Debra Irene Opland

Chapter 16
Indigenous Worldview and the Vision of a Peace Educator

Abstract: Documenting my lifelong quest to achieve peace through self-understanding, I analyzed personal and professional lived experiences related to the divided-self phenomenon as the root cause of problems in society-at-large. Growing up Euro-American in peaceful post-WWII South Dakota, the Vietnam War shattered my idealism. I underwent a dysfunctional rite-of-passage, manifested as divided self-identity issues throughout adulthood. By age 50, my wounded spirit had yet to heal when I became an educator. For 20 years, teaching at-risk youth in poverty-stricken Indigenous communities on and off Western South Dakota reservations, I witnessed students exhibit the same split identity symptoms typical of most youth raised in cultural climates of fear, violence, and war. Evoking personal and existential reawakening, the protocols of transformative phenomenology pattern an ancient rite-of-passage to Enlightenment: On my ichimani wáňwala (Lakota for “journey to peace”), unique self-discoveries led to universal truths, adopting Indigenous worldview as a vision of peace—a way of belonging to humanity, being human, and becoming whole. Primal precepts are founded upon the oneness principle, exemplified in the Lakota concept, mitákuye oyási’in, translated as “all my relatives” or “we are all related” on the quest for understanding and peace. Acknowledging this ideal, peace can be achieved through self-understanding, as each fulfills their ultimate human need to help others—by making a contribution to community, collective knowledge, and the greater good. Seeking the restoration of Indigenous Lifeworlds, I share my story, hoping to empower all my relatives to do the same.

Keywords: Indigenous worldview, peace, transformative phenomenology, divided self-identity, self-understanding

My Ičhimani Wáňwala, Journey to Peace

Much like the agrarian societies of our Indigenous ancestors, I grew up within a culture of peace—post-World War II, White, middle-class, rural USA. We were blessed by an idyllic upbringing, grounded in protestant Christian values

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110691818-016
brought by both sets of grandparents from the old countries of England, Wales, and Norway.

After wartime service, my folks returned home to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, with the sole purpose of raising a family. Dad and a church friend built our house by remodeling an old army barracks. Until Mom passed after 66 years of marriage, that home meant a warm, welcoming sanctuary – the smell of fresh-baked bread, games set up for weeks on the same Monopoly board, and songs sung with either Dad (self-taught at the piano) or Lawrence Welk on the record player. Family attendance was required at the table for all meals, as it was for nightly prayers and church, a central part of social activities.

Doors were rarely locked, neighbors became extended family, and every house on the block felt safe. We thrived without TV, computers, arguments, abuse, alcohol, or drugs. Faith, fortitude, laughter, and loving served as the best medicine for any ailment. My folks lived by the Golden Rule found in most spiritual beliefs worldwide.

In childhood, I perceived a world at peace. As an adolescent, new TV sets brought the reality of the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War into our living rooms. Some family and friends returned in caskets, while others were spat upon for serving, whether draftee or enlistee. Most suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as some died slowly from cancer-causing Agent Orange. Soldiers rarely talked of their experience, until years later, one described confrontation with non-combatants of any age, identified by communist ideology rather than uniforms. I watched loved ones leave with a whole soul, only to return with a fractured self-identity that reflected my own, mirror images of a deeply fragmented nation.

During the 1960s, presidents and peace leaders were assassinated, student protestors killed at Kent State, and Black babies burned in a Birmingham church. Those of us who questioned the establishment were further denied our rights to free speech and assembly. In a country cracked with controversy, my idealistic perceptions of childhood, citizenship, and Christianity became distorted by deception, an American dream corrupted by colonization and capitalism. Our country has yet to heal. My lifelong journey to become a peace hero reflects an enduring desire to return home to a time of trust, a place where my soul felt whole.

From Wallflower to Flower Child

A model student, I was a reserved, studious, innocent wallflower, fearful of breaking the rules or speaking out. Dictated by dress code, girls never wore pants, yet, in
the age of miniskirts, we either knelt with hems touching the floor or went home to change. Education was highly regarded in our family, including the arts, in and out of school. With a fine voice, Father shared his love of music as I learned the piano, memorizing popular songs and hymns. Proud to be a housewife, mother exercised her interest in theatre by wholeheartedly supporting my involvement in it, including a production of *Viet Rock*. Although this war protest play was not well received in conservative South Dakota, we won national awards. The experience served as an introduction to a non-violent revolution and a rebel spirit lying latent inside my soul.

