

A TALE OF TWO STORIES:
Hierarchical Thinking
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They [chiefs from various Haudenosaunee nations] would ask about the history, because most of all they wanted to know – as old Joe Mitchell, Turtle Clan chief from Akwesasne, asked us one night – "What makes the white man act the way he does in the world? What in their history makes them at war with the Earth?"¹

Many authors and commentators remark on the imperial and colonizing nature of mainly white, Eurocentric society, of civilization itself, and often look to Aboriginal cultures to find a healing for the disconnection and alienation so apparent in Western culture. Frequently there is an attempt to obtain knowledge from Aboriginal communities without having an embodied, immersed experience, without an integrated understanding of how that knowledge is dependent on, and emerges from, a larger context. The rapid loss of Aboriginal cultures around the globe has led to an attempt to collect and catalogue that knowledge as pointed out by Marie Battiste and James Sa'ke'j Youngblood Henderson: "The awareness that the demise of Indigenous knowledge and the loss of their languages is causing the demise and the loss of biological diversity has not stopped the rush on Indigenous knowledge systems by outsiders." However,

"These outsiders have not attempted to prevent the extermination of Indigenous Peoples or their ecosystems; instead they have intensified their efforts to access, to know, and to assert control over this endangered knowledge and these endangered resources."²

This could be equally said about science seeking to store endangered animals in zoos and their DNA in archives. Little attempt is made by those same scientists to save the environment of the animals, plants, and other life-forms that are endangered. Jerry Mander, author of *In The Absence Of The Sacred*, writes:

Though many scientists gleaned profitable information from the Indians of the [Amazon] region, few have stood up to defend the natives who are now under direct assault. . . . Indians, their knowledge, and their environment fall within the Western definition of "resource," and are thus subject to exploitation.³

Disembodied knowledge, a product, is the focus; a zoo of knowledge that becomes an end in itself, a source of power-over for those who control the knowledge, a "cognitive imperialism," to quote Wanda McCaslin.⁴ Storing that knowledge does not protect the context of that knowledge. As Gregory Bateson wrote: "The unit of survival is *organism plus environment*."⁵

This obsession with collecting disembodied knowledge and out-of-context flora and fauna could lead to the ridiculous extreme of collecting native peoples in private collections as so comically, and cuttingly, described by Thomas King in his story "Tidings of Comfort and Joy."⁶ One could argue that such collections already exist in the form of native reservations in both Canada and the U.S.A., since these 'collections' are protected, i.e. controlled, by the paternalistic Indian Act of Canada and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the U.S.

In 1974, Allen C. Quetone, A Kiowa chief, at a conference on the traditional upbringing of American Aboriginal children, was making the same point:

There have been experts, sociologists and anthropologists, who have spent their lives studying all aspects of the Indian way of life. They have used the appropriate technical language to describe our behavior, our mores, our beliefs. Whatever our philosophies and our religion, they have classified them and written them into scientific papers. You can go to any library in the country and you will find this material on the American Indian. But what impact, what influence has all this had? And scientific study of the Indian has been going on for at least a hundred years! We have become drawing-room subjects of historic Americana – or even worse, museum pieces.⁷

Arthur Sutton, an Arapaho chief, at the same conference, understood one of the motives of these experts when replying to an anthropologist who was asking him questions: "You'll go back and make a name for yourself, and all you have done was ask questions."⁸

Knowledge becomes a product and a source of superiority, "knowledge is power," rather than bringing a deeper understanding of relationships and the infinite complexity of those relationships.

As an example of taking an Aboriginal knowledge out of context, many First Nations peoples have commented on the disrespectful use of their ceremonies by members of Eurocentric societies, sometimes with disastrous results. One recent example is the death of three participants and hospitalization of eighteen others in a sweat lodge ceremony in Sedona, Arizona hosted by James Arthur Ray in October 2009. Promotional material included the encouragement that it would "blow the socks off" the participants for the tidy sum of US\$9,950.⁹

One aspect of many Aboriginal societies is their non-hierarchical arrangement, whereas most institutions in Western culture are hierarchical, pyramidal, with top-down dominance structures. This structuring is encoded in Western thinking, so much so that many don't notice it, nor notice how such structuring influences Western perceptions of indigenous knowledge.

