

Chapter 1



The indigenous perspective on water: A source of life, not a resource

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1.1 INTRODUCTION

It's natural for human beings to take what they have for granted. In my neighborhood, we wake up and turn on the lights, go to the bathroom, wash our faces, brush our teeth, shower, turn on the stove, make coffee. As residents of the developed world, we consider it a human right to have instant access to clean water and electricity. They bring us comfort, and play a role in everything we consume, including food and clothing. We know we could live without electricity, although it would mean the end of our comfortable lifestyles. But without water, there would be no life.

Is it possible to run out of water on a planet whose surface is 71% water? The Earth has a way of recycling water, giving the impression that we will have enough water forever. However, when you observe the changes happening with our water supplies and climate, it is obvious that nothing is guaranteed. We must be mindful of how we sustain water.

My name is Dave Archambault; my Lakota name is *Tokala Ohitika* which means 'warrior from the kit fox society'. I grew up on two Lakota reservations in the United States: Pine Ridge or Oglala Sioux Reservation and Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. In 2016, when I was Chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, I found myself in the middle of a movement. The Tribe opposed the Dakota Access Pipeline because it crossed our treaty lands and went under Lake Oahe, one of our main sources of drinking water. The movement drew thousands of water protectors to our community and gained global media attention. As I reflect on the movement, I realize it was a moment of unity in Indian country. It was the first time in modern history that there was a coming together of tribes from over 300 nations ([Figure 1.1](#)) to stand up for our traditional way of seeing the world around us.

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Figure 1.1 Indigenous people representing 300 tribes gathered on the Standing Rock Sioux reservation with others to protest construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. (Credit: Frank White Bull)

In my early years on Pine Ridge Reservation I was fortunate to live with family members who practiced our ancestral ways, so I learned to pray. I became familiar with prayer, and the connection with all beings in prayer – not taking anything for granted, completely respecting all. Today I realize that my specific ancestral way of thinking and believing is shared by many indigenous communities throughout the world. Whenever I meet Indigenous People, I hear a lot that sounds familiar. Where I visit indigenous communities – the Kayapo in Brazil, the Mapuche in Chile, the Andean in Peru, the Wangan and Jagalingou in Australia, the Maori in New Zealand, First Nations in Canada, Gwich'in in Alaska, Swahili in Africa, and Sawau in Fiji – I find areas rich not in monetary wealth but in cultural wealth, with a deep understanding of the universe, of the world, of community, family, and youth. Some common beliefs I find particularly interesting, like the idea that you have two parts to yourself, your physical body, and within that body your spirit, so that even when your body no longer lives in this world, your spirit continues. Another common belief is the notion that water is more than a resource: it is a source of life.

1.2 INDIGENOUS AND MAINSTREAM THINKING

Despite subtle differences among indigenous cultures, there are a number of important similarities. It's easy to distinguish Indigenous People from those who follow the Western or European influenced 'mainstream' way of life. Indigenous Peoples are connected to the land and continue to pass down the teachings from their ancestors on how to care for the land. Where Westerners typically think in terms of self or individualism, Indigenous Peoples think in terms of community. Perhaps the most important divergence from mainstream thought is the indigenous belief that Nature – everything living and non-living in the surrounding environment – transcends all. This means that the role of humans is not to rule Nature, but to be a part of it. This and other differences are illustrated in [Table 1.1](#), below, which compares some of

Table 1.1 Comparison of indigenous peoples' and mainstream way of thinking.

Indigenous Way of Thinking	Mainstream Way of Thinking
Communal	Individualistic
Circular	Linear
Nature	Humans
Past Present Future	Future
Connection, related to all things in universe	Life is focus, advance to top
Oral Stories	Written history or documents
Eye contact is overly assertive	Eye contact is part of the conversation
Mystical	Scientific
Praise the group	Praise the Individual

the core beliefs of indigenous communities and mainstream populations, which also influences how these two groups think about water.

All human beings are built the same. We all share the same patterns of physical and mental growth, and we go through these stages of life for the most part not realizing what we are doing until the time we return to Mother Earth. We live much of the time in our minds, hearing our own thoughts, and we long for acceptance by others. In the mainstream thought process, if we do well for ourselves, we will be accepted. In the indigenous thought process, we must do well for others, and acceptance will come. So even though we all crave for our egos to be stroked, the outcomes and impacts are quite different when we strive for our own gain rather than for the benefit of all. Over time, as mainstream thinking continues to expand around the world, so does its impact: individual convenience has become both the norm and the priority.

