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Emerging from the Shadows: A Quest for Self-Identification

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The time has come for the individual to begin his true adult education, to discover who he is and what life is all about. What is the secret of the "I" with which he has been on such intimate terms all these years yet which remains a stranger?... What lurks behind the worlds facade, animating it, ordering it—to what end?

— Huston Smith[1]

The foreman at the door factory where I was employed during the summer stopped by my workstation and informed me that I was to be moved to a new site. The foreman was someone I knew because we attended the same church. As we silently walked through the factory, he suddenly directed a needlelike question to me. He asked, "What are you?" The question came as a surprise, but it didn't need qualification since I knew its intent. I had felt the sting of such inquiries, spoken and unspoken, numerous times in my growing up years in a town located adjacent to an Indian reservation. Since the factory was Dutch-owned and nearly all of the workers were of a similar ethnic background, this gave some explanation for the ques-

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tion. The question was a way of determining if consideration should be given to my placement with certain worker groups. I had experienced this kind of antipathy before, especially with social groups where there was a strong ethnic affiliation. Being a mixed-blood, I found it was often easier to attain structural inclusion in situations where reduced ethnic or racial polarization existed among group members. My answer to the foreman was simply, "I am a human being."

The inquiry exposed an inner conflict I had been wrestling with for a number of years: What meaning can be attached to the identification of being an American Indian? It was not an easy label to wear during my early school years. Numerous playground combats were fought over taunts of being called Indian along with added unpleasant adjectives. When I turned to my parents for understanding of the taunts, they told me to tell people I was French Canadian and not Indian—in other words, to deny my real heritage. Thus my childhood years were confusingly spent in ethnic disposition. Not being able to accept a part of one's heritage is like stepping into deep shadows of disownment. I soon found that dwelling in those shadows provided only temporary cover for a spurious existence. The family move to a large urban center, however, produced some important changes in my adolescent and young adult stages of life that were to lead me out of the half-light of self-awareness. It was time for the process of self-identity and the search for life's meaning to begin—time to follow a new light.

What made the process and search necessary, and why was it so difficult? Perhaps it began with a cultural map I was given as a child to be used as a standard for organizing behavior, beliefs, and thinking. According to Clifford Geertz,

> Culture is best seen not as complexes of concrete behavior patterns—customs, usage, traditions, habit clusters, as has been the case up to now, but as a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call "program")— for governing of behavior.[2]

As humans we assume our individuality "under the guidance of cultural patterns, historically created systems of meaning in terms of which we give form, order, point and direction to our lives."[3] If the light we are given to follow does not provide direction for acquiring true identity, then dwelling in the shadow eclipses our true person.

Raised in an urban setting, with an emphasis on an Anglo-American core value orientation, I was molded by the popular culture of my day. Although dominant norms did impugn the integrity of minority groups in many ways, I am still grateful for those dominant cultural practices that assisted me in achieving worthwhile goals, helping me to make good career choices and providing a starting point for developing a purpose in life. Unfortunately, when cultural conditions of the larger society demean the cultural heritage of subcultures, it can do violence to the dignity and worth of individuals who are members of those subunits. And when the dominant group in a society forms an opinion that its own set of values provides the ideal norm for society, the practices and traits of minority cultures are likely to be seen as deficient. As a young person struggling with an identity problem, I came to view the differences between the popular culture and the American Indian culture as deficits for those claiming the Native heritage.

My career field has been education, in which I have been involved in the practice of describing and promoting skills to be produced in learners. In my search for greater self-understanding, I made use of educational objectives to establish a beginning point for evaluating my identity as an Indian person. I applied a classification system developed by David R. Krathwohl and a group of associates who formulated a taxonomy dealing with educational objectives in the affective domain.[4] A modified use of the taxonomy provided a helpful way of approaching the quest for self-understanding. Although my personal objective is difficult to isolate in one of several domains of the learner dimension, the use of the affective dimensions was sought to arrive at my self-transcendence, decision-making, and evaluation. The familiar Krathwohl taxonomy offered a useful tool for me to focus on the internal and unobservable thoughts and feelings of what it meant to be Indian.

