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**Revelation in a Time of *Survival*: Spirituality and Sustainability. A Zoom Series from Spiritual Leaders of the Greater Boston Area on Climate Change and the** **Pandemic.**

Session Four: “Indigenous Wisdom”

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* Dawn Duncan is part Cherokee and grew up with strong influences from her grandfather who shared this part of his history with the family. Dawn is the President of the Grant Connection, a company that specializes in helping nonprofits navigate the often-complex grant funding maze and access private and government grant funds for their programs.

**Jean-Luc Pierite:** Just to repeat, so I'm speaking from Jamaica Plain and here in the greater Boston area. We recognize this as the traditional indigenous territory of the Massachusetts nation who continue to stay in part through their lineal descendants. And then recognizing the land, we are making. We are positioning ourselves as guests and we are making certain agreements with our hosts one of those agreements is poured every effort by the tribe to repatriate Land and Natural Resources back to the original peoples.

So, you know, as we as we go through tonight's discussion I just ask that everybody that's listening, spend some time to reflect on what it means to be a good guest on this land that sustains us and the land in which their ancestors are buried.

So, my name is Jean-Luc Pierite. I'm originally from New Orleans. I'm a member of the Tunica Biloxi tribe of Louisiana and their back home in Martinsville, Louisiana, where my tribe’s land is. My family works to preserve our language and culture through our language and culture revitalization program, which is a collaboration between my tribe and Tulane University.

In this way, for my family, it not only preserves the oral tradition for a tribe, but this is a tradition has been passed down through my family through my great grandfather. My grandfather on my, on my father’s side. And my great grandfather on my mother's side.

And so, in doing this, we are preserving traditional stories we share our songs we share our knowledge about local flora and fauna. And we also develop classes and textbooks in order to support an educational mission to continue and further develop our tribe’s traditional knowledge base.

Here locally in Boston as Reverend Petersen mentioned, I am President of the Board of Directors of the North American Indian Center of Boston, which in this year, we are observing our 50th year of service to the New England Native American community. We started as an organization in 1969 through meetings would through then the Boston and in helpful at four or five Washington Street. And then in 1970 on October 20 1978 we were officially incorporated as a Boston Indian Council 1976 we were recognized through an executive order by a company then company to caucus as a liaison between The Commonwealth of Massachusetts and residents of the Commonwealth who are members of tribes who have historical

government relationships with Massachusetts, but who are currently outside of the borders. This would include and now Scott patent quality malice seat Nick Amal arm and many other tribes, including the Abenaki and Delaware nations, and I'm a dark Oklahoma.

I say that because in this year 2020 we are serving also the 345th Anniversary of King Philip's War (1675-1678), which was a war of resistance, led by Metacom comment coming out of that word resistance several things. Number one, Metacom. He was decapitated. His head was placed on a pike and its place there for 25 years. Also during the war, five months in and starting on August 30 there were the first concentration camps American Indians were confined to plantations that were surrounding Boston which at that time were called a praying towns and eventually all American Indians within the area were brought to the Boston Harbor islands and left to the elements on. So, to this day, there are Initiatives and real even legal battles coming out of the different bands of, of the, of the greater Norfolk nation. I specifically to bone and Ganga mug on that monkey on tribal council.

Working to protect those graves and stuff like Superior Court. So, we've definitely stood by them in those in those struggles. We've also recognized the intergenerational trauma, which has persisted from that war through the Boston Indian imprisonment Act, which was finally repealed in 2005 but made it Eagle for Native Americans to walk the streets of Boston on a score to and I say all of these things. And I also want to just recognize some of the things that we've done with The New Democracy Coalition on. I'm very happy to see Kevin here tonight. We've definitely been than together in front of Faneuil Hall and we've also have been together in prayer at the Boston Massacre site.

Earlier this year, on March 5 we served together, we observed The New Democracy Coalition representatives as a local tribes. We stood in prayer and observed the 250th anniversary of the murder of Crispus Attucks. I just wanted to just highlight that because it's that that arm that spilling of black and indigenous blood, which led to which as story goes, leads to the American Revolution, but ultimately all of this violence that we have encountered 345 years ago 255 years ago we go back to 1492 and the the violence that the time you know endured under, under the raping and pillaging of Columbus all of that resonates for our people today. Arm and all of it. Uh, you know it, this is these are these are energetic and generational wounds. He's a spiritual wounds, these are things that arm we see very clearly in what is happening to our communities today. Even when we talk about the pandemic and climate change. I'm back home back home in Louisiana. Most recently, a couple of weeks ago we had hurricane Laura which devastated Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Before that a hurricane made it assure the city of Lafayette, Louisiana. There was a, basically, there were, there was a movement happening around the murder of trade third pillar. And because of that movement because of the direct actions because of the people getting out in the streets and demanding justice when that hurricane came ashore.

