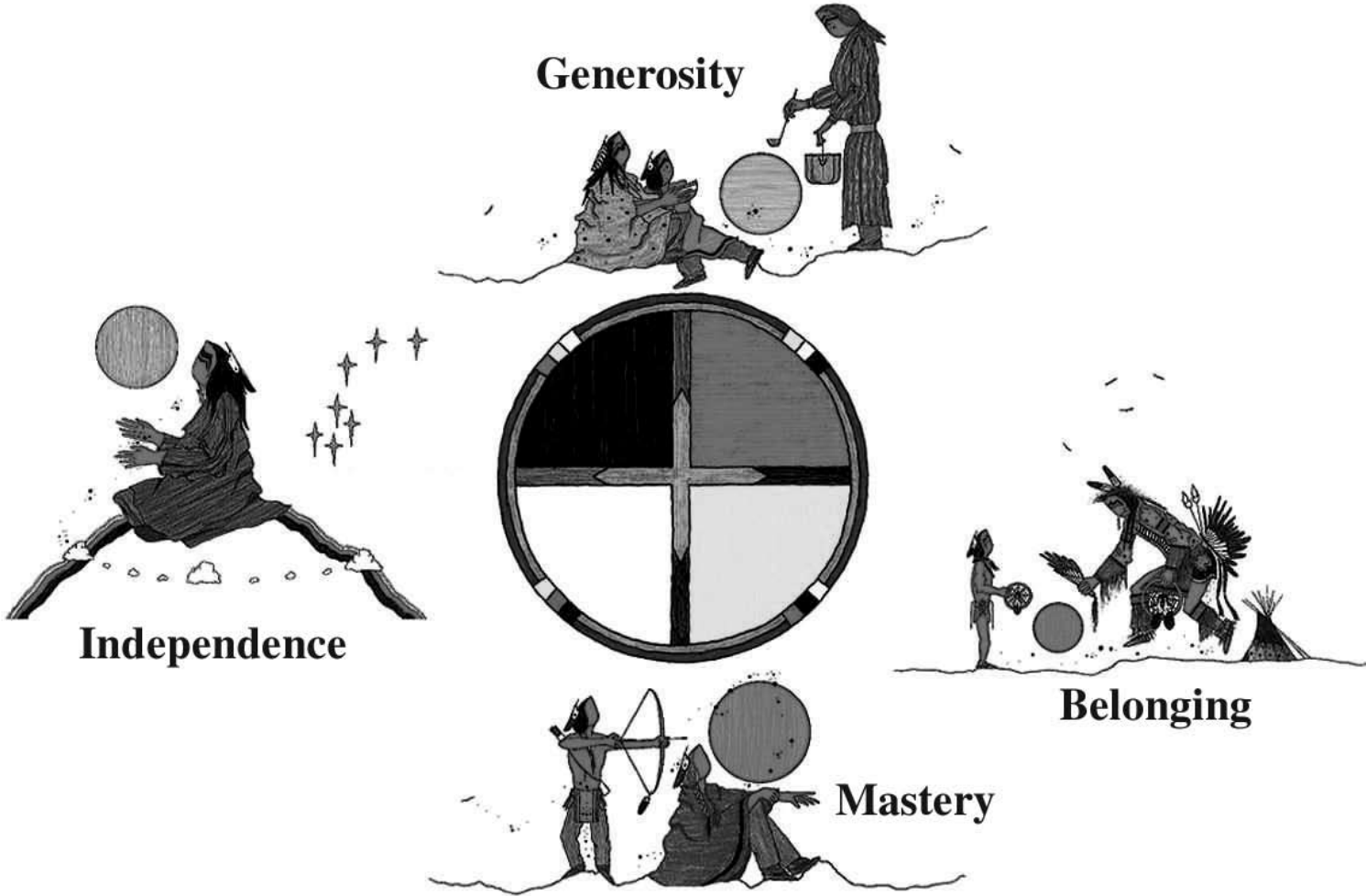


# The Resilience Revolution: Our Original Collaboration

*Martin Brokenleg*

The Circle of Courage™ philosophy emerged from research on how Native American cultures reared respectful, responsible children without resorting to coercive discipline. It was first presented at international conferences of the Child Welfare League of America in Washington, DC, and the Trieschman Center in Boston. The model entered the mainstream of education and youth work with the 1990 publication of *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, & Steve Van Bockern. This article reviews the development of this resilience model over the past two decades.



