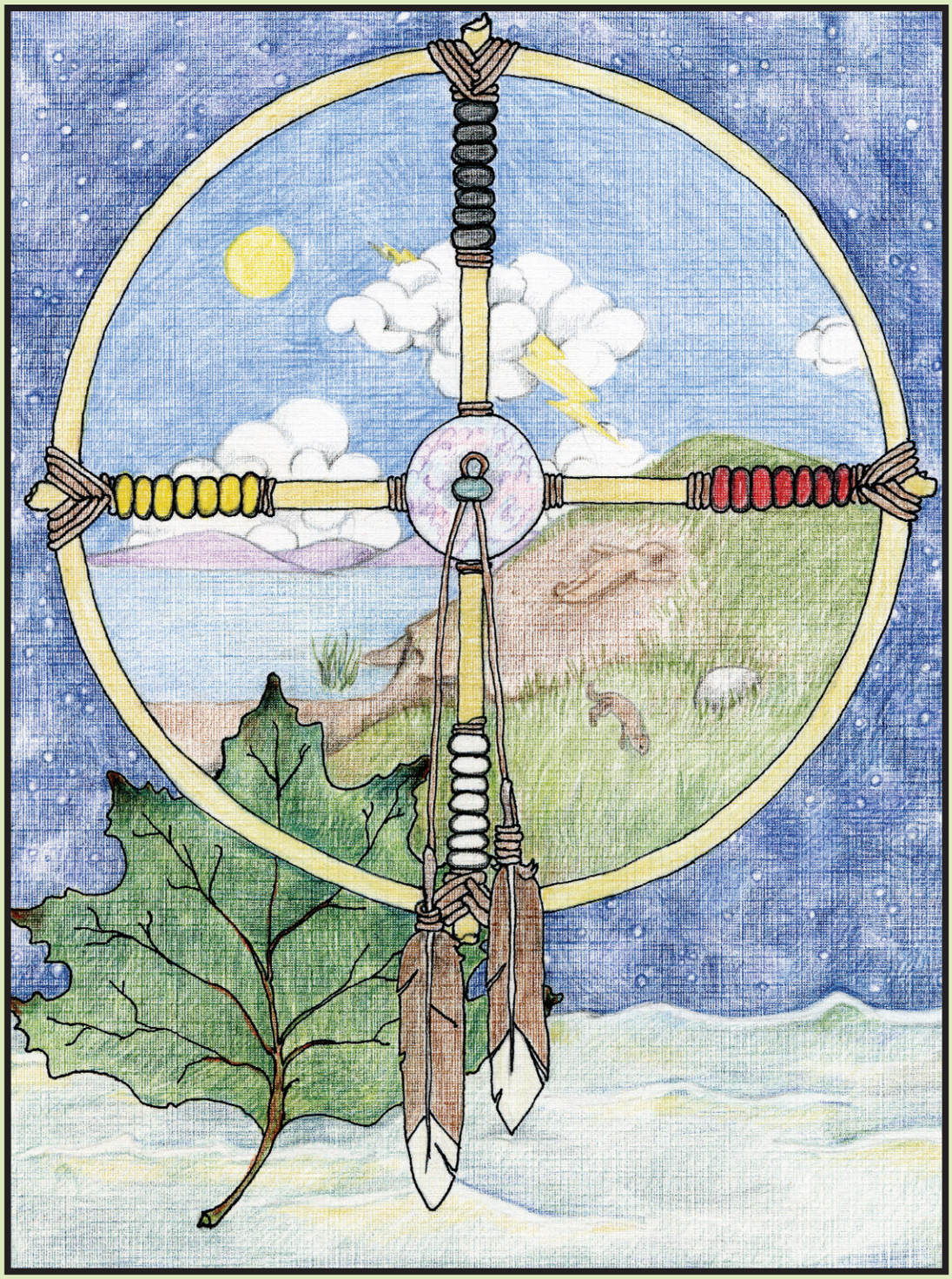
IS NOTHING SACRED?

