

# Bridges: Explorations in Science, Technology & Social Studies



**When Cultures Meet:**

**Native People in Canada**

**Anyone following media coverage of Native people in Canada can be forgiven if he is confused over the presentation of what appears to be two contradictory images.**

- **According to one image, Indians are a poverty stricken group suffering from a variety of social problems including high rates of welfare dependence, inadequate housing, lower life expectancy, frequent suicides and alcoholism.**
- **According to the other image, Native leaders display sophisticated political behavior when they demand special status for Native people including the right to a place in the Canadian Constitution, the right to self-government and redress for past grievance's through land claims entailing large amounts of and millions of dollars in compensation.**

**Further, the media reports that a major revival of Native culture is occurring in Native communities across Canada.**

**Native people even suggest that non-Indians can learn important lessons from Indian philosophy as to how to live properly in North America.**

**How can these two images of Natives be reconciled?  
Which is correct?**

**The fact is that elements of both descriptions are true. Indians in Canada continue to suffer from a disproportionate number of social problems.**

**Incidences of poverty and dependency are all too common in a country which prides itself on its high standard of living and democratic traditions.**

**But this is not the whole story.**

## **The situation is changing**

**The past decade has witnessed substantial improvements in the economic, social and political circumstances of Native people.**

**Natives are seeking a new era in their relationship with the larger society and demanding a new contract with Canada.**

**They are demanding a contract which recognizes Native peoples' place as the first inhabitants of North America.**

**It is important to understand that this situation is neither new nor unusual**

**Both images, the disadvantaged one and the demand for a fair deal from society come about from culture contact, i.e., when people with difference cultures meet in a multicultural society.**

**The same process of cultural nationalism has occurred and continues to occur as the many racial and ethnic groups in Canada vie for what they consider to be their rightful place in Canadian Confederation.**

**Francophones, Ukrainians, East Indians, Jews, Chinese all have struggled to maintain their culture.**

**Each group is faced with the tasks of attaining an adequate standard of living for its members and of participating in the general civic life of the larger society while at the same time protecting and valuing its own heritage, institutions, values and world view.**

**This process inevitably involves some effort to gain access to the economic resources and political power needed to attain economic stability and control over the group's ability to practice its way of life.**

## **GOVERNMENT ATTEMPTS TO ASSIMILATE NATIVES**

**The question arises as to why the Native people are only now moving toward gaining some measure of control over their own affairs.**

**The answer lies in the historical relationship which has existed between the Natives and the government of Canada.**

**In the early nineteenth century, after natives were no longer useful for economic or military purposes, the federal government assumed control of Indian affairs, signed treaties and established a system of reserves designed to "protect and civilize" Native people.**

**The policy was to settle natives on the land and, over time, develop them into "productive citizens."**

**In theory, natives were to learn to exercise self-determination and assume responsibility for their own affairs within the context of Canadian mainstream institutions**

**Missionaries, teachers and Indian agents were sent to the reserves to facilitate the transition from savagery to civilization.**

**The natives, having not been consulted, had little to say about the process, because there were no political structures within which they were to operate effectively.**

**The reserve system, to some degree, replaced the natives' traditional authority structures with the paternalistic authoritarianism of the larger society's agents.**

**Eventually Indians became dependent upon the political and economic structures of the larger society.**

**Viewed with the benefit of hindsight, it can be seen that the policy was bound to fail.**

**Much of the failure can be traced to contradictions inherent in the policy itself.**

**Placing Indians on isolated reserves away from meaningful contact with the larger society did indeed "protect" them from significant encroachments, but, in fact, it also functioned to thwart any substantive "civilizing" effects.**

**For the government to assume that Indian culture could be replaced with a foreign value system simply through the individual efforts of educators, government agents and others was naive.**

**For assimilation to occur, individuals need to acquire extensive first-hand experience with the institutions and processes of the larger society.**

**With Native people isolated on reserves away from contact with white society, civilizing them with an eye to eventually assimilating them did not and could not occur.**

**Indeed, the government policy brought about the opposite outcome.**



**The reserve system has functioned to help Native people maintain a distinct ethnic identity, communal way of life and sense of separateness.**

**Thus Native people remained a people apart from Canadian society, for the most part, in circumstances of dependency, powerlessness and poverty until well into the 1950's.**

**The policy of cultural assimilation culminated with the government's presentation to parliament of its White Paper on Indian Policy in 1969.**

**The White Paper advocated repealing special legislation relating to Indians, dismantling the reserve system and abolishing the Department of Indian Affairs.**

**The announcement of the policy brought such a protest from Native people, who had always rejected the idea of cultural assimilation, that the government was forced to reconsider its policy and in 1973 officially withdrew the White Paper.**

**The government declared that it would no longer impose its will on Native people but rather would wait to hear their wishes regarding appropriate Indian policy.**

**This marked a turning point for Native people. The opposition to the White Paper united natives as never before.**

**It provided a major impetus to their newly developing political consciousness allowing them to articulate their claims for self determination.**

**Since that time native leaders have forcefully presented arguments, calling for recognition of aboriginal rights, honouring: of treaty obligations, settling of land claims, retention of the reserve system and self-government.**

**The government, for its part, has moved, to some degree, toward acceding to the natives' demands. Land claim negotiations are currently taking place in many parts of Canada and, more significantly, aboriginal and treaty rights have been; **guaranteed in the Canadian Constitution.****

**At the First Ministers Conference on Aboriginal Constitutional Matters, held in Ottawa in March 1983, Prime Minister Trudeau articulated this change in government policy when he declared "Clearly- our aboriginal peoples each occupied a special place in history.**

**To my way of thinking, this entitles them to special recognition in the Constitution and to their own place in Canadian society, distinct from each other and distinct from other groups. " This is a far cry from his position on these matters a few years earlier.**

**In 1969 he stated "It's inconceivable that in a given society, one section of the society have a treaty with another section of the society."**

**More recently, a Parliamentary Task Force on Indian Self-Government confirmed Native peoples' right to maintain their culture through a special status in Canada.**

**The Committee recommended that "the federal government establish a new relationship with Indian First Nations and that an essential element of this relationship be recognition of Indian self-government."**

# SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR WHAT? THE NATURE OF CULTURE

As governments and Indians come closer to an agreement that Native people should gain some measure of self-government the fundamental question must be addressed: self government for what?

