

Preface by Robert Francis written May 2, 2019:

In this paper, written more than 11 years ago, I asked the question, "Is it proper for us as American Indians on the path toward decolonization and cultural restoration to refer to ourselves as followers of Jesus?" And, I offered this reflection, "The answer may not be the same for everyone. We each have to work this out for ourselves." At the time this paper was written, although I was by no means a Christian, I called myself "a follower of Jesus." My continuing path of decolonization has brought me to a place where I no longer identify in this way. Although I certainly still place value on the life and teachings of Jesus, I am no longer a follower of Jesus. We do have our own stories, after all, and our own cultural heroes.

We Have Our Own Stories

By Robert Francis

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The Origin of Strawberries

According to the origin stories passed down among our Cherokee people, the first man was Kanati, the Great Hunter. The first woman was Selu, the Corn Mother. There were just the two of them, and they got along just fine, at first. Then one day, in the spring of the year, Kanati and Selu had an argument. I don't know if it was one big thing or a lot of little things that led up to this. Somebody said something. One thing led to another, and finally Selu said, "I've had it! I'm leaving! I'm going to the East, to the home of Grandmother Sun. She's a woman; she'll understand." *

"Just go!" Kanati said, "And good riddance." So Selu left, and the house got very quiet. Before long, Kanati began to miss Selu. After awhile, he thought to himself, "What am I doing just sitting here? I'm a hunter, an expert tracker. I'll go after her. Maybe I can catch up to her and persuade her to come back home." Kanati found Selu's trail outside the house and began to follow, but Selu was walking very fast. No matter how quickly Kanati followed along the trail, there was no way he could catch up to his wife. "If only she'd slow down!" Kanati said to himself. "If only I hadn't said those hurtful things."

Then Creator spoke to Kanati. "What's going on?" Creator asked.

"My wife has left me," Kanati said.

"Do you love her?" Creator asked.

"Yes, I love her," Kanati answered.

"Do you want her back?" Creator asked.

"More than anything," Kanati said.

"I'll see what I can do," Creator answered.

Meanwhile, Selu was still walking toward the East. She was mad. Her jaw was set. She was walking fast with no let up.

The blackberries decided they would help. It was too early for them to have fruit, but they thought they might slow Selu down with their stickers. They reached out to grab at her dress as she walked along, but it was no good. Selu kept on going.

The raspberries thought they would help. It was also too early for them to have any fruit or even blossoms, but they had longer, sharper stickers than the blackberries. They too reached out to snag Selu's dress as she went by, but she kept on walking, even faster than before.

The gooseberries thought they surely could help to slow Selu down with their long thorns. They grew up right in the path, but Selu plowed on through. Her legs were scratched and bleeding, but she kept on going.

Then Creator himself knelt down to plant strawberries in the path ahead of Selu. These were the very first strawberries, and when Selu got to the place where the strawberries were, she smelled something, a sweet smell, and Selu stopped. She looked down to see a green carpet of leaves all around her feet. Above the leaves were tiny white flowers. Selu didn't think the little flowers could account for all that sweet scent, so she knelt down and parted the leaves. There, below the leaves, Selu found the strawberries. She picked one. It was tiny, red and heart-shaped. Somehow it made her think of her husband. Selu tasted one of the berries. It had a sweet taste, but Oh! It was sour. This also made Selu think of her husband. Selu picked her apron full of the strawberries. Standing up again, Selu turned around and headed back the way she had come. Finding her husband on the trail, she stopped and shared the strawberries with him, and the two of them went home together.

To this day, Cherokee people keep strawberry preserves in our homes as a reminder to watch what we say and keep peace in the house.

The Root of All Evil

To indigenous people, the root of all evil is not the love of money; it goes deeper than that. The root of all evil or of that which brings imbalance in the earth is the tendency or desire to control others. ** Self-control is one of the highest virtues, but balanced and harmonious interpersonal relationships are based on mutual respect – holding the other in high esteem while adhering to the principle of non-interference. Lifting oneself up to control others is evil in its basest form – the very definition of evil in the indigenous sense.

When I was a student at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, I recall a conversation about the value of cultural diversity which a fellow student attempted to end with the terse comment, “Well, we are all descended from Adam, after all.”

“We have our own origin stories,” I replied. My fellow student stood there with an expression on his face registering something between confusion and shock. I stood there surprised by my own candor. Many times, both before and since that day, I have listened to similar comments linking all peoples back to the heroes of early Bible stories: Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, the people dispersed from the Tower of Babel. The common, Christian assumption is that these stories are superior to all other stories and should be accepted and understood as historical fact.

