HOW CONTEMPORARY NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN AUTHORS VIEW THE EDUCATION OF THEIR PEOPLE

by Mary Sheldon

Most contemporary Native American women authors are intent on writing the history of their people through stories. They choose to be storytellers rather than historians for many reasons. As storytellers they are working within an honored tribal tradition. Moreover, as storytellers they can reveal the reality of their people's experiences with an emotional energy and a spiritual intensity that might not fit the conventions of historical scholarship. They can attempt to reach into the hearts as well as the minds of their readers. As a result, they have a better chance to increase understanding and create change within society.

For thousands of years Native American women have been concerned with the education of their children, so the fact that education is one of the focal points in their stories comes as no surprise. They explore the characteristics of their traditional tribal education which worked effectively for centuries, as well as the characteristics and effects of the educational system gradually forced upon them by the invaders of their lands after 1492.

THE WESTERN EDUCATION OF NATIVE AMERICAN PEOPLE

In their stories, contemporary Native American women authors uncover the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual abuse their people have suffered at the hands of European-American educators through mission and public educational systems. Common effects of such abuse are also detailed: alcoholism, despair, family disintegration, and tribal office incompetence.

Emotional and mental problems resulting from abuse often scarred children and parents. Perhaps the gravest form of this abuse came from child theft. Parents were often forced or tricked into sending their children to boarding schools both on and off the reservations. Unable to defend their families, parents often took refuge in alcoholism or despair.

Beth Brant, a Bay of Quinte Mohawk author, presents the plight of victims of child-theft in "A Long Story" (1988). After she signs papers she cannot read, a Mohawk mother in 1890 discovers the agent can now force her children to attend a boarding school so they will be "civilized." Her open suffering causes even her friends to stay at a distance:

> I hold myself tight in fear of flying apart into the air. The others try to feed me. Can they feed a dead woman? I have stopped talking. When my mouth opens, only air escapes. I have used up my sound screaming their names. . . . My eyes stare at the room . . . I know there are people here, but I cannot see them. I see a darkness . . . my son and daughter being lifted onto the train. . . . So many children crying, screaming.[1]

A year later her alcoholic husband wanders through the village and calls for his children. "'He is a dead man,'" his wife tells us. And she herself has become "'a crazy woman,'" she admits, "'screaming at the moon in terror'" and "'howling'" to keep away sleep and nightmares.[2]

Southwestern author Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) traces the similar experiences of southwestern Native American women more than half a century later. In "Lullaby" (1981) white doctors trick Ayah, a Navajo woman who cannot read English, into signing a paper which will allow them to take her young children away. This Navajo mother, too, is enveloped in pain. All that remains is

> the pain in her belly and it is fed by everything she saw: the blue sky of their last day together and the dust and pebbles they played with; the swing in the elm tree and broomstick horse choked life from her. The pain filled her stomach and there was no room for food or for her lungs to fill with air.[3]

The children in both of these stories return to their families only for short visits, if at all. In their schools they lose their language, their traditions, their spirituality. They lose an understanding of how tribal and family life works. Their generation and their children's will only know how to scream, and how to drown their screams.

In her highly acclaimed novel *Ceremony* (1977), Leslie Marmon Silko comments on the effects of western education on Laguna Pueblo young people in the 1930s. The mission boarding school taught Laura, one young girl, to reject what it termed her pueblo's "peculiarities" and embrace white ways. As a result, she was pleased that she attracted white men. When they waved, she smiled and enjoyed the success of "her dress, her lipstick, her hair—it was all done perfectly, the way the home-ec teachers taught them, exactly like the white girls." Only too late does she discover the truth in the white men's "fists and in their greedy feeble love-making," and in the low-paying jobs of waitress and hotel maid. By then she is ashamed of both "the deplorable ways of the Indian people," as the "holy missionary white" educators termed them, and her violation of both tribal and family values.[4] She seeks to escape the reality of two worlds through alcoholism and sex.

Laura would blend in with the women a white caretaker points out to young Native American girls in Cherokee author Vickie Sears' story, "Grace" (1989). As the young narrator Jodi Ann reminisces, an

> orphanage lady took me [to a tavern] late one night to show me where all the Indian women was and what kind of people they are always being drunk and laying up with men. That woman said that is all us Indian girls like to do and I will be just like that too.[5]

Educational systems often separated children from their families whether the children roomed at boarding schools or orphanages, or lived at home. As Leslie Marmon Silko shows in *Ceremony*, educators' ridicule of native life styles and beliefs served to distance children in any circumstance from their parents and thrust them into a white world where they would not find acceptance.

