

# EFFECTIVE CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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**ABSTRACT.** When one engages in cross-cultural dialogue in situations where vast cultural differences are involved, it comes as no surprise that misunderstandings can arise. This can happen particularly in education initiatives where Native culture is being shared with non-Native people. Contentious issues between Native and non-Native people reflect very different world-views, an oppressive history and a challenged present. Discussing challenges in cross-cultural dialogue between Native and non-Native people can be a beginning to remedy larger issues of history, race, and culture, benefiting Native/non-Native relationships now and in the future.

## EFFICACITÉ DU DIALOGUE INTERCULTUREL : DÉFIS ET POSSIBILITÉS

**RÉSUMÉ.** Lorsqu'on amorce un dialogue interculturel là où existent de profondes différences culturelles, il faut s'attendre à des malentendus. Cela se produit particulièrement dans les initiatives d'éducation où la culture autochtone est souvent partagée avec des non-Autochtones. Les questions litigieuses entre les Autochtones et les non-Autochtones reflètent des points de vue différents sur l'univers, des antécédents d'oppression et un présent remis en question. L'analyse des défis dans un dialogue interculturel entre Autochtones et non-Autochtones peut être un premier pas pour remédier à de plus grands problèmes d'histoire, de race et de culture qui seront bénéfiques aux rapports entre Autochtones et non-Autochtones aujourd'hui et demain.

... for cross-cultural communication to be open and effective, interlocutors must be aware of their boundaries, both personal and cultural, so that they might know the limits on and possibilities for understanding one another in the exchange. That is, in understanding another person and culture you must simultaneously understand yourself. The process is ongoing, an endeavor aimed not at a final transparent understanding of the Other or of the self, but at continued communication, at an ever-widening understanding of both. (Sarris, 1993, p. 6)

## BACKGROUND

*Kaianaraserakowa*, The Great Law of Peace of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy: Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Tuscarora) is among the first attempts to accommodate diversity on Turtle Island (North America). A Huron named the Peacemaker and a Mohawk named Aiionwatha inspired the principles of the *Kaianaraserakowa* a thousand years ago. The *Kaianaraserakowa* is the result of respecting and accommodating differences during a time of warfare and revenge that may have lasted for hundreds of years. Consistent with historic written documents and contemporary expressions of the *Kaianaraserakowa* are efforts at creating, maintaining, renewing and spreading peace among people. Today, this effort continues with an emphasis on concern about environmental and social issues. As long as oral history remembers, Haudenosaunee leaders have strived to the best of their ability to ensure that every decision and action promotes a healthy natural and social environment for seven generations into the future (Thomas, 1992). This principle of culture continues to the present day. Ensuring a healthy social and natural environment for seven generations into the future is achieved in part by reaching out to non-Native people in an effort to promote cross-cultural understanding about environmental and social concerns.

The Tree of Peace Society has been involved with environmental and social issues on both a national and international scale for over thirty years. The Society is a non-profit environmental and cultural education center that began at Akwesasne Mohawk Territory in 1982. Since 1982, The Tree of Peace Society has been effective in teaching issues related to the expression and preservation of Haudenosaunee language and culture with youth and Elders, and environmental and social ethics to college students and adult learners. Because the staff of The Tree of Peace Society are both Native and non-Native people, they have experience in addressing sensitive questions that arise when sharing ideas cross-culturally. Articulating and discussing challenges as they arise becomes the content for teaching about issues related to respectful cross-cultural dialogue. Although misunderstandings and contentious issues often arise, so does respectful dialogue: learning about, acknowledging and honoring differences and similarities. This discussion will expand upon some of the challenges and opportunities the non-

profit environmental and cultural education organization the Tree of Peace Society has experienced in its efforts at engaging in cross-cultural dialogue and the sharing of Native culture with non-Native people.

Using a case study of a two-day seminar that the authors facilitated entitled *Principles of Peace and Cross-Cultural Dialogue* (October, 2001), and relevant literature, we will discuss challenges and opportunities of engaging in respectful cross-cultural dialogue between Native and non-Native people. For this paper, effective cross-cultural dialogue means to minimize misunderstanding and diminish miscommunication between people.