I cannot remember a time when I did not have serious issues or problems with certain aspects of the creation story or stories contained in the biblical book of Genesis, my 13 years serving as a Baptist pastor *not* excepted. To begin with, the idea of a gulf of difference between human beings and other animals – all the rest of creation, with humans given dominion over the entire Earth as a divine right, with explicit instructions to subdue the Earth (Genesis 1:26-28): This is problematic – not mildly problematic, but problematic to the most extreme degree imaginable, for the simple reason that this sets up control as a virtue.

Joseph Campbell referred to the origin stories of Genesis as “a socially oriented mythology” in which “nature is condemned” (23). There is evidence that the early chapters of Genesis are based in an older, oral tradition but with radical changes. There is good likelihood that the Genesis stories were written down as one of many reactionary attempts to stop or prevent Israelites from considering alternate

theologies or spiritual practices commonly followed in the ancient Middle East. Seeking harmonious relationship with all creation, the people had always conducted ceremonies outdoors, on the hills and mountains, but those seeking to be in control, wanted all the people to worship in a centralized, fenced-off or walled-in location where theological orthodoxy could be carefully monitored and maintained. And so, in their written stories, human beings are set apart from and above the rest of creation.

In Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Books: Volume I*, the monkeys shout, "We are great.... We are wonderful. We are the most wonderful people in all the Jungle! We all say so, and so it must be true" (55). Personally, I doubt that monkeys are silly enough to believe such nonsense. Human beings, on the other hand, will believe nearly anything they tell themselves, especially when it's written down in an authoritative form.

Within many of the beautifully diverse oral traditions of indigenous peoples around the earth, the woman shares fruit with the man, and the eyes of both are opened to something very profound. The metaphor is sexual and meant to show the extreme value, the sacramental or salvific nature of the coming together or uniting of a man and a woman (Stone 220). She is his savior; he is her savior. She sacrifices herself for him; he sacrifices himself for her. The two, who were opposite and separate, are now one, the two halves coming together in completion. This is love, the result of which is renewal of life. Everything turns in a circle. The woman is not the only one "saved through childbearing" (1 Timothy 2:15). The people are saved, quite literally, through childbearing, since without childbearing, there is absolutely no hope for any people to continue as a people in the Earth.

Of course, there are women who cannot bear children or who choose not to bear children for one reason or another, just as there are men who cannot father children or who choose not to father children. We are meant to live as peoples in the earth, not simply as collections of individuals, but as peoples. Each one is part of the whole, part of the people. Each has her or his own gifts, abilities, functions and contributions. Some children need adoptive parents. All children need aunts and uncles.

Long ago, Jesus attempted to teach his close followers that what we eat and drink is the body and blood of Creator (Luke 22:19-20). Indigenous peoples have always understood this truth, seeing Creator in all that is, seeing Creator's sacrificial provision in every plant and animal that gives itself that the people may live. When food and drink are understood as sacred and sacramental or life giving, eating and drinking are rightly understood as sacred acts. With this understanding, body, mind, soul and spirit are nourished and saved through eating and drinking instead of abused and destroyed through overuse and misuse of that which we eat and drink.

In the same way, when sexuality is looked upon as sacred, even as sacramental and salvific, with no artificial dividing line drawn between the physical and the spiritual, sexuality is less apt to be taken lightly or misused. Furthermore, sexuality is much less apt to become a tool or occasion for the abuse or violence that we all-too-often see. And what about the babies, the children who are created through the sacred union of the female and the male? When sexuality is rightly understood as sacred rather than dirty or nasty or "sinful," the children are also seen as sacred, nothing less than Creator enfleshed, Creator-Offspring in our midst. Instead of the supposed "original sin," the original *goodness* of Creator is looked for and seen in them. And so, the children are loved, cherished and nurtured – never abused.

Also, according to the Chickamauga Cherokee Prophet Clear Sky, there is one more child aside from those "visible ones" begotten from a marriage. The primary or first and last child of any marriage is the marriage itself – the living and growing relationship of the husband and wife together as one. There is no more important child than this one, yet this one is the one most often neglected.

As I see it, all of this is thrown out of balance by the Genesis story. The fruit becomes original sin, and the woman becomes the weaker vessel through which humankind falls. Although the man may still be her savior, even her Lord and Master, she will never again be *his* savior. She, the foolish, weaker vessel is now only an extension of the flesh and bone of the man (Ephesians 5:22-29; 1 Timothy 2:11-14; 1 Peter 3:1-7).

