

Call for Native Genius and Indigenous Intellectualism

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Genius and intellectualism have existed and still exist among American Indians and other Indigenous Peoples. Perhaps, only in Indigenous Nations Studies can this fact be fully appreciated due to the ethnocentricism of the western scientific mind. Historically such genius and native intellectualism has not been viewed as relevant to mainstream thought and according to literature written “about” American Indians. Nonetheless, it can be safely observed that all cultures and communities possess extraordinary “thinking” individuals. The Indigenous People of this earth in the Americas were great thinkers and continue to be, although the mainstream culture does not include them in the Western intellectual context.

The following view is an introduction with several important points about the intellectual development of American Indians and other Indigenous Peoples. This essay is a call to recognize the native geniuses and indigenous intellectualism of the past and those that deserve recognition today. The start of the twenty-first century is very late for recognizing the intellectualism of native peoples and how they have served their communities. Furthermore, this call issues a challenge for the American mainstream to acknowledge native genius and indigenous intellectualism.

Definitions of Genius

First of all, the nature of “genius” and “intellectualism” must be defined, at least for discussion here in the following pages and for future dialogue. *Webster’s Dictionary* has defined “genius” as “a single strongly marked capacity or aptitude; extraordinary intellectual power especially as manifested in creative activity; a person endowed with transcendent mental superiority; a person with a very high intelligence quotient,” with the synonym as “gift.”¹ That is a gift that certain people have received and possess--a gift that separates them from other people.

Are you gifted? If you score above ninety eight percent of the general population on a recognized standard IQ test, then you would qualify to be a member of “Mensa,” (Latin for “table”), an organization for extra intelligent people. Founded in 1945 by Roland Berrill and Dr. L. L. Ware in London, Mensa expanded to several other countries, with American Mensa established in 1961. With 70,000 members worldwide, about 48,000 people belong to American Mensa in more than 120 chapters, who are classified as being in the top 2 percent of intelligent people.²

Such a gift is known to exist among native communities--certain Indian individuals possess such a gift. These people are recognized for their superior abilities and extraordinary skills. More so than the Western mainstream, American Indians understand genius and intellectualism very well as a “gift.”

For the definition of “intellect” and “intellectualism,” *Webster’s* defines intellect as “the power of knowing as distinguished from the power to feel and to will; the capacity for knowledge; the capacity for rational or intelligent thought especially when highly developed; a person of notable intellect” and “intellectualism” as “devotion to the exercise of intellect or to intellectual pursuits.”³ Naturally this same definition may not be appropriate for identifying knowledgeable and gifted thinkers of traditional Indian societies of the many diverse indigenous communities throughout the Western hemisphere.

The *Webster* definitions apply to the Anglo-American mainstream culture of a linear-thinking mind-set. Thus, these two definitions of “genius” and “intellect” would be different in Native American society, which has its own diverse cultures, although since the nineteenth century many American Indians have been absorbed into the American mainstream culture, and they think less traditionally as indigenous peoples.

A definition for native genius of indigenous communities might appropriately be “keepers of traditional knowledge who have insightful life experiences and who possess gifts of special insights to life, and whose actions benefit their people.”

Ideology in Indigenous Society

If ideas influence society and thinkers of new ideas offer society significant

improvement, then the “acceptability” of such ideas also deserves examination for discussion. Ideas influence societal development and thus shape the culture of the community. This aspect is critical among native peoples, whose leaders and communities approve of new ideas and new ways for their daily lives. An indigenous community’s acceptance of new ideas is the willingness of its society to accept change. This reception might be called societal reform, even though ideas and new ideology are typically slowly accepted by any society. This observation also sheds significant light on new ideas accepted by Indian people in developing their communities and cultures. As premier examples, the Aztecs of Mexico, Incas of Peru, Pueblos of the Southwest, and eastern mound builders of Cahokia constructed great civilizations. But, who were the architects, engineers, and mathematicians by name?

In order to discuss the basic nature of genius and intellectualism, it is necessary to compare the mind-sets of the American Indian and Anglo-American. A dichotomy of Indian and white mind-sets have evolved in separate hemispheres of the worlds.⁴ How is it that certain geometric forms and architectural designs are fundamentally the same in geographic opposites of the world? How is it that a coincidence that pyramids were constructed in Central America and in Egypt could occur? How have calendars measuring precise time developed in the native Western hemisphere and in the Eastern hemisphere?

