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A Ancient Earth Wisdom: A Path of Healing for the Present

An Interview with Ohki Simine Forest

by Patricia Worth

Ohki Simine Forest, of Canadian Mohawk descent, is author of Red Wheel/Weiser's classic *Dreaming the Council Ways: True Native Teachings from the Red Lodge*. She has received traditional initiations from Maya, Mongolian and other native shamans. Ohki is co-founder of the grassroots Mexican nonprofit aid organization C.I.M.A., which supports the indigenous Maya in resistance. Widely traveled and fluent in several languages, Ohki followed the signs of her path in 1986 and moved to Chiapas, Mexico.

In July 2004, I traveled from northern New Mexico to join Ohki in the Chiapan highlands, continuing my apprenticeship to her in the spiritual warriorship tradition of Native Medicine Wheel ways. Prior to meeting Ohki, I had spent decades exploring the matrifocal and shamanic roots of my Celtic heritage. This quest returned me repeatedly to the enduring map of reality at the root of life, the Medicine Wheel. From Ohki I learned a Native name for the Wheel: the Great Shield of Understanding.

Simple, direct, powerful and never ending, the wisdom held in the Shield of Understanding contains many of the missing links vital to our individual and collective awakening into true responsibility as human beings. Each direction of the Wheel holds endless teachings — on elements, tendencies, perceptual lenses, wounds, walls, powers, gifts, medicines, guardians, doors.

The questions I bring to Ohki arise from the common ignorance and prejudices I've struggled to face in studies with her. They are questions I often hear from her students in the United States, where Ohki also teaches.

This day, in her simple retreat in the highlands of Chiapas, Ohki moves gracefully between turning corn tortillas on the comal, heating water for her daughter's bath, and speaking in Spanish with her daughter, in accented English with me. As Ohki sits to listen and respond to my questions, her penetrating gaze sharpens my focus as well.

PW: Could you speak about the origin of these Medicine Wheel teachings, their significance for our lives and their global recurrence?

OSF: We don't know the true origin — it's only the rational mind asking the question! [Those piercing eyes kindly nail me.] There are the different lineages of shamans that I was taught in Mongolia, the Native Americas and the Maya land. The path of teaching I offer is primarily to help people go back to the root teaching of the Medicine Wheel. This is a very ancient way of life that comes through all of these cultures and is the very first way people lived when they became more

conscious. They lived based on the Medicine Wheel because it's truly, profoundly, right at the root in harmony with the whole of the universe & with all the cycles and ways in Nature — and it brings consciousness. It teaches you how to see where you're trapped, where your mind and your spirit are not fully living.

The Medicine Wheel is not just an external circle outside; it is inside you. In order to live the Medicine Wheel you have to find your internal medicine wheel. The Western mind was trained linearly, with squares, and it's disconnected — the way people think! So to find the medicine wheel within, you have to go back to your womb, to your essence. And from there it's like throwing a rock in the waters — it makes ripples. But if you start trying to work on the ripples outside and there's no sacred stone, no sacred hoop in the middle, it's useless. To find that stone, you start living in the middle of the Medicine Wheel. Everything you do is circular. The way you relate to other people is not a one-on-one basis. It becomes more of a communal-mind way, a community of mind and people. Even if you live alone, you don't feel yourself alone; you feel connected.

PW: In the Medicine Wheel teachings you offer, each of the four cardinal directions has a particular wall associated with it that individuals and nations must face and conquer to become true human beings. Could you speak about the wall faced by the United States as a nation?

OSF: This is the West wall. It's called the Wall of Illusion, the Wall of Self-Importance, also the Imperialistic Wall. What this wall signifies for American people is the American Dream, which is a huge illusion that people have come to believe in, have created as a reality. But in reality there is only one dream, which is the Dream of Mother Earth. The other dreams are false; they are illusions, a deceit of the mind.

The wall in the West can be seen as a wall of mirrors, like a discotheque ball, that everybody is trapped in, with their own egos being mirrored back to them. There are basically seven mirrors in the wall that one has to go through in order to find what the ancient teachings and wisdom say are the powers of humility, the powers of Earth, the power of introspection.

The West wall is also associated with Crazy Mother, the one who brings you insanity or shows you your own insanity. She shows you how to deal with that insanity by testing or overpowering you. Fear of insanity makes you extremely rigid and dogmatic. Embracing insanity as a natural part of yourself helps you see these different mirrors as direct projections of who you are. Some of these mirrors are called self-grasping, ignorance, doubt, anger and terror. Terror is one of the last mirrors you go through before you find the mirror of true self. In each mirror you gain some qualities, some powers.

