

Wounding the Spirit: Discrimination and Traditional American Indian Belief Systems

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When educators debate the effects of cultural differences on educational practice, they are normally concerned with issues of language, learning patterns, and preferred communication styles. Seldom do they consider how differences in belief systems might affect educational practice. Carol Locust argues that fundamental differences exist between the belief systems of American Indians and those of non-Indians, and that the lack of knowledge about these belief systems on the part of the U.S. educational system has led to discriminatory treatment of American Indian students. Locust concludes that educators must understand and respect American Indian belief systems before they can begin to improve the educational experiences of American Indian children.

Discrimination against persons because of their beliefs is the most insidious kind of injustice. Ridicule of one's spiritual beliefs or cultural teachings wounds the spirit, leaving anger and hurt that may be masked by a proud silence. American Indians* experience this discrimination in abundance for the sake of their traditional beliefs, especially when such beliefs conflict with those of the dominant culture's educational systems.

When Europeans first came to North America their hearts were hungry for one thing—freedom from being discriminated against because of their belief systems. The United States of America was founded on the principle of religious freedom,

* As defined in Public Law 93-638, the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act (1978), an "Indian" means a person who is a member of an Indian tribe, band, nation, or other organized group or community, including any Alaska Native village, regional, or village corporation as defined or established pursuant to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (85 Stat. 688) which is recognized as eligible for the special programs and services provided by the United States to Indians because of their status as Indians. Tribal organization means the recognized governing body of any Indian tribe; any legally established organization of Indians which is controlled, sanctioned, or chartered by such governing body or which is democratically elected by the adult members of the Indian community; to be served by such organization and which includes the maximum participation of Indians in all phases of its activities.

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yet the indigenous peoples whose land was used to establish this country were denied this freedom. Incredibly, American Indians were not granted religious freedom until 1978, when Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (Public Law 95-341). The passage of a law, however, cannot bring change quickly after decades of discrimination; racist attitudes toward traditional Indian religions still exist.

These attitudes manifest themselves in the U.S. educational system, which was not designed to honor diverse racial and cultural groups. In earlier years, Indian children did not have easy access to public schools, so they were placed in a military-like education system of boarding schools established by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1819 (Roessel, 1963). Neither the public schools nor the military system were designed to accommodate either cultural differences, including tribal religions and ceremonies, or language differences. Change is very slow in coming to educational systems in the United States; therefore, even today, very few public or Bureau schools respect Indian traditions and beliefs.

To change this situation in the schools, teachers and administrators must begin to understand that belief systems among Indian people are sacred and holy; moreover, they do not separate the sacred from the secular aspects of life. For example, when a medicine person works with an individual to bring about healing of an illness, it is not just an act of obtaining medical help such as going to see a physician for a cold remedy. Healing and worship cannot be separated, as there is little difference between religious and traditional healing practices of American Indians (Aberle, 1966). Jerrold Levy (1963) described the social behavior of the Indian as inseparable from the culture, sacred narratives, and religion. Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothy Leighton (1962) noted that there is no distinct term in the Navajo language for "religion" in the Western sense. While doing a study of Tohono O'odham ceremonies, Marvin Kahn and colleagues (1975) observed that no distinction was made between healing and worship. Carol Locust (1985) stated that there is little or no difference between religion and medicine, between a church and a hospital, in the Indian belief system. Carl Hammerschlag, a former psychiatrist at the Phoenix Indian Medical Center and a friend to Indian people, points out that for them the concept of health is not only a physical state, but a spiritual one as well (1985, p. 2). As these studies show, American Indian beliefs about health may be identified as the core beliefs of the cultures themselves. Educators need to learn more about these concepts, since they are fundamental to both the traditional ways of Indian life and to the health and spirituality of tribal members. Without this understanding, there can only be discrimination — discrimination that wounds the spirit of Indian people.

There is a long history of misunderstanding of Indian beliefs on the part of the dominant culture. Early, widely referenced scholars (for example, Morgan, 1892, and Reagan, 1930) seem to have assumed that American Indians were pagans (had no religion) or that they worshiped idols, animals, or devils. Such misunderstandings may have occurred because these scholars did not know the language or the customs of the people, and therefore interpreted Indian ceremonies from the perspectives of their own religious backgrounds. For example, eyewitness accounts of Apache culture and religion written by Thomas Morgan (1892) and Albert Reagan (1930) have serious flaws. Thomas Mails (1974) documented his misgivings about

the account of the Apaches written by Reagan: Reagan's comments are based on what he saw in only nine months on the western Apache reservations. He was a captain in the Third Cavalry who was among the Apaches from July 1901 until May of 1902. His interpretations of the real meanings and purposes of some acts he saw performed by the medicine men and the Ghan (Mountain Spirit) dancers should not be taken as gospel. More probably, excepting those instances where acts were explained to him, he was not informed or sympathetic enough to make a reliable and profound statement. The fact is that tribal belief systems contain highly structured theological organization, protocol, and ritual, just as other religions do around the world. In most Indian traditions every element of existence and every second of time is perceived as being holy, thereby implying that worship is a constant daily function. The fact that there were no familiar religious objects (no altars, crosses, books) for early observers to see contributed to their conclusion that Indians were "pagan."

