Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Wilson Justin (Althsetnay)

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DH: If you could start by telling us a little bit about yourself, in terms of your heritage, where home is for you, and the focus of your work.

WJ: Well, I'm Athabascan, born and raised at Nabesna, and I've spent nearly all of my life in the area, never really got out, so to speak. I'm one quarter Russian. I come out of a medicine man family, and also am of the Althsetnay clan. The Athabascans are a linguistic family, with most of the members, I would guess, in Canada. You'll find Athabascans in the southwest United States, and also a few Tribes in California. So we're pretty well represented as a linguistic and a national Indian group. The organization that I represent here is a health provider; we provide health services to Indian Health Service constituents who are enrolled in our service area and we represent Mentasta and Cheeshna Tribal Councils in our annual negotiations with the federal government whereby we contract the funds that drives our services and programs. But, separately from that we also do other programs and activities. We have EPA/IGAP programs, ANA {Administration for Native American} language and cultural programs that are more focused on what we would call preservation of traditions and enhancement of our cultures. Kind of like a multi-generational wellness program, recovery program. So we have lots of faces to show as an organization.

DH: Can you speak to how your heritage, your cultural identity, informs your work?

WJ: Well, there's about three different levels. The first level is a question of how Indians are taught. In our society, in our traditional society, parents don't teach their children, they aren't allowed to. Grandparents, uncles and aunts carry the burden of teaching to the nieces, nephews and grandkids. So right off the bat you see we have a radically different way of learning as opposed to what's in western society. I was fortunate enough to be among the last generation to have gone through that process. The primary teachers in my life were uncles and aunts. They took over that process early on, and as I speak you'll find out that I don't really reflect the western learning tree, so to speak.

The second level of teaching in the Athabascan society, or traditional society, is really adherence to protocols and adherence to traditions that are imposed upon an individual by the clan. I should explain here that Athabascan society, like all Indian society, has a secular nature- we spoke about the dualities in nature and the quantum physics world-this is very true in the Indian world. We are both very religious in our teachings and our traditions and non-religious in our adherence to our customs and protocols. The basic difference is that in our traditions, our traditions were given to us as commandments. We are not allowed to change them and we are not allowed to allow these traditions to be evolving. They stand in time solid like stone.

However, codes of conduct and activities related to protocol about our governments, work among governments and how clans develop justice systems amongst each other, those are man-made artifacts subject to change, subject to time, subject to interpretation. It's not easy to determine a difference, and the few that can, like myself, have elevated status within our society. Not because I'm a powerful person, or because I'm a chief, or any of those western notions, but because I can clearly delineate the difference between what constitutes a tradition and what constitutes a cultural norm. That's your second level.

Your third level is the issue of the kind of teachings that are allowed to develop between teacher and student. Most of the time-and people don't realize this until they spend a lot of time with us-our school is our steam bath; that's where the uncles freely speak to the nephew about the important things in life. And yet in a lot of American Indian societies, steam baths are more of the sacred kind. We have two steam baths: we have teaching steam baths and the sacred steam baths which the medicine people utilize. If you cannot differentiate between the two then you are doing a disservice to yourself and to your society, and I can differentiate. Those are the three levels of teaching that we have, and I could go on for a half a day about the remainder of the subjects in teaching, but I'll leave it there for your edification.

DH: Can you define for us the community that you identify with in terms of people and places?

WJ: That's an easy question, I don't identify with a community. That's only in the last fifty years, after the white man came, and then with him came the notion of boundaries and community and property lines and all of that sad stuff. I identify myself with our traditions. Our traditions come first, and if you adhere to them you are one of us, and if you don't you are not.

DH: The term sustainability is being used a lot now by people who are seeking to address environmental, social and economic challenges of today. I'm wondering if that is a term that you use or if there is other terminology that you prefer?

