

## Affirming Indigenous Spirituality

“Indigenous Perspectives” - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net

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*Photo credits: Carl Chapman; Nick Athanas<sup>1</sup>*

### Segment One

Randy Kritkausky: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. In our Land Acknowledgment we recognize Vermont, where we are, as part of N'dakinna, the unceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for centuries lived on and cultivated the lands now included in present-day northern New England and southeastern Canada.

Randy: We also acknowledge that we are on Turtle Island (the North American continent), which is the unceded land of our other-than-human kin who occupied this territory for millennia, if not millions of years. We benefit from their good stewardship of these lands long before any human settlers arrived.

Carolyn: So, let's start today's show, titled “Affirming Indigenous Spirituality,” by posing a question for all of our listeners. Here's the question: what fundamental aspect of being Indigenous continues to be threatened today but is not political, like treaty rights or getting land back, and not economic, like finding new ways to generate income for tribal nations?

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Chapman, Eagle Shots; Nick Athanas, Pine-breasted Lark – see pages 4 and 6 for complete citations

Randy: So the answer to the question, Carolyn, is it's the ways that our Indigenous belief systems - deeply spiritual and affirming routine connections with the animate world - are routinely questioned and dismissed by those in the mainstream, even routinely by those who claim to be our allies and advocates.

Carolyn: So how do we go about defining indigenous belief systems further? I mean, I think about feeling strongly a part of the world of other than human beings, being open to encounters with their spirits and being able to experience awe and wonder in those encounters - being open to all the connections with the natural world.

Randy: You and I have been knocking this idea back and forth between the two of us, of awe and wonder, and as we were approaching the show, I began to realize that those concepts are actually a bit of a problem, because it's too easy to slip from awe and wonder into the notion that an animate intimate world experience is something exceptional, which I think it is for most people in the mainstream. But the whole point of this show is that it is not something exceptional for large numbers of Indigenous people who live in that place all of the time.

Carolyn: Yes. I noticed in your earlier comments you kept using the word "routine." So there's the question of Indigenous experience where these connections are routine and part of the daily framework that you live in. And then you're also saying that for the mainstream that their routine is to go along being - sort of thinking they're rational, logical, calculating cost-benefits, so that for them the spiritual is exceptional?

Randy: Exactly. And as we've discussed on previous shows, and as I have at the very beginning of my book, an illustration of Alice in the Looking Glass, it's a sculpture from England where she's literally stuck halfway through the looking glass between one world and another. I've spent so much of my recent decade betwixt and between, and at one point in my life, most of my life I routinely lived on this sort of western scientific, empirical, rationally grounded side of that. But now I find myself very often spending much of my day on the other side. So having had that journey, I can really appreciate the difference between occasionally wandering into an indigenous consciousness and inhabiting it much if not all of the time.

Carolyn: So I guess there's a real range, a really wide continuum of ability to connect with the world of nature and the spirits and also ability to do this easily. So switching to the mainstream view for a bit, as our recent programs on cultural appropriation discussed, there is a rising tide of interest - mainstream interest - in Indigenous religions and spirituality today. So this might suggest that Indigenous spirituality is gaining broad acceptance, but as you've helped me to figure out,

popular acceptance is not broad acceptance and it's not true understanding. And it's also not the same as acknowledgement and legitimacy. Can you develop this idea?

Randy: Well, yes, thanks. That's really the point of today's program. In fact, what we might refer to as the popularization of Indigenous religion and spirituality can actually, not intentionally, but can actually contribute to its erosion when almost anyone and everyone can play it. Being Indian, spiritually speaking, something very sacred and complicated, can be reduced to superficial mimicking and commercialization. That form of diluted Indigenous spirituality, not what we as Indigenous people offer, then becomes the prevailing notion, I think, of what Indigenous means. And it invites skepticism and dismissal from many in the mainstream who might otherwise be interested.

Carolyn: Okay. And also mainstream guardians of cultural dogma and assumptions about reality. We do depend on media celebrities, what we learn, what's accepted going through school. They don't have much background for really understanding indigenous spirituality, so they often don't take it seriously or if they think it's cool or intriguing, they can default to sort of shallow stereotyping.

