

**Can Indigenous Knowledge Keepers Also Be Gate Keepers?**  
*“Indigenous Perspectives” - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net*  
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*Open gate<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 co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

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

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<sup>1</sup> “Open gate / Porte ouverte” by salaat. Creative Commons license through Deviant Art, <https://www.deviantart.com/salaat/art/Open-gate-102938159>

And we also acknowledge that this is the unceded land of our other-than-human kin, the winged ones, the rooted ones, the four legged ones, and the mountains and rivers who have been present on Turtle Island and been partners and caretakers for countless millennia. They were here before any of us two-legged arrived - before the Indigenous peoples who came over the Beringian land bridge from Asia about 15,000 years ago, and way before the other two-legged who arrived more recently.

Randy: In this podcast, we're going to examine the implications of Indigenous knowledge keepers, who are viewed as guardians of wisdom and ceremony, also becoming gatekeepers who invite non-Indigenous people in.

Carolyn: So some of the background is that Indigenous peoples of North America have struggled to preserve their cultures, persisting in the face of multiple attempts at erasure of them over five centuries. People in the mainstream have always been profoundly aware of the dilemmas that Indigenous peoples have faced, but now some of the tide is turning in a fascinating new way, and Randy's going to give us a story to start us off.

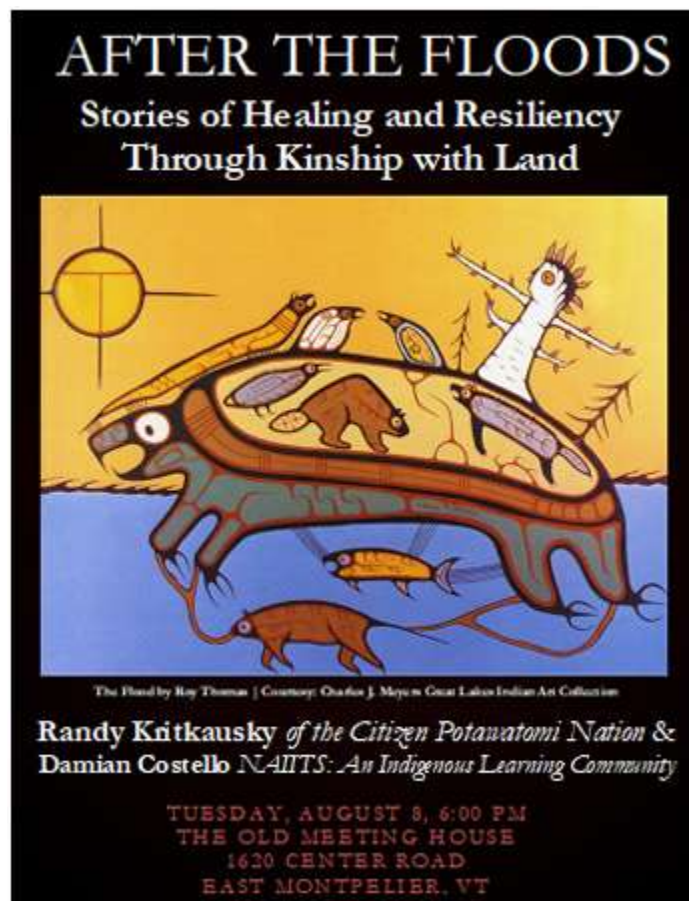
Randy: Yes. So instead of trying to erase us or forcibly assimilate us, many in the mainstream are now knocking on our doors seeking comfort and even an invitation to enter. This was brought home to me in the last week when I was having a discussion with a Vermont state official who told me that he was really quite traumatized by the second year now of flooding, in fact, on the anniversary of last year's New York Times front page flooding stories about Vermont. And he was so upset that he couldn't get to sleep; his wife and his child were, he used the word, suffering from post traumatic stress from the previous flood. And what did he do? He picked up and began reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*. And it calmed him down. And he explained how incredibly important and incredibly soothing this was. I was just absolutely shocked.

So as we have succeeded in reviving our cultures and to some degree are recreating them, we have sometimes turned inward. I'm talking about Indigenous people here; I'm speaking in my Indigenous voice. And we're becoming sometimes very highly sensitive, occasionally and not infrequently overly and unnecessarily resistant to attempts by those in the mainstream, such as the colleague I was discussing from the state of Vermont, who show increasing signs of wishing to study, observe, and - here's the key - even to participate in what Indigenous cultures seem to offer. So I think it's time for us to consider - we, Indigenous people - how we might become

gatekeepers and allow safe passage through rigid boundaries of belonging to the Indigenous world.