EARTH IN CRISIS



"Medicine Wheel" © 1995 Janet Jappen

An Interview with Evan T. Pritchard

Evan T. Pritchard is of Celtic and Native American descent, raised with the environmentally conscientious Algonquin perspective by his mother and his great aunt—"an outspoken Mi'kmaq activist"—with the love and respect for the Mother Earth that is so common to indigenous cultures. He is the director of the Center for Algonquin Culture based in Woodstock, New York, and is professor of Native American Studies and Philosophy at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York. A musician and storyteller, he lectures frequently around the United States and Canada, and is the author of a number of books, including *No Word for Time* (1998) and the widely read *Native New Yorkers* (2001).

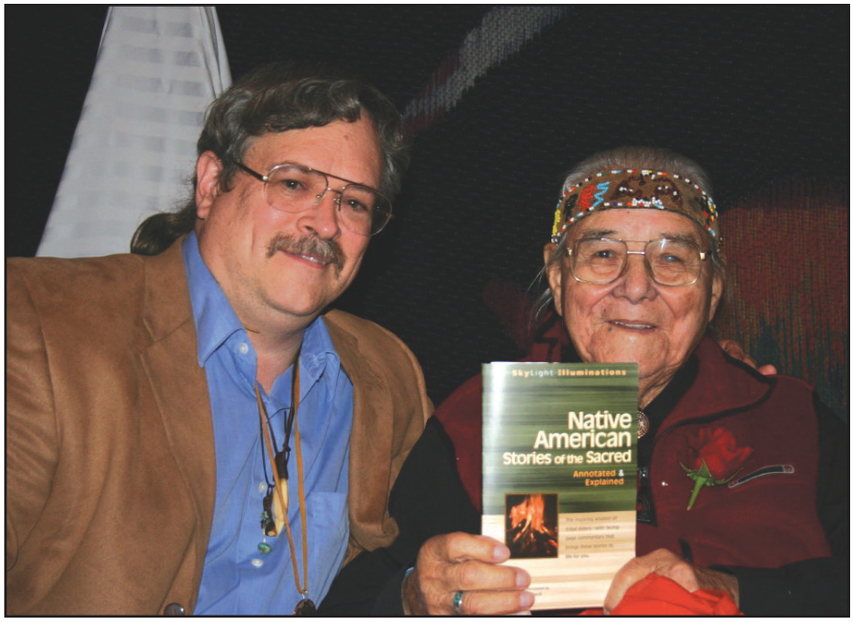
Earlier this year, British environmental scientist James Lovelock issued a chilling warning about global warming: "We are past the point of no return." Made famous in the 1970s by his theory of "the biocybernetic universal system tendency," or "Gaia Theory," in which the earth (Gaia, from the Greek) regulates itself chemically and atmospherically to promote the ideal conditions for the evolution of life, Lovelock now believes that our negligence and abuse, combined with unforeseen factors, have essentially triggered a sequence of self-destruction that is throwing the system into reverse and will result in the extinction of most forms of life. Lovelock prophesies a future, relatively near at hand, in which spasms of climate change will reduce humanity to "a broken rabble led by brutal warlords," competing for a dwindling area of habitable space at the planet's north and south poles. His new book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, was released by Penguin-UK in March.

It seemed only natural to begin this interview with Evan Pritchard by asking him what he thought of James Lovelock's dire prophecy.

Are there any themes in either your book or Native American culture itself that reinforce Lovelock's contention that Gaia—the life-sustaining "Mother Earth"—is taking her revenge and eliminating us from the planet? Is there anything in your book that would counter it with some measure of hope?

I take his "revenge of Gaia" idea seriously, though I would not put it quite that way. Basically the threshold he is talking of is the same thing as the "crossroads" that are in the Hopi and Algonquin prophecies, and he's saying we've crossed it. I, of course, would like to know why now, not next year or the year after. I foresee a variety of "revenges" that can't all be caused by global warming—for example, earthquakes and tsunamis. We need to use technology to subtract from, not add to the problem. Algonquin culture has very ancient roots here in the New York area, and one key to that longevity has been flexibility and adaptation. But to say it's too late could contribute to an attitude of resignation, as in: "It's too late to do anything now anyway."

