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Indigenous Peoples' Day: Five learnings honoring the healing power of two-spirit identity

by Jonathan Pringle on October 11th, 2021 in [Indigenous Health](#) | [0 Comments](#)



By Nancy Agin Dunnahoe

Originally published as part of the Meditating on What Matters article series courtesy of [GaneshSpace.org](#).

Every second Monday in October, Native Americans celebrate our histories and surviving cultures on Indigenous Peoples' Day, an event that runs countercurrent to the date when Columbus arrived on native land.

The events that occurred after contact, the genocide and erasure of indigenous peoples, is the reason we have lost the stories and beliefs that are native to this land. What's been lost to time has included a rich tapestry of ideas about what it means to be human and experience life authentically and in harmony with our multiple spirits of self.

From an indigenous perspective, two-spirit (2S) people represent a third and fourth gender. Two-

spirit individuals paved a path of inclusion long before colonial constructs dismantled the belief system that transgendered and other gendered people could hold some of the most revered roles within a society. Throughout native history, 2S were celebrated as teachers, artists, visionaries and medicine people. Today, they are leading resistance efforts to bring back balance and seek justice for our indigenous communities.

As we revive and reclaim the ancestral memory of indigenous peoples on October 11, here are five learnings we should know and celebrate about two-spirit identity:

They are part of ancient tradition and spiritual practice.



Osh-Tisch, John H. Fouch Image, ca. 1877. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institute

Identifying as two spirit is not a new or modern construct. It predates the history of America. Before

contact, two-spirit people held important roles in Native American society as healers, religious teachers, name givers, conveyors of oral traditions, songs and rituals, and caregivers. Anthropologist Will Roscoe, gay activist and author of *The Zuni Man-Woman*, noted that over 130 tribes in North America documented the two-spirit identity (Lhamana people in Zuni society). Today, these respected leaders can be seen on the front lines as balance keepers and water protectors, leading the fight to defend sacred lands against pipeline developments that continue to violate indigenous treaty rights.

Native American societies recognized a diverse range of genders.

Ancient indigenous practices allowed for greater freedom of expression and identity, emphasizing one's spirit outside of the physical form. Many Native American societies recognized gender variance and expression, identifying as many as five gendered roles: female, male, two-spirit female, two-spirit male and transgendered. Although each tribe has unique names and non-translatable meanings to represent gender fluid identities, LGBTQ+ Native Americans adopted the pan-Indian term "Two Spirit" from the Anishinaabe/Ojibwe language as a universal name. There are, however, over 500 federally recognized tribes in the U.S. with their own languages to express gender variance. Other terms include the Navajo Nádleehí (one who is transformed), the Lakota Winkté (a male who behaves as a female), the Ojibwe Niizh Manidoowag (two spirit), the Cheyenne Hemaneh (half man, half woman), and the Cherokee ᏍᏏᏉᏚ ᏌᏊᏚᏍᏔᏅ or other-spirited (the Cherokee language has 10 different pronouns, all gender neutral).

Two-spirit people were considered doubly gifted, doing the work of both men and women.





We'wha, John K. Hillers Image, ca. 1877. Courtesy of Smithsonian Institute

Ancient societies thought highly of the contributions two-spirit people made to benefit the tribe. They often combined and accomplished the work of both male and female roles without conforming to one set of social activities. This made them practical as well as spiritual leaders, capable of providing more for their communities including taking care of orphans and the elderly. Two-spirit males could become experts in traditional arts such as pottery making and basket weaving, and two-spirit females engaged in hunting and warfare, even becoming war chiefs. What we call same-sex marriage today was not taboo to indigenous practices. Marrying within the same gender or among other genders was common to complement and support one another's economic survival.

They are powerful allies in helping society heal from inter-generational trauma.

