



Title: Power and Place Equal Personality

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Power and Place Equal Personality

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Western science resolves itself into certain "laws" which describe the natural world. These laws are makeshift descriptions of the manner in which physical reality appears to operate, but they are often regarded by Western scientists as inviolable. Phenomena that fall outside the prescribed patterns of behavior are said to be "anomalies," which can be disregarded when explaining how the physical universe functions. Eventually, of course, the Western scientist must deal with the so-called anomalies. These phenomena form an increasingly large body of knowledge and facts which cannot be explained using the acceptable paradigm into which the rest of scientific knowledge is deposited.

American Indian knowledge of the world does not suffer this structural handicap. While tribal peoples did not have a detailed conception of the whole planet in the sense that Western scientists presently do, they did have a very accurate knowledge of the lands they inhabited and the plants, animals, and other life forms that shared their environment. It is also becoming increasingly clear that they had a fairly comprehensive knowledge of the heavens, with their own set of constellations and stories.

Emphasis on the Particular

The boundaries of American Indian knowledge were those of respect, not of orthodoxy. For instance, certain stories about the stars could not be told when the constellations in question were overhead. Some other kinds of stories involving animals, plants, and spirits could only be told at a particular time of year or in a specific place. There were no anomalies because Indians retained the



ability to wonder at the behavior of nature, and they remembered even the most abstruse things with the hope that one day their relationship to existing knowledge would become clear.

The key to understanding Indian knowledge of the world is to remember that the emphasis was on the particular, not on general laws and explanations of how things worked. Consequently, when we hear the elders tell about things, we must remember that they are basically reporting on their experiences or on the experiences of their elders. Indians as a rule do not try to bring existing bits of knowledge into categories and rubrics which can be used to do further investigation and experimentation with nature. The Indian system requires a prodigious memory and a willingness to remain humble in spite of one's great knowledge.

Keeping the particular in mind as the ultimate reference point of Indian

knowledge, we can pass into a discussion of some of the principles of the Indian forms of knowledge. Here power and place are dominant concepts—*power* being the living energy that inhabits and/or composes the universe, and *place* being the relationship of things to each other. It is much easier, in discussing Indian principles, to put these basic ideas into a simple equation: Power and place produce personality. This equation simply means that the universe is alive, but it also contains within it the very important suggestion that the universe is personal and, therefore, must be approached in a personal manner. And this insight holds true because Indians are interested in the particular, which of necessity must be personal and incapable of expansion and projection to hold true universally.

The personal nature of the universe demands that each and every entity in it seek and sustain personal relationships. Here, the Indian theory of relativity is much more comprehensive than the corresponding theory articulated by Einstein and his fellow scientists. The broader Indian idea of relationship, in a universe very personal and particular, suggests that all relationships have a moral content. For that reason, Indian knowledge of the universe was never separated from other sacred knowledge about ultimate spiritual realities.

The spiritual aspect of knowledge about the world taught the people that relationships must not be left incomplete. There are many stories about how the world came to be, and the common themes running through them are the completion of relationships and the determination of how this world should

function. Such tales seem far removed from the considerations of science, particularly as Indian students are taught science in today's universities. However, when the tribal concepts are translated into scientific language, they make a good deal of sense. Completing the relationship focuses the individual's attention on the results of his or her actions. Thus, the Indian people were concerned about the products of what they did, and they sought to anticipate and consider all possible effects of their actions.

And on Appropriateness

The corresponding question faced by American Indians when contemplating action is whether or not the proposed action is appropriate. Appropriate includes the moral dimension of respect for the part of nature that will be used or affected in our action. Thus, killing an animal or catching a fish involved paying respect to the species and the individual animal or fish which such action had disturbed. Harvesting plants also involved paying respect to the plants. These actions were necessary because of the recognition that the universe was built upon constructive and cooperative relationships that had to be maintained.

We can view this different perspective in yet another way that will speak more directly to Indian students studying Western science. Very early, at least beginning with Greek speculation on the nature of the world, the Western peoples seem to have accepted a strange binary system of reasoning in which things are compared primarily according to their size.

American Indians seem to have considered this kind of thinking at one time because there are tribal stories which compare humans to various animals. The stories always emphasized that while humans cannot see as well as the hawk, they can see; they are not as strong as the bear, but they are strong; not as fast as the deer, but they can run; and so forth. However, when these comparisons are carefully analyzed, one finds that both physical and psychological characteristics are described.

When using plants as both medicines and foods, Indians were very careful to

use the plant appropriately. By maintaining the integrity of the plant within the relationship, Indians discovered many important facts about the natural world which non-Indians only came upon later. The Senecas, for example, knew that corn, squash, and beans were the three Sisters of the Earth, and because they had a place in the world and were compatible spirits, the Indians always planted them together. Only recently have non-Indians, after decades of laboratory research, discovered that the three plants make a natural nitrogen cycle that keeps land fertile and productive.

