

To: David Peat
From: Dan Moonhawk Alford

Sun, 12 Mar 2000

Subject: Indigenous Science

re: <http://www.f davidpeat.com/forums/indigenous/indigenous.htm>

I've looked over the emails so far and would like to join into this wonderful discussion, having had the pleasure of meeting and being with you, David, at the 1992 Dialogue with David Bohm in Kalamazoo, as well as at further ones with you in Banff. I don't know whether this is a long email or a paper for discussion.

As you know, I'm a linguist: one whose professional mind was shaped by Chomskyan linguistics during its heyday at UCLA -- only to be shaped again by an encounter with Algonkians of the Plains, the Northern Cheyennes, for four years, and then fine-tuned for the next 25 by a mixed-Algonkian (Cheyenne/Mikmaq) couple and some of their other Algonkian (Blackfoot) friends. Along the way, I helped some students, speakers of Sahaptin and Navajo languages, achieve PhDs. They were grateful that I'd been a good enough student of my Native mentors to not only get them all to meet together, but to base my differentness as a linguist on the effect that the following "Cheyenne Tower of Babel" teaching, among others, had on me:

"Long ago, people and spirits and animals and plants all communicated in the same way. Then something happened; after that, we had to talk to each other in human speech. But we retained 'the Old Language' for dreams, and for communicating with spirits and animals and plants." (Sakej Henderson, personal communication)

More than anything, this teaching convinced me of the relativity of languages in a consciousness context: that different languages are appropriate to different states or rhythms of consciousness. And that led me into the depths of the magnificent academic smokescreen of ideas I call the Great Whorf Hypothesis Hoax (see my webpage). Languages are the most important mystery of our universe, it seems to me, and no conception of language is complete unless it includes the Old Language, which can also be called telepathy or prayer.

This past summer, at a quantum physics of consciousness conference, I launched a concept of quantum (anthropological) linguistics based on consciousness, non-locality and relativity. where speaking from the heart is

qualitatively different than speaking from the head. (See Roundtable Discussion on my webpage.)

Concerning items you've discussed in email correspondence, I'd like to discuss: 1) what the Dialogues mean to me as a linguist, teacher and human being; 2) me as a western scholar with indigenous roots wondering about indigenous intellectual property rights; 3) what language can show us about realities -- even beyond what David said to Inti recently in correspondence.

1) The Science Dialogues are among the most important events of my life. In the first one, in 1992, when I first met David Bohm, David Peat, Leroy Little Bear and Amethyst First Rider, it was like the two halves of my brain finally had a corpus callosum and were talking together for the first time. That is, I'd been involved with Indians since 1971, and reading about and pondering the insights of quantum physics for about as long, but they'd never really had anything to do with each other -- just as with anyone reading this, I'll wager. And all of a sudden, the mystical beauty of Native simplicity was found to be like that of the quantum realm. There seemed to be a consensus in the Dialogue that in the invisible, non-physical realm, by whatever name, *everything that exists vibrates, the only constant is flux, and everything is interrelated in a part/whole relationship*. The physicists call that realm "quantum," while Indians call it "spirit" and we linguists call it "meaning" -- each with our labels, like blind men and the elephant.

The BIG questions on leaving had to do with how it was that Indians had pre-knowledge of a realm they weren't supposed to know anything about -- and even more bizarre, why it was that some Native American languages we discussed were structurally better equipped for talking about quantum events than are English and other European languages!? How? Sakej Henderson said that when talking in, say, Mikmaq, he could talk all day long and never utter a single noun, and that is eerily similar, structurally, to Whitehead saying about the atom that all we know of it is its radiating, but there is no 'thing' there radiating! A language without nouns and a realm without things, both just flowing, as Bohm's Rheomode.

Seeing all this come together was kind of an intellectual orgasm for me, and it changed the course of my teaching and my friendships forever. The first Science Dialogue showed me once and for all that Benjamin Whorf had been absolutely right about the relativity of languages, and over the next few years I further nailed down the fact that Einstein got the idea of relativity from the same general source that Whorf did -- Humboldtian linguistic relativity, from the founder of linguistics! Whorf got it through Sapir, and Einstein through Jost Winteler, his mentor and rooming house owner, who was a Humboldtian-trained relativity linguist. At bottom, Einstein's physics version was also linguistic, showing that you can't describe a 4D universe with a 3D (Euclidean) language.

2) I lived with the Northern Cheyennes for four years in the early '70s. During that time I rediscovered my own heritage, that I had a small part Cherokee and Osage blood from both sides of my family being in Arkansas. As a linguist, I worked on the Cheyenne language, developing an alphabet and writing system, beginning a dictionary -- but after four years of working daily on learning the language, I could not freely speak it, could not 'generate' new sentences. As someone who'd learned (passably, at any rate) such languages as Spanish, Latin, German, Luganda, and Igbo in foreign language classes from junior high school through graduate school, not being able to really speak Cheyenne after four years was a wake-up call that something really different was going on here.