Native peoples continue to experience invisibility and otherness in the United States, Canada and beyond, and their treaty rights and missing persons continue to be ignored. Two-spirit and indigenous women are also more vulnerable to violent crimes against them. According to [Native Womens Wilderness](#), murders of indigenous women, girls and two spirits are 10x higher than other ethnicities, with most of these crimes committed by non-Native people on Native-owned land. What's more, the National Crime Information Center reported 5,712 cases of missing American Indian and Alaska Native women and girls in 2016, as compared to only 116 cases documented by the U.S Department of Justice missing persons database. Countless lives may never be found nor recorded. The White House's [Proclamation on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons Awareness Day](#) on May 4, 2021, was a milestone for acting with urgency to work with Tribal Nations to protect native women, girls and two-spirit lives.

Indigenous, black and two-spirit peoples understand what it means to fight for their freedom, for representation and, continuously, for their own lives to matter to non-native communities. Acknowledgement is the first step on the path toward healing our collective traumas. We must recognize that every day is an opportunity to advocate for one another through acts of kindness and humanity.

Two-spirit/native identity is a living culture we can recognize and celebrate today.



Native Americans are still here, still part of a living culture, and must be recognized as the first peoples and nations belonging to these lands. Holding a sacred space in this history, 2S people have a powerful narrative to share about diversity, equity and inclusion. And as a modern society seeking to acknowledge and heal from generations of trauma, forced assimilation and violence toward people of color, two-spirit allies in the Native community are important leaders on that journey, continuing their traditional role of healer. We must continue to honor and protect them by reconciling our lost knowledge of their healing powers and social significance.

Two-spirit and Native LGBTQ2S Resources:

Guide for Working with 2S and Native LGBTQ Youth: <https://tribalinformationexchange.org/files/products/twospiritresourceguide.pdf>

Health Equity Alliance for LGBTQ+ New Mexicans (HEAL + NM): <https://www.healplusnm.org/>

Human Rights Campaign – Two Spirit and LGBTQ Identities: Today and Centuries Ago (includes resource links): <https://www.hrc.org/news/two-spirit-and-lgbtq-idenitites-today-and-centuries-ago>

Indian Health Service – Federal Health Program for American Indians and Alaska Natives: Two-Spirit | Health Resources: <https://www.ihs.gov/lgbt/health/twospirit/>

KQED – 5 Two-Spirit Heroes Who Paved the Way for Today's Native LGBTQ+ Community: <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13845330/5-two-spirit-heroes-who-paved-the-way-for-todays-native-lgbtq-community>

Mesa Verde Voices Podcast Season 2, Episode 2: Two Spirits: <https://www.mesaverdevoices.org/twospirits>

Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board – Two-Spirit and LGBTQ Health: <https://www.npaihb.org/2slgbtq/>

PBS Independent Lens – Two Spirits Documentary: <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/two-spirits/>

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration – Native Connections LGBTQ2S Resources: <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/nc-lgbtq2s-resources.pdf>

SAMHSA Two-Spirit Webinars: <https://www.samhsa.gov/tribal-ttac/webinars/two-spirit>

University of Winnipeg – Two-Spirited People Web Resources: <https://archive-it.org/collections/12894>

About GaneshSpace

GaneshSpace is a community organization dedicated to creating equity through mindfulness education. We believe that personal action can lead to collective liberation through our breath. By recognizing that every person experiences marginalization and privilege differently, we offer a diverse range of programs, resources and resources to help navigate the nuances of intersectionality and internalized bias when it comes to race, gender, sexuality and the body. Subscribe to the Meditating on What Matters newsletter for resources on how to create change from the inside out at GaneshSpace.org.

Author Bio

Nancy Agin Dunnahoe



Nancy (Choctaw, Cherokee, Guatemalteca) founded Neon Artifact, a Texas-based agency for the arts, to preserve contemporary art history and living archives. Nancy manages a legacy collection of Texas underground music, arts and cultural ephemera, which includes a special collection of 1970s anarcha-

feminist zines and alternative publications donated to the University of Houston Libraries' Special Collections. She has worked as publicist for Mydolls, Houston's longest-performing female-fronted punk band, and most recently lectured on artist archives with aerosol muralist GONZO²⁴⁷ at the 2019 Latino Art Now! Conference sponsored in part by the Smithsonian Latino Center.

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