One of the reasons many non-Indian people do not understand much about Indian belief systems is that they vary from tribe to tribe and from clan to clan. For example, Apaches believe that supernatural spirits seek out an individual to become a medicine person. The Tohono O'odham, on the other hand, believe that one must be born into a lineage of medicine persons or must be a twin in order to become a medicine person. Yet in spite of these differences, most systems are built on a common set of beliefs. In a previous work I have identified ten common beliefs that are basic to most Indian tribes in the United States (Locust, 1985). These beliefs are presented in this paper as general statements and should be taken as indicators or guides for further study, not as universals or absolutes for all tribes or for any specific tribe. While these are not absolute truths for any one Indian tribal belief system, an understanding of each will help non-Indians begin to comprehend how educational systems suppress and discriminate against the belief systems of Indians.

Several factors may influence the beliefs of an American Indian: subtribe or clan affiliation, tribal sodality (society) membership, formal education, influence of an outside religion, marriage, and length of time and/or experience off the reservation. A tribal member may or may not know many traditional beliefs, and may or may not identify with those that are known. However, the following statements are applicable to the majority of tribal members:

1. American Indians believe in a Supreme Creator. In this belief system there are lesser beings also.
2. Humans are threefold beings made up of a spirit, mind, and body.
3. Plants and animals, like humans, are part of the spirit world. The spirit world exists side by side with, and intermingles with, the physical world.
4. The spirit existed before it came into a physical body and will exist after the body dies.
5. Illness affects the mind and spirit as well as the body.
6. Wellness is harmony in spirit, mind, and body.
7. Unwellness is disharmony in spirit, mind, and body.
8. Natural unwellness is caused by the violation of a sacred or tribal taboo.

9. Unnatural unwellness is caused by witchcraft.

10. Each of us is responsible for his or her own wellness.

Educators need to understand the meaning of these beliefs, because Indian sociocultural behaviors rooted in these traditional beliefs strongly affect their formal educational experiences. But an understanding of Indian beliefs is not enough for educators; they must also be able to identify how such beliefs manifest themselves in Indian attitudes and behaviors toward formal educational systems. Below I discuss each of these ten common beliefs and outline ways in which U.S. educational practices come into conflict with these beliefs.

1. American Indians believe in a Supreme Creator. In this belief system there are lesser beings also.

Most tribes identify a Supreme Creator by a name and a personage and usually identify a place of residence for that entity. Although often identified as male, the Supreme Creator is considered both male and female. The name of the Supreme Creator is seldom spoken, for it is sacred. Prayer is usually offered to the Supreme Creator, who is addressed by a term of reverence and endearment, such as "Grandfather." The Creator is usually perceived as omnipotent, in command of all the elements of existence, and as anthropomorphic, but spiritual rather than physical (Lukert, 1977).

Many tribal groups believe in other spirit beings—such as partners, co-creators, mates, or offspring—that are associated with the Supreme Creator. These lesser beings may or may not be impersonated in ceremony. More frequently they are considered exemplary models after which humans are to pattern their own lives. Most Indian tribes also recognize an assemblage of spirit helpers that assist humans. These beings are not gods, nor do they belong to the hierarchy of sacredness; therefore they are not worshipped or prayed to, but they command respect and gratitude. Some of these beneficent spirit helpers may be identified as Kachinas (Hopi), Ghan (Apache), or Yei (Navajo) (Locust, 1985).

2. Humans are threefold beings made up of a spirit, mind, and body.

"Come into this house that has been prepared for you" is a phrase from a Hopi song welcoming an infant into the world. The "house" is the physical body the parents have prepared for the spirit to inhabit. The "I AM" of each person is the spirit that dwells within the physical body. Of the three elements—spirit, mind, and body—the spirit is the most important, for it is the essence of the being. The instrument by which the spirit may express itself is the body. It can learn spiritual lessons and may progress toward the ultimate goal of being united with the Supreme Creator. The mind is the link between the spirit and the body and functions as an interpreter between the two. For example, a person hears a truth by means of the ears of the physical body, and recognizes the truth on a spiritual level. The mind, being aware of the disparity between human desires and spiritual truths, then makes adjustments in the cognitive and response systems within the consciousness to incorporate this new truth.

