

Frank Montano, Red Cliff Ojibwe, Wisconsin

Frank Montano, a teacher and flute player from Red Cliff, speaks about the spiritual relationship of people with the land, his personal experiences, teachings from the elders, values and songs.

There were some things that were shown to me at different times, and these were shown to me through visions and dreams. One of the things that were shown to me kind of deals with how this relationship exists, and a lot of us never really realize that. I was given permission in this vision by this spirit to share that.

This was a spirit that comes to me and has been with me, she told me that it was a grandmother. She came into this vision and she said to me, she said, "(Ojibwe)," she said, "Come here," and I said, "Yes grandmother, what do you want?" I went to her, and she said, "I've been watching you for your whole life, and I like the things that you're doing. I like the way you've grown and how things are going you know, all the things that you're helping people with," and she said, "In your own words I want you to answer a question for me." She said, "You're always talking about respect," she said, "What does that word mean?" I stood there for a long time, and I couldn't think of what that word meant, what she wanted to hear. I said, "I'm sorry, I can't explain it to you. I don't know what you want to hear." She said, "I'm going to show you."

She said, "Pick up that piece of wood on the ground there." And I picked up that piece of wood that was laying there, and I said, "Yes now." And she said, "Look at that, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a piece of wood from a tree that was alive." And she said, "No, no, no, that's not what that is." She said, "Look at it again." And she pointed at it, and when she did I looked at it. I could see inside of it. I could see life. I could see universes of life. They got smaller and smaller and they were inside of each other, and each one had all this life in it. She said, "That's what that is. Just because it's off a tree and it doesn't look like it's alive," she said, "It's still alive."

She said, "Look up in the sky up there, what do you see?" I said, "I see clouds and I see these planets and maybe there's life on them." And she said "No, look up there again." She did that and up that way it was the same thing. It was universes of life inside of universes, and it got bigger and bigger. She looked at me again and she said, "Do you think that you and all these

people that live here are the center of all this? That the Great Spirit would stop and put you right there and build everything for you and around you?" She said, "No, you're just a little part of that whole thing." She said, "Everything is alive, the earth is alive, and they all have an intelligence and they all exist in that same way."

She said, "Whenever you step on the ground and the things you step on, you're changing that." She said, "Whenever you do anything you change that." She said, "Look at your hand." When I looked at my hand, and she says, "Look good at it." She made me see inside of my hand, and inside of there I saw all these life forms that were moving. They were all alive. She said, "So whenever you do anything to your body even, you're not just doing it to your body, you're changing all those things." She said, "It's all part of that circle." And she said, "At this time," (this was two years ago) "it's very important for people to think about that, people all over in this place that you live," she said, "they need to think about that, because things are coming that are going to be very hard and we need to think about this word respect and what it means, and we take and treat each other certain ways, and we treat plants and animals in all these things that way," she said, "That effects us all."

She said, "And I want you to tell people about this." And I started to cry, and I kind of fell down there, and I said, "I never thought about that." She said, "That's OK, that's OK. Now you know. Once you know, then that responsibility is yours." So she said, "I'm not going to say anymore." and she left.

To me that tells me that a long time ago, before people traveled long distances, you know, from one country to another and people that existed in those places, our people here that existed, that they had a closer connection to all of those forms of life that exist. For some reason along the way, a lot of us have tried to remove ourselves from that and forget that. Now, of course, with all the things we have now, it's easy to do that. But that's what all these things are about the sicknesses and the medicines that we look at when we look at plants.

The more I learn about these things, the more I realize we can't exist without, truly and healthy in this world, we can't exist without acknowledging that if we pick a plant, talk to it. If we pick that for medicine, talk to it. Talk to that group of plants. Talk to that tree and ask all these different spirits for help that are there because the plants have their own spirits, the trees have their spirits, rocks, all these things. That's what our people, the knowledge they were given along time ago -- and a lot of us are, some never -- its been handed down, but a lot of us had to

search in other ways to get it, to learn it again, to bring it back.

I feel that this -- and this is just my point of view on these things -- I feel that this is a very important part of our connection. Each group of people had a language and within that language were all these different parts that gave us an easier path to communicate with the spirits of these plants, the spirits of the creator. In Ojibwe, of course, we're learning, we're relearning these things again. Some of it comes from sacrificing. Of course it always usually helps a lot if we do sacrifice for these things. If we fast for language, if we need help -- we need help from not other people, sometimes we need help from spirits for if we're sick, we ask for it; if we want other things, we also can do that for -- the language is one.

