

# Gwitch'in man concerned about future

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for the Tundra Times

ARCTIC VILLAGE — Necessity dictates that man must live in harmony with nature, so it was and still is with our people. In earlier times, our system was such that the people can go on for thousands and thousands of years.

I am of the Gwitch'in Athabascan tribe. My home, Arctic Village, is located in the Brooks Range of Northern Alaska. My ancestors were nomadic, due to the fact that their lives were dependent on the caribou which migrate through the present location of the village.

Since we are probably the most northerly group of Indians, we have been pretty isolated. This has enabled us to retain a lot of our values and beliefs, but the biggest advantage we have is that my grandfather and father kept a journal from about 1880 to about 1985.

Having this direct connection with our past gives us the advantage of evaluating practices that are introduced into our society.

That is not to say all of us have used this. We still have victims of the modern influence of greed, power, drugs and alcohol. The pipeline boom of the 1970s has left a big scar in our society, which we are trying to heal.

The studies of our past help us to re-establish our identity and hence pride in ourselves.

Unlike the material values of today's society, our ancestors relied more on personal and spiritual value. So, what you need comes from within you and not outside or around you.

One thing I've learned from this is our ancestors never did anything on a whim. Everything they did served a purpose.

Starting with the story of Adam and Eve, when they first took a bite of the forbidden fruit, we all have to have a taste of things we were warned against.

Our parents can make life as comfortable as possible, and we can grow up never being hungry or wanting. Yet, when we are on our own, we have to try to be something they told us not to.

As with the story of Adam and Eve, these are the tools of learning our ancestors have used to teach their

children. Of course, since the Bible was not introduced into our society until about 150 years ago, our stories were most likely different, but they served the same purpose.

A lot of our stories have now been forgotten, due to outside influences, so they are now taken from the Bible. The Bible, according to some elders, is a compilation of human experience, which we can use as a guideline in our lives.

When we run into any different situations, we can use the Bible and learn from people who have already been through the same thing. The same is true of elders, what a young person experiences for the first time, they have seen or experienced time and time again.

There is a lot in the Bible we can refer to. For instance, the story of Cain and Abel tells us how bad jealousy can be.

A lot of us start on the wrong foot, but most realize where we have been making our mistakes and correct them. If we don't, we, in a manner of speaking, are lost.

When Abraham made an offering of his son, Isaac, to God because God told him to, Abraham didn't ask God for proof that he existed because he had faith.

Trying to get proof would be questioning your own faith. In the same way, our people never questioned the existence of God, they just knew that there is a supreme being who is responsible for the planet and everything in the universe.

If we take into account the situation of their existence, we will find that faith is a big part of their lives, otherwise, they would all just give up and die.

As individuals, the people lived life as it came (moment to moment), but collectively, the tribe's actions were geared toward the future.

They knew, as individuals, they will eventually die, but the children and the land will have to go on.

It is very easy for a person who does not believe there is a purpose or that tomorrow will be better to give up on life. It would be virtually impossible to offer proof of tomorrow, so faith must be a big factor.

Experience tells us that people with little education or limited knowledge



find it a lot harder to deal with life. The less knowledge or education a person has, the less choice or interest is available.

There are at least two forms of learning in life, and they start with how to use the brain and senses. One is the physical aspect of learning, in which you learn skills that would help you learn to survive. You learn to feed and keep you and your family alive. During the days of our ancestors, this was the ability to make tools and to hunt and trap animals.

In these instances, they had to learn the behaviors of the animals and in some respect to think like them. They also had to learn to find or make shelter and take care of their family.

When children are born their brains are in essence empty. They must first learn to use their faculties. Everything around them must be learned or noticed.

You will find in most pictures of Native infants that their hands are tied.

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in the papoose. The purpose for this is to develop the sense of hearing, seeing and smelling.

Since this is the way they learn, our people regarded children as pure (clean) and would not behave irresponsibly around them, lest they dirty their mind, so to speak. Children are usually quick to notice behaviors and imitate them.

As children grow up, they learn to use and coordinate their senses. Usually this is done by exploring (i.e. getting into things), and since their sense of taste usually develops early, they tend to put things in their mouths.

Parents would either warn them or remove things that are harmful or valued and let them indulge themselves.

In today's society, we have to go to school to learn to survive.

The other form of learning is a little more complex, since it deals with God and man. On the one hand we learn for our spiritual well-being. When we understand this, it gives us peace of mind and positive outlook. But it is virtually impossible to achieve without faith, respect and hard work, both mentally and physically.

Since we believe man is made in the image of God, we have to apply the practice on each other.

We must understand that most laws are made in relation to how man lives with others. For instance, if I am living in isolation, I can fire a rifle in any direction, and nothing would prevent me from doing so.

But if there is at least one other person, it would prevent me from shooting in that direction, and as more and more people come in, my firing decreases.

One thing about the laws we find in the Bible and in all societies is that they have always been consistently tested and have always proven themselves to be true. After all, we are only human and like Adam and Eve, we have to test things.

Knowing and living within the confines of rules is also used in learning self-discipline.

Some basic rules, like the wrongfulness of lying, cheating (another form of lying) and stealing were taught at an early age and in most cases, still are. But the first rule that was taught in early times and should always be, is the lesson of respect. The reasoning behind this is fundamental.

In order for an individual to learn, there has to be an ability to listen. For most people, it would be hard to listen to anybody they didn't respect. Paying attention depends a lot on respecting the speaker.

For this reason, most societies develop in their children respect for older people.

As to the lying, cheating and stealing, the thing we have to realize is they are habit forming. As with alcohol, drugs or cigarettes, the first time is usually hardest to quit, but it gets easier when it is done without thinking.

Early formal education ignored the Native methods of teaching, and as a result, in the eyes of the younger generation of Natives, seemingly discredited it.

As stated earlier, our peoples relationship with the land and the children is aimed to the future. For this reason, even as late as the 1950s there

were virtually no traces of humans in this area, although our people have trekked through this valley for who knows how long.

According to the elders, things like sicknesses or rabies were unknown before contact. Even the common cold was not known until the beginning of this century. Rabies is traced back to the time when trappers or miners started using poison on wolves.

The sacredness of the land was necessary for the future survival of the people. On the same level, were the children who are the people of the future.

For this reason, the purity of the children's mind was very important. The moral and ethical education a child receives at an early age serves as the foundation of a person's life.

The importance of being quiet was one of the first things an infant learned. It was not only important to their survival in their environment, but also a sign of great respect for an older speaker.

As a child will imitate adults, a great deal of the child's activities are of learning nature. In our society, these activities consisted of survival skills, learned as games.

From these activities, they acquire strength, agility and cunning necessary for survival in their harsh environment.

In the days of my ancestors, when the value was based on the person, what an individual knew was a big asset. The same is still true today, except today, it's very hard to see through the clutter.