

# Taking Back “Tribalism”— What We Can All Learn from Tribal Nations

by Sarah Kastelic

Sadly, the word “tribalism” has become a pejorative, suggesting narrow-mindedness. But American Indian and Alaska Native tribes are not exclusionary; rather, they foster deep values of community. “In this way,” writes the author, “bound to one another and cleaving together, we create a reciprocal responsibility for the collective well-being of the human community, the human family.”

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**W**E LIVE IN SEVERELY POLARIZING times. These last several months are a painful reminder of how disconnected we have become from one another, as we retreat into our zones of safety. By “othering” those with whom we don’t share identity, we spotlight difference and increase fear. In a less extreme form, this othering affects our discourse, our voting, our budget and resource allocation, our education, our housing, our justice, and so much more. At its height, this othering leads to the personal and group violence that punctuates our daily lives, that boldly declares the “other” as less than human—giving permission for the very violence that occurred. It is a vicious

and rapidly accelerating cycle, one all-too-familiar to Indigenous peoples.

In today’s discourse, across the political spectrum, the word “tribalism” is used to describe the othering and retreat of people to their own groups, to their camps of like-minded and similarly positioned friends and families. I believe that this is a gross misuse of the term. This phenomenon is the antithesis of what the tribal nations that make up Native America represent.

Indigenous peoples and groups from around the world may be our best instructors regarding the value brought by the group—the value of the tribe. Tribes of Indigenous peoples are about organizing, not othering. Tribal communities are a way to recognize

kinship and shared responsibility, instill and preserve culture and reciprocity, and apportion and steward resources. The ties of a tribe define one’s primary relationships while recognizing or even mandating a wider set of relationships.

Most Indigenous cultures are relational at their core. A more historically accurate understanding of what it means to be part of a tribe is that you are part of a community that welcomes everyone—including strangers and people different from you—with a sense of relationship. At this time of year [talk was given in mid-November], it’s easy to conjure up elementary school images of the first Thanksgiving. But the idea of the tribal community runs deeper than that. It is through the tribe

that you discover how you are connected to someone else, or to a group of people, and come to understand your true bond, connection, and kinship. By establishing kinship, you invoke a reciprocal responsibility for the well-being of the other. For an Alutiiq person like me, a citizen of a tribal nation—the Native Village of Ouzinkie—our community values say that we are responsible for each other and ourselves, and that we welcome everyone and favor sharing.

What this vision from Native tribal nations offers the world is a different path forward. In our tribal communities, we learn to have a recognition of relationship and a kinship responsibility to those who are different from us, which binds us together. It is the very values we learn through our tribe that invests us in our joint—and at scale, collective—well-being. There is not an option to retreat from what you are in relationship with.

Belonging is a universal human desire. It is something that we all want. As human beings, we long for connection—to be linked to our family, to the human community, to be part of something larger than ourselves, to have a shared purpose. This desire for belonging and purpose does not have to mean closing yourself off from those who are different from you—a retreat to safe sameness.

Indigenous worldviews and values offer unique understandings of purpose and belonging. In Maori culture, according to Dr. Chellie Spiller, a Maori author and trainer, “people are a reflection of each other such that in serving others, one is serving one’s extended self and helping to serve a shared purpose.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, from the time I was small, my Alutiiq father told me that “when you need help, help others, and in that process, you will always find the help you need.” This advice has always served me well. In this understanding

of reciprocity, we become nourished through nourishing others.

From an Indigenous perspective, we members of the human community need each other. We are bound together; we are interdependent. No one is dispensable. We need the gifts and talents of each one in order to build and maintain the society in which we live. This value of belonging and togetherness is reinforced in our traditions of introduction, wherein we chart the relationships between things. In contrast to Western introductions (consisting of your name, what you do, and where you live), Indigenous introductions, as Dr. Spiller observes, “trace relationships through layers of connectedness, citing lineage [to people and to place], which illuminates the fullness of a person through relationships.”<sup>2</sup> And, “This tracing of genealogies is much more nuanced and complex than a recital of family trees—it is a way of ordering the world, and connects humans to every other aspect of creation.”<sup>3</sup> As the Lakota say, “Mitakuye Oyasin,” which means “all my relations,” or “we are all related.”

Another aspect of this interdependence is to recognize that personal well-being is not only intimately linked to the well-being of others but also to the well-being of the environment. This kinship with creation is a way of being and relating in a web of interconnectedness.<sup>4</sup> It is a way of belonging, wherein humans come into being through reciprocal relationships with creation.<sup>5</sup>

It is through the tribe that we learn the practice of seeking relationship, crossing the divide, and active engagement in service to the collective good. It is the tribe that teaches us to reject separatism, protectivism, nationalism, and supremacy in favor of the identity, connection, togetherness, and purpose that are in the self-interest of each one of us in the human family and in all of

creation. In nourishing one another, we nourish ourselves.

As Regis Pecos, a Cochiti Pueblo citizen, says, “We restore traditional values to restore attitudes and behaviors. We create new norms in contrast to the dysfunction. The new norms compound over generations.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, bound to one another and cleaving together, we create a reciprocal responsibility for the collective well-being of the human community, the human family. There is no “them” and “us”; there is only “us.”<sup>7</sup> This is what I was taught by my tribe, and this mindset is a resource for people from any culture who want to build community and shared well-being.

#### NOTES

1. Chellie Spiller, Hoturoa Barclay-Kerr, and John Panoho, *Wayfinding Leadership: Groundbreaking Wisdom for Developing Leaders* (Wellington, Aotearoa [New Zealand]: Huia Publishing, 2015), 68.
2. *Ibid.*, 73.
3. *Ibid.*, 73–4.
4. *Ibid.*, 73.
5. *Ibid.*, 74.
6. Personal communication with the author, October 24, 2018.
7. *Ibid.*, November 9, 2018.

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