Natural Dichotomy

Historically, the minds of the American Indian and the Anglo-American are very different, due to their evolution in two separate parts of the world. Developing in opposite hemispheres, the American Indian mind and the Anglo-American mind are naturally set and steeped in incongruent values that distinguish their separateness. In earlier writing, I maintained that the Indian mind and the Anglo-American mind are polar opposites, and that due to cultural developments in different parts of the world, the two races advanced their thinking by developing separate sets of values that remain incongruent in the context of historical Indian-white relations.⁵

In *Individualism Reconsidered*, David Riesman observed “that without consensus on values, our democratic society would not hold together,”⁶ which would also be true of Indian society in general--indigenous communities would disintegrate. Consensus on ideas and values is an imperative in order for a society to advance. Yet, values are pertinent to the shaping of thought and how a person perceives things.⁷ As values are reinforced on a daily basis, individual and society norms are established, and culture becomes defined.

As a result of different hemispheric orientation of the thinking mind, and primarily due to cultural influences and fundamental needs, the brain of the American Indian developed with an orientation to “circular thought” and the brain of the Anglo-American developed with an orientation to “linear thought.” During the 1970s, some scholars noted this difference in intellect and observed

American Indians to be “right-brained” oriented and mainstream individuals to be “left-brained” oriented. The right brain stressed quality performance in the arts and music, emphasizing creativity and imagination. The left brain stressed rationality and scientific reasoning based on laws of physics and math. Naturally, we hoped to merge the two kinds of thinking into one, while society continues to have representation in both groups and many non-Indians have shown an orientation toward the left-brain of creativity and abstract thought.⁸ Furthermore, this theory of left and right brain has been seriously challenged since the 1970s; however, it remains an interesting coincidence of the incongruence of the Western scientific mind of the American mainstream and the American Indian mind due to the fact that their logics are different in thinking.⁹

One fundamental difference that helps to distinguish American Indian genius and indigenous intellectualism is consideration of “individualism” and “collectivism” as embodiments of both Indian and non-Indian societies. In general, society can be divided into these two categories, yet these two entities tell us very much how American Indians and mainstream Americans differ greatly. Although Native Americans are individuals, the cultural emphasis is on the group over the individual so that collectivism is more influential; hence collectivism in communalism is preferred over individualism.¹⁰ For example, the Lakota culture focuses on the “tiosapaye” as the socio-kinship extended family that is the foundation of Lakota society.¹¹ In a similar collective thinking, eastern woodland peoples like the Muscogee Creeks and Seminoles as well as the Cherokees stressed the importance of “clan” as being central to their societal infrastructures.

Among Indian societies, the natural dichotomy of “individual” and “communalism” creates a balance of cultural norm and behavior expectations. While group collectiveness is preferred for social acceptance and validated by kinship and symbolic kinship relationships, the tribal society acknowledges all members of the community. In writing the early classic, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind*, Charles Horton Cooley stressed that in Indian society “every peculiarity of temperament was understood, and the individual was respected or despised according to his predominating characteristics.”¹² Native peoples acknowledged the individual personalities, but the collective emphasis was greater than individualism that could be achieved by one person.

Individuality

Such individuality has been championed in western society, and the American public lauds such individuals as “great minds.” Furthermore, individuals who have pioneered frontier development--explored, colonized, and acted--were men of “inner direction,” as coined by David Riesman, and “they were guided by internalized goals and ideals which made them appear to be more individualistic than they actually were.”¹³ For Indigenous Peoples, an inner direction would be analogous to the vision that they experience, like a path of direction that must be followed.

In an early observation on the development of the United States, Alexis de Tocqueville identified the characteristic of American "individualism."¹⁴ Although Americans found support in communities, they found themselves needing to rely on their own personal strengths and resourcefulness. Due to the development of the United States via the seizing and settlement of Indian lands, the pioneer experience has been the mainstream American story of struggle, success, and identity through individual quest.

In 1892 young Frederick Jackson Turner presented his historic "Frontier Thesis" in an essay before the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago. In this address, Turner stressed "individuality" as being a part of the American experience and its intellect: "The result is that to the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom--these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier."¹⁵

Turner mentioned Indians twelve times by "Indian" or the name of a tribe in his famed essay. Turner gave the vivid impression that the continent was conquered by individual Americas, and that Indian people were not imperative to the development of the country.¹⁶ By the late nineteenth century, scholars and writers of the time suggested that the frontier had disappeared, and so did the Indian presence. Scientific thought permeated American society at the beginning of this next one hundred years. As the United States entered the twentieth century, a popular trend called Progressivism depicted this modernization of America. Theodore Roosevelt championed "rugged individualism," which called for American heroes and image building, whether or not the truth was distorted.