In the same vein, the word 'all' to the indigenous person does not mean mankind alone. The word 'all' applies to everything with a spirit or soul, including the stars, plants, animals, air, land, clouds, sun, and water. To be connected to 'all' means to be part of something that is greater – greater than oneself, greater even than human beings. Wherever mankind has focused too narrowly on its own perceived self-interest, other beings begin to die off, so the more we take and destroy for our own gratification, the more, over time, we threaten our own survival. To develop for mankind alone necessarily damages and disrupts all other beings. By contrast, the indigenous way of thinking offers a broader perspective that's consistent with both self-gratification and with preserving the environment that we depend on for existence.

In the culture I grew up in, our ceremonies were performed in a circle, reflecting the four stages of life:

- Starting at the bottom, the first quadrant represents our first stage: the baby, the toddler, the child. Immature socially and physically, we think only of ourselves. In this stage, it might be said, we exhibit all the characteristics of the mainstream way of thinking.
- The next quadrant represents the second stage: the young adult. At this stage, we begin to think beyond ourselves, as we also care about a pet, a boy/girlfriend, a spouse, or a child. In this stage of maturity, we recognize that someone or something is more important than our individual selves.
- The third quadrant represents adulthood. At this time you think not only about those closest to you but also the environment or community that you are a part of. In this stage, you want to make a better place for all.

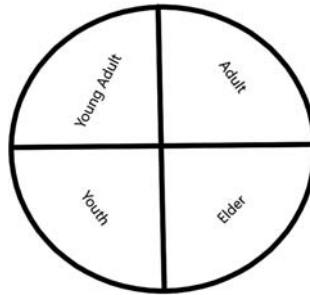


Figure 1.2 Indigenous 'circular' thinking about human society.

- The last quadrant represents the elder. In this stage, you seek world peace. You think not just of the environment but the universe, and the spiritual connection that binds all together. At this point, as we look beyond ourselves we perceive that connection with the same immediacy with which we experienced the world as an infant. (The baby and the elder are said to be closest to the spirit world.)

Our progress, as we mature through life, is illustrated by the diagram in [Figure 1.2](#).

In the mainstream way of thinking, life is not a circle but a straight line, as illustrated in [Figure 1.3](#). This way of thinking views time as linear, and the eyes are focused on some idealized future of the self. The focus is on me and (perhaps) mankind, rather than us all or the universe. The problem is that when you only think of benefits for mankind and self, all others pay the cost.

From the indigenous perspective, water is not a just a resource: it is a source of life. There are four sources of life, and without any one of them, life will not exist on this planet: Water, Air, Land, and Sun. In Lakota, the phrase '*Mni Wiconi*' means 'Water is a source of life'; or to put it even more briefly, 'Water is life!' Many freshwater deposits are starting to vanish – glaciers, lakes, and aquifers. If land developers viewed water as a source of life rather than a resource to exploit, perhaps their projects would plan for sustainability rather than simply consumption. With proper planning and appropriate use of technology, we can secure the source of life for future generations, but only if we are mindful of our actions. If we continue to take this source of life for granted, it will continue to diminish, and the next wars will be fought over water rather than oil.

1.3 A HISTORY OF TAKING

The difference between the indigenous and the mainstream view of water is not just philosophical; it has real world implications that can result in serious conflict. This conflict has been acted out repeatedly on the national stage in the United States, throughout its history and up to the present day. As an example, the recent and highly visible conflict over the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) can be shown to stem directly from the historic conflict between the mainstream Western view of the world and the more holistic perspective of the Indigenous People in this country.

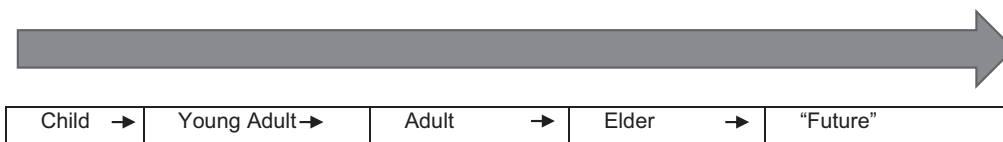


Figure 1.3 Mainstream 'linear' thinking about human society.

