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COMMENTARY: TRIBAL VOICES

A Wake-Up Call

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To be the eldest son of a traditional Indian woman has shaped and influenced my life in ways both abundant and momentous, in ways that continue to be revealed. Even now, as an Indian elder, I remain in her cultural shadow, as do my siblings and most of my kin my age and younger. In her eighties, to recall the effort and the sacrifices she's made for me and her family are memories that are always close at hand. Yet it would be an exercise, an effort in itself to account for and bear witness to the detail of the life she's lived. There has been so much.

This past winter, in a modest rural hospital room, there was a gathering of Indian elders. All were children of the man in the bed and my mother, who was there not only as our comfort but also as his concerned sister and interpreter. Her brother's essential illness is of the mind, made, on that day, much less apparent by his depleted and fragile form.

During that visit home, I could see his awareness of those assembled come and go, and in both, when words were spoken, the language was never English. And so, my mother's fluency with our Native language and her ability to calm her brother once again reminded us of her central significance in our lives and among our people. Grey heads all, we watched them communicate, much as we did as children and young adults. Limited understanding of the words spoken, but a full knowledge and awareness of them as Indians; more than us.

Claims and counterclaims about the closeness and therefore the overall mutual support of Indian families notwithstanding, a sense of loss and the fact of suffering continues to expand. Despite the socioeconomic, educational, occupational, and medical improvements in the lives of American Indian families throughout the twentieth century, a natural toll is being

taken on Indian families and people as, I should think, never before! This is because, as never before, more and more Indian people are living well into their seventies.

Yes, it is well documented that Indian people are living longer. During the next forty years, the US Census projects the American Indian and Alaska Native population age fifty-five and older to grow from approximately five hundred thousand to almost one and a half million.¹ But, just as with other population groups, living longer brings new challenges and additional anxiety. Unique among distinct groups of people, American Indians are living longer in the midst of an epidemic of diabetes and its manifold complications: heart, vascular, and kidney disease, and sometimes blindness. The high and growing levels of obesity among our young people do not bode well for rapid improvement. We are living longer in the midst of the highest levels of substance abuse of any group of people in the United States, in the midst of behavioral health problems that directly and negatively impact every American Indian family and individual. And although there are differences in analysis and opinion as to how well or how poorly we are dealing with these conditions, the fact remains, they are accompanying us into our elderly lives.

However well or poorly we do in caring for our elders will no doubt be a reflection of who we are as a people. In part, this includes not only how well we work with one another but also how well we continue to develop and manage our relationships with the rest of society. We can and we should ask ourselves, simply and frequently, how do we wish to be? How do we wish to be known in regard to how we care for our elderly, both spry and frail, both lucid and confused? Is it accurate (it is certainly politically correct) to say that because of our tribal and clannish sociocultural history and because of what remains of our traditional way of life that our culturally based respect for, and therefore care of, our elders, is not simply a task? Though in practice a task it is, most assuredly!

To answer these questions we must be open and honest with ourselves and with one another about the many aspects and dimensions of elder care. From the delivery of groceries and rides to the mall, casino, and clinic, to finance and estate management, to the intricacies of health insurance, to medical and surgical treatment decisions, to day-to-day personal care (toilet, bathing, dressing, feeding), to palliative care and more, usually much more, the responsibilities are profound and the burden is heavy. And then there are the spiritual, cultural, and traditional needs and desires of our elders!

To do our best we must consider them all carefully, meditatively, while at the same time seeking counsel and reassurance from others, so that we may know the best way to communicate with our elders. To truly convey to them not only our words of love and respect but also our desire to do for them in their life's autumn what we would wish for ourselves. Throughout and for obvious reasons, we must be mindful that all of these issues are as much ours as they are our elders'. Therefore, let us care for our caregivers. We must respect and acknowledge those who care for our elderly 24/7 with both emotional and material support, and with our time. So that they may have time to rest and renew themselves!

When it comes to aging, none of us, of course, are immune or exempt. Acknowledgment and acceptance of this fact are probably good places to begin when considering how we care for our elders. I am most fortunate that my mother and her brothers and sisters have lived into their eighties and nineties. By the way, they are of one tribe, full-blood Indians. This good fortune is spreading throughout Indian country. Let us prepare for it and embrace it with open minds and hearts, willing to learn and seek out information and assistance. Let us take up this challenge with great enthusiasm in the knowledge and belief that failure is intolerable; we must be successful not only for our elders, but for ourselves!

NOTE

1. Table 16, "Projections of the American Indian and Alaska Native Alone Population by Age and Sex for the United States: 2010 to 2050 (NP2008-T16)," Population Division, US Census Bureau, 14 August 2008.