Too nervous for acting, I preferred behind-the-scenes roles: designing costumes, collecting props, and most of all, functioning as an assistant director to my favorite teacher. His liberal politics were tolerated by the school only out of respect for lifetime achievements in state and national arts education. Well-loved by students, his teaching style was so different from many others of the time, who were advocates of strict classroom management, with zero tolerance for diversity or those labeled as deviants.

My love of theatre evolved into a college major. Freshman year marked my first time living away from home yet, follow thespians became an electric, eccentric group of friends who declared independence from the sorority-faternity scene by becoming peace activists. Discussions led to the hypocrisy of war waged for peace, and we expressed admiration for pacifists like Einstein. By 1931, Einstein petitioned governments not to use his inventions for weaponry and war:

> Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding. You cannot subjugate a nation forcibly unless you wipe out every man, woman, and child. Unless you wish to use such drastic measures, you must find a way of settling your disputes without resort to arms.

(1931/2009, p. 67)

Ever since this quote appeared on protest posters, I have asked: In a world so deeply divided, how can peace be achieved through understanding? Barely 18, I lacked the maturity to contemplate such issues, as life's changes led me to leave college my sophomore year, marry, and move to California. Until then, I had led a sheltered existence but grew up fast to become a peace-love hippie in this experimental culture of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll. Although I was destined to spiritually remain a free-spirited flower child forevermore, my role of protestor ended with the war. I joined what Freire (1970) called a "culture of silence" – personal, social, and collective consciousness dominated by duality and ambiguity, inundated with fear and mistrust.

Divorced within three years, I returned to the Midwest to obtain a B.S. in photojournalism, complete graduate work in anthropology, and travel, before residing permanently in the Black Hills of South Dakota for 30 years. Another
marriage brought four exceptional children into my life and a stable career in small business as co-owner of an art gallery. This false sense of security ended the morning of September 11, 2001, when the bombing of the New York World Trade Center was broadcast live on every network.

The events of 9/11 fueled fear and patriotism in many young hearts, including my stepson, who enlisted with childhood buddies. When one was killed in Iraq, it took me three days to reach my stepson by phone at boot camp, battling officers who insisted his military family would care for him. His screams will forever echo in my mind, as his generation asked me the same questions activists posed without answers fifty years ago.

Youth coming of age since 2001 have known nothing of peace. Children are massacred in classrooms, worshippers slaughtered in synagogues, as fearful rhetoric of political pundits encourages hatred and hostility evidenced everywhere – the media, movies, video games, business, sports, and most traumatically, schools.

East River Debra vs. West River Debbie

A useful metaphor for describing my own divided identity, the states of North and South Dakota are both split by the Missouri River, a natural barrier separating ecological habitats, subsistence patterns, and demographics. Why had they not created an East and West Dakota? The reasons become clear from the perspective of settler-colonialism, motivated by a “Manifest Destiny” (Greenberg 2018) creed of greed, gluttony, and glory. Each state demanded their fair share of natural resources on opposite sides of the river – primarily rich arable farming land east side compared to precious minerals and semi-arid ranchland out west – open range, gold, coal, and oil. With native tribes relocated to reservations, the majority of the present-day population resides in the eastern half, representing a greater control of state government, business, and industry. West-river ranchers exhibit an independent spirit, yet this Republican-red state reflects a socio-political atmosphere I define as “right-to-the-right-of-righteous.”

Throughout adulthood, I experienced a disconnect between the internal idealism of “West River Debbie” and the external realism of “East River Debra.” Although I could assume the roles of dutiful daughter, respectable businesswoman, and well-behaved mother, I believed my true self to be the innocent, idealistic child who became a peace-love hippie. Frequently ridiculed for being an optimist, too sensitive, and trusting every time my tender soul was hurt by the outside world, I nurtured that crazy rebel spirit deep inside. Balancing this divided identity often became unbearable, resulting in depression, anxiety, and
addictions – mental illnesses regularly misunderstood in our narrow-minded society, and therefore, hidden.

While I had acquired considerable knowledge and matured professionally, I experienced little personal growth, self-understanding, satisfaction from helping others, or true peace. Subconsciously, my split soul searched for significance, surfacing in this deep-sleep dream: A dark indigo sky filled with stars that transformed into faces of Indigenous elders – wise, troubled ebony eyes silently pleading with me to come to help the people – before fading back into the black. For two months, I had four such visions but never one since. Later, Lakota friends told me stars represent sentient souls, sent to Earth with a purpose; once served, their spirits return to the heavens to become shining examples of lives well lived. At that time, I did not comprehend the full meaning of the prophecy, yet felt a subliminal message leading me on a quest to fulfill old goals.