#### **AN OPPRESSIVE HISTORY / A STRAINED PRESENT**

Euro-centric misrepresentations of Native peoples have been occurring since the time of contact. The misappropriation of Native culture and spiritual traditions can be interpreted as a continuation of the European tradition of intolerance and ignorance of others that began on a large scale with the Papal Bulls of the mid-16th century. In essence, the process of colonization can be seen in a broad sense as one of extreme intolerance and disrespect for cultural differences. Many feel that intolerance and ignorance continue today with Canadian and US legislation enacted on "behalf" of Native people. Others feel that disrespect and ignorance have continued and transformed with academic disciplines such as anthropology and other scholarly pursuits, resulting in distrust and the legitimate questioning of non-Native motives when "researching," working with, or learning from Native cultures and communities (Deloria, 1996; Fadden, 1989). Western scholarship has developed homogenized and generalized paradigms that have been commonly applied to understanding, articulating and validating indigenous knowledge. This active process exists today. Indigenous Knowledge is often determined relevant only in relation to a Western standard. Since European contact, Native peoples' ability to come to know their place and exist within creation on their own terms has been severely, and sometimes violently, compromised. With such an oppressive past one does not have to look too far to see how ignorance and disrespect are expressed and expand in myriad ways, negatively affecting both the present and the future generations. Although intolerance and misunderstanding are dominant themes in Native/non-Native relationships, respectful dialogue and learning about each other is also common.

It is very difficult to learn about others' differences, let alone respect them, if one is not exposed to them. The fact that most non-Native people have not been exposed to the history or aftermath of the colonial process is a major challenge in respectful cross-cultural dialogue. American people have not been taught about American Indians, either historically or culturally, in a respectful or accurate way. Studies show that 95% of what students know

about American Indians is acquired through the media. Cornelius (1994, p. 27) found that textbooks in the public schools "consistently present standard stereotypes, omissions, and distortions about American Indians." He suggests five basic academic stereotypes about American Indians: The Noble Red Man or Noble Savage, The Savage, The Vanishing Race, Living Fossils, and the media generic Indians. The problem of education reaches into the political realm. Often, decisions are being made by Federal and State representatives who know little or nothing about the indigenous peoples they are involved with, their own country's history, or the legal obligations of treaties. Onondaga Chief Irving Powless relates an incident when members of an Albany New York legislature subcommittee visited the communities of the Haudenosaunee and one asked, "Where are the tepees?" (Powless, 1988). Many Iroquois leaders are continually frustrated because they have to "re-educate" recently elected Federal and state officials.

In *Teachings from the Longhouse*, the late Cayuga Chief Jake Thomas talks of hiding history from children in order for a particular culture or people to look good. Thomas feels that in teaching accurate history, people are being honest about their faults. Speaking the truth about history, poverty, theft, and murder helps people become better human beings. Through denying accurate history to the present and future generations, people do not learn from past mistakes. As a result cycles of misunderstanding, mistrust, violence, poverty, and other social crises repeat themselves. Chief Thomas states, "People need to know the truth about their families and nation to gain peace of mind" (Thomas & Boyle, 1994, p. 147). When people are ignorant or disrespectful of differences that exist between people, peaceful relationships remain strained indefinitely.

The misappropriation of Native spirituality can be interpreted as one of the many variables that continue the process of intolerance, ignorance and assimilation of Native culture; an active hindrance to peaceful relationships. The New Age movement, beginning in the late 1960s, furthers the challenge of respectful cross-cultural dialogue, especially in relation to environmental and spiritual issues. With the rise of interest in Native American spirituality in the 1960s came emotional confrontations spawned by popular books such as *Black Elk Speaks* and *Seven Arrows*. Many Native and non-Native people have been accused of exploiting the sacred traditions of American Indians through the sale of sweat lodge ceremonies, shamanistic healing, and sacred pipes. The exploitation of Native spirituality has been likened to spiritual genocide, equated with the taking of land and culture (Shaw 1995; Kehoe 1994).

Non-Native spiritual seekers may not be aware of this because they do not understand the history of their country and the colonization of Native people. People like John Collier and many missionaries and government

officials truly believed they were (are) “doing the right thing” in assimilating Native people into “mainstream” society. Similarly, many feel that they are honoring Native people through adopting and expressing aspects of Native spirituality. Equally, the effects can be detrimental. The misuse of Native spirituality hinders peaceful relationships between people and carries the potential to further imbalanced relationships both in the present and in the future.

Euro-centric misrepresentations, certain expressions of contemporary scholarship that “studies” Native people, and the New Age movement, continue to challenge cross-cultural dialogue because people do not take the time to learn about, acknowledge and respect differences that exist among people. Because of this, peaceful relationships will continue to be compromised.