Carolyn: Well, this is certainly a compelling image, but can you give us any specifics about how Indigenous people can make these choices about whom to let in and how?

Randy: So I'm going to back up and explain what I said about the state official with whom I was talking. A year ago, you and I and some colleagues here in Vermont did a program in Montpelier - which was underwater, our state capitol - called "After the Floods." And it was an audience full of people from many different religious traditions. And we talked about our Native American re-creation or creation story, the Turtle Island story, and it absolutely fascinated the audience. It gave them a sense of hope and a sense of, other people have done this before.



So again, what we were dealing with at that event, and what we've been dealing with consequently and subsequently, is a significant portion of the population not just dabbling in Indigenous thinking as something exotic that they're occasionally interested in. They're intuitively understanding that they desperately need a

radically different perspective on and approach to how we engage and dominate nature.

Carolyn: It just struck me that this is an important dimension of the appeal of the "After the Floods" program we did in Montpelier. Because you started that all off with a really nice rendition of one of the versions of the Turtle Island creation story, a traditional Anishinaabe story widely used in many tribes. And a key thing about that is it's all a benevolent view of the natural world and the animals working together with the humans. And this is different from an Old Testament idea of the Fall and the split between people and the natural world. So it is a profoundly different vision at its core and it's a more comforting relationship with nature perhaps.

Randy: So when we talk about the mainstream, we need to be cautious here. And I think you had an interesting comment when we were explaining what we wanted to do in this show. So why don't you -

Carolyn: Yes. When we're talking about mainstream it's easy to pose this interested mainstream in the U.S. and Canada interested in Indigenous cultures and ideas. But mainstream is not monolithic. There's definitely undertone and pushback against Indigenous and other minority groups having a valid part to play in American society - I can speak for the U.S. - from those fearing that their positions of privilege will be lost. We're seeing this in many ways. There is pushback. So there is a - we're engaged in a struggle in various dimensions over people's basic views of nature, views of the natural world and views of people who are different from them.

Randy: So I think what we're looking at again in the context of this program is the boundary of mainstream society and Indigenous society and the fact that both sides recognize that there's mobility across that boundary, but we just don't have the vocabulary yet - neither Indigenous people nor mainstream people - to talk about an intelligent and non-threatening way how to cross that cultural boundary. Because what we're really talking about here is a cultural boundary issue. And it's akin to what democracies all across North America and Europe are dealing with, with huge numbers of immigrants coming in, which is people want to join another society. What are the rules of joining? And it's often discussed in terms of the legal requirements for becoming an immigrant, but there are also unwritten social norms about joining a society. Those are not discussed. And I think in many ways those are the most sensitive issues.

Carolyn: Yes. Those are the stumbling blocks for whoever is established in a territory or a belief system, or both, coping with newcomers when the newcomers unwittingly transgress against the expected patterns of behavior and respect.

Randy: So to become a U.S. citizen or to become a Canadian citizen, you take - in Canada, in Québec province, you take a language exam. *[In the U.S.]* you have to learn certain facts about American history and the constitution. But we don't have that kind of process for people joining an Indigenous spiritual community or religious community. It's just utterly confusing.

Carolyn: Or to live on a reservation. I know non-Indigenous people do move into and take residence in reservations; my understanding is a lot of this is sort of fraught and a lot of the identities are sort of up for grabs.

Randy: So what we're talking about here, although we've been using the word boundary, is not so much a boundary as it is what is known as liminal space. And let me just take a moment to explain what that is. But the term liminal means it's the intersection of two different spheres that would generally be considered to be distinct.

But instead of it being a clear boundary where like *[an]* international boundary, you cross over in a matter of a foot, you're in an entirely new system. Liminal space is the overlap. An example would be where a forest meets a meadow. That's basically where we live. We say we live in a forest, but in fact we live in meadowlands and forest land and where they intersect.

The most famous example of this is the seashore where with every wave that comes in, and the tide that comes in, the boundary between the water and the land changes. What's remarkable about these liminal overlapping spaces is that they are biodiverse. That's where turtles lay their eggs. So the hatchlings can have air when they're eggs, but when they come out, they can quickly get back to the aquatic environment. And these biodiverse realms, these ambiguous zones, are a perfect metaphor for where Indigenous people and mainstream people are culturally finding themselves now. There's overlap, there's no clear boundary, and the question is, where am I at a certain moment in time in these two spheres?