Two boys in *Ceremony*, Tayo and his cousin Rocky, attend a public school. There they learn that the traditional ways and stories are "nonsense".[6] Tayo begins to doubt them; Rocky scorns them. Educators lead Rocky to assume scientists know more about raising cattle than his father and his uncle, and he begins to treat both his parents, grandparents, and relatives with disrespect. Moreover, church educators teach Rocky to scorn the traditional spiritual ways as well. After he kills a deer, he refuses to participate in the ritual of hanksgiving. Instead, he is "embarrassed" by the "superstition" he finds even within the Catholic members of his family and the tribe.[7]

Rocky studies in the hope that he can be a success off the reservation, not understanding that the only jobs waiting for him are in the military, the warehouses, and the lumberyards.[8] While Rocky dies in a prison camp during World War II, Tayo survives and seeks refuge in despair and alcoholism as he begins to realize how education has led him to violate traditional ways and harm his people.

Children's screams came from physical abuse as well as emotional and mental abuse in school systems. In Leslie Marmon Silko's "Storyteller" (1981), a young Eskimo girl chooses to return to the abusive ways of her stepgrandfather's home rather than be "whipped with a leather belt because she refused to speak English" at a boarding school.[9]

In her award-winning novel *Love Medicine* (1984), Turtle Mountain Chippewa author Louise Erdrich recounts the nightmarish abuse of Sister Leopolda. Assigned to a Chippewa mission school because no white private school would keep her, Sister Leopolda is free to beat children, lock them in closets, and fill them with lies about the terrors of hell and their own savagery. "'You have two choices,'" she threatens the young Marie Lazarre. "'One, you can marry a no-good Indian, bear his brats, die like a dog. Or two,you can give yourself to God'".[10] The sister's goal is clear: the complete submission of broken spirits.

In "Grace" Vickie Sears details how Native American children, sexually and emotionally abused and beaten, find it almost impossible to recover trust, whatever the change in their circumstances. When Jodi Ann and Billie Jim are adopted by Native American elders, they at first react with fear to the couple's every innocent movement and request. When Grace offers to help Jodi Ann change into her nightgown, for instance, the young girl backs away because of memories of sexual abuse.[11]

A reading of Lakota autobiographies, such as Luther Standing Bear's *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933) and Mary Crow Dog's *Lakota Woman* (1991), reveal that the lives of students at Carlisle Academy in Pennsylvania during the 1870s and 1880s and at St. Francis Mission School in South Dakota even into the 1960s reflected all the emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual abuse illustrated in the novels and short stories of Native American women. Standing Bear laments in 1933,

> But the change in clothing, housing, food, and confinement combined with lonesomeness was too much, and in three years nearly one half of the children from the Plains were dead and through with all earthly schools. In the graveyard at Carlisle most of the graves are those of little ones.[12]

Nearly sixty years later, Crow Dog still cries out with the same pain: "The missionaries had always been repeating over and over again: 'You must kill the Indian in order to save the man'".[13] And how did they save "the man"? Crow Dog recalls,

> All I got out of school was being taught how to pray. I learned quickly that I would be beaten if I failed in my devotions, or God forbid, prayed the wrong way, especially prayed in Indian to Wakan Tanka, the Indian Creator.[14]

I would note that such Native American autobiographical accounts typify my own observations of European-American education of indigenous people in mission settings today. As a volunteer working at an American sponsored mission in Guatemala for three summers (1984, 1985, 1987), I witnessed how Mayan children suffer from abuses which work to destroy their values, traditions, and beliefs. Mayan children (especially orphans) are often coerced into adopting Christian worship, wearing western clothes, cutting their hair (the boys), and neglecting their native languages. Upon leaving the orphanage, the young women may be unable to weave (a necessary skill for marriage), and the young people may be unable to take up the responsibilities of their traditional faith. Miguel Angel Mendez, a young Quiche Mayan boy who suffered many abuses, was even forced by American priests and sisters to leave an orphanage in 1987 because he

began to protest abuses heaped upon him. He disappeared while walking to the United States. In a short time, the Mayan people, who have kept their traditions alive over five centuries of conquest, may find them in ruins.

