

## **The End of Living and the Beginning of Survival**

### **Background**

Chief Seattle (c 1780—June 7, 1866) was a chief of Duwamish tribe, the Native Americans in western Washington and metropolitan Seattle. In 1854, the government of the United States of America made an offer for a large area of Indian land and promised a 'reservation' for the Indian people. Chief Seattle's reply to the proposal—the prose passage named 'The End of Living and the Beginning of Survival'—remains a most beautiful and profound statement on environment and related issues.

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the speech of 1854. There are many conflicting pieces of information, various versions of the speech, different dates and debates over its very existence.

### **Summary**

This is an inspiring speech delivered by Chief Seattle, a Native American leader, as a response to an offer made by the President of the United States to buy their land. He feels and argues that it is impossible to buy or sell natural resources like air, water and land because we do not own them. They are a gift. He says that every part of the earth is sacred to him and his people; they are a part of the earth and the earth is a part of them. Even the souls of the Native Americans do not leave their land. Instead, they make it their permanent residence, unlike in the belief systems of mainstream religions. In short, the earth is not an inanimate tract of land, but a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear.

But the worldview of white men is entirely different. For them, it is an object to be tamed, conquered and exploited to the full, until it ceases to be useful. For Native Americans, on the contrary, all natural phenomena are their own siblings.

It is true that the President has promised to take care of them like a father. He has also promised to give them a special area where they can continue living with all their rites, rituals and other cultural practices. But still the sale is going to be difficult as the pangs of parting with such a dear and sacred place are excruciating.

The Chief suggests some conditions. If at all the transaction takes place, white men should remember that the land is sacred and inviolable. They should also teach their children the same. The Chief wants white men to treat rivers and beasts as their own brothers, not to be seen through a utilitarian perspective. They have seen white men pollute rivers and shoot animals for the sake of fun. The reality is that every object in the nature is connected with each other. Whatever happens to animals and land will happen to us sooner or later. No one

can escape this fate. The earth does not belong to us but we belong to the earth and all are bonded like family members.

For his people the din, frenzy and chaos of modern cities are a painful sight. For them simple pleasures of nature are more precious and more important than anything else. They treat rain, wind and land as living organisms just like humans. Unfortunately the white man has neither the sense nor the sensibility to feel the pulse of nature. Chief Seattle ironically and sarcastically adds that perhaps the problem is with himself and his people—they are uneducated, uncultured and uncivilized!

The holistic vision of the speech is reiterated at the end within a theological framework. There is only one God and He does not discriminate between peoples. White or red, human beings are equal in His eyes. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on the creator. The destiny is a mystery to the Native Americans too, but they do realize that the changed environment marks the end of living and the beginning of survival.

### **Comments**

It should be noted that from the 1860s to the 1930s, under the Federal Homestead Act, the American government allocated at low or no cost some 246 million acres of land of Native Americans for farm homesteads to about 1.5 million people, almost entirely from the white population.

One can argue that animism—the belief that non-human entities have also souls—informs the speech though it is believed that the Chief embraced Roman Catholicism in 1848.

It is obvious that the beliefs of a people almost directly impact on their attitude to nature and other peoples. For example, sacred groves in India remain miniature forests not because people are alive to the dangers of deforestation and its accompanying evils but simply they do not want to incur the wrath of irascible snake gods! Whatever be the underpinning belief system, the net result is desirable: at least some parts of the land remain intact. Similar is the case of animals. Practically all religious groups consider certain animals holy or satanic. Irrespective of the attitudes, the final result is that these animals are shunned from habitats and carefully kept away from culinary habits.

The speech raises some interesting questions that deserve deep contemplation. For example it problematizes anthropocentric philosophies and theologies. Have we, the humans, been divinely authorized to dominate the earth and all other organisms? Predictably, we cannot come up with a tailor-made answer. Attitudes vary (often so subtly that we cannot tell one from the other) from culture to culture, from religion to religion. The Biblical god vests come

privileges on mankind: “. . . have dominion over the fish and the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” How far is it logical to say that this view has permeated the gamut of western weltanschauung?

On the other hand, in India many animals are closely associated with deities, as vehicles, servants or symbols. In Vedic literature, Dawn, a female deity, rides a chariot drawn by seven cows and the cow is treated as holy by many sects. The donkey is the vehicle of Shitala Devi, the goddess who is invoked to ward off smallpox, even as her anger can bring it on. Are we to understand that these animals are revered and feared because of their association with divine figures? Are Indians any better than westerners in treating animals?

**Answer these questions in a sentence or two each.**

**1. What is strange about buying and selling land according to Chief Seattle?**

A: The idea of buying or selling land is strange because it is a divine gift, it does not belong to man and every part of the land is sacred to them.