In other words, if Native people are to protect and maintain their way of life through the creation of political structures in their communities, what will these governments look like? Will they be similar to the municipal governments of towns and villages of the larger society?

Or will Indian government be a different system; a system based upon the heritage, institutions, values and world view of traditional Indian culture? There can be no doubt that it is the latter scenario that is in the minds of Native leaders.

The link between self-government and revival of traditional Indian culture was made by George Manuel, former President of the National Indian Brotherhood, in his address to the General Assembly of the World Council of Indigenous People when he said "From time immemorial we have had our own ideology. It is strongly linked to our indigenous religions.

To strengthen and implement our ideology we must bring our religions back to life.“ What remains of traditional Indian cultures. And how can aspects of it be renewed and blended with modern conditions?

**A new relationship with Canadian society, prosper in their own cultures and way of life? This is the crux of the issue facing Native people today.**

**But culture is a tricky concept for anyone, majority or minority, to talk about. This is especially true of Indian cultures because we have been taught to understand it according to narrow and inaccurate stereotypes.**

**Many people when they think of Native cultures conjure up images of "high" culture of art, totem poles and pow wow dancing, or they think in terms of material culture, such items as canoes, tipis, moccasins and feather headdresses.**

**Indeed, this is how Indian culture is usually taught in our schools. Viewed in this way culture becomes a collection of objects and visible rituals understood apart from their vitality and meaning within the particular cultural context. Because this view of culture emphasizes the past it gives the impression that Indian culture is static and traditional rather than dynamic and contemporary.**

**The artistic and material aspects of Native culture, though important, are only a small part of the reality and need to be understood within the framework of these peoples' world view, belief systems and changing way of life.**

**Perhaps it is the non-material or metaphysical aspects of Indian culture that are the most difficult to comprehend and appreciate.**

**The attitudes and understandings of Native elders who espouse Indian spirituality are very different from our own.**

**We are asked to set aside our cultural ethnocentrism and reinterpret our assumptions and beliefs in order to see the world from their perspective.**

**In its broadest sense, culture is everything, material and non-material, learned and shared by people as they come to terms with their environment.**

**It includes the totality of a group's shared procedures, belief systems, world view, values, attitudes and perceptions of life implicit in the group's material objects.**

# TRADITIONAL INDIAN CULTURES

To begin with then, every culture is faced with the task of coming to terms with the ecological circumstances in which it finds itself.

Topography, climate, flora and fauna, availability of game, etc. will have a major impact in determining the cultures that develop within them.

For this reason it is important to recognize that there existed in Canada a wide range of Indian cultures. Aspects of the Six Nations\* culture in Eastern Canada were as different from the Inuit way of life in the Arctic as Germans are from Egyptians.

Indeed, there are in Canada over fifty Indian nations each possessing institutions, customs and languages with considerable distinctiveness.

**A brief description of aspects of traditional Indian cultures will help to understand the cultural revitalization occurring today in Native communities across Canada.**

**The Six Nations people living in the fertile area around Lake Ontario and St. Lawrence River developed a culture characterized by agriculture (and some hunting), permanent villages, elaborate government structures, clannish a formal religion and rich traditions as expressed in music, dances and festivals.**

**Living in villages and having all names of cultures that Indians themselves use to refer to their societies rather than names imposed upon them by outsiders are used in this paper.**

**For example Six Nations for Iroquois, Inuit for Eskimo, Dene for Indians in the North West Territories, Anishinabek for Ojibway etc. Also, nation is utilized instead of tribe, reserve supply of food on hand made it possible for them to develop more elaborate institutions and social activities than most other Native groups.**

**The League of the Six Nations is an example. It was a confederacy of the six nations of Indians (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, .Seneca and Tuscarora) residing in the area. It consisted of fifty chiefs or sachems proportionally representing each nation. They met several times a year in a Council which presided over the affairs of the Confederacy. Each of the Six Nations had well established laws and recognized various legal rights of individual citizens.**

**Three levels of government existed: the village, individual nations and the Confederacy itself and each possessed its own authority and responsibilities. Indeed, this three tiered system inspired the architect of the American Constitution to design a similar three-level system of government for the United States. The Confederacy was very democratic with chiefs differing in no way from other citizens, but depending on individual qualities to hold office.**

**It was a matrix-linear system in which Clan Mothers had responsibility for appointing and, if necessary, removing chiefs.**



**Like most Native political structures, its decision making was based on consensus rather than majority rule.**

**The Six Nations ceremonies illustrate another universal feature of Indian cultures; the integral relationship that exists between the peoples' way of life and the land.**

**An attitude of respect and thanksgiving toward mother earth is manifested through the many festivals held throughout the year. Festivals marked by prayers of gratitude, great speeches, feasting, songs and dancing and games were held to celebrate the cultivation of the soil, the ripening of wild fruits and berries, the harvest and the passing of the seasons.**

**The Indians of the plains developed a culture based upon ecological conditions very different from the Six Nations people. Although there was some agriculture their life revolved primarily around a nomadic existence necessitated by their reliance on the buffalo for much of their everyday needs.**

**Groups such as the Saulteux, Plains Cree, Sioux and Blackfoot followed the wanderings of the buffalo herds, dispersing into small bands during the winter when the buffalo were scattered, and reuniting in spring to discuss the affairs of the nation and celebrate great ceremonies like the sun dance.**

**As a consequence, their political structures were relatively informal with chiefs, often members of military societies, chosen because of their relevant skill and wisdom.**

