

Native American Ways of Learning: Profile of a Navajo Teacher

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As the publications coordinator of the Bread Loaf Rural Teacher Network, I have had the opportunity to meet and work with many rural teachers from remote corners of the United States, from the Rio Grande to Lake Champlain, from the island of Ketchikan, Alaska, to Pawleys Island, South Carolina. The teachers in this network represent diverse cultures of rural America, and those cultures are as varied as the landscape itself.

The Bread Loaf School of English, the graduate program at Middlebury College, brought many of these teachers and other colleagues together at the First Conference on the Teaching of English in Rural Schools, in June of 1996. There I met Rex Lee Jim, a Navajo man, a poet, a playwright, and a teacher, who lives in--and in between--traditional Navajo culture and mainstream U. S. culture. Though some might think it difficult to maintain this cultural balancing act, Rex Jim has developed a sure-footedness moving between varied cultures. Rex attended high schools in Rock Point, Arizona; Asheville, North Carolina; and Carbondale, Colorado. After high school he attended and graduated from Princeton University. Asked whether he felt culture shock when he left the reservation, Rex says, "What was there to be shocked about? Oh, maybe you could say I was 'surprised' but not shocked. In my experiences away from my native Arizona, I've been observant and aware of other cultures; I learned a lot about the world and as much about myself from studying the way others live."

Rex Jim currently teaches Navajo college students at the Navajo Community College in Tsaile, Arizona. According to Rex, in Navajo education, the complex Navajo clan system, a method of codifying genealogy, is important. A Navajo is a member of four clans, which are determined by the clans of the person's maternal grandfather, paternal grandfather, father, and mother. Navajo society is matrilineal, so every Navajo is born for the same clan as his mother and maternal grandmother. Typically, a Navajo introduces himself and establishes relationships with other Navajos by naming his clans. For example, if a Navajo meets someone who belongs to the same clan as his father, then they share a kinship. Relationships among Navajos demand respect and a certain way of interacting physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Teachers in Navajo culture can use the kinship inherent in the clan system to develop special teaching relationships with students. In Navajo schools, a Navajo teacher will think of his Navajo students as his own children in a sense. And parents expect their children to treat their teacher as a kind of parent. In such a setting, the teacher assumes a greater responsibility for the health, educa-

tion, and growth of the student than in mainstream American schools, where teachers are often viewed mainly as conveyors of information. Rex Jim explains, "The kinship among the Navajo clans reflects the kinship found among members of a traditional Navajo family. That means that interaction among the community is much like interaction among the family. For example, I have a student whose grandfather is of the same clan as I am, and this student naturally treats me with the same respect as he does his grandfather. The fact that I'm only a few years older than my student doesn't matter; I am treated like a grandfather, and for this student I base my teaching on this special relationship. What does it mean 'to be treated like a grandfather?' Well, in Navajo culture the grandparents traditionally have a very playful interaction with their grandchildren, and teasing one another is a part of that tradition. So with this particular student, I have a relationship that includes a lot of practical joking and teasing. And he expects that of me. My relationship with each student is based on the fact that many of the student's family members--his uncles, aunts, grandparents, and parents--are members of my clan. In the Navajo custom, therefore, the teacher establishes a unique relationship with each student."

The kinship that Navajos express toward each other also extends to the physical world. They speak of Earth as mother and Sky as father, for example. And these and other elements of the natural world are given the same kind of respect that Navajos give their own natural biological parents. As Rex Jim says, "When we call the Earth our mother, it's not a metaphor; we mean it literally when we say 'Nahasdzáán, shimá. Ba'álchíní niidlí.' (The Earth is our mother and we are the Earth's children.)"

Rex Jim notes that strangers to Navajo culture are often confused by these complex customs of interaction among individuals. All they see, perhaps, is how different the Navajo culture is from their own. If visitors to Navajo culture stay long enough, they will begin to learn these customs, to respond to the social cues, and they'll be treated as a member of the culture in many ways. Rex Jim says that such patient observation of other cultures is just good common sense for living well in the world: "If I go to Japan and visit the home of a Japanese family, they would expect me to take off my shoes before I enter as a form of courtesy. If I refused to take part in this custom, I would create an embarrassing situation. In Navajo culture, on the other hand, it would be very inappropriate to take off one's shoes before entering the home of a family. Taking off one's shoes in a Navajo home is a thing of intimacy and should not happen unless that intimacy has been established and honored already. So, you see, learning involves knowing not just one's own culture but also knowing how and when to participate in other cultures."

"This give-and-take in learning is an important part of it for me. We all give and take in a learning situation. A teacher fulfills some part of his students, which they cannot fulfill without him; and in return, they fulfill a desire or need in the teacher. For example, though a vast age difference exists between a young girl and her grandfather, they can nonetheless fulfill and teach each other. With respect and care for each other in their interaction, the grandfather will show his granddaughter wisdom and knowledge, and she will in turn teach him with her spirit and vitality."

The sad fact is that the traditions of the family are threatened, even in the very family-oriented Navajo culture, as they are in much of America. Rex Jim observes many people concentrating too much on work and losing necessary time with family, clan, and tribal communities. His response is to study the phenomenon and find ways of reversing it.

Story telling, Rex Jim says, is one part of the education of Navajo children that serves to unite family and community. Stories are not told indiscriminately, however. The telling of stories is tailored to the individual child's stage of growth at a particular moment. Two children may be the same age, yet their teacher or elders may tell them different stories so as to accomplish different goals. Rex Jim explains, "Navajo teachers try to get to know each student, to know his or her think-

ing at a particular time, and we make allowances for the differences between the stages of growth in children. For example, let's say I observe that a child lacks courage and is afraid in situations where he or she should stand up for himself or herself. I might tell this child a story that shows how courage is necessary to live well. This story, I hope, would give the student insight into himself or herself."

Rex Jim states that story telling is ongoing in Navajo education, and its goals are long-range ones. Educators don't expect the telling of one story to turn a student around overnight. Rather, the slow and continual accumulation of stories in the mind of the Navajo begins develop the person as an individual and a member of the community. "Sometimes," Rex says, "it takes 10-20 years before one can see stories taking root in the spirit of a child." The custom of telling stories to children is like a conversation that goes on for many years. Each new conversation picks up where the previous one left off, and the individual conversations, or stories, build on each other, creating a much longer dialogue that links the individual and the community together.

In Navajo culture certain family members carry the responsibility for looking after certain parts of the children's education. For example, fathers and uncles will look after the boys' education regarding sexuality; mothers and aunts do the same for girls. Uncles and aunts are responsible for teaching the songs, prayers, and chants, and the grandparents take part in educating the children in many ways, as grandparents do in many cultures. These customs vary a little across the community, but most families practice them. Rex Jim explains, "In this culture, it is my responsibility as a teacher to observe the children, and if I see one acting badly, I will tell the appropriate family member, perhaps the parent or maybe an uncle or aunt. To interfere without involving the correct family member would actually betray the Navajo family structure."

Rex Jim refers to teaching as an art form. In teaching, as in weaving or pottery-making, there are requisite techniques, including observing, communicating, and interacting. In the hands of skilled teachers, these techniques become intuitive, just as they are second nature to the artist. Once in a while, when a new challenge presents itself--for example, a difficult or reluctant student--the teacher might have to draw consciously on those techniques, or create new ones in order to help the student. For Rex Jim, "teaching is based on the Navajo idea of k'e´ , which means respect for relationships, and the art of teaching is a letting go, where the art becomes artless and natural." Since relationships are always changing, the art of teaching is one that requires continual evaluation and revision.

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