[She pauses and resumes speaking very softly.] It seems pretty obvious what the United States is going through: it has to do with having to realize the lack of humility. The direction of the West in these Medicine Wheel ways has to do with your relationship to the material world, the physical world. The culture has put too strong an emphasis on materiality versus spirituality. There's too much concern with the body, the fitness of the body, which just reflects a lot of ego involvement. When you're connected with Spirit, you're not overly obsessed with the fitness of your body or with material things. You live very simply. Of course, you take good care of your self and your things; you're not a slob. When you live properly with reality, you care for these things for a long time. The materialism of Western culture shows this insanity, this lack of humility, this being caught in the illusion of matter, the spell of matter over their minds, and they believe in it as a supreme god. It's a wrong thinking, a wrong understanding of life.

The kind of politics the U.S. government is doing has a lot to do with that imperialistic thinking — wanting to perpetrate the image of the American Dream, to recreate the United States everywhere around the world. The U.S. government is now completely scared to death about the American Dream beginning to crumble apart. It's a desperate, fearful kind of politics that you are having, instead of just going down to the earth, which is the power on the other side of the West wall. There are a lot of people in your country who have started awakening to that reality, realizing it is completely insane; it's not how we can be as true humans. The people know in themselves; they have a better sense than those who seek after this egotistical power.

The wall in the West is being primarily caught into thinking you have the truth and the others are out of it, and you want them to live by your truth. It's the kind of thinking and force of "You will do what I believe in." It's a wrong concept — it's being caught in the wall. When you learn the Medicine Wheel, you don't try to forcefully change other people to your own thinking; this is a very young-soul type of thinking.

The earth in the West of the Wheel is the feminine consciousness. Only through returning to Earth ways, which are sound and spirited at the same time, can we come into healing for ourselves and our world. That's why this is so crucial for American people now. It's not just getting strictly into the organic lifestyle — that's a part of it -- but it's also understanding the true reality of the West, which has to do with living properly on Earth without harming her: being in harmony with her, understanding that Mother Earth has a spirit, and living the reality of her spirit, which, for the most part, Native people have never lost. That's why they are the keepers of her Earth ways since ancient times because the ancestors knew if the people disconnected from the ways of the Earth, humanity would be lost. Throughout the conquest, the wise people have preserved this ancient wisdom more than their own lives, to make sure that link would never be lost and we could have, in America, a way to reconnect with the spirit of the land.

I would encourage American people to not be afraid of the terror that may come upon them as a nation, upon the people. I would encourage them to look bravely into the insanity. The terror is already there anyway; it cannot be worse than it already is because it's all crumbling apart and it's an aggressive world. Also I would encourage them to live with their comforts, but to learn to detach from them. A spiritual warrior is always thinking and preparing himself or herself for the worst, thinking, So what if all of this goes away? So start preparing for living in a way that is much more in accordance with Earth-centered ways. You can already do a work like that as American people. Prepare yourself for that and for the changing of your culture. Go back to the root of the land. This is what will give you the guidance and the answers in times of crisis.

PW: Some people have very mixed or negative feelings about White people studying Red ways. Why do you accept White students? And how does that relate to the times we are in?

OSF: A lot of Native people are against teaching White people. This is contrary to Tibetan ways, where it's very clear among themselves that they don't make any difference of color about who they're going to teach. I think the same way because that's how I was taught by my own teachers. The path to truth and to inner freedom and to the center of the Wheel is the path we all are taking; it doesn't belong to one color or another. It's just plainly human to seek for truth. In this way I completely disagree with Native people who are against us teaching to White people.

However, I can understand why some Native people feel this way because a lot of White people have taken Native ways and completely desecrated the way we think, the way we are, and have not respected these ways. I leave it to Great Spirit to figure this one out or judge whomever. I do understand there is an old and extremely deep wound for many Indian people that needs to be healed and transformed. Indians were living in their way, and Whites took away their way of life and put Indians in reservations. The very little that was left to the Native Americans was the spirit. What was taken away from them was their own way of living, the right to their tongue, the land, their traditional clothes. All this was taken from them — by force. My forefathers didn't have anymore the right to plant even corn. So you take that away from a Native, who is he or she then?