The element of existence that gives vitality to all creation is often called "energy" or "power." The Supreme Creator is all-powerful; all things he has created have power. This power (energy) is spiritual, so someone referred to as a "powerful"

medicine person is identified as a person who has extremely strong personal energy. A stone (such as a crystal) or a plant (tobacco) may be powerful as well. Eagles have very powerful energy, for they fly closest to the sky, which is the abode of the Supreme Creator. Animals are sensitive to human energy; they can sense whether someone is friendly or not. Humans can sense energies also, but most people are not aware of it. For example, a person may meet a stranger that he or she likes immediately and another stranger he or she dislikes immediately. Personal energy is spiritual, and if the personal energy of a newborn infant is extremely strong, medicine people will know that the baby is a medicine person. It is difficult to deceive people who can "see," because energies betray what an individual really is.

Unlike Indian medicine, Western medicine does not incorporate the concept of spiritual illness, and this can create problems for Indian children in non-Indian schools. Suppose, for example, an Indian child is absent from school because of a spiritual sickness. What happens if the school requires a doctor's note to the effect that he or she was seen by a physician, and no note is forthcoming? Non-Indian doctors cannot treat illnesses they do not recognize and were not trained to treat. A spiritual unwellness is frequently more devastating than a physical illness, yet this phenomenon is not recognized by many school nurses. Moreover, Indians believe that an individual's spiritual illness can affect the group (family and friends), and thus group efforts are required to return all members of the group to wellness. As a result, students who are not ill may be absent from school in order to assist a sick relative in returning to wellness. Although this group effort is of vital importance to tribal, clan, and family members, it often becomes a point of antagonism between group membership and school officials, resulting in discriminating actions by school authorities.

Furthermore, many tribal customs revolve around the belief that the body and spirit need not be in the same place at all times. What non-Indians may perceive as inattention, "spacing out," or perhaps, a petit mal seizure may be a matter of "spirit traveling" for the Indians. The term "spacing out" implies the act of thinking or seeing things in one's mind, either in recall or in imagination, but confined to creation within the mind. "Spirit traveling" refers to the spirit traveling to another location, assessing the activities and/or situation there (such as in reconnoitering during warfare) and the traveler being able to give an account of the information gathered during the travel. The ability to project the consciousness from the body appears to be common among tribal members, as many people have spoken about it to this researcher. However, it can create conflict in the classroom for students who have not yet learned adequate control of it.

Some tribal groups seem to possess the unique ability to "travel in their spirit bodies," or to manifest themselves in bodily form in another location, as part of the projected consciousness. This ability of bilocation may create frustration for teachers, whose Indian students may leave the physical body sitting at a desk in the classroom while their consciousness and spirit bodies go elsewhere (Locust, 1987).

3. Plants and animals, like humans, are part of the spirit world. The spirit world exists side by side with, and intermingles with, the physical world.

Most American Indians believe that all creation has a spiritual component because all things were made by the Supreme Creator. The earth is our mother, the sky

our father, and the animals our brothers and sisters. Water is our friend, and every living thing a relative. Traditionally, thanks and a small gift were given to any animal or plant from which life was taken. No life was taken for sport or fun; hunting, fishing, and harvesting were done to obtain food. Most Indian tribes consider the mutilation of an animal's body to be a direct violation of a brother or sister and believe that what is done to others will be done to them in return. This traditional belief comes into conflict with educational practice, for example, in high school biology classes that require students to dissect animals. When faced with the choice of failing the class or bringing terrible consequences into their own lives or the lives of family members by mutilating an animal's body, most Indian students will choose to fail the class (Locust, 1986a).

The idea that spirit forms inhabit the same living space as humans is not uncommon among Indian people. "My (deceased) father came to see me today" is a common statement, although each tribe may attach a different set of meanings to the visitation. Animals, birds, and fish may also manifest themselves in spirit form without a physical body. When an Indian seeks the meaning of his or her life (this is often called a vision quest), an animal from the spirit world may make itself visible to him or her, thus becoming the symbol for his or her life. Traditionally, American Indian people have been visionaries and have had the ability to see into the spirit world. Tribal members with an extraordinary ability in this area become medicine people.

Indian students are frequently reluctant to express their views about spirit beings to non-Indian school people, because they fear ridicule. Many non-Indians think of spirit beings as terrifying specters; others scoff at anything that smacks of the supernatural. Indian people who acknowledge the spirit world as a normal part of existence have difficulty with both non-Indian views; further, they may refuse to debate the issue because of traditional respect for spirit beings.

