

Realizing Our Roots and the Power of Interconnectedness

I embrace you as “beautiful relatives of the world.” This is the Hopi way of greeting those from other nations with an open hand to show that I come in peace. As an indigenous person, I come from a culture that has been on this continent for thousands of years, surviving and thriving despite many hardships and challenges. Over the ages, simple and fundamental truths have supported our survival that I think are relevant for society at large today more than ever. The principles of interconnectedness, humility and making decisions with the consideration of seven generations might seem basic and easy to take for granted. But it is precisely these principles that need to be integrated into our lives, institutions and our structures of government in a deeper way.

⋮ Mona Polacca
⋮ Native American Elder

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An Inter-Connected Family

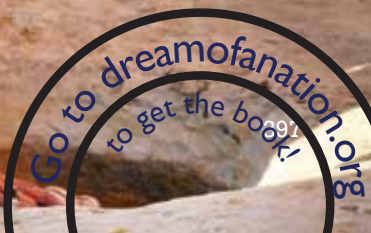
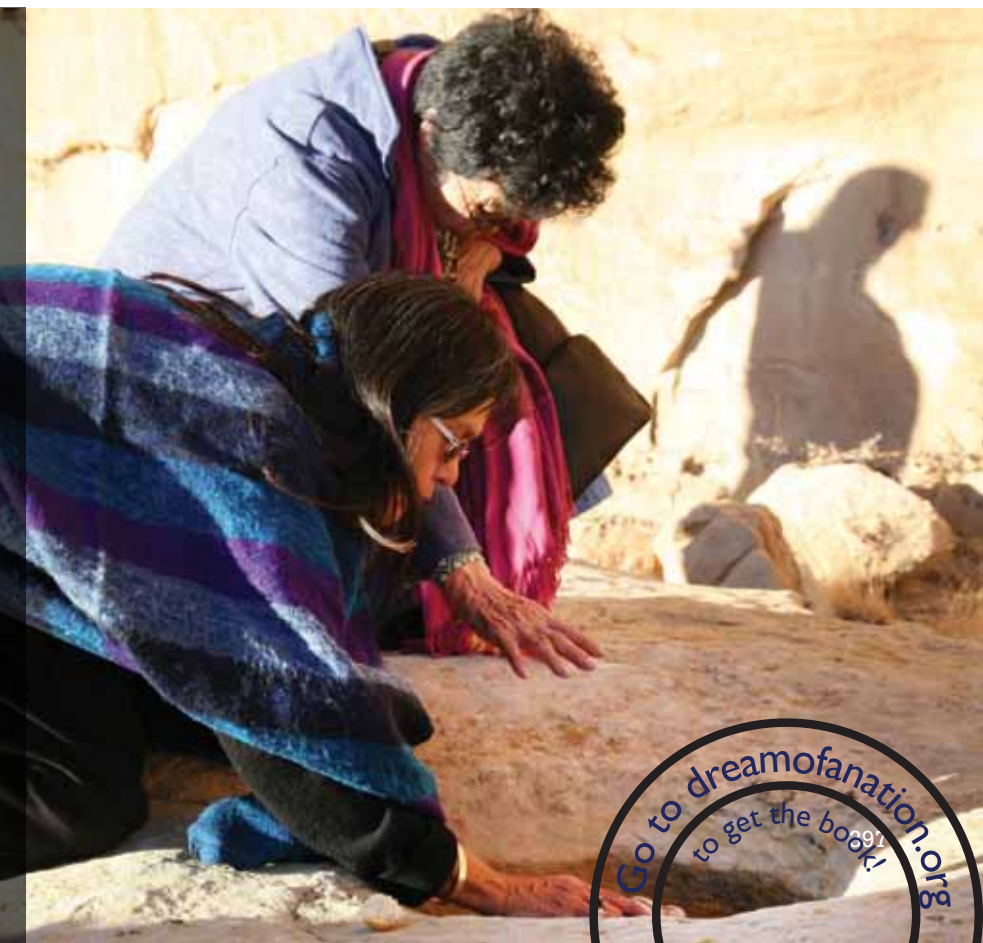
In my upbringing, I was taught that everyone is my relative, that we are all relatives. My parents and grandparents instilled this value since I was a child, and I notice that, without question, it helps to me to see the value in each person and living thing. Looking back at Earth from 200 miles up in space, divisions don't exist, and it is abundantly clear that we are one family on one Earth. But, in our political dealings, in our relationship with our Mother Earth, in the media world and in our relationships with those inside and outside our country, how often do we remember that we are all related? That we are all one family? This simple realization, as basic as it is, has profound implications. If we recognize that all people, plants, animals and even the forests and fish are our relations, then we are guided to act in a way that is life-sustaining and our worldview is more open and inclusive. We listen more and have

