

## Introduction to Mother Earth Spirituality

Mother Earth Spirituality is one popular aspect of the New Age movement. It is, like Neo-pagan Druidism and Germanic Ásatrú, a reconstructionist tradition, for it attempts to draw upon the religious traditions of non- and pre-Christian peoples. Unlike Celtic and Germanic Neo-paganism, however, the traditions on which Mother Earth Spirituality attempts to draw are those of North (and to some extent South and Central) America's Native peoples. This adds a level of complexity to Mother Earth spirituality that is lacking in the Neo-pagan context. Whereas the meeting between Celtic and Northern European peoples with Christianity took place over 1500 years ago, the meeting between the Native peoples of the Americas with Europeans and Christianity was barely 500 years ago. Attempts to reconstruct Norse or Celtic spirituality are therefore attempts to reconstruct moribund or 'dead' religious traditions, for their last living practitioners died centuries ago. This is not the case with the spiritual traditions of North America's native peoples. Although a shocking amount of the spiritual traditions of Native Americans was lost following the contact with Europeans, nevertheless much of these traditions was also maintained, and there are people today who carry on the spiritual traditions of their ancestors. Mother Earth Spirituality, therefore, must be understood both in terms of its relationship to the New Age movement within which it finds its expression, and in relationship to the religious traditions of Native peoples as lived and practised today.

## Historical influences and Precursors

The first historical antecedent to contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality is of course the spiritual traditions of pre-colonial native peoples. Like the ancient Celts and Northern Europeans, the native peoples of North America did not keep written records. As a result, little is known about the history, culture, and religion of pre-contact native peoples. Every tribe has

an oral tradition that tells something about the past, but the oral traditions of most tribes are fragmentary. It has been suggested that as many as 70% of native peoples in the Americas died as a result of the contact with Europeans. Most of these people died as a result of diseases such as influenza, which had never existed in North America until brought by Europeans, and to which Native peoples had therefore developed no immunity. Others were slain outright, while still others died once traditional ways of hunting, farming or fishing were disrupted. Given such a huge fatality rate, it is not surprising that much of the religious knowledge of native peoples was lost as well. Coupled with the determined drive to convert Native peoples to Christianity, the Christian bias of those Europeans who did make a record of Native spiritual beliefs, and the Christian conviction that native peoples *had* no religion and therefore made excellent candidates for Christian conversion, knowledge about the spirituality of pre-contact native peoples is somewhat lacking.

### Pre-Contact Spiritualities

Despite the lack of records and the loss of details, however, surviving native peoples continued to believe in and practice many aspects of their pre-contact spiritual traditions. There were, and are, as many different Native spiritual traditions in North America as there were, and are, groups of Native peoples. Generalizations about Native spirituality are therefore no more universally accurate than generalizations about any other spiritual tradition. Nevertheless, while specific myths, rituals, and practices differed from tribe to tribe and region to region, it has been suggested that there were two main "types" of spirituality practised by pre-contact Native peoples. These types are distinguished on the basis of livelihood: the "hunting" pattern, and the "agricultural" pattern.

According to anthropologist Åke Hultkrantz, the hunting pattern of spirituality is the oldest pattern, traceable back to the Asian origins of native North Americans, and brought with them across the land bridge from Siberia to Alaska 60,000 to 30,000 years ago. This pattern includes the elements of animal ceremonialism, the quest for spiritual power (individual vision quests), a belief in a male supreme being, an annual ceremony of cosmic rejuvenation (Sun Dance), the practice of shamanism, and a belief in life after death that places the afterworld beyond the horizon or in the sky. The agricultural pattern, which developed between 7,000 - 1500 years ago, includes the elements of rain and fertility ceremonies, priestly ritual, belief in gods and goddesses, a round of yearly or seasonal fertility rites, medicine society ritualism, and a belief in life after death that places the afterworld under the earth, or in the clouds.

Each of these patterns was, and is, subject to variation depending upon the tribal and regional differences among Native peoples. The symbolism of each element mentioned above also differs, and differing native peoples who practice essentially the "same" ritual or who hold essentially the "same" type of belief do not necessarily interpret them the same way. Furthermore, native religious traditions historically were not as bound by a single "correct" interpretation as are those religions that rely on written sacred scriptures. Native spiritual traditions have always been syncretic and fluid, open to new interpretation and the incorporation of new symbolism as individual visions dictate. Although new elements were always judged against accepted traditional elements before being incorporated or rejected, there was apparently none of the resistance to innovation that characterizes Christianity, among other historical, textual faiths. For this reason, generic patterns of native spirituality can represent only the broadest of generalizations about pre-contact native spiritual traditions. Nevertheless, such

patterns do provide a basis for understanding the contemporary Mother Earth spirituality movement, which represents a fusion of elements from both types of traditions.

### Revitalization Movements

The second set of major historical precursors to the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality movement are the religious revitalization movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As more and more European settlers moved across North America, as more and more native peoples died, or became Christian converts, or were forced onto reservations and limited in their land use rights, a struggle to maintain, or reclaim, the spiritual and cultural traditions of the past developed. The style of these revitalization movements differed from place to place and group to group, but one movement has been particularly influential in terms of the contemporary Mother Earth spirituality movement. This is the Ghost Dance movements of 1870 and 1890.

The Ghost Dance movement of 1870 can be traced back to the visionary preaching of a Pacific Northwest Wanapum man named Smohalla. Smohalla became the leader of a religious movement called the Dreamer religion. Smohalla warned of the dangers of the European settlers and their disregard for the life of the planet, and of the dangers of the vices they had brought with them - particularly, the dangers of alcohol. He predicted the end of the world, to be followed by a renewal of the world in which the dead would live again. Followers of Smohalla practised a dance to emulate the dance of the dead, in celebration of the coming end of the world which would also see an end to the invasion of Europeans into Native lands.

