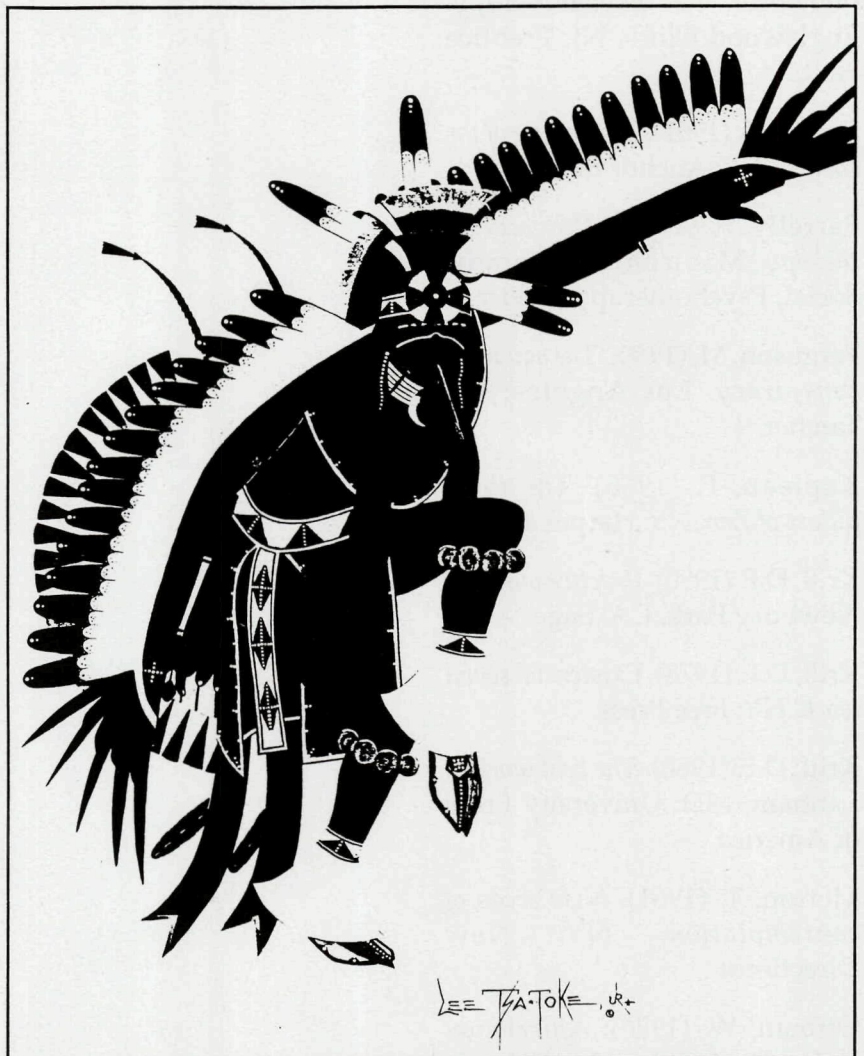


SPIRITUALITY IN FIRST NATIONS STORY TELLING : A Sahnish-Hidatsa Approach to Narrative

In this narrative I share four aspects of storytelling that support the spirituality of First Nations' people. I begin with a portion of the Sahnish genesis story and its identification of our spiritual beliefs and history. I discuss the significance and purpose of traditional narratives in relation to the manner of storytelling by the elders in our village. I then explain how the telling of narrative in our indigenous languages is diminishing, illustrated by a story that my mother has shared concerning my grandfather's "Indian" boarding school experience.

by
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WRITING NARRATIVES CORRECTION

Because of editing errors in Roberta Wells Imre's article PERSONAL NARRATIVES DO NOT COME EASILY TO THE PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED SELF, Vol. I (2), it will be reprinted in Vol. II (1).

