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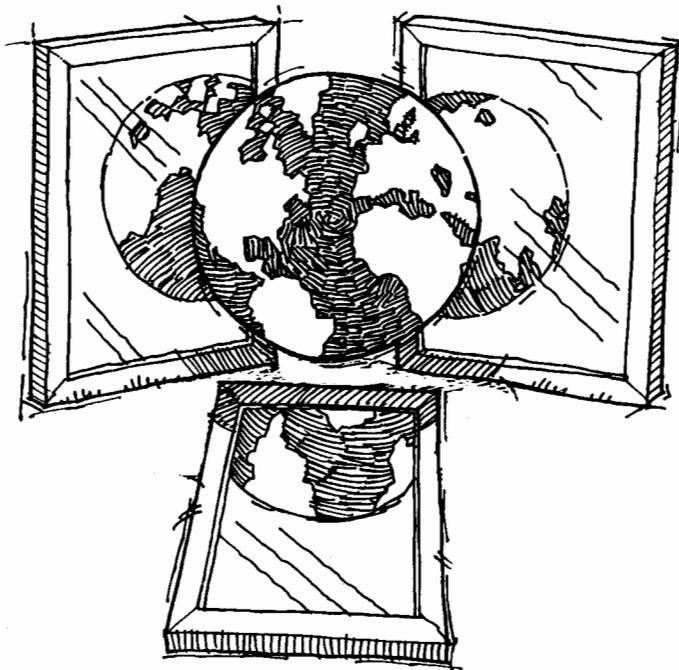
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Perspectives

The Use in Experiential Education of Ceremonies and Rituals from Native American Cultures



Editor's Note: *These perspectives address long standing issues within the Association for Experiential Education which have been a focus for significant informal discussions, but they have not been addressed in the Journal of Experiential Education or in other publications with broad distribution in the field. The Editor and authors specifically invite comment and reaction from others, at a personal, professional, and/or academic level, in order to further awareness and development of these issues. The thoughts below are the personal views of the authors, based on their own experiences and teachings. They do not claim to speak for anyone else. Other people from Native cultures, or other cultures, may disagree with these comments. Both authors work in the same organization and have discussed these issues, but each one's decision to write down his personal thoughts was arrived at independently, and each perspective was written and submitted independently.*

by McClellan Hall

At the 1990 AEE conference in Minnesota, I was asked to offer a prayer as part of the closing ceremony. I don't usually pray in public, but I felt it would have been inappropriate to refuse. I am not a "Medicine Man," but I am struggling to develop as a spiritual person within my tradition. As I began to pray, I heard a voice from behind me, much louder than my voice, "Could you speak up please?" "No," I replied, and continued on with my prayer and the songs that accompany it. Does this person think this is some kind of performance, I wondered? Is it OK within his culture to interrupt someone in prayer?

This prayer was special. I had a lot on my mind: my Latino brother at the conference, Roberto Velez, from the lower East side in New York, was struggling to raise his kids in a drug infested neighbourhood; my

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by G. Owen Couch

The Association for Experiential Education (AEE) has a Diversity Statement that reads as follows:

The AEE asks that everyone acting on behalf of the Association (including AEE employees, AEE board members, and speakers, workshop presenters, entertainers, and other presenters at the AEE annual conference) respect this policy. Specifically, they are requested to use language and actions which are respectful of all people. Racial or sexual jokes and *inappropriate use of cultural/religious ceremonies* are examples of behavior that AEE deems disrespectful. (emphasis added)

This statement appears to be very clear cut yet many people seem to lack a fundamental awareness

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Native/African/Latino-American brothers and sisters were trying to raise consciousness about their need to assume leadership and share positions that control the new programs of Outward Bound in urban communities across the country; the kids we've all worked with, who grow up thinking "I'm just White, I don't have any culture." I was missing my own children, I hadn't seen them for over a week. The tears were running down my face. This was not some Indian performance.

A year later in the *Journal of Experiential Education* I saw a piece entitled, *Thoughts from the AEE Conference*. I was surprised to see this incident captured, by someone I didn't even know. I was described simply as an elder who stood up to offer a necessary prayer. Although I'm forty-five now, I don't necessarily think of myself as an elder. I guess I better get used to that.

After the 1991 conference, I had some time to reflect on this and other events, and decided to take another in a series of large risks and write down some feelings. I've learned that there are some people within the Association for Experiential Education who are sincerely respectful of Native traditions, and who believe that Native belief systems may have something valuable to offer the larger society. On the other hand, there were those at last year's conference who enthusiastically joined in doing the "Tomahawk Chop" as we all watched the World Series in the Terrace building. The "Hollywood Indian" chant that accompanies the chop at the Braves games could also be heard in our midst.