Carolyn: So you're saying that it's very rich, it's also shifting. And my guess is that these liminal spaces in ecology are also places where predators are going to go

looking for food. So there's a whole lot of backing and forthing going on. So this is - it's challenging and it's demanding, but it's also very, very rich.

Randy: So that is precisely what we see in our front yard when we see the deer browsing by the side of our garden. And then if we make a door opening sound, the deer steps into the forest and instantly becomes invisible.

Carolyn: Yes, it's incredible. I've tried to track - there'll be a deer just on the edge of the driveway, and then the deer will take two steps into the forest and then it's gone. Even though I try to track the deer with my eye. I literally do not see it once - I don't see the deer once they merge into the forest.

Randy: So we here in our household, in this forest - meadowland liminal space, are benefiting from being in this diverse environment. And we're going to talk about it being culturally diverse in a moment.

The most astounding example I can give is several years ago when I tried to build a sculpture in our front yard on a sand mound based on this wonderful exhibit we had gone to at the Montréal Botanical Garden where they made sculptures out of planting little flowers and making them spell out words or making them into faces or even the forms of animals.

Carolyn: Just to back up, Randy was so entranced with this mosaic sculpture exhibit in Montréal, which was just unbelievable, that he wanted to recreate one. So he moved a lot of sand, he built a mound of sand, and then he had different items he was going to put there and different things he was going to plant. He got it started, was a lot of work, and it was moving along quite - actually quite nicely. The little plants were taking root.

Randy: Yes. And it was beginning to look like this pagan god, I even found some moose antlers -

Carolyn: Oh, that's right - the antlers!

Randy: - I had planted there. Hey, this is going to be really great. And then I went out one morning and there is this giant snapping turtle who had traveled hundreds of feet from the wetlands on our land - that's another liminal boundary between forest meadow and aquatic environment. There was a turtle digging up my mound, getting ready to bury its eggs.

Carolyn: And Randy was outraged. He called me and said, Carolyn, look at this. There's a turtle damaging or destroying or whatever it was my sculpture. He was really upset.



*Snapping Turtle<sup>2</sup>*

Randy: Yes, I can't repeat the words on the air that I used in my reaction to this event, but the point and it relates to our program, is here we were caught in liminal space between wetlands and forests, between human managing, human dominating the environment, and our other-than-human kin taking it back. And it took me quite a while to figure out what the message was that was being offered to me and us in

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<sup>2</sup> Maynard Life Outdoors and Hidden History of Maynard (Massachusetts)

[http://www.maynardlifeoutdoors.com/2016\\_06\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.maynardlifeoutdoors.com/2016_06_01_archive.html) CC BY-NC-ND 3.0

U.S. <https://2.bp.blogspot.com/-lGdrTsC9qVs/V1yLX-c5EeI/AAAAAAAAAChc/-OUaDDsuI0IQias9osS0d5LIepykL8lzACLcB/s1600/SnappingTurtle.JPG>

this space. And then like duh, it hit me. And it was like a biblical lesson of thou shalt have no images other than me. And what essentially I came to realize is that I was trying to create a foreign god, pagan god image, on Indigenous territory. And our other-than-human kin were saying, "No, actually Randy, I thought you were tuning into your own heritage. I'm obliterating it [*your mosaic sculpture*]. I'm turning it back to what it is, which is a natural space."

Carolyn: And the snapping turtle, she dug around a lot. We didn't try to scare her off or anything, it was just Randy - fortunately he was just riveted in dismay. But she dug around and she laid her eggs. And then a few days later, another smaller snapping turtle did the same thing. So they were seeking out - their instinct is to crawl, come out of the pond area, look for higher land, drier land. Sandy soil is ideal because the little turtles can hatch out of their eggs and get to the surface. And it all was really working well for them even though - and then Randy also, he did a barrier for them for the next year. It was a slow process of coming to understand that the turtles needed to have this access and that this did not belong; this human effort deserved to fail.

Randy: So the point and the relevance to this podcast is we were talking about contested territory. We started talking initially about crossing spiritual boundaries, but the lesson of the turtle and the sand pile was, who controls space? And whose spiritual world and realm will dominate in that space? And that has become very, very relevant to us because our recent work here in Vermont is all about creating a spiritual religious coalition which is inclusive in order to address a seriously contested problem over whose views, whose perspective of the natural world is going to be operationalized and implemented in a national forest. Carolyn, why don't you talk about that?

