

THE FOUR INDIGENOUS DIRECTIONS

**Towards a governance of
planet earth in balance**

Ken Paul¹



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RESUMEN

Este documento se basa en la presentación de Ken Paul sobre la gobernanza sostenible del planeta tierra y los océanos para el encuentro “Transformación de los sistemas alimentarios: perspectivas de Pueblos y Naciones de las Américas” llevado a cabo en Yunguilla, Ecuador, con la participación de representantes de pueblos y naciones indígenas de las Américas. Se presenta un modelo basado en la cosmovisión indígena para la gobernanza y la sostenibilidad, articulado en cuatro direcciones que representan la salud física, mental, emocional y espiritual. Este modelo tiene una aplicación tanto a nivel de individuo como a nivel de sociedad, donde cada dirección tiene correspondencia con un ámbito de organización de las sociedades: física-económico, mental-político, emocional-social y espiritual-cultural. Desde esta perspectiva, las sociedades modernas frecuentemente se encuentren en un estado de desequilibrio, fomentado por el miedo y la priorización desigual de la economía y la tecnología frente a otros elementos, como la biodiversidad y el bienestar de las comunidades. Para reestablecer el equilibrio, se propone la movilización a través del amor, de la mano de asociaciones equitativas con los pueblos y naciones indígenas, la integración de sus conocimientos y una planificación a largo plazo, con el propósito de avanzar hacia una gobernanza con enfoque holístico.

Palabras clave: Cosmovisión indígena, cuatro direcciones, gobernanza, modelo, sostenibilidad

ABSTRACT

This document is based on Ken Paul's presentation on sustainable governance of planet Earth and the oceans for the meeting “Transformation of food systems: perspectives of indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas” held in Yunguilla, Ecuador, with the participation of representatives of indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas. It presents a model based on the indigenous worldview for governance and sustainability, articulated in four directions representing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. This model has an application both at the individual and societal levels, where each direction corresponds to an area of societal organization: physical-economic, mental-political, emotional-social, and spiritual-cultural. From this perspective, modern societies often find themselves in a state of imbalance, fueled by fear and the unequal prioritization of the economy and technology over other elements, such as biodiversity and the well-being of communities. To restore balance, mobilization through love is proposed, hand in hand with equitable partnerships with indigenous peoples and nations, the integration of their knowledge, and long-term planning, with the aim of moving toward governance with a holistic approach.

Keywords: Indigenous worldview, four directions, governance, model, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

At the end of May 2024, the meeting *Transformation of food systems: perspectives of indigenous peoples and nations of the Americas*² was held in Yunguilla, Ecuador. It was organized by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Rimisp – Latin American Center for Rural Development. Representatives from ten Indigenous peoples and nations, from Canada to the Peruvian Amazon, attended this meeting to engage in dialogue and share knowledge and experiences on transforming Indigenous food systems across the continent.

Within this framework, Ken Paul, representative of the Wolastoqey Nation of Neqotkuk, Canada, and an expert in fisheries and marine governance, gave a presentation on Earth and ocean governance from an Indigenous perspective, linking the worldviews of the Indigenous peoples and nations of North America to restore balance to relationships currently harming Indigenous cultures and the environment³.

His presentation is the synthesis of a reflection co-constructed over time in conversations with elders. It identifies four directions associated with understanding physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It represents an approach that can be applied to societal organization and ecosystem sustainability. Furthermore, this proposal addresses the impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities and advocates for legitimizing and integrating traditional knowledge with modern science to tackle issues like the climate crisis, environmental pollution, and the decline in biodiversity related to ocean resources.

These reflections were first presented in April 2024 at the 2024 Ocean Decade Conference in Barcelona, Spain, part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. Ken Paul participated as a speaker, highlighting the disconnect between the intentions of collaboration and ecosystem improvement proposed by multilateral organizations and the realities of Indigenous peoples. This disconnect hampers the effective implementation of projects. In pursuit of a “desired ocean,” people often forget to think about the ocean we need, the everyday conflicts that threaten it, and the relationship Indigenous peoples have with it.

This document aims to disseminate Ken Paul's reflections on the importance of adopting a balanced governance approach to marine resources based on Indigenous worldviews. This involves integrating traditional and scientific knowledge to promote sustainable use of ocean resources while respecting biodiversity and Indigenous cultures.