In contrast to the individualistic nature of the Anglo-American mainstream, the indigenous cultures of America preferred a collective or communal culture. The social knowledge of the community increased with ideologies of the thinkers and wise elders of the community as a type of sociological concept of thought. The results were tribal philosophies and religions. This "sociology of knowledge" that has been described by Karl Mannheim in his work, *Ideology and Utopia*, explains that the "individual" is a product of a group that has influenced the thinking of the individual intellect.¹⁷

Cultural Relativism

Individualism and collectivism form the fabric of the indigenous nature of society and its culture. But, what is relative in culture, is the essential question as the guiding influence to people. A borrowed phrase from anthropology, "cultural relativism" sheds significant light on American Indian genius and indigenous intellectualism. Hence, a group of people or a community live

according to certain cultural traits or patterns that have relevant value to the community. This cultural relativism defies the identity and what the group or community believes to be important as a body; thus culture and group are synonymous. In writing on "individualism and collectivism," Harry C. Triandis, a psychologist, noted the importance of cultural behavior, stating that "a cultural syndrome is a pattern characterized by shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles, and values that are organized around a theme and that can be found in certain geographic regions during a particular historic period."¹⁸

Perception of Reality

Perception of the individual and that of the community is relevant to the defining of the ethos or worldview of the indigenous community. The quality of one's perception is germane to the development of one's intellect. Perception is key to how we associate and see the relationships of objects, even though their meanings may be incongruent. Hence, the foreseen patterns or connections between objects is a kindred association with the mental eye.

Because native people are communally oriented and circular in thought, they have an innate quality of "seeing" and trying to understand relationships and "connections." This norm is imperative in order to preserve community and unity. Such an order of life might be called a natural democracy. Onondaga scholar Oren Lyons stated, "In our [Iroquois] perception all life is equal, and that includes the birds, animals, things that grow, things that swim. All life is equal in our perception."¹⁹ The natural democracy of life is a philosophy of many Indigenous People who understand themselves to be a part of nature, and not above it.

Because the true reality of Indian people is a tandem of physical and metaphysical realities, native thinkers have encountered visions and spirits on a regular basis as a part of life. This aspect of the metaphysical is similar to the dreams of individuals of western society, who sometimes find answers to questions that could not be answered by their conscious minds. This metaphysical dimension of Indian life has led to an easier acceptance of abstract ideas and dealing with abstract thought.

Sense of Place

The abstract nature of ideas and abstract thought is more acceptable to tangible items such as place within a physical environment. The sense of "place," usually one's homeland, has a pertinent bearing on the native person and how he or she views the world and the universe. Place is a tangible commodity for reference to one's thoughts, and we easily "see" tangible things on a daily basis in relationship to our tangible place called home. However, "how" we see non-tangible things and entertain abstract notions of thought still are better acted upon from a reference of place or homeland. Hence, place is importantly

influential in how indigenous people understand the world and the universe. This perspective becomes the basis for their native ethos, for realization, and for adding to their knowledge about life.

Related to the significance of place is the “power” of place. Sacred sites and places possess power for any number of reasons, which have had important effects on Indigenous People’s minds. Such places of empowerment have significantly influenced one’s understanding and process of perception. A concrete example is the “burning bush” that Moses saw; many “gifted” Indian people have had such visions. Sacred places have provided understanding and learning about life and the universe, and they include the Black Hills, Blue Lake of the Taos, Mackinac Island, Mount Ranier, Mount Taylor, and Bear Butte.²⁰ Other sacred places to Indigenous Peoples include Uinta in Utah, Tukumcari in New Mexico, the Black Hills in South Dakota, and the Four Corners area of the Southwest that held special meaning for the Hopi, the Diné (Navajo), and early Spanish peoples.²¹

In a similar manner, Plains Indian people seek hilltops while praying for a vision, other native peoples have special places for prayer, and certain areas were endowed for helping Indian people, especially those who were medicine makers, seers, prophets, and those possessing extraordinary gifts of knowledge. People have special places where they feel more secure and safe, and such places should not be discouraged. This aspect of life is one that Indigenous People have understood for a long time and it is a part of their various cultures.

Perception of Time

A related and important element is time. How a person understands the concept of “time,” however, is less relevant in the basic perception of thought. In making concluding observations about “time” and “order in society,” Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, in *The Art of Time*, stated, “Once the time structures chosen by us materialize and endure, confusion abates.”²² The increments of time as determined by the measurements of seconds, minutes, hours, and days compels those in society to run their lives according to the proverbial clock. The rat-race of Anglo-American society sets up false competition; thus everything is directed toward accomplishing great deeds within spans of time. Such regulation of life according to time measurements has caused a Western conception of time as a commodity to be dealt with, rather than one of the abstract laws of the universe as in the view of Native Americans.

