Basketry and biodiversity in the Pacific Northwest (Marilyn Walker)

'It happened in those mysterious times when Raven still walked among men, exercising the cunning of his mind in bringing good to his creatures by ways strange and inexplicable to mankind. Already his greatest works had been accomplished. He had stolen the Sun, Moon and Stars from his grandfather, the great Raven-who-lived-above the Nass River, Nass-shah-kee-yalhl, and thus divided the night from the day. He had set the tides in order. He had filled the streams with fresh water and had scattered abroad the eggs of the salmon and trout so that the Tlingit might have food. But not yet had Raven disappeared into the unknown, taking with him the power of the spirit world to mingle with mankind.

In those days a certain woman who lived in a cloud village had a beautiful daughter of marriageable age. She was greatly desired by all mortals and many came seeking to mate with her. But their wooing was in vain. At last it chanced that the eyes of the Sun rested with desire upon the maiden, and at the end of his day's travel across the sky he took upon himself the form of a man and sought her for his wife.

Long years they lived together in the Sky-land and many children came to them. But these children were of the Earth-world like their mother and not of the Spirit-world of their father, Ga-gahn. One day, as the mother sat watching her children frolicking in the fields of the Sunm-land, her mind filled with anxiety over their future. She plucked some roots and began idly to plait them together in the shape of a basket. Her husband, the Sun, had divined her fears and perplexities. So he took the basket which she had unknowingly made and increased its size until it was large enough to hold the mother and her eight children. In it they were lowered to their homeland, the Earth. Their great basket settled near Yakutat on the Alsek River, and that is the reason that the first baskets in southeastern Alaska were made by the Yakutat women.'

The origin of basketry and its centrality to life is commemorated and celebrated in this legend, recorded by Frances Paul in 1944 (the name of the story-teller is not recorded). It connects Tlingit origins in an elemental and profound sense with the origin of basketry.

We are told how the earth-world and the spirit-world are connected through basketry. Becoming human transpired through a journey from one world to another in a basket which symbolizes an ancestral connection and a divine one. And we are told how the future of the Yakutat people materialized through the making of a basket. Where the basket touched down became their homeland. The collective memory of a nation is embedded in basketry, one of the oldest and most valued arts of the Tlingit people of the Northwest Coast of North America, and of other Northwest Coast cultures of the United States and Canada from Alaska through British Columbia and into northern California.

Individual women and families became famous for their skills and the beauty and utility of their basketry which permeated all aspects of life. Baskets were woven so tightly and finely they were used as drinking cups or as water storage jars. The traditional way of cooking was in watertight baskets: hot stones from the fire were placed on the food, enough water was added to produce steam, and the basket was covered and set aside until the food was cooked. Baskets were also lightweight travelling trunks. Roots and bark were woven into mats for canoe sails and floor coverings and made into fish nets and cradle swings. Woven hats were made for work and for ceremonies. The high caste wore 'big hats', and special hats were woven for shamans. Shamans used baskets to hold rattles for ceremonies, and charms of goose and eagle down. They drank salt water from baskets with twisted root handles as part of their purification. Some baskets were huge. A 'mother basket', nearly a yard across and as deep, was used as a food dish at Tlingit feasts. Oil storage baskets might hold up to twenty-five gallons of *eulachon* (candle fish) oil. Tiny baskets held tobacco or snuff made from ground and roasted clam shell, dried leaves, and the ashes of the inner bark of yellow cedar, and were hung around the neck on cords to free both hands for berry picking. In the southern part of Tlingit country, and other parts of British Columbia, red cedar bark was the usual basket-weaving material. Above the northern limit of red cedar trees, baskets were woven from yellow cedar and from spruce roots.

Today, clear-cut logging has devastated much of Southeast Alaska and British Columbia and endangers the biodiversity of the Northwest Coast rainforest. Basketry has much to say about how cultural and spiritual values embedded in traditional knowledge are intertwined with biodiversity. Knowledge about materials – when to gather them, where to

find them, how to work with them – requires 'knowing' about the environment in a profound way, through direct experience built up over time rather than through abstract or intellectual knowledge that characterizes Western science's involvement with a place or a resource. Traditional harvesting practices ensured the sustainability of the resources on which basket-makers relied. Scars on old but still vital trees are reminders that a tree has given – for clothing, utensils, or shelter. The inner bark of cedar was used for fishing lines, twine and rope, netting, and even hand towels for use after eating. Mats, and of course baskets, were woven from it.

