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A NATIVE WAY OF GIVING

A little book
on faith &
money



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Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
1 ■ Cycles of Life	4
2 ■ Gratitude	12
3 ■ Generosity	22
4 ■ Abundance	32
5 ■ Abundance in Action	42
6 ■ The Generosity of the Elders	53
7 ■ Trauma and Gratitude	62
<i>Epilogue</i>	75

Introduction

This book took shape in conversations at our kitchen tables over the five years we've known each other. Forrest had left his Roman Catholic roots to find a new home at St. Elizabeth's Episcopal Church in Whiterocks, Utah, where he didn't have to sacrifice his values to be part of a faith community. Michael had been called to serve as a priest in that congregation and was learning to minister in a Native (Indigenous) community. We quickly recognized each other as kindred spirits, though our life's journeys were very different.

Forrest grew up as a member of the Ute Indian Tribe on the Uintah and Ouray Ute Reservation in northeast Utah, and he crossed many boundaries in graduating from two of Utah's most prestigious institutions: Wasatch Academy and Westminster College. After serving for years as a tribal executive back home and in Massachusetts, he was Utah's Director of Indian Affairs under four governors. He proved to be a uniquely gifted bridge person, advocating for the needs of Native people while helping them adapt to the harsh realities of the dominant culture. His spirituality incorporates Christian worship and theology alongside Native traditions like the sweat lodge and Sun Dance.

A Native Way of Giving

After being born and raised in Iowa, Michael's life opened up in his twenties as he explored the West, discovering a love of hiking, gardening, and teaching. After a long absence from church, he and his wife were drawn back into a small-town congregation dedicated to worship and serving the community. Ordained ministry found him serving as a pastor to West African Episcopalians (many of them refugees) and working with a group of colleagues to establish a regional youth program focused on community service. A surprising act of the Holy Spirit led to him being called to serve on the Ute reservation at St. Elizabeth's, where he has taken special delight in helping Native leaders build up their arts program for children and youth.

Despite the differences in our backgrounds we find many strong connections, and our conversations have developed into wide-ranging explorations of our faith, our families, and the perilous state of the world. We begin this writing with urgent questions in our hearts. In the face of environmental devastation, are mainstream Americans willing to adapt and make meaningful changes? Is spiritual and economic transformation possible in today's polarized environment? With the global pandemic as a catalyst, could this be the time when we respond in meaningful ways to the crises we're facing?

If so, traditional Native values and practices offer new ways of seeing our world and living in it together. Despite a grim history of violence, seizure of lands, and cultural destruction, Native communities have gifts to offer that are desperately needed. The life-giving cycle of gratitude, generosity, and abundance stands in stark

Introduction

contrast to the arrogance, greed, and destruction that are so widespread in modern-day life. Our experiences of crossing cultural boundaries and adapting to new challenges give us hope that change is possible, but we know it won't be easy. Still, the Spirit is crying out to us to find a better way forward for all of our people.

We're deeply grateful for the opportunity to share these thoughts and stories, especially to the bishop of Utah, The Right Rev. Scott Hayashi, and to our editor at Church Publishing, Nancy Bryan. We're thankful for our families, for the people who helped to shape our paths, and for the friends who have encouraged us along the way. Most of all we give thanks to the Creator, Jesus, and the Spirit, for their presence with us and the hope they give us for the future.

1 ■ Cycles of Life

We're living in a world that is out of balance. Some people have plenty, but most have too little. Those with the greatest power and influence seem to have lost touch with the Creator and lost respect for creation. For us to survive, a time of cleansing and renewal is urgently needed.

The challenge of transforming a world that has lost its balance begins with trying to understand what a more harmonious state would be like. White folks like me (Michael) can learn from the wisdom of Native people, who for thousands of years have been observing and celebrating the cycles of nature. The contrasts of day and night and the changing of the seasons are two obvious examples. Here are some others: the respiration of plants and animals exchanges oxygen and carbon dioxide, keeping the atmosphere in balance. Leaves drop from trees in autumn to enrich the soil that will feed their roots the next spring. Rain falls and is carried by rivers back to the ocean, from which new rain clouds are formed by the sun.