Randy: Indeed, yes. So there's another angle from which indigenous spirituality is continually undermined, and that's the widespread acceptance in our mainstream culture of what is known as the scientific method, what is known as logic - that dismisses intuitive or animistic connections as unscientific, emotional. Sometimes it's unsaid, but it's implicit that it's childlike, that it's naive. So what we're going to try to do on this show is examine various barriers to affirming Indigenous spirituality and how we Indigenous peoples navigate our way in and out of this confusion.

Carolyn: All right, so one of the things that Randy and I have done is trying to look at intuition and other ways of understanding. We've each found a poem that deals with these issues. So we're going to present these poems to you and then we're going to discuss the takeaways.

Randy: So the difficulty is finding a metaphor for people in the mainstream to understand and grasp the kind of shock, and I won't say anger, but disappointment that we feel when our Indigenous spiritual values are reduced, dissected with the intention of shedding light on what's really going on. And one of our colleagues at a classical radio station when we were discussing doing a program on Indigenous music said, we need to be careful not to overanalyze this rationally and reduce something beautiful to its musicological components because it really destroys the integrity of the whole. And the image he used, which I hadn't come across before,

was a poem by Emily Dickinson called “Split the Lark.” It's a poem she wrote or published in 1896, and it's very, very unlike other things Emily Dickinson wrote.



*Photo credit: Nick Athanas, Pine-Breasted Lark<sup>2</sup>*

Carolyn: Yes, this isn't sort of a warm, fuzzy relating kind of thing, at least not on the surface.

Randy: Oh, no, no, definitely not. So here's the brief poem. It's:

“Split the Lark — and you'll find the Music —  
Bulb after Bulb, in Silver rolled —  
Scantilly dealt to the Summer Morning  
Saved for your Ear when Lutes be old.

Loose the Flood — you shall find it patent —  
Gush after Gush, reserved for you —  
Scarlet Experiment! Sceptic Thomas!  
Now, do you doubt that your Bird was true?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/antpitta/43678524121/> Creative Commons license: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Split the Lark %E2%80%94 and you%27ll find the Music %E2%80%94](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Split_the_Lark_%E2%80%94_and_you%27ll_find_the_Music_%E2%80%94). Emily Dickinson 391

It's a really horrifying image. I mean, it's like live vivisection of a bird in order to figure out how it has this beautiful song. And Emily is trying to shock her reader with the harm that is done to anything beautiful - it could be poetry, which would be close to her heart - but for our program today, we're talking about Indigenous spirituality, ceremony beliefs and subjecting them to the kind of dissection that takes the life out of the beauty and the reality and the wholeness and the integrity of the spirituality. And what do you end up with? Something that's dead as opposed to something that's alive and vibrant.

Carolyn: Like “split the lark and you'll find the music” is how it starts - to split the lark. You've killed it, you've ended the music. I mean, I find it really upsetting.

Randy: Yes, I understand. So did I the first several times I read it, but it really works and I hope it's a way of our mainstream non-Indigenous people accessing the kind of anxiety and disappointment we feel when our belief system is subject to being dissected - killed.

Carolyn: Well, that's quite deep, Randy, I have to say. Okay, now, and here's an excerpt from Joy Harjo's “Eagle Poem.” This was first published in 1990.



*Joy Harjo – photo credit CUNY Academic Commons<sup>4</sup>*

Harjo is a member of the Muskogee Nation and was the first Native American to serve as United States Poet Laureate. She just stepped down in 2022. And it's clear even before we read the poem that it's coming from an Indigenous worldview. So this is part of the poem; it's the start:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://dhintro2020.commons.gc.cuny.edu/too-good-not-to-share-joy-harjos-map-of-first-people-poetry/> Creative Commons license

Eagle Poem<sup>5</sup>  
by Joy Harjo

“To pray you open your whole self  
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
To one whole voice that is you.  
And know there is more  
That you can’t see, can’t hear;  
Can’t know except in moments  
Steadily growing, and in languages  
That aren’t always sound but other  
Circles of motion.  
Like eagle that Sunday morning  
Over Salt River. Circed in blue sky  
In wind, swept our hearts clean  
With sacred wings.”

Randy: Joy is much kinder toward the bird in her poem than Emily Dickinson was in hers. The contrast couldn't be greater.



