HOME IS HERE

Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole

I had no money, no credit. There was no work on the reserve I could make money at. Once again, I was just another damn Indian. I had fallen back into survival, Indian style. What that means is that you work—sometimes you work like hell—but you're not an employee and you don't get paid money. You get paid in a different way—satisfactions, I suppose you'd call them—the good feeling of your body coming together with hard work, the good feeling of your life coming together because all the non-essentials have fallen away and the whole thing is just simple, very simple and primary. There's a direct line between your head and your hands and your belly. Money, the middleman of survival, has been eliminated. Everything you do is directly related to survival: the wood you cut, the water you draw, the garden you plant, the berries you pick, the fish you catch—and that's your life. And that was our life, but not all of it. There was another element in our survival: the people.

Every day somebody would drop in—some woman would drop in and say, "Well, we had this soup last night. If you want it, it's left over. There's enough there for three or four people, but I can't heat it up now because there's eight of us." And there were three of us, so we'd have soup. Or somebody'd drop in with potatoes, or after they'd made bread: "I want you to try my bread." And every day they came. It had nothing to do with them wanting us to try their bread. They were feeding us. And it wasn't just kindness or thoughtfulness, not charity. It was a way of life, or survival. They sustained us because, with Indians, if the community doesn't survive, no one survives.

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I've come home dozens of times, hundreds of times, and no one has ever asked me where I came from or what I'm doing now or where I'm living now or how much money I make or what sort of job I have or any of these questions which are so common in white society. What that means is that the people in that community don't place any importance on these things. They like me and love me as I like and love them, and when I come home they are happy to see me and they don't see anyone except Wilf, who was once a little boy and who's now older and bigger and a man, but who is still Wilf, really unchanged. I haven't become anything, I'm not somebody; I'm just who I always was—Wilf. I don't have to account for myself, I don't have to impress anyone, I don't have to explain myself, I don't have to do anything. I'm allowed just to be, and that is the greatest freedom I know. That is what I mean when I say I've come home. And that is life, total life. And that is the world. There isn't anything outside of that.

Yeah, that's all there is except that one other thing, and that one other thing—I don't know what it is. It can be called "the job," or I guess it could be given lots of names. Anyway, there are hundreds of Indian people like me who go home, but only for a few days, a weekend or whatever, and then they go back to that job. They're a toolmaker or a student or a factory worker or something; they leave and go back to that job. Even though the reserve is all there is. And I don't know...oh, I can talk about economic necessity, the need to survive and so on, and there aren't any jobs on the reserve so you have to go outside to find a job. All that. But I know that doesn't explain it. You're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Everyone has to decide for himself what poverty is, what survival is—to be rich in relationships and poor in possessions, or the other way around. For Indians, it seems to be a choice between staying home and having very little (which is really everything) and going away in order to achieve relative

affluence (which is nothing). I do know that the whole thing I'm talking about of going home, that's what religion is all about. Those people want to go home, all the people in the world. And I wonder...I don't think there are very many who get home any more through organized religion because the people who are trying to lead the way don't know where they're going. What I mean by going home is finding your own people—not just your blood relations, your *whole* family, wherever they may be anywhere in the world. And I guess that means recognition: knowing the members of your family at a glance and having them know you. People who accept you without question. Because if your medium of exchange is not love, you can't survive.

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...So I was lost before I was thirty years old, wandering around in a fog of half-truths and falsehoods. I knew that, but I didn't know what to do about it—where to go or how to get out of it. Then one day I came smack bang into reality. I suppose it sounds silly, but what happened was that I saw a dandelion. Here I was, a middle-aged man surrounded with dandelions all my life. Then I saw one. But there was nothing that stood between me and that dandelion, that's what I mean: no classifications, no categories, no words, not even the word "dandelion." Nothing. And that dandelion was not just a thing, one of a million yellow things that were bright and pretty and very common. That dandelion was a being, a living being that accepted and included me totally. I felt like I was standing in the center of the sun with those cool yellow petals going out from my feet and away into the distance forever.

