

THE ROLE OF THE MATRIARCH IN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

BY [SHERRI MITCHELL](#)
ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN [NATIVE NEWS ONLINE](#)



GUEST ESSAY – WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH

Published March 26, 2017

Editor's Note: This guest essay was originally delivered on March 16, 2017 as the Women's History Month keynote speech at the University of Maine by Sherri Mitchell.

Kwey, Aquanu. Hello and Welcome. N'daliwisi, Wena Hamu Kwasset, nejayu Penawahpskek, N'dilnabamuk Awesus nil Peanwahpskek, naka Kahkakus, nil Sipiyyak. My name is Sherri Mitchell, I'm from the Penobscot Nation. My family is Bear Clan from the Penobscot Nation and Crow Clan from the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipiyyak. N'leeda huzeu, n'dyin. I'm happy to be here with you.

Before we begin I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the ancestors of this land. Since we are in Wabanaki Territory, the ancestors who reside here are my ancestors. I ask that you all rise and join me in a moment of silence to honor their presence here. Woliwon, thank you, please be seated.

Thank you for inviting me to be here with you tonight for this important gathering, to celebrate Women's History Month. The very first International Women's Day was on March 8, 1911. In 1980 President Carter established National Women's History Week. Then, in 1987 Congress made that week a full month. Of course, we know, that every month contains women's history. And, we know that women were influencing the course of history long before 1980 and even before 1911. Yet, it's important for us to pause to think about the role of women throughout history, so we gather here tonight to pay homage to the women and to recognize their contributions to history, and to recognize their role in framing the movements that will shape our future.

We are at a critical time in our evolution, standing at a crossroads within multiple movements, all of which have the capacity to determine whether we move toward life or death. Since women are inextricably connected to life, the subject of patriarchy is not fringe to these movements, it is at the very heart of them.

I'd like to frame this exploration into the role of the matriarch in environmental justice by sharing some excerpts from my upcoming book, Sacred Instructions. The section that I want to share with you explores the role of women within our societies and looks at how that role has diminished and misrepresented by the patriarchy. This is from the chapter titled, Women are the Water Bearers of the Universe:

"As skejinawe apid, an Indigenous woman, I have been taught that the women nurture life into being; we are the creators of life and the protectors of the life that we create. We possess a unique magic. As women, we are able to call forth life, and cultivate that life in the quiet space below our hearts. Within our bodies, we hold an opening to the divine; a portal that allows souls to enter into this world. Because we hold life in that magical space between worlds, within our sacred heart space, we are also the keepers of divine intuition and heart-based wisdom. Thus, the teachings that we carry are essential for keeping our societies spiritually healthy and emotionally balanced.

Every life that passes through our womb is nurtured and developed in water; we carry the waters of life within us. Thus, we are also the water bearers of the universe. This is why women's ceremonies are centered on the water, and governed by Uhkomee, Grandmother Moon. These ceremonies are our way of acknowledging that the water within and around us is central to life.

As women, we are indispensable to the perpetuation, protection, and balancing of life. When the women are absent, when they are silenced or ignored, the heart-based wisdom needed to guide and balance life is also missing. This causes disharmony within our families and societies and disrupts the natural rhythms of life, which places us all in harm's way. The active participation of the women, within our families and within our social and political spheres is critical to the wellbeing of our societies and the continuation of life...

Unfortunately, the divine voice of the women has been missing from the public dialogue for a very long time. As a result, life has gone into disarray. And, the very building blocks of creation, including our life-giving waters, have come under attack.

Around the world, women have begun to rise up to address the many crises that have resulted from the suppression of the feminine. In this uprising, there are countless issues that are calling for our attention. But, there is one issue that is central to them all – the protection and preservation of life. The issue that is most critical to the preservation of life on this planet is the protection of our water. Every living thing on Earth is dependent on water to survive. If we hope to survive long enough to solve all of the other challenges that we face, then we have to ensure that the source of life is protected.

We have a finite amount of water on this planet and it is being destroyed at an accelerated rate. For the first time in human history we are taking water out of the water table, by injecting it beneath the bedrock through the process of hydro fracking. In addition, we are continuing to promote dirty energy projects that contaminate our water from beginning to end – exploration, production, distribution, and the use of fossil fuels in our daily lives all lead to pollution of our water. We are also contaminating our water through large-scale agricultural practices, and diminishing its availability locally, through unchecked water extraction for the bottled water industry. As a result, the water that is required to support life is disappearing.

