

Native People's Cultural Resurgence

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Resurgence and revival of the cultural heritage and traditions is happening amongst Indian people. This resurgence is being manifested in many different ways. The heritage of the North American Indian is the basic cultural strain of the Americas. Even though the heritage of different European countries is vitally important to a multi-cultural society, it is the heritage of indigenous America that is common to each and every one of us. It is this heritage - that of the First Americans - which makes all of us on this continent unique. Unfortunately, this basic truth has never been reflected in the curricula of our elementary schools, high schools, colleges or universities.

On Manitoulin Island, where I am from, this resurgence of our cultural heritage is very evident, very positive and very exciting. I would like to tell you something of our feelings, aspirations, and accomplishments in the area of culture resurgence. We are very involved in the area of "education", but not education as it has existed in the past.

Education for Indian people must be relevant to the philosophy and needs of the Indian people. It is also essential that all Canadian children, regardless of racial origin, have the opportunity to learn about the history, customs and culture of this country's original inhabitants.

The broad purpose of education is to prepare a person for adulthood and to assist in the full development of that person. An educational system serving our Indian people must be compatible with our unique circumstances, and yet at the same time it must equip us to lead our lives wherever we may choose, either on the reserve or off the reserve—but the choice is our own and it should be a comfortable one and a positive one. In the past the choice was made for us; we were told that in order to be a success, we would have to move off the reserve; there was no way that you could make anything of yourself by remaining on the reserve. As Ojibwe people we have a heritage that is thousands of years older than that of the white man. This background produced a rich cultural heritage and a unique life style compatible with the land. Just as the white child in other communities must learn a respect for his own tradition, an Ojibwe child from Manitoulin must also learn about life in such a way that he develops a growing sense of belonging to Indian culture and to his own Indian role. A long history of trying to educate the Indian away from his own culture and transform him into a non-Indian

has been the prevailing theme of education for Indian people. It must be judged whether or not we are giving the Indian children of today something from their own culture as a foundation to enable them to successfully meet and contend with the segment of the non-Indian world in which they might choose to participate.

From centuries of experiences in confronting natural and man-made forces, we have developed a world view and attending values that have been our glory and our burden. Our values have enabled us to maintain our ethnic identity, despite the fact that we are supposed to have disappeared or been assimilated years ago. Our values have also been our burden as they have spelled physical hardships, harsh compromise and cessation from the technological amenities obtained from what were formerly our natural resources. We recognize the importance of retaining and emphasizing what is good within our own culture. We see the need for using our own cultural values as a foundation for making choices and decisions. The greatest road-block Indian people meet on the way to a cultural balance is the present educational mill in which bewildered Indian children find themselves. It is here that the child's Indian values are questioned before he has had a chance to completely internalize and understand them. Many of the unspoken values he has lived by before coming to school are, by implication, ridiculed and even rejected.

Today we witness the results of over 20 years of "integration". It is obvious that even though an increasing number are integrated each year, integration has failed to provide a successful education program. Many non-Indians believe that we have failed education, but the truth of the matter is that education has failed us. It has failed us because it was imposed upon us, was not relevant to us, nor were we given the opportunity of being involved in designing it. Education has failed to recognize our cultural values and customs, our language and our contributions to mankind. It has led to failure and the lowering of self-esteem.

Chief Dan George says of Integration:

Do you know what it is like to feel that you are of no value to society and those around you? To know that people came to help you, but not to work with you - for you knew that they knew, you had nothing to offer?

Do you know what it is like to have your race belittled and to be made aware of the fact that you are only a burden to the country?

What is it like to be without pride in your race, pride in your family, pride and confidence in yourself? What is it like? You don't know for you've never tasted its bitterness.

I shall tell you what it is like. It is like not caring about tomorrow, for what does tomorrow matter? It is like having a reserve that looks like a junk yard - because the beauty in the soul is dead; and why should the soul express an external beauty that does not match it. It is like getting drunk, and for a few brief moments escaping from ugly reality and feeling a

sense of importance. It is most of all like awakening the next morning to the guilt of betrayal. For the alcohol did not fill the emptiness but only dug it deeper.

And now you hold out your hand and you beckon to me to come over ---- come and integrate you say ---- But how can I come ---- I am naked and ashamed. How can I come in dignity?---- I have no presents ---- I have no gifts. What is there in my culture that you value ---- my poor treasure you can only scorn.

Am I then to come as a beggar and receive all from your omnipotent hand? Somehow I must wait ---- I must delay. I must find myself. I must find my treasure. I must wait until you want something of me ---- until you need something that is me. Then I can raise my head and say ---listen----they are calling----they need me----I must go.

Then I walk across the street, and I will hold my head high for I will meet you as an equal. I will not scorn you for your deeming [*sic*] gifts, and you will not receive me in pity.

You talk big words of Integration in the schools. Does it really exist? Can we talk of integration until there is social integration -- unless there is integration of hearts and minds you have only a physical presence.

