



**BREAKING THE  
SACRED CIRCLE**

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## Introductory Note

Breaking the Sacred Circle is being distributed by the Indian Education Office, Multicultural/Equity Education Section, Division of Instructional Programs and Services, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Washington State. The Indian Education Office conducts regular meetings with the Washington State Native American Education Advisory Committee (WSNAEAC) which is composed of Native Americans from reservation and urban areas within Washington State. Three members of WSNAEAC reviewed and edited the content of this document: Ray Mitchell, Edmonds School District; Elaine Grinnell, Port Angeles resident; and Judy Milhofer, Spokane School District. WSNAEAC reviews all documents of this kind prior to publication and discusses them in their regularly scheduled meetings. The three WSNEAC members mentioned above served as a subcommittee to review this publication and report to WSNAEAC and the American Indian community.

This article, written by Dr. Willard Bill, Supervisor of Indian Education within SPI, should be useful to secondary teachers in Washington State. Teachers are encouraged to implement the article into their curriculum, and it is the intent of the Indian Education Office that this document serve as a springboard for student discussion of American Indian issues.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction .....	1
The Sacred Circle .....	1
Definition of the Circle .....	4
Intrusion .....	14
Spiritual Confusion .....	19
Acquisition .....	22
Justification .....	27
Dissolution .....	28
Exclusion .....	34
Lack of Harmony .....	39
Cultural Disintegration .....	43
Conclusion .....	45
Define Terms .....	50
Study Questions .....	51
Footnotes .....	53

## BREAKING THE SACRED CIRCLE

### Introduction

American Indians and Alaskan Natives lived for thousands of years on the North American Continent prior to contact with Europeans. They lived in harmony with themselves, as is evidenced by the lack of protracted warfare and standing armies. They also lived in harmony with nature. The environment of North America was unspoiled when Europeans began to explore the continent in the fifteenth century. To have lived for such a long period of time on the North American Continent, is a testimony to the Indian's ability to maintain a balance between the physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural aspects of life.

The Western idea of linear development and progress was foreign to the American Indian and Alaskan Native. Rather, the idea of cyclical reaffirmation was the foundation for philosophies of the indigenous peoples of North America. Animal and plant kingdoms were treated as equals, and this idea gave such value to life that exploitation, on a large scale as we know it today, was not possible. The goal of the traditional Indian was to strike a harmonious balance with nature and not to attempt to control it.

However, the migration of Europeans to North America distributed the balance of living in the "Sacred Circle of Life" for the American Indian and Alaskan Native. From the time of contact with Columbus in the late fifteenth century, it became increasingly difficult for the indigenous people of North America to live in harmony with the other newly-arrived humans.

The White man, both directly and indirectly, infringed on the cultural and spiritual components of the American Indian and Alaskan Native. Aboriginal spirituality and its concomitant religion were viewed as mere superstition and the culture as the juvenile aspirations of a primitive and backward people. The American Indian-Alaskan Native culture suffered from contact which caused physical and mental suffering. The life span of American Indians and Alaskan Natives has been lower than the national average throughout the twentieth century. Problems of apathy, alcoholism, and other conditions of poverty, have been the result of the imposition of an alien culture on the cultures of North America.