THE TRADITIONAL TRIBAL EDUCATION OF CHILDREN

Western education of Native American people is all the more shameful in the face of the rich traditional tribal education which served Native American peoples for centuries. Marked by respect for the past and concern for present and future generations, tribal education showed young people how to walk on a sacred path in union with spiritual forces, the earth, and the tribe and family. Somehow, traditional tribal education still endures, as Native American women authors show.

Native American children usually are educated by both family members and elders, and by spiritual forces. These people, and the spirits, at times, teach children traditional practical skills and traditional spiritual values. Traditional practical skills are taught by family members who demonstrate and redemonstrate them as the season for them arrives. Paul teaches Billie Jim to fish and Grace teaches Jodi Ann to make baskets and bead in Cherokee author Vickie Sears' "Grace" (1989). From the Native American couple that adopts them, both children learn to ride a horse, plant a garden, and braid hair.[15]

In Laguna author Leslie Silko's "A Geronimo Story" (1974), the guide Siteye teaches his Laguna Pueblo nephew how to memorize and follow a trail. Siteye teaches through storytelling. For instance, he reflects on how he remembers the trail they are presently on from his youth, though he traveled it only once. What you have to do, his nephew reflects, is to "know the trees and rocks all together with the mountains and sky and wildflowers".[16]

Siteye also relates stories that will teach his nephew what to do in certain situations he might encounter. Siteye recalls a time when he lost a trail. Then he saw an old gray snake with chipped yellow-brown rattles that he remembered lived "in a hole under a twisted tree at the top of the trail".[17] He knew he could follow the snake and relocate the trail, and he did. In this instance, Siteye's regular observation of his natural surroundings proved saving, and Siteye's nephew is reminded to continuously observe his surroundings.

The now wiser young narrator reviews what he has learned on this occasion, and on other occasions with his father:

> [I know how] to remember how the trees look—dead branches or crooked limbs; to look for big rocks and to remember their shape and their color; and if there aren't big rocks, then little ones with pale-green lichens growing on them. . . . I closed my eyes and tested my vision of the trail we had traveled so far. I could see the way in my head, and I

> had a feeling for it too—a feeling for how far the great fallen oak was from Mossy Rock springs.[18]

A humility often marks Siteye's instruction. At one point he admits, "Sometimes I don't remember the distance—things are closer or farther than I had remembered them, but the direction is right".[19]

Stories, then, are used to teach children spiritual values, such as humility, as well as practical skills. These spiritual values include respect for spiritual forces, respect for elders, respect for the people and their traditions, and respect for the earth.

While the mother in Crow Creek Sioux Elizabeth Cook-Lynn's "The Power of Horses" (1986) teaches her daughter a practical skill—how to can beets and endure the heat of canning—she also shares stories from her life and from Dakota legends which relate the power of horses. She teaches her daughter about mystery, about wonder.

In the storytelling, the "beets are forgotten, momentarily . . . [as] the aging woman remember[s] the magic of those horses".[20] As the daughter follows the stories, she learns of a time when "all creatures knew one another," and she hears of a sacred horse's wish, that the "tribe be strong and good." Moreover, as she listens and learns about her people's spiritual values, the daughter discovers she also can transcend the everyday:

> The girl's frustration was gone now and she seemed mindless of the heat, her own physical discomfort and the miserableness of the small squalid kitchen where she and her mother moved quietly about, informed now with the wonder of the past, the awesomeness of the imagination.[21]

When she re-envisions the past, the mother also makes vital contact with its power, and so she teaches its presence. "I must look: she thought [with urgency], into the past for the horse that speaks to humans."[22] Somehow, she then brings that power into the present. She re-invigorates herself and her daughter, and perhaps even heals her husband who decides, as if on his own when he wakes from a drunken sleep, not to sell their few horses. Someday her daughter will learn how to enter the past and return with power.

In Pawnee and Otoe author Anna Lee Walters' "The Warriors" (1985), Uncle Ralph teaches traditional Pawnee spiritual values so an alternative to the greed and hate present in American society will continue to live. Uncle Ralph tells his nieces traditional stories, sings them traditional songs, and relates native ways of learning (through observation and listening rather than asking questions) and the ways of mother earth.

Uncle Ralph's stories and reflections teach the nieces, and his behavior reinforces his words. Uncle Ralph is an alcoholic, but he still models the

importance of the traditional ways. As a drummer, singer, and storyteller on ceremonial occasions, he demonstrates his commitment to tradition. Moreover, whenever he visits he brings a sack of food so the Pawnee tradition of the warrior providing physical sustenance also continues.

