**The Hopi Environmental Ethos**
**(rev. 2002)**

by Jude Todd

The Hopi have an acute awareness of humankind's interrelationship with the rest of nature, including not only plants and animals, but also such seemingly inanimate entities as stones and faraway planets and stars. This awareness is reflected in their choice of clan names, in which they claim entities such as the sun, corn, and snow as their kin, along with animals such as the bear, badger, and spider. The Hopi sense of interconnectedness with the forces and cycles of nature not only inspires awesome seasonal ceremonies, but also informs their daily activities.

The traditional Hopi way of planting, growing, harvesting, and eating corn, for example, reflects this awareness and sense of respect for the plant and its cycles. Hopi men plant corn in a peaceful, reverential frame of mind. They tend it lovingly, singing to the plants, encouraging them to grow. The corn is then ritually harvested and eaten with similar appreciation.

In the days when hunting was a crucial part of the Hopi lifeway, hunters approached animals in a prescribed manner. The first animal sighted was left alone and only the second, or subsequent, animal could be killed. One result of this practice was to insure the perpetuation of wildlife. With similar care, a hunter gave thanks to the dead animal, apologizing for the deed and explaining the necessity of taking its life.

Hopi quests for salt were similarly reverential. A salt expedition was a sacred journey, and the salt had to be approached and taken by men whose attitude was respectful of this wonderful gift from Mother Earth (e.g., see Talayesva, pp. 232-46; 252-55; 433-35).

The Hopi sense of reverence for the Earth also motivates traditional Hopi to oppose strip-mining of coal and other attempts to exploit and defile the land. Many traditional Hopi people have worked to halt exploitation of the Four Corners area by speaking in court and at other forums. For example, the following is excerpted from a statement drawn up by six Hopi elders to accompany the 1971 Hopi lawsuit filed against Peabody Coal Company in an attempt to halt strip-mining on Black Mesa:

> Hopi land is held in trust in a spiritual way for the Great Spirit, Massau'u...
> The area we call "Tukunavi" [which includes Black Mesa] is part of the heart of our Mother Earth. Within this heart, the Hopi has left his seal by leaving religious items and clan markings and plantings and ancient burial grounds as his landmarks and shrines.... This land was granted to the Hopi by a power greater than man can explain. Title is vested in the whole makeup of Hopi life.... The land is sacred and if the land is abused, the sacredness of Hopi life will disappear and all other life as well (qtd. in Clemmer, 1978, p. 29).

While the Hopi consider themselves very much a part of the Earth—not set apart from it as observers and manipulators—they also see themselves as having a crucial role to play that other creatures do not. This uniquely human responsibility lies at the heart of their ceremonies, the major function of which is to keep the world in balance. The Hopi see their rituals as a way to maintain an intimate contact with nature that helps to keep the natural forces (e.g., rainfall, lightning, the seasons, Earth's gravitational forces) in harmonious balance for the sake of all life forms.

Let us consider the Snake Dance, whose focus is to bring rain to the sun-parched mesas and cornfields. All Hopi people attending the dance pray for rain. When the rain comes, they understand that they have played an integral part in bringing about the rainfall. However, this does not mean that the Snake Dancers are trying to "make it rain" or that the dance "makes it rain." That kind of explanation assumes that the ritual is meant to control the forces of nature—an interpretation that is a misapplied projection of Western motivations and worldview.

Control, mastery, dominance of nature is foreign to the Hopi ethos. It can be said that they work with and within nature, but not in any way that sets them apart from or in opposition to it, as the notion of control must. Rather than "making it rain," the Snake Dancers and other Hopi attending the dance set themselves in right relation to the forces of nature—and the rain comes. The Hopi play their role in the great interrelationship of natural processes, and so do the rain clouds. The tremendous efforts that Hopi people expend in performing these rituals constitute a gift—their contribution back to the natural entities who give them their life. (For an excellent discussion of the ceremonies, see Thompson, 1945.)