**Peace Educator Persona**

Although my heart filled with pride for entering the honorable teaching profession, I soon discovered those who serve honorably are seldom honored for that service. Obtaining elementary teacher certification, I was highly qualified to teach in the make-believe learning environments idealized in methods classes, yet woefully unprepared for reality in today’s diverse classrooms. Just as my peace-love hippie identity was ill-suited for today’s rage-based reality, my peace educator persona was rejected by most authoritarian systems.

Education is heavily influenced by right-wing state politics, part of a national structure to inculcate the dominant worldview, based upon fear, violence, and war – standardization instituted through the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In favor of academics, students lacked opportunities to develop social-emotional coping skills proven to be a prerequisite to school proficiency and productive citizenship (Goleman 2006). Teachers are inadequately trained in behavior management, yet oppositional, defiant students make up an ever-growing segment of student bodies nationwide, leading to the prevalence of bullying, suicide, and school shootings (Hall/Hall 2003). Socially alienated, the basic human needs of a growing number of at-risk students are not met by family or community – sustenance, security, shelter, and above all, love are not assured. This places a greater burden upon teachers to provide such necessities, even though teacher instructors and school administrators discouraged us from developing compassionate relationships with children and families. I was once terminated as a substitute for caring too much for a class of 2nd graders.
I experienced covert and overt discrimination against those of us who questioned authority to defend students. For five years, I was denied permanent employment in a competitive good-old-boy job market. Taking several short and long-term substitute positions, I found it increasingly difficult to confront behavior management issues and teacher-school politics. Horrified by hegemony and hypocrisy, my peace activist persona reappeared.

The personal mission to heal my divided soul became a professional one when, in 2002, I enrolled in the Educational Leadership Studies program at Fielding Graduate University,1 a leading institution seeking social-ecological justice. Over-educated and under-experienced, I became a scholar, but not yet a practitioner. Reservations were always in need of highly qualified teachers, so I made the difficult decision to leave family, commuting each week to teach two-hundred miles from home – to enter a land so foreign to me, called the “Rez” in vernacular slang.

On the Reservation (The “Rez”)

For Indigenous peoples, this country is not the sweet land of liberty it was for me during childhood. Living the American dream, I knew nothing of poverty or racism, nor do I remember seeing any “coloreds,” especially Indians, except in Thanksgiving plays and movies – White folks face-painted brown portrayed screaming savages circling the wagons. I recall the head-dressed chief in front of souvenir shops when we took our beloved annual camping trips to the Black Hills, visiting Mt. Rushmore, a symbol of freedom and democracy.

Traveling 350 miles across a state filled with spacious skies and amber waves of grain, we were unaware that only a century before, the landscape had been covered with an estimated 30–60 million bison. Told to Mother by her grandmother, I heard a few homesteading stories from the 1880s, describing grasslands covered with rotting bison carcasses, their skulls piled 10-feet high for trophy photos. Bison provided sustenance for hundreds of Indigenous peoples for thousands of years. They had more than 200 uses for every part of that animal, yet Western settler-colonists only valued the coat for robes. My great-grandmother was appalled by the waste, without realizing the real reason for plunder and pillage.

1 I left the program in 2005, reentered in 2006, left in 2009 and reentered in 2019. I will be Dr. Opland in 2021.
Following the Civil War, the U.S. government continued their Manifest Destiny mandate, declaring the Indian Wars to justify hostile takeovers of their lands for economic and political interests – the extermination of tribes was enforced by the rallying cry, “the only good Indian is a dead Indian.” Thousands perished before the first shot was fired in the Indian wars, entire villages were wiped out from bedding infected with smallpox and other diseases, some purposefully. Natives had no immunity from blankets or bullets, yet total annihilation was not possible against the resilient spirit of these people. Therefore, settler-colonists resorted to cultural genocide, legislating assimilation and alienation policies and practices.

