Galen Leonhardy

The Way of Sweat

This essay presents a narrative description of experiences shared by the author, his father, and a Nez Perce man named Larry Greene. Those experiences are explored in relation to institutionalized education in order to provide insight into not only subjugated ways of knowing but also alternative places of learning.

I believe that we still haven't really begun the conversations about equity. We have railed against cultural literacy, but we are still colonial schools. The schools of the colony tend to have curricula that aim at achieving cultural assimilation, a limited assimilation, an assimilation that best serves the needs of those who hold power.

Victor Villanueva Jr.

The story goes something like this. My father was an archaeologist. In the mid-1960s, he led several archaeological excavations located in the Snake River Canyon of southern Washington. One day, a Nez Perce man named Larry Greene came to visit the excavation area. He walked around, and my dad spoke to him. They laughed. At some point, Larry said that if my dad was going to dig up Indian ancestors, he should come down and experience the sweathouse with Indian people. My dad actually did that. He went to the Nez Perce reser-

vation and started sweating at the Spaulding Sweathouse, which was located about two miles from Lapwai, Idaho.

Eventually, my brother, Duncan, and I started going to the sweathouse. Among other things, we learned about language, medicine, physics, and racism. We also learned about ourselves. Unfortunately, institutionalized education, as indicated in the quotation that opens this essay, tends to support a process of cultural exclusion: The knowledge and ways of learning that accompany the process of sweat, for example, are seldom rewarded in the academy. Very few people recognize that a sweathouse is just as much a place of learning as any building on any campus.

An important thing to keep in mind is that Titoquin people have different ways of sweating. The process discussed in this article is fairly specific to Nez Perce people. As my Nee-Me-Poo (Nez Perce) uncles taught me, sweating amounts to putting rocks on top of sticks, making a hot fire, taking the rocks out of the fire when they finish cooking, and then putting them into a pit that is inside a small, blanket-covered structure. Before and after sweating, the sweaters put cold water on themselves. Depending on the distance from a water source, some people swim in creeks, whereas others use water from buckets. After "swimming," the sweaters crawl into the sweathouse, back side first. When the *koos hamma* (water man) puts water on the rocks, the inside of the sweathouse gets hot.

Still, it is hard to explain exactly what sweating is (just as it is difficult and time consuming to explain the intricacies of the college experience). I do know that it takes a lot of strength to sweat. Someone put a thermometer in the sweathouse one time (see Walker). It was discovered that the temperature was more than 180 degrees. But the extreme heat is only one part of the learning experience. I remember descending snow-covered wooden stairs to a pool of spring water when I was about six. I remember the steam rolling off our bodies. I remember sons and fathers, uncles and grandfathers. I think sweating amounts to getting clean. It amounts to getting stronger. It amounts to camaraderie. It is in many ways a celebration of knowledge and existence in relation to family and community.

Larry knew that his cultural knowledge was not valued in the written reports of most archaeologists, let alone at the institutions that supported their practices. In archaeological recovery, current human conditions are made subordinate to the logocentric collection of remains. Titoquin people often recognize this sad truth, but the reality is that many archaeologists do not. As a result, the objectification of Titoquin people through archaeological practices

continues. As an English teacher who supports his family by doing archaeology in the summer months, I have seen this process of objectification. Most recently, I witnessed a very well known archaeologist tear down a sacred structure (stacked rocks) in Hells Canyon. He did not recognize the structure's importance, its position as an unfinalized discursive and spiritual link between the past and the present.

Larry's invitation to my dad hindered the process that facilitates that sort of objectification by bringing the person responsible, the archaeologist, into contact with the people he was objectifying. Larry invited one of his worst enemies into the sweathouse to experience a Nez Perce way of learning. That is, he asked my dad to become a member of the community.

Dad's actions were significant to the process for other reasons. First, he accepted Larry's offer, which is really not that important. Several archaeologists had already gone to the reservation to sweat with Nee-Me-Poo by the time Larry made his invitation. My dad was different, however. He never stopped sweating. Other archaeologists would go sweat, sometimes for a few years, but they always left. Dad never left. Moreover, he brought his children with him. He gave his offspring to the process.

