The author draws from research and experiences in Native American and First Nations cultures to show the impact of cultural trauma. The Circle of Courage model provides the core goals for transforming trauma into resilience.

Education and youth work is exceptionally important for Native populations, because we are a very young people. While the median age for White folks is about 37, the figure for many Native groups is somewhere around 16. Half of us are children! This is quite apparent in Canada as the prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba have experienced a virtual population explosion of Native children. I have talked to principals of public schools in the large cities of Saskatchewan and Manitoba where the Native student population is over 90 percent of the public schools. Yet the systems that socialize our children are not attuned to their rich cultural heritage.

One of the biggest challenges facing Aboriginal populations increasingly is being called “intergenerational trauma.” Restoring our cultural heritage is a central theme in our book, Reclaiming Youth at Risk (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). That work describes the Circle of Courage model for positive development which blends Native child and youth care philosophy with research and best practice wisdom from the Western tradition. This integration is critical, since intergenerational trauma is the result of colonization where the dominant culture sought to stamp out aboriginal ways. Resilience is closely intertwined with trauma. It is defined as “the capacity for adapting successfully and functioning competently, despite experiencing chronic stress or adversity following exposure to prolonged or severe trauma” (Cicchetti & Cohen, 2006, p. 165).

At first glance, colonization might seem like a laudatory dynamic, but the law of unintended consequences mutates this simple idea into a big mess. Colonization by populations that have come together in North America. Linguistically, socially, economically, politically, and culturally, the United States has been described as a melting pot—presumably we should be more alike than different. However, Canada has a very different philosophy rooted in multiculturalism. Canadians work very hard on trying to maintain and respect differences in language, values, and traditions.

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the dominant culture was a central goal of school, church, and government. These social institutions gave us an interpretation about what has happened to us, why we are the way we are, and what we should become. However, in recent decades, Native communities began making a formidable shift. We want to define the world the way we see it, describe the dynamics as we understand them, and design our own course for the future. This is what we mean when we speak of a post-colonial world. Native people have turned a corner and want to be self-defining and to tell their own story.

This brings us to an understanding of intergenerational trauma. There are other terms for this. In a summer school course at the University of British Columbia, I use a book written by what we call in Canada a crown attorney (prosecuting attorney). Rupert Ross (2009) authored *Dancing with a Ghost*. While he does not use the term intergenerational trauma, he describes complex posttraumatic stress disorder (complex PTSD). His work is mostly in northern Ontario, and he describes what he sees in Native people. Ross also is concerned with criminality and colonialism. Whether in my birthplace in South Dakota or my current home in Canada, Native people are disproportionately over-represented in juvenile justice and corrections populations. Some might ask this question: “Is there something wrong in fact with Native people?” The question is not what is wrong with Native people, but what has happened to them.

Traumatic experiences are cumulative. If one generation does not heal, problems are transmitted to subsequent generations. In some form, this cultural trauma affects every Native person. It sculpts how we think, how we respond emotionally. It affects our social dynamics and, at the deepest level, impacts our spirituality. Intergenerational trauma has wounded us deeply. Not a day that goes by in which I do not think about some dynamic related to intergenerational trauma. There were times in my life that I wondered “Is there something wrong with me? Is there something wrong with us? What did we do to cause all of this to happen?” The truth is there is nothing wrong with Native people; we are perfectly normal people responding to an abnormal history.

Because trauma has shaped society, there is no escape. It has been hanging around just outside my normal range of vision all my life. Only if I am aware of the deep dynamics of trauma can I cope. But current approaches to trauma only treat the symptom. This may work with the flu or a cold. We cannot make it go away, so we rub Vicks all over and take cough drops and aspirin to treat the symptoms. Educators and helping professionals dole out a lot of psychosocial aspi-rins.

I recently spoke with one of the lead psychiatrists at Kaiser Permanente, one of the big HMOs (Health Management Organization) in the western United States. He talked about the growing patient population with a diagnosis of morbid obesity. These are not people who are overweight; these are people whose lives are in danger because their weight is so excessive. One of the first efforts is to put them on a food monitoring program by using a journal to record everything they eat. If they do that, their weight starts to drop rather quickly, losing five or ten pounds, maybe even fifteen or twenty pounds. Typically, the patients then leave the program. The doctors tried to determine why the patients were leaving when they started to become successful. They tracked them down and interviewed them and found they weighed what they did, if not more, when they first entered the program. The interviewers discovered that many were dealing with some degree of sexual violation. They had been sexually assaulted as young children or teenagers. What the professionals saw as the problem was actually their symptomatic solution to a much deeper issue. The same is true of addiction. It may be possible to get the chemical out of the person’s life, but that will only open the door to what is much deeper down, and that is where the emphasis must be.