THERE ARE INCREASING AREAS AROUND THE WORLD THAT ARE IN IMMEDIATE DANGER OF RUNNING OUT OF WATER. THIS POSES A THREAT TO US ALL, NOT JUST FROM DEHYDRATION BUT FROM ESCALATING CONFLICTS THAT ERUPT AMONG THOSE WHO ARE SEEKING ACCESS TO WATER.

In light of that reality, here's a side thought for us to consider – People don't need oil to survive. Oil production is a purely profit driven market. However, every single life depends on water, human life, animal life, and plant life. All of the requirements of our continued existence are tied to the availability of clean water. Because our lives are dependent on water, we will do whatever it takes to obtain it. This means that the oil wars that we've seen in recent decades will pale in comparison to the water wars that will emerge if we don't start taking dramatic measures to protect the clean water that we have, and to clean the water that we've contaminated.

The voices of the water bearers have been left out of the larger decision making process around environmental protection and regulation. Therefore, the decisions that have been made by our government and industrial leaders have not properly weighed the consequences of those decisions against the value of life. In order to rebalance our relationship with life, the voices of the water bearers must be moved to the foreground, and their life creating, life protecting, and life sustaining wisdom must be honored and respected, and the destructive patriarchal narrative must be revealed.

The influence of the patriarchy has taken away the vital context in which the role of the women is held. In Wabanaki communities, we see this influence in changes to our language that have resulted from translation through the patriarchal lens. For example, the Mi'kmaq word, Nisqum, is the word used by the people for Creator. When the missionaries translated that into their own context they based it on their own world view, defining Nisqum as the Great Spirit, and identifying that Great Spirit as a male god. However, this interpretation is a

complete reversal of the original meaning. When the word is traced to its root meaning in the language, it translates to “the one who holds all the eggs” which is the woman. In order to understand where we come from, we have to do the work of decolonizing our language and our stories. Our traditional stories set the framework for our belief systems, our values, and our principles. They provide the blueprint for how we engage one another, how we relate to one another, and how we interact with the world around us. To address the misrepresentations contained in these stories, we have to be willing to trace them back to their original form and address the patriarchal distortions that have been made.

Kluskap is a central figure in our mythology. In the stories captured by missionaries, and folklorists (like Charles Leland) much of the original meaning within these stories has been lost and they have been reframed in the colonial context of the translators. In the original teaching, Kluskap is a twin paired with Mulsum. Originally, Mulsum was connected to the feminine, with the root word Mul being tied to the bleeding time of the woman. Over time, the colonial translations changed Mulsum from a woman to a man, and then labeled that man as the evil twin. They then shifted the stories, making Kluskap the hero and reducing Mulsum to a background role. In the translations, Kluskap is given credit for creating the landscape and the animals, and for facilitating their evolution. He is even credited with creating human life. In these stories, Mulsum is all but absent. She has been eliminated from the narrative and denied her role in creation, just as the women are denied their role in creation within the Christian bible. According to Christianity, the woman has no role in the genesis of life. Instead, the story claims that she was created out of the rib of man. This story is not an accurate depiction of the life narrative, where life rightfully comes from the womb of the woman. Instead, this story represents the creation of the patriarchy, where women are removed from their central role in creation. The removal of the women from our stories has impacted our thinking and disrupted the natural balance within our communities.

All of our traditional Wabanaki teachings represent a mirrored balance between the men and women. Our ceremonies provide a clear example of this balance, where the men’s ceremonies are simply an external reflection of the internal processes of the women. For instance, the sacred pipe is comprised of two pieces, the bowl and the stem. The bowl represents the mother, the stem represents the father. The bowl holds the fire, which represents the life force. The stem is an extension of that life force and it transfers its power from the external world into the body, as the air is pulled through the fire to carry the smoke into the lungs. This mirrors the role of the woman. The woman holds the life force within her, and she transfers that power out into the world through the birth canal. She also transfers divine knowledge and heart-based wisdom out into the external world through her breath, in the form of words and actions.

The Sundance is a mirrored image of the birthing process, recreating the pain of labor. In the Sundance, the dancers breathe and pull, until their flesh is torn. In the birthing process, the women breathe and push, until their flesh is torn and a new life is created. In the Sun Dance, the men are dancing to gain connection to the divine by reversing the laboring process that carries life into this world. They are sacrificing their bodies for the creation of a new life for those that they love.