The concept of time for Indian people has been a continuum such that time becomes less relevant and the rotation of life or seasons of the year are stressed as important for understanding life. This idea is inherent to understanding life for American Indians and is also inherent to mainstream Americans and the rest of the world, although time is less of a factor for comprehending the changes or phases of life from birth to childhood to adulthood to old age and to death.

Among the Barren Ground Inuit of the Arctic, the migration of caribou herds

marks the cycle of time for the year beginning in May. The annual cycle of the seasons begins with the caribou. Because of the importance of the caribou in providing meat, hide, antlers, and other natural resources vital to the life of the people, the Inuit have named their months and measure time accordingly.²³ Other native peoples have employed similar cycles of consistency in their lives as measurements of time, such that time is perceived as a continuum instead of a linear chronology.

As “time” is one of the fundamental elements of existence, “space” is another crucial element for understanding life. Space to Indian people is the inclusion of tangible and non-tangible things in the world and in the universe. All such things have existence and the space between things establishes the start of a relationship between two items. For example, any two tangible objects possess a space between them, thus forming a relationship of one object to the other one. Among native people, this relationship was acknowledged with hope that such an arrangement would be positive. Naturally, sometimes the relationship was negative--history holds records of indigenous communities at war with other native communities, known often as historic rivalries.

Existence of Space

The space between objects becomes the relationship with intention for harmony. The objects themselves emit an energy, since each possesses a spirit. Among Indian people, it is known that each item has a story about it--such as a bowl of pottery being made, an uncle making a flute for a niece, a father helping his son in making a bow for hunting--and each event encapsulates a story and the object created, giving it life and energy necessary for spirituality.

“Soul” exists within the object, which comes alive with each story that is told and retold. Characters, place, and action come alive visually in the minds of listeners. This oral tradition comes alive, varying according to the effectiveness of the storyteller and his or her influence on the audience. As vivid as dreams and visions to the subconscious, the soul of the story is vivid to the conscious mind.

The movement of the soul called spirituality is regulated by the storyteller and the listeners. It is the momentum of the story that has an emotional effect on the audience of listeners. And by the emotional effects, the listeners give shape, form, color, and perhaps smell to the spirituality of the story’s soul as they are guided by the storyteller.

Meaning of Mass

The counterpart to space is mass. The mass of an object is fundamental to the universe for its weight and constitution of atoms. However, how we perceive mass is entirely a different matter, depending on perspective, and how Indians “see” is vital to understanding an indigenous intellectualism. Indian people see mass in relationship to other particles of mass; hence, all things are related in light

of a big picture of the world and the universe.²⁴ With individuality de-emphasized, the community of masses (or objects) form a community with human beings that emits a culture of conformity and regular norms that occur in cycles, according to day or night, changing moons, changing seasons, and birth to death.

Masses of objects also contain stored energy. Upon release, this active energy acts as the spirit of an object so that each object has life. This concept is supported by the native belief that sacred sites exist, trees are living entities, and rivers are believed to be alive. Some empowered sites radiate strong feelings of a positive nature, while others might radiate negative feelings. To believe that only humans, animals, and plants are alive is erroneous.

Relationships of Order

Understanding how atoms, items, objects, humans, or entities in general are related to or associated with each other is imperative to an individual's understanding and comprehension of the world and the universe. According to the Creator, all things are in a sequential order called the circle of life. Relationship and order are essential concepts that help to understand the native ethos of Indian people. As mentioned, the relationship of all things in the universe represents an inherent order of life and existence. Understanding the relationships between objects is germane to understanding the Indian world according to tribal traditions.

In the case of indigenous intellectualism, new relationships are extrapolated in ways that have not been previously recognized. Posed as abstract theory, the supposed relationships between objects becomes the catalyst for advancing indigenous intellectualism. Next they are received, usually with a story told about the experience, and this episode may become a part of the oral tradition.

Causality

With the above fundamental elements covered, the final element in forming and defining thought is causality. In the indigenous world, the laws of physics do not always apply in explaining "why" something happened. The laws of nature are more appropriate--at least, the natural laws interpreted by the indigenous mind, since logic of the Western mind often fails to provide an acceptable explanation to scientific-minded society. Among native peoples, the explanation does not necessarily require scientific proof, but instead some indigenous logical explanation is provided.

