

Rural educators speak often of the need to respect the rural culture - to not impose urban solutions on rural problems. Differences infinitely more immense appear when we examine education through the eyes of Native Americans.

Rural Education from a Native American Perspective

by Jacques Seronde

There are today 1 million Native American people in the United States, living on over 400 rural reservations which comprise nearly 53 million acres. These tribal people and lands are extraordinarily diverse: 200 languages are still spoken by peoples whose traditional cultures evolved in environments ranging from arctic barrens to hardwood and rain forests, from windswept tall-grass prairies to mountainous plateaus and hot salt-scrub deserts.

We cannot learn much from our history and social studies texts about the Native American peoples. They were first overwhelmed in battle, then systematically exploited and oppressed by a not-yet-ended succession of government "Indian agents," traders, missionaries, and educators. Perhaps we expected that by now they all would have become completely assimilated by our melting-pot culture, leaving only a few names of states and rivers as their legacy. It may be disconcerting to realize that the Native American cultures yet endure, despite poverty and social distress unequaled in the United States. Educational statistics for Native Americans are grim: ninth grade median educational level, 66 percent high school drop-out rate, 1 percent college completion rate, and almost half of the population 18 or younger (U.S. Census, 1980).

For Native Americans "education" in American society started at the point of a gun. Children were forcibly taken from their parents by army and police, and sent to government or church-run boarding schools hundreds of miles from home. Only 10 years ago, students at such schools were punished for speaking their own languages. The guiding principle was that the Native cultures were inherently barbarous and pagan—cause only for shame.

No people can sustain such systematic and brutal assault on their children's minds and spirits without the development and internalization of severe psychic confusion and emotional stress. What may surprise us is that the Native American peoples have survived, refusing to surrender the

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last inner foundations of their cultures and values. The irony now, in this time of crisis for the identity, direction and vitality of our own national rural society, is that we have much to learn from our Elder Brother on this land.

Underlying the great diversity of Native cultures are a number of fundamental precepts held in common, the warp of a rich and vibrant multi-colored weave. All living beings are related one to another, sharing a common dependence on the sacred elements of the Creation—our Mother Earth, the sun, water, and air—and a common interdependence in the web of life. What we think of as inanimate matter or elemental forces of nature—the rocks, streams, seas and clouds—are known to be imbued with the Great Spirit and to partake of life processes.

Within the circle of being uniting all life forms, there are no sharp fragmentary distinctions drawn between art, medicine, psychology and religion, nor between education and life as a whole. When the origins, nature and interrelationships of all beings are understood, every aspect of our lives becomes a process of performing the right act in the right way at the right time. All of life is a sacred ceremony; every word and gesture, a prayer. Understanding, learning and knowledge are contained and transmitted by all life forms and by the elemental foundation of the Creation. The earth herself, the land, the sun and fire, the dawn breeze, the flowing waters, all our plant and winged and four-footed relatives—these are our first teachers.

It is indeed a very long way from this world-view to the representative reservation classroom. Consider only the gulf between what a child absorbs at home from a traditional healing ceremony grounded in respect for the sacred unity of life, and conventional school curricula in which reductionist views of "biology," "chemistry" and "physics" are taught without any sense of the greater unity underlying these fragmentary descriptions. Consider, too, our civilization's continuing despoilation of earth, water, air, and even the power of the sun, in the light of the Native perspective that teaches that our every decision must take into consideration its impacts on the seventh generation to follow us. It is not surprising that so many Native youth find themselves bewildered and alienated from the school systems to which they are subjected. For Native American peoples, a major part of the solution lies in the articulation of a Native philosophy of education, and in the expression of that philosophy in Native-designed and operated institutions where education is re-integrated with life as a whole—and is directly responsive to the aspirations and needs of Native communities and nations. Native community-controlled schools and colleges do not meet the needs so long as they continue merely to gild non-Native philosophies and curricula with smatterings of crafts and "culture" classes.

