

Writing from the Feather Circle: Seeking a “Language of that Different Yield”

by

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We want a language of that different yield. A yield rich as the harvests of earth, a yield that returns us to our own sacredness, to a self-love and respect that will carry out to others. —Linda Hogan, Dwellings.

There is a Buddhist saying that “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” I moved to Arizona over twenty years ago. I came here fresh from four years of the intellectual, left-brained rigors of graduate school. Beyond my approved study of sonnets and semicolons, however, I had been secretly reading New Physics and brain research and Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance — and hungering for much more than graduate school had fed me. In Buddhist terms, I was ready.

And my teachers came. If I hadn’t been so hungry, I could easily have missed them. They were the occasional silent shadows among the noisy Anglo whiteness of my classes. They were the dark-eyed, tattered remnants of the genocide of American history. They were strangers in their own sacred land. They were Native Americans.

They have taught me well over the years (though I am still a novice, still learning). What I have learned from them, I use in all my classes — and in the very heartbeat of my life. So please remember: Whatever I share with you here is not just some little pedagogic trick for teachers who work with “Indians.” It is about taking back a part of ourselves that has been lost, a part without which neither we nor our students nor our schools nor the very world can survive. It is about

taking back our hearts — and, in turn, discovering “a language of that different yield.”

Sometime during my first year of teaching here, one of those shadows shared with me a common saying among his people: “When you leave the reservation and go away to school, you have to leave your heart behind.” Now isn’t that the truth — for all of us, I sighed, remembering the years of memorization of sterile facts; remembering all the heartless, bloodless, meaningless critical analyses and expository essays; remembering being taught not to use the first person pronoun in formal writing

Not long thereafter, I was introduced to the feather circle. Now, many variations of the feather circle or talking circle exist among Native American tribes, and I do not pretend to know about them nor to be here a spokesman for them. But I have personally experienced one powerful common denominator, whether the circle is in the hogan or the tipi or the sweatlodge or the condominium or the writing classroom: When it is your turn to speak, when you hold the feather in your hand, you are encouraged to speak from your heart. *Speak from your heart.* That is all. Yet that simple dictum sends the blood of life pumping through empty skeletons of words and lives and, when used in my writing classes, restores the possibility of a “language of a far greater yield” than the more orthodox approaches of my academic training.

With such experiences in my heart, eight years ago I began teaching a section of first-year composition at

Arizona State University exclusively for Native American students. I wanted to go on learning from the Native American culture, and I wanted to use the feather circle as the guiding metaphor for our classroom and for our writing

Now, we have grown from that first little class of twelve students to three full sections of first-year composition for Native Americans. And I have come to use the feather circle approach to writing in all of my classes — my graduate level writing courses, my English methods courses, the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project for teachers. And, I must confess, I have come to care little for the kind of writing — critical, left-brained, technical writing — that I was primarily trained to teach and to produce.

And my students and I have come to this: we believe our writing must begin in our own hearts and grow from our own caring and understanding. We also believe our language — not modern, manipulative, Madison-Avenue language nor the sterile language of the textbook, but authentic, careful, I-Thou language — is a part of our larger work, a tool to help save ourselves and save the planet.

Speaking of such things in freshman comp, of course, makes us mavericks. Still, we cannot help but look out the window and see that the Earth is dying and that we and our words have gone astray — and that somehow the two are connected. So our feather circle curriculum statement looks like this:

Tell me a story — a small story, a true story (or as true as you can tell it) — a story from your life. Tell me of a time when you were hurt or afraid. Or tell me of a time when you lost something — your keys, your heart, your mind, your mother or father, your way in the world. Or tell me about a small joy you had today. Tell me a story — and your telling it will change you — and your telling it to me will change me — and such stories will move us both a little closer to the light. Tell me a story — and then tell me another — and I will tell you mine — and we will sit in the feather circle and listen carefully to each other. And then we will write thank-you notes to each other for gifts given in these stories. And then we will do it again, anew. And we will continue doing this — until we heal ourselves, until everything begins to become properly precious, until we stop killing each other and destroying the

Earth, until we care for it all so much that we ache, until we and the world are changed....