4. The spirit existed before it came into a physical body and will exist after the body dies.

American Indians conceive of immortality as circular in nature, having no beginning and no end. In Indian belief systems, when one physical body is worn out, it is shed like an old garment, and the spirit is free to inhabit another body. When that one is worn out, the cycle is repeated until the spirit reaches perfection and returns to the Supreme Creator. This "returning" is basic to the belief of most tribes.

Traditional Indian belief systems do not incorporate an ultimate place of punishment for individuals who have transgressed in this life. But a state of torment is identified for departed spirits who have transgressed and who need chastisement to remind them not to repeat the same errors when they return in another body. Conversely, a peaceful land of rest and plenty occupies a place in Indian religion as a place where existence is carried on. This belief affects burial practices: Indian people provide their deceased with the necessities of life in the next world.

5. Illness affects the mind and spirit as well as the body.

The concept of spirit, body, and mind interacting in humans is basic to most Indian beliefs and traditional healing methods. When Indians become ill, they often

ask themselves why they are ill, since the cause of a sickness is as important as the illness itself. If the spiritual energy around a person is strong, he or she will not become ill, and negative things cannot happen to him or her. If an Indian does become ill or experiences difficulties (family problems, for example), he or she must find out why his or her personal energy is low and take steps to correct the situation; otherwise he or she will continue to have problems. And if the source of a student's spiritual weakness is the school, that student may not attend classes until his or her spiritual energy is strong again.

Modern medicine tends to treat the body for illness without treating the spirit. In the Western approach, bodies are cut open, repaired, put back together, cleaned, medicated, and bandaged; but most Western doctors give no thought to the spirit. If the situation indicates emotional or mental problems, the doctor may refer the patient to another doctor who specializes in such illnesses. The physical—and perhaps mental—side of an illness may be taken care of; the spirit, however, is not treated by Western medicine. For this reason many Indians prefer to see a medicine person at the same time that they are being treated by a physician. For example, an Indian may go to the Indian Health Center to have a broken leg cared for. The physician takes care of the physical injury, but to the Indian the spirit must also be cared for properly. Treating the spirit is the process of finding out why the broken leg occurred, understanding the events in a spiritual rather than a physical sense, and then beginning the process of changing whatever it was in the body, mind, or spirit that was out of harmony enough to warrant a broken leg.

In the schools, misunderstandings frequently arise because of the difference between the school systems' definition of "sickness" and the Indian concept of unwellness. Schools may have a list of physical symptoms for which students are automatically sent home: for instance, fever, upset stomach, headache, vomiting, and other obvious symptoms of distress. These physical symptoms are not cause for alarm, however, in most Indian families, whose members have learned to live with minor discomforts and realize that such suffering is usually transient. As a result, Indian parents may be labeled by the school authorities as uncaring, irresponsible, ignorant, or lazy when they send their children to school with a runny nose or a cough, when in fact those symptoms are so common in their culture that they are not considered evidence of illness. In contrast, a child may be kept home several days for traditional treatments for "ghost sickness," a malady of lethargy, apathy, and general nonspecific unwellness caused by the spirits of dead relatives calling for the child to join them. The child may face punishment for his or her absence upon returning to school, since the school's list of excusable illnesses does not include "ghost sickness," and a note from a traditional medicine person—if it could be obtained—would not be considered adequate. Furthermore, a healing ceremony may call for burning powerful, often pungent herbs and enveloping the ill person in the smoke. This treatment usually includes an admonition not to bathe the afflicted person for several days, a practice that precludes the student's returning to school.

6. Wellness is harmony in spirit, mind, and body.

Harmony is the peaceful, tranquil state of knowing all is well with one's spirit, mind, and body. To be in harmony is to be at "oneness" with life, eternity, the Supreme Creator, and oneself. Many Indians who are visionaries describe the energy

(aura) around an individual who has harmony as a light or radiance of being, to which all life forms react with joy. But harmony is not found within the environment, nor does it come from others; it comes from within and from the Supreme Creator. It is toward this harmony that American Indians strive, despite the poverty and deprivation in their lives and the discrimination they experience because of their belief in harmony itself.

Harmony is wellness, but it is not utopia, as an older Cherokee man explained. When asked about harmony, an elderly Hopi responded that each person has his proper set of relationships for being in harmony and that no two people are alike. John Coulehan (1980) found a similar perspective among the Navajo. A person can be in harmony, Indians believe, despite the condition of his body, mind, or environment. One person's harmony may include dealing with arthritis. Another person's harmony may include compensating for failing vision. It is not the events that happen to a person, but his or her responses to those events that create harmony. Every human chooses his responses, and thus chooses harmony or disharmony.

