



As we, the American public, hack through thickets of politically enhanced blogosphere-distributed demonstrations and debates about who we are -- A people who embrace or reject others? A people weaned on vengeance or compassion? A people divided against others? Among ourselves? -- most of us overlook one factor: the buffalo in the room.

About 2 percent of the population of this country is Native

American. (No, nothing to do in the aggregate with that financially larded 1 percent.) The other 98 percent of us, whether ancestor-initiated us or newly arrived us, are from elsewhere. We came by hook or by crook, of free will or not, landing traumatized or relieved, hopeless or hopeful.

But we did not start out as "a nation of immigrants."

We started out as trespassers.

By extension, we -- certainly not the only such "we" in the world -- are living on foreign occupied territory, are we not?

This is no white guilt screed, no p.c. apologia, but let us face facts, and what better time to do so than November aka Native American Heritage Month? Or, as a Lakota/Navajo wag of my acquaintance calls it, Rent-an-Indian Month.

Another fact, one that helps us live where and how we do: ignorance helps exoneration.

It is no wonder we modern Americans don't sense moccasin trails under the macadam -- most traces of indigenous peoples are literally paved over. As for the hyphenated multitudes, the Greek-, Ukrainian-, Italian-, Cambodian- and so on Americans, whether in the past or still incoming, their ignorance is understandable, too. If the goal is to forge a new life, why pay heed to those people on whose land a new life is being forged?

Throughout the centuries, all this population adding to has meant taking from, of course. Today's Native people, the 2-percenters, sometimes consider themselves invisible and forgotten. Land of opportunity meet land of amnesia.

Another fact: most of us 98-percenters know little about the contributions, however inadequate a word, of this country's original inhabitants and their descendants. We have

little idea that Native-based foods enrich our diets, Native-based medicines enrich our health and Native soldiers, in disproportionate numbers, enrich our armed services.

Rather than take a most enlightening journey to inform ourselves about such facts, many of us non-Natives behave like sophisticated squatters, waving valid mortgages from invalid takeovers, and celebrating ourselves within the whole shebang. "We're the best!" "Number 1!" "USA!" "Manifest Destiny!"

After years of reading about Native history and years of interviewing Native people about life today, I maintain that in general Native people behave differently from us non-Natives, especially if they have strong ties to their cultures. Instead of celebrating individualism, including "rugged" individualism, Native Americans traditionally prized consensus, compromise and collective good. Traits such as tolerance, generosity, taking care of one another and not taking too much for oneself, remain important. Getting along had and has far more status than getting ahead.

Recently, at a tribal women's conference on the Squaxin Reservation in Washington, I heard repeated mention that assertiveness, as well as public speaking, are difficult "when you're from the rez." The youngest women all but whispered their hopes into the microphone. People from Native communities far from reservations tend to speak softly, too -- an oral equivalent of soft Native handshakes.

It is certainly a fact, too, that not all tribal nations harmonized across the fruited plains. Hardly. Yet Native premium on compromise extended even toward the endless insatiable trespassers, including, from east to west, the dreaded settlers. Today, inter-tribal rivalries persist, especially in teasing ("Oh geez, what do you expect from a Kiowa!" or Navajo or...), but from my observations, there is more often a sense of pan-Indian connection. Connection, not disconnection.

We of the 98 percent, though, often seem disconnected, do we not? Many of us from one hyphen don't get along with the other. Our fabled melting pot has boiled over more than once. It's awfully hot now.

Is it possible that a reason for personal disconnection is geological disconnection? That we do not know much about this spot we call home, including who lived on it before we did? It's 2011. Do you know where you are?

I am not suggesting, although some do, that the United States vibrates with unhappy ghosts. I do suggest that most of us non-Natives, living with virtually no trace of Native life, past or present, nor acquaintanceship with a Native person, have lost connection not only with values that grew here before we did, but with the very soil.

Native Americans famously had visceral ties to it. One horror of the Trail of Tears, among other Indian "removals," was being forced from a homeland of intimately understood and utilized ecosystems. How do you find the medicinal bark of a South Carolina tree in Oklahoma?

Perhaps the best November day to face facts in this land we profess to love, but do not always treat lovingly, is Thanksgiving ("Thankstaking" to some).

Candidates for questions at our laden tables: Who used to live here? Where are their descendants? And for extra credit: How would we measure up in their eyes?

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