Here's an example of how a First Nations story and teaching can be altered through a Western perspective. First, the story told by Leon Shenandoah, a Haudenosaunee statesman, as related by Chellis Glendinning:

All the creatures of the world gather in council to clarify the jobs they each are to perform in the service of Creation.

One by one, they step forward. The beaver is here to look after the wetlands, and to monitor how the streams flow through the mountains. The worm is here to burrow through the earth so that the roots of plants may find air and nutrients. The deer is here to slip through the woodlands, to watch what is happening. The council is progressing well – but one poor creature stands in the background, uncertain of his role. This is the human.

At last a man steps forward and haltingly addresses the assembly. "We are confused," he says. "What is the purpose of human beings?"

The animals and the plants, the insects and the trees – all are surprised. "Don't you *know*?! It's so . . . obvious!!"

"No," replies the man, "we need you all to tell us."

And the other creatures of the world respond, "Your purpose is to glory in it all. Your job is to praise Creation."¹⁰

I was deeply touched when I first read this story, a burden was lifted from within. How simple and easy to be human! Later, I read the 'same' story as told by James Thornton. Well, at first it seemed to be the same story. The basic message is the same: humans are here to praise Creation. Here is his version. What differences do you see?

There is a Native American story in which the Creator gathers together in a great congregation all the beings on Earth. He tells them to stand in a circle near the others of their kind. What they must do, He tells them, is figure out their place, their job, their function, in Creation. What is their species meant to do? He tells them that when they have figured out their role in Creation, they are to come into the center of the vast circle and declare what it is.

So all the different species talk among themselves, and pretty quickly, some of them enter the circle. "We are to aerate and enrich the soil so that plants can grow more easily," the earthworms say. "We are to cull the old and sick of the deer and moose herds, so that the herds can be vigorous and of a size that balances the food supply," say the wolves. And so on, until everyone has spoken except for the human beings, who are standing on the outside, unable to resolve what their function in Creation is.

The other animals talk among themselves, seeing the embarrassing predicament of the humans, and send a delegation to speak to them. The leader, a badger, says to the human beings, "Why have you not spoken, like all the rest of us?" And the humans say, one after the other, that they do not know their function.

"But we all know your function in Creation!" the badger says.

"What is it?" they ask all together.

"It's simple!" says the badger. "Your function is to praise all of Creation!"¹¹

One clue is that the social structure is different in the two versions. In the first, Haudenosaunee, version, the animals 'gather in council.' In the second Creator 'gathers them together,' tells them how to stand, and what they *must* do. In the first the animals have their own agency, in the second it is imposed on them; a reflection of a top-down dominance structure. The position paper of the Hollow Water Community Holistic Circle Healing evaluates this role of Christianity, of dominance, in the Canadian justice system:

One can easily see the role of Christianity in the concepts of the Canadian justice system. Christianity is a "top down" system with God at the top. In the Old Testament at least, God smote those who offended him. Christians pay for their sins with God doling out the punishment.¹²

The danger of top-down hierarchy had been recognized earlier in North America. The Haudenosaunee, sometimes referred to as the Iroquois, formed a federal democracy of five, then six, indigenous nations before Columbus reached the Americas. In the formation of that federation:

They evolved a law that recognized that vertical hierarchy creates conflicts, and they dedicated the superbly complex organization of their society to function to prevent the rise internally of hierarchy.¹³

