

PART II: THE CIRCLE OF COURAGE

They had what the world has lost. They have it now. . . . Be it for now or a hundred years from now, or a thousand — so long as the race of humanity shall survive — the Indian keeps his gift for us all.

John Collier⁷
The Indians of the Americas

When professionals are told they are expected to build positive cultures in schools and child-care agencies, they are often perplexed. Even anthropologists who study cultures were never taught how to manufacture them. What could constitute the core of shared values, the unifying theme of such a culture? When we ask our college students to list what they believe to be the pre-eminent values in contemporary society, the prominent mainstay is “success” as defined by wealth, power and materialistic hedonism. Clearly we will have to look somewhere else if we are to find a value base appropriate for youth at risk.

Traditional Native American child-rearing philosophies provide a powerful alternative in education and youth development. These approaches challenge both the European cultural heritage of child pedagogy and the narrow perspectives of many current psychological theories. Refined over 15,000 years of civilization and preserved in oral traditions, this knowledge is little known outside the two hundred tribal languages that cradle the Native Indian cultures of North America.

Indians were conquered by militarily and technologically superior European invaders who saw them as primitive peoples who had much to learn but little to offer to a modern society. In reality, Native peoples possessed profound child psychology wisdom which might well have been adopted by the immigrants to North America. Instead, missionaries and educators set out to “civilize” their young “savages” with an unquestioned belief in the superiority of Western approaches to child care. Typically, children

were removed from families and placed in militaristic schools. Forbidden to use their own language under penalty of severe whippings, their supposedly inferior Indian identity was deliberately stripped away.¹⁵ Generations of such cultural intrusion have left deep scars of alienation on Indian children and families.

Native American philosophies of child management represent what is perhaps the most effective system of positive discipline ever developed. These approaches emerged from cultures where the central purpose of life was the education and empowerment of children. Modern child development research is only now reaching the point where this holistic approach can be understood, validated and replicated.

Fostering self esteem is a primary goal in socializing normal children as well as in specialized work with children and adolescents at risk. Without a sense of self worth, a young person from any cultural or family background is vulnerable to a host of social, psychological and learning problems.¹⁶ In his definitive work on self concept in childhood, Stanley Coopersmith⁹ observed that four basic components of self esteem are significance, competence, power and virtue:

Significance is found in the acceptance, attention and affection of others. To lack significance is to be rejected, ignored and not to belong.

Competence develops as one masters the environment. Success brings innate satisfaction and a sense of efficacy while chronic failure stifles motivation.

Power is shown in the ability to control one's behavior and gain the respect of others. Those lacking power feel helpless and without influence.

Virtue is worthiness judged by values of one's culture and of significant others. Without feelings of worthiness, life is not spiritually fulfilling.

Traditional Native educational practices addressed each of these four bases of self esteem: (1) significance was nurtured in a cultural milieu that celebrated the universal need for belonging, (2) competence was insured by guaranteed opportunities for mastery, (3) power was fostered by encouraging the expression of independence, and (4) virtue was reflected in the pre-eminent value of generosity.

The number four has sacred meaning to Native people who see the person as standing in a circle surrounded by the four directions. Lakota Sioux artist George Bluebird has portrayed this philosophy of child development in the medicine wheel in the art accompanying the text. We propose belonging, mastery, independence and generosity as the central values – the unifying theme – of positive cultures for education and youth work pro-

grams. We believe the philosophy embodied in this circle of courage is not only a cultural belonging of Native peoples, but a cultural birthright for all the world's children.