WJ: Not often, I tend to be a little cynical when it comes to that particular term. I consider it more something like a religion than it is an actual useful term. There are just too many ways to contend with the issues of sustainability in our modern day society. Most of what I hear people use the term sustainability about is either resources consumption or energy uses. Both very valid principles in terms of quality of life, but I think that is taking a run at the problem from the wrong end. We shouldn't be looking at sustainability on the basis of the question of whether or not you should spare this tree or that tree, or cut this tree or that tree. That's the wrong approach, in my estimation. Sustainability is all about the links between your traditions, your culture and the norms that are being imposed upon you by an outside society. The links that I am talking about have to do with the ability of any particular group of people-in your term community-to absorb what needs to be absorbed from the world at large, to protect and preserve what it has to have in order to sustain itself. As soon as you say that you run into the immediate problem of laws and regulations, standards and certification issues related to the quality of water, the quality of air in terms of smoke. So we are already too far down the road, in my estimation, in terms of intrusion at the very local level, to really deal with the issue of sustainability. So all I am saying is that if we want sustainability, we need a radical, *very radical*, realignment of the way we think. That's nothing new, there have been radicals in our history for 6,000 years saying that and I don't expect to be listened to anymore than they were. But, as far the other half of the

sustainability question, if you move into sustainability questions *past* resource use and extraction, and regulatory aspects of resource extraction, and look at sustainability on the basis of economic factors, then you run into more problems in terms of-we spoke a bit about this, about the internet. In my estimation the internet was our last best hope of making a global community equal, but it fell into the hands of privateers, people who had connections and were able to develop software on there, and guys with licenses. If we had to go back to 1980 and look at the internet on the basis of a tool for communication of people, to reach out to the world and develop open, transparent communication, we would have had a very good chance to deal with sustainability on the basis of what you and I, I think, understand sustainability should be, which is an ever increasing quality of life, the preservation of what you hold dear and the ability to live in a society of your choosing, at the level that you choose. Right now all that we have is a mad dash for jobs and a fervent hope that you won't lose your paycheck. And you tend to reflect on the world on that basis. You say what people want to hear, and you do what people want to do. Ecotrust comes in and says, "We come in peace," and I say, "Well, I don't really care." (laughter) I want to see what you've done first in terms of what you want to broadcast to me before I listen to what you have to say in terms of being here. The "come in peace" routine is an old, outdated practice, but it is still how people approach sustainability. I don't see any real changes, except for a few places in the world. I think of places like Nepal…they have suffered invasions in terms of economic intrusion, mountain climbing stuff and they have also been next to unruly neighbors like China, but as a whole they have been able to maintain their need level consistent with their ability to meet that need, without cutting down trees, without pulling out wood. So that kind of society, even though it is kind of hard to describe, they are driven by this very radical pattern of thought that I spoke to earlier. Here and now, in this day and age, the amount of energy that we use is just unbelievable, and yet it is an everyday fact of life to us. It seems like somewhere along the line we should be able to say, alright my family will use 1500 kw, or 1500 whatever of energy this year, no more. But nobody can say that, and if you cannot say that then sustainability in my estimation is out of our reach.

DH (13:40): I'll ask more question here about "sustainability," so you're cynical about the way the term is used in many conversations but you have some hope for transforming it's meaning?

WJ: Absolutely. My big problem with "sustainability" is it's like the way the old time religious society did with indigenous people. Selling a paradise, or selling an idea, it was already amongst the people before the missionaries and the others came along, and I don't like to see that parallel happening where people will preach sustainability for sustainability's sake hoping to convert souls. I'd like to see sustainability used to say, alright, we want to look at the quality of life on the basis of the number of people that's here, or there, or whatever. If we are talking about a hundred, fine. If we are talking about a hundred million, fine. If we are talking about 6 billion, which is what I want to talk about, fine. To me, there is no sense in talking about sustainability for America. We've got to talk about sustainability for the global community. That gives us all kinds of room to talk about all kinds of natural and unnatural catastrophes happening all over the world. Which is where I see us going: we have to solve the global issues first before we talk about sustainability. If you just want to talk about America, well, we know how useless a thought pattern is as far as knowing when to stop taking, or knowing when to stop getting, or knowing when to stop asking.

