

An Indigenous Perspective on Modern Education

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Abstract

Ilarion Merculieff offers a perspective on Indigenous worldview approaches to teaching and learning from his Unangan (Aleut) relatives and communities. He focuses on remembering that we are spirits inhabiting a body; that children must be treated as autonomous, sacred individuals; and that education must focus not on problems but on challenges that are opportunities for learning. He emphasizes that we are living in a world where we have reversed the laws for living that emphasize mind over heart.

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Yupik Elders in southwest Alaska call our dominant cultures “reverse societies” or the “inside out societies.” They believe we have reversed all the laws for living. For example, we used to honor and respect Mother Earth by taking care of her. We used to honor the wisdom of Elders. There were no old folk homes that kept elders out of sight, out of mind. We used to honor sharing our wealth with everyone. We used to focus on the greater good of the community and not just self-gain. We used to emphasize processes and not goals. Perhaps the most salient reversal is that we used to listen to our hearts. We let our hearts tell our minds what to do. The ills we face in our world stem from such imbalanced ways of being in the world.

I was raised by my Unangan (Aleut) parents and the people of my village on St. Paul Island in the middle of the Bering Sea, in a way that reflects the Yupik perspective. My mother taught me that we are spirit beings coming into human form. As spirit beings, we are formless. When we come into life, we will have the trials and tribulations and learning experiences of human beings. When we die, our spiritual selves or souls continue on.

Many Indigenous peoples see infants as especially sacred because they know that babies just came from the spirit

world. Knowing in their human form, infants will be vulnerable and easily traumatized, they are treated with the highest degree of kindness and care. Adults never scold or spank a child. When children cry, they are attended to immediately. They are surrounded by a loving community. In Western society, and indeed much of the world, we do and say things that intentionally or unintentionally result in trauma for the child. I feel that most children in the world are traumatized at a very early age, and this results in a diminished human being.

When I was a child, I was raised by an entire village of people who understood that they must always be positive, think positive, and do positive things with and around children. Every day, from age 5 until about age 13, whenever I encountered an adult, they would affirm me, and say something positive, like “aang laakaiyaax, exumnakoxt tyin” (hello boy, you are good). This occurred every day with every adult I encountered. Even when I stole money from my “papa” (my grandfather), at age 9, and was discovered, I was not scolded. I had wanted to purchase a plastic airplane in the government-run store that was called a “canteen” at the time. I wanted it so badly that I stole the 20 dollars. This was a lot of money for my people at the time. It took some an entire year to earn that much money.

Nevertheless, I stole the money and bought the airplane. I turned around after I bought the plane, and there was my aunt standing right behind me. I thought, "Oh-oh, I am caught." She didn't say a word to me until I was outside of the building. Then, she said, in a very unaccusatory and non-judgmental way, "Larry, where did you get the money to buy that plane?" I knew I had to tell the truth, so I told her I stole the money from my Papa. She paused, and said: "What do you think you should do about that?" Reluctantly, I said that I should return the plane and get the money back and tell my papa I took the money. She said, "Maaxoon" ("OK"). So, after I returned the plane, she reached into her pocket and paid for the airplane. She rewarded me for my actions. I went to my papa and told him I stole it from him. His response surprised me. He said, "Exumnakoxt laakaiyaax" (Good boy!).

I understood later in life that my aunt and papa were teaching me important lessons. They taught me to focus, not on what you don't want to see in the world, but on what you do want to see. In other words, we can help create our reality, and that will become the reality. I never stole again for the rest of my life. What my aunt and my papa did was to create the space for me to learn rather than scold me. Nor did they use any authority to tell me what to learn or how to learn. They left it to me to develop my autonomous ability to learn from experience and reflection. Thus, in the Unangan way, I grew up watching and listening to learn rather than asking others to tell me. It is in this way that I was given the freedom to expand my ability to think critically without the dictates of any adult. I believe this kind of education is foundational to authentic holistic learning.

From the way I was treated by the adults, I also learned that everyone is on their own sacred path and that we never interfere with another's sacred path. We may offer the child what we know, but whether or not the child picks it up is his or her choice. Ultimately, what they become is not something a parent can control. I also learned by the way the adults talked with me; I never was talked "down" to. They treated me as they would any other adult. The only difference was that they recognized that I lacked experience in life, so the only time they would intervene in what I was doing was when I was putting myself or others in danger that I didn't recognize.

My people understood that as a spirit being in human form, I was as intelligent as anyone else. My people did not label anyone as slow, or stupid, or having any disorder. Everyone

has some form of genius in them. It is when the children are indoctrinated to listen to adults and to external authority that they lose their genius and self-authority. I have talked with children in schools throughout my career, and I can see the light in their eyes until about the sixth grade, when most lose this light. In these classes, I would ask each student to write down all the negative things about themselves, then all the positive things. The results were always lopsided. They would find dozens of negative things about themselves, and very few positive things.