One of the main reasons I wrote *Native American Stories of the Sacred* was to create a deeper mythopoetic background to the idea that Native Americans have tools, ideas, teachings that can help us heal the earth and adapt to changing climates. I hope that this will become the foun-



Algonquin Wisdom Keeper, Grandfather William Commanda, at the commencement ceremony of the University of Ottawa (Ontario, Canada), in November 2005, where he received an honorary doctorate. Here he receives as a graduation gift an autographed copy of *Native American Stories of the Sacred* from author and friend Evan Pritchard.

William Commanda is a respected spokesperson and spiritual leader at national and international gatherings, participates regularly in United Nations peace and spiritual vigils, and is acknowledged internationally for his work in promoting interracial and intercultural harmony, justice, and respect for Mother Earth. He is the former First Nations Grand Chief for Canada, and is Keeper of three Wampum Belts, including the Seven Fires Prophecy Belt, which foretells a crossroads at which humankind must choose between two paths: the difficult path of preserving and restoring the land; or the easy path which leads to destruction.

dation of future work on this subject. The book focuses on the deep environmental teachings that are buried in all world religions by studying the culture that, perhaps more than any other, never left that teaching anywhere but right there for all to see. The multicultural connections in the book help readers to see that teaching everywhere it occurs.

These stories were created at a time when the land and the people were one, but already the elders were seeing the signs as to what happens when people treat Mother Earth with disrespect. There were already prophecies stating that treating the earth poorly would lead to the destruction of mankind, and these stories in the book were intended to help children—as well as adults—find the right balance between what they wanted and what actions should be avoided in order to prevent this terrible destruction. If we had listened to these stories all along, we wouldn't be in this position today, and if we continue to ignore these kinds of teachings, we will make Lovelock's predictions come true.

What happens next is up to us. Lovelock says we now can only buy time, but in the ancient stories, the animals and supernatural spirit beings (such as the raven, mouse, rabbit, and coyote) often come to the rescue of the foolish humans at the last minute to bail them out.

Thousands of years ago, villages around the world stressed teachings, similar to Native American teachings today, that were designed to prevent the disintegration of the village. As different villages grew, they needed different value systems in order to hold themselves together, developing the shamanistic teachings, the Taoist teaching of the Way, the Buddhist concept of the Dharma, and various expressions of the right way to live, including the Red Road of the Native American. Now that the world is one village, if we forget those ancient values, we will collapse.

There are four or five ways the great cultures of the past have collapsed: through harm to the local environment (Sumeria, Sahara); bad foreign policy (Sumeria, British Empire, Germany); corruption (most of them!); apathy (which usually accompanies corruption); and the mismanagement of economics (too

many to name here). The teaching tales of the folk cultures and their altruistic values were in place already to try to prevent this collapse—and they worked. However, for some reason, when cultures reach a dominant position in the world, they start expanding too fast, and they collapse, thanks to these same things.

The stories in my book are full of teachings that helped Native children grow up with good values, to avoid harming the environment, to get along with neighbors, to be honest and fair, to care about life, and to be frugal in trade and consumption. It is my hope, even as climatologists are claiming that we have ruined the entire globe and cannot fix it, that enough people will remember the ancient teachings to find a way to reverse the destruction of the biosphere before it's too late.

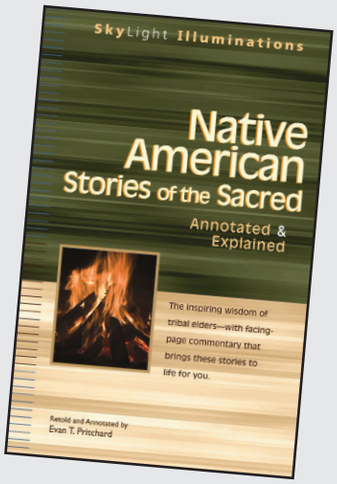
Could you comment on Lovelock's concept of Gaia—the earth as a self-perpetuating living organism—and what it has in common with Native American philosophy? Also please comment on what Native prophecies portend for the future.

