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# Truth Grounding Education

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# Truth Grounding Education

Zachary Lundgren, Western Washington University

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## Abstract

*The following is a transcript of an oral presentation delivered at the Environmental Learning Center in Diablo, Washington in March of 2017. It explores wisdom shared by personal relations to the author that relate to education and education systems. It takes a critical stance on education systems and celebrates learning as a fundamental human act.*

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**Keywords:** *environmental education, storytelling, imperialism, education systems*

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## Introduction

Hello and welcome everybody. I want to take the first moments of this presentation to acknowledge that we are occupying traditional territory of many different peoples who have been in these spaces since time immemorial. I'd like to make it clear that I did not ask permission to occupy this area during my residency last year, nor for my capstone and graduation this week, despite the fact that some of these displaced communities still exist nearby. I am grateful for and inspired by my classmates who also use this platform to voice these acknowledgements. I kindly encourage the North Cascades Institute as an organization to follow examples set by many of their past and present graduate students.

I am also thankful to be in the presence of all of you. I'd like to ask that each and every one of you take a moment at some point during your stay in this beautiful place, to think about what it means for you to be here. Thank you.

### Wisdom Keeper one:

*An important lesson I learned outside of the classroom was something that I learned from my own son. His inspiring ways of acceptance and openness to all sorts of people different than him. His way of seeing people as people. I realized this many years ago. When my son was in 6th grade, which made him about 11 years old, we had a function we were attending at his middle school. He kept telling me about this social studies teacher who he really liked and wanted me to meet. So we arrived at the school and were walking around, viewing all the different exhibits. It was packed, there was a lot of people around. Eventually, my son grabbed my hand and said, "Mom, there's Ms. Carter!" There were a lot of people around and I asked, "Which one? Which one is Ms. Carter?" He replied to me, "She's right there, she's right there!" and*



*pointed into the crowd of teachers and students and parents. Again I asked, "Which one? I can't tell who you are pointing to. Which one is she?" My son, without any hesitation, stated, "She's the one wearing a red sweater Mom." Now, when I spotted Ms. Carter, what I saw was her physique. She was only about 5 feet tall and probably weighed close to 240 pounds. Standing there, I thought to myself, this child did not describe her as the heavy one or the fat one or the big one. Instead, he said, "The one in the red sweater." I was blown away. I thought to myself, wow, this is a good kid right here. He sees past stereotypes, or flaws in people. He just looks at people as people. The one in the red sweater. That has always stuck with me. And I learned something very strong from my own child that day. I learned about openness while watching my son look past judgements that I had, to see this person in a very different way. I have tears in my eyes as I tell you this story right now Zachary. It's short, but it is an important lesson that was taught to me by my own child.*

This story comes from someone I have identified as a Wisdom Keeper. I have been using my capstone project as a place for me to explore the purpose of education. It is a broad question, and an extremely tough one to answer. There are so many different lenses to look through in attempting to answer it. My research has taken me in two distinct directions. I enrolled in a class this quarter that required me to look critically at the historic and contemporary systems of public schooling in the United States. Much of the things I found within this inquiry are deeply troubling to me. I continued my own research down this path despite feeling overwhelmed. I responded by reaching out for help. I asked people close to me, whom I will refer to as Wisdom Keepers in this presentation, if they would share stories with me, about some of the most important life lessons they learned outside the confines of classroom walls. The same classroom walls I was becoming distraught learning about. As I continued to discover how public education in the United States excludes certain forms of student experiences, I continued to receive stories from wisdom keepers detailing how the narrow purposes of the schooling system are sidestepped throughout one's life. In the story I just read, Wisdom Keeper number one affirmed for me that learning can be an ongoing, lifelong process, not to end after high school or college or grad school. It reminded me that an 11-year-old child was not just a student at that middle school, but also a teacher. And in that brief moment, he modeled to those around him an incredibly important lesson: how to interact non-judgmentally with the world.

The rest of this presentation will be following a combination of the two lines of my inquiry: public schooling systems and Wisdom Keepers' stories. And I'm not sure, it may seem disjointed at times. But I feel it is important to share these two different paths of inquiry side by side in order to pass on my understandings.

