

Accessing an Animate World

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Randy Kritkausky: Greetings, or may I say “Bozho” in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspective show. I am Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the host of Indigenous Perspectives. Joining me today for the program is Carolyn Schmidt. And our program is “Accessing an Animate World.”

Indigenous Perspectives originates from Vermont in the United States. Vermont is located on lands that the Abenaki people call N’dakinna. It is the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people, who for thousands of years have been, and continue to be, stewards of the lands found here and across the border in Québec province in Canada.

Carolyn Schmidt: We begin by acknowledging where we come from, both culturally and geographically, as this program, Indigenous Perspectives, focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Earth and our connections with our ancestors

Randy: Today's show, "Accessing an Animate World", explores the healing and comfort that arises from living in the spirit of an indigenous perspective, not only for indigenous people, but also for those in the mainstream. Many of us live in a world where our views of nature, our experiences with nature, and our understanding of nature are mediated by an objectifying Western scientific perspective, and by media stories about a vanishing natural world. While our planet is most certainly experiencing the disruptive influence of human activity, for many indigenous people the overwhelming reality of nature and experience of the natural world is that of an encounter with our other-than-human kin, who are vibrantly alive and well and reaching out to embrace us. Let us take you on a journey into that universe.

Carolyn: We'll start a few illustrations - stories that show real life personal encounters with our other than human kin.

Randy: I'm going to begin with a very simple story that Carolyn and I both shared. We have a house here in Vermont, and we have photovoltaic panels on the roof. And thinking that we wanted to maximize the return on those solar radiation [panels] on the roof, and also eliminate some shade in our vegetable garden, we walked around the yard and noticed that some trees had grown since we'd planted the garden, and since we installed the photovoltaic panels. And we began to mark trees that we thought ought to come down in order to get more sunlight. One of the trees, we hesitated at. It was the largest maple tree, probably on the entire property. Indeed, it casts quite a shadow onto our house roof and our garden. So we put an X on the tree hesitating, thinking maybe yes, maybe no. After all, it was the best producer of maple sap.

As the time approached for the tree surgeon to come, we felt more and more anxious about the fate of this tree. It's a tree that probably gave rise to many

other trees in the forest, a tree that Suzanne Simard recently called in her, in her book *Looking for the Mother Tree*¹, indeed, the mother tree. This is just not an ordinary tree in the forest.

The day before the tree surgeon came, in the late afternoon, we noticed an owl perched in the tree on a dead limb. Sitting there, staring at us, taking up the space, kind of occupying the tree. Trying to tell us something. It didn't take us too long to figure out what Owl was telling us. Owl was telling us, this is the mother tree. You should not cut down the mother tree. Owl was also telling us that it's a place where ki or he or she perches looking for mice in the night. It was a residence to many living beings. It was not just a tree.

As a result of this visit, of this encounter, we re-examined our plans to have the tree cut down. And we thought, you know, the only time this tree shades the garden and the roof is during the most intense sunlight of the summer when we actually really don't need another hour for the garden, we don't need a few more minutes of photovoltaic illumination. So the tree stands. The tree stands because of the intervention of an owl. We were grateful that this message was brought to us.

Carolyn: Well, a skeptic hearing this story might ask, aren't there always owls in trees? What made this event so special for you?

Randy: Well, indeed, you know, there are often owls in trees, but people who know something about raptors will know that owls are primarily nocturnal animals. In other words, they're active at night and you don't often see them during the daylight hours. However, we have developed in our household an unusual relationship with owls, because they do sometimes visit during daylight hours.

Sometimes they visit us when we go on walks. A few months ago, we walked down our driveway to go on our daily exercise routine. And there, sitting on a limb perched at the end of the driveway, was an enormous horned owl or

¹ Simard, Suzanne: *Finding the Mother Tree*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021.

barred owl – I'm not really sure which - but it sat there with utter confidence, just maybe 20 or 30 feet from where we were. And it stared into our eyes. It was completely aware of our presence. And we were completely aware of its presence. So we're not talking about one visitation, one owl, coincidentally, on the night before the tree surgeon comes. We're talking about a relationship with our raptor friends.