Twenty years later, Smohalla's Dreamer religion influenced the visions of a Nevada Paiute visionary named Wovoka. Wovoka had learned Paiute shamanism from his father, had participated in the 1870 ghost dance, and knew something of Christianity from the family of

settlers who employed him. In the winter of 1888-89, Wovoka became ill and experienced a vision of the end of the world. In his vision, he travelled to the spirit world and spoke with the spirits of the dead. They told him that the Paiute people must prepare for the coming end of the world, in which the dead would return, and which would be followed by a rebirth of the world as it was before the coming of Europeans. The Euro-Americans would be swept away, and only righteous Native peoples would be spared to live in the new world. This coming of the New World would be brought about by supernatural intervention, and so military resistance to the Euro-Americans was not called for.

In order to prepare for the coming of this event, Wovoka was told that the people must perform trance dances that would hasten the return of the dead, and give up all drinking, quarrelling and fighting. The dance itself was conducted by both men and women, who would paint their bodies with signs received in visions, and dance in concentric circles, with each dancer's arms linked over the shoulders of the people beside her. These dances were supposed to continue for five days, and the dancers would eventually fall into trance and see and speak with the spirits of the dead. The spirits of the dead then reinforced the message of Wovoka, and the practice of the Ghost Dance spread to other tribes, including the Shoshoni, Arapaho, Crow, Cheyenne, Pawnee, Kiowa, Comanche, and Sioux tribes.

When word of Wovoka's message spread to the Sioux, the practice of the ghost dance was taken up wholeheartedly. The Sioux, who had contacted Euro-Americans later than many tribes, and who maintained a fairly intact spiritual tradition at this point, had been in serious conflict with the American government over their refusal to move to reservations. Among the Sioux, the prophecy of the ghost dance took on a slightly more militaristic flavour, for it was further prophesied that those who wore "ghost shirts" would be impervious to the bullets of

American soldiers. Several hundred Sioux men, women, and children dancing the ghost dance were massacred at Wounded Knee on December 29, 1890 by the U.S. military, as a consequence of the Army's fear of the ghost dance movement.

Although the Ghost Dance movement did not succeed in bringing about the return of a world or way of life that existed prior to European contact, it did succeed in bringing together and unifying a diverse group of Native tribes. One of the important things to remember about Native religion and culture is that Native tribes were sometimes as separate from each other in terms of political policy or social practice or religious belief, as they were from the incoming European settlers. The introduction of the Ghost Dance movement, in crossing tribal and regional lines, paved the way for the development of a sense of "Indian" solidarity that transcended tribal identity. No longer, or at least not as strongly, would native peoples see themselves first and only as "Sioux" or "Cree" or "Zuni," but instead would see themselves first as Native North Americans (what would come in time to be called "First Nations people"), and then second in terms of tribal affiliation.

### Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show

A third influencing factor, linked to this, was the popularity of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. This travelling circus/rodeo, which began in 1883, was tremendously popular in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The natives who travelled with this show were almost all from Plains tribes such as Lakota Sioux, and were therefore almost single-handedly responsible for popularizing the image of the Indian in feathered war-bonnet and paint, smoking a peace pipe and hunting buffalo. Like the Ghost Dance, the Wild West Show brought members of different tribes together, and contributed to the development of a sense of unity among all native North

Americans that transcended tribal affiliations. It also served to paint a uniform picture of the "Indian" in the minds of Euro-Americans, an image that is still dominant for many people.

### Romanticization of the Indian

The fourth major historical factor influencing the development of the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality movement is the widespread romanticization of the Indian that took place in the nineteenth century. Euro-Americans have always had a tendency to see in Native peoples the opposite of themselves. When conflict between Euro-Americans and Native peoples over land was at its height, natives were depicted as "savages" in opposition to the presumed "civilization" of the colonists. During the missionization process of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian missionaries saw in native peoples an innocence and spiritual purity, in contrast to the corrupt, decadent lifestyles of the European colonists. In the nineteenth century, non-Natives began to see in native peoples a respect for nature that they did not see in themselves. This image of native peoples as "noble savages" can be seen in a wide variety of nineteenth century sources. Within the context of Spiritualism, one of the precursors to the New Age movement, it can be seen in the widespread practice of having "Indian" spirit guides as sources of spiritual wisdom. These "Indian braves" and "Indian princesses" were understood to be more spiritually aware than "White" people, because of their close connection to the land, and this in turn let them be more in tune with the spirit world than Euro-Americans. One Spiritualist pamphlet, for example, wrote:

To be aware of Spiritual truth in America, and to some extent in other countries, is to be aware of the Red Man... [for] things of the Spirit came very easily and naturally to these people while they were still in the flesh. Before the white people landed... millions of [natives] Spirits passed the earth-term of their eternal

lives here, in a way which brought them very close to Nature. Then they passed on to the etheric spheres of Nature with a marvellous knowledge of the expressions of the Infinite, to make the way easy and clear for them over there.<sup>1</sup>

Another example of this romanticization of the Native can be seen in a letter that was written in 1854, presumably by Chief Seattle of the Suwamis Tribe, to the President of the United States. This letter has become a famous example of how Native peoples practice a spirituality that reveres Mother Earth. Interestingly, however, the version of the letter that has become famous was not written by a native at all. Instead, it was written by an American script writer, drawing on a newspaper article written by a European journalist, who heard a speech by Chief Seattle, and wrote up his notes of the event several years later. The famous letter reads in part:

The Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. The Great Chief also sends us words of friendship and good will. This is kind of him, since we know he has little need of our friendship in return. But we will consider your offer. For we know that if we do not sell, the white man may come with guns and take our land.

How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing, and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man. So, when the Great Chief in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy or land, he asks much of us...

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself..

One thing we know, which the white man may one day discover - our God is the same God. You may think now that you own Him as you wish to own our land: but you cannot. He is the God of man; and his compassion is equal for the red man and the white. This earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to

heap contempt on its Creator. The whites too shall pass; perhaps sooner than all other tribes. Continue to contaminate your bed, and you will one night suffocate in your own waste....<sup>ii</sup>

In both of these sources you can see the nineteenth century perception that "White" people were somehow lacking in spiritual awareness, or environmental awareness, and that only the spiritual and ecological wisdom of native peoples could help direct Euro-Americans to the proper spiritual path. This image of the native, no more "true" or "false" than the image of the "savage" that was held in earlier centuries by Euro-Americans, has become the dominant image in the practice of contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality, adopted and accepted by Native and non-native practitioners of this New Age form of Native spirituality.