Plants, because they have their own life cycle, taught Indians about time. George Will and George Hyde, in their book *Corn Among the Indians of the Upper Missouri* point out that it was the practice of the agricultural tribes to plant their corn, hoe it a few times, and then depart for the western mountains on their summer buffalo hunt. When a certain plant in the west began to change its color, the hunters knew it was time to return home to harvest their corn. This knowledge about corn and the manner in which its growth cycle correlated with that of plants of the mountains some 500 miles away was very sophisticated and involved the idea of time as something more complex than mere chronology.

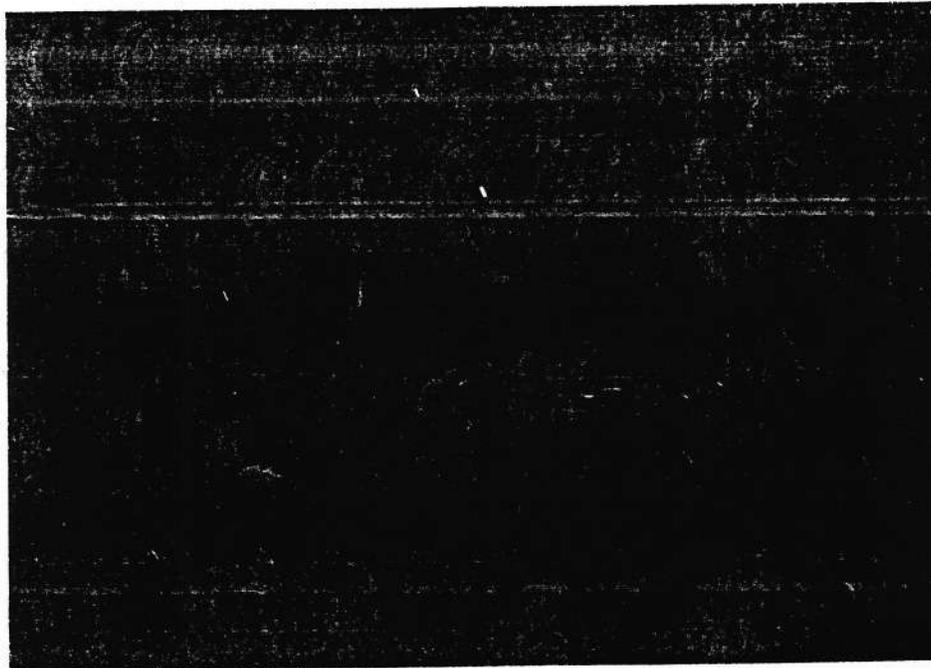
Star Knowledge

Much Indian knowledge involved the technique of reproducing the cosmos in miniature and invoking spiritual change which would be followed by physical change. Hardly a tribe exists which did not construct its dwellings after some particular model of the universe. The principle involved was that whatever is above must be reflected below. This principle enabled the people to correlate their actions with the larger movements of the universe.

Star knowledge was among the most secretive and sophisticated of all the information that Indians possessed. Today, archeoastronomers are finding all kinds of correlations between Indian practices and modern astronomical knowledge. Very complex star maps painted on buckskin hides or chiseled on canyon walls give evidence that Indians were astute observers of the heavens, and their ceremonial activities were often based on the movement of the heavens. A good deal of Indian star knowledge continues to exist, but religious prohibitions and restrictions continue to limit the propagation of this information.

The Principle of Correlation

Star knowledge gives us an additional principle of Indian information gather-



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ing. That principle is correspondence, or correlation. Being interested in the psychological behavior of things in the world and attributing personality to all things, Indians began to observe and remember how and when things happened together. The result was that they made connections between things that had no sequential relationships. There was, consequently, no firm belief in cause and effect, which plays such an important role in Western science and thinking. But Indians were well aware that when a certain sequence of things began, certain other elements or events would also occur.

A kind of predictability was present in Indian knowledge of the natural world. Many ceremonies that are used to find things, heal, or predict the future rely upon this kind of correlation between and among entities in the world. The so-called medicine powers and medicine bundles represented this kind of correlative understanding of how different things were related to each other. Correlation is responsible, for example, for designating the bear as a medicine animal, owls as forecasting death or illness, and snakes as anticipating thunderstorms.