And we have come to notice that these raptors often visit us when we're searching for insights or struggling over some issue. Owls visit on midnight walks, and they often provide a kind of comfort, as if, you know, they are confirming some thoughts we're having that we hesitate to embrace, thinking that some might criticize our perspective.

There's always a sense of comfort, always a sense of messaging coming from another realm, which is very much the spirit and the teaching of my tribe: that raptors and owls are message bearers. So this is not a one-off. This is a continuing evolving relationship with our other than human kin. They're not just saying hi.

Carolyn: So what's going on here? Using a scientific modern view of the world gives one set of answers, but using an animist indigenous-inspired view of the world takes a different approach. Which raises the question: what exactly is an animist view of the world? It involves a profound shift in how we look at the world around us. We extend our view of personhood to other than human beings and view them as our kin, our relatives.

This way, we humans are members of a larger extended family, that includes us, the two-legged and also the winged ones (the birds), the rooted ones (the plants and trees), the four legged ones (animals) and so forth. And to quote Graham Harvey, a British professor of religion, "At the heart of the matter of what animism is, is the opposition between persons and objects. Persons are those with whom other persons interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken with. Objects by contrast are usually spoken about. Persons are volitional, relational, cultural, and social beings. Persons

demonstrate intentionality and agency, with varying degrees of autonomy and freedom.”²

Randy: So Carolyn, with this definition, trees are persons? They display intentionality when turning their leaves toward the sun and when growing their branches out to reach the best sunlight?

Carolyn: Yes, for sure. And the whole idea is everyone has varying degrees of autonomy and freedom. Obviously trees are rooted. They can't walk the way we do, but they have other ways of moving and of experiencing. And this is what works for them. And animism goes further. To quote Graham Harvey again, “People become animists by learning how to recognize persons, and far more important, how to engage with them. The ubiquity of terms like respect and reciprocity in animist discourse demonstrates that the key identifier of a person is someone who responds to or initiates approaches to other persons.”³

If you think of experiences you've had with a pet, for example a dog or a cat, you know that they respond to your actions, words, voice tone, even your moods, and you respond to theirs. This is an interaction and engagement with a non-human being. There's the shared sense that you are kin to each other. Connecting with our kin, our non-human kin, involves the same approach as connecting with our human relatives: show interest in the other person, observe them, be patient with them, be willing to make the first move, be open to their wishes and responses, learn from each other what you each enjoy and value about your time together. So interacting with household pets is an accessible way into an animist view. You can empathize with your pets, think of ways to engage them, while appreciating how they engage you. You know how happy you are when you come home and your dogs wag their tails and run up to you in welcome!

² Harvey, Graham: Animism: Respecting the Living World. New York: Columbia University Press, p. xvii.

³ Harvey, p. xvii.

But how can you go about connecting with the parts of the natural world that are a step removed from the animal world? Many people already do things like weed around a shrub, put out bird seed for birds, plant insect- friendly, pollinator- friendly flowers. We do what we can to make the habitat we share with them a welcoming place. Their interaction back with us may be more subtle. For example, you might notice more Monarch butterfly eggs on the underside of milkweed leaves in places where you've allowed the milkweed to grow tall. You notice that the butterflies are thriving. It's the same kind of awareness that you may have when you see your child's face light up with happiness when you're together.

Randy: So to get back to the indigenous perspective, I'd like to tell our listeners a story. Storytelling is very much a part of our indigenous culture, and we believe that stories are helpful and instructive and occasionally hopefully inspiring. So I'm going to shift from talking about our othe- than- human living kin to something that is a little bit outside of that realm. I'm going to look at the realm of natural phenomena and talk about how they may engage and reach out to us.

