

Applying the Ojibwe Seven Grandfather Teachings to Our Relationship with the Land

Individual and Classroom Reflections

Shannah Anderson, Spring Lake Park High School, Spring Lake Park, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

In this reflection, I consider the concept of the traditional Ojibwe teachings known as the “The Great Law” or Seven Grandfather Teachings. By allowing students to interact with these concepts, both with and without deeper cultural contexts, they are asked to consider how applying the values of truth, humility, respect, courage, honesty, love, and wisdom to their relationship to the natural world could enhance their sense of ownership in taking better care of Niimama Akii (Our Mother Earth).

Keywords

Ojibwe, seven grandfather teachings, traditional Indigenous wisdom, Indigenous values, Ojibwe worldview, storytelling, nature connection narrative

Overview

In 2010, the Minnesota Department of Education published updated standards for English Language Arts and Social Studies that mandated teachers to include cultural components of Minnesota's two main tribes, the Dakota and Ojibwe (Anishinaabe). Ever since that time, I have sought ways to incorporate literature written by Native American authors into my teaching practice. I have also sought to weave in lessons about how humanity's actions (and inactions) affected our connection with the land, air, and water. It seemed like a natural progression to introduce the Seven Grandfather Teachings as a point of entry for my students to begin to reflect upon their own relationships to each of the values (truth, humility, courage, love, respect, honesty, and wisdom) and also their personal relationships with the land, air, and water. As an English Language Arts teacher in a district that has witnessed some community pushback to climate education, this seemed like the most accessible route to engage with the topic of climate change.

To that end, I created a [trimester long curriculum](#) that incorporates the Seven Teachings into three separate units: a research paper about a variety of topics throughout Native America, a choice novel study (using the texts *Night Flying Woman* by Ignatia Broker, *Firekeeper's Daughter* by Angeline Boulley, *Where Wolves Don't Die* by Anton Treur, *Codetalkers* by Joseph Bruchac, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie), and an individual mini-memoir where students share their own Nature Connection Narrative centered around one or more of the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Finally, I created a survey for students to complete at the end of the unit to gauge how they might continue to apply their learning around the Teachings to their relationship with the land/air/water/animals.

Framing

In pondering various ways in which to incorporate climate literacy into my 9th grade Language Arts classroom, I was compelled to look back into my personal cultural history as a descendant of Gaa-waabaabiganikaag (White Earth Nation). Although I did not grow up there, I was always hungry to learn more about this part of my ancestry. I met my paternal great-grandmother, Eliza Fairbanks, who spoke Ojibwemowin fluently, only a handful of times as a young child. My father's mother, Caroline Brown, attended a day school where she was denied the opportunity to learn or use her language. It wasn't until I attended the University of Minnesota-Duluth that I was able to take an intro to Ojibwemowin course with David Niib Aubid in 1998, picking up where my great-grandmother left off. After transferring to the Twin Cities campus, I took an Ojibwe

culture course with Pebaamibines Dennis Jones, once again immersing myself in the culture that had been systematically taken from my family members and me.

One of the concepts that had always stuck with me as an undergrad was the idea of *mino-bimaadiziwin*, which is defined by the Ojibwe People's dictionary as "s/he lives well, leads a good life, has good health." This concept swirled around in my mind over the last few decades as I've pondered what this actually looks like when applied in everyday life and to each of our relationships to the land. There are multitudinous facets to be considered, but one set of teachings became of special significance, as they seemed to be of universal appeal: life lessons/values that are specific to Ojibwe culture but also transcend superficial boundaries of racial, religious, and socioeconomic aspects of identity: the Seven Grandfather Teachings. These values not only can serve to inform one's personal identity, but also as a framework to help individuals ponder how each value can also be applied to their relationship to the land.

The Seven Generations and the Seven Grandfather Teachings

In 2023, James Vukelich Kaagegaabaw published *The Seven Generations and the Seven Grandfather Teachings*. I positively devoured the knowledge shared within and yearned to share the profound insights I discovered with my students but was unsure of the best modality to make that happen. I am grateful that Kaagegaabaw resides relatively nearby and was both willing and excited to share the wisdom he had gleaned from extensive study of the Ojibwe language with my students. Here are excerpts from his definitions:

Debwewin/Truth

"S/he speaks from their heart", "truth has neither an end or beginning", and finally "truth must be something that is experienced" (pp. 44-46).

Dabasendizowin/Humility

"I think lowly of myself... in English/Western culture, this seems like a bad thing. In Ojibwe, it's a realization of a human's place in the world, because our food, clothing, and shelter come from Aki (the Earth).... I am not more important than all the relatives who give me life. In fact, without them, I know I will die.... Therefore, I think lowly of myself; I do not exalt myself above my relatives" (p. 50).

