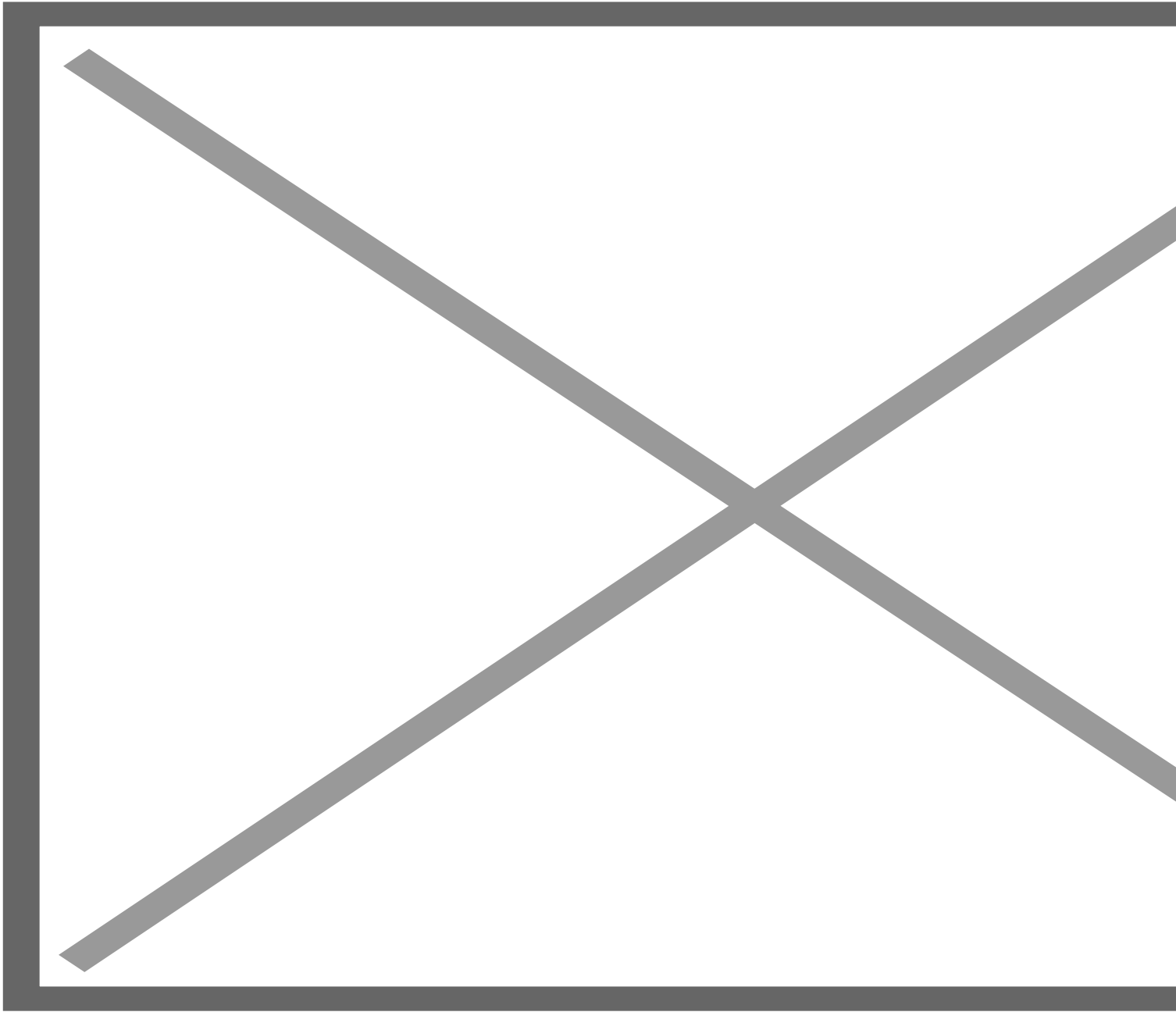


A sacred migration to a changing future

Colonialism wants to keep Native America locked in the closet of the past. But we have something important to say about the present—and about what comes next.

by [Steven Charleston](#) in the [September 2026](#) issue
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No one wants to read what Native Americans think about the future. That is what Vine Deloria suggested to me the first time I met him. Deloria was the author of some very influential books—including *God Is Red* and *Custer Died for Your Sins*—and I was honored to meet him.

Deloria was delighted to meet me, too—not because I had done anything special, but because I had a copy of one of his books on my desk. He arrived in my office that day unexpectedly, and when he saw the book he laughed and said I must be the only other person on earth who had read it. It was called *The Metaphysics of Modern Existence*. According to Deloria, the book had bombed because it was about the future. Native American writers are supposed to talk about the past, not the future.

Why? The larger society, which is a colonizing society, wants to keep Indigenous people firmly positioned in history, where it can control the narrative. Colonization is the process by which Indigenous populations are categorized, defined, and frozen in time. It turns us into artifacts, not participants. We are historical footnotes, not modern agendas. One of the core strategies of colonialism is to consign its victims to the past tense—not to the present, and certainly not to the future.

Colonialism is like the police officer talking to onlookers at the site of a disaster: *Keep moving, nothing to see here*. By keeping the Indigenous experience comfortably in the past, settlers and their descendants avoid having to deal with it in the present, and they seal off any uncomfortable truths about future. This means no lessons can be learned that might alter how we behave in the years to come.