My story has to do with a rainbow - actually multiple rainbows - that have appeared outside of our kitchen window. It began when I was preparing dinner, looking out the window on one of those days when you have this strange weather event some of you may have encountered, where on one side of the house it's raining, on the other side, it's sunny. It's called a sun shower. And it's a time when very often rainbows appear in the sky. So I looked out at the weather, the beautiful sunlight and the dark clouds to another side.

And I suddenly noticed a rainbow coming down, down, down, and literally touching the ground. I've never seen such a thing. It was really quite astounding. It was kind of like some child had taken a bunch of crayons or magic markers and drawn multicolored lines from the sky right down, and then it ended at the earth. I was, I was overwhelmed. I, I just didn't know how to process it; it was outside of what I understood a rainbow could do. I thought they only occurred in the sky.

So some weeks later I was standing at the window and we had another sun shower, and I looked out the window thinking "My goodness, I wonder if this thing is ever going to happen again in my life." And lo and behold, the exact same event transpired in almost the exact same place. I didn't run out with a ruler and measure it, but it was within a meter or a yardstick of where the rainbow had touched before. It was the same brilliant, clearly defined rainbow, touching the ground. I have to say it was awesome. And I began to wonder, what is going on here? What is the message that the rainbow brings?

Well, about six weeks later, we had another sun shower. And this time I actually hesitated to look out the window, almost out of fear of what I might see, because I just really wouldn't know how to process this event occurring for a third time. But there it was, a rainbow touching the ground in almost the exact same place.

So I asked myself, what is there about this place? And then it hit me, duh, Randy, this place is just a few meters from where you and Carolyn planted a ceremonial garden for my mother who had died. We planted the ceremonial garden of Indian corn and squash on the anniversary of her death. And as we planted the garden, I looked out and I noticed thereabout some white ox-eye daisies they're called. That was my mother's favorite flower; I always gave them to her on her birthday. So I cut some of them, put them in the middle of this new garden, in a little vase, thinking they would last for a few days as they normally do before they wilt. Left them out in the hot blistering sun, 90 degrees plus. Three or four days, the water evaporated, the daisies wilted. I went out, poured some water in, they stood up again.

And I wondered, what a remarkable thing, these daisies are going to hang in there. I forgot several times over the coming weeks as the daisies wilted and revived themselves.

And then I began to wonder, how long are these daisies going to last? Well, to be precise, they lasted until my birthday. My mother gave me back the daisies that I gave her so many times on her birthday. What this place was in our

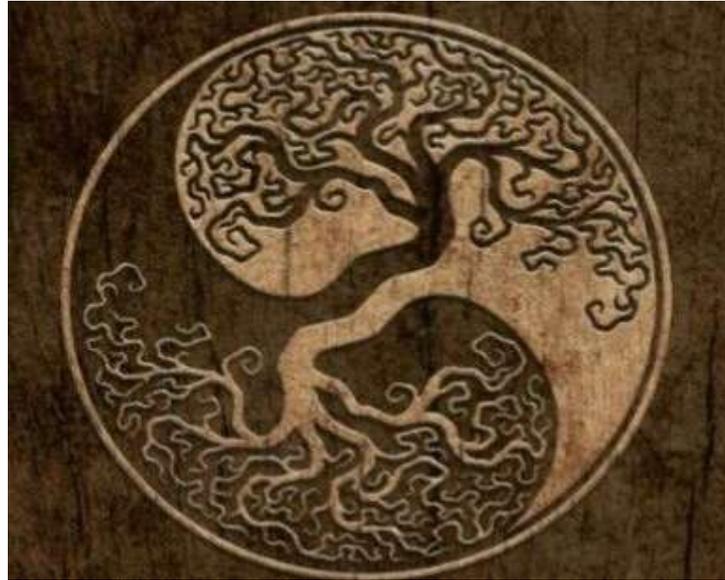
yard was a place where, if you wish, miraculous, wonderful, wondrous things happen and connections open to our ancestors and our animate universe. It's an experience I will always cherish.