**Like other Native groups, the plains Indians placed great emphasis on family life.**

**Children were raised to assume adult roles in an atmosphere of warmth and affection. Values of respect for all living things, the importance of helping others, self-reliance and individual responsibility were stressed.**

**Important events in the life-cycle were marked with ceremonies. Thus, shortly after birth a child received a name, bestowed at a ceremony by a person, often an elder, with supernatural power, who prayed to the grandfathers (spirits) on behalf of the child.**

**The name was considered sacred. It linked the child to a source of spiritual power and provided a clue as to future skills or roles that he would play in the society. The child was held by members present who committed themselves to be concerned with the child's welfare throughout his life.**

**During adolescence, children often received encouragement to continue their spiritual development by seeking an elder to supervise a "vision quest". This entailed going to a secluded place and fasting for four days. It was believed that by depriving the body of food and water, which are the life-giving forces of physical life, the spiritual side would prevail.**

**If the child was fortunate, he would receive a message from the grandfathers which would give direction to his life. At the end of the fast, a feast would be held at which time the elder might interpret the meaning of the experience.**

**Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux elder, suggests that people fasted to have courage to endure an ordeal, to ask a favour from the Creator, to give thanks for a gift, or, most importantly, "to receive understanding of the oneness of all things, to know that all things are relatives and to realize our place in the world."**

**Perhaps the most distinctive Indian cultures in Canada were those that developed among the nations of the north west coast of British Columbia.**

**The Coast Salish, Bella Coola, Nootka, Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, Haida and Tlinkit Indians inhabited an environment in which rivers and the sea provided abundant food supplies allowing for the creation of intricate social organizations.**

**Their cultures were characterized by permanent populous villages, large rectangular houses built of cedar planks, ocean going boats, a system of social ranking, accumulation and distribution of great wealth., highly developed art and elaborate mythology, heir social organization included a complex system of nobility, clans and secret societies.**

**They maintained intricate rules governing the inheritance of crests, songs and rituals, the right to marry into particular groups, the right to carry out certain dramatic performances and the right to titles. The society included a fairly rigid social stratification system composed of nobles, commoners and slaves.**

**Important chiefs were heads of large groups of families, all related or of the same clan. They were required to perform many public duties and responsibilities and accumulate great wealth in order to maintain their status**

**But ultimately their honour and prestige was based less on the accumulation of wealth than upon the generous distribution of gifts in elaborate give-away ceremonials called potlatches.**

**The potlatch functioned to allow the expression of social status as well as serving as a major force for social integration.**

**They were occasions when chiefs could formally announce the inheritance of titles, names, crests, or songs, or mark important events in the life cycle. The invited guests would act as witnesses to the claims, validate them and were rewarded for their good will by being given feasts and gifts.**

**The generous bestowing of copper, canoes, furs, blankets, guns and other items contributed to the total quantity of goods available for distribution within the society.**

**Everyone in the host's group participated in the preparations for the ceremony and thus had an opportunity to share in the prestige which accrued from the ostentatious display.**

**The potlatch was, therefore, a group affair that offered affirmation of each of its members. The onus was then on the chiefs and families who were guests to gain prestige by returning the favour and holding a potlatch of their own.**

**The preceding discussion of selected aspects of traditional Indian cultures illustrates how various ecological conditions resulted in the creation of widely divergent ways of life. But, despite the variations, one discerns that a common thread runs through each of the cultures. That thread is a common spiritual world view.**

**It is an attitude toward the world and man's place within it.**

**Traditional Native society was based on the knowledge that all things in life are related in a sacred manner and are governed by natural or cosmic laws.**

**The land (mother earth) is, therefore held to be sacred, a gift from the Creator. In his relationship to the land man accommodates himself to it in an attitude of respect and stewardship.**

**To do otherwise would be to violate a fundamental law of the universe. Proper conduct was determined by natural laws which obliterated the distinction between "sacred" and "secular" or the "laws of nature" and the "rules of society".**

**For each had as their source the activities which resulted as humans and nature reacted upon each other. And it is through the understanding of this reciprocal relationship between man and nature that man is provided with the sustenance, both physically and spiritually, that he requires to live.**

**Thus, human law was a reflection of natural law and all of the structures, customs and ways of life described above grew out of this central understanding.**

**And it is upon this worldview, as George Manuel pointed out, that any Indian cultural revitalization must be based.**

# **COPING AND ADAPTING: INDIAN CULTURAL REVITALIZATION**

**But today's Indian cultures are not aboriginal cultures.**

**The buffalo, and many earlier sources of economic existence are gone (although traditional economic pursuits such as hunting, fishing and trapping are still viable ways of earning a living in many northern Native communities.**

**Much has been lost because of the assimilation pressures of government policy and the innovations of modern technology.**

**Some Native languages teeter on the verge of extinction. Many Indian have adopted Christianity and no longer practice their sacred ways, and institutions of the larger society have, in many instances, replaced aboriginal institutions.**

**In dress, housing, employment and other external aspects of culture, Native people are almost indistinguishable from other Canadians.**

**But to conclude, as the authors of the cultural assimilation policy did, that Indians would eventually disappear as a distinctive cultural group, would be a serious mistake.**

## **Indians have not assimilated.**

**Their identity as a separate people with a vision of reality and destiny and of themselves and their world remains a central feature of their lives. Indeed, all of the cultural traits of the Six Nations, plains people and north west coast Indians discussed earlier, are to some degree, still in evidence today in Native communities.**

**Indians are engaged in a significant revitalization of their cultures. The continuance of Indian cultures was made possible by a number of factors. Government policy of placing Native people on isolated reserves contributed to the maintenance of a distinct identity by reinforcing the boundaries between Indians and the larger society. This allowed some degree of protection for their communal way of life.**

**Studies have also pointed to a correlation between basic personality structure and cultural persistence. Despite pressures to assimilate Indians in a psychological sense, are still Indians, whatever clothes they wear, whatever their occupation and whether they speak English or not. This is not to suggest that continuity precludes change, but only that change occurs without obliterating the core personality structure.**