Krathwohl and associates make the assumption that in the affective domain the steps involved for acquiring attitudes, interests, and values progress from a low level of awareness upward to the highest level of internalization. The affective areas that were identified include receiving, responding, valuing, organizing, and characterizing. Each of the taxonomy areas mentioned play an important part in the underlying process of this personal transition from beginning to end and can be a constructive means of facilitating orientation and transformation.

The first crucial step in the cultural transition process is receiving. During this level of the taxonomy the learner is subject to certain stimuli which arouse an interest to learn new things, behaviors, or phenomena. In response to this sensitivity the learner demonstrates a willingness to investigate and receive new information. The 1960s were a time of awakening and attending for me. It was a time when Indian country was finding new energy and a spirit of self-determination, motivated in part by the civil rights movement and the leadership of organizations like the National Indian Youth Council, which arose to challenge government termination policies. Not only were rhetorical protests part of the Indian movement, but it became common for the assertion of rights to develop into open activism. During this decade a series of sit-ins in the Pacific Northwest and fish-ins along Washington state rivers drew public attention to the efforts of Indians who were insisting on controlling policies affecting their welfare. The Indians brought their needs and demands to center stage and they became increasingly more visible to the larger American society. Awareness and interest in my Indian heritage was greatly intensified by the political actions of both urban and reservation activist groups in my part of the country. I found myself willing not only to identify with the groundswell of support being generated, but to take an active part in the local demonstrations. At long last there was an opportunity for an urban Indian to exercise cultural ties that had some direction and purpose.

At the second level of the affective taxonomy are responses that go beyond awareness and interest in certain phenomena. The learner's attitude in this situation is one of actively being involved and finding satisfaction in the involvement. My first active involvement was a sit-in with a group of urban Indians who had grievances with the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) offices at the Western Washington Indian Agency in my hometown. Since my tribe is not federally recognized, I was not affected by the tribal sovereignty issues being protested by members of the demonstrating group. However, I was drawn to their support as a fellow Indian struggling with them in this newly acquired sense of independence and aggressive political unity. It was a way of making the statement that no longer could the dominant society or the BIA expect Indian people to acquiesce. The shoulder-to-shoulder, non-violent confrontation produced both a sense of cultural recognition and validation along with the feelings of personal satisfaction.

The third level of the taxonomy indicates that a thing, phenomenon, or behavior has worth to the learner. This valuing category signifies that the learner has received a preference for and a commitment to a value. My Indian identity, kept secret and uncomfortably locked up for so many years, was beginning to emerge as opportunities presented themselves for expressing my Cowlitz tribal heritage.

As an educator I had the opportunity for furthering my commitment to understanding and actively identifying as an Indian person. The passage of the Indian Education Act of 1972 allowed the public school district where I was employed to develop a school district Indian education program. I was appointed to manage the program and to serve Indian students in their educational endeavors. It was an opportunity to assist urban Indian children with their sense of identity, to help instill a sense of pride in their heritage, and to encourage them with their education. Ironically, this took place in the same school district where I struggled as a student with similar obstacles and challenges years before.

When a person participates in activities that include meaningfully held values, there follows an internalization of these values, which in turn can lead to instances when more than one value is related and an evaluative process is needed. During this stage of development the individual is faced with integrating the values into some kind of coherent system. As I became more actively involved with school administrators, teachers, parents, and community resources in my attempt to help Indian students achieve their potential, I discovered some rich values within the Indian culture. I became aware that it is the values and related lifestyle of the Indian community that constituted its essence, not basketweaving, wood carving, and other tangible cultural elements that seemed to be most often emphasized in the customary study of Indians. In order to discover the values of a certain microculture one must become involved in the socialization process that inculcates the pervasive values within that culture. According to Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chinn, "Our values are determined initially by our culture. Values are conceptions of what is desirable and important to us or the group."[5] My work with the Indian education program took me into the homes of Indian families and involved me in ceremonies and other social gatherings of the Indian community. I became acquainted with tribal leaders and elders who enriched my understanding of tradi-

tional ways. I began to teach courses about Indian history and culture for teachers in my school district in order to help them understand that values in the Indian culture often differ from those in mainstream American society. Teachers with Indian students in their classes especially needed to have knowledge and appreciation of the students' cultural background in order to fully understand and successfully instruct them. The essence of the culture could only be understood by studying the core values of that culture and its relationship to the daily lives of the people.

