

# Indigenous Peoples' Day: A Moment of Recognition, Reflection, and Reconnection

By Pam McElvane

Today, October 13th, we pause to recognize and celebrate **Indigenous Peoples' Day** — a day that honors the first people of this land, the Native Americans, whose presence and wisdom continue to shape the soul of America.

I'll admit, I've sometimes struggled to fully understand the scope of this holiday, is it a celebration, a remembrance, a reckoning? Maybe it's all three. But this year felt different.

I asked my proprietary version of AI to create an image to represent this day. I expected something symbolic, maybe a serene landscape or traditional art.

But what came back stopped me in my tracks. The image looked just like my great-great-grandmother, the same high cheekbones, soft eyes, and deep calm in her expression. My heart skipped a beat.

My great-great-grandmother was a full-blooded Cherokee woman who married a Black man. Because of that, the world labeled her "Negro." Her story, like so many others, was buried under the racial lines America drew lines that erased her identity, her culture, her truth.

That image reminded me of something I rarely talk about my *Native heritage*.

I often identify fully, proudly as a Black woman in America. That identity has shaped my experiences, my challenges, and my victories. But seeing that face, familiar yet distant, reminded me that my roots are even deeper and wider than I've allowed myself to remember.

I carry within me a lineage that bridges two powerful heritages African and Indigenous both of which have endured and overcome the unimaginable.

## A Shared Story of Resilience

When I think about my great-great-grandmother, I think about resilience. Both the Cherokee people and Black Americans have lived through displacement, enslavement, broken promises, and systems designed to silence them. Yet both cultures continue to sing, to pray, to build, to love, and to rise.

## **Indigenous Peoples' Day isn't just about history.**

It's about visibility. It's about truth-telling. It's about recognizing that before "America" was America, there were thriving nations here — complex, spiritual, community-centered societies that honored the land and the Creator.

These first people understood balance. They believed in stewardship, not ownership. They lived with a sense of interconnectedness that we, today, are still trying to reclaim.

## **Remembering the Forgotten**

That AI-generated image my great- great- grandmother's face looking back at me through technology reminded me how easily history gets rewritten or forgotten. Entire cultures were erased from textbooks. Generations were disconnected from their languages, their names, their spiritual practices.

Yet, even with all that loss, Indigenous people are still here. Thriving. Teaching. Reclaiming. It makes me think about how many of us carry hidden histories within us — lineages we've forgotten, or stories that were never told because they didn't "fit" into America's version of who we are.

My great- great -grandmother's Cherokee blood wasn't celebrated when I was growing up. But now I see that it's part of the mosaic that makes me who I am in the way I honor people's stories, my deep connection to the earth, and my belief that we are all interconnected not just socially, but spiritually.

## **Bridging the Divide**

There's something profoundly humbling about living at the intersection of two worlds — Black and Indigenous. Both lineages come from people who had everything taken from them yet somehow gave everything back to the world: music, art, faith, strength, love.

What if more of us leaned into that kind of shared humanity? What if we stopped separating ourselves by race, color, or class and instead celebrated the collective wisdom of our roots? Our differences aren't walls. They're windows. And through those windows, we see the beauty of what it means to be fully human.

## **Lessons from the First People**

This day reminds us that the first people of this land the Cherokee, Lakota, Navajo, Hopi, and hundreds of other nations, carried a sacred respect for balance.

They understood that every creature, every tree, every stream had purpose and spirit. That philosophy of interconnectedness is something we desperately need to rediscover today.

We live in a time where progress often means disconnect from each other, from the earth, from our own stories. But the first people teach us to return to harmony.

They teach us that progress isn't just about moving forward it's about remembering where we came from and who we are becoming.

### **A Call to Remember and Celebrate**

Today, as I honor Indigenous Peoples' Day, I do it with gratitude for the reminder that my great-great-grandmother's story still lives in me. Gratitude for the image that made me pause and remember. Gratitude for the first people of this land whose presence is still felt in the wind, the soil, the songs, and the stories.

Maybe that's what this day is really about **remembrance and reconnection**.

Because when we remember, we honor. And when we honor, we heal. This is a day not just for Indigenous people it's a day for all of us. A reminder that this land carries the spirits of those who came before us. That we walk on sacred ground every single day.

So I'll carry this reflection forward, letting it guide how I see, how I speak, how I lead. My great-great-grandmother's legacy and the legacy of all Indigenous people deserves that.

*To all who celebrate and remember today may we honor the first people of this land with truth, gratitude, and love.*

#IndigenousPeoplesDay #Heritage #Reflection #Resilience #Leadership #Inclusion  
#Storytelling

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