

# *Spirit & Reason*

THE VINE DELORIA, JR., READER



FOREWORD BY WILMA P. MANKILLER

EDITED BY

Barbara Deloria, Kristen Foehner, and Sam Scinta



Fulcrum Publishing  
Golden, Colorado

## KINSHIP WITH THE WORLD



**I**t is difficult to present an Indian view of the environment because there is such a difference in the way Indians and non-Indians look at the world. Indians get very confused when non-Indians come up to them and try to engage in a dialogue on nature and the environment. More traditional Indians have a devil of a time communicating to non-Indian audiences exactly what their relationship with nature is.

For the most part Indians do not “deal with” or “love” nature. In the Western European context human experience is separated from the environment. When Indians are told that they “love nature,” they cannot deal with this because nature is not an abstraction to them.

Indians do not talk about nature as some kind of concept or something “out there.” They talk about the immediate environment in which they live. They do not embrace all trees or love all rivers and mountains. What is important is the relationship you have with a particular tree or a particular mountain.

You can find an extremely intimate connection between the lifestyle, the religions, and sometimes the political organizations of Indian tribes and the land in which they live. The religion of the tribes that live in the woodland area, either the Pacific Northwest or the East, is greatly concerned with dreams and psychoanalysis. If you go to the Plains or the Southwest, you have either ceremonial years or very stark vision quests.

The simple proposition that Indians love nature and embrace it does not tell you why different tribes manifest their relationship to the land in different ways. If you talk to tribal peoples in those particular lands, you will get a better insight into why their religion and their culture developed in certain ways. People in the woodland areas deal with dream analysis and with loss of "soul" because in an intimate relationship with a great deal of vegetation and life you are in danger of losing your psyche among all the other life-forms. This is not articulated in a set of doctrines. But it is alive within a community of people so intimately related to a natural environment that the natural environment shapes the very way they relate to each other and their conception of the world they live in. They do not abstract from that experience to a universal religion or set of universal concepts.

When we talk with non-Indians about nature, there is really nothing that we can say in universal Western concepts that is going to make a lot of sense. I think that Western people who come into an Indian environment and attempt to preach take along their own set of categories and use it to deal with the Indian people they meet. Anthropologists, summarizing what they find in the Indian tradition, always call us animists, and that view is accepted by a great many people in the field of religion. We are put in a cultural evolutionary framework, and then we are supposed to move from animism to some great abstract conception of one god.

The problem with that type of analysis is that it is not an article of faith in any Indian religion that everything has spirit. What happens in the different Indian religions is that people live so intimately with environment that they are in relationship to the spirits that live in particular places. It is not an article of faith; it is part of human experience. I think that non-Indians sometimes experience this also when they are in natural environments.

The non-Indian religious person often acts as if all of the Indian experiences of religion are articles of faith in the same way that Western people have creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. Today, after one hundred years on the reservation, a great many Indians do treat those experiences as creeds, doctrines, and dogmas. It becomes virtually impossible to translate from one culture to another because you end up dealing with a set of experiences on the one hand and a set of concepts on the other.

We need to probe for a minute into the question of why non-Indians think the world is the way they want to see it. We need to begin much farther back in Western European tradition. I would prefer to go as far back as Robert Bellah does in his article on cultural evolution. He raised the question of why, around 4,000 B.C., the civilizations that turned out to be urban civilizations made fundamental decisions about the world. One of those decisions, according to Bellah, was that reality is something "up there" and that everything we deal with in our daily life is considered unreal, ephemeral, and transitory. The religious and political systems, and a type of protoscience, began to evolve as we began to look at reality as being someplace beyond the planet, beyond our daily experiences, and our daily experiences became untrustworthy. As a result of looking at the world in those two ways, those urban civilizations in the river valleys adopted an extremely pessimistic view of the world—that the world was a place of trial, judgment, and punishment and that there was a better place beyond the grave. Such a view encouraged massive, imperialistic wars of conquest.

I want to eliminate all but the tradition out of which Christianity came and add a second division from Greek philosophy that divided the world into the cosmos, which was the mechanical workings of the physical universe, and the *ecumeni*, the world of the affairs of human beings. We now have a pessimistic attitude toward the world and a desire to go out imperialistically and conquer new lands and new people. It is a view of the world that splits it twice: once in terms of eternal verities as opposed to transitory experiences; and once in which it divides the world between science and political affairs.

By the nineteenth century, we had grabbed that quarter chunk of the world of science and said, "We are going to investigate all of human reality, or all of world reality, and we are going to begin interpreting all experiences according to the workings of the physical world. We're going to create social science in which we can treat our own selves and our own psyches as if they were something objective that could be observed and described scientifically."

We have reduced our knowledge of the world and the possibility of understanding and relating environment to a wholly mechanical process. We have become dependent, ultimately, on this one quarter of human experience, which is to reduce all human experience to a

cause-and-effect situation. When we then look at nature and environment through Western European eyes, that is really what we are looking at. That is not the "nature" Indians understand. Indians never made any of those divisions.

In the Indian tradition we find continuous generations of people living in specific lands, or migrating to new lands, and having an extremely intimate relationship with lands, animals, vegetables, and all of life. As Indians look out at the environment and as Indians experience a living universe, relationships become the dominating theme of life and the dominating motif for whatever technological or quasi-scientific approach Indian people have to the land.

Indians do not simply learn survival skills or different ways to shape human utensils out of other natural things. In shaping those things, people have the responsibility to help complete their life cycles as part of the universe in the same way they are helping people. Human beings are not above nature or above the rest of the world. Human beings are incomplete without the rest of the world. Every species needs to give to every other species in order to make up a universe.