Carolyn: Wow, Randy, your - your rainbow story, in addition to being very moving, illustrates another important facet about the indigenous approach to the natural world. Many aspects of the landscapes - like rivers, rocks, mountains, rainbows, aspects of weather such as thunderstorms - are also part of the animate world. They have personhood and personality. They interact with other persons in the animate world, including us, if we're open, to be aware of their efforts. And if we do things to try to return that awareness back to them. And again, as you work toward viewing the world this way, you feel more connected to and surrounded by fellow creatures and the natural world around you.

Randy: So I think what we can take away from my story on this first segment is something that Native Americans have long learned, and the mainstream is slowly awakening to, which is place matters. For Native Americans, places, which might be viewed as just ordinary places of mountain, a river, a rock, a tree - places have a way of taking on their own life, of being animated, of capturing and gathering in, if you wish, the spirits and events of the past.

And I think each of us has an opportunity to find those spaces in our own lives and our own neighborhoods and our own world. But as Carolyn and I did, when we planted seeds commemorating my mother's death, and I put out flowers, which my mother liked, we began to create a sacred space. In fact, I'm in the process of putting up a little sculpture in this space and it's going to be called Axis Mundus, which is the scientists' term for the axis that goes through the North and South Pole upon which the earth spins. But for others, "Axis Mundus" is the place where the sacred touches the earth, where they become connected and we are no longer separated.

So I think what we can do is take away from this first segment, a sense of empowerment that we can create that connection, we can create that “Axis Mundus”, make the inanimate become alive and animate.



“Axis Mundi”

Image credit: www.tattooartfromtheheart.com biggest online tattoo encyclopedia
Used by permission of Simon, founder of Tattoo Art from the Heart

Carolyn: And we'll be back in a minute after a break.

Segment 2

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives and today's show, which is about connecting with the animate world around us. Randy was just talking about his experiences with the rainbows and how he was in a different, but very real reality.

Randy: So Carolyn, I think the story raises a really interesting question, which is: why do our conscious experiences and interactions with other than human kin, or with what we might normally consider to be inanimate aspects of the landscape? Why do they happen? Or maybe more importantly, why don't they happen more often? In our mainstream daily lives, we learn to put up, you know, many, many, many barriers to the awareness of the presence and agency of our other than human kin. It's a real problem.

Carolyn: For sure. I mean, I grew up in New York City. So you learn to put up barriers, not just to your nonhuman kin, but also to interactions for many others, as you're going through your daily life on the streets. So this is a serious issue. So to open ourselves to the animate world, we really need to de-gate - take down the gates or barriers that we've put up for our own protection. De-gating gives us the chance to become more attuned to the presence of many different types of kin. For myself. I know I need to feel safe, not on guard or high alert, or even medium alert, against threats or assaults, not buffeted by negative emotions or anxieties, in order to de-gate and become more open. So, Randy, what other kinds of barriers have you felt, and do you want to talk about?

Randy: Well, I continually - even now at this point in my life and the evolution of my awakening to my indigenous ancestry and heritage - I still confront almost on a daily basis, the anticipation, if not the reality, of a culture that's always going to be secular when we talk about such things. The default response of our Western scientific, empirical mechanistic culture is, "Are those things real? Did you make that up?" And that's really inhibiting. I think that's why we hesitate to share these experiences with our friends, families, colleagues, and more importantly, why we sometimes fail to recognize them within ourselves.

Carolyn: Well, I can give a pretty good example, I think, of somebody who consciously experienced de-gating and had profound and long-term impact. I'm on the board of a local group here in Vermont that manages a 77-acre *[about 31 hectare]* parcel of land in the Green Mountain Forest. It's called Spirit In Nature. Our group maintains a series of walking paths in the forest named for different religions, with quotations from those religious traditions posted on trees along each path. For example, there's the Christian path, the Hindu path, the Jewish path, the Muslim path, the Indigenous path, and so forth. The quotations highlight spiritual connections with the world of nature. Because it's a beautiful and peaceful forest place, many people come to walk the paths to experience the sights, smells, sounds, and different life forms of

the forest, to feel closer to nature and to their own sense of God and of the sacred.

