

## Primary Elements Of American Indian Spirituality

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*Spirituality – from historical experience and a particular sensibility*  
Very Rev. Manuel Cortes, SM, Superior General of the Society of Mary.  
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*Spirituality= person's relation to the sacred*  
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*Spirituality: a set of principles guidelines and methods by which we live*  
*a life in tune with the sacred*

Now a spirituality can be more general or more specific. Using the tradition I am most familiar with – one can speak of Catholic spirituality. There are various principles and guidelines that are Roman Catholic. Let us remember that the word catholic literally means universal.

One can consider spiritualities within the Catholic tradition, that is to say, more specific spiritualities: for example, you have Jesuits, Franciscans, Marianists, etc.. Each with a distinctive spirituality. The Jesuits see themselves as individuals who share in common having done (and doing) the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. The Franciscans focus on simplicity of lifestyle and poverty in their communities. The Marianists see themselves as developing communities among people and providing hospitality.

It is in this context that we can speak of a general American Indian/ North American indigenous spirituality. Here I want to focus on some general principles of that spirituality.

As in catholic spiritualities, (Jesuit, Franciscan, etc...), there are many specific American Indian spiritualities (Navajo, Sioux, Iroquois, Lummi – I could go on and on). But here I will focus on a few general principles: especially some that may distinguish North American Indigenous spiritualities from other traditions.

Six primary elements in American Indian spirituality (now there will be some overlap between these areas – because, as we know, all things are interconnected):

1. Land
2. relationships with various Living Peoples: four-leggeds, winged, swimming, crawling peoples
  - a. Rocks
  - b. Plants
  - c. Animals
  - d. Star people and Planets
3. Kin/Family – clans
4. Healing
5. Ceremony/Ritual

## 6. Storytelling

Spirits involved in all six elements. Creator/Great Mystery underlies all of this.

*Spirits: "Testimony from tribal people, however, offers a different world, one in which Spirits are not mental images projected outwards but have real power in the physical world as entities in themselves." Jung and the Sioux (164).*

I'll now elaborate a little on each of these elements involved in American Indian spirituality, using some of the literature.

### 1. Land

Land:

*"The inhabitants of this land were not one people. Their customs differed. Their languages differed. Some tilled the earth; others hunted and picked the abundance of the land around them. They lived in different kinds of housing and governed themselves according to differing rules. But they shared in common a belief that the earth is a spiritual presence that must be honored, not mastered." (ix – x) Nerburn*

*"...our ancestors lived in cultures that were emergent from the places where we lived." (10) Red Alert*

*"...planet Earth – a living being known to many indigenous peoples today as Mother Earth ...." (17) Red Alert*

*"... a nature-culture nexus, a symbiotic relationship that recognizes the fundamental connectedness and relatedness of human communities and societies to the natural environment and the other-than-human relatives they interact with daily." (20) Red Alert*

*"Most importantly, their interaction involves what ought to be described as a deep spatial relationship to the land – an interaction embodying a sacred relationship." (29) Red Alert*

*Power plus place equals personality. Deloria.*

Land:

*These sacred landscapes and waterscapes are where Native peoples who practice their traditional religions go to pray, to heal, to commemorate, to memorialize, to honor, to plant, to gather and to give thanks. At mesas and waterfalls, forests and deserts, meadows and marshes, caves and burial grounds, Native traditional peoples seek visions, solace and sanctuary. Harjo p. 28*

*For Native peoples, most sacred places today are still home to powerful spiritual beings who bring the rain, protect the corn, guide the salmon and keep the world in balance. In these ancient cathedrals, Native*

*peoples conduct timeless ceremonies in the way their ancestors did for generations and millennia. Some dance and sing to celebrate or mourn passages of life. Others leave prayer offerings, pay respects and build shrines. These sacred places embody creation figures and culture heroes, and cannot be separated from the well-being of the peoples who share histories with them and believe in them. All these places hold mysteries, secrets and revelations. Some contain messages from ancestors for future generations. Known as rock art, petroglyphs or geoglyphs, these etched, drawn, painted and shaped messages are found in every state of the union and in varying states of disrepair. Oftentimes they exist as part of a broader landscape and provide instruction about what has been done and is to be done in a particular place. Harjo, p. 28*