Now, I understand that some people don't think this behaviour is inappropriate, maybe others just don't think. Still others probably don't care. From my perspective, Native people who say that it doesn't bother them have either been so desensitized that they don't think about it (i.e., some of the North Carolina folks who come from a long tradition of "Chiefting," where they dress up in Plains headresses and take pictures with tourists for money) or, they're just plain being dishonest about it. It is disrespectful. Somebody has to say it! The fact that Cherokee people are manufacturing the rubber tomahawks doesn't change a thing. They don't own the company, they just work there.

A few words about ceremonies. In my years of involvement with AEE, I've attended eight conferences, going back to the one in Junaluska in 1984, where we presented the program about the 1200-mile bicycle trip which retraced the Trail of Tears with Cherokee kids from Oklahoma. In that time, I've seen a number of so-called ceremonies, including the one I walked out on at Junaluska in '84, and the opening ceremony at Carbondale, Illinois a few years ago, where a non-Indian person, dressed in an eagle feather headress (made with real eagle feathers), per-

of what it means. These days it seems that more and more experiential educators are adding pseudo Indian rituals to their programs, or basing their programs on "Native American philosophies." (This is the case with numerous organizations I am familiar with that are not members of AEE, I have no idea to what extent this is happening within the membership, other than certain incidents at the AEE conferences.) For the purposes of this article, the term "pseudo Indian ritual," or "philosophy" refers to Native American rituals and philosophies adapted, with a lack of understanding, by non-Indians, often from inaccurate or incomplete descriptions in books. Often this is done with the belief that the philosophy or ritual in question relates to all Indians.

In the mid 1980s, while I was studying outdoor leadership at Greenfield Community College, I was deeply interested in this so-called Native American philosophy. I began reading as much as I could and took classes with Tom Brown Junior, an Anglo who claims the right to teach traditional Native American ways. Most of these sources of learning have a tendency to make blanket inaccurate statements like, "The Indians did it this way, the Indians believed that way, and the Indians thought these things." What Tom Brown, and all the reading, never taught me was that each and every tribal group has their own distinct philosophies and religious practices. There is no such thing as a Native American philosophy that represents all of the Native traditions of North America. If I were to approach an Indian traditionalist and say that I am a student of Native American philosophy, the traditionalist would probably think, "What the heck is this guy talking about?"

I began using elements of this new age Indian philosophy in my wilderness courses but I soon realized that the Indian way was not my way and never would be. Culturally speaking, it simply was not to be. So, without discounting the many valuable things that I had learned, I stopped being a "wannabe" and started being me.

Years later (just last year in fact) I began learning a valuable lesson of which I am still in the midst. In June of 1991, I began working in Southern Utah for a wilderness therapy program for troubled youth. This particular program used a lot of pseudo Indian symbolism, and my first reaction when I started there was, "oh no, not this again." I was not in a position to leave, so I allowed myself to ignore my inner voice and I bought into the program, to the extent that I resurrected my former training in "Native American philosophy" and happily added my pseudo Indian perspective to the pseudo Indian philosophy already in place at the time. It was not until later when I began working with McClellan Hall and the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, that I began to understand the implications of what I had been doing in Southern

formed something that was supposed to be a Native song and ritual, and invited everyone to join in. There were a number of things that offended the few Native people who were there. I was concerned at his use of real eagle feathers. Eagle feathers are considered extremely sacred by most Native peoples. In recent years, Native people in several states have been arrested for possession of eagle feathers. After many years of legal struggle, we are now allowed to have eagle feathers, for religious purposes only. Even then, legal documents are required. Another point that needs to be mentioned is that he performed a song that he said was from the Zuni people. I'm confident that he didn't understand what the words meant or the proper context of the song, nor did he have permission to use it.

In all candor, on Saturday night at the 1991 Junaluska conference, when I saw the "Medicine Wheel" design outlined on the field and the fire going

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in the center and heard the song that was being taught to the AEE group, I was embarrassed, I walked away. The Medicine Wheel is a powerful symbol, **to the tribes of the Plains area.** The Medicine Wheel is not, and never has been part of the Cherokee tradition in either North Carolina or Oklahoma. The song used was not from any tribe in this country. My point is that if this was to be a ceremony, then it should have been something from the tradition of the people leading it, and done in a sacred manner. If what was being offered is some sort of "new age" synthesis of elements from a number of traditions, then let's call it that. After talking to an elderly Cherokee man who had been asked there to lead a "Friendship Dance," I was especially upset that he had also been misled about what would happen during the evening's activities.