One man, a Vietnam Veteran, recently told me of his first encounter with Spirit In Nature, which was several decades ago. He had never heard of SpIN, but saw the road sign while driving on a visit through Vermont, and stopped not knowing what to expect. He got out of his car, looked around to get his bearings. Then he saw a sign for the Buddhist path. He felt a profound sense of being welcomed. Literally he felt, "There is a path for me", because he had become a Buddhist. Well, he totally gets the whole point of all the spiritual traditions meeting on common ground at SpIN. He accessed the experience first and most deeply through his own Buddhist tradition.

Randy: I think this example you gave is really beautiful, both, you know, in its literal narrative and also metaphorically because each of us really does have an opportunity to make his or her own path into this animate world. And it, it is sometimes a conscious effort, sometimes made with enormous effort and intention, and other times fleetingly. An unexpected event like the owl in the tree or, or the rainbow.

And I think it's quite important for listeners to understand that they can pursue both paths. One is making their own way through the forest or the park or the backyard, and the other being to just open a pathway in their brains and their consciousness, allowing others - other than human kin, spirits of ancestors, whatever you wish to call them - to welcome them into our consciousness. But it does require a fair amount of intentionality for most of us, most of the time in our culture.

Carolyn: On the other hand, it struck me that you can't force it. You can't go out for a walk and say, today, I'm going to have a special encounter with a spirit being in the natural world. It's going to be artificial; it's not going to happen. There's a lot of learning that you can do, but there's also - the first thing is the de-gating or opening yourself to these possibilities. At least that's how I see it.

Randy: It's a real challenge to know how much one needs to be intentional and to know how much one needs to be patient. You've heard me repeat this story many times. I heard an interview with a relatively famous Native American author who has promoted the notion of contacting - recontacting - an animate world. And the interviewer, who was very sympathetic, said, "Well, you know, I tried taking your advice and went into my garden and tried talking to the elderberry plant. And it didn't say a thing! And I felt like an idiot!" And the Native American author really didn't know what to say; she was caught flat-footed. And I think the reason is that this is the - the gist of the problem for many who have not crossed over the boundary and de-gated. And it's hard for those of us who have passed through those boundaries to explain how we did it. I think that's an issue that we need to address.

Carolyn: I think, especially with an indigenous tradition, if you're growing up within it, there's a lot that you're learning about as you grow. And so it sort of unfolds naturally to you in a way that it does not for those of us from mainstream society.

Randy: So we'll, we'll take a break. And on our third segment, we'll return to this question of exactly how, practically how, do we de-gate.

Segment 3

Randy: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. I'm talking with Carolyn Schmidt about how indigenous people have worked out a worldview and ways to connect to the animate world, and how non-indigenous people today can learn to start to go down this path themselves.

Carolyn: I like the way you said "learn" just now, because my understanding is that everyone, the four-legged and the rooted ones, as well as us two-legged, needs to learn - through respectful interactions and the teachings of elders - how to engage with other beings. When people with indigenous ancestry have grown up within these traditions, they have learned and experienced a profound set of connections with their land, their ancestor, and all the other

than human beings that inhabit it. So for the question of how can you get there, Randy, can you start by talking about the role of ceremonies and rituals?

Randy: Well, I think for many people in the mainstream, and many indigenous people, we immediately default to the notion that there needs to be a vehicle, some formal mechanism for us to connect with that which is beyond the ordinary, that which is sacred, if you wish. So we have very special rituals and ceremonies, which we learn, and they're very often very tightly scripted. It might be music, it might be drumming. It might be incense. It might be for some people a meal. And these vehicles are enabling. On the other hand, they can also be restraining. But let's, let's begin with examples of where rituals and ceremony are enabling, where they put us in a comfort zone to make those connections. You've got some good examples.

