

as they may not meet the needs of our current situation. Our traditional structures were not born in the midst of an anti-colonial struggle, nor were they born in a period of unprecedented global strife caused from destructive human actions. We are in a unique and difficult age in which we must summon our collective strength, spirit, and intellect to forge a new political pathway into our liberated future. Our youth will be the ones to lead this struggle and we need to prepare them the best that we can. If our Peoples are to survive, we must teach our young people to live the mantra “For the People! For the Land!”

### L. Final Comments

The most compelling aspect of working toward the goal of training New Warriors is that much of the decolonizing work may be undertaken on our own, without permission, sanctioning, or oversight from colonizing society. While this chapter was intended to explore how to raise a new generation of young people dedicated to our Peoples and lands, we can make a personal commitment to implement decolonizing practices in our daily lives, whether or not we are ever part of a young warriors’ camp. Those of us with children can begin these practices now. We do not need to wait to take action. We can begin this moment. But, as communities, given the challenges and crises that our younger generations will face in the coming decades, we need to collectively strategize about how we can support our young people in carrying our nations into the future. We can help them return to our core teachings and resume a close relationship with our homelands. They will need tools and support to strengthen their hearts, bodies, and minds. There is already a growing sense among young people that change is coming. *Zuya Wicasta Naka Nazinpi!* New Warriors Are Rising! Let us help them.

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## Chapter 8

# DECOLONIZING INDIGENOUS EDUCATION IN A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY WORLD

Gregory A. Cajete

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- A. Thoughts on American Indian Education
  - B. Reclaiming Our Heritage of Education
  - C. “Coming Back to Our Power”
  - D. American Education from an Indigenous Perspective
  - E. Indigenous Education as a Sustaining Life Process
  - F. Education for Life’s Sake
  - G. Stages in a Traditional Education
  - H. Ten Essential Characteristics of Indigenous Education
  - I. Creating a New Circle of Indigenous Education
  - J. Education as Social and Political Struggle
  - K. Resources
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### A. Thoughts on American Indian Education

The purpose of contemporary American Indian education is to ensure that Indigenous people learn the skills necessary to be productive—or at least survive—in post-industrial American society. The educational system teaches Indigenous people to be consumers in the tradition of the “American dream” and all that it entails. We have been encouraged to use modern education to “progress” by being participants in the “system.” We have been conditioned to seek the rewards and benefits that success in the world of modern education purportedly provides. We are enticed from every direction to pursue careers in law, medicine, business, and the sciences, which form the pillars of Western thought and conditioning. Although many Indigenous people have succeeded in Western society by embracing this educational system, many have not been very successful or have dropped out entirely. In reality, many students—particularly minorities—have educational experiences that differ dramatically from the ideal. Their experience is wrought with contradictions, prejudice, hypocrisy, narcissism, and unethical predispositions at all levels including the schools. As a result, there have been educational conflicts,

frustration, and varying levels of alienation experienced by many Indigenous people following their encounters with mainstream education.

This is the reality of modern education for Indigenous people. As we examine the purpose of modern education, Indigenous people must analyze the effects it has had on our collective cultural, psychological, and ecological viability.

As Nicholas Peroff has explained, Indigenous people have been forced to adapt to an educational process that is essentially not of their own making. Historically, the views guiding the evolution of modern American Indian education have been based on assumptions that are anything but representative of Indigenous cultural mind-sets. In spite of this, traditional educational processes have continued to take place within the context of many Indian families and communities, and while there has been progress in the last thirty years, the integration of modern and traditional approaches to education has been practically non-existent.

Much of contemporary American Indian education is based on teaching academic skills and content, in order to prepare students to compete in the American mainstream workforce that represents the vested political, social, and economic interests of society. Furthermore, it is an educational system devoid of ethical or moral considerations regarding the means that are used to achieve its ends.

### **B. Reclaiming Our Heritage of Education**

The alienation of Indigenous students from education makes it less likely that they will be able to serve their communities to their fullest potential as adults. But this situation need not continue if Indigenous

people revitalize and reclaim our own deep heritage of education. Indigenous approaches to education can work if we are open to their creative message and find creative ways to revitalize and reintroduce our inherently universal processes of teaching and learning. These principles are relevant whether one is learning leadership skills through community service, learning about one's cultural roots through creating a photographic exhibit, or learning from Nature by exploring its concentric rings of ecological relationships.