In the Native tradition, ceremonies are sacred occasions. There is normally fasting, prayer, and other ritual behavior and restrictions to be observed. For example, there can be no menstruating women involved due to the unique power that women possess at that time, and no persons under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Participants and leaders must abstain from sexual activity for a prescribed period of time. It is well known that ceremonies, such as sweat-

Utah.

There was one incident where, by using rituals I had no business using, I put a group of young students in emotional, psychological, and spiritual jeopardy. This practice had actually been going on since the start of the program. I was simply, and blindly, taking over where my predecessor had left off.

I put a group of students on a solo experience having briefed them quite emphatically that this was to be a vision quest in the Native American tradition, and could quite literally change their lives if they were willing to open up to the experience. One student in particular did open up to the experience and he returned to the group having had a very powerful dream. This dream was full of symbolism and archetypal images that I recognized from Plains Indian mythology. The danger arose when neither myself, nor any of the other staff, were able to help this student process the dream. We simply did not have the knowledge, the cultural background, or the training to do so. To help put the situation in perspective, I would add that the student was not Indian, but two of the group leaders were. One of them was the son of a powerful traditionalist in his own tribe. But neither of them were from the Plains culture. Fortunately, that particular student seemed to be able to pass it off simply as a strange, though very vivid dream.

In an interesting synchronistic, or karmic twist, to the whole situation, the program went out of business less than a month later, and less than two years after its inception, despite some very strong and positive program elements and many success stories with youth at risk.

When I came to the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, I listened with great interest as Mac Hall talked about his offense at the new age Indian ceremonies used at the AEE conferences. I've heard Mac say numerous times, in reference to any context where an Indian ceremony is used by someone who is not formally trained in its philosophy and proper use, that "those people have no idea what they are doing, they could really cause some problems."

To help put this in perspective, I will refer to a book I recently read, *Profiles in Wisdom*, by Steve McFadden (1991). It offers profiles of fourteen Indian traditionalists from all over North America, including Mexico, and one from Peru. The thing that sets these traditionalists apart from others of their own nations is that their world views are influenced not only by the traditions of their ancestors, but by new age spirituality as well. Almost all of them felt there was a need to teach something of their traditional philosophy to non-Indians (a controversial view among traditional Indians), but many of them made a point of saying that non-Indians should not try to lead ceremonies they don't understand. Oh Shinnah, an Indian

lodges, where these "rules" have not been strictly observed, pose a real danger to the health of all involved. In a discussion with Larry LittleBird, prior to the 1989 Santa Fe AEE conference, it was decided that there should not be sweatlodges (as there were in Carbondale) because it would send the wrong message. The point being that if it wasn't going to be done right, it wouldn't be done at all. The spirits of the fire, the water and the other elements are present in real ceremonies and they are powerful, and potentially dangerous.

I want to make it clear that Native traditions, certainly the Cherokee teachings, with which I'm most familiar, are inclusive, not exclusive. We recognize

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the Black, Brown, Yellow and White people as brothers and sisters, as children of the same Creator. We believe that we were all together in ancient times and were given the same basic teachings, along with instructions for fulfilling our roles in the bigger picture of things. In our prayers, we invoke the spirits of the Red, White, Yellow and Black races.

I also agree with many of our spiritual leaders that the time has come to share those things that we know with others who are sincere and interested. With that in mind, AEE could serve as a forum for discovering what each of our cultures has to offer. I am committed to continuing dialogue around this. However, AEE does have a Diversity Statement and the language is clear about the inappropriate use of cultural ceremonies. I'd like to suggest that, in the future, we maintain a clear distinction between spiritual and secular—if it is a social dance, let's call it that. If we can do a ceremony, then let's be clear on the ground rules. What is secular to one person may be sacred to another, and until we learn the difference, we will continue to alienate people. I'd like to see the Association for Experiential Education lead by example in resolving this issue, once and for all.

woman of mixed descent with a background in Apache and Navajo healing ways, Theosophy, and Tibetan Buddhism, states quite simply: "People should be very cautious with traditions they do not understand. People who participate in a ceremony and are not clear about what they are doing can create inharmonious results" (McFadden, 1991, p. 148). I think it is important to point out that Oh Shinnah is saying that simply participating in a ceremony can cause problems, how much more of a problem is created by leading one?

