

The Medicine Tree

Martin Brokenleg

They had what the world has lost. They have it now. . . . Be it for now or a hundred years from now, or a thousand—so long as the race of humanity shall survive—the Indian keeps his gift for us all.

—John Collier, *Indians of the America* (1947)

When the government placed us on reservations, they called us Sioux, but we call ourselves Lakota or Dakota, depending on the dialect we speak. We trace our origins to the sacred *Paha Sapa* or Black Hills, and our traditional homelands extended from the Missouri River. We are also called the Buffalo Nation because we ranged across the great plains along with our four-legged relatives. When the invaders to our land destroyed the American bison, our people starved. We were only sustained by our spiritual heritage.

Historically, when our bands gathered together at a camp circle, we would always have the opening of our tipis face to the east. There was once a time when many of our people were camped near the river, where they were starving and dying because they were so weak. One morning at dawn an elderly man who did not even have the strength to get up from his bed struggled to roll up the flap of his tent to peer toward the east. He saw in a bush a warrior singing these words: “Your grandfather the sun is about to rise; sit up, brew it, drink it, and through your spiritual ways you will live without diminishing.” Then the strange yellow warrior shook, turned into a meadowlark, and spread his wings. As he flew away, he dropped a small branch to the ground. The old man knew that this branch was to be used to brew tea. His wife had been out helping others and when she returned to the tipi, she fell at the doorway, exhausted. The old man asked her to bring the branch and brew tea as the warrior had told. They regained their strength and survived.

The medicine tree story carries the lesson that solutions for our problems do not come from somewhere else but from where we live. This applies to all indigenous and dominated people. Our survival depends on reinvigorating the strengths of our culture. Unfortunately, remedies have been imposed more often by persons oblivious to our ways.

My father was part of a forced acculturation. He was captured in 1919 by White boarding school staff who ripped him from his family and heritage, seeking to impose a White solution to what was called “the Indian problem.” He gained many things from the Episcopal boarding school and would one day become a priest in that faith tradition. But he almost lost his culture. When we recently buried him, we sang the great hymns of the church but also the songs of the Lakota Sun Dance tradition. My father’s life celebrated two cultures.

The Invisible Culture

When we compare different cultures, we can study them at many levels. We might collect artifacts, study ceremonies and rituals, map kinship systems, or listen to the language and the stories. But the most basic ways in which cultures are unique are the least visible: The very unique and distinctive patterns of thinking are not easily observed.

Even when we try to understand the values and logic of another culture, we filter this through our own cultural biases. Thus, when Erik Erikson (1950) studied Sioux child-rearing for his book *Childhood and Society*, he was no doubt shocked to discover that many children could not readily identify who their real (biological) mother was because most children called several women “mother.” Likewise, traditional Sioux grandmothers probably found it scan-

dalous that poor White children had only one mother. What if she were too young, too irresponsible, or too overwhelmed? Tribal people all over the world “know” that every child needs many mothers.

Many cultural values are in place well before school age. These value preferences are so deeply ingrained that when violated they can produce strongly negative bodily reactions. To talk or dream about a dead relative may cause a traditional Navajo to feel sick, but we Lakota value these remembrances. Values are deeper than attitudes, for they are at the heart of our cultural ethics, our ideas of right and wrong, our sense of well-being. Of course, not all values are culture bound, for there are absolute values that transcend culture because they are based on universal needs (Adler, 1990). But the ways in which we meet these needs may vary greatly between cultures.

Suppose I am a seventh grader taking my homework to school and a peer who hasn't completed his or her assignment wants to copy mine. What is the right thing to do? If my teacher is using an individualistic system in her evaluation, the right answer is, “No, you can't copy my work,” because it would ruin her grading system, which pits students against one another. However, if I am Lakota, I know that I should treat others as relatives and share with them, so the right answer is, “Of course, I will help you. What's mine is yours.” How you define right and wrong is heavily dependent on culture.