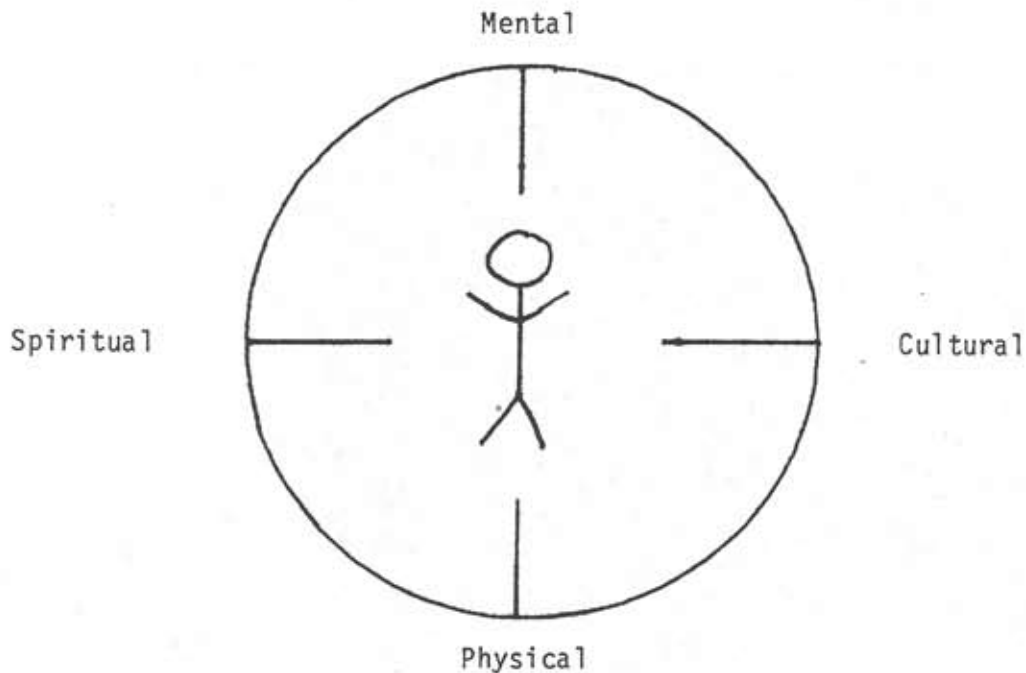
This unit will attempt to establish factors that we must examine to understand the American Indian and Alaskan Native cultures in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Traditional values have doggedly persisted among various tribes and villages in North America; and a number of Indian communities are developing tribal resources, both human and material, to insure self-determination.

But the development of both human and material resources is complicated because the Sacred Circle was broken during the Indian-White contact period. Tribes and villages are continuing to recoil from oppressive policies perpetrated at every level of government from the earliest days of contact. These policies served to break up the continuity of the Indian culture.

Indian culture was attacked during the contact period via military attacks, treaty signing, subjugation, disease, and relocation. Tribal leaders are faced with the problem of repairing the Sacred Circle. How can they do it? This is a question that faces the contemporary political and

spiritual leader of the tribe and village. American Indian-Alaskan Native leaders must make crucial, accurate decisions to maintain their land and mineral resources for succeeding generations of Indian youth. This is a question that must be answered to enable the tribes to function at full strength.

## The Sacred Circle



### Definition of the Circle

American Indian-Alaskan Native cultures were cooperative societies that depended on each facet of their environment for sustenance. This was reflected in the beliefs of the tribe, band, or village. There was a need to interrelate for survival, and this need was passed on through the centuries. The native person found himself threatened if he were in a situation where he had to function in isolation. This metaphysical-based idea was expressed by a contemporary Indian speaking from Wounded Knee, South Dakota.

We believe in the sacredness of a circle where everything has its own place, from the lowliest insect to the sun. When I have a brother he is actually part of me because we believe we're part of the same earth and my power goes through that to him, and his to me . . . . You accept all people as being part of you, and you're able to extend that not only to the people but to everything. These things are part of the nature of Indian people and our cultural heritage. We never think that we have to conquer anything. We don't have to build a big dam to divert a river that would eventually end up harming the balance of nature. We don't have to send something to the moon--which is our sister--and take away a part of her flesh and bring it down here for no reason whatsoever. Those things are not to be done and the great circle is not to be tampered with. And the American people are learning that finally.<sup>1</sup>

The preceding statement was made by a contemporary Indian leader explaining a personal view during a confrontation at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. The statement is not too different from proclamations made throughout the contact period by Indian leaders when they explained their views to representatives of different cultures.

Lame Deer clearly details what the traditional concept of the circle was. He notes that the circle is found in nature as well as in the behavior patterns among American Indians.

He states:

. . . To our way of thinking the Indians' symbol is the circle, the hoop. Nature wants things to be round. The bodies of human beings and animals have no corners. With us the circle stands for the togetherness of people who sit with one another around the campfire, relatives and friends united in peace while the pipe passes from hand to hand. The camp in which every tipi had its place was also a ring. The tipi was a ring in which people sat in a circle and all the families in the village were in turn circles within a larger circle, part of the larger hoop which was the seven campfires of the Sioux, representing one nation. The nation was only a part of the universe, in itself circular and made of the earth, which is round, of the sun, which is round, of the stars, which are round. The moon, the horizon, the rainbow--circles within circles, with no beginning and no end.<sup>2</sup>

The traditional Indian activities were conducted with the circle in mind. It was believed that the power of the world worked in circles. The American Indian was part of a strong culture, and the origin of the strength was working in a circular fashion. Black Elk referred to this as the power originating from the sacred hoop of the nation.<sup>3</sup> As long as the hoop was unbroken the American Indian, as a people, flourished.

