

Elder warns of devastation

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Oct 30/94

A Hopi elder speaking at the Woodland Cultural Centre over the weekend warned of ecological and social devastation if modern materialism is left unchecked.

Thomas Banyacya, an 85-year-old resident of Kykotsmovi — known to non-natives as Arizona — told his listeners to purify and prepare themselves.

Many of the Hopi prophecies have already come true, including the rise and fall of Germany and Japan during the Second World War, Banyacya explained.

Now, the elders talk of disaster caused by ecological carelessness and social strife.

Rampant development, pollution and spiritual bankruptcy are converging toward what the Hopi call Purification Day, also known as Judgment Day, he said.

At that time — Banyacya did not offer a specific date — the Great Spirit will rise up in a powerful display of nature. Good people will then be weeded out from the bad.

Banyacya said recent natural disasters such as the Los Angeles earthquake last winter are warning signs of things to come.

The elder has been travelling throughout Canada and the United States since 1948, spreading a message of peaceful co-existence and environmentalism. Donations collected after his talks help finance his work.

The Hopi people are charged with protecting Mother Earth and are aware that humans are inseparable from the natural world around them, Banyacya said.

A polluted world eventually poisons the polluter, and Banyacya reminded his listeners that even the rich can't eat money.

He and several spiritual leaders from across North America presented a similar message to United Nations delegates in New York in 1992. They urged the UN leaders to correct the many historical wrongdoings inflicted on native peoples.

Banyacya said Saturday that most politicians are passing laws to take everything from native peoples, and cited casino gambling as a direct threat to what First Nations have left.

On the brighter side, Banyacya said he's encouraged by increased cultural interest and awareness shown by young people. Native youth are now trying to revive rites, songs and language — traditions that were all but extinct in several areas just 40 years ago.

Grandmothers are especially obliged to preserve the native way of life by passing teachings and customs on to the young, Banyacya told the audience of about 40.

"He's journeyed here several times, and each time I'm overwhelmed," said Renee Thomas-Hill, a museum cultural interpreter at the centre. She is also encouraged by developments in and outside the Six Nations community.

"A lot (of people) are questioning what will happen tomorrow," she said. "Regardless of their nationality, people know something's coming."

This is demonstrated in native circles by people who sense they must be ready, she added.

"There's a lot of healing going on, in preparation for something to come. More and more are becoming concerned about promoting and preserving the language, and preserving our way of life."

Environmentalism is another growing interest, she said.

Jeb Powless, 30, a student teacher at the centre, said he thought Banyacya's talk was "very moving on a philosophical level" and it reinforced many of his own ideas.

But the former Six Nations resident admitted embarking on a crusade similar to Banyacya's seems unfeasible.

"I'd like to be doing that kind of a mission in life. But I'm working, caring for my daughter and getting educated.

"These are excuses, I guess."