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Rebirth of the Indigenous Spirit Turning the World Right Side Up

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I am now considered well educated because of the formal degrees I hold. Yet I somehow have also held onto the value of being *bien educada*, the essence of having respect for one's elders and living in harmony within one's community. On my journey toward becoming *bien educada*, I also discovered that Columbus did not "discover America." No one told me, but I came to know this as being a lie. I also came to understand when to and when not to speak of this truth, because speaking such truths publicly challenges the illusion created by a people who need to believe in what Loewen (1995) refers to as "heroes," however symbolically violent (Anderson and Herr, 2003) this position may be to those of us who claim roots in this land.

We are all born into a world, a situation, a story over which we do not have control but ultimately must understand. In order to gain control

over how we live in this world, I believe that a rebirthing of one's self, a reconnection to one's spirit, is necessary. It is a journey that requires us to let go of stories and images that have caused us to devalue ourselves, and it is a journey in which we each reframe our story, rediscover and rewrite the story as it is told through the voices and stories of our ancestors, thereby turning the world right side up so that ultimately we each take control of our own story. Taking control of the story is not enough though. We must share the story through our life's work. This is the journey, the story, the reclaiming of truths, and the sharing of those truths that I repeat with the students I teach in my classes.

THE JOURNEY: MY STORY

A family friend recently reminded me that as a child I used to gleefully announce to anyone who would listen, "I was born on Columbus Day!" This statement from a young child of indigenous ancestry—but what else could I say? In elementary school I was required to memorize facts about Christopher Columbus, the Italian-born mariner hailed "discoverer." Later in life I learned how this man had turned this side of the world upside down. Subsequently, even though my ancestors lived in the "New World" for thousands of years, I have no knowledge of their language and only limited knowledge of their history. I can, however, readily name the three ships under Columbus's command when he first voyaged across the Atlantic; the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*. This is one of many "truths" I was taught about "his" tory. This chapter addresses my voyage to uncover "my" story and the subsequent impact that my discoveries have had on my teaching as a university professor.

"In fourteen hundred ninety-two / Columbus sailed the ocean blue." As children we were taught this song that immortalized this "discoverer." I remember outlining the images of the three ships with my color crayons. Blue construction paper provided the backdrop of a vast blue ocean. This child's artistic rendition was proudly displayed on the classroom wall. It was a fitting tribute to a man portrayed to be gallant and valiant and whom we honored with song, study, and artistry. I was taught to believe

that we were indebted to this mariner, whose feats warranted a day off from school, holiday sales and promotions, and parades in tribute.

The activities in which I engaged during my childhood *expected* me and *conditioned* me to show *gratitude* and to celebrate the fact that I was being introduced to an advanced “civilization” attributable to this momentous “discovery.” From the perspective of my childhood eyes, it seemed appropriate that we honor someone who brought this advanced culture to fill the void of nothingness assumed to have existed prior to Columbus’s arrival. Yet, even while we sang praises to Columbus and I exclaimed, “I was born on Columbus Day,” I intuited that I was not *intended* to be where I was, in the United States, and that somehow *who* I was, a descendant of indigenous people, was a source of contempt, disdain, and even inconvenience to many confronted by my existence.

Even as a child I sensed an existential chasm between the society in which I existed and the home in which I lived. Attempting to bridge the two worlds, I drew from my home culture’s tradition of storytelling and created my own story. This tale was repeated to teachers and classmates in order to justify my existence in a land in which I subconsciously recognized that I was the “other.”

I came from a walnut that grew in a tree that is south of here. One day I fell off the tree and landed in a creek below. Protected by the outer shell I traveled on the water for many miles. I came to rest in Walnut Creek, California, and that is where I came out of the shell and so I was born here.

Americanization had claimed my identity by omitting to explore my heritage and instead, in its place, attempting to inculcate me with a homogeneous, nonethnic identity. To integrate myself into the colonizer’s story, I instinctively adapted to the fixed reality (Freire, 1970/1998) and creatively merged “my” story with “his” story, and in my story the attempt of a child to rationalize her existence where she is otherwise absent is evident. I was too young to understand that without the use of chains and locks, my mind had been enslaved by “edification”

skillfully designed to ensure that the reality of the world in which I lived reflected the reality of the conqueror, the subject, and not the vanquished, the subjugated.