To the extent in his power, Uncle Ralph lives a principled and spiritual life. Because his nieces see this, their uncle's words and actions have meaning for them. "'We care, Uncle Ralph,'" one niece admits. When he asks "'Why?'" she responds, "'I guess because you care so much, Uncle Ralph'."[23]

After his death the nieces recall, "'He knew why the sun pours its liquid all over us and why it must do just that. He knew why babes and insects crawl. He knew that we must live beautifully or not live at all.'" The young women commit themselves to enter the "battle for beauty" as women warriors.[24]

Spirits, as well as parents and relatives, teach children. In Taos-Sioux author Soge Track's "The Clearing in the Valley" (1969), a hochin's (or watcher's) spirit instructs the young Taos Pueblo narrator in spiritual values.

When she is playing in a valley, a young girl comes across an Old Man, the pueblo's hochin. Though she doesn't know it, the Old Man has just died back at the pueblo. It is the Old Man's spirit, in fact, that she meets, and it tells her an elaborate story of four young men, each sent on a mission by an elder. The first three fail in their mission because of greed and personal needs. The last young man overcomes his hunger and accomplishes his mission. Though he dies, he restores his people's faith, hope, and love; the elder, in turn, transforms him into a sparrow so he can use song to lift his people's spirits.

The Old Man gives the girl the moral before he tells the story: Listen to "our people's cries" and put aside "greed and hate" so you can help them.[25] The young girl returns to her grandparents determined to help her people.

THE TRADITIONAL TRIBAL EDUCATION OF ADULTS

While children learn from such activities as storytelling and observing concerned and skilled men and women at their tasks, adults also learn in Native American communities. Education is seen as a life-long process which brings the person into greater harmony with his or her world. Often it is connected with healing.

Most adults learn from shamans (such people as visionaries and healers) and spirit guides who keep them on or return them to the sacred path. Tayo, a Laguna and white veteran of World War II who returns to Laguna Pueblo in Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), finds himself unable to function due to his experiences in a Japanese prisoner of war camp and the racism he encounters upon his return home. Trying to find a different alternative than alcoholism and despair, Tayo seeks the help of a Navajo/ Mexican shaman named Betonie.

In modern day, however, an education often must occur before the student/patient is responsive. In order to teach and heal Tayo, Betonie first needs to establish a bond with the young man. Tayo notices that Betonie too is of mixed blood (Navajo and Mexican), and Betonie explains that what Tayo has always viewed as shameful is an advantage. Witchery "'wants us to believe all evil resides with white people. Then we will look no further to see what is really happening. They want us to separate ourselves from white people, to be ignorant and helpless as we watch our own destruction,'" Betonie cautions.[26] But white and Mexican can join with the Native American to end the suffering, Betonie insists: "'We must have power from everywhere. Even the power we can get from the whites'."[27] And the necessity and beauty of such a union is revealed in Tayo's own heritage.

As he establishes a bond with Tayo, Betonie observes that the young man looks with disbelief at pouches and bags, gourd rattles, deer-hoof clackers, and layers of calendars and piles of telephone books. Betonie then knows the next step is to convince the young man that he is a teacher/healer who has the power to aid him. In the face of Tayo's doubt about shamanic power, Betonie remarks indignantly, "'Didn't anyone ever teach you about these things?'."[28]

Betonie then encourages Tayo to talk, and he listens to the young man's story. With a new sense of his own dignity and a new hope in a cure, Tayo opens himself to the experience of learning and healing. He is ready to accept Betonie as a teacher/ healer by listening to Betonie's stories and opening himself to the ceremonies designed to cure him.

After he participates in the ceremonies (the sandpainting, the prayers, the songs, the stories), Tayo comes to understand how his story fits into a larger story, and that his pueblo, his country, and the world need healing as the result of five centuries of exploitation of the land and indigenous peoples. Tayo works to heal himself knowing that this healing will bring healing on a larger scale too. He has learned how he fits into a larger pattern, and his knowledge brings him a new purpose.