SAHNISH-HIDATSA NARRATIVE

Storytelling among First Nations people has a long and rich history. In my village, the oral traditions of my people remain one of the most important ways to define and give meaning to our Indigenous spirituality. Our stories teach us that spirituality is the knowledge of, value for, and participation in our sacred ceremonies and traditions. The telling of certain sacred and non-sacred stories and events by different members of our peoples often is intended to support and preserve our spirituality. For example, many of our narratives present circumstances, places, persons, or events that ensure that our people remember who we are, how we should behave, what we should know and value, and where we came from. Our stories help us to honor and respect the struggles and experiences of our ancestors and contemporaries and enable us to pass on our oral histories to our children and grandchildren.

In this article, I prefer not to use the words "Indian" or "Native American" to name my peoples. We are not from India. Also, the term "Native American" could refer to anyone who is born in the Americas. I prefer to be called Sahnish and Hidatsa, which are my Nations. I also prefer the terms First Nations, Aboriginal, or Indigenous to refer to my peoples collectively.

The purpose of this article is to share four different aspects that relate our people's storytelling to spirituality. To set

the context, I begin with our Sahnish genesis story along with our spiritual beliefs and history. Then follows a discussion of the way storytelling helps to promote spiritual thinking and actions among our peoples. Next, I tell the way elders in my village share their personal narratives in a community setting as an example of a traditional form of storytelling. I then discuss the reasons the telling of the stories in our indigenous language is diminishing, illustrated by my mother's narrative about my Hidatsa grandfather's "Indian" boarding school experience.

The Sahnish-Hidatsa approach to narrative that I share throughout this paper is based upon my own experiences and constructions and should not be construed as definitive. The Sahnish and Hidatsa are two different nations. Each has its own rich and wonderful stories, storytellers, and ideas of what stories mean and how they should be told. I hyphenate the two nations since I am a member of both groups.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR GENESIS AND HISTORY IN SAHNISH NARRATIVE

Recounting our people's genesis and history is one of the most important examples of the way our oral traditions support our spirituality. Our people, like many other First Nations, believe that we have lived and moved throughout "Great Turtle Island" (the Americas) since time immemorial (Wright, 1993;

Maracle, 1993). Our origin stories have always helped to create within our peoples a sense of belonging, purpose, and relatedness with all other forms of life. For eons, the genesis narratives of the Sahnish have taught us that we, along with all other living things, existed first in an embryo state deep within the womb of Mother Earth. As our desire to attain a higher state of perfection grew, Neshanu Natchiktak (the supreme being of power and wisdom) and Mother Corn (the intermediary between humans and Neshanu Natchiktak) heard our cries, pitied us and helped us emerge from Mother Earth. Mother Corn gave us the gift of corn which gave us life and enabled us to live as human beings. She guided us on a long migration from the south to show us where to live. Our traditional narratives teach us that, as we developed into humans and journeyed to our destination, we endured many hardships and tragedies which often compelled us to call upon Mother Corn to intercede on our behalf. We are taught to have reverence and gratitude to Mother Corn for all she has done for us. Our oral traditions also clearly point out that our emergence from Mother Earth occurred in this part of the world in the southern hemisphere. Indeed, none of our sacred bundles, which represent the most ancient memories of our people, tell us that we crossed the Bering Strait as anthropologists suggest.

Our peoples now live on the Fort Berthold reservation, located around the Upper

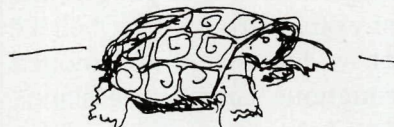
Missouri river in North Dakota. I come from a small Sahnish village called White Shield, which was named after one of our most respected Chiefs. In our languages, Sahnish means "the people" while Hidatsa means "river or willow crow." My father is Sahnish and my mother is Sahnish and Hidatsa. My father's people are closely related to the Skidi Pawnee who once lived in Nebraska but now reside in Oklahoma. My mother's people, on her father's side, are closely related to the Crow Nation who reside in southeastern Montana.

Sahnish refer to the Missouri river as the "Mysterious or Holy River" since it was important to many of our most sacred ceremonies. Before 1953, we lived along the flood plain of this river and raised several varieties of corn, squash, and beans in the rich soils that were deposited there. We also grew potatoes, melons, pumpkins, sunflowers, and tobacco, all of which are indigenous to Great Turtle Island (Weatherford, 1991; Gilmore, 1987). The caretakers of our gardens were the women who engaged themselves in highly complex planting and harvesting rituals. In between these two seasons, they would clean and water the gardens and sing to the crops as if the crops were their own children. We often traded many of our crops with other Indigenous people for horses, buffalo meat, robes and other things we may have needed.