I come into this examination with deep held beliefs that education is one tool, if not the fundamental one, for building an equitable, peaceful and just society. I believe that education should be used to create space for understanding and celebrating the unique experiences of our students and their communities. And I believe that we use these understandings to actively create knowledge in a cooperative manner. But during my

research and studies, I have found that my beliefs and lofty goals are in stark contrast to the reality of what purpose public education serves. That is why I asked for help from my Wisdom Keepers. I want to make clear though, that the Wisdom Keepers' experiences I will share throughout this presentation are not intended to be evidence proving any assertions I make about the complexities or oppressions existing in public education. I'll repeat that. They are not evidence to support my understandings. Instead, they serve as a way to complexify where and how education occurs, as well as providing hope for me to imagine how I can contribute to creating the spaces in education for individual and community experiences to breathe and create knowledge.

With that, I am going to turn it over to Wisdom Keeper number two. After their story, I will alternate between my understandings about the purpose of education through a critical and historical lens and my understandings that developed through the ground truthing of my Wisdom Keepers.

### **Wisdom Keeper two:**

*You asked for an important thing I learned outside of the classroom walls. This story in fact does not take place outside of the classroom. But it is a lesson my friend taught me that was clearly outside of the educational system, and the teacher's planned class work.*

*Long Beach, California. In 1969, when I was twelve and in the 7th grade, my first period class was Wood Shop with Mr. Vance. Mr. Vance was of middle age, and patriotic, as his generation was. He served in WWII like many of our fathers. One of my close friends in the class, Joey, had parents of a slightly younger generation who were active in the peace movement at that time, speaking up against the war in Vietnam. My parents, on the other hand, were of the older generation and believed that good citizens were not protesters.*

*Our school day was regularly started by the flag salute and, standing with hands held over hearts, we always recited the Pledge of Allegiance. One day, when first period bell rang, all of us boys (no girls took shop) stood and pledged our allegiance. Except for Joey. This day Joey stood but kept his hands to his sides and looked forward with what appeared to be uncomfortable resolve. When we finished pledging, Mr. Vance asked Joey why he didn't recite the Pledge. Joey replied that he did not want to pledge allegiance to a country having policies and goals with which he did not agree. Mr. Vance became completely unwound. He barked at this diminutive boy as if he were a bad person and deserving of no common courtesy or respect. Mr. Vance frightened all of us in his mean-spirited response. I felt terrible to witness the meanness; and I felt a lot of sympathy for my friend, whose polite and sincere response I tried to understand. Joey had immediately become a bad person to at least one person, and a hero to many of his peers.*

*What important lesson did I learn? Joey's resolve in standing up for what he believed in stuck with me into my adult life. I learned to question authority. I learned that I should do and say what is right with resolve, and be self-confident in my thoughts of what is right,*

*just, and fair. Because the lesson was disruptive to the status quo is likely the reason it stuck with me. When I was a father of young boys, one of the many things I tried to teach them was not to be blindly patriotic to any cause, and to stand up and speak up against bigoted and bullying people and organizations.*

*This is so important to me because seeking the truth makes a good citizen. Questioning authoritarian rule and acting in resistance against bullies are actually acts of kindness and goodness when defending others and the world community in general. I must also remind myself to act confidently when confronting bullies and to be comfortable in asserting a philosophy of kind and thoughtful resistance to unfair acts. I have my friend Joey to thank for this.*

*This carried me forward in life as a father. Raising children to be good and kind is arguably the most important task that is assumed by a father. I was able to pass on to my sons, the meaning of doing the right thing and of being an independent and just-minded individual. Because of courageous examples Joey and others provided me, I had help learning what it meant to be successful as a father.*

### **Analysis:**

One of the lessons I gather from Wisdom Keeper two, is the importance of standing up for one's own beliefs when they are contradicted by a higher authority. Joey likely went through a process in his mind that critically questioned how his personal beliefs were incongruent with his participation in a classroom activity. The courage he summoned to confront the conformity expected of him, translated into an exercise of personal freedom. And similar to what was exemplified in the first story we read, Joey did this in a space where other people could bear witness to an authentic human interaction. Joey may have not even known it, but at least one of his classmates learned from him an important lesson on how to exercise individual freedom. Wisdom Keeper two supports my beliefs that education is a tool for justice. He does this by reframing the notion that acting in resistance of something we may be expected to conform to is not necessarily disrespectful, even if it may be misunderstood as such. In fact, reframing these actions as acts of kindness and goodness opens the opportunity for more individual and community experiences to exist openly in society and within our schools.

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### ***Imperialism, Colonization and Roots of Western Education***

I want to now focus on one of the historical contexts that influences schooling in the United States today as I see it. I understand the historical framework of imperialism and colonization as having significant influence on restricting the existence of some individual and community beliefs in schooling. This is especially true if these beliefs do

not conform neatly to that of the predominate culture. And I don't believe it is limited to history. I believe its effects are felt today in many schools.