This attitude and understanding of a dominant central power controlling 'lesser' humans is endemic in Western culture, showing itself not only in the justice system but also in religious, governmental, financial, corporate, police, military, educational, social service, volunteer and other institutions. It also shows itself in racism and gender prejudice, prejudices which are themselves the consequence of dominance institutional structures such as slavery and patriarchy. God, as a central controlling principle manifested in institutional Christianity, is a reflection of the formation of centralized states, starting in the Middle East over 5,000 years ago, where military aggression and defence required a centralized authority in the form of a king or pharaoh. Rather than the king being a representative of the divine, God in the principle of an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent force, represents and justifies the monarch's power; in the reverse of the proclaimed divine right of kings, monotheism

represents and justifies monarchy, or central governing power. There is no central dominating principle in the Haudenosaunee version of the council of animals.

Dominance-based institutional structures, such as bureaucracies, have a profound alienating effect on people where good people can do bad things. Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Folk School in the 1920s, writes "One of the lessons I've learned about bureaucracies is that although they are not made up of evil people, they can do something bad to good people. . . . I came to the conclusion that the bureaucratic system is an inevitable disease that afflicts all organizations and governments."¹⁴ People in such systems become split between their conscience and the desire to fit in with institutional policies, often for reasons of job security, their position in the hierarchy, fear of punishment, or the desire for rewards such as a promotion, increased pay, power-over, or privilege. In his book, *In The Absence Of The Sacred*, Jerry Mander relates a very public example of this split between conscience and allegiance to a hierarchical structure:

In 1986, Union Carbide Corporation's chemical plant in Bhopal, India, accidentally released methyl isocyanate into the air, injuring some 200,000 people and killing more than 2,000. Soon after the accident the chairman of the board of Union Carbide, Warren M. Anderson, was so upset at what happened that he informed the media that he would spend the rest of his life attempting to correct the problems his company had caused and to make amends. Only one year later, however, Mr. Anderson was quoted in *Business Week* as saying that he had "overreacted," and was now prepared to lead the company in its legal fight *against* paying damages and reparations. What happened? Very simply, Mr. Anderson at first reacted as a human being. Later, he realized, (and perhaps was pressed to realize) that this reaction was inappropriate for a chairman of the board of a company whose primary obligations are not to the poor victims of Bhopal, but to shareholders; that is to its profit picture.¹⁵

Bureaucratic and hierarchical systems promote power-over and privilege and in so-doing they can pervert truth and justice. To quote Norman Finkelstein: "If you pursue truth and justice, it will always mean a diminution of power and privilege. If you pursue power and privilege it will always be at the expense of truth and justice."¹⁶

To return to the two versions of the story: James Thornton's version reflects patriarchy with a power-over stance, not to forget the implied gender prejudice in that the Creator is male, as in "He tells them to stand in a circle," . . . "What they must do, He tells them," . . . "He tells them that when they have figured out their role . . ." Chief Justice Robert Yazzie writes that this "idea of someone with power and authority making decisions for others is entirely contrary to Navajo morals."¹⁷ Michael Cousins writes of the Haudenosaunee: "All people in the society are considered equal, and no one is compelled by a higher authority to do anything."¹⁸ For the Hopi, "Under the Hopi system no person has power over another."¹⁹ Similarly, John Lansa, a Hopi elder explained to Jerry Mander: "The Hopi didn't have any class structure at all – no bosses, no policemen, no judges – everyone was equal."²⁰ Leanne Simpson asserts,

"For Nishnaabeg people, our political and social cultures were profoundly non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian and non-coercive." ²¹ And Wanda McCaslin confirms, "Force is not the Indigenous way of achieving balance and harmony in families and communities." ²² Rupert Ross recounts the surprise in a northern Ontario courtroom when the judge out of respect asked an elder what he would recommend as a suitable sentence. The elder "replied that it was not for *him* to tell someone else what was right!" ²³ Another example comes from the Igbo peoples of Nigeria: "the use of force is minimal or absent . . . there are leaders rather than rulers, and . . . cohesion is achieved by rules rather than by laws and by consensus rather than by dictation." ²⁴

And here is another difference: the animals in the first story know their role in creation; it is typical of Western culture, as revealed in the second story, that we have to "figure it out," using only logical, rational processing to find a solution. Embodied knowing, gut and heart intelligences, intuition, are discounted, even ridiculed.