### Black Elk

Finally, perhaps the most influential historical factor in contributing to the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality movement is that of the teachings of the Oglala Sioux holy man named Nicholas Black Elk. Black Elk's religious teachings were recorded by two different non-native writers, first by nobel prize winning poet John G. Neihardt in a book titled Black Elk Speaks, and later by anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown in a book titled The Sacred Pipe. According to one philosopher of religion, the search for the "real" Black Elk and the "real" teachings of Black Elk is akin to the search for the historical Jesus, independent of the faith texts written about him, or the search for the "real" Socrates independent of Plato's influential description of him. The picture of Black Elk that emerges today is of a man familiar with the historical teachings of his people, a visionary who had a mystical experience that profoundly shaped his life, and a Catholic who converted to that faith in 1904, and remained faithful to it for the rest of his life. According to both Neihardt and later scholars, Black Elk regretted in his later life that he had failed to live

up to the vision he received as a child, and this was why he passed his story on to the non-native poet who came seeking information about Sioux history prior to Wounded Knee. Whether Black Elk regretted his conversion to Catholicism is unclear.

The historical Black Elk may have been a Catholic convert, but the two books Black Elk Speaks and The Sacred Pipe present him as a traditional Sioux holy man, and it is this image, rightly or wrongly, that has contributed to the development of the New Age Mother Earth Spirituality movement. Certainly Black Elk was familiar with the teachings of his people, and it has been argued that he continued to practice at least some elements of his traditional faith long after his conversion to Catholicism, despite the objections of other Catholic catechists. Although the spirituality portrayed in these two books may or may not reflect what Black really believed, therefore, and although the beliefs of Black Elk may or may not accurately reflect the beliefs and practices of the Sioux prior to the coming of Euro-Americans and Christianity, the beliefs recorded in Black Elk Speaks and The Sacred Pipe have become, to paraphrase one writer, like the 'Bible of all tribes.'<sup>iii</sup>

Black Elk Speaks is significant primarily for its recounting of a vision Black Elk experienced when he was nine years old. According to this account, Black Elk heard voices calling to him as if from a distance for several years, until finally when he was nine the voices became so clear that he got up from where he was sitting to follow them. After standing, however, he felt great pain in his legs, and was distracted from his pursuit. The following day, he collapsed, and by the day after that, his legs and arms were so swollen that he could not move. At this point he saw two spear-carrying figures come down from the sky, who told him to follow them for his "grandfathers" were waiting. Black Elk follows them, leaving his body behind, and is "gone" from his body for twelve days. During this time, he experiences an elaborate vision.

## Black Elk's Vision

The first thing Black Elk saw was a Bay horse who told him to look to the west, where twelve black horses with lightning for manes and bison hooves around their necks were standing. Then the Bay horse told him to look to the north, where twelve white horses were standing, with manes like blizzards and white geese flying about their heads. Then the Bay told him to look east, where he saw twelve sorrel horses with necklaces of elk's teeth and manes like morning sunlight. Then he was told to look south, where twelve buckskin deer stood with manes like trees and grass. These animals lined up four by four, one of each colour, and followed Black Elk towards a teepee where six old men sat. The Bay then whinnied towards each of these four directions, and the sky was filled with all the animals and birds that exist, which came from and returned to the four directions.

When Black Elk reached the teepee, the horses of his vision turned to face inward from the four directions, four by four, and the old men called him over, and told him that they had called him because the grandfathers of the world were having a council, and wanted to teach him. He realized then that these old men were not really men, but the Powers of the six directions (west, north, east, south, up/sky, down/earth). The sky was then filled with a flaming rainbow, and the first power gave to Black Elk the power to make live, in the symbol of a cup that held water, and water that held the sky; and also gave to him the power to destroy, in the symbol of a bow. The second power gave to him the power to heal, in the symbol of a white wing of cleansing, and a healing herb. The third power gave him the sacred peace pipe, and the fourth power gave to him the power to found a new nation, in which all peoples and all animals would live in harmony, in the symbol of a red stick that grew into a tree. The fifth power then

gave to Black Elk the powers of the air and the stars in the symbol of a white wing, and the sixth gave to him a vision of his powers over the earth.

In this vision-within-a-vision, Black Elk went forth on his Bay horse on a black road of trouble, with the other horses following behind, and slew a "blue man" who was the force of drought, and healed the sick and dying by planting the stick that turned into a tree, so that all within the shade of its branches would be within the sacred hoop of the nation. He then went forth on the red road of peace, with all the people following behind, and for two generations all was peaceful. Then the road turned black, and troubles came again, and the people were starving and restless. A holy man then turned into a buffalo, and then from buffalo into a sacred healing plant. Black Elk then realized that just as the buffalo had been a gift from the spirits, now a new gift was given and needed, and he took this and used it to heal the people and the animals. Then a horse he had healed turned into a great black stallion, and four women came out of the four directions, holding the cup, the pipe, the hoop of the nation, and the white wing. The stallion and the women sang a hymn of praise, and all was healthy and happy again. And then Black Elk saw the whole world laid out before him, and he saw the hoop of the whole world, within which all people lived. He was given a sacred herb to drop on the earth, and it was the herb of the morning star, the herb of understanding. Then he returned to the six grandfathers, while the cheering voices from across the universe were heard in the background. And then he was sent back to earth, to his body, with the message that it was his task to make this vision come true.