Let us look at the question of interrelationships between education and economic development—now of national concern to rural educators—from a Native American perspective. First, what is "economic" development? We start from the origins of the word, the Greek "oikonomima" or "household order." An economy thus deals with the order, or balance and harmony, of a set of interrelated parts to a defined whole. For a land-based people and culture, the "household" in question can be no other than the Earth herself, and more immediately, the land upon which the people live. In the Native view, economic development then is the ordering in balance and harmony of our relationships with all our relatives with whom we share this earth-household.

A clear way to visualize the land as the basis of economy is to consider the watershed as a natural geographic unit. From the highest ground, often forested and moun-

tainous, down through woodlands and rangelands to the low-lying alluvial valleys, the watershed forms a set of inter-related and interdependent environments, each with its distinctive micro-climate, rocks, soils, vegetation and animal life, and united by the life-giving waters coursing above and below the land surface. When this "household" is disordered, all life suffers. Overgrazed and clear-cut uplands no longer retain rainfall to nourish plants and animals. Sheet and gully erosion scour the land of fertile top-soil and drain water tables from under valley floors. Pour chemical wastes on the ground on one part of the watershed and they reappear in the ground water downstream. Eradicate the woodland homes of the foxes and ferrets, and farm fields are taken over by prairie dogs. Such relationships, only now being tracked by our science, have long been intuited, observed and respected by Native cultures.

Economic development in Native communities must be grounded on the foundation principles of reverence for all life, and recognition that all life depends equally on the freely given earth, air, water and sunlight. The primary task for Native families and communities is to re-assert responsibility for defining and articulating their own aspirations and visions for their future. This responsibility has been too long abdicated to more-or-less well-meaning experts from the dominant society, with the result that the traditional Native institutions for social balance, economic justice and education have largely atrophied from disuse. At the core of economic development planning for Native communities lies the process of participatory goal and objective-setting. This in turn requires understanding and affirmation of who the people are, where they are coming from and where they are at present.

Once this conceptual foundation has been strengthened, it is possible to look again at the land, for indications not only of potential livelihoods but also of specific learning, knowledge and skills needed to attain such livelihoods. The educational curricula emerge from the earth herself, from the first Teacher. Think again about the watershed, and list the fields of knowledge needed to restore the productivity of this region. We can start with climatology and meteorology (including atmospheric physics), geology and hydrology;

then forestry, wildlife management, range management, animal science, soil science, botany, agronomy and entomology; and to interface with the external economy, finance, business management, and marketing.

For each of these fields of knowledge, listed as separate disciplines in the non-Native world, there is a corresponding body of information and knowledge in Native American traditional culture—each with its clearly-defined relationship to the others and to the whole of life. Pieces of this knowledge have certainly been lost, as elders have died without passing on all that they knew. However, the first Teachers still wait patiently, and the means of learning from them have not been lost. The possibility is open for the building of a re-integrative learning process, combining the detailed analyses of non-Native science with the wholistic understanding of the traditional Native world view.

The vision unfolds. Imagine a school where, first, the children learn to read and write from their own people in their own language. Imagine that learning of reading and writing from the transcribed oral wisdom, myths and history of the people themselves. Imagine now a curriculum developed from the parents' own perceptions of the life they aspire to for their children: a life of harmony and happiness, a life of being grounded, secure and productive in the land of their ancestors. That life is sustained by the land; the curriculum teaches the children about the sacred unity of life in all its diverse and beautiful aspects. Classes are the woods and fields, the deserts and mountains, the spring swelling of seeds and the fall contracting of plant-life back into the earth. Books and the wealth of audio-visual aids serve to relate what is seen and felt and observed in the immediate local area to the region and world at large, to the experiences and wisdom of other peoples in other lands. And as skills and knowledge develop, nurtured by parents, elders and teachers, the young people move gently and steadily to assume their own ways of response to the Creation's invitation to join in the work.

To paraphrase Sitting Bull: let us put our hearts and minds together to see how we shall make learning for ourselves and our children once again a joyous affirmation and building of the life we choose.