Embracing an Indigenous Understanding of Service-Learning:

NWIC Second Summit on Indigenous Service-Learning: Keynote Address

Source: John Guffey, July 2008

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First of all, let me say what an honor it is to be here with you at the second summit on indigenous service-learning. To be given the opportunity to speak at this time, in this place, to those gathered here, has made me stop and think how strange and wonderful a place the world is. When the world has its way with us we enter into a world of love, receiving stories which no storyteller could invent, arriving anew at an old understanding of how we humans, "two-leggeds", "ikce wicasa", "Zuni", "Dine'", "Black", "Red", "White", however we say it, fit into this existence we call life. What we have seen and heard at this summit over the past few days, revisited through so many eyes, ears, mouths, and minds, are the truths that do indeed set us free upon a path of enlightenment both now and for generations to come.

The organizers of this summit on indigenous service-learning deserve recognition for the emphasis placed on the power of storytelling and service to bring people face-to-face with themselves, with others and with the places we live. Whether we're cautiously feeling our way in the dark or running full speed ahead in broad, brilliant daylight, at whatever point we're on in our journey - whether just starting, or nearing the end, whether we're sick or healthy: in the combination of storytelling and service-learning presented here, we find answers to three enduring questions: Who are we? Why are we? Where are we going?

Here we've found the lessons and experiences that are often missing in school: access and connection to community, a sense of purpose and fulfillment, happiness, reflection on the nature and meaning of truth and other enduring values, all within the framework of storytelling, service-learning, people and place.

Some preliminary questions which I offer as part of the story I am here to share with you:

- What does education mean?
- What kind of education do you want for your children?
- What do we, collectively, need from education?
- What are you providing your/our children for their education?

Think back on how this conference has helped formulate answers to these questions: making connections with elders, unplugging from dependency on technology, mentoring, reflection, finding a sense of community, creating a place for people to sit together, creating the next generation of storytellers, visiting others in the neighborhood. Think of the strong elements and themes that have been carried along over the course of the summit: storytelling, native voices, traditional culture, harmony with the earth, spirituality of relationship, storytelling, place-based service-learning. Think too of the brilliant, effective applications of digital images, podcasts, and movies that have be demonstrated and shared.

Now join me in my story, as told, in part, through the words of several other storytellers:

From the introduction to N. Scott Momaday's, House Made of Dawn:

Dypaloh. There was a house made of dawn. It was made of pollen and of rain, and the land was very old and everlasting. . . . The land was still and strong. It was beautiful all around."

In this land, writes Momaday, there is a "tenure" held by the coyotes, eagles, lizards –the wildest creatures, and the humans who have lived upon it for time immemorial. The "late-coming" things, beasts of burden, domesticated animals – and by implication whites, the latest comers –"have an alien and inferior aspect, a poverty of vision and instinct, by which they are estranged from the land, and made tentative.

House Made of Dawn begins with the protagonist, Abel, returning to his reservation in New Mexico after fighting in World War II. The war has left him emotionally devastated and he arrives too drunk to recognize his grandfather, Francisco. Now an old man with a lame leg, Francisco had earlier been a respected hunter and participant in the village's religious ceremonies. He raised Abel after the death of Abel's mother and older brother, Vidal. Francisco instilled in Abel a sense of native traditions and values, but the war and other events severed Abel's connections to that world of spiritual and physical wholeness and connectedness to the land and its people, a world known as a "house made of dawn."

Momaday articulates the importance of oral tradition and storytelling. He puts it this way, "A word is intrinsically powerful. If you believe in the power of words, you can bring about physical change in the universe. That is a notion of language that is ancient and it is valid to me. . . . Every day we produce magical results with words". Storytelling is a powerful way to ensure the survival of Native culture through the perpetuation of oral tradition. The power of the spoken word is validated with each telling and re-telling, as generation upon generation creates a chain of words. Momaday also points out the danger of a single weak link, noting in House Made of Dawn, that oral tradition is "but one generation from extinction". Abel's silence and alienation contribute to the threat of extinction because, as a weak link in the chain, he is "unable" to fulfill his role in the continuation of tribal culture.