Black Elk drew examples of how the earth worked in circles from the environment around him--the roundness of the sky, the earth, and the stars; birds make their nests in circles, which is similar to the way that the

Plains tribes make their tepees; the sun and moon rise and set in a circle; the seasons of the year also make a circle by changing and returning each year to where they had been previously.<sup>4</sup>

Black Elk observed that the Sacred Circle was in fact being broken, and the American Indian was being placed in boxes. They were restricted to such an extent that they could not carry on the traditions that had been established for generations. He believed that this caused a loss in power and led to the death of the Indian people.

The most blatant example of the restrictions was the development of the reservation system, with all the accompanying restrictions on the Indian people. Often many bands or tribes, which may or may not have had anything in common, were banded together on one reservation. The federally-established reservation boundaries did not take into account cultures, economy, or territorial rights. The traditional boundaries of the Indian tribe were well identified and they extended for much greater distances than the artificial reservation boundaries permitted.

The reservation was often located on an abandoned military fort or undesirable land. The government did not take into account the methods of gathering fruit and berries; the hunting ground for deer, elk and other large game; and traditional fishing grounds or water passages for collecting sea life. It certainly did not allow for trading that was a vital part of inter-tribal economy. The ignorance that the United States demonstrated in constructing reservation boundaries was an example of how the Sacred Circle was being broken for the American Indian.

Throughout the nineteenth century the federal government further contributed to breaking the circle by dividing up land and allotting it to individual Indians. The General Allotment Act (24 Sta. 388) was enacted by Congress in 1887. This legislation became known as the Dawes Act, and its

history has been infamous as far as Indians are concerned. It is a classic example of how the American Indian culture was disrupted and fractured in the nineteenth century. Reservation lands were allowed to be parceled out to individual Indians, and citizenship was conveyed to them if they ended the trust status of the lands. In other words, the land was taken out of jurisdiction of the reservation and the Department of the Interior. We should note that citizenship was not granted to American Indians and Alaskan Natives until 1924, and the offer of citizenship provided some incentive to indigenous people.

Indians could also obtain citizenship by moving away from the tribe and adopting the "habits of civilized life."<sup>5</sup> The two ideas--alloting individual parcels of land to Indians and encouraging them to move away from their families--were two critical breaks in the circle. Land had been used by the tribe in a communal way for centuries. The resources within the tribal boundaries were to be shared and used for the benefit of a group. Members of the tribe were often dependent upon other members of their own and of other tribes. Certainly, to live in close proximity to other tribal members was one of the characteristics of the tribal life.

Therefore, Indian leaders throughout North America could see their traditional life style being by-passed by an alien culture that placed high priority on individual ownership of property and living an atomistic life as a self-sustaining individual. This nineteenth century assault on the values of the aboriginal inhabitants was to continue into the twentieth century with modifications of style, but not of substance. The twentieth century Indian had to try to survive--not in the traditional style, but within a culture that valued individual property ownership. Black Elk stated the case quite succinctly.

Once we were happy in our own country and we were seldom hungry, then the two-leggeds and the four-legged lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us. But the Wasichus came, and they have made little islands for us and other little islands for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed.<sup>6</sup>

Estimates have varied as to how many Indian "two-leggeds" there were at the time of contact. Dobyns has estimated that there were approximately 9,800,000 Indians in North America at the time of contact. The figures for the New World population were staggering. The same study estimates that there were ninety million Indians at the time of contact with Europeans. This would mean that the population of the western hemisphere was about the same as the population of Europe at the time of contact.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, by the time anyone started counting the Indian population, most had disappeared. Black Elk's observations were all the more urgent in light of the original population.

Chief Luther Standing Bear indicated the extent that breaking the circle hurt the native culture. He stated:

The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization. And when native man left off this form of development, his humanization was retarded in growth.<sup>8</sup>

The white man had difficulty realizing that the Sacred Circle existed for the aboriginal people. It was beyond the comprehension of the outsider to realize that the Indian had a culture that was founded on a well-thought-out philosophy of life and eternity. The white man, whose roots were in Europe, believed that they were more advanced culturally than the people who had inhabited the North American Continent for thousands of years. When attempts were made to establish Indian/non-Indian relationships, the outsiders did not know how to make their offer in such a way that it would strengthen the native culture.

