

When one is in dire need, the brain digs into abysmal resources. I needed clarification about the true motives behind every new word, expression, manner, or emotion I was stumbling upon. And it struck me back then, that behind every tangible one prowls a hidden microscopic one, undetectable to the naked eye in a never-ending loop of cause and effect, an endless chain of action/reaction. I was trapped, unable to connect frankly with my surroundings.

Confusion and frustration followed as I was forced to copy and mimic actual trends and patterns, trying to adapt them to my old self. I set my mind on tracking all the way down to the roots, finding and excavating the reasons behind every behavior I stumbled upon with others, for better or for worse. It was a big ambition.

2. An Unexpected Encounter of the Third Kind

One evening, after a long day at work, I was walking back home, sniffing the fragrant summer breeze trying to shed some calories and bring out more muscle definition. I was looking in the direction of the traffic before crossing the road when my gaze got hooked on a piece of paper pinned to a wooden pole, flapping in the wind. It bore a picture of a colored cross surrounded by a circle with a few feathers attached to it. As I approached under the streetlight, it read:

Native American Meeting and Smudging Ceremony

Next Tuesday, 10am.

15601 W. Sunset Blvd - Pacific Palisades

No dress code – Welcome to All

I had watched Native Americans on the screen, but never in my life had come face to face with one. In books and screenplays they were always depicted as valiant warriors with a great heart, a lot of wisdom, and living close to the earth they called Mother.

This was my lifetime opportunity. I was excited, and thought I would get the Native Americans' esteem with my pumped up muscles and aloof attitude. On that date I had to take a day off from work in order to attend the meeting.

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The hall of the Center was spacious and high, and there was a sign indicating where the gathering was taking place.

As I stepped in, there was silence. People were already sitting in a circle; I could sense from their facial expressions that some were old-timers, others novices. A few minutes later a man and woman walked in from the door; he was tall and slender with tanned skin and the build of a hardworking chap, wearing a brimmed hat from under which long black hair fell down his back. His eyes were gleaming, impenetrable, but his face was placid. The female was very pretty, fit and tall, dressed in a traditional fringe dress with bead and feather detailing.

There were greetings from the audience then both sat down cross-legged at the top of the circle. Silence ensued again for a few seconds as everybody waited for a hint when the man would start talking. He spoke calmly, welcoming us and thanking the Great Spirit for the beautiful day. He then made a sign to his companion, who stood and opened a leather bag from which she took out a bowl, a feather and a collection of colored tissue packs.

She picked a pinch of herbs from each pack, placed them in the handmade bowl and ignited a match to light them. While she was doing this, the man introduced himself as Paco, which meant 'eagle' in his culture, and the woman's name as Meda, the 'prophetess'. The last time they visited this Center, he said, was two years ago when they came to talk about Sundance and Vision Quests. Today the subjects of their visit were the Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions.

Before he started discussing the topics of the evening, he proposed to open the event with a smudging ceremony. There were nods of approbation along with some yeses from the audience. I was totally ignorant and much intrigued by what this smudge ceremony could be, and consequently I felt tense and observed closely.

Paco stood by Meda's side and blew a few times into the bowl to enliven the fire, then took it from her hands and started reciting a prayer while directing the smoke into the four corners of the room with the feather. We could hear him intoning:

"May your hands be cleansed, that they create beautiful things. May your feet be cleansed, that they might take you where you most need to be. May your heart be cleansed, that you might hear its messages clearly. May your throat be cleansed, that you might speak rightly when words are needed. May your eyes be cleansed, that you might see the signs and wonders of the world. May this person and space be washed clean by the smoke of these fragrant plants. And may that same smoke carry our prayers, spiraling, to the heavens."^[3]

When he finished, he turned to his companion and offered her the smoke from which she began making movements similar to freshening up the face and body with her hands. After she'd finished, she took the bowl from him, and he proceeded in the same way. Once he was done, they both turned to the first person on their right. Paco stood there in front of him, eyes closed for a few seconds before reopening them and offering him the smoke. The visitor apparently knew what he was doing as he proceeded so self-assuredly. People would wait until the Native opened his eyes, do the ritual with their hands and the smoke, then give a nod as a sign of completion.

Paco and Meda kept going around until they reached my destination. The Native stood there in front of me, his eyes closed. I could hear his breath amid the silence, while time felt like eternity; it also felt as if all gazes were focused on us. When he opened his eyes, I imitated the ritual in accordance with what I had seen and nodded my head toward the end to signal completion.