DH: Are there any images or symbols that come to mind for you that represent the notion of sustainability in these terms that you speak of.

WJ: Well, the only thing I really think about is…I guess you could say the creeks or rivers that come together out of the mountains. They all start out small. They take their time, but when they get to the ocean, they're big. That's how I look at these rural areas. The rural areas have always provided the energy, so to speak, for the urban communities to live off of. It's like in Anchorage- it's probably around $2.8 million is probably the average funding level that Mt Sanford has on a year to year basis, sometimes 3.5, sometimes 2.4, it goes up and down depending on a number of grants that are active. But an unforgiving fact of that number, whatever it is, is that 65% of those dollars go directly to Anchorage, and the rest is, well, look around here: we've got a lot of money going into energy extraction. Paper, crude oil, what have you. So, I look at the whole sustainability issue as saying, well, we have to learn how to run creeks uphill. Not just one way, it just can't keep flowing out to Anchorage, and then from Anchorage to other places, it needs to come back. And that's where America doesn't seem to have any direction, any idea or mission as to how to do that. Myself I think the changes that we are facing are going to be very rapid and dramatic and sustainability is going to be forced upon us by a whole series of collapses. I think desperation is going to make us straighten our minds out. If you think about, if you think about the fact that 65% of every dollar we get goes directly to Anchorage and you say what's the point of talking about sustainability when you have to do that? Am I mad at Anchorage? Yes (laughter). Would I be mad at them if we didn't have to spend that much money? Who knows (laughter). But that is where you start, you start with the fact that the creeks and the rivers flow downhill to the ocean. In nature what happens: the ocean evaporates, it goes up into the clouds, the wind blows if back over the mountains, it drops back in the creek. In nature it is very obvious that you have sustainability issues that are self contained. In the man world, the man made world, everything goes one way and never comes back. That's something we have to change.

DH: I would like to hear about what your vision would be for that kind of a pattern. What would you envision for a future characterized by those cycles of returning that flow of resources or whatever it is.

WJ: Well the most immediate need in terms of bringing the water back uphill is importation of skills. This is the second, third, well pretty close to fourth generation of people that have been exposed to the western line of thinking. So the survival skills are really poor out here. I don't think we really need to worry about survival skills, in terms of the resources in the woods and the mountains. I think we need to worry about the survival skills in terms of navigating banks, financial institutions, stores, and what have you. So the natural way to look at sustainability in this type of community, place, or arena, is to look at exportation of *expertise* from those certain centers back out to the world arenas. The amount of money that I get paid here, you'd laugh at it- it's a joke, I know that. It's all out of proportion to what a person would get paid for in a particular corporation anywhere else. But that's what it takes to maintain an organization like MSTC in place, the low income factors. It doesn't make a poor man out of me. I still function at an extraordinarily higher degree of effectiveness both here and in Anchorage, but that's because I have the skills to do so. I know how to save money. I know how to conduct my life in a way that doesn't cost me more money than necessary, we need people like me to come on from places like Anchorage or Fairbanks and put five years out here. That's the kind of return that makes a

