

# The Importance of Elders and Family in Native American Culture

BY PATRICIA CLARK AND NORMA SHERMAN

Within the Native American community there is an abiding tradition of respect for the importance of family and the honoring of elders. In *To Build a Bridge: Working with American Indian Communities*, authors John Poupart and John Red Horse affirm that “cultural values have been the source of strength for Indian people for many centuries. Today,” they say, “traditional Indian values are being ‘re-discovered’ and implemented in restorative justice, leadership, alternative dispute resolution, and community development programs.”<sup>1</sup> During the time we spent traveling through South Dakota, meeting with our American Indian sisters and brothers of all ages, we began to see this “re-discovery” of traditional Indian culture, and we wanted to understand more about the ways the people there were rediscovering the gifts of elders and families.

---

*“Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity.”*

—1 Timothy 5:1–2

---

Along our journey, we had the honor of spending time with Simon Looking Elk. A local pastor, Simon grew up on the Pine Ridge Reservation and at Makasan Presbyterian Church. In reflecting on the importance of elders in Indian culture, Simon revealed that there is not much mystery involved in what qualifies one as an elder. An elder is simply a man or woman, usually older than the others in the family and community, who, while not elected or appointed, is widely recognized and highly respected for their wisdom and spiritual leadership.

Simon told us that elders often are known for being the kind of people who have paid attention, gaining knowledge and wisdom from life—during their childhood they watched and listened carefully to ceremonies and traditions, and as youth, they paid attention to the ways the elders in their communities behaved. For it is by the way they live that elders teach younger tribe members about the tribe’s culture and traditional ways of life, and it is through the oral traditions shared by elders that social values and beliefs are preserved. Essentially, elders are libraries of Indian knowledge, history and tradition.

The ways of the past are still of vital importance to the lifestyles of the present. Simon told us that in Lakota encampments of the 1800s,



Collage by Mark Cable/Debbie Paris



Beverly Lane



Joy Temple Ray



Courtesy of Alice Wyatt

**Left: Simon Looking Elk pauses for a moment of reflection and prayer at the memorial to the Lakota men, women and children who were killed at Wounded Knee. Center: Madeline Terry, the great-great granddaughter of Lakota chief Big Foot who was killed at Wounded Knee, offered her thoughts on respecting the wisdom of elders. Right: Alice Wyatt, PW vice moderator for mission relationships, thanks Sidney Byrd, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Flandreau, South Dakota, for sharing his stories with the USA Mission Experience group.**

there was one large tipi where the elders met to make decisions regarding the village—decisions about where the tribe would be moving, when and where to hunt, the planting of crops, the security of the village, and more. Today, elders still meet to make decisions through discussion and consensus. At a presbytery gathering, a meeting of the elders might be called to make recommendations on issues before the governing body.

*“These stories were the libraries of our people. In each story, there was recorded some event of interest or importance . . . A people enrich their minds who keep their history on the leaves of memory.”<sup>2</sup>*

—Luther Standing Bear, Lakota

During our time in South Dakota, we met with women who explained the importance of elders further. Elona Street-Stewart, associate for racial ethnic ministries and community for the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, PC(USA), told us that tribal council members, youth and

community leaders go to the elders before planning takes place for public events and ceremonies. The elders explain how and why the particulars of a ceremony are performed. Elders are always present as part of public meetings, task force sessions and council meetings. They might not say anything, but their presence is always requested. Elona says that elders are held in high regard for their wisdom—they are valued for being the bridge between the past and the present.

Madeline Terry, great-great granddaughter of the beloved Lakota chief Big Foot and a member of the Makasan Presbyterian Church, said she could remember from a very young age that it was always important to listen. “When one of the elders spoke, you listened—it didn’t matter if the person was directly related to you or not. You *listened*.”

*“I know how my father saw the world, and his father before him. That’s how I see the world.”<sup>3</sup>*

—N. Scott Momaday, Kiowa/Cherokee

Madeline shared with us several memories of the involvement of elders in the life of the community. She said that at one time there was a group called the Gray Eagles. This group of elderly adults worked in the community regularly. The Gray Eagles would go to schools, Head Start programs and community meetings to share American Indian wisdom through storytelling. They would tell the stories of history and of prior decisions that they knew would affect every part of American Indian life. They knew what to share in order to help the present generation learn from the wisdom of the past.

