

A Dakota Reflection on “Individuality” within “Commonality”

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From their childhood on, most Americans have heard of the “rags to riches” stories and “shame to fame” anecdotes that are prevalent within American cultural media. In fact, it would seem that the “self-made man,” and the “lone ranger” law-bringer of the Wild West fascinate Americans of all skin hues.¹ Contemporary Americans often find themselves caught up in a frenzy of media and paparazzi-obsessed idolization of individual celebrities such as Paris Hilton, Tiger Woods, Anna Nicole Smith, and Oprah. While on the one hand, these celebrities are sought after as models to emulate, the media are just as quick and remorseless to relish the downfall of a celebrity, viz. O.J. Simpson, Martha Stewart, and Michael Jackson. Such celebrities are unimportant to the world as individual children of God, that is as individuals who experience life, consider foundational questions regarding purpose and meaning, and daily encounter God’s creation in countless ways. Instead, the process of idolization relegates these individuals to a category of individual, empty shells without emotion, purpose, and being.

Ultimately, in the context of brokenness, which American society finds itself, “individuality” has continually been held up as a harbinger to the “freedom” that has historically been fought for and continues to purportedly be a goal of American political and sociological aspirations. Even before the English Anglicans, Puritans, and other individuals of European ancestry settled on the American continent, a sense of individualism was foundational in Christian religious experience and understanding. In fact, it is a Puritan sense of an individual’s own hard work and self-reliance that have undergirded “traditional American values.” While there has always been a parallel sense of “the common good” and philanthropic endeavor, the sense of individuality is still paramount in the American psyche.

As a Native American man², specifically as a member of the Santee Sioux Nation (now based in the federal state of Nebraska), my own experience of living *and* surviving in a multi-cultured society is fairly common to most Native Americans. From a theological point of view, the Dakota are panentheistic, understanding the essence of being, *wakan*, to be present in all of creation. In a sense, *wakan* is a singularity in that it is the ultimate existent being, i.e., both the creation itself and the process of initiation, actualization, and fulfillment that are inherent within its own becoming. Some would compare this to Hegel’s *Idee* in its process of actualization (through history) towards self-

¹ Cf. fairy tales such as *Cinderella* and stories such as those of Horatio Alger, Jr.

² I will use “Native American” to designate individuals whose ancestry is of the indigenous peoples of the North American continent. While the term Sioux is a misnomer from the French, the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota people use the term officially as it is used as a federal government designation. Dakota, Lakota and Nakota are technically three dialects of the same language. The term “*Dakota*” means “ally.” The political national name of the Dakota is “*Oceti Sakowin*,” meaning “Seven Council Fires.”

understanding of itself as the *Absolut*. However, from a Dakota perspective, compartmentalization does not add to human understanding of the metaphysical nature of *wakan* since human knowledge and ignorance both are part of *wakan*, as well. Therefore, in a sense, the individuality of a person is enveloped within a greater blanket of being that we experience and call *wakan*. While *wakan* is integral to all physical creation, what becomes more important is the understanding that *wakan* exists in all relationships between all parts of creation, both physical and non-physical, i.e., thought, nothingness, intentions, emotions, etc. The “web of creation,” in that all parts are connected to the others, takes on theological significance for the Dakota. This understanding of the connectivity of all creation, then, is the basis for Dakota thought and spirituality.

During a summer school session of the Niobrara School for Ministry in 2002, a lay ministry program supported by the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota, Albert White Hat, a Lakota elder from the Rosebud Indian Reservation, spoke to students concerning the evolving human understanding of *wakan*. While Albert was brought up as a Roman Catholic, his family resisted assimilation policies of the U.S. government, which were supported by the mainline churches up to the 1960s. In their resistance, they strongly held onto Lakota theological belief and rituals. He told the group that the term “*wakantanka*” (often translated as “Great Spirit”) was an adaptation of Lakota terminology to Christian concepts. While *wakantanka* is a term which really emphasizes a philosophical conceptualization of *wakan*, the Lakota traditionally addressed *wakan* as “*Tunkashila*,”³ a term of intimate relationship, namely “Little Grandfather.” This is to be understood as an instance of relational emphasis.

While in western/American culture, the need and emphasis toward individuality is held up, in Dakota culture, as well as in many of the cultures of indigenous peoples, individuality is valued but only when put into context of a greater theological understanding of “commonality,” reflecting the sense of interconnectedness with all of creation. Traditional Dakota society lifts up and supports the individual because of the centrality of relationship in the society. Conversely, a Dakota person traditionally is living out their understanding of relationships to relatives, the tribe, the creation, and *wakan*.

A responsibility of traditional Dakota society is to assist the individual in discerning his call in life, that is, his own specific role in society. Traditionally young men would be taught to hunt for family, clan, tribe, and for the hungry stranger. Young women would be taught the role of caring for children, taking care of the home, caring for elders, gathering medicinal herbs, etc. At times, elders and parents would discern that a young person (traditionally a young man) was different from other peers in that they were called to intellectual pursuits, spiritual endeavors, artistic creation, etc. Often these young people were then reared by elders to become the “medicine people,” the “healers,” the priests, the artists and artisans of the society. Their individual lives especially were to serve the people. Same-sex attraction was often one sign that the individual was called to such a vocation. In Dakota understanding, the *wi’i’inkte* (now more commonly said and

³ The term “Tunkashila” is related to the term “inyan” which is translated as “rock.” Because a rock is considered as one of the oldest relatives within creation, the term lovingly addresses the creator as familial and reverential while connecting it with elderhood.

spelled as *winkte*) are a separate gender from male and female.⁴ What is most important is to establish is that same-sex attraction was not seen as sinful or as aberrant by traditional Dakota society, since *winkte* are also part of *wakan* and all members of the society are related.

The “coming out” experience of young Dakota men and women is a new phenomenon that is a result of generations of oppression by the dominant white American culture. Due to past federally-mandated assimilationist policies enacted by churches and schools, *winkte* and their societies (which are concerned with rituals and ceremonies) were forced into secrecy in order to survive. Whereas in the past, *winkte* had specific vocational and ceremonial roles to fulfill in the society, those roles have disappeared with the suppression of Dakota spirituality and traditions. Whereas elders and parents were traditionally aware and proud of their offspring as *winkte*, this pride has now been turned into shame as the dominant white culture of America continues to denigrate gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people. This denigration and dehumanization can only be done when a sense of relationship is completely severed.

In the semantic gospels, Jesus instructs his followers to completely love God and to love their neighbors. He insists that there are no greater commandments than these.⁵ The Dakota people have traditionally lived out this understanding by embracing *wakan*, which envelops and permeates all of creation and its members. It involves setting aside individuality for the sake of commonality and setting down commonality for the sake of individuality. It is a precious balance that is set as the ideal. It is a story that the Dakota can share with the Anglican Communion as it struggles to find its unity within the diversity of its own membership.

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⁴ The term “wi’i’inkte” has been expounded upon by the Rev. Dr. Martin Brokenleg (Lakota) of the Vancouver School of Theology (www.vst.edu). Presently, the abbreviated form of “winkte” is commonly used. In contemporary American society, many *winkte* have embraced the English term “two-spirited.” In some tribes this is descriptive of the belief that both male and female spirits are “embodied” in one person.

⁵ Cf. *Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31, and Luke 10:27*