



# Living in Balance:

## A Lakota and Mohawk Dialogue

***Martin Brokenleg & Adrienne Brant James***

For thousands of years, tribal peoples of North America sought to create societies where humans lived in harmony with one another and in balance with all of nature. The authors share wisdom from two Native traditions of how ageless values of respect and cooperation are essential to peace and well-being in our time.

**Martin:** The most often repeated phrase in Lakota ceremonies and life is *Mitakuye Owas'in*, literally translated as, “My relatives, you-all [are].” This is mostly glossed into English as “All my relations.” This naturally raises the question of to whom this is said. The answer is: to all things. To human beings and to other nations—some are four-legged, some fly, some swim. It is spoken to the sky, sun, stars, winds, plants, trees, and stone. It is said to all those in the spirit world, one’s ancestors, and even to those not yet born. These are all my relatives. My

kinfolk include all things animate and inanimate, visible and invisible, sentient and not. My task as a Lakota is to relate to all of them, to be a good relative so they will be good relatives to me.

**Adrienne:** That is so much like the Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse), where my nation, the Mohawk, are elder brothers to the Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. At the beginning and at the end of all of our ceremonies we review the “Words that come before all else,” which we call our

Thanksgiving address. Simply put, we acknowledge all of our relatives—the same as you have just identified—and thank them for what they bring to the circle to help human beings live.

**Martin:** I have heard about those words before. Whether Lakota, Haudenosaunee, or any other beings, the basis for good kin relationships is what anthropologists call reciprocity. What goes over will come back. If a person—human or otherwise—does a good thing for me, then I must do a good thing for that one at my first opportunity. If I take something in order to survive, then I must return something to re-balance the relationship. All good relationships are strong if reciprocity is observed. In human friendships, each participant must contribute something to the other if the friendship is to endure.

**Adrienne:** That is also a big part of why we talk so much about the circle—what goes around comes around—a never-ending cycle of giving, receiving, and sharing responsibilities.

**Martin:** Yes, indeed! If I take something out of my need, I must return a favour. If I go out to pick prairie sage for a ceremony, when I have gathered what I need, I must give something to the Grey Grass nation for helping me. I will probably give a handful of tobacco or maybe leave a coin on the ground near the gathering spot. If I have taken the life of a deer for food, I must thank the deer for giving me his life. This is reciprocity; when something comes to me, I should give back. Lakota ceremonial customs are based on reciprocity with the spirit world. In a pipe ceremony, I would give tobacco smoke and prayer in order to have spiritual power returned to me. In a sun dance, I offer my suffering and prayer, so life and power will be returned to me and my relatives.

### ***Life is always circular and cyclical—not linear.***

**Adrienne:** That reminds me of your earlier comment about the spirit of our ancestors. When the Haudenosaunee conduct a ceremony in which food is served, we put a plate of food in a place of honor—the spirit plate, we call it—to nourish the spirits of those who have walked on.

This is a reminder that we function not only in circles, we also live in cycles. Intergenerational, for instance, when commemorating our ancestors or our children. Seasonal, like the cyclical changes in weather—spring, summer, fall, and winter. Birthdays, special events, or other days of remembrance. These are all occasions when we re-balance by recycling the past as we celebrate the present and

think to the future. Life is always circular and cyclical—not linear. Our challenge to maintain personal balance must reflect the fluctuating and circular context with which we interact.

**Martin:** Since we experience Mother Earth as a living being, we are acutely aware of the necessity of reciprocity with her and all life. I was once talking with an elder who commented on the aspen trees we were seeing in the Black Hills. She said she did not see trees like that where she lived in the prairie. I anticipated her response but asked her anyway if she wanted some of the leaves from that tree to take home and show others. She said, “No, that wouldn’t be respectful.” She meant respectful of the tree. Our mentality is that we should only take what we need to survive for the next cycle. We need food to get through the winter, so we take only that much. We trust that there will be enough food the next year.

**Adrienne:** Yet that trust is not blind. We also know that in taking care of Mother Earth, in respecting her needs, we are helping her maintain balance so that the next cycle will provide for all. With regard to the future Native peoples, we recognize that our decisions impact all life. So we follow the “seven generations” rule: when we make collective decisions, we do so while considering that our decisions will affect generations to follow. We must think of balance not just for the present but also for the future, including the faces yet to come.

**Martin:** We have been talking about our culture and traditions in very personal terms. If I am a bad relative and do not keep helping my relatives, eventually they will not help me when I am in need. Then it might be said of me that I live as though I had no relatives, the harshest condemnation a Lakota can experience. If I am a good relative, then everyone knows that I will do my part, and others will always be willing to help and support me.

**Adrienne:** Within the circle then, these bonds, trust, and strengths extend from you to me, from us to the relatives with whom we are in close proximity, and from them to all others within the family, clan, or nation. In this way, peaceful communities and nations are created, nourished, maintained, and strengthened.

**Martin:** So it is. In relationship to the earth, we Lakota experience her as a living being. Because she gives us so many things, we understand her as our mother. To show our kinship and our respect, we observe many customs. We take from her only what we need to survive. We mark every change of season, month, day, and year with ceremony. We welcome back the Thunders to begin the summer season. We observe new moons and full moons. We carefully observe every requirement of reciprocity on earth so that we remain good relatives, and she nurtures us as a mother. Should we not be a good relative to her, who knows what the outcome will be? We reflect on the many times she has cleansed some region because of human failings.