Western culture and thinking is riddled with dichotomies and dualities, of separation of mind and body, logic and emotions, acceptable and rejected (shadow) personality qualities, matter and spirit (or immanent and transcendent), subject and object, science and art, science and religion, secular and religious, nature and nurture, civilized society and wild nature ("red in tooth and claw"), work and play, win and lose, reward and punishment, victim and offender, vulnerability and resilience, altruism and selfishness, and so many, many more. With each division, there is a judging of one half of the duality as better than the other and with this judgement comes a power-over stance to control that which is deemed to be lesser, weaker, or worse. Also, with each division there is a tendency to limit a field or person to one characteristic, excluding all other aspects of that field. Thus a 'victim' is limited to only being a person who has been hurt disrespectfully and does not acknowledge all the empowered ways that person has lived her or his life apart from that incident of being hurt.

The inner and outer worlds are constantly being separated and subdivided into professional disciplines and bureaucratic institutions addressing a single aspect of a complex web of systemic interactions. With each division the left hand no longer knows what the right hand does. Erica-Irene Daes observes this process taking place in indigenous communities:

In my recent travels among North American First Nations, I have been quite taken by the extent to which land-use administration, environmental protection, human health, education, and cultural activities have evolved into separate institutional domains – separate bureaucratic departments with inconsistent goals and values.²⁵

Henry Old Coyote, of the Crow First Nation in Montana, emphasizes this point about the categorization of Indian culture:

But among my people, the Crow Indians, you can't categorize the social or religious life of an Indian the way the white man does, because everything is interwoven; it's all one ball of wax.²⁶

There is a trend now in educational institutions to reverse the isolating effects of specialized departments by introducing faculties of 'interdisciplinary studies' that can integrate the various disciplines included in the new faculty. Will this lead to a more open and interactive educational system or merely impose another level of dominance hierarchy on the included disciplines?

The emphasis on using nouns in most Indo-European languages accentuates the tendency to limit knowledge to discrete bits of information, to divide into 'black-and-white' dualities and, as a consequence, to exclude other characteristics of the whole and, more importantly, lose sight of the relationships that connect and inform all aspects of the whole. Such noun-centred languages then more easily allow an attitude of control, of power-over, of "divide and rule," and of neglecting the contribution and importance of the lesser, the weaker. As an example, dividing humanity into black slaves and white slave-owners leads to seeing the former as inferior and the latter as superior – an attitude that has been resolutely defended over generations into the current century by white supremacists, an attitude that still prevails in the mass and disproportional incarceration of blacks in the U.S.,²⁷ a situation mirrored in Canada with the disproportional incarceration of Aboriginals. How different if the black slaves were recognized by their owners for their contribution, as in "those we depend on for our survival." In fact, during the approximately ten-year Reconstruction Period after the Emancipation of the slaves, white plantation owners suffered great losses revealing how dependent they had been on slave labour. The solution: white dominance was reinstated in the following period of Redemption where the Southern black population was essentially re-enslaved and intimidated through indentured labour, prison work gangs, segregation, and lynching.^{28,29} In a paradoxical reversal, the most dependent vilify and dominate those they are dependent on, those that produce their wealth. Barbara Ehrenreich, the author of *Nickled and Dimed* made the observation that the minimum wage earners of the fast-food trade are the real philanthropists of our modern commodity culture.