Every Native language has a different way of referring to "Mother Earth." They all basically mean the same thing. This word "mother" implies that we are little children, that we are from her womb, that we depend on her for our food and for wisdom as to how to live our lives—and that she loves us as a mother loves her children. All these things we attribute to the earth, the planet on which we live. "Mother Earth" implies that she is a living being with thoughts of her own, and a being with which, at certain sacred moments, we can talk, share, and give gifts. We can cry on her shoulder, raise our arms in defense of her, and lament for her unhappiness.

In spite of this wonderful relationship, prophecies of countless tribes and nations foretell the possibility of a day when she can no longer sustain us—that if we do not follow the old teachings, she will make certain adjustments in order to balance herself that will not be to our liking. Some elders say it will be like a dog shaking off so many fleas. The Washo stories of the Water Babies, for example, imply that the forces of nature are not to be taunted or tested, and that the earth has guardians that are so powerful that they can level whole villages with a thought.

We are not the only ones who belong to Mother Earth—there are millions of species, our brothers and sisters, in fact. If we are beating up on our brothers and sisters, we will be sent away from this beautiful home like prodigal sons and daughters. Whether it is wisdom or anger and revenge that causes a loving parent to make this decision is not for me to say, but it is done to protect the rest of the family from harm. The animals, trees, reptiles, fish, and frogs are all family to us, and yet even as they're being born deformed we don't change our behavior. Is it so unimaginable that a loving mother such as Gaia would spank us, or even send us out into the cold to die in order to protect the others? In the old stories, it is the other animals who find a way to reach us humans, to convince us to stop and think about what we are doing. We come from a good family. We need to listen to their advice, and it doesn't get transmitted in words, but in nonverbal ways.

How likely is it that we will be able to turn around climate change and gain some measure of preventive control over the loss of species and the degradation of all forms of life? Will we ever regain some



A SACRED WORLD

NATIVE AMERICAN STORIES OF THE SACRED
Annotated and Explained

Retold and Annotated by
Evan T. Pritchard

Skylight Paths Publishing
Woodstock, Vermont

We've read enough history and done enough research to know that there is a spiritual bedrock lying beneath Native America—a religion of the natural world, a devotion to the sacred—that many born within that cultural and genetic heritage still practice. As Evan T. Pritchard points out in *Native American Stories of the Sacred*, it makes no difference whether it can be historically verified that Chief Seattle said, "The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth." Countless people before and after him have said essentially the same thing. The idea is central to the Native tradition.

This is not to imply that any kind of orthodoxy is involved. There is no holy scripture or priestly order. The Native tradition is as multifaceted as the number of cultures evolved throughout the North and South American continents over the last fifteen millennia (give or take a few, depending on whose research is appealed to). Given the immense tribal diversity, in response to the physical circumstances, from the frozen wastes of the Northwest Territories to the abundantly fertile valleys of central Mexico to the steeply terraced slopes of the Peruvian Andes, the wonder is that such a homogenous strain continues throughout, of religious awe, humility, gratitude, and respect for the forces of the natural world—sometimes known as the Great Spirit. A way of life that honors that spirit has come to be known as the Red Road. It is an omnicultural, nonconceptual rendering of obeisance to the Earth (the Mother) that arises from a life of arduous and tenuous survival in an abundant but demanding environment.

Pritchard has collected stories exemplifying that spirit from various Native cultures of North America—stories that were meant to be told to children (though the stories are adult in perception and understanding), and to be told only in winter, and after dark. No doubt this had to do with the long seclusion of the season, when there might actually be time simply to sit by the fire—as opposed to the warmer months, when the all-consuming labor of hunting, gathering, planting, cultivating, harvesting, and laying up of stores for the winter was critical to survival. The winter night and confinement to the hearth must have been liberating to the imagination, and conducive to connection with both the animal world and the spirit world.

Some of the ten categories into which the stories have been divided make clear that the intended audience was children—such as "The Chickadee Story," "Fire-Stealing Fox," "Coyotes and Other Tricksters," and the "Why?" stories, which include "How Deer Got His Horns" and "Why Deer's Teeth Are Blunt." These are essentially parables in the tradition of Aesop (or "wisdom tales," as Pritchard refers to them), most remarkable for the degree to which animals are commonly known and accepted, on humanly equal terms, within the cultural landscape (not the lesser beings doomed to extinction that barely exist in the back of the modern mind). It is Muskrat, in "The Mud Diver Story," who, in competition with Loon, Beaver, and Otter, has the strength to retrieve the mud from the bottom of the pond that, piled onto the back of Turtle's shell, will give material shape to the world—"Turtle Island"—and who even gives up his life in the effort.

