
FIRST NATIONS TRADITIONAL VALUES

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The life-style of each First Nations society was and is directed and controlled by commonly held values. While the outward cultural expression may vary from tribe to tribe all may be similar by virtue of the application of a specific set of values. More often than not these values are clearly different than those held by members of the dominant society. In traditional First Nations societies, the primary means of teaching proper behavior and community-held values was through story telling and were informally taught. In later years children, through observance, were prepared for more formal expression of the values through such activities as weddings, funerals, namings, etc. The youngsters were instructed and entertained.

“Stories, you see, are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships, and attitudes of a people. Stories, how a people, a culture, thinks.”
(Keeshig-Tobias, 1990)

“The stories are woven of elements that illuminate the ritual tradition of the storyteller’s people, make pertinent points to some listener who is about to make a mistake or who has some difficulty to resolve, and to hold the listeners’ attention so that they can experience a sense of belonging to a sturdy and strong tradition.”
(Silko, 1981, p.6-7)

Traditional values are not normally identified such as the list which appears in this paper, however community and or family patterns clearly revolve around consistent reinforcement of a specific set of values. For example, young people may be consistently told of the importance of helping others, saying hello to older people and being respectful to elders. Similarly, the differences between First Nations and non-First Nations world views are rarely delineated, however what is very clear is the conflict which may occur between each group. Often, conflicts may arise from each group’s methods of initiating

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discussions, setting of priorities, etc. Each group, of course, act according to their own cultural constraints. First Nations people, particularly youth, may sense the differences in the expression of the culture but cannot pinpoint or articulate them. An inability to understand value differences could lead to confusion, withdrawal and if left unresolved be very uncomfortable for both groups. First Nations values offer strength, a sense of belonging, rules for proper behavior and a fine sense of identity in their life. Within the community particularly amongst members with a strong traditional background the most formal expression of the values can be found in speech patterns.

Educators of First Nations people, which might include First Nations professionals, need to become knowledgeable about First Nations values and where possible incorporate these elements into their community activities. Educators need to be able to recognize which values First Nations students and families still accept and follow. In doing so, the whole spectrum involving the use and reinforcement of the Tribal Voice, Ethnographic record, and curriculum/innovative program development opens up. They also need to recognize how European-American values have influenced them and how those influences have affected their expectations of First Nations students. The introduction of new values is possible but should not occur at the expense of destroying other values. Traditional First Nations elders have consistently expressed real concern over the changes in our cultures, particularly the weakening of the value and importance of old people. Concern has also been raised over the designation of the term elders to individuals who may be unfamiliar with a traditional culture. In some cases, age is the principle designation for an elder. This is clearly insufficient, and may be confusing for the outsider and detrimental within the culture. It is not necessary to destroy the First Nations cultural foundation in order to teach a First Nations student a different viewpoint. Instruction about the two differing value systems should be given and would be beneficial to both First Nations and non-First Nations students. This kind of approach may be useful as a way of alleviating feelings of insecurity or discrimination, for example. If First Nations and non-First Nations values are discussed equally, both groups would - for the first time - be given a choice of which value system to retain, combine, or discard. Such lessons educate both the First Nations and non-First Nations

youths by bridging the two different world views. Students should not be force-fed only one set of values, as has happened in the past—something that has been a great disservice to First Nations people.

Educators must recognize the need to begin any study of First Nations culture with a thorough discussion of First Nations attitudes and values. Similarly, it is equally important and challenging to determine the various institutional methods by which values are reinforced. Within traditional communities family and community values are highlighted with formal speeches and certainly through ceremony. For example, each ceremony has a one of its purposes the transference on of a certain right or privilege, such as a song, prayer or regalia item. Traditionally trained Elders might be called upon to direct the order of business or to validate an individual's right to receive the ancestral rights or privileges. Normally, transfers are made within a family structure in this way. The value of respect for the old has then taken on a contemporary function and the process reinforces contemporary application. The process of transference also reinforces the need an individual has for the extended family and perhaps cultural specialists.

As a result of church and state oppression various types of sacred and secular clothing may be found amongst tribal/First Nations representatives. Regalia use may vary from clothing which is clearly sacred and authentic to fully western and secular. Regalia variation may depend on the internal rules of the culture (sacred vs. secular use) or the impact of government directed efforts to acculturate the indigenous population. It is more important to understand the values used and transmitted than to describe the type of objects used or the clothing worn during the ceremony. The values are of primary importance in understanding what it is to be a First Nations person. The material aspects are secondary until such time as sufficient understanding of the culture and traditions provides new insights into regalia use.

Of special concern is the positive effect the teaching of First Nations values will have on First Nations students. They will begin to understand themselves, to appreciate their culture, and to be able to make free choices about which values may be applied with their

own people and to people outside of their culture. Possibly for the first time in their lives First Nations students will understand what makes them different and recognize that being different does not mean being deficient. They may also begin to grapple with the ramifications of church and state oppression in a positive traditional way.

First Nations people who continue to rely on traditional values and institutions look at the world and see themselves as a part of it—see themselves in a caring and supportive relationship to all human beings. They feel the earth is the source of life and give reverence to the earth and to the wonders of life coming from Mother Earth. They give spiritual regard and respect to the animals, the plants, the land, and to the universe. They feel related to everything and everything is a part of them—all things are connected. They see beauty everywhere. They respect themselves and others. They have a stronger ability to understand and counteract personal and community pressures (i.e., alcoholism, in-fighting, suicides, etc.) of a non-traditional nature by applying traditional concepts.