Carolyn: Well, specifically there is a proposal on the table by the U.S. National Forest Service for logging in a 12,000 acre territory that belongs to the Green Mountain National Forest. And logging for timber, including mature trees and old growth stands, a lot of areas that have not been touched by human hands for a long time. And there's been a lot of opposition to it from many groups, many environmental groups, ecological groups in Vermont.

And then one thing that happened is we coalesced, we developed a Vermont Coalition of Indigenous Communities and Allies to spearhead the argument that discussions of forest maintenance, logging or leaving it alone, not be only based on

what the quote-unquote “ecosystem services” of the forest were in terms of what humans can benefit from, but also in terms of the spiritual cultural dimensions of welcoming and encouraging the diversity of all the beings that have lived there for so long.

Randy: So what our colleagues in mainstream conservation organizations, which don't necessarily have religious roots, were saying to us, those of us in the Indigenous world was, “We lack the moral grounding that we would like to have to push back on a bureaucratic process of nature domination. Can you give us a helping hand?”

And we've now expanded our little Coalition of Indigenous Communities and Allies to include public officials and conservation organizations who want to work with us. So what we're finding, again - this is the point of this broadcast - is one of the implications of taking down these rigid boundaries is that we can create alliances based on deep moral convictions that resonate with the public. So this is not some ethereal discussion about theology or religion or spirituality. It has enormously important implications for acting in the real world.

Carolyn: And this is really important because we're looking at a lot of ecological - thriving - survival - decisions in the next couple of years. And Native communities have a weak hand against large corporations, against organizations like the Forest Service and all the weight of the extractive industries, especially factoring in the poverty in many Native communities, the appeal of material improvements that can be put as an inducement to Indigenous peoples with land, who control land, to sell off parts of it for mining.

And so people who want to protect the land urgently need allies in the mainstream in terms of numbers, in terms of finances, in terms of networks of advocacy. And a way to make these bridges is to show that the Indigenous communities have this - can take the lead on this spiritual moral connecting with all our kin reasoning that goes very deep, much deeper than calculating who makes how much from the board feet of the cut timber.

Randy: Indeed. And what we are discovering and what we're trying to affirm in this podcast is that these alliances between mainstream and Indigenous communities grow deeper and stronger when our allies in the mainstream feel that they can participate freely and meaningfully and deeply in our perspective. It helps them to pull out of the kind of dormant hidden state their own spiritual and moral

grounding which they need to operate within their bureaucratic frames. We'll come back to that in a moment.

Carolyn: Stay tuned.

## **Segment Two**

Randy: Welcome back. In this segment we're going to continue the thread of thought we began in the initial introduction. And what we're going to look at more in depth is how Indigenous people and mainstream people can move beyond the kind of ad hoc alliance we were discussing here in Vermont and start a kind of deeper cultural sharing that really results in a renaissance of thinking in mainstream society. Not just about how we interact with nature, but how we interact with one another.

Carolyn: So basically you're talking more about cultures spreading from the Indigenous communities into the mainstream.

Randy: Correct. Reversing a centuries-long trend of erasure. All of a sudden now we're being pushed to the forefront and as I said, people are knocking on the door saying, how far into this can we come? So let me just begin with a couple of quick anecdotes about colleagues and friends we have who've already crossed that boundary *[and]* are in the kind of liminal space that we were discussing. In the first segment *[anecdote]*, we have one friend who participates in a very famous Native American ritual of the Sun Dance, and has for decades, as a Fire Keeper. And it's a position that one would not conceivably imagine a non-Indigenous person being invited to participate in. But because he was there year after year, he became actually the person who knew more about how to do that than the Indigenous people who were attending. And an elder actually stepped forward and asked him to become the guide on this particular process.

So here's a person who was sort of caught in liminal space between being a mainstream person and not quite really Indigenous person because he's not participating in the deeper spiritual aspects of the Sun Dance itself. But nevertheless, he's occupying that neither in nor outside space. We have other friends who are of religious background who move back and forth between these two spaces and find themselves comfortably invited at one moment and other times feeling that there is some ambivalence about their coming in too deeply with their non-Indigenous views.

Carolyn: Well, I think one of the things that's going on is a lot of the Indigenous ceremonies are being re-created. For example, we've had the fortune to participate in two different Potawatomi naming ceremonies. Each ceremony was very moving. Each ceremony had a different elder conducting it. Each ceremony followed Potawatomi - at least the Citizen Potawatomi, they've - they had a time of dormancy. So the present day people have worked to create a durable new version of the Naming Ceremony and encourage people to pass it on. So this is again, an example of liminal space. It's rich, but it's also perplexing and demanding because there are mixed signals and messages coming in. All these different influences.