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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46545/eagle-poem> Joy Harjo, “Eagle Poem” from *In Mad Love and War*. Copyright © 1990 by Joy Harjo. Reprinted with the permission of Wesleyan University Press, [www.wesleyan.edu/wespress](http://www.wesleyan.edu/wespress)



Carolyn: Yes. Here the eagle is not only an inspiration and a beauty for the people to observe, but the eagle acts in a healing way toward the observers. “Swept our hearts clean with sacred wings.” Also building on the whole intuition idea, the languages that aren't sound but other circles of motion. So there's ways to communicate that are deeper than language, and this all comes through as a part of her - at least as I see it - as a part of her profoundly Indigenous worldview.

Randy: And basically what she's calling everyone to do, not just Indigenous people. It's really simple but profound, which is to really take time to stop, to listen and to see before we say, oh, there must be something else there beyond what I could be looking at and thinking about, and let me dissect it and find out what's really going on. She's saying the phenomena itself before our eyes, what we're hearing is rich and deep.

Carolyn: And she's also saying that you have to make yourself vulnerable. You open your whole self. That's a challenge. And that then you also have humility. You know that there's more that you can't see, can't hear, can't know, but then just accept in moments steadily growing, which reminded me of - Randy, your growing sense of being able to make these connections and transitions more frequently and maybe a little more smoothly?

Randy: Well, yes, we're going to deal with that in the next segments of the show. But before we do that, let's get away from digging ever deeper into the spiritual and ask what the practical implications and the real world harm might be in not affirming the value of Indigenous spirituality. It has really astounding implications.

Carolyn: Okay. In a previous show on the Rights of Nature, we discussed the global movement toward granting legal status, legal personhood, to features of the natural world such as rivers and mountains. This legal approach is working its way through national, state and local court systems in a number of countries, and is a strategy that helps to protect the natural world from human actions such as mining, dredging, and dumping pollutants. This also protects human health and animal habitats.

For example, a 2021 Constitutional Court in Ecuador applied its right of nature constitutional clause to refuse a permit to the Ecuadorian State Mining Company

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bald\\_Eagle\\_Alaska\\_\(10\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bald_Eagle_Alaska_(10).jpg)

and its Canadian corporate partner who wanted to start mining operations inside a national forest protection area, Los Cedros. Since 2008, Ecuador's Constitution has recognized the rights of Pachamama, or Mother Earth, to exist and, quote: “to maintain and regenerate her cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes.”<sup>7</sup>



*Photo credit: Andreas Kay, Waterfall at Los Cedros<sup>8</sup>*

Randy: So I think it's important to stop here and hesitate and again remind ourselves that by dismissing this notion of animism and not understanding and not empathizing with it, these movements like Rights of Nature really just don't have traction because the notion for many people in the mainstream that our other than human kin and landscape have personhood and being is really strange. It requires an enormous act of imagination. But as you just pointed out, the implications are significant.

It's really noteworthy that the countries where Rights of Nature are having the most success, such as Ecuador and New Zealand, are countries with politically active Indigenous communities for whom this is more than a practical approach to protect themselves in their land. And Ecuador, 25% of the population is Indigenous, mainly forest dwellers. And another 55 to 60% are mixed Indigenous and European descent. So there's a giant constituency within the nation of people who hold and practice Indigenous spirituality, and that's a platform or a grounding for a shift in

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<sup>7</sup>Source for quotation from Ecuador's constitution:

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/03122021/ecuador-rights-of-nature/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.flickr.com/photos/andreaskay/6947037411> Creative Commons license: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



how we deal with the environment, how we either protect it or how we don't protect it and abuse it.

Carolyn: I'd say by contrast in the United States as I understand it today, some of the most vital Rights of Nature movements are with Indigenous nations, Native American nations, each struggling to protect their land and their land's, natural beings from outside pollution harming everything else. And the Indigenous communities go at it from two perspectives. One is showing the economic harm and so forth, but the other is showing the cultural, religious, spiritual importance of these features.

And by contrast, the very first Rights of Nature, successful effort I know of in the United States was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and it was a coalition of people who basically pushed for rights for a certain river because the pollutants being dumped in the river were so bad that human health of the downstream people was really being impacted. They were able to prove it. So that's an understandable motivation, but the broader spiritual cultural motivation is going to be the way to unite large numbers of people to get this going.

Randy: So what we're trying to claim and demonstrate in this program is that we as a people, not just in the United States, but across the face of the globe, need to get to the point where we're going to proactively protect Mother Earth and have values such as Indigenous spirituality, which motivate us to do that rather than as the people in Pittsburgh had to do, come up with what we call an "end of the pipe" or after the fact solution to having done things wrong. So there's a lot more at stake in the theme of this program than merely giving respect to Indigenous spirituality. What we're really talking about, not to be overly dramatic, is something as important as the fate of the earth.

