

Fred Ackley, Sokaogon (Mole Lake) Ojibwe, Wisconsin

Fred Ackley, a wild rice leader, treaty-rights activist, dancer and singer from Mole Lake, speaks about the connection between the land and spirituality of the Ojibwe, respect, wild rice, natural resources, mining issues and treaty rights.

My name is Fred Ackley. I'm from the Mole Lake Reservation in Wisconsin. The name of my tribe is the Sokaogon Chippewa Band. My Anishinaabe name is Makoonse(?), which means cub bear. I'm what they call a "ricer" from Mole Lake. Oh, since time memorial, the tribe had been...way back in the 1700s they migrated down in our area and Mole Lake and to get away from Madeline Island to look for more food for our people and more areas. There was a lot of rice on the lakes in our area, so the runners went back to Madeline Island, told the people up there...our band followed the trails down there to Mole Lake area, and that's where we've been for the rice. Myself, the first time I was ricing in my life was in '58 with my Uncle Ray. I wasn't strong enough to really pull around it, in the boat, but I tried anyways, and he taught me how to do stuff. He taught me how to do ricing with sticks, and I did that the first year and got 5 or 10 pounds learning how to do it, but to me that was a lot. I was young, but that's how I learned growing up, listening to people talk about it in the household everyday and during winter, stories, and why we do things, the rice, you know. For quite awhile I was taught...handed down from my father and mother how to make it up, roast it, dance it, those things like that we had to do.

Our relationship to everything in nature, if you live in nature, you have a feeling for everything out there. The trees, the water, the marsh, lakes, those things all have what they call spirits, to me, all the things on the earth. To use everything you need, you have to look at it as a spiritual harvesting tool. You're not only taking the plant or something on earth, you're taking part of the spirit with it and those are important parts to remember when we're harvesting, that's how we have things come back to us all the time by respecting it, and respecting the spirits behind it, not so much is worshipping the spirit you know, but being side by side with the trees, or the plants, or the animals their spirits, and we're all worshipping the great spirit. They give us all life here, so we respect the other plants, or the fish, or the deer, rice, in a spiritual way, because we believe also what you consume they're giving their spirit too in our bodies to help us along, because there's a real strong spiritual tie between everything on the land and the people

here. When they (human beings) have a tendency of separating themselves from the earth, they think we're separate, but we're really part of the earth. You can just walk on it. You have that luxury. When our time comes to leave this earth, we go back, our spirits go on, and our body goes back to the earth. So you're never apart from mother earth. That's how I feel about it. Everything on earth, you're equal to, and we're all under the power of the spirit, the Great Spirit.

One thing about the resources I had to learn was, only take enough of what you need for your own need, your own use. If you take anymore, if you're lucky and get more than what you need, you're suppose to give that to other people. Share throughout the year. That way, you respect everything and always the thought of only take what you need. When you do that, then you're respecting everything on earth. Your life is a lot better that way, I believe, by doing that.

There was a story I heard, an old guy, he told me to watch the birds, so I watched the birds on my lake and what they do is...when the birds are eating, or it's going to rain, the birds sing along. When they do that they're doing the same thing we do as human beings, so we copy the birds, the Anishinaabe people, the binesi manitou, as you know.

I was at LCO two months ago for work, and at break time I went outside to have a cigarette, and all these little birds were on the ground around me. They were picking up these seeds that were blowing off these flowers or plants next to the parking lot. They were picking them up and dancing around, and they were singing chirping away like a little bitty melody. They moved around like a little dance and picked up all of the seeds, and my first thought was when I was... from this older person, that when you see those birds doing that, they're praying. They're thanking the creator for giving them food, taking care of them, the water, and the air they need. When they do that it goes around for them. So whenever you see birds now, you think about it, because they never have to plant seeds, corn, anything like we do. The creator, nature, provides it for them as long as they keep praying and dancing and singing thanking the creator for what he's giving them. Man should take a look at that nowadays. They would think a little bit different how they look at the resources. It's not just looking at it for the monetary value, but also what the teachings and the learning you can get from nature.

There's a thing right now where the eagles, migiizis, they were dying out, that was a man made disaster to their people, the birds. They stopped spraying those chemicals on plants along the roadways and the eagles are coming back now. I just heard last week that they were taking them off the endangered species list. But I think we have a lot to worry and watch out for

because the eagle, they're a bird, they mostly eat fish, they're good fishermen, eagles. When they eat the fish they're expecting that fish to be clean. They don't know about mercury or chemicals or heavy metals in the water. They just eat the fish. If that keeps on going, if they keep eating polluted fish, there's not going to be the DDT, what they sprayed on the roads the chemicals or the killing the plants, it's going to be something else that's going to kill them, what's in the water, mercury, metals. I can't imagine what it would be for in the future if the eagles were gone, when we have to use their feathers for our ceremonies. I don't know what I'm going to do if there are no more feathers around to use for what the Indian people would use. What bird would carry our prayers to the creator if that was the one the creator selected?