Randy: Yes, as I said, we don't have on either side of this boundary line, liminal space, we don't have vocabulary to even begin talking about it. So the question is, where do we get guidance? And one of the places you and I have found guidance living here in the forest meadowland liminal space is from Mother Earth herself. And whenever we have perplexed, mixed, confused feelings, Mother Nature steps forward. Just very recently during a kind of physical struggle with an ailment and let's say a spiritual struggle with where this train of thought we're discussing today is leading me, I was feeling left by my other than human kin. And at night when I was getting ready to go to sleep, suddenly Koo-koo-o-koo, Owl, who had not been around for some time, reappeared with chorus of other owls, the message was, we are still here; Coy-Wolves, the nature, is still here, and nature is our ultimate teacher.

Our elders are teachers on ceremonial tribal specific activities, but in terms of how to engage the greater world and the universe, it's Mother Nature herself. So one of the alliances, one of the bridges that we need to cultivate, is our ability to listen to and get guidance, not from other humans, but from nature, which goes back to the flood program we did. Just don't build back; look at what the river's telling you.

So the question is what mechanisms do humans have for including people outside of their community? And in fact, they're numerous. Most of the religious groups in the United States, all of the dominant religions, have methods, very specific, clearly defined processes for joining the community.

Carolyn: You're talking about conversion.

Randy: Exactly. Exactly. And the statistics from Pew<sup>3</sup> and others about the number of Jews and Muslims in the United States who are born into the faith as opposed to converting are absolutely astounding. Very significant numbers of people in these religious communities joined, they are admitted in and they become full members.

What's ironic is that Indigenous people really have not had a conscious effort and process to allow people who want to join to come in. Now, if we -

Carolyn: Isn't that because part of it is that Indigenous communities, it's a total way of living based on your connection with the land. And many of those things have been disrupted. It's not like a belief system that's abstracted from where you are.

Randy: That's a small part of it because in most cases, we're not talking about people living on a reservation, being surrounded on a daily basis by other Indigenous people. We're talking about the 70% of Americans who are off-rez like me -

Carolyn: -70% of Native Americans -

Randy: - yes, Native Americans - and then mainstream people who have only glancing encounters.

But I want to correct the impression that I gave [*that*] we haven't had such mechanisms. The fact is we have, during the colonial period, there were huge numbers of "mourning wars" where Indigenous people would raid white settler communities and abduct people and bring them to their Indigenous communities and adopt them, make them full fledged members. And astoundingly, if you read these accounts, many of those people who were abducted were very happy to stay there. And when they had a chance to go back home to the white settlements, didn't. Another example is the famous work of Black Elk as described in his - one of the books about him - *The Sacred Pipe*, where he talks about what he considers to be his most important ceremonial process, which is making relatives. In other words, taking non-tribal members and making them tribal members.

So we do have some precedents in Indigenous communities for providing crossing through that liminal space across the boundary and becoming a full-fledged member

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<sup>3</sup> Pew Research Center's studies in 2018 found that 25% of Muslims in the United States had converted to Islam. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2018/01/26/the-share-of-americans-who-leave-islam-is-offset-by-those-who-become-muslim/> A Pew Research Center study of US religious landscapes, done in 2014, found that 17% of U.S. Jews were converts, - <https://jweekly.com/2015/05/15/1-in-6-american-jews-are-converts-and-9-other-findings-in-pew-study/>

of the Indigenous community, which isn't what we're talking about on this show, but it is relevant because it shows that it is possible in the world of Indigenous peoples to provide for crossing boundaries. So what we're advocating in this show is not a radical departure from what we think is out there. It's a forgetting and ignoring of what capacity and mechanisms we already have.

Carolyn: Thank you. Everybody, stay tuned for Segment Three.

### **Segment Three**

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives. And we're picking up the idea of connecting with the natural world and the barriers - and trying to break through the barriers between Indigenous and non-Indigenous views of the natural world. And Randy, I want to pick it up because you were giving your story about a recent owl conversation you had when you were feeling really down, and I thought you left out a really important point, which was [*when*] you went out on the porch, you were feeling in not a good space. And you gave your own version of the Barred Owl call, the Koo-koo-o-koo. Your version is a nice effort, but it's definitely not the real thing.

You gave your call once, there was no reply. Then you gave it again, there was no reply. Then you gave it the third time and several owls replied. And it was clear to me that these owls knew you weren't an owl, but they were still giving you a response. And I found that incredibly moving. Because I interpret it as, they know someone's out there trying to connect with us and we will reach out to that being. So to me, that was a really important part of the interaction there.