This kind of knowledge is both tribal- and environmental-specific. In diagnosing illness, for example, medicine men might search for the cause of sickness by questioning their patients on a variety of apparently unrelated experiences. They

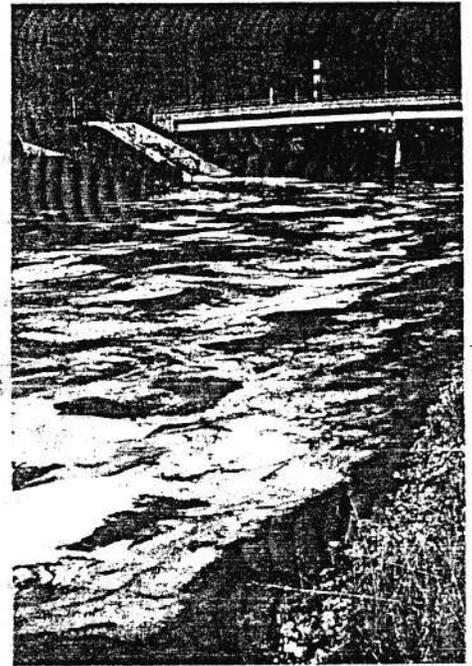
would be searching for the linkages which experience had taught them existed in these situations. Here again, there was considerable emphasis on the heavens. One need only examine the admonitions of different tribes with respect to shooting stars, different configurations of the moon, eclipses, and unusual cloud formations to understand how correlational knowledge provided unique ways of adjusting to the natural world.

A More Realistic Knowledge

The acknowledgment that power and place produce personality means not only that the natural world is personal but that its perceived relationships are always ethical. For that reason, Indian accumulation of information is directly opposed to the Western scientific method of investigation, because it is primarily observation. Indians look for messages in nature, but they do not force nature to perform functions which it does not naturally do.

The Indian method of observation produces a more realistic knowledge in the sense that, given the anticipated customary course of events, the Indian knowledge can predict what will probably occur. Western science seeks to harness nature to perform certain tasks. But there are limited resources in the natural world, and artificial and wasteful use depletes the resources more rapidly than would otherwise occur naturally.

Indian students can expect to have a certain amount of difficulty in adjusting to the scientific way of doing things. They will most certainly miss the Indian

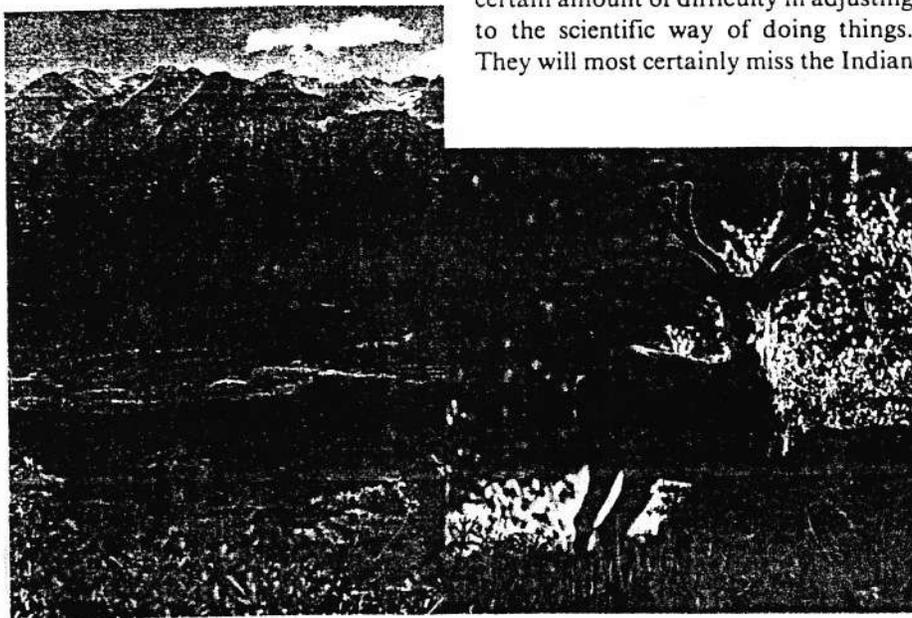


Western technology often produces by-products which are more life-threatening than the inventions it creates which seek to save lives. We do have many manufactured conveniences, but we take with them innumerable hazardous waste dumps, acid rain, and a deteriorating environment.

concern with ethical questions and the sense of being personally involved in the functioning of the natural world. But they can overcome this feeling and bring to science a great variety of insights about the world derived from their own tribal backgrounds and traditions.

By adopting the old Indian concern with the products of actions, students can get a much better perspective on what they are doing and how best to accomplish their goals. By maintaining a continuing respect for the beliefs and practices of their tribes, students can begin to see the world through the eyes of their ancestors and translate the best knowledge of the world into acceptable modern scientific terminology.

Most important, however, are the contributions being made by American Indian scientists. With their expertise, we can better frame our own ethical and religious concerns and make more constructive choices in the use of existing Indian physical and human resources. It is this linkage between science and the community that we must nurture and encourage.



...and place being the relationship of things to each other.

Photos by Carlye Calvin