Allotment, land-grant, and homesteading laws were implemented not only to righteously transform these hunting/gathering cultures into agriculturists, Christians, and Western thinkers, but realistically, to dispossess them of their land, timber, minerals, and other natural resources (DeLoria, Jr. 1999). Provoked by the discovery of gold in the Black Hills in 1874 and the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876, the government embarked on resettlement plans. The First Nations that made up the Seven Council Fires of the Ochéti Sakówin – the nomadic horse cultures who once roamed all of America’s northern Great Plains – were forcibly confined to seven reservations and two designated tribal areas in South Dakota, more than any other state. Three of these share borders with the poorest counties in the country. The people were systematically deprived of health and human services, and their lifestyle and livelihood destroyed when the bison were massacred to the point of endangerment. Only 5000 wild bison remain in the United States (Buffalo Field Campaign 2020).

Education was designed to inculcate the dominant, dehumanized warlike worldview of Euro-America, a mission-vision statement expressed as “kill the Indian, save the man.” Youth were removed to boarding schools far from home and loved ones. Their clothes were burned, hair cut (considered sacrilege among natives), names changed, the language was forbidden, and customs scorned; they suffered malnourishment, neglect, and abuse – verbally, physically, socially, and sexually (DeLoria, Jr./Lytle 1983).

I have interviewed elder boarding-school graduates, one who showed scars on her hands, punished with a metal ruler for speaking Lakota. Another, born in 1937, had grown up peacefully according to the old Lakota ways, in a village along the banks of the Missouri River. When that waterway was dammed and their village flooded, her family was forcibly relocated from the west to east side of a massive lake, separated from relatives outside the waterline. We stood in the cemetery where her ancestors had been reburied without markers. At age 5, she was shipped off to boarding school, granted few trips home, nor could her parents afford to visit. At age 15, she was hurriedly getting ready for a dance,
excited about seeing the boyfriend who became her husband. She checked out an iron to press her dress but broke the rules by allowing a friend to use it without checking it back out under another name. Without explanation, a nun used a broomstick to knock her teeth out. Since then, she seldom wore ill-fitting dentures, while few pictures show her smiling or the anger suppressed deep inside. In the wake of prolonged dehumanization, reservations have become Deathworlds, leaving future generations cursed by historical trauma, a carcinogen that has metastasized in the divided souls of the children I came to teach.

**Rookie Year on the Rez**

Accepting my new job two weeks before school started, I crossed the Badlands, first named by French fur traders to denote the stark landscape. For me, the unique scenic beauty prompted childhood memories of annual vacations camping in the Black Hills. Windows wide open, my curly head wafted in the warm wind, solitary yucca bloomed atop razor-edged escarpments, horses ran free of reins, and buffalo grazed, motionless as birds picked bugs from their backs. Cedar, sage, and sweetgrass provided aromatherapy, as pastel sunsets melted into sandstone of the same shades. What seemed so rightfully real and wondrous on my youthful trips now became a frightful reality check as I crossed from preserved parklands onto the reservation.

Often called third-world countries, reservations represent a blend of Life-worlds and Deathworlds, far different from the fantasy lifestyles once promised by peace treaties and now glamourized on TV. An invisible demarcation line signifies a rapid depreciation of property values, ramshackle houses, fallow fields, rusted-out autos resting on blocks, feral dogs chewing garbage by road-sides, and bubble-nosed drunks stumbling along ditches. Looking past the decay, some homes are painted with lovely murals of medicine wheels and graffiti covers a church wall with one word: “RESPECT.” Pastures bloom with wildflowers, colts suckle contentedly, the red tails of hawks radiate in sunlight, while farm boys shoot hoops into a bottomless bucket tied to a tree. On the streets of small towns, the sweet scent of fresh-baked fry bread intermingles with the odor of unwashed clothes, smelling like cat pee if worn too many days. The lilt of Lakota language and toothless grandma giggles contrast with the tweak talk of meth-heads, hiding their sunken cheeks and rotted grins behind hoodies. Youngsters with filthy faces, unkempt hair, and loaded diapers play alongside others adorned with squeaky-clean smiles, spotless jerseys, and new Nikes.

Most dramatically, the state’s white majority becomes a minority. These colonized people had just cause to prejudge me for the lack of color in my skin, for
suffering experienced at the will of racists, and opportunities granted freely to me but denied to them. At first, I experienced disgust, distrust, and hatred not always hidden, sometimes confronted by those who defined the worst problem with “my kind”: too many had come to dictate quick fixes for their problems, only to leave matters worse.