Randy: So you're giving the perfect example of what we're talking about. You're the non-Indigenous person in the relationship and you're reminding me and our listeners, our readers of the transcript, that sometimes we need to step back and try to ask, "So what was the message that the owl is giving?" How do we mainstream and non-Indigenous people learn to become quote "more Indigenous" unquote by learning to listen? And I think you have something.

Carolyn: Yes. I've got an excerpt from the book *Starlight* by the Canadian Ojibwe author Richard Wagamese. And the basic frame of the story is an Indigenous man living in Canada on land has been raised by a stepfather who taught him - Starlight - the ways of living and connecting with the world of nature, the forest and mountains and streams where they live. So he is sheltering and teaching a woman and her daughter who have fled really hard times. So here's a quotation -

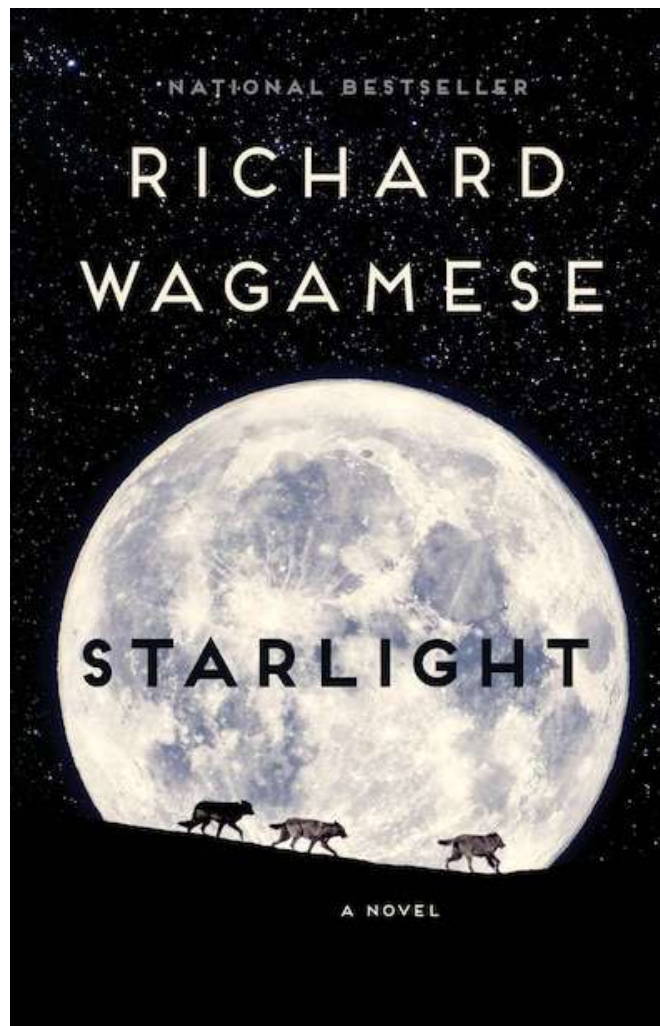
Randy: Just before you read it. You've left something important out for the reader, which is that the stepfather is not Indigenous.

Carolyn: No, he just knows the land.

Randy: Right. The stepson is Indigenous, but he hasn't been given instructions by Indigenous people about how to listen. So this work of fiction is about a non-Indigenous person teaching an Indigenous person how to listen like an Indigenous person. Is that what's going on?

Carolyn: Well, I guess.

And in this excerpt *Starlight*, the Indigenous man who has discovered this connection, is teaching two non-Indigenous people. So starting on page 178:



*Starlight* by Richard Wagamese <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wagamese: *Starlight, An Unfinished Novel*. McClelland and Stewart, a division of Penguin Random House Canada Limited. Copyright 2018 by the Estate of Richard Allen Wagamese Gilkinson.

“He [*Starlight*] taught them [*the woman and her daughter*] to listen. They walked out in silence, leaving the horses behind at the camp. They walked across the valley and up into the heart of the backcountry, and she could feel the nature of things begin to reshape, rearrange, and reorder themselves so that by the time he stopped, the land had become a pelagic role of greens and grays, browns, purples, black, and undulant earthen shades she found no name for in her head. Everything was the same in all directions. Yet was different everywhere she looked. She felt lost in its immensity, shrunken, diminished, pitiable almost and she found she could barely breathe. He led them halfway up a slope that looked out over the territory they’d just walked through. She could see the glint of the stream wending its way toward their camp, a shim of tinsel beyond the thick clasp of trees. He sat and the three of them eased down beside him.

