

Native American Scenarios

Dagmar Thorpe (Sac and Fox)

Giving is an inseparable part of the way of life of Native people. It is your acknowledgement and thanksgiving to the Creator for the things that you have been given. This thanksgiving shows itself in the ways in which you give to others. It can be giving in words, prayers, gifts of time, energy, or love. Giving is an integral part of what your life is, your acknowledgement of life itself and all that life gives to you.

The motivation to give is love and is unconditional without expectation of return – knowing that to give is to show your respect and your love for another, and that as we live the way we are intended to live, the goodness that we share with others will come back to us. It is a natural part of this way of life.

Henrietta Massey (Sac and Fox)

For us, giving means sharing. I grew up in a home where, if a visitor came to your home, you give that person something. If you've got something cooking, you feed them. Or if you have no food, you give them something to drink – even a glass of water. Those are relatives – they thought enough to come to see you, so you share. There are many ways that we all share.

You just do it – like when someone comes to visit, I make a collection of little items, material things – and I will give it to the person who has come to visit; you appreciate for them to come to see you. This is how we're taught when we're young. You're taught to give – and that if you give, it will come back to you ten times.

LaDonna Harris (Comanche)

In the Comanche tradition, giving and receiving are an intricate part of the social norm that you grow up in. The whole concept of ownership is different from the Euro American view of property and giving. The basic concept is "You should never own anything that you couldn't give away." You should always offer to feed anyone who comes to your door. If someone admires something you own, you should be able to give it, take it down and present it to them - because they have honored you by admiring some of your possessions.

Norbert Hill (Oneida)

In the Oneida tradition...the definition of "being noble" is to give to those who have less. And so you get more by giving^{3/4} rather than by saving or hoarding. If you have something, you give the best of it - you give the best piece of meat to the most elderly person, and so on. Throughout the country, I find Indian people very generous. They may not have much to give, but they share whatever they have. It's not generosity with regard to things, it's generosity of the spirit. I never fail to see that, especially with older people. You're more likely to be known for what you give away rather than for what you keep.

Wilma Mankiller (Cherokee)

The concept of giving is very natural for Indian people. If you look first at the very strong interdependence among tribal people – and I think that is the most significant difference between Native people and non-Native people today – we Native people have a sense of interconnectedness with, and a sense of responsibility for, one another. If that is so, that we



still have a sense of community or of tribe and a clear understanding that we have to depend on one another, somehow separate, as something that one does as part of a social obligation in our community, then it does not quite come together.

Tessie Williams (Nez Perce/Cayuse)

It's not just responsibility and it's not just bonding. It's the respect – that's the key – the respect for such a person, such a group, people who really have the knowledge of respect. And that is to me the most important thing. When I do teaching I always emphasize self-respect - how I feel about me? And when I can understand and have self-respect, I can then learn how to respect other people – regardless of how they appear.

Don Coyhis (Mohican)

When you look at the origins of giving, based on the old traditional communities – the way that it was explained to me by the elders – there was always the concept of “share the deer.” There was no custom of people accumulating things. In the society there was a system of balancing things out in the community. Whether the community was on hard times or not, whatever was there was given out. Traditionally, it was more a survival situation. I've been told that there were some communities where, on a periodic basis, they would lay everything out, and then divide it. It was a survival mechanism. Additionally, it was frowned upon to accumulate; it was more popular to give to the community. So it had to do with survival, and always looking for the good of the people first.

Excerpt from Wells, Ronald Austin. *The Honor of Giving*. Bloomington: Indiana University Center on Philanthropy, 1998. Used with permission from Indiana University Center on Philanthropy.

