

Viewpoint

The Value of Global Indigenous Knowledge in Planetary Health

Nicole Redvers ^{1,2}

¹ Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P1, Canada; dr.redvers@gaiand.com

² inVIVO Planetary Health, The Worldwide Universities Network (WUN), West New York, NJ 07093, USA

Received: 10 July 2018; Accepted: 19 July 2018; Published: 26 July 2018



Abstract: In order to fulfill a broader vision of health and wellness, the World Health Organization (WHO) 2014–2023 strategy for global health has outlined a culturally sensitive blending of conventional biomedicine with traditional forms of healing. At the same time, scientists working in various fields—from anthropology and ecology to biology and climatology—are validating and demonstrating the utility of Indigenous knowledge. There is a misperception that Indigenous peoples are in need of Westernized science in order to “legitimize” our knowledge systems. The Lancet Planetary Health Commission report calls for the “training of indigenous and other local community members” in order to “help protect health and biodiversity” (p. 2007). Such calls have merit but appear authoritarian when they sit (unbalanced) without equally loud calls for the training of (socially dominant) westernized in-groups by Indigenous groups “in order to help protect health and biodiversity.” The problems of planetary health are both profound and complex; solutions can be found in a greater understanding of the self and the universe and the land as a medicine place. The following message was delivered as part of a keynote at the inVIVO Planetary Health Conference in Canmore, Alberta, Canada—20 points of consideration for a planetary health science in its pure, raw form, on behalf of the Indigenous elders.

Keywords: planetary health; indigenous health; spirituality; knowledge translation; justice; health equity; cultural competency; environmental health; ecology

Planetary Health—The Land as a Medicine Place

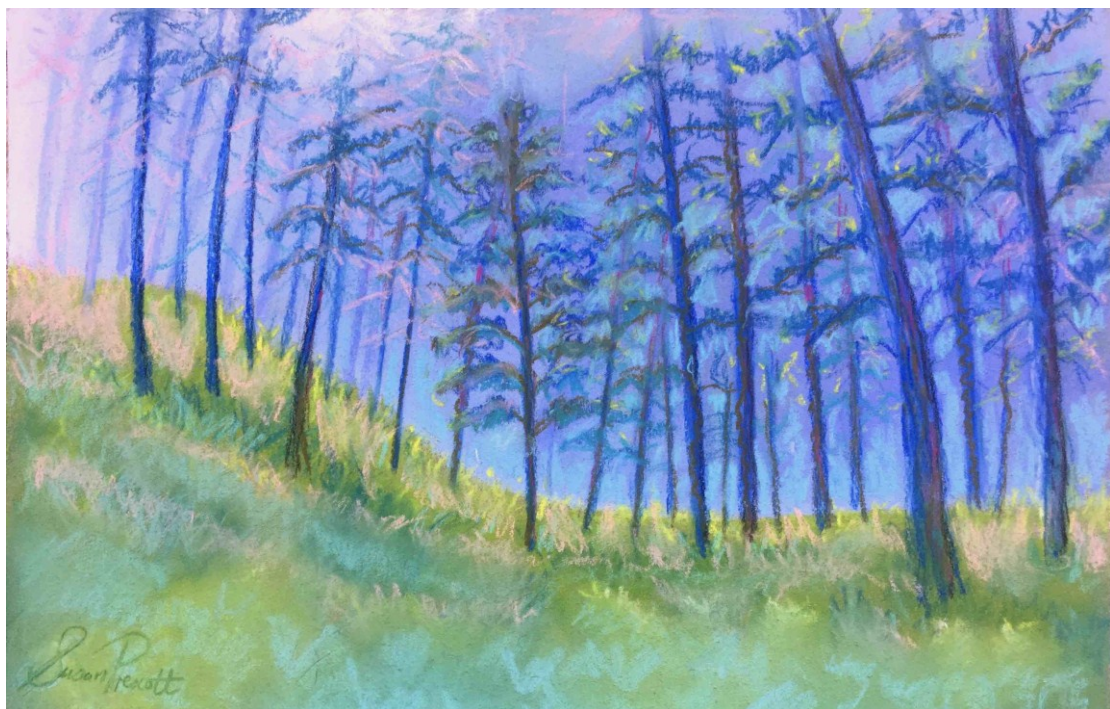
Editor’s note: Dr. Nicole Redvers is a member of the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation, recently awarded the \$1 million 2018 Arctic Inspiration prize for its project to develop an Indigenous wellness centre in Yellowknife. She was born and raised in the North West Territories of Canada as a member of the Deninu K’ue First Nation. She works with the Foundation to revitalize community health with language, culture, traditional foods, and practices. Her Dene Aboriginal background motivates her to help bridge the gap between modern advances in medical science and more traditional forms of healing, which recognize the rich interdependence of all living things. Dr. Redvers was invited to share the wisdom and knowledge of the Dene elders at the 2018 inVIVO Planetary Health conference in Canmore, Alberta. These ancestral perspectives of planetary health provide a deeper wisdom that can also help guide modern discovery. We are privileged to share her words here:

