

Lesson 5: Mother Earth

Summary Lesson 5: Mother Earth

Indian people believed that the land was a gift from the creator, to be used by everyone for their survival and sustenance. No one individual owned the land and no laws existed to exclude others from the land. This concept of land ownership was important especially among the tribes, including the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Ute, who moved from area to area with the seasons of the year.

The earth was sacred and the spirit of life was in the two-legged ones, four-legged ones, the flying ones, the ones that swam, the ones that crawled, the trees, and the plants. Even rocks and stones were considered “alive” and were treated with respect. In the story of the Bear Dance, the bear is addressed as a relative; he was called “Grandfather.” The Lakota, a Plains tribe, pray with the words, “Mitakuye Oyasin”, we are all related.

American Indians were indeed the “first environmentalists.” Because the people lived off the land, they believed that natural resources were to be used carefully and with respect for the plants and animals. They took only what they needed and balance was maintained with the nature and the land. Their population was small and their needs were simple. They expressed their gratitude in many ways - ceremonies, rituals, and symbols.

My children,
My children,
Here it is, I hand it to you
The earth,
The earth.

Southern Arapaho song¹

Addressing the Curriculum Standards

1. Students will describe how American Indians’ beliefs about the land were different from the beliefs of European Americans. (DPS History Standard 6)
2. Students will discuss some of the beliefs of American Indians and how these beliefs were (are) reflected in cultural practices. (DPS History Standard 6)

¹ Coel, M. (1987). Chief Left Hand (reprint). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma.

Specific Content Knowledge

1. American Indian beliefs about the land were very different from European beliefs.
2. Indian people believed that the land was a gift from the creator, to be used by everyone for their survival and sustenance. No one individual owned the land and no laws existed to exclude others from the land.
3. Because the people lived off the land, they believed that natural resources were to be used carefully. They took only what they needed and balance was maintained with the nature and the land.
4. For Indian people, the land that supported them was and is “home.” It is the place that defines them and shapes who they are.
5. American Indian beliefs and values are reflected in traditional songs and poems.

Resources/Materials

- Bruchac, J. (1996). The circle of thanks: Native American poems and songs of Thanksgiving. Mahwah, NJ: BridgeWater.
- Jeffers, S. (1991). Brother eagle, sister sky. New York, NY: Dial.
- Stroud, V. A. (1995). A walk to the Great Mystery. New York, NY: Dial.
- Swamp, J. (1995). Giving thanks: A Native American good morning message. New York, NY: Lee & Low.

Instructional Strategies

Reading songs and poems of American Indian cultures, inductively making generalizations from these songs and poems about the beliefs and values of American Indian people

Student Learning Objectives

Students will:

1. make generalizations about American Indian beliefs and values concerning Mother Earth from traditional songs and poems.

Student Activities

1. Read “Brother Eagle, Sister Sky” by Susan Jeffers aloud to students. Lead a discussion focusing on how American Indians relate to the earth. Please read the author’s notes at the end of the book. *There is much controversy about this particular book, especially related to whether or not these are even the words of Chief Seattle*. Discuss this concern.
2. Form small groups of no more than 3 students, designating 1) a reader, 2) a recorder, and 3) a reporter. Distribute to each group a copy of one of the poems in “The Circle of Thanks” by Joseph Bruchac. The group is responsible for reading and discussing the poem and answering the questions on the worksheet.

Assign the following roles and responsibilities for each group.

- * The reader is responsible for reading the poem to the group.
- * The recorder will write the answers to the worksheet sheet.
- * The reporter will read the groups' answers to the class.

Please read the author's notes at the end of the book.

3. Talk about how people are shaped by the environment in which we live and how in many ways one place becomes special. It is "home" to us.

Extensions

1. Create a choral reading of all the poems in "The Circle of Thanks."
2. On a map, locate each of the tribes noted in the book.
3. Read Swamp, J. (1995). Giving thanks: A Native American good morning message. New York, NY: Lee & Low.
4. Create individual poems of thanksgiving for Mother Earth.
5. Additional statements of American Indian people are provided in this lesson. Read and discuss the meanings of one or more of these statements

Student Assessment/Performance Task

Read aloud the poem, "Thanks to Mother Earth." Ask students to write a paragraph explaining what they think the term "Mother Earth" means to American Indian people.

Thanks to Mother Earth

Onen, we give thanks
to our mother, the Earth,
for she gives us all that we need for life.

She supports our feet
as we walk upon her.
She is there to catch us
if we should fall.

It has always been this way
since the beginning,
for she is our mother
the one who cares for us.

It gives us great joy
that Mother Earth
continues still to care for us

So it is that we join
our minds together
to give greetings and thanks
to this Earth, our mother.

Bruchac, J. (1996). The circle of thanks: Native American poems and songs of thanksgiving. Mahwah, NJ: BridgeWater.

A Circle of Thanks

Name of Poem: _____

Tribe: _____

Culture Area: _____

What does this poem give thanks for?
(Use 2 or three complete sentences)

What are some things in nature are you grateful for?

Names of the people in your group:

Ute Beliefs

Beginning on the day a Ute child is brought out of the birthing hut and continuing throughout his life, he was taught to live in close harmony with nature. Like all American Indian societies, the Utes lived with deep respect for the earth and the sky, the plants and animals, because understanding nature's lessons concerning the cycle of life meant survival.

