

Spirits: Helpers, Guardians & Guides

By Robert Francis, January 2014

Look at your little finger. There are many, many cells in that little finger: skin cells, muscle cells, bone cells, bone marrow cells, nerve cells. There are also blood cells that travel in and out of that finger on a regular basis. Now, any one of those multitudes of cells could be described as an individual, but of course we know that is not really the case. One cell cannot live on its own. The cells of the finger are interdependent not independent. In the English language we can speak of the finger as if it is an individual. There is a different English noun signifying each part of the body as an individual entity. American Indian languages also contain words for various body parts, yet in American Indian languages, these tend to be action words or verbs, signifying the function of this or that part of the body within the entire body – not signifying objective individuality. How can objective individuality exist in a system of intricate interdependence and constant change? We know, of course, that a finger cannot function apart from the hand. The hand cannot function apart from the arm. The arm cannot function apart from the entire body. The body *can* continue functioning without the little finger. However, the entire body will suffer pain at the loss of the little finger, and although it will continue to function, it will have to deal with and somehow compensate for the loss.

Now, getting back to the cells in your little finger: Each and every cell is a spiritual entity. Each cell that may be physically seen with the aid of a magnifying glass or microscope is based in and springs from an underlying and overarching, spiritual reality or network of relationship which goes unseen. The entire finger, all the cells in network together, is also a spiritual entity as are the hand, the arm and the entire body.

Now, as I am using this word “spirit”, I am ascribing or attempting to ascribe an indigenous, Chickamauga Cherokee understanding to that non-Cherokee word. The word means various things in various cultures. In European-American and European cultures, a spirit may actually be imagined as an object: something tangible that you have or may possess. This idea would sharply contrast with the understandings of Chickamauga Cherokee and other American Indian cultures.

To put it most accurately, you do not “have” a spirit. You **are** a spiritual entity, presently made manifest physically.

Are you an *individual* spiritual entity? No more so than the “individual” cells of your finger. You are a functional part or aspect of your family, of your tribe, of humanity. You are a part or aspect of the Earth in her entirety, of the Solar System, of the Milky Way Galaxy. You are a part or aspect of the Universe and even of the Multiverse, in comparison to which our immense Universe may well be smaller than one of the cells of your little finger.

Even as you are a spiritual entity, so is your family, your tribe, humanity, all animal life and plant life, the Earth, the Solar System, the Galaxy, the Universe, the Multiverse. Each and every network of relationship to which you belong as well as each of those to which you do not belong is a spiritual entity. Each family, each tribe, each species of animal or plant, each type of rock is a spiritual entity. And you yourself, as a spiritual entity, are, in fact, a network of relationship.

All is related / all is connected. And, it is what we do not see that is keeping us all connected.

So, imagine a muscle cell deep within your little finger. It is there, doing what it is supposed to do, hopefully. You yourself may be the greatest thing that muscle cell can imagine, if so, then you are God to that muscle cell. That muscle cell has faith in you and depends on you. And, that muscle cell has helpers. Red blood cells bring that muscle cell life-giving oxygen and nutrients while carrying away carbon dioxide and other waste products. White blood cells fight off disease. Skin cells provide protection. Bone cells give foundational structure. Nerve cells give that muscle cell a direct line of communication to the entirety of the body. But get this: you and that muscle cell are one.

Conceivably, there could be muscle cells in your little finger who can imagine nothing greater than your little finger. These might look askance at or even interfere with muscle cells who can see beyond your little finger to the connectedness of the entire body and can recognize the helping functions of blood cells, skin cells, nerve cells and bone cells. Who knows?

Regrettably, it is also possible that there could arise a group of cells in your little finger who imagine that they, themselves, their little group of cells, are the only life or the only meaningful life in the entire body, with the rest of the body imagined as inert matter created only for the exploitation of their little group of cells.