Medicine Story is the spiritual leader of the Assonet band of the Wamponoag Nation and had been active for many years in the "Hippie" rainbow gatherings held across the United States (McFadden, 1991, p. 115). He relates the story of how he was asked to lead a sweatlodge by a group of non-Indians. He didn't feel right about it so he consulted some elders. They asked him, "Would these people do a sweatlodge whether you led it or not." And his reply was that "yes, they probably would." The elders answered, "Well, people don't know what they are doing, they can hurt themselves" (p. 125). In this case it was determined to be best that Medicine Story do the sweatlodge.

What it comes down to is that doing a ceremony, a sweatlodge for instance, is just not as simple as one would think that it is. One can't simply watch an elder do a sacred sweatlodge and then think that one can emulate it, any more than one can watch an ordained minister bless and administer the sacraments of the Christian church and expect to do it oneself.

Dhyani Ywahoo is a member of the Etowah Cherokee Nation and an acknowledged master of Tibetan Buddhism. In relation to Native American traditions, she has this to say: "Because of its simplicity and beauty, the Native tradition looks like something you can easily do yourself. It is the wise person who recognizes that the sweatlodge and the other rituals are very sacred and powerful medicine" (McFadden, 1991, p. 49). She goes on to say that "it's become fashionable in these times for people to imitate Native American ritual.... It's also dangerous, not having a good foundation" (p. 49). Dhyani says that one must know the proper prayers for constructing a sweatlodge, there are even prayers for removing the bark from the willow (p. 57). How many experiential educators know the prayers for removing the bark from the willow? What if there is a sweatlodge where there is no willow? What materials does one use? What are the proper methods and prayers for gathering them? What prayers are used as one constructs the sweatlodge?

I chose to quote from *Profiles in Wisdom* specifically because these elders have a new age orientation to their traditional spirituality. I believe it is the new

age movement that is the biggest abuser of North American Indian rite and ritual. This begins to spill over into the experiential education movement because Native American philosophies are, in general, holistic and ecological, and the new age movement gives "permission" to use these rituals. But, as the elders quoted above are quick to point out, things aren't as simple as they may seem.

There is also a whole perspective that I have left out here that needs to be considered. I will mention it briefly. Apart from the dangers of misusing religious rituals, there is the matter of respect for other cultures. I have heard the cry from American Indians, as well as from African Americans and others, that they are quite

simply offended by abuse of their sacred practices, for whatever reason, whether it be for the mascot of a sports team, or a sincere effort to introduce a bit of spiritual reality to one's life and culture. It is time to go beyond simply paying lip service, and to commit to being aware of the implications and consequences of one's actions. If not, experiential educators are going to alienate people at best, and cause harm to themselves and others at the worst.

References

McFadden, Steve (1991). *Profiles in wisdom*. Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company Publishing.

Search Opens for a New JEE Editor

I have resigned as Managing Editor of the *Journal of Experiential Education* upon completion of the November 1992 issue. It has been an exciting and challenging four years of work and I leave with the wish that I was a magician and could create the additional ten to twelve hours a week in my life so as to be able to continue along this path. But after too many Saturdays at the computer, too many times turning down other exciting work opportunities, and too many other pressures that can not be turned down, it was time to make a hard choice. Mind you, I feel lucky, particularly in these economic times, to be in the position to choose between things I want to do. That is the fun and challenge of being an experiential educator who, like many others, happily survives on the "fringe" of large mainstream organizations.

I have gained an immense amount of knowledge reading all of the manuscripts which have come across my desk—good, bad, and indifferent. But most importantly, I have gained an even greater appreciation for all of the talented, thoughtful, and caring people in this field. I have had many more stimulating discussions and received much more affirmation and constructive feedback across this relatively short period of my working life than in all of the hours working full time in more traditional work settings. I never cease to be amazed at the willingness of authors to take criti-

cism constructively from me and other reviewers with respect to manuscripts they are heavily invested in and of which they feel proud. Thank you for all of the support!

I invite all those who might be interested to consider applying to take on this role. It is a wonderful way to get to work with a lot of fascinating people. It is an opportunity to challenge yourself while making a valuable contribution to the field. The search committee, which will be chaired by Karen Warren as the AEE board member responsible for publications, will be looking for a person who has: demonstrated writing and editing skills, a strong and broad educational and work background in experiential education, strong interpersonal networking skills, the ability to work independently and meet deadlines, and access to and the ability to use current computer word processing technology. It requires approximately ten hours per week of work and the Editor is paid \$2000 US per issue. Applicants are asked to send their vitae/resume to Karen Warren, Hampshire College O.P.R.A., Amherst, Massachusetts 01002, USA. Further information can be obtained by contacting Karen Warren, the AEE office in Boulder, Colorado, or myself. Screening of applicants will begin July 1, 1992. I look forward to working with a new editor!

Sincerely,

Alan Warner