



SACRED INSTRUCTIONS

Indigenous Wisdom for Living Spirit-Based Change

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We'na Ha'mu Kwasset (She Who Brings the Light)

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The Cultivation of Warriors

This chapter is lovingly dedicated to the memory of our beloved Sage Nequtatahwet Rapp. He dedicated his short life to service. He became a soldier in his quest to be a warrior. In the end, he took his own life, because his soldier's path did not align with his warrior's heart. We miss you every day and will love you forever.

There are a number of ideas about what it means to be a warrior. In modern times, the term has become related to soldiers and warfare. However, in most ancient warrior traditions, being a warrior related to a very specific code of conduct that involved respect, honor, protection, and service. In the Wabanaki tradition, being a warrior meant that you were both a helper and a shield to the community. This same philosophy is held by other tribal traditions as well.

Tatanka Iyotake (Sitting Bull Hunkpapa Lakota), the great Lakota warrior, who was involved in one of the most notorious battles in history, the Battle of Little Big Horn (Greasy Grass Creek), expressed similar thoughts on the role of the warrior when he reportedly said:

Warriors are not what you think of as warriors. The warrior is not someone who fights, because no one has the right to take another life. The warrior, for us, is one who sacrifices himself for the good of others. His task is to take care of the elderly, the defenseless, those who cannot provide for themselves, and above all, the children, the future of humanity.

Our traditional view of being a warrior is well aligned with this thought. In the Wabanaki languages, there are a number of words that define warriors, or warrior philosophy. Not one of those words represents fighting or violence. Every word represents humane service to the community. There are two words in particular that I'd like to focus on. They define the values and actions that are associated with being a member of the warrior society.

The first word is *kinap*, which means “helper.” This is someone who dedicates themselves in service to the community. They look for ways to be helpful and then take action when help is needed. This help takes many forms, from the menial to the grand. There is little consideration given to the status of titles or credentials when determining what needs to be done and by whom. Instead, when help is needed, it is simply given. If the *kinap* cannot do what needs to be done, they will find someone who can and assist them. These individuals are humble and reliable, but they are also strong and competent. They show up whenever they are asked, or wherever there is a need, and offer whatever assistance is required.

The second word is *s'magnus*, which denotes the action of being a shield. It literally means to stand in the path of harm, using just enough force to prevent the harm from occurring, without causing any harm in return. This is about holding back the tide of destruction and offering protection to life. The water protectors at Elsipogtog and Standing Rock, who gathered in a prayerful, protective stance, were engaged in this practice. The water warriors are willing to put themselves in harm's way in order to prevent a larger harm from occurring. They understand the connection between water and life, and know that without water we will not live to solve the many other problems that we face. Therefore, they put their bodies between the water and those seeking to harm it, literally forming a shield for the protection of life.

Warriors are willing to sacrifice their lives to ensure the survival of others. They are strong, balanced, and unafraid. They do not hesitate to speak the truth about issues that pose a threat to the well-being of the people and the continuity of life. Yet they do so in ways that demonstrate respect for those they are addressing. They live each day with honor, respect, and dignity, adhering to a set of core values that guide their every step. Chief Oren Lyons, Wisdom Keeper of the Onondaga Nation, tells us that when we place our feet on the Earth, the faces of our grandchildren are looking up at us from the soil, so we must walk carefully. A warrior is aware of their obligations toward all life, past, present, and future, and takes care to develop discipline in their walk upon the Earth. Warriors like these don't just emerge. They are carefully cultivated in fertile ground and nurtured into being.

The call for the warrior is not simply an individual call to action when all hell is breaking loose; it's a call for us to cultivate the ground in which warriors can be grown. It's about living in a way that teaches the young people how to walk strong through life, but gently upon the Earth. A warrior must be respectful and disciplined in their interactions with all living beings, and committed to protecting the sacredness of every life. This respect, discipline, and commitment must be instilled in them from a young age. Their character must be carefully developed in a ground that supports, nurtures, and develops an abiding code of ethics that will inform their decision-making going forward.

When we look around the world today, we see many who are striving to become warriors. However, they often lack clear purpose and direction, or they lack clear guidance. As a result, they lose focus or misplace their efforts. Sadly, the mainstream society has not been structured to cultivate lifelong warriors who are committed to protecting life, nor does it provide a ready space for those warriors to exist. Instead, it has become adept at cultivating short-term conquerors that are proficient in the destruction of life and all the requirements necessary to support it, like our lands and waters.

Very few people in positions of power today demonstrate true loyalty to life, or the intent to bring forth harmony or peace. Instead, they show loyalty to false hierarchies of power, status, and money. They model systems that promote competition over cooperation. These leaders aren't capable of demonstrating respect to the young because they don't have that respect to offer. What happened to the lineage of warriors that were meant to guard life and hold it in a sacred way? Where have they gone, and what can we do to bring them back?

A warrior is cultivated within the community, within the family, and through a way of life. The values that they hold are planted and nourished from an early age, and reinforced throughout their lives. Like the corn, the ground that warriors are planted in must be rich and strong. If you want the corn to grow strong and healthy, you have to plant it in the right place, and feed it properly. You can't plant it in weak soil or along a flood plain and expect it to grow. The seeds will simply be washed away.

