Native Images

I stood by the open window in my second floor bedroom at the back north side of the 1765 colonial New England house that was my childhood home and looked out across the fields to the woods beyond. I was probably about eight or ten years old. I held a carved stick to which I had attached ribbons and feathers. It was a special stick to me, though I could not have said why. It vaguely had something to do with what little I knew of Indians. I liked the stick, but it seemed not connected with the rest of what went on in my life in that small New England town north of Boston. I felt I couldn't tell anyone that it was special to me.

I always was attracted to Indian ways, or at least to what I thought were Indian ways. When we played cowboys and Indians, I always wanted to be an Indian; I made my own bows and arrow, and constructed small tipis from sheets and poles. My grandmother saved for me the "Straight Arrow Injunuity" cards that came in shredded wheat boxes. They had much information on Plains Indian crafts and lifestyle.

My best friend through grade school lived in an area that had in the past held Indian villages. Frequent discovery of arrowheads had led her grandfather to name his land Arrowhead Farm. Playing in those woods and fields we imagined—or felt!—the presence of Indians.

At some point my small staff got packed away and then discarded as I grew into the world of high school and college.

Looking back I think it was perhaps a shaman's staff, an object of the ordinary physical world that is useful in leading one's awareness beyond into more subtle realms.

At Arrowhead Farm

It was not until the 1970's that I again became actively interested in Indian things. While in one of Stan Grof's month-long workshops at Esalen Institute in Big Sur I met a white American who had trained for several years with a Huichol Indian shaman in Mexico. He led us in some ceremonies around a fire, and I immediately felt at home. A few years later I spent time with friends who worked at the school on an Indian reservation in north-central Washington state. There I got to know modern Indians and saw them as real people, not some idealized image in my mind.

At the Sunflower Festival, Colville Reservation, Omak WA 1978

While I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area in the early 1980's I was active in a group that was loosely affiliated with the Native American Church as well as with the Huichols. There were regular evenings of singing, drumming, and praying in a tipi around a fire, as well as occasional all night ceremonies led by various Native Americans.

During that time an ambivalence was growing in me. The ceremonies and practices felt good to me, but I was aware that as a white person I was sort of playing Indian. I didn't really belong to these traditions. I tried to be true to myself, though, and did not just cut myself off from all that Indian ways meant to me — a close connection to both earth and spirit.

Some Native Americans say that we white folks should look back to the indigenous spiritual traditions of our ancestors, to Celtic mythology for instance. But my ancestors came to this continent, to New England, eleven generations ago. So where do I fit? Of what land am I a native? It is hard to know. Sometimes I envy Native Americans who at least, in spite of the pain and dislocations, have memory of an intact native tradition. For me that is all gone. Maybe this connection is what I was longing for as a child playing Indian and holding my colorful staff.

During the early 1980's I was also pursuing my explorations of what it meant to have been born cesarean. I came to see that to really understand birth, one needs to look at the larger picture of what it is for a

soul to come into physical form. So I began taking workshops on core shamanic practice from Michael Harner, culminating with an intensive month-long experience at Esalen in 1984. His work as an anthropologist had led him to see certain practices that were common to many indigenous cultures around the world. We learned shamanic practice, but without cultural trappings. I got the tools I needed for inner journeying, though after the workshop I felt a lack of community into which to ground the practices.

Shortly afterwards, I saw an ad for a used tipi for sale and met with the man selling it who was part Native American. He seemed to think that I would take good care of his lodge and sold it to me. I then embarked in the very labor intensive task of making a set of 17 twenty-five foot poles for the tipi. We set up the tipi in the back field of a friend who lived near me in Point Reyes Station, CA. We used the tipi for personal shamanic journeying and for occasional meetings of the classes my friend taught on shamanic art.

During this time I often made moccasins, both for myself and for friends, vaguely aware that my intention was to help people walk softly on the earth.

Moccasins I made for my twin niece and nephew when they were born in 1986.