As a society, no one in this country is exempt from the urgency of the "weak link" theory. It is not difficult to imagine that we are currently on a path of cultural extinction, not simply as tribes, or indigenous people, but as a collective, as a species, and, in keeping with the "weak link" theory we could be but a generation away from that loss. The prospect of extinction keeps me in education, looking for ways to return to the source of life. Moving away from the traditional classroom, like a renegade, into the field of service-learning, I have sought to build a "strong link" from indigenous ways, the earth and nature into the larger society. Based upon my understanding that the earth, in harmonious concert with the sun is the ultimate source of beauty and truth as we know it, I ask the question: how do people learn to find and know themselves in this world?

The answer that I have come to is two-fold: first, by encountering and establishing spiritual connections with the earth through the senses, the intellect and the emotional body. Second, through the inter-relationship of storytelling and service-learning. Think of storytelling as a needle and service-learning as the thread. The story makes an impression and creates an opening, then service-learning follows. Together they draw the fabric of life: people, places and nature together in new experiences. Connecting the power of storytelling with each generation takes more than repetition and reflection on the stories. It also takes real-life encounters in the form of service-learning.

In the way that this summit has brought storytelling and service-learning together, they are partners for life, providing a means of nurturing culture, and restoring an honorable and vital way of life for all people.

Used together, stories and service-learning weave a seamless fabric connecting people, the land and nature. Their effect is to repair, restore, and renew the relationships and the structure of society where it has nearly been torn apart across this land and around the world, among so many people that now inhabit the earth.

David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson, writing in Wisdom of the Elders: Sacred Native Stories of Nature, recount the following story:

All things in this world, say the Koyukon Indians of Subarctic Alaska, are connected by a common ancestry. Everything that exists on Earth – whether it be human beings, animals, or plants; rocks or rivers or snowflakes – shares a spiritual kinship arising from shared origins. Every entity is the expression of a timeless story that can be traced back to a primordial era known as 'Distant Time.' Among Koyukons, who live along the Yukon River and the Koyukuk River, Distant time represents nature's timeless substratum. This primal, creative time of life on Earth is the fertile, boundless, mythic soil in which everything – all things human and natural—in this world is ultimately rooted. Distant time is like a memory, substantiated by traditional stories and spiritual practices; lying outside of precise measurement or clear understanding. It is a time of heroic adventure, earthly upheaval, and transformation on an enormous scale; a time of metamorphosis that underlies and lends meaning to the recurring patterns of the natural world. These forces of chaos and mystery that scientists cannot readily measure or comprehend, are vital to our understanding and experience of life and nature.

During Koyukon Distant Time, the trickster Raven brought the gift of sunlight to the world. To do this, Raven transformed himself into a tiny spruce needle so he could be swallowed by a woman in whose house the missing Sun was hidden. She gave birth to a baby boy and raised him. When he had grown strong enough, the boy found the sun beneath a blanket and rolled it out the door. Then he magically metamorphosed back into Raven and, taking flight, transported the sun up into the sky, bathing the Earth once more in radiant, life-generating light.

Raven and his heroic Distant Time companions served as cosmic catalysts in an epoch of explosive creativity and change. During this time the Earth's powerful original inhabitants – extraordinary hybrid human-animal beings—were somehow abruptly transformed into

animal and plant beings, the species that inhabit Koyukon country today.
That crucial transformation, according to the accounts of living Koyukon elders, took place within the crucible of a great, era-ending catastrophe: a world flood. Raven placed representatives of each of the primal life-forms on a raft. Through these heroics, he saved the humanoid plant and animal beings. By the time the waters of the great deluge had subsided, however, the creatures no longer possessed their original physical, social, and linguistic attributes. They had been physically transformed into ordinary plants and animals. Nonetheless, their dreamlike metamorphoses left a residue of human qualities and personality traits in the north-woods animals.