7. Unwellness is disharmony in spirit, mind, and body.

In contrast to wellness, or harmony, unwellness is characterized by disharmony. One cannot be in a state of disharmony caused by suppressed anger, frustration, heartache, or fear without sooner or later developing unwellness in the physical body from that disharmony. Disharmony may be a vague feeling of things "not being right" in one's life, and a time of meditation may be needed in which to discover what is not right. One can be affected by terminal cancer, but if the spirit, mind, and body are in harmony, the cancer becomes part of the harmony and the person is at peace.

Indian tribes tend to allow each person his or her harmony without forcing absolute conformity to all cultural standards. This custom allows the individuals who are less capable mentally to find a meaningful place in their society in simple physical tasks, such as wood-gathering. A beautiful Hopi man once wept when he recounted the story of his friend "Bear," a big, loving, mentally retarded boy who was the village water carrier. The Bureau of Indian Affairs social worker insisted that Bear go to a school in the city. Bear went, but he was terribly homesick and became violent. He spent the next twenty years in the state hospital for the criminally insane and then returned to his village to die. What a tragic waste of human life! Bear was in harmony in his village carrying water. His retardation was part of his harmony; the state hospital was not.

Avoiding disharmony is desirable in Indian cultures: disharmony is negative and pervasive and can result in unwellness. For instance, Indian parents frequently refuse to go to the school when called, because they have learned that being called means their child is in trouble. The negative situation that is certain to develop among school officials, the child, and the parents brings disharmony for all concerned and can result in illness if spiritual energy becomes low. Therefore the parents may choose not to be involved with the disharmony at the school and instead to counsel the child at home in a positive manner. Non-Indians, whose culture dictates swift punishment for students who transgress school rules, may view the Indian response as too lenient or as pampering the child, and may become angry because Indian parents do not respond in the manner the school thinks

appropriate. The disparity between the cultural expectations of parental responsibilities and control of children may create dissension and hostility between school officials and tribal members. Students who are faced with a disharmonious situation at school may choose to remove themselves from it in an effort to avoid the possibility of disharmony in their own lives. Physically removing themselves—through leaving school or hiding—is the first defense against disharmony. However, if a student is called before a school official and forced to listen to a tirade full of loud, angry reprimands and accusations, and is therefore endangered by being in proximity to such negativity, the student may choose to protect his or her spirit by removing it through spirit travel if he or she cannot escape physically. At the first available opportunity, the student may also choose to transport his or her body with him or her in the spirit travel and leave an empty chair and a furious school official behind. But to Indians, escaping disharmony does not mean escaping the consequences of an action. Indian children are taught early in life that every thought and every action creates a ripple in their being and that the consequences of those actions are inescapable.

8. Natural unwellness is caused by the violation of a sacred or tribal taboo.

Most American Indian tribal beliefs include a distinction between those illnesses that are the result of natural causes and those that result from unnatural causes. Natural unwellness is a consequences of violating a taboo, whether it was done intentionally or unintentionally, and can affect the offender or the offender's family. Although the word *taboo* is not a perfect translation of the concept, it is closer than any other word in English to the meaning of the concept. However, *taboo*, in the Indian sense, carries cultural and religious implications, and to violate a taboo brings spiritual as well as physical consequences.

Each tribe has its own taboos, with specific consequences. In some tribes there is a definite relationship between breaking a certain taboo and experiencing identical consequences. Mutilating an animal's paw or leg, for example, always results in injury to the mutilator's foot or leg. In other tribes, a particular reptile may be seen as a carrier of negative energy, and getting near the reptile may cause a variety of illnesses secondary to "reptile illness."

Most tribes recognize cultural and moral taboos that relate to personal conduct, such as never laughing at a disabled person or at an animal (Gifford, 1940). Religious taboos may concern proper observance of rituals. Some of the prevalent tribal taboos concern death, incest, the female menstrual cycle, witchcraft, certain animals, some types of phenomena such as lightning or an eclipse, particular foods, dead bodies, marrying into one's own clan, and strict observance of religious and ceremonial protocol.

One particular taboo, based on the belief that bodies are sacred to their owners, often creates conflict in schools. For Indians, exposing one's bodily sacredness to the indiscriminate view of others violates the holiness of the being. Thus, violation of the sacredness of the body occurs when students are required to change clothes or shower as a part of their physical education classes, since many of the schools do not provide private showers or changing rooms. Rather than commit the sacrilegious act of exposing their bodies, many Indian students opt to fail physical education, since changing clothes and showering are required to pass the course. Non-

Indian educational systems have been extremely slow to respond to the Indians' need for privacy in regard to this issue.

