

Armstrong

Steenbock Library  
Notice: This material may be protected  
By Copyright Law (Title 17, US Code).

Armstrong, Jeanette. 1996 "Sharing One Skin: The Okanagan Community." Pp. 460-470 in Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (eds.), *The Case Against the Global Economy*, San Francisco, CA: Sierra Club Books.

39

## "SHARING ONE SKIN"

*Okanagan Community*

Jeannette Armstrong

*Jeannette Armstrong is Okanagan, a member of the traditional council of the Penticton Indian Band in British Columbia, and is director of the En'owkin Centre, a school that teaches traditional Okanagan philosophy and practice. She is also a well-known activist on indigenous sovereignty issues and has been especially engaged in the international resistance to the Genome Diversity Project, which gathers Native genetic materials for eventual commercial exploitation.*

*In this chapter, Armstrong observes some key differences between the Okanagan views and practices of community — practices that have proven successful for thousands of years — and the views and practices of the dominant society, particularly focusing on psychological variations.*

*Armstrong's books include two works for children, as well as Native Creative Process (1991, with renowned Native architect Douglas Cardinal), a very popular novel, Slash (1985), and a collection of poetry.*

### IDENTITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

I AM FROM the Okanagan, a part of British Columbia that is much like most of California in climate — very dry and hot. Around my birthplace are two rock mountain ranges: the Cascades on one side and the Selkirks on the other. The river is the Columbia. It is the main river that flows through our lands, and there are four tributaries: the Kettle, the Okanagan/Smikamean, the San Poil, and the Methow.

Armstrong 1996  
One Skin

My mother is a river Indian. She is from Kettle Falls, which is the main confluence of the Columbia River near Inchelieu. The Kettle River people are in charge of the fisheries in all of the northern parts of the Columbia River system in our territories. The Arrow Lakes and the tributaries from the Kettle flow south through the Columbia Basin. My great-grandmother's husband was a salmon chief and caretaker of the river in the north.

My father's people are mountain people. They occupied the northern part of British Columbia, known as the Okanagan Valley. My father's people were hunters — the people in the Okanagan who don't live in the river basin. They were always a separate culture from the river people. My name is passed on from my father's side of the family and is my great-grandmother's name. I am associated with my father's side, but I have a right and a responsibility to the river through my mother's birth and my family education.

So that is who I am and where I take my identity from. I know the mountains, and, by birth, the river is my responsibility: They are part of me. I cannot be separated from my place or my land.

When I introduce myself to my own people in my own language, I describe these things because it tells them what my responsibilities are and what my goal is. It tells them what my connection is, how I need to conduct myself, what I need to carry with me, what I project, what I teach and what I think about, what I must do and what I can't do. The way we talk about ourselves as Okanagan people is difficult to replicate in English. Our word for *people*, for *humanity*, for *human beings*, is difficult to say without talking about connection to the land. When we say the Okanagan word for ourselves, we are actually saying "the ones who are dream and land together." That is our original identity. Before anything else, we are the living, dreaming Earth pieces. It's a second identification that means human; we identify ourselves as separate from other things on the land.

The word *Okanagan* comes from a whole understanding of what we are as human beings. We can identify ourselves through that word. In our interaction, in our prayer, we identify ourselves as human as well, different from birds and trees and animals. When we say that, there is a first part of the word and an *s*; whenever you put an *s* in front of any word, you turn it into a physical thing, a noun. The first part of a word refers to a physical realm.

The second part of the word refers to the dream or to the dream state. *Dream* is the closest word that approximates the Okanagan. But our word doesn't precisely mean *dream*. It actually means "the unseen part of our



existence as human beings." It may be the mind or the spirit or the intellect. So that second part of the word adds the perspective that we are mind as well as matter. We are dream, memory, and imagination.

The third part of the word means that if you take a number of strands, hair, or twine, place them together, and then rub your hands and bind them together, they become one strand. You use this thought symbolically when you make a rope and when you make twine, thread, and home-made baskets, and when you weave the threads to make the coiled basket. That third part of the word refers to us being tied into and part of everything else. It refers to the dream parts of ourselves forming our community, and it implies what our relationships are. We say, "This is my clan," or, "This is my people. These are the families that I came from. These are my great-grandparents," and so on. In this way I know my position and my responsibility for that specific location and geographic area. That is how I introduce myself. That is how I like to remember who I am and what my role is.