Once the circle was complete, Paco and Meda returned to their initial places. She lowered herself to the floor, placing her palms over her knees and sitting cross-legged, while he remained standing and started talking.

“The medicine wheel is a circle with a cross in the middle. It represents the four directions: north, east, south and west. Even though the four directions are opposite to each other, they are always connected by the cross in the middle as well as by the circle connecting the edges of the cross. There is also the space above and below the circle which makes six directions and therefore six dimensions. And finally the center of the circle and the cross which makes the circle seven-dimensioned.

“There are colors in the circle representing the different races of people in the world: yellow for Asia, white for Europe, black for Africa and red for the Americas. In an ideal world all the colors would be able to overlap with each other and mix. Everything in this world is a gift offered to us by Mother Earth and the Great Spirit.

“Besides the colors, the four directions also represent the four elements: fire, air, earth and water, and the four aspects of life: spiritual, mental, physical and emotional. Our health is dependent on the balance of all these elements; therefore, illness is seen as an imbalance in this wheel. In ancient native medicine, the healers helped people find their balance between spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects, hence prompting the patient to take an active role in the healing process, while in modern medicine the patient assumes a passive role and relies on the doctor to treat him. Whereas the traditional Native American medicine approach is holistic and treats the four aspects of the human being, modern doctors are often called physicians because they tackle only the physiological side of a human being.”^[4]

He continued, “When we appreciate the beauty, virtues and generosity of this Earth, we live in harmony and peace, and our righteous wishes shall be answered.”

Sundance, Vision Quests, Holy Mother Earth and the Great Spirit: too many new notions I was coming across for the first time. My mind was racing, trying to digest all

this new information pending on my senses, while my brain struggled to find space to sort them out, make sense and put order to these new interpretations.

Paco closed the seminar with renowned Native American words of wisdom: “Our grandfathers warned us a long time ago that only after the last tree has been cut down, only after the last river has been poisoned and the last fish caught, only then will we realize that money cannot be eaten.” ^[5]

Everybody applauded, then stood up and approached Paco and Meda to converse with them. Meda went to the door and invited us into the hall for refreshments. I waited for the crowd around Paco to subside then got closer to initiate a conversation. As I was approaching him, I could sense his intense gaze, full of intent yet still impenetrable.

I thanked him and told him I was honored to be attending my first Native ceremony. He smiled and replied, “You are always welcome. If you hadn’t come forward, I would have sought you anyway. When I stood, eyes closed, across from you, I could feel strong vibes yet uneven, in disarray. You are too tense and on your guard, as if something is about to happen. Chill out, learn to relax, ninety-nine percent of the time nothing happens. And when it does, who cares? Better deal with it in a cool manner than always be defensive.”

On that day, I left the Center feeling totally exposed, disarmed. My thoughts were racing at the speed of light; I could feel something in my mind was shifting. It also felt like a strange energy was invading me, bursting in my whole body, pointing to another journey, another direction.

3. Old Friend and Foe

Ever since the Native American encounter, my mindscape had been undergoing tectonic changes. I had seen and experienced with my own eyes a different way of interpreting and explaining the world. It dawned on me that tackling the big questions and giving them such succinct and practical representations as Vision Quests, the Circle of Life and the Medicine Wheel made more sense and was far more honest than what I had been previously taught. It felt for the first time there were alternatives to the collection of beliefs I had so vehemently quarreled for and protected, and which caused me and my peers many differences and complications. I was also walking light, with the feeling of never being alone, always in good company, safe and close to the earth.

Paco had mentioned something about the stars, the trees and all nature being witnesses to our thoughts and deeds. I had neglected these true friends and other aspects of my life for too long, and now was the time to elicit their help. The public library was not far from where I lived, on the corner of 6th Street and Santa Monica Blvd, and for a while it became my sanctuary. Each day after work I would skip the evening gym session and hang out on different levels, sometimes on a couch, other times on the floor until the closing hour, searching and considering any thought or idea that would provide me with an answer, an explanation, and guide me through my obligation. I had embarked on a new quest that started with human sciences and popular culture.

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The most obvious section to begin with was religion and philosophy; having bumped into it at school, it was the easiest for me to engage. I was about to reconcile myself

with an old friend and foe: the book from which I had divorced myself a long time ago because of the substance and structure they presented it with. I'd felt the need to take some distance back then, to reflect on the natural order of things rather than getting a diploma for my wall and a title that would land me a boring job based on hierarchical status and remuneration, inevitably leading to the conventional rat race.