Where did this bring me in terms of organizing the emerging values I was experiencing? According to the categorical subdivision of this taxonomy level, learners need to conceptualize the value and to establish their hierarchical relationship. The activities arrived at through stimulation of interest and awareness in the traditional Native culture brought me to this cognitive level.

There are common values embraced by most communities throughout the United States. Also, there are other values which have special importance in a minority community that differ from the mainstream society. The traditional Indian community value structure, for example, can be inharmonious with certain values of mainstream America. An example of value differentiation is the mainstream society's stress on the importance of individual conditioning for independent attitude development. The Indian community, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on group participation. Individualism, as taught by the dominant value system, leads to self-reliance and doing things alone, which often manifests itself in a disregard for other people's needs and rights. The Native microculture's value orientation fosters a strong sense of family and community obligation and places less importance on independent behavior. Similar value difference and cultural norms, such as the use of eye contact, are learned from the community in which the person receives his or her social training.

The values of the community are conceived in the mind of the learner as a formulated thought or opinion. This conceptualization of values is usually not learned in formal teaching sessions, but is learned by experiences in the early stages of socialization. Kenneth Cushner, observed: "... people are culturally socialized by observing others, through trial and error, and by continuous reinforcement. In other words, culture and language are learned effectively and through experience, not cognitively."[6]

For those raised in the traditional Indian ways, the internalization of cultural values is often taken for granted. However, when Indian persons have been raised away from their traditional setting and have not had the opportunity to observe cultural patterns and to be reinforced by those around them, the acquisition of cultural knowledge undertakes a more cognitive focus. Information, once it is perceived by the senses, is organized into categories, and meaning is attached to it. Additionally, information in areas that are more important to the person becomes more highly differentiated and is placed in a hierarchical relationship to other cultural values. Therefore, the larger my interest in learning traditional ways and the more I involved myself in the Indian culture, the greater became my development of self-worth and valuing of my heritage. The organization of cultural values followed conceptualization and provided a value system that could be applied to my day-to-day journey.

At the highest level of affective taxonomy learners begin to display consistently the values they previously accepted and to which they have been committed. The organized values held by the learner become integrally established to the point at which it is possible to characterize the individual in relationship to these preferred values. My self-actualization movement from a low level of Indian heritage awareness toward the higher level of value internalization has resulted in a characterized Indian identity. The bicultural adaptations produced significant changes in the previously operating dominant cultural system. This cultural shift represents a syncretic adaptation. According to Young Pai, "Syncretism refers to the development of a new and unique culture and a new personal identity by interweaving different cultural elements."[7] W.H. Goodenough further explains, "A person may change his/her operating culture through syncretistic incorporation of elements from a different culture into the private culture."[8]

The urban Indian experience and eventual contact with norms of the traditional Indian culture produced an integration of mainstream standards and traditional values. The new experiences and the reorganization of certain values resulted in a syncretic process for leaving the shadows behind and producing new meaning and purpose for meeting the contingencies of daily life. The newly expanded operating culture contributed to a changed personal identity with the interweaving of different cultural elements. This characterization level is evidenced

by newly formulated personal relationships, career pursuits, tribal and intertribal involvement, acquisition of cultural items, study and research, ceremony participation, speaking engagements, and volunteer efforts. The activities mentioned and others support the characterization of the previously accepted values and increased involvement with the Indian community. The freedom of expressing traditional Indian values was like leaving a synthetic identity behind and stepping into the sunlight of full self-disclosure. The dynamic of self-revelation brought with it a sense of genuine acceptance even when the general societal value structure insisted on presenting a deceptive light to follow.