With a shortage of teacher housing, for the first two weeks, I lived in my van. After moving down our motorhome, I endured another three months of microwave cooking with no restaurants nearby, wondering how to explain a lack of Internet to my online graduate school. Then, the RV steps broke and so did my ankle, though an ancient X-ray machine diagnosed it as merely sprained. I crawled in and out of my tin home, walking in a painful boot for a week before getting a better diagnosis and surgery to place pins in a broken bone. Impoverished communities have poor health services. Finally, an apartment was vacated by a young, stressed-out teacher quitting her first year early. My ankle healed and I escaped to a comfortable home, unlike many of my students.

Byproducts of boarding schools, modern systems wallow in underfunded dysfunction. Unable to meet state proficiency requirements, standardization now serves to perpetrate assimilation policies, providing hegemony in place of fair, equitable, high-quality education for all. My first classroom was covered with layers of dirt, desks piled high underneath, intermingled with books, supplies, and confidential records. With a high transition rate, I had 24–28 students at any given time, when a maximum of 15 is considered feasible for a single 5th-grade teacher without aides. Few schools could afford permanent paraprofessionals.

Told they were the worst class in school, my students came with an incredible amount of psychological baggage, taking every opportunity to test rookie teachers. Daily, I was subject to verbal abuse, scratched, or targeted with rocks or flying garbage cans. Others told me, “You’re too nice, Ms. Debbie. We’re used to yelling so we will listen.” Avoiding specific identifiers, I illustrate the depth of the problems I faced during this first year:

- About once a month, we had both soft and hard school lockdowns – the former if only a threat of violence was made, and the latter, if a weapon was brandished.
- One Monday morning when standardized state tests were set to begin, five students entered the classroom late. A white-looking native boy had his backpack stolen on the bus, threatened with a beating if he told. A brother and sister were up all night in a hospital waiting room because their drunken father had broken their mother’s leg. Another girl said her sister failed at a suicide attempt and was medevacked to a hospital 300 miles away. A different student showed pictures of her mother and the vodka they shared. When I questioned the test administrator about the possibility of skewed
results, she stood tall in a three-piece suit, insisting all students be tested. Her stiletto heels clacking on the titles a she patrolled the classroom.

- One of my brightest students said her mother and grandmother would often force her to smoke pot or leave her to babysit two younger siblings while they left for days to gamble. She had not spoken of this for months, fearing she would be separated from her sisters. When I asked police about prosecution, they told me I had to understand rez law: abandonment was not an issue if children are old enough to dial 911, and drug abuse was not a concern unless the substance was stronger than pot.

- Another time, a school administrator chased a student back into the classroom for committing the crime of trying to board the bus knowing he needed to attend after-school study hall. Steaming with uncontrollable anger, face raspberry red, the principal wrapped her hands around his neck in a chokehold, screaming, “You are not allowed to mouth off to my staff!” He had his back to me, but I could see his body stiffen with fear. I, too, still in a walking cast, froze with fright. Realizing others were watching, she let go and stormed out of the room. He collapsed at his desk crying. I comforted him as best I could, vowing to seek justice, yet powerless to do so. I accepted a counselor’s advice to let it go, regretting that decision ever since.

**Twenty Years of Rez Reality**

The incidences summarized above only touch on four traumatic occurrences during my first year of teaching, compared to the hundreds I have experienced in 20 years working with at-risk students in poverty-stricken communities on and off the reservations of Western South Dakota.

After teaching in my first reservation school for two years, I deeply regretted the time spent away from my daughter and returned home for her senior year. I also realized I had gained much more through everyday praxis than the scholarship of dead White men, finding higher education far removed from reservation reality. In 2009, I withdrew from Fielding. My mother passed away in 2010, and by 2011, I divorced. Without my beautiful home in the Hills, I lost my sense of place and depression became a way of life.

Substituting for another two years, I was finally offered a position with a non-profit, servicing predominately Indigenous communities in Western South Dakota – connecting children with sponsors worldwide through a pen-pal exchange of letters. The organization had been in the area for 25 years when they suddenly chose to no longer service native communities. During their departure,
they were disrespectful of communities and culture, leaving unresolved problems and bittersweet resentment among the people. It broke my heart to break ties with the people until they assured me they blamed the company, not me. I stayed in rez schools for another two years, as counselor and teacher. When my father passed in the Spring of 2018, I diagnosed myself with an acute case of PTSD – the pain of others commingled with my depression and anxiety. Overwhelmed by exhausting impotence, I felt powerless to effect change within these systems or my own life.