Carolyn: Okay, well, with that significant point, we'll wrap up this first segment and we have a variety of other topics coming up in the near future. Stay tuned for the next segment of Indigenous perspectives.

## **Segment Two**

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives, our show on affirming indigenous spirituality. This is segment two.

Randy: So Carolyn mentioned in segment one that a fair amount of the material in this segment and in our discussions preparing for it, and actually over the last few years have something to do with my own journey of discovery from being a university educated, rational empiricist to someone who, as I previously said a few minutes ago, spends a fair amount of time now living on the other side of a different

kind of consciousness. I want to give you an example of how long it takes to break out of that mindset, which does not respect or even understand Indigenous spirituality. I'm going to give you an example that took me 50 – five, zero - years to accomplish.

Carolyn: I just want to put in a note for anyone who might not know this. Randy grew up in a mainstream household that was aware of their Indigenous roots and lineage, but it wasn't a part of their cultural, spiritual life in any way at all.

Randy: Thanks. So when I went to university, the University of Pennsylvania, I was very fortunate. It was an Ivy League university education, and I got into the sociology honors program, which was another wonderful thing to happen for this kid from a relatively small upstate New York town. My Indigenous perspective certainly was nothing more than in the far back corner of my mind. So when I took this sociology course, I read an article, which for years for me, when people would say, what did you read in college that you'd like? I would say, I read this article and it blew me away. Well, what the article really is, is an example of a Western cultural bias. And that bias is “if it cannot be measured and empirically verified, it isn't real.” It's a kind of condescending tolerance reflecting momentary sensitivities, perhaps, about displaying acceptance of marginal peoples, like Indigenous peoples and their beliefs.

But it's not the same thing as acknowledging that other ways of knowing have meaningful and legitimate insights. So here's what happened. For about a decade in the middle of my life, I taught an anthropology course. And I always assigned this reading I had encountered as an undergraduate student that I loved. And the reading is “Divination - A New Perspective” by Omar Khayyam Moore<sup>9</sup>. It was published in 1957 in the journal “American Anthropologist.” It's a very brief article. It's very easy to read and very succinct.

So Moore is not a Native American. That's important. And he's not an anthropologist. It's important. He wrote an article about an Indigenous population, the Naskapi, who live in northeastern Québec and Labrador. What Moore knew about the Naskapi he gleaned from cultural area files. They were very popular in the fifties and sixties before airplane travel was easy and cheap. They were basically notes and documents written on paper and people had to go and read the files because this is before the digital age.

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<sup>9</sup> *Divination- A New Perspective* by Omar Khayyam Moore. 1957 Article in the journal, American Anthropologist, Vol 59 pages 69-74.

So I'm going to quote you the first paragraph of Moore's famous - for me - article. He says, "The purpose of this paper is to suggest a new interpretation of certain kinds of magical practices, especially divination" Divination is using shamanic powers, medicine man powers, to see what people normally don't see -

Carolyn: and to predict -

Randy: and to predict, most importantly, thank you.

First, however, he says, "I should perhaps explain briefly the motivation for undertaking this analysis. The initial impetus came from experimental investigations of problem solving activities by groups." Those would've been laboratory experiments conducted in social psychological laboratories on university campuses, not real world observations. He then continues: "These experiments quite naturally involve the study and classification of ineffective problem solving techniques". Yes, I can't believe I read this for decades and didn't see that word. "And it appeared that fresh insight into this whole matter might be gained through examining some classic cases of ineffective solutions to problems."

So he's already phrasing his mindset of looking at the behavior of this Indigenous group as being ineffective. And then he ends up saying "One of the things that most puzzles theories of magic is why it is that human beings cling so tenaciously to magic if it does not work." Think about that for a moment. He's asserting that magic never works, or more to the point what Western scientific investigators classify as magic doesn't work.

Carolyn: And he's also saying that people who rely on magic are blind to the fact that it will never work. Right?

Randy: And he uses the words "cling so tenaciously." It's like out of their ignorance and lack of understanding of the real world, well, they hold onto these beliefs. What is Omar Khayyam Moore actually saying in his article? Well, he's basically saying he's going to examine and give a scientific interpretation of what is really going on when "superstitious" people practice and cling to "ineffective" magical practices.