Additionally, the document seeks to support Ken Paul's message, which inspires the global community to establish equitable partnerships with Indigenous peoples, reinforce ocean protection, and promote long-term planning so that future generations may inhabit a balanced planet Earth.

² [Project Transformación de los sistemas alimentarios: perspectivas de Pueblos y Naciones de las Américas](#)

³ This presentation was made on Friday, May 31, 2024.

THE INDIGENOUS FOUR DIRECTIONS: TOWARDS A GOVERNANCE OF PLANET EARTH IN BALANCE

The text presented below is an adaptation of what Ken Paul shared. It is narrated in the first person and explains, step-by-step, a worldview of coexistence between human beings and the ecosystems of planet Earth.

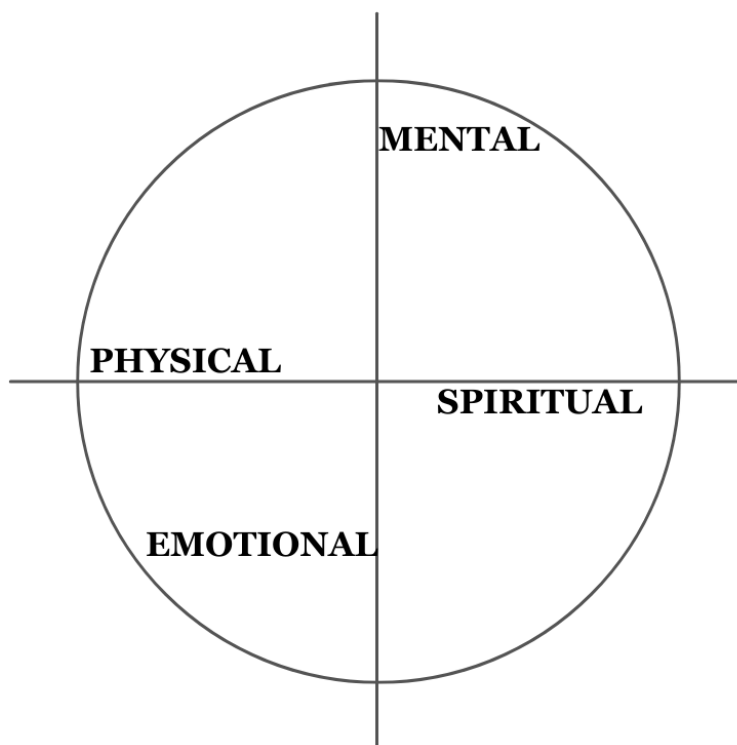
1. The Indigenous Four Directions Model

The four directions model is closely related to the chakana, or Andean cross. At the Yunguilla gathering/meeting (Ecuador), when we held the opening ceremony and acknowledged the four directions, I felt at home, because we once again honored the four directions—the same ones we celebrate in the North (Canada). It is important for me to locate myself within this context and see how we connect with the various delegations present at this meeting from across the Americas.

Something I often share in my presentations, based on teachings I have received from many elders—especially Gwen Bear, who has passed on to the spirit world—is that the circle is one of the most common symbols among spiritual and religious groups worldwide because it represents a complete model. It has no beginning and no end; it is a full cycle.

We can ground this model for the four seasons and the four different times of the day: sunrise, noon, sunset, and midnight. Our planet is a circle; the moon is a circle; the sun is a circle; and the atmosphere surrounding the Earth is a three-dimensional circle. In the diagram shown in Figure 1, I place two perpendicular lines to represent the four directions, but they are embedded within a circle expanding outward, like a three-dimensional model.

Figure 1. Indigenous Four Directions Model



Related to this model, the basic aspects we talk about when we learn about it correspond to the four areas of health. First, physical health. Many people understand that if you cut yourself, you can apply a bandage, locate the wound, and heal. That's a physical phenomenon.

Next comes mental health, which gained significant relevance during the COVID-19 pandemic. People, confined in their homes, lost connection with their families, isolation grew, and unhealthy relationships emerged. This led to an increase in abuse and addiction, bringing mental health issues to the forefront.