**2. What does Seattle say about the cities of the white man?**

A: The cities of the white man are full of din, frenzy and chaos and the sight of these cities pains their eyes.

**3. What would happen if all the beasts were gone?**

A: If all the beasts were gone, men would become extinct from a great loneliness of spirit as whatever happens to animals will happen to humans sooner or later.

**4. What is the difference between living and surviving?**

A: Living is a meaningful existence with many activities including hopes for a bright future whereas survival is the bare minimum mode of existence in which a being struggles to remain alive somehow.

**5. What is the white man likely discover before long?**

A: White man is likely to discover before long that there is only one God and He does not discriminate between peoples. White or red, human beings are equal in His eyes.

**6. What is the attitude of the Indians to their ancestors?**

A: Native Americans believe that their ancestors do not leave their land but make it their permanent residence, making it a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear.

**7. How does the Indian look upon water?**

A: Indians regard water as the blood of their ancestors and as their brothers. Water, thus, deserves to be treated with care and affection.

**8. What does Seattle want the white man to teach his children?**

A: Seattle wants white men to teach their children that the land is sacred and inviolable, they need to treat rivers and beasts as their own brothers and to approach nature with moderation.

**Answer these questions in about 100 words each.**

**1. Write a short note on the implications of the statement "The Earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth."**

A: The statement implies the need for holistic vision, interconnected nature of living organisms, preservation of environment, unitary nature of the universe, environmental awareness and a new paradigm of development which takes into account the delicate relations that structure the world. Indians regard land as a sacred divine gift of which they are a part. They believe that their deceased ancestors permanently reside in the land, making it a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear. There is only one God and He does not discriminate between peoples and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on the creator.

**2. What do you think of the white man's attitude to land? Write your answer based on Seattle's reply to the President.**

A: As far as the white man is concerned, land is a mere hostile territory to be tamed, conquered and exploited to the full until it ceases to be useful any longer. For him it is a buyable and sellable commodity not worthy of love, care, respect and fear. He has no religious, spiritual, genealogical or eschatological associations to the land and naturally there is nothing that ties the white man down to it. Land is uniform all over the world and it is an area to build bustling cities on. He is insensitive to the finer sensibilities and pulse of the land. Chief Seattle justifiably fears that his appetite would devour the earth and reduce it into an arid desert.

**Answer these questions in about 300 words each**

**1. Seattle's letter to the American Government is a passionate plea for respect on the part of humans for environment. Discuss.**

A: Seattle's letter to the American Government is a passionate plea for respect on the part of humans for environment as it emphasizes the need for holistic vision, interconnected nature of living organisms, preservation of environment, unitary nature of the universe and a new vision of development.

The anthropocentric, utilitarian, materialistic and parochial worldview of white settlers considers earth an inanimate object to be tamed, conquered, plundered and exploited with scant regard for posterity. Land is uniform everywhere with no spiritual values and associations. While one piece of land runs out its utility, they march ahead looking for another. But for Native Americans earth and natural resources are a divine gift—sacred and

inviolable. They are a part of the earth and vice versa. Earth is a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear. Everything is interconnected. Whatever happens to animals and land will happen to us sooner or later. For them rain, wind and land are living organisms just like humans. There is only one God and He does not discriminate between peoples. The earth is precious to Him and to harm earth is equal to scorn Him.

According to Chief Seattle, even the souls of the Native Americans do not leave their land. Instead, they make it their permanent residence, unlike in the belief systems of mainstream religions. But the unscrupulous white settlers destroy it and deny his own children the graces of the earth and prevent them from enjoying the music of nature. Modern cities are full of din, frenzy and chaos and city dwellers are missing the simple pleasures of nature. White man, in his critical view, is incapable of sensing the subtle aspects and changes of nature.

Chief Seattle makes it abundantly clear that all living and non-living beings are interconnected and depend on each other. To extinct one species is a crime to ourselves, future generations and to God. What we need is a new paradigm of development which takes into account the importance of nature and the delicate relations that structure the world.

## **2. How does Seattle establish the view that man's exploitation of nature will lead to the end of living and the beginning of survival?**

A: Chief Seattle argues that it is impossible to buy or sell natural resources like air, water and land because we do not own them. They are a divine gift. Every part of the earth is sacred to him and his people; they are a part of the earth and vice versa. Even the souls of the Native Americans do not leave their land. Instead, they make it their permanent residence, unlike in the belief systems of mainstream religions. In short, the earth is not an inanimate tract of land, but a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear.

As far as the white man is concerned, land is a mere hostile territory to be tamed, conquered and exploited to the full until it ceases to be useful any longer. For them it is a buyable and sellable commodity unworthy of human emotions. He has no religious, spiritual, genealogical or eschatological associations to the land and naturally there is nothing that ties the white man down to it. Land is uniform all over the world and it is a surface to build noisy cities on. Chief Seattle justifiably fears that the white man's appetite would devour the earth and reduce it into an arid desert.