Our elders are the most brilliant scientists of them all. Their understanding of the universe as described in their powerful and symbolic stories provides clues to their deep knowledge. It is our job to listen to those stories and interpret their meanings so that we do not lose the lessons of the past and can ensure better hope for a healthy planetary future. Elders’ stories have many levels of meaning. When we actually begin to realize the teachings that are contained within these stories, a profound awe sets in. We can only then marvel at the vast amount of knowledge the human experience has produced

independently of Western thought. “Knowledge translation” of Indigenous ways of knowing the planet are fast becoming a distant reality. Many of our “elder libraries” are burning, so to speak, leading to a smaller pool to learn from. This leaves only a select few individuals on the planet who can adequately combine, in the delicate manner necessary, the stories and understandings from the past with the profound scientific advances we have also been privileged to have.

Utilizing the Indigenous lens as a platform in understanding our world, the following words are meant to stimulate ideas about our planet and our lives as humans—a message from the elders:

“When mother trees are dying, they send messages of wisdom on to the next generation of seedlings. She sends these messages through a vast internet-like fungal network in the soil to her neighboring seedlings. This increases the resistance of these seedlings to future stresses, which in essence means that trees talk.”



“Like trees, humans have evolved into a network of interdependence that spans the rocks, the plants, the animals, and the air that we breathe. Many have forgotten or are unaware of how or that the ability exists to communicate on the subtlest level to the living and non-living entities that have surrounded us for thousands of years.”

“If we take the knowledge of basic physics to point, we can clearly see that there is no real difference between a person, the food they eat, and their environment—particularly if going to the indivisible fundamental particle level of which is essentially “nothing.”

“Great sages were said to come out of deep meditative states with the realization that all we are is a thought. Consciousness or awareness is not in the clouds or in some designated point of space; it is right behind the darkness that you perceive with closed eyes.”



“Indigenous cultures cannot separate their bodies and health from the environment around them. Every ritual, dance, prayer, and song is done to connect with this underlying fundamental energy force within the universe that can be heard, felt, and seen when in the state of mind that transcends the physicality of the body.”

“This adaptation and awareness of the smallest particle level of existence is profound as, by definition, if a fundamental particle cannot be broken down any further, it means there is nothing physical about it in the first place.”

“Our lives may only appear to exist, engendered as holographic images on a two-dimensional field that tricks our sense of physicality into a realm that brings more mystery than answers. Ask any trail-blazing research physicist.”



“You cannot understand true medicine power (in whatever capacity that may be) unless you have an understanding of the nature of things. To understand the nature of things, you need to be in nature, and you need to connect to the animals, the rocks, the plants, the stars, and the winds.”

“Land as medicine is not necessarily a physical description of our ability to use plants or animals by taking them in our hands but to understand them like our ancestors did as part of a complex phenomenon that we have the ability to effect or be affected by.”

“For example, to burn a plant is said to release its soul, and each plant has a unique soul or imprint on our bodies whether we breath it, ingest it, or apply it, sending our body very specific messages.”

