Australian Aboriginal Wisdom

By Hank Wesselman PhD.  - April 6th, 2010  - 11 Comments

We Westerners live in a world of continual and unrelenting distraction. Our days begin with the newspapers in the morning, our work world during the day, and television, other entertainments, or the internet in the evenings. In addition, there are our self-promoting schemes and our ever-changing life-styles, replete with families and friends, restaurants and films and various cultural and endless sporting events, all of which are part of the multi-leveled template of distraction that we call life.

Accordingly, throughout our days, and our nights, our minds are never, ever still. The internal chatter in our heads continues to surge this way and that, dealing with our problems and our fears and our widely-flung networks of relationships with everyone, everywhere. In response to all of this, we Westerners worry... and we worry a lot.

The Indigenous World

This brings me to consider a quite different state of being, one that the indigenous peoples of the world know well?a state that few in the Western world remember, although as I make this statement, I have to acknowledge that those worthies who have a meditation or yoga practice will know exactly what I’m talking about.

Among some of the Australian Aboriginal peoples, this state of being is known as 'dadirri,' a term that literally translates into English as 'deep listening.' Some information about this is included in Awakening to the Spirit World (by Sandra Ingerman and Hank Wesselman, 2010).

Several years ago, I received an email from some unknown soul?an unexpected missive that included the words of an Australian Aboriginal elder named Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann. I had never heard of her before, but as I read through her brief statement, I realized that her narrative was filled with power in its simplicity and directness. Miriam Rose’s message is clearly for all of us, and so I share some of it with you here enhanced by some additional information about Aboriginal thought.

For starters, Miriam Rose defines the ability called dadirri as a special quality that allows each of us to make contact with a deep spring that lies within us. To connect with that spring requires that we achieve a state of quiet, still awareness. It is similar to what we Westerners call 'contemplation' or 'meditation.' Shamanic practitioners know it well.

Dadirri
For the traditional Aboriginals, Miriam Rose proclaims that this contemplative focus permeates their entire way of life, their whole being—that dadirri continually renews them on a day-to-day basis, bringing them peace, creating harmony where there is disharmony, producing balance where there is imbalance, restoring health where there is illness.

There are no great hidden truths here, no 'secret knowledge' hidden away for centuries, waiting for a bunch of New Age charismatics with power point presentations to rediscover them, excavate them, and write a book about them, proclaiming them as the solution to all our problems, personal and collective.

This woman's message conveys a simple and unmistakable truth—that the practice of dadirri makes the Aboriginals feel whole again. She shares that they cannot live good and useful lives unless they practice dadirri and that they learned how to do this from their ancestors.

As a Western anthropologist who has done considerable time in the indigenous world, I can appreciate this traditional woman's words. During my years spent among the tribal peoples of Africa, one of the things that I learned is that they are not threatened by silence. To the contrary, they are completely at home in it. Their traditional ways have taught them how to be still and how to listen to the silence. Accordingly, they do not try to hurry things up. Rather they allow them to follow their natural courses—like the seasons... and they wait.

So the Aboriginal woman's message from Australia conveys a familiar message as well as an extraordinary claim—that those Aboriginals still living in their traditional lifeways don't worry... that they never worry. They know that in the practice of dadirri—the deep listening and quiet stillness of the soul—that all ways will be made clear to them in time.

The Aboriginal Perspective

The traditional Aboriginals are not 'goal oriented' in the same way that we Westerners are programmed to be from childhood, nor do they attempt 'to push the river' which they know with absolute certainty is an exercise in absolute futility.

In Miriam Rose's words: "We are like the tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burnt, but inside the tree, the sap is still flowing and under the ground, the roots are still strong. Like the tree, we have endured the flames and yet we still have the power to be reborn."

After more than 200 years of assimilationist practices inflicted upon them by church and state alike, the Australian Aboriginals are still here. They are used to the ongoing struggle and to the long waiting. In this sense, they still wait for the white people to understand them better. They have spent many generations learning about Western ways. They have learned to speak our language and have listened to what we have to say. Yet they continue to wait for us to come closer to them. They long for those things they have always hoped for?respect and understanding.