The two stories again: in the first version, the humans act on their own agency with a human stepping forward on his or her own initiative. In the second, a committee is formed, a delegation chosen and the leader questions the human, demanding an answer, "Why have you not spoken like the rest of us?" Incidentally, a constant teaching in the Aboriginal healing or talking circles I have attended is that no-one has to speak. To force participation is a Western idea, another form of domination. Jean Liedloff, in her book *The Continuum Concept*, recounts the story of a man who returns to live in his Aboriginal community in Venezuela. He had been adopted by Venezuelans when very young and taken to live with them in a small town. Without any interference or judgment by the community he does nothing for a couple of years, depending on a friend for food. Then he starts fishing, adding his catch to the community and then after five years clears a garden of his own to grow food. His friend thinks it "hilarious that anyone should not know that he wanted to work."³⁰

Healing the alienation of Western culture and reversing the effects of imperial or colonial thinking and attitudes is unlikely to happen without protecting, living in, and learning from a natural environment. Indeed a study in Wales reported by the BBC shows that kindergarten children “grew in confidence and were able to implement conflict resolution with no outside help” when playing in nature. Projects that allow children to interact in “Wild Zones” are expanding in Europe and the U.S.³¹ Jean Liedloff, in an interview with Michael Mendizza in 1998, remarks on the total lack of fights and even arguments among the children of all ages in an Aboriginal community in the South American jungle who played all day by themselves, i.e. without adult supervision.³² This is a very different view of unsupervised childhood from that of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* where a group of “civilized” English children marooned on a deserted island “revert” to violent, brutal, “savage” behaviour.³³ The real-life “savages” in the South American jungle live harmoniously. Stanley Diamond suggests that it is only in civilized societies that humans manifest mob behaviour.

The mob is a civilized phenomenon, not a primitive one; it is the collective in frenzy, the repressed emotions exploding outward without restraint or form, balance or responsibility. The image of the mob is part of our image of the city, and the city is the carrier of the best and the worst of civilization.

But the primitive society is a *community*, springing from common origins, composed of reciprocating persons, and growing from within. It is not a collective. Collectives emerge in civilization; they are functional to specialized ends, and they generate a sense of being imposed from without.³⁴

Randolph Bourne, a consistent critic of the state as a central dominating structure and of its appeal to collectivism, wrote in an essay unfinished due to his death in 1918:

Consciousness of collectivity brings confidence and a feeling of massed strength, which in turn arouses pugnacity and the battle is on. In civilized man, the gregarious impulse acts not only to produce concerted action for defense, but also to produce identity of opinion. Since thought is a form of behavior, the gregarious impulse floods up into its realms and demands that sense of uniform thought which wartime produces so successfully. And it is in this flooding of the conscious life of society that gregariousness works its havoc.³⁵

While imperial thinking, with its emphasis on separation and duality, is part of the consciousness, or unconsciousness, of members of Western culture, imperial thinking also infects indigenous cultures that are exposed to Western culture just as bureaucratic institutions and imperial attitudes are perpetuated in countries that have achieved independence from colonial powers. Similarly, dominant, patriarchal thinking may be present in feminist critiques of patriarchy as warned by Donna Haraway.³⁶

Western, Eurocentric culture places humans at the apex of a pyramid of hierarchy of control and decision-making – though such a world view has its roots in much earlier middle eastern cultures as mentioned before. This absolute view is sometimes hidden by the rationalization that God is the decision maker and the leader of a hierarchy can claim to be carrying out the orders of God. In a self-serving circular argument, imperial and colonizing forces claim divine right when appropriating the land and resources of other people as in the presumption of “Manifest Destiny” to justify American expansionism, announced in 1845 in the *Democratic Review*. This belief was “firmly anchored in a long standing and deep sense of a special and unique American Destiny.”³⁷ Sotsisowah, remarks on the introduction of this belief into Haudenosaunee territory:

French imperialist missionaries introduced the idea – an entirely foreign idea – that a divine will might guide the fortunes of people in government and in warfare. . . . throughout history it has been an idea that has accompanied empire builders everywhere.³⁸

A manifest destiny justification is not limited to the settler colonization of North America. It is an inherent aspect of patriarchy and imperialism, encoded in the myths of the culture:

Using the language of Tradition, Precedent, and even Divine Will, men in many cultures have appealed to, or established, a mythical or sacred past to justify social dominance in the present.³⁹

I was brought up with several jingoistic anthems lauding British manifest destiny. Here’s an example from “Land of Hope and Glory” set to Edward Elgar’s *Pomp And Circumstance March No. 1*, performed yearly at the “Last Night of the Proms” in London:

Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the Free,
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?
Wider still, and wider, shall thy bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet!

