



Fixed or Fluid

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In the late 80s, inspired by David Bohm, I hosted Touch the Future Dialogues, in the spring, on the West Coast, and in Vermont, as the trees turned, in the fall. One of the most memorable was in Ashland, Oregon. I recall Saral Bohm, David's wife attended, along with Joseph Chilton Pearce and an indigenous elder, Leroy Little Bear and his wife. Leroy is a highly respected Blackfoot scholar, educator, and advocate known for shaping Indigenous studies, Indigenous rights, and cross-cultural understanding in North America. His work has influenced universities, governments, and international organizations.

During one session Leroy described the different naming conventions in the West and Indigenous cultures. Fixed and fluid. Names in many indigenous and aboriginal cultures carry a depth of meaning, fluidity, and relational significance that contrasts sharply with the more fixed, bureaucratic naming traditions common in Western societies. These differences reveal how each culture understands identity, community, and the natural world.

In indigenous/aboriginal traditions names are living, evolving identities, verbs, not nouns. Leroy gave the example of a tree 'leafing,' rather than a 'leaf.' Indigenous names can change after major events, achievements, or spiritual experiences. In the West, names are usually fixed at birth and rarely change.

Indigenous names often reflect natural elements (animals, weather, landscapes), ancestral lineage, clan or kinship, spiritual visions or dreams. These names aren't just symbolic—they express a person's relationship to the world at that moment. 'Dances with Wolves,' is a classic example. Western names tend to be chosen for aesthetic, familial, political or religious reasons, but rarely encode ecological, clan or unique individual traits.

Indigenous naming traditions reflect worldviews centered on interconnectedness, respect for ancestors, spiritual relationships, a community identity that grows and transforms. Western naming systems reflect individualism, civic or bureaucratic needs, fixed identity, and personal preference. Western names aren't really about the person they are given. Western names focus on property.

Recently, my sister invited me to share an evening, along with 1,500 others, to hear pod-caster Sam Harris. Of his many incisive observations, Sam casually commented, 'identities are meant to be out-grown.' Digging deeper, I understood this to mean that ideally, identities would arise and change moment by moment, like dancing, or the wind, never being fixed or static, constantly adapting and improving. Identity implies being identified with something; mother's scolding, father's disapproval, the teacher's below average rating, the surrounding church, political or national ideology. Fixed dogmas, not fluid.

Imagine how not identifying with these fixed images or beliefs, rather with attentive, sensitive, empathic presence, would change our interpretation of shame, embarrassment, being criticized, blamed, pride, vanity, arrogance, or the feelings we call humiliation. Comparison is challenging when something is fluid, not fixed.

These emotions might arise like a sudden breeze, but there would be no fixed 'identity' to stick. How would this transient-fluidity regarding personal identity transform what we call the social ego? Would there be a social ego? Or simply moving, adapting, agile 'presence,' awake, aware, sensitive, empathic, luminous, engaging, now. And here is a new now, forever changing, dancing, and playing?

How would this shift from dogma-ego to empathic-entangled presence, from fixed 'things' to evolving 'process and mastery,' affect the fetishes and phobias we invent, fuss and murder over, regarding gender, pride, race, politics, nationalism, and religion?

Try it, and you will find out.

Michael