So here's what his case study is. It's really fascinating behavior in and of itself. It's the use of divination by Naskapi which is in their case, using the shoulder blade bone of an elk and putting it in a fire and looking at where the cracks occur. And then the medicine man or the diviner or the shaman examines and interprets the cracks to figure out an answer to a question. And in the case of Omar Khayyam Moore's analysis, it's "Where are the elk?" That's an important question.

And he points out that they only use this technique when they are most threatened with a lack of food. They don't use this every day to go hunting food. I mean, very often they know where the elk are. They use it when they are most in danger.

Carolyn: So this is the last resort appeal?

Randy: Exactly, exactly. So Moore's conclusion is it doesn't work well, it doesn't work the way the Naskapi think it does. It doesn't actually show them where the elk are. And he says, that's good, okay? It's good that it's ineffective because the cracks are random and it's going to send the Naskapi off in all different directions, including the wrong directions most of the time. And because they go in the wrong direction, they don't over hunt the elk and it helps promote the sustainability of the elk herd.

Carolyn: I guess you could call that a rational, elegant explanation, but it's obviously got its problems.

Randy: Well, when I first read it and the professor who assigned it both said, we said, wow, that's really brilliant to figure that out. And the Naskapi didn't know that. So he's [Moore] basically saying because he's a mathematician, that it takes a mathematician and a statistician to understand that randomness is a good thing. So here's what it does. It sort of works out to be good for the Naskapi because it's good for the environment, because it doesn't help them over hunt.

Carolyn: Well, but they're starving!

Randy: Right. Well, he kind of ignores that fact, and again, I'm embarrassed to say I was blind to that and didn't see that. So I never saw the error in his thinking that why would intelligent people whose lives depend on finding food use a random device to go looking for food? And I think the answer to the question is that I couldn't get through my own blindness and my own WOWness over scientific reasoning. And I think that we have another more respectful way of answering the question that Moore asked, which is what's really going on here? So stay tuned for the next segment and we'll give the answer.

### **Segment Three**

Carolyn: We're now in Segment Three of our Indigenous Perspectives show on affirming Indigenous spirituality.

Randy: So to continue the story and what we're illustrating, or what I'm trying to illustrate by telling really a joke on myself is that it took me 50 years and the adoption of an Indigenous perspective- the name of this program -to come to an alternate understanding, and one I think is both more respectful and actually more scientifically accurate.

Here's what it is.

So the idea that scapulimancy<sup>10</sup> actually works is I think what Moore got right. It's probably the only thing he got right.

However, I don't think that Moore got it right when he was comfortable portraying the Naskapi as ignorant, or to be really blunt as just plain stupid. Here's what I think is actually really happening.

First of all, the medicine man is not just sitting there reading the cracks in the bone, okay? He's a very important person in the community. People bring him information all the time. It's a small community. So the hunters who are out daily looking for food are bringing back information about where elk were last seen, about the environment, about weather conditions. This is all going into the head of the medicine man or shaman. Also, the community has literally generations, if not centuries, of accumulated knowledge about where elk find food at certain times of the year, under certain seasonal conditions and weather variations.

This is getting complicated and quite possibly something that O.K. Moore would never entertain, but I find quite easy to accept - is that the medicine man also has a spiritual connection with the elk and has a kind of sixth sense of where his other-than-human kin might be. So the medicine man is processing all of this information. And it's more complex than most modern computers would be able to process. The permutations are infinite and varying and changing from day to day.

Carolyn: So you're saying the medicine man is being able to channel the spiritual world and the elk spirits? And get their permission for hunting in this situation of desperation? He's able to do all this on a level like from Harjo's poem, you can't see, you can't hear, but he nevertheless knows?

Randy: Correct, correct, correct. And if Omar Khayyam Moore had ever traveled and talked to the Naskapi, they would've explained this is what they're doing. But he didn't do that. He was just reading papers and jumping to his own-

Carolyn: - oh wait, he never actually -

Randy: - oh no -

Carolyn: - he never actually went to Northern Québec?