One of the reasons I explain this is to try to bring our whole society closer to that kind of understanding, because without that deep connection to the environment, to the earth, to what we actually are, to what humanity is, we lose our place, and confusion and chaos enter. We then spend a lot of time dealing with that confusion.

## SANITY, SELF, PLACE

As a child of ten, I once sat on a hillside on the reservation with my father and his mother as they looked down into the town on the valley floor. It was blackcap berry season, and the sun was very warm, but there in the high country, a cool breeze moved through the overshadowing pines. Bluebirds and wild canaries darted and chirped in nearby bushes, while a meadowlark sang for rain from the hillside above. Sage and wild roses sent their messages out to the humming bees and pale yellow butterflies.

Down in the valley, the heat waves danced, and dry dust rose in clouds from the dirt roads near town. Shafts of searing glitter reflected off hundreds of windows, while smoke and grayish haze hung over the town itself. The angry sounds of cars honking in a slow crawl along the black highway and the grind of large machinery from the sawmill next to the town rose in a steady buzzing overtone to the quiet of our hillside.

Looking down to the valley, my grandmother said (translated from Okanagan), "The people down there are dangerous, they are all insane."

My father agreed, commenting, "It's because they are wild and scatter anywhere."

I would like to explain what they meant when they said this. I do not wish to draw conclusions about the newcomers' culture or psychology. However, I do wish to highlight some differences between the mainstream view and the Okanagan view of self, community, surroundings, and time and to explain something of the Okanagan view of a healthy, whole person. I comment on these things only as I personally perceive them. I do not speak for the Okanagan people, but my knowledge comes from my Okanagan heritage.

## The Four Capacities of Self

The first difference I want to explore is our ideas of what we are as human beings, as individual life forces within our skins. I'd also like to explore how we might think of ourselves in relation to the unseen terrain we traverse as we walk the land and in consequence how we perceive the effect on the world around us.

When we Okanagans speak of ourselves as individual beings within our bodies, we identify the whole person as having four main capacities that operate together: the physical self, the emotional self, the thinking-intellectual self, and the spiritual self. The four selves have equal importance in the way we function within and experience all things. They join us to the rest of creation in a healthy way.

① The physical self is one part of the whole self that depends entirely on the parts of us that exist beyond the skin. We survive within our skin and inside the rest of our vast "external" selves. We survive by the continuous interaction between our bodies and everything around us. We are only partly aware of that interaction in our intellect, through our senses. Okanagans teach that the body is Earth itself. Our flesh, blood, and bones are Earth-body; in all cycles in which Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse. If we cannot continue as an individual life form, we dissipate back into the larger self. Our body-mind is extremely knowledgeable in that way. As Okanagans we say the body is sacred. It is the core of our being, which permits the rest of the self to be. It is the great gift of our existence. Our word for *body* literally means "the land-dreaming capacity."

② The emotional self is differentiated from the physical self, the thinking-intellectual self, and the spiritual self. In our language, the emotional self is that which connects to other parts of our larger selves around us.

We use a word that translates as *heart*. It is a capacity to form bonds with particular aspects of our surroundings. We say that we as people stay connected to each other, our land, and all things by our hearts.

As Okanagans we teach that the emotional self is an essential element of being whole, human, and Okanagan. We never ask a person, "What do you think?" Instead we ask, "What is your heart on this matter?" The Okanagan teaches that emotion or feeling is the capacity whereby community and land intersect in our beings and become part of us. By this capacity, we are one with others and all our surroundings. This bond is a priority for our individual wholeness and well-being. The strength with which we bond in the widest of circles gives us our criterion for leadership. It is the source from which the arts spring in celebration and affirmation of our connectedness.

③ The thinking-intellectual self has another name in Okanagan. Our word for *thinking/logic* and *storage of information (memory)* is difficult to translate into English because it does not have an exact correlation. The words that come closest in my interpretation mean "the spark that ignites." We use the term that translates as "directed by the ignited spark" to refer to analytical thought. In the Okanagan language this means that the other capacities we engage in when we take action are directed by the spark of memory once it is ignited. We know in our traditional Okanagan methods of education we must be disciplined to work in concert with the other selves to engage ourselves beyond our automatic-response capacity. We know too that unless we always join this thinking capacity to the heart-self, its power can be a destructive force both to ourselves and to the larger selves that surround us. A fire that is not controlled can destroy.