Systemic dysfunction is obvious, often expected, on the reservations, but the White world remains hidden under the façade of an idealized vision of prosperity, the illusion of safety and security. The Black Hills have always been a place of peaceful sanctuary for me, yet, this time I moved back to discover my own neighborhood was no longer quiet, middle-class suburbia. On Father’s Day, a neighbor held his wife and child hostage at gunpoint, and then, made an unsuccessful attempt at suicide-by-cop; all afternoon we listened to him beg the SWAT team to kill him. Every day I hike the forest only to hear target practice, at times the sound of rapid-fire from an AR-15. Blocks surrounding a nearby elementary school are posted as drug-free zones, yet, I see sidewalks lined with meth needles, beer cans, liquor bottles, condoms, and vape pens. Each piece of litter represents the life of a child suffering from a dysfunctional rite-of-passage into adulthood. Whether on the rez or off, I have watched far too many children endure the same inescapable split-identity issues, alienated from self and society with no sense of belonging or being loved.

According to Brokenleg, in this materialistic, fast-paced culture, many children have broken circles, and the fault line usually starts with damaged relationships (Brokenleg 2019). Therefore, having no significant bonds to adults, youth chase counterfeit belonging through gangs, cults, and promiscuous relationships. Some are so alienated that they have abandoned the pursuit of human attachment altogether – guarded, lonely, and distrustful, they live in despair or strike out in rage. Finally, he added, families, schools, and youth organizations are being challenged to form new “tribes” for all of our children so there will be no more psychological orphans.

Unemployed and uncertain of the future, when I last drove back from Badlands to the Black Hills, I had plenty of time to let my thoughts tend to my sorrowful soul. Old memories mingled with a whole new perspective on the landscape as I realized I was no longer a stranger to the rez – this place was now more home to me than Euro-America. As both scholar and practitioner, I had gained the ability to look beyond the Deathworld façade of modern existence to find signs of life. Within my mind’s eye, I gained strength remembering the resiliency of Indigenous peoples and hope in the lifelong relationships I developed. The ancient faces of
my old dream renewed their plea for help as I repeated this question: How can peace be achieved through self-understanding?

Gabbard (2006) said individual schizophrenia is created under the dominance of a worldview that places humanity out of context with the universe. He urged decolonizing researchers to join hands with the colonized:

For Americans of European descent, embracing such a project will require a unique process of healing . . . the wounds left by the sins of our fathers on the backs of Indigenous People across the planet, we must simultaneously heal our own wounded spirits. Left unhealed, as most recently witnessed in the invasion of Iraq, where the genocidal patterns of colonialism have resurfaced, those wounds condemn us to perpetuate those same sins generation after generation. (p. 223)

**Divided-Self Phenomenon**

In January 2019, I returned to Fielding, with a renewed purpose to achieve peace through self-understanding. Senge (1990) documented the difficulties involved with using the master’s tools to rebuild the master’s house. I was pleased to find a greater acceptance of multiple perspectives and alternative research methodologies.

Throughout my dissertation, I follow the protocols of transformative phenomenology to analyze personal and professional lived experiences that relate to the divided-self phenomenon first documented by Montessori during her studies of traumatized orphans in industrialized, post-World War II Italy (Montessori/Lane 1972). Her conclusions are based upon this premise: as education is dehumanized within cultural climates of fear, violence, and war, children develop divided self-identity crises that manifest in adulthood to become the root cause for most problems in society-at-large.

Several studies find that the phenomenon has increased dramatically within techno-scientific societies dominated by the Euro-American worldview. Colonialization and globalization of Western thought have contributed to the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, intergenerational knowledge representing cultural alternatives to the Western way, and biodiversity in the degradation of natural systems, threatening all life on the planet (Bowers 2003). Capra stated: “Inner fragmentation mirrors our view of the world outside.” The awareness of self as an isolated ego existing separately from society and the environment becomes the main reason for present-day problems worldwide (Capra 1975, p. 23). In too many communities and classrooms, souls split easily and often. Society suffers forever.
Through writing phenomenological protocols (rich descriptions of lived experience) in our “Collaboration with Strangers” project, I determined the essence of the divided-self phenomenon. World problems stem from a crisis of consciousness – the disconnect between the dominant warlike Western worldview and cultural constructs based upon Far Eastern mythology, the peaceable precepts of Indigenous wisdom.

I sought consensus within the collective conscience, following the second protocol to analyze the essential structure of the phenomenon and align the problem with purpose. Since education is the primary proponent of enculturation, Freire (1990) advocated decolonization and humanization effected locally with concurrent cultural climate change and educational reforms. I join a growing number of scholars who believe these goals can be accomplished through the restoration of Indigenous Lifeworlds. Harris and Morrison (2003) stated peace education researchers must first envision a culture of peace to create a new consciousness.