The sweat lodge represents the womb. In that ceremony, you return to the womb, to get closer to the intuitive, heart based wisdom that comes through the portal that opens between worlds during pregnancy. All the men’s ceremonies are a reflection and reversal of the women’s internal processes. These ceremonies externalize the internal processes of the

women, so that the men can gain the wisdom that those processes naturally provide to the women.

In our tradition, the women are connected to the moon, representing the quiet, heart-based intuition that she carries. The feminine energies are internal and their power is demonstrated in the inner realms. The moontime is the woman's most powerful time. This is when her body enters its own natural ceremony and she is most open to the divine, as the life force moves through her body. The moontime is connected to the night because it is symbolic of the dreamtime where communication is open between worlds. The men are connected to the sun, representing the active, external movement of the day. The masculine energies are external and their power is demonstrated through active movement out in the world. The roles of the men are designed to balance and support the roles of the women. The men protect and provide for the external needs of the people. But first, they must learn what those needs are by following the wise internal guidance of the women. This balancing between internal wisdom and external action is key to balancing masculine and feminine energies within ourselves and within our world. It is also key to maintaining the balance of life on this planet. This balance is missing in the mainstream society. Thus, the needs of the people have not been properly balanced with the needs of the rest of creation, and the larger society has become unhealthy and unjust, putting all of our lives at risk.

The way to change this reality is to change our perceptions. We have to look at the underpinnings of the patriarchy and withdraw our consent from its systems, both within the public sphere and within our own lives. This involves shifting our cultural values away from those defined by the patriarchy, such as holding power over others, seeking homogeneity, encouraging hyper competitiveness, and sanctioning excessive aggression. And, moving toward more spiritually and emotionally balanced behaviors such as empowering others, allowing others to be themselves, working cooperatively and collaboratively, and acting with more compassion and equanimity.

One of the traps in this shifting process is assuming that the patriarchy is simply a male issue. The ideas associated with the patriarchy have been engrained in us all. If we hope to unravel the patriarchy, we have to acknowledge that we have all been influenced by it and we have all been complicit in its continued existence.

The Patriarchy has been kept alive artificially for generations, despite being completely bankrupt, through our thoughts, ideas, and attachments to its imposed ideals. Yet, the patriarchy's "accomplishments cannot compete with its disasters: climate change, racism, endless wars, and so on." If we hope to end the disasters that the patriarchy has wrought, we must begin withdrawing our support from it, this includes changing the narrative that the patriarchy has carved into our minds. This requires us to honestly assess the many ways that our minds have been impacted by the cultural norms held by the patriarchy, and begin to change them one by one. Anti-apartheid activist, Stephen Biko, says: "The most powerful tool in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." Therefore, the most powerful thing that we can do to end patriarchal oppression, is to free our minds from the shackles of the patriarchal mindset."

The patriarchy is based on notions of property ownership that are framed in hierarchies of power. This inevitably leads to conquest behaviors that result in elitism, gross disparities in wealth and poverty, and the creation of illusory social caste systems. These systems are marked by aggression and competition and distorted ideas of winning. This is clearly

apparent in the emergence of hate politics that frames the modern dialogue. Within this system, being able to aggressively overpower or shut down an opponent, whether by physical force or linguistic witticism is viewed as winning. However, this outcome is only a win under standards of patriarchal conquest. The moment that we succeed in ending a discussion, dismantling an allied network, or eliminating someone from our movement, is the moment we have lost. When we engage in angry, aggressive diatribes that seek to dismiss or silence another we are simply engaging in acts of conquest, and thereby upholding the patriarchal power structure.

We do this because we have been taught to believe that might is right, and whoever ends up on top is the winner. We have bought into a mythology that tells us that a new system can emerge by simply replacing who's on top and transferring power from the hands of one to another, for example transferring it from the hands of the men to the hands of the women. This is a fallacy. A simple shift in power will never eliminate the patriarchy. So long as the power that we operate under is steeped in patriarchal ideals, the gender identification of our leaders will remain irrelevant. Matriarchy is not a gender role, it is a value based system that defines our way of being in relationship to one another.

Matriarchies are not the functional opposite of patriarchies. Whereas patriarchies are dominating and founded in notions of power, hierarchy and exclusivity, matriarchies are egalitarian and founded on patterns of kinship, balance, and inclusivity. Kinship in this sense is not simply about familial connection, but the development and nurturing of relationships. Matriarchs are concerned with the creation, preservation, and protection of life. Therefore, they must take life into consideration in their decision making. Matriarchs are also concerned with the balance that exists within the structure of life, and must also consider how their decisions will impact this balance. They are also the guardians of the spiritual and emotional wellbeing of their families and societies. Thus, they must work to establish communal relationships that foster harmony, unity, and compassionate understanding.

