

MINIWAUKAN NEWS



Am I the Last of my Generation?

By Dr. Erich Longie

Last February, I wrote a newsletter article entitled, [Who is Indian? Reservation Culture vs. Dakota Culture](#). The article discussed problems assimilation has caused on Indian reservations. Assimilation is an issue that is constantly evolving. It probably goes back to our first contact with the “White Man” when some Indians called other Indians “Hang around the Fort Indians.”



For those unfamiliar with the term, “Hang around the Fort Indians” referred to, well, Indians hanging around the fort waiting for handouts while other Indians chose to live the traditional lifestyle of hunting and gathering. Later, when trappers or early settlers married Indian

women, their children faced discrimination from both races. When I was a child, an Indian who received an education and went to work every day was ridiculed as a White Man. To some extent, this attitude still exists today. More recently, the reverse has also become true, meaning that if you do not go to ceremonies and take a Dakota name, you are looked down on by some of those who do.

Many of my values were instilled in me during the 1950s and 1960s while I was growing up. Here is an excerpt from my one of my recent blogs:

I remember my mother's generation always shook hands with each other when they met. I remember when visitors were treated respectfully. They were fed and if they were traveling long distances, they were given gas money and/or food to take with them. I remember when first cousins were considered brothers and sisters and my parent's siblings were called aunt and uncle. I remember when adults ate first; when we always respected the elderly; when we were punished for lying; and when you were not afraid to stand up for what you believe in... There are many beliefs I remember as a child that we no longer practice today.



Because I was born and raised on the Spirit Lake Nation by a parent who did not learn to speak English until she was nine years old, I always figured I am just as much of an Indian as anyone. So you can imagine how I feel whenever someone accuses me of not being “Indian.” This has happened quite a few times lately.

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A month or so ago, during an online conversation in the comment section of the Grand Forts Herald, a person using a fictitious name told me something to that effect. The commenter claimed that because I do not have a Dakota name, and I do not attend ceremonies, I am not a "real" Indian (Although this person used a false name, I could tell he/she was "Rez Indian."). Naturally, I took offense to that accusation. "After all," I thought, "Who is this person to determine whether another Indian is a good or bad Indian?"



But the person's accusations did get me thinking. Why would someone accuse me, of all people, of not being a real Indian? Most of my acquaintances say just the opposite. They call me Indian to the core. Pondering this question led me to examine who I am. To begin, I started with memories of my childhood.

As a child, I remember listening to my mother and other adults converse in the Dakota language and wondered why they didn't teach me. Regardless, I loved listening to them speak in their native tongue, and I would try to interpret what they were saying.



I remember attending the Fourth of July and Labor Day Powwows and how much I enjoyed watching the dancing. I remember my Auntie Alvina Alberts telling me stories about how life was when she was a child. I remember other adults talking about their childhood, and how fascinated I was listening to those stories.

My fascination with these stories led me to read many books about Indians (or Native Americans or American Indians as we are now known) as a teenager. Each book had a similar ending; it ended in disaster for us Indians. It didn't matter if the story was about the Huron, the Apache, the Comanche, or Sioux, we always lost in the end. We were defeated in battle by a superior number of soldiers. Our land was stolen usually through outright theft or through legal theft. We were cheated

time and time again over what little the government agreed to pay us in return for our land.



Due to the extensive reading I did in my youth, I developed an extreme sense of tribalism. The books also described our ancestors' character traits (courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity). Tales of how these traits were exhibited filled my heart with pride. This knowledge, along with my childhood experiences growing up on the reservation, made me proud of myself as an Indian person and proud of Indians in general.

There was also the reality of growing up in the 60's and 70's, a time when racism was rampant and Indians were often considered second-class citizens. As a child, I often observed how horribly my mom was treated when we were off the reservation. As a result of experiencing such treatment, I made a vow I kept to this day: I would never let any white person treat me like that when I grew older. As I grew older, when it came to racist behavior, I learned to give as good as I got -- and I was proud of it.



Then I quit drinking, went to college, earned a couple of degrees and became involved in Indian Education. Like most Indian students at UND, I enrolled in some Indian Studies courses. It

was in these courses that I learned yet another version of our history -- one written by historians -- which was different from the history I learned from grade and high school history books and the movies of the day.