needed difference in organization and infrastructural development out here. That's one. The second one is, got to get some teachers out here that are teachers. It's just impossible to get anyone out here that'll fit into the way things work. Because teachers are a sustainability tool. But they already have preset notions and they have already, in my mind, been corrupted by the system, in terms of the kind of teaching they're going to do. So they come out here and they help widen the gap and make the ability to get to town down river even faster. So, the second export or return that should happen but doesn't is the kind of teachers we get. You don't want to get urban teachers out in a rural city, but that's what we have. Or we get teachers who are so deep-set and ingrained in their thinking that they automatically reject everything that's out here. The third thing that we really need to look at in terms of return is telecommunications. We should have telecommunications and capabilities *automatically*. We should have satellite systems; all of it is paid for right now for the use of Rural Communities. Our system here at MSTC is underwritten by the federal government under USF. They pay for eighty percent of it, otherwise, we couldn't afford to do what we do businesswise. That same feature should be extended to all remote communities. Well I've been told before that those signals are free, the electromagnetic spectrum is a natural feature of the universe at large. And yet you have these self serving apparatuses all over the place. There should be no place in the world that shouldn't have access to modern telecommunicative means. If the US military can spend a couple trillion dollars with no wars to fight outside of the Mid East-and we don't even have any reason to be there-but we have a military machine that is just enormous. That's a lot of energy. Instead of marching people around and keeping them housed, they should have them out there-or should have that resource converted to the communicative apparatus the world over. So, there's ways and means to think about returns, just got to quit thinking about the fact of going to a community and seeing what's here, you say, "Well it's not what here that counts, it's what's not here that counts." And I would start with the skill. Actually, I could survive anywhere, you could send me over to Nepal and I don't need to understand the language. Outside of falling off a cliff or freezing to death I'd be alright (laughs). That's what you need, that's what you have to have to have outside in these rural arenas.

DH: Skills?

WJ: You need *global skills*. You don't need skills, which you see so common today which are all technical in nature, you need global skills. You need to understand people; you need to understand people's needs. You need to understand how to communicate, and I do, so I don't have to be here. I could be in Switzerland; not speak the language and get along. That's what you want out here. Then you have some of the fundamentally key features of a sustainable economy, or a sustainable initiative.

DH: Are there other global skills you can speak to?

WJ: Well, there's lots; you could write a book on global skills. You have to remember, America in most ways, is still very racist in its core. Most racism has been institutionalized, so it's not exhibited in people; it's not on an individual basis. The racist attitude of America is all tied up in the way money is programmed to be spent, the way institutions are put together, and even how business planning is put together. So do you want to talk about sustainability? The first thing you have to do is get rid of the American way of thinking. I can't tell you that's going to be done

soon in your lifetime or mine (laughter).

DH: What are some of the key attributes of that thinking that need to be removed?

(26:30)

WJ: The first one is the self-delusion that America is the only country in the world that knows anything. The second thing is the fact that in America if you're rich and powerful then you have value. In our society that would be an "en'gee." You're either a pirate or someone that couldn't be trusted. So the issue of the way we look at the world is really a self-limiting vision. When we look at the world as "they're all poor" and "there's too many-they populate too fast," you can't look at the world like that. It's just one world, it's already too small and when the internet came into being back in the early 80's at that point we no longer had the capability to think of ourself as something unique or over-archingly important. As long as we continue, as long as this country has the inability to see it, in the eyes of the people it has to work outside of its boundaries, we're not going to go anywhere. And that's the radical rethinking I was talking about. An Indian is an Indian no matter where he is. They could send me to South America and I could live there for 50 years and I'd still be an Athabascan to the core. It doesn't matter where I from here, there's nothing the world can do to change me. You talk to the typical American and they're frigging afraid of change and having other people's ideas imposed on them, they can barely sit still. Until *that's* changed, the issue of sustainability is going to be a long way down the road.

DH: Anything else you'd say about the attributes of thought that need to be shifted?

WJ: Well, I think one of the fundamental problems in sustainability is the fact that we've allowed our parents to be single parents. We've broken up the households so that everything flows to the mother and fathers don't have a role in any way of shaping children's thought patterns. I spoke about the issue of how our teachings are different from western society. In our society, in our traditions, that's a crime to do that; to make one parent more powerful than the other. And that's a fundamental issue of sustainability. That's a serious flaw in the American way of thinking; that you can actually empower one parent and not empower the other and still have a healthy family, and healthy kids, and have kids who could develop the kind of skill level that I've obtained. Like I said, I was very fortunate. I had powerful uncles and aunts, very self-sufficient, who were my primary teachers. It made all the difference in world to me, as far as being able to take care of myself, whatever locality I'm in. We don't develop that in our families. So you have to have healthy families as the backbone to any sustainable economy in the community. We don't have that. That's something that's fixable, that's fixable immediately, and I kind of doubt that's going to happen.