In the study of theology, one hears terms such as monotheism (the doctrine or belief that there is but one God) and polytheism (belief in or worship of more than one God). The book *Emily of New Moon* is a novel by L.M. Montgomery set in late 19th Century Prince Edward Island. In the book, following her father's death, the orphaned Emily Starr comes to live with her maiden aunts and their bachelor cousin on a farm called New Moon. As Emily makes friends with Ilse, the wild and unkempt daughter of the local physician, the following, very interesting theological exchange transpires between the two girls:

“And you’ll tell me things – nobody ever tells me things. And let *me* tell *you* things – I haven’t anybody to tell things to,” said Ilse.

“And you won’t be ashamed of me because my clothes are always queer and because I don’t believe in God?”

“No. But if you knew Father’s God you’d believe in *Him*.”

“I wouldn’t. Besides, there’s only one God if there is any at all.”

“I don’t know,” said Emily perplexedly. “No, it can’t be like that. Ellen Greene’s God isn’t a bit like Father’s, and neither is Aunt Elizabeth’s. I don’t think I’d *like* Aunt Elizabeth’s, but He is a *dignified* God at least, and Ellen’s isn’t. And I’m sure Aunt Laura’s is another one still – nice and kind but not wonderful like Father’s.”

“Well never mind – I don’t like talking about God,” said Ilse uncomfortably.

“I do,” said Emily. “I think God is a very interesting subject, and I’m going to pray for you, Ilse, that you can believe in Father’s God.”

“Don’t you dast!” shouted Ilse, who for some mysterious reason did not like the idea. “I won’t be prayed for!” *

What makes this honest, if fictional conversation even more fascinating is that L.M. (Lucy Maud) Montgomery was the wife of a Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Ewen Macdonald.

I used to stand in staunch defense of indigenous spiritualities as “monotheistic”. However, in more recent years, I have come to see the terms monotheism and polytheism as meaningless or even worse, as they seem to have been invented primarily for the purpose of division. Humans ascribe divinity to spiritual entities at higher levels. What if one’s imagination or vision cannot extend beyond oneself or one’s family or beyond the tribal spirit of one particular people? What if a tribal spirit or deity is mistaken for the overarching and underlying spirit of the entirety? What if those who do not share the same view are considered spiritual fools or are even obliged, as young Ilse, to see themselves as atheists? What if the rest of creation, apart from one’s own religious group or culture, is considered nothing more than fodder for exploitation?

According to Chickamauga Cherokee tradition, as I have come to understand it, the Earth is recognized as our Mother, while the Sun is recognized as Grandmother. The Sun and Moon are often considered the embodiment of deity as Uhalotiga (Creator) and Unetlanvhi (Apportioner). They are also associated with Kanati (The Great Hunter) and Selu (The Corn Mother), First Man and First Woman of the Cherokees. Of course, there is understood to be that which is beyond the Moon and the Sun; there is the Dojuwa Star (The House of the Sun) which is, in fact, a distant galaxy lying at the center of the Universe and understood to be the birthplace and Mother of the Sun and of the entire Universe. There is also that which lies beyond all sight and all imagining. Please keep in mind that I speak only for myself, from my own incomplete understanding of Chickamauga Cherokee tradition.

According to Chickamauga Cherokee tradition, offspring of the Sun and the Moon include

- The Thunder Boys
- The Dojuwa Bird, also called the Daughter of the Sun
- Unetlanvhi Uweji (Creator-Offspring), seen in the heavens as Eco or the Morning / Evening Star, who comes to Earth as the Shooting Star and is also known as White Otter
- The Sacred Fire

Each of the Seven Directions is understood by Chickamauga Cherokees as a Spirit Guardian who also serves as a teacher of the people. Four of these are considered female while the other three are considered male, according to tradition.

There are many stories of the Nvnehi, who are spirit people, appearing very much like ordinary human beings, who live beneath the mountains or whose abodes, possibly in other worlds, are reached through portals in the sides of mountains.