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<sup>10</sup> "scapulimancy" is the practice of studying shoulder bones of animals to predict the future. There is a detailed explanation, including specifics about the Naskapi, on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapulimancy>



Randy: No, no. He was a mathematician. He wasn't even an anthropologist. He just got, as I said earlier, all of his information from these papers that he read. I mean, this is like second and third hand information. So the point I'm making about the information that this man [*the medicine man, or shaman*] has in his head as he is sitting there in front of the fire in the village, nearly starving is gathered him looking at the cracks on the bones. What's going on is that he's going into a trance-like state looking at the cracks. And it isn't the cracks that point to the solution. It's the randomness of the cracks and the mystery and ambiguity of the cracks that allow certain intuitive processes of processing immensely complicated arrays of information. This allows the medicine man to put all of that together and let a solution come to the surface.

Now, that may seem pretty farfetched, but ironically, it's the study of mathematical problem solving in the recent decades that have demonstrated certain cognitive processes of intuition whereby mathematicians who work on problems for years, sometimes decades, suddenly have an intuitive flash, an image, a metaphor, a picture, and they put together all of the pieces.

So, the very kind of problem solving that I am saying probably happens with scapulimancy - looking at cracks in a bone - is exactly the kind of process that Omar Khayyam Moore should have been privy to. So what I'm suggesting is that actually contrary to what Omar Khayyam Moore is saying, that this is ineffective problem solving and people clinging to a stupid ignorant solution is actually a brilliant and enormously complicated way of practicing combining information and coming to a solution when your very life depends on it. And if we can get our heads around that, we can get a whole new way of approaching looking at Indigenous spirituality.

Carolyn: Yes. Randy, I remember when we were just getting to know each other, you describing this thing about the scapulimancy to me and this wonderful solution about the randomness of it and how brilliant this was. And to me what's really interesting and inspiring is the fact that now you decades later have been able to step outside that framework of the genuine excitement about how to solve - about this problem solving - to realize what was missing, and also to understand the accepted view of the Western scientist [*who thinks they have*] got to be - his or her understanding has got to be - superior to that of the people, especially the Indigenous people living their own lives without all that education.

Randy: Well, I mean, we were impressionable young undergraduates and our professors were, they were really excellent, they were really brilliant, and we were wowed by their brilliance, and we weren't as critical as we should have been. So the takeaway I think from this segment is, first of all, please don't dismiss the behavior

that we don't immediately understand. I mean, most people who study religion, when they see the word superstition or magic, they would not use that word today. It's a derogatory term. Or as one professor once told me, superstition is somebody else's religion; magic is somebody else's ritual. So I mean, a Protestant might say, when a Catholic goes up and has Communion<sup>11</sup>, that's magic. That's not really happening. So we have to be really careful about being dismissive of that which we do not understand. And at the same time, we need to be respectful. Omar Khayyam Moore didn't do what a modern anthropologist would be required to do, which is get permission from people you're studying and also to give the people that you studied and wrote up and explained away their behavior an opportunity to write their response to what you said about their behavior. We've come a long way, and it took me 50 years to come my long way, and it is only because my Indigenous perspective, which boiled up in my consciousness, freed me from the constraints of thinking only in a scientific rational perspective.

Carolyn: Okay. Stay tuned for the last segment, Segment Four.

## **Segment Four**

Carolyn: Welcome back to Segment Four of “Affirming Indigenous Spirituality” on our Indigenous Perspectives show for this month.

Randy: So we were just discussing one concrete example of, let's call it disrespect, that's what it is, for Indigenous spirituality and it's disrespect masking as, and given high prominence and plaudits, for diminishing and really denigrating Indigenous spirituality. I'd ask the listeners, readers of our transcripts, to just take a deep breath and ask for a moment what it might be like for an Indigenous student to be sitting where I sat in this class and reading this or what it might be to use the analogy I used of someone who's Jewish or Muslim or Catholic, reading about one of their religious practices being described as “ineffective superstition” -

Carolyn: - “primitive” -

Randy: “primitive”, right? And then you begin to get a sense of what Indigenous students, my people, have dealt with for centuries. We've been through these educational systems. You see a lot's been written lately and we've discussed it on our

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<sup>11</sup> “Communion” is a Christian ceremony whereby participants re-enact the “Last Supper” of Jesus, whom they believe to be the son of God, with his disciples. They drink wine and eat bread. A detailed explanation of the various forms and interpretations of this ceremony is on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eucharist>

show about residential schools and cultural assimilation and erasure and stripping us of our culture.