The words were written by A.C. Benson in 1902 at the height of the British Empire. And in the typical double speak of empire, the Mother of the Free had colonized vast territories around the world including lands in North and South America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

To affect any change in a pyramidal hierarchy requires that the decision-maker in the system is influenced: in a school, the principal; in a bureaucracy the head of a the organization or of a department. Notice the use of the word ‘head’ here, reflecting a Western view that the head, or brain, is the essential decision-maker of the body. An Aboriginal view is different as reported by Carl Jung when he talked with a Pueblo elder in New Mexico in the 1920s:

“See,” Ochwiay Biano said, “how cruel the whites look. Their lips are thin and their noses sharp, their faces furrowed and distorted by folds. Their eyes have a

staring expression; they are always seeking something. What are they seeking? The whites always want something; they are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think they are all mad.

I asked him why he thought the whites are all mad.

"They say they think with their heads," he replied.

"Why of course. What do you think with?" I asked him in surprise.

"We think here," he said, indicating his heart.⁴⁰

Sylvester Morey repeated this point at the Harper's Ferry conference when suggesting that the American Indian is going to understand the white man before the white man understands the Indian:

This is so because the Indian can think with his whole heart, whereas the white man thinks with his head, and thinking only with the head really doesn't help one to understand the other person.⁴¹

Leanne Simpson repeats that embodied knowing is an essential feature of Aboriginal knowledge:

On a deeper philosophical level, that heart knowledge represents our emotional intelligence, an intelligence that traditionally was balanced with physical, intellectual and spiritual intelligence to create a fully embodied way of being in the world. Emotional intelligence or presence on its own, however, is a vital force in Nishnaabeg consciousness. As Nishnaabeg Elder Jim Dumont often explains, our word for truth, (0)debwewin, literally means "the sound of the heart."⁴²

The dominance hierarchical system, which is now becoming global, ranks on the basis of 'importance' or 'significance,' ranking some humans over others, whether in monarchy, feudal systems, slavery, social class structures, sports teams, educational institutions, and in industrial, corporate, financial, military, judicial and political hierarchies; and ranking humans over animals, plants and even the earth. This model perpetuates a power-over dynamic where those of a lower rank (whether human, animal, plant, material) are seen and used as a resource for those above. To protect those in the lower ranks from those in the upper ranks, legislation is then required and needs to be continuously fought for, in the form of women's rights, civil rights, workers' rights, and animal rights. One attempt to balance the power in dominance hierarchy was the institution of separate executive, legislative, and judicial powers in the U.S. Constitution. As is readily apparent from the current U.S. political scene, this separation of powers is being eroded, particularly in matters of foreign policy, and will lead to a single dominance hierarchy headed by the executive branch, or rather, trunk. This can be seen as an example of the futility of using a dominance model to protect against dominance –

a structural oxymoron. A similar critique can be made of trade unions where those in executive positions at the head of a union bureaucracy can forget their responsibility to those in the 'lower ranks' whom they represent. As an Aboriginal woman, in dismissing the introduction of a charter of rights to protect against physical and sexual abuse in her community, articulated, the problem is not that the power within hierarchical systems is misused or abused, it is that power-over is given to individuals in the first place.⁴³ Rupert Ross emphasizes this point when referring to the justice system in Canada where individual judges are "given immense powers over the fates of our citizens:"

