

Unshackled by Visions and Values

Martin Brokenleg

The author uses the case of a troubled Native American youth to demonstrate the effects of cultural conflict, alienation, anomie, and contemporary urban life. This article also shows how traditional Native American values can create a vision for a better future for our youth.

Kevin was brought in shackles and handcuffs by a staff member who clearly demonstrated his authority by keeping a firm grip on the boy's shoulder (see Note). The escort asked if I wanted the cuffs left on Kevin, and I said they were not necessary. The cuffs were unlocked and the staff member left, stating tersely that he would be back at the end of the session. I asked Kevin to join the counseling group and come sit by me in the only unoccupied chair. The court had ordered him to attend my counseling group.

Kevin is a typical Native American kid, 10 years old and of average height, but thin. He has black hair and deep, dark eyes, but he neither smiles nor looks up. Kevin resides at a juvenile center where he has been diagnosed as having a behavioral problem. At times it has taken five staff members to hold him down, and he has been handcuffed to the bed frame in his cell. He has earned none of the reward system perks. During this first group session for Native American kids, Kevin says nothing, but I know he is carefully observing the other children. By the end of the session, I notice that Kevin is leaning against my arm with his shoulder and his head. I do not verbalize my observation.

In the following months, I learned more about this troubled youth. The police first took him to the detention center because his mother had reported that he threatened her with a board. Kevin shared that his mother had been drinking and she had threatened him verbally and with her fists doubled. She chased him and shouted profanities at him. When she cornered him, he was frightened and grabbed the board; she then called the police. I recalled his



Pen-and-ink drawing by Charles M. when he was 12 years old. Charles is a student at Lawrence Hall Youth Services in Chicago.

account when I met her later. She stood at least 6 feet tall and outweighed me by 50 pounds. No wonder he had been afraid!

After several months, Kevin became a leader in the group. He would chide others if they were disruptive and would tease the quieter participants into speaking. He would refocus the group if it was getting off task. He was intensely curious about his tribe's philosophy, rituals, and customs. Not once did he challenge me, a Native American man, although he would bristle when speaking about White teachers and administrators. Kevin embodies many of the themes Native American children and others from diverse backgrounds face at the beginning of the 21st century.

A Vision of Hope

My Lakota (Sioux) nation has a tradition of visions and vision seeking. Generally, a vision inspires one to renewed purpose and hope, giving power and strength to live out that vision. The viewer is neither mystically transported to Never-Never Land nor experiencing hallucination. Having a vision is simply a new way of seeing things in this world as they ought to be. It is seeking the essentials that allow a life to be lived well. Applying these principles to Native American children offers a new level of understanding, a new way of seeing these kids as they really are. A new vision of Native American children is not some far-fetched fabricated dream; it is grounded in the real conditions and circumstances encountered by these youth as they enter the 21st century. For youth workers to implement that vision will not be unduly difficult, because power and momentum come with the achievement of the vision. Their new insight will be attractive because it will inspire hope. Adults committed to working for the full development of these youth will be drawn to this work in large numbers.

What is the reality from which the new vision of Native American children is formed? *Alienation, urbanization, cultural conflict, and anomie* are four serious problems confronting Native American children and families. From these four realities emerge four visionary responses: *belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity*.

From Alienation to Belonging

Among certain Native American populations, it is estimated that more than one third of all children were in out-of-family residential care in the early 1990s (OEO director, personal communication, May 19, 1991). The vast majority of those children experienced neglect from parents who were so preoccupied with their own personal problems they could not adequately provide for their own children. All too often, parental chemical dependency contributed to the decision to remove the child from the family—the ultimate alienation.

A growing number of children with behavioral disorders have bonding problems. Deprived of close parental care, such children do not form the psychological union that results in a disciplined personality. The Indian Child Welfare Act of the 1970s was designed to stem the removal of children from the Native American environment, but some are still placed outside their communities. What happens as they grow up and attempt to heal the alienation forced upon them?

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My mother, 80-year-old Anna Brokenleg, lives on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. With tears, she shared with me a conversation she had with a young Native American man she did not know. He had been adopted as a child and had driven to the reservation he suspected was his home. Picking her rural house at random, he knocked on the door and asked if Anna knew anything about him or who his family might be. “He was dressed well, and he was so handsome,” she reported. “There was no way I would know anything like that, and I felt so bad for him.” He knew he belonged somewhere with his own people.

Belonging is the antithesis of *alienation*. A visionary future will give Native American children a strong sense of belonging with their people. Albert White Hat, an honored professor of Native American Studies at Sinte Gleska University in Mission, South Dakota, reported that ever larger numbers of Lakota young people are returning to their communities in search of place and identity (personal communication, September 17, 1995). Kevin, the Lakota boy described in the opening paragraphs of this article, knows that his identity and place emanate from his tribal people. It is only there that he does not exhibit hostility or belligerence. Clearly a vision for the future of Native

American children and youth must tie them to the places and groups from which they ultimately gain their sense of belonging—their tribes and peoples.

Mastering the Challenges of Urbanization

The relocation programs of the 1950s urged Native Americans between the ages of 18 and 35 to leave their reservations and move to cities. With promises of jobs and housing, large Native American populations migrated to urban areas. The Bureau of Indian Affairs (OEO director, personal communication, September 1995) estimated that as much as 85% of Native Americans were living in large cities during the early 1990s. All too often, life in the city provides Native American youth with a profound experience of being a powerless minority. In the new vision, life in these cities will instead provide mastery.