The causes of action is a part of the physical and metaphysical realities of native people. Furthermore, metaphysical beings can cause things to occur in the physical world, but not vice versa. For this reason, American Indians value highly the metaphysical world, and thus believe that it is more powerful than the physical dimension of their world. Basil Johnston, Ojibway scholar, has written, "Stories about the manitous [spirits] allow native people to understand their cultural and

spiritual heritage and enable them to see the worth and relevance of their ideas, institutions, perceptions, and values.”²⁵

Many indigenous communities of the Western hemisphere acknowledge that the causality of the “unexplained” resulted from supernatural forces that control the environment and that a supreme force bestowed life upon the universe. Indigenous thinkers rationalize that the causes of life and historical events were connected and resulted from the actions of positive and negative forces. This natural dualism of the world and the universe superimposed on humans concludes that a balance would produce a harmonious life experience. Indigenous People accept this general explanation since “a shortage of [day’s] time disallowed scientific investigation (a privilege of bountiful civilizations and later phase of societal development), and their waking hours demanded obtaining and preparing food.”²⁶

Language and Knowledge

Language is the oral expression of people and a manifestation of their culture. Among indigenous communities, the native language conveys meaning and culture simultaneously so that the listener learns much about the values of the speaker and his or her culture. Language served as a two-way communication so that the speaker could convey his or her ideas and the listener could interpret the same ideas, although the same meaning of the speaker and listener did not always occur. Hence, perception and how one thinks logically due to language becomes a variable or reason for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

Within indigenous cultures, certain individuals were viewed as having important roles in their stations as keepers of traditional knowledge. Elders of Indian tribal communities have been viewed as the most knowledgeable people among Indian people. Wisdom accumulated over the years from life experiences and as observers of historical events and events of other people’s lives for Indian elders, who possess great knowledge that has evolved from the early beginnings of their people.

Keepers of traditional knowledge could be listed as native geniuses, although a contribution of creation to society seems to be a criterion in western society. The profile of an American Indian genius and the profile of an indigenous intellectual have yet to be determined. One profile of an American Indian genius might be a person steeped in the traditionalism of his or her people relating to values of the tribal community and the manifestation of individual expression through individual actions of the person that represents deep inner thought on a frequent basis that also enlightens one’s family, relatives, and community.

American Indian Genius

With all of this considered above, the word “genius” from the English language might not necessarily describe the Indian genius, and it would be helpful

to consider that there would likely be more than one kind or level of Native American genius. For example, an Indian genius could be a person who might be intuitive about thought, while another native genius could be both intuitive in thought and in action. Possibly, a native genius could be intuitive about their own personal life, while another native genius could be intuitive about his or her personal life, but that person could also influence others or change the course of action such as on the battlefield or in a classroom by influencing the learning level of students.

On many occasions, the brilliance of individual Indian people has been demonstrated by the influence of circumstance or situation. Unfortunately, such brilliance has been on the battlefield in war against the United States, as it has been recorded by mainstream observers and written by non-Indian journalists, writers, and scholars. As a result, many outstanding Indian leaders who might have been deemed geniuses have been tested on the battlefield whereas their true arena may have been elsewhere in another area. For example, young Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce did not wish to be a military leader. He was a man of peace, but circumstances forced him to exhibit his brilliance in war against the United States.

It is in these other circumstances that we must look at Indian intellectualism. Deeds of honor, development of native society in religious thought and philosophical thought, and in medicine are other areas in which a native genius was likely to be acknowledged by his or her people. For example, Sanapia, Comanche Eagle Doctor, was such a person who earned the respect of her people, even though this came later in life as she initially avoided the gift of medicine making.²⁷

Again, native values must be considered when considering indigenous intellectualism. Of the various values that Indian people hold in high esteem, relationships is one of them. As described above, relationships are keys to understanding the world and the universe; hence, knowing and gaining new relationships is essential to well-being and existence in the Native American world.

Related to relationships is kinship. Kinship is the bonding element that holds together the entities of the Indian world. This type of spiritual energy is essential for the maintenance of Indigenous Peoples who depend on collectivism. Thus, relationships are vital to communal continuity as well as to understanding relationships with non-humans and with the metaphysical entities of life. Appreciation and respect for animals is an important value to native people. Animals via the oral tradition have shared knowledge about life with Indian people, and Native Americans view themselves as being related to animals.²⁸

Undoubtedly, tradition and native heritage would influence a native genius and form the foundation of their thinking. Early childhood exposure to pertinent values and beliefs would be routine in one's life. As early influence by adults, for example, the child would be engaged in conversation by adults and taught the differences between things and why such differences are evident. The child would then see the relationships or illogical relationships among things, at first among concrete items, then among abstract items.

