

Cultural Pain and Wellness Issues for Native People

By

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Our country's history of the treatment of American Indian people, including genocide, institutionalized racism, and lateral oppression, has resulted in many challenges we face as indigenous people. These challenges produce cultural pain and must be recognized, felt, grieved, and accepted in order to move toward wellness. Cultural pain causes us to feel insecure, embarrassed, angry, confused, torn, apologetic, uncertain, shame, or inadequate because of conflicting expectations and pressures of being a person of color and an Indian person.

In June of 2011, I was asked to Keynote in the Bay Area in California, this is where my Parent at 25 and 26 years old took us on "relocation"; I was 8 years old along with my 3 sisters and my brother who was 19 months old. At the gathering I met young people between 12 years old and 25 years old, our family knew their Grandparents, parents, and older Uncles and Aunts. These young people came from all different Tribes, but had been born in the city. They were smart, respectful and like sponges for cultural information. They all were all learning Lakota songs, Lakota words, and a "wiping of the Tears" ceremony was held, even though they were Navajo, Pomo, Nez Perce, and other Tribes. Their Native Spirit and Soul wanted their own culture, so they grabbed what was available in their Journey back home. That Journey involves feeling the Cultural Pain.

In July of 2011, I audited a Graduate class offered by The Blackfoot Project at Blackfeet Community College on our Environment and its significance of Sacred sites and how our Ancestors were connected to the land, rocks, trees, water, plants, roots, wind and animals. When people come to our Reservation, some see only the trash, old cars, and other litter. Our people when they camped, always left a place like they found it, sometimes you could not even see where they camped except for tipi rounds of rocks. The families who have no regard for the Environment, their homes, area surrounding their homes, and who throw litter on the ground and from their car window have "cultural pain". So the Journey begins.....

Below are examples of what is said, felt, or observed when an Indian person is experiencing cultural pain:

- ❖ "I am not your paycheck." (A youth from a tribe with a casino.)
- ❖ "I am not enrolled. Does that mean I am not Indian?"
- ❖ Resentment when another Indian person seems to be denying his or her Indianness.
- ❖ Discomfort when an Indian uses "broken English" in the presence of non-Indians.
- ❖ Embarrassment when a non-Indian tries to act Indian or like a "wannabe."
- ❖ Discomfort when a non-Indian is patronizing on racial issues. For example, "Your people and their jewelry-making talent are so wonderful. Did you make what you're wearing?"
- ❖ Anxiety when a non-Indian expect an Indian to explain or defend questionable behavior by other Indian people.

- ❖ Anxiety when we wonder if we have done enough for our Indian community.
- ❖ Internal conflict when we have two different sets of mannerisms, speech, slang, and humor: one set is used when around other Indian people and the other set is used when around non-Indians.
- ❖ Anger and discomfort when an Indian faces overt or covert racism.
- ❖ Discomfort, anger, or shame during discussions of the “drunken Indian” or all the “awful statistics of Indian people.”
- ❖ Feeling awkward about not speaking one’s tribal language and hurt when someone says, “You’re not saying that right,” or “That’s not how you say it.”
- ❖ Feeling inferior if you’re “light complected” or “dark complected.”
- ❖ Feeling embarrassed by the conditions of the rez and what people must think when they see it.
- ❖ Confusion or discomfort when an Indian or someone else says, “Those days are gone. That Indian stuff is just devil worship.”
- ❖ Feeling embarrassed and shame about not knowing one’s own culture. For example, “I don’t have an Indian name, and I’m scared to ask. Who and how do I ask for one?”
- ❖ Engaging in shameful behavior, such as the embezzlement of tribal funds.

The above issues can be healed and talked about in wellness circles, so welcome to the healing.

Native Wellness Institute