9. *Unnatural unwellness is caused by witchcraft.*

For almost all tribes, evil is a real and powerful adversary, and one must be continually on guard against it. Evil is seen as a power, and it is also identified as an entity, either human or animal. As part of an attempt to develop a clear definition of evil in Indian belief systems, this writer asked several Indians to explain how they perceived evil. The terms they most often used to identify evil were *bad power*, *bad energy*, *negative energy*, *negative power*, or *dark side*. Some tribes see the bear as a personification of evil, and others see evil as being an owl or a reptile. Most tribes associate a legendary cultural figure with evil. These traditional cultural figures usually only represent evil, and are not seen as the creators of evil. Evil may manifest itself in a multitude of shapes and forms, and can be manipulated by witchcraft.

According to some Indian belief systems, an individual may choose not to walk in the spirit of harmony, and instead choose to walk in the power of malevolent spirits and to do harm to other humans. Indians refer to these individuals as "witches" and to their activities as "witchcraft." Hopi Indians refer to these individuals as *buaka*. In the Yaqui language it is *yesisivome*. These terms are not synonymous with Western concepts of witches and witchcraft—actually, there are no English terms for the Indian concept. The Hopi word *buaka* might be translated as "those who go around at night" or "those from the dark side," as compared with non-witches, who are "beings of light." The Yaqui word *yesisivome* means "one who is on the bad side" of using supernatural power. The Indian term for *witch* refers to both males and females. Tribal groups differ on what the terms "witches" and "witchcraft" mean in their language, but most Indian people understand the use of negative energy against one another. Yet one need not be a witch to cast a spell or to "witch" another person, for most Indians know how to manipulate energy (power), especially mental energy. In intense, destructive cases of witchcraft, however, the witch involved is a skillful professional user of negative power.

Witching usually follows one of two patterns: it may affect the environment around the victim, which in turn affects the person; or it may affect the person directly. If the intended victim's personal power is so strong that the witchcraft cannot affect him or her, a member of the family who is weak will fall victim. Incidences of witchcraft related by Indian people of various tribes indicate that sudden physical illness, sharp pains, accidents, depression, irrational thinking, and unusual behavior are often suspected as having been caused by witchcraft. Protective objects such as medicine bags, certain stones, bits of organic material, and symbolic items of a religious or spiritual nature are frequently worn on the body; their removal (which is often required by school officials) can often create a dangerous vulnerability for the individual.

Keeping one's personal energy strong is the best defense against negative energy. Parents are responsible for the personal protection of their children and of any older, weak family members in their household. When the house is filled with love, caring, and kindness, evil cannot find a weakness by which to enter. If it does enter, therefore, one knows that there is a weakness somewhere and that it must be cor-

rected before more harm is done. Staying away from situations that cause an Indian's personal energy to become weak is a survival behavior that may be frustrating to non-Indians. In the first place, such behavior is not part of their culture, and second, the identification of a harmful situation is culturally determined. Thus, such behavior frequently causes conflict in school settings, and consequently discrimination.

Medicine people are on the "good side" of the use of energy, and are frequently prevailed upon to counteract the negative energy of witchcraft. If the spell is not strong, the victim, with the help of his or her family, may be able to dissolve it. If the negative energy is strong, however, or if the individual does not know where the weakness lies, a medicine person may assist the victim in these areas. (Medicine people never claim to "heal" anyone or to "take off" a spell; properly speaking, they assist other people in healing themselves or in dissolving the negative energy around them.) Medicine people are also healers of the physical body; one may specialize in "bones" and another in childbirth. The visionaries also work with positive energy to counteract negativity, for they have the ability to perceive spiritual matters. In some tribes, healers dedicate themselves to "light" and therefore can never intentionally harm anyone, in others a medicine person may heal someone today and harm someone else tomorrow, depending on the situation. Traditionally, however, medicine people are warriors for "light" and witches are perpetrators of "darkness."

10. Each of us is responsible for his or her own wellness.

Many American Indians believe they are responsible for their own wellness. They can make themselves well and they can make themselves unwell. If an individual allows him- or herself to become upset by something, he or she has allowed disharmony to enter his or her life. This disharmony may create physical symptoms such as a headache or indigestion. Thus, that individual has caused the headache or indigestion by becoming upset. If an individual's spiritual energy is so low that he or she can be affected by witchcraft, then the individual has allowed the witchcraft to affect him or her. Therefore, keeping one's energy strong and keeping oneself in harmony precludes unwellness.