So, in our feather circle writing class, as in the traditional Native American feather circle, we try to write openly and honestly. We do not look for our words in the library; we try to find them in our hearts. We work on writing to ourselves in our personal journals (“How do I know what I know till I see what I say”) before we write to the world. We try to find our own voices — not Shakespeare’s or Hemingway’s or Faulkner’s, but our own. We try to use our words to find out who we are and what really matters in this world. And doing this, we often arrive at a very different place from where the commercials and the textbooks and the first-year composition directors would lead us.

And then, as we work the words from our hearts and our journals into public writing, so that we might share them with others, we let them seek a form. We try to let the form arise from the words themselves. We remember that as a baby grows in its mother’s womb, the heart is first and all else comes from that. We remember that a heart can grow a skeleton, but a skeleton cannot grow a heart. We try, always, to start with the heart.

And so, while it may seem that we do not care much about “rhetoric” and “modes of composition” and such things of more orthodox writing classes down the hall, do not be deceived. It’s just that we want our words to take shape like the clay in the potter’s hands, like the wool in the weaving. We want them to hold up in the world outside the classroom. We want to be able to take our words home with us. We want them to help us survive and grow. We want them to be alive with our own living and loving — and to help others to live and love.

And they have. Without our ever intending, a group we call Native Images emerged from the First Year Comp class, and their writing has now touched hundreds of people of all ages and backgrounds. Over the past few years, we have done over a hundred presentations for classes, conferences, church services, and workshops. These Native American students have shared their writings and their hearts with audiences ranging from 350 seventh and eighth graders at an inner-city school to classrooms on the reservation to inmates at Arizona State Prison to NCTE conferences around the country.

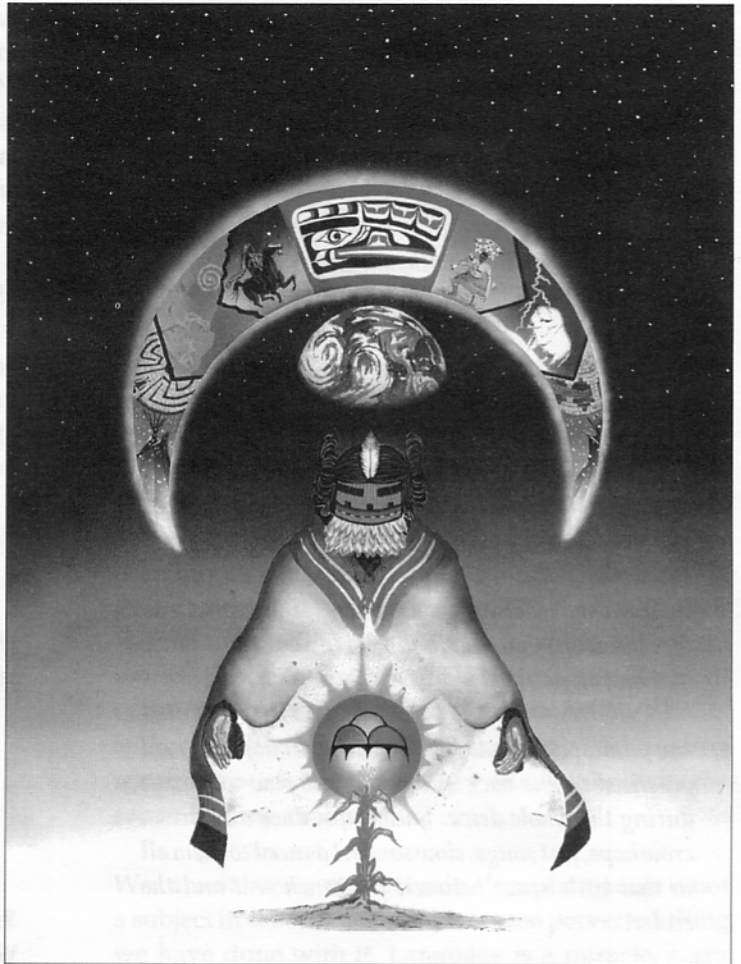
Sometimes, when we do a Sharing (our readings, as one student put it, are not Show Business but Share Business), we bill our presentation as "A Drive-By Sharing by a Native American Gang." We call it thus because our experience has taught us that *everything in us gets published*, one way or another. That is, we need to tell our stories of our anger, our pain, our losses, our confusion — or they will sit in us until they translate themselves into some other language, almost always a language of violence. So a drive-by shooting by a gang or blowing up the Federal Building in Oklahoma or suicide or alcoholism or drug abuse are all "publishings" of the stories within us that must be told. So the feather circle writing has become for us a way toward healing, a ceremony in which the listeners/readers become an integral part of the process.

