

In The Maelstrom of Confusion, a Stilling Voice

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The spirit and pride of Native being has been struggling in a maelstrom of confusion due to the many people living with homeless minds, destitution, poverty, pestilence, war and dereliction of being, even as we live in the wealthiest nation in the world. You see, we have tried to comply with the wishes and dreamworks of a narcissistic society, but we have not been able to progress from the doldrums of uncertainty and hopelessness. However, a few of our American Indian and Alaska Native people have begun to see through the small channels in the blizzard and once we are able to see more clearly again, we will have something very important to share with the world.

We, as Native peoples, have always known that genotypes of all living things have micro-consciousness or micro-intelligence that enables them to communicate with one another and to work together for the good of the whole. Let me tell you why I think this is so. As a Yupiat, we have many rituals and ceremonies, some of which require special masks. Some of the masks are human masks. A few of these will have a third eye painted on the forehead. This eye we call Ellam iina, the eye of the universe, the eye of consciousness, the eye of awareness, thus intelligence. This says to me that the Great Consciousness, God if you wish, resides in my mind, and my consciousness is in the Great Consciousness. It is there that we find our collective memories and the power of our collective mindfulness. These essences of memory are imbued into the creatures, plants and elements of nature to remind and teach us how to be people that live lives that feel just right.

Nature is our textbook as a Native people. In it we find wisdom to make a life and a living. In order to have dialogue with it we must listen for the still small voice within. To ensure growth of wisdom, we recognize that we need to be with those that we consider wise, most often the Elders. We know that we become that which we hold up and respect.

How many times have you heard this truth! You and I, as educators, seek through dialogue with those we admire, through reading all sorts of written media, through seeing videotaped media and through learning to read and communicate directly with nature. The information we gather requires that we sift through it to remove the chaff in the form of misdirected, misinformed and useless information which we or others may have interpreted wrongly. Knowledge is merely information, but wisdom requires that we understand, become enlightened or aware and, as we grow, live what we know! This is what we learn from our wise Elders—this is wisdom.

This wisdom cannot be separated from the sacred—our Native spirituality. Wisdom is embedded in the sacred, thus we live it. Remember that wisdom also resides in you—look for it. As a Native person, you need your Native language to commune with nature and to describe it in its own terms. A Native friend of mine from the village of Minto told me that our Native languages are living languages and that if you don't use it, you are giving yourself away—relinquishing your identity. As a Yupiaq man, I have to draw on my Yupiaq language and mindset to feel the crispness of the snow, the balminess of a warm wind. I have to draw on my language to fully experience the mountains, the moon, the sun, the river, the spruce tree, the taste of Hudson's Bay tea, the wolf, the eagle and the paramecium—it is a living language! All these experiences with the language, along with the five senses and intuition, are necessary for my growth and my spirituality.

Barriers have to be removed for my continued growth, otherwise staleness follows. This is another reason why we must get the children out of the classrooms as much as possible to be with and in nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Nature becomes (to man) the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept 'know thyself' and the modern precept, 'study nature' become at last one maxim." Get the children to see beauty in the flower, tree, butterfly, grass, stream, fish and, yes, the slug. These living things interact and cooperate. This process does not leave out the rocks and other elements of Mother Earth—they are all an integral part it. Let them begin to understand that we are here for a purpose, to contribute to the good of the tribe and be of service to others. This involves goodness of self, morality, joy, cooperation and happiness. We have Christ, Dalai Lama, Ghandi, Chief Peter John, Lyons and others who have the selfless love which is the stabilizer, the balancer of life. They are our role models.

Let the children think of all the good traits and skills that they possess. Someone has called these the "inner assets". They have talents and skills inherited from their ancestors with the Great Mystery working the genotypes to fit the place and conditions. This

process needs our continued meditation and prayers for the still, small voice to let us know what else needs to be done. Ellanginginartuqut—we are becoming more aware!

The inner assets might include ability to interact effectively with others, intuitive perception, athletic skill, ability to observe and make sense of what is being seen, ability for abstract thinking, dexterity combined with mind, leadership skills, mindfulness of place, cooperation, showing love and humility and all the many other positive traits that children may possess. Not only must the children be guided to making a worthwhile living but to making a life that feels good to them as well. This is done through the mythology, stories, singing, dancing, drumming, place names and all the other rituals and ceremonies that have been handed down to us through many thousands of years. They must be guided to living life to the fullest—a good and responsible life working to become the very best they possibly can while making a contribution to their community. Children who want to live a healthy and stable life will be contributors to a healthy, stable and sustainable community.

These inner assets of children have to be capitalized on for them to become the very best that they are capable of. They can become the very best hunter, medical doctor, electrician, artist, craftsperson or medicine person, but this has to be infused with liberal amounts of love, humility, compassion and open-mindedness. This means that love has balanced the outer and inner ecologies of the young person. They work and experience place for the good of the community. We have to know place in order to know self, for place is our identity.

The last 500 years or so we have seen a maelstrom of confusion, a perfect storm! It is destructive because it is based on self-love, greed, hate and anger, which are in direct conflict with what nature teaches us. We must avoid personal narcissism just as we must avoid spiritual narcissism. We have to work for a balance. Some American Indian people refer to this as “Walking the Red Road”, a very narrow path which guides us on that thin line between good and evil. We are gradually emerging from this maelstrom of confusion and getting on a pathway that feels just right!

We, as teachers, are not just repositories of knowledge, but serve as a role model and guide for the physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual development of these children, our future. May the Ellam Yua, the Spirit of the Universe, give us guidance and direction in this most important role.