

Native American Perspectives on Generosity

Martin Brokenleg

This is the last in a series of articles on the four elements of the Circle of Courage. Traditional Native American child development practices have created environments of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. As with the previous articles, Dr. Brokenleg sets the theme with a discussion of generosity from a Native American perspective.

Some years ago, a graduate student at one of our South Dakota universities did a comparative study of generosity among young Native American and White boys, comparing the responses of these boys upon receiving a gift of two candy suckers. As might be expected, in both groups the youngsters put the first sucker in their mouths. What happened to the second sucker demonstrates deep cultural differences concerning the value and purpose of material possessions:

- The Native American boys handed the extra sucker to a nearby child who did not have one. This is an expression of the internalized cultural principle that the purpose of possessions is to share them with others.
- The White boys took their second sucker and put it in their pocket, presumably saving it for future consumption. This also expresses a cultural principle—an individual has to watch out for “Number 1.”

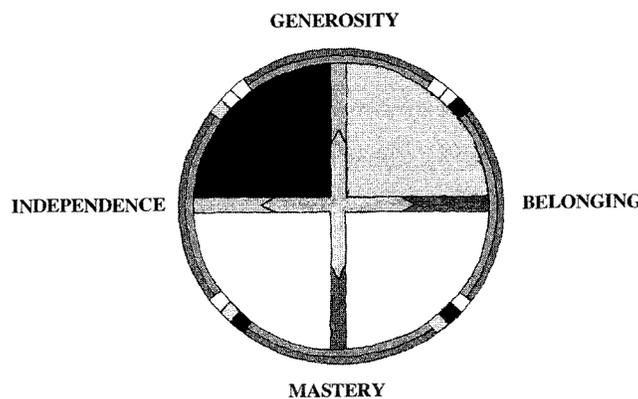
We were taught much about generosity in my Lakota society because it was so molded into our social system. For example, if you were visiting someone and you openly admired a possession of theirs, they would probably give it to you. Giving in this way would make them happy. Of course, real giving entails sacrifice—if it doesn't cost you something, it is not generosity. Thus, if I were to give away that necktie that Aunt Mil-

dred gave me last Christmas—the one that I was never going to wear in public—it would not be generosity, it would be recycling!

In many tribal cultures, giving away possessions is part of an entire way of life—one that creates powerful social bonds. Young children learn that it is not always easy to give things away. I remember my mother telling me that friends were coming to visit who had two young boys, and I would need to find two things to give them when they came. I remember standing in my room, looking around, trying to decide which things I could possibly give up. I also knew the rule that what I treasured the most was the first thing I must give away. By the time the friends arrived, I had selected my favorite shirt and favorite toy to give them so they would feel welcome.

Recently on our reservation, we had a memorial feast and *give away* in memory of my elderly parents, who had both died about a year ago. Thousands of people came. In the year of mourning, we had been accumulating star quilts, Pendleton blankets, and beaded items—all the possessions we could possibly muster.

At the feast we gave them all away to honor everyone who had supported us in our time of need. I have seen people give away literally every possession they had except the clothes they were wearing, secure in the knowledge that relatives would always care for one another. The most frequently repeated saying in our Lakota language is *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which means “we are all relatives.”



The Circle of Courage

What is the value of such overflowing generosity? Anyone who has been through a crisis can tell you that your first casualty is your sense of self, even if you didn't cause the crisis. Nearly every child whose parents are going through a divorce will believe that it is his or her fault that this is happening. When real generosity occurs, the recipient feels nurtured and healing begins. In the process of reciprocal generosity, the community reaches out to those in need; the person befriended responds with generosity as well.

Unfortunately, not many examples of such total generosity exist in a largely materialistic Western culture because of a preoccupation with acquiring possessions. This stockpiling of stuff is related to several factors, such as the following:

1. In a highly individualistic culture, persons can become socially remote from one another—"Lone Rangers" who have to fend for themselves.
2. Excessive materialism results when a person who lacks human love seeks a substitute, albeit a poor one, in "toys."
3. The phenomenon of conspicuous consumption is fueled by the cultural thinking error that flaunting wealth is a testimony of a person's worth.

Some individuals have suggested that the give-away ceremonies may actually be a form of "conspicuous generosity" based on less than truly altruistic motivations. Although this may sometimes be the case, genuine generosity is not an ego display. My father was the first Native American to be ordained as an Episcopal priest on the Rosebud Reservation. His parishioners lived in 1 of the 10 poorest counties in the United States. After visiting in their homes, he would often say a "departure prayer" and then shake hands while unobtrusively transferring to them a large-denomination bill. Just as he avoided making a show of his generosity, so also the recipient did not have to fawn in obeisance. Sharing is just what relatives do.