All living things were considered to possess a spirit or soul and were respected as people of the universe. Only when necessary were plants harvested and animals killed. As Ute hunters and gatherers harvested food supplies, an apology was often murmured to the plant or animal being offended, such as "excuse me for taking this life, rabbit, but my family is hungry."

SOURCE: Marsh, C. S. (1982). People of the Shining Mountains. Boulder, CO: Pruett. p. 129

It Is Our Responsibility to Renew the Earth

It is a fact; this land is sacred. It is not debatable, it is not negotiable. Over the time we have been here, we have built cultural ways on and about this land. Because of our diversity, we have our own respected versions of how we came to be. These origin stories - that we emerged or fell from the sky or were brought forth - connect us to this land and establish our realities, our belief systems. They explain the origins of the seasons. Creation stories also contain accounts of how land came to be and the origins of human beings.

As Cheyenne, we are made from the soil, the dirt, the dust of this land, and the winds of the four directions gave us the breath of life. The Great One created four sacred substances; sinew to hold the world together, sweetgrass as the beginning of plant life, buffalo fat which was the beginning of animal life, and finally, the red Earth which was the substance of all things on Earth. These substances are sacred, and these four sacred beings were fused into something that looked like a ball. So he breathed on the ball four times to give it life.

This is the same things that happens every year at our sundance - we bring down and renew the breath of life. That is our responsibility, to renew this Earth, and we do this through our ceremonies so that our Mother, our Grandmother, the Earth can continue to support us. We have ceremonial and spiritual responsibilities to renew the Earth.

Dr. Henriette Mann, Southern Cheyenne
Montana State University

SOURCE: National Museum of the American Indian (2002, Winter). Washington, D.C.; Smithsonian. p. 22.

What Does the Ground Say?

I wonder if the ground has anything to say? I wonder if the ground is listening to what is said? I wonder if the ground would come alive and what is on it? Though I hear what the ground says. The grounds say, It is the Great Spirit that placed me here. The Great Spirit tells me to take care of the Indians, to feed them aright. The Great Spirit appointed the roots to feed the Indians on. The water says the same thing. The great Spirit directs me, Feed the Indians well. The grass says the same thing, Feed the Indians well. The ground water and grass say, The Great Spirit has given us our names. We have these names and hold these names. The ground says, The Great Spirit has placed me here to produce all that grows on me, trees and fruit. The same way the ground says, It was from me man was made. The Great Spirit, in placing men on the earth desired them to take good care of the ground and to do each other no harm...

This was a speech given by Young Chief of the Cayuses (Plateau Culture Area) who opposed a treaty that would sign away their land. He grounded his objections on the fact that the Indian had no right to sell the ground which the Great Spirit had given for their support. He gave this speech before signing away their land.

SOURCE: McLuhan, T. C. (comp.). (1971). Touch the earth. New York, NY: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster. p. 8.

The Earth is Sore

The white people never cared for land or deer or bear. When we Indians kill meat, we eat it all up. When we dig roots we make little holes. When we built houses, we make little holes. When we burn grass for grasshoppers, we don't ruin things. We shake down acorns and pinenuts. We don't chop down the trees. We only use dead wood. But the White people plow up the ground, pull down the trees, kill everything. The tree says, "Don't. I am sore. Don't hurt me." But they chop it down and cut it up. The spirit of the land hates them. They blast out trees and stir it up to its depths. They saw up the trees. That hurts them. The Indians never hurt anything, but the white people destroy all. They blast rocks and scatter them on the ground. The rock says, "Don't. You are hurting me." But the White people pay no attention. When the Indians use rocks, they take little round ones or their cooking....How can the spirit of the earth like the White man?... Everywhere the White man has touched it, it is sore.

Spoken by an old holy Wintu (California Culture area) woman about the destruction of the land in which she lived---a place where gold mining and particularly hydraulic mining had torn up the earth.

SOURCE: McLuhan, T. C. (Comp.). (1971). Touch the earth. New York, NY: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster. p. 15.

God Created Indian Country

God created the Indian country and it was like he spread out a big blanket. He put the Indians on it. They were created here in this Country, truly honest, and that was the time this river started to run. Then God created fish in this river and put deer in the mountains and made laws through which has come the increase of fish and game. Then the Creator gave us Indian Life; we walked, and as soon as we saw the game and fish we knew they were made for us. For the woman God made roots and berries to gather, and the Indians grew and multiplied as a people.

When we were created we were given our ground to live on and from this time, these were our rights. This is all true. We had the fish before...the white man came. We were put here by the Creator and these were our rights as far as my memory to my grandfather. This was the food on which we lived. My mother gathered berries; my father fished and killed the game. These words are mine and they are true....I was not brought from a foreign country and did not come here. I was put here by the Creator.

This is part of a speech given by Chief Weninock of the Yakimas (Northwest Culture Area) in testimony to the United States Senate. He wanted his people to be allowed to fish unmolested at their traditional fishing places.

SOURCE: McLuhan, T. C. (comp.). (1971). Touch the earth. New York, NY: Touchstone/Simon and Schuster. p. 8.