

Yaya' and the Firbough: A Philosophy of Respect

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Abstract

Given that respect is an attitude which is underpinned by one's beliefs, a philosophy of education based on the Nlakapamux concept of respect is explored as lived by an Nlakapamux grandmother and transmitted through narratives about her.

Résumé

À partir du principe que le respect est une attitude consolidée par les croyances de chaque individu, le présent article explore une philosophie de l'éducation fondée sur le concept Nlakapamux du respect, telle qu'elle est vécue par une grand-mère Nlakapamux et transmise grâce aux récits qui lui sont consacrés.

I was facing my first major challenge in graduate studies. A paper was due for a course in Foundations of Curriculum. I didn't know what to write about, couldn't speak philosophese, didn't know if I should be doing graduate studies. That Sunday, I was drifting off to sleep when I had a waking dream. In it my grandmother, my yaya', was standing about four feet away from me, talking to me in my language. She held something out towards me. It was a small branch from a fir tree. It was green and fragrant, and soft the way it moved in her hand. It was then that I knew what to do. I knew that we could use metaphors in academic writing. I could write about my grandmother as an example of someone who lived the Nlakapamux concept of respect, exploring the issues for educational purposes. I went home grateful and happy and excited about what I could do with my grandmother's gift, and began to write the paper. (personal notes)

When my mother's mother, Shannie Antoine Voght, went into the woods to gather range mushrooms or river mushrooms she took a sharp knife. She would slice the caps off the mushrooms leaving the stalks in the sand so that new mushrooms would grow again. She would sprinkle sugar into holes in the ground when she pulled out tiger lily roots, then cover the hole over so as to leave the earth in the same condition as she found it. She said that when you take something from the ground you must leave something. She thanked the plant.

Shannie lived to be 89 to 102 years old. As there was no baptismal record we had to calculate her approximate birth date by determining her age at the time of her first child. Up to eight months before she died she lived in a little mountain cabin where she cooked on a cookstove, washed her clothes by hand, and packed water from a nearby spring. After Shannie had a stroke my sister and my mother took care of her at my mother's house. During those

months my sister Sarah noticed that although Shannie experienced recurring bouts of memory loss, disorientation, speech loss, and other symptoms, she always made the Sign of the Cross and bowed her head before eating, then left the choicest part of her deer steak, the juiciest peas, and a tiny portion of her Saskatoon berries. When my sister tried to get her to eat the last part of her meal Shannie refused. She said it was for the “spirits” (personal field notes). Shannie told the family to respect all religions and peoples.

During those months when I went home to visit, my grandmother beckoned for me to come over to her. When I did she attempted to tell me about her life. We had great difficulty because she spoke very little English and I spoke very little Nlakapamux-chin (the language of the Thompson River Peoples). She said that she had not wanted to marry my grandfather, and that she had run away from him at first. But then he had come for her in a wagon and she went with him because her father told her to.

Shannie was born in a *shi'istkn*, a Salish pit house, on a grassy field in a little village overlooking the Coldwater River, near Merritt. She will have gained much of her understanding about respect from living in the pit house, a semi-subterranean winter dwelling housing several families. She was the only daughter of Chief Yapskin Antoine and his wife Quaslametko. A quiet person, Shannie spoke always in Nlakapamux which is a soft, musical language. She sometimes came to look after my brothers and sisters and me when my parents had to go somewhere. I do not remember her raising her voice, or striking any of us children or insulting anyone or harming people in any way. She did not treat children in a different way than she treated adults, except that she could not communicate well with us because we had lost the use of our language at residential school. I remember her laughing a lot and working hard and helping people and owning a herd of Hereford cows. I remember her telling my mother to tell us to look after our feet so that they would carry us wherever we needed to go.

This attitude of respect Shannie had for the plants, for Elders, for things, for herself, and for God is typical of Nlakapamux people. When we have funeral gatherings and celebration gatherings it is a given that Elders are served first and honoured. The hunters thank the animals they have slain for giving their lives to feed the people. Visitors are treated with hospitality and courtesy. These qualities have survived and as First Nations take more control of the education of First Nations children one of their main objectives is that of teaching this attitude of respect.