Every community is unique in its experiences and needs, and ultimately it is up to each community of Indigenous people—whether they live in an urban setting or on a reservation—to decide how education can help sustain or revitalize their culture. Each community must find ways to integrate the learning that occurs through modern education with the Indigenous knowledge and values that are essential for perpetuating a community and its way of life; a balanced integration must be created. Over time, the emphasis on only modern educational methods and Western-oriented curricula, by their nature, will erode an Indigenous way of life. Indigenous educators and tribal leaders must understand that when people embrace modern education they are conditioned away from their cultural roots, not toward them. While modern education provides tools that are essential to the survival of Indigenous people and communities, education must also reflect and support Indigenous culture. Indian educators and tribal leaders need to advocate for culturally based education as a foundation of self-determination, self-governance, and tribal sovereignty. Indigenous education offers a highly creative vehicle for thinking about the evolving expressions of Indigenous cultures as they develop in the twenty-first century.

#### **The key questions we must collectively ask ourselves are:**

- What has been lost and what has been gained by participating in a system of education that does not stem from, or really honor, our unique Indigenous perspectives?
- How far can we go in adapting to such a system before that system literally educates us out of cultural existence?
- Have we reached the limits of what we can do with mainstream education?
- How can we re-envision and re-establish the “ecology of Indigenous education”—the web of reciprocal relationships, understandings, and responsibilities that guided and sustained our tribal societies?

### **ACTIVITY:**

**Based on your experience, in what ways does the current educational system honor Indigenous perspectives?**

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**In what ways does it not honor Indigenous perspectives?**

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### **C. “Coming Back to Our Power”**

The goal of revitalizing Indigenous education is really about “*coming back to our power*.” In contemporary terms this is often referred to as “empowerment,” but “coming back to our power” is a phrase that I believe better describes the multi-faceted process of transforming Indigenous education that is taking place in the Indigenous world.

A primary goal of Indigenous education must be empowerment, which for Indigenous people and communities must begin with an inward transformation, a kind of “in-powerment” that emphasizes the internal work that each of us must do to “come back to our power.” This type of empowerment leads to greater

personal, interpersonal, communal, and political power and enables Indigenous people and communities to transform oppressive situations into actions of healing and revitalization.

The colonial history of America is rife with detrimental and devastating effects on every facet of Indigenous Peoples' lives, including physical, political, economic, and social domination; oppression, exploitation, and control; physical and cultural genocide; and cultural assimilation through the various social institutions of religion, education, government, law, and economics. We need to analyze these historical and present-day injustices, acknowledging that this history is rooted in the internalized belief that American

Long-term effects of colonization on Indigenous people include a host of collective and individual ills. Some of the most pronounced are:

- Loss of traditional homelands
- Loss of personal and communal self-sufficiency and traditional sustaining practices
- Disintegration of traditional communities, economies, and languages
- Significant reduction in Indigenous populations
- Consistent disruption of personal freedom and family life
- Loss of personal self-respect, honor, identity, and economic independence

All of these conditions have been described under terms such as “historical trauma,” “internalized colonization,” and “ethno-stress.”

Based on abundant scholarly research on the myriad effects of colonialism throughout its history, some Indigenous scholars and educators are calling for a contemporary expression of Indigenous education to revitalize Indigenous ways of knowing, to facilitate a “coming back to your collective Indigenous power.”

colonialism—and the Eurocentric culture and racism it is based on—is superior to Indigenous culture.

In order to begin the process of “coming back to our power” through education, we must especially understand the ways in which colonialism continues to function in hidden forms in educational, institutional, economic, and political structures, and in the psychology of both Native Peoples and non-Native alike. The nature of prejudice and discrimination, and the inherent dehumanization of colonialism, must be understood in historic and present contexts. We must

also confront the modern denial of colonialism with its accompanying tendency to blame the victims for their own victimization. Likewise, we must challenge the instances when victims blame themselves and, as a result, act out various forms of self-abuse. The internalized shame and negative self-image that some Indigenous people feel must be understood in their various expressions. Finally, the effects of internalized colonization—manifested most profoundly as hopelessness and powerlessness—must be understood and remedied.

