

Alma de Mujer, the Gift  
Restoring land to indigenous people  
by Genevieve Vaughan

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'Alma de Mujer' is a beautiful name. It means 'Soul of the Woman' and it actually comes from the name of my friend, Italian feminist, Alma Sabatini, who died with her husband in a car accident shortly after I bought the property. I felt it was fitting to commemorate her in land that would be dedicated to social change under women's leadership. Now that I have given the 'Alma de Mujer' retreat center to the Indigenous Women's Network, I still feel good about the connection with my friend and the international women's movement.

I was born in Texas but lived in Italy from 1963 to 1983, when I decided to come back to the USA and use my resources for social change. I had learned a lot in Italy that I never would have learned at home. It allowed me to see my own country from the outside — how the US manipulated the politics of the countries under its 'umbrella' of influence in non military ways, but also how it used its military — Italy was riddled with US bases — and the tension with the Soviet Union to extend its power everywhere.

People from all over the world live in Rome. Even the feminist consciousness raising group I participated in was very international. I learned a lot. People from everywhere rejected the US influence in their countries' affairs. It was like the patriarchal domination women in the consciousness raising group were talking about. There was a double standard. What was right for the US was wrong for everyone else, just like what was right for men - especially powerful men - was wrong for women. I realized that if I wanted to change things for the better, I should go home where my voice could be heard. I should go to the source of the problem.

At that time I had also developed a theory of what was wrong and how to change it. Briefly, it consists of making a distinction between giving to needs-which is a mother based activity, because mothers have to do it in order for children to survive — and exchange which is giving in order to receive and which requires an equivalence. Exchange is ego oriented while gift giving is other oriented. Our society bases all our economic and many of our human interactions on exchange. Instead we need to return to a mother based economic way, giving up exchange, money, even barter (which is still exchange). Patriarchal capitalism is a way of channeling the gifts of the many away from needs to become profit for a few. The values of competition and hierarchy when put into practice reward the few with

positions of domination. Giftgiving, which is directed towards needs is in direct opposition to those values. In fact, if everyone were giving to everyone else, there would be no need to exchange. Indigenous economies have often made use of giftgiving principles, and have been more mother-based than European groups. In fact, the Europeans wiped out their mother based practices through the slaughter of 10 million witches (who were practicing an earth oriented religion) during the Inquisition.

I decided to follow my theory and begin to use my monetary resources to satisfy needs. I felt that the needs that had to be satisfied first were the large scale needs for social change, so I began to give money to activist groups. I also felt that the giftgiving way itself is mostly practiced by women because we are the ones who are socialized to be mothers. Along with the activism I decided to fund women's leadership in order to create a change in values. In our society free giving appears to be unrealistic, a sort of 'bleeding heart' attitude, but I believe that is just another way patriarchal capitalism defends itself from the giftgiving way. It creates scarcity for the many so that giftgiving becomes difficult, even sacrificial. Arms spending is a way of taking the wealth out of the economy and wasting it on instruments of death. Military jobs and hard ware do not produce goods which satisfy needs, instead they are a drain on the nurturing economy. I decided to use my money in the peace movement. Nuclear war was a real danger at the time and the nuclear industry and nuclear testing were having devastating effects on the planet. I joined protests and helped to fund them.

I also began some ongoing projects such as the retreat center, Stonehaven Ranch, which has offered free or low cost meeting space to feminist and peace and justice groups since 1984. Because the exchange economy thrives on lies, I decided to fund women's media projects which could bring the gift of truth and women's perspective to the public. I also tried to offer free space in town through the Austin Women's Peace House and the Grassroots Peace Organizations office building. (I have recently closed both of these last projects as well as a donation fund after several years of operation because most of my resources have now been spent.)

In 1987, I gathered all the projects I had started together under the name 'Foundation for a Compassionate Society'. The women who run the projects form a kind of multicultural community of progressive, activist women. They are my friends and co-hearts. They are living proof that women of all kinds long for social change and, given a chance, can work together. Our way has not always been smooth and we have struggled over many issues; however, we continue to hang in there and care about each other and the work.

One of the most inspiring of these women, who I have known for a long time, is Marsha Gomez. She had already been working with some of our

projects for several years when I bought the retreat center Alma de Mujer and asked her to be in charge of it. Marsha requested that her long time friend Esther Martinez co-facilitate the retreat center with her, and I agreed. Over the years since that time, Marsha and Esther have enhanced the natural and spiritual beauty of the 20 acres and kept the houses warm and welcoming. A large number of progressive groups have used the facility for their meetings to good outcomes. Marsha has also continued in her unceasing activism for a better world and has made the retreat center into a center of networking and resources for indigenous people and for all people in the movement for social change.

Several years ago I bought some land near the nuclear test site in Nevada because I wanted to build a temple to the Goddess on it, to take a stand for mothering and the integrity of our genes against the scourge of nuclear radiation. (Marsha's sculptures of Sekhmet and Madre del Mundo are housed in the temple, a small but beautiful straw-bale and stucco construction). Since the temple does not occupy much space I decided to return the land itself to the Western Shoshone, to whom all that land originally belonged. I think it is a good idea to give back land to native people because they are able to hold it in common as their ancestors did.

The Europeans used to have examples of land which they used together and called 'Commons'. Then when the wool industry began to grow, in England for example, centuries ago, the owners of large herds of sheep took over the common lands. The privatization of land is not a natural process and it can be undone. I felt happy to take a small step in Nevada in the direction of the reversal of the process. Now that I have given Alma de Mujer to the Indigenous Women's Network, I have taken another small step. I am happy to think that women will hold this land for the common good and that it will continue to be a resource for indigenous people for years to come, under the guidance of Marsha Gomez and the IWN board.

The devastation of the earth and all her peoples by patriarchal capitalism must be stopped. Women working in solidarity can create social change in ways which do not repeat or aggravate the problems. I want to thank all my sisters in the indigenous women's movement for their commitment to social change and I want to say how happy I am that this land may be useful to them.

In closing, I would also like to honor my great grandfather Horatio Bardwell Cushman who wrote a book in defense of the native people of the Americas, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians*, Greenville, Texas, 1899. Talking about the treatment of the native people by the Europeans he wrote in a letter handed down to me by my aunt "...could the veil be lifted and the deep sin of the American (European) people, composed of every grade and character known to man, 'tho' claiming every virtue, be made to pass in panoramic view before the holy

angels of heaven, a universal cry of horror would be heard". I am sure he would be pleased, as I would, if these small gestures could encourage a wider trend to restore lands to the indigenous people.

(We love you and thank you Gen!  
IWN)