In Miriam Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's words: "We know that our white brothers and sisters carry their own particular burdens. We carry burdens as well. Yet I believe that if they let us come to them, if they would open up their minds and hearts to us and hear what we have to say, we might lighten their burdens. There is a struggle for all of us, but we, unlike them, have not lost our spirit of dadirri."

She concludes her message by observing "I believe that the spirit of dadirri that we have to offer to the world
will help you Westerners to blossom and grow, not just within yourselves, but within your nation as well...

"There are deep springs within each of us and within them, there is a sound?the sound of the deep calling to the deep. The time for rebirth is now. If our culture and your culture are alive and well, as well as strong and respected, they will grow. In such a case, our culture will not die, nor will yours, and our spirits will not be lost. We will continue, together, as this was always meant to be."

**Aboriginal Philosophy**

This wonderful statement reminds me of a paper I read years ago in an anthology called Shamanism: Expanded Views of Reality edited by Shirley Nicholson (1987). The paper is titled 'The Dreamtime, Mysticism, and Liberation: Shamanism in Australia,' and it is authored by the Venerable E. Nandisvara Nayake Thero PhD, then the chief Sanghanayaka of the Theravada Order of Buddhist monks in India.

A former professor of comparative religion at Madras University, as well as director of the Maha Bodhi Society of Sri Lanka and secretary general of the World Sangha Council, Dr. Nandisvara had recently returned from a research expedition with an anthropological team in Australia, where he had lived for some time with a native Aboriginal community?in his words, an extremely ancient race whose way of life (hunting and gathering) had not substantially changed for perhaps 35,000 years.

In his report, Dr. Nandisvara makes an extraordinary statement.

"To those who judge the degree of (a) culture by the degree of (its) technological sophistication, the fact that the Australian natives live in the same fashion now as they did thousands of years ago may imply that they are uncivilized or uncultured.

"However, I would suggest that if (a) civilization be defined (by) the degree of polishing of an individual's mind and the building of his or her character, and if that culture (reflects) the measure of our self-discipline as well as our level of consciousness, then the Australian Aboriginals are actually one of the most civilized and highly cultured peoples in the world today."

From his conversations with their shamans and spiritual elders, Dr. Nandisvara concluded that their spiritual tradition is highly advanced and that their religious beliefs are parallel with those found in the various branches of the Perennial Philosophy.

The Aboriginal elders told Dr. Nandisvara that the spirit of a human being is always in contact with the higher spiritual realms of being, even if there may be no awareness of this contact in one’s ordinary state of consciousness. They informed him that this gives to each one of us an extraordinary gift in that there can be direct communication between the human and the divine planes of being without the need for any ecclesiastical intermediary or priest.

In other words, in Aboriginal thought, there is quite simply no great impassable gulf between the human and the divine?a perception that is in direct opposition to most esoteric schools of theology, including Judeo-Christianity. This is why the Aboriginals had no need to develop any organized religion run by a bureaucratized and stratified priesthood. What they have instead is an authentic spiritual egalitarianism in which they, as individuals, can access the Dreamtime through trance, giving them direct and immediate access into the spiritual dimensions through the shamanic techniques of ecstasy.
This ability gives them an unshakable authority to make highly evolved philosophical observations. For example, like the religious thanatologies of other spiritual traditions, the Aboriginals describe the progression of human consciousness after death as "survival in infinity." They know from direct experience that the individual point of contact with the infinitude of cosmic consciousness continues to expand after death until it is co-extensive with it... until it literally 'becomes' it.

This is not a theory for the Aboriginals, nor is it a concept. It is a percept based upon their own direct experience, a revelation that is revealed also in the Tibetan Book of the Dead. The Hindus and Buddhists use the word Samadhi to describe this state. The Aboriginals call it the Dreamtime, yet it is clear from their descriptions of it that empirically and phenomenologically, these states are the same.

**Earth and Sky Philosophies**

Dr Nandisvara's essay also reports that there is a tradition of personal spiritual aspiration in Aboriginal society that is similar to that found in yoga. This is not surprising as the shamanic tradition is the ancestral precursor to all the yogic traditions.