**Some of the ways that Native people have tried to come to terms with the situation where their culture has not been appreciated by the larger society have resulted in the negative features of their society so often described in the media.**

**But people not only respond to their circumstances, they also create them. Thus Indians have developed a number of adaptive strategies which allow them to cope with their changing environment by attempting to select out of available choices those alternative; that do not require substantial changes in their identity and in fact, can contribute to the continuance or revival of their traditional culture.**

**In some cases the strategy has been to continue their way of life in secret**

**For example, a study of a Plains Cree community revealed that the Indians were unwilling to reveal to non-Indians cultural differences that would call attention to their Indianists**

**They speak Cree on the reserve, practice traditional crafts, hold naming ceremonies and observe other religious rituals without the knowledge of whites living in a nearby town.**

**In addition, conduct that many whites regard as reprehensible may in fact be seen as representing some traditional cultural behavior pattern.**

**Plains Indians do not share the non Indian idea that work is an end in itself or that success can be measured by the accumulation of material goods for personal gain. These dynamics result in the two societies operating side by side without meaningful knowledge of each others' way of life or appreciation of each others' moral worth.**

**Whites criticize Indians for being shiftless and irresponsible and losing contact with their traditions while Indians believe non-Indians to be greedy and claim the moral superiority of reserve customs that are based on traditional values and a spiritual world view.**



**Another strategy involves simply continuing to practice traditional ways.**

**The League of the Six Nations continues to exist as a parallel government to the elected band council on many Six Nation reserves. Chiefs are selected by Clan Mothers, the Council discusses the affairs of the Confederacy and the festivals are celebrated just as they have been for centuries.**

**A substantial portion of the population of the reserves still recognize the League's political authority. In other instances Native leaders leave the reserve in order to practice their traditional culture more freely. Chief Joseph Small-boy and his followers have been living a traditional life style in an isolated part of Alberta for more than a decade.**

**Similar traditional Indian communities exist in almost every province in Canada. Most Indians, however, live in a world which overlaps significantly with the larger society. They, like any minority group, are faced with the task of participating in that world while at the same time protecting the inner world of their community.**

**This involves change, but in most cases change which does not lead to social disintegration but to adaptation to new conditions. In effect, the changes develop congruity with the institutions of the larger society.**

**For example, a study carried out by Mary Lee Stearns, an anthropologist at Simon Fraser University, demonstrates that the Haida Indians of British Columbia have reinterpreted aspects of their social organization in a way which preserves much of its distinctive cultural content.**

**Subsistence activities, exchange of property, ceremonies, observance of life-cycle events and honouring kinsmen remain congruous with the traditional culture.**

**They are able to do this by:**

- a) continuing to perform traditional behaviours (fishing continues to be an important economic activity which preserves many traditional relationships).**
- b) reallocating duties to substitutes if individuals originally charged with the obligation are no longer available the witnessing of potlatches is now performed by elders, who represent the whole community.**
- c) reinterpreting events to make sense in terms of Haidas' own system of ideas and beliefs.**
- d) revitalizing traditional Haida art {silversmithing and carving}.**
- e) reviving traditional positions (hereditary town chief)**
- f) taking political control of their community.**

**For the Haida, as for Indians across Canada, these actions serve to recreate and validate an Indian way of life in today's society.**

**Another aspect of traditional Indian culture is described by Wolfgang Jilek, a Canadian psychiatrist, who suggests that a "collective Indian renaissance" is occurring among the Coast Salish of British Columbia.**

**He demonstrates that the revival of spiritual healing ceremonies have functioned to permit Native people suffering from various psychological disorders to reidentify with their culture and develop healthier personal existences.**

**He suggests that these cures are often more effective than Western therapeutic methods. The preceding description of how Indians are adapting to today's society are only a few examples of a phenomena which is occurring in Native communities all across Canada.**

**We are witnessing nothing short of a major revitalization of Indian culture. This does not mean turning the clock back to aboriginal times, but rather selecting aspects of the old ways and blending them with the new.**

**Edward Bellerose, Michael Thrasher and Mark Amy who formed Four Skies Training and Development Services, a company which sponsors cultural awareness workshops throughout the country portray the blending of the old and the new.**