It is true that the President has promised to take care of the Native Americans like a father. He has also promised to give them a special area where they can continue living with all their rites, rituals and other cultural practices. But still the sale is going to be difficult because the pangs involved in parting with such a dear and sacred place are acute.

Seattle wants white men to teach their children that the land is sacred and inviolable. He wants them to treat rivers and beasts as their own brothers and to approach nature with moderation. Indians have seen white men pollute rivers and shoot animals for the sake of fun. The reality is that every object in the nature is connected with each other. Whatever happens to animals and land will happen to us sooner or later. No one can escape this fate. The earth does not belong to us but we belong to the earth and all are bonded like family members.

For his people the din, frenzy and chaos of modern cities are a painful sight. For them simple pleasures of nature are more precious and more important than anything else. They treat rain, wind and land as living organisms. Unfortunately the white man has neither the sense nor the sensibility to feel the pulse of nature. Chief Seattle ironically and sarcastically adds that perhaps the problem is with himself and his people—they are uneducated, uncultured and uncivilized!

The holistic vision of the speech is reiterated at the end within a theological framework. There is only one God and He does not discriminate between people. White or red, human beings are equal in His eyes. The earth is precious to Him and to harm the earth is to heap contempt on the creator. The destiny is a mystery to the Native Americans too, but they do realize that the changed environment marks the end of living and the beginning of survival.

## More questions and answers

### **1. Why does Chief Seattle say that buying their land will not be easy for the Great Chief in Washington?**

A: The process will not be easy because Native Americans consider their land sacred and inviolable. They are physically, mentally and spiritually attached to it and maintain deep kinship-like ties with natural phenomena like rain and wind.

### **2. What is the difference in approach between the Native Americans and the Whites towards Mother Earth?**

A: For Native Americans earth is sacred, living, sentient and inseparable from them, where their souls reside forever. But for the whites it is a mere hostile territory to be tamed, conquered and exploited to the full until it ceases to be useful any longer.

### **3. Explain the sarcasm in the words of Seattle when he says "I am a savage and do not understand."**

A: The ironically caustic remark implies that it is the white man who lacks the sense and sensibility to feel the pulse of nature—to understand it. It is the ignorant white man who wastes his life in noisy and frenzied cities and thus misses the simple pleasures and rhythm of nature.

### **4. What are the conditions laid by Chief Seattle to sell his land to the Great Chief?**

A: Seattle wants white men to remember that the land is sacred and inviolable, to treat rivers and beasts as their own brothers and to approach nature with moderation. They should open their eyes to the reality that as every object in the nature is connected with each other, whatever happens to animals and land will happen to us sooner or later, however hard we try to thwart it.

## Paragraph questions

### **1. Comment on the Red Indian's criticism of the white settler's treatment of Mother Earth.**

A: According to Chief Seattle, earth is not an inanimate tract of land, but a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear. Even the souls of the Native Americans do not leave their land. Instead, they make it their permanent residence, unlike in the belief systems of mainstream religions. Unfortunately, white settlers have no such spiritual and emotional associations but consider it an object to be tamed, conquered, plundered and exploited to the full until it ceases to be useful. His actions deny his own children the graces of the earth and prevent them from enjoying the music of nature. Modern cities are full of din, frenzy and

chaos and city dwellers miss the simple pleasures of nature. White man, in his critical view, is incapable of sensing the subtle aspects and changes of nature.

**2. What are the two worldviews on environment reflected in the speech of Seattle?**

A: The anthropocentric, utilitarian, materialistic and parochial worldview of white settlers considers earth an inanimate object to be tamed, conquered, plundered and exploited with scant regard for posterity. Land is uniform everywhere with no spiritual values and associations. When one piece of land runs out its utility, they march ahead looking for another. But for Native Americans earth and natural resources are a divine gift—sacred and inviolable. They are a part of the earth and vice versa. Even their souls do not leave their land. Earth is a living presence to be treated with love, care, respect and fear. Everything is interconnected. Whatever happens to animals and land will happen to us sooner or later. For them rain, wind and land are living organisms just like humans. There is only one God and He does not discriminate between peoples. The earth is precious to Him and to harm earth is equal to scorn Him.

**Useful links**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homestead\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homestead_Act)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chief\\_Seattle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chief_Seattle)

<http://www.chiefseattle.com/history/chiefseattle/chief.htm>

<http://www.halcyon.com/arborhts/chiefsea.html>

<http://www.kyphilom.com/www/seattle.html>

<http://www.barefootsworld.net/seattle.html>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duwamish\\_tribe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duwamish_tribe)



The relationship between trees/plants/animals and star shines

The philosophy behind apparently bizarre Jain cultural/religious practices