Native Thought

By understanding the relationships between items, the native thinker engages thought to theorize about illogical relationships between items that could relate to each other in an unusual pattern. Such unusual relationships and parallels engaged by the native genius would then become familiar, such that theory, idea, familiarity, and permanent relationship would develop for a philosophy about such relationships and parallels within the world and universe.

Such relationships and parallels do not have to always be human-to-human relationships and parallels. Rather, native thinkers have involved human-animal and human-plant relationships since their earliest oral traditions, as their people envisioned a human relationship with all things tangible and non-tangible.

The indigenous understanding of tangible and non-tangible things reminds us of the differences between the traditional Indian world and the white world. The native thinker comes from his or her Indian world of values and ethos, and he or she is able to function within the values and ethos of the white world of the western mind. This dualistic behavior calls for competence and confidence of the abilities of the native genius to operate successfully in both societies. Furthermore, the Indian genius is an amalgamation of both worlds and their sets of values and norms.

However, a true native genius would excel in both societies, although the first level is to demonstrate intuitive knowledge and performance in one's native society. And this level of genius performance should be enough, but because native people are in the minority compared to the majority, then the latter is required for the superior Indian intellectual functioning in the white world to be accepted.

The state of action here is the native cyclical mind operating in the Western linear society and being acknowledged at a high level of intelligence. Continued performance at a high level and acknowledgment from the linear society establishes a categorical status of the American Indian genius of indigenous thought. "You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round," stated Black Elk, the noted holyman of the Oglala. He continued, "Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round . . . and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves."²⁹

Specifically, some of the past native leaders were most likely indigenous intellectuals and possibly American Indian geniuses. For example, Tecumseh, the great Shawnee leader during the War of 1812, envisioned an Indian confederacy based on many alliances. He foresaw such relationships, while his skeptics

and enemies sought to undermine his goal to unite the many Indian tribes against the United States.

The Cherokee genius, Sequoyah, was a quiet individual who invented an 86-character syllabary to produce a written Cherokee language. Diligent in character, Sequoyah strove to create a written language for his people. His invention revolutionized the Cherokee nation, making the Cherokee the most advanced Indian nation during the mid-nineteenth century.³⁰

Young Chief Joseph was noted for his resourcefulness in times of war against the United States when his people, the Nez Perce, did not wish to fight. Employing trick, deception, and resourceful thinking, Chief Joseph out-maneuvered the armies of the United States and saved his people in several battles, until he was forced to surrender just before he was able to get his people into Canada.

Alexander Lawrence Posey wrote a humorous satire about the Indian Territory at the turn of the twentieth century. A witty young Muscogee Creek, Posey wrote about the wrongdoing of the federal government's treatment of American Indians from a native perspective. In 1902 Posey purchased the *Indian Journal* and quickly established a reputation for his political satire in his "Fus Fixico" letters over the next few years. In 1908, the quick-witted Posey tragically died in a drowning accident. His writing earned him a national reputation among journalists, and he wrote poetry as well. For the suppressed Indian people of Indian Territory, his "Fus Fixico" letters provided humor and hope that better times were ahead. This was during a difficult time that involved land allotment via amendments to the Dawes Act affecting the Five Civilized Tribes and the push for statehood of Oklahoma, which occurred in 1907.³¹

Dr. Charles Alexander Eastman, a Santee Sioux, became a physician in 1890. After serving in Lakota country as a doctor, Dr. Eastman wrote several books about his life, and that of the American Indian in general, at the turn of the twentieth century to enlighten the American public, who had grown curious about Indian life. His transition from an Indian world to the white world proved remarkable as he succeeded in both. Another notable Indian is Dr. Carlos Montezuma (Yavapai), who was a contemporary of Eastman's.

In modern life in the twentieth century, the modern American Indian genius and indigenous intellectuals have yet to be properly recognized by the American mainstream. In indigenous communities, the modern Indian genius has been acknowledged by native peoples, sometimes with other names. Deep thinkers and native individuals of traditional knowledge fall into this category of modern Indian geniuses, who also take action in some way. Their thoughts and actions usually distinguish them in leadership positions, although this manifestation does not always have to be in the political arena, such as a tribal leader or leader of an Indian organization.

One such modern American Indian genius is Vine Deloria, Jr. Easily considered the most articulate Indian spokesperson of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Vine Deloria, Jr., a Standing Rock Sioux, continues to

write books and articles of his thoughts and ideas that have educated many Indian and non-Indian people. A prolific scholar and author of more than fifteen books, Deloria is a keen thinker and has produced work of such great insight that he has led others to see and to understand Indian people from an Indian point of view. He is an American Indian genius.

