

what would democracy look like?

the talking circle

Manitonquat (Medicine Story)

How can we re-learn respect, understand the gifts of creation, and break the cycle of violence? In prisons, a Native American democratic tradition brings healing and new possibilities

In the 1960s I joined the protests against the war and for the rights of women, Native people, and African Americans. But I wondered more and more what was the cause of all this oppression and violence. Study of history, psychology, philosophy, and the world's religious and mystical traditions gave no answers that satisfied me. I returned to the elders of my own Native traditions and asked them what had gone wrong with this society. They said that human beings have forgotten their instructions.

Black Elk said, "In the old days, when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came from the sacred hoop of the nation, and as long as that hoop remained unbroken, the people flourished." Now many of our people are seeking to mend that hoop and return to the ways that worked for us and made us happy.

For me this mending began in 1974 when I visited the Brotherhood of American Indians incarcerated in a federal prison. Here I discovered a group of dear and valuable Native men who had been torn from their families and left to rot forgotten in this white man's dungeon. I reflected on the reasons for their transgressions, the alcohol and the conquerors' destruction of the sacred hoop. Before they came, our people had no need for cages for human beings.

I made a commitment to bring the way of the circle to people in the prisons. When my friend Slow Turtle first set up prison circles in New England 20 years ago, he stipulated that, as our elders taught, these are human being ways, not Indian ways, so all people should have access to our circles.

I now go to 10 circles in New England prisons and have witnessed their healing power. Here the men have found the only time in their week where they are treated like human beings, treated with respect, which we teach is not something that must be earned but should be accorded to all equally. Respect is the first of the Original Instructions for human beings. We are told to respect all of Creation, the Earth, and all beings on it. To respect the elders, the young, the women, the men, and all people

no matter what their differences, and to respect ourselves. When that instruction is adhered to, the circle works miracles. When it is not, the circle may break down.

The circle begins with thanksgivings to Mother Earth, to all our relations here on Earth and in the great circle of the universe, and to the Creator. The elder then takes the talking stick and speaks on what is on his mind, and then the stick passes around for each to reflect on what has been said, or to speak from his heart about his life, his thoughts and feelings. As the prisoners hear each other, they feel connected through similar experiences. They open up as they feel the bond that grows among them, and they reach out and support each other. They begin to remember their childhood and to understand the forces that brought them to prison. They learn that they are good men contending with bad circumstances, and this helps them to deal with that on the outside. They learn that everyone is suffering, and this changes how they understand other prisoners, prison staff, relatives, and others outside.

I have seen wonderful changes in the men who have stayed in our circles. Through the circle they became human beings again, learning to trust and love, to seek their gifts and make their give-aways. They are so grateful that they say the circle has saved their lives and they want to give back. They want to start circles themselves in the prisons and on the streets and in schools to keep young people from the same traps. More than 100 men I worked with have left prison, and I am aware of only six who returned—all but one for minor parole violations, not crimes.

So my proposition is simple. Too simple? I don't think so, of course. I see that this Creation is complex, but the laws that govern it everywhere are simple. And if all we are doing is not working to give us a life that is truly human, should we not consider the ways that did work for us, the ways of our ancestors passed to us through the oral traditions of the elders—the Original Instructions?

Manitonquat, an elder of the Assonet Band of the Wampanoag Nation, is the author of several books, including *Ending Violent Crime* (Story Stone, 187 Merriam Hill Road, Greenville, NH 03048, or www.mettanokit.org)