The four stages of life in Hinduism are: brahmacharya-unmarried student; grihastha-married householder with children; vanaprastha-forest dweller; and sannyasa-wanderer. During the last years of their lives, many of the Aboriginal elders leave their communities and go off alone into the mountains to engage in spiritual practices, much as in the last two stages of the Hindu system which are characterized by solitary retirement to the forest, a striving for spiritual understanding, and preparation for death.

One of the techniques reported by Dr. Nandisvara practiced by such "renunciate Aboriginal elders" is gazing at the sky with wide-open eyes. This is not a type of astronomy or astrology. Rather it is a meditative method used to obtain spiritual inspiration and intuition directly from the cosmos.

In Buddhism, Yoga, Judeo-Christianity, and other relatively recent religious systems, 'sky philosophies' predominate in which the concepts of space and sky deities are of greatest religious import. In opposition to this are the earlier religious as well as indigenous traditions in which 'earth philosophies' were the norm, focused as they were upon the Earth as Mother as well as other earthly deities, power animals or fertility goddesses as the predominate objects of reverence.

Interestingly, in Aboriginal thought, both philosophies are present. The Earth is the basis for all spiritual studies during the first and intermediate stages of life. But with the approach of life’s end, the basic Earth study is completed and there is a refocusing of the still embodied spirit of the individual toward the boundless reaches of the sky.

Thus, for the Australian Aboriginals, the highest spirituality is associated not with the Earth, but with the shamanic Upper Worlds and with the infinity of space?with Cosmic Consciousness itself. This again is in complete alignment with the great teachings of the Perennial Philosophy.

At this stage, both the body and the mind have become absolutely still. This is not the same state associated with the chakras as described in kundalini yoga and the other esoteric schools, for it is beyond such experiences. It is in fact a withdrawal of energy from the charkas so that they no longer have any effect on the mind whatsoever.

This is the state of dadirri... the deep listening.
Dr. Nandisvara describes this state as the borderland between the mind that is connected to this world, and the mind that is not connected to this world—the mind that is absolutely free. It is the interface between the explicate and implicate orders of reality of the physicist David Bohm... the intimate one on one connection with the 'higher self' of the mystic.

This is the state that the Aboriginal elders seek as they leave their homes and go off to live in the mountains to practice gazing at the sky. This is the shaman’s invitation to the spiritual cosmic force to approach and embrace the focus of our mind. It is and was and will forever be, union with the infinite?authentic non-dual mysticism.

Reconsidering Indigenous Wisdom

It is time, I think, to acknowledge that the indigenous tribal peoples were not and are not at some child-like form of awareness. Rather, the time has come for us allegedly 'civilized' Westerners to seriously reconsider their worldviews and their spiritual practices. For their ways of being in the world have kept them and their societies alive and well for 40,000 years and more... while we who consider ourselves so highly evolved have only been here for a few hundred... and things are not going particularly well these days.

Dr. Nandisvara also discusses something else of interest...

Along their way to achieving the higher states of consciousness, the shamans in Aboriginal societies are able to develop various sorts of psychic abilities. They possess, for example, the capacity to travel out of the body across the sky in an altered state of consciousness and visit any place they wish.

It is also known among the Aboriginals that their shamans can journey to the moon, or to any other planet at any time they choose. This is why they were not particularly impressed when the Apollo missions flew to the moon and back. In fact, they failed to understand why we had needed machines to go there as they are both bulky as well as slow.

Dr. Nandisvara concludes his essay by observing (with considerable reverence) that those Aboriginals still involved in their traditional lifeways are so peaceful and quiet, as well as so harmoniously in tune with Nature and the spiritual dimension. By contrast, the rest of the world around them, including most of the so-called 'civilized' societies, are in crisis, dominated by murder and mayhem, political mendacity and corporate greed, with people killing each other in the name of whatever god they espouse, exploiting the environment and their fellow living beings of this beautiful world, only some of whom happen to be human.

We could observe in passing that there is little doubt that we are the Romans of our time. Is it therefore surprising that Dr. Nandisvara, who some have called the 'Pope' of India, has chosen to describe the native Australians as one of the most civilized and cultured peoples on the planet today?

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