The following First Nations values and traits are broad generalizations that have been refined from traditional values to reflect contemporary First Nations culture. These values are frequently inconsistent with the values of individualism, competition, hierarchy, material success, and personal achievement that the dominant society holds. Keep in mind that one can always find interesting exceptions and deviations to each generalization.

1. • Emphasize connections with the past - Continuity of Life
 - Tradition is important, even in the here and now.
 - The value of respecting elders for their wisdom, age and experience particularly with regard to their knowledge of family songs, prayers, genealogy, etc. and represents a key element of a traditional community.
 - Traditionally trained elders are often called upon during community functions to verify ancestral rights, songs, names and heredity rights. Part of their role is to ensure proper application of the process identifying ownership. To the untrained eye this activity may go unnoticed.
 - Traditionally trained elders also provide the strongest ancestral connections to concepts of healing; a return to states of balance and strength in the modern age.

- This value used in concert with the following assists the very old mechanisms which reduce alienation.
- 2. • Emphasize good listening skills. When the value of emphasizing connections with the past is used in concert with the values listed below, it activates the very old processes which reduces alienation between generations.
 - Placidity, patience and the ability to remain quiet are considered good qualities. Children raised in this environment are prepared early in life to participate in and learn activities during the onset of adolescence, and other activities which infer ritual transformation.
 - Often various community rites of transformation require the inductee to go into seclusion or at least remain quiet for lengthy periods.
 - Good listening skills and powers of observation are emphasized.
- 3. • Emphasize good relationships -conversation represents acts of power
 - Personal criticism and harsh discipline damage a child's self-image and are to be avoided
 - Emphasize the feeling and tone of a conversation. Words are to help buttress the listener's feelings.
 - Consistent with other values it is felt that 'words' have power and should be used carefully. In effect words too constitute a portion of the sacred.
- 4. • Emphasize good relationships - Egalitarianism
 - Equality and mutual respect - respect to differences.
 - Group needs more important than individual needs.
 - Privacy and noninterference valued.
 - People express ideas and feelings through their actions.
- 5. • Emphasize the importance of the family
 - Extended family-responsible for childrearing. In some communities great aunts/uncles are automatically assigned the status of grandparent.
 - Children participate in adult activities and may be taught very early in life their responsibility to each other. Part of this responsibility involves learning to be quiet and to listen.
 - Cooperation necessary for family, group or human survival.
 - Basic worth of any individual is judged in terms of family.
 - A child's status may depend on who your parents and grandparents are; this as a reflection of expected behaviour.
 - Modern families continue to rely on the use of rights/regalia/songs which could be traced up to 20 generations.
- 6. • Emphasize sharing

- Generosity, sharing, and hospitality –whatever First Nations people have, they share. This value is particularly important when a family undergoes a crisis such as a death in the family or during various potlatch functions (i.e., memorial, naming, regalia/rights transfer, etc.).
7. • Emphasize a connectedness to all things: Nature is a part of life
- Land gives First Nations their sense of identity and religion.
 - Caretakers of the land, animals and resources.
 - The natural and supernatural worlds represent potential sources for natural and supernatural gifts/songs. Individuals who are not trained in a sense of internal balance ordinarily would have great difficulty accessing this aspect of the sacred.
8. • Emphasize a commitment to spiritual life, religion and health
- Private and public songs represent an ancestral connection to the natural and supernatural worlds.
 - Good personal and community health usually depends on the consistent application of values, and activities which drive them.
 - Consistent respectful relationships with others reflects a balance within the individual. A condition which the very old can readily identify.
 - Ritual specialists/prayers/songs may be used to restore balance and healing. This activity is also consistent with the value of forgiveness.
 - The passing along of songs, prayers, advice represents a gift from the people which includes their accumulated knowledge.
 - The recipient of new teachings has a responsibility to remain balanced.
9. • Time is viewed as flowing - from one family event to another - which may also include the passing of days, moons or seasons.
- Lessons learned from yesterday, last week, last month are considered before actions are undertaken in the present. Once the cumulative effects are understood, then it is possible to discuss future possibilities.
 - To a traditional First Nations person one's maturity is gauged by an understanding of where we come from.
 - Activities are acted on as needed and geared to the family or community function.
 - the time to begin an activity or event is when people are ready - when everyone arrives.
 - Depending on an individual's ability to listen, to be still, respectful, etc., elders determine the various levels/challenges/teachings a person has the capacity to learn.

10. • Emphasize an enjoyment of life to be enjoyed - which includes humor, teasing and fun.
- Humor has several functions, useful except during the most formal activities: It acknowledges acceptance of each other and may enhance each others ability to cope during times of stress.
 - Often one of the very first acts of acceptance within a traditional community involves a willingness to tease outsiders. In contrast, for example, an outsider might be excluded by speaking only in a First Nations dialect.

NOTES:

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2. In July of 1996 The School of Child and Youth Care, UVic/Dr. Philip Cook, Unicef/Rebecca Rios Cohn and Bill White/Aboriginal Liaison Officer/UVic, organized a small gathering of Indigenous representatives from around the world. It was during this gathering that the Elder/Sulxwane Dr. Samuel Sam pointed out another very important traditional value. That of 'forgiveness'. Acts of forgiveness are consistent with traditional spiritual/physical healing practices. In essence, the individual returns to a state of balance. This format reflects that addition.

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