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Who is Indian? Reservation culture vs. Dakota culture

By Erich Longie, Ed. D.

In one of my blogs I had asked the question, who's Indian? I also said I would answer my own question in a later blog – well, my answer was too long, so it became this month's article in our newsletter.

To understand my answer, you have to recall the manner in which I asked the question. In my blog I insinuated that if you did not speak your tribal language, if you did not follow your tribe's traditions, if you did not attend pow-wows, if you were not raised in poverty, if you did not follow Indian Time, if you did not booze all night, etc., etc., – then you were not Indian. If this is the criteria that everyone had to meet to be called Indian, I would say Indians are extinct.

When you take a wide ranging, freedom loving people who were defeated militarily and placed within the confines of a small piece of land with no viable means of survival other than depending on US Government they often lose the majority their customs and culture. Especially when those customs are very dependent on a wide-ranging, freedom loving (go anywhere) lifestyle to begin with. With the loss of their customs and culture they become susceptible to all the psychological ills, (emotional and mental) of a defeated

people i.e. alcoholism, depression, loss of identity, no pride in their heritage etc. This type of dysfunctional behavior sometimes becomes the norm for certain individuals. This is what happened to the majority of Indians who were placed on Reservations. They succumbed to the psychological ills of a "conquered" people and became dysfunctional individuals.

Fortunately for us, against all odds, in spite of the horrible conditions that existed on Indian reservations, a few of our ancestors managed to hang onto their customs and passed this sacred knowledge down throughout the centuries.

A few weeks ago my older brother Phillip John Young (PJ) lost his valiant fight against cancer and went to the Spirit World. At his wake and funeral Father Chuck (Catholic Priest for Seven Dolors Church here in Fort Totten) talked about Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture. I was fascinated by what Father Chuck had to say because, what he said is parallel to what I have been saying and writing about in my Tribal Leaders Institute.

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Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture

After the burial, when we were eating I asked Father Chuck if I could interview him. I wanted him to expand on his Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture sermon he gave. He agreed and we met at my home. Here are a few of his thoughts on Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture:

Individuals who practice reservation culture instead of their Dakota culture avoid the reality of life. Most of these individuals live a dysfunctional lifestyle and it affects how they deal with stress; they have no identity, because they are not operating within a Dakota Culture framework, nor within a Christian framework. Years ago I was involved in a survey asking what the problems on the Reservation were. The Big Three were 1) Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, 2) Tribal Council not operating in a healthy manner and 3) Nepotism. There was a former Chairman who agreed to a blood test to prove he was not under the influence of either drugs or alcohol. I think this would be a very good role model for others to follow. The people said their (tribal council members) decisions were suspect because of drugs or alcohol usage and, as a result, they could not handle deadlines. Because of nepotism programs were not accomplishing the goal of the programs.

Father Chuck went on to draw a circle. He explained the middle of the circle is "you". The top of the circle represents your higher power. On the right side is the Physical World (Creator) the bottom of the circle is your inner self and the left side is other people and animals. He explained to me, who you are is how you relate to all of the elements in the circle. He reiterated that those individuals who do not follow Dakota or Christian values have negative relationships with the other elements of the circle.

Very quickly I drew my own circle. In the

middle I put Joe The Tribal Worker (my fictional tribal worker), his higher power is money (greed), his Physical World consists of vindictiveness, lying and stealing. Joe's inner self is using humor as form of denial, he practices Indian Time, and he has no self-honesty. He sees other people merely as way to accomplish his devious goals.

I informed Father Chuck that Charles Eastman, the first Dakota physician said something to the effect that Christianity and today's civilization are incompatible. However, Christianity and Dakota spirituality are basically one in the same. Father Chuck said he has been saying the same thing for many years. He then asked where I got that information. I showed him the book, *The Soul of the Indian*.

Back to my question, who's Indian? Here is the standard (easy) answer to that question. Each tribe has their own criteria to determine who is technically eligible to be enrolled in their tribe. Therefore, individuals who are officially enrolled in a tribe are "Indian", at least by US Government standards.

However in regards to my tribe, I personally, I agree with Father Chuck's answer when I asked him who's Indian (Dakota)? Here was his response...