Third is emotional health, which concerns our relationships with people. I had difficulty fully understanding this when I first learned about it. So, I thought: if I can't grasp what it means to be emotionally healthy, maybe I should ask myself: *What would an emotionally unhealthy person look like?* In answering that, I thought of someone who gets angry or cries too often or too easily, or someone who laughs or jokes about serious matters that normally aren't funny. Eventually, I understood that an emotionally healthy person is someone who fosters good relationships and can express themselves well, encouraging others to do the same.

Finally, spiritual health is also a bit challenging to understand. My understanding of it is that we must have a true connection to comprehend our place in the world, beyond material or physical things. You may be aware of what happened with the Canadian and U.S. governments and the churches. In a coordinated effort, they removed Indigenous children from their communities

across various territories and placed them in residential schools. These schools, often run by the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and the United Church, among others, prohibited children from speaking their native languages, forcing them to learn English. If they spoke their own language, they were punished.

Many children suffered physical and sexual abuse, and just three years ago, mass graves were rediscovered at these residential school sites in Canada. People said it was part of the past and should be overcome, but in truth, only one or two generations have passed since then. The Pope visited Canada two years ago, and there was great expectation that he would apologize for the Catholic Church's role, but he did not. Instead, he expressed sorrow. He did not apologize because the Catholic Church did not want to accept legal responsibility for reparations to Indigenous peoples.

Personally, I do not follow the Church. Some members of my family do, and I support them, but that is not the path I choose. I follow my Native traditions, and these kinds of decisions and practices are related to our spiritual health. All the colonialism and violence imposed upon us stripped Indigenous peoples of their spiritual health.

Thus, these are the four aspects of a person's health: our body, our mind, our heart, and our spirit. Every person lives within these dimensions and faces the challenge of maintaining balance among them. Perfect balance does not exist; the challenge of life is the constant attempt to achieve it. The way to try to maintain balance is, for example, that I try to learn something new for my mind every day and, at the same time, foster a good relationship with at least one person each day. This might involve reaching out to someone, talking with them, and learning from them. Likewise, I embrace my emotions—if I feel sadness, I allow myself to feel sad in order to overcome it, preventing repressed emotions from manifesting negatively.

Physically, I try to do healthy things as well. It might be something as simple as walking or climbing a hill. For example, yesterday we went on a hike with different people, and I felt my legs burning and my heart working.

For the spiritual aspect, what I do is spend some time outdoors every day and marvel at the miracle of simply being here, thinking of all my ancestors and what they had to survive so that I could exist physically. I look at the plants—even in cities where we see trees growing—and I listen to the birds communicating in their societies. We are connected to other living beings, and we must never forget that. I acknowledge this every day and sometimes hold small ceremonies for myself. In this way, I strive to find balance.

Moreover, we must also try to balance the elements that are at opposite ends: that is, between mental and emotional health, and between physical and spiritual health. For example, I have friends who say: "I believe in this table—it's physical, it's here—but I don't believe in spirits; what is all that about spirits?" Well, in my people's tradition, there is a ceremony that takes place in a sweat lodge. It's a circular dome where we place hot stones inside, and the leader of the rite pours a little water on the rocks to create steam. It's dark, physically difficult to breathe, and you get cramps sitting on the ground. We occupy the space above the Earth while imagining that the dome

continues underground to touch the spirits below. While there, the spiritual world appears, and it's a moment to seek balance. We suffer physically in order to connect spiritually, much like in traditional fasting rituals. The last fast I did lasted four days without food. In this way, the body "dies" physically so that we can enter spiritual contact. For me, this is an intense effort to understand the balance between the physical and the spiritual.

Regarding the relationship between mental and emotional health—between the mind and the heart—people often say: "The longest journey is from the mind to the heart." We hear this sentiment in many places. This balance means that sometimes something makes logical sense but doesn't feel right, or conversely, something feels right but you can't logically explain it. Therefore, the best decisions we can make are those that both make sense logically and feel right emotionally. Seeking such decisions connects the opposites.

2. Societal Application of the Indigenous Four Directions Model

The model I have developed can be applied at the individual level, but we can also adapt it to society as a whole.

When we speak at the societal level, *spirituality evolves into culture*. One can recognize that a community has a strong culture because it manifests physically in that community's practices and expressions.

