



Pan-Tribal Confederacy of Indigenous Tribal Nations

The Only Multi-Racial Worldwide Indigenous Confederacy In Existence

A Rewilding Renaissance

*By Jason Godesky
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In 2002, Daniel Quinn, the author of *Ishmael*, gave a speech he called, “The New Renaissance.” He said:

If there are still people here in 200 years, they won’t be living the way we do. I can make that prediction with confidence, because if people go on living the way we do, there won’t be any people here in 200 years.

I can make another prediction with confidence. If there are still people here in 200 years, they won’t be thinking the way we do. I can make that prediction with equal confidence, because if people go on thinking the way we do, then they’ll go on living the way we do—and there won’t be any people here in 200 years.

Quinn draws a parallel to the Renaissance. We call it a rediscovery of classical thought, but in fact, few of the classical thinkers or philosophers would have recognized it. Like us, medieval people expected that people in the future would go on thinking just like them, forever. Pay close attention to our science fiction; yes, they have many interesting gadgets, but they still think the same way we do, value the same things we do, and approach the world the same way we do. None of those things have held constant across human traditions, nor even in our own through time. They have changed, but we, like our medieval forebears, cannot seem to escape the conceit that all that history just tells the story of how they eventually got to us, and here the story ends. We might know, intellectually, that this makes no sense, but that doesn’t stop it from permeating our thoughts as an unspoken assumption.

In the Renaissance, the way people thought and perceived the world changed. It changed in ways that medieval people could not have predicted. As Quinn says, “You could say that if the Middle Ages had been able to predict the Renaissance, then it would have been the Renaissance.”

If you change the way people think, they’ll work out new ways to live. For many years, I put my faith into that, but all too often I saw the process work in reverse. People with “changed minds” still had to pay rent and buy groceries; that meant engaging the economic system, paying taxes, and all that comes with that. Curtis White wrote two articles for *Orion* magazine, first “The Idols of Environmentalism,” and then, “The Ecology of Work,” in which he lays bare the ways in which our very participation in this industrialized, globalized economic system makes us part of the destruction of our homes, the land that gives us life, and ultimately, our families and ourselves. That plunges the “changed mind” into a terrible plight: the realization that what you must do, every day, to survive, wreaks untold destruction on everything you love most. You yearn to change the way you live, but unless you happen to have the

resources to do something about it, what can you really do? How many of us could live with that cognitive dissonance? Not many, I learned; faced with that, nearly everyone I know simply changed their perspective.

“Humans aren’t rational creatures, we’re rationalizing creatures,” a former colleague once said. We like to think that we think things through, come to a logical plan, and act on it. How often do we really do that? How often, by comparison, do we come up with a justification for what we’d already decided to do, for entirely irrational, subconscious reasons? We can change our perspectives and skew our beliefs quite easily, especially when they don’t fit into our daily experience. Derrick Jensen put it exceedingly well:

If your experience—not your philosophy, not your thinking, not your heart, not anything else—if your experience is that your food comes from the grocery store, and water comes from a tap, you will defend to the death the system that brings those to you, because your life depends on it. ... And if your experience is that your water comes from a stream and that your food comes from a landbase, you will defend to the death that stream and that landbase, because your life depends on it.

So, I became a cultural materialist. I saw all the ways in which the material reality that people lived with determined the way they thought and the way they perceived the world. Even the Renaissance views that Quinn pointed to for his example came, as William Catton illustrated so well in his book, *Overshoot*, from “the Age of Exuberance.” Catton writes:

When Columbus set sail, there were roughly 24 acres of Europe per European. Life was a struggle to make the most of insufficient and unreliable resources. After Columbus stumbled upon the lands of an unsuspected hemisphere, and after monarchs and entrepreneurs began to make those lands available for European settlement and exploitation, a total of 120 acres of land per person was available in the expanded European habitat—five times the pre-Columbian figure!

Changelessness had always been the premise of Old World social systems. This sudden and impressive surplus of carrying capacity shattered that premise. In a habitat that now seemed limitless, life could be lived abundantly. The new premise of limitlessness spawned new beliefs, new human relationships, and new behavior. Learning was advanced, and a growing fraction of the population became literate. There was a sufficient per capita increment of leisure to permit more exercise of ingenuity than ever before. Technology progressed, and technological advancement came to be the common meaning of the word “progress.” ...

The people of the Age of Exuberance looked back on the dismal lives of their forebears and pitied them for their “unrealistic” notions about the world, themselves, and the way human beings were meant to live. Instead of recognizing that reality itself had actually changed—and would eventually change again—they congratulated themselves for outgrowing the “superstitions” of ancestors who had seen a different world so differently. While they rejected the old premise of changelessness, they failed to see that their own belief in the permanence of limitlessness was also an overbelief, a superstition.

I experienced this first-hand. When I first attended a wild edibles weekend workshop at Raccoon Creek, I learned about a few edible plants, where to find them, and how to prepare them. It took only that to make me see the world around me in a very different way. People who speak of nature as cruel and uncaring no longer make sense to me. Now, I see abundance even in an abandoned city lot; I see delicious feasts spread before me, for free, mine for the picking. I had read Bradford Angier quote George Leopold Herter in *How to Stay Alive in the Woods*, “It is next to impossible to starve in a

wilderness.” Only then did I understand that statement. My experience had changed. Now, I’d had the experience of my food coming from the land. My relationship to the land changed, too; no longer did my passion come from ethics or aesthetics, but a deeply-felt need to protect myself, my family, and my life.

