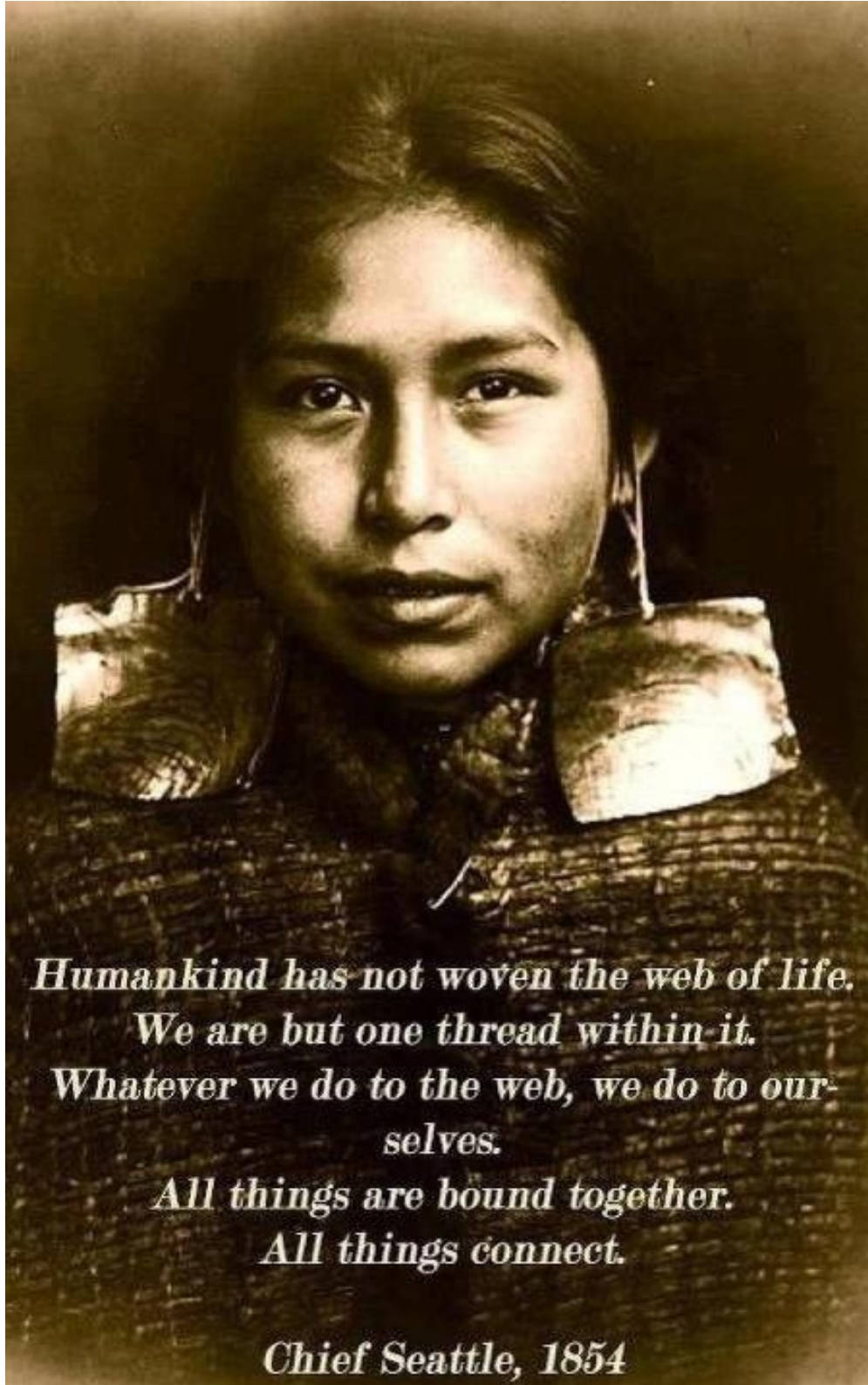


The First Nations Concept of Interconnectedness

(as it Applies to the Environment)



*Humankind has not woven the web of life.
We are but one thread within it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to our-
selves.*

*All things are bound together.
All things connect.*

Chief Seattle, 1854

For the First Nations people, the concept of “*Interconnectedness*” is at the core of their view of the world. In general, this mindset centers toward a fundamental belief that everything in the universe is connected, and that every creature, plant, and even object has a purpose, deserves to be respected & cared for, and has an important role to play in the overall script of life.

