

Book Review of Sitting Bull's Words: Walking Backwards into the Future by Wahinkpe Topa (Four Arrows) aka Donald Trent Jacobs, Ph.D., Ed.D.

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Abstract

Four Arrows' new book, *Sitting Bull's Words: Walking Backwards Into the Future* is a meditation that invites us to reflect on the imperative to shift our worldview back towards the indigenous. It is a call to arms, that is to raise our collective arms towards compassionate action. The book guides the reader through 17 contrasting precepts that differentiate an indigenous worldview from our current dominant assumptions. The urgent imperative to adopt a more ancient consciousness, one rooted in the inherent connectedness of all things is a critical framework for holistic educators.

Keywords: Book Review, Indigenous Education, Holistic Education

And there were songs as old as turning wheels

and deep as bird throats after rain

Deep wisdom of the wild, wet earth

The pain of joy, the joy of pain.

–Sigerson Clifford, Irish poet

Four Arrows' manuscript is a call to arms. Not the kind of arms that are used to kill or maim a people or their spirit, but rather it is a call to the arms of the global community, arms of healing, arms of restoration, arms offering respect, harmony, and connection in vital times. This is the call we hear in the words of Sitting Bull who, as Four Arrows reminds the reader, was a warrior– but was first and foremost “a Spiritual Leader, a Medicine Man, a Sun Dancer, [and] a Lakota Pipe Carrier”. Four Arrows' impassioned message opens each chapter with the words of Sitting Bull that speak eloquently to the power of a community's arms, of trusting the wisdom to a worldview that restores balance between the physical and spiritual realms of humanity's existence, and of our “obligation to walk the chanku luta–the high, beautiful road”. Four Arrows invites the reader to dig deep within themselves because ultimately the source of physical and

spiritual unity does not reside in external power and authority but within each of us. It is to our inner truth and individual consciousness that the journey of the book directs us. The values shared here and the strategies for change are places to come together, to re-group, re-think, re-feel, and to reconnect.

The Indigenous worldview as interpreted here through Sitting Bull's words, speaks in an essential way to the work of holistic education and holistic educators. It integrates diverse perspectives and value systems, in particular those that allow us to move forward with strength, courage, and love while sustaining the planet's life-giving resources for future generations and for the continuing cycle of nature, birth, and re-birth. The book's premise and message throughout find much in common with the perennial philosophy of education that serves as a bedrock for holistic views of education. Miller (2019) identified the relationship of those views to spiritual practices and collective wisdom in diverse traditions based on values “derived from seeing and realizing the interconnectedness of reality” and of the “mysterious unity in the universe”. As in Four Arrows' writing and his personal history of social and environmental activism, this realization can serve as a catalyst for “social activity designed to counter injustice and human suffering”

(Miller, 2019, p. 22). Thus, the call to community arms also means a call to take compassionate action in the world.

The book's chapters are brief and clearly organized as seventeen Indigenous worldview precepts presented in contrast to seventeen corresponding dominant worldview characteristics. While most (or all) of the Indigenous values selected to frame Four Arrows' proposed transformations will be familiar to most readers of this review, several of the juxtapositions in worldviews deepened my own awareness of their implications for holistic education and served as a stark reminder to me of how little these values are represented with any level of regard in the dominant narrative and popular culture of many places. The desired transformations Four Arrows selected for the urgency of our modern time include, for instance: Low Regard for Rites and Trance to High Regard for Rites and Trance; Low Social Purpose to High Social Purpose; Limited Intimacy to High Intimacy; and Marginal Resistance to Injustice to Significant Resistance to Injustice. As I set out to read this manuscript for review, it became apparent by Chapter 2 that this was not a book to be devoured in one or two sittings, though it is only 68 pages. But instead, it was to be read slowly and reflectively. Hence, the book became part of my morning meditation time during which I read one or two chapters, each with pause to practice a kind of "self-hypnosis" that Four Arrows prescribes in the last section of each chapter. This practice is based on his CAT-FAWN model and is employed to help the reader move closer to recognizing and engaging with an Indigenous worldview.

CAT stands for Concentration Activated Transformation; FAWN stands for Fear-Authority-Words-Nature. Like a conscientious spiritual teacher, Four Arrows' gentle way of offering examples for self-awareness, reflection, and application (transformation) invite the reader to actively participate in exploring each of the 17 contrasting perspectives. The exercise begins with metacognitive work based on confronting fear, recognizing authority on which the fear is based, and recalling the words that perpetuate a belief or value; the exercise ends with prompts to induce one's own trance-like state or meditation to envision the desired transformation based on an observation of some feature of the natural world, the deep wisdom of the wild, wet earth. The call to arms I referred to in the opening sentence, is really a call to change and transformation that must start within each person. Similar to Fullan's well-known maxim that you cannot mandate what matters, Four Arrows' CAT-FAWN method is used to individualize each chapter because this is where the work begins (Fullan, 1994). The deep change advocated here is meant to begin by changing hearts and consciousness from within. While not stated in the book, the CAT-FAWN method could be a useful

tool for transformative work with classes, schools, organizations, and other institutions as well.

I have spoken with Four Arrows at holistic education conferences where we met, and I fondly remember his warmth and grace as a person. In a surprise meeting at a local big box home improvement store, I ended up at the same check-out register behind him several years ago. He had decided to include a small Southern Oregon town in his annual migration between Mexico and British Columbia. One of his orders of business as he settled into his new home, before undertaking home maintenance and repairs, was to build a sweat lodge in his backyard. It would be a place to gather with others, purify one's consciousness, and to nourish the spiritual journey. To me, the importance and urgency in his building of the sweat lodge reminded me of the sense I've gotten from his talks and writing, that we don't have time to waste. We don't have time to build the sweat when, finally, the rest of the house is in order. It might already be too late. This book shines a focused light on the importance of Indigenous worldviews that offer hope and guidance for current and future generations. The world can't wait to embrace a path for the future that is balanced, sustainable, and loving—a path that is ancient but perhaps just largely forgotten.

References

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