DH: How would you fix it?

WJ: Well, number one, you just have to wipe out a great deal of the hundred thousand laws we have on the books, and basically start over. I have no idea how many laws we create a year. I have no idea how many regulations we have on the books. But I can tell you about half of those regulations have a lot of conflict with each other. The family unit at all time, and this is where we're at odds with the rest of the world-the greatest, the biggest gap, the family unit in the rest of

the world is much more important than everything else. In my society, it's not the family unit that's more important, it's the tribe. The clan comes first, then the family, then the individual. So I can't tell you enough about the fact that in rural communities, family units are often times torn apart by the application of regulations and laws. Whether it's divorce, whether its child custody, makes no difference, you basically ruin the family. You've neutralized that family for at least a generation. That puts the burden of maintaining communities on fewer and fewer people at a harder and harder pace. That's why you hear me saying, "Let's quit thinking about resources, extraction, and uses." I know that's a big issue. Let's start thinking about our number one resources that we've completely, totally, neglected for the last three hundred years or so, and that's the family. Start from there, everything will work out better in the long run. If I sound a little preachy, so be it (laughter). Makes no difference to me; I won't out-live the catastrophe that's coming on this planet in terms of climate change. My best hope is that they happen long after I'm gone (laughter).

DH: Let's imagine for a minute that we can avoid such catastrophes and that we can create a sustainable future that includes, obviously, it would be essential to have an intact family unit, what else would we see in that kind of a future?

(33:01)

WJ: Transparency. Right close to the top of my list along with the healthy family unit is transparency. One of the problems we have here, and this is not unique to us, is that if people don't understand what it is we're doing, they conjure things in their mind about what they think we're doing. Every single person on the block doesn't even have the slightest inclination of what it is we're thinking about in terms of what we're doing. So we're constantly being accused of nefarious things, and yet all of our activities are outlined in our contracts and are out negotiated on a year to year basis. So transparency is very key. I don't know how versed you are on confidentially issues regarding health providers and impact on health providers and families, but transparency and confidentiality issues creates immediate conflict. You can't have a healthy society, a functioning society, and a sustainable society, unless you have transparency. When you think about it on the basis of not only what I just said but what it applies to, I expect black helicopters flying around here next week (laughter). Of course if they have UFOs in them that's fine (laughter). Transparency is number two. And the third one I think is just a uniform standard of education across the nation. That's something that in our system of teaching, we practice. No Indian child is taught different than the other Indian child. You get the same standards and the same level. You don't see that in school systems. The rate of curriculum development responding to community needs is almost non-existent. I'd leave it at that. With those three we'd look at some really good stuff happening.

DH: Can you say a little bit more about that education piece. When you say "uniform standard of education", does that mean that everybody in every community is learning exactly the same thing, or is there a degree of focus on the needs on the community?

(35:35)

WJ: Well, here's the thing. When I say "uniform standard," I'm talking about basically, the

educational system being able to respond to the community needs. The Indian system of teaching with uncles and aunts to nieces and nephews, if one nephew doesn't learn as fast as the others, he's not going to be forced to do anything differently, he'll be taught slower. If one niece is unable to keep up with anybody else, that niece isn't going to be forced to go up or down, she'll just be taught slower. So their educational timeline gets pushed out further than anybody else. To me that's the uniform method of teaching. Everybody teaches like that in our society. Every single teacher whose and uncle, whose an aunt. In western society, you use performance-measurements ideology, which to me is crazy. You have six billion people in the world and all six billion people are unique. So when I say uniform, I'm talking about uniform in terms of the ability of the society to pass on, not only values, but also skills. Since you like to ask questions, let me ask one in return to you.