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### ACTIVITY:

**Do you think you have been harmed by being educated in a Western form of education?**

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**What insights have you gained by your experiences with Western education?**

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### D. American Education from an Indigenous Perspective

Throughout history, human societies have attempted to guide, facilitate, and even coerce the human instinct propensity for learning in order to achieve socially defined ends. A variety of educational methods and approaches have evolved to achieve these goals, ensuring the society’s survival and expressing its unique *cultural mythos*—a culture’s story of itself and its perceived relationship to the world, which forms the foundation for each culture’s “guiding vision.” This vision sets forth the culture’s ideals that create the learning processes contained within the educational system. In turn, these ideals reflect what that culture values as the most important qualities, behaviors, and morals to instill in

**Learning is always a creative act. Through the unique processes of learning, we are continuously engaged in the art of creating our world and creating meaning from our world. For humans, learning is instinctual, continuous, and at the same time the most complex of our natural traits. Learning is also key to our ability to survive in the environments that we create and that create us.**

its members, and which are central to the culture’s survival.

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### ACTIVITY:

**What ideals are central to the survival of your nation?**

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These ideals may be considered your guiding vision or *cultural myths*.

The problems faced in Indian education reflect the critical dilemma of American education. While the legacy of American education is one of spectacular scientific and technological achievement resulting in abundant material prosperity, the cost has been inexorably high. American prosperity has come at the expense of the environment and has resulted in unprecedented exploitation of human and material resources worldwide. As America faces significant challenges while the global community struggles with profound social, economic, and cultural change, the education system must find new ways to help Americans learn and adapt in a multi-cultural, twenty-first century world. It must come to terms with the conditioning inherent in its educational system that contributes to the loss of a shared integrative metaphor of *Life*. The loss of such a metaphor, which may ultimately lead to a social, cultural, and ecological catastrophe, should be of primary concern to every American.

What underlies the crisis of American education is the crisis of modern man's identity and his collective cosmological disconnection from the natural world. Those who identify most with the "bottom line" more often than not suffer from a life of image without substance, technique without soul, and knowledge without context. The cumulative psychological results of this condition are usually unabridged alienation, loss of community, and a deep sense of incompleteness.

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### ACTIVITY:

**What do you remember learning about your tribal history or tribal ways outside of school, and how you interacted with family, friends, and your community?**

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### E. Indigenous Education as a Sustaining Life Process

In contrast to Western education, traditional Indigenous education historically occurred in a holistic social context that developed a sense that each individual was an important contributing member of the group. Essentially, tribal education worked at sustaining a life process that unfolded through reciprocal relationships between one's social group and the natural world. This relationship involved all dimensions of one's being, while providing both personal development and technical skills through *participation* in every area of community life. It was essentially an environmental education.

Understanding the depth of relationships and the significance of participating in all aspects of life are the keys to traditional Indigenous education. *Mitakuye Oyasin* (we are all related) is a Lakota phrase that captures one of the essences of tribal education because it reflects the understanding that our lives are truly and profoundly connected to other people and the physical world. Likewise, in tribal education, knowledge is gained from firsthand experience in the world and then transmitted or explored through ritual, ceremony, art, and appropriate technology. Knowledge gained through these vehicles is then used in the context of everyday living. Education, in this context, becomes education for "life's sake." Education is, at its very essence, learning about life through participation and relationship to community, including not only people, but plants, animals, and the whole of Nature.

**How did this learning make you feel? Both good and bad experiences should be listed. Ask friends and relatives about what they remember and how they felt.**

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### F. Education for Life's Sake

The Indigenous ideal of education directly contrasts with the orientation of American education that continues to emphasize "objective" content and experience that is detached from real life and community. This conditioning for being a marginal participant and perpetual observer involved with only objective content is the basis of the crisis of American education and the alienation of modern man from his own being and the natural world.