To give you a feel for the kind of writing that emerges from the feather circle, I have asked some students to share with you a piece of their writing from our work together. We invite you to honor us by being a part of our feather circle here on the printed page. [I will put in brackets before each piece a very brief version of the "assignment" that called forth the piece. Remember, too, that each finished work shared here was preceded by much personal/journal writing, by much vision and re-vision, and by help from peers in writing groups.]

A Drive-by Sharing by a Native American Gang
We begin with a prayer, a "Dancing Prayer," by Pierce Harrison, a prayer that is about both his pow-wow dancing and about our feather circle writing:

My name is Pierce Harrison, and I am a Yakama/Navajo from the state of Washington. I have been at Arizona State University off and on for five years. I have many plans for the future, but I don't know what the future has planned for me. I try to live by one simple rule: Enjoy the journey. I hope you enjoy my writings.

[The assignment here was to write a prayer from your heart.]



Artwork by Hopi-Navajo student Mark Tahoe

Dancing Prayer by Pierce Harrison

*Oh, Grandfather, give us a good song, A song with
a perfect beat. Not too fast and not too slow, A
song that makes me dance, A song that makes my
feathers dance.*

*Oh, Grandfather, give them a good song, A song
for the people, A song that they will feel, A song
that will make them watch, A song that will make
their ears smile.*

*Oh, Grandfather, give me a good song, A song that
takes away my pains and my sorrows, A song that
won't let me get tired, A song that will carry me
and let me tell my story, A song that fills me with
pride. Oh, Grandfather, give me a good one.*

[The assignment: tell us a story about a time of loss in your life.]

Blues Tape by Pierce Harrison

My Grandpa, from whom I get my name, lying in the cold hospital bed, said to me, "Go dance. Go dance hard and win. Dance for me, my legs don't work anymore."

I looked at my Dad with a tear in one eye and determination in the other.

He shook his head and looked at his Dad in the same way.

My mom stayed with Grandpa as my Dad and I hit the trail without her for the first time.

A four-hour drive to Nespelum and the Porcupine singers was the only tape we played. Porcupine was the host drum that year, and I couldn't wait to dance to their songs.

My Grandpa's words kept repeating in my head, so I practiced in the back of our old red pow-wow van during the whole drive. Sneak-ups, duck and dives, crow hops, fast songs, slow songs. I danced to them all in that little space between the bench seat and the cooler.

Then it was time. We got Porcupine for the first song and old Slimjohn's drum for the second. I danced like my Grandpa told me to dance, and through my face paint I looked for him.

When we returned, I handed my Grandpa all of my first place winnings and a recording of Porcupine and told him that it would make him feel better.

He called it his "blues tape," and six months later it was given back to me.

Now it is my "blues tape," and it makes me feel better.

My name is Lori Chee. I am an eighteen-year-old Navajo woman pursuing a degree in English Education. I'm originally from the Black Mesa area, where I spent my childhood summers losing sheep. I am from the strong words of my Mother (Near-the-Water Clan), the reassuring smile of my Father (Water-Flows-Together Clan), the protection of my

Maternal Grandfather (Bitter Water Clan), and the kissable cheek of my Paternal Grandfather (One-Who-Walks-Around Clan).

[Share a word-picture from a Turning Point in your life.]

Frybread Love by Lori Chee

Sunlight lay upon his curly, dark hair as he sat in front of the huge window in his favorite vinyl brown chair. "Shi yazhi make some frybread for Che Che. Achoodi." The tiny frame of the three-year-old girl bounced into the imaginary kitchen built by Che Che's loving heart. She slapped the dough like Grandma, stretched it to the perfect circumference, and fried it in the love she had for her Che Che. Excited, she ran over to her dying Grandpa to give him his daily smile, a delicious frybread only he could taste and feel the hot grease drip between his fingers. She sat leaning against his chest, hearing the frybread comfort his heart. He wrapped the warmth of love around her body and said, "Ahe he, shi yazhi."