As I understand it, the basis of what is trusted as "knowledge" in the United State's educational system has origins from long ago as a biased collection and arrangement of information (Willinsky, 2000). The methods and ways of ordering information are rooted in imperialism and colonialism as practiced by European powers. Author and Stanford Education Professor John Willinsky states:

*It was the duty and pleasure of [imperialist powers] to make the whole of the world coherent for the west by bringing all we knew of it within the imperial order of things. So it was that this order dictated all that future generations were going to learn of the world. (Willinsky, 2000, pg. 11)*

Willinsky writes about an educational process that went on for centuries and as I understand it, still exists today. Imperialist nations extended their physical and intellectual arms to collect and organize information in their distinctive way. Although making claims that continue to this day of "pure" and "objective" ways of creating knowledge, these empires existed in a biased reality that dehumanized people of other cultures, distinguishing them from European cultures. From this hierarchy of self-legitimizing authority, the largely white, imperial powers of Europe sought to control how the world was understood, and then sought to teach the world [the colonized] of itself through their subsequent project of colonization. It is extremely important for understanding *who* has authority to create knowledge. An imperialist power that believes itself to be the center of humanity and superior to other cultures, constructs and imposes knowledge about another community and its culture. The discriminatory processes of imperial powers did not listen to what a culturally different community had to say about itself or in the physical place it existed. Instead, the imperial powers of Europe biasedly observed and created their own damaging truths from a socially constructed position of power. These imperialist cultures then insisted on teaching other communities a very different reality about themselves, contradicting the subjects' own self-perceptions. By definition, imperialism and colonialism, in order to control, intended to disrupt their subjects' community, culture and identity, negating their reality and lived experiences. Educational processes were used as a tool to do this. Education was a way to exclude values or beliefs not stemming from the dominant, imperial culture. Bringing it back to who has authority over knowledge creation, it comes from a specific, position of cultural power.

So that is some historical context and a lot of jargon. I'd like to recap with a brief definition of imperialism and colonialism as I understand them. Imperialism is the policy and actions of expanding influence through direct or indirect control of political, economic, social and educational systems in another territory. Colonialism is one type of practice of imperialism by physically establishing settlements in another territory (while simultaneously subjugating its inhabitants through denying their humanity). The reason I do not believe what I just described is limited to an historic sense, is because I see

colonization as an ongoing process. Imperial powers may no longer exist as they did in the preceding three centuries, but the legacies of their political, economic and social systems are found entrenched all over the world today. I believe the United States' public school system is a manifestation of this legacy, and that it still limits beliefs and expressions of many communities that are not held by the dominant culture of this country.

### **Wisdom Keeper three:**

*Hi Zachary. As my partner said, it's been a hard one. We are down south as you know. Tomorrow I get the T-cell infusion that may or may not cure me of cancer. In the meantime, it has been regular visits to get everything from chemo to blood and platelet transfusions. Anyway, here I am, at last, to tell you one of the most important things I've learned: the importance of community. At this treatment center, I have seen a big difference between people who have community and those who don't. People in my community have sent me letters of love and inspiration, have held a fundraiser for me, and given me many gifts of friendship and encouragement. One cannot just go out and adopt a community when they need it, so I believe it is essential to invest and participate in community for a lifetime.*

*I would put my family as high on my most important things about life as well. We gave everything we could to our family. I always said one of the things we did well was to have a small house. It meant no one could hide. We all stayed in relationship, even though sometimes it drove our daughters crazy. We are close now, and while a small house wasn't the only reason... it certainly helped.*

*Our home, in all its dimensions, has been our anchor. Community, family and the closeness of friends. And Place. Sense of Place has been a topic I have spoken about for years. I really believe in it. It brings me into nature in a powerful and intimate way. I love knowing what trees and birds and bugs are my neighbors. I believe it grounds me in a way nothing else can. On the last day of my life, I will see my northwest home, the shimmering Salish Sea, the evergreens and the hallelujah of the Garry Oaks, the snow crowned mountains and the farmlands, marshes and rivers of the valleys.*

*Because of home, we love travel. Our home community is what makes travel fun and worth coming back from. My partner and I both loved travel before we met each other, and have enjoyed it as a couple and as a family as well. Travel has allowed us to see the dimensions and commonalities of the world. People are both so very different and so very much the same.*

*So there you have it... community, home and travel. The moorings of a life well lived!*

### **Analysis:**

I am so grateful for Wisdom Keeper three's lessons they share with me. I find myself lending even more credence to these lessons when I contextualize them within this Wisdom Keeper's life. Coming to know the importance of community has provided a literal lifeline for this individual. I understand community as being embedded within their identity, well-being and wholeness. I also find it powerful to hear how exploring the world and people different from them with an open heart is prompted by having such a solid identity within their community. I find myself imagining what a classroom could look like, not just as its own community, but as a space to support the diverse communities' students exist in outside of their classrooms.