Knowledge embedded in Koyukon tales of the Distant Time breathes life into their local subarctic landscape. That landscape is climatically harsh, and dominated by blue northern skies, coniferous forests, and, depending on the season, crystalline or cascading waters. Their knowledge lends meaning to the local tapestry of forest and tundra, rivers and muskeg. It reveals the underlying choreography of the seasonal movements and activities of caribou, moose, waterfowl, salmon, and other precious game species that provide sustenance to their people. And it reveals the ultimate sources of the growth and fertility of local plant species ranging from the stunted stands of black and white spruce to lush, fruit-laden thickets of bog blueberry, cranberry, and cloudberry.

Because all things on Earth harbor a divine ember of Distant Time, it is virtually impossible for traditional Koyukons not to feel somehow spiritually connected to everything in their natural surroundings. From this perspective, everything in the natural world—fish, flesh, or flower; stone, star, or rain shower –continuously bear witness to a shared past in its own way. Everything in the natural world is thus endowed with a special kind of life, something powerful and deeply revealing.” (1992)

Now travel with me back to 1983. Let me jog your memory about what was happening then: The HIV virus – the vector for AIDS had been identified; crack cocaine had reached the streets across the country; cell phones became available to people in Chicago at $3,000 each plus a service charge of $150/month, Ronald Reagan introduced the Strategic Defense Initiative “Star Wars”, the Dell Computer company was started by an 18 year old freshman in his dorm room at the University of Texas, Peter Matheissen’s “In the Spirit of Crazy Horse” was published, Paula Gunn Allen wrote “The Woman Who Owned the Shadows”; William Least-Heat Moon’s “Blue Highways: A Journey into America” came out that year, and the National Youth Leadership Council was founded in St Paul, MN.

In 1983, at the age of 32, I made a major life change. Early that spring, as a member of a local group of peace activists working to stop the deployment of the MX missile, I was invited to participate in a debate at North High School, in Wichita, Kansas, on nuclear weapons and warfare. My debate opponent, a university professor and expert on the Soviet Union, cancelled at the last minute and I, a young artist, seasonal firefighter, and tofu manufacturer, took to the stage before 1000 high school students to describe the short and long-term biological effects of nuclear warfare and the risks of pursuing nuclear solutions to global problems. Then I took questions from the students – feeling pretty much like I had won the day. As a result of that fortuitous meeting with an auditorium full of sympathetic teenagers, I made the decision to become a high school science teacher. Who knows what might have happened had the debate actually taken place?

Leaving behind my dream of being an artist, the tofu business, peace activism, firefighting in Alaska, everything familiar to me - I turned to a new path that I had never dreamed would

be mine. I enrolled in the masters in science education program at Wichita State University - and two years later, I started teaching school.
My first teaching job was in sight of the Arab Gulf at the Universal American School in Kuwait. As the new 6th grade science coordinator I was suddenly on the road to find out what being a school teacher was all about. I had not yet heard of the term service-learning, but I did make an early effort to get my young students out of the classroom as much as possible, doing projects on the playground and in the neighborhood near the school, taking frequent field trips to museums, farms, the shoreline, historic sites, research stations, playgrounds, and homes, giving students as many community learning experiences as we could schedule in a year.

Coinciding with my beginnings as an educator, on April 25, 1983, "A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform," came out alerting Americans to what was then perceived as the weak performance of our education system. The report warned of a "rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people." That dire forecast set off a quarter century of education reform that has paralleled my own journey from school teacher to community-based critic and back to school again.

The1983 commission admonished the country, saying it was time to attend to academic excellence and school results. While many people in the schools viewed the report as overly critical of their efforts and profession, others heeded the alarm, and the report began an era of forceful innovation and accountability guided by non-educators – elected officials, business leaders and philanthropists.

This "civilian" leadership brought about two profound shifts that the professional educators, left to their own devices, would never have embraced. Today, instead of judging schools by their services, resources, or fairness, we follow their progress using preset academic standards – and we hold them to account for those results.

