

It's in Our DNA! Holism as an Indigenous Worldview Approach to Happiness

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Abstract

Frank Bracho of Arawak heritage offers a convincing case that the concept of happiness has more to do with “being” than with “having” and that the Indigenous proclivity to live in accordance with natural laws is the path toward such personal and communal happiness.

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I am happy for the invitation to join such distinguished native scholars to speak of “holistic education” from the perspective of Indigenous cosmovisions for a number of six reasons:

1. Education (or essence-wise, rather: Re-Education!) is key to the most pressing task of bringing about an urgent change of consciousness in humanity.
2. Indigenous cosmovision, or worldview, is already in our hearts – in our cultural DNA. (One might think this could make our transformational task much easier.)
3. I know this issue of HER is intended to be much more than the worldly career-oriented stuff taught exclusively at “accredited” schools. It has to do with cultural and spiritual values that are “conscientized” at the community-level as a voluntary conviction.
4. It is an opportunity to mirror the ways of beloved Mother Nature.
5. This issue can directly connect us with the most pressing world issues; issues that are a mammoth crisis where modern-day humans have turned their backs on all of nature, including ourselves who are part of it.
6. And finally, I am happy for this chance to write about Indigeneity and holistic thinking because, not by accident, nowadays many people seem curious to turn

their eyes to those “Natives” still living according to Nature’s laws and are proven and living custodians of Nature’s Wisdom that is key to the salvation of the current, magnetic compass-deprived world.

In the past, we have had many notable Indigenous prophetic warnings of what happens when we forget who we are and forget our physical, mental, social, spiritual, and place-based aspects. One ancestor who spoke thusly is Chief Seattle, author of the famous response he addressed to the U.S. President Franklin Pierce in 1855 when the latter intended to “buy” the lands that was the home of Seattle’s people. Part of his quote is, “The Earth does not belong to us, we belong to the Earth.” Such a sentiment has been echoed from Indigenous wisdom teachings from around the world.

The Hopi, for example, made four visits to the United Nations headquarters in New York to forewarn of the imminent total collapse of the world, the need to “radically change course” and to prepare for a new “Ark of spiritual salvation.” The Kogui Mamas of Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, Colombia procured a BBC documentary, “From the heart of the World: The Elder Brother’s Warning,” and revealed that human disregard for nature was creating a

chain reaction of destruction worldwide. The South African notion of Ubuntu guided such leaders as Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu toward the interconnect and dignity of interconnected life.

Sadly, these and a plethora of other similar manifestations seem to have fallen on "deaf ears" in the corridors of world power in light of the current ominous, multifaceted global crises we witness all around. On the other hand, it is also fair to say that the sacred and invaluable teachings of Indigenous activists remain "a beacon of light" to a varied, committed, and significant global minority who seem to be listening with great attention such as those who are reading this journal issue.

So, I write as an Indigenous man with an inescapable duty to speak out with all Indigenous Peoples in these potential "end of times" – who remain the courageous protectors of the last natural wilderness lands of the world. I speak not so much from a scholarly formality, but from a richly experiential common sense, a universal language of the heart. I speak of holistic education as an urgent return to a deep communion with nature that lies in the pre-conquest consciousness of us all. Such consciousness has no skin color, blood type or race. It embodies the physical, mental, social, spiritual and place-based aspects of each of us in ways that are universally interconnected, if only we can nurture each interdependent concept. To re-balance life systems, we must be nurtured and guided by actual internalizing experience, not by mere abstract intellectual theoretical notions. How can holistic education via its original manifestation as Indigenous worldview achieve such internalization?

I propose the key is no less and no more than the attainment of happiness. This has always been a fundamental goal, has it not? The pursuit of happiness has been enshrined as a value for nations. Sadly, without the oneness of what Four Arrows and Darcia Narvaez refer to as the kinship worldview, such happiness is elusive and must wrestle with more competitive notions such as wealth. With the kinship worldview, however, the basic needs for happiness emerge. These start with self-actualization from birth, maintained and nurtured with good nutrition, community engagement, parental caring, personal vitality and a feeling of interconnectedness and purpose. In other words, holistic wellness that entwines health with social, mental, spiritual, emotional, and ecological wellness. How can we qualify ancestral Indigenous wisdom in relation to these

benchmarks for happiness? However, as we proceed, I suggest that we should not idealize or romanticize Indigeneity. Nor should we deny that they have also been subjected to their own degenerative processes in a cycle that seems to have been inescapable from forced dislocation and a loss of communion with Mother Nature and its laws.