For Native people, our deeper issue is related to intergenerational trauma. Whether this was intentional or not, trauma became the carrier for cultural genocide. I hesitate to use the word genocide because it is so powerful; we feel impotent and just close down the brain. But this is what happened in my homeland, South Dakota, between 1860 and 1890. This was military genocide; my own grandfather told me stories about hiding from the Cavalry.
Canada did not experience this large scale warfare. What caused intergenerational trauma there was a government-enforced program of taking children away to residential schools. We have had a recent twenty-year history of courts clogged with cases of the various abuses that Native students suffered in that kind of trauma. A person who experiences intergenerational trauma essentially can shut down because the grief is so great. It cannot be expressed, but without acknowledgement of a problem, it cannot be fixed.

Working with Native populations in Canada entails some different vocabulary. Canadian law recognizes three Native populations:

- Those with only Native ancestry are called First Nations peoples.
- Those of mixed ancestry are called Métis (based on the French word for mixed).
- The Inuit were called Eskimo until it was identified as an insulting term. The Inuit have a small population of 35,000 but occupy 40 percent of Canada's land space, most of which could not be inhabited by the general population.

In Canada, the term Aboriginal is used to include all three groups. Today, all of these populations are struggling with intergenerational trauma. These issues apply to indigenous populations worldwide, but I will focus on my own experiences in North America.

What are some of the sources of trauma in Native life? Some have to do with dynamics that occurred in the past, often enshrined in formal federal and state policy. Most notable was the boarding school dynamic where children were taken away from their parents, with lifelong effects. I spoke with a woman in Winnipeg who was a smartly dressed, articulate, intelligent school teacher. When she was five years old, a plane landed in the community. The officials aboard took all of the five-year-olds away and they never went home again. She does not know what happened to her parents or if she has brothers or sisters. When she finished residential school fifteen years later, she got a job in Winnipeg. Her community was in the north and reachable only by plane. The institution of the church was complicit in all this. Notice I do not say Christianity or the teachings of Jesus, but the institution of the church was very much complicit in this trauma.

Poverty hits Native people perhaps more than any other population, and poverty perpetuates trauma. For instance, not having a large enough income to buy sufficient protein—peanut butter, meats, cheese, eggs—can affect a child's intelligence by a standard deviation if the mother misses out on good nutrition during her pregnancy. And, those living in poverty are not protected from other crises. Those who have a decent enough income could probably miss two or three days of work and will make it through the month. But those who are poor cannot miss a half day of work and be certain they can still put food on the table or pay their electricity bill at the end of the month. Poor populations are always at the mercy of the dynamics of life distress.

Various kinds of oppressions create trauma. These are sometimes conscious and deliberate, but most are imbedded in the institution. One institution that I love very much is the university, which usually prides itself on treating all people fairly. So why are there not more female administrators? Why are female faculty members paid significantly less than their male counterparts? It is an unconscious dynamic. It is in the dynamics of the institution apart from the good will of the people who work there.

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The worst kind of oppression is internalized. Once it is in someone's head, it is hard to remove. The first time I went to South Africa, I asked to visit the grave of Steve Biko. He courageously fought for equality in apartheid South Africa, but was killed while in police custody. Biko often declared that the most powerful tool of an oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. If someone can convince us that we are not good enough, not smart enough, and not capable enough, then oppression becomes pretty permanent inside our heads.

The Brazilian activist Paolo Friere declared that it is impossible for the oppressor to liberate the oppressed. Thus, those who are suffering have some work to do. This work cannot be done for us; we have to do this work ourselves. I have been a professor for about forty years and had to find a way to start to talk about spiritual dynamics to those who were going to be working with Native populations. We will have no effect dealing with Native people if we ignore spirituality. Instead,
we will meet resistance and hostility, often silent. Native American cultures are intensely spiritual, the plane on which all of the dynamics that matter occur.

We need to rethink some of the strategies that we promote. For example, traditional ceremonies welcomed young men and women into adulthood. Today, the youth search for that somewhere else. Quite often the gang becomes an artificial source of spirituality. It provides substitute sources of belonging which traditional communities worldwide have provided throughout history. We may need an ally, maybe a social worker or teacher to be supportive, but essentially this healing is work that we are going to have to do. This may involve reclaiming our traditional ways, even if it simply knowing a few expressions in our Native language. In my Lakota tongue, the word for child is unlike the inferiority-nuanced English word. Instead, children are called Wakan which literally means sacred. Such is the culture that was stripped from us by colonization.

The focus on youth is significant and appropriate whenever one is approaching Native populations because of the large proportion of youth that make up Native groups. Today we see a culture-wide disregard of young people, the mentality that children and youth do not really matter. In any community that I visit, I often ask teenagers how far across their town I could walk before someone would speak to me. Some say I could walk all the way across town and no adult would talk to me. Society-wide, one of the biggest threats to all youth is having insignificant interpersonal relationships. Oddly, this is at a time when we “friend” on Facebook. We can twitter and tweet and cheep and chirp, but at the same time, we are missing the eyeball-to-eyeball contact that keeps us strong.