John Seita, a fellow contributing editor of this journal, recently told me a story about his 5-year-old daughter Anorah. She came home from school seemingly distressed and fearful. At bedtime Anorah finally broke into sobs as she reported that she had helped a little friend with her schoolwork only to be scolded by her teacher, who threatened to tell her parents. To invoke terms coined by Riane Eisler (1987), this little girl's generous instincts would be virtues in “partnership cultures” but vices in “dominator cultures.”

Culture is closely intertwined with religion, but of course they are not always equally potent. Sometimes religious values override culture, as when a martyr stands against the dictates of the state. At other times, culture may shape or even disfigure religion. For example, Christianity instructs followers to become like little children if they are to inherit the kingdom of heaven. But the history of childhood in Western society is replete with examples of abuse of the young. Children are small, weak, and poor, and they become the ultimate underdog in a culture that worships power and wealth.

In Native American culture, spiritual concepts are totally intertwined with the secular—in fact we make no distinction between body and soul, which is a Greek concept.

This blending of the physical and spiritual is seen in our view of children in Native American culture. In the Lakota language, the term for *child* is translated as “sacred being.” Such values regarding children are shared by other tribal people in North America and beyond. For example, the Maori designation for child is literally “gift of the gods.”

Who would throw away a gift from heaven? Who would strike, ridicule, or scream at a sacred being? In U.S. culture, we do it all the time, of course; and when the brutalized child gets big enough to strike back, we hold juvenile “injustice” transfer hearings to strip him or her of any childhood. Having failed to nurture our most needy children, we abort their childhood. By certifying troubled children as fictional grown-ups, we can dump them in the landfill of adult prisons with other culturally devalued ex-citizens.

After decades of what some call “freedom from religion,” it is now becoming acceptable to consider spiritual and religious issues in schools and the broader culture. As chronicled by *Youth Today*, leading presidential candidates of both major parties are endorsing new initiatives between government and faith-based organizations to serve troubled youth (Shirk, 1999). Even business is joining this movement as corporations conduct “spiritual audits” of their workplaces. How this will work in our multireligious or perhaps nonreligious culture will depend on how hard we try to understand persons whose cultural values are different from our own.

As John Naisbitt (1982) predicted, spiritual themes are becoming salient in the postmodern millennium. This has all kinds of implications. Consider this, for example: The principal religions that originate in the Middle East have male heroes such as Moses and Mohammed. Societies that are influenced by those religious systems have typically been male dominant. Men have priority in the system where major heroes are men. In contrast, in all of the religions that originate in North America, major heroes are women. If you ask a Navajo who created the world, they will tell you, “Grandmother created the world.” If you ask Kiowa, “Who is your sacred model?” they will say, “We look to Star Woman.” In traditional Lakota culture, White Buffalo Calf Woman saved her people. Wherever you look across North America, First Nations societies are at least female equivalent and much more female dominant.

I met a Navajo couple on our college campus one afternoon. I asked, “What did you folks do today?” The woman said, “I went to the mall and bought myself some boots” and then pointed to her husband's boots. In Navajo society, she owns all property. She bought the boots for her husband, but they belong to her. The pickup truck belongs to her, the house belongs to her, the sheep belong to her, the kids belong to her—which leaves him with nothing except religion. He is able to participate in the ceremonies.

Bridging Cultures

In the next generation, the United States will undergo the most remarkable demographic shift since the Whites began to outnumber Indians in the colonial era. Already many schools and youth agencies are populated with children whose cultural backgrounds are unlike those of the adults who work with them. With a limited number of persons of color in preprofessional training programs, this imbalance may not be redressed for some time. In any case, all of us will need to develop competence to connect across cultural differences. Here is short list of suggestions that can help teachers, counselors, and others who work with culturally diverse populations.