But is the First Nations concept of respect relevant in the public school system and how might we apply it to classroom teaching? In view of the fact that 30,000 First Nations learners attend public schools in British Columbia, these are relevant questions.

In the Ministry of Education (1989) document, *Enabling Learners: Year 2000: A Framework for Learning*, the section entitled “Native History, Cultures and Languages” acknowledges a mandate for native input in the classroom:

Curricular content which reflects Native cultures will be incorporated in appropriate places throughout the provincial curriculum, for the benefit of all learners (p. 18).

This basic necessity for First Nations curricular content remains entrenched in the Integrated Resource Packages. In the introduction to *English Language Arts K to 7: Integrated Resource Package (IRP)* (Ministry of Education Skills and Training, 1996), under “Appreciating Culture” it states:

Students increase their understanding of and respect for their own and other cultures through literature and other forms of communication. (p. 3)

Here I will discuss First Nations curricular issues in terms of the older “Year 2000” document (Ministry of Education, 1989) because it speaks more specifically about respect as an attitude and makes the point about the benefit to all learners. Two questions came to mind in terms of cultural learning. Since “curricular content which reflects Native cultures” (p. 18) could include the Native concept of respect, the first point we need to examine is that of definition. What exactly do we mean by respect, and is respect a belief or an attitude? How would the inclusion of the First Nations concept of respect benefit all learners?

The “Year 2000” (Ministry of Education, 1989) has three learning dimensions—knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The last learning dimension involves developing attitudes related to:

- valuing oneself as a person of dignity and ability (i.e., self-respect), and
- valuing the individuality of others and respecting their rights (i.e., respect for others) (p. 14).

We see that self-respect and respect for others comes under the attitude learning dimension. In *Attitudes as Educational Goals* (1990) Jerrold R. Coombs says: “To have an attitude is to have a certain stance towards something” and every attitude “involves a dispositional component” which is “accompanied by a certain feeling state” (p. 27). But the deeper implication is that having attitudes requires having beliefs:

Having an attitude involves having certain beliefs about the object in virtue of which one has feelings and dispositions . . . they are inextricably bound together. Consider, for example, the attitude of respect for others. To have this attitude she must believe that one should not violate the rights of others. (p. 27)

For Nlakapamux respect has a meaning which is embedded in spirituality. James Teit (1900), in *The Thomson Indians*, stated that the Nlakapamux “believe in the existence of a great many mysterious beings” (p. 338) which suggests a belief in the existence of spirit beings in animate and inanimate objects:

The “land mysteries” were the spirits of mountain peaks. In the lakes and at cascades live “water mysteries.” Some of these appear in the form of men, or women, grisly bears, fish of peculiar shape, etc. emerging from the water. People passing within sight of these places always turn their faces away from them, lest they might see these apparitions and die. (p. 338)

So, when an Nlakapamux desires not to violate others this includes humans, animals, elements, and objects because of the belief that all things have spirits which have the ability to interact with their own spirits, in some cases causing death. To treat any object with disrespect is possibly to incur the disfavour or wrath of its spirit which could result in a poor hunting season or some other personal misfortune. There is an egalitarian quality here in the relationship between man and object, the equalizer being the existence of these spirits or souls. Sometimes when we are in the mountains, my mother tells me to speak to the water when I wash my face and ask it to clean my heart of hard feelings as well as to clean my face. My grandmother used to tell us not to kill spiders because it would cause thunderstorms. If we accidentally killed one we were to apologize by saying something like, “I’m sorry grandfather spider.” This attitude of respect apparently had the power to prevent disaster, and implies a belief that water and spiders are persons you can talk to.

This Nlakapamux belief system may not be in keeping with the Western Christian Biblical mandate from God to Adam and Eve, the “first” man and woman. In Genesis 1:26 (New International Version bible, 1984) it is written:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” (p. 1)

The relationship between man and creature appears to be hierarchical with man placed by God above the animals.

Although no mythology is presented in public school classrooms as the truth, which might be perceived as indoctrination, the basic beliefs of a society are going to be inherent in that society’s enculturation system, or schools. Like competition which is perhaps never “taught” in a lesson it is nevertheless propagated in the marking system and learners know very well how important it is to be in the top group. One way that the Biblical view of man’s dominance over animals is evident in reading material is in the portrayal of animals as “cute” in cartoons, suggesting that the animals are harmless, helpless, and dominated by humans, and therefore less important. In First Nations oral traditions animals are often portrayed as humans, protagonists, or mystical beings, suggesting their equality to people.