Social scientists have badly misunderstood Indian customs. When they look at Indian customs, particularly in relationship to plants and animals, and say, "Indians have this great taboo that something is going to happen unless they do certain things with plant and animal remains," I think that is taking the Western quadrant and projecting onto the Indian psyche a cause-and-effect relationship with the world.

Different tribes deal specifically with customs and traditions related to other forms or related to what we call the natural world. In this cooperative enterprise between humans and other life-forms, you cannot leave a cycle of relationships undone or hanging loose. In these relationships both parties must fulfill the ultimate purpose of the other party. You do not let dogs eat salmon bones or the skin of the salmon, or chew on the bones of the elk, because your relationship with salmon and elk is such that it precludes dogs. However, in your relationship with dogs and other animals, you have an inclusive situation wherein you can feed dogs. To violate a relationship, or to mix up a relationship, would be to introduce a disharmony into the world that would eventually lead to the downfall of all species. Consequently, what you find in Indian custom is a sensitive

awareness of who other things are and who humans are. It is not a superstitious taboo that says God is going to throw a lightning bolt down on you if you do not behave in a certain way. It is a cooperative need to engage in joint enterprises.

In order to maintain relationships, you do certain things to show respect among beings. Another way of saying it is that these are kin relationships. You are related to different life-forms in different ways. Some are closer to you than others. In the nature of things, some are antagonistic to begin with.

A lot of tribes have stories of how the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds determined their basic division of responsibilities in the world. They held a gigantic race around the rim of the world to determine whether the two-leggeds would supply meat to the four-leggeds or whether the four-leggeds would supply meat to the two-leggeds. The two-leggeds were humans, the grizzly bear, and the birds. The four-leggeds were all of the horned, hoofed, and padded animals. Of course, the birds pulled a sharp one on the four-leggeds. A small bird rode the buffalo horn almost to the finish line and then put in the overdrive and came across first. Otherwise, friends, we would all be in state parks.

That tradition begins to explain the kin relationship between people and animals. It is not a relationship of conquest or of imperialism. It is a relationship in which both basic divisions of the world look back to a time when they had to find some means of allocating responsibilities in the world.

Kin are extremely important in this view of the universe. There are those animals that approach specific human beings and give them specific powers. If you talk to Indians of almost any tribe, and they know their traditions, and they are willing to share them with you, they can take you into communities and point out which persons or which families have had particular relationships with particular medicine animals.

From those animals and their relationships some tribes have developed tremendous systems of psychoanalysis, better and more accurate, I think, than astrology or Jungian psychology or anything else the West has developed. They can look at people and intuitively pick out what medicine animal that person has, or what animal would approach that person and develop a relationship of medicine exchange. From the characteristic of that animal, and how it behaves in its



natural environment, the human personality of that person takes on certain parallel or similar aspects. In extremely traditional Indian societies, people finally come to the realization through vision quest or training that they have the medicine of the deer, or the badger, or the antelope, or the raven. That realization opens a whole new avenue of human development through observation of animal adjustments to other life-forms and adjustments of the human personality to the life-forms with which he or she must deal.

The medicine animals become very close kin with human animals. Traditions in many tribes recall a time when all organic forms talked to each other and married each other in an exchange of communication. Since I am no longer an evolutionist, I am investigating whether there really was not a creation when all life-forms became immediately aware of their relationships to each other. Because your kin are individuals and peoples in all of the organic life-forms of the universe, you do not think of passing on your heritage to human beings alone. You pass on your knowledge and heritage to all of creation, and, more particularly, your powers and your insights to your kin in that organic universe, which includes not only human beings but also the medicine animals and the medicine life-forms that you have dealt with while you have been on the planet.

By presenting it this way, I can give you a glimpse of the relationships Indians have to nature and the environment. It is a relationship of specific responsibilities, specific insights, specific knowledge, and a specific task in the world. It is never a community of human beings who go out and "embrace nature." In this situation, what is nature? Nature is too generalized a concept to deal with.

In the modern period, Indians are in tremendous transition because we are going through your educational system, wherein we move away from the specifics of the universe traditional Indians lived with and we move toward the scientific way of thinking. Many Indian people are leaving their culture and traditions in ways they do not suspect. They are developing a schizophrenia. They look at their grandfather, who goes out and talks with birds and coyotes, and they think he is superstitious. And yet they go to school and they learn that they are supposed to love nature and learn from nature. So we are getting, in my opinion, a generation of lost Indians who are going out there, just like lost whites, and trying to embrace trees and think this is doing something Indian.

Lost whites come to the West to love the environment, and they end up paving the damn thing and subdividing it. That is what you end up with. American education is still limited to the fourth quadrant. It does not heal those ancient breaches in the worldview that produce those types of people. Certainly, I would like to keep all of them east of the Mississippi, and let them clean up what they have already screwed up. But there is something that Indians and non-Indians can do well and must do in the future. They must probe these worldviews. We must look at the Indian worldview not as primitive but as one that was generated by experiences in nature. Those experiences proved so intense and so encompassing that Indians did not move away from them.

You have got to look back into your own culture. Why did people six thousand or seven thousand years ago determine that heaven is good and "down here" is bad? Why did they decide to go out and conquer things? Then why did the Greeks later make that other division between history and nature? And why, after Newton and Darwin, did you grab that one quadrant and say that is what the world is about?

I think you have got to ask these questions and start probing them. And when you start working your way through that, I think you will see more of what we are talking about.