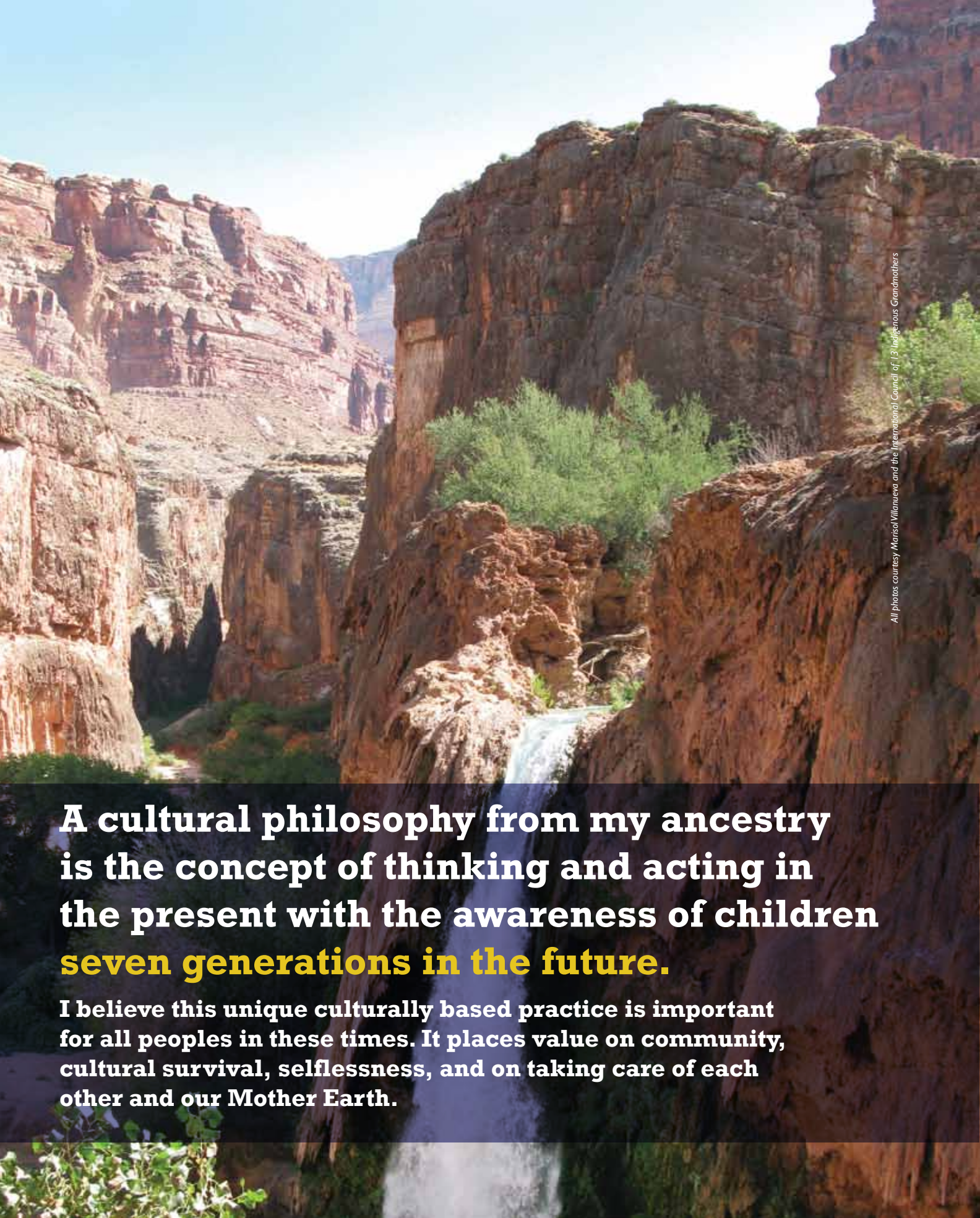
greater patience, finding solutions more readily instead of keeping the fight alive. The fact of the matter is that we don't exist independently. The honor of one is the honor of all, and the hurt of one is the hurt of all.

Humility

Corn is vitally important for our people. It has been a source of sustenance for thousands of years and also carries a much deeper meaning representing our connection to the forces of nature and the unseen world. There is a story that, long ago, our people were given a choice regarding which seeds of corn to choose. We chose the humblest seeds, those that produce small stalks and ears of corn. But even though these kernels are small and humble, they are hearty, capable of growing in the desert, in extreme temperatures with little water. The humble nature of these seeds is also their strength. Humility is a key ingredient in life. There are

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All photos courtesy Mansol Villanueva and the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers

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certain challenges that we all face, and these challenges are a teaching of humility. No doubt, we are facing many challenges as a country. But it is important to acknowledge that whatever we are presented with is like a gift. How are our current struggles causing us to take pause, to reorganize, to commit to new and different priorities? To cast away old and habitual ways of being that don't serve us? How are our current challenges actually opportunities for renewal if we face them with a spirit of collaboration and creativity?