We've also become more open to charter schools, vouchers, virtual schools, and home schooling. We no longer suppose kids must attend the campus nearest home.

These are historic changes – and most of today's education debates deal with the complexities of carrying them out. Yet our school results haven't appreciably improved, whether one looks at test scores or graduation rates. There have been no lasting changes in performance, even though we're spending tons more money. (In constant dollars, we've nearly doubled the per-pupil spending of 1983.)

And just as "A Nation at Risk" warned, other countries are beginning to outdistance us academically. While our outcomes remain flat, theirs rise. Half a dozen nations now surpass our high-school and college graduation rates. International tests find young Americans scoring in the middle of the pack.

So what to do now?

First, give communities responsibility for our children's education. We can't leave it to the government to run the learning process. Washington lacks the capacity to reorganize thousands of schools and create alternatives for millions of kids, and education belongs in the hands

of the people. Having said this, some things are best done on a large scale – notably creating uniform standards and expectations in place of today's patchwork of uneven guidelines and non-comparable assessments. These we have foolishly resisted. So, if we want storytelling and service-learning to figure large in our kids' lives, we have to build these elements firmly into the standards by which education is measured.

Second, retain community control of education while pushing for more continuity in standards across the country. Governors, mayors, and other local community leaders must be called upon to help re-invent the system. The adult interests that run education – deans and professors of education, textbook publishers, teacher's unions – look after their special interests and fend off change. If community leaders embrace the education agenda, the reforms are more apt to endure.

Third, support innovations that give schools freedom to run (and staff) themselves with the community as partner, attended by choice, expected to meet high standards, and accountable for their results.

Finally, content matters, but it is the content of community of which I speak – and at the core it is whatever the community needs. What does this look like? It is the place-based approach we've been learning about here at the NWIC summit. Certainly storytelling and service-learning come immediately to mind. We call upon expert educators to inspire our children, we draw from a rich pool of community resources, such as Roger Fernandez and Tracy Rector, we utilize technology to extend and share the best resources from around the world. Kids no longer need to sit in school to be well educated but they can't get what they need without the community.

Far from delivering an undeserved insult to a well-functioning school system, the authors of "A Nation at Risk" were clear-eyed about that system's failings, as well as the challenges and opportunities being posed to us for our future. As we enter that future, we need to keep educational reform alive and moving according to the needs of our communities and our children.

This brings me to the impact and role of service-learning in my life as an educator.

My return to the US from Kuwait was prompted by a realization that I had some fundamental questions that needed answers. This led me to the study of spirituality and religion at Earlham School of Religion in Richmond, Indiana. Over the next three years I studied comparative religion and peacemaking and became involved in service-learning experiences related to current issues in the school, in the community, and beyond. Having witnessed conflicts and judgmental interactions among groups in the Middle East, as well as here at home, I was interested in learning how different religions sought to create harmony among people and with the natural world. I was interested in deepening my own spirituality as well as finding where I fit among the prevailing religions and worldviews. While I had grown up as a Protestant, joining the Methodist church as a youth, my understanding of the role of religion and my faith in God had undergone changes through college and into my adult years. At this time, there was no church or "community of believers" that I considered to be my spiritual home. Even my family had become divided around spiritual and religious matters.

During this time community, service, and reflection became more significant in my life and work. I was deepening my understanding of different religious traditions and cultures, and I reflected a great deal on the impact these ways had on my life and education. I learned that

by reaching fully into life's experiences my uncertainty, anger and fear were dissipated and replaced by courage, action and engagement. I learned that living in harmony with things, especially with things that cannot be changed, produces good results. I felt the peaceful nature of love come into my life.

Through these experiences and study I became aware of the historic disconnect between schools, starting with boarding schools, and indigenous communities. It became apparent to me that school culture and curriculum was out of touch with Native culture and with nature and that this disconnect constituted a spiritual barrier affecting us all. I learned that the pressures of assimilation, carried out to a great extent through the formalized system of American schooling that Native communities had lost or were losing contact with their traditional culture and nature-centered spirituality.

