

ON INDIAN ELDERS AND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE ELDERS

Much confusion surrounds the term "Elder" since our traditional teachings and spiritual ways are now being revived, renewed, rediscovered and re-established. This is due primarily to over 500 years of exposure to a foreign and alien culture which persists in imposing its culture, its religion, its values and its laws on us.

All of our Elders are loved, respected, revered and listened to, but there are distinctions that should be clarified.

I fall into the category of "Elder" or an older Indian person, with another distinction which needs clarification. I also consider myself as a traditionalist, or to be more accurate, a "transitional traditionalist". This means one who was born of Indian parents and Indian ancestors, born on an Indian reserve, but who was raised in a white culture as a white person, and who is now returning to the ways of our ancestors and to the traditional teachings.

These are the four distinctions among types of Elders:

1. *Traditional Medicine or spiritual Elder* - prior to contact.
2. *Transitional Traditional Medicine Elder* - since contact, who were forced to lay aside their spiritual ways, ceremonies, teachings and understandings during a period of five or four or three or two hundred years and who are now returning to those spiritual ways and the traditional teachings.
3. *Transitional Traditional Layperson* - one like myself, who is returning to the spiritual ways of our ancestors, but who needs time, understanding, acceptance, teachers, self-respect, self-knowledge, perseverance, dedication, clarity of vision and unconditional love on his or her journey back to the sacred ways of our ancestors, and possibly a journey to becoming a Traditional Medicine Elder.
4. *Elders, or older Indian people, or Indian senior citizens* - who do not practice, understand, follow or accept the sacred ways, ceremonies, understandings and teaching of our ancestors, but who, as I have

already mentioned, are very much loved, respected, revered and listened to.

The Medicine Elders prior to contact were much respected and sought after for their knowledge, understanding, teaching and wisdom, which had been accumulated through life experience, through ceremonies, through self-awareness and through forgiveness.

To my understanding the Medicine Elders prior to contact could achieve their Medicine Elder status through different routes. One could be born to it and the family and/or community knew this at the time of birth; or at birth someone, such as an Elder or an immediate family member, would see something different or special in the newborn and begin almost immediately to prepare the child for his or her life's work. As an example of both of the above situations, the Kogi people of South America begin the preparation for the "training" of a Medicine Elder at birth by placing the newborn and his or her mother in a specially-prepared cave where the child will remain for the first nine years of his or her life receiving teaching from other Medicine Elders. Upon completion of the initial nine years the choice of whether to remain for another nine years is left with the child. Either way, the individual is considered to be a full-fledged Medicine Elder and a teacher of the way.

In my "research" of our traditional spiritual ways over the past 25 years, nowhere have I found teachings of our ways that restrict or otherwise show disrespect to the Life-Givers, our grandmothers, mothers, sisters, wives, daughters or granddaughters, with regard to their being "allowed" to conduct a ceremony or to participate in ceremonies, or to hold certain positions, or to otherwise be put into a lower position to men simply because they are women. We should all keep in mind that the sacred pipe was brought to our people by White Buffalo Calf Woman, a woman, and that she killed the first man that she came across. We refer to earth as our Mother and to the sweatlodge as the womb of our Sacred Earth Mother. We also refer to Grandmother Moon. This is as the Creator intended it to be - that Medicine Elders should be of both genders. There is no imposing by males of laws, rules, regulations, criteria, etc. which serves to restrict or otherwise limit the powers of Life-Givers.

For one to be considered a Traditional Medicine Elder, he or she must know the language, the culture, the traditional teachings and the sacred ceremonies. He or she walks in balance and is in harmony with all things. He or she is free of all baggage that small and weak human

beings are prone to carry during their brief earthwalk - things like ego, fear, violence, negativity, anger, hatred, greed, guilt, resentment, bitterness, jealousy, anger, inner turmoil, intolerance and disrespect.

They also must be free of all of the whiteman's sickness such as drugs, alcohol, and all other addictions i.e. spousal abuse, disrespect of women - the Life Givers and disrespect for oneself.

A Traditional Medicine Elder is challenged to assume responsibility, practice humility and display the power of giving, and then center his or her life around a core of spirituality. Today's Medicine Elders are challenged to live like a Traditional Medicine Elder on a moment by moment basis.

In this time of "new-ageism" and a renewed interest in exotic Hollywood red Indians we are presented with a modern problem that serves to prostitute and profane our ancient traditional ways and teachings. This is the making of instant Indian medicine men/women.

In the days prior to contact our people respected our traditional spiritual teachings and our spiritual ceremonies and would never think of taking "short cuts" in order to become instant Medicine Elders. We just had too much self-respect and respect for our traditional teachings, unlike what we have today.

To our people being a Medicine Elder required a lifetime of commitment and the required training meant anywhere from nine to twenty years for the chosen individual. It meant long intense and rigorous training, teaching and sacrifice.

As for non-Indians today conducting any of our ceremonies, where the public is to participate, that cannot and should not happen. In addition to the required time and intense training our people lived a life of spirituality on a moment by moment basis. It has been this way for thousands of generations for our people, except for that brief period of time since contact when we were forced to set aside our traditional spiritual teachings and ceremonies.

Those traditional teachings are in our genes, our blood and so we can now return to them quickly and easily which is what is happening. But this is not so for our non-Indian brothers, our Creator-given ways is not in their genes, in their blood, nor are they passed on from generation to

generation, therefore they cannot possess the depth of understanding, love and respect for our traditional spiritual teachings.

But the fact that all of these sacred understandings, Traditional teachings, etc are in our genes, blood, etc does not negate the fact that we as Indian people still require training from other blood Indian Medicine Elders.

For any non-Indian who is attempting to learn the ways of our people and has participated in any of our ceremonies and feels that he is walking on the red road way of our people, if he has acquired that depth of love, understanding and respect for our spiritual ways that will be one of the very first understandings that will appear to him. It will take on the form of...I will not prostitute nor profane these sacred traditional spiritual teachings and ceremonies.

When one of our non-Indian brothers presumes to take on the sacred role of conductor of our sacred ceremonies, after participating in a few of those ceremonies, it demonstrates such disrespect and lack of understanding of our traditional teachings. It is akin to my having participated in or witnessing a funeral, wedding or any other church service and then having the audacity to think that with this one church experience I can now be a priest, minister, preacher, etc. and that I am now able to conduct a religious church service.

I write this so as to share what little knowledge that I have acquired in my 25 years of walking my spiritual red road and in the hopes of helping others like myself who are groping around for knowledge and understanding. Maybe in this way others may avoid some of the pitfalls that I experienced, some of the confusion and dilemmas that I experienced, some of the misunderstanding that I experienced and some of the resentment that I experienced. I also write this so that there will be better understanding, respect and acceptance of our ways by our people and all other people.

All My Relations

Dan Ennis