I was not raised on our traditional homelands beside the holy river. The U.S. Army Corps

of Engineers, despite our elder's protests that our lands were protected under the "Treaty of Fort Laramie, made in 1851" (Meyer, 1977, p. 217), built the Garrison Dam just south of our reservation, which flooded out 155,000 acres of our richest lands. Our gardens, timber, sacred sites, and ancient way of life were inundated to control floods and produce electricity for people further down stream whom we never even knew. We were relocated to higher, more barren grounds on our reservation and given welfare as a substitute for our sustainable way of life. I never saw the wonderful gardens of our people or experienced the traditional village ways. But my grandmother (White Eagle Woman), always said, "Oh, it was so beautiful there, you children just don't know how beautiful it was."

The Sahnish genesis story reminds us of our connections to the land, the sacred beings, and the ways of our ancestors. It also reminds us to protect and to honor our spirituality since it is often violated for the sake of other peoples' "progress" and "development."



A SAHNISH-HIDATSA APPROACH TO NARRATIVE

While personal narratives are told to assist the storyteller to process everyday experiences and events, they are also shared to help promote spiritual thinking and behavior among the village community. Many times narratives are told to help reaffirm our identity and to remind us of our purpose in life and in death. Since I am related to many people in my village, the stories usually tell me something about the emotional and spiritual state of our peoples. Narratives are told in order to teach our people about morality and to raise awareness and concern for one another. They help to instill in the individual and the village membership a passionate desire for both greatness and humility while stressing the importance of sacrifice, prayer, and courage. Narratives help to keep our Indigenous spirituality alive by reminding us of our responsibilities in ancient rituals and ceremonies.

There are two aspects that I think are very important to a Sahnish-Hidatsa approach to narrative. The first aspect is a particular manner of the storytelling which is affected by the place where the story is told and the person telling the story. This manner is illustrated by the way our elders tell stories. The second aspect is the language in which the story is told. Traditionally, stories are conveyed orally and personally. The meanings are closely tied to

the nuances of the particular spoken language. Unfortunately, storytelling in our Indigenous languages continues to diminish at a steady rate. Many of the elders in our village, who in earlier times would have passed the languages on to us, are not fluent speakers because they attended federal government and religious mission schools where they were coerced to learn English. Although the children in our village spend some time learning our language in school, they spend significantly more time learning English. The use of English to tell our stories is problematic since it changes the tenor and manner in which a story is told. Many times there are no comparable words in English that can convey the intent and meaning of our languages. For me, the declining use of our languages to tell our stories further threatens the loss of our identity and contributes to our emotional and spiritual distress. This point will be conveyed through the story of my own grandfather.



THE PERSON TO VILLAGE NARRATIVE: STORYTELLING BY THE ELDERS

In many instances, the narrative among my peoples has not been an individual person-to-person event. In my village,

one traditional approach occurs when an individual shares a narrative with several people at once. The best example of this is when our elders "stand up" during public gatherings or ceremonies and share their personal stories. Sometimes they are asked to "offer some words," while at other times their sharing is a spontaneous action. Depending upon the event, the narrative may be either very humorous and uplifting or very painful and sad. Sometimes it can admonish the listeners for the injustices, failures, and unnecessary complacency in the village. At other times, the stories are gentle, motivating, and inspiring and call upon the generosity and kindness of the people in the village to address a pressing issue.

There seems to be a predictable pattern in the process and delivery of this type of oral story. The speakers usually begin by explaining to the audience their hope that what they are about to share will help the people in some way. Then, they generally put forth a disclaimer that their knowledge is limited and apologize for taking this time to talk about themselves or share what they know.