As I explicated assumptions grounded in the misconceptions of my Euro-American heritage, I completed the next protocol to experience epoché. Looking beyond the fear, violence, and war of my Euro-American heritage, I envisioned Indigenous worldview as the place of peace from whence we came, and to which we must return for future sustainability. Originally, the terms “human” and “humane” shared synonymous meaning. Primal perceptions of peace were founded upon the oneness principle – exemplified in the Lakota concept of mitákuye oyás’in, defined as, “we are all related in the quest for understanding and peace.”

A final writing protocol documents the experience of moving from epoché to enlightenment. Giorgino and Bentz (2016) analyzed the phenomenology of consciousness as contemplative inquiry; upon reaching epoché, one is destined to not only undergo a personal transformation but generate an existential reawakening within society-at-large. My research was not only intended to raise consciousness personally and socially but incite a revolution collectively and peacefully.

Adopting Indigenous Worldview to Achieve Peace through Self-Understanding

Evaluating restorative justice practices of Indigenous peoples, McCaslin and Breton (2008) urged researchers to accept the challenges of decolonization by acknowledging the original Indigenous vision of community-based healing and transformation: To seek consensus about how to achieve peacemaking in any
given situation, scholars must first acknowledge the oneness principle — mitákuye oyás’in — and second, be mindful not only of how we are all related but how we can relate to building relationships at peace with each and all:

Moral and spiritual values are guidelines for how we can acknowledge our relatedness and be good relatives . . . People come together with a commitment to hearing the stories on all sides and working together to put things right to everyone’s mutual satisfaction. (p. 528)

Unconditional Care of Each Becomes the Universal Cure for All

Harris and Morrison (2003) reiterated the principles of peace education research: Human beings must work together to transform human values — a process of understanding ourselves and our position in society. To comprehend the consciousness of self in relation to others, Bentz and Shapiro (1998) challenged researchers to not only focus on the accurate and deep interpretation of meaning but also, on the alleviation of suffering, with respect for the Lifeworlds of all involved. Mother Teresa (1997) said depression is a form of selfishness; by helping others, we heal our own souls. Likewise, generosity is highly valued among Indigenous peoples, for it takes the greatest amount of courage (Four Arrows 2016).

Throughout my teaching experiences, I encountered far too many instances where children lacked care, that human need to be loved and belong, without which we cannot gain understanding or esteem. I found major differences between students who had a caring adult in their lives and those who did not. Even those who did care, usually grandparents, felt helpless and hopeless as they watched their Lifeworlds disappear.

Martin and Martin (2012) discussed the work of Nouwen (1974), who focused on care as the basis and precondition of all cure. Like me, they discovered life as others experience it, and thus learned about the generosity of caring, putting the needs of another person ahead of our own comfort, and sometimes, our own rights. Therefore, caring is always associated with risk. Professionals may care, but we are taught to keep a professional distance or are simply overwhelmed — social workers with heavy caseloads or schoolteachers in overcrowded classrooms. Although it is impossible to measure the number of children we help, they suspected a few of them will be the ones who gave us the most grief. For sure, all of them will be the ones who knew we cared. They asked us to remember the stories that grow out of the risk of caring. My research evolved from those stories and the risks I took to care.
Sharing experiences with veteran teachers became much more valuable than methods classes. They taught me how to balance idealized standards, unjust regulations, cultural relativity, and rez reality. Having been there 30 years, one Lakota teacher had former students visit her on their way to college, to thank her for caring. When asked how she did it, she replied, “Once children cross the threshold of my classroom, I never let them go.”

Frequently during my first year on the reservation, I heard the Lakota phrase mitákuye oyás’in used in greetings, prayer, ceremony, and sweat lodges. Eventually, I incorporated this philosophy into lesson planning – every morning, reminding students of both their dual citizenship and their universal inheritance. We not only said the “Pledge of Allegiance,” but recited mitákuye oyás’in. Following the Indigenous way of council, we gathered in a circle to pass a feather as a talking stick, a symbol that combines respect and responsibility for native cultures (Zimmerman/Coyle 1996). Only the feather-holder may speak. Each student was asked to state, “I respect myself because . . .” Some responses were phenomenal: “I talked to my Dad in prison last night, first time in a year”; “I told my friend no when he offered me pot”; “When my sister talked of suicide, I told her how much I loved her”; “For the first time, a teacher defended me and I learned never to underestimate her.”

