

The Native American Vision
and
Teachings of 'Abdu'l-Baha



My name is Paula Bidwell and I'm Shawnee, Delaware, Cherokee and Seneca. Although, I spent much of my adult life on the Cheyenne River Sioux reservation. I speak their language and follow their traditions, because of this I'm frequently linked to the Lakota people. Which is an honor to me.

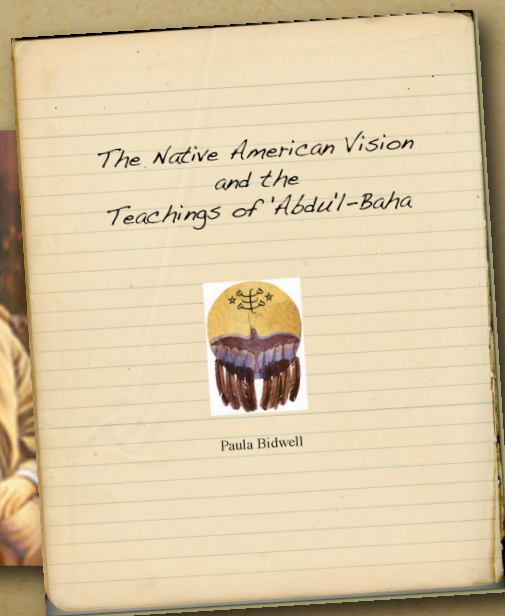
My Grandma and me
dancing



Before I start, I would like to acknowledge Christopher Buck, Rob Stockman, Ismael Velasco and Moojan Momen all of whom I consider to be my elder brothers. They have encouraged me and taught me so many things that the depth of my gratitude is inexpressible. Also a big thanks to my husband Brian O'Flanagan for his unequalled support and enduring patience.



The Native American Vision and Teachings of 'Abdu'l-Baha is based on a much larger work. I've condensed it for the purpose of this conference.



My primary focus is Native American audiences. Through this focus, I hope to bring ideas for further adaptations appropriate for other indigenous peoples around the globe.



Currently, Native Americans make up a very small percentage of the Baha'i Faith. Those who are members have a high rate of inactivity. There are many reasons for this inactivity, a few of them will be touched on during this talk.





It is important not only to gain membership, but to keep those who are already members active in the work of the Faith. I believe the only way to change this is for Native people, including myself, to make not only our concerns, but our contributions heard.

When 'Abdu'l-Baha presented the Baha'i teachings in the United States. He chose topics that would be applicable to his primary audience. An audience of upper to middle class white anglo-saxon Protestants living in 1912.



Native Americans 1912



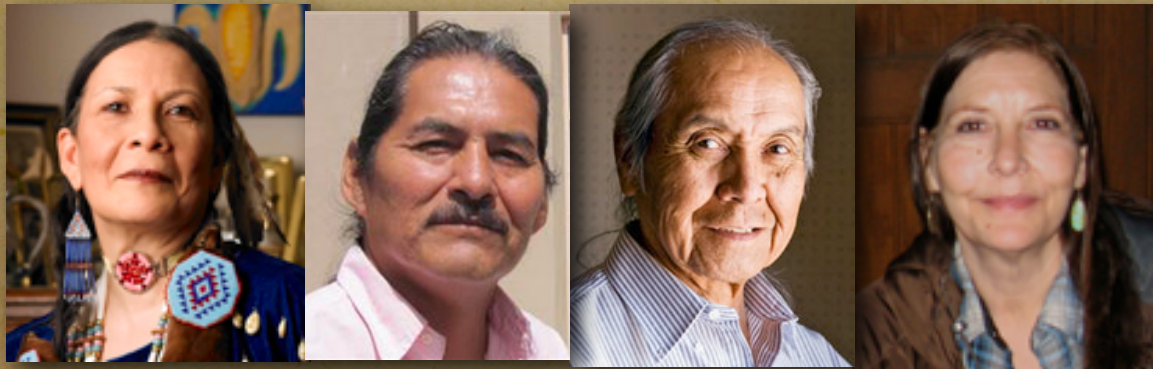
White Americans 1912



Following this example, with a Native American audience in the twenty-first century, it would be beneficial to be aware of some current concerns affecting us.

“Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements”

Tabernacle of Unity



Once these concerns are identified we can then choose from the vast array of Writings and principles which are pertinent.



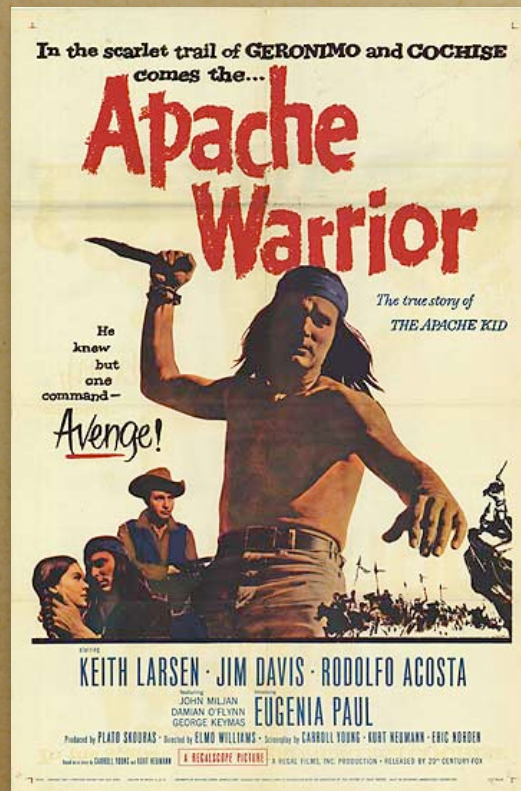
Native Americans have experienced religious persecution fraught with bloodshed, battles, and massacres in the past, Today, we experience it as a legal issue.



In 1978 we were granted the right to practice our religion, but the legalities were not complete and we are still fighting battles in courts of law for the freedom to pray.



Stereotyping as a form of racial prejudice is a real problem for Native people. The media, especially the film industry, has engrained an image of us with bows and arrows, feathers and tipis.



We are not recognized without them. Because of this we are called the “invisible race” and struggle for recognition beyond stereotyping.



Dr. Charles Eastman - Dakota Sioux



Violations of the human rights of Native American people has come into question with the United Nations. A special rapporteur was commissioned to conduct an investigation. His final report was presented on August 30th of 2012.

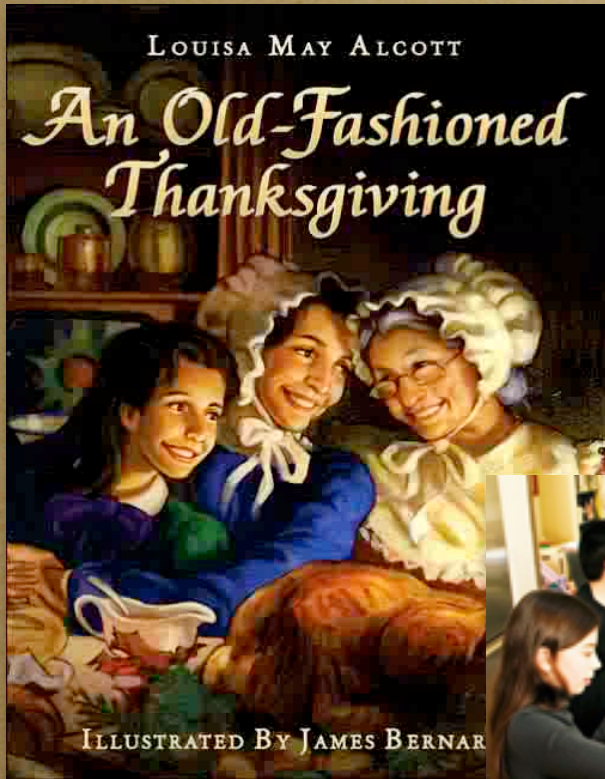


This report is very extensive and there are many changes that need to transpire before Native Americans have the basic human rights that are granted to other citizens.