The nuclear family is an experiment in human relationship that has never worked before and I am a bit puzzled about why we think it will work now. It is the notion that parents and two children are a complete social unit. This is a relatively strange idea that goes back perhaps 100 years. Traditionally, normal families throughout the world were typically a couple of hundred people spread over about five generations. They lived close to one another in social interaction because that is how to maintain a strong humanity.

One of the most promising dynamics that has occurred in youth development is the focus on positive psychology and resilience. Originally, Larry Brendtro and I started a conversation in which we brought together our collective fields of knowledge: contemporary psychology, particularly related to youth, with traditional Native child rearing. What we found was that they were well matched. Native grandmothers knew exactly what they were doing, drawing knowledge from centuries of experimentation in a culture that deeply valued children. Resilience science helps us understand the power of these human connections. We talk about that in our little green book, Reclaiming Youth At Risk (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Resilience is being able to get up again when life knocks us down. That is what is required in order to live life well. So actually what adults should be doing with young people is teaching resiliency.

Our schools are much better at dispensing facts than they are at building youth who flourish. Knowledge describes training of the mind, and we are in a mad race to do this with the goal of high test scores. But there is another kind of learning which Aristotle called capacities. At the University of British Columbia, we used the word formation. We said we wanted our graduates to be knowledgeable but we also wanted them to be formed. We wanted to reach their heart, to teach their spirit, to nurture them on the inside. That is where one creates resiliency.

Resiliency is being strong on the inside, having a courageous spirit. One cannot teach resiliency with words or posters. What we need are transformative experiences. Here are four simple examples which show the match between findings of pioneer researcher in self-worth, Stanley Coopersmith (1967) and the four Circle of Courage dimensions of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity:

1. Significance: Realizing that one matters to others creates enormous strength inside of that person. This describes the spirit of Belonging.

2. Competence: A capable human being can learn, solve problems, and develop talents and abilities. Such is the joy that comes from Mastery.

3. Power: This is not power wielded over others, but the ability to control one’s emotions and set the course of one’s destiny. This is true Independence.

4. Virtue: Ultimately, one cannot know that he or she is valued unless he or she is of value to others. This is the spirit of Generosity.
Let me share an event from my youth which captures the spirit of significance and belonging. My parents were traditional Lakota people and typically would not go anywhere without their children. The first time I was ever going to be away from my parents was when I was seventeen years old. To this day I do not know where I got this idea, but I asked my parents, since I was about to go into grade eleven, if I could go to a boys’ military school. They said they did not know anything about them but I should apply and see what happened. So I applied to three military schools out east and was accepted at all three. I picked one and that fall my parents drove me out to it with a carload of possessions. I had my new blue-grey West Point-type uniforms. We had to buy our own textbooks, so I had ordered boxes of these. We also used to have these round flat things called records, and I brought along my collection and record player. I wore my uniforms and marched around at school from September to December and then it was home to the Rosebud Reservation for the Christmas furlough.

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After wonderful holidays with my family, Christmas vacation came to an end. The winter weather was threatening so my father decided it best that I fly back to school. As we drove toward Rapid City, the radio warned of a blizzard coming in from Alberta, predicting high winds, below zero temperatures, and tons of snow. My father left me at the downtown hotel in Rapid City and he hurried back to the reservation. I got up early the next morning when it was still dark. The snow was blowing sideways and I could not even see the ground. I called down to the front desk and found that the shuttle was going for the 6 a.m. flight which was still scheduled. I checked out of my room and sat down in the lobby near the window. Snow was blowing everywhere. An occasional car would go by but there was almost no one outside.

The snow let up and I could see almost a half a block. A shadow passed under the street light and someone was leaning into the wind heading toward the hotel. The person was all wrapped up and came inside. She shook the snow off her Pendleton blanket and I could identify that she was my father’s cousin. She lived a couple miles away. She had no car but had walked to see me before I departed. She came up to me and put her arms around me and said, “Son, I heard you were going back to school today and I wanted to come see you. How is your mother and how is your father?” We sat down and talked until the shuttle bus pulled up. I stood up to go and she stood up and put her arms around me. She said, “I want you to know that I am proud of you for staying in school. Someone in our family should have an education. You learn everything you can. I will think about you every day. I will pray for you every day.” She wrapped the blanket around herself and walked back out into the blowing snow.

When someone cares for us amidst the blizzards of life, we know we are significant. This is not something that can be taught in words but can be communicated to others in how we treat them. Every teacher worth being a teacher knows that her students will forget what she says to them but they will never forget how she made them feel. That is the difference between learning something in the head and learning something in the heart. Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are the vital signs of positive youth development. These are a birthright of Native people, but also a precious gift for children of any culture which sees its children as sacred beings. These are the things that we need to learn in our heart. We have put these things around a medicine wheel and we call it the Circle of Courage because the result is someone who is courageous in surmounting the challenges of life.

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References