These efforts toward balance include not only the observable ceremonies, not only the many days of ritual preparation for the events, but also the appropriate mental /emotional attitude during the preparation and the ceremony itself. In explaining the importance of the Hopi clowns' activities during ceremonies, Emory Sekaquaptewa says, "A smile is sacred " (quoted in Ferrero). This is because one's wishes, prayers, thoughts, and emotions affect all of nature (see Whorf, 149; Kennard, 492). It is thus imperative to stay cheerful, happy, and optimistic so that the rain will come and the crops will grow well. An angry thought or petty resentment can adversely influence the forces of nature. So each Hopi person has a great responsibility to keep a pure heart and mind during these ceremonies, for the sake not only of the Hopi people, but of all life.

For those of us concerned about current environmental problems, it is tempting to look for a way to translate the Hopi attitude toward nature into ideas that are both graspable and workable in the non-Hopi world. This task may be more difficult than it first appears. Since attitudes grow out of beliefs about the nature of reality, attitudes and actions cannot be simply grafted onto a belief system with contrary implications. For example, the pervasive contemporary Western assumption that there is a clear distinction between animate and inanimate objects is deeply ingrained—so much so that to suggest that rocks are living may arouse not only disbelief but derision. That same assumption makes it

more difficult (though not impossible) for a person steeped in Western culture to act in a respectful way towards rocks, coal, uranium, and other Earth elements.

But the animate/inanimate distinction is related to even deeper, less conscious Western root assumptions that also differ from Hopi beliefs. One such assumption is that mind and matter are dichotomous. An important corollary is that mind influences matter only through the physical manipulations of a living body in which it is completely contained. According to this view, a hunter can influence an animal to die only by shooting it; wishes, prayers, thoughts, and expectations have nothing to do with a successful hunt. Similarly, a person cannot influence a rain cloud to move a centimeter by willing it to move, even if hundreds of other people were to desire the same thing. Clearly, the Hopi, who refer to Spider Grandmother as "Thought Woman" because she thought the world into existence, and who stress the importance of humans keeping a positive mental outlook to keep that world in balance, have different beliefs about the power of thought.

A related assumption prevalent in contemporary Western culture is that the world is made up primarily of things, or discrete objects, and that events are the result of the activities and interactions of these things. Analysis of the Hopi ethos suggests that, in their view, the opposite is true. The world is constructed of events, or processes, some of which take on the temporary appearance of being a thing. As indicated above, the Hopi are acutely aware of the cycles of nature: for example, the changes and transformations of a corn seen combined with soil, water, sunlight, and loving care into a seedling, then into a mature plant with ears of corn, and then into a dried cornstalk that falls back to the Earth. Such cycles, or processes, are emphasized over the specific segments of the process that modern Westerners might more likely isolate as the thing, e.g., the ear of corn that is eaten.

This emphasis on processes and events rather than things is reflected in the Hopi language, according to the controversial writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Whorf claims that the Hopi language emphasizes verbs over nouns, in contrast to English and other European-derived languages, which emphasize nouns. For example, the Hopi language permits sentences with only verbs and no nouns (Whorf, 243). Moreover, certain Hopi verb forms demand that the speaker attend closely to types of vibratory or wavelike motion just to formulate a sentence. What Whorf terms the "aspect-contrast" of Hopi verb forms allows the Hopi speaker explicitly and with a single verb to describe waving, vibrating, pulsing, flaming, trembling, radiating events or phenomena that English can describe only awkwardly if at all. This aspect-contrast is imposed on a verb form to indicate repetitions of characteristic movement. For example, in Hopi "ri'pi" translates to "it gives a flash" (notice also the necessity of an English pronoun, a doer of the action separate from the action itself), while "ripi'pita" means "it is sparkling." "Wa'la" means "it makes a wave," while "wala'lata" means "it is tossing in waves" (Whorf, 53-55). This feature of Hopi verb forms, which Whorf concludes "practically forces the Hopi to notice and observe vibratory phenomena, and...encourages them to find names for and to classify such phenomena," would suggest a fine-tuned attention to motion, events, and processes rather than to static things (Whorf, 55-56).