**R**eclaiming Youth at Risk: Our Hope for the Future (1990) is a work of collaboration that began nearly 20 years ago as a project of mutual understanding between “White” and Native North American persons who embodied the history of both native and newcomer to the prairies. The two “White” guys include Larry Brendtro and Steve Van Bockern. Larry has ethnic ancestry from Norway and Germany and brought not only his expertise as a psychologist but also his extensive experience with troubled youth. Steve, of Danish ancestry, understood the field of education and had experience as a teacher and principal in elementary and secondary schools. I, the Native North American of the group, brought along my Lakota cultural ancestry as well as an education in psychology, counseling, and theology.

The fruit of our professional collaboration produced what has become our philosophy—The Circle of Courage. We decided our major themes could be presented best in the image of a medicine wheel, a Lakota symbol for wholeness. This image gave us an icon to express the fundamental human needs of all youth—to be significant, capable, powerful, and virtuous and how these needs are met by the experiences of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. Meeting these fundamental human needs generates strong, resilient youth who can meet life’s problems.

By using psychological research and exploring Native North American child-care philosophy, we developed our understanding of inner strength and how it is learned. By bringing together our learning fields of education, psychology, and theology, we researched how “deep heart learning” is accomplished by consistent experiences. We consciously avoided using “churchy” language for universal “spiritual” concepts which allowed teachers, youth workers, parents, and child advocates a way to strengthen the inner world of all youth so they can meet their own life challenges. By deliberate design, The Circle of Courage meets universal psychological parameters.

Our work has taken us many places—South Africa, Europe, Asia, Pacifica, and all across North America. When we initially presented The Circle of Courage in South Africa, the Zulu people said we were explaining their cultural tradition. Later Sutu and Xosa people reiterated the same thing. We had already experienced similar sentiments around North America from people with European roots and from those with Native North American traditions. The Circle of Courage really is an ethnically universal model.

In presentations around Canada and the United States, a teacher or a youth worker will often say that he always believed in the universal human learning of The Circle of Courage. They welcome the validation we give them. Occasionally an elderly person will tell me she has tried to raise her children and grandchildren using the fundamental themes in The Circle of Courage. Innumerable teachers have reported to me that they always knew these experiences were important to their students. They just needed someone to tell them they were correct in what helped their students.

### ***All students now at risk***

Twenty years ago when we selected the title for our book, Reclaiming Youth at Risk, we understood “youth at risk” to mean some proportion of all youth who lived in high-risk environments that may cause them to falter. These “falterings” might include academic or social failure at school, failure in family relationships, or problems with the law in the community. Twenty years ago, some youth were at risk.

Recent research by The Search Institute ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)) documents that now all youth are at risk as a result of having too many “deficits” and not enough “assets” to live well and easily. Statistics Canada reported in 2008 that typical Canadian parents were spending 30% less time with their children than 20 years previously (Turcotte, 2008). This reduced time of contact is negatively correlated with resiliency. We now see general social patterns intensifying, thereby putting youth at greater risk. No matter where we turn, youth are dealing with such ordinary parental behavior as busyness with work and life which impairs necessary adult contact with youth.

Perhaps the greatest risk to today’s youth is from the broad acceptance in modern society of the concept of nuclear family (Marshall, 1998). The idea of the nuclear family is only about 100 years old and is driven by business that sees the nuclear family unit as an economic resource. The psychological implications of two adults living with only their children means that caregivers face unrealistic expectations for providing parental support and meeting growth needs.

Older and perhaps more universal is the concept of the extended family which enables all adults relationship opportunities for emotional support and a resource for parenting skills. In an extended family many adults take the responsibility for rearing

all the children and the biological parents are given respite in their parenting. Likewise, a network of family members offers support to one another so any couple can rely on more than just an individual spouse. Not only does it take a village to raise a child, it takes a village to meet each adult's emotional needs. A couple living alone in an urban apartment does not have the support of family members who may live far away. All duties of spousal and parental care fall on only these two adults (if in fact this is a two parent family). Is it any wonder that they would feel stress in their lives?

The children of a nuclear family grow up without experiencing many adults caring for children. They do not grow up knowing the many ways various spouses respond to one another because they see only their biological parents as spouses and know only the parenting skills of their biological parents. Without other modeling, the children will grow up with limited resources in their memories about how to parent or how to be a spouse. The children of nuclear families are at high social and family risk, perhaps more now than at any previous time.