"I'm more Indian than you," it is used to put somebody down. You need to demonstrate you are (Indian) instead of saying you are Indian. It's not the

Who is Indian? (continued)

Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture

degree of blood, it's your spirituality that you ordinarily receive from your family that determines who you are. If you did not receive it from your family then it is hard to learn it when you are older. You should understand and practice your traditions instead of just talking about them. The person who does this is a Dakota. Other people may be Dakota on paper, they may have the genes of an Indian (Dakota) and they may be registered as an Indian but these others take advantage of being a Dakota, using it as an excuse for dysfunctional behavior. Often Indians accuse other Indians of not being Indian! You can't go back to living in Teepees. Having a job, an education, electricity and running water in your home does not make you a white person. It's how you act; how you talk, it's your spirituality and how these affect your relationships everyday. That's what makes you a Dakota.

Every now and then I have doubts about what I am doing. Are people really that bad, I ask myself? Then I run into someone like Chuck and he reinforces my belief that change is so badly needed here on our reservation. Or, I visit with individuals from other tribes and they say the same thing Father Chuck and I are saying.

This past Sunday, I went to another reservation for a Book Party. At the Book Party we discussed the book Rebuilding Native Nations. The book accurately identifies issues on Indian Reservations and offers solutions to them. We discussed how the contents of the book described our reservations and how the solutions would make a better life for all tribal members. Inevitably, the discussion turned to the shenanigans' of tribal employees (council members, governing board members and entry level worker). As I sat and listened their stories and added a few of my own I thought it is amazing how much unethical behavior we Indians accept without doing anything about it. When they

talked about their own experiences, I was pleased to that every now and then one of them would turn to me and in a teasing way ask, is that ethical? (It was friendly teasing, because I promote my ethics course all of the time.)

I was pleased because it was an indication that my promotion is working. Before we do something, we need to ask ourselves, "Is it ethical?"

Years ago when I first became Academic Dean at our tribal college I attended a training seminar where I heard a piece of advice from the trainer that would guide me throughout my years at the college, "Before you do something ask yourself this question, 'how would it impact the students?' If the answer is, 'negatively' then don't do it, it is as simple as that," the presenter said.

And that is what we should do before we do something, we should ask ourselves, is this ethical? If it is not, then don't do it, it is as simple as that.

Let me close by airing a pet peeve of mine. I am extremely irritated by certain individuals my age and older who claim to be traditional. They attend or hold ceremonies (sweats, sun dances, naming, etc.) yet they do not follow the Dakota values of courage, honesty, perseverance and generosity. It would be nice to see a person who participates in ceremonies such as sweats, also practice these four values. Vice versa, it would be nice to see those people who practice the four values of courage, honesty, perseverance and generosity get involved in ceremonies such as sweats, name giving, Sun Dances and other ceremonies. My next newsletter will be addressing this issue in depth.

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*Making Life
Better*

Introduction to Ethical Issues on Indian Reservations

New and improved – and on your reservation!

This is an Ethics course so we wouldn't say it if it wasn't true!

In all seriousness, the initial pilot version of the on-line course, Introduction to Ethical Issues on Indian Reservations was just completed. We thank all of those who were part of this course for their insightful comments, their feedback and taking time out of their busy schedules to reflect on the ethical issues on the reservation.

After the pilot was completed, we went through the course page by page adding improvements. If you found it difficult to navigate the course, you will notice that we have included both menus on the side and arrows at the bottom of each page for you to move through the course in order. If you are the type of learner who likes to jump right to your area of interest, you'll use the menus. If you prefer to follow a specific order, you'll like the arrows directing you in the path we would use to learn about ethics.

More is added each day to the tribal leaders wiki, electronic filing cabinet, virtual library and tribal leaders forum. All of these resources are free and open to the public. Take a look at <http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/>

Tribal Leaders Institute courses, including the Introduction to Ethical Issues on Indian Reservations course all require registration. In the next few weeks you will have the opportunity to take a new computer-integrated course, that includes group discussions, a presentation by Spirit Lake Consulting president Dr. Erich Longie and hands-on web-based learning. The next class will be held in the computer lab at Cankdeska Cikana Community College on the Spirit Lake Nation, February 26 and at Turtle Mountain Community College on the Turtle Mountain Reservation on February 27. To register, email ericstev@spiritlakeconsulting.com . Or, register by phone by calling (701) 351-2175 . Or register here on the web: <http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/join.html>