I said I saw a dandelion for the first time. But it really wasn't the first time. I learned that too because there was a flash of remembrance in that experience—no when or where, just a flash— but enough so I knew that when I was a very young child I lived in that reality all the time. Those remembrances of reality began to happen to me more and more often and they were all about just simple things, really very little simple things, and none of them ever lasted very long. But they were what I lived for.

I suppose lots of people have experiences which actualize their identity, their totality. Experiences of oneness with the earth. I remember hearing a man singing in the middle of the night. Everyone was asleep, and way off somewhere he was singing. Indian singing—chanting. He had no drum, just the voice. And the voice seemed to go down into the earth, and shake the earth and come up into me. And that experience was an experience of oneness. I've had that experience, too, hearing a wolf howling, and like the Indian singing, the song of the wolf has no words. And the feeling it gives me also has no words.

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Then I took a look around. I saw city halls, courthouses, houses of parliament, churches, schools, and universities by the hundreds and thousands. I saw systems—systems for managing the land, the air, and the water; systems for managing human behavior; systems for managing religion; systems for managing learning; systems for managing food, shelter, clothing; systems for managing love and procreation: a vast complex of carefully engineered systems. I saw millions of people working, not for themselves, but for someone else. I saw millions of people doing, not what they themselves want to do, but what someone else wants them to do. I saw the depressing evidence of a people who have externalized and institutionalized—in fact, have tried to standardize—the very nature of humanity. I saw a whole people who've lost the way of life and in its place have built a mechanical monster which does most of their hard work, carries their water, delivers their food, raises their kids, makes their decisions, says their prayers, transports them, "informs" them, entertains them, and controls the people it serves, absolutely. I also saw that the monster, unable to manage itself, was running wild, totally out of control, ripping the land to pieces, spreading poisons, filling the air with filth, dumping garbage and shit in the rivers and lakes and oceans. I saw all that, and I saw the people, millions of them, crowded together in cities, living side by side in towns, villages, rural areas. But I didn't see a single community.

Still, I knew of some. There were a few *bona fide* communities left in America, all of them Indian or Eskimo. A community is invisible from the outside—just a collection of people. But from the inside it is a living organism that manages itself. Not engineered, not planned; just growing there—a sort of happening that flourishes or shrivels depending on the climate around it. A community has no institutions, no agencies, no forms of ex-

traneous government, because *there are no departments of activity*. There's only a way of life, and all the activities are just naturally in that flow, all the things that people find it necessary to do in order to survive. In the communities I was thinking of, the people know nothing of Justice or Religion or Education or Equality or Culture or any of those big institutional concepts. Their language has no words of that sort in it.

But the people themselves are just and learned and religious and equal. Those people don't even know they are a community. The word itself has no meaning for them.

Another thing they have no awareness of and certainly no word for, but which I have observed lots of times, is something I have come to call community consciousness. I'm not sure I can describe it except to say it's common ground, a kind of corporate consciousness that is shared by everybody in that community and used by everyone. Maybe the best word for it is "trust"—a kind of trust that people outside that community can hardly imagine and which the people inside that community cannot name. I think it must be closely related to the kind of consciousness you see in a flock of sandpipers. Fifty or sixty individual birds are all packed together into one dense flock and they're going to beat hell, turning this way and that, diving and climbing, cutting around in tight circles, and that flock stays right together, stays the same shape all the time. And not one bird runs into another. Each bird acts, flies, moves like every other bird. The flock behaves as one, one single organism. You can see the same thing in a school of fish and in some swarms of insects, too.

Optimum Scale

If I begin this discussion of the bioregional paradigm with the concept of scale it is because I believe it to be, at bottom, the single critical and decisive dominant of all human constructs, be they buildings, systems, or societies. No work of human ingenuity, however perfect otherwise, can possibly be successful if it is too small or, more to the usual point, too big, just as a door fails if it is too small to get through, a doorknob if it is too large to grasp; just as an economy fails if it is too small to provide shelter as well as food, a government if it is too large to let all its citizens know about and regularly influence its actions.

