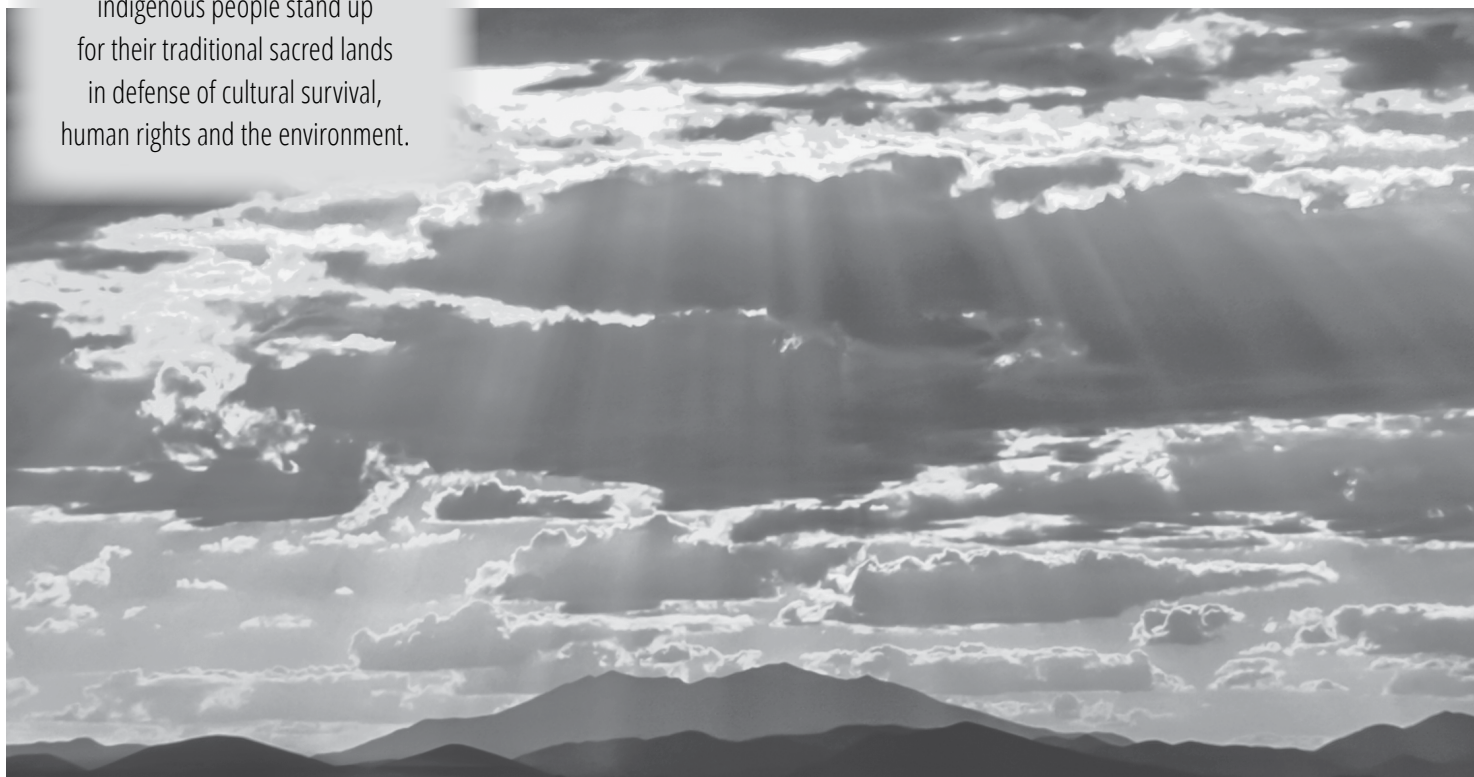


Sacred Land Film Project



Around the world,
indigenous people stand up
for their traditional sacred lands
in defense of cultural survival,
human rights and the environment.