Similarly, the human being is an equal player on the level ground of creaturely existence, but, like Muskrat, due to a certain kind of inner strength, it is the People who are given the chief responsibility for the other creatures. This is seen as a lesson important for children to learn at the earliest age. In "Why the Blackfeet Never Kill Mice," the revelation that justifies the title is that the leadership of the world—long coveted by Buffalo, Bear, and Rabbit—was eagerly ceded to Man by the astute and intuitive Mouse, who couldn't be bothered.

Other stories in the collection are more ambiguously appropriate for both youths and adults, especially those included in the sections titled "Creation Stories," "The Origins of Fire," "The Sacred Hero," and "The Spiritual Journey," in which selfless struggle, suffering, and sacrifice figure prominently. None, however, comes close to reaching the spine-tingling, exalted heights of collective spirituality found in the Lakota story of "White Buffalo Calf Woman," a powerful entity from the spirit world (here known as the Great Medicine) who brings to earth the sacramental "Sacred Pipe"—"a direct link to the supreme deity," as Pritchard describes it—from which all the peoples may learn the love, mercy, and wisdom that will help to generate unity and peace, in this life and beyond.

Pritchard points out the essence of these stories that are mostly too ancient to be dated: that all the earthly beings, animate and inanimate, as well as the earth itself, are sacred; that humankind can be extravagantly foolish; that by blindly following selfish impulses and addictions, we can throw the harmony of all living things and the environment that sustains them severely out of balance; that the animals, who have no religion but instinctively avoid suffering, often come to the rescue of a blundering and oblivious humankind; and that the lesson to be learned, again, after the problems have been solved and the people have been given the opportunity for a fresh start, is that "the earth does not belong to us—we belong to the earth."

Like all stories with ringing archetypal resonances, these "stories of the sacred" are models of brevity and concision. Almost every line can be opened up to broad reaches of explication and commentary. In the format adhered to by the Skylight Paths "Skylight Illuminations" series, with text on the right-hand page and notes on the left, Pritchard is given ample room to annotate, explain, and expound on every story's wider implications. This form is, in fact, the most reader-friendly I have encountered—hands-down superior to footnotes, endnotes, or backnotes—for transmitting the background information conveniently at hand and in a readable type size, not requiring scrutiny with a magnifying glass or endless trips back and forth from one part of the book to another.

"Skylight Illuminations," with Andrew Harvey as series editor, has given similarly enlightening and uplifting treatment to a number of other spiritual texts, mostly in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but including the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, and the Islamic writings of Rumi. The series does a great service by making more accessible, and at the same time more thoroughly explicating, many key works of world spiritual literature that, for lack of inspiration in their presentation, tend to be shelved and ignored. "Walking Together, Finding the Way" is this publisher's motto and general approach, with implications, at least one hopes, of further illuminations to come. ❑

ecological balance? If not, what kind of world do you foresee?

I think we have just enough time to turn it around, and change the way we live now. I also foresee that even if we miss that mark, great effort will be spent to slow down the process of degradation. I foresee a great renaissance of human culture worldwide as people realize that they might not be able to accomplish anything in another fifty years, similar to the inspired writings of a dying man. It makes me wonder if our greatest achievements as humans will only be heard thousands of years later by visitors to this planet as they sort through our remains. I think we can do better!

I support the radical junglification of New York and other cities, and I think that the new "green architecture," as developed by John and Nancy Todd, the Native American architectural pioneer Douglas Cardinal, and New York's own award-winning Makrand Bhoot (the other kind of Indian), will help us avoid this "dying man" scenario. New York should be at the forefront of this movement. We have the resources, and we know how to make living buildings that do not add to but actually help alleviate pollution. However, we must overcome the technical problems of electric cars, and use even more public transportation than we do now in and around New York. The spirit of the Algonquin Landkeepers is still strong on Manhattan Island; we can find inspiration in them as to how to make this transition, to get ourselves off the dead-end road we're speeding down and onto the Red Road again, which, as the Hopi say, leads to a world where children will be safe to grow up.