Carolyn: Okay. Here's one example from an unbroken indigenous tradition, of how ceremonies are integrated within an animist daily life from the Maori. "When Maori dig up their sweet potatoes, kumara, they have planted intended them. They dig up the sweet potatoes, knowing that a history of intimate kinship is involved. The kumara migrated to Aotearoa - New Zealand - with the Maori in the same canoes, thus digging and eating require invocations or addresses partially equivalent to prayers."⁴ This is a quote from Graham Harvey again.

And another example from a British group of ecological activists who had been in a protest camp to try to stop the creation of a highway bypass that involved bulldozing into a long established forest and cutting down trees there, but their efforts failed. The trees were cut down, including one large tree that they had named Melia. As one person involved told an interviewer, quote, " 'It was decided that we would burn her trunk so that no one would profit from the timber. We gathered wood and broken bits of tree house and piled it over her trunk, poured over paraffin and set light to her. Suddenly the mood, the atmosphere, the meanings of our actions changed. From a final

⁴ Harvey, p. 106.

futile gesture of defiance, it became a funeral pyre, a spontaneous ritual that provided an outlet for our grief and our rage whilst giving expression to our animism. As the smoke drifted across the mud, I played a lament on the bagpipes and then slowly we left the site.”⁵

So one of the things I got from this was they felt better after the ceremonial burning and respect they paid to their special tree. But since they're activists, they also needed a sense of getting their energy back and not to give up. So I think I got that from this story as well.

So I'd conclude on this by saying, when you're a member of a community, you need to engage in good relationships - being respectful toward others and returning favors and kindnesses so it's not a one-way relationship. So I see how ceremonies could really help with this because ceremonies are ways that people learn and then practice gift giving, and other signs of respect.

Randy: The words that jumped out of the story for me were 'spontaneous ritual.' One doesn't think of the two things as going together. Ritual in many ways is very, you know, routine, very heavily scripted. But it need not be. And in fact, if, again, we think of our own lives, our family lives, our community life, very often the most memorable moments are those strange little family rituals that evolve over time and become the threads that bind us for generations. It might be as simple as making a particular food item or a way of giving a gift or hanging up a decoration or going for a walk or skiing or biking, whatever it happens to be on a holiday.

I think the message that is coming out here is that in the current environment, in which we live, where we're bombarded by stimuli constantly, you know, we're in a house where the radio is on, the TV is on, the cell phones and smartphones are beckoning, it's really difficult to carve out a place and a time to de-gate and be open to the possibility of connecting with something other than a mechanical world. And I really think that is something that we need to

⁵ Harvey, p. 90.

work on. And if we need to rely on ritual and ceremony to do that, if we need to rely on going to a ceremonial space to do that, more power to us.

Carolyn: I guess I'd say I've experienced some rituals that are really powerful and moving, but I've experienced others where I felt awkward and just trying to do what I'm supposed to do, but feel really detached. So do you have any suggestions as to ways to make rituals that mean a lot to other people, how ways to get into them? Or is this just too much to ask?

Randy: No, I, I think the, the answer is actually relatively simple, which is that you do this, you know, as I just said, spontaneously and sort of consensually you know, building, you know, your own rituals piece by piece. And the alternative to this, you know, like the radical, extreme opposite, is what became popular in the 1960s, and we could do a whole show on- people have written whole books about – de-gating using, you know, psychoactive drugs and going into a very, very, very private space and trance, but that's really not what we're focused on here today.

We're talking about more communal and public kinds of pathways to engagement with an animate universe. And again, I think that requires, as you have said several times, being respectful of our other human kin and involving them, but apropos of the program theme today, being respectful of our non-human kin and letting them participate. And hearing and seeing what they have to offer as they invite us into their space, as the owl did, and as the rainbow did for me.