④ The spirit self is hardest to translate. It is referred to by the Okanagan as a part both of the individual being and of the larger self of which all things are part. We translate the word used for our spirit self as "without substance while moving continuously outward." The Okanagan language teaches us that this self requires a great quietness before our other parts can become conscious of it and that the other capacities fuse together and subside in order to activate it. Okanagans describe this capacity as the place where all things are. It teaches that this old part of us can "hear/interpret" all knowledge being spoken by all things that surround us, including our own bodies, in order to bring new knowledge into existence. The Okanagan says that this is the true self, and it has great power. It is a source for all things and affects all things if we engage it within the rest of our life-force activity. The Okanagan refer to it as the living source of our life.

### Community: Our One Skin

The second difference I want to explore has to do with community and family. The Okanagan teach that each person is born into a family and a community. No person is born isolated from those two things. You are born into a way of interacting with one another. As an Okanagan you are automatically a part of the rest of the community. You belong. You are them. You are within a family and community. You are that which is family and community; within that you cannot be separate.

All within family and community are affected by the actions of any one individual, and so all must know this in their individual selves. The capacity to bond is absolutely critical to individual wellness. Without it the person is said to be "crippled/incapacitated" and "lifeless." Not to have community or family is to be scattered or falling apart, which is how my father put it that day on the hillside.

The Okanagan refer to relationship to others by a word that means "our one skin." This means that we share more than a place; we share a physical tie that is uniquely human. It also means that the bond of community and family includes the history of the many who came before us and the many ahead of us who share our flesh. We are tied together by those who brought us here and gave us blood and gave us place. Our most serious teaching is that community comes first in our choices, then family, and then ourselves as individuals, because without community and family we are truly not human.

### The Language of the Land

The third difference between the Okanagan perception of the self and that of the dominant culture has to do with the "us" that is place: the capacity to know we are everything that surrounds us; to experience our humanness in relation to all else and in consequence to know how we affect the world around us.

The Okanagan word for "our place on the land" and "our language" is the same. We think of our language as the language of the land. This means that the land has taught us our language. The way we survived is to speak the language that the land offered us as its teachings. To know all the plants, animals, seasons, and geography is to construct language for them.

We also refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. This means that the flesh that is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things that the land is. The soil, the water, the air, and all the

other life forms contributed parts to be our flesh. We are our land/place. Not to know and to celebrate this is to be without language and without land. It is to be dis-placed.

The Okanagan teach that anything displaced from all that it requires to survive in health will eventually perish. Unless place can be relearned, all other life forms will face displacement and then ruin.

As Okanagan, our most essential responsibility is to bond our whole individual and communal selves to the land. Many of our ceremonies have been constructed for this. We join with the larger self and with the land, and rejoice in all that we are. We are this one part of the Earth. Without this self and this bond, we are not human.

### Hands of the Spirit

The fourth difference has to do with the idea that, as Earth pieces, we are an old life form. As old life forms, we each travel a short journey through time, in which we briefly occupy a space as part of an old human presence on the land.

The Okanagan word for *Earth* uses the same root syllable as the word for our spirit self. It is also the word that refers to all life forces as one spirit. Everything we see is a spirit. Spirit is not something that is invisible, subjective, or in the mind. It exists. We are a microscopic part of that existence. The Okanagan teach that we are tiny and unknowledgable in our individual selves, but the whole-Earth part of us contains immense knowledge. Over the generations of human life, we have come to discern small parts of that knowledge, and humans house this internally. The way we act has significant effects on Earth because it is said that we are the hands of the spirit, and as such we can fashion Earth pieces with our knowledge and therefore transform the Earth. We are keepers of Earth because we are Earth. We are old Earth.

### CREATING COMMUNITIES OF HEART

The discord that we see around us, to my view from inside my Okanagan community, is at a level that is not endurable without consequences to the human and therefore to everything that the human influences. A suicidal coldness is seeping into and permeating all levels of interaction; there is a dispassion of energy that has become a way of life in illness and other forms of human pain. I am not implying that we no longer suffer for each

other as humans but rather that such suffering is felt deeply and continuously and cannot be withstood, so feeling must be shut off.

I think of the Okanagan word used by my father to describe this condition, and I understand it better. Translation is difficult, but an interpretation in English might be "people without hearts."