Dr. N. Scott Momaday became famous when his novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968) won the Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1969. His gift of writing was recognized by the public, and since then he has provided Indian people and the world with poetry and novels. Born a Kiowa of schoolteachers, Scott Momaday has an inquisitive thirst for understanding and sharing native tradition. His ability to express such traditions and his own interpretation exemplifies the connections between tribal traditions, humor, and understanding that have made his work such a joy to hear and to read.

Conclusion

Ample evidence exists of the American Indian genius being in the past and present. This evidence of the American Indian genius is historic and dates back to the earliest existence of indigenous communities, although such individuals were probably called wise elders or persons of great medicine. An encyclopedia-like publication by Gales Publishing called *Notable Native Americans*, edited by Sharon Malinowski, lists 267 notable American Indians in various fields and occupations, such as education, tribal leadership, warriors, activists, and writers.³² While this is a low number to recognize, even if a safe 10 percent of these 267 American Indian individuals were considered, then there have been at least 25 American Indian geniuses who have lived or are living today. Furthermore, there are many more notable individuals to mention than the ones discussed above.

During the mid-1970s, Dr. Dean Chavers completed a survey of American Indians in academia, and found that 191 American Indians held doctorates. His survey also noted that most professional Indian people went into law and education. This is a very low number, and in the year 2000, Dr. Chavers projects that there are now at least 1,000 American Indians holding doctorates.³³

The status of indigenous intellectualism was established thirty years ago. Building upon the American Indian studies program that originated in 1968, more than 112 academic institutions in the United States and in Canada have been the host of Indian and non-Indian intellectuals recognized by the mainstream. These programs and departments have fostered native intellectual growth as more college students have majored in American Indian studies over the years.

However, many traditional elders are also Native American intellectuals at various levels, and some might also be geniuses. In their own communities, tribal members acknowledge wise individuals who have exceptional abilities that can provide help and perspective on critical problems. In native society, great thinkers are not given as much respect as those gifted individuals who are able to

provide explanations and solutions to problems, thus stressing practicality as a value that identifies exceptional individuals in Indian society. Perhaps more important is the question about the future and the potential of Indian youth. Luther Standing Bear, Lakota, expressed his choice in 1933: "If today I had a young mind to direct, to start on the journey of life, and I was faced with the duty of choosing between the natural way of my forefathers and that of the present way of civilization, I would, for its welfare unhesitatingly set that child's feet in the path of my forefathers. I would raise him to be an Indian!"³⁴

In conclusion, undoubtedly more Indian geniuses and native intellectuals have lived and are living now than the American public has ever acknowledged. For example, at this date, Mensa is not sure how many of its members are American Indian, if there are any. The point is that American Indians have not been previously thought to be intellectuals or have even been called geniuses by non-Indians. Until mainstream academia acknowledges the existence of Indian intellectualism and Native American genius, many such brilliant native people will go undetected. Some possible reasons might be that the mainstream has not seen American Indian intellectuals as contributing to the mainstream society, unless such native people participate in the mainstream. Possibly mainstream intellectuals know too little about indigenous intellectuals; thus they are uncomfortable about recognizing American Indians as geniuses. And possibly, mainstream intellectuals and their organizations are unsure how to acknowledge the extraordinary work of Indian intellectuals.

Perhaps Indian people should give recognition to their own native geniuses and indigenous intellectuals. Their contributions should be acknowledged, but ironically this presents a challenge in itself among various tribal traditions of individuals not wanting to be singled out for attention for fear of ridicule. While group acceptance has prevailed as a part of the indigenous cultures of this continent, this cultural assumption should not deny the recognition of the American Indian genius and indigenous intellectualism.

Notes

1. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, based on *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1970), 348.

2. Marvin Grosswirth, Abbie F. Salny, Alan Stillson, and members of American Mensa, *Match Wits with Mensa* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1981), xiii-xiv.

3. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, 440.

4. As examples of the western mind, see Arthur K. Moore, *The Frontier Mind* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1957), and Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character Since the 1880's* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

5. Donald L. Fixico, "The Struggle for Our Homes: Indian and White Values and Tribal Lands," in Jace Weaver, ed., *Defending Mother Earth: Native American Perspectives on Environmental Justice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 30-31.

6. David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered: And Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 17.

7. A helpful discussion of American values is Donald N. Barrett, ed., *Values in America* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1961).

8. Jan Ehrenwald, *Anatomy of Genius: Split Brains and Global Minds* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1984), 7-9.

