

## 4 Prologue to a Vision of Aboriginal Education

### *Beatrice Medicine*

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*Mitaku yepi, chante wasteya nape chi yusa pe.* My kinspersons, with a good heart I shake hands with you. I elaborate, but history remains the same—the importance of kinship, not only with people but with other creatures. When we speak, we speak with a good heart and surmise that the listener listens with a good heart and that the symbolic handshake unifies us as Aboriginal peoples of all nations in the circularity of life and the world.

As an anthropologist I am concerned about culture, tradition, and social change, which have affected all of us as Native peoples in North America. I have also wanted to continue working with Native issues and Native communities that I have dealt with all my life. I know that there is great disenchantment with anthropologists, who are accused of “digging up bones” or are not giving research data back to Native communities. I also find that this latter accusation is true in the fields of health care, psychiatry, sociology, and education. Research in education predomi-

nantly has focused on a deficit model, that is, on low self-esteem of Native people. I make no excuse for being an anthropologist, or a Lakota (Sioux), or a woman. My concern has always been to attempt to fill gaps in the anthropological record. Thus the book *The Hidden Half—Studies in Indian Women of the Northern Plains* appeared (Medicine, 1983). Although I have emphasized feminist theory and research, I am aware of the complementary nature of our pre-Contact cultures. All gender roles were valued in traditional societies. Men and women were concerned with the quality of life for our peoples. Issues that confront our people today should be the concern of all genders. Issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, homophobia, and gender disparity should be researched with a preventive agenda. On the other hand, strengths of survival as unique nations need investigation. It will require both men and women to do this.

I am concerned with what I notice to be a totally Canadian problem in education. That is a concern with Elders in the educational system. I've heard this statement since about 1985, "My Elders tell me ..." People will then go on to state what they are doing. I was raised by my grandparents: I pondered, "Are our families so dysfunctional?" Or how does such a statement lead to research? This is my way of generating research agendas. I am very interested in this whole notion of Elders. My research in this area was instigated by Margaret Waterchief, a respected Elder on the Blackfoot reserve. We were at a meeting and were discussing Elders. She said, "Elders are often taken off the shelf just to open a conference with a prayer." I thought that there must be some dynamic here that needed investigation. I started doing research and interviewing people and then published an article titled "My Elders Tell Me" (Medicine, 1987), which appeared in the book *Indian Education in Canada, The Challenge*, edited by Barman, Hebert, and MaCaskill. Although a lot of Native people talk about and emphasize the oral tradition and are seemingly against literacy and books, we live in a world of literature. We need to be aware of these types of publications, especially those written by our own people. If we are to change institutions of higher education, we must build on what I have referred to as *Native intellectuals* in our communities. Our cultures and languages are embedded in these communities. On the other hand, if we choose to be academics, we must meet the challenges and expectations of the academy. We cannot expect institutions to accommodate completely our unique situations. Excellence in First Nations education at all levels should be our major concern.

I would like to talk generally about the role and the influence of the elderly in educational systems. There seems to be a disparity in how we view Elders and how we use them in a very important way as someone who is a receptacle of knowledge and wisdom. On the other hand, we know of severe abuse of the elderly in some Native communities in North America. But I have also seen the abuse of Elders in a Canadian university setting. I think that we must confront this as a very real issue, because in

every aspect of culture there is the *ideal* (which we espouse), and there is the *real* (which we do). When we understand this, we have a strong notion of who we are and in what kind of a society we exist. I feel that in order to deal effectively in Native education, whether it is in elementary school, or in university, in undergraduate classes or in graduate programs, we must be aware of the students and know what cultural matrices they are in. Moreover, what is more important is this notion of identity. As professors we should be aware of our own cultural orientations and values.

How do people see themselves as a person, a Native, a functioning member of a Native society? And how do they see themselves in the larger Canadian society? I think we have to be very careful about taking into account what I see happening at present. I wrote about this in the 1970s because I could see the beginnings of what I called "a contrived culture." A contrived culture is something that people make up. It results from cultural loss, pressure to change, inadequate education, eroding kinship systems, and eroding Native belief systems. Many Native people are making up their own culture. I think a good example of this is the use of a prairie song in a Northwest coast film. My concern is that when we talk about First Nations education, we do not become more involved with the accouterments: the jewelry making, the beadwork, the drumming, and the singing than with real culture. What we do need to concern ourselves with are the values of the people we are working with. Unless we know this, we are never going to be effective change agents, and that's what we all are, whether we are teachers, psychiatrists, professors, health workers, and so on. We are attempting to change the system so that it will be a better fit for Native people. And unless we know that the Plains Cree in Canada are culturally different from the Menominee of Wisconsin, even though they are linguistically Algonkin, we will fail. Native communities are different. And many people who talk about Native communities do not know how they function. So in this new program, we must deal with *real* culture, not with idealized culture or with contrived culture. But we must realize that cultures change and factors that contribute to change should be examined.

We must understand the spiritual beliefs of the students we are working with. Such issues as traditional knowledge and intellectual property rights are crucial. An increasing number of the dominant society are searching for Native spirituality. They are searching for an epistemology or a philosophical system that is based on Native ideals. For example, many books are written by a woman called Lynne Andrews. She bases her information on Cree beliefs. She speaks about a woman who gave her this right and who trained her. This white author is holding shamanistic seances in Beverly Hills, California. You see how our beliefs are being appropriated and perverted!

When we talk about "introducing tradition" or are concerned about Native culture and "traditional ways as opposed to urban lifestyles" we must realize that 55% of the Native people in North America live in urban

areas or off-reserve. Knowing this is vital to understanding Native people. Again, I emphasize, Native culture is extremely variable. We have all lost some of our Native identity, because we have gone through what I call "a secondary enculturational process" in elementary and secondary schools. Now tertiary enculturation in higher educational institutions is our concern. We are living in a bicultural world. We have to know who we are. We must be able to learn in the larger society and work in the dominant society without losing our own identity; without forgetting who we are or our cultural roots and the Native community. That is a challenge for a graduate program. Can the students go through the program and be stronger First Nations people than before they came in?

I do not want to address publicly my own Native spirituality because that is a personal part of my life. As an Elder, I do not make public prayers. A Native belief is a part of life that I live, and I don't explain it. I cherish it. I am also a university professor. I live the two together.

In this search for a viable First Nations graduate program, we must have an idea of who the repositories of knowledge are. If we work with communities, if we do research that is meaningful to the communities, and if we return our work to the communities, we will have performed a valuable service (Stiegelbauer, 1990). We must be selective of proper Elders, and we must develop criteria that allow both us as the university community and them as Elders to know what is expected of them. We will train students to hunt buffalo and tan skins in a whole new way. And if we listen to the Elders and to other wise people (which is sometimes hard to do), we will gain new insights into our educational plans. We can all learn much from each other. That is one reason why I like being an anthropologist (Medicine, 1978). I can earn a living and still live and learn with Native people in North America, Australia, and New Zealand.

I close with words from Sitting Bull, who also spent time in Canada. My father had great respect for Sitting Bull and often reminded me of his words, "Our world is changing, Let us put our minds together. Take the best of two worlds and make a better life for our children."

#### References

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