



A REFLECTION ON PEACE, ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S WORLD-MAKING

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The roots of war and violence go deep, into earth herself. As an indigenous woman, I wish to simply state that until we make peace with earth, there will be no peace in the human community. Please allow me to explain.

As native peoples of the hemisphere, we have historically been the victims of violence and continue to be plagued by injustice and inequality. In our history we have had to go to war to protect our lands, as peace would simply mean our enslavement and extermination. And every course of action we sought — whether accommodation or resistance— had only one outcome, the theft of our lands. All this is well known.

What is not clearly understood is that all this was ostensibly done for our good, and the good of humanity. The underlying justification for the theft of our lands has always been that we were not making proper use of them, and that these lands could be put to better use. The wilderness that we cultivated and maintained was simply going to waste. It was selfish of us to padlock our vast forests and plains and deprive millions of hungry and millions of landless from their enjoyment. It was argued that stealing our land would provide for the common good of the world and all would become better off as a result. And of course during this process, we would be lifted from our less than civilized state and would eventually recognize the goodwill that had been lavished upon us.

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Today, most of our lands and most of the wilderness are gone and yet there are more poor people than ever, more misery, more landlessness. And today there are those who still argue that tearing down the remaining stretches of lands benefits humanity, or in today's jargon, "creates jobs".

As we look upon the increasingly despoiled planet, we can only ask the question: "Has our land indeed been put to better use?" Could there have been another way?

Not only could there have been another way, there *must* be another way. Destroying natural resources, destroying the planet's ability to provide sustenance, only aggravates the world's misery and poverty, the injustice and discontent. This is because, like everything, ultimately, the wealth of the world comes from the earth. We may fashion this wealth and remake it to perform marvelous things, but the barren planet does not create jobs, and wars for food and water could become a terrible epitaph for the human species. As we destroy the ability of the earth to sustain us, we lose our ability to address the chronic needs of the poor, the hungry, and the landless.

The current economic order based upon an ideology that does not recognize the wealth of the natural order that cannot place value on anything unless it is solid in the marketplace, that enshrines greed and avarice as the engines of development is destroying the real wealth of the planet. While it pretends to create jobs and products, in reality, it is similar to burning furniture to provide heat: every bit of flame, like many of our jobs, is actually impoverishing humanity, not enriching it. For the longest time, only Indians and other natural peoples cried out against the war against nature. Today, we are allied with many environmental groups. Yet, still, the understanding of how we must fundamentally change the way we think about the planet is only now beginning to become a subject of discussion.

There are many definitions of sustainable development, and the word has become overused and almost meaningless. Moreover, it rings hollow unless the efforts of humankind are centered toward rebuilding the planet.

Indigenous peoples have long understood sustainable development. The wilderness that we inhabit is wilderness only to those who cannot grasp the complexity of our agricultural systems, which regenerate and produce in ways that work in accordance to natural laws —not against them. For this reason, our agriculture has existed with only little impact on the earth, for hundreds, if not thousands, of years all of the while producing for the needs of our people.

Among the technologies we use to produce in harmony with this earth are products such as corn developed and cultivated in this hemisphere. Corn is truly a product of our technology: it cannot live without people, just like our people could not live without corn. For this reason it was central in our spiritual and cultural existence. It was also developed in infinite varieties that were each adapted to the particular environment where it would have to exist, so that they

would best fit in with people with the minimum impact on the environment, and people's lives close to their corn, their way of life.

Compare this to the new, genetically engineered varieties of corn, which require the habitat to be similarly engineered, and thus require tremendous inputs of pesticides, chemicals fertilizers, and other agents that so change the environment and are so mechanized that people no longer live on the land and are forced to cities. If one measures the yields, yes, it produces more corn per acre than Indian corn, but it is not sustainable and the chemicals eventually poison the land.

The true cost of working against nature is never factored into this equation, only how much money a bushel of corn brings. But the true environmental and social costs of this process far exceed the benefits for humanity, and in the end impoverish the planet further.

Yet, so often the world believes that some technological marvel will prevail and make things right. There is little consideration that maybe it is these technical marvels that are part of the problem. Development must take the path not of mitigating its impact on the environment but of enhancing the natural environment.

Instead of environmental impact statements for development, we need environmental enhancement statements. Rather than destroying the means of sustenance that this planet brings us, we need to increase it; the poverty and hunger of much of the world demand it.

We need a peace with earth. We must have it. We cannot pretend to have long term sustainable development without it, for the very foundation of this development *is* a peace with earth. Our philosophy of development must be guided by the natural laws that have guided all living things, not some arbitrary, man-made illusion.

We indigenous people believe that development with a different focus would enrich the planet and, in so doing, alleviate some of the discontent and anger that surfaces as war and violence.

Yet for so long, indigenous peoples from across the globe have been unable to speak, to contribute to the solutions of the problems facing humanity. Many of us are ancient peoples; indeed many of our cultures are your elders, and yet you never turn to us for our opinion, even when the issues affect us directly.

As our cultures disappear with the wilderness that sustained us, we are a vast library, a repository of knowledge, intelligence, and an understanding of the earth that is being lost to the world. But we continue to be victimized and ignored. If we seek to embark on the elusive search for peace, we must first unlock the silence of our peoples, and other peoples like us. Ultimate peace lies in all of us working together, to make things better for future generations. Unlock the silence, let us speak to the world.