### Black Elk's Seven Sacred Rites

Black Elk never forgot his vision, but he never felt that he had fulfilled its message and promise, either. It was this feeling, apparently, that led him to recount his vision to John Neihardt. Having done so, he apparently felt a further necessity to pass on the details of his

people's traditional religious life, for when the anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown came to speak to him in the 1940's, he collaborated with Brown to produce The Sacred Pipe, a book in which seven sacred rituals of the Sioux people were recorded.<sup>iv</sup> Like Black Elk Speaks, it is unclear whether The Sacred Pipe accurately reflects Black Elk's own beliefs, practices and memories, or whether Joseph Epes Brown contributed more than his writing skills to the production of the book. It is also unclear whether the rituals recounted in this book accurately reflect the nature of traditional pre-Christian Sioux spiritual practices, or whether Black Elk and/or Brown invented them or adapted them for the purpose of the book. Nevertheless, like the vision of Black Elk, the rituals he recounts in this book have become central in the revival of Native American spirituality, and consequently in the development of the New Age Mother Earth Spirituality movement.

The seven sacred rituals of the Lakota as recounted by Black Elk to Joseph Epes Brown have become the central core of rituals practised within contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality.

These rituals are:

- 1) Keeping of the Soul
- 2) Sweat lodge
- 3) Vision quest
- 4) Sun Dance
- 5) A Girl's Coming of Age
- 6) Making of Relatives
- 7) The Throwing of the Ball

Most of these rituals have been incorporated within the Mother Earth Spirituality Movement, and will be discussed in the "Rituals" section below. Black Elk himself apparently

felt that of all these rituals, the peace pipe and the Sun Dance were the most important. According to Black Elk's account of the Sioux myth, the peace pipe was brought to them by a spirit maiden named Buffalo Calf Woman. She appeared to two Sioux hunters, and gave them the first peace pipe. She taught them that the pipe was a symbol of prayer and unity between mankind and all the animals, and between mankind and the Great Spirit and Mother Earth. The pipe is therefore a symbol of unity, peace, and cooperation.

The Sun Dance, which Black Elk felt was so central, is a way for natives to seek guidance and help from the spirit world, and to seek unity of the tribe as well. Black Elk's version of the Sun Dance puts a very great stress on survival of the people, and unity of the people, in face of the Euro- American invasion. Traditionally the dancers would meet for 2 full days, and dance around the clock the whole time. Today, the whole tribe gets together once a year, usually in the summer, and the Sun Dance lasts for four days, but dancers only dance from morning to sundown. It has been suggested that Black Elk's vision of the flowering stick that unites the people who fall beneath its branches is a symbolic reference to the sun dance. The sun dance was outlawed by the American government following Wounded Knee, and Black Elk would not have been able to speak about it openly. It seems clear from his recounting of the ritual, however, that even though the practice was outlawed, it continued to be danced in secret by the Sioux people, including Black Elk himself.

The impact of Black Elk cannot be underestimated. He has been massively influential not just in the New Age native spirituality context, but in terms of the revival of Native spirituality among native peoples also. Drawing upon all of these historical influences, and the teachings of Black Elk in particular, the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality movement emerged in the late 1980's. The Mother Earth Spirituality Movement must be seen on several

different levels. As part of the New Age movement, it must be understood as simply one aspect of a much broader social movement concerned with alternative health, living, and spirituality. For some New Agers, Mother Earth Spirituality is simply one facet of an eclectic, wide-ranging spiritual pursuit. For other New Agers, it has become the central focus for their spirituality, and as a consequence they themselves share something of a different worldview than other members of the New Age movement. In addition to its appeal to both groups of New Agers, however, the Mother Earth Spirituality movement must also be understood as part of a wider spiritual revival among Native peoples'. For some Native peoples, Mother Earth spirituality represents an opportunity to return to a form of traditional native spirituality that can replace that of their own traditional tribal spirituality that was damaged or lost with the coming of Euro-Americans. For others, it represents a complement to traditional tribal ways that are practised still more or less intact. For still others, it represents a spiritual and a political tool, to be used towards the goal of aboriginal self-government, and in opposition to Euro-American ways. And for still others, it represents a corruption of traditional tribal ways, and the 'selling-out' of Native spiritual traditions to Euro-Americans who, have stolen the land and the freedoms of Native people, are now attempting to steal their religion and culture also.

### Worldview

Although all these facets of Mother Earth spirituality are equally genuine and relevant, we are primarily concerned here with those who approach Mother Earth spirituality from within the context of the New Age movement, and who have made Mother Earth Spirituality the primary focus of their spiritual involvement with the New Age. For these New Agers, the monistic, wholistic, individualistic, evolutionary and millennial worldview of the New Age movement adds an additional layer of complexity, drawn from the worldviews of native

spirituality. The individualistic emphasis within the New Age worldview is maintained, for New Agers interested in Mother Earth spirituality nonetheless practice it for their own individual self-transformation and healing, rather than for communal unity or tribal renewal (although as with other facets of the New Age movement, such self-transformation and healing is understood to contribute to the transformation and healing of the world.) The monistic and wholistic emphasis of the New Age worldview, on the other hand, adds an animistic and nature-based orientation.

The animistic worldview of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality takes two forms, both also found within the context of traditional tribal worldviews. The first, similar to the animistic emphasis of other reconstructionist groups, represents a belief that all of nature is alive, is filled with spirits, and that human beings can communicate with the spirits in nature, and they can communicate with you. Within the context of Mother Earth spirituality, this animistic emphasis is primarily (but not exclusively) placed on the spirits of animals. Animals are seen as the brothers and sisters of human beings, and as equally worthy of respect, and equally spiritually aware, as human beings. Some Mother Earth spirituality practitioners form a close kinship bond with one particular kind of animal - bear, wolf, eagle, etc. - and find or try to develop in themselves the spiritual qualities associated with each animal. These animals are referred to as "totem" animals. Other New Agers simply respect, and honour, all animals as brothers and sisters of human beings.

