Enduring Values In A Changing World

Dorothy Milligan

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol1/iss3/6
Most of us travel a tortuous path in a search for our own identity. Who am I? Why am I here? and How am I going to get there? seem to be questions the average thinking person dwells on — particularly in his teen and young-adult years.

One can’t generalize about any group of people, of course, and say: “These people have the answers.” However, having spent some four years working with, talking to, and enjoying Indians of Oklahoma’s Five Civilized Tribes, I have come to believe that Native Americans are less bothered by those perplexing problems of personal identity than any other people I have known. I believe there are some aspects of their way of life that we could emulate and thus make our own lives happier.

**EXTENDED FAMILY**

A high-school-aged Seminole-Creek boy made his home with my family several years ago. Every time we attended any sort of gathering, even those that were not really Indian get-togethers, Jacob always found someone he knew, and the pair were always very glad to see each other. “That’s my cousin,” he’d tell me later. I came to believe that Jacob probably had more cousins than anyone I’d ever known. Later, I learned that by white-man definitions, most of these were not really cousins at all. They were merely members of the same clan. Relationships are not as concentrated as they are in our Anglo nuclear family. Any maternal aunt is like a mother to the Indian child. I’ve known probably twenty Indian youngsters who told me stories about the same grandmother. Any uncle is like a father, and children respect his paternal influence.

It is not at all unusual for children to be brought up by uncles, aunts, grandparents, or even older cousins. Many young parents move to the city for better jobs. If they feel the environment is not suitable for bringing up children, they are likely to leave the children with a relative, secure in the knowledge that the children will be loved and wanted by members of this extended family. Members of the same clan are regarded as cousins.

Quite a contrast to our nuclear family: mother, father and two stiffly starched children! Indians are, of course, much less mobile than Anglos. They tend to stay in one place, put down roots, and to acquire many, many family and clan members. The family is a support system not only in times of sorrow but in times of joy and celebration as well, and each family member has an awareness of “Whatever happens, I am not alone.”

Elderly people, in particular, have a pleasant role in Indian society. I talked with many oldsters and their families, and I was touched by the obvious love and pride felt by each person for the senior relative. “The Old Ones say” often prefaced any story they told me. Medicine men, in particular, stressed that wisdom comes only with maturity. “I had some training in medicine when I was only about 50,” a 105-year-old active medicine man told me, “but I didn’t begin to help my people until I was well past 60. It takes a long time to know the right herbs to use and to be able to resist ‘witching’ for the power and glory that comes to the medicine man,” he told me.

How many Indians stay active and alert late in life is amazing to me. I talked with several men who had sired children in their late 70’s.

**MATERIAL POSSESSIONS**

It came as a bit of a shock to me to realize that many Indians cannot accept the principle of land ownership. Many told me, “One may as well talk about owning the sky or the river. The land is a part of Nature. It belongs to all of us.”

Lack of interest in material things extends to personal possessions as well. Many Indian homes in our area have several automobiles parked nearby, but often none are in running condition, and the family must depend on others for transportation. One seldom sees one or two people riding in an auto; the vehicle is almost always crowded. Indians have owned property in common for so long, they expect to share. “What I have today, I share with my family and friends, and they will do the same for me tomorrow when I have a need,” they told me. For economy’s sake, I could wish for the Indians that they might learn some maintenance skills, but I have to admire their willingness to share and their indifference to the getting and spending that infects the Anglo society.

**NATURE AND RELIGION**

So much has been written about the Indian’s reverence
for nature and his need to be attuned to forces of nature that I won't belabor that point. I saw repeated evidence, however, of the Indian as a conservationist. Many rely on wild game to supply meat for their tables, but I never saw hunting or fishing done for the sport of it, and I never saw Indians who favored killing more game than was needed for immediate use.

It was interesting to me to watch the Cherokees, for example, in their stomp dances making "feeding the fire" a part of their ritual before their own meal is eaten. "Feeding the fire" with meat - preferably game, but certainly some choice part of an animal saved for this special occasion - is a part of their worship service. They recognize fire and meat as gifts of God, and they express their gratitude to their Creator by returning to the fire a portion of the meat they have been permitted to possess.

Somehow I think of worship in traditional Christian churches as being primarily a female activity - perhaps because women outnumber men in most churches. Among the Indians who participate in stomp dance ritual, there are usually more men than women, and it is the men who are leaders in the worship service. Somehow there is something very masculine and majestic about a worship led by men who have fasted for the previous 24 hours and who are now dedicating themselves to several hours of dancing as a way of showing their love and reverence to God.

TIME AS AN ALLY

Before I started THE INDIAN WAY, I had heard people mention "Indian time," implying that Indians were often late for appointments and perhaps undependable. I resented Anglo generalizations and vowed I didn't for a minute believe all Indians were vague and unconcerned about time. As a result of my naivete, I played a lot of solitaire the first year I attended Indian activities. I wouldn't classify Indians as undependable, but I would certainly say that many of them have never become enslaved to time clocks. They recognize that clocks and calendars are man-made for his convenience, not his incarceration. The fact that a pow-wow is advertised to start at 2:00 p.m. doesn't necessarily mean that it will get underway before 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. Indians move at their own pace, and if they find the earlier hour inconvenient, they arrive when they get ready. Indians don't get upset if someone shows up an hour or so late - or doesn't show at all. They wait patiently if they have time; if not, they move on and do whatever they want to do. "Something must have come up" is the way they excuse their Indian brother who has failed to keep his appointment.

Indian nonchalance toward time frustrated me when I started, but I came to see that on many occasions it is better to arrive late, relaxed and serene, than to get there on time, frazzled and irritable. Of course, I wondered how they held jobs since most employers have a rather inflexible attitude about schedules. Some told me they live by Anglo rules five days a week, but on the weekend they slow down and enjoy being Indian. Others shrugged and said, "My boss understands. I get there when I can." I know many Indians who are excellent workers who thoroughly enjoy their work. Those who don't like their work usually don't give more than token service to their jobs. They are not about to get on a treadmill of spending a lifetime at employment they don't like and for which they're not suited.
away children who showed promise of becoming medicine men or women. They take the child away to their own land and impart to him the wisdom of the race. Once they have chosen a child for a position of such importance, the youth will usually have an unhappy life if he refuses to accept his calling.

Many people who told me stories of the Little People were educated and talented people. A few confessed, "I've tried not to believe some of these things I was taught as a child, but I guess it's ingrained."

Why not? In this very prosaic world, couldn't we all use a little magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?

"THE INDIAN WAY" GIVES STRENGTH FOR THE UNKNOWN

Among the many benefits of tradition are the comfort and sustenance it brings those who adhere to it. Indians, in particular, reverence the ways of their ancestors and find them a help in time of trouble. I am reminded of a young Chickasaw woman married to a Seminole man. She had been brought up in the white man's way; he was traditional Seminole. She was inclined to scoff at all use of magic at times?