Though I'd been given two Indian names while I was there, when I left there was very little I could have done that would have been considered cultural appropriation. I certainly began using examples of the Cheyenne language in my Introduction to Language and other classes, but I didn't for instance hold classes to teach people how to speak Cheyenne -- which, had I been able to do it, would have been appropriation; I didn't conduct all-night Native American Church meetings, or Purification ("sweat") lodges, just because I'd been in a few of them; and I didn't even use in any way my Indian name publicly in any way until many years had passed. I didn't want to be known as a 'wannabe'.

The simplicity of truths in Native America takes a long time to wear down through the accretions of our cultural knowledge. In the early '90s I began letting my hair grow long enough to wear as a ponytail for the first time, and began using my Indian name as my public teaching persona. After 20 years of staying in tune with Native America, I felt nobody could accuse me of wannabe-ism -- the information and experiences had actually stuck, and were an integral part of me. Seeing quantum physics and indigenous knowledge fall together gave me courage for what I knew, and initiation as a pipe carrier gave me an authority to speak about what little I actually knew from experience.

So while I myself have never been accused of violating intellectual property rights, I know of those who have. They can often be easily spotted, as with the man who came to the US from a foreign country to study shamanism, and after attending some Purification lodges built one on his land and began "doing sweats"; someone I know attended four of these and said that not once did he ever hear this guy speak from his heart! This gentleman had the outer manifestations of ceremony, but not the essential inner ingredient -- which can be seen as the very essence of cultural misappropriation!

3) Indigenous languages are the key to indigenous thought and worldview -- and, as alluded to above, they are as different from our European view of reality as quantum is from the classical view of reality. Recently Leroy Little

Bear told the participants in the seventh Bohmian/Indigenous Science Dialogue that there is no Blackfoot language, or Navajo language, in the European sense of vocabularies and word lists -- instead, there are about 80 roots in Blackfoot [each of which stands for a kinesthetic prime of animate motion, as far as I can tell], which are combined and recombined on the fly to describe what-is as accurately as possible.

To help you understand this, take the word /Se?Se/ in Cheyenne, which by itself can mean 'duck' in English. But when you add /-novote/ to the end of it, meaning 'goes down into a hole,' you don't have a logical connection of "duck goes down in hole" but RATTLESNAKE! That's because /Se?Se/ doesn't really mean 'duck' at all -- it means the combined dry scraping sound and zigzag motion both the duck and the rattlesnake make as they're going away from you. It's an event of animate motion which uniquely characterizes both the duck and the one that goes down in the hole that makes that same noise/movement.

This is a unique way of using human language -- a kinesthetic base closer to Sign Language than to our more visual/verbal base. Amethyst First Rider has said on numerous occasions that when she says the simplest thing in English, like "The man is riding a horse," she gets pictures coming up in her head. But when she says the equivalent thing in Blackfoot, no pictures come up in her head -- only body feelings of movement! I'm sure this is connected somehow to her other oft-made claim that no matter what it sounds like when it's translated into English, when they're speaking their own language they're NOT using metaphor. Actually, this is true because the Indians are using categorization itself (like George Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* as a lexical category in Dyrbal), while metaphor is a different kind of categorizing used extensively -- some might say nearly exclusively -- in Western European and other languages, and which they like to fancy is universal.

While all of us have been subtly conditioned/brainwashed/socialized by our European language/culture complex to believe in the "things" of reality as being more real than the invisible connections between them, valuing the dancers over the dancing, it's a highly important antidote and counterbalance to know that Native American and other indigenous peoples value the dancing over the dancers, believe that processes and interrelationships are more real than the 'things' that grow out of them -- that the physical is an epiphenomenon of the non-physical, and that cyclical timing is more real than linear time.

We need both descriptions for a complete picture of how reality works for everyone, as well how language works for everyone, on this planet. The Middle Way, as the Chinese termed it, is a difficult road to even FIND, and especially in our newfangled, ultra-gadgety world. Yet finding it and balancing

ourselves will become even more important as we face what is to come in the next decade or so as we approach what the Mayans called the beginning of the Age of Consciousness.

I hope I haven't overstayed my welcome here. My intent is to bring up questions, not to provide definitive answers. Indigenous knowledge brings us questions for how we see fundamental reality, as when a Haida man, Woody Morrison, walked up to me at a Dialogue and said, "In the Haida language, the wind doesn't push a boat; it pulls it!" If you follow this to its conclusion, considering it comes from a sea-faring culture, you realize that the wind is more complex than the paltry labels various human languages pin on its different aspects -- and so is just about everything else in Nature. Organisms are far more complex than machines, and indigenous peoples are far ahead of us in understanding organisms since that is their unbroken stream of knowledge while we diverted much of ours into machines.

warm regards, moonhawk
