a place.

Another phenomenon attached to holy places is that the more information an individual has about the location, the more likely he or she is to encounter unique emotions and experiences there. Information heightens awareness by providing a context within which experiences can be understood. The intensity of dread is partially defused by a framework to make the experience comprehensible.

We have reports of religious experiences similar to those of American Indians from mystics of other religious and philosophical traditions. Common themes in these traditions are the disappearance or transformation of familiar apprehensions of time and space, and the appearance of a reality undergirding or transcending physical reality. These traditions do not, as a rule, rely on specific locations as does the American Indian tradition. There can be no denying that the European continent has a multitude of sacred places, and it is no accident that, as different religions have come and gone, the same locations appear as sacred and receive adoration, even though the language and religious context continues to change. One can project, then, that sacred places in North America may yet see a series of transformations in which new peoples using new languages rely on them for spiritual sustenance.

Quite frequently the result of a revelatory experience is the creation of a new ceremony, but not all ceremonies arise in this manner. So we cannot say that the creation of a ceremony is one criterion by which we judge whether a place has sufficient holiness to provide new ways of relating to higher spiritual powers. Since the primary content of most revelations within the Indian traditions is the definition of individual vocations that will serve the people in the immediate future, it is exceedingly difficult to classify most locations by a precise description of their primary content. Historically Indians believed that they lived between the physical and spiritual worlds, and consequently there was not much effort to make the kinds of distinctions that non-Indians find useful in understanding topics. Ceremonies were supposed to help keep the people attuned to the rhythms of the spiritual world, and therefore what was important was whether they fulfilled that function.

The most important aspect of sacred places, and in particular the holy places of which we have knowledge, is that they mark the location and circumstances of an event in which the holy became an objective fact of existence. Christians have the same idea in the doctrine of the Incarnation, except that they restrict holiness to the human species. Indians understand that there is holiness in everything, and that human beings are simply a part of the larger whole which must be shaped and informed by the holy. We can see some of the mystery of these things in Black Elk's vision when he meets the Six Grandfathers, and also later when as an old man he stands on Harney Peak and invokes them to help him and take pity on him. The complaint of many traditional Indians against the white man's understanding of things sacred is the tendency to reduce the holy to a subjective category of experience, and to fail to come to grips with the meaning of the objectification of the holy. Indians and New Agers

part company at the point where New Agers argue that it is possible to create one's own reality—that belief is an avoidance of sacred experiences, and hence detaches one from real relationship with the land.

If we recognize the two kinds of sacred lands and admit the objectification of the holy as a particular event at a specific place, the question arises as to whether one can have the sacred experience of relationship to land. Is this experience restricted to American Indians, or is it possible for any devout and sincere individual seeking a higher spiritual reality? We can only discuss theoretical possibilities since it would be presumptuous to argue that fundamental experiences are limited to American Indians. But there are certain preconditions that make it unlikely that non-Indians would have these kinds of experiences, and these conditions also make it probable that it will be increasingly difficult for most American Indians to enter into or maintain such relationships with places.

Civilized life precludes most of the fundamental experiences that our species once had in relating to lands and the natural order. Today we rely entirely too much upon the artificial universe that we have created, the world of machines and electricity. In most respects we have been trained to merge our emotions and beliefs so that they mesh with the machines and institutions of the civilized world. Thus many things that were a matter of belief for the old people have become objects of scorn and ridicule for modern people. We have great difficulty in understanding simple things because we have been trained to deal with extremely complicated things, and we respond that way almost instantaneously. The old traditional Indians were in tune with the rhythms of life. They were accustomed to bringing in and relating to a whole picture of the land, the plants, and the animals around them. They responded to things as a part of a larger whole which was a subjective reality to them. We could say the traditional Indian stood in the center of a circle and brought everything together in that circle. Today we stand at the end of a line and work our way along that line, discarding or avoiding everything on either side of us.