In Unangan Tunuu (the Aleut language), there is no word for "problem" and so we do not recognize any experience in life as being a problem. Rather we saw them as opportunities. This idea was ingrained in me. As I went through life, any difficulties I had I saw as challenges, not problems, so I was able to deal with any situation I encountered as lessons to be learned. When I got to high school, I was sent to a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Chemawa, Oregon, 5 miles north of Salem, 2,000 miles from home. I was 12 years old in the 10th grade at the time. We called it going to school without love because we were "air bussed" from our home, with no contact with our parents for the entire school year, and yet this was not a problem; it was only an opportunity to learn many things. When I graduated from the 12th grade, I was advised by my high school counselor to choose a small college to have a better chance of success. I saw this as a challenge, so I applied to the University of Washington with an enrollment of 34,000 students. It was the largest single campus in the Pacific Northwest. It took me four and a half years, but I graduated.

Shortly after I arrived at the university, I noted that it did not have many Native Americans attending. At age 18, I decided to go to the university president to tell him that this institution was in a state that had 22 Indian reservations, and that there were only 4 people, including myself, that identified themselves as Native Americans at the university. Of course, I was not familiar with the proper procedures to get to the president, so I just walked into his outer office and told the secretary I wanted to see the president. To make a long story short, the president agreed to see me, and I told him what I observed. He made a decision on the spot. He told me, "Ok, you obviously feel strongly about this, so I want you to recruit Native American students to the university. We will pay you and provide you with a vehicle."

At that time, I didn't know how to drive in a city, but I said I would do it. This was not a problem for me, but an

opportunity. At age 18, I became the first recruiter, counselor, and financial aid advisor for what became the Native American program at the University of Washington. Today it has its own department. As the director for a Native American program at a major university, I was asked to be a member of the National American Indian Education Advisory Board, which advised the federal government on Native American educational issues. I was the youngest member. All the other board members were tribal chiefs or held some top position at a university. I saw this as a challenge that I accepted.

During my early 30's, I was offered a job with the State of Alaska to be the director of business development. I had one staff member in the State Department of Commerce and Economic Development. I did not think that we were too small to guide small businesses in the state. This was a challenge, not a problem. After a year in the position, the Commissioner asked me to create a single department focused on economic development for the state. At that time, we had Forestry, Fishery, Mining, Tourism, and Business Development that acted separately from one another. I accepted the challenge, and we organized as the Economic Development arm of the state, and I became its first director. We were successful in becoming a unified department because I utilized traditional talking circle formats where all personnel contributed to how the new department would function. As a result, the governor asked me if I would accept the position of the Commissioner of the Department of Commerce and Economic Development, a state cabinet post. I served as the first Alaska Native commissioner for the last 2 years of the governor's term in office. I had never served in a public office before or headed up an entire department with 2,000 employees, but I did only because it was a challenge, not a problem.

If holistic education is about meeting the social, physical, emotional, academic, and spiritual aspects of a child, then I believe the traditional Indigenous worldview I have been describing is essential. How different schools would be if they modeled the idea that things we encounter in life are challenges and not problems. Such modeling allowed me to be very successful in whatever I chose to do in life. Holistic educators should not tell our children what to learn, how to learn, and define everything. Doing so, in effect, tells the child: "Do not depend on yourself to know what to do; listen to the authority."

In these critical times we are in, I wish for education to focus on the world we wish to see, without focusing on the problems and reacting, but rather viewing it as an opportunity to take on a new challenge. What we are doing instead is to focus on stopping things that we don't wish to see in the world, be it political corruption, wars, refugees, the violation of women, and ultimately the violation of Mother Earth. My Elders say that we are "energy beings" mentally, physically, and spiritually. When we put our energies into what we want to stop, it only adds to the power of what we are trying to stop. Of course, we should act to stop the negatives in the world, but we should not put all our energies into that. For example, we have been trying to stop wars for a long time, but wars continue, and the world is experiencing increasing violence. There are thousands of more environmental groups trying to "save" the planet than there were 30 years ago, and yet today we have brought ourselves to the brink of extinction. We talk about equality but continue rigid hierarchies and discrimination.

We must focus on the world we wish to see with a worldview that recognizes our interconnectedness and that understands our spiritual journey on this wondrous planet. Otherwise, our children are being given a world that is bringing human beings to the precipice of near extinction for the first time in known history. The children are seeking answers, but they are not well equipped to think critically and "outside the box" for the answers. I feel that in order to raise children who are self-empowered and equipped to think critically in addressing the world's ills, we must listen to Indigenous peoples of the world who still remember what the old ways are telling us. In order for us to achieve peace and harmony in the world, we must become the things we wish to see. If we want peace, we must be peace; if we want love in the world, we must become love. We cannot work for peace when we don't have peace in ourselves; we cannot work for harmony on Mother Earth when we don't have harmony within ourselves. Nothing is created outside till it's created inside first. If we really want our children to be successful in life, we must focus on healing ourselves. The Indigenous Elders say that that is the most unselfish thing we can do for the world at this time of daunting challenges.

From the Unangan way, I learned to focus on affirming the positive, recognize and value my own experiences in life and those of others, to recognize and honor the spirit in human form, to think critically, and to have reverence for all in

Creation. As educators who love children, we all can help instill these qualities in them.

Author Bio

Ilarion (Kuuyux) Merculieff is Unangan (Aleut). His people have survived and thrived for over 10,000 years in the Bering Sea and they are still there. Ilarion was given his traditional name of Kuuyux at age 4. Kuuyux means an arm extending out from the body, a carrier of ancient knowledge to modern times, a messenger. He is now living the legacy of his name.