

Kris Herbst: On Common Ground

Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Kris Herbst

On Common Ground

[One of three mini-sermons on "[Common Ground on the Hill](#)", a music retreat in Western Maryland.]

I want to give you some impressions of what it's like to attend Common Ground. For me, Common Ground has been a door that opens my connection to Spirit, when that takes the form of Joy, or even ecstatic communion – through singing, dancing, drumming and music in general. These two drums here came into my life because I decided to go to Common Ground two years ago, where I received the first drumming instruction of my life. Before that, drumming was an unrequited love for me ... a passion that lay dormant, an itch waiting to be scratched. Beginning at Common Ground, I've peeked into the land of percussion and rhythm, and I've seen an amazing depth there, to be explored and appreciated. The origin of rhythms that animate our modern music is that they were the received voices of the gods, in West Africa and playing them was a way to invoke and celebrate Spirit to make a powerful connection. The knowledge of these rhythms, and their divine significance, became secret when they were brought to the New World, because the slave-owning societies suppressed captive Africans' culture and power. Knowledge of this spirituality remains little-known today in our culture.

By taking African drumming and dance at Common Ground, with Mama Kibibi (Ajanku) and her amazing Sankofa drumming and dance troupe, I have learned, in an experiential way, how drumming and dance are One. They cannot be separated. My first

year at Common Ground, I began the day in African drumming class, and then learned to dance to the rhythms on a bare wooden floor in the chapel there, with temperatures soaring above 100 degrees. A photographer came from Westminster, Maryland, and the town paper published a photo taken in our class. There I am, in the back; a tall, gawky, white guy, struggling with the heat and trying to move like an African.

At night, I'd join the Gospel Choir, a funky, swaying group of voices that positively roars into hypnotic, repetitive harmonies, (under the direction of Shelly Ensor) with the backing of a pick-up band of fine musicians from Common Ground, including Steve Marcus on flute. The Choir learns songs by heart – at the head-spinning rate of one per day no sheet music or printed lyrics allowed. Most of the people in the choir are that good they can do it. Rockin', multi-racial Gospel choirs are a rarity, so how wonderful to be part of one for a week!

The atmosphere at Common Ground: how to describe it? It think it's like having a back stage pass to a festival of top-notch blues, folk and other musicians, but spread-out on the Western Maryland campus in the evenings. You can mingle and jam with these musicians, while they are meeting and reuniting which is a rare opportunity for these artists who may spend much of their life on the road. And they make the most of it, jamming together, swapping stories and songs. They are there for one week with nothing much better to do than teach you something. A rare privilege for me – and a kind of party and vacation for them while they connect with a community they love.

Common Ground has opened other doors to me. Last summer, I spent afternoons, and some evenings, with Ahmoo Angecone, an Anishnawbe Indian who lives in a village of 12 people, on a lake, 400 miles north of Lake Superior. He taught a small group of us how his people experience the world and spirituality through art – his own art, and others. He helped us draw and paint in the Native American style. Most important

to me, he sat quietly with us, sharing stories, talking about his people's ways. We'd join him on the lawn for pipe ceremonies – in which we'd speak, prayerfully and intimately, and then chant and drum.

I delved deeply into Native American cosmology and life ways with C. Randall Daniels-Sakim, the ethnomusicologist flute maker, who is also a tribal king and keeper of medicine for the Apalachicola Creek Indians in Pine Arbor, Florida. I later learned that his ancestry is also Jewish, and I found him to be a remarkable scholar of Judeo-Christian religions. He shared some whimsical stories of animals and other beings, which Native Americans use to convey their cosmology, beginning when children are at a young age. I found it wonderful that they always begin these stories by saying: "This is only a story; you needn't concern yourself with the details ..."

Sakim said that Indian children, like everyone in their culture, are in charge of themselves. The adults help them discover how to do that, with stories. Children are the center of the universe, close to the Creator. They belong to the village, and they are on loan to their parents.

Let me try to express, in a few words, the core of Native American cosmology as I heard Sakim tried to convey it. The key concept is Power which is very different from the Western attitude toward Power. This Power is at the heart of things, and is all-pervasive. All things animals, rocks, ethereals – everything with form, substance, purpose and place – derive their being from Power, which comes from within a sacred, central source that sustains all beings. So, Power is the enabler of all things, the original energy, animator or pure force – and this is sacredness itself. Another expression for it is "innate wisdom," which is a kind of incorruptible thought, similar to genetic memory.

Power can be experienced personally. Humans influence, and

they are influenced by, the flow or movement of Power this flow is its deepest spiritual expression. But unlike the Western view, Native Americans believe Power itself is impersonal and unemotional. It is conscious, but without judgment it neither rewards nor punishes, and it does not purposefully change the human condition. Humans, by and large, bring punishing or rewarding consequences on ourselves – depending on whether we harmonize with, and use, Power properly. Humans can turn their hearts toward the Source and be intimate with Power, but humans create this intimacy. Power does not. Power is equal toward all things. It has no personal perception, beyond a consciousness of self-awareness, and the will to exist.

Humans are the only creatures who are aware of their own innate character, and this character determines interactions with all things, especially Power. It is through rituals and prayer, through acquired wisdom and right living that we seek to know Power and receive its inflow. We use ceremony and ritual to alter our innate character – to find a balance and harmony that prepares us as we seek this inflow of power.

This is heady stuff to me, but I offer it with a final word from Sakim: "Indians, he said, don't take the serious seriously; they make God laugh at you."