My point is that whether or not fundamental beliefs are ever overtly presented in the classroom, the mainstream belief system is going to be a hidden agenda in the classroom. If the teacher is, say, a Presbyterian, she is going to live according to Presbyterian precepts by attending service, sharing

experiences and ideas with students which reflect Presbyterian ideals perhaps without ever mentioning God, or good and evil, or Genesis 1:26. The same would go for a First Nations teacher. She would bring her cultural biases into the classroom with her and the students would be affected by it whether or not she ever mentioned cultural stories, experiences or beliefs. If we present stereotypes or fail to present other belief systems at all, or present them in a biased manner, we are offering teachings which are cousin to presenting one point of view as the truth which is akin to indoctrination. This is, in my view, harmful in a multicultural society where we are expected to “promote understanding and respect among different cultural groups and races and to eliminate discrimination and racism” (Ministry of Education, 1991, p. 74). Ignorance about an ethnic group’s fundamental beliefs can result in fear and bias. It also seems expedient to foster some interest in other philosophies so that we may give our future citizens more information to draw upon when they become decision-makers. How is appreciation or respect between culturally unique neighbours possible without our knowing something about the belief systems that underpin our many different attitudes and predispositions?

In *The Ethics of Teaching* (1992) Strike and Soltis discuss respect in terms of philosopher Immanuel Kant’s version of the Golden Rule:

According to Kant the Golden Rule requires that we act in ways that respect the equal worth of moral agents . . . that we regard human beings as having intrinsic worth. . . . That is why we have a duty to accord others the same kind of treatment we expect them to accord us. (p. 15)

The Golden Rule states simply that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. At the moment I cannot conceive of any ethnic group or creature or object to whom/which this principle, in general, cannot apply. Where First Nations diverge from the Golden Rule is in the concept of people. In mainstream society the word people refers to human beings who are “free, rational and responsible moral agents” (Strike & Soltis, 1992, p. 15). For the Nlakapamux the word people might include Coyote who could change into human form at will, or all the *speta’ki* who are transformed humans from the mythological age.

Strike and Soltis (1992) go on to define further the “principle of equal respect for persons (which) involves three subsidiary ideas” (p. 15-16):

First the principle of equal respect for persons requires us to treat people as ends rather than means. Second we must regard all people as free, rational and responsible. Third, no matter how people differ, as free moral agents they are of equal value. (p. 15-16)

In the second idea, the point is made that we must not only respect “freedom of choice . . . [but also] . . . the choices people make when we do not agree with them” (Strike & Soltis, 1992, p. 15). So, regardless of differences in beliefs we may respect the choices of others, or agree to disagree.

In *Caring and Curing: A Philosophy of Medicine and Social Work* (1980) Downie and Teffler discuss what in human beings is to be respected or valued. Two aspects include “a capacity for self-determination . . . [and] . . . a capacity for forming and pursuing ideal values . . .” the latter of which is “a secularized version of the Christian concept of man alone as made in God’s image and possessing a soul capable of salvation” (p. 38). This is different from Nlakapamux beliefs about the soul. James Teit (1900) wrote:

Every living person has a soul. All animals and everything that grows, such as trees and herbs, and even rocks, fire, and water are believed to have souls, since they were people in the mythological age. (p. 357)

With such different belief systems it is not surprising then that First Nations might have a different concept of respect. For one thing, mainstream “people” refers to humans and humans alone, and respect is directed only to those humans who qualify. Teit (1900) indicates that for the Nlakapamux all things are transformed people.

One of the difficulties Downie and Teffler (1980) have with the concept of “capacity and self-determination” is that “infants, the severely abnormal, the severely mentally ill, the senile and those in a terminal coma” cannot be said to have a capacity for self-determination, yet are respected (p. 39). What Downie and Teffler do to resolve this issue of varying degrees of self-determination is to identify “three levels of concern”:

On the lowest level are the animals who are regarded as having a presumptive right not to suffer. Next we have what we may call sub-normal humans who are not accorded full respect but are not treated like animals either. Finally we have the normal humans who are accorded full respect. (p. 40)

The three levels of concern bring questions to mind. What precisely do they mean by “accorded full respect”? Where do children fit into this hierarchy, and at what age are they considered to be level one, level two, or level three? For traditional First Nations, based on Nlakapamux beliefs, those levels do not exist, at least in principle, although it is possible that the rites of passage and other customs may suggest that differences exist. My grandmother’s actions described at the beginning of the chapter imply that, in general, all things were treated with respect.