When an Indian is in harmony, his or her spirit, mind, and body are so attuned to the self, the environment, and the universe that transgressions against moral, religious, or cultural taboos do not occur; further, negative energy from witchcraft cannot find a weakness by which to exert its influence. The idea of this powerful protective shield of harmony is articulated in song by the Navajo: "Beauty is above me, beauty is before me, beauty is all around me."

Most tribes believe that a spirit chooses the body it will inhabit. In the case of a handicapped body, the spirit chooses that body knowing its limitations but choosing to use it for some purpose determined by that spirit and the Supreme Creator. Furthermore, tribal members envision the spirit inside a handicapped body as being whole and perfect and capable of understanding everything that goes on in the environment, even when it appears that the physical body cannot comprehend anything. One might express sympathy for the physical conditions of the body in which a spirit chose to express itself, to learn lessons, and to teach lessons. One might express respect and honor for the spirit that is strong and wise enough to

inhabit such a body, and assist it in accomplishing whatever it came to the earth to do. Indians distinguish between a spirit in a handicapped body and the body itself: the causes of a body's being handicapped may lie with the parents (as in the case of fetal alcohol syndrome), and consequently the blame for (prenatal) mutilation of a body falls on the parents; the choice of being in the body, however, remains with the spirit in the body, not the parents.

Consider, though, that the concept of handicaps is culturally determined; what may be a handicap to a non-Indian may not be considered a handicap to an Indian. Many Navajo, for instance, are born with a congenital hip deformity, but the condition does not disable them and therefore they are not handicapped. When surgery is performed, however, they become unable to sit on a horse comfortably and so become disabled, for riding is still an important mode of transportation in many areas (Rabin & Barnett et al., 1969).

In school systems, children may be classified as mentally retarded, while within their own community they are not retarded but function as contributing members of their society. (Consider the case of Bear described earlier.) Most traditional Indian languages do not have words for retarded, disabled, or handicapped. Dee Brown's book *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1970) contains many names of individuals that are descriptive of disabilities—No-Eyes, Big-Head, One-Who-Walks-with-a-Limp, Hump, One-Arm—but categories such as “cripples” do not appear in the literature. The Hopi people identify some individuals with the white or snow kachina (albinos), and legends tell them that one deity who was incarnated as a human, the kachina Kokopeli, was humpbacked. Neither of these two conditions constitutes a handicap to the Hopi people (Locust, 1986b). A beautiful term for describing a disabled person comes from the Yaquis: “not completed yet” (Locust, 1987).

Obtaining an education has been a necessity for all Indian children. Traditionally, teaching children who learned at a slower pace than others was as normal as teaching children who learned faster than others, and little difference was shown in the way they were treated. Only when formal education came to the Indian Nations were labels applied to the differences between children. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), was a two-edged sword for Indian people. On the one hand, it provided educational opportunities for severely disabled children who were once institutionalized off the reservation by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, but on the other hand, it caused multitudes of children to be labeled mentally retarded or learning disabled who up until that time were not considered handicapped in their cultures (Miller, Miller, & Miller, 1987). This is because American Indian cultures reinforce nonverbal communication, visual/spatial memory, visual/motor skills, and sequential visual memory over verbal skills. Psychological evaluations include verbal skills as a large portion of the tests Indian children are given. Tests are conducted in English, a second language to many Indian children. Small wonder, then, that non-Indian tests identify disproportionate numbers of Indian children who score very low in verbal skills.

The formal education process, as well as standardized achievement and intelligence tests, are designed to assist and measure mental functions desirable in the dominant culture. Their use for other cultures is discriminatory; nevertheless, little change has occurred to adjust either the educational or the testing process to accommodate the language or cognition styles of other cultures.

Discussion

Belief systems are integrated into the total being of the American Indian, and discrimination against these beliefs occurs in ways that non-Indians do not easily understand. Indians view immortality and existence as circular rather than linear, and appear to learn best when information is presented to them in a circular manner (Emerson, 1987). Traditional ceremonies are based on the concept of circular completion, just as the spirit continues on the medicine wheel until it reaches completion. Formal education, in contrast, is composed of linear lessons, each of which occupies a linear spot on the year's time chart. Completion is from the top to the bottom of the chart, year after year, until the final year has been reached. Traditional education of Indian youth is not linear and frequently not verbal. Indian children learn by watching their elders, by having the grandparents identify for them the whole of the task, the complete circle, the perfection of completion. The whole is then marked into meaningful parts, just as the wheel of life is divided into the four sacred points of the earth, or the four sacred points of life itself. From these reference points on the circle the elder begins to teach, always relating the parts to the whole, not treating them in isolation—for a part must remain in the whole or the circle is broken—but in reference to the whole, so there is comprehension of the entire task, not just completion of the work. The process may be longer, but at completion the students know why a task is done a certain way, not just how to do it, for they have seen the completion of the circle.

