

## THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

### Visiting as an Organizing Tool



by Ellen Spirit Seeker Fisher

Native American communities have long known about the power visiting has in their way of being. Connection to family and community is important to traditional peoples and it is indeed a powerful tool for fostering closeness and power in numbers to get things done. Many times native communities have gathered to help those in need, feast and frolic together and to address causes for their well-being.

In Appalachia visiting was a way for people, native as well as other groups to maintain familial and friendly relationships. Gatherings were informal or structured community events. Our Council and its member groups have events such as these in their monthly meetings. We learn, engage in ritual and feast together and we gain a family that will support us in times of joy as well as times of sorrow. We talk and gossip together, learn new skills and express our deepest spiritual natures.

Appalachian cultures hold quilting bees, gather at the local store for impromptu music, small talk, exchange of local news and opinions and a person generally gains a sense of satisfaction, self-worth and working towards something good together in a larger cause. When my father was in his late teens the local school presented a "womanless wedding" to the community and everyone was there. These were popular events when my dad was young. It was a time to relax and have fun together. My father was "Miss Fall Branch" in that play. It is very strange to me to see the pictures of him in a tight, one-piece bathing suit complete with makeup, polished fingernails, high heels, wig and tiara. I wish I could have seen it. These plays were a way to entertain the community, but also to gather the community together and this fostered cohesiveness. Community members could remember they were a part of something larger than themselves and they felt a loyalty to their fellow villagers.

Community gatherings in Appalachia serve social and economic functions. They help maintain bonds to community and neighbor preserve community cultural traditions and serve to welcome newcomers to the community. Many times they are fundraisers for pressing community needs, needs and rescue crew needs. Music, dance,

food, crafts, baked goods, barbeque dinners fish fries, spaghetti dinners, country or pancake breakfasts are offered up in their best community traditions. Native American powwows and historical events serve the same purpose for native communities. These programs offer traditional customs, crafts, storytelling, children's games and crafting lessons, native food and lots of music, talk and general good times. Sometimes speakers at these gatherings would remind us of issues the native community needed to address and, of course, elders and warriors are honored.

Visiting, just plain going next door and talking with your neighbor is nearly a thing of the past outside native reservations and communities. It seems today that people fear their neighbors in the interest of making sure the "things" they have don't get taken from them. That's a shame, but I feel that the Occupy and 99% movements are changing that, at least amongst our young adults. They are our brave warriors today, unafraid to stand up and say what needs to be changed so America can be a place of community where people love and care for each other.

In exposing the inequality of economic conditions here and in other countries, these movements are moving toward helping all of us reconnect with each other on a familial basis. Their aim is to expose those few of the 1% who take and take and take with no concern for the people they are taking from through foreclosure, environmental devastation, stealing pensions and retirements, and making health and health services all but impossible for the common person to obtain. There is a gratifying authenticity to these new movements; they seem to have emerged organically from people's disenchantment with a system that didn't deliver as promised and from a genuine urge to join with others. There's also the sense that small, individual actions can have meaning for the greater community.

*"Only after the last tree has been cut down. Only after the last river has been poisoned. Only after the last fish has been caught. Only then will you find that money cannot be eaten."* The sentiments expressed by the Occupy Wall Street and 99% movements and those opposing development of the Keystone XL Pipeline have a familiar ring for me and, I suspect, a lot of other Indian people. You see, Indians have been talking about the perils of unchecked greed and its impact upon the earth and us as human beings for a really, really long time. Indian peoples have traditionally relied on connections to community and family and responsibility to future generations to counter the siren song of greed. Watching the current protesters organize themselves

into communities, I wonder if the world is finally listening to Indians.

Many tribes have prophecies telling of a time when Earth will rise up to cleanse herself. The people, it is said, will either rise up with her or fall. I pray that these movements can help us reestablish communities that will join with our Mother Earth in her cleansing process and that these communities will take a cue from gathering that Native American communities have always known – there is power in banding together to help and uphold one another.

We are hardwired for community, for visiting; we long for it, we need it. Our strength as humans emerges from it. Those people participating in the Occupy and XL Pipeline protests are spending time visiting and gaining strength from that act, one that is so easily dismissed in mainstream culture.

## RECIPE FOR A COMMUNITY FEAST

### CHEROKEE BREAD PUDDING (Modern)

2 1/2 cups stale bread cubes  
2 1/2 cups scalded milk  
1 cup butter  
1/2 cup sorghum  
Pinch of salt  
2 eggs, slightly beaten  
1/2 tsp. maple flavoring  
1/4 cup dried currants

Pour scalded milk over bread. Let stand five minutes. Heat together sorghum, butter and salt. Gradually pour over mixture. Cool. Gradually pour mixture over beaten eggs. Stir in flavoring and currants. Pour into a greased casserole, place in pan of hot water and bake at 350° F. for 50 to 60 minutes or until firm. □Double or triple recipe to make enough for everyone.□ □□

Williamson, Darcy J. (2010). *Cooking With Spirit, Native American Food and Fact* (Kindle Locations 1164-1168). From *The Forest*. Kindle Edition.