Thinking at the time that I would go to work in a tribal college, I went on from Earlham to a PhD program in education at Indiana University where I continued to explore the impact of schooling on Native cultures and communities, and where I gained relevant knowledge through Lakota language study and direct experience among native people in the Northern Plains and the Southwest. It was during my second year of the doctoral program that I began to connect a growing interest in service-learning with a general critique of the American school system based upon what I saw as disconnectedness from and destructiveness to tribal cultures and communities in this country.

When an opening came to go to work with the National Indian Youth Leadership Project in Gallup, NM, I shortened my stay at the university, took a specialist in education degree, loaded up the U-Haul and made the move to a trailer house on Navajo checkerboard land between Gallup and the Zuni reservation. There, under the tutelage of Mac Hall, I began to work for school reform from a service-learning and storytelling perspective. Through outdoor adventure and service-learning projects we supported Native youth as service leaders in their schools and communities. We also developed seminars and a teacher training program that brought service-learning to light in reservation schools in Arizona, New Mexico, South Dakota, Michigan and Minnesota.

Eventually, as part of the Turtle Island Project, we extended our service-learning efforts to teacher education programs in a number of tribal colleges and universities. Throughout the process we sought to build bridges of understanding and connection between indigenous communities and schools through service-learning. The NIYLP service-learning model was based on the standards for best practice put in place at the Wingspread Center in 1989. These standards provided a basis of support for service-learning in the school curriculum.

The preamble to these early standards states:

> We are a nation founded upon active citizenship and participation in community life. We have always believed that individuals can and should serve.

It is crucial that service toward the common good be combined with reflective learning to assure that service programs of high quality can be created and sustained over time, and to help individuals appreciate how service can be a significant and ongoing part of life.

Service, combined with learning, adds value to each and transforms both.

Those who serve and those who are served are thus able to develop the informed judgment, imagination, and skills that lead to a greater capacity to contribute to the common good. The Principles themselves were considered essential components of good practice. They included:

1. Engagement in responsible and challenging actions for the common good.
2. Provision for structured opportunities for reflection on service experiences.
3. Articulation of clear service and learning goals for everyone involved.
4. Allowance for those with needs to define those needs.
5. Clarification of the responsibilities of each person and organization involved.
6. Match-up of service providers and service needs through a process that recognizes changing circumstances.
7. Expectation of genuine, active, and sustained organizational commitment.
8. Inclusion of training, supervision, monitoring, support, recognition, and evaluation to meet service and learning goals.
9. Assurance that the time commitment for service and learning is flexible, appropriate, and in the best interests of all involved.
10. Commitment to program participation by and with diverse populations.

Around these ideas, the field of service-learning thinkers and practitioners began to coelesce.

In March of 2008 a revised set of standards were released at the National Service-Learning Conference as the new K-12 Standards for Quality Practice. These standards and indicators had been vetted through a series of "reactor panels" convened nationwide by the National Youth Leadership Council and RMC Research Corporation. The panels were composed of young people, teachers, school and district administrators, community members, staff from community-based organizations, policy-makers, and others interested in service-learning.

The revised standards include:

- Meaningful service
- Link to curriculum
- Reflection
- Diversity
- Youth voice
- Partnership
- Progress monitoring
- Duration and intensity

These standards, while supportive of service-learning within the traditional school setting and curriculum, stop short of a strong connection with indigenous service-learning and storytelling as presented at this summit. To bridge the gap between the national standards for service-learning and the impetus for service-learning in indigenous communities, I offer 4 traits of service-learning from Dawn Duncan and Joan Kopperud's *Service-Learning Companion,* combined with 12 Lakota values, here abbreviated, but fully articulated in a series of stories from Joseph Marshall's, *The Lakota Way.* The objectives, traits and values presented in this framework underscore the connections between community relationships, personal growth, service-learning, and storytelling that are inherent in indigenous education. Here, in simple terms, I offer this basic and timeless learning framework to our schools and communities:

- Commitment to community partnership
  cantognake – love: place and hold in one's heart
  icicupi – sacrifice: to give of oneself, an offering
- Learning and academic practice
  wowacintanka – perseverance
  wayuonihan – honor: integrity, honesty, upright character
  woohitike – bravery: having or showing courage
  c(k)antewasake – fortitude: strength of heart and mind
- Intentional and reflective thinking
  wowicake – truth: that which is real, the way the world is
  woksape – wisdom: to understand what is right and true, to use knowledge wisely
- Practice of civic responsibility and reciprocity
  unsiiciyapi – humility: to be humble, modest, unpretentious
  wawoohola – respect: to be considerate, to hold in high esteem
  waunsilapi – compassion: to care, to sympathize/empathize
  canteyuke – generosity: to give, to share, to have a heart

"Service-learning is a teaching and learning method that upholds a commitment to appreciating the assets of and serving the needs of a community partner while enhancing student learning and academic practice through intentional reflection and responsible civic action."

This definition of service-learning from Duncan and Kopperud, juxtaposed with references to indigenous values drawn from *"The Lakota Way"* provides a transitional link between school as we know it and the storytelling, service, reflection and place-based learning of indigenous communities.
(With acknowledgment to the following: Service-Learning Companion, Dawn Duncan and Joan Kopperud,2008 and The Lakota Way, Joseph M. Marshall III, 2001)

I close with this statement from, "It Takes the Whole damn village: An Education Fantasy," by Sandra Barnhouse. Bridging past and future to create a new path for learning and life, she writes:

"About 10,000 years ago there was a village. It might have been in western Europe or central Africa, or North America, or Java, or near a great river. In any case, it was a place where there was a garden, plenty of food stored up, well-fed people, and long periods of relative peace.

Archeologist Marija Gimbutas researched for several recent decades in the central European Mediterranean region, uncovering and cataloging evidence of what she came to theorize was a matrifocal culture, which she called "Old Europe", dated from about 20,000 to 8,000 years ago – a very old, long-evolved culture. After having catalogued more than 30,000 objects of art, she presents ample evidence that the religion and culture of Old Europe was fertility-based and focused on a goddess/creator, engaged in cooperative values, honoring procreation and sacred sexuality, cherishing children, with a largely vegetarian diet.

Gimbutas also asserts that war was relatively unknown in that region and time, as cities from that era had no walls around them. For some, this has been too much to believe; it's disrupted their paradigm – torn their umbrella.
We take it into our hearts to discover what we think it might have been like in our own indigenous cultures where the children were the center of everything and the grandmothers made most of the important decisions about the clans, sitting around the fire at night, after a great meal of vegetable soup and course bread, discussing every relationship in the neighborhood.

How do we grandmothers want our children and grandchildren to be treated, or taught? Since we closed the classrooms, our communities have turned right away to the grandmothers and elders. Somehow, they seem to know a lot that the rest of us don't understand. They have a bigger picture of things. We've learned this also is true of the grandfathers, especially when they sit in circles where they are slightly outnumbered by the grandmothers.

The grandparents and elders don't actually boss everyone around. They just hold council with each other and with the children. They advise us. They are consulted in order to understand the bigger picture, or in order to embrace our youthful blunders. Our children sit in their laps, fall asleep at their feet, get read to by them, learn about what they know.

Some of us don't have grandparents nearby. The world has become a place where grown children live in cities thousands of miles away from their parents. We've had to find grandparents anyway, and we've managed to do it. We've patched our communities together as best we can, with unrelated strangers, at first, some of whom eventually become fast friends. (Some don't work out, but some never do.)

We've opened our hearts and minds as never before, to what few indigenous cultures we find that continue to have the circular/village sense – such as the First People of North America, among many others – in order to learn older structural and behavioral traditions.

This is a great effort we're making in order to accomplish the shift. In every community we have to find ways to get closer to each other, to form true bonds, to create the village. We've set out to make this village into the school for our children."

The Second Summit on Indigenous Service-Learning draws us toward these values and the ongoing reconstruction of education through service-learning.