The local authorities and some of actually some of the some of the pastors that were running the shelters in Lafayette were actually scared because there was a security threat because people were rising demanding justice, while at the same time they were not opening the shelters and basically blocking people coming from Lake Charles, seeking refuge from the storm from losing all of what they had.

And so, when we talk about the spiritual side, the pandemic, the state violence and the direct actions and then climate change all that on this together that confluence It definitely, I have seen and in my communities back home and Louisiana have experienced and so I'm very happy to be here to my very honored to be here tonight with all of you to share a little bit of my own knowledge and my own my own experience. So, thank you.

**Dawn Duncan:**

My name is Dawn Duncan and I'm here in Lynn, Massachusetts, that's where I'm speaking from so in terms of my own background I am I grew up my grandfather was Cherokee and actually found out. Also, how Hatton so we've been finding someone the further back. So, I grew up with a lot of influence from him and always being very proud of being Native American, and then I moved to Boston in 1989 to go to grad school at Boston University School of Social Work and then Harvard School of Public Health. And that's it's actually interesting Jean-Luc was what you were saying to as one of my first when I was at the School of Public Health, which was right around the corner from what was in the Boston Indian Council. I went into the Boston Indian Council one day and just to see what was happening and then an elder came up and said, welcome sister. You have to help us. And so, it was just a really wonderful sense of community.

I have always felt very connected since then. So, I'm on the board of the Massachusetts center for Native American awareness. I've been on that board for about 17 years. And so, you know, we do several events and pow wows and things like that and yeah, so that's pretty much my background.

About the pandemic and climate change from you. When I was thinking about I was thinking about some of the questions that That you had sent in preparation for the event tonight and it's interesting, I think, from I think from a Native Americans perspective, my understanding is really that you know great spirit created the world so that everything has a purpose in nature and sometimes even the things that seemed the most destructive.

It like everything that has occurred is necessary for kind of the path that we're on. I feel like it has to do with the circle. And kind of includes both divinity and chaos, which are often in close proximity to each other. And I feel like as humans we're, we're, we're kind of assign the role of stewards to like oversee and take care of everything and from an indigenous perspective, it is quite an irony, because with climate change and with pandemics for with climate change.

It's a big irony that for example Alaskan villagers are among America's first climate refugees so many Alaskan villages are really going to be susceptible to flooding and having to move and everything, and at the same time indigenous people. We are the ones who probably have the strongest historical connection to nature and ecological knowledge and wisdom that can kind of save us. So, it's kind of a strange irony and then the fact that, as I had spoken about at our United Nations International Day of Peace event, the other day.

You know, the, the reality is that germs were the biggest mechanism for wiping out much of the indigenous population at 90% of Native Americans were actually wiped out between when Columbus landed and when the Mayflower landed. So, between that and like small the you know, smallpox and sets the blankets that were given to indigenous people that they thought were gifts, but really ended up killing them. So, you know, our people are very familiar with the impact of pandemics and so it's interesting, on some level that you know this is happening now and you know as Jean-Luc mentioned as well. Native Americans are being more affected by the pandemic, along with other people of color. So, it's you know it's a major issue.

Well, I feel like, I feel like a big part of it is like our philosophies of one that, you know, thinking, everything is a circle. Everything's interconnected. And so, for one thing, we think seven generations into the future. So, all the things that we focus on and the decisions we make. should be focused on how that will affect up to seven generations in the future. At the same time, we, we really respect the past from the line coming forward and respecting our elders taking care of them and protecting them as one of the most important thing. So, I think that kind of view of looking at the world that way and looking at life. That way you know has there's a natural way that we can I don't know what the word is but that we are able to have an understanding of things because that's kind of just built into our upbringing in a way.

Jean-Luc Can you weigh in here.