But I think we need to end this program by acknowledging that that very same process is going on in a much more quote “civilized, modern” way in our institutions of higher learning. Because students who are Indigenous and mainstream students who are interested in things Indigenous are being told, don't go there. Don't write your final exam essay about how Indigenous spirituality and beliefs and practices and quote “magic and ceremony” actually sometimes work because you aren't going to get a very good grade. Now, I'm not speaking off the top of my head, because I've had many recent conversations with professors in academia and with graduate students whose names will remain anonymous because they've confided in me, all of whom explained that basically their professional credibility and their grades will be diminished if not catastrophic, if they are out about believing that sometimes Indigenous spirituality actually is something real deserving respect.

So on this show, many times I have said that Western science is not the enemy. Some of my Indigenous colleagues, friends, make that sometimes pretty harsh claim. They try to be dismissive of Western science. Just as Western science has been dismissive of Indigenous spirituality, I have argued continually that we need to develop a world where each can interrogate the other. In other words, as I just showed, an Indigenous perspective, can interrogate what passes as good science and occasionally reveal it to be much, much less than it pretended to be. I've also been very forthcoming saying that some of what passes as Indigenous wisdom, even Traditional Ecological Knowledge, might be slightly outdated or completely outdated and might need to be updated, upgraded, and refined by looking at what modern science has to say. So we're not looking at enemies and absolute adversaries here. We're looking at trying to find common ground and mutual respect.

Carolyn: Okay. I mean, this is all sounding very good, and I take and understand and accept your main point for sure. But when push comes to shove, when people have to make real world decisions, how are they going to do it? How are they going to cope with - will the mainstream people, and even some of the Indigenous people who've gone through the Western educational system, will they default to the rational logical cost benefit or the politically acceptable decision about like, I know this pipeline's going to damage your graveyards and disrupt your access to sacred spaces, and this is too bad, but progress demands it and you have to let it go.

Randy: Well, you've raised the critical issue and the pragmatic implications of what today's show is about. So when we hear about somebody doing an environmental impact assessment of a pipeline, they have to, as we found out in our own decades of

work on these assessments, you have to come up with metrics which literally are measurable and come up with numbers. So doing an environmental impact statement, no less a social impact statement saying, you're disturbing sacred ground just isn't going to hold water because how do you prove it's sacred? How do you prove there are real ancestral spirits there? You see, we're right back into this default of being incredulous and dismissive of things that pertain to Indigenous spirituality. So the answer to your question is, and it's not an easy answer, it's easy for me to say, but it's hard to implement, is that people who are Indigenous need to develop a bit more backbone about pushing back when they're told No, don't go there.

It's hard to do it alone. I twice walked away from PhD programs feeling I was overwhelmed by ridiculous demands of the process. So I am not pretending that it's easy to do, but maybe collectively, students at colleges, universities, need to get together just as other BIPOC - you know, Black, Indigenous, People of Color - are, and say, we need more space. We need more respect for our perspective. We need to be able to bring it to the table, and we need to be able to talk back and not just buckle under the pressure of making everything subject to empirical verification of western science.

Carolyn: So you're stressing the importance of a dialogue instead of each group going off into its own silo and not discussing or dealing with these hard issues with each other?

Randy: Correct. And the standard coping mechanism in previous generations has been, and I'll use Vine Deloria as an example, to get the credentials, get your theology degree and get your position at Harvard, and then you're safe to express some of these ideas. But for the undergraduate, for the student getting a Masters degree, student working on a PhD, they don't have that safe space.

Carolyn: And you shouldn't have to be a Vine DeLoria in order for you to have confidence in your own spiritual beliefs and the ability to express them to others and to make decisions based on them.

Randy: That is correct. But unfortunately, the reality of the world we live in is it's hard. And again, as you were saying, it's economically dangerous and professionally potentially disastrous to be too assertive under current conditions. So what we have to do is talk about how to change those conditions, how to change the power structure, and that's the debate this whole country is having.

Carolyn: Well, that's a lot to think about.

Randy: So I hope this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots and Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, we encourage you to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, our animate kin, and perhaps even that of our ancestors and others who have walked on. Allow yourself to touch their presence. Capture that moment and hold onto it.

Carolyn: And write to Randy. Let him know about your experience, if you wish. Or with any questions or suggestions you have for these shows, he can be reached at his email, [randykritkausky@hushmail.com](mailto:randykritkausky@hushmail.com) or through his website, which is [www.randykritkausky.com](http://www.randykritkausky.com)

Randy: Until our next show, Migwetch - thank you - and goodbye.

Carolyn: Migwetch.

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