My search for a process that encourages, affirms, and supports the growth of self-knowledge has led me to view life with a new perspective and a new awareness. In this quest I have found that self-inquiry is often a difficult task and involves a radical reevaluation of the contemporary society's departure from the parameters of traditional cultural foundations. Sonia Nieto expressed it well when she said, "Because the positive sense of cultural identification challenges the messages and models of an essentially assimilationalist society, it creates its own internal conflicts."[9] The journey to self-discovery, among other things, requires the individual to become a risk-taker who must be willing to confront the status quo. It means functioning not only within the social structure of the dominant society, but also within the cultural values, attitudes, and behaviors of one's own family and community.

Perhaps future research will produce strategies and approaches that will affirm and support self-identification investigations. Materials and resources may provide the tools and a framework for assisting the journeyer, but I have found that transformation depended more on an inner realignment of values than on external devices for finding my way. The cultural renewal path I have taken, using Krathwohl's taxonomy as a tool, is not intended to provide readers with a ready-to-follow guideline for making their self-identify quest. Rather, it is hoped that those who are in the shadows of undeclared self-identity will be challenged to capture the vision of attaining full self-disclosure—to discover the secret of the "I" by forging their own pathway to better self-understanding. This article is predicated on the faith that those who risk such a journey will increase their cultural repertoire and emerge with greater pride and cultural appreciation. The undertaking of the journey,

then, can be the beginning of a more meaningful and unique approach to life using traditional values and heritage as a personal anchor. This positive expectation is maintained by Terry Huffman who states, "Cultural traditionalism becomes a blessing rather than a burden, when one is able to cross the transcultural threshold between alienation and self-discovery."[10] Regardless of one's cultural background it becomes possible to reach this transcultural threshold and to relate simultaneously to a traditional cultural worldview as well as to the mainstream society.

Obtaining the transitional threshold of successfully embracing aspects of traditional ways together with Western worldviews without coercion constitutes a new beginning. The journey from the shadows leading to a fuller discovery of self and the meaning of life does not end with the attainment of the transitional threshold. For those attaining this syncretic experience, a dawn light will illuminate a pathway to follow that is both promising and challenging. The progressive journey provides the time to grow and to deepen. It is a time for inner processes to manifest themselves in outward expressions of cultural tradition and practices and to assume responsibility for who you are as a person.

In traveling the pathway of incorporating cultural practices into daily living, I discovered a way to negotiate boundaries obscuring and limiting my ability to manage a position with differing cosmological worldviews. In following the lighted pathway provided by devoted elders I learned a valuable lesson:

> To walk the lighted path, follow the footsteps of the elders until you reached the dawn light. Leave the shadows of self-doubt, hold on to traditional ways and step out into the sunlight.

NOTES

1. Huston Smith, *The Religions of Men* (New York: Mentor Books, 1958).

2. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

3. R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934).

4. Adaptation has been a means of survival for Native people. The author's use of a non-Indian taxonomy for self-discovery pursues the way Native Americans have adjusted to a world of increasing change while claim-

ing a sense of past cultural permanency. The late Chief Dan George wisely commented in this regard: "I shall grab the instruments of the white man's success—his education, his skills. With these tools I shall build my race into the proudest segment of your society." Chief Dan George, *My Heart Soars* (Vancouver, BC, Canada: Hancock House, 1974), 92.

5.   Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education In a Pluralistic Society*, 3rd ed. (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1990).

6.   Kenneth Cushner, Averil McClelland, and Philip Safford, *Human Diversity In Education* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992).

7.   Young Pai, *Cultural Foundations of Education* (Columbus, OH: Merrill, 1990).

8.   W.H. Goodenough, *Cooperation In Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1963).

9.   Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (New York: Longman, 1992).

10.   Terry Huffman, "The Transculturation of Native American College Students," *Seeing Ourselves: Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology*, 3rd ed. John J. Macionis and Nijole V. Benokraitis (Englewood Cliffs: Simon and Schuster, 1989).