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8 Things You Should Know About Two Spirit People



Tony Enos at Oceti Sakowin in front of the Two-Spirit Nation camp.

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Two Spirit has been present for countless generations that predate LGBTQ terminology.

When attempting to explain the concept of **Two Spirit** people in Indian country, many people may visualize images of Unicorns and Rainbows, Donna Summers and Seventies disco balls. Try to explain the concept of Two Spirit outside Indian country, and you may as well throw in war bonnets and glitter.

The term Two Spirit has been present in Native communities for countless generations that predate LGBTQ terminology. For generations, Two Spirit Native culture went underground to avoid detection and persecution.

Today the Two Spirit movement has been negatively affected by rumor, gossip, the tyranny of western religion, and an all-around lack of information.

Here are eight misconceptions and/or things you should know about Two Spirit people that may help foster a better understanding of the Two Spirit community.

Two Spirit is not a contemporary “new-age” movement

While the term Two Spirit was coined in 1990 In Winnipeg, Canada as a means of unifying various gender identities and expressions of Native American/First Nations/Indigenous individuals, the term is not a specific definition of gender, sexual orientation or other self-determining catch-all phrase, but rather an umbrella term.

Two Spirit people have both a **male and female spirit within them** and are blessed by their Creator to see life through the eyes of both genders.

The term does not diminish the tribal-specific names, roles and traditions nations have for their own Two Spirit people. Examples of such names are the *winkte* among the Lakota and the *nadleeh* among the Navajo people.

These names and roles go back to a time before western religion. Two Spirit is not a “New Age” movement, but rather a reclamation of Two Spirit’s rightful place in Native culture.

We have proof of Two Spirit individuals in historical photos



A historical image of Two Spirit Native people.

A quick google search will render black and whites from decades ago with Two Spirit tribal members from various nations, such as We’wha, a very well-known and documented Two Spirit of the Zuni people, who crossed over in 1896.

Gay is not an interchangeable term with Two Spirit



Two-Spirit Dancers prepare, from the film *Two Spirits*

Being a gay native is oftentimes confused with being Two Spirit. While the two may have parallels and intersections, they are not the same. Gay specifically is about attraction to a person of the same sex. Two Spirit is more about the embodiment of two genders residing within one person.

A Two Spirit person may be gay, but a gay person is not necessarily Two Spirit. Claiming the role of Two Spirit is to take up the spiritual responsibility that the role traditionally had. Walking the red road, being for the people and our children/youth, and being a guiding force in a good way with a good mind are just some of those responsibilities.

The Two Spirit Road is a road of long held traditions, prayer and responsibility



Facebook BAAITS community Out of the 250 groups invited to participate in the 46th annual San Francisco LGBT Pride Parade, the Bay Area American Indian Two Spirits (BAAITS) parade participants were a crowd favorite.

Living as a Two Spirit is not all pride parades and hot pants. To be of service to our elders and youth with our very particular medicine is paramount. If we lose our traditions, our songs, our medicines, and our languages, and make no effort to restore what was lost, we doom ourselves.

In 2016 Two Spirit nation at Oceti Sakowin built the Cannonball River prayer pier, to be used for water ceremonies. Knee deep in mud on a cold 2016 November morning, the Two Spirit camp worked till sundown, so that our women and elders could have a place to pray the following morning. Actual events such a this are now part of our modern history as Two Spirit people and should never be minimized. As with all of Native culture, Two Spirit is also a living culture.

Two Spirit people held significant roles and were an integral part of a tribal social structures

Two Spirit people held a meaningful place in the sacred hoop. In many tribes Two Spirits were balance keepers. Thought to be the “dusk” between the male morning, and the female evening. As the role has evolved over time as necessary, the tradition is still alive. At Two Spirit gatherings and communal events, we can be found saying prayers that have needed to be said for decades, and fostering healing to all present. Restoring much needed balance to spirit.

Two Spirit Does Not Indicate Colonized Boxed Definitions of “L”, “G”, “B”, “T” or “Q”

We can be all of these, or none of these. A western mindset categorizes based on standards of ‘norm’ and ‘other’ in a kyriarchal (to rule or dominate) type structure. This mindset imposes a series of boxes to fit into (you’re either gay, you’re a lesbian, etc.) rather than being comfortable with gender fluidity, Two Spirit acknowledges the continuum of gender identity and expression.

Two Spirit is a term only appropriate for Native people



Marcel Petit Wanting to capture the essence of a Two Spirit relationship and decolonize homophobic attitudes, Saskatchewan-based producer, filmmaker, and photographer, Marcel Petit (Metis) created a photo essay of Two Spirit couple Warren Ibister (Ahtahkakoop Cree Nation) and Don Bear (Peter Ballantyne of Cree Nation) wearing traditional regalia in women's Cree style.

Two Spirit is a role that existed in a Native American/First Nations/Indigenous tribe for gender queer, gender fluid, and gender non-conforming tribal members. If you don't have a tribe, you can't claim that role.

Two Spirit People face compounded trauma's on top of inter-generational trauma

Imagine going from your nation where you're a celebrated Two Spirit individual, to a boarding school where you're assigned your gender, with any push back about it being beat out of you. For a lot of our boarding school survivors (*and those who didn't survive*), this was their reality. As a result,

there is still healing from much internalized socio-political stigma, phobia, and lateral oppression to be done in the Two Spirit community.

The resilience, strength, and sheer indomitable will of Two Spirit people is something to be shared with all nations. When you watch the sun rise every day, the sun set every evening, and the moon come out each night, remember the miracle of Two Spirit people. Not unnatural, not evil, or perverse, just all things in balance, and everything in divine order.

*Follow Tony Enos on Twitter at **@TonyEnos***