Aho, darixga. Baxoje min ke, mahto wokigo. I am a member of the Ioway tribe, a people descended from the makers of the Effigy Mounds of the American Midwest. I took up anthropology in the early 1980s to help preserve our tribal language and traditions. I became interested in archaeology, but I was brought up to be morally opposed to doing it. After talking with my elders, who thought it was necessary to understand archaeology and its growing impact on native communities, I agreed to explore archaeology and set up some rules. I would never deal with burials, and I would leave if they were found. And I would always first make offerings at the site, to the guardians of the place, to explain who I was and why I was there, and to leave if or when I was not welcome.

I worked for several years as a field tech (also known as a “shovel bum”) on many sites in the 1980s and 1990s, from California to Virginia, prehistoric and historic sites, both Euro-American and Native. I worked for private firms and for the feds. I always consulted my elders in my choices and actions.

I ran into a peculiar gulf in archaeology between prehistoric and historic archaeology. I remember working on a historic site in the east, that when someone found a chert flake or sherd of Woodland pottery amongst the broken glass and square nails, the crew chief would take a quick look and flip it over their shoulder into the backdirt with the remark, “Abo-shit.” I also remember working on prehistoric sites in the west, that while lithics and pictographs were drooled over, historic cabins were often “managed with a match.”

Based upon my experiences, there are a few observations I would share with anyone trying to put together outreach efforts to involve Native communities with archaeology.

It is true that Native people often have conflicts with archaeology, but if you really look at what’s going on, the conflicts usually boil down to: (1) respect for burials and (2) questions of origins, with Kennewick Man as an example of both. Burials will always be problematic, for both prehistoric and historic archaeology. The great thing about focusing on historic archaeology
in outreach to indigenous communities is that the question of distant origins has no part. That divisive issue can be avoided; with historic archaeology the recent past becomes the focus, a past in which it is easier to find common ground.

The separation between what is “historic” and what is “prehistoric” is not always clear-cut. How does oral history fit in? But also, what about all the written history by Native peoples, either in indigenous scripts and languages, or in the colonial languages? For some tribes, the boundary between “prehistoric” and written history begins 500 years ago whereas for others it really only begins a little over 100 years ago. “Contact” and “pre-European contact” have much more utility and acceptance in the community.

The whole idea of what is acceptable “history” or “oral history” (not just to archaeologists but also to various tribes with differences in their viewpoints) is a mire, which is perhaps best sidestepped. Even dreams can provide the basis for workable and testable hypotheses—because scientific proof comes through scientific testing, not from the inspiration for the hypothesis.

Besides the ideas of “prehistory” and “history,” using common archaeological terms can also be tricky. Do not use the word “abandoned.” Although no one may reside at a site anymore, it may not be “abandoned” at all. Plant, animal, and mineral resources may still be gathered, or prayers made and graves maintained. Because everyone is in the living room watching television, do you call the kitchen or the bedrooms “abandoned?” Time has a different meaning to many, and movement is made freely between the rooms of a landscape “house.” Sites should be considered as activity areas on a larger archaeological landscape, and the unseen and unmarked often are as important as the seen and the marked. People may have been pushed out by neighbors or by federal policy, but Grandma’s house will always be Grandma’s house. Such places are not “abandoned,” though they may no longer have residents at least ones that can be easily seen.

The word “ruin” is also not a good one to use. Everything has a life span, a life cycle of birth, growth, maturity, dotage, and death. This is not only true for people, but also for places. The indigenous way is to respect that cycle, not to interfere. Just because Grandma isn’t what she was at age 20, or even 40, do you call her a “ruin?” Just use the term “site” or “structure,” “village” or “town.”

Native peoples easily accept the question of stewardship, but the idea of what constitutes stewardship may differ. In many cases in traditional communities, preservation in a frozen state may not be feasible or desirable. One respects Grandma by visiting and loving her—and after she passes on, by remembering her in stories and visiting her grave, not by sticking her full of tubes and dipping her in varnish.

The word “trashpile,” especially if human remains are associated, is a problem, as if the person was considered “garbage.” The term “trashpile” is often used in Puebloan sites for certain features containing remnant elements. The ashes, sherds, and detritus of a person’s life are a part of that life. The dead are