As I mentioned earlier, the Okanagan self is defined as having four capacities, each separate though fully cooperating when we achieve whole human capacity and wellness.

The emotional self, the part that forms bonds to the larger selves of family, community, and land, is described by a term that translates as "the heart's rhythmical beat," signifying a living being. We say that we are connected to each other, to our land, and to all things by our heartbeats; it is a pattern that is in rhythm with others rather than creating dissonance and adversity.

Okanagans say that heart is where community and land come into our beings and become part of us because they are as essential to our survival as our own skin. By this bond, we subvert destruction to other humans and to our surroundings and ensure our own survival.

When the phrase *people without hearts* is used, it means people who have lost the capacity to experience the deep generational bond to other humans and to their surroundings. It refers to collective disharmony and alienation from land. It refers to those who are blind to self-destruction, whose emotion is narrowly focused on their individual sense of well-being without regard to the well-being of others in the collective.

The results of this dispassion are now being displayed as large nation-states continuously reconfiguring economic boundaries into a world economic disorder to cater to big business. This is causing a tidal flow of refugees from environmental and social disasters, compounded by disease and famine as people are displaced in the rapidly expanding worldwide chaos. War itself becomes continuous as dispossession, privatization of lands, and exploitation of resources and a cheap labor force become the mission of "peacekeeping." The goal of finding new markets is the justification for the westernization of "undeveloped" cultures.

Indigenous people, not long removed from our cooperative self-sustaining life-styles on our lands, do not survive well in this atmosphere of aggression and dispassion. I know that we experience it as a destructive force, because I personally experience it so. Without being whole in our community, on our land, with the protection it has as a reservation, I could not survive. In knowing that, I know the depth of the despair and hopelessness of those who are not whole in a community or still on their

own land. I know the depth of the void. I fear for us all, as the indigenous peoples remaining connected to the land begin to succumb or surrender. I fear this as the greatest fear for all humanity. I fear this because I know that without my land and my people I am not alive. I am simply flesh waiting to die.

Could it be that all people experience some form of this today? If this is so, it seems to me that it is in the matter of the heart where we must reconstruct. Perhaps it is most important to create communities with those who have the insight to fear, because they share strong convictions. Perhaps together they might create working models for re-establishing what is human in community. However, fear is not enough to bind together community, and I cannot help but be filled with pessimism, for what I continue to see is the breakdown of emotional ties between people. I see a determined resistance to emotional ties of any kind to anything.

I see the thrust of technology into our daily lives, and I see the ways we subvert emotional ties to people by the use of communications that serve to depersonalize. I see how television, radio, telephone, and now computer networks create ways to promote depersonalized communication. We can sit in our living rooms and be entertained by extreme violence and destruction and be detached from the suffering of the people. We can call on the phone or send e-mail to someone we may never speak to in person.

Through technology there is a constant deluge of people who surround us but with whom we have no real physical or personal link, so we feel nothing toward them. We get to the condition where we can walk over a person starving or dying on the street and feel nothing, except perhaps curiosity. We can see land being destroyed and polluted and not worry as long as it's not on our doorstep. But when someone is linked to us personally, we make decisions differently. We try harder to assist that person because we (or someone we know) care deeply for the person.

Community is formed by people who are acting in cooperation with each other. Each person is cared for because each is bound to someone else through emotional ties, and all in the community are bound by generations of interactions with one another. Extended family is a healthy, essential part of this. Healthy extended families in community interact with each other over generations through intermarriage and the shared experience of mutual crisis conditions to create customs that sustain them and their offspring and ensure survival.

The customs of extended families in community are carried out through communing rather than communicating. I want to illuminate the significance of communing and point out that through its loss we have

become dehumanized. To me, *communizing* signifies sharing and bonding. *Communicating* signifies the transfer and exchange of information. The Okanagan word close in meaning to communizing is "the way of creating compassion for." We use it to mean the physical acts we perform to create the internal capacity to bond.

One of the critical losses in our homes in this society originates in the disassociation we experience as a result of modern "communications" technology. People emotionally associate more with characters on television than with people in their lives. They become emotional strangers to each other and emotional cripples in the family and community.

In a healthy whole community, the people interact with each other in shared emotional response. They move together emotionally to respond to crisis or celebration. They "commune" in the everyday act of living. Being a part of such a communizing is to be fully alive, fully human. To be without community in this way is to be alive only in the flesh, to be alone, to be lost to being human. It is then possible to violate and destroy others and their property without remorse.