There are many types of spirit folk referred to as Little People, including the Yvwi Jvsdi who appear as miniature humans and the Little People Who Wear White who appear as spheres of white light.

There are certain Spirits who are Special Helpers for the entire people. These include

- Uwohali (Eagle), a special guardian of the people and a carrier of prayers
- Jola (Tobacco), the spouse of the Sacred Fire, who carries the prayers of the people up to Uwohali, who in turn carries the prayers to Creator. Tobacco is also associated with renewal of life.
- Red Cedar who brings healing and cleansing to the people.

Plants and animals who give themselves to provide sustaining food are helper spirits allowing us to remain physically manifest in the Earth from day to day. Raising a garden, fishing, hunting, killing and butchering the meat that we eat facilitates personal relationships with these helpers. Purchasing all one's food from stores serves to distance one from these life-sustaining spirit helpers.

Working animals and pets such as dogs, horses, cats and others are also spirit helpers. Dogs have been intimately associated with human beings longer than any other "domesticated" animal. It is difficult to say who domesticated whom.

Ancestors are spirit helpers, providing protection and guidance for their descendants and sometimes for others who are not necessarily their own descendants but in whose lives or paths they take interest.

Each plant spirit gives itself for the healing of some disease, injury or ailment. Not all plants work the same for every person. When practicing plant or herbal medicine, it is best to think in terms of relationship rather than chemical properties. Practically stated, it is always better to properly and respectfully gather medicinal plants oneself than to purchase plants or plant extracts from an herb store. I am not saying what you get from an herb store will not work for you, just that gathering your own medicinal plants, whenever possible, is better.

According to Cherokee traditional thought, spirits of animals may bring diseases upon those who are disrespectful or disregard proper relationships. At the same time, spirits of animal or plant species or of rock varieties often seek out human beings for special one-on-one helping or guiding relationships. Generally speaking, the spirit seeks out or chooses the human, not the other way around. Perhaps there is something about a certain human being that is attractive to a certain spirit; I don't know. Basically, we must remember that all is connected / all is related.

Much is said and written these days about determining or finding your "Spirit Guide". I say keep your senses open, and your spirit helpers will find you. Also, you have to put yourself out there, in the fields, prairies and woods. Connect yourself to the Earth or consciously work to augment the connection, since you are already connected with all that is; develop your relationship with the entirety. You are not apt to encounter your spirit helpers while sitting in your living room watching television or playing video games. Sometimes a spirit helper will contact a person through dreams or visions; this is more apt to happen while fasting and watching on a hill than while snoozing in one's comfortable bed at home, although significant dreams *may* occur anywhere, anytime. Very often a spirit helper will seek a person out directly through encounters with the species through which the spirit helper is physically manifest. What catches your notice? What puts itself in your path in uncanny or noteworthy ways time and time again? Be open, watch and listen for the communication. People are sometimes blinded to their true spirit helpers by always focusing on the big, tough animals or those they see as more romantic. Small or seemingly unromantic animals (small birds, mammals, reptiles or even insects) can be powerful spirit helpers, as can plants and rocks. Learn the oral tradition of your own people and keep all your senses open and free from blinders of prejudice. When a spirit helper seeks you out for a special relationship, you will know it; there will be no doubt in your mind.

What about evil spirits? This question came up after I shared about spirit helpers within a talking circle at an Indian Fellowship meeting. Put simply, evil is that which seeks to possess and when it cannot possess, to destroy. Certainly we can look about us and see evil at work in the Earth. There are spirits of empire who, having objectified the Earth, seek to impose alternative, possessive order, which in truth, is not order at all but chaos and destruction. Evil spirits might be understood as imbalances within a greater spiritual entity, manifesting as

diseases in the body, in the Earth or even in the Universe. Shortsightedness is a cause of much evil, as it would seem that there are those spirits who cannot see past a very limited level of connection or relatedness. Remember those hypothetical cells in your little finger, the ones who can imagine nothing greater than your little finger and those other cells who imagine the rest of the body as inert matter created only for their use or abuse? Indeed, these would be shortsighted little spiritual entities, capable of working great evil in the body. The first group of cells could interfere with the circulation and proper function of the finger. The second hypothetical group of cells is organizing as a cancer which will seek to colonize and exploit the entire body, ultimately destroying the body and themselves in the process, unless checked in their progress.