In short, it does seem possible that the structure of the system we have designed creates its own unique need – the need for powerful measures to protect citizens from abuse *by those who operate the system.*⁴⁴

In the U.S. justice system, power-over is given to individual prosecutors to decide who is to be indicted in a system where "Few rules constrain the exercise of prosecutorial discretion."⁴⁵ Moreover "the most remarkable feature of these important, sometimes life-and-death decisions is that they are totally discretionary and virtually unreviewable."⁴⁶

While it may seem that we have designed "the structure of the system," much of my argument in this article is that the structure of the system is designing us, our relationships, and our thoughts and perceptions. And then, in a vicious circle, we perpetuate the structure of the system.

If Aboriginal thinking can be viewed as hierarchical, then it is a hierarchy of dependencies in which the plant world is dependent on the earth, the animals are dependent on the earth and plants, and humans are the most dependent, being dependent on the earth, plant and animals.⁴⁷ This view is reflected in the saying: "One is the sun. Two is the earth. Three are the plants. Four are the animals. Five are humans."⁴⁸ However, I am cautious of using the word 'hierarchy' for an order or ranking in this context, where hierarchy literally means 'sacred rule,' (from the Greek *hieros*, sacred and *archein*, rule),⁴⁹ being used for rule by a priestly government. In the late 1960s and early 1970s I spent five years as a student in Eire, the Republic of Ireland, where the institutional Catholic Church, commonly referred to as "The Hierarchy," controlled the legislature and the behaviour of the nation. Those we are dependent on for life, such as the air, the water, the plant and animal 'kingdoms (!),' do not control us, rule us, "long to reign over us," in a power-over dynamic. However, we jeopardize our survival by ignoring the natural order of dependencies and interrelationships.

Viewing ourselves as the most dependent species on the earth leads to an attitude of humility in contrast to one of arrogance in which we believe, or more exactly 'know,' we have the right to control all other manifestations of the universe, including other humans. To repeat a comment I wrote earlier: In a paradoxical reversal, the most dependent vilify and dominate those they are dependent on, those that produce their wealth. To view ourselves as the most dependent leads to respecting everything we are dependent on, i.e. to respecting all life and the sources of life including the earth, water, and air, and our relationships with them.

The dominance hierarchical model permeates all aspects of the human experience in Eurocentric culture. It is a fractal system, where pyramids of power starting at the highest political level are repeated throughout ever smaller divisions of human activity, whether in society in general, as in each hierarchical institution, or within any institution itself; a repeating structure of smaller and smaller units, a Russian doll of pyramids within pyramids within pyramids, ad infinitum – a structure that is repeated in our thinking which then influences the way we see and interpret the world and act in it. Even storage systems on computers are displayed in a similar manner, of folders within folders within folders, ad infinitum – though the information is not stored on a hard drive in that way, and we don't naturally recall memories that way.

Hierarchical structures inform our way of thinking and so we project our form of organization through that template onto other societies and communities. For instance, early Western settlers in North America looked for a chief, i.e. for a person, a man, who could make a decision for the group, because that is the way the Westerners understood social organization, and then imposed the Western way on the Aboriginals:

The white conqueror meeting tribes that were organized into bands demanded that they be organized into chiefdoms, a structure that reflected his own, as authoritative as the cavalry and as easily manageable from above. Thus the pyramid of Western civilization was thrust upon the Indian, forcing him into conflict with his own people to insure compliance with the demands of his conquerors.⁵⁰

Another example comes from modern Vietnam: My former wife, Birgit, visited the matrilineal Ede peoples of the Dac Lac Province in Vietnam on the border with Cambodia, many times from 1996-2000, as part of her Red Cross work with health and environment. She writes:

"They still lived according to their cultural values and structure of community life, but had had to adapt some to the majority culture in power, the Kinh or Vietnamese people. For example they had chosen to let a man represent them as community leader in the official structure of government to be more acceptable, but back home in the village he referred to the woman head of households. My overall impression was that, it was an egalitarian society, where men, women, and children were respected and thrived, despite poverty, illiteracy and disease."⁵¹

Thus if you come from a patriarchal culture such as the Kinh, you will see only men as the decision makers in other cultures; if you come from an imperial culture you will only see 'chiefs,' and warrior chiefs at that, as the decision makers.

