

Peacemaking the Navajo Way by Mark Sorensen

Forty years ago I moved to the heart of the Navajo Reservation in northern Arizona. I was a graduate student, working on my PhD at the University of Illinois, and I wanted to live for a while among the People, the Dine', to find out what research for my dissertation would be most helpful to the tribe. Within a few weeks, I fell in love: in love with the incredible landscape of red sandstone cliffs and mesas that was as different from the Midwestern rain and black soil as if I had moved to Mars. And in love with the magnificent people and the way they welcomed me as family. So I dropped out of my doctoral program and decided to stay in Navajoland.

I needed to provide something in return for the privilege of living on the reservation, so I taught in a local elementary school. I had become a successful teacher in Illinois and knew how to do that job well. Besides, I loved being around the children, treating them with respect and being respected by them in return. Soon the family of the school's lead bus driver took me under their wing and invited me to live in their traditional Navajo dwelling—a hogan—located near the mountains in their sheep camp.

It was a glorious time of discovery and I reveled in it. I felt so blessed to be surrounded by such awesome, austere natural beauty and living in a home of such an ancient design. I still live within this awesome beauty—within the four sacred mountains of the Navajo people—and I still feel incredibly blessed. This story, however, is not just about how I fell in love with the depth of the Navajo people and the cultural values they have developed over the centuries; it is a story about the system of Navajo Peacemaking and how it could be a gift to the world.

Absorbed into K'e

The couple who took me in during that first year treated me as part of their family and began calling me "son." Since they had nine children, all younger than me, I became the older brother and learned a great deal over the years about the concept of extended relationship called "K'e." Although I had been raised in Illinois by a loving and close-knit family, I was completely surprised that this Navajo family living in the high desert of the Navajo Nation and speaking a language I could barely understand would so completely take in an urban American white guy. I was not only adopted into the nuclear family, I was told to introduce myself in Navajo as part of their clan.

As I hesitatingly took on the role they offered me, it began to dawn on me that I could, through the clan system, have an unlimited number of mothers, fathers, sisters, or grandfathers. And my newfound relatives were not only human beings. I was taught and shown that I was also related to the fire and the air, the earth and the water, and all of nature. Indeed, I learned that I am always surrounded by relatives, and it still gives me a feeling of incredible support.

Within a few years I was hired as a principal in the first tribally controlled school in the country. I kept learning more about the Navajo culture and language and found it endlessly fascinating because my friends and the people in my community lived it. I was struck by how resilient the people were in spite of the genocide and demeaning educational practices imposed on them by the U.S. government. Of course, there were many obvious problems: alcohol abuse, domestic violence, low levels of education, to name a few. Nevertheless, the people were generally cheerful and generous with one another.

Some 15 years later, I had fully felt the power of K'e—of interrelatedness and kinship—and I had seen many examples of how to be caring and supportive. I was also very fortunate to begin working with a Navajo community leader, Thomas Walker, who had been raised by generations of Peacemakers, and he brought that training to his work with the school.

Traditional Peacemaking is a system of resolving conflicts that Navajos used long before contact with Europeans. It is built upon K'e, and the fundamental idea is to restore relationships and harmony rather than to assign guilt and punishment. Even though the Peacemaking system of justice and healing is foreign to mainstream American culture and the antagonistic nature of the American courts, the tribe has, since the 1980s, made Peacemaking part of the tribal courts. Most intriguing for me was that I was able to learn how the very concept that brought me into my tribal family was also used to make peace in the community.

The Process of Peacemaking

While Navajo Peacemaking shares a number of processes with what is currently called restorative justice, it also has some distinct differences. Here are the seven steps of the process that Thomas Walker brought to our school:

Step 1 A request for spiritual assistance is made. This is often thought of as offering a prayer for the best possible outcome for everyone, but in the Navajo view, it could also be thought of as aligning ourselves with Hozho, the state of harmony and beauty. Thus it is not considered as being of a particular religion, but more accurately affirming the best of who we are as human beings.

Step 2 Everyone present (and this can include relatives and concerned others) identifies how they are connected or related to one another. For Navajos, this includes identifying one's clan and establishing connections with clans of others.

Step 3 The Peacemaker describes the rules of behavior in the session: One person speaks at a time; participants refrain from personal put-downs and focus on talking about one's own feelings rather than judgments about the other person.

Step 4 The participants describe the problem that caused the conflict. The Peacemaker often asks the person who feels most wronged to go first.

Step 5 The Peacemaker guides the discussion to identify areas of common ground, such as everyone's desire to be treated with respect.

Step 6 Specific things are agreed on for each party to do to renew the relationship. These are written down and repeated for all participants to agree to. Heartfelt apologies are

often exchanged at this time.

Step 7 A statement of gratitude and appreciation is made for relationships being repaired and moving forward with hope.

Because Peacemaking is uniquely and proudly Navajo, Thomas and I got the idea that it would be an excellent way to build character and resilience among our Navajo youth—a way that would help sustain them in the face of discrimination and injustice. We also thought it was a great skill that young people could use to settle their own conflicts, so we set about teaching both teachers and students how to conduct Peacemaking sessions. As we ventured down this path, however, we realized to our sadness that the values of K'e were no longer being practiced in all Navajo homes. In order for our youth to learn Peacemaking effectively, they first had to learn the underlying values: Respect, Relationship (K'e), Responsibility, and Reverence: what we came to call the 4 R's.