In response to such a monumental crisis, American education must forge approaches that are truly for "life's sake" and that honor the Native roots of America. A transition from today's American educational orientation to a more sustainable and connected one requires a close look at other cultural, life-enhancing, and environmentally oriented types of education. Traditional Indigenous forms of education are wellsprings for such "new" ways of thinking about education, providing a model of education "for life's sake" in the twenty-first century

### G. Stages in a Traditional Education

The goals of wholeness, self-knowledge, and wisdom are held in common by all traditional educational philosophies around the world. Indeed, even through medieval times all forms of European education were tied to some sort of spiritual training. Education was considered important in inducing or otherwise facilitating harmony between a person and the world. The goal was to produce a person with a well-integrated relationship between thought and

action. This idealized outcome was expected to follow naturally from the "right education," which consists of the following guiding principles:

1. The process begins with a deep and abiding respect for the spirit of each child from before the moment of birth. The first stage of Indigenous education therefore revolves around learning within the family, learning the first aspects of culture, and learning how to adapt and integrate one's unique personality in a family context. The first stage ends when one is oriented to place.
2. Education in the second stage revolves around social learning, being introduced to tribal society, and learning how to live in the natural environment. The second stage ends when one has acquired a sense of tribal history and understands how to apply tribal knowledge to daily life.
3. The third stage revolves around melding individual needs with group needs through the processes of initiation, the learning of guiding myths, and participation in ritual and ceremony. This stage ends with the development of a profound and deep connection to tradition.
4. The fourth stage is a midpoint in which the individual achieves a high level of integration with the culture and attains a certain degree of peace of mind. It brings the individual a certain level of empowerment, personal vitality, and maturity, but it is only the middle place of life.
5. The fifth stage is a period of searching for a life vision, a time of pronounced individual learning

and the development of "mythical" thinking. This stage concludes with the development of a deep understanding of relationship and diversity.

6. The sixth stage ushers in a period of major transformation characterized by deep learning about the unconscious. It is also a time of great travail, disintegration, wounding, and pain, paving the way for an equally great reintegration and healing process to begin in the final stage. The pain, wounds, and conflict act as a bridge to the seventh stage.
7. In the seventh stage deep healing occurs in which the self "mutualizes" with body, mind, and spirit. In this stage deep understanding, enlightenment, and wisdom are gained. This stage ends with the attainment of a high level of spiritual understanding that acts as a bridge to finding one's true Center and the transformation to "being a complete man or woman in that place that Indian people talk about."

These stages of inter-relationship form a kind of creative continuum or "life way," which helps us become more fully human as we move through the stages of our life. Indigenous education traditionally recognized each of the most important inter-relationships through formal and informal learning situations, rites of passage, and initiations.

Since the highest goal of Indigenous education was to help each person to "find life" and thereby realize a level of completeness in their life, the exploration of many different vehicles and approaches to learning was encouraged. This was done with the understanding that individuals would find their own best approach in their own time. But "finding oneself and achieving inner peace" was not the goal or central focus of Indigenous education. Seeking peace and finding self was considered a *by-product* of following a path of life, which presented significant personal and environmental challenges, obstacles, and tests at every turn.

This kind of personal development should also not be confused with "individualism," which is so highly prized in American society today. Rather, this is the developmental process of "individuation," as Jung called it. It is a mature stage of human "being" that

**Inherent in Indigenous education is the recognition that there is a knowing Center in all human beings that reflects the knowing Center of the Earth and other living things. Indian elders knew that coming into contact with one's inner Center was not always a pleasant or easily attainable experience. This recognition led to the development of a variety of ceremonies, rituals, songs, dances, works of art, stories, and traditions to assist individuals in accessing and utilizing the potential healing and whole-making power in each person. Connecting to that knowing Center was choreographed through specific ritual preparation to help each individual on their journey to their own source of knowledge. Through this process, the potential for learning that is inherent in the major stages of a person's life was engaged in the task of connecting to one's knowing Center. This was the essential reason for the various rites of passage associated with Indian tribes and societies within each tribe.**

does not come easily. It has to be earned every step of the way. But in the process of earning it, one learns to put forward the best that one has, learning the nature of humility, self-sacrifice, courage, service, and determination. Indian people understood that the path to individuation is riddled with doubt and many trials. They understood that it was a path of evolution and transformation.