What exactly is "sacred" for the Native American? All life? The whole manifestation? Perhaps the question is, what is not?

In my use of this word "sacred," I refer to that which is eternal, that which is beyond human improvement, that which should not be changed. I chose stories that were not sacred stories per se—not to be interpreted or changed—but those that referred to the sacred: everyday, fun stories. However, the Algonquin elders say that everywhere you stand is sacred, and every day is sacred—in fact, that all life is sacred. I also believe this, and feel that everything that lives has a place in the sacred hoop of life.

Nature is sacred in a different way—not exactly eternal, not exactly beyond human improvement. Part of our purpose is to interact with nature, to be a part of it, to "comb the mother's hair" by collecting fallen branches for our hearth fires, to collect acorns, and to keep the deer and beaver population in balance. However, we are not to dig out or remove whole sections of the earth, or destroy any species of local plant or animal. All holes should be refilled eventually—even subway holes, in the long run.

Human life is sacred in a third way. Its sacredness lies in the four gifts that are always changing and growing: our name, which tells us of our mission in life (about which we are always learning more), our free will (which changes its mode of expression every day), our language (which we should be free to use creatively), and our peace of heart and mind (which we must regain every day).

When you speak of the Red Road teachings—or the Native American spiritual philosophy—and equate it with the Mi'kmaq "way of truth," the Cherokee "way of good," the Navajo "beauty way," and similar spiritual precepts of other cultures,

beyond the Native American, what is the thematic thread that you see running through all of them?

The three levels of sacredness I just mentioned can also be found in the descriptions of the Way of the Tao, the Buddhist Dharma, the Egyptian Ma'at, the Islamic Shari'a, and others. There is the way of the eternal, in other words, the Way of Heaven. There is the way of Nature, also known as the Pure Land. Thirdly, there is the Way that Humankind Should Live. All three are sacred in different ways. The same can be said of the Red Road.

What role does storytelling play in the Native American spiritual life?

Stories are the essence of mythopoetics, which is the essence of culture. The history of the human race is nothing more than a story told to a child. Stories must have conflicts between characters, good and evil must be addressed in some way—ignorance and knowledge, innocence and experience. Without story, we remember nothing. Jesus, Buddha, Muhammad, all used stories to convey their teachings; it's how children learn, and adults too. Stories are lessons in 3-D: they present objects and events without direct evaluation, and it is up to us to look at them from all sides, like a sculpture in our minds.

We learn these stories before we have the faculties to reject or censor them, and they become a part of us; they mold our values and opinions. But stories generally do have values to impart, and we have to be careful what we are teaching through them.

Do all Native American stories of the sacred have a moral or practical point to make? Which ones best express the higher concept of the right way to live? What are the major moral or practical lessons to be learned from these stories?

All the stories have moral and ethical points to make. All are expressions of the Red Road teachings (which the Mi'kmaq call *Agoolamz*), only many of them are presented in reverse, which is a very effective teaching tool for showing us the chain of unpleasant events that can occur if we fail to follow the Red Road and the "right way to live,"which is similar to the Eightfold Path in Buddhism. The stories are told this way so that we can make our own decisions and not feel we're being lectured. There are four directions for the Red Road—the body, the heart, the mind, and the spirit—all of which want to be in balance. All of these stories, either directly or inversely, teach respect for Mother Earth and for all beings upon it (creatures, plants, rocks), and this definitely includes human beings of all sizes and shapes and colors—including ourselves, with all our flaws.

Would you say that "The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth" expresses the essence of the right way to live? If so, could you elaborate on the implications of this statement—the consequences of not living life according to this principle, and the state the earth might be in if we did live according to this principle?

This saying was originally attributed to a certain speech by Chief Seattle. In fact, it has been said for thousands of years by elders across North America, in every language of this land. This is the message behind each of these stories, and it does indeed express the essence of the right way to live on the earth. We have minds and hearts that are connected to the earth, and spirits that live on, somewhere beyond this earth, but our bodies are of the clay and soil of this planet, and we cannot live long without respecting that fact. While we live, if we ignore or think harmful thoughts about our bodies and the connection we have with the earth, we will soon lose our hearts; we will eventually lose our minds; and when that happens, we will lose our souls. It's that simple.