This enforced alien worldview is not new to the people from this land. My ancestors experienced this force through the violence of guns, swords, biological warfare, relocation, genocide, broken treaties, and rape. My generation came to know this force through the violence of the pen that erased the existence of anything *pre-Columbian* and that characterized anything related to my culture as *savage* and *uncivilized*. Conquered people are rendered harmless as long as the conqueror's weapons remain visible to remind the conquered of the pain they can cause. Sustaining the bondage of the descendants entails convincing these oppressed people that "true knowledge" came from beyond the ocean to the East, thus rendering their minds harmless.

A child's mind is malleable and can be easily deceived. Absence of knowledge about my heritage, my origins, my ancestry, rendered me harmless and therefore incapable of posing threat. Weaponry of pen replaced physical violence to dominate a conquered people. My coping mechanism rendered me incapable of recognizing that I had been culturally invaded and historically raped. Born, I was, on Columbus Day.

READING AN UPSIDE DOWN WORLD

Freire (1970/1998) posits that most children do not have the capacity to read their world from beyond their state of submersion. So, being born on the day that Columbus discovered America meant that who I was, who I am, was shaped by how those in America treated and celebrated this date. For me, hanging onto the coincidence of my date of birth with the "discovery" of America made my reality more palatable. The teachers who shaped my day-to-day reality provided history books that bore nothing positive about anyone whose origins might be traced to my own heritage. The absence and invisibility of my ancestors implicitly conveyed the value they were to be given.

As I moved into adolescence, my eyes began to perceive a world that revealed *my place* in it. In my community, those who looked like me worked long hours in agriculture, steel mills, or canneries. On weekends and vacations, we worked in the fields of those who owned them, but on weekdays we attended school alongside the owners' sons and daughters, where self-imposed segregation commonly occurred. My childhood illusion of being exceptional due to my coincidental date of birth no longer satisfied my adolescent mind, which perceived this reality differently. The seed of anger sprouted. The adolescent and the child were now at odds with one another.

My child self found validation through a meaningless, coincidental connection with a significant historical date. My adolescent self detected an unspoken silence that encapsulated my reality. And this silence grew louder each day. Unwritten rules spoke to an implicit understanding, that the way of being and using language that mattered in one context, my home, was not accepted or valued in the dominant context represented by school. And while I academically excelled in this dominant context, there was a growing spiritual void. Silent anger—my adolescent self swallowed it like a pill.

SEARCHING FOR THE RIGHT MEDICINE

Freire (1970/1998) notes that differences in culture, language, and worldview exist where conquest and colonization have led the way for forces of cultural invasion. The pen follows the swath left by guns, swords, biological warfare, and rape, then holds the power to write history from the vantage of the colonizer. The colonized, indigenous child is left to endure the differentiated outcomes of a world devoid of her essence. Yet her *place* in the existing class structure is clearly prescribed. This same child is also indoctrinated to believe that she can *make it* in this world because there is a *meritocracy* and that only those who work hard will *succeed*. What the indigenous child is not told is that there is a cost to her soul for engaging in ways that disassociate her from

her authentic self. That cost often leads to alienation and isolation from a person's family and community.

Even though on occasion there is an exception in how this person is perceived, all too often he or she becomes known in the community as a *coconut*. The person is accused of *selling out*. Such derogatory terms reflect the community's perception of individuals who *forget who they are*. So how does a child begin to understand a world in which she is encapsulated with knowledge other than her own? The shackled self lacks the key.

From my position as the subjugated, I had ample opportunities to see the world from the bottom rung of the social class ladder. Working the fields of my classmates' parents, being placed in classes with "troubled" youths (most of whom were children of color or low-income Whites), being excluded from programs such as Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) due to my limited English vocabulary, and getting dirty looks for speaking my home language in public, spoke loud and clear, implicitly and explicitly, that *who and what I was* was not acceptable. To gain acceptance I had to learn to live by *their* rules, so I adapted. According to Davidson, Phelan, and Yu (1998), during such times one separates one's two worlds by employing navigational skills to cross back and forth between them. For me, this meant that I had to learn to succeed in one world while struggling to retain the other; subsequently, an empty void filled my soul.