### *Who is responsible for the past*

Who is responsible for the past? Does a person of Asian-American descent have less responsibility for the aftermath of colonization than a person who is English-American? Does a Tibetan refugee fleeing Chinese occupation who makes her way to Turtle Island, has children and raises a family have any less responsibility than a person of German descent whose family lineage was here since the 1600s? Does the responsibility for the past and present increase incrementally with each generation that is born on Turtle Island? Do all non-Native people inherit a responsibility for the effects of colonization? Are/were all non-Native people colonizers? Are/were all non-Native people oppressors? At what point does a child become an oppressor?

These are very difficult questions and we are sure that everyone has different answers. Stereotypes and “finger pointing” are not only detrimental to effective cross-cultural dialogue but distract from addressing contemporary problems. Non-Native people have been born or have recently arrived into institutions that directly benefited and continue to benefit from colonization. There is a very good chance that non-Native people were raised on or live on land that was stolen, either by force, coercion or through illegal means. Native communities continue to suffer disproportionate incidents of alcoholism, drug abuse, learned helplessness, suicide, child abuse, and poverty. The mainstream economy destroys the natural world, directly affecting the economy, social balance and languages of many Native peoples. Governments and states continually ignore treaty rights for economic gains and corporate interests. Part of our responsibility as non-Native people lies in learning about the past, learning about current issues, and supporting governmental candidates and policies that seek to address Native grievances, poverty and other social problems. We have to acknowledge the legacy of colonization and the institutions that we inherited and work within them as best we can. If we are so inclined, we can work with grass roots initiatives,

or directly with Native communities. If nothing else, we can teach our children aspects of the history of our culture that are intrinsically connected to the destruction of Native peoples and cultures.

### THE LOSS OF ORIGINAL INSTRUCTIONS

The sharing of Native teachings with non-Native peoples can bring about problems. There are many well-intentioned spiritual seekers who wish to lead a more meaningful existence. Many feel alienated from their own traditional roots and feel as if they have no spiritual grounding. As a result, many look toward other traditions, notably those of the Far East and those of Native Americans. When the Lakota Elder Mathew King was approached by two non-Native people seeking advice he replied:

I know why you're here! White Man came to this country and forgot his original instructions. We have never forgotten our Instructions. So you're here looking for the Instructions you lost. I can't tell you what those were, but maybe there are some things I can explain. (Wall & Arden, 1990, p. 29)

All the world religions have practical, ethical and spiritual teachings referred to as 'original instructions' by many Native peoples; instructions of how to behave as human beings, co-existing with each other and the natural world in a respectful and responsible way. Whether one is a Native person raised without his/her language or culture, or a non-Native person who feels that he/she is not fulfilled culturally or spiritually, many such people are looking for some type of grounding or connection, an unfulfilled yearning to connect with a more meaningful existence.

### *Grief*

A major concern of the Tree of Peace Society is people encumbered by grief. The Society feels that at least 80% of people in the world are in a state of grief, feeling alienated from their cultural roots, communities and the natural world. Grief is an experience of loss, an event or circumstances, which deprives us of something or someone. The loss of a loved one, health, culture, social networks, self-esteem, even unfulfilled expectations are all examples of loss. In essence any loss related to change can result in a form of grief (Bright, 1996). Many Native people feel that it is difficult to address environmental and social ills or preserve language and culture if peoples' minds are clouded by grief, if people feel alienated or powerless. The process of modernization may initiate symptoms of grief. With new priorities in society resulting from the industrial revolution, the decline of religious practice, urbanization and upward mobility came changes in family and community structures (Stearns, 1994). As a result, many people today feel alienated from their culture and the natural world. The materialistic society

has contributed to what has been called a “crisis of spirit,” where ethics and spirituality have been replaced with selfishness and materialism (Lerner, 1997).

Forced assimilation by the United States and Canadian governments resulting from the process of colonialism, economic expansion and changes in cultural livelihood, all of which contribute greatly to the decline of language and culture, directly affects social stability of Native peoples. When a person or a group of people’s ability to come to know their own place in creation is compromised, an imbalance results and is expressed and expands in myriad ways both in the present and into the future. The continued degradation of Native languages and culture perpetuates intergenerational trauma, social alienation and other forms of grief such as: alcohol and drug use, spouse abuse and suicide, and learned helplessness – continuing a cycle of degradation (Duran, Duran & Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1998).