At the right scale human potential is unleashed, human comprehension magnified, human accomplishment multiplied. I would argue that the optimum scale is the bioregional, not so small as to be powerless and impoverished, not so large as to be ponderous and impervious, a scale at which, at last, human potential can match ecological reality.

— **Kirkpatrick Sale**, *from* **Dwellers in the Land**. *San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1985.*

Now, I don't know how they do that, those creatures, except that *they* don't do it; *it* does it. And I think this same thing, this same sensitivity or alertness or whatever, is present in tribal communities. For one thing, work is shared and produce is shared. People survive together as a group, not as individuals. They aren't into competition. But they aren't into cooperation either—never heard of either of those words. What they do just happens, just flows along. And they're not into organization either; no need for it, because that community is *organic*. Wherever people feel the need to organize it's because the normal condition of their society is dis-organized (not together). But I don't think the Western European way of organizing brings things together anyway, in the sense of human relations. From what I've seen, it usually does just the opposite. It gets things done, but it alienates people.

Let's say the council hall in an Indian community needs a new roof—maybe that would be a good example. Well, everybody knows that. It's been leaking here and there for quite a while and it's getting worse. And people have been talking about it, saying, "I guess the old hall needs a new roof." So all of a sudden one morning here's a guy up on the roof, tearing off the old shingles, and down on the ground there's several bundles of new, hand-split shakes—probably not enough to do the whole job, but enough to make a good start. Then after a while another guy comes along and sees the first guy on the roof. So he comes over and he doesn't say, "What are you doing up here?" because that's obvious, but he may say, "How's she look? Pretty

rotten, I guess." Something like that. Then he takes off, and pretty soon he's back with a hammer or shingle hatchet and maybe some shingle nails or a couple of rolls of tarpaper. By afternoon there's a whole crew working on that roof, a pile of materials building up down there on the ground, kids taking the old shingles away— taking them home for kindling—dogs barking, women bringing cold lemonade and sandwiches. The whole community is involved and there's a lot of fun and laughter. Maybe next day another guy arrives with more bundles of shakes. In two or three days that whole job is finished, and they all end up having a big party in the "new" council hall.

All that because one guy decided to put a new roof on the hall. Now who was that guy? Was he a single isolated individual? Or was he the whole community? How can you tell? No meeting was called, no committees formed, no funds raised. There were no arguments about whether the roof should be covered with aluminum or duroid or tin or shakes and which was the cheapest and which would last the longest and all that. There was no foreman and no-one was hired and nobody questioned that guy's right to rip off the old roof. But there must have been some kind of "organization" going on in all that, because the job got done. It got done a lot quicker than if you hired professionals. And it wasn't work; it was fun.

(From **No Foreign Land: The Biography of a North American Indian**. Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 1973.)

Illustration by David LaChapelle.

Black Values

We need to recognize, I think, that Green values or bioregional values are not something wholly new or limited to native peoples. I know in the black community in my own family history, my roots are in the rural South, and the values that the people that I grew up with in my earliest years were bioregional. Ours was a politics, an economics, a lifestyle of place, and a real respect for the whole community, the community of beings—that was the most fundamental experience I had as a child. I experienced everything as connected, everything was related and you were to respect that and live out of that, and also to be humbled by the limits of what you knew. To recognize your own limitations and therefore to act more cautiously or to be responsible about how you lived in the place that you called home. So I think there's a whole tradition in our collective history that we're a part of, that we're growing out of. I think that's true too for rural culture in general. It's a part of Western culture, part of white people's own history that they need to also understand and reclaim.

— **Jeffrey Lewis**, *interview by Paul Cienfuegos and Ellen Rainwalker, from* **NABC III Proceedings**, *1989.*