The physical aspect is the economy. When I first heard this, I had a hard time accepting it because I always associated the economy with the exploitation of resources. But after some reflection, I said, "If Gwen Bear told me this is true, then it must have been true 500 years ago as well." Five hundred years ago, what did the economy mean to our ancestors? It meant hunting. Our ancestors used to hunt caribou, moose, and other species, using the hides for clothing and the meat for food and sustenance. They gathered berries and root vegetables, which were also used for medicine. They built structures like homes, often made of wood. They constructed canoes, snowshoes, sleds for transportation, and created goods for ceremonies or trade with other nations.

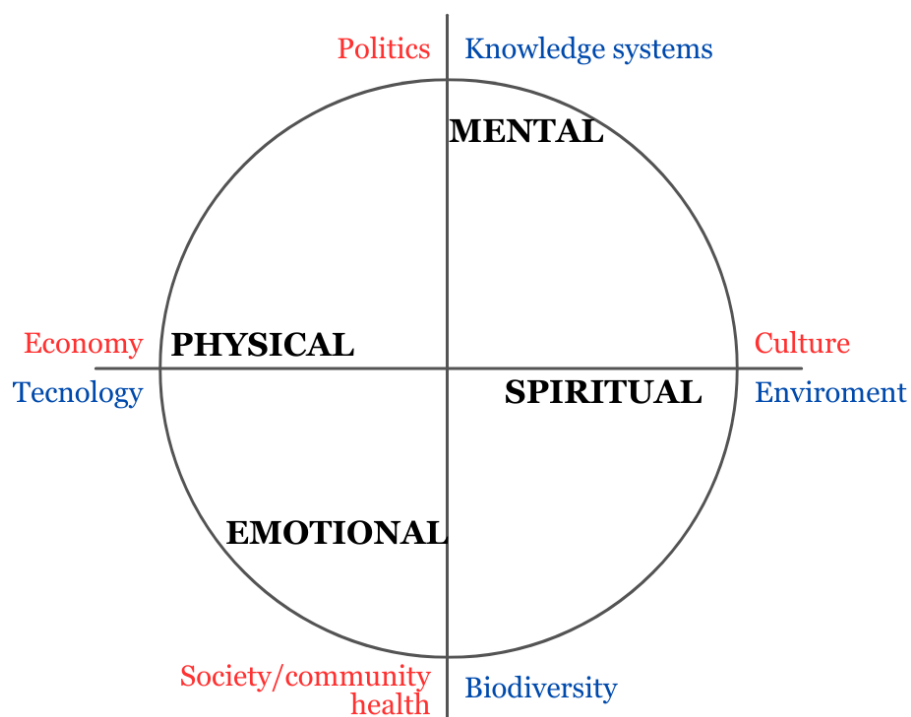
Today, we live in a culture where when I earn money for the work I do, I use it to pay for my basic material needs, such as food for my family, transportation, a home and, after that, I can purchase other things, like decorations for my home. The reason I initially had a problem linking physical health to the economy is because our current economic system is distorted.

If we observe the life cycle of a tree, we see four stages: first, the tree's birth; then its growth. But from the moment it is born, it is also on its way to death, because nothing lives forever, and death is a process. Sometimes it happens quickly, but usually, it takes time. After death, the tree falls to the ground and begins to decay and decompose. In doing so, it nourishes the soil so that other trees can grow. In contrast, our current economic system focuses only on birth and growth. We are supposed to start a small business and, under the global economic system, continue expanding indefinitely. There is no planning for death or decline; in fact, death and decay are avoided at all costs.

In 2008, we experienced a global economic crisis triggered by the United States—the subprime mortgage crisis—because a series of investors were selling financing packages built on mortgages by people who could not afford them. When that bubble burst, economies around the world suffered. The bigger the tree, the harder the fall.

I believe the coal and oil industries are entering this phase of death in the natural cycle because they are running out of resources. You can't manufacture oil—it comes from the death of the age of the dinosaurs. What supports the balance today is renewable energy. That's why, to think about sustainability at a social level, we should always plan economic efforts in cyclical terms.