Manaaji'idiwin/Respect

"To go easy on...respect is not a submission to authority...but rather an acknowledgement of relationship.... The moment we realize other beings give their lives so that we can survive, we begin to take only what we need for food, clothing, lodging, and medicine and leave the rest behind.... I acknowledge the sanctity of my relatives' lives" (pp. 52-55).

Zaagi'idiwin/Love

"... a description of how something eternal moves within us... to emerge/to rise.... something ineffable, it must be felt. It rises from deep within us, from somewhere beyond thought and sight. When it emerges, it benefits all of our relatives... There is not just one way to say I love you. Zhawenim 'to have compassion for,' 'to love unconditionally,' 'to bless someone' may be one of the most important concepts in Ojibwe spirituality and perhaps one of the most important words in the language" (pp. 56-59).

Zoongide'ewin/Courage

"To have a strong heart" (p. 64).

"We can see the strength of heart in the people we call Ogichidaa 'the warrior.' They are now the people who attend ceremonies and have the strength of heart to pray for all of their relatives. Someone who has Zoongide'ewin is totally unafraid to seek out the good life, not just for themselves, but for all their relatives. We need strength of heart to have faith in people and to unconditionally love all our relatives" (p. 69).

Gwayakwaadizin/Honesty

"... straight/proper/correct ...way of being" (p. 70).

"It is not enough to simply speak the truth; this sacred law instructs us to live honestly, align words with action and lead a holistic life" (p. 71).

"... a person with peace, balance, and order in their life will act with honesty, virtue and righteousness...the words we say are not so important as the deeds we do" (p. 73).

Nibwaakaawin/Wisdom

"...a culmination of all the laws" (p. 74).

"A life led with truth, honesty, humility, respect, love, and courage is a life led wisely. Wise decisions benefit people seven generations from now" (p. 77).

"To lead a life with vision, to see things as they are, to be enlightened... to look at things without prejudice or bias" (p. 77).

Student Reflections on their Relationship to the Land using the Seven Grandfather Teachings

Several students responded to an end of year survey about their reflections around applying the Seven Teachings to their own life experiences. Here is a sampling of their answers:

Question #1: How could learning about the Seven Grandfather Teachings apply to improving humans' relationships (on a large scale) to the land/water/environment?

- "I think, I didnt really apply them, but they did make me more aware about my surroundings and to respect people and other life more."
- "Humility can be taught to many people who think they are above the land that supports our life."
- "By the concept of relatives, and how truly regardless of whether we admit it to ourselves or not we are all connected through life."
- "If we learn about the seven grandfather teachings, we'll see the world through Native Americans' eyes. We could learn to take more appreciation and respect the world and see it as if it's another part of us."
- "It could deepen the emotional intelligence and integrity we have as humans into wanting the best for our environment and nature."
- "Learning about the teachings such as humility and love can help humans be kinder to nature and take less. Because humility includes believing you are not superior than what gives you life, realizing that could make people be more conscious when cutting down trees and destroying the environment. And learning to love the environment would cause us to take less from it and work to protect it rather than destroy it."

Question #2: Has learning about the Seven Grandfather Teachings helped you to understand your own relationship to the land/water/environment in a different way? Why or why not?

- "Not in a different way because I've always seen and treated nature with respect it deserves."
- "Not a whole bunch, but it kind of opened my eyes to nature's importance."
- "Yes it has made me more conscious of how I treat others and animals making me more careful and always know we are equal."
- "Yes, I did already respect the environment because nature is so beautiful and it hurts to see the natural world being harmed and I am glad I was able to see how different groups see the land."
- "Yes, learning about the teachings helped me realize that respecting the environment was right important and that there is a way to live with nature while not destroying it. It was interesting to think about the environment because my love for nature and its sights/sounds was a lot like how some Native Americans felt about nature as well."
- "It gives you this deeper insight on how the emotions or adrenalines we feel everyday can be directed towards the living, breathing creatures and plants around us. To show courage, by telling the people around you, even your friends that they aren't contributing to the life around them like it contributes to us. To be honest, to admit to yourself that you are not doing the best you can, and that the best you think you can has a limit."

After looking through the numerous responses, it seemed clear that most students were able to make at least a superficial connection from these abstract concepts to how they might look when applied to mindsets and actions associated with conservation/preservation of our planet's resources. It also built their ability to take on another's cultural perspective, which is always a valuable exercise to build empathy.

Future Considerations

After sharing my findings with district leadership, my principal agreed that students would benefit from spending more time outside to more fully integrate the lessons held within the Seven Grandfather Teachings on a more profound level. As students have such varying levels of experiences interacting with nature, it would be especially important to ensure that students have at least one significant experience where they are allowed to be mindfully observant outside, take pictures, and then process their experience through the lens of the Ojibwe worldview along with their own five senses.

The Executive Director of Learning and Innovation at Spring Lake Park, after attending my session at our spring symposium through the Center for Climate Literacy, stated that she thought students should go on at least two field trips to help them build up their capacity for not only experiencing what nature has to teach each of us, but also to reflect deeply on the Seven Teachings, a perspective that could stay with them for life.

