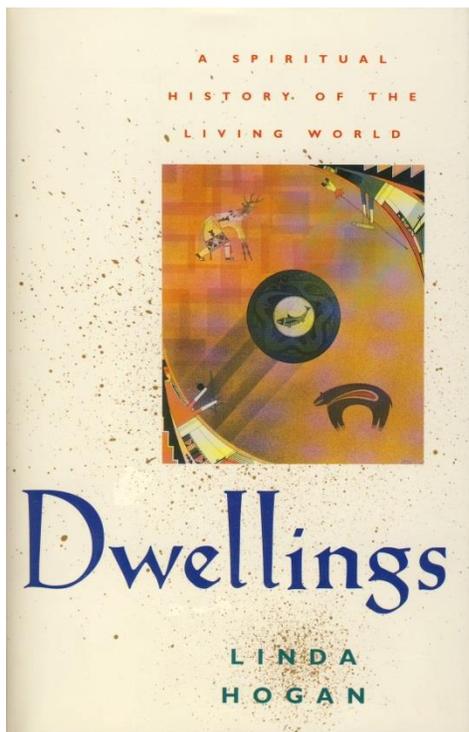


Spiritual Roots of the Environment in Linda Hogan's *Dwellings*

By Shannon Darr

Linda Hogan has a core emphatic theme in her memoir *Dwellings* that resonates with her personal religious and spiritual experience with the environment. She writes, "I can only think there is another force at work, deeper than physics and what we know of wind, something that comes from a world where lightning and thunder, sun and rain clouds live" (17). She emphasizes the need for the human race to reconnect with the environment on a spiritual level and emphasizes this need by showing the reader how our ancestors held on to this connection for basic survival and understanding of the vast earth that we live on. Linda Hogan makes references to myth, ceremony, and spirituality to reveal the nature of the world around us and how our spiritual connection to the world is just as important as the physical.

Native American traditions hold a mythical reverence for the eagle feather. For Hogan the feather represents "the power of sky, and thunder, and sun" (19). In the chapter "Feathers"



she stresses that life still exists in things that are supposedly no longer viable. A feather, in her case an eagle feather, is one of these objects. She explains how, in a dream, a voice tells her to "look up," and she did so once she woke. For years she had been praying for her own eagle feather from a live bird. This dream led her to the acquisition of an eagle feather that fell from the sky just when she woke up from and obeyed the "voice" in the dream. Hogan muses that "this event rubs the wrong way against logic" (17). She is correct to surmise that

spirituality and human logic do not agree and that this event makes little sense to the outside observer, especially if that observer shuns the idea of spirituality.

Luan Fauteck Makes Marks, in her article “Great Mysteries: Native North American Religions and Participatory Visions,” remarks, “Indian religions, because of their overarching emphasis on individual visionary experiences, are mystical at their core,” when she explains the ethos behind Native American religions as a whole (31). Linda Hogan’s experience with her spirituality is deeply personal and encompasses her understanding of the world around her. She says, “Others have tried for centuries to understand the world by science and intellect but have not yet done so” (Hogan 19). This is stated after she observes, “Perhaps there are events and things that work as a doorway into the mythical world” (19). This confirms her firm belief in the spiritual realms of creation and that the more that is discovered through science the “closer [we] come to the spiritual, magical origins of creation” (19). Makes Marks writes, “Indians have encouraged the seeking of visions and dreams through various practices and beliefs” (Makes Marks 31). For Linda Hogan and others these visions and dreams lend a hand in seeing further into what binds the physical world together into a cohesive, working pattern of life.

Linda Hogan illustrates her personal connection with the earth’s spiritual realm in the chapter “The Caves” when she recounts a story from her childhood about her seeing a lion that her father couldn’t. “Since that time I’ve dreamed of caves. In one dream I passed through a doorway that was a gaping mouth, guarded by a skull,” she writes (Hogan 32). Hogan feels this connection to caves and remarks, “I must have known, even then, that caves are not places for men. They are a feminine world” (31). Linda Hogan is a maternal figure and seems to embrace the traditional, and in many cases, biological role of femininity: a calm, nurturing, caring woman. Julie Fiandt, in her article “Autobiographical Activism in the Americas,” observes that

Hogan's day-to-day "activities reflect her concerns for human, environmental, and animalian health" (Fiandt 577). In "The Caves" Hogan describes caves as the earth's womb and connects them, and the earth, to femininity. She identifies with the earth as a loving mother who gives birth and produces life. Her recognition of the earth as a force of nurture is what gives her an innate understanding of the needs of women around her - a recognition that women are just as important as men in life's ever-turning cycles. Although she may not place the label of "feminist" on her brow, Hogan's concern for the environment is a reflection of her willingness to embrace a trait that is biological and rooted in nature: femininity and all its beauty.

Ceremonies, or rituals, are important in reconnecting with one's spirituality, especially with the vast spiritual realm that connects every living thing. In Hogan's chapter "All My Relations," the ceremony that is depicted in detail illustrates the importance of rituals as follows: "The ceremony itself includes not just our own prayers and stories of what brought us to it, but also includes the unspoken records of history, the mythic past, and all other lives connected to ours, our families, nations, and all other creatures" (Hogan 37). This ceremony described in the chapter begins with Linda Hogan bringing tobacco to a religious elder she has known for many years and respects a great deal. During this meeting she explains to him why she has come to him for this ceremony. The elder nods, and she is sent home to make preparations. Hogan ties prayer ties and gathers together basic components for the ceremony like wood for a fire, meat and bread. On the day of the ceremony a man is present who is in charge of leading the ceremony by drumming and chanting. The ceremony begins late in the afternoon, and they speak and sing and breathe smoke. This is a ritualistic ceremony described in somewhat vague detail by Linda Hogan generally performed by her Chickasaw tribe.