I expect that most outsiders would think this type of opening means that the storyteller has a lack of confidence or poor public speaking skills. On the contrary, by opening this way, the elders are reminding us to "respect what you know," "remember you don't know everything," and "think for yourself." When I compare our elder's opening

statements with those of other speakers who claim to be "the experts" but convey little, I now realize that my elders were really teaching me humility and intellectual freedom.

Following the opening, elders generally share one or more of their own meaningful experiences, especially those with special relevance to the occasion, the audience, and the request that has been made of them. During this time many of their narratives convey some of their deepest emotions of grief, anger, humor, and delight. As I have listened to their stories, I have found that many of the things that they share are very emotionally and spiritually liberating. I find myself fully listening and reaching for the important messages that may be conveyed in the narrative.

Often their stories are quite lengthy and, at times, contain long pauses between different words and ideas. Sometimes certain words and phrases are said in our Sahnish language which I cannot understand. Many times I have turned to my mother or father and asked, "What did they say?" They generally do not look at me but usually answer with a slight frown and quick point at the speaker with their lips, which means "pay attention, something important is being said." I'm generally quiet after this directive. As I reflect on my grade school experiences, I am reminded that our elders' style of narrative was clearly in conflict with how the local Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) school teachers expected us

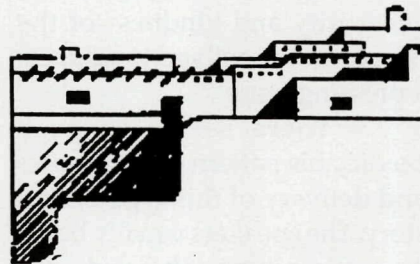
"Indian" kids to speak. They often pointed out to us that we needed a quick, to the point, "look at me when I am talking to you" kind of delivery. Learning this style of speaking made me impatient with our elderly storytellers. However, it also made me very nervous about what the government teachers would say whenever I would slip into the traditional style of narrative delivery at school.

One of the things I remember most about the traditional manner of storytelling is that, despite all of the time taken to tell the narrative and the indeterminacy of certain expressions, no one in the audience would ever interrupt or tell the person "we are running out of time so you have to hurry up," or "would you please define or explain what you mean." As listeners we were expected to develop patience and search for answers to the questions that were triggered by the person's narrative.

Each elder always had his or her own way of ending the narrative. Some would finish by adding a bit of humor to their story by telling a joke. Others would tell an amusing unexpected story about themselves or someone else, which usually got a big belly laugh and "happy" tears from the audience. I believe that this ending is very important since one of the chief codes of our peoples is not to dwell too long in angry words or thoughts and not to leave in an angry way when speaking publicly.

When the storyteller is finished, he or she again thanks

the audience for their patience and time. The speaker often repeats the statement "I don't know that much" and apologizes for taking time to talk about him or herself. When the person sits down, members of the audience often seek out the storyteller and offer some tobacco, a blanket, some gas money, or a handshake to thank him or her what was said for the benefit of the people. To me, this entire process reaffirms the importance of this type of narrative for creating a sense of spiritual well-being and connection. It also demonstrates the position of our elders as our most prominent storytellers.



THE DIMINISHING SAHNISH NARRATIVE: THE POLICIES OF THE "GREAT WHITE FATHER"

Sharing a personal narrative in the traditional language has not always been possible. When First Nations peoples were "removed" to reservations, many Indigenous children were federally mandated to attend government and religious missionary schools for "civilization" purposes. Our peoples were among those who had to participate in the "Great White Father's" (United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs)

forced acculturation programs.

As a matter of public



policy, which was usually directed by the Great White Father, these schools prevented First Nations children from using their Indigenous languages and deliberately neglected any discussions that would allow the children to promote or understand their Indigenous identities. For example, on July 16, 1887, J.D.C. Atkins, the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, wrote the following to all schools that educated Native students:

"Your attention is called to the regulation of this office which forbids instruction in schools in any Indian language. This rule applies to all schools on an Indian reservation, whether government or mission schools. The education of the Indians in the vernacular is not only of no use to them, but is detrimental to the cause of their education and civilization. You are instructed to see that this rule is rigidly enforced in all schools upon the reservation under your charge. No mission school will be permitted on the reservation which does not comply with the regulation." (Prucha, 1976, p. 175).

