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WEEKEND BREAK



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Photo by Roger Durband
Paiute Petroglyph Steens Mountain

CONNECTING WITH THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

By DENISE REED
For The Daily Astorian

Previously I studied Native American culture in classes, and individual research, but had not dealt with the information for many years. It was again brought to my attention when I decided to enter the North Coast Chorale in a choral Symposium in Auckland, New Zealand.

One of the requirements was to relate the music for our concert to the theme, “People and the Land,” (He Tangata, He Whenua). This theme might include culture, family, nationalism, colonialism, dispossession, alienation, interconnectedness and environmentalism.

With these concepts in mind, I focused on the native peoples of North America using my personal library, which had a great deal of information on indigenous music and cultures.

I wanted to express through music cultural awareness and empathy. I chose as the North Coast Chorale’s focus piece, “Songs of the Earth,” an unpublished piece of music by Hal Eastburn. This piece includes poetry, sayings and prayers of Native American communities expressing their philosophical and spiritual beliefs about the world and our role in it. The chorale will perform this piece in May in Astoria.

Recently there has been much discussion in America and around the world about climate justice along with justice issues of bias and discrimination. These important issues are related and have been addressed in the philosophies of this nation’s first peoples.

Most indigenous tribes share a common belief about the earth being a “spiritual entity.”

This belief was not a part of the culture of the Western Europeans who colonized this continent. The colonists considered it their duty to tame the land and the indigenous people who had inhabited the land for hundreds of years.

Kent Nerburn, editor of “The Wisdom of Native Americans,” expressed many of today’s concerns. “As we enter the twenty-first century Western civilization is confronting the inevitable results of the colonists philosophy of dominance. We have gotten out of balance with our earth, and the very future of our planet depends on our capacity to restore this balance.”

Ed McGaa (Eagle Man), author of “Mother Earth Spirituality,” states that in order to successfully approach the issues we are discussing today, “we must shed our narrow-mindedness, we must stop exploiting one another, and we must eliminate wasteful expenditures for weaponry that are useless for the survivability of our planet.”

For centuries, Native Americans have embraced

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LIST

- “A Long and Terrible Shadow” by Thomas Berger
- “The Sun Came Down” by Percy Bullchid
- “The Indian’s Book” by Natalie Curtis
- “Native American Wisdom” by Cameron Fleet
- “Walking on the Wind” by Michael Garrett
- “A Cherokee Feast of Days” by Joyce Sequichie Hifler
- “Braiding Sweetgrass” by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- “Wisdom of the Elders” by Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki
- “Secret Native American Pathways” by Thomas E. Mails
- “Mother Earth Spirituality” by Ed McGaa, Eagle Man
- “The Wisdom of the Native Americans” by Kent Nerburn — Editor
- “Walking in the Sacred Manner” by Mark St. Pierre and Tilda Long Soldier

NORTH COAST CHORALE SPRING CONCERT

Songs of the Earth
7 p.m. Friday, May 17
3 p.m. Sunday, May 19
Clatsop Community College Performing Arts Center,
588 16th St.

a philosophy with ecological justice at the forefront. Most of us have ignored people of the First Nations, historically relegated to reservations, out of guilt, shame and ignorance. Missionaries and government policies worked systematically to destroy both the people and their culture, silencing their wisdom that addresses many of the critical issues pertinent today.

Many of us fall short of embracing completely a sound ecological philosophy because we fail to understand our spiritual selves and the life force that inhabits the earth and everything on and above it. Empathy and cultural awareness are the concepts we must now embrace in order to survive together. I believe it is time to acknowledge the existence and reality of OUR Turtle Island, summed up in the words of M.J. Slim Hooey, part of the narration in “Songs of the Earth.”

“I have come to terms with the future. From this day onward I will walk easy on the earth, plant trees, kill no living things, Live in harmony with all crea-

tures. I will restore the earth where I am. Use no more of its resources than I need and listen, listen to what it is telling me.”

I would add, observe, look at what is happening: receding coastlines, loss of habitat for animals, melting polar ice, global rising temperatures and a sweeping mistrust of our neighbors. These things are affecting all of us everywhere on the earth.

Researching the words of the music we are presenting, I pulled a book from my shelf co-authored by the genetic scientist, David Suzuki, an advocate of ecological justice and human rights. In his book, “Wisdom of the Elders,” Suzuki quotes a native Kepayan, a tribe that kept the land they are indigenous to in Canada. Suzuki says its appearance is likened to an Eden.

May 17th, Friday, 7:00 p.m. & May 19th, Sunday, 3:00 p.m.
Songs of the Earth
Annual Spring Concert
Paulinho Paiakan comments, “The river is like our refrigerator that keeps fresh meat. The Forest is like our drug store and has our medicines. It is like a supermarket with all of the food and things we need. Why would we poison our water or clear the forest?”

We may not accept everything from any one culture, but we should open our minds to examining and adopting what makes sense. Young people who will inhabit the world of our future must adjust and move toward a solution to global warming. Perhaps if we all respect and empathize with the histories and realities of other cultures we can have both a sustainable environment and peace, for our children.

If the colonists who first came here had acknowledged and adopted at least some of the ideas of the First Nations, we might have slowed and even eliminated some of the negative affects of climax change. We need to come to terms with the reality that sometimes our fear of diversity keeps us from hearing and responding positively to the wisdom of others.

Possibly if we study, and respect the wisdom of the Native Americans and understand the references to the earth as our mother, our treatment of the earth and all of its inhabitants would approach respect and love. We would take care of the earth and all of its people. This is a lesson we need to learn now and teach our children for the sake of the earth’s sustainability and our own survival.

Denise Reed is the conductor of the North Coast Chorale and a member of the Oregon Humanities Board of Directors. She teaches opera and music appreciation, along with world music and the histories of some of America’s popular styles of music, at Clatsop and Tillamook Bay community colleges.