Figure 2. Social Balance and Its Elements Based on the Indigenous Four Directions Model



The *emotional aspect at the societal level is society or community and the health of the community*, as shown in Figure 2. These are the interconnections and relationships we have within the community—how we care for one another. Finally, the *mental aspect becomes our politics*—the space where we create policies and laws, because these are mental exercises: understanding and solving problems.

If we are going to make policies, we have to involve the whole community. We can't create laws without community engagement, because otherwise those laws lack the necessary support and effectiveness. Similarly, when investing in culture, there must be sustainability and economic return.

There is another layer that I have worked on myself, and after some time, elders confirmed it to me. There is a connection between the *mental/political aspect and knowledge systems*, which can include Western science and Indigenous knowledge systems. Here, I want to be very clear: there is a methodology behind Indigenous knowledge. Producing knowledge in Indigenous systems is not merely about collecting community information and extrapolating it elsewhere, nor is it a resource that someone can take ownership of and use at will. No—the information and knowledge are part of a context, a system of observation and experimentation, and cannot be understood in a fragmented way without disrespecting the entire value system and the processes that create knowledge.

I place *biodiversity within the emotional aspect and link it with society and community*. This includes the interrelationship between plants and fish, between people and the land, between wildlife and insects. We must have biodiversity. Any project promoting monocultures, for example, or aquaculture, might produce food temporarily, but it is much better and healthier to have natural species and natural food systems.

I placed *technology alongside the physical and economic aspects*, because technology represents the physical tools we need to do our work. Finally, I placed the *environment with the spiritual and cultural aspects*, because the environment is something that is not entirely tangible. However, I have many friends who want to go outdoors, walk trails, go out on the ocean in a kayak, spend time on the coast—to strengthen themselves spiritually. Thus, this is a very close connection with the spirit.

Each of these dimensions is interconnected and mutually dependent. For example, regarding knowledge systems, we must understand biodiversity before we can create any scientific program. We must respect and promote it. Similarly, we must create technologies that do not harm the environment, which is a fundamental part of our culture. The same applies to the economy—we must consider the environment in all economic activities.

3. Fear and Love as Mobilizing Forces: Imbalance and Balance in Modern Societies

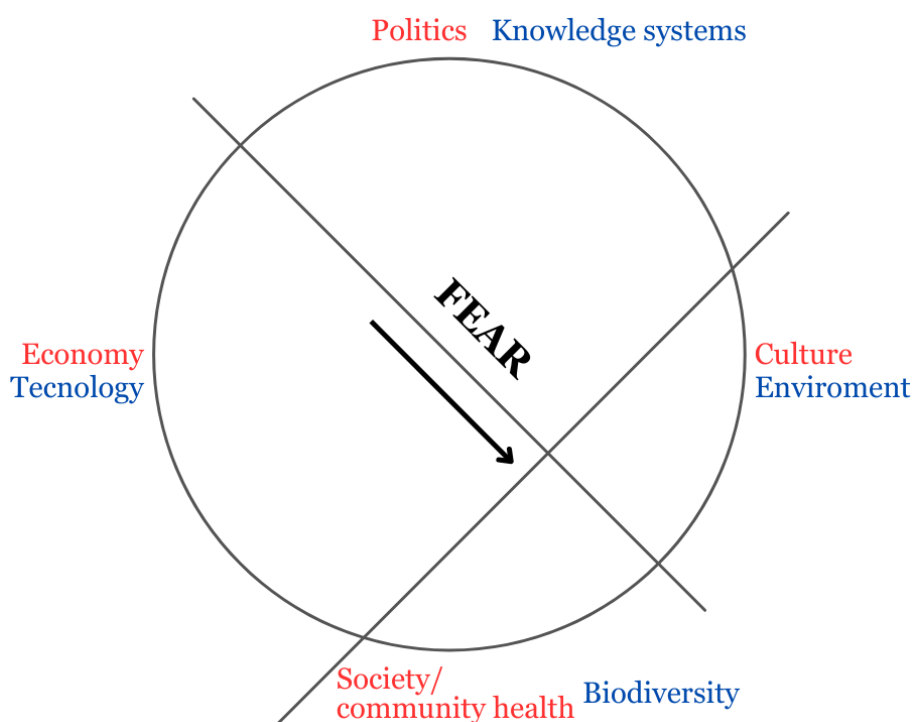
All these dimensions and elements should ideally be in balance. Suppose we could achieve such a balance. If that were the case and the world were wonderful, we could imagine it as four equal parts of a pie. However, we know that this is not possible. Unfortunately, experience shows us that we live in imbalance.