When I went on to graduate school, I learned how specific government actions were actually a cover for cheating and defrauding us (Indians) out of our land and whatever else we were owed. Learning this history of deceit and deception, hardship and toil, made me proud of our ancestors and how they persevered. Empowered by their struggles, I knew I would never give in to racism either.

So, how does this apply to my conversation with the person online? This reflection made me realize that, yes, I may not attend ceremonies or speak the Dakota language, but that does not make me a bad Indian. I am very proud of who I am – a Dakota man. Just like going to church on Sunday does not necessarily make one a true Christian, simply attending – or not attending – ceremonies does not define one as Indian.

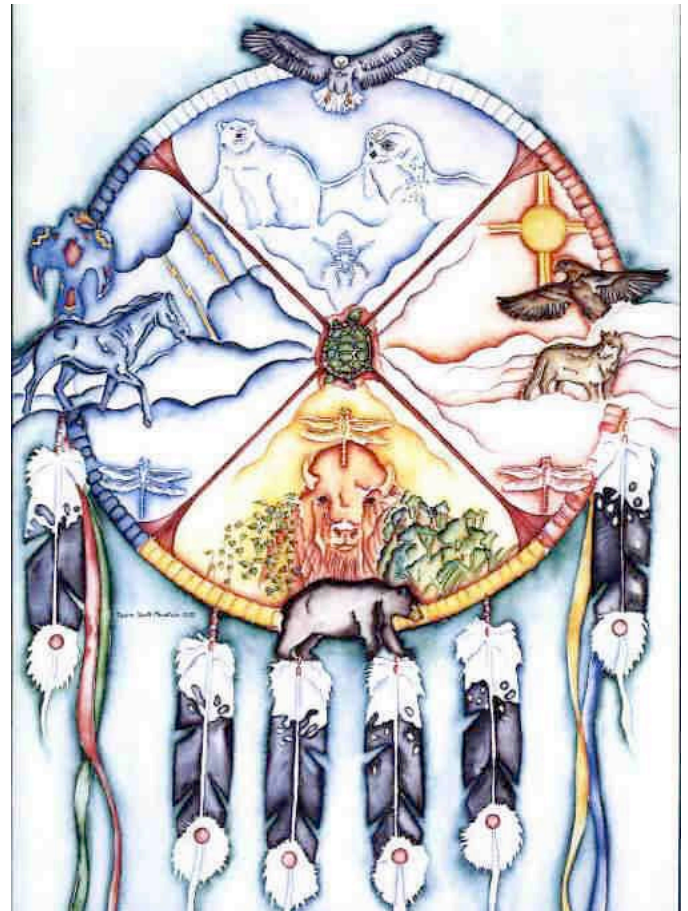
What I did learn from my mother and other adults of her generation is a "good Indian" is one who practices our Dakota values of courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity. Take "honesty" for example, the person who accused me of being a no good Indian did it online using a fictitious name. Not using a real name showed cowardice and dishonesty, which are the opposite of courage and honesty (I signed my real name after my comments). He was brave behind his fictitious name.

Getting back to our Dakota values, I will be the first to admit as a young man I did not follow these tenets. However, largely due to the values taught to me during my childhood, I became the person I am today, a person who judges character on substance rather than rhetoric.



At a very young age, I realized that going to church every Sunday or listening to a minister was not going to make me a better person. The only one responsible for my behavior was

me. As a result, I rejected all religion by the time I was in the seventh or eighth grade. Another reason for rejecting religion at an early age was I had seen a lot of mean and bad people do mean and bad things all week then go to church on Sunday and act like a saint. I hated this hypocrisy. So, I quit going to church.



It is the same thing with people who insinuate that by having an Indian name and attending ceremonies that they are better Indians than those who don't. Having an Indian name and going to ceremonies is one thing. Practicing our values of courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity is another. Attending ceremonies and taking an Indian name does not make any one Indian better than another Indian.

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Over the last 30 years, there has been resurgence in learning our ceremonies and traditions. Most of the individuals I know who attend ceremonies and follow our traditions are sincerely interested in reviving the "old ways." They are good decent people. In fact, I have attended a couple of "sweats" at my cousin's home, and you cannot find a more humble decent man than my cousin.