This hierarchical conditioning is seen as a consequence of patriarchy by feminists or of colonization by North American Indigenous peoples:

“Colonialism teaches people to think that they are someone else – it tries to change peoples’ identities. A colonized people can free itself physically or legally – yet continue to be completely colonized in its thinking.”⁵²

The same process was occurring in those parts of Africa colonized by Western powers for “several decades of colonization had created in the African a deep-seated ‘inferiority complex,’ coupled with a crisis of identity.”⁵³

Many colonized people take on the thought and organizational structures of the colonizer, particularly if they are forced to give up their own languages and speak only the language of the colonizer, as was the case with Aboriginal children educated in residential schools in Canada.^{54,55} I have met Aboriginal people in Canada who have tried to hide their native accent so that they could feel included in the Western Canadian culture. Indigenous people subjected to British colonial rule often became “more British than the British.” Mahatma Gandhi relates how he tried to dress the part of a British lawyer, “aping the British gentleman,” when he was studying and practising as a lawyer in London toward the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Indigenous Mozambicans could become “Assimilados” if assimilated through education and religion in the Portuguese colony and then be eligible to attain Portuguese citizenship.⁵⁷ Julius Nyerere, Tanzania’s first president, commented on the fact the describing an African as a “Black European” was once a compliment.⁵⁸

The corollary of this is that members of the colonizing peoples also have these thoughts and organizational structures in their minds and in their relationships, a ‘natural’ way of thinking and organizing that is rarely questioned. And the group ‘colonizing peoples’ includes all members of Western culture who have been indoctrinated from birth in this form of social organization. Such indoctrination comes in the form of a win-lose orientation promoted through competition for rewards in the education system (gold stars, scholarships, valedictorian), sports (championship cups and medals), video games (whether violent or not), jobs in the work-place (competitive hiring and promotion); and the top-down structures in all bureaucratic and hierarchical institutions.

And while colonialism “tries to change peoples’ identities” it also distorts the identities of those in the colonial, Western, culture. Rupert Ross asked: “Can our institutions be forcing us to deny who we are?”⁵⁹ Most people in Eurocentric society identify with status including class and financial achievement, their job, level of education, material goods such as a car or house, and loyalty to a centralized organizing principle such as the state, in the form of patriotism, or a corporation, as in brand loyalty.

Egalitarian and non-dominant thinking and relationships need to be nurtured in an environment and context that inform and nurture that way of being, an environment that reveals and teaches consistently the necessary role of all living and non-living beings to the existence of all others. Michael Cousins writes of the Haudenosaunee approach, “No single thing or force has a more inherent value or more beneficial purpose to serve, since all things exist in order for all other things to exist.”⁶⁰ Segwalise, also Haudenosaunee, writes:

It is the belief of our people that all elements of the Natural World were created for the benefit of all living things and that we, as humans, are one of the weakest of the whole Creation, since we are totally dependent on the whole Creation for our survival.⁶¹

Eurocentric culture promotes a view of the natural world as an enemy to be dominated and a resource to be exploited, and exports this view to each culture it dominates through imperialism and more recently through financial colonization. Such a culture is doomed to destroy itself. Gregory Bateson wrote in 1972: "The creature that wins against its environment destroys itself."⁶² This dominating attitude is revealed in all interactions, whether with people, animals, plants, or the earth. Healing this attitude requires paying attention to our thoughts and attitudes that perpetuate this domination and exposing ourselves to alternative cultures and thinking that reveal and can heal those dominating attitudes in ourselves.

Thank you for your attention.

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