By participating in the Nez Perce way of sweat, my brother and I were educated in a Titoquin way by Nee-Me-Poo. We were not Indian. We were never raised on the reservation. However, we experienced an alternative way of learning, a way of learning that did not separate formal education from daily activity or local knowledge. That gift influences the way I experience my role as a teacher of English. When I enter a classroom, for example, I not only see the students who are there to learn about English composition, but I also see the Titoquin men, women, and children who are not there. I see all those people I have met and learned from who keep their cultural traditions alive, people who will not be separated from their families or communities, people who often live lives of economic subjugation because they do not maintain or endorse the dominant form of acquiring knowledge.

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Larry always moved me toward a greater understanding of what it means to live an honorable life. At this point, I would like to return to a time when he was still alive. My attempt is to honor his way of teaching, a way of teaching in which the process of education was not kept separate from daily activity. If you hear me crying while I tell the story, please do not be alarmed. The tears are

tears of joy, tears that come to me whenever I think about my uncle. I cry because I am grateful.

Between the time that my dad died and the time Larry died, I would drive from Spokane, Washington, to Lapwai, Idaho, to be with Larry. He lived his whole life on the reservation. He lived a life devoted to maintaining his traditions. After my dad died, I would drive down to sweat with Larry and the other men at the Spaulding Sweathouse. It was good to be with my uncle, and I learned a lot. On one occasion, a man who had been taking people by the hand and helping them get out of the sweathouse (the practice is not common to the Nez Perce way of sweat) saw that I was Soiappo, a white person. I had extended my hand to him, and he saw the color of my skin. He took his hand away and spat. I was saddened, and when the man had gone away, I told my uncle what had happened. I told Larry that I was confused, and I asked him what he thought about the experience. Larry was quiet for awhile, and then he said, "Now you know what I have had to deal with every day of my life."

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Those words would have been enough to help me for the rest of my life. My uncle was a powerful man, however. After Larry and I left the sweathouse, while we were driving toward his home, we saw a man walking down the road. He was hitchhiking. Larry said, "Is that the man who did that thing to you?" I said that he was, and Larry said, "Pull over and give him a ride," which I did. Larry let the man into the truck, and I drove him to a house. When he got out of the truck, the man came over to my window and shook my hand.

Larry was a good teacher. So was my dad. One taught at a sweathouse on the reservation, and the other taught at a university. I have come to recognize that the experiences they shared were empowering because they respected each other's knowledge and approach to teaching. They were both experts in their areas of study, but they were wise enough to listen and learn from each other. The key was that neither dominated their interactions. Perhaps it is descriptively better to say that through their actions, they were supportive. Regardless, the result was affirmation.

Had either attempted to dominate their interactions, the relationship would have failed. Perhaps that is why all of those other archaeologists and anthropologists never stayed around for very long. Their need to dominate the discussion and their need to dominate others' actions led them back to the institutions where their voices could continue the process of subjugation. If we

as English educators are to affirm the pluralism that exists around us, we must "trust in the oppressed and in their ability to reason" (Freire 48). For that to happen, we must begin with respect, open our minds to the potential of alternative ways of learning, alternative places of learning, alternative ways of reasoning, and even alternative reasons for learning—no small task for a group of people so dominated by the process of modern academic training. It would be worth the effort, however.

My dad died on August 19, 1991. After he died, Duncan and I drove to Grangeville, Idaho; Dad had been on an archaeological site on Joseph Plain. Once in Grangeville, Duncan called the funeral home and asked to see the body. I did not want to remember my dad that way, but I respected my brother's wishes. We went together into the darkness of that night. I put my arm on Duncan's shoulders, and he put his on mine. Our father was lying in a cardboard box with some sort of a white sheet draped over his body. Duncan greeted him in Nez Perce. After that, neither of us said another word for the next hour. Too tired to drive, we spent that night at the base of a grain elevator before making the trip to Lapwai.

Duncan and I arrived at Larry's house in Lapwai about an hour after sunset the next night. Larry and some of the other drummers were in the front yard. Larry had a fire going in a burn barrel. We greeted him, but he didn't know who we were; neither of us had been down to sweat for a few years (both of us had been in the military and then college). We told Larry that our dad had died. He didn't say anything. After some time had passed, he went inside his house. Duncan and I followed. Once we were inside, Larry recognized who we were. He cried for a long time before he could speak clearly. Larry's only request was that we let him and the other drummers sing for Dad before we cremated him. We told Larry that his brother would not leave without a few songs from our uncles.

