

Learning to Bridge Different Ways of Knowing: The Dream of Wild Health American Indian Seed-Garden Project as Mentor

by Craig A. Hassel

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In the summer of 1999, I received a call from Sally Auger, who identified herself as an urban American Indian woman living in the Twin Cities. She wanted to talk with me about a gardening project aimed at bringing back some of the heirloom foods cultivated by American Indian people for centuries, including corn, beans, and squash. These foods, she explained, were being grown from seeds kept by American Indians all those years.

At the time of Sally's call, my academic work as a faculty member in the Department of Food Science and Nutrition at the University of Minnesota was both shifting and expanding. I was attempting to include the voice of communities holding knowledge of food and health that lie beyond the

academic models that I had learned as a nutrition scientist. This was a challenge, because being properly "scientific" meant studying the world in certain ways—through control, prediction, and formal theory or experiment. Although I was conditioned to recognize as legitimate only the academic sciences learned formally, I was beginning to understand and appreciate that American Indian people have always had their own forms of science.¹ "Native science" has brought forth sophisticated systems of agriculture that have given us beans, corn, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, tomatoes, and more than 20 other foods that

we commonly use today.² Of the more than 30,000 types of vascular plants found in North America, American Indians have used 2,874 as medicines; 1,886 as foods; 492 as fibers for weaving, baskets, or building materials; and 230 as dyes. All told, they have found a useful purpose for nearly 4,000 types of plants.³ These contributions were seldom, if ever, acknowledged during my training in food and nutrition science. Such knowledge must come from more than simple trial and error, I thought, but I had not yet been able

¹ G. Cajete, *Native Science. Natural Laws of Interdependence* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light, 2000).

² E.D. Keoke and K.M. Porterfield, *American Indian Contributions to the World: 15,000 Years of Inventions and Innovations* (New York, NY: Checkmark, 2002).

³ D. Moerman, *Native American Ethnobotany* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 1998).

to wrap my head around the larger implications of very different knowledge systems that lie beyond the academic world.

My Introduction to Dream of Wild Health

During our initial phone call, Sally invited me to meet her and visit at her modest home in central St. Paul to learn more about the seed-gardening project known as Dream of Wild Health (sidebar). When I arrived, Sally greeted me warmly and invited me in for tea. Little did I know at the time that this would be the first of many tea visits that continue to this day. Sally described herself as coming from the Abenaki community that sits on either side of the New Hampshire–Canadian border in upper New England. Her husband, John, was from the Odawa community in Michigan. Sally told me that the seed-garden project had started in earnest when Cora Baker, an elderly Potawatomi woman from the Wisconsin Dells area, gifted her lifelong seed collection to Dream of Wild Health in March 2000. Cora was a Keeper of the Seeds, who wrote to Sally:

I was delighted to learn that you were starting a real Indian Garden. I had thought some 35 years ago that someone would be interested in our gardens. I had prayed and prayed that someone would take up gardening again. I am very pleased to learn about your project. I feel that the Great Creator has answered my humble prayers.

Cora died at age 94, not long after she put these words on paper. Her heirloom seed collection included many different varieties of the Three Sisters—corn, beans and squash—along with several sunflower varieties, several varieties of indigenous tobaccos, and many different plant medicines. Sally told me that she and John were the recipient of a beautiful and valuable gift, but that with this gift came significant responsibility and obligation. As an American Indian person, Sally did not consider herself to have any say in whether or not to keep the seeds or honor this particular responsibility. Cora chose Dream of Wild Health for this responsibility (passing on), and it was Sally's honor, duty, and obligation to keep, protect, and share Cora's gift of seeds. Sally could not simply walk away—she now had a responsibility not only to Cora, but to the American Indian community and to the seeds themselves.

Peta Wakan Tipi and the Dream of Wild Health Network

Peta Wakan Tipi (Lakota for “Sacred Fire Lodge”) is one of Minnesota's oldest (20 years) American Indian–established and –run nonprofit organizations, having provided culturally appropriate housing and support services for recovering American Indian people in the Twin Cities since 1986. Its mission is to help American Indian people achieve economic, emotional, and cultural balance.

Peta Wakan Tipi's core programs are Sacred Fire Lodge and Mother Earth Lodge. These are transitional homes serving Native American men and women recovering from substance abuse and experiencing homelessness. Clients stay for up to 24 months, and during that time develop and follow their own individualized self-sufficiency plans that incorporate input from social service/healthcare providers, employers, family members, and most importantly, the clients themselves. The majority of clients' plans have led to reunification with their children, higher paying jobs, and permanent housing.