My wife, Kate, and Thomas and I then became determined to build a new school serving Navajo youth that would be founded on Peacemaking principles and values. How we established our off-grid solar-powered school on land that had once been a junkyard is a story in itself. What is important here is that we built the STAR (Service To All Relations) School on principles consistent with Navajo Peacemaking: Respect, Relationship, Responsibility, and Reverence. We determined that everyone in the school from the bus drivers to the smallest child would do our best every day to practice these values. We even developed a rubric for everyone to use to check their own behavior and how they were expressing these values.

Restoring K'e

Over the years we've learned that the better our staff and students at the STAR School practice these core values, the fewer incidents that require the full-blown traditional Peacemaking. However, there have been situations that demanded the full procedure. In one such incident, a middle school student and his cousin stole a school van and drove it over 100 miles away, where it was vandalized. We had to report the incident to the sheriff, but when I talked with him about the case, he pointed to a thick pile of papers on his desk and said it would probably take a month for him to get to this one. Meanwhile, our student would be in limbo. So I offered to try Peacemaking, and the sheriff agreed: If Peacemaking worked, the sheriff would drop the case. If it didn't, the student would return to the dominant culture's system of justice.

I presented the Navajo youth and his family with these options, and they agreed to try the Peacemaking approach. Thomas, our resident Peacemaker, agreed to run the session. As each person shared how they were related, the young man's stepfather said that he had once stolen a school van and ended up serving six months in jail. The stepfather broke down in tears as he spoke about how awful that experience had been. Then the young man revealed that he took the van because his stepfather had used some very harsh words and told him to leave—and that he was trying to reach his grandmother's place. As the Peacemaking moved into the stage of repairing the relationships, the young man agreed to do 100 hours of service for the school and asked his stepfather to treat him with more kindness and respect. The stepfather, in tears, said that the young man was one of their most responsible children, and he would spend more quality time with him. Checking on the situation a few months later, we discovered that the stepfather and son were setting aside time each week to play ball together and the whole family had become more united.

Navajo Peacemaking is not focused on determining who is at fault. It is focused on bringing those who have conflicts back into harmonious relationships. In other words, it is more about healing than punishment. Successful Peacemaking generally involves heartfelt regret and apologies—and the truth is, not everyone is willing to get to that point. Some people feel so wronged and harmed that they are not willing to forgive. Some perpetrators are hard-hearted and cannot genuinely express their remorse. However, our experience is that the vast majority of youth are willing and able to take these courageous steps, and for them—and for all of us—traditional Navajo Peacemaking offers a process that can yield remarkable healing.

The STAR School Is Built on Service to All Relations

The STAR School is an off-grid, public charter school located on the southwestern edge of the Navajo Nation in northern Arizona. It is the first of its kind in the country, and our total reliance on renewable energy generated on campus is remarkable. However, it is our efforts to ensure that the school infrastructure and outdoor spaces reflect our focus on all relationships among staff and students and families—as well as our relationship with the cycles of nature—that reveal the heart of the STAR school.

For those who have never lived off-grid with solar and wind power as your only sources of electricity, it may be challenging to visualize how sensitive one can become to the moods of nature. When the day is windy, for example, it is not considered simply a nuisance—because the wind spins the turbines that provide power. Similarly, we are thankful for the cloudy days that bring us rain because our plants are often parched. But we long for the bright, sunny days to return, so our solar panels can be put to use.

A number of other structures around the school campus also help to enhance our relationships with the people and plants that surround us. We built a replica of an ancient Indian amphitheater that is now a National Monument located about 20 miles from our school. The circular gathering place allows the entire student body and faculty to assemble together in a circle. On the walls of the amphitheater we have embedded mosaics made by many of our former students, representing their family clans. At the beginning of every week, the students assemble and greet and acknowledge one another with the Navajo greeting “Ya’at’eeh” (literally, “the universe exists”) to make sure that everyone in the school knows they are seen and acknowledged by everyone else.

We have also developed a site under a group of shade trees with some log rounds as seating and some traditional bread ovens to encourage our Navajo elders to feel at home at the school. This place resembles what is known in Navajo as a “cha’ ha’ oo” or shade house, traditionally used in the summer months as the gathering and cooking area for families. When the harvest season comes around every September, we use this place to encourage Navajo elders to share with the youth their songs and stories about growing traditional Navajo foods. Intergenerational gatherings like this were common when the modern world wasn’t such an overwhelming presence, and we see it as a practice that has value for reinforcing relationships among all generations.

The STAR School also has developed a series of greenhouses and cold frames in which students plant, tend, and harvest vegetables—which are then served in our twice-a-week salad bar. Obviously, there are clear benefits in terms of hands-on science lessons, but one of our major goals is to help the students develop a relationship with these growing, living things and what we eat. To deepen this relationship, we also developed a culinary class in which students learn how to cook tasty, nutritious dishes using locally grown

vegetables with recipes that the students vote on for serving in our cafeteria. Once the students have developed the recipes and gained experience with cooking, we invite their families to come to the school for dinner to eat healthy, local foods that are grown, cooked, and served by their children. The focal point, again, is to strengthen relationships—with the food we eat and with ourselves and our families—by being of service to our families and the community.

It is not easy to encourage all these relationship-building activities and still survive as a public charter school judged by standardized test scores. But we are demonstrating what we believe: that meaningful, caring relationships are vital to our children and that they are the means by which children develop a strong sense of who they are and why their lives matter. We would suggest that children who develop strong, caring relationships with all the people and living things around them will be more grounded and ultimately more prepared to function in, and meaningfully contribute to, an increasingly complex society.

Our next goal is to develop a school Wellness Center. If you would like to learn more or can offer assistance, please go to starschool.org.