Once again, the chief purpose of changing and writing the story in this way is establishment of control.

First, there is establishment of human control over all creation. Now, male control over the female is established. What's next? The supposed divine choosing of one people (the Israelites and later the Christians or today the Americans) through which all humanity may be controlled.

Many American Indians who are Christians have problems with the Genesis stories about human dominion and male dominion. A common way to deal with the dissonance is by simply ignoring these texts. However, as I read the writings of European and Euro-American theologians, I realize how foundational these texts are. If we take these texts away, the whole theological system falls apart. If humans are not set apart as exclusively created in God's image, then how can one people be set apart as exclusively God's chosen people? If human males are not set apart as superior to females, then how can one and only one man be exclusively God enfleshed? And, how can there be a second Adam without their having been a first Adam and a fall from grace?

The overarching indigenous view as I understand it is that Creator is both imaged and enfleshed in *all* creation. Raising humanity to the status of the only aspect of creation made in God's image lowers God to the status of an anthropomorphic deity. Raising the male to a status of the only sex among human beings made in the image of God lowers God to the status of an unbalanced, male-only deity. Raising Israel or Christendom or America to the status of the only chosen people lowers God to the status of tribal deity or imperial deity. In the same way, raising the 33 year lifespan of one man in Palestine (extraordinary though that life was) to the status of the only or even the primary way God is expressed or revealed or enfleshed, further lowers God by enforcing one and only one limited view or understanding of the *unlimited* Creator.

The problem is control. It's all about control. Recently, I was confronted with some of my own controlling behaviors. I had fooled myself into thinking I left the controlling tendency behind in 1999, when I stopped being a Baptist minister, but now I must confess, it is a continuing struggle for me. I am not alone in this. In the strawberry story, even the blackberries, raspberries and gooseberries, for all their good intentions, resorted to controlling behaviors. Of course, their attempts to control the Corn Mother failed; no one likes to be controlled. Today, even among some of the purest American Indian tribal traditionalists, there may be seen a tendency toward building traditionalist orthodoxies or dogmatics. Admittedly, such controlling behaviors arise in frustrated reaction to constant interference from Christian missionaries and other disruptive outside forces, but far from bringing the people together, controlling behaviors most often succeed only in driving people further away. We all struggle with this tendency to control others. But the struggle against this tendency cannot even begin for those who hold in their minds and hearts an image or idea of Creator as a controlling God in heaven who sets up hierarchical systems of control on earth. So long as this idea of God is held, control of others will continue to be seen as a virtue rather than as the insidious evil it is. And I tell you, as long as this idea remains widespread, there will be no widespread or lasting peace on earth, with goodwill seldom seen or experienced.

What Remains?

Christians and followers of Jesus may well ask, "But if we dismiss or reinterpret the biblical stories in which the theological system of control is based, what from the Bible remains?"

There are still many good teachings and sound principles, wisdom literature, poetry and prophetic proclamations of justice. There are still the teachings of Jesus and of the early church or followers of the Jesus Way. By the way, *Jesus prayed on the mountains* (Matthew 5:1; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 26:30; John 4:24). We just need to remember to read everything with a critical eye and with one hand on the salt shaker, understanding the need for "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15 K.J.V.). Dividing it from what? Gold from straw, wheat from tares, truth from lies. But, don't forget; we have our own stories.

Several years have passed since I stopped identifying myself as a Christian. I consider myself to be a Cherokee follower of Jesus. If someone chooses to call me a Christian, I try not to take offense, but by most definitions, I no longer qualify. Recently, I was confronted with the question of whether it is proper

for a Cherokee person to even identify himself or herself as a follower of Jesus. After all, when the non-Jewish man across the lake, freshly healed from the self-destructive effects of Roman colonization, asked to go with Jesus, Jesus sent the man back to his own people (Luke 8:38-39). So, this is a very good point and a very good question. Is it proper for us as American Indians on the path toward decolonization and cultural restoration to refer to ourselves as followers of Jesus? The answer may not be the same for everyone. We each have to work this out for ourselves.