Students grew to trust this White teacher, as did their families, elders, and other community members. I learned most from those who protected the old ways, either directly or from stories repeated by children. A matriarchal society, a Lakota grandmother is called unci, highly respected for leadership, their power silent but absolute. Many have become the chief caretakers of children among poverty-stricken, ethnically oppressed populations. Without pride or prejudice, they helped me incorporate cultural traditions and Indigenous wisdom into the curriculum and classroom. One day after school, an Unci came to give me a big hug, saying, “In Lakota phiámayaye, meaning ‘thank you,’ but to you I say wopíla!” She explained this word is not used very often, only to convey a deep appreciation for the care I was giving the children.

In my class, students are asked what they can give back to their community. One replied, “Hope and faith!” Another, “Respect and honor!” When asked, “who taught you that?” the first answered, “My grandmother!” The second, “My teacher!” Lakota people honor special teachers with star quilts. At graduation one year, an unci wrapped my first quilt around my shoulders and it now hangs in my living room as a symbol of my commitment. Later, cleaning up in an empty auditorium, I looked up to see two of my most difficult students, one who had contemplated suicide. Without a word, they shaped their hands in the form of a heart and pointed at me.
I came a stranger to the rez, but became a trusted teacher, collaborator, and ultimately, accepted as family, forever – a feeling of unconditional love that I had not known since childhood. Together, we discovered our human similarities far outnumbered cultural differences. Although we each had taken a unique path to get to this place, we found the universal truths inherent within the Indigenous worldview of our ancestors, mitákuye oyás’in, we are all related on the quest for understanding and peace. This wisdom of oneness is placed within every human heart at birth (Four Arrows, 2016).

Following an ancient rite-of-passage on my ichimani wáňwala (Lakota for “journey to peace”), I finally completed Dad’s Sunday School lesson, discovering the Way, the Truth, and the Light – a peace that surpasses all understanding. I had gained wolokokiciapi, Lakota for “practicing a sense of peacefulness in all relationships.” By relating my personal journey to become a peace hero, I can professionally empower others to do the same. Restoring Indigenous Life-worlds through the education of our children becomes my contribution to the collective. Connecting past to present to create a sustainable future, we nurture whole souls for the benefit of the whole world. If you grow close to a Lakota, they adopt you as a hunka relative. In this way, I became their sister, aunt, and unci. One hunka friend, a fellow teacher, honored me by saying I now have an “Indian heart.” I like to think I have a human heart. We all do.

References


Chapter 17
Colonization of the Lifeworld of Sheepherder Communities of Mongolia

Abstract: Mongolia is known for its steppe lands, traditional livestock-herding lifestyle, and a population of 3 million people. An estimated 25% to 40% of the population live as nomadic herders. It is central to culture and identity. Open-cast mining causes degradation of natural pastures and permanently hinders the migration of animals between pastures. This is a serious threat to traditional pastoralism, which is of high importance not only from an economic point of view, but also cultural.

Keywords: Mongolian herders, dzud, migration, colonization

From Lifeworld to Deathworld

I was born and raised in the desert of Mongolia. Coming home always brings back memories of an unbelievably wonderful childhood. Spending the whole day outside, pasturing sheep and goats, or driving camel, we fulfilled our duties as livestock herders, even during the frozen wintertime in minus 40 °C temperatures. I remember how soft camel fur is, and the feeling of warm wool on my skin. Now, it’s sometimes hard to believe a desert girl could live her dream, studying for a Ph.D. in economic-environmental science at the University of Łódź in Poland, a country so far away from the land of my birth – eight days by train, 24 hours by aircraft, and almost three weeks by car. It’s unbelievable what I have now, what I am doing, and who I am, and that all of these things are connected to my childhood in the desert, to my dissertation research topic regarding Land Rehabilitation After Mines back home.

The world’s most sparsely populated sovereign country, Mongolia is home to 3 million people, originally a rural nation of nomads, a horse culture of shepherds living in a desert climate on approximately 600,000 square miles of little arable land. Moving every season, the nomads of Mongolia have multiple pasturelands to allow for regrowth, making fields usable for many years, rather than overgrazing them until the ground is unable to support the herds. For the better part of the year, these nomadic households are individualistic, but during the warmer seasons, multiple households gather together at one pasture and

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110691818-017