Some of the people that I know have excelled rapidly, that is the path they took, and it does help to acknowledge that the language is very important even if it's just a few words.

One of the elders told me, "Try not to always apologize. If you speak, and you're speaking in native language, try not to always apologize for not knowing more than what you know in the language. Just do as good as you can. Even if you know a couple words, it shows that you're trying." So, it's important, the language is an important part of it.

As we get older, of course, it's like this saying about the old dog: It's really hard to teach an old dog new tricks. But old dogs can learn, too, if we just kind of go back and remember we're still all those ages that we always were. We're still young, we might look old, but we still have a young mind inside if we think that way. It's when we start thinking we're old that's when we can't learn anymore. One of the elders here, that is gone, told his daughter one time -- she said, "Thank you for helping me grow up." And he said, "I'm glad you grew up. I never did, and I never want to." She said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "When we think we're all grown up, then we can't learn anything anymore." So that's important to keep that in our mind in relation to the language being there. It's there. It's out there. It comes to us in different things. We have books. We have tapes people are making now, and those are helpful. Most of it has to come from inside dreams. When we have dreams, a lot of the times they talk in the language, and we understand. So when we do the best we can, that's what, I think, that's what's important.

So when we talk about music and how it relates to a specific group of people, such as our native culture our native people, sometimes people that are not of the native culture, or even ones that have not been exposed to our traditional music our drum music our flute music, sometimes they have this different idea of what music is suppose to be. The music that we're taught in

school is not necessarily the same because in our music our drum music and our flute music and the things we do with our voice a lot of times again, it's a real spiritual connection, it's a connection that is, you know, everything in our traditional way of life is connected with spirit with spiritual reasons.

People I've had come up at pow wows that maybe were there for the first time and never heard that kind of music before. They will ask, "That doesn't make any sense. What are they doing? They're just singing, they're just hollering." When some of the songs don't have even native words, some have what we call vocables. What I was taught about that was that the songs even with just the sounds, are an attempt by the people that are doing it to communicate with these different levels of spirits. How they look at it is from how they were taught about the creation.

When you sing you usually try to start the majority of the songs...the vocal part will start on the highest note that this person that's going to be the lead singer can reach. There are songs that are repeated through ages that were handed down and a majority of them are like that. Somebody will start up in the higher register with their voice, and that takes and acknowledges everything and creation and in the order that it should be acknowledged, paying respect to those spirits starting at the top with the great spirit, who's the creator. And as the song progresses the voice comes down, and it's communicating with say the birds and the other levels of the spirits and how they were created, how we were taught that this creation took place in the beginning. So even the vocables in that way have that meaning that they come down in notes.

The voice is an important part of this communication that takes place with a lot of the, you know, especially our sacred drum songs. The drum itself is another part of it you know, and then of course the name of it just kind of tells you what it means. Once you learn... its name in Ojibwe is *diweagaan*, which means of course heart beat. It has a spirit to it, these drums. The heartbeat that they're speaking of is the heartbeat of the earth, our mother earth. As we use the drum, then we have different patterns that we use on the drum, and these usually represent different ways that our own hearts if we listen to them that they beat at for certain times. Sometimes they beat real fast and sometimes slow, and so when those things happen those vibrations are set up, then the connection there is made with these spirits, the earth spirits, the spirits that are the wind and the rain and the thunders and all those different things. It's these connections that we usually look at when were using these and acknowledge these spirits.

And some of the young people will say when you ask them, “What is the drum about?” Well, they put tobacco on it or they sit around it and smoke a pipe or they do this and they do that. So they're already learning when they're really young. If they're exposed to it, they're already learning these little things, which when they're put together will be the total of what our understanding is, of what exists, this relationship between these spirits that are there with the drum.

One of the elders told me one time, he said, “When you're sitting around a drum, you think about this now: You're sitting around that drum and sitting around that same drum are all these, your mothers and your fathers, if they're not in this world, all the grandmothers and grandfathers. All these different people way back to the beginning are sitting there also, and they're sitting around in the room listening because once we make that journey over into the spirit world and we no longer are connected here with these bodies the physical forms, time ceases to exist. So all these other ones are here sitting here with you in this meeting and singing and communicating. So there are a lot of special things that are involved in learning about the drum and singing with the drum and using the sticks in making the sound of the drum and the vibrations that take place.