We spend a lot of time valuing intelligent people and invest heavily in intelligence, thinking that through learning we can solve our problems. We also know who the politicians are; their work is constantly covered in the media, so we stay updated on their activities. Likewise, we value the economy and invest greatly in technology, putting a lot of effort into those fields. However, we tend to make economic decisions that harm culture and the environment, and these imbalances are at the heart of the discussions we have today.

We do not value biodiversity, and we tend not to value communities. In North America, for example, daycare workers—those who care for our children—are among the lowest-paid groups. I imagine it must be similar in South America. The same happens with healthcare workers, like nurses and assistants, who work under tremendous stress and yet are some of the least compensated. Those who care for our elderly are also undervalued and poorly paid. This is the kind of society we have built.

The reason we live in such a society is fear. We live in a North American society that is filled with fear—fear that Canada might not prosper. When the war in Iraq happened and George Bush was president of the United States, he used the fear of weapons of mass destruction to justify the war, but his true motives were economic—access to oil reserves.

Figure 3. Society in Imbalance Explained Based on the Indigenous Four Directions Model



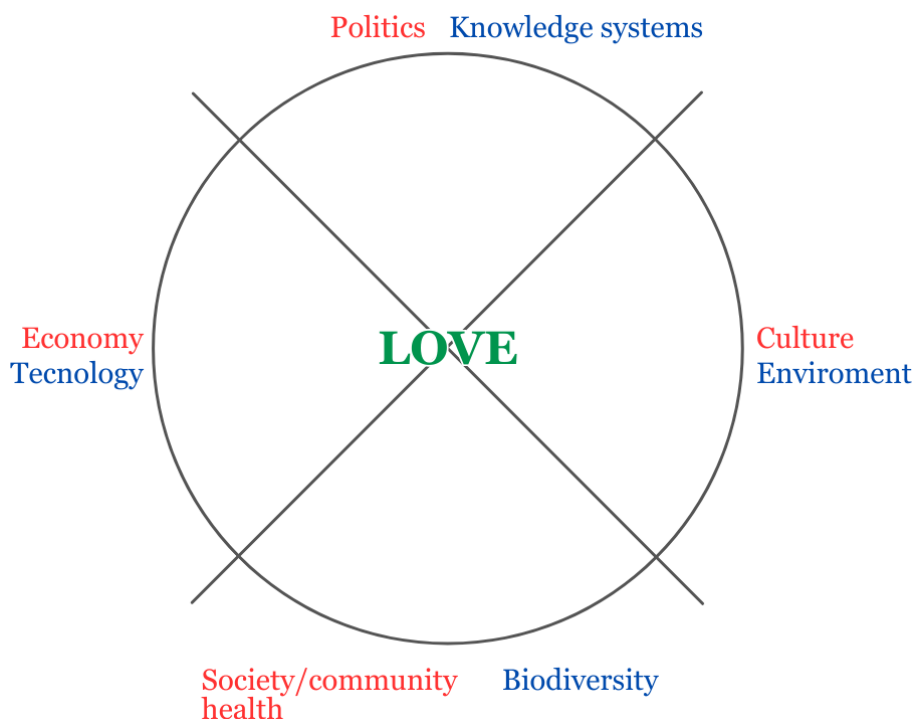
As individuals, we fear aging and becoming poor. We fear not being liked by others, and the advertising industry exploits these fears, particularly within the beauty industry. There is an entire industry based precisely on these fears. At the same time, there is the accumulation of wealth, but what I see is that people who have vast amounts of money and build huge houses often end up living in a kind of prison—alone, with no one else living there, just vast empty spaces. Behind the façade of wealth, there is often great loneliness.

This is often the reality we live in—but what can change it is a crisis. When someone dies in my community, for example, the offices close, the council chief cancels meetings. This week, in fact, there were deaths in my community, and the schools were closed. Most businesses shut down, and then social and cultural leaders take over—they begin caring for the family, producing and gathering food, and conducting ceremonies. Some people go to church, but others light a sacred fire for four days and support the families through the mourning process.