We were in South Africa a few years ago, just as the apartheid laws were being lifted, to speak at one of the first interracial youth worker conferences in that country. The attendees were several hundred youth professionals, and it was obvious that one of the White participants was distressed at being required to listen to a person of color speaking from a position of authority. Her racial discomfort was telegraphed by periodic, critical comments about the ideas we were sharing. When we were talking about generosity, I said that the Lakota say one should be able to give away anything "without the heart pounding," an idiom equivalent to "without your pulse quickening." Suddenly, the woman interrupted: "I really like your earrings." In our Lakota society, the tradition is to pierce the ears of a 2-year-old child at the Sun Dance because it

shows how the ears are open to spiritual teaching. The Lakota earrings I was wearing were the ones my parents had given me as I was leaving on this trip because they were terrified that I was going to a nation that had abused people of color. The conference participants were obviously deeply embarrassed by the woman's statement. Of course, I followed our custom. Walking to where the woman sat, I removed my earrings and handed them to her. Holding her new gift, the now-embarrassed recipient echoed my earlier comment: "Oh, now my heart is pounding." I told her, "It is just joy," and walked back to the front of the room. If I had been a completely generous person, I would have left it at that. But when I returned to the front of the auditorium, I couldn't resist saying, "Now, I hope that no one admires my trousers."

While we were on our way out to the parking lot, a White teacher standing by the corner of the school building asked us to come over. Through tears, she said, "I saw that you gave your earrings away." I replied, "Well, the lady commented about them, and I felt I needed to do that." The teacher said, "She is always doing things like that." Then she showed me her earrings and remarked, "These were my mother's and she wore them the last 2 years she was alive. They are very precious and have been handed down from relative to relative." She gave them to me. I still have them in a little box on my dresser so I can be reminded of her generosity. Perhaps some day I will find the right occasion to give them away.

Behavioral scientists are now discovering principles of generosity that tribal peoples have known for thousands of years. Altruism is inborn, and the rudiments of empathy are apparent even in a newborn. Have you ever noticed that when one child in a hospital nursery begins to cry, the child next to him or her starts to cry as well? Even if all the child can do is cry, it is still a form of generosity. If a preschooler falls down, another one wants to help him or her up. Last year, an entire town in our area was leveled by a tornado. The governor sent out a plea for a few hundred people to come and help with the cleanup; 5,000 people showed up. We need to take advantage of the fact that generosity is a part of human nature by providing our youth with opportunities to be of value to some person or cause greater than themselves. Only as they contribute to others will they create their own proof of worthiness.

Generosity comes in many forms. You can see it every day in simple human behaviors such as giving compliments and showing respect. As Long (1997) has noted, these small kindnesses are part of the therapeutic process for unloved, distrustful children. They also undergird all genuine teacher-learner interactions. To be patient, to listen, to share a smile, a joke, or even a tear are powerful gifts in a culture where abrasiveness, ridicule, and poor manners are so common.

An apology to one we have offended can be a form of generosity, because it puts one in a position of humility. Even more powerful is the generosity of forgiveness extended to those who have hurt us. The less they deserve it, the greater the gift. Such generosity heals hurts and hatred.

In his pioneering book on stress, psychologist Hans Selye (1978) indicated that stress appears when our lives are not in balance. He concluded that the most effective curative for stress is "reciprocal altruism." Unfortunately, this principle is contradicted by cultural traditions of dominance, exploitation, and selfish materialism. Because the tribal peoples of the world have had fewer technological distractions, they have been better able to focus on what is really of value. The principle of generosity, however, is at the core of all great ethical systems.

In my role as a teacher and therapist, I encounter many young persons whose lives are empty because they are liv-

ing a material existence. And in another of my roles—that of an Episcopal priest—I have often been at the bedside of persons who are dying. At such times, they never ask to see their bankbook or their BMW—they ask to see their relatives. *Mitakuye Oyasin.*

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Courage Through Art

The cover art is the fourth in a series of four illustrations by Lakota artist George Blue Bird. This art is now available as a 19" × 28" full-color print. Surrounding the Circle of Courage™ are Native American children representing the values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The artist is a former youth at risk confined in prison. A legal defense fund, which has been established to work for his release, is supported by royalties from sales of this art. For more information on the Circle of Courage™ print, contact: Circle of Courage, Inc., PO Box 57, Lennox, SD; phone: 888/647-2532 or 605/647-2532.