“You paid attention coming through?” he asked.

“Yes,” Emmy said.

“So you know what's out there.”

“Some. There's more I likely missed.”

He nodded. “You can't see everythin'. Every sense we got is limited somehow. It's only when we use them together that we come to recognize things. Can you see right across the valley?”

“I can.”

He looked at the others<sup>5</sup> and they nodded.

“Good. Take a good hard, deep look. Take your time. Sweep your gaze across it. Try and know it with your eyes. When you feel like you have the whole thing recognized, close your eyes. Breathe. Long an' deep an' slow. Imagine there's a point of light between your eyebrows. Focus on that. Push your attention toward it. When you feel like you're there in that space, start listenin' to the sounds around you. Don't force it. Stay in that small space and just listen.”

The three of them closed their eyes.

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<sup>5</sup> In the text, Wagamese has their names, “Roth and Winnie”. Carolyn omitted these by accident while reading aloud.

“When you figure you can hear everything around you, push your hearing outward. Try’n listen further out.”

Emmy closed her eyes. She felt him move into a more comfortable position beside her and she did the same. She heard him breathing, long, slow draughts, and she copied his rhythm. It took some effort but she found the small space on her forehead he’d described. She willed her concentration to that spot. She breathed deeper. Then she began to listen.

She heard the breeze rustle the leaves of the aspens and poplars. She heard it nudge its way through the grass and ferns. She felt herself pushing harder through that spot in her forehead and she heard bees and the tiny claws of chipmunks on bark and a stone loosened by the passing of some other larger creature roll briskly downhill and stop abruptly against another. The knock of it audible as a finger snap in an empty room. She heard birds hopping from branch to branch. She heard all of that. Then she willed her hearing outward beyond the downed log twenty feet in front of her. Then forward, deeper into the trees. There were even more sounds and she nudged him with her elbow.

“Okay,” she said.

“How did it feel?”

“It felt like the inside of my head got bigger.”

“It did. It got bigger because you let yourself hear deeper. We think we hear what’s going on around us, but we’re only hearing a little of it. When you push out your listenin’ you start to really hear things.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You don’t have to do nothin’ to listen. Sounds gets to us anyhow. You can listen to someone while you’re doing dishes, say. Or you can listen to the radio while you’re doin’ a chore. But when you push your listenin’ out, you can hear everything. I kinda figure it’s on accounta of ya open yerself to it all.”

“What happens then?”

He smiled. “You get connected to what you hear. You become a part of it. It becomes a part of you.”

“Is that why you say you're never lonesome out here?”

“Ya can't be when yer a parta of somethin’.”

“We get to be a part of all this?” Winnie [the little girl] asked.

“When ya really learn to listen. When you can push your listenin’ out and really hear where ya are, yeah,” Starlight said.

“Then let's push out some more.”<sup>6</sup>

End of this excerpt.

Randy: I think this is one of the most beautiful passages I've ever read, written by a Native American explaining in simple terms what it feels like to connect on a deeply spiritual and not just material level with the world around us that we rarely take time to engage with. And I think it offers enormous hope and opportunity for building bridges that cross through that liminal space and invite mainstream people to join in the perspective and sensibilities of Indigenous people.

Carolyn: Okay. Everybody, we'll take another break and be back with the final segment.

#### **Segment Four**

Carolyn: Welcome back to the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives, and we're picking up the discussion of the excerpt from *Starlight*, the book by Richard Wagamese that I read last segment. And the whole idea is that Starlight, the Indigenous man, is showing the non-Indigenous people how to carefully, deeply, listen and to connect with the beings of the natural world in their place. That's becoming naturalized to place. And the tremendous reward for the effort is the feeling of connection and feeling not alone. So the question is, isn't there more to the whole complex of what Indigenous identity and culture has to offer?

Randy: Yes. And that's where today's podcast theme is challenging and controversial in the Indigenous world. Because what we're saying might be misunderstood as, “Oh, let's just open the floodgates to non-Indigenous people and let them come in and all be Indigenous.” It's not that simple. You used the term “**naturalized** to place.” I first ran across that term in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she says that anyone can become with effort and time

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<sup>6</sup> Wagamese, *Starlight*, p. 178-180.

naturalized to place. In other words, sink roots. She uses various biological invasive species adaptations as the metaphor for explaining this.