Native people have related observations like these to their own life cycles. For example, the burial and decomposition of their bodies nourishes the soil, from which plants grow to be gathered by people or eaten by game animals. The cycle of the seasons provides metaphors for the eras of their lives: springtime for children, summer for young adults, autumn for older adults, and

winter for elders. Passages through these stages are celebrated in coming-of-age ceremonies, vision quests, marriages, and burial rites. The harmony and balance of creation are readily observed in their home environments and serve as models for their lives.

The Medicine Wheel

Medicine Wheels are found throughout the western hemisphere, from the arctic to Antarctica. Much of the knowledge and understanding of these mysterious, circular rock formations has been lost. There are a variety of interpretations for what they represent, from ancient maps that identify the locations of events and phenomena to sacred philosophical constructs. To some tribes, they are considered sacred or of a powerful spiritual essence or purpose, showing the cycles of life, seasons of the year, and the relationship of an individual to the family/tribe and eventually the world/universe.

While there are many tribal variations, rocks are typically arranged on the ground in a circle or circles within circles, and sometimes they are separated into four quadrants. These can correspond to the four directions or the seasons, and they are often associated with the sacred colors of yellow, white, black, and red. Usually the circle in the center represents the Creator at the heart of all life. Medicine Wheels have a variety of purposes: for ceremonies, healing, marking burial sites, and communicating tribal boundaries or seasonal movements. “Medicine” refers to the spiritual power that is represented and invoked.

Despite the importance of the Medicine Wheel, I (Forrest) was not aware of it until my adult years. It has been said that the Utes

A Native Way of Giving

were once quite familiar with the Medicine Wheel, but over time this knowledge has been lost. In any case, one summer when I was preparing for the challenges of the Sun Dance, as I lay down to rest, I was swept away by a vision. I found myself flying rapidly through the air, following the contours of hilly grasslands. Soon I was above a road winding through the high grasslands, with a huge mountain surrounded by other mountains looming in the background. The road straightened as I entered a flat valley and the pace quickened, becoming faster and faster. Just as I reached the base of the mountains, I woke up and lay in bed confused. Was I losing my mind? Would there be a message for me in the Sun Dance?

Nothing in the ceremony reminded me of the vision, but afterwards the Spirit told me to visit my oldest uncle, my grandmother's brother. I told him the story and he sat quietly, thinking for a while. "I know that vision," he said at last. "I've had that dream many times. The mountain represents your life. You're young, just starting to go up. Me, I'm older, most of the way up the mountain, but whenever I turn around to look back, I wake up."

Then the Spirit sent me to another uncle, and he had a different interpretation. "You're going up north to the grandfather country for some purpose," he said. "No, Uncle, I don't have any plans to travel." "Nephew, you'll be going there." Sure enough, several months later my job as tribal Education Director included an invitation to a Native Healing and Renewal Conference at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. The focus of the teachings was the Medicine Wheel.

It is well known that Native people have been deeply traumatized by the horrors of our history with whites: deaths from violence and disease, the loss of our ancestral lands, our children being taken away to boarding schools, impoverishment, and incarceration. Widespread impacts of these traumas include the destruction of family ties, alcohol and drug abuse, loss of languages and ceremonies, chronic illness, and suicide. We have been a people out of balance for many generations, struggling to maintain our lives day by day. The purpose of the conference in Lethbridge was to help us use the ancient wisdom of the Medicine Wheel to return to harmony and balance. After what my uncles had told me, it was clear that I should pay attention.