For over 500 years, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe of the Dakota/Lakota people and all the other Great Sioux Nation tribes have warned that the benefits associated with mainstream thinking came with a cost borne by the Tribal Nation, altering the indigenous way of life and endangering the natural world and all that entails. Our creation story includes the buffalo: ‘A man changed himself into a buffalo to help our people survive’. In 1803, it was estimated that 70 million buffalo roamed the great plains of America and Canada. The buffalo was our economy, our food, shelter, tools: our everything. Then the railroads arrived – the first infrastructure project to encroach on our human rights – and nearly exterminated the species. Hunters rode railcars across the plains, shooting buffalo for sport, and as a strategy to eliminate the Indians and take their land. By 1889, there were fewer than 100 buffalo roaming the plains. When the railroad came, our way of life changed forever.

After killing off the buffalo, in 1851 the US government ratified the Horse Creek Treaty, securing for the Great Sioux Nation the rights to 60 million acres to reside upon forever, without any more interference. Before the ink was dry, however, that treaty was broken when gold was discovered in South Dakota’s Black Hills, the heart of the Great Sioux Nation. To get the gold to back its currency, the US Congress passed new laws that carved the Black Hills out of the Great Sioux National Lands, eventually placing the indigenous population on reservations. Not US citizens, their treaty rights revoked at will, my ancestors, the Indigenous People, at the time were considered less than human. Mainstream society failed to understand the dignity of our cultures, our spiritual beliefs, and our interconnection with the natural world. And despite our courage and strength, the physical power of the indigenous population was further weakened by breaking the Great Sioux Nation into individual tribes, like Standing Rock.

Along with the treasured gold, land was also considered a resource to exploit. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries the US government routinely opened up the best land on the reservations to farming by non-indigenous homesteaders. Out of the 2.3 million acres on the Standing Rock reservation, fewer than 1.3 million acres remain reserved in government trust for the tribe and members of the tribe. (See [Figure 1.4.](#)) Out of the desire to exploit ‘land resources’ for the sake of monetary profit, the US government continually reneged on its promises and took land it had promised to the Tribes ‘forever’.

And the taking continues, this time inspired by another ‘*resource*’: water. In 1944, Congress approved a massive infrastructure project which resulted in construction of seven dams on the Missouri River. At the time considered the largest dam project in the world, the dams and reservoirs were strategically placed to maximize the flooding of Indian reservation lands. They were created for hydroelectricity, for flood control, for recreation – or more broadly, for money and wealth. This was done without regard to the great and enduring costs to those of us connected to the land, and to our ancestors who, when forced onto the reservation, had settled on the river bottoms where the water, game, fruits, and wood were most plentiful. By 1958 this land was under water, a result of the Oahe Dam, and once more we were forced to move, abandoning the fertile and protected bottomlands of our ancestors for the harsh and windswept uplands. Once more the clash of the mainstream and indigenous mindsets forced us to alter our way of life.

1.4 THE LAST STRAW: DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE

The history of infrastructure projects is a history of transferring benefits from indigenous populations to the nation, with the US government as the perpetrator that abuses Indigenous Peoples. This history has repeated itself time and again. But recently, a point came when the members of Standing Rock were no longer willing to accept wrongs committed against not just us but against all, including the ones that don’t speak our language: the ones that crawl or fly, the ones with four legs, the ones that blossom or bloom, the ones that swim or slither, the ones that sway in the wind. From that perspective, perhaps what happened at Standing Rock was inevitable. At some point, there was going to be a stance taken by a concerned

