



Sunday night's confrontation with police. (photo: Rob Wilson)

Four Ways to Look at Standing Rock: An Indigenous Perspective

By Kayla DeVault, Yes! Magazine, 23 November 16

In the shadow of the Trump election, I found myself explaining to world climate leaders how to see Standing Rock through an indigenous lens.

A couple of weeks ago, as I stood before climate scientists, advocates, and world policy leaders at the COP22 in Morocco, I felt the increased importance of my message as climate denier Donald Trump was voted into office. My perspective as a young Native woman living on the Navajo reservation and studying both renewable energy engineering and Diné studies had earned me an appointment to the NEJAC/EPA Youth Perspectives on Climate Working Group as well as to the SustainUs Youth Delegation attending the November climate talks in Marrakech.

I was there to bring Standing Rock to the world climate talks.

Watching the events at Standing Rock unfurl over the past year, I felt compelled to ask our Navajo leadership to divest from oil, coal, and uranium and instead invest in the Standing Rock Sioux tribe's fight against the Dakota Access pipeline. Eventually they did. Navajo Nation President Russell Begaye announced a formal stance of solidarity and traveled to Cannon Ball, North Dakota, to plant the Navajo Nation flag there. A week later, I stood on the front lines of #NoDAPL while energy company employees hit us with pepper spray and threatened us with attack dogs. I found everything dear to me, suddenly,

at the heart of this battle—fought by people from the four corners of the world.

Which brings me to the significance of counting by four. To understand Standing Rock, you must remove the Western lens and adopt a holistic, indigenous perspective of the world.

BUMP bump bump bump. BUMP bump bump bump. The rhythm of the powwow drum, the heartbeat of life, beats in a sequence of fours. It celebrates the ebb and flow of the natural world. The rhythm falters only during the Honor Beats, when a Jingle Dress dancer raises her fan to catch the spirit of the drums. Rarely do so many nations come together in one space for a shared purpose. It is a gathering where commonalities are celebrated, such as the sacredness of the eagle feather and the direness of maintaining balance in the world. Certain concepts—holistic methodologies, the value of ceremony and language, the religious significance of certain landmarks, the beliefs of interconnectedness and interdependence—put indigenous groups in stark contrast with Western thinking.

This similarly has been the exception of Standing Rock.

And, just as the powwow rhythm carries four beats, an overwhelming number of indigenous communities count various elements of their lives in fours. The medicine

wheel of Native culture represents the four directions. There are the four elements, which build all life and the four seasons that govern time.

Where I live in the Navajo Nation, the culture is steeped in fours. Dinébikéyah, the land given to the Diné (Navajo) by the Holy People, falls between four sacred mountains. The day is broken into four phases, which correlate to the four stages of life and the four steps that govern life in Navajo philosophy: Nitsakees (Thinking), Nahat'a (Planning), Iina (Living), and Sihasin (Reflection, which provides hope and assurance). Each Navajo has four clans that constitute his or her identity.

The beauty of using fours, to define so many aspects of life, is that we are forced to see the holistic picture. Without this bigger picture, we lose sight of the interconnectedness of humans to nature and to each other. The intricacy of this worldview is captured in the traditional Navajo home, the *hooghan* or hogan. It represents the entirety of life as a Navajo: its four pillars symbolizing the four sacred mountains. Its doorway faces the east, a fire at the heart. Within the hogan, you are cradled between Mother Earth and Father Sky (visible through the smoke hole in the ceiling). This same smoke hole allows the sun to pass through. It traces a clockwise path on the walls called *sha bikego*, or "sunwise." This direction is used in every ceremony and every meeting. When the sun reaches the northern wall, this symbolizes winter; when it strikes the fire, it's time to plant. The northern star, above the hogan, is the symbolic fire in the sky around which the First Man and First Woman constellations rotate.