## ACTIVITY:

**Have a discussion with a few friends or relatives about what our collective history of Indigenous education has to teach us today. What do these traditions and core values of Indigenous education have to teach mainstream society?**

### H. Ten Essential Characteristics of Indigenous Education

There are basic characteristics that exemplify the transformational nature of Indigenous education. The following are a few of the most important, which may provide guidance for educational goals and content.

First, *learning happens of its own accord if the individual has learned how to relate to his or her inner Center and the natural world.* Coming to learn about one's own nature, and acting in accordance with that understanding, is necessary to prepare the individual for deep learning.

Second, *accept that at times experiences of significant hardship are a necessary part of an individual's education* and that such circumstances provide ideal moments for creative teaching. A "wounding" or memory of a traumatic event, and the learning associated with such events, provide a constant source for renewal and transformation, enlarging one's consciousness if individuals are helped to understand the meaning of such events in our lives.

Third, *empathy and affection are key elements in learning.* In addition, direct subjective experience, combined with reflection, is an essential element of "right" education. Therefore mirroring behavior back to learners helps them understand their own behavior, and how to use direct experiences to their best advantage.

Fourth, *there is an innate respect for the individual uniqueness of each person.* This idea gives rise to the understanding that ultimately each person is his or her own teacher in understanding and realizing their process of individuation. Indigenous education integrates the notion that there are many ways to learn, many ways to educate, many kinds of learners, and many kinds of teachers, each of which has to be honored for their uniqueness and their contribution to education.

Fifth, *each learning situation is unique and innately tied to the creative capacity of the learner.* When this connection to creative learning and illumination is thwarted, frustration and rigidity follow. Learning therefore must be connected to the life process of each individual. The idea of lifelong learning, therefore, is a natural assumption.

Sixth, *teaching and learning are a collaborative, cooperative contract between the "teacher" and learner.* In this sense the teacher is not always human but could be an animal, plant, or other natural entity or force. Based on this perception, a "teachable moment" could be recognized at any time. Distractions and analogies could also be used creatively to define the context for an important lesson. The tactic of *distract-to-attract-to-react* is a common strategy of Indigenous teachers.

Seventh, *learners need to see, feel, and visualize a*

teaching through their own and other people's perspectives. Therefore, telling and retelling a story from various perspectives and at various stages of life enriches learning, emphasizes key thoughts, and mirrors ideas, attitudes, or perspectives back to learners. Re-teaching and re-learning are integral parts of complete learning. Hence the saying, "every story is retold in a new day's light."

Eighth, *there are basic developmental orientations involved with learning* through which we must pass to reach a more complete understanding. Learning through each orientation involves finding personal meaning through direct experience. The meaning that each of us finds is always subjective and interpretive based on our relative level of maturity, self-knowledge, wisdom, and perspective.

Ninth, *life itself is the greatest teacher, and each person must accept the hard realities of life along with those that are joyous and pleasing.* Living and learning through the trials and pains of life are equally important as learning through good times. Indeed, life is never understood fully until it is seen through difficulty and hardship. It is only through

experiencing and learning through all of life's conditions that one begins to understand how all that we do is connected and all the lessons that we must learn are related.

Tenth, *learning through reflection and sharing of experience in community allows us to understand our learning in the context of greater wholes.* In a group there are as many ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, and understanding as there are members. In a group we come to understand that we can learn from another's experience and perspective. We also become aware of our own and others' bias and lack of understanding through the process of the group. We see that sometimes people do not know how to take or use real innovation and that many times people do not know how to recognize the real teachers or the real lessons. We see that a community can reinforce an important teaching or pose obstacles to realizing its true message. It is not until, as the Tohono O'odham phrase it, "*when all the people see the light shining at the same time and in the same way*" that a group can truly progress on the path of knowledge.