I continue to call myself a follower of Jesus, but to me, properly following Jesus is just this: going back to your own people, living your life and giving your life that the people may live, just as Jesus, among his own people, lived his life and gave his life that the people may live. Jesus said “yes” to life, and he did not flee from death. Jesus ate, drank and danced. Jesus blessed often, cursed on occasion and died willingly. Jesus prayed on the mountains. Jesus resisted and protested against the control of those who set themselves in authority over others. His death on a Roman cross was a direct result of his active dissent. In calling on his followers to “take up [your] cross” (Luke 9:23-25), Jesus calls not to a denial of life but rather to a denial of the right of authoritative control that is itself the ultimate stifler of life. Jesus was called a heretic and a blasphemer. Those who follow Jesus will be called these and many other names by those who set themselves in authority, even by those who create systems of control in Jesus’ name. Jesus embraced joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, life and death. It makes sense that his followers will do the same. As I said before, living your life and giving your life that the people may live; this is following Jesus.

Was or is Creator fully invested in Jesus? Yes! However, Creator is also fully invested in you and looks for even greater things from you (John 14:12). Jesus walked with his own people in the ways of his own people. Was he a second Adam? Certainly he was and is. And, if you are Cherokee, you are Kanati and Selu. As I have been told by elders of our people, “Long, long ago is right now. The old stories are about you.” Jesus fulfilled the stories of his people. *You* fulfill the stories of *your* people.

No Fuller Vision

There is a song entitled “I Can Only Imagine.” I’ve heard this song on the radio, performed by a group called Mercy Me. It’s a pretty song, but to me, it’s sad. The singer says he can only imagine seeing Creator face to face. Look around you. In all that is, Creator is there, enfleshed. According to Miami tribal member Mike Rhynerson, as he was taught by Miami singer George Strack, the first two words of the Miami Snow Song are saying “Snow comes” or “Snow is falling.” However, these same words are also saying, “Creator-Spirit is coming down.” The song is saying Creator is in the falling snow. If everyone understood that Creator is in the snow, maybe there wouldn’t be so much complaining about the snow! Creator *is* in the snow. Creator is in the rain and in the sunshine and in the growing grass and plants and trees. Creator is in the birds flying and in the animals giving themselves that the people may live another day. Creator is in the sun and the moon and the planets and the stars. Creator is also in the tiniest little creeping things and in the heart of every atom. Creator is in everything and Creator is what holds everything together. A person should be able to look around anywhere, everywhere, and see Creator. If a person is not seeing Creator now, enfleshed, face to face, in all that is, one day that person may die and still be wandering around saying, “I can only imagine.”

I have seen Jesus. In a dream I saw him. He did not look as I had ever *imagined* him to look nor as I would have wanted him to look, but I knew it was Jesus. I knew it was the very one who walked and talked and lived and died in those far-off lands of Galilee and Samaria and Judea so long ago.

I know others who have seen Jesus in this way. I have no reason to doubt or disbelieve any of these visions. Even so, I must say that my seeing Jesus in a dream was no fuller vision of Creator than what anyone else may experience anywhere, any time. It was no fuller vision of Creator than I experience each morning when I walk out to greet the sun rising and celebrate a new day dawning in the earth. It was certainly no fuller vision of Creator than I have when I look into the face of my wife or behold the faces of our children.

Sometimes I hear someone say, “I need to spend more time with God.” What does this mean? To begin with, the statement assumes time to be a commodity to be made, saved, spent, wasted, etc. This statement also sees relating to Creator only in terms of solitary prayer or meditation. While prayer and meditation are good and worthwhile activities, relating to Creator goes beyond these. Inasmuch as Creator hears every thought, feels every feeling expressed within creation, we are relating to Creator all the time and there is no time in which we are not relating to Creator. What we really need is more relating with our spouse, our children, our siblings, our parents, our grandparents and our friends. We need our feet on the ground and our hands in the dirt. We need to walk in the woods, wade in the creek, work in the garden, pet the dog. And, we need a greater awareness that in all these relationships we are relating directly with Creator.

I can only imagine? I don’t have to imagine and neither do you. I don’t have to wait to see Creator, face-to-face, and neither do you. Creator lives in all that is. Creator lives in you. We have our own stories. We have the stories of our people and the stories we are living, right now. We might listen respectfully and appreciate the stories of others but there is always the danger that we will misinterpret or misapply the stories of others, as is often done. We have our own stories, the stories of our own people. No matter how old these stories are, they continue to be reborn and live in us. As long as we continue in the earth as distinct peoples, our own stories will continue living and growing, and Creator continues living in us as well as in all that is.

Explanatory Notes:

*Cherokees are one of only a very few peoples, worldwide, who refer to the sun as having feminine gender. In most Cherokee stories, the sun, if referenced, is female, while the moon is male.

** Even as the love of money may be rooted in the tendency to control others, the tendency to control others may also have deeper roots, such as selfishness, narcissistic self-worship or fear.