Sensitive spiritual seekers may be in a vulnerable place if they feel alienated from themselves, their culture, the natural world, their families or communities. The Tree of Peace Society has seen well-intentioned non-Native people become depressed and disheartened when challenged about their use of Native spirituality. Many come seeking teachings to overcome emotional or physical pain. People in vulnerable situations may open themselves up to charlatans who are looking for an occult type of following or out to make money. By acknowledging their vulnerable state, spiritual seekers can move toward taking responsibility for themselves and not become over-dependent. Because one is ignorant, does not mean that one is intentionally disrespectful. It is important for those who encounter the misuse of spirituality to begin with understanding, patience and compassion. Patience and compassion can be a beginning to remedy larger issues of ignorance, misunderstanding, racism, and other lingering effects of an oppressive history. A lack of understanding, patience, and compassion continue and expand misunderstanding and conflict.

### ***Guilt***

In 1995 the Onondaga Nation released a letter to Haudenosaunee people, encouraging people to go back to their culture. They felt that many people were reluctant because they carried guilt in not knowing their language or who they were as a people (Barnes, 1995). Many non-Native people also harbor guilt for not understanding their religious or cultural roots or because of the historic atrocities of their country – whether or not they or their ancestors were directly involved in either the slave trade or the destruction and assimilation of Native people. There have been situations where non-Native people with good intentions working with Native communities were driven by guilt, which became obvious to those they worked with and distracted from the potential of working together.

There is nobody who lives a peaceful existence when they harbor guilt. Guilt is counter-productive to respectful cross-cultural dialogue. There are many causes and conditions, both historic and contemporary, that shape the world we are born into. Stereotypes, and cultural accusations (whether conscious or unconscious), abound in the literature of Native Studies and some Native/non-Native relationships. The potential to carry and project stereotypes is a human trait, not restricted by culture or race. Stereotypes and prejudice stem from not knowing about, judging, or disrespecting others' differences. It is very easy to approach a person or situation with stereotypes particularly in light of the history and the nature of some of the current relationships that exist between Native and non-Native people.

### *Be yourself*

All cultures have value. Many feel that at the very root of the Western cultural tradition is intolerance and dominance of others. The Tree of Peace Society feels this assumption is inaccurate. The Western intellectual and cultural tradition can be a beautiful expression, as valuable as any other tradition. People can derive benefit in terms of inner development from any culture. However, transporting rules and customs from one culture into another can create problems. Confusion can result when one uses language and cultural metaphors and philosophies out of context. When people are respectful of other's differences, they can be receptive and open-minded to lessons learned from other cultures. The process of learning can be greatly enhanced as lessons learned appeal to specific aspects of their own culture, religion or personal experience.

An important goal of The Tree of Peace Society is to encourage people of all cultures to go back to their roots to look for similar instructions that speak to a concern for the natural and social environment. Mohawk author Doug Kanentio George explains:

I like the idea that people are questioning the things that are going around them and trying to come up with alternatives. I also understand the imperative to do this with what short time we have on this planet. Indian people have a certain way of looking at the world that's necessary for everybody to adopt, which is that man is an integral part of creation, not detached by virtue of his intellect or his reasoning . . . If you look far enough back, you'll find that the Celts and the Anglos and the Saxons and the Jutes all had similar rituals of thanksgiving based on the cycles of the moon and the growing seasons of the Earth. That's what needs to be revived. Maybe we can use this as a kind of spiritual judo. When people come to you with a desperate need to know more, just turn them around and say the solution is within your own self. The solution is in your own community. (George in Shaw, 1995, p. 89)

Western interest in Tibetan Buddhism is similar to that of Western interest in Native teachings. As a consequence, similar problems result. In the book



*Relating to a Spiritual Teacher: Building a healthy relationship*, Alexander Berzin, whose has extensive experience with contentious issues related to spiritual teachings between Westerners and ancient traditions (particularly the Tibetan culture), provides the following insight to learning about one-self and others through respecting differences:

Cultures play a large role in shaping the form of the personal interactions of their members. Just as the child-parent relation differs from one society and time to another, so does the relationship between spiritual seeker and spiritual teacher . . . Trouble occurs when one or both sides think that they need to mimic an alien culture or expect the other to adopt foreign ways. For example, Western students may think that they need to act like Tibetans, or that Tibetan teachers should behave more like Westerners . . . When each side understands and respects the other's cultural background, however, flexibility and adjustment become possible. This often eliminates some of the problems. (Berzin, 2000, p. 25)

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1973) coined the phrase "spiritual materialism." This is an appropriate term for people who are interested in Native ceremony and ceremonial instruments. If working with one's experience, thoughts and emotions and instilling respect for others are absent from a ritual, the objects and actions of ceremony may be reduced to materialism. Another thing to keep in mind is the use of dreams and visions. Of all our experience in dealing with Native and Tibetan teachers and elders, we never once heard them talk about their visions or dreams. Also, in the Tibetan community talk of visions and realizations are never discussed because they carry the potential to exacerbate the ego. Individual ego runs contrary to spiritual traditions that point to an existence that is intrinsically greater than the individual.