**"Today Indian people are becoming part of a modern, professional and technological world.**

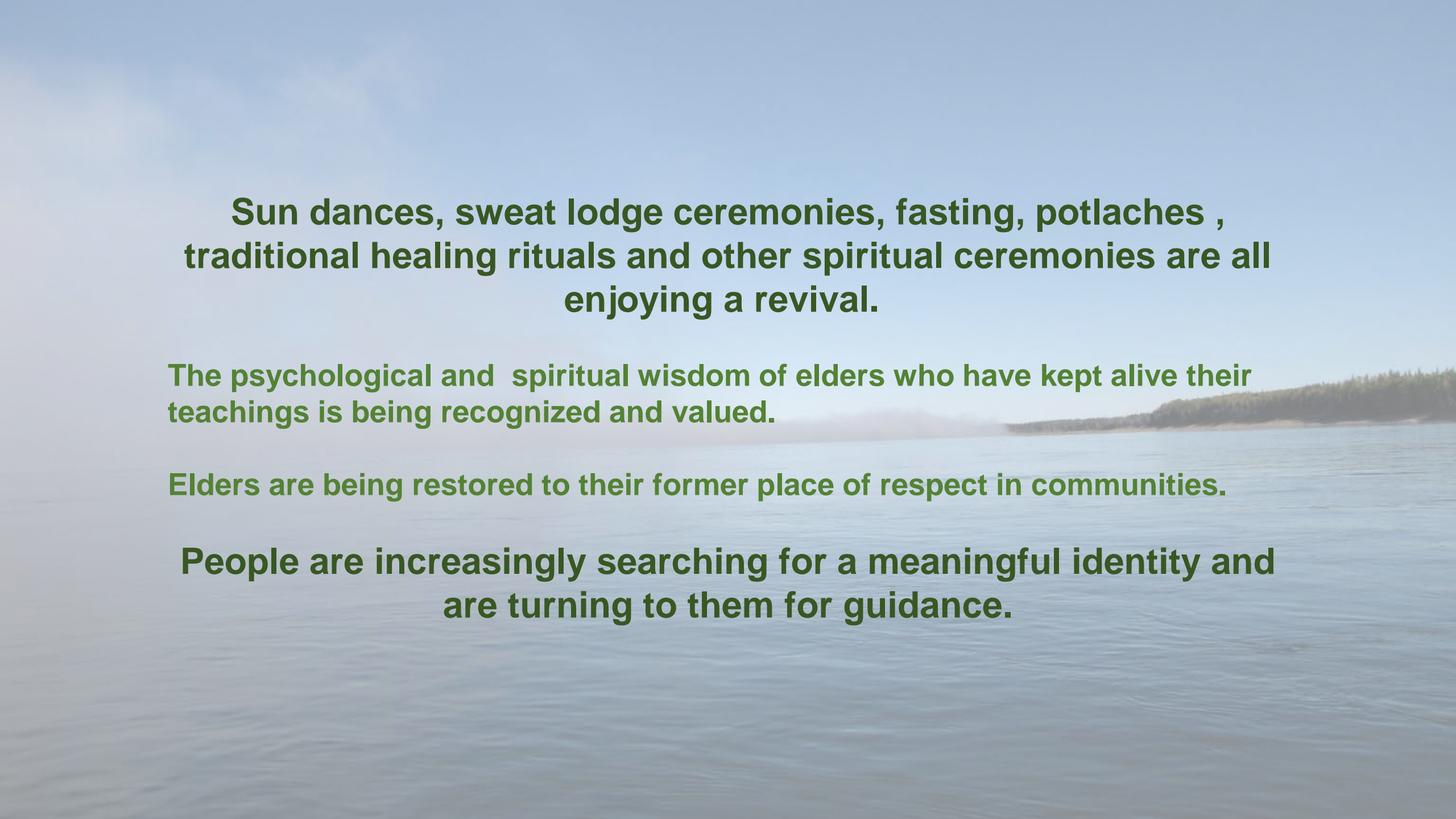
**New Native lifestyles are emerging that call for new skills, new jobs, new awareness and new roles.**

**A new wind is blowing- across Indian country. But the new wind has a brother an old wind, a wind rich in heritage, knowledge and tradition.**

**This wind contains the principles of the unique Native character. It also contains the wisdom of the elders.**

**This wind continues to provide balance, meaning and guidance for successful healthy living.**

**These winds blow together, We must learn from them both."**



**Sun dances, sweat lodge ceremonies, fasting, potlaches ,  
traditional healing rituals and other spiritual ceremonies are all  
enjoying a revival.**

**The psychological and spiritual wisdom of elders who have kept alive their  
teachings is being recognized and valued.**

**Elders are being restored to their former place of respect in communities.**

**People are increasingly searching for a meaningful identity and  
are turning to them for guidance.**

**Another component of the revitalization is the Indian controlled institutions that are being refashioned.**

**Of particular importance are educational institutions such as cultural survival schools and, to a lesser extent, Native Studies programs. Cultural survival schools function as alternatives to the public school system. They are based on a Native philosophy of teaching and learning to provide students with an affirmation of their traditional and spiritual roots.**

**In addition to conventional academic subjects, Native students are taught traditional Indian culture and language as a major part of the curriculum. The schools are designed to socialize Native children into a redefined Indian history, culture and reserve reality.**

**Elders and traditional people, as well as parents, are extensively involved in the school operations, The founders of the Akwesasne Freedom School, located on a Mohawk reserve near Cornwall Ontario, eloquently describe both the purpose of the school and the goals of the larger revitalization movement.**

**"The Akwesasne Freedom School represents the future of the Mohawk Nation. It is dedicated to the sovereignty, self-sufficiency and survival of the Mohawk culture a distinct and beautiful Way of Life.**



**We use the word "Freedom" respectfully because that is precisely what our traditions teaches us to be a free people, conscious of our rights and obligations to ourselves, to other nations, to Our Mother the Earth.**

**The School has a preamble "One World For All People". This is our guiding concept. That our children should be prepared to meet the contemporary challenges with the strength available in the principles of our traditional culture."**

**What is emerging then in Native communities are people with bi-cultural identities; individuals who have an identity firmly anchored in the cultural world of their people while at the same time possessing the skills and knowledge required to succeed in the larger society.**

**This bicultural identity enables them to pursue the goals of both cultures.**

**This article has attempted to demonstrate that Native people want a full-  
fillment comparable to what other minority groups in Canada have been  
asking for, namely the right to practice their own way of life within the  
context of the larger society.**

**Indians desire to create a new Indian culture in their communities. Past government  
policy has denied them that request.**

**But Native people have become more articulate and forceful in demanding their right to  
self-determination.**

**The government, in turn, has become more responsive to Indian demands. Perhaps a  
new era of co-operation in Indian-government relations is emerging.**

**Canada should now seize the opportunity and develop creative  
mechanisms and institutional arrangements to facilitate the cultural  
revitalization occurring in Native communities, thereby allowing Indians  
to occupy their rightful place in Confederation.**



## **SUGGESTED READING:**

**Peggy Beck and Anna Walters, *The Sacred Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*, Navajo Community College, Tsaile, Arizona, 1977.**

**Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, Maryland, 1971.**

**Ian Getty and Antoine Lussier, *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows: A Reader in Canadian Native Studies*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, 1983.**

**Government of Canada, *Indian Self-Government in Canada: Report of the Special Committee*, Ottawa, 1983.**

**Wolfgang Jilek, *Indian Healing: Shamanic Ceremonialism in the Pacific Northwest Today*, Hancock House Publishers Ltd., Surrey, B.C., 1982.**