A Time for Reflection

BY CHRISTOPHER McLEOD

ON CHRISTMAS DAY 2020, after the presents had been opened and a delicious meal cooked and consumed, I sat at the table enjoying a reverential moment with Jessica, Miles and Fiona, appreciating the clear blue sky and stunning view from Grizzly Peak down to the site of the West Berkeley Shellmound, and beyond to Alcatraz and the Western Gate. The ravages of Covid, the horrific wildfires, the exhaustion of isolation all receded in a wash of family love. There was a pause, the first quiet moment of the day. My phone dinged—those two familiar bells, *pax interruptus*—and I glanced at a text from my good friend and cameraman, Andy Black, “So sorry about Barry”—and a year of never-ending sadness

instantly took a deeper turn.

I first met the writer Barry Lopez in 1980 at a conference titled “Technology: Over the Invisible Line?” Bay Area visionaries Jerry Mander, Lee Swenson and Stephanie Mills convened 50 of their most insightful, radical friends to define the moral boundary beyond which any given technology should not be allowed to intrude. Writers, artists and activists would discuss whether and how to ban destructive technologies—nuclear power and weapons, carcinogenic pesticides, genetic engineering. I was hired, from my position as an intern at *Mother Jones* magazine, to do the detail work of inviting and organizing travel for a group of illustrious writers, activists and thinkers.

It was my job to call Barry Lopez, one of my heroes, and make his travel arrangements. Barry’s talk at the conference explored the power and importance of storytelling.

Over the ensuing years, I often wondered why he spent any time on me, a filmmaker with little to show. “You introduced me to Oren Lyons,” the Onondaga elder, he would say with a laugh, “and I’m forever grateful for that.” Barry became a valued mentor. He introduced me to people who contributed greatly to my films, and our friendship grew. The often uncomfortable roles we shared as outsiders in traditional communities, the hard work of translating what we saw and felt to a western audience, the grief we felt at the horrors we witnessed, all deepened our bond over

the entire 40-year life span of the Sacred Land Film Project.

Now Barry had passed away, 75 years young, after a seven-year battle with cancer, during which he maintained the highest spirits and continued to love his family and nurture his friends. His compassionate spirit was a marvel and his generosity a true gift. The world lost an essential truth-telling messenger far too early. In my grief, I feel his spirit still watching and worrying.



A few months before the Technology Conference, I'd gone to hear Anishinaabe activist Winona LaDuke—at the tender age of 20, already a fiery speaker and brilliant thinker—and Native American activist John Trudell, in Oakland. As Trudell spoke, I noticed that the young woman sitting in front of me had an article I'd written about the Church Rock uranium tailings spill on top of a pile of news clippings. I tapped her on the shoulder and introduced myself and the woman turned and said, "Hi, I'm Winona. I was looking for you!" That was the beginning of decades of collaboration as two young (and not very objective) journalists covered the ravages of uranium and coal mining on Hopi

and Navajo lands in the Southwest—and I got to invite Winona to the Technology Conference.

I recall vividly an image of walking with Winona through a Mills College library and seeing Barry Lopez and Oren Lyons sitting in two leather chairs as they talked late into the night. We served them tea.

Oren Lyons was much like the Hopi elders I was just getting to know—quiet, imposing, thoughtful, visionary, profound, intimidating. I kept my distance, and many years would pass before I got to know Oren.

When the PBS science show *NOVA* commissioned me to update *Downwind/Downstream*, my 1988 film on water and mining in the Colorado Rockies, the producers asked me to seek out and interview what they called a "Big Thinker." The law professor and historian Charles Wilkinson nailed that role in *Poison in the Rockies*, providing context and gravitas. As *Standing on Sacred Ground* took shape, we set out to provide global context and historical insight through interviews with other big thinkers with understanding of sacred lands. Twenty years after the Technology Conference, Barry, Winona and Oren would be three of our four Big Thinker interviews for *Standing on Sacred Ground*—along with the

Hindu/Jain writer Satish Kumar.