Two years later, another Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Thomas J. Morgan, issued a

directive calling for the "Inculcation of Patriotism in Indian Schools" (Prucha, 1976, p.180). In this order he states that

"In all proper ways, teachers in the Indian schools should endeavor to appeal to the highest elements of manhood and womanhood in their pupils...and they should carefully avoid any unnecessary reference to the fact that they are Indians" (Prucha, 1976, p.181).

The punishments were often very severe for children caught speaking their language or identifying with their people. Children as young as 4 and 5 years old who attended these schools (I call them forced acculturation camps) were tortured, abused, and ridiculed for speaking or acting like an "Indian." After these children returned to their homelands, grew to adulthood, and became elders, many refused to or could not teach their children or grandchildren their traditional language. I am certain that these years of colonialist imperialism and inculcation caused many of our peoples to be ashamed of who they are and contributed to the lack of interest in learning and teaching our languages.

My family's narrative of the "Indian" boarding school experience, similar to that of many other Indigenous peoples, has a lot to do with surviving and trying to understand that experience (Haig-Brown, 1988; Knockwood, 1992). It is especially significant since it is the historical juncture where personal narratives in our own Indigenous languages began to decline.

Over the years, my

mother has shared with me my Hidatsa grandfather's personal story of his experiences in the "Indian" boarding school system. For me, it is one of the most profound and difficult stories to hear. Whenever I hear his narrative, I often go through many intense emotions: grief, anger, and fear to name only a few, and react with long deep silences. As my mother tells me his story, she often begins by describing how my grandfather was taken from our reservation in North Dakota and sent to Hampton Institute in Virginia. She never forgets to tell me that most of his experiences there were very terrifying and lonely. He was one of the "Indian" children who didn't have a choice - he had to go! The "Indian agent" would go among the people and select different children they thought would benefit from being sent away. She says that he was "just a little boy when he went there, maybe 6 or 7 years old." What he remembered most about his experience was being severely beaten and punished many times. He said "sometimes they just used their fists, but other times they used a horse whip." The part of the narrative that she shares most often with me, however, has to do with his not being able to understand or speak English. "He could only speak Indian and didn't know what they were saying to him or what they wanted him to do, so they would beat him up," she says wiping her nose and eyes. Whenever she tells me his story, her tears always well-up, and she never looks directly at me,

which is unusual for such a loving mother. But my response is usually the same, so I rarely look at her when she tells me this part. She tells me that "many other bad things happened to him there." She suggests that maybe many of the difficult times that he experienced in his adult life had a lot to do with his beatings and cruel treatment at the "Indian" boarding school. Sometimes while she is telling me his story, my mind recalls the pictures I saw in a book about Hampton that showed the headstones on the graves of the little "Indian" children who died there. Being a parent, I often think of how heartbroken and shattered these children's moms and dads must have been when they learned of their children's death. Unable to hold their child for the last time or perform the proper burial ceremonies, they must have undergone tremendous shock and grief. I know as long as I live I will never forget these images in the stories my mother has told me.

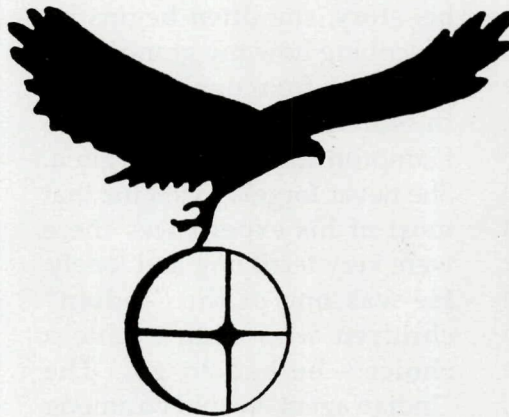
I often think that my grandfather's narrative now belongs to my mother. While it is a horrible story, I know that she faithfully guards and shares it as a tribute to his surviving the "Indian" school boarding experience. I sometimes dream that when she is telling me his story, his spirit is rescued and lifted free from his terror and suffering for being an "Indian." And, although she has never said it, I am sure that she wishes she could have been there to cradle and protect this child from his "civilized" tormentors.

