

The Service Ethic in Native American Culture

“They (Natives) exhibited great love toward all others in preferences to themselves”.

Remarks attributed to Christopher Columbus
In: This Country Was Ours Virgil Vogel, Harper Books, 1974

“Their great men are generally poorer than the common people for they affect to give away and distribute all they get so as to leave nothing for themselves. There is not a man in the leadership of the Five Nations (Iroquois) who has gained office other than by merit. Their authority is the esteem of the people”.

Cadwallader Colden, 1827
In: History of The Five Nations

“I know not of any government where so much personal liberty is united with greater subordination and devotedness”.

Father Pierre-Jean DeSmet, 1941
In: This Country Was Ours

“I think that perhaps my early training in the home impressed me with the philosophy of our forebears. It was taught to us that if one could be of service to his people, this is one of the greatest honors there is”.

Bernie Bearskin (Winnebago) 1966
In: Division Street America
Studs Terkel, Avon Books, 1967

“An Indian Leader is a servant of the people”.

N. Scott Momaday, Ph. D. (Kiowa), 1977
In: More Than Bows and Arrows (film)

“To lead is to serve and in doing so, help others to help themselves”.

Ross Swimmer (Cherokee), 1982
Principal Chief, Cherokee Nation
Address to Cherokee Nation Youth Leadership Program

“One of the things that has interested me over the years in terms of Native education is that what you call service learning is how Native people transmitted knowledge and culture in their own communities. Yet this was never widely accepted as a legitimate way of transmission of knowledge in this country. So Native people’s views often conflicted with those of high education or public school people about how knowledge should be transmitted from one generation

to the next. It's good to see that you are beginning to come around to our point of view about how young people should learn".

Roger BuffaloHead (Ponca), 1991
Comments at the National Service
Learning Conference, St. Paul, MN

"Service learning is not a new concept to Native communities. It's part of the fabric of our lives, our well-being and survival. In my tradition, to be noble is to give to those who have less. It is an issue of service and leadership. You are a servant of the people must come first".

"Service is a spiritual act. In many cases we've been disconnected from the truth and from ourselves. We need the spiritual ethos of service learning to rebuild our communities, redesigning the "new world order", based on humanity and not on power relationships. Service learning is also a political act, because it empowers people in a very human way-as individuals".

"Service is the rent we pay for living, the anchor to our humanity. It is about moral courage, not about being smart. Moral courage is about stepping forward, and I think everybody can do it-if they find their memory and find their song".

Norbert Hill, Jr. (Oneida) 1991
Comments at the National Service
Learning
Conference, St. Paul, MN

"Money doesn't mean anything to us (older generation). If you give to the needy, that proves you're a man".

Ben Black Elk (Lakota), 1969
In: Can the Red Man Help the White
Man?
Gilbert Church Publications

"As Native people, we have a responsibility to give something back".

"Service can provide an entry point to bring those young people who have been alienated back into the circle".

"Service can represent an act of faith-in our communities, in our traditional values and in our young people".

McClellan Hall (Cherokee) 1992
Comments at the National Service
Learning
Conference, Seattle, WA

“Kinship and clan were built upon the idea that ‘individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors and that if each performed his/her task properly, society as a whole would function’.

Vine Deloria, Jr. (Lakota) 1993
In: Indian Education in America: Eight Essays. AISES Publishing

“In the beginning were the Instructions. We were to have compassion for one another, to live and work together, to depend on each other for support. We were told we were related and interconnected to each other”.

Vickie Downey (Tesuque), 1993
In: Wisdom’s Daughter’s,
Steve Wall (Ed)

“Core values of sharing and community responsibility were deeply ingrained in the community”.

Beck and Walters, 1977
In: The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge Sources of Life. Navajo Comm. College Press

“Prestige was accorded those who gave unreservedly, while those with nothing to give were pitied. To accumulate property for its own sake was disgraceful”.

Hassnick, R. 1964
In: The Sioux: Life and Times of a Warrior Society. Univ. Okla. Press

“...however, property was not acquired for conspicuous consumption but to be better able to help other. Things were less important than people, and the test of one’s right values was to be able to give anything without the pulse quickening”.

Ella Deloria, 1943
In: Speaking of Indian Friendship Press