Barry called me in mid-December of 2020, two weeks before Christmas, his voice clear and strong. Fire had whipped down Oregon's McKenzie River Valley in the late summer, and Barry and his wife Debra had to evacuate in the middle of the night with barely a moment's notice. His home of 50 years was badly damaged by the flames. The outbuilding where he stored his archives and correspondence that had not yet been shipped off to Texas Tech University burned to the ground. As the cancer in his body now spread out of control and beyond the reach of medication, Barry said he wanted to get back to the house to die but probably would not make it because the house would not be repaired until springtime.

"Please," Barry said at the end of the call, "tell our friends: Don't despair. Just keep doing the work."



When I could finally bear to listen to Barry's voice, four or five months after he passed away, I realized what a treasure the interview was, and how little we'd used in the film. It's hard to talk about spirituality, to speculate as outsiders about the sacred places of indigenous communities, and it takes many minutes and a series of thoughts to build a powerful, insightful exchange.

I've been writing a memoir for the last four years because I've come to realize that film can be painfully shallow. Two-hour interviews are cut and culled for 30-second comments. While these golden nuggets may be profoundly moving, we still end up using just a tiny portion of the complex ideas—which we spend a lot of effort to record, and which the interview subject takes valuable time to ponder and deliver. So in my memoir, in our new Audio Archive inspired by Barry Lopez, and here in this retrospective annual report, I'm presenting some long interview bites—profound commentary, worthy of contemplation.

The times we are living in demand deeper reflection.



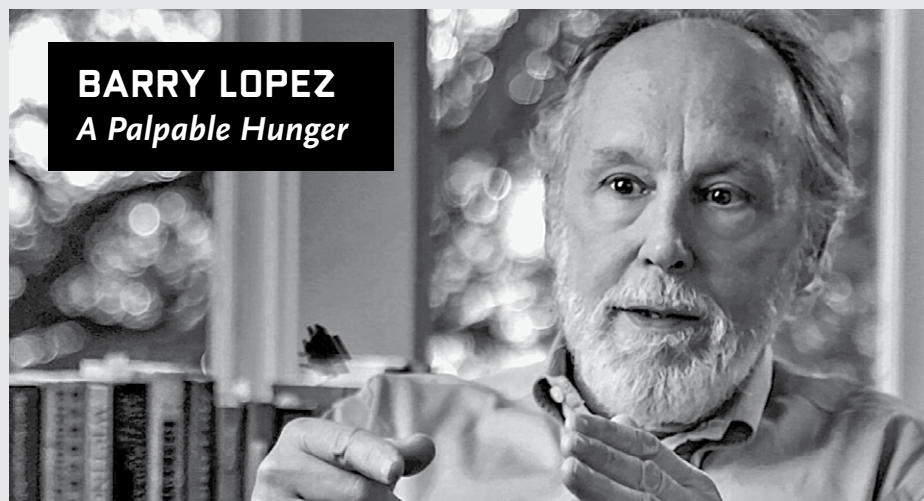
PHOTO OF BARRY LOPEZ IN MAUI BY CHRISTOPHER MCLEOD

“ I THINK the sign of where it goes wrong is when the world outside the self is no longer the companion, but the servant. If you can move the natural world out of your moral universe, then you no longer have to be in an ethical relationship with animals, soil, air, water. It’s a commodity that doesn’t have any living essence to it.

Trying to understand the relationship between a particular group of people and what they identify as sacred land is a way of understanding a much larger problem, and that is the answer to this question: What is our moral relationship, or to put it another way, what is our ethical relationship to the world outside ourselves? What we’re talking about with sacred lands is a place of intense relationships. You’re talking as much as anything about the maintenance of a set of relationships. Your relationships with a sacred place are a guide to everything that goes on in your life—spiritually, psychologically, physiologically. It’s your essence, like your heart.