The Deadly Cycle

The cyclical nature of life represented in the concentric circles of the Medicine Wheel illustrates how different Native ways are from the dominant culture, which is much more linear. In the dominant world, life is viewed as a journey from A to B, with the goal justifying the means. This creates a human-centered (God-absent) model, in which people and resources are used to meet objectives like increasing profits. Faith becomes a Sunday morning activity rather than a guiding force and principle that is practiced daily. When individual “wants” take priority over community needs, it’s a sign of arrogance, and Jesus’s command to “love our neighbors as ourselves” is forgotten.¹

1. Matt. 22:39.

Due to human limitations and failings (sin), arrogance opens the doors to greed. From March through December 2020, when COVID-19 brought a catastrophic economic time for so many Americans, our country “gained” fifty-six new billionaires, bringing the total to 659.² Although the pandemic was raging, the wealth of this tiny group increased by over \$1 trillion, a heartbreaking example of greed. The dominant culture’s goal orientation (on profits) and its emphasis on ends over means are ideally suited to generating wealth. Because shareholders and company executives are richly rewarded for their activities, greed becomes a driving force for decision-making.

When profits are the primary goal and “natural” resources are merely components of production, environmental destruction becomes inevitable. With managers under pressure to produce more and minimal regulatory oversight, there is no incentive to be concerned about impacts on the land or restoring degraded sites. The destruction accumulates over time, affecting local communities (often Natives or other people of color) and creating scarcity. For example, the diminishment and pollution of groundwater is a widespread problem, with major impacts on drinking water and food supplies for ordinary people. Multiplied by our many industries, these impacts amount to an assault on God’s creation.

Worst of all, because the dominant culture’s economic model generates so much wealth, it becomes comfortable for many leaders

2. Institute for Policy Studies, reported on NBC news online, December 30, 2020.

to overlook the human and environmental costs. A deadly cycle has been created in which arrogance leads to greed that causes destruction, and as profitability reinforces arrogance, the cycle becomes self-sustaining. The impact of this model on global climate change makes it truly deadly for all of us.

Dear Reader: All of us in contemporary American society participate in what we've described as a "deadly cycle." Seemingly ordinary actions such as driving a gas-powered vehicle have major impacts on our world. Middle-class people working to support their families (like the resource managers we mentioned) can get caught up in this troubling cycle. An important first step in making systemic changes is to recognize the workings of the system and the parts we play in it. Only then can we begin to appreciate a different way of seeing and doing things.

The Life-Giving Cycle

In Native traditions, every day is a gift from the Creator, and the natural response is gratitude. The blessings of each day are not meant to give us whatever we want, but to meet our deepest needs. This perspective is based on familiar, respectful relationships with the Creator and close connections with creation and our communities. When Native people speak of "all my relations", the term refers to the entire living earth, not just blood relatives. The Medicine Wheel pictures these relationships with concentric circles, all interrelated and mutually dependent, sharing joys and pain alike. A Native elder may mourn over a toxic waste dump as if a family

A Native Way of Giving

member were critically ill, just as their heart will rejoice when a flock of birds flies north in the springtime.

If every day is a precious gift, then it is natural to give back generously to the Creator, the community, and all of creation. There are many Native people who don't hesitate to care for one another, and, for many, the only purpose for wealth is to give it away. This reinforces a sense of abundance in which hunts and harvests are celebrated and feasts are shared with others on every sort of occasion. Deep, caring relationships with creation make this bounty sustainable, because people take only what they need to live (versus whatever they think they want). A life-giving cycle is created as gratitude leads to generosity, promoting a sense of abundance that generates more gratitude, making it self-perpetuating. The Medicine Wheel can make this cycle visible and invite us to live our lives in balance and harmony.

Many of us see this Native Way as a model for deepening spirituality, reversing damage to creation and building stronger communities. We think it could transform any community, though embracing it raises major challenges: Native people (and others) will need to find healing to grow beyond trauma. People from the dominant culture will need to let go of control and think more of "we" than "me." Deeper connections with the Creator, creation, and community will be essential for both groups, and we will all need to be gracious to one another. The underlying foundation is nothing new. As Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’³

As we’ll describe in more detail, this Native Way is profoundly different from the dominant culture. It’s not an alternative approach to achieving prosperity, but a fundamental reorientation of relationships. To get a glimpse of how it works, you might try putting a note on your bathroom mirror or above your coffeepot: “What am I thankful for today?” Would thinking about that several times a day make a difference in how you see the world?

3. Matt. 22:37–39.