In our electronic/electric, mechanical world, we rely on instruments of our own construction to enable us to relate to the rest of the world. The world becomes an object of our actions in an entirely new way, for we are able to overcome certain aspects of the natural world such as time and space that had always stood as barriers to us. But our mechanical instruments cannot help us relate to the rest of life except by reducing it to an object also. Consequently any apprehension of the sacredness of land must be filtered through our mechanical devices, and consequently we attribute to landscape only the aesthetic and not the sacred perspective.

Land, for traditional peoples, includes the other forms of life that share places with us. Thus some places were perceived by Indians as sacred because they were inhabited by certain kinds of birds and animals. The Black Hills, for example, were regarded as a sanctuary for the animals, and human beings were not supposed to dominate the Hills or make their presence an inhibiting factor in the animals' use of the area. We might even say that the sacredness of lands extends to and is apprehended by other forms of life. Without their presence the land would lack an important dimension.

Not only is the presence of other forms of life necessary for the land, it is sometimes the determining factor in identifying sacred locations. There are many stories among the tribes regarding the role of guardianship played by birds and animals in protecting sacred places. Within the last several years we have experienced events in which Indians going to perform vision quests were prevented from entering certain locations by birds, animals, and reptiles who seemingly had intuited that the humans did not have the proper attitude. Such a situation may seem impossible or simply superstition, but there is a high level of predictability in these things. Within the traditional context, certain individuals being blocked was predicted prior to their efforts to enter a sacred location.

We thus move from simple appreciation of land to an apprehension of its sacredness and to the discovery that our analysis must include proper relationship with animals. But if these other forms of life can inhibit or even prohibit human beings from using lands, what is our status within the natural world? Unlike the religions of the Near East which see humanity as the supreme production of creation, traditional religions see our species as existing about halfway up the scale of life, when such a scale is based on relative strength, wisdom, and talents. Each bird, animal, or reptile is thought to possess major potentials which make it what it is. Thus the eagle can fly highest, the hawk see farthest, the owl see deepest, the meadowlark hear keenest, and so forth. Human beings have some talents, but not developed beyond those of any one of the other forms of life. The special human ability is to communicate with other forms of life, learn from them all, and act as a focal point for things they wish to express. In any sacred location, therefore, humans become the instrument by which all of creation is able to interact and express its totality of satisfaction.

The sacred place and the myriad forms of life which inhabit the land require specific forms of communication and interaction. These forms are the particular ceremonies which are performed at the sacred places. It is believed that birds and animals give up their lives and bodies so that human beings can perform the proper ceremonies by which every crea-

ture is blessed. The ceremony is a form of exchange of gifts and responsibilities. As gifts are given and responsibilities accepted, the world as we know it is able to move forward to completion of its possibilities. When we understand this demand for taking mature responsibility for the land and its places, we can understand the ceremonies which require human mutilations. Unless humans are prepared to offer their own bodies also, the circle cannot be completed.

The necessity of some form of sacrifice in the ceremony is a major stumbling block for non-Indians. Christianity teaches that Jesus made the one supreme sacrifice, and that following the Crucifixion no other sacrifices are necessary. But the rest of creation is involved in the Crucifixion only by logical extension and does not participate in the same way that Indian ceremonies involve it. Many non-Indians, when told that the relationship with land involves ceremonies and sacrifices, seem to feel self-conscious. They experience a sense of inadequacy because they have been trained by Western religions to feel that sacrifice is necessary because of their sinful nature. Traditional Indians do not see that sacrifice necessarily involves a sinful nature; rather it is the only way that humans can match the contribution of other forms of life. Without a commitment at this level of being, the relationship with the land remains only aesthetic, because one has remained detached from participation in the ceremonial event.

Although we rarely experience it, there must be times when non-human forms of life perform ceremonies without the presence of human beings. Traditional people granted this possibility, and as a result set aside certain specific locations where they would refuse to go in order to let other forms of life conduct their own ceremonial life. This possibility is the ultimate boundary of human apprehension of the natural world. In recent years we have seen good faith efforts by Congress and state legislatures to set aside areas of land as "wild rivers" or "wilderness areas." These lands are to be protected from commercial exploitation and are to be used by human beings only under rigid rules of behavior. But this effort does not go far enough. It is a mere balancing of possible human uses of land; it does not credit the land and non-human forms of life with an existence in and of themselves.