All over the world, traditional people go to extraordinary lengths to maintain the conversation that they carry on as a culture with the place that empowers them, from which they draw a sense of composure, of spiritual and psychological composure. They go to great lengths to protect that conversation. A person traveling around the world would have to say to themselves: Isn’t there some wisdom here?

All traditional people have this idea of empowered and empowering places, with which they are regularly engaged. When you talk about enduring cultures, cultures that have been around, not for 100 or 300 or 500 years, but for thousands of years, you see in each of these cultures a common element, a ceremonialized, ritualized, profound relationship with certain places, and we know that there is conversation between those places and those people.



A loving relationship is characterized by reciprocity. I give. I receive. The reciprocal relationship is something that must always be nurtured. And what traditional people, I think, say at so many junctures is: ‘You have to be talking to the earth and listening to the earth all the time.’ So to remain in a loving relationship with the earth means *keep that conversation going*.

But we don’t have sacred places in the same way that traditional people have sacred places, where ritualized, formal conversation, that’s distinguished by a speaker and a listener, and a listener and a speaker, which may go on for days—we don’t have that...

The longing to be intimate with the world is a palpable hunger. We’re going to traditional people and saying, ‘We’ve noticed that a difference between your culture, which at a distance we admire, and our own culture, which is troubling to us, is that you have maintained a set of relationships with your places that we haven’t. So could you talk to us about that and maybe then we could see a way out of our predicament?’

It is such a waste of our precious energy to identify and castigate enemies. All of that energy could go into the discovery of a kind of beauty, or the rediscovery of a kind of beauty—and by beauty, I mean beauty is the state of good relations. The more perfect the relations, the more beautiful

the thing is. And that’s what we’re trying to make. We’re trying to make ourselves beautiful.

So what you’re trying to do as an individual is stop the conversation with yourself and begin the conversation with the world. What traditional people are telling us is: The conversation with yourself is a dead end. The only conversation to have is the conversation with the world, and it begins by saying, ‘Who are you?’—and waiting for an answer.

“Maintain a conversation with someplace on the Earth that empowers you and in which you feel that you are in the presence of the sacred,” Barry advised. “That’s not primitive, it’s profound. And it is not part of the past, it’s part of the future.”

As one who has struggled for decades to experience sacred places and then convey the mystery without trying to name it or define it, I love Barry’s brilliant word choice—“empowered and empowering places.” It’s a perfect definition—in four words!—casually slipped into an interview. Sacred places are vested with power, have agency to empower and inspire—are inspired and inspiring—and we need to be in loving relationship with these living places.

Interviews lightly edited for space and clarity.

“ SACRED PLACES have many facets. Sometimes they are the place that we emerged from in the earth. Sometimes they are the place where we were instructed to go. Sometimes they are the place where we know a certain medicine lives. Sometimes they are the place where the caribou birth their young or the sturgeons spawn. Those are places of reverence, where we are always not only careful, but prayerful. In those places, we reaffirm our relationship to our relatives, to spiritual beings, and we reaffirm our humility in our dependency on them all. Our ability to be resilient intergenerationally is contingent upon that respectful reaffirmation of that relationship.

Sacred places are like the spiritual recharge area where we're instructed to go to give our acknowledgments and thanksgivings and in turn, we would, if we are righteous, receive the gifts we need for our work and for our lives. And so in this recovery of our humanity as indigenous peoples, where we remember our songs and we rid ourselves of the cloaks of Christianity or the cloaks of consumerism and remember who we were supposed to be—these spiritual places not only buttress our beings, but are the places to which we must essentially go to keep restoring that relationship and recovering that power of place.

The process of colonialism is one that is military. It is religious. It is economic. It is in educational institutions. It is pervasive and it is insidious. Historically, it has been a companion to the taking of land and resources and it is essential to separate people from their connection to their land. It works best if you can tell them that how they pray—and their deepest connection spiritually—needs to be supplanted by something that you offer them. But in all cases, it is essential to wedge a separation between people and their land.