Our modern-day floodplain is the colonial education system. It provides shallow soil that is deficient in nutrients. Instead of teaching respect for the rich biodiversity that ensures a healthy balance, it teaches homogeneity and strips away the value structure that is held within our core culture teachings. It teaches students to seek the right answer according to social norms, rather than instilling critical thinking skills that would lead them to right action. And it teaches allegiance and obedience to our existing structures, without allowing our young people to consider if those structures actually serve the fundamental needs of life. Colonial education does not provide us with the tools needed to live sustainable lives that are in reciprocal harmony with the rest of creation. It teaches us to seek ways to continue taking, without any commitment toward reciprocity, and leaves us dependent on the trappings of our addicted society.

As a result, we are losing the environment required to cultivate true warriors. We have allowed that environment to be contaminated, in the same way that we have allowed the Earth to be contaminated, by stripping away all of its nutrients. The desecration of sacred sites, the placement of pipelines through our waterways, the defilement and desecration of the Earth, and the loss of connection to life is a reflection of this loss. We have stopped investing in the development of commitment and responsibility in our youth. We have stopped teaching them about the sacredness of all life. Instead, we send them off to be trained by those operating and maintaining the broken systems that are brokering our death. Thus, we are no longer turning out warriors; we are turning out obedient soldiers that are trained to operate within the currently failing paradigm.

The conflict that this creates in our young people is evident in the increasingly high suicide rates among military personnel. Those who seek to be helpers and protectors frequently enter the military expecting to serve humanity. Once there, they realize that what they are really doing is serving the interests of an industry that profits off death and destruction. This system impedes the individual's ability to be helpful, by tying them up in rules that ensure their obedience rather than promoting their humanity.

I have had the opportunity to meet and work with many beautiful people who are members of our armed forces. Their desire to be helpful is easily apparent in all of the good deeds that they engage in outside of their military service. They take firmly to the teachings on respect and politeness.

They offer assistance to the people that they meet in their daily lives, carrying groceries for the elderly, helping a young mother change a tire, or showing up to repair a playground for the kids in their communities. In their hearts this is the service that they imagined. Yet, in the ranks, they are taught to stifle their innate empathy and compassion for “others,” especially for those that are labeled as their enemies, and to exchange it for a form of detached hypermasculinity. In the process of becoming a soldier, the true service that these individuals have to offer life is often lost in a maze of confusion that serves to protect the industry of war at the expense of human life and the well-being of the Earth. This causes incredible harm to the psyche of these individuals and creates deep conflict in those who are answering a deeper call to be of service.

My family has suffered the impacts of this conflict and the loss that it causes. My nephew was born with a light in his eyes. It was immediately apparent to anyone who saw him. In fact, his spirit name was Nequtatawet, which meant the light of the North Star. He lit up every room that he entered. He was a kind and beautiful soul who wanted nothing more than to serve and protect. His path toward achieving that goal was to join the military, which he did right out of high school. This had been his dream since he was a small boy. He had been obsessed with the military since he was able to talk and we all knew that one day he would join some branch of the armed service. Beyond this goal, his entire life was reflective of his desire to be of service to others. All of his friends and family members are able to recount stories of the times that he was there to help them when they were going through a difficult period in their lives. He volunteered for social service organizations and served as a mentor for youth programs. He counseled his friends when they were struggling. He went through all the training and ceremonial rituals to become a member of the Wabanaki Eagle Dance Medicine Society, so that he could help guide and mentor other young men. He was polite, friendly, and always quick to offer assistance. In his military division, he was recognized as the first one to go up to the new recruits, make them feel welcomed, and show them around. He didn't do this because it was his job. He did it because it was in his nature to be kind and helpful.

My nephew also carried a lot of spiritual gifts. He was empathic and incredibly intuitive. He knew where he was needed and he sensed when

things weren't right. He picked up what others were feeling and took those emotions into his body, without knowing how to filter or funnel them back out. In his chosen path, there was no place for his spiritual gifts to be honed. There was no way for him to share the intuitive knowledge that he held. So, he kept that information to himself and it haunted him. There was no place for the compassion and sensitivity that was a fundamental part of his being to be expressed. In his eyes, there was no visible way for him to balance who he was called to be deep inside and who he was expected to be as a soldier. Eventually, the pressure of all that conflict became too great for him to manage, and he took his own life. The grief of that loss hit my family like a cannonball through our center. The vacuum created by his leaving was immense, the pain unbearable. Several days in a row I woke myself up by sobbing in my sleep. We staggered through those first days and weeks, clinging to one another, knowing that our lives would never be the same, and certain that they weren't meant to be.

Six months after his death, he came to me and told me that he couldn't find the path in this life to offer the gifts that he had to offer, or a way to manage the spiritual abilities that he carried. Though he appeared to have it all together on the outside, on the inside he was scrambling to survive every day. Because his being wasn't balanced and his gifts were left locked inside him, he couldn't get grounded. He said that everything hit him like an earthquake. He was never able to find his place here, he felt like he never quite fit in, even though he was loved and loved us all deeply in return, this world didn't offer him the space to be who he was meant to be. His message is critically important to us all—the world didn't offer him the space to be who he was meant to be. This tells us that we have some work to do, so that we can create space for all people to be and to become who they are meant to be, especially our young people.