This all-encompassing world view embraces the idea that people are tightly connected to their communities, to their ancestors, to future generations, to the lands on which they live and to all of the animals, plants and even inanimate objects that reside on these lands. Traditionally, (prior to contact with European explorers, traders and settlers), First Nations peoples lived in harmony with their natural environment. Their practices were based on acute awareness, and knowledge of ecology, the need for sustainability, climate, and earth science. Their earth was sacred, life was sacred, and adherence to these core beliefs resulted in these populations leaving an extremely light footprint on the earth.

Certainly, it is easy for one to see the vast values associated with the holistic concept of interconnectedness; however, for the purpose of this course, the focus will be how these traditional beliefs and practices have a positive impact on the natural environment.

Under this model, the First Nations people live in a world where interactive cycles occur, rather than a series of unrelated and disconnected events. Relationships are cyclical, continuous and all encompassing rather than linear, separate and individualized. In a nutshell, this means that everything is important to everything else, and that everything depends greatly on everything else. This idea bridges time, describing a cyclical, infinite and continuous existence. It states that should any part of the interconnected system be abused or neglected, the whole system will feel the impact.

Based on these concepts, knowledge of the land as well as the plants, animals and even objects that reside on the land, have become central to the lives of First Nations peoples. This knowledge has, through thousands of years, been shared with subsequent generations, allowing them to love, and to demonstrate environmental responsibility. These teachings include the idea that the environment is part of a “web of creation”. Humans are also part of this web. As such, humans are closely related to the environment. If fully understood and appreciated, this concept, it is felt, will foster a sense of environmental accountability. Once a sense of accountability towards the natural environment has been nurtured, a sense of personal responsibility is likely to follow. Developing a strong sense of personal responsibility towards the environment was (and still ought to be) of pinnacle importance for cultures that depend so substantially on the natural environment. This has led to the mindset that people share a close relationship with nature, rather than control over it. Though first nations peoples did engage in practices that impacted the natural environment, they did so in a manner that held at pinnacle levels the ideas of sustainability, responsibility and continuous relationships.

From an outsider’s limited perspective, it appears as though these enlightened people were able to see the universe as a living, breathing organism with a strong spirit, feelings and emotions. For the organism to function properly, its entire being must be cared for, with no one part being considered more important than another. Like any living being, hardship experienced by one part can result in difficulty for the entire being; therefore, it is important for the part experiencing difficulty to be cared for and nurtured by the rest of the being, in order for all pieces to experience total wellness.

Focusing on one piece of an organism, though not ideal, and contrary to the concept of interconnectedness, may allow us a small snapshot of a bigger picture. Picture if you will, the vast impacts that could result from people abandoning their senses of accountability and personal responsibility, and polluting a lake. Many might feel the ripple effect would be limited to that particular location; however, the idea of interconnectedness tells a different story:

- Polluting the water could kill plants or make them toxic
- Dying plants means: less oxygen in the water (which can result in fish dying due to lack of oxygen during the iced-over), no habitat (or toxicity of habitat) for aquatic insects (meaning they will perish, or build up toxins), limited protection for fish (from predators)
- Lack of oxygen, insects and protection leads to the demise of fish populations, or eating contaminated insects would result in high concentrations of these toxic substances in fish
- Lack of fish means: less food for predators like eagles, bears, etc; less food for scavenging animals from insects to vultures; loss of angling opportunities which can provide vast amounts of relaxation, enjoyment, and shared family time.
- Contaminated fish that have eaten several contaminated insects would pose a substantial health threat to anyone (human or animal) who caught and consumed them.
- Lack of relaxation, enjoyment and family time could result in higher levels of stress, and compromised relationships with loved ones.
- Hungry scavengers and predators may need to look elsewhere for food, therefore impacting other species in an unnatural manner, they may also scavenge in town causing danger to the local residents.
- Illness caused by ingestion of toxins can lead to inconvenience, medical bills, crowding of hospitals, among countless other problems.

(The diversity and range of impacts would then continue well beyond what is listed above)

Hopefully we can see that these are only a small number of impacts, and that clearly this chain of cause and effect would continue, and could become cyclical. Also we should note that the impacts become far more numerous and widespread as we move down the chain. Our world is interconnected, and as part of this we have a responsibility to operate as a part of it, not as the masters of it.

First nations people have long believed that since it is the land that nurtures people, it is the people who possess a sacred responsibility to protect it. Where European cultures seem to be concerned with dominion over land (ownership of it), Indigenous cultures share the belief that human beings ought to live in accordance with the land because the land itself has stories to share. It is through paying attention to these stories that we can learn who we are (as individuals and as societies) as well as what our meaning and purpose may be in a particular place. The land has been speaking to us since the beginning of time, and currently she is pleading with us to listen. Should we continue to ignore these pleas, and exploit our nurturer, we will be cutting out a critical part of ourselves in the process.