We did a study on the provincial schools in our area where Indian children have been integrated and the following things emerged:

1. The local provincial schools have a very limited source of material on the Canadian Indian and the Ojibwe in particular.
2. Pupils come from homes with stereotyped images on Indians and the schools do little or nothing to change this attitude.
3. Since integration is a two-way street, non-Indian children aren't prepared for it.

I am not suggesting that Indian culture be the focal point of education in an integrated school. I am suggesting that the learning experience of the child be related to his unique background of experience wherever possible. The Indian child will learn of the white culture in its relationship to himself, to his non-Indian classmates, and to the majority culture in which he will probably have to live. It is hoped that his classmates will learn something of Indian culture. Through such reciprocal learning it is hoped that a mutual understanding will develop, and arising from this will come an appreciation of the two cultures.

[Segment spoken in Ojibwe language] The looks of bewilderment on some of your faces reflect the confusion many of our Indian kids face upon entering school. Indian—be it Ojibwe, Cree, or Mohawk—is the first language of many of our Native youngsters. I would like to read an excerpt from “The World of the American Indian”.

Language is the lifeblood of a culture. When the last speaker of a language dies, a wonderful tradition of thought and

expressive power, extending from the infinite depths of man's history, dies too. Sadly, such a passing goes almost totally unnoticed, even now as if an entire world were lost without anyone caring.

Language and culture are synonymous. You can't have one without the other. Ojibwe is a very rich language of man's natural relationship with the universe. In it are naturalistic and humanistic concepts and shades of meaning which relate to human and natural behaviour with far more expression than English.

Teachers of Indian children have not been prevailed upon to gain knowledge of any of the Indian languages. They seem to believe that mastery of English is the key to the child's academic progress. Instruction in the Native Language for the first few years should have been implemented years ago. English during this time could have been taught systematically as a second language. Instruction in the child's own language would give him more security and enjoyment in school. Learning, after all, goes far beyond gaining a knowledge of the English language. Language is a living thing—it is a valuable gift—a very special way of looking at the world. So unless native languages are given the prestige that goes with recognition, our native languages are condemned to a slow death. When a language dies, the vitality of a way of living and thinking dies with it.

I work with a group of native teachers who are concerned that our cultural heritage is slipping away. We are concerned that the next generation of children will not speak the language. Since language and culture are so closely related, preservation of our Ojibwe language is of priority concern. We have worked together, looking at different orthographies on Ojibwe which are available - one written by a Frenchman, another by a Scot. While there were many good things in each of these, there were also discrepancies, so as Ojibwe-speaking people we set about setting up our own spelling. This was necessary, since our next step was the implementation of Ojibwe language teaching in the federally operated schools. After 3 years of Ojibwe language teaching - which could be compared to French conversation programs - 15 or 20 minutes per day in each classroom, we felt that this was not sufficient, so next year, beginning in September, we will be implementing an Ojibwe language immersion program for 4 year olds. This will be expanded the following year to include 3 year olds and 5 year olds. The subsequent year (Grade 1), both languages will be used and broadened - both languages used as a medium of instruction to enable the child to understand various concepts that are being taught to him - both languages used to acquaint him with his own roots, his own unique Indian background, and above all and most important, to establish a sense of self-esteem.

Being exposed to and involved in the cultural arts has special educational potential as a singular area of inquiry and demonstration and as a vital means for enlivening other subject areas. Being exposed to and becoming involved in the creation and performance of the arts of his own people enables the contemporary Indian child to confront directly that grey area of bridging the present with a unique past. In the process of seeing, examining and doing art forms of his own people in an

educational setting, the child is not only exposed to art forms but experiences identification directly related to him as a person who is a member of a special group of people who are unique in the history of this country, because of their world view and values, which are finally being recognized by those who are desperately searching for ways and means to re-establish harmony and balance between man and the earth he lives upon.

For the Indian child to become aware of the fact that the earliest art materials came from nature - wood, stone, and earth, formed and given life by fire and water - and to know that he is not far removed from these art materials of his ancestors develops pride in his cultural past and creates a desire to experiment with these earthy materials himself.

Since Indian children tend to be less verbal, they are encouraged towards self-expression by becoming involved in the process of sensory exploration through rich visual, tactile and kinesthetic experiences. They are encouraged to develop aesthetic attitudes about their own culture by seeing and knowing how wigwams were made and decorated; by seeing, handling and playing with real deer hide; by seeing dancing costumes, bead and quill work, and dolls representing different tribes. Using these as a basis for their own experiments in design and colour will encourage creative development for each child in a very personal way.

Today's renaissance can be seen in the resurgence of our languages, in the growth of political institutions both old and new, in the revival of Indian religion in urban Indian centres as well as on the reserves, and in the growing number of young people seeking out the wisdom of the grandfathers and finding ways to apply it in their own lives, however different their lives may appear from the old ways. The resurgence or renaissance of today is the fruit of the accumulated labours of our grandfathers. It was always there beneath the surface.

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