## ACTIVITY:

**How can Indigenous people today apply some of the principles of Indigenous education to the issues we face as individuals, families, and communities?**

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### I. Creating a New Circle of Indigenous Education

For Indigenous people, a new "Circle" of education must be founded on the roots of tribal education and reflect the needs, values, and sociopolitical issues

as Indigenous people themselves perceive them. A new Circle must encompass the importance Indigenous people place on the continuance of their ancestral traditions. It must emphasize a respect for individual uniqueness in expressing spirituality. It must facilitate

a clear understanding of history and culture in the context of life today. As Eber Hampton points out, it must develop a strong sense of place and service to community, and forge a commitment to educational and social transformation that recognizes and further empowers the inherent strength of Indigenous Peoples and our respective cultures.

To accomplish this, Indigenous people must begin to exploit all avenues of communication open to us and establish a dialogue about a contemporary theory for Indian education that evolves from *us* and *our* collective experience. In the past, Indian education has been defined largely by non-Indian educators, politicians, and institutions through a huge volume of legislative acts at the state and federal levels, which for decades have entangled Indigenous leaders, educators, and whole communities in the morass of the federal government's sociopolitical bureaucracy.

In fact, no contemporary theory of Indian education exists that can guide the implementation or direction of curriculum development. Instead what is called "Indian education" today is really what Vine Deloria Jr. called a "compendium of models, methodologies and techniques gleaned from various sources in mainstream American education and adapted to Indigenous circumstances, usually with the underlying aim of cultural assimilation."

It is time for Indigenous people to define our education in our own voice and in our own terms. It is time for Indigenous people to allow ourselves to explore and express the richness of our collective history in education. Among Indigenous Peoples, education has always included a visionary expression of life. Education has been, and continues to be, a grand story, a search for meaning, and an essential food for the soul.

### J. Education as Social and Political Struggle

From this perspective, education is a social and political struggle as we try to find ways for it to embody the very "soul" of Indigenous Peoples. These efforts also illuminate the extent to which we have been conditioned by modern educational processes, and how this conditioning has seeped into the deepest levels of our consciousness. We become critical observers of the modern education to which we have had to adapt—an adaptation that demands conformity to a certain way of education that more often than not has been manipulated to serve only certain "vested interests" of American society. Through the exploration of Indigenous education we learn how to demystify the techniques and orientations of modern education.

This understanding allows us to use modern education in accord with our needs, and combine the best it has to offer with that of Indigenous orientations and knowledge. We cease to be merely recipients of modern education and instead become active participants and creators of our own education.

On a personal level, Indigenous education liberates both the Indigenous learner and educator to participate in a creative and transforming dialogue that is inherently based on equality and reciprocity. It is a way of learning, communicating, and developing relationships that mirror those ways found in Nature.

It also de-stigmatizes the Indigenous learner as being "disadvantaged" with the educator in the position of "provider of aid." Rather, it allows both the learner and educator to co-create a learning experience and together undertake a pilgrimage to a new level of self-knowledge. The educator enters the "cultural universe" of the learner and no longer remains an outside

#### An Ecology of Indigenous Education

**Indigenous people must forge a new kind of educational consciousness—an "ecology of Indigenous education"—to explore and express their collective heritage in education, and contribute their deep ecological orientation to global educational practices. Exploring traditional Indigenous education and applying it in a contemporary context will illuminate how human learning is integrated with all life, and how it liberates the experience of being human.**

authority. By co-creating a learning experience, everyone involved generates a kind of critical consciousness and enters into a process of empowering one another. With such empowerment, Indian people are able to alter the negative relationship with their current learning process. Ultimately, by reasserting Indigenous values and practices, integrating a contemporary context, and implementing Indigenous processes at all levels of Indian education, Indian people may truly take control of their own history by becoming the transforming agents of their own social reality.

In the final analysis, Indigenous people must

determine the future of Indigenous education. That future must be rooted in revitalizing and transforming our own expressions of education. As we collectively "Look to the Mountain" we must truly think of that seventh generation of Indigenous children, for it is they who will judge whether we were as true to our responsibility to them as our relatives were for us seven generations before. It is time for an authentic dialogue to begin to collectively explore where we have been, where we are now, and where we need to go as we embark together on our continuing journey "to that place that Indian People talk about."

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## ACTIVITY:

**In what ways can you apply Indigenous perspectives to your own self-education and the education of those around you?**

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**In doing this activity with dedication you are well on the way toward decolonizing yourself and those around you toward a brighter future for all Indigenous people.**

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