I am certain that the

horrible and inhumane experiences suffered by First Nations children in these schools changed, forever, the meaning and sharing of the personal narrative of Indigenous peoples. I know that my grandfather shared the Indian boarding school stories only with my mother when he was an elder in our community. He did not tell anyone what happened to him until he had been the tribal judge and served on the tribal council. I wondered why he waited so long to share his narrative. Maybe the reason is he wanted his daughter (my mom) to avoid having to carry his pain, and thus, "giving" it to his grandchildren. Then he thought it was necessary to tell her these things when she became a mother and responsible for keeping her children safe. Or maybe he waited because, somewhere in his dreams, there still lingered a nightmare of Commissioner J.D.C. Atkin's "rigidly enforced" rule which brutalized Indigenous children for speaking their languages or acting like an "Indian."

When my grandfather did share his personal narratives with my mother, they were not in our Indigenous languages; they were in English. When my mother shared with me my grandfather's stories, they were also in English. And now, I share these same narratives with my children in English. In 1887, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, J.D.C. Atkins, wrote, "*No unity or community of feeling can be*

established among different peoples unless they are brought to speak the same language..." (Prucha, 1976, p.175). After considering this statement of the "Great White Father" on different occasions, I often wonder why then there have been many times that my grandfather, mother, and I, all



English-speaking people, have never really felt like "Americans" or like a part of the American community. As I ponder the reasons for our feelings, I think maybe there have been too many John Wayne movies and too many John Wayne "wannabees." Maybe there have been too many presidents like George Bush who have said "I never apologize for the United States of America. I don't care what the facts are" (Wright, 1993, p.212). Or maybe there have been too many Washington Redskins or Atlanta Braves games with too many tomahawk chops and too few protesters. I'm not sure. What I do know, however, is that, now, I rarely wonder why my English-

speaking children's personal narratives contain many splinters of the same fears as my grandfather's mother's, and mine. Often, I wonder how long the "Great White Father's" "civilizing efforts" will haunt us.

On the one hand, my grandfather's "Indian" boarding school experiences are partly responsible for my family's inability to learn or speak our languages. Without our languages it is extremely difficult to teach and practice our spirituality or to share our most sacred traditional stories in appropriate and meaningful ways. On the other hand, his experience reminds me that our Sahnish genesis story teaches us that our lives have not been without difficult and tragic times, and maybe it is now time to call on Mother Corn.

SUMMARY

Storytelling in my village is one of the most important ways to define and give meaning to our spirituality. Our stories teach about our ceremonies and traditions which we should value and participate in. There are four different aspects of storytelling that help to point out the relationship between our people's narratives and spirituality. The first is the perspective provided by our Sahnish genesis story, which helps to create a sense of purpose, belonging, and relatedness among our peoples and all other life. Indeed, telling

our history reminds us of who we are, where we came from, and what we should expect from our future. The second aspect is that personal narratives are often used to help individuals or the village membership to reaffirm their identity and purpose in life and death. They also tell us something about the emotional and spiritual state of our peoples and remind us of our responsibilities to one another and our traditions. A third aspect is the manner in which our stories are told. An example of this aspect is the way in which our elders publicly share their personal narratives. This traditional approach teaches the village membership about humility, respect, and patience. The fourth aspect relates to the impact of the policies of the "Great White Father" which censured the use of Indigenous languages by Indigenous children who were forced to attend federal government and religious boarding schools. As my grandfather's "Indian" boarding school experience illustrates, not only is there a loss of traditional language among First Nations peoples, there are also many emotional and spiritual scars that remain.

The narratives in my village attest to the pain, loss, resiliency, hope, and humanity that is found among our peoples. Persons in the helping professions who are interested in Indigenous narratives must understand that not all First Nations peoples are willing to share their personal stories in public gatherings or in private. It is important to remember that

narratives will vary according to the traditions of each First Nations group. Most of all it is important to listen carefully and honestly and to be sensitive and respectful to the storytelling protocol of each group. □

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