I am Jennifer Nasewytewa. I am from the village of Sungopavi in Second Mesa, Arizona. I am Water Clan from the Hopi Reservation.

[Answer the question, "Where are you from?"]

Seeds of Many Directions by Jennifer Nasewytewa

Her great-grandmother told her that she comes from the earth around the vicinity of Puerto Rico. From the dark depths of the green waters, she rose. She rose, Phoenix from the flames. She rose to greet this fourth world given to her by Masauwu, keeper of fire and death. Her body tired from the journey through the bamboo shoot of the third world, she rose.

Her great-uncle told her that she was created from the great bear. Masauwu sent her to this place to find the great bear, and she was bear people. She is to use the strength of the bear for healing.

Her grandmother told her that she was created by Gogyeng Sowhuti, Spider Grandmother, and her two warrior grandsons, Pokanghoya and Polongahoya. They created people in the fourth world.

Her grandfather told her that she is a creation of God. He gave his life on the cross so that she could live.

Her father told her that she was an accident and that she should have been a boy. He told her that he never intended for her to be here. He told her that she belonged to a different man. This man denies her through his drunken slurs.

Her seeds were planted in many different directions. They didn't follow the colors of the corn. She came from the depths of the water through a bamboo shoot that was created for her by the Lord Jesus Christ to find a bear to use its healing powers to free her from the drunken words of a creation never intended.

I am Keith Slim-Tolagai. Kinlichini nishli, Toahani bashichiin, Todich'iini dashicheii adoo Tsenjinkini ei dashi nali. Be'ak'idba'ahoodzani dee ei nasha.

[Tell us a story of one of your losses.]

Shi Masani by Keith Slim-Tolagai

Spring sang my grandmother to sleep with its secret warm wind. My grandmother left with the melting of the snow and the growth of green grass. We were left lost and unaccepting. The sheep knew she was gone and tried looking for her that summer. They wandered aimlessly, searching in the gentle rain. The sky wept. The autumn leaves knew; they swirled and spiraled in the air, frenzied in the cold breeze, looking, it seemed, for someone. Winter came. Even she knew as she covered the earth with her white blanket. She told us then to accept our loss. I saw rainbows around the silver sun that day. It was cold and I remember that breeze from the north. The horses whinnied and pranced. They danced on snow and the sheep stood still and looked to the north, tasting the air. Even the scraggly dogs sat quiet, attentive. We had gathered to celebrate as we had always done, but our hearts were heavy. Our strength was missing. He came that day, my uncle, bringing with him a silver bucket full of chilled fruits and set it in front of my aunt. Then a shaft of sunbeam broke through the ash-covered clouds and shined on the bucket. It shimmered. We sat, quiet, watching tiny crystals sparkle and the jeweled fruits blaze in the sunlight. Then we cried. It was then we

knew that our grandmother had been in the mist of the summer rain. She had been in the breeze, singing the leaves to dance. She was in the rainbows, the turquoise sky. She was in the smile of my mother, the touch of my aunts. She was in the eyes of my cousins, the strength of my sisters. She had been with us all the time. She is not lost.

And so my students go on amazing me and teaching me And down the hall in other rooms, other students are writing in the "modes of rhetoric" — they are writing serialization papers and comparison papers and classification papers. They are learning to make proper skeletons in their English classes, for their English classes. I do not doubt that this is a good thing to do, but still I wonder: Do they take their words home with them? Do their words help them toward peace, toward love? Do their words reach out to others? And I think of the line from Arlene's poem to her mother about being sent away to boarding school: "You did not know they would take away my songs and my prayers."

We cannot live by the left brain alone. Language is not a subject in school — that is just some perverted thing we have done with it. Language is a miracle, a gift given to us as much for songs and prayers as for expository essays. More than ever, we need the power of this "language of a different yield." More than ever, our students need it.

I am convinced that what my Native American students have done and are doing can be done anywhere, in any writing classroom, by any students of any age. It does not take a \$50,000 grant or a new textbook adoption or a resolution by the school board. It only takes a quiet belief in the power of people and words — and a reliance upon our heart's vision. And the rest will begin to happen.

Lynn Nelson is the director of the Greater Phoenix Area Writing Project. An earlier version of this piece appeared in G. Lynn Nelson's book, Writing and Being: Taking Back our Lives through the Power of Language, published by Lura Media.