So, how do we create this space? How do we recreate the sacred space for spiritual warriors to emerge once again? It is the belief of my people that the path toward creating that space is contained within our culture. They are held in our ceremonies and way of life. And they are found in our ancient languages, which define our relationship with the rest of creation. We have to stop trying to make our children fit into the world that they find themselves in, and start creating a world that fits them. This begins with how we educate them.

I've spent a lot of time talking with my friend Miigamaghan, who is a Mi'kmaq'i speaker, about the stripping of the feminine aspects of the words in our language that brought balance to our way of life, and how this has had a dramatic impact on our communities. I've shared some examples of this earlier. Another example is in the word *kinah ma'sin*, which is used for "education" or "teaching." When that word is traced back to its original meaning, it relates to the way we learn and the way that we teach ourselves. The word has a feminine root that connects to the intuitive wisdom that we gain from going within. Along the way this word was shifted to a masculine interpretation and stripped of its intuitive wisdom, leaving only the external aspects of scholarly education. The original instructions in our language teach us how to harmonize the masculine and feminine energies within us, and to balance our external actions with internal wisdom. When the deeper meanings are stripped away, we lose half of the information—most often the information that is associated with the feminine or intuitive aspects of our being. This leaves no space for the empathic and intuitive abilities to be honored, nurtured, and balanced, and denies us the opportunity to become whole human beings.

The same transformation has occurred in the meaning associated with the word *warrior*, taking it from a balanced perspective that honors the sacredness of life, to a militant perspective that glorifies warfare. Thus, if we hope to regain the balanced version of the warrior in our world, we must go back and examine all that we've lost along the way and resurrect the core cultural values that fertilized the ground in which our warriors were grown.

We have lost our balance and along with it our sense of responsibility for one another, thereby diminishing the role of the true warrior within our society. As Sitting Bull said, the role of the warrior is to "take care of the elderly, the defenseless, and those who cannot care for themselves." The warrior of old was charged with caring for those in need. Today, that job has been outsourced to systems of government that almost always fall short of meeting the needs of the people or providing the protections necessary. Our systems of government have been designed to separate us from our responsibility toward one another, making us negligent in our efforts to ensure that our family, friends, and neighbors are properly taken care of. Instead of taking in our hungry brother and feeding him, we send him to

social services. Instead of taking care of those with deep emotional and spiritual wounds, we send them to a stranger for talk therapy or medication. All of the artificial systems that we have come to rely on have taken us away from our humanity and weakened our ability to truly take care of one another.

If we want to reclaim the environment needed to grow true spiritual warriors, we have to get back to the Earth and renew our relationship with the natural world, so that we can renew our understanding of the value of life. We need to take responsibility for instructing the children in the ways of compassion, kindness, and generosity toward others. We need to ensure that every child has a solid sense of belonging and kinship, developed through close contact and meaningful engagement with loving adults.

I was very fortunate to have grown up in such an environment. From my earliest memory, I was taught to love the land around me, to understand the history that it connected me to, and to take responsibility for its care into the future. When I stand on that land today, I still feel that strong sense of kinship as well as the obligation that I was given to protect it as a child.

I was also fortunate to be raised in a family that not only taught kindness and charity but also demonstrated it through their actions. Throughout my youth, I observed my grandparents secretly helping members of our community with clothing, food, school supplies, and medicine. I watched my grandfather fiercely defend the right of Native students to be educated and then create programs that helped them reach their goals. In my community, I frequently witnessed people checking in on each other and rallying around those in need. I saw friends and family members stand up for one another against any outside force that sought to do them harm. And in the midst of all of this, there was the constant subtle guidance from the elders, teaching us through countless stories the difference between right and wrong, teaching us about interrelatedness, and making us aware that every one of our actions impacted others, both positively and negatively.

I grew up in a community that was connected in the true sense of the word. Those connections and what they symbolized forged strength in the young people that were raised in that environment. Nearly all of the people that I grew up with have become strong leaders in our community. They run our tribal offices, teach in our schools, take care of the sick and the elderly,

and protect our children. They run our courts and manage our natural resources. They teach the language, share traditional knowledge, and ensure that our ceremonies are carried forward. They run youth programs that help instill a sense of community and a love for the land and the waters that sustain our community. And, they stand up for the rights of Mother Earth, modeling for our youth a strong commitment to preserve and protect our homelands for the generations yet to come. They are warriors, each and every one. The strength that they have and the values that they hold were cultivated in rich soil, and watered daily through countless interactions with one another, their families and the elders in our community. This environment helped build a deep sense of kinship among them and a strong sense of commitment within them to care for one another.

It is now our responsibility to cultivate the warriors of tomorrow. To do that, we have to take responsibility for nourishing the ground where they will grow. We have to get down on that ground and plant the seeds that will give them life. Then, we have to ensure that their environment is capable of providing them with everything that they need, including a set of core cultural values that will guide them on their path.