The second expression of the animistic worldview of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality is the belief that some animals are not "real" animals at all, but are in fact spiritual beings in animal form. These are the "power animals" of Mother Earth spirituality, the focus of many New Age vision quests. Power animals are understood to be the spiritual essence of different animal species - Bear, rather than a bear, Owl rather than an owl. Although any animal

can become a power animal, some of the common ones are: Bear, who represents strength, protection, and resourcefulness; Owl, who represents perception, wisdom, and instinct, Wolf, who represents sensitivity, guidance, and truth, and Eagle, who represents intuition, inspiration, and achievement. The animistic emphasis within the contemporary Mother Earth spirituality worldview therefore also leads to a nature-centred view of the world. Just as nature is filled with spirits who are brothers and sisters to human beings, so to is the land a spiritual place, and worthy of respect and honour. In many respects, the theology of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality can be located here, for Nature is understood to be one of the greatest of spiritual powers, Mother Earth herself. All other aspects of nature - animals, plants, rivers, etc. - are children of Mother Nature.

This respect for Mother Nature as a deity and for her children as spiritual beings in their own rights lies at the heart of the Mother Earth spirituality movement. This focus on the Earth as Mother leads to a perception of the interrelatedness of human beings with all other animals, a view of the universe as being in cosmic harmony, in which man, animals, and the goddesses and gods keep the universe in balance. It also underlies the social and environmental activism of Mother Earth spirituality practitioners. This activism is oriented towards saving the earth from pollution and exploitation, but also towards saving certain geographical features of the earth as sacred sites. Although only a minority of Mother Earth Spirituality practitioners within the New Age context are native peoples, most New Age practitioners show at least some concern for preserving Native burial grounds, traditional sacred sites, and traditional tribal lands.

### Ethics

The ethical system of Mother Earth Spirituality practitioners must also be located within the Nature-centred aspect of the worldview of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality. Given

the primary emphasis on relatedness with nature, the ethical code within contemporary Mother Earth spirituality stresses the need to treat all people, all animals, and all aspects of nature with respect, honour, and a feeling of kinship. Conceiving of nature as Mother and nature's children as family, the ethical system of Mother Earth Spirituality is simply an assumption that you should treat the things around you as you would treat your human kin. This, it is suggested, can then become the basis of a transformed world, in which our human relatedness to, rather than dominion over, nature can be acknowledged. Such a world would become ecologically aware, and humanitarian also, for all peoples, those of the First Nations, those of the Third World, are also worthy of respect, honour, and kinship.

#### Varieties of Mother Earth Spirituality

The organization of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality reflects the diverse appeal of the movement. There are three main "types" of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality.

#### Tribal Reconstructionists

The first can be referred to as tribal reconstructionist spirituality, in which Native peoples work to reconstruct, or revive, the spiritual traditions of their own particular tribe or region. This reconstructed traditional spirituality, however, within the context of the Mother Earth Spirituality movement, adds a concern for environmental and social justice issues that would have been lacking in the historical context. Historically, there would have been little need for a global perspective on environmental issues, and it has been suggested that the rhetoric of "mother earth" consequently represents an attempt to communicate a nature-centred form of spirituality to contemporary post-contact native and Euro-American peoples, rather than an accurate articulation of pre-contact tribal beliefs. The worship of or reverence for "Mother Earth" as a spiritual entity or goddess in her own right therefore probably represents a modern addition to

reconstructed tribal traditions. Similarly, the major social justice issues of concern today would have been of little concern historically. In the contemporary context, tribal reconstructionist spirituality is closely connected to the issues of freedom of spirituality in prisons (the right to burn sweetgrass), and the treatment of alcohol and drug abuse with native spiritual and traditional healing methods. Tribal reconstructionist spirituality therefore represents an attempt to revive past spiritual traditions while making them a force for renewal, and resilience, for Native peoples in the face of contemporary life.

### Pan-Indian Spirituality

The second form of contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality can be referred to as Pan-Indian spirituality. Pan-Indian spirituality is the adoption and practice of a generic (primarily Sioux-inspired) "Indian" form of spirituality by Native peoples. For many Natives, particularly those on the east coast whose peoples experienced the earliest contact with Euro-Americans, access to the rituals, beliefs, and stories of their own tribal spirituality has been lost. For others, their own tribal traditions simply do not have the unified appeal of the pan-Indian Mother Earth Spirituality movement. Still others argue that despite tribal differences in detail, at root all native peoples historically practised the same spiritual tradition, and that it does not really matter that any given tribe may not have practised a given ritual, therefore, since the basis of the religion - the animistic nature-oriented basis - was the same across the continent. As a result of these factors, the model of Mother Earth spirituality that grew out of the historical factors of pre-contact traditions, revitalization movements, the Wild West Show's fostering of a "generic Indian" image based on the Plains Indian model, and most particularly the writings of the Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk has been adopted by native peoples from Northern Canada to the Southern U.S.

Pan-Indian spirituality has a political component (or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that the political rights movement of American Native peoples has a spiritual component.) The American Indian Movement (AIM), for example, has fused their political agenda of self-governance and land reclamation with a Mother Earth form of spirituality. AIM is attempting to build a national political platform in which the lands, rights, and cultures of Native peoples are recognized as legitimate and sacrosanct. In doing so, it is necessary for the movement to do two things: first, to foster a sense of pan-Indian identity which transcends tribal lines, so that all Native peoples in North America can feel that they have something in common beyond the sheer fact of being First Nations people. For this reason, Mother Earth Spirituality is very helpful, for it is seen as a universally "Indian" form of spirituality not limited to only one or more tribes. Second, AIM needs to distinguish the lands, rights, and cultures of native peoples from those of Euro-Americans, for only in their distinctiveness can they hope to succeed in gaining political action on their claims. For this reason, "whites" are excluded from participation in pan-Indian spiritual rituals, for allowing Euro-American participation in pan-Indian rituals would undermine the very politico-spiritual goals the movement hopes to realize.