Because of all of this, I have great respect for the primitive skills groups and gatherings that focus on sharing skills, like how to build a debris shelter, how to start a friction fire, how to use coal-burning to make utensils, bowls, and other tools, how to flintknape and so on. These things change our experience of the world, and that changes our relationship with it in the most powerful way.

All the same, I found recurring themes in the stories of highly-accomplished “neo-abo’s” as they sometimes call themselves. They all returned from living away from civilization after a few weeks, or a few months, or sometimes even a year. They often brought tales of bitter interpersonal strife, groups breaking down, and bitter, crushing isolation. I still have mixed feelings about Tamarack Song and his school, the Teaching Drum, though I’ve corresponded with alumni, some of whom give it their highest praise, and some of whom tell a much more ambivalent tale. But regardless of my personal discomfort with the school in general, I find it difficult to disagree with something Tamarack Song wrote to the Teaching Drum email list:

We come from a technological society, so we naturally think that substituting primitive technology for civilized technology is our doorway. The only problem is that Native people are not into technology. They spend only a couple hours a day providing for their simple needs, and they mostly use simple means. Look at their tools—few and crude, and their craftwork—basic and utilitarian. What a Native person excels at is what I call qualitative skills—how to sit in a circle with your clan mates and speak your truth, how to find your special talent so that you can develop it to serve your people, how to use your intuition, the ways of honor and respect, how to live in balance with elders and women and children, how to speak in the language beyond words, how to befriend fear and live love. Without these skills, you will surely die. Or else you all go back to the life that shuns these skills.

This resonated with things I’d started to learn about native traditions. Working amongst Yukon elders, Julie Cruikshank named the book she finished for something one of those elders had told her: “My stories are my wealth.” Reading David Abram, Graham Harvey, Calvin Luther Martin, Tim Ingold and Rane Willerslev helped me see the world from a different perspective—in Rane Willerslev’s words, “to take animism seriously.”

I would not say that I’ve come right back around to the beginning again. I don’t see actions as driven by thoughts. Rather, I no longer see a division between action and thought at all. I no longer live in two worlds, so questions of which would take primacy no longer make sense to me. Alongside people like Willem Larsen and Urban Scout, I, like Daniel Quinn, now want to take part in a New Renaissance—a Rewilding Renaissance.

Yes, it means mastering a new set of skills. Yes, folks interested in “the Great Reskilling” of the Transition Town Movement will find a lot to take interest in here. Yes, it means learning permaculture design and wild edibles and anarcho-herbalism and how to make a debris shelter and how to start a friction fire.

But it means asking for more than just survival. All too often, you find primitive skills associated with wilderness survival. We shouldn’t feel content to merely survive. Native people thrived. They lived lives of abundance and luxury; they called the land they lived in, the land that provided them freely with everything they needed, “Paradise.” The Rewilding Renaissance means taking as much pride as they

did, not only in what the land provides us to give us life, but what it gives to give us joy and comfort. It means not just knowing how to make buckskin clothes, but appreciating them for all their worth. In our society, only the wealthiest can wear buckskin and fur; in the Rewilding Renaissance, we all do. Many who have not studied how native people live dismiss these facts as the myth of the “Noble Savage,” not even realizing how that very term condemns their argument: Lescarbot first used that phrase for the L’nu precisely because every member of their tribe enjoyed luxuries and freedoms and comforts that only the kings of Europe could match!

The Rewilding Renaissance means regenerating oral tradition, finding the stories that knit us together and relate us to the land. It means participatory folk art, it means singing beautiful songs and painting beautiful things. In *The Way of the Human Being*, Calvin Luther Martin summarizes the Dené (a.k.a., Navajo) view of the human place in the world. They regard the world as utterly beautiful, but entropy constantly unravels it. “We were created, they say, to restore the beautiful.”

I found a strange thing, over and over again, as I began to glimpse the way native thought truly moves (and I would not claim to have had yet any more than a glimpse). Creation hasn’t happened; it happens. Whether you ask the Dené, as Martin did, or you ask the aboriginal people of Australia as they retrace the ancestral songlines and keep the duties and songs of their places, or you ask the Haudenosaunee from my own land, or the Ojibwe, who only tell their stories in the proper season, they all make this assertion that without humans participating in the land, telling the stories, singing the songs, practicing the rites, living natively on the land, the land falls apart. It seems silly to the modern mind, yet without anyone to tell the stories, to sing the songs, to practice the rites, to live natively on the land, the land has started to fall apart.

Some rewilding folk converged online, and tried to tell a story about the wolves returning to the Eagle Cap Wilderness. A month later, they did. Only a coincidence, surely; only a coincidence that the elders of so many traditions proved right, but still, I say, the land needs us to rewild. Rewilding means reversing our domestication. Our domestication had many facets; not only did it change our bodies and our habits and our tools; it changed our stories and our communities, our art and our values, our songs and our rites. Our rewilding must address all of those things. One of them does not matter more than the others. We do not live in a dualistic world, where one has priority over the other. We don’t need to rewild our technology or our thoughts; we need to rewild as human people.

The Rewilding Renaissance means regaining the humanity we lost. It means living fully as humans in a more-than-human world. It means pulling together the Great Family Reunion of our long-estranged, beloved relatives, Family and Land. It means demanding more freedom, more joy, more art, more beauty, more stories, more songs, more kinship, more passion, more earnestness, more authenticity, more luxury, more humanity in our lives. It means settling for nothing less.

I’ve dedicated my life to this. How about you?