What the government knew is that power resides within our spiritual practice. The government has worked well with deployment of Christian churches into indigenous territories. In the teachings of

the churches, there is a separation of the land from the people, a cut of the umbilical cord so that people are not related to the land by their creation stories. They assume someone else's creation story. There is a loss of connection as to how we reaffirm relationship. Instead of having reaffirmation religions, we end up with commemorative religions that commemorate someone else's history someplace else.

Then we end up with a belief that it doesn't matter what we do here because

WINONA LADUKE *Naming Large Mountains After Small Men*



salvation is someplace else. So let 'em mine. Let 'em dam. That must be God's will. Because our salvation is in the next world. That whole set of religious teachings has very dangerous implications for indigenous communities and has been absolutely essential to the interests of mining corporations and governments in the religious and spiritual domination of peoples...

I believe the power we have as people doesn't come from us. It comes from the Creator, and from our relatives, and from the spirits and sources of power that are there on the land. We may not have all the guns, we don't have all the pens, we don't have all the courts, but we have that power—and that's what keeps people able to battle for so long against such hard odds.

Another facet that I always want to say is: Your plan is bad. You cannot continue to build a society which is based on conquest. We have run out of places to conquer,

places to put our flags, new places to mine, new places to dam. At a certain point, you have to bring your world into an economy that is durable and you need to do it sooner rather than later because the more you compromise ecosystems and spiritual recharge areas, the harder it will be for us all, including you, to recover.

We remain largely unable to fully heal because saying you're sorry has to mean something and it has to change your behavior. That's what you would tell a five-year-old: You can't kick your sister again. It has to mean something. Opening up a new mine after you say you're sorry is not changing your behavior. Running a bulldozer over a sacred site is not changing your behavior. Allowing egregious contamination in a community after apologizing is not changing your behavior.

As Nelson Mandela said, the perpetrator also carries this weight of the crime and becomes his own victim in the dynamic of having done something egregious. And so in that guilt, the perpetrator is not healthy either. So, the process of apology, redemption and forgiveness is a mutual healing process. ”

...
Winona ended our interview with yet another gem. "One of my objections to colonialism, Americanism, settler society is the naming of large mountains after small men. Harney Peak in the Black Hills. Arizona's San Francisco Peaks [see photo pg. 1]. I'm pretty sure Saint Francis was never there, yeah?" Ayers Rock in Australia has finally been renamed Uluru and Alaska's Mt. McKinley is once again acknowledged as Denali. "Although it is just in the realm of words," concluded the insightful elder, "it still offers this return to consciousness. Not having these places named after people puts us back in the perspective that we are those who travel through, live here a short time. The mountains precede, will be here long after we're gone, and they are sacred beings unto themselves. I think we are seeing some of that and we need more."

OREN LYONS

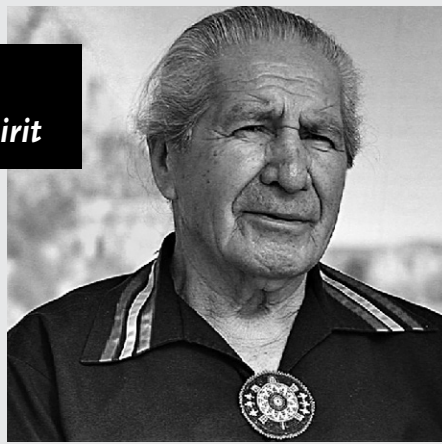
One Heart, One Mind, One Spirit

In 2012, Jessica and I were invited to attend a three-day remembrance of Hopi elder Thomas Banyacya at the foot of Navajo Mountain. Since Thomas had made a trip to Mt. Shasta with Winnemem Wintu healer Florence Jones, Winnemem Chief Caleen Sisk came with us. This was a family affair. Santa Clara elder José Lucero had asked us to edit a short film from the footage we'd shot of Thomas over the years, and we projected it onto a sheet hanging between juniper trees. After the screening, I walked around the fire and heard Onondaga elder Oren Lyons remark that people have forgotten their right relationship to fire. It struck me that this was one of those simple statements that seemed to hold everything. At that moment, I was looking forward to interviewing Oren after the memorial gathering concluded.