As USA Mission Experience participants, one of our most memorable experiences was our interaction with Sidney Byrd, who shared quite a bit about the wisdom of the past. Sidney ministers at First Presbyterian Church of Flandreau, South Dakota. At 92 years old, Sidney is a descendent of the Weston family, who were some of the first missionaries in the area. Sidney grew up in Pine Ridge and was a part of the Porcupine Church community. He told us that a person earns the

title of elder because that person has lived long enough to have wisdom about a matter; thus, someone who needs direction will come to an elder for advice. This does not necessarily mean the elder is of a certain age; rather, what the elder knows at a particular time or for a particular situation is what is important.

Elona confirmed this notion, saying that no one declares that he or she has reached eldership. It is not a matter of self-nomination but a term of respect bestowed upon the person by others in the community.

*“We have lived upon this land from days beyond history’s records, far past any living memory, deep into the time of legend. The story of my people and the story of this place are one single story. We are always joined together.”<sup>4</sup>*

—Pueblo elder

As we learned about the importance of elders from our wise new friends, they also helped us understand their unique perspective on family. Simon told us that the American Indian view of family goes far beyond the nuclear family, extending to grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. In this larger family unit, members work and share together. American Indian tradition teaches that it is essential for families to share resources in order that *all* may survive. This concept of sharing all resources leads to another important standard: a person is not respected for what he or she *has*, but for what he or she *gives away*.

Simon also told us about one of the most important family traditions in the Lakota culture—the sacred Hunka ceremony. The Hunka ceremony could very well be called the “making relatives” ceremony.

### Learn More!

Learn more about Sidney Byrd! Thanks to Ten29 Productions and Dakota American Indian Mission, you can order *Sid Byrd: An Oral Narrative—His Life, Faith and Ministry*. This four-hour DVD set gives you the opportunity to see and hear from Sidney himself! Contact Bob Offerdahl at 330/207-6233, or [pastorbobccp@yahoo.com](mailto:pastorbobccp@yahoo.com), to order. The set is \$35, which includes shipping costs.

Click [here](#) to see a short video about Dakota elders.

During this ceremony, an Indian receives her or his Indian name, and one person will tie an eagle feather or plume in the hair of another person—younger to older or older to younger. This process establishes a special relationship between the two and, after the ceremony, it is as if a new relative has been adopted. The two people are now connected in a deep way.

Elona expanded on this a bit for us, telling us that the family is essentially one large community—all of one’s maternal aunts can be considered one’s mothers by extension, and all of one’s paternal uncles can be considered one’s fathers by extension. In American Indian culture, it is standard for families to be that close to one another.

We asked Sidney Byrd who was important to him while he was growing up. He replied, “In the old days, there would be a storyteller—an elder—who would go house to house and tell the story of the Indian people from the beginning. These stories would be told around the fire in the evening and it is because of the retelling of these stories that I was able to write about the history of our people and the church in this area. Almost all of it came from storytellers. By passing

on their stories, I honor the memory of Wischincamaza (Iron Old Man), the man who was the *lapi oaye* (“word carrier”) in our community. His words were published at the Santee Normal Training School in June 1871 and I translated them from Dakota into English in 2002.”

What Sidney revealed to us in that final story was the connection between families and elders, the enduring importance of both in American Indian culture. During the USA Mission Experience we received the gift of listening to older voices *and* younger voices. Progressive policies and projects are being developed and implemented through the Oglala–Sioux tribal offices on the Pine Ridge Reservation. As we listened to the plans of a group of strong, young Native women, we recognized that, as they push their people forward, they do so through discussing and honoring the words and wisdom of those in their tribe who have gone before. 🍓

*“Let the spirits help you, and they will help you. . . . They’ll give you the understanding and wisdom of your people.”<sup>5</sup>*

—Abe Conklin, Ponca/Osage

Patricia Clark participated as representative from Synod of the Mid-Atlantic, and Norma Sherman participated as representative from Synod of the Pacific, in the PW USA Mission Experience to South Dakota, September 2010.

### Notes

1. John Poupart and John Red Horse, *To Build a Bridge: Working with American Indian Communities* (St. Paul, MN: American Indian Policy Center, 2010), 25.
2. Editors of Reader’s Digest, *Through Indian Eyes: The Untold Story of Native American Peoples* (Pleasantville, New York: Reader’s Digest, 1995), 6.
3. *Ibid.*, 354.
4. *Ibid.*, 76.
5. *Ibid.*, 379.