DH: Yes.

WJ: How would you rate your skills in terms of your ability to sustain a community or a rural place? Anywhere in America, besides Oregon?

DH: Well, given that I haven't been tested on that, put in that situation, where I had to see results of my ability, probably say not very good. I'd just have to guess.

WJ: My point exactly, I would say they're zero (laughter).

DH: Yeah.

WJ: On the other hand, if you were to take me from Mount Sanford and put me-you're from a city or a community?

DH: Both.

WJ: Both. If you were to take me from here and put me in your community, that community would benefit; if not immediately, then sooner or later, by my being there. That's what we have to have in order to have sustainable communities. It's pretty basic.

DH: People with the global skill set that you're talking about.

WJ: Yup, no matter where I go, they would benefit. Now we should be able to have every single person that you interview say that. And Ecotrust, and whoever you're dealing with otherwise should be able to say, "Well, when we come in, you'll benefit." But you can't get people like me to look at people who come in and say, "I agree that we'll benefit with your coming in." We know better. That's a question that you want to put on the table. Ultimate transparency and transference; the skills that I have, which would benefit any community anywhere. This community should be able to get it from anybody who comes in, but it's extremely rare that it happens.

DH: You mentioned a minute ago the education and transmission of values. In your vision of a sustainable future, what who be some of the characteristic values that all the people in the

community would hold?

(39:26)

WJ: Boy, those kinds of question are entirely background dependant. My background forces me to tell you a prescribed answer. Right off the top of my head, setting my Indian-ness aside-and my background-right off the top of my head there is at least three or four essential values. Number one, people should recognize leadership for what it is. We have a tendency to assign great value to leaders who are basically manipulators or populizers. They don't really *make* anything or *give* anything. The best leaders we have are often shunned. I was talking to an individual in Washington D.C. from another Native American tribe. He's enormously liked and popular everywhere except in his home town. That's the kind of example I'm talking about. So the kind of values I would like to see develop at the everyday level on an everyday teaching basis is the issue of looking at leadership in terms of what I would call "forward steps," not pandering to. We have too many leaders who will tell anybody anything, pander to the perceived needs to keep themselves in positions. We need to get away from that.

Another value that I would closely, or enormously want to see occur is the ability to value children. Most families seem to think that kids should be direct reflection of-there's not that many families that are really intact-but most parents seem to think that their children should be a miniature version of themselves, not a separate individual. I think that kind of value needs to get to the point to appreciate children for what they are going to potentially be, not for what you think they are. Those are the kind of values that are impossible to talk about in the modern day American society. But they were a very essential part of my background.

Just off the top of my head another value that is very essential is the value of acknowledging that every people on this planet has a different trail to the creator. I would no more question a Jewish person as to his beliefs then I would a Hindu, or a person in Africa who has his or her fundamental beliefs. We seem to think that there can only be one. But in reality the issue of religious war has dominated this century for no reason other than the fact that people don't learn to tolerate each other's ideals. We make it difficult for our kids to understand that. That's another value driven teaching that I would-it's okay with me that the rest of the world thinks like the rest of the world. That's no big deal (laughs). But everywhere you go there seems to be a fatal flaw if you think like that in America.

(43:39)

DH: You mentioned leadership in terms of some of the problems with leadership. What's the kind of leadership that we should be looking for?

WJ: Leaders in my estimation are like spotlights; they illuminate issues, they illuminate the trails ahead. And they have the ability, or innate in the complexities of leadership there is the ability to show where you are, at any given time, on the trail. And they have a lot of moral courage. They speak out, they say things: like "we have no business being in Iraq." That part of the world is their business, it's not ours. The kind of leaders we have today, are either the political leaders or economic leaders-they are actually pirates with really no leadership skills. They have skills that are directly related to twisting and manipulating and using covert activities. So until we can raise a generation of leaders in America that are actual leaders from the very basic family unit,