A few days later, we set up our camera with dramatic red rock cliffs of Monument Valley behind Oren, a bit of a violation of our protocol that an elder of Oren's stature should speak to us in his traditional home territory—Onondaga country amidst the lakes of northern New York. But Oren is an international messenger who can speak anywhere, and we were there with common purpose to honor Thomas and his defense of sacred land.

I started by asking Oren about the meaning of "sacred places," and he immediately critiqued my premise.

“ IN FACT, the whole earth is sacred. It's your mother altogether, and I don't care where you are, there's no place that's not special. There's no place that's not to be respected. We use the word sacred now. That's not an Indian word. That comes from Europe, comes from your churches. We have our own ways to say things, but it means the same. Sacred is a good word. The way we use it, it means a place to be respected, a place to be careful. It means it's a place that people gather.



For Indian nations and indigenous people, the most important thing is relationship. We value relationship way beyond anything else, way beyond what you can have. Relationship—to be close, to be next to the tree, to be next to the water, to be next to the earth. And I would say that's the biggest loss I see in humanity now, is this loss of understanding of relationship.

How do you maintain this relationship? How do you keep it fresh? How do you work with it? Our people have done that through ceremonies. We have developed these very elaborate thanksgivings. It requires a community to do that.

That's what people have to understand about these ceremonies, the ceremony is for everybody. You don't have to be there. Just be grateful that it's going on, that we're keeping it up. Sometimes you can be there, and most of the time you can't, but be grateful that somebody's looking after that, the spiritual side of things. That's the real world, actually, the spiritual side of it you can't see, but it's probably the most real of all.

So, we have to bring the rest of the world into that context. They have to understand the relationships and the responsibilities. And who's your teacher? The teacher is nature, the Earth. You learn. You learn how to get along. You learn how to be respectful. What indigenous people know is nature. So, your teachers are going to be indigenous people...

The Bill of Rights—that's what you called it. Our instruction has always been about responsibility. So, it should've been the Bill of Responsibility. If it was the Bill of Responsibility, I think we'd be in better shape today than the Bill of Rights.

They've been trying to instruct the Indians to be capitalists ever since they got here. And they keep failing because we don't value what you value. We give it away. They say, 'You people never amount to anything. You just keep giving stuff away.' The people in the Northwest have potlatches where they give everything away and they borrow money to give more away. Why? It's to keep the peace. It's to share. So, if there's something we have to relearn, it's the idea of sharing, and sharing equally, and being responsible.

We need to be unified and to work collectively for the good of the people, for the good of the commons. Somehow that's been perverted into the individual. The commons succumbed to individual rights—and that doesn't work—and the result is what we see right now.

Leaders have to take a long perspective, that seven generation perspective. Because if you take care of the future, seven generations from now, you yourself will have peace. If you're protecting the future, then you're protecting yourself now. And you benefit immediately by that.

The ideas of profit and loss have to be adjusted and changed. Business as usual is over. It's over. You can't do what you've been doing. It's over unless you change. It's just going to drive into the ground.

It's not competition. It's cooperation. You're going to have to cooperate now. And then you're going to have to fight for the commons, for the common good. Protect the land. Because when you cut down all of the trees in a rainforest you may be destroying the very medicine that you're going to need for survival. You don't know. You know just a very little of what's in there. But it's more important to cut a tree down and put money in your pocket than it is to protect the future. When you change your direction of thinking and you start worrying about the commons and the common good in the future, we might have a chance. It's really up to us.

Our future is in our hands and we're able to handle it. We can if we work together. It's as simple as that. Put your minds together—one heart, one mind, one spirit, to be unified.”