A society that promotes aggression and domination, whether it be ruled by men or women, is patriarchal. To move away from this paradigm, we must be willing to honestly contemplate how the patriarchal mindset is influencing our thoughts, actions, and decisions, and then consciously move in a new direction.

One of the greatest challenges that we face in this move is revaluing the role of the matriarch and the offerings of the divine feminine. One of the most tragic losses caused by the patriarchy is the loss of value that is placed on the role of the matriarch within the larger society. Today, much of the power obtained by and exerted by women is firmly planted within the patriarchal framework. Aggression, domination, arrogant assertions of power and superiority are all viewed as symbols of strength. The ability to rise to the top of the ladder, within any given field, is viewed as success. These ideas are all a reflection of the patriarchal narrative.

A true matriarchal society brings harmony, compassion, and the wisdom of the heart. It creates, sustains, and nurtures life, and builds inclusive networks of reciprocal support and mutual respect.

The most important step that we will take in our collective movements is the step away from the narratives of patriarchal power. If we truly hope to elevate a matriarchy within our current movements, we must be fearless in our intent to elevate the value of true matriarchal characteristic within our own minds. For many this move is terrifying. The

notions of patriarchal power have been so deeply embedded into our psyche, and the systematic dismantling of true matriarchal power has been so pervasive that we can no longer see the true measure of authentic matriarchal power. Yet, if we look carefully, we can see that power all around us. None can doubt the true power of Mother love. It is fiercely protective and equally gentle and nurturing. A mother's love is the most powerful force in nature. A mother's guidance is crucial to the development of an emotionally healthy child. Therefore, the inclusion of mother love within our societies is crucial to the development of a healthy expression of humanity. If we hope to create a world that is more harmonious and balanced, a world that is just and equitable, then we must be willing to let go of the false power narratives of the patriarchy and begin purposely and consistently engaging and empowering the matriarchal narrative. This requires us to shift our value structures away from power and profit and move them toward the protection and preservation of life.

There could be no more vital role in the work of environmental justice than making this shift. Since patriarchal policy-making has been rooted in class and race divisions that cause disparate outcomes for the most disadvantaged populations, ending these disparities requires us to frame new environmental policies that put forth the life balancing ideals of the matriarchy.

Hope for a better world is grounded in the tireless commitment to create harmony, equanimity, and compassionate justice. This commitment is held in the heart of the Matriarch. Thus, the creation of the world that we hope for must be guided by matriarchal ideals and led by matriarchal movements.

The degradation of the Earth, has gone hand in hand with the subjugation of the women and the denial of feminine knowledge. Therefore, the restoration of the Earth will be tied to the liberation of the women and the resurrection of matriarchal wisdom. In order for that restoration to occur, we must all take the role of the matriarch into our hearts and allow it to guide our thoughts, decisions, and actions. A key part of this process is reconnecting our hearts, minds, and bodies to the wild heart of Mother Earth.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes says:

“When women reassert their relationship with the wildish nature, they are gifted with a permanent and internal watcher, a knower, a visionary, an oracle, and inspiratrice, an intuitive, a maker, a creator, an inventor, and a listener who guides, suggests and urges a vibrant life in the inner and outer worlds.”

So, as we celebrate the historical contributions of women and acknowledge their unfolding role in our future, I ask you to join me in making a unified commitment to reassert our relationship with Mother Earth, the original Matriarch. Today, let us call forth the wildish nature that exists within us, and then use that inspired, visionary wisdom to begin creating a more vibrant life and a more just and equitable world, for ourselves and for all other living beings within creation.

Thank you so much for allowing me to be here with you today. Kci Woliwon, P'silde N'dilnabamuk. For All my Relations



Sherri Mitchell (Wena' Gamu' Gwasit) was born and raised on the Penobscot Indian Reservation. She is an Indigenous Rights attorney, writer and teacher. She's been an adviser to the American Indian Institute's Healing the Future Program and the Spiritual Elders and Medicine Peoples Council of North and South America. Sherri speaks around the world on issues related to Indigenous rights, nonviolence, and the traditional Indigenous way of life. Sherri is the Director of the Land Peace Foundation, an organization committed to protecting Indigenous Rights and the Indigenous Way of Life.