up through the communities, up through the town, up through the cities, we're going to be mired down for another generation or two. I don't even have to point out the amount of corruption that is inherent in our society-it just seems like it is everyday business. But at one time, we had leaders who are not afraid to speak their mind. Who served as beacons. Who illuminate issues, and allowed their followers to make a choice as to which way they wanted to go and what they wanted to believe in. Our current crop of leaders, whether it's military, political, economic, corporate, or what have you, don't give their people that-they don't want any choice in the issue. I very much think that until we solve that problem along with the family issue we're not going to make much headway on sustainability. Our society is kind of like a run-away freight train-you're talking about sustainability as a breaking system. Well, in my mind we're going at such speed it doesn't matter what brakes you put into place, we'll just burn them out and just continue. So, we need some real transformation of thinking, and a real transformation of the kind of values we want to impose on ourselves.

DH: Would you add anything about those values that we should be self-imposing?

(47:17)

WJ: Well if I had to do that, then all hope is lost (laughter). I tell my daughter, an Indian knows how far is to far, how much is too much. I'm talking basically about greed, and I'm also talking about the inability of a typical American to think outside of themselves. In our society, and I'm talking the Western-world, when we talk about ourselves, we talk about ourselves as being the center of the universe. That's so abhorrent to my tradition that it makes me recoil. But, in this day and age you can't find anybody that thinks outside of themselves. That's a marked value of true leadership that they can think separate from themselves. There's lots of things to talk about on a value basis-just on one list alone I saw 30 some-odd traditional values that was a compilation of American Indian society, on another list I saw something like 37, but to me, I just like to think about the fundamental values. The human being ones, not the Indian ones, or the Pakistani ones, or the Jewish ones; but fundamental human beings.

DH: Please say more about what these fundamental human values are, and what it means to be a fundamental human being.

WJ: Compassion for one: Nearly all Indigenous Societies have learned to weave Compassion into the fabric of their Traditions and teach compassion as a value. Another would be thoughtfulness: learn to spend time with yourself and reflect on being thoughtful when with others. There are more but we'll run out of time quickly with these kinds of discussions.

DH: That reminds me of what you were saying in terms of different human beings in their own spiritual paths: can you speak to that relationship, the connection between people on their own spiritual path and the issue of sustainability?

(49:18)

WJ: One of the very much misperceptions about Indian society is about how traditions fit into our society. I mentioned early on that our traditions are actually commandments. Every one of

our traditions is a covenant between an individual and the creator. It's not a covenant between the tribe and the creator, it's not a covenant between the family and the creator, it's a covenant between the individual and the creator. That's why in so many Indian societies, the issue of prayer was of such great importance. On the other hand, a tribe or a clan-in my case it's a clan-there's a total of 11 clans in this geographic area that my people are-8 of them are traditional Ahtna clans, three are associated. But the fundamental role of the clan is to enforce those traditions. Make sure those traditions are adhered to. When you have traditions that are rooted in covenant with creator it gives the society you are a part of both a secular and non-secular appearance. I don't have the ability to interpret our traditions. They are cast in stone. But on the other hand, my trying to impose my traditions upon you is a direct violation of one of our other traditions. So, I'm barred from telling you that you are to be like me. I'm barred from telling my children that they are to be like me. You don't find that in the typical American church where the tendency is to say that this it the only truth in this building; that there can not be any other truth-any other truth has to be a falsehood. In my traditions, we don't speak for others in that basis, you speak for yourself because the covenant is personal in nature between you and the creator. So, it's fairly straightforward in terms of the spiritual path-so to speak. I must recognize yours. I'm not allowed to impose mine on yours. I can respect yours, and recognize yours and live with it. I can't even, in that tradition, force my children to be like me. I must give them a choice. I think that is the hardest part of our traditions for non-Indians to understand. Our traditions are not a physical thing in terms of a personage, where as our costumes or protocol, and even our language to a certain degree, are personal in nature. They have a physical impact on the physical person. Our traditions are completely spiritual in nature. That's about as close I can come to describing what you are talking about with difference spiritual paths.

