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Growing Our Young in Cultures of Respect

Martin Brokenleg

Cultures exist so groups can function harmoniously and socialize the young. What is the state of contemporary culture and its approach to children?

The Wisdom of the Buffalo

When we Lakota came to live in this world, we survived only because of the help of the *Pte Oyate*, The Female Buffalo Nation. She supplied everything we needed to live in this world. For many reasons, we use a buffalo skull in the center of our ceremonial areas and feature this in our art.

When under threat, buffalo organize themselves into a protective formation most likely to guarantee the survival of the herd. Bulls form the outside perimeter of the protecting circle. They are the strongest ones in the herd and, as males, they are not the most necessary for the herd to survive. Inside that perimeter is the circle of buffalo cows. They are the next strongest members of the herd. As adult females, they are next in importance for herd survival so they are protected by the bulls. Should the attacker get past the males, then the females will still be present to protect that which is the most necessary for the survival of the herd—the young, the buffalo calves.

When danger arises, the herd encircles the young since they are the future of the herd. The major task of the adult buffalo is to protect the young by enveloping them with care and protection. If the young survive, the herd will continue. Are we human beings living in the 21st century this wise? Without any perceived communication, the buffalo herd uses its cultural behavior to respond to a threat. Animals have cultural patterns as do communities of humans.

Cultural Wisdom

Consider the state of our contemporary culture and its attitudes toward children. I have developed this working definition of culture:

A culture is a pattern of group behavior exemplified in thought, speech, actions, and artifacts in a form that can be taught and learned.

Culture defined in this way can be applied to the ethnic culture of any community. The definition can also explain the differences between youth culture and adult culture. This definition applies to sub-cultures formed around interests such as those

who ride motorcycles or those who follow soccer. We can even use this framework of culture to explore gender differences in a community. Each gender may have distinctive patterns that define behavior and values. Of particular importance is the culture we provide for children in our own time.

Cultural forces often function unconsciously, below our level of awareness. Culture is a powerful controlling influence even when we are unaware that it is present. Consequently, we must be culturally conscious if we are going to understand its power and make use of it in intentional ways. Consider this example: When you get on an elevator, which direction are you supposed to face? Probably no one has ever given you specific instructions on which direction to face but you know the appropriate direction. Should you doubt the power of cultural teachings, sometime when you are in a place where no one knows you, get on an elevator and face everyone else and watch what happens. Everyone will be nervous and no one will know why, except you.

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We are each limited by our own cultural patterns. For example, Native American cultures from the prairies are absolute democracies. Even the chief has no authority to tell anyone else what to do. Once this level of democracy is understood, it will become normal to see that children are not coerced into obedience but influenced in cultures of respect.

From the time of medieval Europe, children were regarded as almost unimportant and more like property than persons. Children were not valued except for their ability to work and accomplish chores. Most children in those times lived with physical poverty and so would have only the barest of physical goods such as clothing and housing. As beings of little value, they were beaten, barely fed, and sometimes sold and purchased.

The value of being a child was not high even though religious teaching call for adults to become like little children. This inferior status still haunts the English word, *child*. To be told one is “acting like a child” is not a compliment. Contrast this to another cultural system. The Lakota word for child is *wakan’heja*. The etymology of this word

comes from wakan which means sacred and heja to stand. “Standing Sacred” is the Lakota concept of a child. A culture with this concept would demonstrate high respect and honor for a child.

Artifacts. One of the four major areas in which culture is manifested is at the level of artifacts, the physical manifestation of a culture. Examples include clothing, food, architecture, and the arts. In North America, technology is more highly valued than most other places in the world. Certainly the average child in North America would have adequate clothing, shelter, food, and surrounding architecture. But there is an increasing risk factor: pervasive technology. Certainly technology allows for new and vital experiences and fosters learning. The risk comes when technology replaces human interaction, an increasing issue for all children. Television becomes a child-minder so busy parents can tend other tasks. It can entertain children who are tired and in need of activity after school. Computer time and digitally recorded music replaces conversation and sounds of nature. The risk factor is highest when technology replaces face-to-face time with adults and peers. Human relationships should not be sacrificed in favor of technology. When technology replaces human conversation, the child is at risk of losing the emotional support necessary for confidence and growth in responsibility.

Teachers and researchers now report that students may not know how to use their faces to communicate, perhaps because they have spent too much time in front of screens. Children and adolescents show increasing rates of loneliness and depression with increased immersion in technology. Human contact is crucial for youth development, but current cultural values surrender relationship time for time with technology, putting youth at risk. The antidote is to set parameters and limits to technology in a world designed with their best interests in mind. There is a place for technology, but it is not every place.

Speech. Anthropologists say that speech is the carrier of culture. In our increasingly multilingual society, we

may still proclaim an official language, but the reality of many languages exists in cities and towns everywhere.

More importantly language shapes one’s reality. We see only what we have words for, and we see reality only the way our language permits us to see it. A complex example comes from the way people who think in a European language believe that time exists. This is not an objective reality but a function of European verb systems which always come in a time tense for past, present, or future. If one thinks with those systems, we believe time is real.



When I began to study German in high school, I was bewildered by the notion of objects having gender and that this was woven into the language. I memorized gender articles but the reality of objects with gender still eludes me. Imagine a Lakota speaker trying to accept the notion that English pronouns have gender. Lakota pronouns are all gender neutral.

Consider how we use language to speak about children and youth. What terms do we have? How old is the term *teenager*, for example? The term did not exist in the 1800s, and society consisted of adults and children until the 1920s when the word *teenager* began to be used. We commonly use the term *kid* to refer to a child but no one before the mid-19th century would have understood our meaning. Similarly, we should ask about pejorative terms such as *the terrible twos*, *rug-rat*, *crumb-grabber*. Is the word *child* still a pejorative term? Adults use *adolescence* almost as a term for a pathological condition. The language we use to refer to children and youth conveys values about of which we are not conscious.

Actions. Every culture has ways of communicating using gestures, eye behavior, and hand or head signals. These smaller forms of communication are a set of daily ceremonies. A culture will also have complex ceremonies to welcome a person to a group, initiate a youth into adulthood, announce the relationship of two persons, and celebrate birth and death.

For our purpose, we can contemplate the daily ceremonies by which we greet a child, acknowledge her worth, add her to our group, or communicate her status. Each school building has rituals that communicate to the students their value in the adults' eyes. Families mark birthdays, holidays, and family anniversaries with ceremonies, cakes, foods, and decorations. Positive youth cultures develop ceremonies that include the young people, address their psychological needs, and celebrate their role in that community. This is a welcome development since society in general has lost many traditional ceremonies.

Thought. Every culture has a set of intentionally held values and attitudes. These are conveyed through teaching, story, and song. A vibrant community will instruct their youth in the ethics of the group. If the group values bravery, youth will

be taught to act bravely in the face of doubt or fear. The group's values may be supported by a religious system that defines the important aspects of life, provides instruction in how to live by those values, and uses ceremony and ritual to support the values of the group.

Culture is learned. Culture is not innate but must be taught if it is to continue. This is the dynamic of *enculturation*, learning one's own culture. Many youth are at risk of not learning the culture of their ancestors if adults do not systematically teach their traditions. Individuals who do not learn their own culture will learn another culture, which we define as *acculturation*. If adults

are not intentional about teaching their own cultural system, then media culture may become the most influential force in teaching youth.

In sum, as adults intending to create resilient youth, we can make evident our cultural patterns about young people so we can examine them. Cultural assessment will help us become aware of the true message we use to relate to youth. A youth-respecting culture will consistently send positive value messages by language, behavior, policy, and practice.

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