1. Don't view the unknown as pathological. The more we understand a young person, the more his or her behavior, however counterproductive, will be seen as a means of coping. My favorite example is a new teacher who had moved from Florida to South Dakota. As winter approached, she wondered why some of the kids had a twitch when they went out on the playground. Actually, the children who did not have gloves were pulling their hands up inside their coat sleeves. As they did so, they made a movement with their shoulders that appeared to be what the teacher recognized as a twitch. In South Dakota winters, this is a survival technique, not some type of hyperactivity.
2. Don't withhold interventions because you are uncertain what to do. Doing nothing will accomplish nothing, except perhaps to communicate to the young person that you are wary or disinterested. Try some intervention and, if you do make a mistake, you can apologize, which may do wonders for your relationship.
3. Don't let common conditions become stereotypes. We can very easily overgeneralize from something that seems typical. The best definition for stereotype was one I got from a 7-year-old: "All Indians walk single file, at least the one I saw did."
4. Know how to incorporate cultural factors into the diagnostic code for your profession. In cultures where showing superiority is shameful, students might say they don't know the answer because this might make them appear better than their peers; this does not mean they are clueless—rather, they are actually very socially perceptive. In another case, a counselor reported to me that a Lakota girl described talking to her deceased mother in a dream. This may be referral material for a White kid, but this youth was describing a blessing.
5. Be a friend before there is a need. Most communal cultures in the world are relationally based. Young people will turn to you only if they know who you are. Most teenagers in the United States live in a relational culture. If a fight takes place on the school parking lot after school, most kids will know about it long before teachers or the principal.
6. Guard confidentiality in communal cultures. In those environments we must be very conscientious about confidentiality, not only because it keeps private information private, but because it shows that we are trustworthy.
7. Use elders and their advice. In a relational culture, people tend to go to the oldest persons in the community, those who have the longest tenure. In a gang, the leader might be the "elder." In a Native American community, it would be the chronological elder, perhaps someone who is 70 or 80 years old. The elders know the oral stories. Someone not connected to the community will not know the oral tradition.
8. Be involved in the community that you serve. A White teacher reported that after he moved into the minority community where he teaches, he started attending funerals and other cultural events, and his discipline problems declined dramatically.
9. Trust your intuition. If your feeling is respectful and makes sense, you are unlikely to spoil your relationships. There is powerful therapeutic value in kindness, and children will notice small things you do that are beyond expectations for your job.
10. Help those with minority backgrounds work with the larger cultural system. Just as you can learn about other cultures from youth and families you serve, so you can help them navigate the dominant culture if they are unsure in this respect.
11. Integrate rituals and symbols from the cultures of young persons into the milieu of school or agency. For example, judicious use of art and paintings can help youth feel comfortable (but remember that the goal is not to prove that you are a connoisseur of their culture).
12. Work through historic distrust. Generally a person of color will not immediately trust a White person. Like it or not, we represent our race until we become known as a person. Until youth feel safe in a relationship, they may be wary of you for fear you might be like others who have diminished their race or culture. Trust takes time, and relationships can't be "microwaved."
13. Help students or clients meet their own goals. Some youth expend great effort opposing persons they see as adversaries. When you are seen as an advocate helping them develop their interests and potentials, resistance is transformed into cooperation.

From a cultural point of view, “what you see is what you get” does not apply. For example, when I grew up, my mother would prepare a meal and set the table for my father, my brothers, and me. When we finished, she would clear the table and reset it for the women and girls. From the European perspective, this looks like men are being fed first because they are more important. The cultural truth is that the house and all the food belong to her. She is feeding the men first to get them out of the way so the women can enjoy their time together. If you watch people walking down the highway in my Native community, the woman will be about 15 feet behind the man. This is not because the men are superior but because they are the protectors of the woman. A man’s job is to take care of any endangerment that might come along, sacrificing himself if need be in order to preserve her. In our system, the men are disposable, but the women are not. We have a saying in Lakota that the nation is not dead until the hearts of its women are on the ground.

Two Worlds

I often hear, “Well, all of that Native culture is very interesting, but how does it apply to this modern world?” I would call this kind of thinking the “two world theory.” According to this view, you have to choose to live in one world or the other. In reality, a range of possibilities exist in dealing with a world where my culture of origin comes into contact with a dominant culture. D. Ross (personal communication, June 1983) described five different types of adjustment found among Native populations. These comprise something of a continuum from those practicing traditional culture through those whose culture has been totally lost by acculturation.

1. *Traditional.* Aboriginal people identify fully and function effectively in their tribal community. They know the language and appropriate behavior for that setting and will be able to transmit this to the next generation.

