Growing up in America, most of us are challenged with integrating different parts of our lives, as most of us represent a mix of cultures, backgrounds, traditions, and worldviews. My particular challenge has been to find my authentic voice as a mixed-blood person who has both Native American and European ancestry. I am Métis, or "Michif," as they call us at my home reservation at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa community in North Dakota. I am blessed with inheriting one of the rich, land-based cultural traditions of North America. I have also inherited blood of my Nordic and French ancestors who, two centuries ago, fled from the injustices of their homelands to seek a better life in a new land. Through the Saint Lawrence River, travelers, voyageurs, and fur traders entered the Great Lakes region. On the forested shorelines, they found beaver and birch bark and met the Anishinaabe dreamers in their woodland homes. Greeting each other in their respective tongues—"bonjour," "boozhoo"—some of the French and Ojibwe united, coevolved, became Métis.

The reservation where my mother was born and raised is called the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. The word "Chippewa" is a French
interpretation of the name my ancestors called themselves, "Ojibwe," which refers to the type of moccasin they wore. But there are other interpretations of this word. The older, original name for my people, "Anishinaabe," describes a larger group of Native Americans in the Great Lakes region. This name goes back to the creation stories and is usually interpreted to mean "original or spontaneous being."

Today I am concerned with learning how to honor all parts of myself: the spiritual traditions of my Ojibwe ancestors as well as the traditional knowledge of my European ancestors. I keep asking, how do I simultaneously honor the past and transcend the past in order to live in the present? I am also looking for that place in myself, independent of my heritage, that is completely new and different each moment, the part that is constantly revealing itself.

Not having grown up on the land my indigenous ancestors called home and being the most recent offspring from a long line of "half-breeds" on my mother's side, I was not raised within my Anishinaabe tradition. My mother remembered some of her Anishinabemowin, her native tongue, but even that was mixed with Cree and Canadian French. When she was sent away to Catholic boarding school she was forbidden to speak this strange "Michif" language. My father remembered some Norwegian, but his parents discouraged him from speaking it. Emerging from the fifties, both my parents were swayed by the dominant culture to "become Americans—drop that past nonsense." For my mom this "choice" was reinforced by the implementation of federal relocation and assimilation policies. After she returned to her reservation and completed high school, she was selected to be a part of the relocation program that sent reservation Indians into major urban centers around the country. My mother was given a one-way train ticket to California and ended up in downtown Oakland, close to where I was later born.

Neither of my parents fully took in the strict Catholic and Lutheran religions they were immersed in as children, nor did they put any pressure on me or my brother to conform to the rigors of those religions. My imagination was free to wander through the many possible explanations and descriptions of the eternal mysteries. Not feeling connected enough to my indigenous heritage to claim an Indian identity and spiritual path, I wandered, like so many other young people, through the books and lectures and ashrams of the many branches of Buddhism, Taoism, Christian mysticism, and the meditations of classic and contemporary nature writers and philosophers such as Robinson Jeffers, Arne Naess, Gary Snyder, Carolyn Merchant, and Theodore Roszak.

The deep ecology perspective offered me some very satisfying ideas about the connection between humans and the natural world. It explicitly emphasized the intrinsic value of nonhuman nature and the peace found in "wilderness." Part of my interest in deep ecology also stemmed from the fact that it was articulated by an old Norwegian man, Arne Naess, who closely resembled my father and his uncles. There was something in the slate-blue eyes, those charming eye folds that evolved to protect us from the glaring snow, the high, brooding forehead, and the adamant sense that being "outside" in the open air was so much better than being indoors. I was joyfully surprised to discover such an environmentally sensitive philosophy coming from Norway.

But where was my Native American family in the deep ecology philosophy? Haven't these ideas been a part of traditional cultures for thousands of years? Yes and no. Within the deep ecology movement people often make a distinction between an anthropocentric worldview and a "biocentric" one. This distinction can support a "people versus nature" type of thinking that has very little meaning for indigenous peoples. A friend, native restoration ecologist Dennis Martinez, has said, "We need to move beyond the anthropocentric-biocentric dichotomy and see that we are really kin-centric," meaning we must recognize the reality of our extended family—the rock people, the plant people, the bird people, the water people—and human beings' humble place in this web of kin.

I learned, too, that even in the deep ecology movement there are those who share the racist and colonial assumptions implicit in a lot of mainstream environmentalism. Many deep ecologists adhere to a myth of pristine wilderness and consider Indians anti-environmental because they want to "use" the "untouched" wildlands. Yet more and more people are finally realizing that the precontact North American landscape was well cared for and highly managed by its original inhabitants. Many conservationists I've talked with still believe the stereotype of the "lazy, dirty Indian" and consequently, do not consider local Native Americans valuable contributors to discussions about
how to manage resources. The more I got involved with traditional native ceremonies and indigenous resource-management practices, the less interested I became in deep ecology.