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The next day, we gathered together and drove over to Lewiston, Idaho, where the nearest funeral home was located. We sang traditional songs for him. Fish and his wife, Daphne, were there. Fish is a sociologist who has devoted his life to learning from Nez Perce people. Joe Calfrobe, Sexy Rexy, and Ty were there, too. I remember telling my uncle Ty that my dad's favorite Nez Perce word was *thlepthlep*. Ty looked at me, and joining his hands at the thumbs and waving them, he said, "Butterfly." Of course, Larry was there, teaching all of us the

Nez Perce way as we sang for Dad. *The Veteran's Song* was first because Dad had served in Korea. Two old songs followed, and then we sang *Frank's Song,* which was named after my dad because it was the first traditional song that he learned. Finally, we sang *It's Time to Go, It's Time to Walk Away.* At about eight o'clock in the evening, just as the sun was setting, they lit the fires. Duncan and I had stopped at a place that overlooked the city at the top of the Lewiston Grade. We saw the river below and the red glow of the sun as it passed beyond the horizon.

Larry taught Duncan and me how to bury our father traditionally. After the remains were returned to us, two of my dad's brothers from Oregon, his sister from California, our mom, a colleague, and my brother and I flew into the Frank Church wilderness. Of the seven people who went into the wilderness, four were veterans. My brother had been in the army, and I had served four years in the Marine Corps. Two were Vietnam veterans who had seen a significant amount of combat: one had served in the marines in 1968, and the other had been in the navy at about the same time.

Dad had spent several years working in the wilderness, and he grew to know that place. He had said that he wanted to be buried in the wilderness, so Duncan and I chose to bury him as Larry had instructed us, traditionally. In that way we felt we would be respecting both our father and Larry's traditions.

We were glad to return to the mountains Dad loved. I remember aspen leaves shimmering in the breeze as we started down the trail. One of dad's brothers, Bruce, remained near the landing strip because he had emphysema and could not walk to the place where we were going. An hour after we started, we arrived at the place my brother called Dad's Sitting Rock, but my dad's colleague and I noticed that we could not bury him there because it was right on top of a place where Indian people had once lived. We did not want someone digging up our father's remains.

I looked up the hill and noticed a rock structure, and that is where we decided to let Dad rest. The hill was steep, but we were all able to climb it by grabbing handfuls of dry bunch grass and pulling ourselves up. Once we arrived, we dug a shallow grave. Then we placed Dad's ashes in a traditional blanket and built a cairn. Shortly after the ceremony, my brother and I were standing near the grave. Everyone else was sitting behind us on the hill. Some were talking, and some were looking across the valley or down at the river that flows beneath my dad's resting place.

At that time, a clapping began. I remember that the noise started some ten or so feet to the right of where we were standing. It was very loud. I looked

over and saw a large gray butterfly flying toward us. It had a bright red stripe that ran along the outer edge of each wing set. First it flew over and faced toward Duncan and me from a distance of three or four feet. Then it went to each of the four people sitting on the ground behind the two of us. At a distance of less than a foot, it hovered by each person at eye level, passing from one to the next with a quick flirting. After that, it flew back to Duncan and me. I remember it flying around our heads and moving back and forth between us. Suddenly, it flew away, back to the place where the clapping began. After a short time, the clapping started again, and the butterfly returned. It flew back and forth between Duncan and me for quite some time, diving and fluttering within inches of our heads. I remember that the clapping was loud, and with the exception of my eyes, I was paralyzed. Eventually, the butterfly turned and flew away. The clapping faded into the sounds of the early afternoon breeze and the river below us.

We live at a time when we need to know that we are not alone in a world of isolation, that we are capable of discovery, capable of learning from and engaging the pluralistic reality that surrounds us.

After that experience, I started sweating again. I also started relearning the Nez Perce songs I used to sing when my dad was alive. Larry guided my exploration. A couple of years later, he too passed away. After Larry's death, I had dreams that came true, but the dreams eventually stopped. Over the years, I have told a few people about these experiences. But only the people who were there in the wilderness truly believe me. One of my dad's colleagues even asked if I had been to a psychologist. I told him that I did not think all six of the people who were there experienced a group hallucination, but it did not seem to lessen his certainty that I was suffering from delusions. Of the people who were not there, my wife and Nez Perce family seem most understanding. The fact remains, most people look at me as if I am crazy when I describe the events that occurred on that hot August day in 1991. Perhaps that is why I am the only one of the six people who regularly tells the story. But I think I will continue to tell the story. Such events are quite rare, and we live at a time when we need to know that we are not alone in a world of isolation, that we are capable of discovery, capable of learning from and engaging the pluralistic reality that surrounds us.

K'atz-a-yow-yow Quin.

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