In response to the Twin Cities' Native American community, Peta Wakan Tipi expanded its services to include the **Dream of Wild Health Network**, which is a cultural-preservation project that brings Native American adults, elders, and youth together to collect and grow indigenous, heirloom seeds. Some of the seeds that are already growing in the Dream of Wild Health gardens have come from an 800-year-old archeological site, whereas others have been donated by Native American families whose elders have passed them down over several generations. The women's medicine garden has become an excellent forum for elders to teach young people about the ancient traditions of American Indian medicine and gardening, helping to build cultural pride and self-respect as well as to preserve this knowledge.

Source: Peta Wakan Tipi website, www.petawakantipi.org



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According to Sally, other gifts of seeds soon came from across the country. Each gift had its own story to tell:

► 100-year-old Arikara corn from North Dakota that arrived wrapped in tissue paper with a note explaining that,

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“Grandma had been saving these seeds for years. Now that she has passed, she wants you to take care of them.”

- ▶ Two varieties of Ojibwe corn that came from Red Lake, Minnesota, with a note apologizing that the two types may have been crossed, because the old farmer “mixed the seeds up.”
- ▶ Corn seeds carried on the Trail of Tears, a more than 1,000-mile journey that resulted from the forced removal in 1838 of some 100,000 members of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole nations from the eastern United States to what is now Oklahoma.

At the time of my meeting with Sally, Dream of Wild Health found itself in possession of a rare collection of more than 200 indigenous heirloom seeds gifted by elders, reservations, and seed-savers. Sally explained that the project was not only responsible for the protection of the physical seeds, but also accepted the responsibility to recover and preserve the traditional American Indian relationships between plants and people. She described a worldview in which all “things” natural, including soil, water, plants and seeds, animals, and even rocks, are animate and have spirit. She spoke of the seeds as conscious beings, holding the gift of life and reflecting American Indian people’s spiritual and aesthetic identity. According to Sally, within the seeds is a spiritual connection with the ancestors who grew and nurtured the plants, and this spiritual connection requires that we as humans must approach any action or intervention in the natural world with great care, much consideration, and “good intentions,” sanctioned through appropriate ceremony.

At the time, these ideas lay well beyond anything I recognized as “scientific.” My thinking as a professional was oriented toward physiochemical dimensions of the material world. Yet Sally’s soft-spoken sincerity and conviction were quite compelling. In addition, I found in her words a sense of powerful consciousness, wisdom, and compassion that somehow seemed timeless. Her words influenced me in a way I had not experienced in my professional relationships on campus. Although I could not have known it then, that initial meeting in 1999 led to a long-standing partnership between Dream of Wild Health and the University of Minnesota that continues today. As I reflect back on the past 11 years, my relationship to Dream of Wild

Health went beyond intellectual or cognitive dimensions; it also engaged my heart and soul in a spiritual connection.

Bridging Academic and Cultural Communities

As an extension nutritionist at the University of Minnesota, I have responsibilities to serve the citizens of Minnesota. This mission is often translated into “delivering content,” providing evidence-based programs, conducting teaching/outreach, and pursuing research opportunities. The relationship between “expert” and “audience” is often characterized in terms of “service” to a “customer,” “client,” or “citizen.” Whereas this kind of work has its place, my experience with Dream of Wild Health, as well as other American Indian or marginalized communities, suggests that a higher priority is placed on building a meaningful relationship prior to any “content” work. Building such a relationship requires honest and forthright expression of who I am and where I come from, bringing my fullest self as a human being. This process does not occur in many professional settings, where maintaining one’s image, credibility, and professional reputation are major factors driving the action, agenda, and decisions of academic professionals. I found myself attempting to bridge an institutional world of control and self-protection with a community world of mythos and spirituality.

I believe this distinction to be of paramount importance in the quality of interaction between academic professionals and cultural communities. Many American Indian communities have had quite negative experiences with even well-intentioned academic research that is grounded within a Eurocentric worldview and presumed to have universal application. In my own experience, I was taught, as many researchers are, to proceed by imposing programs and methodologies seen as internally valid by professional peers, without sufficient sensitivity to or regard for their fit within diverse community and cultural settings. All research methods carry implicit background assumptions and presuppositions that may become a source of conflict when put into the context of American Indian worldviews. Training in many scientific disciplines still can lead members to hold so tightly to Western/scientific models that little room is available for open-minded consideration of the experiential, subjective, spiritual, and ancestral knowledge



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Over the years, many student interns from the University of Minnesota have worked with Dream of Wild Health. Each one has had to bring “a good heart” to the relationship, which includes a sincerity and openness that allows for self-examination and mutual learning. Here, a graduate student in nutrition works with young American Indian women to learn about good nutrition and cooking.

within American Indian communities. On campus, academic research is viewed as a public good. On the streets of many American Indian communities, the word *research* “stirs up silence, conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful.”⁴ As some American Indian people have said, “we have been researched to death.”⁵ Even well-intentioned attempts to be more culturally sensitive can fail to comprehend the cultural damage that can be inflicted when a community’s knowledge assets are discounted or disregarded.