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: Yeah, and I think religion spirituality definitely plays a role into the sort of like the experience and sort of like the advocacy around the revitalization of our sensitivity our knowledge, um, you know. Again, I you know it Kevin's here. Like I keep on thinking about like our struggle with like Faneuil Hall with the state flag with all of these issues of symbolism and this warfare that that's going on. What I see on when we were having these discussions? Is, is that the systems are set up to support a white supremacy and a certain narrative a certain sort of colonial context when we're talking about the conquerors, the people that are supposed to be uplifted that the knowledge is supposed to be uplifted. We know their names because their names are very clearly on the sides of buildings are we know who that you know what they actually look like because they're the portraits are very distinct but when it comes to talking about black and indigenous people in these public spaces and the perpetuation of our stories of our knowledge. A lot of the times when you look at the state flag that is that is a composite image. That is the head of Thomas, little shell. The bones of a Massachusetts person and the

sash from Metacom, King Philips, so we are we are of course we are in the public space, our images are in public space as composites, but our knowledge is so I wanted to like bring that forward because that's central to some of what Dawn is talking about is, it's the sensitivity on knowledge about the lands in which we.

Alaska Native Villages are one of the first climate change refugee communities also in southeast Louisiana, we have the original band of Biloxi shouldn't matter chapter, we have the point ocean. Yeah, all of these tribes that have lost over 90% of their land and since the 50s. due to rising sea levels coastal, erosion. But at the same time what we're, what we're seeing. Is not disconnected this reprogramming and this disruption, either through pandemics wars, through epidemics of missing and murdered indigenous relatives, particularly our women and girls. All of that works to disrupt us. Words us perpetuating our knowledge and our way of being. So, we have to we have to go through this whole process of revitalizing our traditional knowledge. Theecological knowledge base and reprogramming and we integrating what it means to be both.

Both indigenous but yes you know that we do have people. We do have relatives. We are people of faith as well. And so we have to, you know, we have to really like walk those walk those complicated dimensions in order to actually like further our knowledge and push back against this whole colonial legacy.

**Rodney Petersen**: And that conflict in colonial America came after 50 years of settlement by the Pilgrims in Plymouth. And so, established then a conflict between two civilization. Could it have been any different? So, in other words are we living with the same conflict from America’s Indian Wars into the present?

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: Yeah, I, you know, absolutely. I, you know, going back to those initial experiences of the Boston in the imprisonment act the fights over the graves. Even the symbols within our public spaces. We're still fighting a lot of that residual battles coming out of that war.

But I just wanted to reconceptualize because, you know, of course 2020 we came into this thinking that this was going to be the year in which we were going to observe the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower. Since that time we've just been sort of tossing ideas around t what specifically that that landing actually means. And it wasn't until April 1621 when the Treaty with Massasoit happen with started augments government relationships between the vehicle and ending business nations here and not just not just thinking about like just falls within the Commonwealth. In that that treated like talk about Massasoit and his confederates. We're talking about different nations and yes, you know the civilizations as coming together. So, you know, yes it is, you know, landing of them a far is, you know, I guess it's important but important to like what? What is the actual like? Actually observing when we are saying that this is the Four Hundredth year. Is it just the fact that about came over permanent, is that what is remarkable? Or is it remarkable that we are acknowledging ourselves as all sovereign peoples with our own autonomy, and our ability to hold agreements with each other, treaties with each other to actually look at this continent not as you know just virgin wilderness with people?

You know, living without laws or anything like that. No, we actually had we actually, you know, our peoples are nations, because we are extent nations, we have complex societies, we have complex traditions arm and we have preserved these lands for millennia. And so, it is, you know, is the great tragedy of, you know, these past 400 years have gone from sustainability to ecological destruction.

**Demie Stathoplos**: I have a question. Jean-Luc. One of the presentations I have seen about the ways in which Indigenous people in the United States have thought about the ecology of where we are is by thinking in terms of bio sheds watersheds. food sheds….

**Dawn Duncan:** And so forth.

**Demie Stathoplos**: And that that knowledge was something that was lost to the white people who have come into this land in terms of their understanding. And I'm wondering to what extent you or Jean-Luc could speak to how that knowledge has been either preserved or not preserved and what you think about that as a basis for thinking about what what needs to happen next.

**Dawn Duncan**: Sure. I don't know a lot about the specific terms of the food chain or the watershed. So, it's not something that I, you know, have particular expertise on I would just say that my sense of feeling about community and indigenous community is that those kind of concepts, I think have more of a natural connection and feeling in terms of how indigenous people traditionally see life working together to take care of the community. So, they're probably more like grounded in traditional environmental knowledge. But again, they're not something that I have any. They're not concepts and I'm really familiar with as environmental is not my area more of a public health that graph myself which does include sometimes environment, and particularly things like environmental justice. So, somebody may have more to say about it or probably knows more about it than I do.

