Native Wisdom on Belonging

Martin Brokenleg

*This is the first in a series of four journal issues exploring the principles of Belonging, Mastery, Indepen-
dence, and Generosity that are embodied in the Native American Circle of Courage. The author introduces
the conceptual background of this model of youth development and discusses the first principle—Belonging.*

Cultural Tails and Personal Tales

Our worldviews are shaped by our cultural and family at-
tachments. Each of us drags around a *cultural tail* a thou-
sand years long, as well as our more personal *family tale.*
My Lakota (Sioux) grandfather was born in the mid-1800s
and did not see his first White man until after the en-
croachments of Custer's cavalry. He proudly carried the
name Brokenleg, which memorialized an injury incurred
in his job of training wild horses. Up until his death at
99 years of age, he only spoke Lakota as he would tell us,
his grandchildren, stories of our culture before we were
subjugated by European settlers.

My father should have been given his own special name,
but, following the European patriarchal tradition, he was
given the surname of his father and the first name of Noah.
When he became old enough to go to school, he was cap-
tured and hauled away in one of the trucks that came each
fall to our reservation from government or church-
sponsored boarding schools. The motto of colonial educa-
tion at the time was "Kill the Indian to save the child."
Thus, Whites thought they were rescuing these children
from savage families and bringing them to civilization as
embodied in militaristic boarding schools. These children,
who had never experienced force dealt out in anger by an
adult, were beaten if they spoke their native language.

The Europeans believed Indian children were little primi-
tives in need of socialization. In reality, they had brought
with them a very backward theory of child development,
one that assumed children were evil and had to be pun-
ished into submission. In contrast, tribal peoples had al-
ready embraced many democratic principles and had
sophisticated systems of childrearing. The goal of disci-
pline was to teach courage instead of obedience. Elders
used respectful communications with children to instill

the values of being a good relative. In the words of a
Lakota leader:

> The days of my infanthood and childhood were spent
> in surroundings of love and care. In manner, gentle-
> ness was my mother's outstanding characteristic.
> Never did she, nor any of my caretakers, ever speak
> crossly to me or scold me for failures or shortcomings.
> (Standing Bear, 1933, p. 46)

Anthropologists have long been aware that North Ameri-
can tribal cultures had very different systems of discipline
than the coercive obedience and harsh corporal punish-
ment common in Western culture. At the core of the puni-
tive mindset of the latter is a view of the child as inferior
to the adult. If one were to say "You are acting like a child"
in any European language, this would be interpreted as an
insult. In my Lakota tongue, this phrase would be "You are
acting like a sacred being," which is certainly not a put-
down. When an early treaty was broken by the U.S.
government, a Lakota chief remarked, "What would we
expect from people who beat their sacred beings!"

We Are All Relatives

In traditional tribal kinship systems, the siblings of my
parents would also be my mothers and fathers, and the
persons Europeans call cousins we would call brothers
and sisters. Most everyone with white hair was a grand-
parent. Similar kinship models exist among tribal peoples
worldwide, as reflected in the African adage, "It takes a
village to raise a child," and the Cree belief, "Every child
needs many mothers."

Noted psychoanalyst Erik Erikson studied childrearing on
our reservations to prepare a chapter in his book *Childhood
and Society* (1950). He was shocked to discover that some

Sioux children didn't even know who their "real" parents were until it came time to fill out papers for school admission. Lakota grandmothers did not share Erikson's concern that shared parenting was destructive to a child. In fact, they were more concerned about the poor little White kid who had only one mother—what would happen if that mother were too young, immature, or overwhelmed by her own problems?

My aunt, Ella Deloria, was a teacher and anthropologist who described the spirit of belonging in Native American culture in this manner: "Be related, somehow, to everyone you know" (Deloria, 1943, p. 46). The ultimate test of kinship was not genetic but behavioral: You belonged as a relative if you acted like you belonged. Treating others as kin forged powerful human bonds that drew everyone into a network of relationships based on mutual respect.

The Circle of Courage

In 1988 we were asked by the Child Welfare League of America to make a presentation on Native American child development principles to an international conference in Washington, DC. We called our synthesis of this research on tribal wisdom the Circle of Courage, and it has been the basis of various publications, including our book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990). We worked with Lakota artist George Blue Bird, who created the art that illustrated these principles. The Circle of Courage as reproduced here is a medicine wheel,
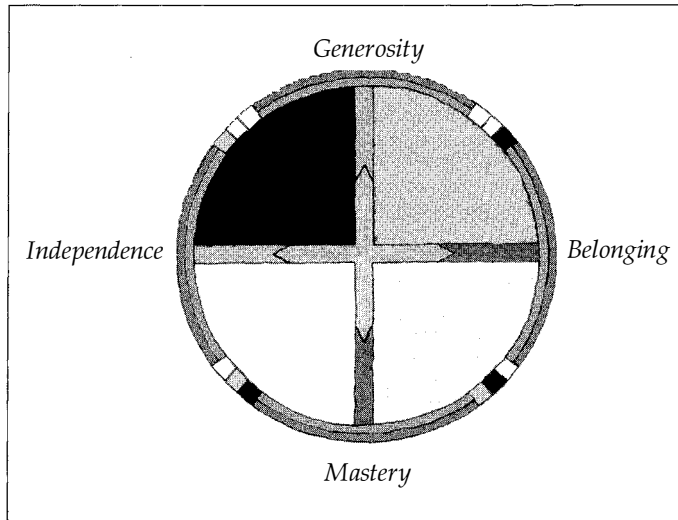
The Circle of Courage

which is used by tribal peoples to illustrate that all must be in balance and harmony. The art accompanying the Circle is reproduced on the cover of this issue.

