

Chief Seattle's Web of Life

Chief Seattle, 1854:

"The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land (1). But how can you buy or sell the sky? the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them? Every part of the earth is sacred to my people (2). Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us. The perfumed flowers are our sisters. The bear, the deer, the great eagle, these are our brothers. The rocky crests, the dew in the meadow, the body heat of the pony, and man all belong to the same family.

The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each glossy reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of events and memories in the life of my people. The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father.

If we sell you our land, remember that the air is precious to us, that the air shares its spirit with all the life that it supports. The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also received his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. So if we sell our land, you must keep it apart and sacred, as a place where people can go to taste the wind that is sweetened by the meadow flowers.

Will you teach your children what we have taught our children? That the earth is our mother? What befalls the earth befalls all the people of the earth. This we know (3): The earth does not belong to us. We belong to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Notes

- 1) **Buy Our Land:** Chief Seattle, a leader of the Suquamish tribe, was responding to a land purchase offer from new non-native settlers in the area. Eventually the Suquamish exchanged the land for fishing and hunting rights, health care, education and territory for a reservation.

- 2) **My People:** Seattle was a hereditary leader of the Suquamish tribe, one of the native groups of the Puget Sound area. He was known as a warrior and an orator. He befriended the non-native settlers in the area, and used the alliance against rival tribes. Today, the Suquamish live on the Port Madison Indian Reservation.

- 3) **This We Know:** The text of the Web of Life is disputed. There are several contested versions of Chief Seattle's original speech and we do not have an authenticated document. Seattle delivered the speech in Lushootseed, the Suquamish language. It was written down in Chinook, a Native-American intertribal trade language, then translated into English. The version of the speech used for this song was adapted for a film made in the 1970's. Although the accuracy of the text is uncertain, it's message is consistent with what is known about the historical Chief Seattle, the culture of the Suquamish and events of the time.

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