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: Well you know I think that you know part of part of the experience is sort of like the knowledge is actually all around us arm and it's just, it's really in the place names arm that that we have here in Massachusetts, all of the different arm. All words that that actually, you know, when we say places like Neshoba like Massachusetts you know, you're actually speaking like what specifically you know. Where are you specifically are like where the water is

In relation to the land. But then also, like, what the land is actually good for so the disconnect is actually kind of linguistic arm and of course you know because….

I'm from Louisiana, I can definitely say you know places in Louisiana tangipahoa means the place to be the place to grow corn on the New Orleans was actually Is uploaded known among indigenous peoples as Bob onset or the place of many languages. So, you know, when we actually look at the land in which we are on through an indigenous lens. First, we recognize the land. First, we realized that there are ancestors very here on this land that sustains us but then we also look at the deeper meanings from actually out on what these names actually mean and it's, it is not necessarily for me to say because I am. I'm a guest as well. The people who rightfully so are the Massachusetts or the woman or the or the enigma of the Adirondack a constant quality and so on, you know, in this region. This is this is their home. Um, and so, in order for us to actually make sense of, of the, of the towns of the places that that we inhabit, we really do have to have a level of consulting.

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: With the governance and with the traditional knowledge keepers that we actually like have like a deeper relationship with the land that we're on It.

**Aijaz Baloch**: Hi. So, so thank you. Thank you for this, and especially I since I've joined CMM my every, every conversation that I have learned something new and also something relatable. So, I will say to Dawn, you mentioned earlier as part of the introduction that the tradition is to think eight generations.

In the future was whatever actions we take. So this is, I mean, what a beautiful concept. I mean, it says there's something similar in the religion that that I follow which is Islam that even if you have to very old, my mother used to tell me a story when I was little, about a grandfather planting a tree and grants and asking whether you won't be alive. What are you going to do it for, and he said, well the food that I'm eating, I didn't plant it so. So that was the gist of it. So are there any traditions or any, anything that go in those lines that are very common that you observe or that we can then also inform others about. So, in terms of, like, for example, planting trees, of course would be one. Are there any celebrations that that go along or anything more on those I would love to know? If there are. If not, then that's they're suggesting itself is I hope everybody thinks that way. I mean, it's whatever we do in our actions.

**Dawn Duncan**: I think different nations have different celebrations. I'm not a member of a recognized of a tribe, so I don't have specific celebrations. That way we'll be able to speak about more as he is in terms of I grew up more with

My grandfather, he grew up he what he grew up on the Osage Indian Reservation, although he wasn't Osage so I think he always felt fairly kind of out of place. So, see actually today later in his life. In a few years before he passed before he passed away, he would always call me and tell me things from when he was a child. So I think it was more I learned more. It was kind of this. It was almost like this really simple things like you know every like all the animals and all the plants and everything like everything is a living thing and everything matters. So you would take care of it more like even now, like I had to have a couple trees cut down recently in my backyard and like I physically felt this pain of like these trees being cut down so unlike with my grandfather, I can just remember everywhere he went animals to follow him all the time. So matter what. So I think that was more my experience was more like daily lives. There was a simplicity and just connecting to nature and like just have a sense of life. When I go to plant things and stuff. I can just kind of feel like I have this kind of not like it's just very natural. But that's more my experience. I don't have any kind of specific things that I do, but lots of tribes do have definite things that they do. So I'll let Jean-Luc we can answer this one as well.

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: And in some was my family. For the past few decades. And it's something that has been maintained consistently since 1890 there was some disruption. What's commonly known among different tribes as the time of the Green Corn I we call it A particular though this is happened between July 4 July 15 and it's basically the time when the young corn is just about you know, good enough to harvest. So there are there are different. There are different roles in the ceremony. There's, there's the men's role and my grandfather. Another point where he knew he had to pass a ceremony on me. He brought my mother and I'm to learn the other than school. And it was actually kind of a radical thing to do. The men in the community were kind of a bit puzzled, but my grandfather said, nope. This is my daughter in law, she you know. She needs to know.

And so, you know, our people usually, you know, during these times with fast. We have a ball game that we play in the southeast we call a stick ball. You know it's come a little bit more commonly as lacrosse in a certain format, but it is playing ball. It's dancing. It's fasting praying. For four days and honoring our ancestors by preparing sort of a spiritual a like almost like a communion for them, go and visit all of all the different graves. But, you know, we have that one ceremony, the green form, but there were many different arm ceremonies like for beans, squash.

It's just that, you know, in this in this time. This is the one thing that we have, um, but it was it was basically a year long thing. You know, I, I'm often asked, you know, because I'm here, I'm a, you know, in New England and we have the 50 years tradition of national day of mourning.

