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Book Review

Learning Native Wisdom: What Traditional Cultures Teach Us about Subsistence, Sustainability, and Spirituality

Gary Holthaus

2012

Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky

266 pages

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This book by Gary Holthaus, a humanities scholar, is in his words a collection of “vernacular essays.” The book constitutes an experiential and analytical account of the author’s learning and insights gained through his years growing up with a farmer grandfather in Iowa, working with nonprofits, and with the Alaska Humanities Forum. The narrative also includes his discoveries in commercial fishing, teaching, and reading, along with in-depth interactions with indigenous Alaskan populations as well as people in the arts and humanities. This deeply personal, reflective work by this sustainability proponent draws the reader into a thought-provoking journey about people’s place and responsibility in their ongoing quest for preservation.

Holthaus sets the context for his learning forays in the introductory chapter where he introduces Prescott Bergh’s phrase “sustainable culture” (p. 6). He broadens the scope of envisioning sustainability beyond agriculture, economy, and natural resource depletion to the need for sustaining harmony and the sense of community. His anecdotal review of interactions with Eskimos and Native American community members, as well as exhaustive readings of Eastern Confucian, Hindu, Buddhist and other philosophies lead him to highlight the need to revive and re-create the “fundamental elements of humanity”(p. 9). “Social spirituality” (p. 9), he elaborates, challenges the discriminative ‘-isms’ and embraces respect, mutual effort and mutual need, in turn narrowing social inequality. These, in turn, would trigger the sustainable culture to confront resource insecurities.

The book is divided into four sections: *Back to Basics, Subsistence, Sustainability, and Spirituality*; and these themes are elaborated in the 2-3 chapters that follow each sectional heading. *Back to Basics* examines the power of wisdom gained through appreciating and living the arts in their varied facets. Music, inspirational yet experiential storytelling, poetry, and other creative arts that pervade indigenous communities as ways of life and expressions have helped sustain generations despite hard times. Although sustainability is often conceptualized as a three-legged stool comprising the environment, social context and economy, Holthaus infuses the need for the one-legged stool instead. This leg is the spiritual environment that will foster balance and the regenerative spirit to accomplish the harmony to drive preservation. He particularly highlights the power of language in offering diverse worldviews, and the need to honor the uniqueness of languages as one key element in restoring balance, as opposed to the “toxic pattern of *English only*” (p. 41). The chapter on *Functional and Structural Cultures* (p. 50) contrasts the

inclusive, integrative nature-blending functional cultures with the exclusive, disruptive, nature-manipulating structural cultures. Real world illustrations of the nature of institutions (religion, education, vocational, legal, formal and informal organizations) within these cultures provoke thought. The description of the ways of life relating to sense of time, dynamics of relationships, links with nature and other living systems, systems of governance and healing reveal the contrasts between the global east and west, south and north, the traditional and modern. Insightful is the fluidity that is described and the diffusion between the functional and structural when these cultures mingle, resulting in losses that could threaten the survival of the more desirable functional cultures.

In the subsequent section on *Subsistence*, Gary Holthaus makes a deliberate attempt at redefining how we understand the term subsistence. He explains that if subsistence is defined in terms of the minimum resources needed to survive, cultural worldviews define what needs contribute to subsistence. In his words, “the subsistence life of village people has changed over the years, as every culture changes” (p. 68). Indispensables for us like oil, automobiles, cash and threats of toxic resources like water and food are no less a reflection of a subsistence culture. However, more threatening to subsistence, he adds, are the “external threats” (p. 73-74) through enforced assimilation and ethnocide as well as “internal threats” (p. 74) of a culture’s extinction through the decline in intergenerational teaching and learning. In the chapter on *Education for Subsistence* (pp. 84-96) his narrative laments the current educational preparation for jobs and credentials when education for subsistence, recognizing the connections between learning, knowing and the real world and wholeness, should be the goal.

The thematic section on *Sustainability* addresses the role of education, reflects on the definition of sustainability, and offers a way to comprehend it through lived examples. The author calls for the need to steer away from standards based curricula, economy and jobs as education’s foundation, but focus instead on the acquisition of wisdom, self-discipline and an attitude of mutual respect, sharing and connectedness with the natural world. He then proceeds to describe the attributes of a sustainable culture, namely one that recognizes the value of relationships, protects all forms of diversity (human, plant, animal, and natural forms), is socially just, nonviolent, and nurtures intellectual and spiritual growth for all. This section concludes with a single chapter exalting the power of stories reinforced through the author’s own reflections and personal stories and insights. These stories can be pillars in sustaining cultures: formative stories that teach and foster learning, teachable moments as life happens, stories of the past reinforcing lessons learned and stories that caution.

The final overarching thematic section on *Spirituality* (pp. 153-218) is an enriched cumulative blend of what various religious orientations have to offer including insights of philosophers and scholars from around the world. The enlightened learning and universal common thread is first that the power of the “word” and clarity of language (p. 172) can foster or destroy harmony and balance; and second, the task of cultivating oneself to be able to add to common good and societal wellbeing. He concludes with another revelation namely the permanence and infiniteness of Nature despite the ongoing destruction. Currently a called minister at the Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Gary Holthaus’ writings powerfully mirror this fellowship’s mission of a common purpose amidst diversity in beliefs (Anchorage Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, 2014). A concluding message, a notes section, a bibliography and index complement the book.

This comprehensive analysis and message on the indispensable connection between subsistence, sustainability and spirituality derived largely from delving into Native American and other indigenous cultures is indeed a journey in introspection and self-discovery. The author's fund of knowledge and use of life lessons and social experiences with people from all walks of life to share these powerful insights are awe-inspiring. For many readers, especially from a non-traditional/ non-Native /non-eastern orientation, his foresights and perceptions can be less easy to fathom. The narrative in various parts tends to get repetitive although the reiteration adds to the conviction in the message. This book will strike a chord for social workers, especially in a rural context with its focus on a collective culture, transgenerational learning, respect for kinship and community, social justice, and that "small is beautiful" and person-in-environment frameworks. Holthaus has woven in ongoing events, both cultural and political, through his illustrations to exemplify what is working and what is not in the current world. One is reminded of the 60 year old congressionally chartered National Conference on Citizenship (NCoC) whose mission is driven with the belief that "every person has the ability to help their community and country thrive" (National Conference on Citizenship, 2014, "NCoC: About us," para. 1). As the author says, this book is not a how-to-guide to clean-up the mess, but to engage in meaningful conversations toward a better world.

References

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