Survival in cities is difficult for Native American youth and their families, who must learn to cope with strange and complex institutions. Attending large schools, developing respectful social lives, and participating in work and urban institutions all require profound skills usually unknown to tribal children. They must develop both a solid mastery of urban life and a functioning tribal life. More than just adapting to urban ways, these youth must develop a lifestyle that enhances their sense of self and provides great life satisfaction. For example, Native American populations have unique health problems and will benefit from a healthy, holistic lifestyle as embodied in the philosophies of most Native American nations.

Native American youth in the 21st century must have a significant mastery of the environments and social settings in which they live, especially as it relates to achievement in school. Experiencing mastery will lead to satisfying work and to social lives with integrity. A life experience of mastery is the visionary response to the reality of urbanization.

From Conflict to Independence

Because of the cultural conflicts that have existed in the past, Native American communities have a tenuous relationship with U.S. institutions. Schools have been the site of most conflicts for Native American youth in the past 100 years. The price of success in the early residential schools was sacrificing self and culture. Long-term residency away from their families and tribal communities cost many youth their cultural heritage and deprived them of parenting and family skills: They had no models of how adults and children relate in a healthy Native American family. Out of this cultural reality emerges the third response of the new vision for Native American youth—a new sense of independence.

A sense of independence is growing among Native peoples worldwide. From Maori gathering places in New Zealand to Hawaiian communities, from Alaskan villages to Canadian Native communities, and on every rural reservation and urban Native American community in the United States, a renewed sense of allegiance to their own unique identity is the foundation of Native independence. In Canadian Native communities, healing wounds of residential schools has been a concern for some years now. Native Canadians are challenging churches to apologize for the negative experiences their children faced years ago. Native Hawaiians call the government to task for their cultural and land losses in the last century. Maori communities in New Zealand work to reclaim their language and cultural inheritance. On the United States mainland, Native Americans labor to operate their own institutions and run their own affairs.

Cultural and religious traditionalists are rekindling the languages, customs, and sense of self missing in many Native youth. Efforts include reestablishing religious ceremonies, fostering language development, and applying traditional philosophical principles to contemporary conditions. Central to all of these efforts must be programs to strengthen families and youth, because families are the foundation of true independence.

Ethnic enculturation has served other populations and will strengthen Native American communities as well. Nearly 20 years ago, Jewish efforts included developing manuals of Jewish life to teach the religious and cultural traditions that were in danger of being lost to Jewish youth. Now, the World Wide Web contains electronic manuals of Native American history and culture designed for educational use by young Native Americans. All such efforts nurture the sense of self-responsibility. Any new vision of Native American youth and children must foster this spirit of independence.

From Anomie to Generosity

Non-Native American scholars had long thought of tribal peoples as having cultural deficits. Defining “progress” in an ethnocentric fashion, they assumed their own civilization represented the apex of development. Aborigines were different; therefore, they obviously were underdeveloped. The flawed main tenet in this thinking was that all societies move toward the same goals (Bucko, 1995). Of course, this is not the reality of U.S. society. From the beginning, life in this country has been multicultural, multilingual, and multiethnic. Tribal traditions respect diversity at all levels but also permit realistic interactions. Native American children, the inheritors of this tradition, have much to offer and can experience generosity in giving this tradition away.

Perhaps the most influential offering is a new way to think about values. Native American communities see all life as intertwined with spiritual importance. In mainstream public life there is frequently a reluctance to speak of spiritual things in order not to violate the principles of separation of church and state. Native Americans speak of spiritual dynamics without forcing a particular religion. The focus is on the human spirit and the spirit of all other things. Attending to the inner world is a birthright of Native American youth.

In my Lakota language, the word for child is *wakanheja*. The etymology of this word comes from *wakan*, sacred, and *najin*, to stand. Thus, the child is one who stands in the sacred. Using such words acknowledges the greatness of children, who have much to give. Tapping the generosity of a Native American child empowers that child to share an inherited spiritual legacy and to experience deep nurturance. The fourth part of the new vision replaces anomie with the spirit of generosity.

Reclaiming the Vision

I speak of Native American children, but the vision applies to all of our children who are living in the hazardous ecology of modern society. Felix Cohen (1942) once described the minority experience in the United States with the metaphor of the miner's canary. Miners used the caged canary to test air quality. If the canary died, the air was deemed unsuitable in the mine. Minority populations are like that canary, providing an early warning that society is unfit for human existence. Today, the many problems of Native American children and those from other cultural groups are the miner's canary signaling that danger is at hand. Still, we remain profoundly hopeful about the future of our children. Even though schools create problems for their children, most Native American parents believe in education and hope that this experience will be a source of renewal.

Our tribal leaders speak of this generation that will enter the 21st century as the "seventh generation." According to prophecies, the seventh generation will return Native American life to its previous glory. In the expectant hope for this generation we see the vision: The seemingly ordinary is transfigured into something new and extraordinary.

Sitting Bull, the Lakota leader of the 1860s, was quoted as saying, "Let us put our minds together and see what kind of life we can make for our children." When we put our minds to the task of our time, we face the four realities of alienation, urbanization, culture conflict, and anomie. From these conditions, four responses arise: belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Taken together,

these four responses become a new vision, a new emerging force that will show all our children how to be sacred beings, the carriers of hope in a complex world.

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NOTE

Pseudonyms are used for all youth names.

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