Members of AIM, and many other native peoples, feel that Euro-Americans are practising a form of cultural imperialism when they turn to Native spirituality. The argument they put forward is that having taken native lands, and having destroyed native cultures, and having oppressed native peoples, and having ignored all the hardship, poverty, heartache, and ongoing discrimination that they subsequently produced, Euro-Americans are now dissatisfied with the culture they have produced. And so, rather than fix their own culture, or look to their own historical roots, they now come to take native spiritual traditions in the way they have always "taken" in the past - without concern for those who might be hurt, and without concern

for the social contexts within which those spiritual traditions are practised. As one native woman named Andy Smith expressed this,

[New Agers] want to become only partly Indian. They do not want to be part of our struggles for survival against genocide, and they do not want to fight for treaty rights or an end to substance abuse or sterilization abuse. They do not want to do anything that would tarnish their romanticized notions of what it means to be an Indian. Moreover, they want to become Indian without holding themselves accountable to Indian communities. If they did, they would have to listen to Indians telling them to stop carrying around sacred pipes, stop doing their own sweat lodges, and stop appropriating our spiritual practices. Rather, these New Agers see Indians as romanticized gurus who exist only to meet their consumerist needs. Consequently, they do not understand our struggles for survival, and thus they can have no genuine understanding of Indian spiritual practices.<sup>v</sup>

This position is an extremely powerful one, and many native peoples adhere to it. For this reason, although "whites" can sometimes attend pow wows as tourists and watch the performance of Pan-Indian spirituality rituals such as the Sun Dance, they are rarely allowed to participate actively.

The third type of Mother Earth spirituality can be referred to simply as New Age Mother Earth Spirituality. Very similar in terms of ritual structure and worldview to that of pan-Indian spirituality, New Age Mother Earth Spirituality is practised by both native peoples and non-natives. Like pan-Indian spirituality, it draws very heavily on the Sioux spirituality outlined by Black Elk, and is considered by practitioners to be appropriate for any person interested in practising a more earth-based, environmentally sound form of spirituality.

One of the earliest proponents of this form of Mother Earth spirituality was a man named Sun Bear. Sun Bear (Gheezis Mokwa) was born Vincent La Duke in 1929 on the White Earth Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota. His father was Chippewa (Ojibwa), and his mother was European. According to Sun Bear, he had his first visionary experience when he was four, while suffering from diphtheria. In this vision, he saw a rainbow of coloured globes spinning around himself, and then a black bear surrounded by light, who reached through the globes and touched his hand.

In later life, Sun Bear came to see this vision as a call to unite peoples of all colours in a spiritual goal of healing the earth, for the Bear is a symbol of healing, and this Bear of his vision was a Bear of Light. Although he spent the next fifteen years on the reserve on which he was born, and another fifteen or so years travelling the United States, meeting people from many different tribes, worshipping with the Native American Church (Peyote ceremonies), working in Hollywood, and running a native newspaper called Many Smokes, he did finally act on this childhood vision. In 1966, he moved to Reno, Nevada with three non-native women and founded the Bear Tribe Medicine Society, which he describes as "a group of people striving daily to relearn their proper relationship with the Earth Mother, the Great Spirit, and all their relations in the mineral, plant, animal and human kingdoms... a tribe of teachers responsible for sharing... lessons of harmony."<sup>vi</sup>

Sun Bear argues that anyone genuinely interested in Native spirituality should be taught to practice it, and suggests that "whites" who are interested in Native spirituality may be the reincarnated souls of deceased native peoples. Most of the membership in the Bear Tribe is non-native, although many members have adopted native names. The Bear Tribe Medicine Society is now head-quartered in Klamath Falls, Oregon. It holds a yearly cycle of festivals all

across the United States, and offers an apprenticeship training program for those interested in learning shamanic techniques.

### Primal Shamanism

There is in fact a fourth type of contemporary Mother Earth spirituality that has been referred to as primal shamanism. Primal shamanism draws upon all world's shamanic traditions, not just Native North American, although North American native symbolism is often dominant. The primary spokesperson for this kind of spirituality is an anthropologist named Michael Harner. Harner did his anthropological fieldwork in the 1950's with the Untsuri Shuar tribe in Ecuador, where he was allowed to study shamanism only by agreeing to participate in the rituals fully, including drinking the hallucinogenic drug that Shuar shamans used to induce trance. Harner did so, and experienced many shamanic visions and journeys. He returned to the Shuar three times over the next ten years to continue his study of and training in shamanism. Then he studied shamanic techniques with North American native peoples, where he learned how to induce trance without the drug used by the Shuar tribesmen. In 1980, he published a book called The Way of the Shaman, designed to teach people how to practice this form of visionary spirituality, and in 1983 he founded The Foundation for Shamanic Studies. Although Harner does not stress a reverence for Mother Earth in his teachings, his training institute has become a primary source for credentials for non-natives wishing to practice native spirituality. For that reason, he can be included in the broader New Age Mother Earth Spirituality movement.

### Rituals

The primary ritual practised within Sun Bear's Medicine Society is that of the Medicine Wheel. According to one Native studies scholar, the medicine wheel was probably originally a minor ritual or game of skill practised by the Cheyenne in pre and post-contact times.<sup>vii</sup> Within

the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality context, however, it has gained tremendous importance. Sun Bear changed the name of his native affairs newspaper to Wildfire: The Magazine of the Medicine Wheel Network, and has dedicated it to the use of the Medicine Wheel to heal Mother Earth. This stress on the Medicine Wheel as a spiritual technique for healing, both of the earth and of individuals, is strong throughout the New Age Mother Earth Spirituality movement, not confined simply within Sun Bear's Bear Tribe group. It is within Sun Bear's group, however, that the Medicine Wheel becomes the primary focus.