9. For information about the closer parallel of Indian and Anglo-American thinking, see Leslie Linthicum, "Scientist Sees Religious Parallels," *News From Indian Country* 14(5) (mid-March 2000): 1A, 5A.

10. "Popular individualism is hardly beyond criticism, however, and its major fault is that, like all other individualism, it creates victims. . . . Those who have lost ties, voluntarily or otherwise, but cannot develop new ones may suffer from levels and forms of social isolation that can lead to despair." Triandis, Harry C. *Individualism and Collectivism* (Boulder, et. al.: Westview Press, 1995).

11. I am indebted to Dr. Leonard Bruguier, Director of American Indian Studies at the University of South Dakota, for introducing this Lakota concept to me many years ago.

12. Originally quoted in F. S. Dellenbaugh, *The North Americans of Yesterday*, 416; Charles Horton Cooley stresses the importance of individual recognition by the clan, and the parallels he draws of American Indian tribal communities to the German Teutonic tribes in stating, "In a life that the Teutonic tribes before they took on Roman civilization, the social medium was small, limited for most purposes to the family, clan or village group. Within this narrow circle there was a vivid interchange of thought and feeling, a sphere of moral unity, of sympathy, loyalty, honor and congenial intercourse. Here precious traditions were cherished. . . ." *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 107-08, copyright 1909, published in 1937 by Charles Scribner's Sons.

13. David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered: And Other Essays* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1954), 27.

14. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 2 vols.

15. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," an original copy at State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, December 14, 1893, 226-227.

16. In 1892, Turner, a historian, at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, delivered his famed essay on the "Frontier" at the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago.

17. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1936), 2-3.

18. Harry C. Triandis, *Individualism and Collectivism* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 43.

19. Oren Lyons, "An Iroquois Perspective," in Christopher Vecsey and Robert W. Venables, eds., *American Indian Environments: Ecological Issues in Native American History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1980), 173.

20. As an example, for the Diné (Navajo), see Klara Kelley and Francis Harris, "Places Important to Navajo People," *American Indian Quarterly* 17(2) (Spring 1993):151-170.

21. Winifred Gallagher, *The Power of Place: How Our Surroundings Shape Our Thoughts, Emotions, and Actions* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 23 and 96.

22. Jean-Louis Servan-Schreiber, *The Art of Time* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1989), translated by Franklin Philip, 3d printing, 127

23. David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson, *Wisdom of the Elders: Honoring Sacred Visions of Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 181.

24. For examples of indigenous thought, see Miguel Leon-Portilla, translated by Jack Emory Davis, *Aztec Thought and Culture: A Study of the Ancient Nahuatl Mind* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963) and Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Time and Reality in the Thought of the Maya* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988).

25. Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Supernatural World of the Ojibway* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1995), viii.

26. Hans Kelsen professed that the principle of causality was unknown to primitive peoples (and American Indians are often classified as such), and that primitives interpreted nature according to social norms and the norm of retribution), (Hans Kelsen, *Society and Nature, A Sociological Inquiry* [Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1943]), vii; and see Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1998), chapter 11.

27. David E. Jones, ed., *Sanapia: Comanche Eagle Doctor* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1984).

28. Howard L. Harrod has described the Indian-animal relationships among twelve northern plains tribal groups in *The Animals Came Dancing: Native American Sacred Ecology and Animal Kinship* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000).

29. Quote of Black Elk, 1933, in Norbert S. Hill, Jr., ed., *Words of Power: Voices from Indian America* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), xi.

30. W. C. Carmack, ed., *Indian Oratory: Famous Speeches by Noted Indian Chieftains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 101-102; see also Traveller Bird, *Tell Them They Lie: The Sequoyah Myth* (Los Angeles: Western Lore Publishers, 1971), George E. Foster, *Se-Quo-Yah, The American Cadmus and Modern Moses* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Association, 1885), and Grant Foreman, *Sequoyah* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1938).

31. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., and Carol A. Petty Hunter, eds., *The Fus Fixico Letters: Alexander Posey* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xiii-xiv.

32. Sharon Malinowski, ed., *Notable Native Americans* (Detroit: Gales Publishing, 1995).

33. Dr. Dean Chavers did the survey for the Ford Foundation during the mid-1970s, and at a conference of directors of American Indian, Native American, and First Nations Studies Programs, held at Arizona State University, March 2-3, 2000, Tempe, he reflected on his survey and estimated that at least 1,000 American Indians held doctorates currently.

34. Quote by Luther Standing Bear, 1933, in Norbert S. Hill, Jr., ed., *Words of Power: Voices from Indian America* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 1994), 12.