

CROSS CULTURAL CIRCLES
What We Have Learned in Indian Country

Phyllis Boernke, Executive Director
The Center for Restorative Justice

I. Introduction

If you are a member of the dominant culture attempting to work in a minority culture, a number of attributes and attitudes will serve you well. Based on 25 years of working on Indian reservations throughout North and South Dakota and in working with Lakota and Dakota Peoples in urban settings, we have learned some lessons to share with others who wish to bridge the cultural distances.

First I must acknowledge that I am, by no means, an authority on native traditions and cultural ways. I am born of the dominant culture, raised in its belief systems and prejudices. *My own biases do not allow me to accurately see my biases.* Think about that, ponder it well. *Your own biases do not allow you to accurately see your biases.*

When we look out to the world of another, from within our cultural perspective, we *cannot* know whether our viewpoint is inclusive or separating. Reading, viewing documentaries, conducting research, having conversations with others of our own dominant culture - be they colleagues, teachers or clergy – *will not* allow us accurate assessment of our own biases. These are academic pursuits. It is only through *relationships* with individuals of the other culture that we come to know the extent of our own conditioning. We must enter the realm of the other – the world view, the personal experience, the stories.

Establishing and nurturing relationships with one of another culture may begin to reveal our biases to us. However, these relationships cannot be entered lightly if we are sincere in our willingness to learn to see. These relationships must be created with integrity, with agreements to be honest even when it is painful and to be dedicated to uncovering personal biases and exploring them together. If we are highly educated, sensitive, well liked and respected, we do not usually consider ourselves to be prejudiced, racist, or oppressive. Yet, we of the dominant culture are *infants* in understanding what it is to “walk in another’s moccasins.” We are too privileged and have been for generations, to truly be aware of the culture and life conditions of those of other races and cultural traditions. Relationships that allow us to take baby steps, to stumble and begin again, and to plumb the depths of our individual, inculturated beliefs and perceptions, gradually reveal to us the enormity of our prejudicial positions. With that discovery, we *may* begin to embrace a way of healing, a way of change, of inclusion, and practices that we may adopt that demonstrate “mitakuye oyasin” – we are all related. You have, no doubt, heard this phrase spoken at gatherings and seen it on T-shirts. I’m certain that non-Indians are unable to comprehend the story behind the words, the richness and depth of the meaning to Lakota people when they speak these words of blessing.

II. Restorative Beginnings

Restorative justice has its roots in indigenous practices. These traditions are so radically different from the dominant position that they require a “letting go” of our established beliefs and practices. *Indigenous peoples value community more than individuality.* In the dominant culture, our “individual rights” often take precedent over the good of the whole. We expect and demand our individual independence – freedom of movement, freedom of speech, freedom to bear arms,

freedom of religion. When the community comes first and the individual is secondary, the wisdom of the elders, those who have proven themselves able to be impartial and generous, is sought out for decisions and for applying judicious action. An individual's "rights" may be at odds with the good of the community, as seen from the perspective of the wise elder. The community engages in dialogue with the elders as they come to agreement on wise action. The community supports the elder's decision and helps keep individuals within the circle of community, even if he/she does not agree with the decision.

When one individual harms another, the community, as well as the one harmed, experiences the effects of the harmful actions. Indigenous practices support healing in all relationships; taking care of both the individuals harmed and the ones who cause the harm; expecting and assisting the one who caused harm to repair that harm and restore relationships with the individual and family harmed; and to make things right with the entire community. The individual who was harmed is supported to speak, to take time to heal, and to fully engage in community life without fear of greater harm. The community heals as its members move past the harmful actions and back into cooperative and trusting relationships. Nurturing these relationships does not stop when the initial incident is addressed and repaired. Harm and healing exist side by side on a continuum where relationships that are family and community oriented are valued. Rebuilding, restoring and monitoring actions and outcomes is ongoing because *relationships matter*.

These restorative practices worked well – and continue to work well in Indian country - because of shared values. As we examine and adopt the shared values identified in the next section, we more easily bridge the gap across cultures. We strengthen our position as advocates for restorative justice and enlarge our context for integration of restorative practices into our existing judicial systems, our corporate structures, our schools and community agencies, our churches and our neighborhoods.

III. Attributes and Attitudes

As we intentionally leave our dominant cultural perspective behind, we enter a world of other practices. We suspend judgment to come to the relationship to learn. We begin with the practices of

- *not knowing*: we come to our interaction free of our past mental constructs, ready to be shown who we are meeting, in their words and from their framework;
- *bearing witness*: in silence, we listen, we absorb, we are receptive; we release fear and judgment in order to open to the other and "feel" into the relationship;
- *taking action*: a deeper understanding, an appreciation of another way, allows us to relinquish control, embrace mutuality, and act for the good of the whole.

The practices of first, not knowing, secondly, bearing witness and finally, taking action that flows from the previous two practices, are preparation for engagement with indigenous peoples. We are infants, unprepared for the expansion beyond our limitations, that we might encounter. Indigenous practices are ancient and, if we allow it, will assist us to walk in the world as peacemakers.

The attributes and attitudes we need to adopt to work effectively with indigenous cultures, and more holistically in the dominant culture, are the values that shape the lives of native peoples. They are:

INVITATION: we go where we are invited to go. We do not impose our ways, nor approach from an hierarchical position. We are not the experts coming to convert others to our ways. We come as a guest.

HUMILITY: like “not knowing,” we are not arrogant. We enter free of our opinions, ready to be taught ways that are sacred and ancient. We make no comparisons.

RESPECT: though we know little of another’s ways, we respect the values that have shaped the culture and the peoples. We view the others as our equals, our brothers and sisters who bring a wealth of tradition to share with us, because we are viewed as worthy of trust. We are humble and respectful before our elders and teachers.

GENEROSITY: we practice generosity of spirit through deep listening that is respectful and invites deeper sharing. We are generous with our time and allow the process and time frames to be established by the other. We are generous with our words of gratitude.

ACCEPTANCE: people in relationship of equals have no need to control another’s thoughts, words or deeds. We accept that the other is following inner wisdom and acting on behalf of the good of the whole. We surrender our need for specific outcomes.

INCLUSION: we value the cultural and traditional differences that make each of us unique. We have no desire to remake the other to be more like us. We are in relationship with the other authentic being just exactly as he/she is and we are sincerely appreciative for all that he/she is.

CURIOSITY: we are students, eager to learn all that we can. We engage in dialogue, we spend time together, we attend traditional and culturally related events, by invitation, that allow us to deepen our understanding. We are open to opportunities as they are presented to us.

COOPERATION: we keep our agreements and do those things we said we would do. In building trusting relationships, we are mindful of the context and meaning of our actions to bring deeper understanding, rather than keeping track of whose turn it is now to do the next thing. We don’t “keep score.”

We are grateful for opportunities to approach relationships from a restorative perspective and we sincerely appreciate the lessons learned in Indian Country. This transformative process benefits many, including ourselves. Honoring the traditions of those who historically *lived* restorative practices, enables us to be in meaningful partnership as we introduce those practices in the dominant culture and revitalize them in indigenous settings.

Phyllis Boernke, Executive Director
The Center for Restorative Justice
712 Columbus Street
Rapid City, South Dakota 57701
605.348.3665
cfrj@rushmore.com