Those vibrations also were shown to me like a physical form where you could see vibrations of the drum, vibrations of voices, vibrations, some vibrations of the flutes, circular vibrations that come off of the traditional flutes or any sound flute and how they travel out and how they're absorbed by the people and all things that are around and how that effects those people. And why some of those vibrations cause you to feel calm and why some cause you to feel excited. How it affects you, the vibrations of sound.

It's also with the flutes the songs have different levels. There's a word in music that we learn in school, you see on the paper sometimes, it says, “spirit, with spirit.” The traditional flute songs, I was told that the spirit notes in a flute song, when it is played in the traditional way, we usually flutter the notes up and you hear the high notes come in there consistently along with the lower notes as you're going through the song. The higher notes, when you use your mind and you think about communicating with spirits, the higher notes are a song that's created for the spirits, when the lower notes are a song that's created for life that's here. As you go through these songs, if it's done the way it was intended, then you bring those spirits and those humans or whoever that's there closer together, which creates what we call a healing for the humans that are

there or whoever is there that needs that. So even in different cultures those things that they do with vibrations, voices... I've ran into people that use these overtones, these chants where they use the overtones, some of them can do five different overtones or harmonics at the same time with their voice. There this one particular man used that was when he doctored, and it was amazing to just even here that. So sound is very important and all these things in wellbeing or whatever and communication.

We're still discussing how songs are related to our culture to life. Sometimes, you know, this is probably truer in this age than maybe years back, a lot of the songs are handed from one generation to another, and sometimes it's not even having a contact with someone from the other generation. Sometimes people seek it in other ways because they have modern equipment. Now, some of these things are recorded of course, and someone will listen to some of the recordings that are documented and learn the songs from there, but in a lot of cases you know, even with songs that have come to me, they come through dreams or visions you know, dreams from spirits. Some of these spirits... may even see them as they were when they were physical forms, some of the elders that were living. You might either fast or ask for a song, and they might come to you in a dream and give you this song.

Then of course, if we truly look at it in the way it is, we don't own it. We're given it to share. Nowadays it's easy to fall back onto this thing about I own this song. We're given it to share. If we accept it in a right way, that means we usually have to somehow pay for it in a sense with, you know, traditional sense with maybe tobacco and some food or something, putting it out in the woods and paying for that to the spirit and thanking him for... That way, if someone else wants to use it usually out of respect, if the understanding of it is in the traditional way, they might come to you and then offer some things to you and say, "Can we use that song?" Sometimes it doesn't happen that way because of the way things are today, but a lot of times it does.

One of the things I was shown at one time in a dream was that songs and sounds that come in the beginning of course, come from pure spirit, maybe even right from the great spirit. Then, when we use our physical forms to create the sounds, maybe a drum, maybe our voice, maybe a flute, we start these vibrations, which moves particles in the air and so on. This was shown where this song of the voice or the drum or whatever will travel out of this universe, out of this place we know, travel somewhere and eventually, because all things are in circles, it will

come back, when it comes back, it may be a thousand years, it maybe a hundred years from now. Some of us are in a state of dreaming or are in a state of, you know, what we call a dream state of, or our receptors are, we're able to receive that. So we may be walking along or we may be sleeping maybe somewhere, and this will come into our head into our mind and we'll stop and we'll say, "I just had a wonderful idea for a beautiful song," and we'll start doing it.

Someone that is familiar with that song from before will say, "Where did you get that?" "Well, I just thought of it." Well no, that's a song from along time ago, you see. So what it was shown was that these things are just like everything else in life, they travel in circles even as songs, songs that are created, and they come back.

Just as a knowledge that we always seem to be concerned about, that it is going to be lost. And knowledge of an elder, a lot of the knowledge of the elders came from spirits. So when someone is ready to receive that knowledge, whether that elder is alive or not, whether it's documented on a piece of magnetic tape or whatever, the way that person will get that knowledge will be through spirits. So the beginning is how it usually comes back again through that spiritual part. Our traditional way is very connected, the traditional way of life is very spiritually connected, everything is connected, looking at spirits, a spiritual way of existing here is how things are.