Dreams and visions do inform people's thinking, motivation and actions. But those who embody vision rarely let that be known. In fact, among the Tibetan people it is said that rarely do we know who is a realized person because those who are understand the suffering that results from a lack of humility. In our experience, we often hear people voicing their dreams and visions in a way that we find uncomfortable, in ways that we feel are merely a reflection of people's egos and/or confusion. This does not mean that one should not acknowledge and listen to dreams and visions. In doing so, we suggest that a person remain aware of the entrapment of ego, the voicing of confusion, individual gain over group gain, and disrespecting other's differences. There is a time and place for everything.

#### **EGO ENTRAPMENT**

Some people look to Native teachings for fulfillment of fantasies, occult secrets, rituals and supernatural phenomena. Unrealistic attitudes and high expectations cloud critical reasoning, carrying the potential to fuel dormant

or existing egos. Unfortunately, those whose egos are fueled by ceremony, ritual, and assumed "secrets" are often those whose self-reflection capabilities are dulled. It is among those with strong egos that this appropriateness is most lacking. Some feel that because of visions and dreams they are justified in using and teaching Native spirituality and ceremony. Some feel that because they have had dreams, visions, and were instructed in ceremonial protocol, they are in a position of power. This also may lead one to become part of, or seek to be, the leader of a cult-like situation.

The Tree of Peace Society has heard of strong-willed people manipulating others with "Native spirituality." The following is an example of the logic used: because my intentions are in accord with what is appropriate for the future generations, if you don't subscribe to my vision and methods, your aspirations are not in accord with what is beneficial for the future generations. Some become ego driven and assume that because they are helping Mother Earth and the future generations, their "visions" are authentic, regardless of what Elders or community members think. Some may ignore the advice of the Elders and teachers who shared teachings in the first place (Romancito, 1998). Some whose ego dominates their thinking have very little empathy for the disastrous effects of their actions on the peace of mind of those who are around them. Positions of authority, power and abuse can also come in the form of "give me money." As a result, people may be exploited financially, emotionally, and sexually (Knack, 1997).

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIVE AND WESTERN KNOWLEDGE

It is difficult to take seriously people who do not "walk the talk" or those who were not raised in a community, culture or with a Native language yet give talks and sell Native teachings. Traditional Native people are raised in a close community, as active participants in language and culture. Close observation of Elders over extended periods of time ensures continuance and understanding. Elders are essential, they know the nature and dispositions of those who are taught, and often embody insight resulting from a lifetime of living spirituality.

Many Westerners go to workshops and wish to learn profound teachings and to gain spiritual realization immediately. Some want to receive full instruction and engage in Native spiritual ritual without understanding the complexity of this knowledge. The attention span of many Westerners is short. We have heard Western people say "I already heard that." They don't understand that time, self-discipline, understanding of language, and continual guidance of Elders are paramount. Perhaps most important, and the variable that is the root of many problems, is that many with an interest in Native culture often do not reflect on the assumptions they bring to a teaching. Anyone of us who has spent time in a Western education system

has inherited a particular way of looking at the world. Assumptions or interpretations that are derived from Native teachings framed through a Western “lens” can be viewed as a form of assimilation.

Those who think that after going to a few workshops, they not only understand, but have the knowledge and experience to conduct and teach Inipi, Chinupa, or Condolence ceremonies, are indeed presumptuous. How many of these spiritual seekers have set foot in a Native community? How many have spent quality time in a Native community? How many understand the Native language from which the teachings derive? How many would feel comfortable giving workshops about cultural or spiritual practices they learned at a workshop in a Native community? Often, legitimate angered reactions from Native people are dismissed as grief-related by non-Native spiritual practitioners. We have seen spiritual seekers react with anger and resentment. Indeed it is very difficult to react with understanding when our assumptions are confronted. However, critical reflection when faced with adversity can lead to greater understanding.