Tribes accorded each other respect when it came to using the land. Several tribes might share an area with different motives in mind, one tribe using the place for hunting and winter camp purposes, another using it primarily for religious purposes. Thus sacred lands frequently intersected, the sacred mountains and lakes of one tribe being the secular lands of another. It was commonly admitted that each tribal people had its own destiny to complete. Consequently, lands that had a

powerful spirit frequently carried with them a form of sanctuary, so that people could come and go without having to deal with secular considerations. The Sioux and Cheyenne, for example, shared Bear Butte in western South Dakota. Each tribe had a different religious story that made the butte significant, and each tribe had tribal-specific ceremonies to perform with respect to that location. The Pipestone Quarry in southwestern Minnesota was shared by a great number of tribes, since it provided the stone for the sacred pipes.

Over a long period of time tribes developed a general knowledge which linked together the most prominent sacred places. Some of these linkages evolved into ceremonial calendar years, instructing people when and where to hold ceremonies. Other combinations described hunting and fishing cycles and migrations. The Great Serpent Mound in Ohio is said to represent a Hopi migration, and some of the Hopi knowledge of the land is said to be comparable to ley line and geomancy knowledge which the early inhabitants of the British Isles and the Chinese possessed. In general, Indians would not radically change the contours or features of the land, and they tried to blend in changes to mark locations with existing features.

It is apparent that the Indian relationship with the land is one brought about by prolonged occupation of certain places. Non-Indians can work toward this condition, but it cannot be brought about by energetic action or sincerity alone. Nor can mere continued occupation create an attitude of respect, since the basic premise—that the universe and each thing in it is alive and has personality—is an attitude of experience and not an intellectual presupposition or logical conclusion. Yet we see in the present best efforts of groups of non-Indians an honest desire to become truly indigenous in the sense of living properly with the land. Thus we cannot help but applaud the interest non-Indians are now demonstrating in the areas of conservation and ecological restoration. The future looks far more hopeful than previously.

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IS RELIGION POSSIBLE?

An Evaluation of Present Efforts to Revive Traditional Tribal Religions

Many Indians are irritated, and justly so, with the wholesale appropriation of American Indian rituals, symbols, and beliefs by the non-Indian public. Several national magazines and newspapers and a myriad of pamphlets, posters, and bumper stickers proclaim the wonders of studying with the likes of Wallace Black Elk, Richard Erdoes, Sun Bear, Lynn Andrews, Edward McGaa, and a host of lesser luminaries in the New Age/Indian medicine man circuit. Even the staid Christian churches are busy trying to revamp their doctrines and programs to fit with the new interest in Indian religious ideas. Ecologists of all stripes including the self-appointed "Deep Ecologists" claim a kinship with traditional Indian beliefs so that one would wonder whether the tribes did not in fact win the Indian wars and expel the hated invaders from their homelands.

A few knotty problems do exist. The Pope at some point must choose between the Indian and Chicano versions of California history and classify Junipero Serra as a psychopath or a saint. Other Christian denominations must explain why, after five hundred years of persecution and neglect, they are now identifying Indian saints and beloved of the faith—people they would never have allowed in their ecclesiastical deliberations when they were alive. And Indians must determine whether adding a pipe and sweat lodge to organizational banquets and annual meetings necessarily blesses the programs and policies of the participating groups.

In short, Indian traditional religious affairs are a complete disaster area.

We must, if possible, dig beneath the rhetoric and poetry of present

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Cover photograph: Within the famous racetrack that encompasses the Black Hills of South Dakota, in a small prairie clearing, is a sacred place where generations of people have come to seek counsel with higher powers. Not all sacred places are large and overpowering, like Bear Butte or Bear Lodge, since silence is valued above all things when ceremonies are performed.

Cover photography by Vine Deloria, Jr.

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