**Adrienne:** I am reminded in this regard of a very good documentary that I saw on television recently on the Dust Bowl. That terrible event did not come about just by accident. Human beings contributed to it by not respecting the nature of the land. Methods of farming they brought with them were not

conducive to maintaining the life-supporting powers of this particular land. Mother Earth reacted with the dust bowl.

At this moment, we are doing things to Mother Earth and Father Sky with very little acknowledgement of the impact we are having. Tar sands oil, fracking, emission of carbon dioxide and other noxious elements into our air and water are common. We try to change the course of rivers only to find that we cannot really do that without very negative consequences. When we blast our way into Mother Earth and we pull out things we want to use—like oil and gas—what are we doing to replace the supportive structure that we have destroyed? Where is the reciprocity? How do we know what impact these dramatic changes wrought by man will have? We know that Nature abhors a vacuum. What will Mother Earth do?

**Martin:** One of the tragedies—and hopefully it is not beyond repair—is that in coming to North America in pursuit of freedom or for other reasons, too many immigrants did not realize two important things. First, the land and the culture they were coming to was not the same as the land and culture they had left. Second, the people of this land—human and otherwise—lived respectfully and cooperatively with Mother Earth for thousands of years in peace and reciprocity. Together they nourished and protected a land of natural bounty and promise.

**Adrienne:** Unfortunately, human and government mentality changed then from the Native view of reciprocity among all forms of life to the Western European concept that our West was “wild” and needed to be conquered. The newly-arrived too often brought an attitude of disrespect and superiority which led to destruction, genocide, and environmental conditions which now challenge our very survival.



**Martin:** As we reflect on the theme of this dialogue, vital balance, I remember vividly how Larry Brendtro, Steve Van Bockern, and I (2002) came together at Augustana College to describe the Circle of Courage. Our initial discussions grew from a kinship we had developed as colleagues and an understanding about views we shared with respect to the care and development of children and youth “at risk.” We came from Norwegian, Danish, and Lakota heritages, respectively, and the collegial setting encouraged and facilitated reciprocity. The result was a theoretical foundation based on experience, education, and research, in which a key ingredient was identifying the path to the right balance among the four needs we had identified as essential components of life: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity.



**Adrienne:** We have written this in the style of our Native teachers. We learned these things from words shared and from watching our elders and others around us. We have not cited many written sources in the usual Western style for they are far too abundant to select the most significant from among them. We must recognize that most of the written history of North America, especially with respect to its indigenous and original inhabitants, has been written by anthropologists and archeologists. They relied upon observation

and study produced through “digs” and second and third-hand narratives usually based on relatively unreliable language translations. They were startled and amazed by the architectural and engineering structures and trading centers built by Natives—and by the wonderful child care system that was evident.

### ***All good relationships are strong if reciprocity is observed.***

Written materials from indigenous, directly-knowledgeable participants in their own culture have been slow to achieve recognition, becoming more visible starting in the 1950s and continuing. Two notable exceptions with respect to merging indigenous and Western child and youth development views are especially significant: Erik Erikson, whose life cycle theories and the eight stages of man evolved from his direct experience with and observation of the Lakota and Yurok, and Abraham Maslow, whose hierarchy of needs model was influenced and corroborated by his direct involvement with the Blackfoot tribe. Maslow described the Blackfoot “good society” as “like creating an oasis in the desert.” (Maslow, 1993, p. 228). So, with that enticement, we offer other articles and books for the interested reader.

**Martin:** We note, also, that as Native people acquire more training in Western academic ways, they have learned to describe their work in terms commensurate with modern sociology, psychology, and education. Science has become a watchword. In this regard, we note the work of Gregory Cajete as symbolically representative of Native steps in bringing about a reciprocal interaction between Native worldview and Western science. His book is called *Native Science, Natural Laws of Interdependence*.

As Dr. Cajete, who is Tewa, Santa Clara Pueblo, notes: “Native science is a metaphor for a wide range of tribal processes of perceiving, thinking,

acting, and ‘coming to know’ that have evolved through human experience with the natural world” (Cajete, 2000, p. 2). After describing the functions of the medicine wheel in Lakota practices, he cites the foundational premises and realities of Native worldview as follows: “natural democracy must prevail; everything is related; all relationships have a natural history; native science orients itself to a space and a place, and everything has a time and an evolutionary path” (Cajete, 2000, p. 77).

Westerners must respect and reciprocate by incorporating indigenous worldview into their thinking: concepts such as circular, cyclical, definitions of life, relationship with the cosmos, kinship, recognition of ecology, mutual respect, and acknowledgement of the contributions of Native people to contemporary life. We need to recognize also that all human beings came originally from indigenous roots. That common factor can be a step toward strengthening kinship feelings and attitudes.

***For it is only by maintaining balance—within the self and within the world’s communities—that we all survive in a good and healthy way.***

**Adrienne:** This dialogue reflects our basic view of the meaning of vital balance from a Lakota and Mohawk perspective. Vital balance as discussed here is an essential, life-sustaining, steady and upright position to promote harmony, equipoise, or equilibrium (i.e., a balance of forces or interests).

We do not purport to represent the worldview of all Natives of North America, but we do suggest that there is a commonality of perspective among such peoples that contains knowledge and experience useful to all who inhabit Mother Earth. We believe in reciprocity. When we take, we also give. For it is only by maintaining balance—within the self and within the world’s communities—that we all survive in a good and healthy way.

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