What we are seeing now is that large numbers of people are afraid to speak up in defense of Mother Earth, and it's a strange silence. The consequences of not belonging to the earth are that the earth will no longer continue to serve us and help us. Whether this reversal will seem like "revenge" as foreseen by Lovelock in his new book, or whether it will be more of a crippling, a falling away of the beauty of the earth, remains to be seen. Our prayers will show us the way both as individuals and as a race. We can't rely on mass communication alone to end this silence. We must communicate what we know to our friends and family.

Were the pre-Columbian Amerindian cultures living in a kind of state of grace in which this principle was widely or universally

observed? Or was it as little or sporadically observed as it is now? What lesson might be learned from the destruction and subjugation of cultures living the Way by cultures dedicated to an opposing way of life?

I always make a distinction between "traditional" Natives and Native culture as a whole. The old stories are filled with characters such as "The Boy Who Got Mad at the Sun" (also known as "The Boy Who Snared the Sun"), who do not follow the traditional teachings and get into lots of trouble. We laugh at his efforts to snare the sun; meanwhile, we build dams that snare the rivers, make nuclear bombs that snare the atom, and launch ships that snare whales and dolphins. When we finally learn to snare the sun only through solar panels, we'll have learned a traditional lesson: respect, and proper use of our resources.

Traditional teachings in Native culture about how to leave no traces on the earth are very exact, and, I think, sound a little extreme to those entranced by twenty-first-century culture, but those are the teachings. They're getting harder and harder to live by in their pure form. I don't always live up to them, but they're constantly on my mind. There have always been Native Americans who felt those rules didn't apply to them, but they are good rules to live by. We all are quasi-traditional to varying degrees, but the traditional teachings don't change.

The first explorers were often crazy people who weren't welcomed at home. They were welcomed here, by and large, and wore out that welcome in record time. It is that restless conquering spirit, implanted in the New World at that time, which has led to some of our problems. The Native culture, which takes things slow, is a good balance to that. Some of those who followed the conquerors were often kind, with good intentions, and it was these salt-of-the-earth working immigrants who often intermarried with the Natives, and whose earth-minded descendants are still here today. They know that "the earth does not belong to us," and are not the problem, regardless of ethnicity.

What do you see as the force that contributes the most to the loss of life and the decline of wisdom? What can we do to oppose it and turn it around?

As seen in the story "Co-no, The World's Greatest Gambler," addiction is probably the most dangerous element that nature has placed inside of us. Addiction gets worse when fed by *loowaywoodee*, an Algonquin word meaning "bad things in my heart." We say that poor communication leads to confusion, confusion leads to fear, fear to anger, and anger to violence. These all are *loowaywoodee*. We also know that, according to "the Way of the Heron," the Algonquin path of conflict resolution—one of the four paths to wholeness—we can find ways to resolve all conflicts through good communication skills. This will reduce the inner emotional pain that feeds addictions.

We have a lot of inner pain these days, and it leads us into further addictions to materialistic solutions, to entertainment, oil consumption, junk food, alcohol, and drugs. All of these things weaken our connection with the spirit, the true source of wisdom, of which a warm heart and clear mind can only be good servants. Addictions can cut us off from spirit, and can destroy our hearts and minds as well, not to mention the medical problems they cause. The solution is as old as the hills—it's *communication*.

We need to meet lies with facts and truth. We need to say that global warming is a fact, and that there isn't much time, even if Lovelock, Hansen, and Lovejoy and others are wrong. We need to point out that 24 to 26 percent of the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has its origins in the United States, that everyone but us acknowledges that, and that the underlying cause is an addiction to oil and power. One of the strongest cures for addiction is passionate devotion to something we love. Religion may not always be rational, or even wise, but it's a powerful cure for self-destructive addictions of all kinds, and this has been the salvation of millions. If we are as passionately devoted to nature as we are to our addictions, it could really help us break the yoke of addiction to refined oil and all the other unnatural things we crave. ❑

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