With these things in mind, I see how a market economy subverts community to where whole cities are made up of total strangers on the move from one job to another. This is unimaginable to us. How can a person be a human while continuously living in isolation, fear, and adversity? How can people twenty yards away from each other be total strangers? I do see that having to move continuously just to live is painful and that close emotional ties are best avoided in such an economy. I do not see how one remains human, for community to me is feeling the warm security of familiar people like a blanket wrapped around you, keeping out the frost. The word we use to mean community loosely translates to "having one covering," as in a blanket. I see how family is subverted by the scattering of members over the face of the globe. I cannot imagine how this could be family, and I ask what replaces it if the generations do not anchor to each other. I see that my being is present in this generation and in our future ones, just as the generations of the past speak to me through stories. I know that community is made up of extended families moving together over the landscape of time, through generations converging and dividing like a cell while remaining essentially the same as community. I see that in sustainable societies, extended family and community are inseparable.

The Okanagan word we have for *extended family* is translated as "sharing one skin." The concept refers to blood ties within community and the instinct to protect our individual selves extended to all who share the same skin. I know how powerful the solidarity is of peoples bound together by

land, blood, and love. This is the largest threat to those interests wanting to secure control of lands and resources that have been passed on in a healthy condition from generation to generation of families.

Land bonding is not possible in the kind of economy surrounding us, because land must be seen as real estate to be "used" and parted with if necessary. I see the separation is accelerated by the concept that "wilderness" needs to be tamed by "development" and that this is used to justify displacement of peoples and unwanted species. I know what it feels like to be an endangered species on my land, to see the land dying with us. It is my body that is being torn, deforested, and poisoned by "development." Every fish, plant, insect, bird, and animal that disappears is part of me dying. I know all their names, and I touch them with my spirit. I feel it every day, as my grandmother and my father did.

I am pessimistic about changes happening: the increase of crimes, worldwide disasters, total anarchy, and the possible increase of stateless oligarchies; borders are disappearing, and true sustainable economies are crumbling. However, I have learned that crisis can help build community so that it can face the crisis itself.

I do know that people must come to community on the land. The transiency of peoples crisscrossing the land must halt, and people must commune together on the land to protect it and all our future generations. Self-sustaining indigenous peoples still on the land are already doing this and are the only ones now standing between society and total self-destruction. They present an opportunity to relearn and reinstitute the rights we all have as humans. Indigenous rights must be protected, for we are the protectors of Earth.

I know that being Okanagan helps me have the capacity to bond with everything and every person I encounter. I try always to personalize everything. I try not to be "objective" about anything. Everything becomes valuable to me in that way. I try where I can to engage others in the same way. I fear those who are unemotional, and I solicit emotional response whenever I can. My community and my family and therefore my land has increased greatly. I do not stand silently by. I stand with you against the disorder.

40

## PRINCIPLES OF BIOREGIONALISM

Kirkpatrick Sale

*Sometimes called "watershed economics," bioregionalism is a growing movement in the United States that advocates economies of self-sufficiency within naturally articulated "bioregional" boundaries. Finding many of its roots in Native practice, bioregionalism emphasizes that culture, community, and economics are rooted in a geographic place that needs constant observation and protection. Trade with other places is possible and sometimes desirable, but submission to a globalized economy of nation-states is anomalous to bioregionalists.*

*Since bioregionalism focuses on the local, we rarely learn of it in mass media; but in this chapter, Kirkpatrick Sale presents an overview of the principles by which bioregionalism operates, and advocates its viability. Sale is codirector of the E. F. Schumacher Society and a founder of the Green Party of New York. His many best-selling books include SDS (1974), Human Scale (1980), Dwellers in the Land (1985), The Conquest of Paradise (1990), and most recently, Rebels Against the Future (1995), in which he argues that the much-maligned Luddite movement of nineteenth-century England was absolutely correct in its observations that mass-production technologies would destroy livelihood and community. Sale's articles appear frequently in the New York Times and the New York Review of Books, and he is a contributing editor of The Nation.*

**I**T IS NOT so difficult to imagine the alternative to the peril the industrial-scientific paradigm has placed us in. It is simply to become "dwellers in the land." We must try to understand ourselves as partici-