A concern that comes up every year in America is the holiday called Thanksgiving. For most Native peoples this is a day of mourning, a reminder of genocide and barbaric treatment. For non-Natives, it is a day of celebration.





Many Baha'is in America celebrate Thanksgiving, it would be step toward healing the wounds of racism and genocide if we would educate ourselves about the real history of this day.



Acknowledging the past is a step toward creating a better future. My advise is to tell the story of the true history and then pray for us to be able to create a different future, where the celebration of this day is a true celebration of unity, equality and gratitude.



“The arrow is far deeper in the hearts than we dream and we Bahá'ís should draw this arrow, in the name of Bahá'u'lláh...”
Rúhíyyih Khánum



Some Native American Concerns

Religious Persecution

Stereotyping and Racial Prejudice

Violations of Human Rights

Thanksgiving a Day of Mourning

After finding applicable topics within contemporary concerns, the next step is choosing principles to emphasize. Progressive Revelation and Independent Investigation of Truth are two good examples.

The principle of progressive revelation can be applied to the issue of religious persecution. The common basis for religious persecution is believing a people's Manifestation of God is heathen and unworthy of remembrance. Native Americans have suffered from this disregard of their Manifestations of God and continue to suffer from it today.



Worldwide, not one of the Messengers of God who came with oral traditions have been recognized. Progressive Revelation necessitates a previous Revelation to progress from. Do we think Abrahamic traditions are the only valid ones? Or that there are only nine religions? It is past time to start recognizing that the oral traditions from Indigenous Messengers are equal to written traditions.



The principle of Independent Investigation of truth is a basic principle in most Native traditions. The concept that someone is above another in a spiritual sense is unheard of. There has never been the concept of clergy.



Although, there are those who are considered elders and healers, but they are more like scholars and not considered ultimate authorities.



Patricia Locke - Tawacin Waste Win
Lakota/Chippewa Baha'i
Served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States



Chester Kahn
Navajo Diné Baha'i
Served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States

Even though, this principle seems the easiest to emphasize, there is a problem in the fact that a clergy and missionary mentality still exists in Baha'i communities. In fact, one of the popular jokes among Native Baha'is is about being told by well-meaning individuals that we can't wear long beaded earrings because the Kitab-i-Aqdas says to "... exercise moderation in all that pertain to dress." This is only one example among many.



It is my hope that the culture of the post-protestant Baha'i with its clergy and missionary mentality can be modified or eliminated. It is not only in direct conflict with the Writings, it is also a great hinderance to the acceptance of Baha'u'llah Message especially by Indigenous peoples who have already suffered immensely from Christian clergy and missionaries.



At this point we have considered some of the ways to adapt the Writings and principles, but we might also consider a few methods for sharing them. In ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s last talk in America He gave us an idea on how to do this.



“Consider... the great souls who have appeared and the sages who have arisen in the world have exhorted mankind to unity and love...”

With this in mind, we can consider the possibility of making connections with the Faith to other great souls and sages.



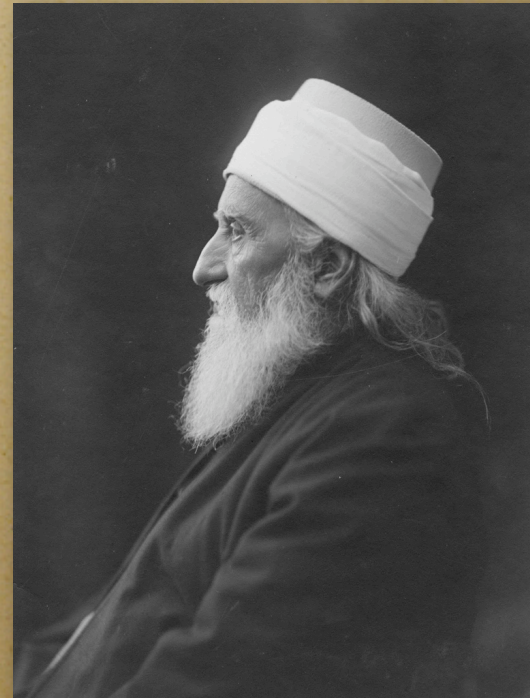
Charles Eastman a Dakota Santee Sioux wrote:

“It was our belief that the love of possessions is a weakness to be overcome. Its appeal is to the material part, and if allowed its way, it will in time disturb one’s spiritual balance.”



‘Abdu’l-Baha wrote:

“Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished...”



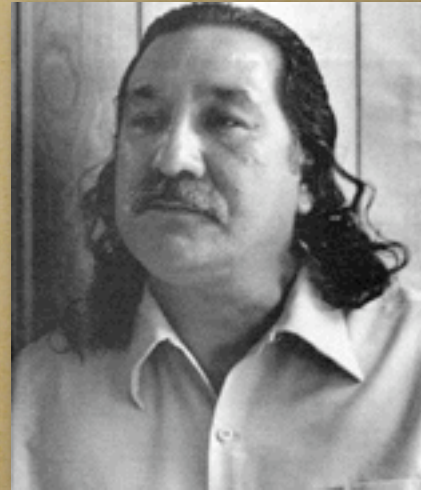
Making connections is an effective way to touch the hearts of people who are seldom recognized for the gifts they bring or the wisdom they hold.



Telling stories of the martyrs both from the past and from the present is also a way to open dialog about the Faith. Who wouldn't be fascinated and inspired by these noble souls? Native people have had their own martyrs and understand all too well the effects and consequences of religious persecution as it existed in the past and as it exists today.



As a note of interest, Leonard Peltier is considered by both Natives and non-Natives as a contemporary Native American martyr. His story is readily available on the internet and in various books and articles.



In summary, we can note that Baha'is live in virtually every country and have members from almost every background imaginable, yet there is a disproportionate number of indigenous people in the Faith.



To begin taking steps toward adapting the way we share the Writings is a journey toward righting the wrongs experienced by so many indigenous peoples and accepting and embracing the importance of their contributions to the world.



The outcome of this process will inevitably result in the strengthening of indigenous voices and a larger presence in the world wide community and in our own communities.



As we have seen from the history of the Faith in the United States, a Christian presentation and interpretation was effective at one time. Today, it is time to start developing another model. A model that is universal in approach that will not limit but expand our membership. By writing from a Native American perspective I hope to have given ideas for adapting the way we share the Faith that will apply to any race, religion or ethnicity.



“Unto the cities of all nations He hath sent His Messengers.”



Maybe one day Native Americans will be enabled and encouraged to carry forth the best of our traditional ways into the Revelation of Baha'u'llah.



Which might lead to the fulfillment of 'Abdu'l-Baha's prophecy that the Indigenous peoples of America might become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world.

Mitakuye Oyasin
You are all my relatives

For questions please contact me at: nativebahai@gmail.com

Further reading:

Christopher Buck and Donald Addison, "Messengers of God in North America Revisited: An Exegesis of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet to Amir Khán", Online Journal of Bahá'í Studies, Volume 1 (2207): 180-270).

Christopher Buck, Native Messengers of God in Canada, The Bahá'í Studies Review 1996 p.113 -114

Christopher Buck, "Never Again': Kevin Grover's Apology for the Bureau of Indian Affairs." Wicazo Sa Review, 2006

Moojan Momen, "Learning form History", Journal of Baha'i Studies, Vol. 2, number 2, 1989

Paula Bidwell, "Many Messengers of God - A Native American Perspective", Irfan Colloquia, Session 107, 2011. Available on-line at [http://bahai-library.com/bidwell many messengers](http://bahai-library.com/bidwell_many_messengers)