While it is not necessary or even perhaps desirable for societies to accept each other’s belief system as the ultimate reality, it is helpful for two societies who live in such close proximity, and whose lifestyles affect the other’s, to have some understanding and respect for the philosophies which guide the behaviour and attitudes of its citizens. The effects of such things as toxic dumping and clear-cut logging raises concerns that the present societal concepts of respect are not inspiring citizens to protect Canada’s natural resources. This is where First Nations curricular content, explaining the attitude of respect based on the belief in spirits or souls existing in all things, may

be presented “for the benefit of all learners” (Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 18). We need this generation of children to become citizens who would be more careful about land use.

The “Year 2000” document (Ministry of Education, 1989) states that the goal of education is to enable learners to become educated citizens. However, the framework for learning which underpins all provincial programs consists of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, all the dimensions of which are interrelated, and many are interdependent implying that knowledge and attitudes are interwoven to a greater or lesser degree. The question is, how are we to design and evaluate learning experiences based on the First Nations concept of respect so as not to use indoctrination which presents one point of view as the truth?

Four suggestions come to mind. Storytelling is a universal First Nations oral tradition which passes information from one generation to the next, entertains, teaches, and guides, among other things. In “On Fairy-Stories” (1966) J.R.R. Tolkien says:

The storyteller proves a successful “sub-creator.” He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is “true”: it accords with the laws of the world. You therefore believe it while you are, as it were, inside. (p. 37)

The process apparently suspends belief during the actual storytelling, giving the hearer enough time to develop an empathy or understanding of the text. Then when the story is over the listener may choose on the basis of good argument whether or not to accept the belief, part of the belief, or to accept the attitude based on a third belief, or to simply agree to disagree with the understanding that others have a different attitude and belief about existence. Hopefully, learners will have gained some empathy or understanding.

The need for teaching and policy making tools is evident. The oral tradition has much to offer and it is recognized by the Nlakapamux as one of the most effective methods of traditional education. We have to remember to be respectful in recognizing that stories, family crests, and knowledge have been obtained at a price, and are therefore owned by individuals, families, or groups. The owners of the stories, crests, and knowledge are the ones who have the right to make the decisions about how their property is used. They have to be in control throughout the entire process.

For teachers and educators wanting to learn about the issues surrounding First Nations oral traditions a number of articles have been written by First Nations authors such as Jo-ann Archibald, Michael Dorris, Eber Hampton, Verna J. Kirkness, and Terry Tafoya. Some books written by First Nations authors about oral traditions include: *The Manitous: The spiritual world of the Ojibway* (Johnson, 1995), *Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A holistic Approach to American Indian Texts* (Sarris, 1993), *Red Earth White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (Deloria, Jr., 1995), *Khot-La-Cha: The Autobiography of Chief Simon Baker* (Baker & Kirkness, 1994), and *First Nations and Schools: Triumphs and Struggles* (Kirkness, 1992).

My second suggestion is to have books in the classroom written by First Nations authors: history books, poetry, novels, fiction, and books on First Nations myths and legends. That way at least two belief systems may be present for students to read and ponder even if the teacher never utters a word about them. For classroom use three books which include stories written for and/or by First Nations children are *Courageous Spirits: Aboriginal Heroes of Our People* (Archibald, Friesen, & Smith, 1992), *My Name is Seepeetza* (Sterling, 1992), and *My Family My Strength: A Collection of Illustrated Stories by Children Across British Columbia* (Muller & Sterling, 1994). These books are written in the First Nations voice and inherently contain the values of family and sharing. Such books are informing and self-informing in that they teach members of a nation as well as non-members about the community's issues and concerns.

