

Native Americans, Traditions of Tribal Sharing

North America was known to many Native American tribes as Turtle Island because of its shape. When Europeans first came to this land, the Native American population was thought to be about twenty million people, speaking over 300 different languages. Native Americans believed that learning was a life-long experience, which began before birth, through songs and ceremonies. The Native Americans believed this was the way to teach children so that they would grow up and take their place in the community. Children spent the first months of life in a cradleboard. This carrier, the cradleboard, was taken everywhere and was propped up, enabling the baby to watch everything that was going on all around him or her. Games were used for teaching and learning. There was great respect given to individuals and individual differences. The education of the child was the responsibility of the entire community, not just that of the parents.

Little attention has been given to the Native American tradition of sharing; however, the new settlers from Europe would not have survived their first winters without gifts of corn, squash and beans, as well as an herbal medicine and planting and fertilizing techniques from the American Indians.

This kind of helping and sharing with the new settlers was not just a one-time act of caring. The belief of the early Indian tribe was that sharing was a virtue, a value to be learned and imitated, and selfishness was a fault. In Native American tradition, wealth was produced for its distribution, not its accumulation. "Gift giving is a unifying cultural trait in which both the giver and the receiver are honored and their equal status validated," (Kidwell). Native Americans honored the freedom of the individual, but valued the good of the community.

The Anashnabek women shared their peoples' tradition of giving and serving others. If women were able to make more mats, pots, and other items than the family needed, they were given as gifts to others. Sharing was considered to be very honorable and lifted one's prestige in the community. A representative leader was often considered worthy of the responsibility by his or her ability to share.

Kidwell, Clara Sue. "True Indian Giving," *Foundation News* 31, no. 3 (May/June 1990): 28.

Questions:

1. *What gift would you give another?*
2. *What would you contribute to a world culture if you could give your finest attribute?*