So we have to watch out for everything in the environment, and we have to watch out for the animals. If you pay attention to them, you'll see they'll give you a message if the environment is good or if the environments bad. In my house there's a lot of snakes around this year. These young boys that come over and visit us go out and have fun catching these snakes. A lot of people don't want that. They say, "get those snakes away from my house." But to me, that's telling me the environment is good on the ground, because them snakes are alive. There was a time in my village where these pine snakes weren't around anymore, now they've coming back. So that's telling me the environment is good around us, because the frogs, snakes, the fish, the eagles, they all give you the signs.

There was a thing I heard about mining. This guy said that they use to take a canary down in the mine with them. They watched these birds down there in the mineshafts. If the birds dropped over they knew that some kind of gas was coming out, and they might as well pull out of there, because they would die too. It's the same thing in life for Indian people. If you watch up and they say... the birds, they will show you if nature and everything else in nature... they will show you that something is going wrong.

There was a story way back, I heard in the... Anishinaabe people about the roses. The rose is a wild rose, our people got so vain I guess in our life, that we quit looking at that wild rose and the wild rose left us. So those were stories that were long before we looked about the pollution on the earth...what we're doing now to have a living. We also have to, in our minds, give up that part... that's going to take the other things from us is man, just like they took the wild rose from us at that time. So now, what those roses do is a very powerful thing. To give it to a woman, she'll feel good about it because of the flowers, so we got to respect them, just like

when we forgot one time about the roses.

Yeah, there were songs that they sang for dancing it, giving thanks to the creator, pow wow, our dances. How could I translate it? They're hymns. Say somebody is out there fanning their rice, waving it in the wind, cleaning it out. They sing their little song. You bring in the wind; you bring in the motions of everything, the heat, sun, all that, you sing about that. When you dance it, you're asking the plant to give up its fruit, so you dance on it gentle. Good dancers, traditional Indian dancers, they don't stomp their feet on the ground. They're real light when they dance. Just like we dance rice, because we don't want to break the kernels. You got to get the husk off without breaking the kernels, so you got to dance real light. You got to be related, thinking in your mind and your body and that's when we sing that song. Those things, when you think about it, you're asking that plant for help all the way through and that's what those songs are. They're hymns to the plant and to the great spirit to know that we're giving thanks for everything, the nourishment and everything they're doing for us and that's why we're asking that plant or the animal, whatever you take, to give up their life, and we respect that. When you go out and waste it, then you're being disrespectful, then you get other things that happen to you, because you forget about the great spirit who placed everything here on the earth including man.

It's set up like this, there's the earth and the sky, earth and the sky. When the drum starts the vibration from that drum goes up and goes down, and that beat of the drum, when the song comes out, they're singing to the higher spirits. When you're dancing you move your feet on the ground. You're letting mother earth know you're respecting her. So all this talk when I was dancing when I was young...always dance light on the earth, that's your mother, respect her. That's the difference between a good traditional dancer and a person who's just out there trying to show, you can see by their feet. A good traditional dancer man or woman is real light on their toes. There's one basic thing why they do that, so you don't wear out your moccasins. So protecting, but you're also respecting your mother earth when you tap on her real lightly with your feet. So the four layers on the earth will hear you and the four layers in the sky will hear you and great spirit hears all and that's what it's about, the dancing, the drumming, and the singing. So you connect everything around the world this way and that way in the spirit world too. So everything is connected there and that's what you're doing when you dance and sing. You're really praying to give thanks for what you've received. No matter if it's maybe a child or mourn a member of the family, or child, or food, you may give here... or people that prepare the

food for you, whatever you're asking for, all your thanks is what you give.

Well the greatest thing I think of what happened...what goes on today is because of years back when people first started coming over here from Europe. They used the waterways they also used the waterways for transportation. Also, to make products, they had the water for their meals, to grind grain, or and water for industry maybe like mining for one. It takes a tremendous amount of chemicals and water to wash ore so you can get to the gold and silver. Separate the ore; you have to pour sulfuric acid in water to do that. Then, you pour your ore and it's washed out. Once you do that you ruin the water. The same way with steam boats in the old days coming up from the Mississippi or Lake Superior. They gave out pollution too and started killing fish way back before they even signed the treaties yet.

The Indian people in their negotiations talked about how development would ruin the resources, it takes away the Indians way of life and work. When the fish were gone the Indian couldn't work there any more. When the rice is gone they can't work there any more. When the deer are gone they can't work there any more. All other animals and plants, they can't work there.

There was enough ginseng in my area way back not too long ago now, 1900, before they cut all the trees down, the hardwoods from Mole Lake to Lac Vieux Desert(?). People walked side by side all the way up there picking the mature ginseng. They grew for a long time that way year after year. The Indian people had that medicine they use nowadays. I was told they got nine dollars a pound from walking from Mole Lake to Lac Vieux Desert(?) under a canopy of hardwoods. You go through that area now, ya, there's Nicollet Forest, there's trees there, but not like the old days, because all the big trees are gone. Once they cut the hardwoods off, then the ginseng died out too. You can walk all the way up there now and maybe you're lucky to find a couple plants of ginseng in the forest. Yet, when my grandfather and their generation around 1920, 1900... they could walk from Mole Lake and pick that ginseng and it grew here.