My third suggestion is to explore educational philosophies which are based on Nlakapamux and other First Nations concepts. Two components are often present in the mission statements of First Nations learning institutions; that the First Nations concept of respect be taught and that learners must be given the knowledge to live successfully in two societies. If we take it that respect of the Creator, of people, of animals and plants, the land, and self are the most important learning objectives or learning outcomes we strive to achieve in teaching we would have to define what we mean by respect. William K. Frankena (1970) in "A model for analyzing a philosophy of education" suggests that an analytic philosophy of education "consists in the analysis of educational concepts, arguments, slogans and statements" (p. 15). I have explored the meaning of the Nlakapamux concept of respect as an attitude with predispositions based on the belief that all things have a spirit which can interact with our human spirits and cause good fortune if we treat them well, or cause misfortune if we do not treat them well or fail to observe the taboos. Frankena says:

Education is primarily a process in which educators and educated interact, and such a process is called education if and only if it issues or is intended to issue in the formation, in the one being educated, of certain desired or desirable abilities, habits, dispositions, skills, character traits, beliefs or bodies of knowledge (if it is intended to but does not it is called bad education), for example, the habit of reflective thinking, conscientiousness, the ability to dance, or a knowledge of astronomy. For convenience, I shall refer to all such states as dispositions. Then education is the process of forming or trying to form such dispositions. (p. 16)

The desirable disposition we need to foster in all students as future educated citizens is the ability to treat with respect the land, the Creator, all persons, all living things, and ourselves because there are unfortunate results if we engage in violent actions against them. If, for instance, we continue to dump toxic waste into rivers then the water will eventually become poisonous and drinking it, living near it, and using it will contaminate and kill us. It is not necessary to believe that all things have a living human spirit as did/do

the Nlakapamux, but it strengthens the desired ability to know that such a belief exists. The belief will be embedded in the Nlakapamux and other First Nations oral traditions and the telling of these traditions can help educate the students about care of the land.

Finally, as always the onus is on the teacher to come into the classroom with an attitude of respect for students and an open mind about new ideas. Her attitudes and behaviour will have a profound effect particularly on First Nations who traditionally learn by example, and who notice by non-verbal cues when teachers have biases against them. The ideal teacher of First Nations concepts is the First Nations teacher or resource person who has had a common background in a First Nations community. In any case, the teacher must also see to it that she teaches those things necessary for the development of critical thinking skills so that learners may make their own judgements about other points of view, other cultures and races, based on sound thinking.

This paper has examined the Nlakapamux concept of respect, given that respect is an attitude which is underpinned by one's beliefs. Shannie's attitudes about God, self, plants, animals, and people give an example of respect as lived by an Nlakapamux traditional person. Western philosophies based on Immanuel Kant's discussion of respect as conceptualized by the golden rule and Christian beliefs about the hierarchical relationship between man and animals have been discussed to provide a comparison with Nlakapamux beliefs for the purposes of clarification. The "Year 2000" document (Ministry of Education, 1989) has been examined for those tangent points of common interest at which the public education system meets with First Nations content for the benefit of all learners.

The Nlakapamux belief that all things have a living spirit worthy of respect causes me to cultivate certain behaviours towards all living things, the environment, the Creator, and myself. I may not like certain individuals or agree with their ideas, but I hope I can accord the same standards of hospitality and care that my grandmother did.

In educational theory a philosophy of respect based on Nlakapamux beliefs may be presented in classrooms through the process of sharing the oral traditions and discussing them in the context of the underlying beliefs. As instructor I display my respect at the first class by forming a talking circle at which all participants have an equal voice. Each of us has the opportunity to hold the eagle feather or talking rock and when we have it we have the floor as long as we need. This allows us the opportunity of hearing from all members of the group, not only those who are articulate and competitive. When we have issues to resolve we have the talking circle so that we may work together as a group to discuss them.

Most important of all I must live in a way which models respect for the young and uninitiated. When I go out to gather berries and roots I will carry a small aspirin bottle with little holes punched in the cap and sprinkle

sugar into the ground. I will express my thanksgiving in special Festivals before gathering from the land. I will enter each classroom and introduce Sophie, Shannie, Quaslametko, Sushiana, Mabel, Mary, Dolly, Lizzie and all the other grandmothers in stories and they in turn will do the teaching, the training, the cherishing, the including, the correcting, the healing, and the entertaining.

Notes on Contributor

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