



Spiritual Reflections For Land's Sake

By Marvin Lee Anderson

The notion of family for Indigenous peoples, of kinship with others, goes beyond the people we are closest to, but includes "all our relations," with all of Earth's living beings as our siblings...

The land around us and all its living beings have a force and presence upon us in which we partake.

Whether he was surprised, taken aback, or frustrated, "for Land's sake" was my late father Dell's typical response. I've always been intrigued by where and how that vernacular phrase originated. Though my father never swore, it was a frequent euphemism for mild swearing, dating back to the early nineteenth century. It was also a colloquial rendering of the common expression, "For the Lord's sake."

The poetic and evocative identification of our heading "The Land is Us" resonates with me on several levels, though I am not indigenous. As a guest contributor descended from European immigrants and American settlers, it is probably more accurate to describe the pretext of *that* story as "The Land is Ours," or the "The Land is Mine," echoed in Woody Guthrie's national ballad, "This Land is Your Land." This brutal narrative campaigned to make room for white settlers by removing and often eradicating whole indigenous populations. As James Wilson's book laments, *The Earth Shall Weep*, and weep it and we still do.

It's not surprising that "For Land's Sake" was overheard among farmers and rural settlers because their livelihoods and very survival depended on the land. My paternal Swedish American grandparents barely scraped by to buy a small farm, only to lose it to drought and the local bank during the Dirty Thirties. But that is only part of my story.

"Not family only, but land too, has its stories," writes Kent Meyers about growing up on a small family farm. "When you make your living off the land and belong to it, you come to feel it as something with force and presence, and as a past that is not dead but an ongoing narrative presence in which you partake."

From long summer days of my youth spent working in the fields, irrigating, and hunting on our own family farm in Nebraska, I know, too, how formative the land

was in shaping and making me. I felt a part of that land my father and I farmed together, though I didn't realize its claim on me until many years later.

How is the land *us*, we might ask? By listening to and learning from Indigenous voices, my hope is that the healing process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island must begin by hearing our respective though different stories about the Land and historic relationships to it. In Blackfoot teachings, the Creator made all living things, and all living things are equal. Humans have no inherent right to rule over and exploit the rest of the "natural" world.

The Indigenous worldview in North America could be described as "kin-centric:" they regard all of Earth's living beings as "all our relations" or kin, different from humans in form, but in no way inferior and no less sacred. "All beings around us are our relatives," observes Cherokee philosopher Brian Burkhart.

Unlike the Western conception of the human person, this kin-centric worldview expands our conception of persons to include nonhuman animals and beings such as reptiles, birds, and trees as persons in their own right.

The Ojibwa, like many Indigenous people, use the kinship term "Grandfather" (and sometimes "Grandmother") in reference to powerful spirit beings and persons, both human and nonhuman.

As Shawnee philosopher Thomas Norton-Smith points out, there is no discernible distinction made between them, "because human and nonhuman grandfathers stand in similar relationships with their human kin." This "kin-centric" cosmology *begets* a comparable array of kinship terms and genealogy of 'all our relations' and ancestors, a-kin to the indigenous familial social group or tribe—besides human persons and the Grandfathers.



At the beginning of Black Elk's narrative, he shares that his story is "of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of *us two-leggeds* sharing in it with the *four-leggeds* and the *wings of the air* and *all green things*; for these are children of one mother and their father is one spirit." Black Elk's explicit naming of these (italicized) nonhuman animals and plants—as *siblings*, mirrors similar relationships in human families, thus acknowledging and legitimating their personhood.

Our own individual biographies and histories begin with our parents and the place of our birth. They sometimes go back through our parents to the bloodline of four grandparents, but most stop their genealogy at Mom and Pop, as Jungian analyst James Hillman wryly comments. We have been led to believe we belong *only* to this personal story and our parents' personal influence on it, rather than to the invisible ancestors and myths our immediate parents have often displaced.

The more we cling to the overriding importance of parents and the more cosmological power we accord them, the less we notice the fathering and mothering afforded by the world every day in what it sends our way... The more I believe my nature comes from my parents, the less open I am to the ruling influences around me.

In telling stories about my dad, I recall the nursery rhyme, "The Farmer in the Dell," and quip that my dad Dell was *in* the farmer and Dell was the archetypal farmer. The word "dell" comes from the same Old English word which means a secluded hollow or small valley usually covered with trees.

In literature dells are often portrayed as pleasant and safe havens. I was graced with parents who were not "helicopter parents" or overzealous gatekeepers, but spiritual gateways to seeing and honoring the Creator among "all our relations" and ancestors in the dells and safe heavens beneath the majestic blue canopy of the Great Plains sky — "for Land's sake."

For my human (and paternal) Great Grandfathers and Grandmothers, the dire threats of famine and destitution forced them to leave their homeland of Sweden. In order to survive, they became immigrants because of their virtual landlessness and indentured servitude. Steeped in the biblical vision of a Promised Land, their "exodus" to the New World was based on the Christian myth of the

New Jerusalem or New Eden. The Kentucky author Wendell Berry has epitomized their predicament:

"Agrarians value land because somewhere back in the history of their consciousness is the memory of being landless... If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life. If we remember this, we know that all economies begin to lie as soon as they assign a fixed value to land. People who have been landless know that the land is invaluable; it worth everything."

With the pervasive and systemic expropriation of Indigenous peoples' lands and their forceful removal from them, it is painfully obvious that generations of Settler people have not only bought and profited from the lie which Berry laments. We Settlers have been morally and culturally blind to the historic amnesia of Indigenous landlessness created by colonization.

Moreover, Christian settlers have generally had no historical memory of the divine conditions of inheriting the Promised Land, laid down by the jubilee economy and land sabbath laws of ancient Israel in Leviticus 25:23: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants."

As the biblical scholar Norman Habel reminds us, the Israelites were "designated something like 'immigrant tenants' who hold their land by the authority and goodness of YHWH, the [ultimate] landowner."

No one owns the land. It is thus incumbent on North American descendants of European immigrants and precarious tenants to recall that we, too, like many of our ancestors, are nothing "but aliens and tenants." We all belong to the land, and the land belongs to the Creator.

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Questions for Reflection

1. *What struck you most?*
2. *How do you feel when you hear the phrase, "for land's sake"?*
3. *Share a quote or insight that sticks with you.*



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