But then she says that being *Indigenous* to place is a birthright. And it took me a long time to understand what I think she's saying. What I think she's saying is that there are other aspects of being Indigenous which go beyond merely connecting to the natural world, which pertain to the world of ancestors. And this is still a bit of a mystery to me. It's still perplexing and it's still wondrous. And it basically comes down to this: non-Indigenous people might develop intimate relationships with the deer, the owls. We know people who do this. But are they going to develop intimate connections to my ancestors or to the ancestors of other tribal communities?

Carolyn: No.

Randy: Exactly. And that's where the alarm bells go off. Because Indigenous people resent and are threatened quite rightfully by mainstream people who simply want to pick up a ceremony that is a gateway - to use this metaphor we're using today of opening the gates - a gateway to their ancestors. Because they know that non-Indigenous people aren't going to be able to make that kind of connection. It's hard to explain it if you haven't experienced it. But I have experienced it and I know that it is highly, highly specific to an individual line of descent.

Carolyn: Yes, Randy, you've had - I know Randy's had experiences with his ancestors that are very real, very compelling and something I can testify to, but they were not my experiences.

Randy: Correct.

Carolyn: I saw the outward manifestations, but I was not part of the experience.

Randy: And no matter how hard I try or how hard someone from the mainstream tries, they're not going to develop that kind of intimate connection to my ancestors. So what we're talking about in this podcast is how Indigenous gatekeepers can allow non-Indigenous people to come partway into the Indigenous world of sharing our views and connectivity to nature. But we also have to draw boundaries saying, but don't trespass on our ancestral territory. Don't try to use our ceremonies as a leverage, a tool or a mechanism to access that. You can't.

Now, that is the gatekeeping function. A gate allows some people to come through under certain conditions and keeps other people out. And that's what we're talking

about here; it's very nuanced. And as I said, we don't really yet have the vocabulary or the mechanisms to describe this,

Carolyn: So, but I think what you're - as I understand what you're saying - is it's the importance of the Indigenous people having some process, some way of welcoming the truly interested others - non-Indigenous people - to participate in some aspects like the nature connection, like some ceremonies of respect, but not to try to become purely Indigenous, because you're saying that's something that is an ancestral connection that is either there or it's not.

Randy: Yes, I am still trying to figure it out. I sometimes use the term with you of an inherited ancestral memory or memory embedded in DNA. And I keep using, you know, the Monarch butterfly example of Monarchs leaving California and coming home five generations later. And a lot of us who are Indigenous are doing that. We're coming home after five generations of being disconnected. Well, mainstream people aren't going to have that kind of - excuse the expression, but - ancestral memory or DNA memory - they're not going to get there. So we have to be careful about creating expectations mainstream people can't meet.

And we also have to be very, very careful about not telling them that they can do that or pretend to do that because that's cultural appropriation. And it's harmful to Indigenous cultures when non-Indigenous people pretend to do that or worse, pretend to teach other people in the mainstream how to do that. It's a dilution and a perversion of what Indigenous culture is about.

So in this podcast, we're just beginning to explain the beginnings of how we might build these bridges through liminal space and take down some of the boundaries. On the other hand, maintain those boundaries that are necessary to protect aspects of Indigenous cultures that are fragile and unique to each tribe, because each tribe has its own ancestral legacy.

Carolyn: Very, very nicely put. And the only thing I want to add is that many Indigenous spokespeople today are - like you yourself, Randy - have mixed ancestry, but you have enough Indigenous ancestry that in you, not in everyone, but in you, these connections are able to start coming through. So I think that's an important point to make. We're not talking about a blood quantum requirement. It's a connection and a feeling that either people have or they don't.

Randy: In my book, I describe how an elder in my tribe has guided me home to reconnecting with my heritage. So I think I understand, in a way that many people don't understand, what it means to be an outsider to Indigenous culture and then to begin to enter it. And I think I am just beginning to understand the limitations as well as the potential of that journey. And I'm sure we'll be investigating this on many future podcasts.

I hope that this broadcast has given you something to think about, and an opportunity to reconnect with your own roots in Mother Earth. Before your busy day distracts you and sweeps you away, we encourage you to reach out and feel the presence of living flora, fauna or animate kin, and perhaps even that of your ancestors who have walked on. Allow yourself to touch their presence. Capture that moment and hold onto it.

Carolyn: And if you wish, write to Randy, let him know about your experiences or with any questions or suggestions you have for these shows. Randy can be reached at his email, which is [randykritkausky@hushmail.com](mailto:randykritkausky@hushmail.com).

Migwetch.

Randy: Migwetch.

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