Tatanga Mani's (Stoney Indian) contrasted the white man's education with the traditional Indian education. It should be noted how the mental activity is linked with nature and religion. He points out how difficult it was for the white man to establish cross-cultural communication.

Oh, yes I went to the white man's schools. I learned to read from school books, newspapers, and the Bible. But in time I found that these were not enough. Civilized people depend too much on man-made printed pages. I turned to the Great Spirit's book which is the whole of his creation. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature. You know, if you take all your books, lay them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for a while, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity for study in nature's university, the forests, the rivers, the mountains, and the animals which include us.<sup>9</sup>

The American Indian and Alaskan Native perceived the world as intimately linked to, and a product of, the physical environment. To understand the Indians' world one must understand the environment, because most Indian people did not live in houses that separated the individual from the environment. Not because they had no choice. Indians of the Pacific Northwest, for example, made their houses out of cedar and many of these longhouses were larger than contemporary homes, some being inhabited by many families. Rather, the native people lived in the elements to such an extent that they did not need total shelter to protect their bodies. The hunters or fishermen had to live outdoors for extended periods of time; consequently, the tougher they could be, the more comfortable they would be during those periods of time when their skills of hunting or fishing were called into play.

The aboriginal person identified with the environment in a very personal way. Lame Deer states:

A human being, too, is many things. Whatever makes up the air, the earth, the herbs, the stones is also part of our bodies. We must learn to be different, to feel and taste the manifold things that are us.<sup>10</sup>

American Indians (similar to Lame Deer) spoke of their personal frustrations as they attempted to reconcile the differences in their philosophies and those of the white man. One of the most eloquent spokesmen was Chief Sealth--principal chief of six tribes in the Pacific Northwest. Today the City of Seattle bears his name, and he is remembered for the speech he made in 1855 that indicates the importance of the physical environment to the Indian.

Your religion was written on tablets of stone, by the iron finger of your God, lest you forget it. The red men could never remember it or comprehend it. Our religion is the tradition of our ancestors, the dreams of our old men, given them by the Great Spirit, and the visions of our sachems and is written in the hearts of our people . . . . Every part of this country is sacred to my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove has been hallowed by some fond memory or some sad experience of my tribe. Even the rocks which seem to lie dumb as they swelter in the sun . . . thrill with memories of past events connected with the fate of my people.<sup>11</sup>

Contemporary Indian leaders state their case in a similar way to that mentioned by Chief Sealth over a hundred and twenty-five years ago. In a Washington State task force report during the 1970's, an Indian leader expressed it this way:

The Indians think of themselves as participating with nature in the cycle of life. They hold for nature a respect and reverence that is spiritual. To the Indian land is sacred. To attempt to subdue or subvert the natural world is to him sacrilege. He understands the vital interdependence between man and his natural environment.<sup>12</sup>

The passage from this hearing conducted in Washington State points out how the contemporary Indian regards the physical world and the spiritual world as integrally linked. This idea has remained unchanged throughout the years. Indian leaders who were in the forefront of the contact between

tribes and non-Indians, made similar statements regarding the land, water, air, and other resources that the Indian could not perceive owning or selling. Throughout the contemporary period, Indians and Alaskan Natives have made similar proclamations. In the Washington task force report, a Western Washington Indian leader expressed this idea regarding land:

To the Indian, land was not simply a plot of clay to occupy, to build a house or barn or city or ranch on, or to sell for cash. Land was owned communally and could not be sold by an individual Indian. It was not "developed" for commercial use, but kept in its natural state and appreciated, even worshipped. According to the oral tradition of the Western Washington Quileutes, the trees talked to the Indians. The ocean, the birds, the rocks and the mountains communed with the Indians and passed on to the red man the secret wisdom of nature.<sup>13</sup>

A contemporary Indian writer, Vine Deloria, noted this feeling of reverence for the land in his book God is Red. He noted that life and death and resurrection linked the Native American to the cyclical rhythm of nature and the physical world:

But in the Indian the spirit of the land is still vested; it will be 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 forefather's bones.<sup>14</sup>