The Circle of Courage portrays the four developmental needs of children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. The various Native tribes do have many differences, but these four principles can be found in the traditional writings and practices of indigenous peoples throughout North America. These values grew out of cultures with structures markedly different from the structure of hierarchal European society. Riane Eisler (1987) contended that the two basic models of cultures are the Dominator and Partnership paradigms. The Dominator culture was the traditional model that appeared throughout much of European history. The Partnership model may well have existed in European antiquity and is still seen in many tribal cultures that are organized around more democratic principles. As is shown in Table 1, these values are strikingly similar to the elements required for positive self-esteem found in the research of Stanley Coopersmith (1967).

A comparison of the values found in these models is given in Table 1 and is briefly summarized next:

1. **Belonging** is the organizing principle in Partnership cultures. Significance is assured by belonging, whereas in Dominator cultures one gains significance by standing out from the others, as seen in the hyperindividualism of U.S. society today.

TABLE 1

Comparison of Coopersmith Values, Circle of Courage Values, and Traditional Western Values		
Coopersmith foundations of self-esteem	Circle of Courage (Partnership) values	Traditional Western (Dominator) values
Significance	Belonging	Individualism
Competence	Mastery	Winning
Power	Independence	Dominance
Virtue	Generosity	Affluence

2. **Mastery** measures competence by an individual's progress relative to past performance rather than in comparison to others. The achievements of all are celebrated. In Dominator cultures, "winners" show competence by beating "losers."

3. **Independence** is the only principle that allows all persons to exert power over their lives. In Dominator systems, only a few can occupy coveted positions of power; the majority are obliged to submit.

4. **Generosity** is the measure of virtue in Partnership cultures, where relationships are more important than possessions. In the Dominator culture, the "good life" is reflected in the accumulation of materialistic goods.

After we first presented this model in Washington, a participant in our session approached us privately to ask, with some shyness, whether perhaps these were not just Indian values but also universal values underlying most ethical systems, such as those seen in first-century Christian communities. We subsequently discovered the writings of philosopher Mortimer Adler, who contended that a common error of many modern thinkers is to assume that all values are relative. Certainly, many values are determined by our cultural or individual preferences, but early philosophers never doubted there were some universal values, such as truth and courage. To Adler, the test of an absolute value was that it met a universal human need (1985). In fact, developmental psychologists have found universal human patterns of attachment, achievement, autonomy, and altruism that correspond to the principles of the Circle of Courage.

As we begin this series on the Circle of Courage, it seems appropriate to share with our readers something about the person who created the art. Since his early 20s, George Blue Bird has been incarcerated in a South Dakota state penitentiary. While intoxicated, he committed a violent

George Blue Bird Family. White Buffalo is the young man holding the child. Used with permission.

homicide that he does not remember. He entered a plea bargain for manslaughter and was sentenced to life imprisonment. George Blue Bird is active in working with younger Native inmates through cultural programs, and he continues his work as an artist within the prison, hoping to gain his release some day and return to his family.

George Blue Bird had two small children when he entered prison 15 years ago. The youngest was an infant son named White Buffalo. This boy has never seen his father outside of a prison visiting room. When George drew the Circle of Courage art for the principle of Belonging (as reproduced on the cover of this journal), he pictured a father dancing with a 6-year-old boy. Significantly, White Buffalo was 6 at the time. Recently, George asked us if we would meet with his son, who is now 15 and was visiting from his home in another state. We gave the youth a framed print of his father's art and pointed out that he was the boy dancing with his father in the painting.
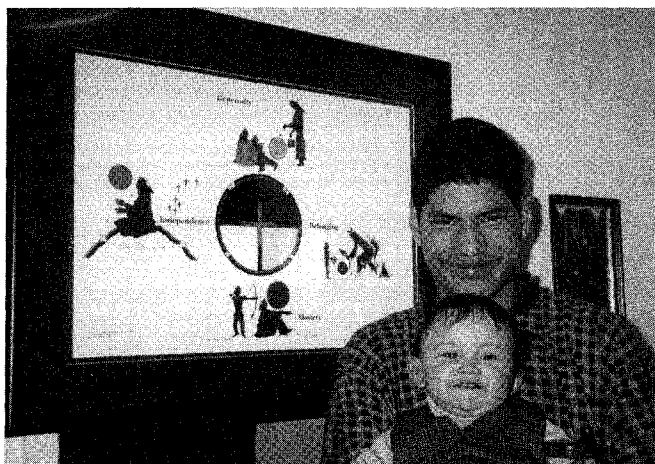
Conclusion

In this materialistic, fast-paced culture, many children have broken circles, and the fault line usually starts with damaged relationships. Having no bonds to significant adults, they chase counterfeit belongings through gangs, cults, and promiscuous relationships. Some are so alienated that they have abandoned the pursuit of human attachment. Guarded, lonely, and distrustful, they live in despair or strike out in rage. Families, schools, and youth organizations are being challenged to form new "tribes" for all of our children so there will be no "psychological orphans."

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