One of the most blatant issues of discrimination against American Indian belief systems involves traditional ceremonial times. School calendars include holidays based on Christian tradition and on national historical events. In most school systems, American Indian children do not enjoy religious freedom, but are penalized for being absent from classes while participating in traditional tribal ceremonies. Consider the case of the Pascua Yaqui Indians near Tucson, Arizona, who attend classes in the Tucson Unified School District. Hundreds of years ago, traditional Yaqui religion was combined with Catholicism, producing a unique belief system with strict religious procedures, ceremonies, and observances in the weeks before the Running of the Gloria (corresponding with Easter Sunday). Each year, scores of Yaqui children are absent from school twice a week for several weeks preceding the Lenten season in the spring, and each year the children suffer the humiliation of having to justify their absences. Each year it was the same; excusable absences did not include participation in traditional tribal functions. However, in 1986 the culturally sensitive school board amended its attendance policy so that the observance of traditional Indian ceremonies and feast days became excusable absences. Unfortunately this bold step toward religious equality in the educational system is an exception, not the norm, for school boards.

The dominant culture's lack of understanding of the tribal concept that the unity of a group is binding also leads to discrimination against Indian people. In years past, it was the unity of the tribe, clan, or even family that enabled its members to survive. This survival instinct is still present in Indian communities, and it dictates behaviors that are frequently misunderstood by non-Indians. For example, the group's survival depends on everyone's working together and sharing. All members work together and contribute to the group, supporting each other in times of stress, for they know that they will find the same network of support for themselves

should they require it. Children are expected to contribute to their group, as soon as they are mature enough to do so, so that a four-year-old may have the responsibility of looking after a toddler, and a six-year-old Navajo may act as a shepherd. With this kind of early responsibility comes an early breaking of the maternal bond; children as young as nine and ten "break the apron strings" and are respected as adults, since they participate as adults in the group effort. Responsibility, loyalty, and proper codes of behavior are taught to the children by grandparents, who are the traditional teachers in Indian communities. The U.S. educational system has dealt a severe blow to this group bonding behavior by separating children from the home to send them to school, thus removing from the grandparents the opportunity to teach them properly. Frequently, children are still accorded respect as adults at an early age, but too often they have not had the advantage of traditional teachings. This creates freedom without knowledge of how to accept responsibility, and consequently Indian children are called "delinquent," "wild," and "uncontrolled" by a social system that created this situation for them.

Another aspect of the group membership concept often conflicts with educational systems: that of justifying membership in the group through one's contribution and loyalty. Junior high school girls will stay home to babysit younger siblings while their parents work, enabling the family to have two incomes without the cost of child care. Young boys, pressed to go to work to help buy food and unable to find employment because of their age, may turn to stealing in order to contribute to the group. So strong is the membership bonding that students go hungry rather than ask their parents for lunch money, for in asking they would be putting their needs in front of the group's needs. For the same reason, Indian students may not participate in group sports that require uniforms or equipment that they must purchase, for money spent on those things means that someone else must go without. In an era when unemployment among American Indians is 62 percent on and near reservations (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1987), and the average annual income of all Indian families in the United States consistently runs \$6,000 to \$7,000 below that of the general population, money is a great concern (Northern Arizona University and the University of Arizona, 1987, p. 6).

Belief systems are the framework upon which cultures and societies function. It is the bond that holds civilizations together, and it is the small voice inside each of us that urges us to be true to what we have been taught. As Native people, we cannot separate our spiritual teachings from our learning, nor can we separate our beliefs about who and what we are from our values and our behaviors. As Indian people, we ask that educational systems recognize our right to religious freedom and our right, as Sovereign Nations, to live in harmony as we were taught. However, non-Indians must be educated to the traditional beliefs that Indian people may have before they can understand what changes may be needed.

Tribal beliefs vary, as does the extent to which a tribe embraces its traditional cultural beliefs. Each tribal group has distinct and unique beliefs that are basic to that tribe's culture. Most tribes cling to the Old Teachings because they know that, once gone, it means the death of their culture. The majority of American Indians wish to maintain their identity as Sovereign Nations under the Constitution of the United States, and wish to maintain their tribal and cultural belief systems and

lifestyles. We remain positive that, once understanding has been established between tribal cultures and educational systems, discrimination will cease.

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