Carolyn: That's a really good point: to remind ourselves that we're not in this alone and you know, where we're sharing the responsibilities of communication with all of our kin.

We'll take a break and be back for the final segment in just a minute.

Segment 4

Randy: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives, our final segment. In this segment, I want to try to illustrate how I struggled to communicate the need to get us two- legged out of the perspective of viewing ourselves as the center of the universe and the measure of all things. I have to present to you, an excerpt from a short story I wrote in response to a prompt from a writing center which said, “Write a short story that starts with ‘It was the first storm of the year...dot dot dot.’ ” Here is how I responded.

“A Gathering of Storms” by Randy Kritkauský⁶

It was the first storm of the year, and all of those who wished to be big names in the coming hurricane season were gathered for the 33rd Annual Global Hurricane Planning Conference in Bermuda.

This year’s event began with an unusual sense of foreboding. Clouds, both physical and metaphorical, hung over the gathering even before the opening ceremony started. Actually, the atmosphere should be described as one of dread. Storms were brewing and frustration roiling to a degree never witnessed before, and to the great dismay of all involved.

“So, here we go again”, sighed Albert who was one of the more eccentric elders at the gathering. Known for his highly vocal disavowal of alcohol and caffeine, he cradled his signature coffee mug bearing the message ‘Warm Water, I Love It’. “Maybe we should just cancel the season and take a rest, or self-isolate and use COVID as our excuse”, he continued in a breathy whine.

Bernadette protested gustily, “And miss MY chance to be seen and heard? No way! This is my year.”

⁶ Randy cut some parts of the story to fit the time constraints of this show. For the complete version, see: <https://adirondackcenterforwriting.org/2021/09/20/a-gathering-of-storms-by-randy-kritkauský/>

“I am weary,” sighed Claude. “We plan. We plan. We send out warning messages and no one seems to pay attention until the threat is imminent. Making our message louder, our impact bigger, and our threats ever greater is ignored, year after year. What’s the point?”

Indeed, it was the case that year after year humans rebuilt hurricane-flattened homes and entire towns placed in low coastal areas or along rivers prone to flooding. People did seem incapable of getting the message about hubris and the need to recognize limits on human capacity to control flooding.

“Maybe we could arrange a blizzard in July and see if that communicates our message about climate change. It would be amusing to sit back and watch people trying to buy snow shovels at the hardware store along with their Fourth of July barbecue supplies”, Eugene howled as he propelled various light objects about the room in a fit of anger.

Filomena attempted to restore calm. “Maybe we should just try to see eye-to-eye, instead of using up our energy struggling with one another,” she thundered. “We do have something important to say, and maybe we just need to accept that it will have to be said over and over before the public gets it.”

Quietly dissenting, George observed, “No matter where we take our message and no matter how much we make it louder, it’s still ignored. Sandy tried to deliver the message to New York City and really cranked up the volume. The city’s transport system was shut down and the lights went out, hinting at what is to come. But the two legged didn’t get it.” Diane muttered something in agreement, shaking her head which hung low in despair.

Then there was a long silence, the proverbial calm before the storm, the long awaited keynote speech. The speaker was introduced:

“This year we are honored to have an indigenous representative from Central America. It is appropriate to hear an indigenous voice, as this is the first year of the United Nations Decade of Indigenous Peoples and such voices and

names are too rarely heard in our world. It is with great honor that I introduce U K'ux Kaj. She has studied hurricanes for a long time and brings a much needed perspective to our work.”

The room went silent as a colorfully dressed tall woman walked onto the stage. She wore a traditional feather cloak and displayed hair hanging in dreadlocks into which were woven various small shells and large seeds. Her majesty was spellbinding. After the visual shock, the appreciative and spellbound audience burst into deafening applause.

“Thank you for inviting me to your gathering. It is an honor. Let me begin by explaining how I became part of this world so obsessed with big storms. It is probably due to the name that my tribal elders gave me at my coming of age ceremony. My parents tell me I was an unusually active child, occasionally disruptive, running about the village turning things upside down in my path. That is why our elders gave me the name U K'ux Kaj.