Now, here's a good question: Do evil spirits know they are evil? My feeling is, most usually probably not. I don't know for sure, but I think most evil spirits believe themselves justified or even righteous in their actions. So, is there such a thing as a totally evil spirit? I don't know, but here is something to consider: Imbalances, diseases and cancers in the body, the Earth or the Universe, serve to break down the order of the Universe, bringing chaos. Yet, even chaos has its place and purpose, for from chaos springs creation. Also, sometimes it takes a disease at one level of creation to bring balance or healing at a higher level. For instance, our Cherokee oral tradition tells of when humans became so numerous, selfish and arrogant as to threaten the life of the entire planet. Does this sound familiar? In order to save the Earth, the animals elected to send diseases among the humans. Most humans died, but those who lived learned some respect. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21 N.I.V. Bible); this is a wise saying, worthy of note and in keeping with indigenous understandings.

Spirit helpers help you in many ways. Keep in mind that plant spirits, animal spirits and rock spirits help in different ways. Various spirit helpers help you maintain or restore life and health. They can also help open your mind and heart to new levels of communication. They can provide guidance on your path and help provide the strength or endurance to keep going, that the people may live. They can even help lessen or eliminate loneliness, depression and despair, reminding you that you are never alone: you are part of or an aspect of something or someone unimaginably larger than what you may think of as your own small self. How do we reciprocate? We may reciprocate by living a life characterized by thankfulness and thanksgiving, by loving as we are loved – even by loving those who do not love us, by being respectful, by walking lightly in the Earth – not taking more than we need, by helping others as best we can and by sending up prayers and engaging ourselves in ceremonies on behalf of all Creation. This is our human responsibility. Remember all is connected / all is related. We too are helper spirits. We are one with the entirety.

Robert Francis (Chickamauga Cherokee) is a traditional medicine society member who serves as Fire Keeper for the Daksi Grounds, a Chickamauga Practice Grounds in rural Bates County, Missouri. He also serves as consultant/helper for Mid American Indian Fellowships, a network of American Indian spiritual groups. He lives with his wife Janet on the Daksi Grounds. Additional writings by Robert Francis along with writings by others are available at www.midamericanindianfellowships.org

Book Recommendation:

During the better part of this past year I have been pondering and outlining what to include in this essay. In December, as a Christmas present from my wife Janet, I received a book entitled *The Condor and the Eagle: Uniting Heart and Mind in Search of a New Science Worldview* by Phillip H. Duran. Some who are reading this will remember Phil Duran and his wife Norma from the occasions when they served as guest speakers at the annual Mid American Indian Fellowships Gathering. As I have been reading Phil's book while also writing this essay on spirits, I am heartened by the similarity of theme. Writing from the perspective of a Tigua Indian and a physicist, Phil Duran demonstrates how Western Science, specifically within the field of modern physics, has within the past century or so "discovered" many principles always known to indigenous people, such as the living, sentient nature of the Universe and the connectedness/relatedness/oneness of all that is. If this short paper has been of any help to you at all, you will do well to also read *The Condor and the Eagle*, published by Eaglehouse Publications in 2013. I think Janet found the book on Amazon.com.

***Note:** L.M. Montgomery's *Emily of New Moon*, the first in a trilogy of Emily novels, was originally published by Frederick A. Stokes Co. in 1923. The copyright was renewed in 1951 and 1993 by L.M. Montgomery descendants with recent publication and printing by Random House, Inc. of New York.