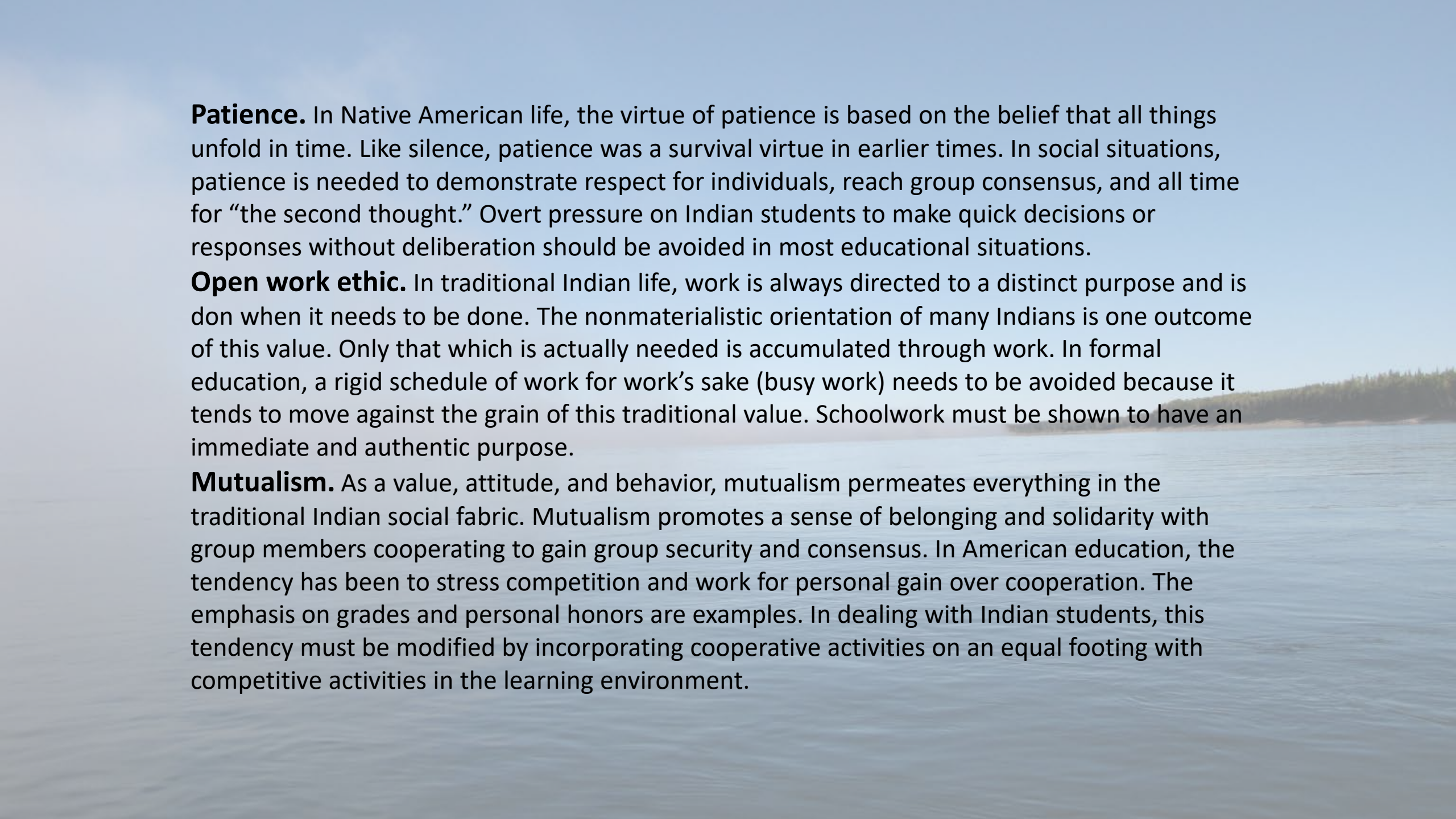
**Mary Lee Stearns, *Haida Culture in Custody: The Masset Band*, Douglas and McIntyre, Vancouver, 1981.**

## Traditional Native American Values and Behaviors

The following paragraphs draw contrast between selected and widely shared Native American core cultural values and non-Native American values and associated behaviors and attitudes. These brief descriptions are somewhat idealized. They cannot reflect the wide variations within Native American communities that result from different levels of cultural assimilation among individuals nor the differences among various Native American cultures across the North American continent; yet, these values are common enough that readers may have encountered them already.

**Personal differences:** Native Americans traditionally have respected the unique individual differences among people. Common Native American expressions of this value include staying out of others' affairs and verbalizing personal thoughts or opinions only when asked. Returning this courtesy is expected by many Native Americans as an expression of mutual respect.

**Quietness:** Quietness or silence is a value that serves many purposes in Indian life. Historically the cultivation of this value contributed to survival. In social situations, when they are angry or uncomfortable, many Indians remain silent. Non-Indians sometimes view this trait as indifference, when in reality, it is a very deeply embedded form of Indian interpersonal etiquette.



**Patience.** In Native American life, the virtue of patience is based on the belief that all things unfold in time. Like silence, patience was a survival virtue in earlier times. In social situations, patience is needed to demonstrate respect for individuals, reach group consensus, and all time for “the second thought.” Overt pressure on Indian students to make quick decisions or responses without deliberation should be avoided in most educational situations.