As I entered my adulthood the unresolved anger from my adolescence resounded. An internal confrontation centered on what had been inculcated into my mind as a child. The adolescent spoke through the adult to the child and asked critical questions, "How do you reconcile the absence of 'self' in historical accounts touted as 'truth'?" "Why do you celebrate the accidental fact that the date of your birth coincides with the memorializing of the first person to bring the transatlantic slave trade and genocide to your ancestors?" "Why do you listen to 'teachers' who teach lies and vilify your ancestors?" The child in me fell silent. I did not have an answer. My ears stopped listening to the world around me. My spirit began searching.

REDISCOVERING MY WORLD OF ORIGIN

My first teaching experience in higher education was as a faculty member at California's only tribal college, D-Q University, in the summer of 2001. The students, adults who were either from First Nations or whose ancestors had been indigenous to what is now referred to as *Latin America*, became my teachers. Though I was the one with the formal education, they were the ones who taught me about who I am culturally. They taught me that through our collective identity we can create a world that is not dominated by individualism, competition, and self-interest.

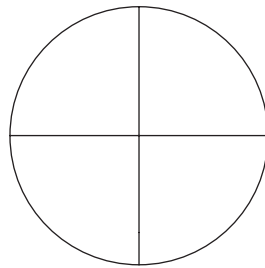
My true education began with my primary teacher, Angelbertha Cobb, a member of the Mexica tribe, and her understudy, Benjamin Torres. Together, they provided me with an authentic education that helped me realign my frame of reference and that spoke to what Cobb (personal communication, January 2002) refers to as "my" story. Mama Cobb, as she is affectionately and reverently called in our community, taught me the cultural values that are embedded in the sacredness of the medicine wheel, or, in *Nahuatl*, the language of the Mexica, the *Xantotl*.

The medicine wheel teaches cultural truths about our relationships with one another. As shown in Figure 1.1, a cardinal point resides at each of the four directions on the sacred circle. Each point is opposite to another without being *oppositional* to the other. They exist on the same plane, which means that each holds equal worth, and yet they are interdependent. In the direction of the East, the place of the rising sun, is the place of men. The element of fire resides in the East. Opposite to the place of men, in the West, is the place of women. The element of water is held sacred at this point. To the South is the place of children, where the element of earth is recognized, and to the North is the place of our elders, where we honor the sky, the air we breathe, the fourth vital element. Together, the four directions create balance to the whole in this realm of existence.

The elements of the medicine wheel come alive through an immersion in a community of collectiveness, selflessness, and cooperation. For me, this began when I began undoing forty-plus years of what



Figure 1.1
The Medicine Wheel



Woodson (1933), a noted African American historian, refers to as one's *miseducation*. This miseducation occurs whenever one is told that others' ways of knowing and being are to be valued over one's own culture and history. For me, this meant that I had to rid myself of these other ways of knowing. In this new world, my students modeled how to believe and act—such as sharing without being asked. They considered the needs of others without being reminded. They sought resolution and consensus without ego. There was respect for elders and for teachers. There was a relational respect that did not require being written. Children and women were valued in a way the outside world has yet to achieve, and even though the soul wound from years of genocide and relocation was present in the form of alcoholism and other ills, there was a sense of pride that comes with being a survivor and in reclaiming one's (my) authentic self.

TURNING THE WORLD RIGHT SIDE UP

The answers I would discover came in my reclaiming my truth, my world as seen through the stories of my parents and my ancestors. Through this quest, I discovered that truths about my father's ancestry had also been taught. His tribe, the Purépecha, originated from Aztlán, a region now known as the southwestern United States. Other indigenous people



have called this land Turtle Island. His tribe resided in an area called the Land of the Cranes, also known as Salt Lake City. In the central region of Aztlátan reside the Hopi, where they have lived since the beginning of the Fifth World, and whose connection to Mother Earth is analogous to a child's umbilical connection to its mother. Through the oral tradition I learned about the twelve tribes that originated from this region. Seven of these twelve, including the Purépecha, traveled south of Aztlátan after the great flood waters receded during the beginning of the Fifth World, to the region known as Aztlanahuac, which consists of Mexico and Central America.

