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Elder Reflections

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Dr. Maenette K. P. AhNee Benham of Michigan State University and Dr. Wayne J. Stein of Montana State University convened a group of native scholars and emerging scholars as a continuing phase of the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF) Native American Higher Education Initiative (NAHEI). Each two-person team conducted a site visit to one of four WKKF-NAHEI projects, wrote a story, and gathered in what can be described as a contemporary storytelling session. They told their stories in the traditional verbal ways of the people, which they enhanced with visuals using state-of-the-art Power Point presentations. These narratives were powerful in that they blended the old and the new and brought native storytelling to a new time and place.

I offer these elder reflections against a seven-year backdrop of history in the work of “bringing out the stories.” For indigenous nations, stories are cultural treasures that embody the soul of a people. They contain all aspects of a people’s ways of life, and the totality of their individual and collective experiences throughout time. Stories are sacred

or profane, they teach or entertain, and they contain a people's worldview: genesis, history, philosophy, or tribal values. They also are stories of success and human drama.

Contemporary native experiences are history in progress, stories in the making. They are the stories of the ongoing cultural evolution of a people who excel as storytellers. Modern storytellers have other roles, as scholars, professionals, educators, writers, researchers, and leaders. As pointed out in the stories, one of the key ingredients for success has been leadership, and Dr. Benham and Dr. Stein have modeled exemplary leadership in this regard. We come out of traditions of leadership and diplomacy and of respect. We are culturally and spiritually rich.

Everyone has done a stellar job in telling their stories and "capturing the dream." They are wonderful dreams, made more so by the fact that the projects are culturally based and spiritually rooted in this land. Furthermore, considerable thought has been given to the critical ingredients of language and culture, which are still at the forefront of where it is we are going. They are incorporated into TCU curricula, whether it is in native teacher preparation programs at Northwest Indian College; whether it is in the family education model of Fort Peck Community College; whether it is in the alternative veterinary program at Crown Point Institute of Technology; whether it is in examples and models of the Learning Lodge; or whether it is the beautiful shores of the Pacific paradise at Brigham Young University, Hawai'i. There is cultural continuity, and each of you brings that continuity to this good road.

The Road of Life we walk has a pattern to it. In response to a question about protocols, Native America has numerous protocols. There is protocol that governs when stories can be told. Salish-Kootenai College schedules Coyote stories during the winter

months, the only time Coyote stories can be told. Cheyennes tell their stories at night. There is a time and season for telling stories, there is a season for living, and there is a time for change. Native cultures have a system of checks and balances, which order life. Our philosophers studied life and concluded that everything in life is made up of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. This was a part of indigenous knowledge before the importation of science courses that teach the same principles.

It is important to understand that creation stories provide a people's orientation to the world, their belief systems, and how they behave in relation to everything in their environment. They are a people's cultural foundation. As such, native creation stories are sacred. To understand this better, let us briefly explore the Cheyenne creation story.

The Great One first created four sacred beings, who were placed at the semi-cardinal directions of the universe to watch over human beings. When shown respect, they will protect us and guide our hearts and spirits. They are the sacred beings to whom our men offer their pipes. They are the sacred beings to whom our ceremonial women offer babies when they are blessing them. The Great One then made the world from four sacred substances, sinew, buffalo fat, sweetgrass, and red earth paint, which continue to be used in our major ceremonies today. The point is that our ceremonial ways have their origins in our sacred creation story, which continue to serve as the basis for Cheyenne ceremonies, belief, thinking, and actions.

The Great One also informed the people that they would come to new situations on the Road of Life. Indeed, the past 500 years have brought considerable change, some of which has not been good, and there has been mistreatment. The beauty is that we

have survived. We have survived the most methodical and lethal intentions to eradicate our cultures and spiritual ways. It did not work. You are evidence of that.

We have been engaged in an education Cold War for several centuries. We are sovereign nations, yet there is the reality that our languages and cultures have been affected by oppressive federal and state policy. After World War II, the United States of America enacted the Marshall Plan to rebuild post-war Germany. A Native American Marshall Plan would have been ideal. It did not happen, so the WKKF-NAHEI has become the tribal college equivalent of the Indian Education Marshall Plan.

As modern storytellers, you are painting our winter counts, with your gifted minds and indigenous thinking. All of you took me on an incredible journey with your stories. I was transported on my flying red buffalo robe across the Pacific and saw the Iosepa launched at sea, a canoe that floated despite predictions to the contrary. It floated because the curriculum focused on language and culture that was culturally based on the land and sea.

I went to Fort Peck and saw their Family Education Model, which is a model of perfection because it focuses on family. The story of the Native Teacher Preparation Program at Northwest Indian College is not over. I had a view of the “cow babies,” the elk people, and the land at Crownpoint. Yes, self-determination matters; language and culture matter; linkages with other institutions matter; and community building and economic support matter. I saw the magnitude of the “Eagle Project” at Salish-Kootenai College, which reaches Australia, Canada, and other places in the world. Then there is the Learning Lodge Project based at Little Bighorn College, which works with all seven of the tribal colleges in Montana. Chief Dull Knife College is one of the multiple voices,

as is Fort Belknap College, which looks upon education as the new buffalo. Ah, yes! It was a happy journey among great minds and good-hearted people. My prayers for your health, your long life, happiness, peace, and success cover you far, far into this millennium. Continue to walk in sacredness. Thank you for making certain that the stories of our spiritual and cultural richness are going to be alive for all our grandchildren yet to come. This story of reflection ends with love and respect.