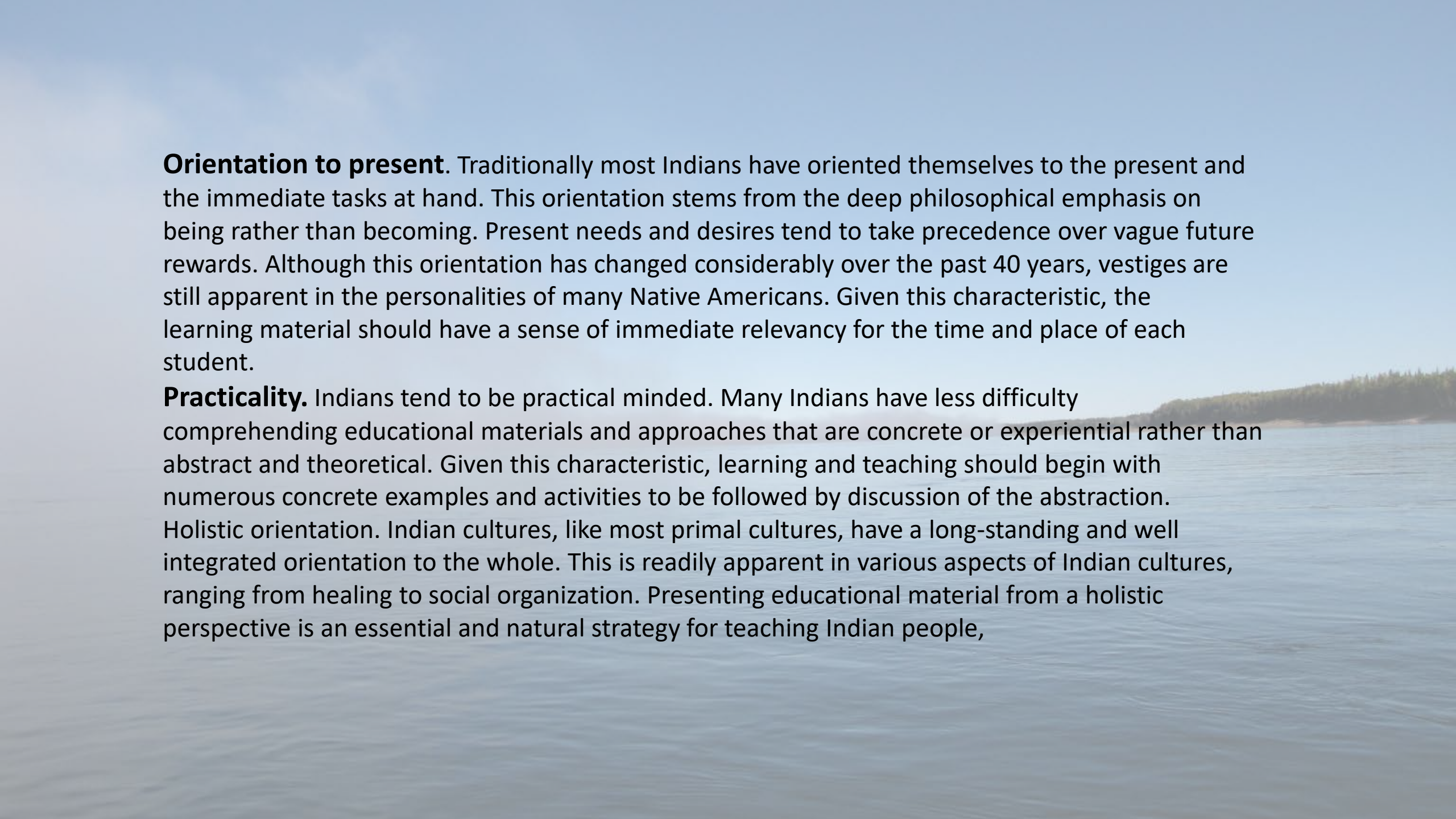
**Open work ethic.** In traditional Indian life, work is always directed to a distinct purpose and is done when it needs to be done. The nonmaterialistic orientation of many Indians is one outcome of this value. Only that which is actually needed is accumulated through work. In formal education, a rigid schedule of work for work’s sake (busy work) needs to be avoided because it tends to move against the grain of this traditional value. Schoolwork must be shown to have an immediate and authentic purpose.

**Mutualism.** As a value, attitude, and behavior, mutualism permeates everything in the traditional Indian social fabric. Mutualism promotes a sense of belonging and solidarity with group members cooperating to gain group security and consensus. In American education, the tendency has been to stress competition and work for personal gain over cooperation. The emphasis on grades and personal honors are examples. In dealing with Indian students, this tendency must be modified by incorporating cooperative activities on an equal footing with competitive activities in the learning environment.

**Nonverbal orientation.** Traditionally most Indians have tended to prefer listening rather than speaking. Talking for talking's sake is rarely practiced. Talk, just as work, must have a purpose. Small talk and light conversation are not especially valued except among very close acquaintances. In Indian thought, words have a primordial power so that when there is a reason for their expression, it is generally done carefully. In social interaction, the emphasis is on affective rather than verbal communication. When planning and presenting lessons, it is best to avoid pressing a class discussion or asking a long series of rapid-fire questions. This general characteristic explains why many Indian students feel more comfortable with lectures or demonstrations. Teachers can effectively use the inquiry approach, role playing, or simulation to demonstrate they have a full understanding of this characteristic.

Seeing and listening. In earlier times, hearing, observing, and memorizing were important skills since practically all aspects of Native American culture were transferred orally or through example. Storytelling, oratory, and experiential and observational learning were all highly developed in Native American cultures. In an education setting, the use of lectures and demonstrations, modified case studies, storytelling, and experiential activities can all be highly effective. A balance among teaching methods that emphasize listening and observation, as well as speaking, is an important consideration.