Learning about such truths began to feed my spirit—one that had long been silenced. No longer was there joy in proclaiming, “I was born on Columbus Day,” because for the first time I understood the significance of not only the physical and cultural violence that took place as a result of the acts of conquest and colonization but also the pain of cultural invasion which had left me devoid of my *authenticity*. Once I began to peel away the layers of this story, the next act was to remove the pill of anger that had turned into a cancer in my spirit. I began to consciously and spiritually reconcile the true meaning of my date of birth coinciding with a day that marked the physical, cultural, and spiritual genocide of my people. And so on my forty-fourth birthday, I was spiritually reborn. I participated in a ceremony that allowed me to symbolically emerge from the womb of my mother, Mother Earth, a Lakota sweat lodge. This rebirthing took place after having undergone hours of chanting, singing, and praying.

HEALING WHILE TEACHING: REBIRTHING

The rebirthing was the first step toward gaining an appreciation of who I am in relation to my family, my community, and the world. The next step was taking this awareness into my work and the relationships I would ultimately encounter in my journey. A gentleman employed as a resident adviser at D-Q University told me, “You are my other me,” meaning that the “other” is merely our spiritual self in another

physical body. For this reason, we must treat the other as we would want ourselves to be treated. So as an example of this, this man once a year gave away all of his material belongings so that he would not become attached to the things of this world and be owned by his possessions. He valued the harmony of relationships with others and was resolute in considering the needs of others as a primary objective in his life. His values made him empathic and caring, dispositions that I believe are needed by people who endeavor to become educators and counselors.

For me, this is a very important example, for I now am responsible for helping graduate students uncover and share themselves with others in the field of counselor education. For me, as a faculty member in an institution of higher education, teaching is not just solely about the content; it is also about the journey we take our students on while they are in our classes. It is a journey that for many will be about their own rebirthing and reclaiming of stories yet to be told. Throughout my years as a faculty member, I have discovered that many graduate students do not have the cultural self-knowledge to foster the disposition required to become caring counselors. My challenge, then, is to create a classroom experience in which the student can go on the journey of rebirthing, learning, and sharing.

Given the ethical expectations of my profession, I find challenge in undoing values fostered by years of conditioning and modeling in a society whose values reflect materialism, self-centeredness, disassociation, and extrinsic gratification.

I believe that undoing the miseducation of students requires a recognition that we—teachers and students—all have equal value in the classroom. In order to achieve this, teachers must set a tone for learning, collaborating, and sharing with one another. There are several tools that I use and that I believe are essential to achieving and going through the rebirthing phase. Drawing upon the medicine wheel—the circle—I believe that having students arrange their chairs in a semicircle or full circle reframes the power dynamics in the classroom. Students often say that they feel vulnerable and exposed as a result of not being able to “hide” behind a desk. The physical structure of a circle forces them

to *see* one another; subsequently all of us in the room begin to overcome what Schaefer (2005) refers to as years of interracial social distance. I ask students how this might help them gain an understanding of how their clients might feel when they expose them to similar circumstances in their counseling sessions. In addition to changing the seating arrangements, I walk around the class and introduce myself to each and every student.

Acts of inclusiveness are preceded by valuing the other. Adults raised on values of exclusion, competitiveness, independence, self-centeredness, and future orientation can only be what they know. The next generation learns what is modeled. After I model civility, students begin to see and ultimately deconstruct what they observed and how they felt as a result of being acknowledged by their teacher on the first day. In a classroom where inclusion is valued from the heart and not just the head, we are then able to talk about what happened, and this becomes not only a teachable moment but the beginning of their rebirth.

From acknowledgment we move to listening and ensuring that everyone is heard. Often students share that they have lost their voices by the time they reach graduate school. After years of “educational” conditioning that has taught them to regurgitate what their teacher tells them, they find it difficult to believe that someone is actually interested in what they think. Their capacity to think critically has been stolen, so they rarely question what they are told, whose perspective it is taught from, and why it is even relevant to their lives. Then I tell them to question *me*. I give them permission to restore their voices.

They talk about how they have never experienced a class such as this and how they hope to replicate the *feeling* of it in their practice. They begin to reach out, smile, and talk with one another. They anticipate their classmates who may arrive late and prepare a seat for them in the circle. They begin to share notes and conduct study groups. They suggest holding potlucks at the end of the semester, and everyone brings something to share. It is then that I know that the world is right side up again. I, as my authentic self, have something of worth to offer my students because in my classroom I have created the conditions

through which my students have made the ultimate discovery—they have discovered themselves and each other, their indigenous spirit, reborn, and alive.

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