PW: What are some of the challenges American people face in working with the teachings of the Medicine Wheel?

OSF: My experience has been that a lot of Native people see White people as not wanting to plunge; they just test the water, often going only at the surface of things because they're afraid of themselves. And Native ways are very direct ways. When you follow them it will take you directly to who you are. Once you live among Natives you realize you just can't bullshit Native people — they see right through you most of the time! [Laughter.] They see how screwed up you are, and they just mirror that right back to you. So it's extremely testing to be around Native people and to be following a Native way that involves that.

This is not a formal religion, it's a way of life. Native ways are about living life wherever you are, as it is. So there's really no recipe of the way, there's no external imagery — you have to be very creative. Right at the start in Native ways you're called to undertake your quest — to take responsibility for your own walking with these teachings and find your own inner wisdom. You have to make an effort, and sometimes it's a tremendous effort to change your way of life to one that is closer to the earth and closer to your true nature. It takes courage to say no to the conditionings of your culture that are so far away from Nature.

For a lot of American people it's kind of vague or too scary or too difficult. But in this it's a true way because it takes you directly to Spirit — yours and the one "out there." There is no worshiping of anything, no magic pills or mantras. It's real and direct.

Another obstacle is that a lot of people come to the spiritual path lost in themselves and confused. They'd like to have recipes because there is so much rational mind in your people. But the best way is to follow your own calling — you have to dig in. So I guess it's harder for people to do that. They get lost more easily, or they get discouraged and they just give up. It's easier to have a lama who's telling you and giving you all the blessings. But there's a danger for American people in that because you don't take full responsibility for your questing.

In shamanic ways the shaman will constantly slam you back in the face with love and humor, urging you to take responsibility for yourself. "Don't project yourself onto me!" they'll insist. "I'm not a lama. I'm not a guru. I'm just a human being, and I'm following my own quest so get on with yours!" That's a good teacher, one who nudges you, fiercely or kindly, to find your true self. Your true self is not out there in the sky or in heaven or up the ladder. Your true self is layered in you. It always has been — you've just been blind to it. A good path will help you remember and unveil that truth. Many American people with their self-importance get easily offended by such directness and don't understand this process is a mirror for them to learn through humility. So it takes a lot of sincerity and willingness. It's not easy.

This is the beauty of Native teachings: they give you that possibility of growing with yourself, feeling that you're the one to have done this, to have grown in your own spirit and to have made that connection on your own. You don't come to these ways to become an Indian or because Indian people are now the fashion. It's not about that — it's about finding your spirit. It's a way of life, but that doesn't involve living like an Indian. You're still an American person from whatever background or culture in the way you live. But it means integrating some of these practices that make you connect with your own spirit and make you open that way to go back home within yourself. I think it's important to distinguish this, for people to understand this. My sense is that American people are ready for such ways because so many have left the religion of their parents. This means American people have an advantage: they can see through the harm that religious hypocrisy can do to individuals and entire peoples.

PW: What are some of the traditional prophecies you've encountered that apply to these times of global awakening?

OSF: I've studied different prophecies, and it's been very interesting to me to see the co-relationship between most of them. For example, in Mongolian prophecies, they talk about a change of eras starting in 1985. We are leaving the Era of Man, which has lasted for 5,400 years, and we're entering into the Era of Woman for that same amount of time. This means the return of the feminine consciousness. The Mohawk people have a prophecy that states that in these times the matriarchal council ways will return throughout the whole of America.

The return of matriarchal ways for the Mongolian and the Mohawk doesn't mean giving all the power to women and doing to men what they've done to us for that long, but simply a return to the balance. Women are the entrance; we are the elemental forces and the entrance to the universe of all children. There can be no true government if it's not based on the principle source, which at the human level is the mother and at the communal level is Mother Earth. She has given birth to all of us. We place that as a symbol of respect.

Matriarchal ways are very balanced between the men's circle and the women's circle, but they're called matriarchal ways because the land is passed down the lineage of women. The prophecies talk about that natural return; it's called the restitution of women, and it's given naturally to women to reconnect to that part of themselves. So everywhere around the world women are waking up suddenly, saying, "OK, this is enough of slavery! This is enough oppression!" And this is happening right now. It's a cosmic restitution. It's not a mental thing or a movement for women's rights or anything like that. The restitution of women's natural, cosmic power and their capacity to reclaim it are just given naturally in their wombs. Everywhere around the planet, we see women awakening and reorganizing themselves and their communities to find better ways to live. This is part of the return of the feminine.