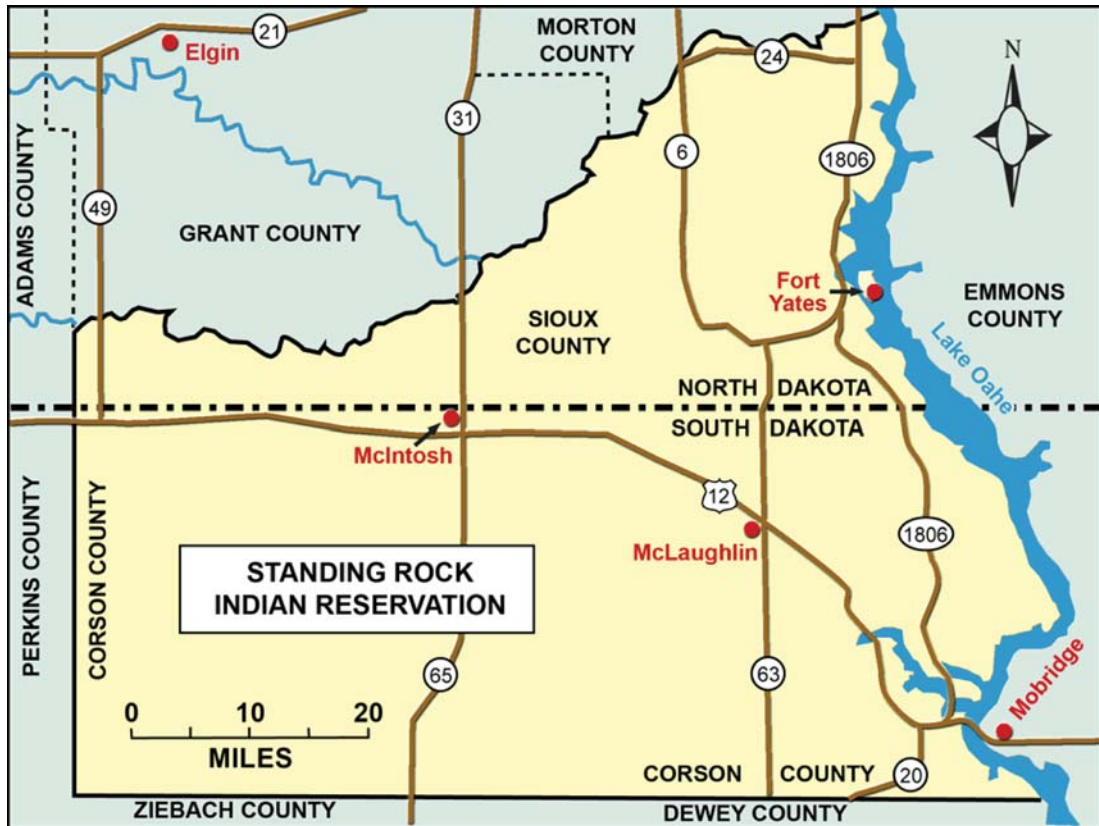


Figure 1.4 Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, North and South Dakota, USA. (Credit: State Historical Society of North Dakota-North Dakota Studies. <https://www.ndstudies.gov>)

indigenous population against the government and corporations; the resistance to this one particular pipeline just happened to take place at Standing Rock, where an oil company planned to construct the DAPL across our land and under our water.

The Tribe opposed the DAPL because it crossed our treaty lands and went under Lake Oahe, one of our main sources of drinking water, and the very same lake whose construction by the US government 70 years earlier had displaced our grandparents from their homes. The movement drew thousands of water protectors to our community and gained global media attention. As I reflect on the movement, I realize it was a moment of unity in Indian country when tribes from over 300 nations came together to stand up for their rights, and the rights of the water and the land. We received prayers and letters of support from Indigenous Peoples across the country and around the world. Our message of *Mni Wiconi* – water is life – resonated with other Indigenous Peoples who were also fighting to protect our Mother Earth (Figure 1.5).

We had campaigned against the project from the time we first heard about it, even though in June 2014, when Energy Transfer Partners announced their plans to build it, the planning and scoping of the project was already complete. According to federal law, the process for massive infrastructure projects requires that the owner first get permission from all the federal agencies and the states that the project will impact. After those initial approvals are granted, the exact route is determined, and additional permits and approvals are



Figure 1.5 A campground at Standing Rock during the 2016 demonstration against the Dakota Access Pipeline. (Credit: Frank White Bull)

obtained but nowhere are Tribes/Indigenous Peoples contacted or consulted, much less asked for their consent. Only after all agencies and states approve the project does the permitting federal agency consult with the impacted Tribes, and these consultations are designed to be *pro forma* – an insignificant item on a procedural checklist.

Nevertheless, we wanted to have a say, and to be given the opportunity to decide whether or not this infrastructure project could happen. We asked for in-depth study of the impact DAPL might have on our way of life, not the conclusory environmental assessment written for the company by a former general of the US Army Corps of Engineers that barely glanced at the facts and determined there would be ‘no impact to environment’. We knew that this was not true, and that a deeper study needed to be conducted. We knew it was not true because in the past, every infrastructure project has had a negative impact on our way of life.