Basically, the settler mindset wants to keep Native America locked in the closet of the past. It wants to silence any voices from Indigenous culture that contradict the history already written for them by their colonizers. It wants to maintain that all of this is historical—it happened long ago. Therefore, colonialism is not the fault or responsibility of contemporary generations. It is just old news that can be catalogued and forgotten. Until someone like Deloria is audacious enough to suggest otherwise.

Indigenous people have something important to say about the present and, even more crucially, about what is to come. Deloria and I did not agree on everything he wrote in his work on metaphysics, but that is the point: We were two Indigenous thinkers with a vision for the future. The important thing is not that we agreed but that we shared a perspective broad enough to encompass past, present, and future together. We shared in the process of being fully situated in time and space. We saw ourselves as active agents of contemporary change, with deep notions about the shape and direction the future should take. For Indigenous people to take this position is a radical thing to do. It is how we step out of history onto the world stage.

Spiritual migration is the free movement of any seeker moving up and down the spiral of time. That migration can loop back into the past, surfacing wisdom from long ago, or it can project itself far into the future, envisioning the world into which we hope to emerge. All thinkers and seekers need the freedom to take this kind of wide-ranging migration. They must be free to move beyond cultural stereotypes to create a level field of inquiry, where travelers from different directions can meet and explore vision together.

The only barrier to the future is imagination. What we envision is what we have experienced in the past, brought forward to suggest what will happen next. It is not possible to carry out this process without space for past, present, and future to exist together at the same time.

So we must shape our pliable reality to include and involve people from every tradition. There can be no outcasts or marginalized cultures in this context, only a willingness to listen and learn together.

The future is not a secret destination known only to the few. It is the broad avenue of human curiosity leading to change. The key to using it is understanding tradition as a vision of the future, not of the past. In the society in which we live now, the future is a vague world of danger and opportunity. We know we are ruining our planet home. We know we are locking in huge debts for our children. We know we are no closer to ending war than we were a hundred years ago. And yet we feel helpless to change this reality, because we are so mired in the conflicts of the present. The difficulty with facing the future is that it means facing the past at the same time.

Reconciliation cannot occur without the past being part of the future. Truth telling, critical analysis, accurate information—these must all be engaged in the present if past and future are to meet. But the trouble with doing this, as logical as it seems, is that engaging the past requires shifting some perceptions. People resist doing that, because they will have to let go of manufactured certainties about the past to take the risk of discovering the truth behind the history. *Sacrifice* is the word no one wants to say. It appears when we finally have honest conversations about our current situation.

We need to go on a spiritual migration—not because things are going so well under colonization but because things are beginning to collapse. Things are beginning to shut down and disappear. To seriously confront our reality, we are going to have to sacrifice some well-loved illusions.

For example, if we were to bring the Native American tradition of *giveaway* out of the past and into the contemporary context, we would have to talk about the place of greed in our society. The giveaway is an Indigenous ceremony that takes place when a person in traditional Native American society dies and all their worldly goods are handed out—given away to family and friends. This act symbolizes a basic aspect of Indigenous spirituality: that we are all entangled in kinship. It is not all about you, or me, even in death. Rather, it is about how we exist in community.

Up until now, under colonial control, greed has been an unspoken driver of our present economic system. We not only tolerate it; we enshrine it. We admire the rich and powerful. We look the other way when people suffer because of economic disparities. We pretend there is little we can do about it. We cut programs designed to help the poor so the money can go to the wealthy elite. We definitely do not want to pay attention to what an old tradition says about our new addiction.

Above all, we do not want to have to sacrifice anything. We do not want to lose our privileges. We do not want to compromise our lifestyles. We do not know how to envision a world where people live sustainably, modestly, and reciprocally. It would mean giving up too much—or at least that's what we tell ourselves.

Colonialism fuels our anxiety by telling us the proponents of equality and fairness are dangerous voices of discontent that will wreak havoc with our reality. Colonialism gives us many options to hate, to fear, to blame. These distractions are designed to prevent us from having to share, much less sacrifice. Because they contradict the settler narrative, and because they allow critical analysis of the assumptions made by our colonial culture, they are dangerous.

I believe the desire to keep Native American thought safely in the vault of the Smithsonian occurs because our tradition offers such a powerful critique of the migrations that took place (and are still taking place) in this hemisphere. It is important to remember that manifest destiny is one form of migration. When colonizers migrate, they decimate the communities and cultures of the populations they encounter. They create systems that advantage their descendants and disadvantage everyone else.

The only way to break that grip would be to deny that this is reality—and to make the sacrifices necessary to redirect our migration toward full inclusion and genuine reconciliation. Indigenous people are ready, willing, and able to do this, but for it to happen would require a major shift of perception and imagination in the dominant

culture. It would require engaging others with humility and kindness, not greed and control.

The focus on the future will not be easy. The spiritual migration we are taking is not a pretend fantasy like *The Wizard of Oz*. It is an exploration of some very dangerous spiritual terrain. We are going to have to travel through racism and misogyny, homophobia and xenophobia, greed and exploitation. We will have to place our traditions, our values, against the apologists for the status quo and, by so doing, give the world an alternative direction to follow. Our migration will reassure everyone that what we fear as sacrifice is only change. We will make a lateral move to a peaceful option, not the violent upheaval feared by the inheritors of colonial oppression.

Understanding the past as a portal to the future is understanding the metaphysics of modern existence from the Native American viewpoint. It is a perspective based on the migration principle: If what we have is not working, then it is time to get up and start walking.

This article is excerpted from Charleston's book Sacred Migration: An Indigenous Elder's Vision for Our Future, forthcoming from Broadleaf Books.