

Native Values

Cultural education is a strong component of Eagle's Nest Center's mission along with transitional care and restorative justice work.

In an effort to educate, we'd like to share the following article during November's National American Indian Heritage month. Please see Ms. Ramierz's web sites, www.walk-in-peace.com for her parenting book, and www.parenting-child-development.com, which is her parenting web site, for further information.

Ancient Native Values Inspire Mainstream Culture

Written by Laura Ramierz

November is National American Indian Heritage Month, and it's the perfect time to reflect upon the values that Native people have contributed to mainstream society. Since these values are central to sound leadership, it makes sense to consider them as voters determine who will be the next president. Although these values are deeply rooted in Native culture, it may be surprising to learn that they are the foundation for many of the mainstream beliefs held today.

Respect for Nature

At the heart of the conservationist movement is a respect for nature that has its roots in Native people's deep reverence for the earth and the practical understanding that people must harness, rather than exploit the earth's resources, so they can be enjoyed by generations to come. Native people have practiced this belief by taking only what they needed from the earth. Underlying this is the understanding that it is the human capacity for consciousness that dictates the role as caretakers of the earth.

Inclusion

To indigenous people, life is represented by the circle. In the circle, there is room for everybody. No one is first. No one is last. Everyone is equal. Each person is seen as having something to contribute to the whole.

This same philosophy is beginning to show itself in an understanding of the level of consciousness to which Americans must aspire to strengthen diplomatic relations with other countries in a world where diminishing resources will have to be rationed and shared, at least until new energy sources can be developed. Of course, before Americans can achieve this, they must learn to practice it at home. While America's diversity provides

ample opportunities, it is not enough to practice tolerance because this merely requires tolerating each other. Diplomacy means accepting differences and moving beyond them to find common ground.

When white people first set foot on this continent, Native people welcomed them with open arms because they saw beyond surface differences and recognized the humanity that binds all people as humans. If Americans are to survive the environmental and financial dilemmas of today, they must accept differences, roll up their sleeves and work together toward the common good.

Americans do not realize that it is this philosophy that the founding fathers borrowed from the accords of the people of the Six Nations (Iroquois, Tuscaroras, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas and Senecas) that became the basis for the U.S. Constitution and the belief in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The founding fathers were inspired by the participatory democracy of the Six Nations, which was the first of its kind. Although history claims that Native people were led by chiefs, in truth, they were led by councils made up of individuals whose expertise, vision and humanity were trusted because they served the best interests of the people.

Child Stewardship

In the book "Keepers of the Children: Native American Wisdom and Parenting," I write that when a Native woman is pregnant, she is said to have a piece of turquoise inside her womb. When that piece of turquoise is born into the world, it is the parents' job not to break it or try to make it into something other than what it is, but to polish it, until its unique beauty comes to light.

This is a strengths-based way of parenting that was practiced by Native people. These beliefs are also reflected in the principles behind developments in happiness psychology. When you raise your children in this way, they become progressively aware of who they are and what their strengths are. This is essential because with the state of affairs in the world today, it is the adults who learned to bring their unique strengths to the table as kids who will possess the ingenuity and confidence required to create a better world.

Einstein said that people can't solve problems at the level of consciousness at which they were created. I believe that one way to solve the problems is to raise children to develop their strengths and critical thinking skills, so they will use them to make unique contributions to society.

Vision Quest

Although the vision quest has been a long standing tradition in the Native world, the quest to lead a purposeful life - a recent trend popularized by widespread middle-aged dissatisfaction in America - comes directly from this practice. In the Native culture, adolescence is seen as the perfect time for a vision quest because this is when a child begins to individuate from the parents and has a deep yearning to know who he is and why he is here.

Taught how to survive in the wilderness since childhood, the Native adolescent is taken to a remote place (the desert, a forest or the mountains) and left alone for a few days without food, water or any of the comforts or distractions of modern life. As the young man grows thirsty, hungry and tired, he is forced to rely on himself and call upon his inner strengths. It is the act of looking within for strength, rather than looking outside for validation, that helps the young person discover the purpose inside him waiting to unfold.

When a child is brought up to act from his purpose, he learns how to lead a life of meaning and fulfillment. At the same time, by offering his strengths and vision to society, he makes a lasting contribution to the world. In this way, the individual and society benefit.

Although society tends to focus on the ways in which Native Americans have assimilated the values of mainstream culture, it is possible now to see that the adoption of ideas was mutual. Strong indigenous values will continue to shape the way Americans see the world. This is the legacy of Native people - something Americans can honor and celebrate - particularly during National American Indian Heritage Month.

Laura Ramirez is the author of the award-winning book, "Keepers of the Children: Native American Wisdom and Parenting" and the publisher of "Family Matters Parenting Magazine."