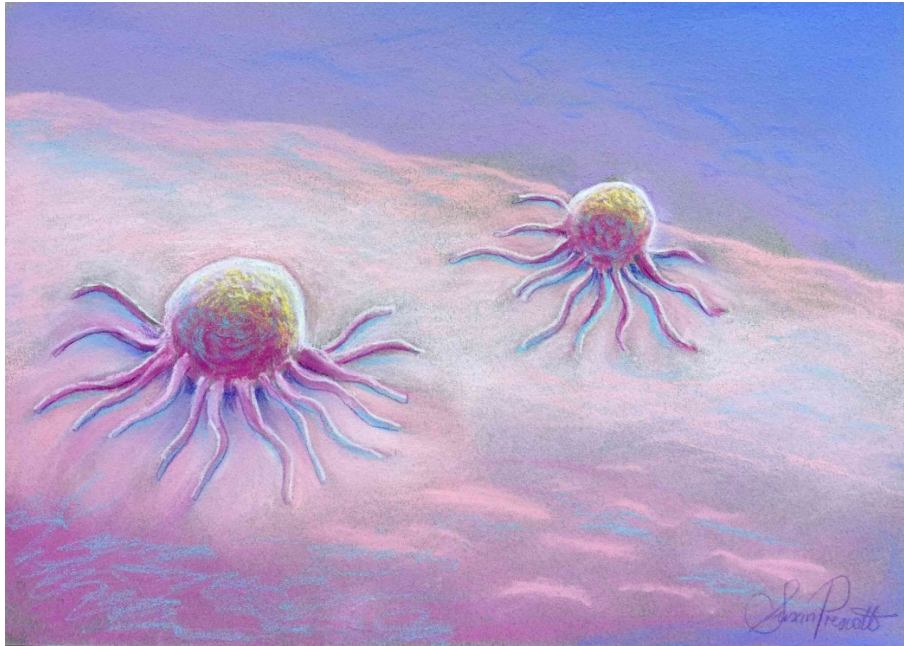
“To talk with animals or observe them like our ancestors did and elders still do today allows an understanding of the skills and gifts that they have to teach us about ourselves and the world.”

“To heat certain rocks increases its internal magnetism, which interacts with special receptors in our bodies that allows grounding and a re-organization of mineral-rich tissues. Such is done in many ceremonial practices.”



“By connecting back to these natural elements, our reality becomes one of peace, understanding, and purpose. We come to know an ancestral safe haven, regardless of the endless ups and downs in life.”

“Even cancer cells come from cells that deregulate themselves, recapitulating successively earlier ancestral life styles. So if a cancer cell is trying to go back to a primordial ancestral state, maybe it is trying to teach us something?”



“If the body has a purpose in health, wouldn’t it also have a purpose in disease? Herophilus stated ‘When health is absent, wisdom cannot reveal itself, art cannot manifest, strength cannot fight, wealth becomes useless, and intelligence cannot be applied.’”

“Chief Dan George said, ‘Allow me to learn the ways of your book knowledge so that I may combine it with my natural knowledge and lead the way.’ A blend of traditional knowledge with modern knowledge is the only way forward sustainably for our people.”

“When people have a true understanding of self and the universe, they become one and the same, and through this, they achieve peace. This peace can then translate to meaning, focus, purpose, and the ability to use this short physical life as a hologram to allow others to achieve the same.”



“Without access to the land for the purpose of re-establishing our interconnections we will constantly feel like we have something unfulfilled. Pretending to be a rabbit when you are not only leads you down the wrong trail.”

“By deciding to work toward an understanding of the vibrational force, which is the universe, we all make a decision to live more than we have ever done before. This is not esoteric; it is science at its purest and rawest form. Or, as my wise sister said, We are not New Age; we are native.”

“Remember that land as a medicine place provides a space where we can play our drums to remind us of the vibrational force that creates all living beings and that the whole world really is inside of us as it is outside.”

Declaration: This presentation is based on material found in the author’s trade paperback, *The Science of the Sacred: Bridging Global Indigenous Medicine Systems and Modern Scientific Principles*. North Atlantic Books (Feb. 2019). Images have been created by Dr. Susan L. Prescott inspired by the original images used in Dr. Nicole Redvers’ presentation.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declare no conflict of interest.



© 2018 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).