*Land – “But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be a long time until other men are able to divine and meet its rhythm. Men must be born and reborn to belong., Their bodies must be formed of the dust of their forefathers’ bones.” Chief Luther Standing Bear (in Nerburn, 74).*

*Land/Rocks – “Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished.*

*Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring event connected with the lives of my people. And the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.” Chief Seattle (in Nerburn, 198).*

*Land and other peoples: close of God is Red:*

*“Who will find peace with the lands? The future of humankind lies waiting for those who will come to understand their lives and take up their responsibilities to all living things. Who will listen to the trees, the animals and birds, the voices of the places of the land? As the long-forgotten peoples of the respective continents rise and begin to reclaim their ancient heritage, they will discover the meaning of the lands of their ancestors. That is when the invaders of the North American continent will finally discover that for this land, God is Red.” (296)*

## **2. Relationships with various peoples:**

Rocks

*“an aspect of the Sioux universe that does not appear in the Jungian scheme of things, but which I shall suggest might have been included – seemingly inanimate material objects, which do not exactly reflect human perceptions of time or the physical dimensions of space, but rather a different category of experience.” (92) “These stones were the physical representation of the universe.” (93) Jung and the Sioux*  
*Stones/Ceremony: “In the old traditional way, stones to be used in a sweat lodge ceremony were gathered in a special way.” World. (153) .... “Some stones are given to people in visions and ceremonies.” (157) Relationships:*

*“Indigenous knowledges are not a human construction, but, more importantly, a gift given to us, when we pay attention, by the relatives who surround us.” (76) Red Alert*

*Animals: “The Sioux received new information about the physical world from other creatures in dreams and visions, and also through direct vocal communication.” (129) Jung and the Sioux*

*Animals – “The animals had rights – the right of man’s protection, the right to live, the right to multiply, the right to freedom, and the right to man’s indebtedness – and in recognition of these rights the Lakota never enslaved an animal, and spared all life that was not needed for food and clothing.” Chief Luther Standing Bear (in Nerburn, p. 37).*

*Animals: “Some people have described the role of other creatures as that of intercessor on behalf of the human in both dreams and visions. Some birds and animals may indeed play that role. One thing seems certain: dreams, daytime encounters, and visions all consist of communications from higher powers who already know much about us and who have a specific purpose in revealing themselves to us and, at least for American Indians, appear in the form of birds and animals.” World. (107)*

### **3. Kin/Family**

*Peoplehood: Bob Thomas – a language, a sacred history, place/homeland, ceremonial cycle.*

*Kinship/Family: See C.J. Jung and the Sioux Traditions – Chapter 8*

*“Sioux society offers an excellent example of this multi-generational family concept, for a Sioux child was born into a complex system comprised of personal parents, a kinship family, the extended community, a cultural collective, and the living presence of ancestors, all psychically present in powerful ways.” (139)*

*“Kinship, he (Black Elk) made clear, was designed to reflect the cosmos and the larger unity of the people.” (141)*

*Family: “Sioux society was built upon allocation of duties and responsibilities rather than the recognition of rights.”(146) Jung and the Sioux*

#### **4. Healing**

*Healing: “One of the primary gifts to people in dreams or visions is the power to heal illnesses. It appears that sometimes the medicine man calls on the bird or animal spirit, and they respond by using their medicine knowledge working through the medicine man.” World. (43)*

*Healing: “Most healing powers are given during a dream or vision and are the result of a gift presented to a human by a bird or animal.” World. (44)*

*Healing: “... Navajo healing powers are immensely complicated. They use a two-step process of diagnosis and healing that is as sophisticated as Western practices, but often more thorough. According to Leland Wyman “The function of the diagnostician is to discover not only the cause of illness but also to recommend the treatment to be used... and to recommend a particular practitioner who can apply that treatment” ... There are three kinds of diagnosticians used by the Navajo: 1.) the Hand Trembler; 2.) the Star Gazer; and 3.) the Listener.” World. (49)*