2. *Transitional.* Typically, this might be a youth who was raised in a traditional community but now lives elsewhere because of work or school. This person might be able to function well in the dominant culture but would prefer to be at home were this possible.

3. *Bicultural.* This individual moves between cultures, picking up cues and responding accordingly. Such persons can live with integrity in either world. They have not had to compromise their own culture to succeed in another. Let me give you an example of a successful bicultural person. I took my class to a leadership conference at the Control Data Corporation, where we listened to a speech given by the vice president of the company. He had a pinstripe suit, Gucci shoes, appropriate jewelry, and razor-cut hair. At a break, I met him at the coffeepot. I said, “Your name sounds

familiar; have I met you before?” He said, in a drawl, “Well, I am an Oklahoman Indian. I grew up down there in Oklahoma.” During our conversation, his whole demeanor changed—hand movements, face and voice, body movements, everything that identified him as a recognizable Kiowa. After the coffee break, he returned to the podium and returned to the business demeanor. Like a skilled bilingual speaker, this person is biculturally competent.

4. *Marginal.* These folks cannot function in either society. Nothing works for them, and they need continual support. There are three clues:

1. They believe that life can be lived however they want because they don’t know the rules;
2. Their family life is in complete disarray—everything is teetering on the brink; and
3. Their identity is very defensive, almost explosive, as they display fleeting appearances of understanding cultural mores but don’t fit in.

5. *Acculturated.* Genetically, these people come from a specific culture, but now know none of the appropriate behavior or values. An example might be a youth adopted at infancy who has never had contact with his or her culture.

As Doreen Spence notes in her article in this issue, early in this century the stated goal of most political leaders was to achieve total acculturation of these North American “savages” as rapidly as possible. Many missionaries and Europhile anthropologists also supported the view that with “de-parenting” and Western education, aboriginal populations would soon be eager to trade their traditions for “real civilization.” The motto of educators of Indians during that period was “kill the Indian to save the child.” They succeeded on neither count.

Native populations have suffered great hardships because of the conscious war on their culture. This epic of cultural genocide spanned 500 years in the Americas. If any human behavior could be called savage, it would be to destroy the cultural roots of a people. Such assaults have been experienced by persons of other aboriginal groups wherever they came under the rule of European colonialism. However, among careful students of these matters, there are many who now believe that the key to our future is to embrace our many cultures, listening and learning from one another.

We have been subjugated, but we have survived in spite of all of this. Among the first government officials to declare that the policy of assimilation was flawed was John Collier, who headed the Bureau of Indian Affairs throughout the long administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. For a long time, he, like many fellow anthropologists, assumed that Indian culture would be supplanted by

Western civilization. However, as the capstone of his career he wrote *The Indians of the Americas* (1947; cited in Brendtro, Brokenleg, & VanBockern, 1990). He observed that many indigenous cultures had survived in spite of a 500-year death hunt by Europeans, a testament to the staying power of their cultural beliefs. In his view, tribal people have preserved what the dominant culture desperately needs, which is precisely a sense of tribe, of human connectedness. Remarkably, Collier had reversed his earlier definitions of *civilized* and *savages*. Now it is Native culture that waits to become the teacher to a Western civilization that has lost its way. Collier's inference that it might take the dominant culture 100 or 1,000 years to recognize its error is a sobering thought at the dawn of another century and millennium.

The parable of the medicine tree tells us we must search for spiritual truths if we are to live without diminishing. No society can endure long unless it cares for the young of

each generation as though they were gifts from the heavens. Only when our nations treat our youngest citizens as sacred beings we will finally have become civilized.

Martin Brokenleg, EdD, is professor of Native American studies at Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He has trained youth workers internationally. He can be contacted at: Department of Social Sciences, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, SD 57197.

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"Mylo" by Rebekah J., age 16, Kandiyohi County Girls Group Home, Willmar, MN. The artist describes her work as follows: "The picture I've drawn represents different issues in my life. There are various symbols in my drawing, which represent the abuse by my neighbor. The four-sided shapes that are plaid or checkered represent crossroads in my life. Drawing has helped me express my feelings in a more appropriate manner." Used with permission.