In the Maya land they talk of the return of the Plumed Serpent, which is a whole prophecy on the return of the feminine as well. A lot of old patriarchal paradigms will have to be shed, shaken off. The more we resist shaking these old patriarchal paradigms, the bigger the inner battle will be. We're called at this time to just simply open and not be afraid, especially for men to relinquish their power and for women to take it back. That doesn't mean taking the power back to fight back; it means the power to live in good ways, to show the way. We are natural teachers as women, and the times are calling us to show the way for our children to live better, to live more in accordance with Earth ways, to live more harmoniously, more in tune.

As natural educators, women have a tremendous work to do because a lot of women in your culture are still cut off from their root, their Earth Lodge. They live primarily in the Sun Lodge of men and try to make careers, and there's nobody really to raise kids anymore. Women have to go back to that Earth Lodge connection without forgetting about their Sun vision. Many American women still act like authority is outside of themselves, in the culture, in the society. For us, natural authority is right here in our womb and it's right in the earth.

The prophecies talk about a huge cosmic change in eras in these times, and we're in 25 years of purification before entering into a new cycle in 2013. It's a huge cycle. For the Maya it englobed different cycles, some of them several hundreds of years, others several thousands of years, up to about 64,000 years.

Right now many different prophecies talk of our having to meet our shadows. They are being brought up right in our faces because we won't be able to enter into the new cycles if we haven't dealt with them. Shadows are our fears, our past karmas, anything that we have not looked into and that we are locked into. All the situations in your life are asking this of you, one test after the other, more than it was before when human beings would maybe have one major test in their lives if there were any. Right now there is just one test after another; it's very intense. The energies are intensifying, and we are called to deal with the things we've not dealt with so far. We have to be able to be strong and even more fully in integrity, more truly human, in order to enter this new cycle.

Clarity is also coming at this same time, not just the shadows. More and more people are awakening to clarity of consciousness, and what is conscious and what is not conscious. Who are those who are destroying and self-destroying, and who are those who are working for protecting and preserving? Those who think long term are those who are conscious. Those who create ways in a community that will bring long-term improvement rather than short-term gains or profits or ego interests are conscious.

So you can think, Oh, I'm conscious — I'm thinking of the preservation of the planet, and yet here you are living and doing a lot of things that are totally unconscious. In the small ways of life you are still caught in a system that is a short-vision world, and you don't make transformation there. It all has to do with holding both these levels. This is the vision we need to carry in our lives at a truly conscious level.

This is where the sacred world comes in because you're conscious that you can't live completely primitively either. You have to live in this modern world, and yet at the same time it's harming in many ways. But then in your ceremonies you apologize and you ask for things to change and for help in maybe finding ways to change things in time. Slowly that will create some openings because there's nothing more powerful than a well-done ceremony. It's the start, the seed for the actions to come. If the actions are not based on ceremony they don't go well or endure. That's why we do medicine for everything. We create a medicine, then we send out the medicine to Spirit, then we walk into the medicine. Doing this creates the energetic opening for things to eventually change.

You know, when I was young it was so shameful to be an Indian, and now I'm so proud of it because times are changing. A lot of Natives are reconnected to their roots. Why? Because Native people, several generations ago, saw all this was going to happen and made ceremony for their children not to forget. The European invaders tried everything to exterminate us but they couldn't. It's an ancient connection; you just can't break that.

This is a tremendous gift — that these ancestors made ceremonies for their children not to forget. They even made ceremonies for you non-Native people to one day be ready to share with us, and now this is happening. Those who feel the call to this, you're hearing their call & you're hearing their voice, their ancient wisdom. There's hope! And that's the point in doing ceremonies: to call that consciousness to come forth.

True spirituality must take us back to being like a child, to our purest innocent self. It liberates our spirit, our creativity, and we can recognize the sacred in anything, in every part of our life. A true spirituality is at all times and moments in the most simple, ordinary things of life. It is faith in the power of life, the magic of life.

Ohki Simine Forest will be in Santa Fe and Abiquiu October 12–27, 2004. For information on her spiritual warrior retreats, ceremonies, cross-cultural healing work, private sessions and evening talks, please contact Patricia Worth at 505-429-0529 or redwind@plateautel.net.