We argued the laws in federal court, and the federal judge ruled against us, just as the court has ruled against us for centuries. Just as the court ruled against the heirs of Thomas Johnson in 1823, when they contested a government land grant to William M’Intosh on the basis that Johnson had previously purchased the same land from the Piankeshaw tribe. In that classic case (*Johnson v M’Intosh*) the US Supreme Court upheld M’Intosh’s grant by invoking the ‘Doctrine of Discovery’ which declared that all ‘discovered’ lands belonged to the government in whose name they were claimed. (It’s worth noting that this doctrine, a joint invention of the Catholic Church and European kingdoms, was itself based on the premise that since the Indigenous Peoples who lived on this ‘discovered’ land did not believe in Christ, the conquistadors were authorized to take their land – and to maim, mutilate, and kill these sub-humans – in the interest of wealth.)

Despite this legal history, we at Standing Rock felt compelled to pursue every possible angle to try and stop the Dakota Access project. We didn’t want our descendants to be able to say, 100 years from now, that we didn’t try so when our youth spoke out and said ‘We don’t want that pipeline to go under our precious



Figure 1.6 Authorities block a road on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation during demonstrations against the Dakota Access Pipeline. (Credit: Frank White Bull)

river’, our elders held a ceremony. In the ceremony, the spirits’ guidance was this: With peace and prayer you will stop the pipeline; with violence and arrest, the pipeline will go under the river.

We had no idea when we began our peaceful opposition to the DAPL that people from around the world would come in support. When people came, we asked them to come in peace and in prayer; no alcohol, no drugs, no violence, and no weapons. The spirit of the movement was most powerful when those that came adhered to our request. We had the power of prayer on our side; the voices of our ancestors permeated through to today’s generation. Like many things grounded in a spiritual understanding, the indigenous opposition to the Pipeline was more than words – it was a deeply felt and abiding feeling. Imagine an oppressed population being liberated for the first time in over 200 years and finally understanding the teachings, the way of life, the way of thinking that was passed down for centuries.

Despite the Tribe’s opposition, the DAPL was built. Unfortunately, the Tribe will be the ones impacted when there is a spill and so we continue the fight. Tribes across the country continue to face development projects that impact their treaty, land, and water rights. These projects include Keystone XL, Line 3, and the Liberty Pipeline. Our concerns about these projects are not going away (Figure 1.6).

1.5 THE INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVE ON WATER: A FAMILY MATTER

I get tired of people saying, ‘get over it!’ meaning that we should ‘get over’ the past. They don’t understand that the past continues to repeat itself – that federal law continues to be an impediment to the interests of Indian tribes, and our ability to protect our lands, waters, and way of life. The major difference from the time of *Johnson v. M’Intosh* until today is the identity of those now partnering for greed and wealth to our detriment. The laws that are enacted by the US Congress are supposed to be in the interest of the people, but when corporations lobby and fund the campaigns of politicians, federal laws favor business and wealth over the universe, planet, environment, and human rights.

The Lakota teach that water is a source of life and that we are all related. From the business perspective, on the other hand, water is a resource. Yet there may be a path forward that can bring the indigenous view into business and development decisions.

As I look out onto the prairie, I see and hear movement – the grasses sway, the trees dance, a deer flips her tail in alertness, and a bird chirps as the clouds float by. There is movement all around me. In the Lakota way, when we see movement, we say *taku skan skan*, which means there is something out there. If something moves, then it has a *nagi*, a life force or spirit. If something has a *nagi*, then in our way, we say *mitakuyasin*, or all my relatives. We are related to it. And if we are related to it, then we should treat it with respect, just like we would treat our own mother or child.

We also learn that there are four sources of life: water, air, sun, and earth. Not only do we demonstrate respect and love for our relatives, but we do the same for these sources of life, with the understanding that they too have a *nagi*. These sources nourish life so that our *nagi* can grow and mature within our bodies. They are part of *Tunkasila*, or the Creator. *Tunkasila* is not one being. *Tunkasila* is all around you. With every prayer and every ceremony, we give thanks to these four elements. We treat them with respect and understand that we are all connected and rely on each other. In this way, our ancestors understood sustainability before the term ‘sustainable development’ ever existed. Today’s environmental problems and the mismanagement of water arise from the mistreatment of our relatives. Corporations and governments exploit our relatives because they do not recognize how we are all connected. They extract and transport oil, take fossil fuels from Mother Earth, manufacture and create products that pollute the air, and exploit water, treating it as a resource rather than a source of life.