Aware that he must complete his own education/healing, Tayo leaves Betonie. Tayo is determined to act to reverse any harm for which he might have been responsible. Before he leaves, Betonie reveals to Tayo a pattern of good which he will encounter if he remains on the sacred path: "'Remember these stars,' [Betonie] said. 'I've seen them and I've seen the spotted cattle; I've seen a mountain and I've seen a woman'."[29]

Tayo soon discovers that though he leaves Betonie, his teacher/shaman is still with him. Tayo soon meets his old friends. "We'll give you a[n education/]cure!" they promise as they pass a bottle.[30] The next morning, however, Tayo wakes up abruptly:

> Someone was yelling. Someone was shaking him out of the tall tree he was in. He thought it might be old Betonie telling him to that he'd

> slept too long and there were the cattle to find, and the stars, the mountain, and the woman.
>
> He started to answer old Betonie, to tell him he hadn't forgotten.[31]

As Tayo continues his journey, he discovers that spirits also accompany him, to teach and to protect him. For instance, he comes across Ts'eh Montano, a young woman the reader connects with the spirit of Tse-pi'na, Mount Taylor. Ts'eh first confirms everything that has passed. She points at the sky. Tayo sees Betonie's star pattern revealed there. And suddenly "Betonie's vision was a story Tayo could feel happening--from the stars and the woman, the mountain and the cattle would come."[32] Later, Ts'eh spreads her storm-pattern blanket outside and so brings the snow which saves Tayo from arrest and helps him capture the cattle.[33]

Ts'eh, the mountain spirit, most helps Tayo by loving him. After spending days with her, he discovers the "breaking and crushing were gone and the love pushed inside his chest, and when he cried now, it was because she loved him so much."[34]

Earlier rain had descended from Mt. Taylor because of Tayo's prayers; now Ts'eh releases the tears from within Tayo which flow and end the drought within his soul. Healed by Ts'eh's love, Tayo can face a final challenge. His choice for good guarantees that he will remain always on the sacred path.

The experience of adult education as recorded by Native American women authors is born out in everyday life. I have encountered shamans (visionaries and healers) and people who consult them, and I know Native Americans with such a profound sense of the immediate presence of spiritual forces that they perceive their direction and guidance in visions, in encounters with the natural world, people, and events, and in the unfolding patterns within their lives.

As Luther Standing Bear remarks in his autobiography in 1933, mainstream American society has yet to acknowledge what it can learn about education from Native American peoples. Now, more than five hundred years after Columbus, we have only just begun to listen, to understand how principles of Native American education can help all our children bloom, all our people walk on a sacred path. To listen and learn more, we can turn to the published stories of Native American women authors.

ENDNOTES

1. Beth Brant, "A Long Story," in her *A Gathering of Spirit: A Collection by North American Indian Women* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1986), 101.
2. Ibid., 104-05.
3. Leslie Marmon Silko, "Lullaby," in her *Storyteller* (New York: Seaver Books, 1981), 47.
4. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1977), 68-9, 115.

5. Vickie Sears, "Grace," in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writings by Native American Women*, edited by Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 169.
6. Silko, *Ceremony*, 19.
7. Ibid., 51, 76-7.
8. Ibid., 76, 115.
9. Leslie Marmon Silko, "Storyteller," in her *Storyteller* (New York: Seaver Books, 1981), 19.
10. Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984), 45.
11. Sears, "Grace," 172-73.
12. Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 234.
13. Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman* (New York: Harper Collins Publisher, 1991), 22.
14. Ibid., 32.
15. Sears, "Grace," 176, 181.
16. Leslie Marmon Silko, "A Geronimo Story," in *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians*, ed. Kenneth Rosen (New York; Vintage Books, 1974), 137.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, "The Power of Horses," in *The New Native American Novel: Works in Progress*, ed. Mary Dougherty Bartlett (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); reprinted in *Spider Woman's Granddaughers: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writings by Native American Women*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 205.
21. Ibid., 206.
22. Ibid., 208.
23. Anna Lee Walters, "The Warriors," in her *The Sun Is Not Merciful: Short Stories by Anna Lee Walters* (Ithaca, New York: Firebrand Books, 1985), 18.
24. Ibid., 26.
25. Soge Track, "The Clearing in the Valley," in *The American Indian Speaks*, ed. John R. Milton (Vermillion, South Dakota: University of South Dakota Press, 1969); reprinted in *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writings by Native American Women*, ed. Paula Gunn Allen (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1989), 93, 95.
26. Silko, *Ceremony*, 132.
27. Ibid., 150.
28. Ibid., 120.
29. Ibid., 152.
30. Ibid., 158.
31. Ibid., 167.
32. Ibid., 186.
33. Ibid., 177, 208.
34. Ibid., 227.

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