“U K'ux Kaj is the Mayan god of wind, storm, and fire. She is also one of the deities who participated in the creation of mankind.

“That paradox, a disruptor who is also a creator, is the theme of my presentation today. My perspective is undoubtedly partly due to a cultural expectation that I live up to my name. It certainly encouraged me to re-examine cultural and scientific assumptions about hurricanes. Let me begin by elaborating on what many of you may already know, but which you have barely mentioned, or not explained consistently in your messaging.”

The thirty minute power point presentation that followed was indeed partly familiar to most of those attending, the exception being journalists whose jaws dropped. U K'ux Kaj used photos, charts and scientific data to document that hurricanes provide what is now referred to as “ecosystem services”. She explained in detail how tropical storms restore coastal wetlands and barrier islands, using data on silt deposits to make this clear. Beautiful videos of colorful flora and fauna which returned to once barren white sandy tourist beaches were quite convincing.

Then U K'ux Kaj showed slides of fallen trees. "This is the public face of hurricanes, yes?", she asked. "Who dares to have a news broadcast or weather forecast about a hurricane without showing a tree fallen on a house or car?" Nervous chuckles of confirmation rippled across the audience.

"Let me explain why this is not just destruction. Without occasionally removing the dense forest canopy, lower growing plants cannot compete. Critical habitat is lost. So not only does tree downing open the forest, the fallen limbs and logs provide much needed breeding and nesting locations for the following." U K'ux Kaj then quickly flashed through beautiful slides of birds, small mammals, and reptiles ending with fish. "Yes," she commented. "Even fish benefit. Limbs fallen in streams provide protection for young fish and attract insects needed for food.

"If this be familiar territory for some of you, please bear with me now, as I beg you to allow me to guide you into the unfamiliar. For indigenous people, *[when]* we talk about tropical storms and hurricanes, we are not just discussing natural forces and objects, we're talking about our other than human kin. We see no discontinuity between the two-legged, or humans, and other creatures. We are equals. That is part of our animate view of the universe.

"But landscapes and forces of nature are also alive and conscious. Hurricanes are our brothers and sisters. They deserve respect. The two-legged must share the world with them. They must learn to live with storms and help them do their important work.

"Building sea walls and giant flood gates may seem to be necessary in areas where the two-legged have invaded and colonized nature. But such measures should not be viewed as the best path forward. Humans need to learn humility and recognize that we are no match for Mother Earth. The two-legged may just need to decolonize some coastal areas and return the land to the continual renewal that natural forces bring."

The assembly jumped up, applauded, cheered, and howled.

“Thank you for your support,” U K’ux Kaj bowed and smiled.

“Our sister, Fire, also provides these services. But that’s another story.

“If there is a message I want to deliver to you, it is this. It is time to stop being apologetic for the work we do. It is time to work with our kin, Fire, and once again attempt to get the two-legged to see the wisdom of working with us and stop trying to contain us or wishing we would just go away.”

There was not a dry eye in the room as a five minute standing ovation roared like thunder. “I have never been so proud to be a hurricane,” was shouted repeatedly. “Let’s celebrate!”

The chant began as rain and wind were welcomed to the gathering and the first glorious storm of the year began.

[end of story]

Thank you, Migwetch, for listening.

Carolyn: Migwetch, Randy. So, listeners, Randy, and I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, we encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, our animate kin, and perhaps even that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it.

And if you might, write to Randy and let him know about your experience. He can be reached at his email, randykritkausky@hushmail.com or through his website, which is randykritkausy.com.

Until the next show, Migwetch - thank you - and goodbye.

“Indigenous Perspectives” monthly podcast is hosted by Randy Kritkauskay, and broadcast on the fourth Thursday of each month, 12 noon Eastern Time (US & Canada), on HealthyLife.net.



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