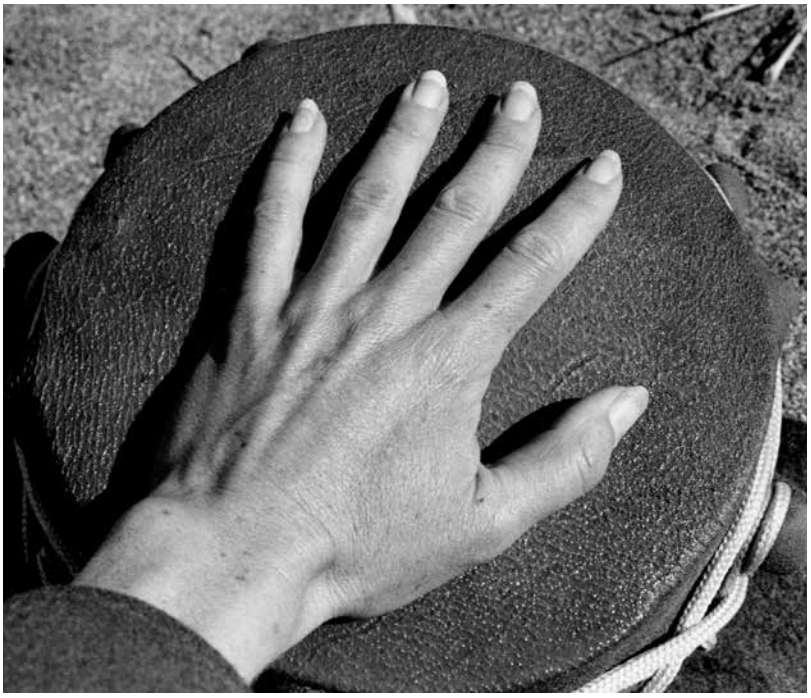
Rainbow Fire

canvas 6 feet diameter

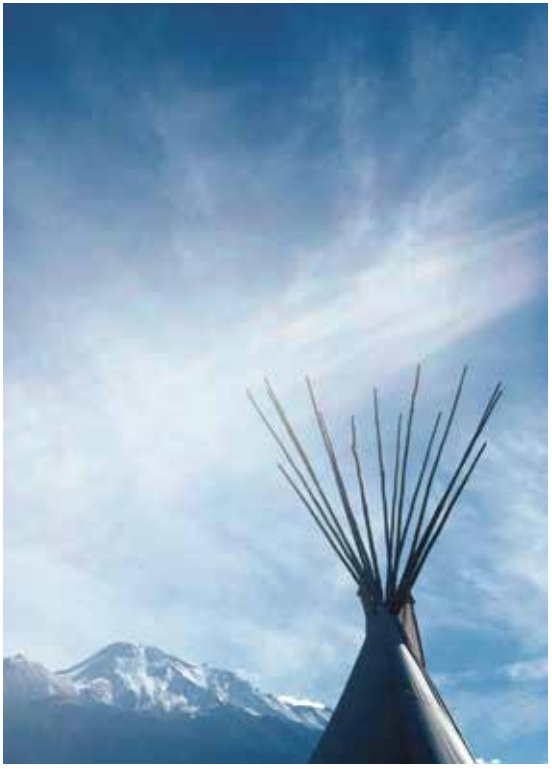
I made this to create the experience of diverse people sitting together around a fire without actually using a fire. It was used in schools, homes and even in a tipi during daytime.

I also made for myself a water drum, a deeply resonant drum made from a three-legged cast iron pot with water in it and a skin tied across the top.

With Teles, about 1983



This brought me to some good discussions with Native American ceremonial leaders as to just what I was doing with such a drum. By staying true to myself and with the support of some dreams, I came to see that I was being inspired by native ways but not exactly copying them. I felt especially good about the path I was on after one group evening of drumming, singing and praying in a tipi during which Teles Goodmorning from the Taos Pueblo used my drum the whole time.



When I moved to Mount Shasta, CA in 1987, I bought a new tipi and set it up in my yard. It has been a guest bedroom, a place for singing and praying, a place for neighborhood home-schoolers to meet while doing a unit on Indians, and a place for wonderful marshmallow roasts. The first time we did marshmallows I felt a bit irreverent, but soon saw it as just another kind of ceremony!

One morning recently I was thinking about my relation to Native American ways. It was easy to slip into feeling like a guilty white honky. After all, it was people of my race who raped the land, the people and the culture of the Native Americans. The whites had totally different values and imposed them on the natives and the land. I tried to feel what this had been like for the Native Americans.

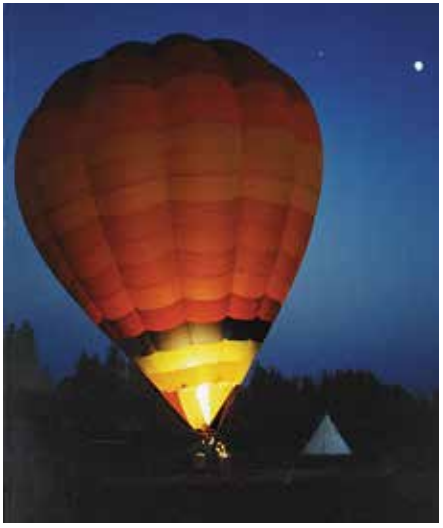
Then the phone rang. A friend told me of making a lot of money on an obscure computer stock in the stock market the day before. "Sure beats working," he said. Then I realized I did know some of what it must have felt like to be a Native American 100 years ago. The values of the culture of material greed threaten to sweep away what I know and value just as much as the miners and ranchers of the 1800's destroyed the native culture with its values. In a way, all of us who value integrity, respect for the Earth and connection to spirit are in much the same position as the Native Americans.

Dragon Egg in Shasta Valley with Mount Shasta and the Shasta River

All through these past 20 years I have worked with my ambivalence about Native American ways. There was much in them that fed my soul, yet I did not want to be disrespectful of traditional culture. I began to look for the essence of what I am attracted to and tried to find ways to touch those same places within my own culture.

In 1997 I finished training as hot-air balloon pilot, earned my commercial pilot certificate and bought a used balloon, which I named "Dragon Egg." Floating over the land made me wonder if ballooning was an experience similar to that of astronauts on space walks. Another balloon pilot had a former astronaut as a passenger. The astronaut confirmed my thoughts, saying that a balloon flight was the closest he had ever come to the space walk experience since coming back from space.

I find that flying brings me to many of the same places as the native practices. A balloon flight can be much like a ceremony. There is preparation, the flight, cleaning up and sharing food afterward. And it seems to transform people. I find myself smiling the rest of the day after I fly in the morning. Like native ceremonies it can give one perspective on ordinary daily life. I am delighted at last to find a practice that is rooted right in my own native culture.



At the Indigenous Environmental Network conference

Then this summer, in 1998, I was invited to bring my balloon to an indigenous environmental gathering, a meeting of native people from all over the globe, including many Native Americans. We did an evening of brief tethered rides for the winners of a raffle that raised funds for protection of traditional sacred sites. The next morning, as at the other end of the encampment the sacred fire for a sweat lodge blazed up in the morning twilight, we again inflated the balloon, its own fire glowing in the pre-dawn light! Our sunrise flight with some of the Native Americans was exquisite. We flew over the woods and fields with Mount Shasta in the distance. I had come full circle, bringing my own native practice back to people whose native practices had shown me the way over the years.

And, after all, all of us are natives, natives of Earth!