When the planes struck the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001, George Bush Jr. boarded Air Force One—but none of that mattered anymore. Wall Street shut down, the New York Stock Exchange closed. People gathered with their communities, and I remember that day very clearly. I went to pick up my daughter from daycare, and we spent the whole afternoon together in the park. With everything happening, I didn't know what else to do—I just wanted to be with her. People returned to their churches after 9/11. Thus, what usually lies dormant—the strength of culture and community health—rose up in those moments, gaining more space and importance.

What emerged then, and what can help dispute imbalance and maintain balance, is love. There is the romantic kind of love one may feel for a partner, of course, but there is also a broader sense of love—self-respect, appreciation for people, and gratitude for nature, which provides us with everything we have. When we began this workshop, when we held the opening ceremony, what we were truly expressing was love and respect, which are essential to building a better, more balanced society.

Figure 4. Society in Balance Explained Based on the Indigenous Four Directions Model



It is a shame that we do not practice love regularly. As a society, we are driven by larger forces—mainly through the economy—not to fall behind, not to be poor, not to be alone. All these fears gradually erode our mental, spiritual, and emotional health, which are closely tied to the politics, culture, and health of society itself.

4. Strengthening a Holistic Approach Together with Indigenous Peoples

To conclude, regarding the lessons that can be drawn to strengthen a holistic approach that integrates Indigenous peoples, I must mention that I am a strong advocate for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples⁴, and it must be respected. Countries cannot be forced to comply with it, but the vast majority of states around the world have signed and pledged to honor this declaration.

Additionally, from the perspective of my people, who look toward the sea, who live among the oceans, I want to honor the oceans as living beings. In this context, Indigenous peoples understand the Earth as a living being—we speak of our Mother Earth—and this is what we have done during this gathering of peoples and what we do in our ceremonies. We have also spoken about

⁴ [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

reciprocity—the importance of giving back. And as we believe in my community: if we give back, the ocean will provide for us. The Earth will support those who support her. We know this, and through our conversations with you all, I can confirm that we all know this deep down.

In various conferences where I have had the opportunity to participate, I have told the global community that it must invest in Indigenous peoples and Indigenous knowledge systems. I do not want people to simply show up at our doors expecting to take things from us. We want people to come so that we can strengthen our knowledge systems, invest in modern technologies—such as mapping systems, tools like drones, videos, databases, and computers. All these modern tools that we need to manage our lands and connect with other knowledge systems and sources of information. Only by doing so will we have better opportunities to understand what is happening in the world we inhabit. But we must invert the relationships: our relationship with the global community must change to transform the hierarchies and build a shared project.

Regarding developing genuine and equitable partnerships with Indigenous peoples, there are a few key elements to highlight. First, Indigenous peoples need allies—we cannot advance our agendas alone. However, we do not need people to show up and expect us to be partners instantly. Relationships must be built. When I talk about these relationships, people sometimes don't fully understand what I mean. What I mean is that if I go to a community that is new to me, I must spend time there. They need to get to know me. This logic must scale up to the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. If a community doesn't know me, why would they trust me? How would they know that I am there to help them?

This is important because it also opens our eyes to learn. I don't have all the answers—nobody does. However, it seems that industries that come into territories often act as if they have all the answers, and what they offer is simply for us to help them with their projects. But if they are not going to help us in return, why should we work with them?

Returning to coastal communities—we must prioritize and support the food security and the natural ecosystems of coastal areas, rather than simply extracting resources. Until now, the dialogue has been one of theft and extraction. Companies see the ocean and only think of it as a place to harvest fish. But what are they doing to improve and ensure that we have healthy fisheries for the future?

Finally, we must not forget to plan for future generations. In our nation, we talk about the "seven generations"—it is a prophecy that it took us seven generations to arrive at this point. Before Western contact, it was known that all these events would unfold in different stages. Now, everything has become true, and we are living in the time of the seventh generation. When planning our actions today, we must think seven generations ahead. I know that I personally will not fix the climate crisis. But I know that my actions will support those who come after me, and that the actions of our people will strengthen the society of the future.



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