Different cultures have come to know their place, and exist within creation in their own way. Indigenous ways of understanding and Western ways of understanding are very different. In the west, to understand often involves defining. In the academy, there is further emphasis on intellectual knowledge as opposed to experience. When Native persons relate cultural understanding they often preface their expression with “this is how I understand it.” Implicit in this preface is the idea that there are many ways of knowing which are contrary to some expressions of Western culture where emphasis is on definitive truth. Also, it is understood by Native speakers that there are always people who are more knowledgeable than themselves.

It is very difficult to say that a person has authority to teach something that is out of their cultural experience. However, this does not mean that one cannot connect in a personal way to a teaching. Connecting in a personal way is very different from understanding to the extent that one understands or is an expert in a Native culture or is sanctioned to perform rituals. One way non-Native persons can relate their understanding is to relate their personal experience in working with or learning from Native people. However, they have to be very careful with how they relate their experience and cannot assume that they fully understand a culture. They may mis-interpret aspects of culture out of context.

This is not to say that all people who learn from Native traditions are disrespectful or create problems. Effective cross-cultural dialogue is possible and happens often. The root of effective cross-cultural dialogue is respect for differences that exist between people. Mature spiritual seekers or people with an interest in different cultures often leave inspired and grateful, with a commitment to work on themselves and improve their relationships with

family, community, the natural world and the future generations. They do not expect access to cultural, ritual or spiritual “secrets” nor are they trying to be something that they are not.

#### **HOW CAN A NON-NATIVE PERSON APPROACH NATIVE TEACHINGS IN A RESPECTFUL WAY?**

What follows are recommendations a non-Native person can use as a starting point in approaching Native teachings:

- Who is the presenter and what is her/his standing in their community?
- If the person is non-Native or not of the community from which the teachings derive, what is her/his relationship to the community these teachings are coming from?
- Does the material offend community members? In what way? To what degree?
- Is she/he presenting the teachings in a mature, respectful and responsible way?
- What assumptions am I bringing?
- In what space am I? If I am hurt I have every right to acknowledge this and understand that I may be in a vulnerable position.
- What are my interests?
- What are my intentions?
- Whose interests am I serving?
- Where I hear something from a teaching that I can relate to, where can I look in my own cultural or historic roots to encourage my growth and learning?
- What are the interests of the organization sponsoring the gathering or the facilitator of the workshop?
- What is their relationship to the community of the presenter or the community from which the teachings derive?

#### **CONCLUSION**

The misuse of Native traditions works contrary to the goal of respectful cross-cultural dialogue. The Tree of Peace Society has seen first hand non-Native spiritual seekers and Native teachers become disheartened and hurt as a result of sharing ideas. It is a challenge for a non-Native person or a Native teacher with good intentions to face criticism. Non-Native people

may be faced with historic grief, racial stereotypes, anger, or legitimate concern of misappropriation. A Native leader or teacher may be confronted with similar negativities from people in their community, regardless of whether or not they are teaching appropriately.

Reflecting on Native teachings can lead to positive development within any individual. The increase of ego, or generating a profit through manipulating people with knowledge and ceremony, is contrary to what Native teachings are all about and to how they can positively contribute to a person who was not raised in the culture, with the language, or under the eyes of the Elders. The Tree of Peace Society feels strongly about the important instruction of thinking seven generations into the future. We are the seventh generation for whom the Elders and people seven generations ago held responsibility. As we again reflect on Euro/Native history, ignorance, the loss of original instructions, the sense of loss and hopelessness, guilt, conditions in Native communities, and stereotypes, we can see part of our collective inheritance – manifestations of colonialism. Many people feel that with such pervasive disconnection comes a lack of empathy, concern, obligation and responsibility. As we encounter challenges in respectful cross-cultural dialogue, we encounter strong reminders of how actions move and transform in the interrelated web of creation. After over two hundred years of conflict it is imperative to strengthen the relationship between Native and non-Native people. As we inherited many of the problems that exist today, so will our children and grandchildren regardless of whether or not we are Native or non-Native. Thus, as the Elders continue to assert, we have an obligation and responsibility no matter who we are. As we think of individual or collective grief we can make a connection between consequent negative emotions and current social and environmental deterioration. Many Native people feel that it is difficult to address environmental and social ills, let alone have obligation and responsibility for the future, if people's minds are clouded by grief.

There are many people who have a sincere quest for spirituality and a sincere respect for Native cultures. They may, however, because of a lack of understanding of colonization and the results, approach teachings with ungrounded assumptions or expectations. Just because one is ignorant it does not mean that one is intentionally disrespectful. Meeting such people is an opportunity to begin the process of respectful dialogue, a process of healing.

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