In an interview with Joseph Bruchac, Hogan remarks that she:

feel[s] very fortunate. Fortunate that I have a place to live where I am grounded - surrounded really - by the earth, the circle of mountains...That balance you mentioned between the spiritual and the physical and the mental - a lot of people who become interested in the spiritual tradition become very silly. They go off so far there is no balance of no footing, and our feet are very important in spiritual life touching earth. (5)

She stresses the importance of balance in “All My Relations” and how community with the spiritual helps ground her in the living, breathing world around her when she observes, “By the end of the ceremony, it is as if skin contains land and birds. The places within us have become filled” (41). A reconnecting has happened and Hogan is grounded on earth while becoming one with the spiritual forces around her that makes her aware of the living world. This cannot happen without the ceremony and her willingness to become spiritually aware of all life around her and how that life is connected to all physical things.

Mary L. Keller, in describing what an Apaalooke ceremonial elder says about “the sacred” and participating in ceremony to reconnect with the sacred, writes, “Because of men’s hubris, the Creator only allows them to access this power in desolate places where humans must sacrifice greatly and ask for the Creator’s gift” (6). Hogan explains that it “is part of a healing and restoration. It is the mending of a broken connection between us and the rest” (40). For Hogan, ceremony and ritual provide amending, a reconnection, of the person to the people, places and things around them. It is a return, and she fervently believes that the human race as a whole is in desperate need of because “ceremony is a point of return. It takes us toward the place of balance, our place in the community of all things” (40). Humanity in this modern world has consistently rejected their place in this world as part of a harmonious whole.

Spirituality is essential to sharing an intimate connection with the environment. In her chapter “Creations,” Hogan takes the reader back to her roots to explain creation stories to show where she believes the fault of man rests. She primarily uses Native American creation stories

from both North and Central America. She uses these stories to prove that “many of us in this time have lost the inner substance of our lives and have forgotten to give praise and remember the sacredness of all life” (83). She writes that “at the beginning, there was nothing and something came from it” (95) is the core of all creation stories. She would be right. In Greek mythology everything begins with the creation of the first gods, the primordial deities as historians have termed them. In *The Holy Bible* Elohim spoke creation into being in six days and rested on the seventh. At the beginning of the chapter Hogan uses a Mayan creation myth to help illustrate her point on the importance of roots for both individual human beings and civilizations as a whole: “For the Maya, time itself is alive. In the beginning, the day sets out walking from the east and brings into being the world and all that inhabited it” she explains (81). Creation stories in any tradition give an account of how that civilization believes all life came to be. They all create a sense of beauty and wonder, including the creation story detailed in *The Holy Bible*. However, not all of them show a sense of wonder and majesty or even a care for the creations that were made by gods. Some creation stories carry violence and death while some show a falling away of a first creation from its original purpose.

She uses the Mayan creation account (this version) to conclude that “emptiness and estrangement are deep wounds, strongly felt in the present time” (82). Hogan uses the creation stories she’s familiarized herself with to help illustrate to her audience the direct, harmful result of humanity’s willful departure from the spiritual. Julie Fiandt writes that Hogan seems “sad about - sometimes even resigned to - the declining value of spirituality and ecology, and of American Indian rights” (587). In our present time we have absentee fathers and mothers, parents abandoning their children to the care of their grandparents while they lead frivolous, meaningless lives. Dave Aftandilian notes in the introductory paragraph of his article “What Other Americans

Can and Cannot Learn from Native American Environmental Ethics.” “Since the 1960s, many Americans have experienced a sense of acute moral crisis, both in terms of our spirituality and our relations to the environment” (219). This acute moral crisis, according to Aftandilian, permeates in a modern “self-critical climate,” where it is “only natural to turn for answers towards the peoples who were seen to have remained untainted by either capitalist greed or Christian spiritual traditions” (220). A minority of Americans, he observes, have broken away from the mainstream spiritual and economic ideologies and have begun to embrace the traditions of Native American cultures. In the case of Aftandilian, he mentions in particular the Hopi and the Koyukon. Though there is a distinction between traditions all of them are based in a collective sense of individualistic revelation.

While Linda Hogan is of the Chickasaw peoples, there are shared spiritual values that seem to be held by all Native Tribes, although they have different traditions and methods. Linda Hogan observes in *Dwellings* that “emptiness and estrangement are deep wounds, strongly felt in the present time. We have been split from what we could nurture, what could fill us. And we have been wounded by a dominating culture that has feared and hated the natural world” (82). Our estrangement from the environment has affected American culture. With this disconnect the silent, critical, observer sees teachers quick to label children with disabilities as “stupid” or “below average,” when in reality these students are beyond brilliant, but think a different pattern of thought than the average person does. The divorce rate, while declining, is as high as is the amount of children born outside of wedlock to single parents. All of this could very well be a reflection of what Linda Hogan observed just within the borders of the United States. Humanity is lacking something and Hogan believes it is humanity’s estrangement from the environment and spirituality that has significantly contributed to it.

Linda Hogan's references to myth, ceremony and spirituality reveal the nature and the necessity of connecting to the world around us on a spiritual level and how it is just as important as physical observation and care. We need to recognize that there are unexplained forces at work in the world and see that such a recognition will not harm the masses. Should humanity acquiesce to a spiritual connection to themselves, the Creator and the creation, then maybe the damage humanity has done to themselves can be repaired as well as the damage to humanity's neglect of the earth.

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