

## How Does the Crane Keep Its Language?

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“When I was a little bitty baby, my momma would rock me in the cradle, in them old tundra hills back home,” and as I rocked I would hear the voices of my ancestors just as the crane chicks in their nest hear the mother crane making its call.

I don’t know if the crane has the genes in its DNA to make its own distinctive call or if it learns it from its mother and other members of its own kind, but it does learn to speak the crane language. Baby cranes do not make a call like that of a seagull’s raucous, squalling sound or like any other member of the bird family. Each species has its own distinct call—a language readily identifiable as its own—and all those unique languages continue to be passed on from one generation to the next.

As Native people, we too have our own unique languages which have been passed on from one generation to the next for many millennia. So why are we losing our Native languages so rapidly? Could it be because we, as parents, grandparents and villagers, do not speak to our children in our own Native language anymore? Why is it that we do not speak to them in our languages? One of the reasons is that our primary language has become English, which is a voracious language that eats up our Native languages. Perhaps this is brought about as a result of the remembrance of some Elders and parents of the shaming, abuse and punishment they received in school for speaking their own Native language. We must begin to freely talk about such experiences and the hurt feelings and shame so the healing process can begin.

So what must we do to keep from losing our Native languages? For one thing, we can look at other indigenous people who have been successful in re-enlivening and revitalizing their languages. We can take a look at the Maori language nests or the Native Hawaiians’ programs and then put into practice that which is proving to work. We must consult with our Elders to see what we, as Native people, need to do to save our Native

languages. This is a very tough and complicated charge for those of us engaged in teaching, research and role modeling. Head Start teachers, parents, Elders and villagers have the grave responsibility of teaching our Native youngsters their Native language. After all, they are our future.

Why teach our Native languages that are often looked upon by the modern world as useless, nontechnical and incapable of conveying profound meaning and concepts? As Alaska Native people we need to convince ourselves and our young ones that our Native languages are important and can convey deep meaning and complex thinking. As I have said in the past, using our Native languages thrusts us into the thought world of our ancestors. We can talk about our traditional hunting and gathering ways and sophisticated technology by using our Native languages. For example, our Yupiaq word, *pinaa*, which means “his, her or its strength,” can mean physical strength of a person, of a bow, of the oogruk skin covering the *qayaq* or of water. It can mean intellectual prowess of a person, place or thing. It can mean emotional or spiritual strength and stability, all depending on the context in which it is used. Or take *qalluq*, our word for rolling thunder or electrical discharge. It is now our word for electricity. Who says our Native languages are not technical? They can be very technical and profoundly spiritual at the same time. Don’t ever believe anyone who puts forward such feeble reasons for encouraging us to lose our Native languages. Manu Meyer, a Native Hawaiian, puts it this way: “We practice abstract thinking, but it is tied to purpose and a meaningful existence.” We—ourselves and our youngsters—need to learn and understand this important philosophical thought.

There are other reasons why we should not lose our Native languages. They allow us to articulate spiritually and emotionally and convey the deeper meanings of life. Richard Littlebear of Montana has pointed out that our languages allow our people to articulate the subtle attributes and meaning associated with self-governance, law and order, jurisprudence, literature, a land base, spirituality and sacred practices. We, as well as the rest of the world, cannot afford to diminish the diversity of cultures. To have but one language and one culture in this world would be boring indeed and would put our very existence as a species at greater risk.

The most important part of growing up is when children are developing a beginning understanding of their language, culture and place. However, human beings do not have a built-in mechanism for learning a particular language. Unlike the crane, Native children have no such genes in their genotype, so they have to listen, imitate and learn to utter the sounds found in their own languages. It is like having to learn English, German, Russian or any other language—they have to work at it. The children have to be talked to in their

own language during play, so they can imitate, mimic things and ask a lot of questions. They have an acute curiosity to learn during their early lives. We must encourage this attribute by doing things that they can learn from in association with their families, friends and communities. By doing things that are important to their families and communities, their curiosity and willingness to learn will never diminish. In the school, however, they are often learning about things that are foreign to them and find no application in the surrounding community so that by the time they get into the fifth and sixth grades, their inborn curiosity to learn has been leached out of their minds. Sad, but true. We have too many dropouts from high school and others who drop out intellectually and emotionally long before they enter high school.

I have a problem when history is written by an outsider, especially when it deals with Alaska or Alaska Native history, because it is often just one interpretation, usually from a limited perspective. You know where our history is found? It is in our *quliraat* (mythology) and *qalumciit* (stories). So invite the Elders to come into the classroom to tell the stories in their own language. You will find that the values and those qualities that make us a strong people are embedded in our Native words and stories. The youngsters will begin to understand and yearn *yulunii pitallqertugluni*—being a person who is living a life that feels just right. Alaska Native mythology contains the power and wisdom for guiding us in making a life and a living that feels just right. Alaska Native languages enable us to show proper respect and express courtesy for all elements of Mother Earth.

Another important language activity is to arrange for the Elders to teach the youngsters singing, dancing and drumming. In doing so, the children will become acquainted with the technical words ascribed to rituals, ceremonies and sacred practices. By learning the songs, they will begin to cultivate an identity and connection to place. As hunter-gatherers, we had no need for written history because our history was embedded in place, stories, songs, dances and movement from place to place according to the seasons.

The youngsters should be brought outdoors to begin to appreciate and experience the beauty of nature such as the caterpillar, chamomile and tree. They must be taught that we are connected to everything. The caterpillar eats vegetation, turning it into excrement which is useful to the tree. It gives off carbon dioxide which is also used by the tree. The tree provides a home and food for the caterpillar and gives off oxygen which is used by the caterpillar. As shown by the abbreviated cycles above, everything must go somewhere. Everything that is done in nature is done for some purpose.

Human beings cannot have everything that we want. We must learn to live with limited needs. We must learn to respect and be satisfied with what we have. Life is the greatest gift that we have and we must nurture that which makes life meaningful. Most importantly in that regard, we must maintain our languages because language, more than anything else, shapes who we are, just as it does for the crane. By maintaining our languages, we are sustaining the ultimate standard of health and endurance of the human species.