Industry is blind to the environmental and social impacts of their projects because their decisions are based on money. Money does not move. Money does not have a *nagi*. We are not related to money, and it does not provide a source of life. Money is fictitious, and yet people make decisions based on whether they will increase or decrease the money they can obtain. People are so focused on money that they forget to respect the very things that give us life. They continue to drift, even as there is growing recognition that our environment is dying because of our actions.

This money-focused perspective was evident in the DAPL controversy. In September 2014, a few months after the announcement of the DAPL, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribal Council met with representatives from Energy Transfer Partners, the principal company behind the project. At this meeting, we expressed our concerns about the pipeline because it crossed our treaty lands and had potential impacts on our relatives, including our water, our burial grounds, and other sacred sites. The representatives listened but they did not internalize what we told them. I wonder if the investors behind the DAPL would have made the same decisions if they had fully listened to the Tribe and meaningfully brought our perspective into the process. Would they have more deeply considered our concerns about the crossing of our treaty lands and rerouted around the lake? If they had, they would have saved money. Their failure to fully consider the environmental and social impacts of the project led to a six-month delay that resulted in numerous costs. We estimate that the project cost 70% more than originally anticipated – over \$7.5 billion. In addition, the banks financing the project lost at least \$4.4 billion in account closures, and taxpayers and local stakeholders suffered costs valued at least \$38 million. These are very real costs that stemmed from poor project management and a failure to account for the project’s social risk.

1.6 BUILDING PROJECTS, BUILDING COMMUNITY

I am not against development, I am not anti-pipeline, and I recognize the need for water projects. However, when governments and companies give Indigenous People a voice at the table, they will only strengthen

their projects, mitigate social risks, and prevent unnecessary costs. My hope is to see more water management projects that are led by Indigenous People and centered on community needs. This is consistent with human rights principles found in international instruments, including Article 32 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which states that ‘states shall consult and cooperate in good faith with the Indigenous Peoples ... in order to obtain their free and informed consent prior to the approval of any project affecting their lands or territories and other resources, particularly in connection with the development, utilization or exploitation of mineral, water or other resources’. This is also aligned with Goal Six of the UN Sustainable Development Goals to ensure access to water and sanitation for all.

The Bell Waterline Project is a great example of a water project that incorporated the indigenous perspectives. It was pioneered by Wilma Mankiller, the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation. Prior to becoming Chief, she worked with the community of Bell, a small village on the Cherokee reservation in the 1980s. She asked the community what they most wanted, and their response was ‘access to running water’. She helped the community build an 18-mile-long water distribution system and required that they contribute their own time and labor to build the project. Her work is a model for how water development projects can be successful when they are consensus-driven and community-led.

It is going to take a generation who cares to save our existence. *Tunkasila* and all our relatives will recover in time. Mother Earth will always find a way to heal and to recover. However, if we continue down this path of exploitation and destruction, we will continue to hurt our sources of life and to threaten our existence as a species. Instead of seeing this opposition as a problem, I hope companies will begin to see it as an opportunity: an opportunity to learn more about how their projects are impacting our way of life and an opportunity to bring indigenous values into their planning, which will save money and prevent the negative environmental, social, and historical impacts to Indian communities. We are all related, after all.

1.7 AFTERWORD

Over 300 tribes came to Standing Rock to pray for Grandmother Earth. The federal government and the corporation ignored us, giving Grandmother Earth no choice but to protect herself. At the time of this writing, we now must self-isolate, create social distance, and quarantine. We are forced to spend time with our loved ones if we want to protect them. In short, people all over the world have an opportunity to re-learn what family is, and that family is more important than money. From this perspective, COVID-19 can be seen both as a cleansing and a warning – Grandmother Earth speaking again: ‘*You can no longer just take, you must give back*’. Indigenous People around the world have for generations faced extinction from epidemics and armies, but we are resilient. We will make it through this pandemic, too, for we have always understood that we are part of something greater than ourselves. Now everyone, for the moment, is forced to acknowledge the need to reciprocate the nurturing of our Grandmother Earth and to explore renewables and sustainable living.

At the same time, in March 2020 the District Court of the United States for the District of Columbia ordered the Army Corps of Engineers to prepare a full environmental impact statement on the DAPL. Just as we had argued, the Court ruled that the original DAPL environmental review did not adequately consider how an oil spill would affect our tribe’s water, our fishing and hunting rights, and would further impact the environment. Oil began flowing through the pipeline in June 2017; a decision whether to shut down the pipeline while an environmental study is being completed is expected sometime later in 2020.