*Healing: “From various accounts, it appears that some medicine men could diagnose illnesses and heal patients in a purely intuitive fashion, singing no songs, barely touching the patient, and effect a cure.” World. (50-51)*

*Healing: “bear medicine ... usually had very strong power to deal with illnesses.” World. (56)*

*Healing: Southwestern Healing Practices. “Charles Lummis summarized the standard practice in many tribes of the medicine man using a sucking device such as a hollow bone, a feather, or a wand. Often, the medicine man himself would suck the bad spirits out of the patient’s body. This practice was rather widespread among many tribes and exemplified the Indian belief that illnesses were caused by tiny entities invading the invalid’s body.” World. (61)*

*Healing: “... much illness is a result of spiritual conflict rather than germs and viruses.” World. (63)*

#### **5. Ceremony/Ritual**

Ritual/Ceremony:

*“Many avenues of spiritual expression seem to have been shared by tribes. Many tribes practiced the sun dance, the spirit lodge, the vision quest, the sweat lodge, the use of sacred stones, and other rituals, with slight variations in format, that originated in the past.” World (xxiii)*

*Ritual/Ceremony:*

*“Deeper knowledge than what had been originally allotted to human beings was possible only if the spirits through the mediation of other creatures, shared some of their knowledge with us. Thus there came about a ritual in which humans set aside time from their routine lives and opened themselves up to the possibility of establishing relationships with spirits and other creatures. This ritual was the vision quest, a time and means for seeking communications from nonhuman sources.” World (16-17) ... The real criterion that defined the valid experience of the spirits from simple hallucinations was the requirement that any powers or insights received by a person in a vision or dream had to be demonstrated before the whole community sometime in the future.” (19)*

*Ceremony: “There are certain ceremonies that become important in the continuing communications between these people [medicine men] and the spirits. Two ceremonies in particular stand out, if only because they are found in such widespread places. In the Plains, there is the yuwipi, or the binding with ropes, in which a medicine man is tied up firmly with strong ropes with thongs around each finger and toe so that he is almost completely immobile. The Algonquin peoples have the spirit lodge, in which a temporary shelter is made from poles and skins and the spirits come and converse with him.” World. (83) ... In each ceremony, there seems to be the opportunity to receive messages from the spirits on current problems, to receive predictions about the future, and to heal illnesses.” (84)*

*Ceremony: “The practitioner does a ceremony and rain falls—at least within a short time afterward.” World. (137)*

*Ceremony: “...space changes to accommodate the spiritual energy that can be mustered in a ceremony.” World. (204)*

*Ceremony: “It is my hope that Indians will read these stories and know that many powers are available through the ceremonies and rituals of the tribes and that the powers can be applied to our daily lives to enrich our well-being and enhance our understanding of life in the physical world.” World. (214)*

## 6. Storytelling

*Storytelling cuts across the other five primary elements. It is a way that the tradition is concretized and energized.*

*It is important to remember that prior to colonial contact the bulk of information in American Indian cultures was communicated through stories told orally, remembered, and passed on, and that the written form of communication is a relatively recent development for most Native nations. Washburn, p. 115*

*stories referred to as: “teaching stories or sacred living histories” Corntassel et. Al. p. 157*

*stories help convey the values and experiences that characterize the other five elements:*

*e.g. ‘Respect the old mysterious powers, Grandson, and never tempt them’. Tingle, 145.*

*“Pity the wicked, “ she said . “They hear no music . They have no love.” 28*

*...a Choctaw family would never hoard food but share it with those who had less. It is the old way, the way to be.” 57*

*“When everybody loves somebody, it won’t be long before somebody gets jealous.’ 113*

*“When the elders speak, it is always best to listen.” 134*

*“Dead people won’t do you any harm, at least not usually. If you stay away from their home, they’ll stay away from yours.” 158*

## Conclusion

To reiterate:

Six primary elements in American Indian spirituality:

1. Land
2. relationships with various Living Peoples: four-leggeds, winged, swimming, crawling peoples
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  - b. Plants
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  - d. Star people and Planets
3. Kin/Family – clans
4. Healing
5. Ceremony/Ritual
6. Storytelling

Spirits involved in all six elements.

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