Within the Bear Tribe Medicine Society, Medicine Wheel rituals take place over the period of a weekend at a campground where participants bring sleeping bags, tents, or rent cabins so that they can stay for the full weekend period. Although Medicine Wheels can be small enough to fit on a bed-side table (and often are - people can build their own individual Medicine Wheels), at Bear Tribe weekend rituals the wheel is built big enough so that all of the participants can circle it easily. Participants are smudged (ritually purified with smoke from sacred herbs, usually sage for protection, cedar for cleansing, and/or sweetgrass for calling on spirit), and then help to build a circle of thirty-six stones, each of them representing one of the powers and one of the sacred places of the universe. A buffalo skull or the skull of some other sacred animal is placed in the centre of the circle as a symbol of the Creator and centre of the universe. Participants also make tobacco ties out of cloth in the colours of the four cardinal directions (west/black; north/white; east/red; south/yellow), and tie the cloth around a small offering of tobacco, and seal the ties with their prayers for healing. These offerings are then placed in the Medicine Wheel circle. Building the Medicine Wheel is the act of creating a sacred space, in which healing is possible for both the Earth itself, and the participants who attend.

Following the building of the Medicine Wheel, Sun Bear's ritual weekends also include other ritual events, such as peace pipe ceremonies, sweat lodge ceremonies, blessing and giveaway ceremonies, and drumming, chanting, dancing, praying and healing sessions. They also include outdoor classes on shamanism, herbal lore, Native astronomy, and any other topic that a teacher might choose to teach. One of the central topics taught at Sun Bear's Medicine Wheel festivals is on the coming earth changes. Sun Bear believes that the Earth has been poisoned by what mankind has done to her, and that she is attempting to cleanse herself of those poisons by the weather changes, earthquakes, and other natural phenomenon. The Medicine Wheel, in representing a perfectly aligned Universe in harmony with itself, helps the Earth in her attempts to cleanse herself and return to a state of healthful harmony. Participants in the Medicine Wheel workshops are also encouraged to live in harmony with nature, and to master spiritual and survival skills that will help them to live through the earth changes that are coming.

Although Sun Bear was one of the first native people to extend native teachings and rituals to a non-native audience, he is not the only native leader of the New Age Mother Earth spirituality movement. Other New Age Mother Earth Spirituality leaders include Wallace Black Elk and Ed McGaa (Eagle Man). Wallace Black Elk (no genetic relation to Nicholas Black Elk) is a Lakota shaman who places a primary focus on the sweat lodge ceremony. Ed McGaa, also Sioux, places his primary focus on the Sun Dance ceremony. For each of these three mother earth spirituality leaders, however, the core ceremonies of the Mother Earth Spirituality movement are a modified version of those dictated by Nicholas Black Elk to Joseph Epes Brown. Three rituals have been omitted: the Spirit Calling Ceremony, the Girl's Coming of Age ceremony, and the Throwing the Ball ceremony. The Medicine Wheel ceremony has been added. The other four main contemporary rituals practised in Mother Earth Spirituality are:

- 1) The Peace pipe ceremony
- 2) The Sweat lodge ceremony
- 3) The Vision quest
- 4) The Sun Dance

### The Peace Pipe Ceremony

According to Black Elk's version of Sioux myth, as picked up and elaborated within the contemporary Mother Earth Spirituality movement, the peace pipe was brought to them by the spirit maiden Buffalo Calf Woman. The peace pipe ritual itself is simple. The pipe is filled with tobacco or red willow bark (non-hallucinogenic), and the pipe holder also sprinkles some tobacco on the ground, to return to Mother Earth some of what She has given mankind. The pipe holder then turns to face each of the four directions (east, south, west, north) in turn, adding a pinch of tobacco for each direction. East is praised as the source of new beginnings (dawn), south for growth, warmth, healing, west for darkness, release, water, life, and north for courage, strength, purity, truth. The pipe is then touched to the ground to acknowledge Mother Earth, and raised to the sky to acknowledge Father Sky and Wakan Tanka. The pipe is then lit, and passed from person to person. The smoke of the pipe is believed to represent truthful words, truthful actions, and a truthful spirit. The smoke from the pipe is held in the mouth, not inhaled. Generally speaking, the peace pipe ritual is conducted as part of the other rituals mentioned here.

### The Sweat Lodge Ceremony

The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is a purification ceremony. It usually precedes other ceremonies such as the Vision Quest or the Sun Dance. First a lodge must be built. The lodge is approximately 8ft by 12ft, and is built of bent saplings covered with blankets. A pit is dug in the centre, in which a rocks heated in a fire are placed. The floor is covered with sweet herbs and

flowers. Water is poured over the rocks to produce steam, which purifies the participants. In the ritual, the participants sit around the centre rock pit, and observe a period of silence. The leader of the ritual then calls for the rocks to be brought in, which are glowing red from the heat of the fire. This is the only light in the lodge, and participants stare at the glowing coals and open their minds to any vision that they might see there. Then the first dipper of water is poured on the stones, and steam shoots upward. The leader of the ceremony offers a prayer to Mother Earth and Wakan Tonka for peace, knowledge, wisdom and healing. Then three more dippers of water are poured, and a prayer for cleansing is offered. Then a period of drumming or singing follows, while the steam heats the interior of the lodge. Then the leader will offer a prayer to Wakan Tonka, and the participants introduce themselves to the spirit world. After this, the flap entrance is lifted to let in a few moments of cool air. And then the cycle repeats itself three more times, with different prayers offered each time, each representing a different cardinal direction. These four cycles are called 'endurances' - the first is for recognition of the spirit world, the second for courage, the third for recognition of knowledge, and the fourth for healing. After all four endurance, a prayer is offered for the successful completion of the sweat lodge, and the participants leave the lodge one by one. The sweat lodge ceremony is designed to purify participants and to fortify within them positive personality characteristics. It is usually followed by the peace pipe ceremony.