DH: And then how that's important to this conversation about sustainability?

WJ: When you have a background like that, it's easy to see sustainability in terms of a people activity. Right now sustainability is about artificially propping up societies by whatever means possible, more money, more this, more that. But a self-sufficient society that has the ability to welcome-you know America had at one time a world-wide reputation of welcoming all kinds of people. Now we put fences up. To me, that's the whole thing in a nut-shell. But a society that is driven by its values to accommodate the world, because the world is a creation of the creator, has the ability to self-sustain for thousands of years. As far as I know, we have been here through at least 20 (thousand years)-I know through two ice ages. Does it work, absolutely. Will it fail? I don't think it will fail so much as it will just be dissolved and just fade away. But that's how this world is going to survive all of its own mischief, is to develop a self-sustaining society on the basis of what you would call multi-generational teaching. Once we get to that point, it doesn't matter what catastrophe we're going to run into, we'll figure out a way to deal with it.

(54:59:34)

DH: "Multigenerational teaching," meaning?

WJ: Values is just multigenerational. When you think about a value, you think about as big historic event or maybe some spiritual revelation. But in reality, a value has value because its multigenerational. It stays in place. Each generation comes and goes; it doesn't go anywhere;

it's either taught or not taught. And most of the values that my people have are in place, they are just getting more and more distant from each family.

DH: Before we close I'm wondering if there are other thoughts that you haven't had an opportunity to share? Questions that you wished I had asked, or points to add?

WJ: No. No, like I said, I'm doing this as a favor, so...

DH: Well, thank you. Are there any final thoughts, any closing points?

WJ: Well, I guess there is one. When Ecotrust first came into the area they did the standard, "we come in peace" routine, not understanding or not realizing that there are select representatives of our, my society, all over the place that you need to deal with on a slightly different basis, because of the protocol some of us still adhere too. So I called the founder, or one of the guys who were instrumental in putting Ecotrust together in Oregon, and left a message. And then he called back and left a message and basically referred me to the local representative. So at that point I said well, just another one of those white-guys things. If Ecotrust was very serious about making an impact or dealing with the Copper River region in terms of the protocols necessary for one society to deal with another, then the person I called would have realized the importance of that call, and would have made every effort to call me back and speak to me personally. But he simply left me a message on my phone system and said, "Well you gotta talk to such and such because he's our representative up there." And I said, "Okay, that's fine. You're just another one of those guys that comes along every generation."

DH: Are there other protocols that one should be sensitive to?

WJ: There's lots, but it's not my job to tell you guys that, or Ecotrust. That's Ecotrust's job to find it out.

DH: If I'm trying to find out now?

WJ: (laughter) You should have asked that at the beginning, let's put it that way. Not here, not today, but when I first called.

DH (added after interview, before transcript returned for review): Just to clarify, I am working in collaboration with, but independent of Ecotrust. I would like to know about other protocols I should be sensitive to for my work if you're willing to share here.

DH: I do want to ask one other question. Just back to all the other things you've talked about, particularly in terms of your thinking for the future. Are you hopeful?

WJ: Well, I guess I'm like any other Indian: whatever happens is going to happen. And in my estimation, because Indians are not, what you would call, *afraid* of death. My estimation is that the ability to bridge these current crises to a new world is already inherent. It's just not in *this* society. I think the ability to capture the kind of restructuring and kind of rethinking that we're doing is in the next generation, who probably-I'm not sure if they are being born now, or the

next-but within two generations, the ability to think of the world as our world is going to be inherent in that generation. And then we'll see a lot of the rethinking that I'm talking about now. It's not possible for this generation and this society, but I think it's going to happen. The internet is going to make it impossible to *not* think like that (laughter).

DH: Great. Any final things to add?

WJ: Nah.

DH: Well, thank you so much for your time; I really do appreciate the favor.

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