

The Spiritual Legacy of the Aboriginal Peoples

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The spiritual legacy of the Aboriginal peoples came in the way and in the form of many gifts. In order for a gift to become a legacy, it must be used, perfected through practice and repetition. The numerous gifts all deserve attention, but here we can only mention a few.

The gift of an intense prayer life

As we recollect our own childhood with our relatives, we were immersed in one prayer form after another throughout the daily routines of life. The getting up to the sound of the morning thanksgiving prayer was as familiar as the crackling of wood fire, the offering of fragrant tobacco, and the burning of sweet grass, at once fragrant and calming. The smell of sage, pungent and strong; it is time to get up.

- The words of prayer: I am grateful to see the morning sun once more whose strength and warmth covers the earth.
- For the hunter: I am grateful I will see the way to find the brother animal that will give up its life to offer us sustenance.
- For the mother and the father of the home, the prayer for a good day for everyone, while taking care of the children and the need to keep them safe.
- The need to travel to special places and gather with other people to send an appeal to God who looks after us to keep us together as a people.

- Every name is spoken, none are forgotten. Names are added all the time, never removed just moved according to birth, life, and passing into the spirit world cycles.
- The sweat lodge where the intensity of prayers call the spirit world and the God mystery with all defences down. Our bodies helpless in the heat of steamed water on red hot rocks.
- The prayer for peace in the midst of trials of every kind that never stop. It is as constant as the drawing in and out of the breath.

The gift of many languages to describe the places where we lived and still live

Each in its own makeup crosses the divide from thoughts into the passion of meaning within the words. Each word reflects the rock, the pebble, the roaring sea, the tranquil lake. Each Aboriginal word that has gone into the air and never seemed to return is now raining down and we catch the words. The words are not ashes in our mouth. We work this language course, this language class, listen to the Elders speaking in tongues to accommodate our sluggish minds.

Listen here. Our people found God on this mountain, here on this plateau. They gathered to mention His name in holy song. There they danced the supplication rite to imprint their minds not of the pain, but to remind them of the pain of forgetting their God.

The special gift of great compassion that can be found only among Aboriginal peoples. Sometimes we can find it sharing and caring. A process that is both holy and binary.

We have suffered greatly, too often for centuries, all for nothing in the end. Now no matter where we turn, we find brothers and sisters of that historical suffering who were strangers yesterday. Out of those chance meetings, while on our different paths, but coming together through common interests, we begin to see how divide and conquer led to our oppression. And we remember and our great compassion sizzles up and embraces the other soul brother or sister. For that shining moment, we stand in solidarity. We all become poets. So few words in any language can express what we feel for one another. And yes, the oppression taught us how to pay attention to who we are, how we exist. Our complacency has left forever. We take nothing for granted and now build mounds of resiliency. "The early encounter between your traditions and the European way of life was an event of such significance and change that it profoundly influenced your collective life even today. That encounter was a harsh and painful reality for you. The cultural oppression, the injustices, the destruction of your life, your traditional societies must be acknowledged." —Pope John Paul II, Native Gathering in Phoenix, Arizona, 1987.

The gift of sight into the spiritual realm and the gift of words to describe what has been seen.

Albert Lightning, the Cree Elder from the Erminskin Band in Alberta, comes to mind about his travelling episodes into the spirit world. He had no problem describing those journeys and experiences. We have the problem of understanding and discerning what he has interpreted for us. He is now in the spirit world giving us more directions. One has to be brave to speak like this. The repetition of his words has to be done. So we can become comfortable with the spirit world as Albert Lightning knew it. The words and the images are at last coming back to us as we become facile with our language once more. We no longer fear the spirit world, though it pays to be always cautious. We cannot explain all the mysteries. We all have experienced them through the truly gifted.

The gift of a belief system in the spirit world with the ritual acknowledgement of ancestral past

The Sun Dance has its moments of primal pain and grief. This is an affirmation ceremony that one partakes in full body and spirit. The preparation is in the mind and in the body. To experience the pain is to move closer to the thought that we must never forget our Creator. As one moves past the pain, the honouring, and the paying respect, the higher acknowledgement of the Great Spirit rises to greet each movement through the ritual. It is a prayer form and it is re-created with great preparation through the cleansing of the body and the anticipation of visions worth each participant. This ritual was outlawed, but survived because enough Plains people remembered what this meant in their relationship to the Creator and in all their relationships.

The gift of mythologies that encourage human understanding of the useful ways of knowing and how to be comfortable within the meaning of the environment.

Often our world experience is beyond words. We had to find a verbal way beyond the sights we experienced. We had to find the way to ... [missing text].