They didn't have to plow the field or put all these covers over it like you see now, how the farmers are doing ginseng, because nature did that. It's hard, for that kind of work. It's hard to fence out an area in the forest and say, "That's my ginseng. I planted it there. I'm going to harvest it, nobody else can. I'm going to make the money." see there's the difference.

So nowadays they cut down all the trees, cut the whole field down, plant ginseng, cut trees down to make a covering for the plants so they have shade, so they can grow. Then they ruin all of the earth, you can never farm there again, those kinds of things for productivity and

money value on the plants. You give up and you grow other things on the earth, you get that money. No consideration for all the other stuff around here or the next generation or your grandchildren being able to plow that up again, where that ginseng is growing and plant corn there in the future, because you can't. Once you plant that ginseng that way you draw all the nutrients out of that soil and it's no good. So those are some of the things that happen sometimes.

I could go on and on about other things but you see where the greed and the money and the daily things, how we... the monetary value of our life, we have to give up other things to get that, and then when it becomes important for men and women other things are gone. Now if you need medicine and it was growing there... once your body is hurting and you might need that medicine and if it's gone... Whatever God gave us is good for us. It's up to us to take care of it and keep it good.

Health, health and life, scientifically it has been proven that indigenous people have to have their chemicals that they have been eating all these thousands of years and to take that away your going to kill them people. Right now, my life... I'm fifty years old I talked about my teeth, if I would have been lucky enough to have been staying with my grandmother on the reservation around the woods all my life and eat the same things they ate, my teeth wouldn't fall out. I eat this white sugar and they're gone. My whole body is deteriorating.

Other things... that native diet... scientifically they know, scientifically they know that we need them indigenous things, the plants, the animals, everything, the fish, water, for us to have a healthy body. Nowadays, Indian health statistics nation wide...the Indian people are not very healthy. They're blaming other things on our way of life, personal thoughts in life you know, but their not looking at changing over from buffalo to beef and what that did to their bodies, the people, why not allowing me to eat fish and the rice and getting the plants I need as food to go along with them things, seasoning, whatever we use...Then, they're not keeping me healthy. Scientifically they know that that's wrong.

Nowadays, people like to say well, "Eat a hamburger, eat a pizza," then my body gets harmed, because I don't have them same chemicals as an Anglo person does in my body. I get conflict, because I'm part Anglo and part Anishinaabe. This stuff, say the pizza, doesn't hurt me so much, but for my brother who's got more blood in him, it might hurt him. I'm getting hurt too, but I'm a mixture. I'm a new person on earth. It's important for me to have that what I'm original from. We were all placed on the earth by the creator. We didn't appear or come out through

monkeys and all that. We're placed here as human beings just like everything else that was placed here, the plants, the water, everything. I've got to have that, it's more important for me to have my diet and what goes along for thousands of years in my body, and to take that away, it puts other chemicals in there that are going to mix it up and mess it all up.

Then, you find out what I'm finding out by doing that. I ruined my own... not from... they say by smoking cigarettes or them, but from the diet I had in my life. Eating a hamburger and fries and then going to work ten hours a day, riding back and forth, that kind of life driving in the car. Those things all compile why we get cancer, why we die early, heart disease, diabetes, all them things, because of the life. To get that, the money, you waste all your health and everything when you drive by the plants to work. To go to another plant to make money you drive by all these other plants on the ground and ignore them. Then, when you get sick you go to the doctor or the pharmacy guy, who gives you some chemicals to take when maybe you could just pick it up off the ground if you knew about it That way they're keeping their secrets so you have to pay them for it. When the creator gave you that knowledge already. You open your ears and your eyes and your heart to see it and hear it. That's what counts.

That's why the fish and the rice are still important to me; I've got grandchildren now they have the same blood I've got in me. My same kind of body make up and everything, features, and it's going to be important for their bodies and their health, I know. I went to school, I can understand some of the scientific thoughts and the warnings and I know if they don't have that diet they're going to be weak too. And then my race is going to be weaker and weaker healthwise, like it is now. Right now we're just starting to get back up our health and get back into a lot of people with native medicines from the day when people... and other things that we try.

Me, I learned from my grandmother. I wish I would have learned and listened more when I was younger, but the basic things I know are there, they're still there. I can still go out in the field, or out in the woods with my tobacco asking in the right way what I want to do with it, I'll get my reward. If I don't do that then I'm just...I'm lost as a human being. I'm what you call a spiritless person on earth just going day by day and I'm lost, and I'm weak health wise every generation, and before you know it, you're eliminated, so if you don't have this diet, you know... I think that's what the people tried with this...to the fellow Indian people. "Oh, you can't do this no more and you can't hunt deer no more and you can't hunt the buffalo no more. You can't go

get this no more or fish you can't go netting you can't go this and that.” They knew by taking that food from us that was killing us, and now we’ve got it back, where our people can go back out there.