In addition to customs and rituals, we need to practice and preach the Dakota values of courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity. These values should be taught beginning in childhood so a person can practice them while growing up. However, if you did not learn

these values as a child, it is not too late. You can still learn them. In my opinion, practicing these values, along with learning the language and going to ceremonies will make you a better Indian.

Why is all this talk about Dakota values and customs important? ...Because we are at a point where we, as a people, appear to be splitting in two separate directions. Often, I feel that I am going in one direction and many of my tribal members are going in another.

In the chart below I have listed the directions I am talking about:



Attitudes Regarding...	Others	Me
...Acceptance of Past Wrongs	We are now assimilated into the mainstream. It is time to forget about the past and the wrongs that have been committed against our ancestors.	Absolutely not! Not when those wrongs are still being committed against us today. Only when everyone treats us Indian people equally across the state of North Dakota and only when all acts of racism against Indians stop will I consider forgetting about past and present wrongs.
...The Status Quo	It is better than it was 40 - 50 years ago. We need to be happy with what we have.	Be happy with 50% unemployment, a critical housing shortage, and with a standard of living far below the national average? No way!
...Racism	When I encounter racism, I simply smile and walk away. We teach our children to do the same.	When I encounter racism, I do not smile and walk away. I confront it! I passed this trait down to my children. After all, I am a proud Dakota who will not let anyone from any race treat my family disrespectfully.
...Tribal Independence	Our tribe's survival is dependent on others. We will be forgotten and suffer if we don't accept outside help, even if it is under their conditions.	We are part of the Great Sioux Nation. There have been thousands of books written about us. There have been hundreds of movies made about us. Other tribes copy us. We are dependent on no one.
...Values	It is okay to win at all costs. It is okay to let some outsider come on the reservations and pit us against each other. It is acceptable to lie, cheat and steal to achieve the "American Dream."	Now more than ever we need to return to our traditional values of courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity? We should never forget the sacrifices our ancestors made to hold onto a small piece of land that today are called reservations.

Some people say it is time to let go of the past and move on. I agree – to an extent. Many years ago, I

attended a meeting in Bismarck. At lunch, I stood behind a non-Indian woman who turned around and

talked to me. Her dislike/hatred for me was easily discernable, although she did her best to hide it. As I stood there talking to her, it struck me how unhappy she was. The more I studied her, the more I realized her unhappiness came from her dislike of me. At that moment, I had an epiphany. I realized racism does nothing more than make a person extremely unhappy. *“Wow! Is this how I appear to the non-Indian when my racism gets the better of me?”* I thought as I was standing there listening to the woman. I did not like my answer, and I vowed, on the spot, to change. Realistically, I knew I could not overcome my racism immediately, but what I did at that time was to make a vow not pass my racism down to my children. After all, I reasoned, if I love my children why would I teach them to be unhappy?

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Since that conversation, I have made a concerted effort to unlearn the racism that I was so proud of for many years. I have many friends who are non-Indian. One is a guy in a wheelchair who I have been shooting pool with for the past 25 years. Around the same time I met



this friend, I started hanging around with a couple of non-Indian pool players from Devil's Lake. I was invited to their homes, and I joined their pool team and even joined the Eagles, something unheard of in those

times. As an educator, I have worked with and become friends with many non-Indians over the years. Does this mean I have overcome my racism? Not completely, but I work very hard to not let it interfere with my

interactions with people.

On the other hand, you can still hear me ranting and raving when I perceive that an injustice has been committed against us Indians. When that happens, I am often accused of being racist, but my response is different than it was years ago. Instead of saying, "You're go_ _ right, I'm racist! What're you going to do about it?" Now I say, "I'm not racist! I'm just strongly pro-Indian rights."



I have learned to be successful in the white man's world. I promote his education and follow many of his ways, and I have many non-Indian friends, but I have not forgotten who I am or where I came from. I am a Dakota man who was raised by an intelligent proud Dakota mother who taught me the Dakota values of courage, honesty, perseverance, and generosity. Regardless of where my life path takes me, my first loyalty will always be for my family, my relatives, and to the Spirit Lake Oyate.





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