### The Vision Quest

The vision quest ceremony is conducted by individuals rather than groups. To conduct a vision quest ceremony, all that is needed is an isolated setting, and four twigs tied with pieces of coloured cloth to represent the four directions - red for east, yellow for south, black (or blue) for west, and white for north. Sometimes, the quester will also take along tiny bundles of tobacco

tied into coloured pieces of fabric, the colours matching those of the four directions. These bundles act as offerings, if the quester desires to ask a favour from the spirit world during the quest. Once the quester leaves on her quest (usually following a sweat lodge ceremony to purify them), they climb to an isolated, preferably elevated spot, and mark off the quest site with the four twigs, forming a square or rectangular area in which they will sit. The person fasts during the quest period, and tries to put themselves into contact with Mother Earth and the spirit world. Historically, vision quests would last up to 4-5 days, but today they are usually only between 24 and 48 hours long. During the vision quest, the quester watches the moon rise and set, the sun rise and set, watches nature, animals, the weather, and links their own life into the wider natural setting. Dreams and visions occur, and the symbolism in the dreams can guide the quester in the future life. Vision quests are done for any number of reasons, whenever the individual feels a need for guidance, understanding, or help from the spirit world.

### The Sun Dance

The Sun Dance is also a way for natives to seek guidance and help from the spirit world, but it is a tribal rather than individual or group activity. The whole tribe gets together once a year, usually in the summer, and the Sun Dance lasts for four days. On the first day, the Sun Dance chief selects a cottonwood tree, and a woman takes the first ceremonial cut at the tree with an axe, after apologizing to the tree for taking its life, and explaining to the tree why it is necessary to do so. The tree is carried back to the Sun Dance area, where a large circle has been drawn. A hole is dug, into which a peace pipe is placed, and the tree is placed upright in the hole. Coloured banners are tied to the tree, in the colours of the four directions, plus blue for sky and green for Mother Earth. Twelve branches are tied to the tree, as are cut out shapes of buffalo

and humans. Those who will take part in the ceremony then undergo a sweat lodge ceremony to ready themselves for the ritual.

On the second day, the first day of the dance, the participants again undergo a sweat lodge ceremony. They then dress in ritual clothing - a kilt for men, a white dress for women. All wear sage wreaths around their wrists, ankles and head, and sometimes wear a cutout shape of a sunflower to represent the sun. A ritual shape is painted on their chests by a holy man, usually in red. The dancers carry whistles and a peace pipe, and follow the Sun Dance leader in dancing around the centre pole. The Sun Dance leader carries a buffalo skull. They chant, sing, and play their ceremonial whistles. This dancing continues from dawn to sun set for three days.

On the fourth day, the male dancers have the flesh of their chests pierced. A shaman will make two parallel cuts in the flesh of their chests, and then pushes a metal spike through the flesh between the two cuts. This is then removed, and the shaman asks the participant for a wooden skewer, which the participant has sanded smooth. This wooden skewer is pushed through one cut and out the other. Rawhide thongs are tied to the protruding ends of the wooden peg, and these are tied to a rope, which is in turn tied to the centre pole. The participants are therefore tied to the tree, called the tree of life, which represents the union between Mother Earth and Father Sky, the Sun. The willingness of the participants to have their flesh pierced shows their dedication to the well being of their people and the Earth. Women do not have their flesh pierced in the sun dance. Native tradition teaches that they have already sacrificed themselves through pain in childbirth, and it is not necessary for them to endure such pain again in order to bond with the earth.

After the piercing, the dancers dance inwards to touch the tree of life, and outwards again, tied by umbilical cords to Mother Earth. They do this four times, and then the dancers

lean back against the pull of the rope, tearing the peg from their flesh and breaking their umbilical cord to Mother Earth. The ceremony is over, with the whole community having replugged its ties to both earth and sky, as well as to each other.

The Sun Dance ceremony symbolizes the ties of each person to Mother Earth, but it also symbolizes the willingness of the dancers to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs. As you can clearly see, the Sun Dance is a long, painful, but ultimately uplifting experience for the dancers.

### Other Rituals

In addition to the Medicine Wheel, the Peace Pipe ceremony, the Vision Quest, the Sweat Lodge, and the Sun Dance, several other rituals are commonly practiced in the Mother Earth spirituality context. One of these is the Giveaway Blanket. Although not a formal ritual, it is a practice that is commonly found at Mother Earth spirituality pow wows. Participants in other Mother Earth spirituality rituals, if they choose to do so, give a gift to a blanket that has been laid out for that purpose. Each may then also take a gift from a blanket. This is a practice which is intended to mirror Native redistribution of goods practices from the pre-contact period. In this way, wealth is shared, and ties between community members are strengthened.

Another common ritual practice is the Making of Relatives ceremony. In this ritual, two or more people, unrelated by blood, ritually bind themselves as brothers and sisters through an exchange of blood and vows. The spirits of the four directions are called upon to witness the oath of blood-brother or sisterhood, and then each person makes a small cut on the heel of their palms, and clasps hands with the other. If for health reasons the participants do not want to cut themselves and join their blood literally, other symbols of joining may be used - a rope to bind their hands together and a joint promise to contribute time and effort to help the other, or a joint sacrifice of cherished possessions by having each participant give something of value away to

charity - so that the bond is marked by something meaningful. In these ways, non-native practitioners of Mother Earth spirituality, called members of the Rainbow Tribe, may become the brothers and sisters of Native practitioners.

#### Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Harding, Frederic. n.d. "Why Red Indians are Spirit Guides." Pamphlet.
- <sup>ii</sup> Quoted in McGaa, Ed. Mother Earth Spirituality: Native American Paths to Healing Ourselves and Our World. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990, pp. xi-xii.
- <sup>iii</sup> Deloria, Vine jr. "Introduction," in Neihardt, John G. Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux. 1932. Reprint Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979, p. xiii. In reference to "Black Elk Speaks," Deloria writes "the book has become a North American bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life...".
- <sup>iv</sup> Black Elk. The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux. Recorded and Edited by Joseph Epes Brown. 1953. Reprint Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971.
- <sup>v</sup> Smith, Andy. "For all those who were Indian in a former life," in Ecofeminism and the Sacred. Carol J. Adams, ed. New York: Continuum, 1995, 168-171, p. 169.
- <sup>vi</sup> Sun Bear, quoted in Kehoe, Alice B. "Primal Gaia: Primitivists and Plastic Medicine Men," in The Invented Indian: Cultural Fictions and Government Policies. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996, p. 200.
- <sup>vii</sup> Kehoe 1996, p. 200.