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We Have Our Own Stories: Addendum about Control

Written April 16, 2008

According to Webster, control means “to exercise restraining or directing influence over”. When exercised in relation to others, control amounts to the limitation or elimination of the freedom of choice.

Few would argue the supreme value of love. Few would disagree that love necessarily includes respect. Therefore, as love is valued, respect must also be valued. According to Webster, to respect is “to consider worthy of high regard” *and* “to refrain from interfering with”.

By limiting or eliminating freedom of choice, control militates against respect and so also militates against love. Self-control is a value that helps us to respect and love others, but should or may control of others always be avoided?

Each person is obligated to respect others. Likewise, each person and each people has a right, maybe even a responsibility, to expect and, if need be, to demand respect from others. Here is where the value of protection comes in. We have a right to protect or to defend ourselves, our households, our families, our clans, our peoples. Exercising the right to protect may, at times, include exertion of control over those who actively disrespect or seek to exert control over us.

There is a certain religious organization that sends out people who have come to our place, a few times each year, for the express purpose of proselytizing or converting us to their religion. The belief of this group is that until and unless we accept their theology, we have no chance for eternal life. On most occasions, I have not been at home when these people have arrived unannounced and uninvited to the great discomfiture of my family. A few times, I have been home. Each time, I have gently urged the people that, if they call and make an appointment I will gladly dialogue with them but that they should not come back without first making an appointment. The disrespectful, unannounced and uninvited visits continued. Finally, I very firmly told a group from this religious organization that opening our gate and entering our property without first calling and obtaining an invitation constitutes trespass and that they are not to do this again. This is an example of exerting control for the purpose of protecting my family from the controlling behavior of others. However, I still left them a choice; if they call and make an appointment, I will gladly enter into a respectful dialogue with them.

I choose not to identify this religious group. There are actually many groups like this. Sometimes “missionaries” from various churches even come to our Indian Fellowship meetings. They soon find out that although there is freedom of expression within the talking circle, the freedom to disrespect what others in the circle say is not guaranteed. I often wonder whether any of these “missionaries” would give me an opportunity to speak to their people if I were to enter their church, uninvited, on a Sunday morning.

Sometimes control must be exerted in order to protect. Every people has a right to their own defense and the defense of their space or territory. No people has a right to invade or take over the territory or lives of another people, although this sort of thing is often done, with protection or defense being used as an excuse for control.

What about controlling children? Generally speaking, the more control parents and others exert over children, the less able those children are to learn healthy self-control. Even so, there are instances in which a child’s behavior may immediately endanger herself/himself or others. So, is it alright to eliminate a three-year-old child’s choice of running out into a busy street? Is it alright to eliminate a seven-year-old child’s choice of throwing rocks at the neighbors? What if our child wants to watch movies all night with a pedophile who lives down the street? What if our child wants to attend a church that actively disrespects the indigenous spirituality of our people? Is it alright to limit or eliminate such choices?

We took our children out of public school when our eldest finished sixth grade. Some may see that as an exercise in control. Actually, the decision to home educate was made by consensus in our household. The only one left out of the decision-making process was our youngest, who was a pre-schooler at the time. But, home-education has afforded our children more freedom, not less, academically and otherwise.

What about controlling livestock? Before Europeans came to the Americas, there were few domesticated animals. In South America, llamas and alpacas were domesticated as well as Guinea pigs, chinchillas and musk ducks. In the Valley of Mexico, turkeys were domesticated. North of Mexico, there were basically just the various breeds of dogs, and by some accounts, dogs took as active a role as humans did in their own domestication. Some would even say that dogs domesticated humans just as much as humans domesticated dogs. Sometimes, in those days before the invasion, wild animals were kept as pets. For instance, Cherokees were known to keep Carolina Parakeets, ravens and an occasional black bear. However, most animals used for food and clothing ran free. But, shortly after the Europeans arrived, Cherokees had horses, hogs, sheep, goats, cattle, chickens and even peafowl.

Aside from dogs and cats, our family keeps goats, sheep, a horse, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese and Guinea fowl. Yes, we have fences. Yes, with the exception of the Guineas and the cats, we control all our livestock to a certain extent. But we don't keep chickens in tiny cages where they go crazy and have to have the ends of their beaks snipped off. Everything gets as much freedom as is possible to give under the circumstances.

It's a fine line we walk. However, by remembering that control of others is not a value but rather an evil, whenever circumstances necessitate control, we may remember that less control is better than more.