

Taking the Pulse of the Universe

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There are, at least, four basic characteristics of the universe that are the data source for North American cultures in maintaining a balance between the physical sense of the universe and the intuitive non-dimensional spiritual sense of the universe. This balance is delicate and can become distorted by too many words, too many hypothetical constructs, too many models, and too many non-related experiences. That is the senses become contaminated and can no longer read the data that are available.

In the oral tradition of the tribes and groups of the U.S., the first characteristic is water. In the tribes and groups from Alaska to Texas, from the Atlantic to the Pacific there are probably more words describing water in all its forms and behaviors than any other trait of the universe.

Here in the Northwest water is the sacrament in the tribal salute of thanks to the universe in the ceremonial and ritual life of when the salmon return, of when the berries ripen and of when the roots can be dug. The salute is given in recognition of this liquid as the life blood of their universe and, in recognition, that humans life and die in the health and wealth of the universal blood called water.

The second characteristic is the one most non-tribal people know about. This is the concept of mother earth. In many oral traditions the relationship of Father Sky and Mother Earth is the foundation of their creation stories, with Mother Earth being the womb for all creation

on earth. This also is the foundation for the tribal beliefs of life interrelationships.

Light is the third characteristic. There are a lot of data written about tribal behavior in trying to keep track of light and what might be called space and time. The efforts to develop an understanding of the movement of the sun and its relationships to life on Mother Earth is difficult for tribal outsiders to understand.

Many tribes use a form of oral tradition – story telling – to express their findings, beliefs, and expectations that tries the patience of non-tribal listeners. Non-tribal listeners want a straight line of “you know” communication, but the oral tradition follows a combination of what might be called myth – exact observation, past knowledge, analogy and intuition – but never first person “I”. This form of “knowing” is both human inter-relational and human generational. In other words a person may be the depository for the knowledge, but not the origination of the knowledge.

The last characteristics of the universe that tribes of the U.S. consider is that change is the norm. The universe is changing its form, humans are changing, and the interaction between other life forms and the universe is changing. But in the attempts to gather data about the universe in other ways – to balance the spiritual and the dimensional – must be kept.