For myself, I will continue to deeply engage with these concepts and how they continue to evolve within my own personal relationship to the land and to the culture that was systemically taken from my relatives and me. I plan to add in more opportunities for both me and my students to write poetry and short stories about these concepts. There is great wisdom to be gained in not only contemplating the Seven Grandfather Teachings, but also putting them into action, both in personal, educational, and environmental contexts.

References

Vukelich, J. (2023). *The seven generations and the seven grandfather teachings*. James Vukelich.

Appendix 1: Personal Definitions of the Seven Grandfather Teachings

Before diving deeper into the Seven Grandfather Teachings, I formulated my own definitions of these values as a baseline and have shared them below. I encourage anyone who might consider exploring these values to reflect on their own definitions and notice how they may change or deepen over time.

Truth: the highest form of wisdom; it does not change no matter the circumstance, used as a measuring stick by which we gauge our reactions and decisions

Humility: not putting your own needs/desires above others'; considering the community's needs as a whole, inextricably linked with one's own

Respect: honoring oneself, one's elders, one's immediate and further reaching community through your words and deeds; following through and keeping your word

Courage: embodying and acting upon your values, even when others may not be (including especially those whom you are close to or admire)

Honesty: being unafraid to examine yourself in terms of strengths and areas where growth/change is needed—extending that same careful consideration to your loved ones/neighbors

Love: the (other) highest form of wisdom-generating and extending a sense warmth, comfort, understanding, and ease to all whom you encounter, a lack of judgement, giving from your heart without expecting something in return

Wisdom: living out and SHARING the culmination of all other values; using discernment when choosing your own next steps and considering past lessons when sharing advice with those who have not yet walked as far on their life path; being a good ancestor

Appendix 2: Student Examples

Nature Connection Narrative #1

On the fourth of July, I was at the park with my family celebrating. We had a barbecue with hot dogs and Pepsi. My cousins, siblings, and I all went to play by a river and catch some fish. I didn't catch any but my cousin caught a lot. Afterwards, he threw them back into the river. This reminds me of manaaji'idiwin as we showed respect to the fish since we didn't need them for food at that time. We left fish for others in case they needed it. Then we had to leave early to find some parking near our fireworks spot. We were sitting on the grass while the fireworks went off. The fireworks were pretty and colorful and loud. It was the perfect summer night.

Nature Connection Narrative #2

Skipping rocks on the lake and feeling so small next to it. I remember feeling calmed and at peace with myself and my life. Hearing the waves crash on the rocky beach spoke to me on how much noise the world makes without humans. Seeing the rocks drop into the lake and hearing the "plop" of it made me feel so small and insignificant compared to the universe. I felt like nature respected me and I respected it, it had me think about myself and the lake was there for me. Sitting there alone made me think about all of my different relationships with everyone in my life. It made me appreciate where I was in my life at that moment. Feeling the cold wind on my bottom half of my wet legs made me feel calm and collected. Driving home that night made me think about how the world showed me how it works with everything. Laying in bed that night I got to align everything in my life and see where all the puzzle pieces fit to make me who I am. All of this gave me the courage to live how I want and not how society tells me to. Being there at that moment forced me to be alone and not be distracted by anything else. This all made me more clear headed for the rest of my life.

Nature Connection Narrative #3

When I was in second grade I saw a bald eagle for the first time. It was around 6:30 about an hour and a half before school started. It must have been in early to mid spring because it was still cloudy and cold but all the snow had melted already. I did what I always did before school which was to go swing on the swing set to me swinging in the dark with a cool breeze on you just thinking about anything was the best feeling at the time. The rough jagged feeling of the chains connected to the swing and the seat being a little bit too big for me grounded me. It almost felt like the world was colorless and emotionless until I saw the eagle. It was like a vibrant barrage of color onto my eyes. I focused my

sight on it immediately. I felt no need to chase or bother it. I felt just fine from where I was on the swing watching it with interest. To me that was showing respect to the eagle. I watched it from afar but I never got up in its business. I let it do its thing while I did mine. I took joy in watching the eagle but I never took more than what I could give if I went into the eagles business and bothered it. I would be talking more than I could give and that wouldn't be respect, but I didn't and only watched from afar. I ended up watching the eagle for the next hour. I was swinging on my swing while the eagle tended to its nest. I could hear the whispering of the wind in the background and the smell of freshly cut grass but I really only cared about the eagle. When we had to go inside I was disappointed to not be able to see the eagle anymore but when one of my teachers at the time told me that since the eagle was nested on our schools roof it would be there the next day and that made me feel excited for the next day for I would be able to see the eagle again. To me I also feel like it was love, love for the eagle, love for the playground and love for the cool breeze of the wind. It was unconditional love. I didn't feel like the eagle needed to love me back to say the truth. I didn't care if the eagle didn't love me I loved the eagle and that was all that mattered to me.