To indigenous peoples, the basic tenets of deep ecology are just a reinvention of very ancient principles that they have been living by for millennia before their ways were disrupted, and in many cases destroyed, by colonial forces. To learn who I am today, on this land I live on, I've had to recover that heritage and realize a multicultural self.

In exploring what a multicultural self is, I found myself swimming through a sea of racial beliefs—pure, full-blood Indian, pure, full-blood European; tainted mixed-blood, diluted soul. This internal division parallels other prevalent dichotomies—mind and body, civilized and savage, rational and impulsive, science and folklore. It is difficult not to fall into the "either-or" pattern and to integrate all of these differences.

By studying the process others have gone through to embrace the cultural richness of diverse backgrounds, I have come to understand the importance of decolonizing my mind.

Decolonizing the mind is not disregarding rationality or European heritage. It is transcending the self-centered, ethnocentric, and exploitive patterns of Western hegemony. It is explicitly questioning the so-called objectivity and universal character of the Western scientific paradigm. Decolonizing the mind allows other more diverse and mysterious ways of knowing the world to enter the field of perception. For example, intuition and imagination are part of the creativity necessary to decolonize the mind. To facilitate my own creativity, I write poetry and have started to play the selje flute, a Norwegian folk instrument. I was fascinated to discover that selje flutes are often made out of birch bark, the same subarctic tree so sacred to the Ojibwe. Birch trees and their bark have become a living symbol of my heritage.

Another powerful way I have found to decolonize my mind is by simply questioning my certainty about things and asking, Where do my thoughts and ideas come from? Because colonization is based on the belief in Manifest Destiny, that is, the spreading of so-called universal truths, I also began to ask, Are there really any universal truths? On the other end of the spectrum is the perspective of cultural relativism, which assumes that any cultural differences, be it genital mutilation or human sacrifice, are justified in the name of culture. How far can cultural relativism be taken? Where do ethics step in? Whose ethics?

Such questions helped me to see that, contrary to the popular opinion of wannabes, there are no special spiritual "goodies" in being part Native American. Traditional knowledge is really a deeper knowledge of the self within a wider ecocultural context. It comes with patience, hard work, and sacrifice. As I have learned from many elders and teachers, if someone is interested in Native American spirituality, they must also learn about the colonial history of North America and be aware of contemporary Indian issues such as treaty rights and land claims, poverty and health problems, and efforts to gain federal recognition and revitalize tribal sovereignty. They must learn to honor the local, the distinctive, in the place where they live.

For example, because I live in central coastal California, which is primarily Ohlone territory, I support and work together with some Ohlone people and other California Indians who are working to protect the diversity and quality of all life in this region: endangered species, languages, habitats, songs, stories, and the free flow of rivers. Managing a native nonprofit organization dedicated to these native land protection goals, I have spent many nights and weekends faxing letters to Congress, writing letters of support for tribes and communities, grant writing, compiling and sending out educational and technical information packets, and responding to various requests. This activism has been a part of my commitment to my own native heritage. I am learning to take care of our Mother by honoring the traditional way local native people have lived on and loved their homelands, be it harvesting certain plants and using fire at particular times, or conducting world renewal ceremonies. Giving something back to the earth, through ceremony, is one of the most important parts of Ojibwe and other native spiritual traditions. Ceremony is a unique blend of tradition and innovation. Ultimately, ceremony is creativity, where our own imaginations unfold and become part of the divine creative force of life. Vine Deloria Jr. has written, "The underlying theme of ceremony is one of gratitude expressed by human beings on behalf of all forms of life, and they complete the largest possible cycle of life, ultimately representing the cosmos in its specific realizations, becoming thankfully aware of itself."
We all have earth-based spiritual traditions in our past and we should work to uncover our heritage. But we also have our own individual creativity, imagination, and distinct relationship with what we call the sacred. Our own heart-minds in this very moment of life can show us how to pray, praise, worship, give thanks and blessings. I have been deeply inspired by the teachings of the East Indian educator and philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, who has written, “To sing we must have a song in our heart, but having lost our song, we pursue, instead, the singer.” We often sacrifice our own song, our individual connection to the sacred source within, by seeking wisdom outside of ourselves. But we don’t need an endorsement from any priest, guru, or medicine person. In fact, these teachers’ greatest gift to us is to show us that we have our own unique relationship to life and that no one but ourselves can facilitate that connection to the source of creation.

I am sitting outside with an Ojibwe elder and some other people, mixed-bloods like myself (urban Métis and Mestizo), a few Lakota visiting from South Dakota, some nonnative Berkeley students, a Sami woman from Norway, a Yurok California Indian man. We are facing what the Bay Miwok call “the mountain where the little animals play.” Before entering the lodge, we get oriented, literally and metaphorically. We find our place in the cosmos. First we pray to the four sacred directions. Some tobacco is given to each orientation. We then honor the sky above, the earth below, our Mother. Then the final orientation is acknowledged, within ourselves, the inner origin. In silence, under the valley oaks and sycamore, individually and as a group, we embrace the mystery of which we are a part.