Just one strip was taken, usually from a tree on the steep side of a mountain, and with no branches on one side because these are reaching towards the light, away from the hillside. A horizontal cut is made near the base of the tree and the bark is pulled with two hands. This way a long, tapering strip of bark can be peeled up the length of the tree, leaving the tree to heal and to continue to grow. Even whole planks were harvested this way. Some scars are 150 to 200 years old on trees that were much older when they were harvested. 'The Tree of Life is what we call the cedar', Theresa Thorne, a Cowichan elder and basket-maker told me. 'It gives us everything we need'. Roots were taken also without killing the tree.

To a basket-maker, the place her materials come from is key, not simply the materials themselves. The long-term sustainability of the resources needed by the basket-maker is part of a complex traditional land and resource management system that spans many generations – past and future. 'Taking care' encompasses not only the materials themselves but also the places in which these materials are found, and the meaning these places have in First Nations/Native American history and consciousness.

Stewardship of the resources needed for basketry protects biodiversity in the broadest sense. Understanding the role of basketry in traditional culture, and the role of the basket-maker, requires us to expand out understanding of biodiversity to include not just the physical elements of the biosphere but the metaphysical also. A basket is a physical object, but like the land it is derived from it is also a container of meaning, of memory and identity, of myths, teachings and dreams. Western science divides the world into the organic and inorganic, the animate and inanimate. In one of these baskets, however, body, mind and spirit are inseparable. Looking at such a basket or holding one in our hands if we are lucky enough, we are forced to reconsider such distinctions as well as our answer to the seemingly simple question, 'What is alive?'

The spirit of a basket connects a maker to her past, present and future, to her family and her community. Basketry is a link with the ancestors, with the children who receive the knowledge passed on in the baskets she's making, and with the land in which her history is etched. Northwest Coast basketry acknowledges the land and the objects derived from it as sacred places to be attended to with respect and humility, and reminds us that planning and sustainability mean more than our lifetimes. Reading the Origin of Basketry story once more, we are reminded that the earth is the source of all creativity. We are reminded also that biodiversity is about the physical world and the metaphysical. It is about body and spirit and the interconnectedness of all life.

Basket-makers talk about understanding their craft and the materials they use from 'within', 'from the heart', 'from the centre of the body...', 'the soul', 'the core' – not from the head, I was told, as Western science is seen to do. I was told how Western science misunderstands this profound difference – how we are used to working with the head. It is even

difficult to talk about basketry in this way, to try to convey such feelings to a Westerner, people told me, because these are things that must be experienced or felt, not simply spoken about.

First Nations have shown me how our relationship with the materials we use is one of reciprocity. Gathering plants means preparing yourself, putting yourself in the 'right' frame of mind, 'thinking good thoughts' and 'having a pure heart'. This may mean fasting, entering a sweat lodge, or 'smudging' by burning herbs for cleansing and purification. When Theresa Thorne, Bob Sam, Larry Louie, Judy Good Sky and others showed me how they gather plants, they told me how they ask the plant's permission: 'You ask the plant to help you', I was told. 'Perhaps someone in your family is ill or needs help in some way. You tell the plant how it will be used, and ask it to help you.' First Nations/Native Americans talk about this as showing respect for a plant and the gift it offers us. A gift must be made in return. You give a little tobacco, some tea or sugar; perhaps a handful of corn meal or rice is scattered at the base of the plant. A hair from your head or even spit will do if you are poor or have nothing else to give. Afterwards you must say thank you.

To someone who knows about baskets and their meaning, to a basket-maker herself, this respect and energy may be retained in baskets themselves. A basket-maker may feel the memory of the maker and the materials she used in the delicate strength and power of old baskets in museum collections. She might also feel sad that they have been removed from their spiritual context and that they are judged now by criteria very different from when they were made and used. But for a basket-maker without older women who know how to make baskets, the baskets themselves are mentors, as are the plants from which they are made. If we know how to listen.

Amongst First Nations and Native Americans who speak about these things, the making of baskets is intuitive and multi-sensory. Basketry is about the *making* of the basket: it is not just about the finished piece. The process of creation connects you to other basket-makers – past and future – to your materials, and to the place that offers such a gift. Meaning and spirit are in the materials themselves – in the bark and in the strong but flexible roots of cedar and spruce which connect us with the earth and retain its energy and strength.

Footnote: In Canada, Indigenous People refer to themselves as First Nations; in the United States, Native Americans is the term of self-identity.

Acknowledgement
The author thanks the many people who have taught her about plants over the years, a few of whom are named here.