Everything in Navajo philosophy is related to the concept of balance, and even groups of fours balance one another. These are pairs rather than opposites, and maintains what Navajos call *hózhǫ́*, a sort of harmony the universe relies on. The other key concept is *k'é*, or your relations. These could be your siblings, your clan relatives, your tribe, or even your belonging among all creations on this shared planet.

To me, conversations of *hózhǫ́* and *k'é* are crucial to global talks of sustainability. We cannot address how climate change will affect our futures if we do not acknowledge the need for both balance and our fellow beings. The concepts may be of Navajo origin, but they embody the holistic viewpoint of many indigenous communities.

What does this view have to do with the climate? To achieve sustainability in any society, we must ensure the protection of four areas of community well-being:

Environmental: We are all made of water. We all breathe air. We cannot change our dependency on the four

elements or the fact that they create us; therefore, we must protect our environment.

Economic: No community can operate without an adequate and fair economy. Furthermore, the diversity and adaptability of an economy are key to its survival.

Social: Our relationships to one another ensure the well-being of us as individuals and as societies. Our communities thrive when we have mutual respect, safety, and room for personal growth.

Cultural: Identity is a critical part of community sustainability, and it is often left out of the greater picture. This is a crucial issue when indigenous communities attempt to assert their sovereign authority and are faced with infringement of their cultural freedoms and rights which, without, would destroy the ability to maintain harmony.

So this is what I had to say to the climate justice world two weeks ago. Standing Rock requires us not to forget that fourth piece: cultural identity.

When we have global conversations about loss and damage, we cannot simply tick off the population counts for displaced people or the dollar figures for economic impact or infrastructure damage. This is watching disorder through a Western lens. Instead, we must analyze the loss and damage done to a way of life, to the sustainability of an entire identity of people. The United Nations may have a definition for poverty, but to be impoverished does not always equate to having no financial leverage. Hardships come in many forms.

Jon Eagle Sr., the tribal historic preservation officer for the Standing Rock Sioux, recounts the struggle of his ancestors through his tribe's winter records. Their lives were extraordinarily difficult, but the definition of what they consider true hardships provides important context. Not surprisingly, the traditional Lakota people define four hardships in life:

To hear an orphan cry, as it was a terrible sound.

To lose a child, an indescribable pain.

To lose your mother.

To not know where your warriors fell.

With this reference point, consider Energy Transfer's decision to desecrate sacred sites and destroy graves of warriors and other ancestors. It is forcing cultural damage on the Lakota people.

I want to make sure the world's youth hear an indigenous perspective on sustainability and comprehend how the need to protect our cultural identity and exercise our tribal

sovereignty in the DAPL fight impacts our survival as nations.

Because we are still learning how to erase the colonization of our own minds to really see the cultural implications of our so-called “infrastructure projects,” perhaps it is easier to identify straightforward acts of environmental racism, such as placing a refining factory within an impoverished community. Perhaps we can more easily oppose using cheap labor as a country’s leading export or stand up for the rights of a particular sex, gender, or religion.

And perhaps that is why, on Sept. 3, the water protectors who watched Dakota Access workers destroy the graves of their ancestors, continued to pray for and forgive the ignorance of those committing the crimes against them.

“These people in our history, they were our heroes,” explains Jon Eagle Sr. in National Trust for Historic Preservation’s Standing Rock Preservation Leadership Forum, as he described the ancestral burial sites that Energy Transfer destroyed. “I don’t think the mainstream society understands that.” Our cultural lenses prevent many of us from realizing that.

As I told the COP22 audiences, the battle at Standing Rock symbolizes the greater battle we all face: The assurance of cultural well-being and sustainability as a global community while combating the short-term visions and greed of corporations. We must remember the importance of hózhǫ́—balance—and that we, as beings of the Five Fingered Clan, are connected as k’é—relatives. We are made of the same four elements, and we share the same finite resources. As my mother says: “We may be coming from all four directions, but we all come from the same neighborhood—the earth.”