With this in mind, I offer that the term 'happiness' is not explicitly in most Indigenous languages, but lifestyles and attending values did express the concept. The Waraos, the ancestral aborigines of the Orinoco Delta in Venezuela, my homeland, did not have a word for happiness. Rather, they used "oriwaka" which has such meanings, depending on context, as waiting together, having a party, joyful sharing with others, and paradise where the dead are happy. Such meanings highlight the importance of sharing of joy and of the transcendent as a key to happiness. In the Piaroa language (a Venezuelan Amazonian ethnic group) happiness is called "eseusa" and means "the joy of sharing with others." To the ancient achaguas Arawak, who also inhabited Venezuela, their word "chunikai" meant something more kin to good health or personal vitality.

For the Mayas, the notion of happiness is found in their moral code known as "the Pixab" and says "everything is good as long as it harms no one. I think is right as long as it contributes to the happiness and life at all." In the Maya language Q'eqchi, happiness is called "sahil ch'ool" and means "having a glad heart," with the word glad probably meaning a combination of healthy, happy oneness with all. Confirming the great centrality that the value of happiness had in Q'eqchi Mayan life, the main social greeting is "masa'laa ch'ool," which means, "How is your heart?"

The contrast with the European lifestyle serves to raise conscious awareness among Indigenous Peoples about the merits of their ancestral lifestyle relative to happiness. In this regard, the following reflection made around 1676 by Chief Micmac in North America is eloquent: "Which of these is the wisest and happiest, he'll laborers without ceasing and only obtains, with great trouble, enough to live on or he who rest and comfort and finds all he needs on the pleasure of hunting and fishing? There is no Indian who does not consider himself infinitely more happy and powerful than the French" (Nerburn and Mengelkoch 1991, 82). Or, consider Chief Maquinna of the Nootka Nation after he learned about banking practices of the white civilization: "bank, but when we have plenty of money and blankets we give them away to other chiefs and people, and by and by

they returned them with interest in our hearts feel good our way of giving is our bank” (Nerburn and Mengelkoch 1991, 82).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, is famous for having said “Our first wealth is our health.” I believe it is not a coincidence that he was great friends with Henry David Thoreau whose philosophic work was largely based on Indigenous wisdom (Pratt 2022). Well-being and optimal social, physical, mental and spiritual fitness was a lifestyle for the traditional American Indian, where in respect and integration with the five elements of the natural order (earth, water, fire, air and ether) was all that was needed for subsistence. Honoring these interconnected elements and their spiritual substance provided good nourishment, housing, clothing, education, exercise, environmental quality, and community-based affection. When one of the facets was out of balance, the Natives would turn to purification ceremonies to recover it. As pointed out in the Maya Pixab, when disease, problems, pain and desperation invade our days, it is necessary to perform a purification so that harmony will return, so that peace and happiness will return (Verano and Ubelaker 1993).

Thus, we see that the holistic oneness of earth’s five elements and the sense of self, mind, spirit (soul), community and place ultimately are what happiness is all about. This is why an emphasis on materialism in our dominant worldview throws happiness out the window so often. I propose that the most potent explanation for why having or enjoying things does not guarantee happiness is the ephemeral nature of possessions. Those who are attached are destined to suffer when possessions disappear as inevitably, they must be removed from our lives. This is why Indigenous Peoples do not understand the dominant culture’s strong attachments to objects. Although personal vitality for living on earth is important, the Indigenous holistic perspective also realizes that too much attachment to our bodies and fear of death stifles authentic happiness. It is separation from the oneness of all, the Natural Order, that is the enemy of happiness. To reach happiness we need to recognize that being is linked to the transcendent. Ancestral Indigenous wisdom understands integration with Creation and the Natural Order is most conducive to happiness.

I close by saying happiness is a vital life mission on our beautiful planet. It is dependent upon alignment with our natural identity and sense of a deep sense of

interconnectedness with nature, a phenomenon of which we are part (despite the dictionary definitions that say otherwise). Happiness is having a fearless heart that recognizes the significance of all life, including our own, no matter what artificial designs a civilization imposes. Such impositions from the dominant cultures that over-emphasize the dominant anthropocentric, materialist fear-based worldview, have corrupted the true way to happiness. With each species that becomes extinct, each river that becomes polluted, a child that goes unwanted, conflict that ignores the laws of Mother Nature, we each lose some of ourselves, with happiness being the first to go. The return, however, is easy, because our interconnectedness with the cosmos is in our DNA!

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Author Bio

Frank Bracho is a Venezuelan of Arawak heritage. A passionate Indigenous activist, he is author of numerous books on health, the environment and economics. He was once Venezuela’s ambassador to India and has advised several presidents of Venezuela. He is currently auspicing an international Indigenous People’s conference to be held in a particularly threatened, natural biodiverse country that will express the urgency for bringing Indigenous leadership to the fore before it is too late.