Whorf, a chemical engineer before becoming a linguist, suggests that the Hopi language would thus be better suited than English for expressing the conclusions of contemporary physics (Whorf, 55). With progress in modern physics, we now understand that the world, which is "made up of" atoms, is considerably less solid and "thing-like" than it appears. For example, some of the components of the atom (e.g., the electron) are more wave-like than particle-like in their behavior. Objects, then, are ultimately not solid but consist of trillions of wave-like/particle-like events. But our language lags behind our understanding of physics, and we still talk about objects as though they are not undergoing constant change. What would it be like to see the world in terms not of interacting solid objects but of interacting events? Is it possible—and, if so, is it desirable—to see the world as processes, events, and relationships?

If contemporary physicists and the Hopi are on the right track in seeing nature as composed of processes and events rather than objects, the key question is: what does this have to do with our relationship with the environment? It stands to reason that a worldview that approximates reality less well will lead its adherents to make more frequent and more serious blunders as they relate to their environments than would a worldview that is better aligned with the way nature actually functions. To the extent that our understanding of nature corresponds with natural processes, we are more likely to act in accordance with nature's laws rather than in opposition to them. This means, practically speaking, that we would make lifestyle decisions that would result in less pollution and destruction of our environment. In short, worldviews influence actions which in turn affect the environment, and holding a worldview that corresponds more closely with the way the world actually works is therefore more likely to result in our acting in appropriate ways in relation to nature.

But, even if a process/event oriented worldview such as the Hopi's were no more accurate than a thing/object based worldview—that is, if both approximations correspond about equally well with the nature of reality—the process ethos would still be likely to result in a healthier, less polluting, less destructive relationship with the environment. In a thing-oriented worldview, one sees oneself as a discrete entity, separate from other things in the environment—or as a "higher being" who uses and manipulates other "lower" forms of life and inanimate objects. In a process worldview, one must see oneself as a process also (e.g., coming into being, growing, dying, breaking down into elemental parts), as part of many other larger processes. This understanding would tend to prevent an excessive emphasis on one's own ego and its concerns. For, like the corn that can be seen as soil, air, water, and sunlight temporarily organized into a particular pattern, we who eat it are similarly soil, air, water, and sunlight temporarily organized into a particular pattern.

A number of people in the film Hopi: Songs of the Fourth World, by Pat Ferrero, draw an analogy between planting human and corn seeds, from insemination through embryonic development and birth, reproductive life, old age (a time when both types of beings "lean on Mother Earth for support"), and death, when the life force abandons the material body and leaves it as a mere shell to decay back into the earth. People in Western culture may become aware of this process at times of the death of a loved one, but often try to push this awareness away as quickly as possible.

In an event worldview, on the other hand, the ego is not a substantial thing, standing in relation to external objects that can be manipulated to suit one's will, but a process among processes, all changing. Trying to grasp and hold something forever—whether a fleeting moment, or wealth, or an apparent object—is understood to be futile because everything is in constant flux. Instead, it is in one's own interest, as well as the interest of others, to facilitate and enhance the processes of which one is a part. This is precisely what the Hopi ceremonies accomplish.

These brief comments should be taken as my personal interpretation of some of the environmentally relevant aspects of the Hopi ethos. For a fuller understanding, non-Hopi readers might study literature by and about the Hopi in order to bridge the gap between their own worldview and that of the Hopi. Tapping these resources can be useful in translating Hopi beliefs, attitudes, and actions into forms that are meaningful to non-Hopi people—a translation that could contribute significantly to bringing human life back into harmonious balance with the rest of nature.

END

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A Note Regarding the Title:
*The phrase "environmental ethos" is used here instead of "environmental ethic" to emphasize the point that a respectful, reverential attitude toward the non-human environment is an integral part of the Hopi lifeway rather than an intellectually derived set of moral principles, as the term "ethic" may imply.

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