Have you thought about your worldview recently? Do you believe deep down everyone everywhere should think like you? We’ve all done it. We know it causes arguments with our mums, best friends and partners. But what if we’re talking ‘worldview’ on a culture-to-culture global scale? What then?

Look at these images. Do they have anything in common?
Remember James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*? If you do, you probably think the Mohican tribe disappeared long ago. Well, it didn’t. The Mohegans (as their tribal name should be spelt) are still around, still inhabiting their ancestral homeland of Mohegan Hill in Connecticut. The images above show a couple of their traditional dwellings alongside the iconic Mohegan Sun casino and resort. Constructed in the 1990s, the latter generates income that helps the tribe invest in preserving their culture and heritage.

For contemporary Mohegans, these contrasting images reflect the duality of their reality as an indigenous people living in what we might call a ‘modern’ society. It’s not an easy reality. The Mohegans’ continued existence was won at terrible cost – a cost replicated in blood and tears by North American indigenous groups mile for mile and state for state across the Union.

It’s too simple to say white European settlers rampaged across the American continent purely due to lust for land and economic gain. Recently, thumbing through a few volumes in the Centre, I discovered a far more complex picture. As Roger Nichols puts it in *Indians in the United States and Canada. A Comparative History* (published 1998), “What in fact happened is that several societies with widely differing values and practices collided. The result was a vast tragedy.” Indeed.

Worldview. That’s the key. What do I mean? Have a think about the following.

In *Medicine Trail. The Life and Lessons of Gladys Tantaquidgeon* (published 2000), Melissa Jayne Fawcett introduces her great aunt. A full-blood Mohegan, Gladys lived from 1899 to 2005. On the one hand, as a child she was schooled to be a ‘Medicine Woman’ by her female elders (nanus), learning tribal ‘good medicine’ and lore. Nanus over the centuries had been protectors of Mohegan identity during times of cultural persecution, and Gladys was in touch with personal
memories stretching back to the 1830s, enriched by generation upon generation of inherited wisdom. On the other hand, in the 1920s Gladys assisted Frank Speck (a student of Franz Boas, the ‘father’ of modern anthropology) at the University of Pennsylvania, specialising in collecting the lore of other tribes and interpreting it for a sceptical ‘scientific’ audience. This must have caused a dilemma.

Gazing at her beloved Mohegan Hill, Gladys the Medicine Woman communed with the *Makiawisug* (Little People of the Woodlands), whom Mohegan believe influence the elements and inhabit the features of the landscape. Dewy cobwebs on the grass are their laundry, and their moccasins are Lady’s Slipper flowers. But her academic training would have pulled Gladys in quite another direction, taking seriously as it did only the vision of rocks and plants as objects to codify and exploit. From this perspective, Mohegan Hill’s geographic features were mere inanimate barriers to creating ‘civilisation’ in the form of farms or urban dwellings...

A fundamental gulf between worldviews surrounded Mohegan Hill. It wasn’t new. Mohegans remember the Pequot War of the 1630s. Widely recognised as brutal far beyond necessity, the English Puritan scorched-earth policy liquidated the once-strong Pequots by extermination and
enslavement. Mohegans survived because their leader Uncas had transferred allegiance from his Pequot allies to the English.

What could explain the intensity of this orgy of destruction? In *The Pequot War* (published 1996), Alfred Cave suggests – you’ve guessed it – a fundamental clash of worldviews. The Puritan mind, unlike that of the Native American, was formed by concepts of the duality between ‘good’ and ‘evil’, God and the Devil, ‘the saved’ (or ‘elect’) and ‘the damned’. Persecuted in Europe, they fled to the New World to establish God’s ‘City on a Hill’. If the Puritans were the ‘saved’, what then were the indigenous peoples, whose lifestyles were so unfamiliar and whose beliefs did not embrace the Christian God?

Even before they crossed the Atlantic, the Puritans were predisposed to fear that the ‘savagery’ of the untamed ‘wilderness’ might at any moment snuff out the civilisation established by the ‘elect’. Economic and political intrigue might have fed the conflict with the Pequot, but only worldview can explain the particular character of the violence that ensued.

So-called ‘Indian Wars’ litter American history. Suppression of indigenous religion and ways of life went hand in hand with the westward march of the frontier. The Mohegan nanus succeeded in clinging on to Mohegan Hill in the 1830s only because of their insistence on founding the Mohegan Church. The controversial Indian Removal Act of 1830 decreed the transportation of non-assimilated Native American nations away from east of the Mississippi River. In 1838 the Cherokee were the last to go. Thousands died walking in severe winter conditions from Georgia to what is now Oklahoma in the west. This ‘Trail of Tears’ was a fitting symbol for the suffering to come, as mile by mile the frontier advanced...
What about Gladys? She chose to return to Mohegan Hill and her family’s Tantaquidgeon Museum, founded in 1931 to share the beauty of indigenous religion and artefacts rather than the disparaging judgments pronounced by the era’s ‘experts’. The tribal documents and history inherited by Gladys from her nanus helped gain Federal recognition in the 1990s for the Mohegan as a sovereign Indian Nation.

Gladys brought together in one person the knowledge and perspectives of vastly differing worldviews. From her we can learn to be open to seeing others for what they really are rather than what we think they ought to be.

The Centre has a number of resources related to Native American history and culture. Among the volumes I thumbed through are: Alfred A Cave, *The Pequot War* (published 1996); Ella Cara Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (first published 1944); Vine Deloria Jr, *Custer Died for Your Sins. An Indian Manifesto* (published 1969); Melissa Jayne Fawcett, *Medicine Trail. The Life and Lessons of Gladys Tantaquidgeon* (published 2000); Caroline Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis. Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (published 2003); Roger L Nichols, *Indians in the United States and Canada. A Comparative History* (published 1998). You’ll find these really absorbing. If you’ve got any more energy after that, there’s lots more to read. Let me know how you get on...