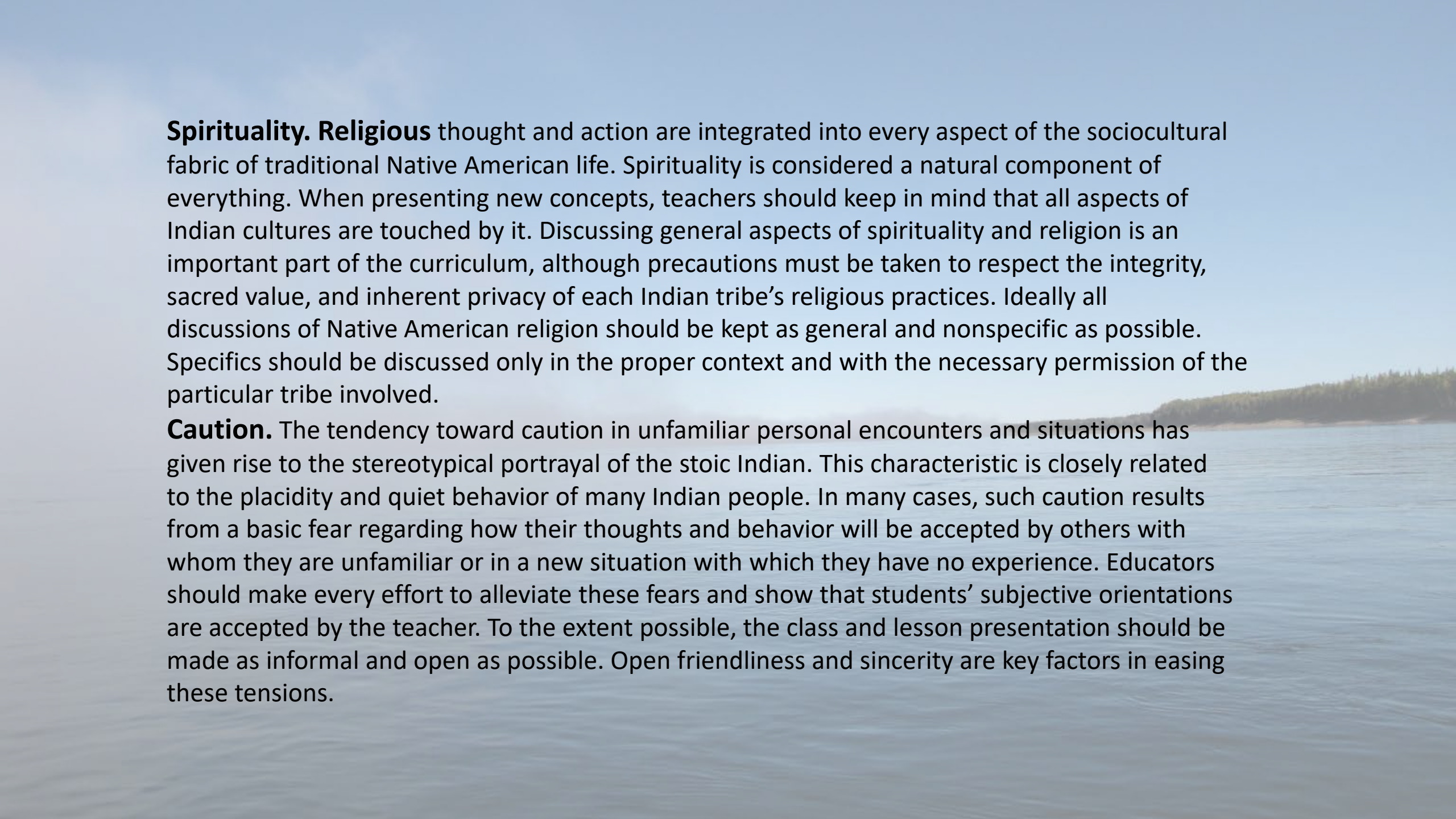
Time orientation. In the Indian world, things happen when they are ready to happen. Time is relatively flexible and generally not structured into compartments as it is in modern society. Because structuring time and measuring it into precise units are hallmarks of public schools in the United States, disharmony can arise between the tradition-oriented Indian learner and the material being presented. The solution is to allow for scheduling flexibility within practical limits.



**Orientation to present.** Traditionally most Indians have oriented themselves to the present and the immediate tasks at hand. This orientation stems from the deep philosophical emphasis on being rather than becoming. Present needs and desires tend to take precedence over vague future rewards. Although this orientation has changed considerably over the past 40 years, vestiges are still apparent in the personalities of many Native Americans. Given this characteristic, the learning material should have a sense of immediate relevancy for the time and place of each student.

**Practicality.** Indians tend to be practical minded. Many Indians have less difficulty comprehending educational materials and approaches that are concrete or experiential rather than abstract and theoretical. Given this characteristic, learning and teaching should begin with numerous concrete examples and activities to be followed by discussion of the abstraction.

**Holistic orientation.** Indian cultures, like most primal cultures, have a long-standing and well integrated orientation to the whole. This is readily apparent in various aspects of Indian cultures, ranging from healing to social organization. Presenting educational material from a holistic perspective is an essential and natural strategy for teaching Indian people,



**Spirituality. Religious** thought and action are integrated into every aspect of the sociocultural fabric of traditional Native American life. Spirituality is considered a natural component of everything. When presenting new concepts, teachers should keep in mind that all aspects of Indian cultures are touched by it. Discussing general aspects of spirituality and religion is an important part of the curriculum, although precautions must be taken to respect the integrity, sacred value, and inherent privacy of each Indian tribe's religious practices. Ideally all discussions of Native American religion should be kept as general and nonspecific as possible. Specifics should be discussed only in the proper context and with the necessary permission of the particular tribe involved.

**Caution.** The tendency toward caution in unfamiliar personal encounters and situations has given rise to the stereotypical portrayal of the stoic Indian. This characteristic is closely related to the placidity and quiet behavior of many Indian people. In many cases, such caution results from a basic fear regarding how their thoughts and behavior will be accepted by others with whom they are unfamiliar or in a new situation with which they have no experience. Educators should make every effort to alleviate these fears and show that students' subjective orientations are accepted by the teacher. To the extent possible, the class and lesson presentation should be made as informal and open as possible. Open friendliness and sincerity are key factors in easing these tensions.



**THE END**