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Fields attempting to rescue indigenous traditions

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Regional

Fields attempting to rescue indigenous traditions

It is a sad fact that many Native American traditions are being lost. Because so many of these traditions are passed between generations in a verbal form, when older generations die oftentimes the traditions die along with them. This is why it is so important for researchers to record those traditions in forms that can be preserved. One scholar working to do just that is Greg Fields, professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Fields was born and grew up in Hawaii. He received his bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Utah, a master's degree in philosophy of education from Goddard College in Vermont, a second master's in philosophy from the University of New Mexico and his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Hawaii. It was from his father, who grew up in Montana, that Fields said he inherited his interest in and respect for native people. He eventually developed an interest in the religious ideas of the Native Americans of the Northwest coast.

"I started with recordings of oral traditions," said Fields, who soon began concentrating on medicine songs. "We are talking about a very broad category that incorporates songs that are used for all kinds of purposes including giving thanks for food, for the abundant blessings of the earth, for asking help, calling upon the forces of nature and the spirit to bless enterprises and to give thanks," Fields said.

The loss of indigenous cultures occurs due to a combination of factors, Fields said, including loss of natural habitats, economic deprivation and the disappearance of their languages. "We expect about

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90 percent of world languages to be extinct by the end of the current century and most of these are smaller languages spoken by indigenous groups," he said, adding that a special interest of his is in the preservation of children's songs.

"In old times kids didn't have the electronic forms of entertainment and education that we have today and kids spent more time with their elders, their parents, and their siblings. Singing was so much part of everything," Fields said, "including having a good relationship with the spirit and with the natural world and with your relatives so that you may be happy."

Another ancient tradition with which Fields has worked is classical yoga. He authored a book in 2001 titled "Religious Therapeutics," which focused on classical yoga Ayurvedic medicine, the ancient medical tradition of India, and Tantra.

In the book, Fields examined the traditions of India that he found to be heavily involved in what he called "liberation as healing." In developing this model, he examined broadly conceived relationships between spirituality and healing and religion and medicine.

"Yoga interested me a lot because many of us initially think of yoga as involving physical exercises," Field said, "but the classical yoga, the yoga of Pantanjali, which is one of the six classical systems



Rebecca Chamberlain/The Evergreen State College

Coast Salish elder Pauline Hillaire, of the Lummi Tribe of northwest Washington State, and SIUE Professor of Philosophy Greg Fields at a recording session in Seattle.

of Indian philosophy, is actually a philosophical system and a meditative practice and a means of spiritual liberation which includes study, philosophical reflections,

physical practices, discipline of the breath during meditation. It may include chant."

Yoga and its philosophical companion tradition called Samkhya stress that mat-

ter and spirit are the two fundamental substances or phenomena of the universe. Spirit or consciousness, according to this tradition, is really the reality and our physical body is real but not the higher person. "Yoga aims to help people obtain freedom from suffering which is what medicine aims to do to," said Fields.

Lately there has been some criticism at the way yoga is practiced, emphasizing the physical aspects rather than its spiritual roots. "I think a lot of people are aware that the point of the exercises is actually to calm what is called the vricetes," said Fields. "Vrict in Sanskrit means to turn, and vricete means the turnings of the mind."

There are many distractions – including memories and hopes and worries – that keep us from a pure clear concentration on what is most essential, said Fields, who offered a clear way to deal with them.

"Meditation certainly helps people to reduce those turnings of the mind and achieve a more calm and more peaceful state of what is called Ekagrata, or pointed concentration," Fields said. "I teach it in my classrooms or I advocate that students practice it in order to be more successful in their participation in a lecture or discussion, in their doing their chemistry homework for more successful concentration and action."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.