The Indigenous approach to well-being

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The Lenape, meaning "the people" inhabited Lenapehoking, present day New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and parts of Connecticut and according to oral history and anthropology. have lived there for thousands of years. Traditionally, Algonquian speakers and matriarchal, they were never politically unified as a single tribe, rather were bands with clan relationships in many locations in their original homeland, living in semi-permanent seasonal villages. The history of the Lenape during European colonialism and the birth of the United States is a complex story of enduring and surviving massacres, disease, removal, fragmentation, economic degradation and participation in every war over the course of over two centuries. The Lenape today make up a geographically scattered diaspora. This includes two Federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma and two Nations in Ontario, the result of forced removals towards the West formalized with treaties beginning with European colonists through the birth of America and until the 1850's. It was not until 1924 that Native Americans were granted U.S. Citizenship, and it was not until the 1970's that Native Americans were legally allowed to pray in their own traditions.

Despite this turbulent history and migrations, the people maintained their communities, traditions, values and languages all the while adapting to new sets of circumstances.

The traditional core of the Lenape people has always been highly spiritual and their relationship to the earth and land has never been one of entitlement, but rather inclusion. Land could not possibly be seen as a monetarily valued geometric plot. Prior to colonization, land could not be owned, the earth was seen as living, as our "mother" since it gave and sustained all life through generations. It was understood that when we die, we go back to the earth. When we are living, it carries us, its water, air, minerals and plants keep us alive. Therefore, the earth is in us when we are alive and we are in the earth when we die; it is not outside of us.

As the cycles of generations live and die on the land, they become part of the land itself, reinforcing the depth of connection to land. Elders visiting Lenapehoking from Oklahoma have expressed their connection to their original homeland, reflecting on their ability to see and sense their ancestors.

The original Lenape economy was inherently part of Lenape spirituality.

Fishing, hunting and harvesting were done while thanking Creator and honoring the spirits of those who gave their lives in order for the people to live. This resulted in an economy infused with respect and reverence towards the animals

and crops that sustained the people. Ensuring continual animals for the hunts and seasonal harvests demanded maintaining ourselves as a balanced part of mother earth, not taking or killing more than what was needed and not wasting any food. This is because all life was seen as part of creation and everything has a spirit. We are part of a living universe.

Today, a segment of humanity is hungry, while some nations as the U.S. waste enormous amounts of food. The Lenape idea of responsibility towards one another included food distribution, which was shared in community so no one went hungry.
Though environmentalism and sustainability seek to address the problems of energy, pollution, waste and food production, as human beings we have yet to fully internalize our relationship with and connection to the earth.

The "Environment" implies an external entity that surrounds us. But the "environment ", is inside of us. A polluted body of water such as a lake is not different than our polluted human bodies of water. Eventually, the water in bodies of water will enter as water in human bodies of water.

Similarly, a polluted cloud is no different than the air in our lungs, eventually, it becomes part of us.

The sun and lunar cycles also once dictated the activities of harvesting and ceremony, keeping the alignment for seasonal renewal and sustaining life and health.

This respect and understanding extends to the interconnected diversity found on earth. It is a phenomenon, that no two trees, rocks, clouds, people, snowflakes, dogs, languages, thoughts and artistic expressions are truly identical. As human beings, we are also diverse expressions of the same source, made from the Earth like all other life. Human diversity like all diversity and biodiversity, is a phenomenon of the earth, of the universe.

Sadly, human beings have the ability to dehumanize others, when in times of war, genocide, slavery. This is a denial of this inherit diversity which includes all people, an infinite diversity of life all originating from the same source. And if we all originate from the same source, as always understood among the Lenape, all people are relatives, hence familial references used in describing other peoples and animals.

We are connected with all of the earth and the universe, because it is made of us and us of it.

The Lenape Center is a non-profit reestablishing a Lenape cultural presence in Manhattan, (Manhattan is Lenape for "the Island") through artistic programs and an eventual physical center. We believe that Lenape and other Indigenous knowledge and understanding will continue to play a significant part in creating a better world for generations to come.