



Living Earth Community

Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

SAM MICKEY, MARY EVELYN TUCKER, AND JOHN GRIM



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14. An Okanagan Worldview of Society

Jeannette Armstrong

I grew up in a very remote part of the Okanagan on the Penticton Indian reservation in British Columbia, Canada. I was born at home on the reservation, and I was fortunate to be born into a family that was considered by many people in our area as a traditionalist family. I grew up in a family where the first language was Okanagan, and which practiced hunting/gathering traditions on the land. I'm still immersed in that family. I've lived that life and I continue that practice in my own family. Growing up in a community that was small and fractionalized — fractionalized both by colonization, and, in many ways, in terms of the community itself — has given me valuable insights and observations. I thus have two perspectives from which to look at society — the perspective and experience of my small extended, traditional family support system; and the perspective and experience of a community that has been fractionalized by colonization.

One of the primary observations I wish to make centers on human relationships — the relationships that we have with one another, and the way in which these relationships impact our interactions with the land. Some, indeed many, of the changes experienced by our land have to do with our relationships with other humans — what we do to each other, and how we look at each other. In order to understand our relationship with the land, we must look closely at the relationship that we have with one another. I grew up in a community, in an extended family. In this community, people organized themselves in a very different way than that which I have observed outside of our

community. I want to describe how this community organizes itself, and to outline my perspective to you.

The land that I come from is similar, in terms of climate, to California. It is very dry and semiarid. It is considered the northern tip of the Great Basin Desert, and its ecosystem there is very, very fragile. Indeed, the Okanagan is one of the most damaged areas and ecosystems in Canada, due to its fragility. We live in an area where there are many conservationists and environmentalists concerned about the endangered species in the Okanagan, and where extirpations have been occurring over the last hundred years. I have seen some of those extirpations firsthand.

This experience has been difficult for our community, because we grew up loving the land. We grew up loving each other on the land, and loving each plant and each species the way we love our brothers and sisters. This form of love is not a result of an intellectual process. It is not a result of needing to gather food and needing to sustain your bodies for health. Rather, it is a result of how we interact with each other in our families, in our family units, in our extended family units, and in our communities. It is a result of the networks that we develop outwards from our families, extending to the other people surrounding us in our community. These networks are an essential part of how we interact with the land. My work hinges on interpreting these networks, and on reconciling members of my community, in order to restore health to the land. I am only able to do this responsibly if I have been able to generate a sense of understanding. In the Okanagan, our understanding of the land is one in which we are not just *part* of the land, nor just *part* of the vast system that operates on the land, but that *the land is us*. In our language, the word for our bodies contains the word for land. Our word for body literally means 'the capacity for land-dreaming' — the first part of the word invokes my ability to think and dream, and the latter part of the word invokes the land. Therefore, every time I say the word for my body, I am reminded that I am from the land. I'm saying that I'm from the land and that my body is the land.

Our community loves to go out to the land to gather, which I have continued to do every year of my life, and which I look forward to every year. I go out to the land to gather the foods that have given me life and given my grandmothers, and my great-great-grandmothers, life

for many generations. We have perfected a way of interacting with each other when we do so, that is at once respectful to the land and respectful to each other. Our grandparents told us that the land feeds us, but that we feed the land as well. What they meant was that, in our very language, we give our bodies back to the land physically. In turn, we live on the land and we use the land; we can impact the land and we can destroy the land. Or we can love the land and it can love us back.

So, one of the things that I examined in the development of our education program at En'owkin Centre was how to teach about the way in which we, as a society, interact. My aim was to explore how our community interacted with each other, and to find a way to distill, describe, and teach this form of interaction, so that we might reconstruct it in our communities.

In doing so, I started to understand that the way in which we make decisions, and in which we choose to look at each other as people — as equal human beings — is fundamental to how we interact with the land. In the most basic sense, our use of the land relates to our need for food, for shelter, for clothing, and so on. When we look at society, we need to look at how society is constructed. Those are the things that we need. Those are the things that we need in order to live and breathe every day. But besides these basic essentials, we need pleasure. We need to be loved, we need to have the support of our community, and the love and the care of the people surrounding us. If we consider how these two necessities (our need for food and shelter; and our need for pleasure) are connected, and how they work together, then we can begin to understand how we might impact the land either in a negative way or in a positive way.