In the case of the Dream of Wild Health seed-collection project, Sally stated very directly that she could not allow the project to lose control of the seeds. She feared that some university researchers might want to exploit the seeds to benefit their own research agenda, which could be inconsistent with American Indian cultural values. In this context, to be helpful to Dream of Wild Health, I would need to be more than a content expert in nutrition science; I felt an obligation to assume a kind of gatekeeper responsibility that would help to protect the seeds from unwanted use or unintended consequences. I would need to learn about American Indian culture, but also to learn about myself to have enough integrity in where I stood that I might help to minimize the possibilities for

⁴ L.T. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Zed Books, 1999).

⁵ K. Harala, C. Smith, C. Hassel, and P. Gaiffus, “New Moccasins: Articulating Research Agendas through Interviews with Faculty and Staff at Native and Non-Native Academic Institutions,” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 37 (2005): 67–76.

unintended or subconscious violation of trust.

In this way, my interaction with the Dream of Wild Health project in the subsequent 11 years involved a continuous process of learning. This kind of work represented a shift in professional role from a content expert consultant to being an acolyte or co-learner mentored by Dream of Wild Health.⁶ It required my sincere commitment to the mission and goals of the project, while also causing me to examine some of my own professional impulses.⁷ As my learning progressed, I recognized the importance of being willing to engage in a process of self-examination. My experience of navigating cultural difference included a metaphorical mirror that greatly facilitated this work. What assumptions do I bring to the table about how the world works? What are my motives? Who benefits from the work? Rather than simply presuming biomedical science to represent the final voice of authority, I had to make room for American Indian epistemologies that go beyond the material world. I had to be willing to go back and study the history and philosophy of the science I learned, as these aspects were not required in my formal training. I had to be willing to navigate the deeper dimensions of cultural difference and to develop an interaction that respectfully bridges different cultural worldviews. This process of cross-cultural engagement could then allow for mutual learning and benefit where university knowledge and expertise might then *complement*, not *replace*, the indigenous knowledge that serves as a foundation for the Dream of Wild Health programs. Maintaining this balance requires yielding power and control for a mentoring and learning relationship.

The Growth of Dream of Wild Health

Over the years, the Dream of Wild Health partnership has expanded to include the University of Minnesota's Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Department of Horticulture Science, and Extension. Each of these units has provided expertise, student volunteers, and interns who assist with researching and documenting seeds,

⁶ C. Hassel, "Can Diversity Extend to Ways of Knowing? Engaging Cross-Cultural Paradigms," *Journal of Extension* 42 (2004), www.joe.org/joe/2004april/a7.php.

⁷ C. Hassel, "The Craft of Cross-Cultural Engagement," *Journal of Extension* 43 (2005): www.joe.org/joe/2005december/a1.php.

working directly in the greenhouse and gardens, utilizing agro-ecology throughout the farm, and working with young American Indian people to learn about good nutrition, cooking, and shopping skills. Each individual who has worked with Dream of Wild Health had to bring "a good heart," which includes a sincerity and openness that allows for the kind of self-examination described above, to the relationship. Through the years, a number of Dream of Wild Health student projects have been supported through CURA's Community Assistantship Program and Community university program (see sidebar).

Dream of Wild Health began and remains a community-based program committed to reconnecting urban American Indian people to their land and their gardening traditions. From 1999 until 2003, Dream of Wild Health leased a half-acre parcel of land in Farmington,

Minnesota. Dream of Wild Health established several gardens on this land, including:

- ▶ a diabetes-prevention garden for American Indian youth
- ▶ a women's medicine garden
- ▶ a sacred tobacco garden
- ▶ a seed-stock propagation garden
- ▶ a Three Sisters garden

Unfortunately, the gardens at the Farmington site were at risk of contamination from nearby fields growing genetically modified crops; without control of the land, insufficient room existed to safely grow heirloom seeds or expand community programming. A strategic planning process led to the search for a permanent farm. In October 2004, a program-related investment from the Otto Bremer Foundation secured the rights to a 10-acre organic farm in Hugo,

CURA and the Dream of Wild Health Projects

Beginning in 1996, CURA has supported eight projects with Dream of Wild Health, generally by providing a research assistant to complete applied research on a community-defined project. These projects include the following:

- ▶ A graduate student in archaeology conducted a literature review of American Indian plant varieties and completed a database of indigenous plants that was initiated by Dream of Wild Health.
- ▶ An undergraduate student in natural resources assisted Dream of Wild Health with its annual plant research by propagating, growing, and harvesting plants in its 150 plant collections.
- ▶ A student from Minneapolis Community and Technical College researched and documented the pollination, germination, propagation, and harvest of heirloom plants and seeds in the Dream of Wild Health collection that are edible or have sacred medicinal uses.
- ▶ A graduate student in public health assessed the impact of "In Cora's Garden," a Dream of Wild Health summer program for elementary school-aged children intended to improve diet and exercise choices among urban American Indian youth using a combination of Western-scientific and indigenous concepts of nutrition and physical, emotional, and spiritual health.
- ▶ A graduate student and a professor in horticultural science successfully propagated several varieties of near-extinct indigenous corn in the collection of the Dream of Wild Health, securing these varieties for future generations.
- ▶ A graduate student in nutrition developed recipes using indigenous bean varieties grown by Dream of Wild Health, which have particularly high levels of antioxidants, and used the recipes to educate urban American Indian communities about reclaiming indigenous foods as an avenue to improved health and wellness.

Minnesota, just north of the Twin Cities. Today, the Dream of Wild Health farm in Hugo remains as a location for the Twin Cities urban American Indian community to teach and share learning about reinvigorating indigenous agriculture.

A strategic planning session in 2007 articulated the four holistic goals that continue to guide Dream of Wild Health:

- ▶ We honor the seeds as our ancestors by protecting, growing, and sharing them in a good way;
- ▶ We restore an indigenous relationship with the land by reciprocating the gifts we are given with what we give back;
- ▶ We promote healing relations with people, food, and culture;
- ▶ This work carries through seven generations.

During the past six years, the work of Dream of Wild Health has included:

- ▶ Expanding community knowledge of the value, history, and potential of indigenous foods by reaching approximately 1,000 American Indian and non-Native people in educational workshops, presentations, classrooms, and hands-on garden activities.
- ▶ Writing and piloting a new health-promotion curriculum and companion book for American Indian youth titled *In Cora's Garden*, which features the voice of seed-saver Cora Baker teaching her great-great granddaughter Liz diabetes prevention.
- ▶ Demonstrating the high level of nutritional value in many of the corn, bean, and squash in the collection. Two sets of tests, conducted through a win-win partnership with the University of Minnesota and a subsidiary of General Mills, have indicated that Potawatomi beans gifted by Cora Baker have more antioxidant activity than store-bought beans.
- ▶ Providing seeds and/or technical assistance to a wide variety of reservation-based communities across the Upper Midwest and Canada—from the Bad River Ojibwe Reservation in Wisconsin to the Sioux Community in Morton, Minnesota.

As reflected in the goal of carrying the seeds through the generations, the well-being of children and future generations is very important to the work of Dream of Wild Health. As the leaders of tomorrow, American Indian young people must learn and pass on the



As the leaders of tomorrow, American Indian young people must learn and pass on the importance of healthy life ways to keep their community strong and vibrant. Each summer, 30 children travel from the Twin Cities to Hugo to participate in the Dream of Wild Health youth-education programs, where they learn about their cultural traditions, American Indian agriculture, health, nutrition, and leadership.

importance of healthy life ways to keep their community strong and vibrant. In this vein, the youth-education programs of Dream of Wild Health are a significant success story. Each summer, 30 children ages 8–18 travel daily more than 25 miles from the inner city to the Hugo farm, where they spend four days per week over a month. They learn about their cultural traditions, including their ancestral relations to the land, the plants, and all that is. They engage in art, science, gardening, preparing and eating meals, and recreation. They learn about American Indian agriculture, agro-ecology and permaculture, greenhouse growing, health, nutrition, diabetes and obesity prevention, project and financial management, advocacy, and leadership. The Dream of Wild Health staff, horticultural and permaculture experts, community members, cultural leaders, and county extension nutritionists lead the programs' hands-on activities and experiential learning. The youth each earn a stipend, open and manage a bank account with the stipend, harvest crops, and sell the harvest at a farmers' market in their community. They teach their parents about the "Indian foods" they grew and prepared.⁸ They learn leadership skills and are recognized by their family and friends at a harvest celebration every August.

⁸ N. Murphy and S. Auger, *In Cora's Garden* (Peta Wakan Tipi, 2005).

Conclusion

The partnership work of cross-cultural bridging and interaction is essential to improving the health of indigenous people in low-income, urban communities. Although many academic researchers are still not sensitive enough to the spiritual realities of indigenous culture, many in American Indian communities do not trust academic researchers or do not see their methods as offering viable solutions that will benefit people on the streets. Dream of Wild Health has become a leader in learning how to navigate and negotiate these different cultural worlds, situating academic knowledge from permaculture, horticulture, farming, nutrition, and food safety alongside indigenous cultural wisdom that guides the traditional American Indian relationships between plants and people. Together with the University of Minnesota and with support from the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, Dream of Wild Health has built a partnership that could well be a model for connecting research universities with cultural communities for mutual benefit.

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