Another significant factor putting youth at risk has to do with the "religious" versus "spiritual" concepts pervading modern society. Douglas Todd (2009) writes that many people avoid religion yet consider themselves spiritual and reports most adults as saying, "I'm not religious; I'm spiritual." This label of "religious" is problematic and avoided by many modern young adults. Youth often suffer the results of this confusing conceptual dichotomy. The work of resiliency is not necessarily "religious," but there is definitely a spiritual aspect within it that nonetheless strengthens the heart of youth.

Todd ponders whether there has ever existed a human population that has so avoided religion as we see in contemporary times. All young persons need a sense of purpose beyond self. By failing to give youth some spiritual roots, we undermine resiliency in youth. The work of creating resilient youth is very much the work of tending their spirits and making them strong. Perhaps this is the quality of "I am not religious but I am spiritual" that Todd says is typical of the new North American people.

### ***The Convergence of Research***

During the past 20 years, other researchers in youth issues have come to conclusions similar to the ideas proposed in The Circle of Courage philosophy. In 1990, Peter Benson of The Search Institute published *The Troubled Journey* in which he identified the major deficits putting most youth at risk. Not long afterwards, Peter came to our Black Hills Seminars to talk about the 40 "Developmental Assets" which many youth workers now use (Benson, 1997). At his presentation, Dr. Benson acknowledged that although he had not known of our "Circle" when the assets began to emerge, it was his conclusion that every one of them fit around our circle. The resilience components identified in the 40 assets converge with The Circle of Courage. Clearly, fundamental human relationships and basic skills in societal interaction create resilient youth.

In 2004, Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Mate published *Hold On to Your Kids* in which they explored the ways adults' busyness creates detachment from youth. Youth end up clinging to peers rather than to adults, causing a break in basic relationships with family adults and putting them at greater risk than ever before. Although not conscious or deliberate, this break is indicative of the importance our society places on commerce at the expense of caring relationships. At one of our Vancouver Island Seminars, Dr. Neufeld was presented with our Circle of Courage award, He presented his findings and restated that the weakening of family relationships is a major risk factor to all youth and contributes to their failure to thrive. His work converges with our saying that the slippage in family relationships in our time requires an increased focus on fundamental human relationships. This convergence of Mate and Neufeld's work with principles of The Circle of Courage is typical of many other researchers in the resilience field.



The 2007 publication of the work of Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, has inspired teachers and youth workers anew. Palmer explores the human spirit of the teacher as an asset in relating to learners. He fosters a renewed focus on the teacher's inner world as an inspiration and a connection with learners. Palmer's long friendship with the well-published Roman Catholic priest and author, Henri Nouwen, encouraged the focus on the inner world and the human spirit as tools to foster sound learning and build mastery in youth. Here the spiritual focus of Palmer converges with work to strengthen the inner world of youth, the resilience work of *The Circle of Courage*.

***Perhaps the greatest risk to today's youth is from the broad acceptance in modern society of the concept of nuclear family.***

In October 2009, I was part of a group of educators who participated in a formal discussion with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. "Educating World Citizens for the 21st Century" brought together educators concerned for the education of the inner world of youth. Human compassion is the common ground called "Generosity" in *The Circle of Courage*. The Dalai Lama has an interest in how this common human quality can be enhanced among all children and youth. Educators including Mark Greenberg, Marion Wright Edelman, Linda Lantieri, Dan Goleman, Peter Benson, and I are working to enhance the inner learning of youth, the very focus of the *Circle of Courage*.

***What Kind of Life Can We Build?***

More than a century ago, the Lakota leader Sitting Bull said, "Let us put our minds together to see what kind of life we can build for our children." Lakota adults both past and present realize the promise of education to enhance the lives of Native American children. All other adults who understand the true purpose of education also believe it is our task to create happy, functioning children and youth who can live well and develop strength to withstand the stresses of life—what we call resiliency. *The Circle of Courage* addresses this goal as a model to build strong and capable youth. We brought together Native North American child-rearing theory with contemporary psychological research and found a validating convergence of these two fields of knowledge.

Increasingly more researchers are finding that fundamental human relationships are foundational in creating resiliency. This is in the face of increasing risks for all youth created by contemporary life in modern society. It may be that we have created more severe youth problems than we realize by unknowingly continuing the inhuman patterns of busyness, a focus on commerce, and an education based only on observable outcomes when we know the inner world of the student matters most. It is time to heed the words of a great leader and to "put our minds together to see what kind of life we can build for our children."

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