When we observe how the land has been impacted by western culture, we see that there is, at once, an overuse of resources, and a lack of access for some people to these resources. In other words, some people have more of a right to resources, and some people have less, or, indeed, no right to these very same resources. Within this system, there are also people who cannot access the basic things that they need to live. There is something profoundly incompatible between my idea of democracy, and the reality of a hierarchical system in which people, living side-by-side, do not have the same access to resources as one another. Equal access is a profoundly basic principle in our

community — equal access to food and shelter; and equal access to pleasure and enjoyment of life.

I therefore started looking at decision-making as a construct. I looked at the traditional, historical Okanagan decision-making process, elements of which are still present in our community today, and have been carried forward because we're only two generations along from our colonizations. In our traditional decision-making process, we have a word — *enowkinwixw* — based in an image of people helping each other to absorb information like droplets of rain. This word demands four things from us: that we solicit the most opposing views; that we seek to understand those views using non-adversarial protocols; that we each agree to be willing to make adjustments in our own interests to accommodate diverse needs expressed; and that we collaboratively commit to support the outcomes. These are the four things that constitute an informal process that is continuously at play in our community. We can also engage with the process in a more formal way — in which case, it is known as the Four Societies process. When this is done, it functions as a construct, in the same way as, for example, Robert's Rules of Order, or the modern construct of democracy functions. However, the basic democratic construct entails that the majority has decision-making power over the minority. From my perspective, an adversarial approach is embedded in this construct. It sets up the oppression of the minority and establishes conflict at the heart of the construct, since there will *always* be people in the minority and people in the majority. It engenders dissension. I understand that it is an easy and practical approach to decision-making. But, in terms of the outcome this decision-making process produces — for society and for the land on both a local and global level — it seems to me that we must systemically rethink it.

From our point of view, the minority voice is the most important voice to consider. It is the minority voice that expresses the things that are going wrong, the things that we're not looking after, the things that we're not doing, the things that we're not being responsible toward, the things that we're being aggressive about or overlooking. One of the things our leaders said in the Four Societies process is that if you ignore this minority voice then it will create conflict in your community, and this conflict will create a breakdown that endangers the *whole* community. This conflict will endanger how we cooperate, how we use

community as a process, how we think of ourselves as a cooperative unit, a harmonious unit, a unit that knows how to work together, that enjoys working and being together, and that loves one another. If such a breakdown occurs, then it starts to affect those things we need to do every day in order to meet all of our needs. I can see this in action in our world today. If we begin to think about the minority, about *why* there is a minority, why there is poverty, then we should be able to find creative ways to meet the needs of the minorities. Is it about economics? Is it about societal access? Human creativity is capable of identifying how to meet the needs of those minorities. It will enable us to bring that minority group into balance with the rest of the majority. This process is what we call *enowkinwixw*. If we are unable to enact this process in our community, then our humanity is at stake, our intelligence is at stake; we can't call ourselves Okanagan if we are unable to provide for the weak, the sick, the hungry, the elderly, and the disadvantaged.

In the same way, one component of our decision-making process is reserved for the land. This component involves individuals known as land speakers. I have been fortunate to be trained and brought up as a land speaker in my community. Unlike other communities, our community has people who are trained as part of a family system to be a speaker for the children, to be a speaker for the mothers, to be a speaker for the elders, to be a speaker for the medicine people, a specialist group of helper practitioners, to be a speaker for the land, to be a speaker for the water, to be a speaker for all of these different components that make up our existence. As land speaker, I have been trained by elders to think about the land, to speak about the land. This does not mean that I necessarily represent their view, and I do not consider myself an expert; rather, my constant responsibility to my community, no matter the decision in question, is to stand up and inform the community on how that decision is going to impact the land. How is it going to impact our food? How is it going to impact our water? How is it going to impact my children, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren? What will the land look like at that time? The Four Societies process, *enowkinwixw*, is therefore founded on this principle of human interaction.

Another part of the process requires people to look at relationships. How is this decision going to impact the children? What are the children's needs? What are the elders' needs? What are the mother's needs? What

are the working people's needs? It is someone's responsibility to ask these questions. When this person asks these questions, they must also give their views on the situation, just as part of our community is asked to think about the actions that need to be taken.