You know, well, what is your relationship. As Native people we the concept of feasting of giving thanks and being together in a community that's not something that was important here. That was something that we've always had and we, you know, did throughout the year in silver our families of our community of our ancestors. So we keep that up through the, through the Green Corn ceremony and we absolutely keep up the tradition by you know, sharing our songs and stories regularly.

**Aijaz Baloch**: Thank you.

**Dawn Duncan**: Oh, and I just think of one thing that a ceremony. My grandfather. I just remembered. So whenever a pet passes away, we set out of both with the pet with a little bit of water and the pet favorite food, and you leave it out for three days. And then afterwards, and you thank the pet for the time that they gave you. And then after three days, you take it outside and you can use the water to water plants. And we, the little bit of food and things out there so that you're sending the spirit of the pet on its way. So that's something we have a son and my family.

**Kevin Peterson**: Yeah, yeah. I have a question that darlin and john Luke.

I'm thinking about the Paris Accords and the signatories across the globe. I am curious as to whether the Native communities in the in the America of the United States were a invited to be a part of those talks in be to what was there any coordinate or sporadic response across the tribes to the talks in the final agreement. Just curious.

**Jean-Luc Pierite**: So really quickly. And I'm going to paraphrase what it says. Because the Paris Climate Accord is actually fairly problematic for Indigenous nations and we're not just talking about American Indians. I'm in the United States, and we're talking about Indigenous peoples, you know, you think about the world map, you think about all those nice little lines and names on inscribed on land. But that does not reflect all of those different nations that are extent that that continue on. So we're not just talking about American Indians here we're talking about the Maori and you see the Solomons. In Scandinavia, you know, all of those all of our peoples as Indigenous peoples were actually kind of in a way, insulted by the by the Paris Climate Agreement. Because the preamble to that agreement stipulates that nation states. Member States that actually opt into this agreement would consider their obligations to indigenous nations versus honor on their, their obligation to honor the Treaties and so it's a it's a bit discretionary as to whether or not, you know, obviously, we have a stake, the nation states should be listening to us as indigenous peoples, you know, preserving our knowledge revitalizing and our knowledge further developing yet, however, you know that that document is problematic and there have been activists and organizations in particular, I believe the Indigenous Network statement.

On critical of the Paris Climate Agreement. It's, you know, as problematic as it is, you know, the fact that indigenous peoples are mentioned at all is an open note and we have to squeeze every bit of, you know, we have to three that as much as possible so that nation states you honor their, their obligations to us as indigenous peoples. Of both a bit like getting blessed maternity If you use that we just have to keep up, keep up the pressure

**Dawn Duncan**: Yeah, I would agree. And it feels like as with most things that the kind of starting point for it is not from the perspective of Including indigenous people. It's more from the perspective of the already existing kind of structures of the countries that are, you know, largely based more on the European and White Supremacy kind of a thing so I agree with Jean-Luc get something that clearly in an indigenous people have a lot to say. And a lot to offer. But, you know, aren't necessarily brought in from that kind of foundational perspective. So I agree. It's something we have to fight for. And it's not the specific stuff around the court. I actually don't know very much about, I do hear people talk about soda lack of involvement, when we should be more Involved, but this was consistent with this is a lot of the things that I see and I actually have a workshop that I do.

At places that sometimes invite me on contribution, I call it contributions of Native American. So, I go through lots of things. Historically, absolutely. So many things in our society originally came from Native Americans, not the least of which is our basic constitution. It's all based on democracy, which was, you know, the Iroquois Confederacy was one of the is one of the longest sustaining democracy. So, you know, there's so much that came from indigenous culture that we have to continually educate and keep letting people know that really a lot of things that we take for granted came from us. So, before we run out of time.

share some perspective.

**Gunnthor**: I might actually want to reflect a little bit on the, the value of the service or traditional ecological knowledge we have the indigenous people wherever they are there. The wisdom song stories. I see you Jean-Luc were referring to and It's a question if you might somehow expect us that this knowledge this wisdom. Your songs and stories could be passed on and introduced into the general education system.

**Dawn Duncan**: Or not just confined to the indigenous people population. It's a value heritage are extremely value valuable somehow the mother calculation to be extremely disruptive. We need to somehow unite to be grounded to listen to the heartbeat of God in creation us the Celtic Christians of ancient time would have X express themselves when they were trying to find meaning and connection. In the surroundings and in the environment, the fast very much close to web of life.