Seven Generations Ahead

A cultural philosophy from my ancestry and of many indigenous peoples in North America and across the world is the concept of thinking and acting in the present with the awareness of children seven generations in the future. I believe this unique culturally based practice is important for all peoples in these times. It places value on community, cultural survival, selflessness and taking care of each other and our Mother Earth. Its beauty and truth is in its simplicity and calls us to find common ground and work to leave the world a better place.

This principle plays out in many different ways. If we are thinking and acting with sensitivity to our future descendants seven generations ahead, how does this

inform our decisions now? Do we start to prioritize differently as a country? Perhaps in the coming generations we will turn the tables so that we spend eight times more on education than on our military instead of the other way around. Perhaps in the next generation, it will become a reality that every home will be powered by the sun and wind? Thinking ahead, perhaps we begin to measure our richness in terms of happiness and equality instead of Gross Domestic Product? This way of thinking is taking root more and more across this land and across the world. It is good to see, and it needs to keep growing.

The Grandmothers' Council

Looking at my grandchildren gives me hope. To have hope is to realize that there is going to be something more coming, like looking at the dawn before the sunrise. Being a member of the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers also gives me hope. We represent indigenous peoples and traditions from all over the world and have come together in unity to further education and healing for our Mother Earth, all Her inhabitants and for the next seven generations to come. We come together in prayer and ceremony to imagine a different vision for our future and serve as spokespeople on a wide range of social justice and environmental issues.

The International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers represents indigenous people and traditions from all over the world that come together in unity to further education and healing for our Mother Earth and all Her inhabitants. Here, the Grandmothers gather in New York.





In Italy, the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers fulfill a long-held intention to preform prayer ceremonies at the Vatican.



Mona Polacca offers prayers during an International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers gathering in the Southwest US.



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In a sense, the Council is a microcosm for a way of being and working in partnership that is growing on a global scale. One of my sisters in the Council, Agnes Baker Pilgrim, is fond of saying, “The greatest distance in the world is the 14 inches from our minds to our hearts.” Facing a world in crisis, we believe solutions will come as people and institutions continue to come together in partnership, from a place of heart and compassion.

Indigenous people have come through a time of great struggle, a time of darkness. The way I look at it is like the nature of a butterfly. In the cocoon, a place of darkness, the creature breaks down into a fluid, and then a change, a transformation, takes place. When it is ready and in its own time, it begins to move and develop a form that stretches and breaks away from this cocoon and emerges into this world, into life, as a beautiful creature. We grandmothers, we have emerged from that darkness, see this beauty, see each other and reach out to the world with open arms, with love, hope, compassion, faith and charity. Finding strength and purpose in each other is a beautiful thing.

A Future Vision

We find ourselves in transition, in a place of uncertainty where all is not resolved, where there are great

questions and concerns, but also hopes. This state of transformation, movement and becoming is not final; it is not perfect. The key is to know and acknowledge that within us all exist the conditions for creativity and the conditions for grace to descend. We are living in a time of definitions and decisions. We are the generation with the responsibility and option to choose the path with a life for our children. Now is the time of awakening, where we become more aware of our connections and our fundamental relation to each other. Aware of our existence in this world. What it means to be human.

By stepping forward between and within cultures and languages, we can overcome boundaries. We can cross borders not only geographically but also psychologically and spiritually. This means that one is never finished, that one is always journeying onward. It is time to make a commitment to encourage the development of a new history and partnership among us. As the great Lakota leader Sitting Bull said, “Let us put our minds together and see what life we can make for our children,” let us chart a course of peace and harmony. Let us have the courage, strength, the will and the wisdom to do this for the next seven generations.

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Mona Polacca, M.S.W., is a Havasupai, Hopi and Tewa Native American whose tribal affiliation is of the Colorado River Indian Tribes of Parker, Arizona, where she has served as the treasurer and tribal council member. Today she is a self-employed human services consultant to tribal communities. She is committed to supporting initiatives that involve developing effective strategies and sensitive approaches and action towards addressing indigenous human rights and works towards improving the quality of life of global indigenous peoples. Currently, she is a member of a working group planning the Indigenous World Forum on Water and Peace. Polacca, a founding member of the International Council of 13 Indigenous Grandmothers (www.grandmotherscouncil.org), is featured in a collection of teachings and stories compiled in the Grandmothers' book, Grandmothers Counsel the World: Women Elders Offer Their Vision for Our Planet, and their documentary film, For the Next 7 Generations. She lives in Arizona and has a son, two daughters and nine grandchildren.