Part of our community stands up and says, what are the things that need to be built? What are the things that need to be implemented and how much is it going to cost? And all of those important action details need to be asked about and discussed. Those people in that part of our community who are speakers and doers are given the responsibility of continuously reminding our people that actions are going to have impacts — both short-term and long-term. If we overuse a resource, there are people whose role it is to stand up and inform the community of this.

An additional group of people in our community are known as the visionaries, the creative people. These are the artists, the writers, and the performers whose responsibility it is to bring innovative perspectives into the community, informing us of creative approaches, and new ways to look at things. These visionaries remind us that we must always make room for innovation, and that creativity is necessary in order to resolve issues that we haven't faced before.

In this way, all four of these components participate together in a decision-making process. Through this collaboration, the process then becomes a different process than Robert's Rules, or indeed the modern construct of democracy. The process becomes something that is participatory, that is inclusive, and that gives people a deeper understanding of the variety of components that are required to create harmony in a community. By incorporating the perspective of the land in terms of human relationships, the community changes. People in the community change.

Something internal happens, where people begin to realize that material things themselves are meaningless; that it is not material wealth that secures and sustains you and protects you from fear. Rather, it is the people and the community that secure and sustain you. When you become immersed in this belief, all fear leaves you, and, instead, you are imbued with hope — the hope that others around you in your community can provide these things.

This is the kind of work for the community that I'm involved in at the En'owkin Centre, which is a non-profit cultural educational organization

governed by the seven reservation communities of the Okanagan Nation. I'm talking about all of the community. I'm talking about all of the people who live in the Okanagan and people that we reach outside of that. Not just the Indigenous people, because at this time in our lives, what our elders have said is that unless we can Okanaganize those people in their thinking, we're all in danger in the Okanagan. While it sounds simple, it often seems an overwhelming task.

Some days, it seems as though one person cannot make any difference. But, I think about my aunt, who spoke to me the other day, and asked me, 'Where are you headed off to now?' I replied, 'Oh, I'm going to this conference, the Bioneers Conference.' And she asked, 'Oh, what is that about?' So I did my best in my language to explain it to her that it is a conference that describes its purpose as bringing forward breakthrough solutions for people and the planet. And she said that kind of conference is a really good thing. She said, 'How did you come to be asked to speak at that conference?' And I said, 'I'm not really sure, but I think I managed to do that by talking and writing about some of the things that seem everyday and simple to us. That seem to make sense to us, that seem to transform complete strangers into our loved ones, by bringing them into our community so that they become part of my family and part of my extended community'. People like Fritjof Capra and Zenobia Barlow and other individuals who are friends of this community, and part of this movement. They feel the same as my aunt to me. I think that this is how we need to relate to each other. In doing so, we will begin to understand how we relate to the land, and we can begin to liberate ourselves from our perceived dependence on material things — such objects that make us feel secure and empowered, that tell us, 'you need a new car, you need lots of money, etc.'. Once this dependence begins to dissipate, then we begin to understand that the power is *us*. That *we* are our security on the land. And that that's what's going to sustain us.

The last thing that I want to share with you is my father's observation on insanity. For us, one meaning of insanity is too many people talking simultaneously about different things, as opposed to people collectively talking about the same thing. There seems to be this kind of insanity in the world because of something currently missing in terms of how we conduct our humanity with one another. When we

start to address our relationships with one another, the land, in turn, has an effect on us.

One final observation I leave you with, is the power of taking our young people out to the land, to participate in the work we do to gather seeds and other Indigenous foods. Our community has started a program to replant the habitat needed for some of the endangered species that provide Indigenous foods. In order to replant Indigenous plants and to restore endangered habitats in the land that En'owkin is caretaking, we are growing about 10,000 plants each year. We have done so both to sustain ourselves and to sustain these species. The process of being with people, collaboratively, on the land, is a fundamentally healing process. This practice of gathering, potting, and replanting seeds to provide this habitat has proved immensely popular among all sorts of individuals from the non-native community, from multicultural societies, and from elderly communities. It is an especially valuable, healing process for struggling young people. The value of this process resides not simply in collecting seeds — but in being with people, the community, and communing with each other. It is how the land communes its spirit to you, heals people, and it does this in an incredibly profound way. We need to think about how we can do more of this.