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### ***Perspective and Subject Material***

My inquiry into purpose and public school education led me down a path exploring what is taught in history and social studies. I realize that much of the subject material taught in our public schools reflects the cultural perspective of those who produce it. In large part, the textbooks used for K-12 instruction tell the experience of Euro-American communities' relationship with the world. An example of this is how certain historical time periods are framed, such as the Age of Exploration. This is taught as a period of discovery and expansion of the known borders of the world. A narrative reflecting the cultures and communities that were "discovered" would undoubtedly teach this time period very differently. In the context of United States history, the "discovery" and Euro-American westward expansion and progress on this continent, is not often taught from Indigenous communities' perspectives. If it were taught in schools, these narratives would more likely detail an intentional colonialist campaign to remove Indigenous culture and communities from this continent.

My understanding is that a Euro-American perspective dominates public education in the United States. I am concerned with how it leads to an inequity in how other people, cultures and communities are represented in mainstream curriculum and accepted in the classrooms. The curriculum of heroes, change-makers and producers of knowledge mirror economically well-off, white, heterosexual males. In the context of human and civil rights in the United States history, women and minorities are often depicted as passive victims in a time long ago who were saved by white men and their culture. But that could not be further from the collective truth of those who have experienced and fought against sexism, racism, religious intolerance, classism and many other inequities. What also concerns me, is that these topics are taught as things of the past. There is little critical and contemporary connection to what many communities are experiencing through struggles today. This situates learners who may not experience these oppressions, as possibly never truly hearing first-person accounts of important and ongoing struggles. It also means that learners who *have* experienced these oppressions, may be denied the legitimacy of their communities' experiences and understandings, simply because their narratives and voices are left out of the classroom.



## Wisdom Keeper four:

*One of the most important lessons I have ever learned in and about my life and the world has been about the idea of perception. When I was a junior in college, I studied abroad in India, living in a very remote place: the district of Kalimpong. We're talking about a completely eastern traditional setting and way of being. There was little electricity, no refrigerators, no stoves. Most everything I was eating was grown right outside my home.*

*Now, I was half-way around the world as a black man from America and had multiple people, in fact almost everybody I interacted with, ask me where I was from and honestly not believe me when I would tell them America. Most conversations eventually led into something that you could say is akin to an argument, as I was trying to explain, mind you in another language, that I am from America. And that black people do live in America. And that no, neither of my parents are white. Yes, they are both black. But the people I was encountering were convinced that I could only live in America if one of my parents was white.*

*Although not foreign to me, encountering perception that contradicts my reality hits hard. To believe a black man cannot live in America is only possible because the images that they see on television and in magazines disregard my reality; the images are all just of the typical blonde-haired, blue eyed people of Hollywood. And not the Hollywood that could be diverse, but the Hollywood that is very prototypical American, which is, honestly, just aryan. But the important thing that really stuck with me wasn't the weirdness of my reality being displaced. It's the understanding that still, three hundred or four hundred years later, as a black man in America, I am always going to be displaced. And it's larger than just how I am perceived. People that I was living with on a different side of the world are educated at the mercy of whatever media is given to them. They can only know what is presented, not the realities that are left out. I had the unfortunate fortune of being able to go to this faraway place and see these perceptions and constructed realities of some of the other six and half billion people on this earth.*

*What if one of the people I lived with from Kalimpong traveled to Brooklyn to live with me for six months? I wonder how they would come to terms with and understand that their life and their reality and the experiences they live are unseen? When we travel to America or other places around the world, or even when we travel to different communities within America, we face stereotypes. One's perception is one's reality. If America only exports or educates to the blonde-haired, blue-eyed America, that might as well be the only reality that exists. As an individual, I go out into the world and often mend perception. I and many others are faced with the challenges that come with others' perceptions of reality. When I am talking with people, when I am growing and trying to form my own identity, I have so many factors I have to deal with.*

*An important truth that I found in India, is that everywhere around the world we are all people simply learning. Learning how to be people and how to be around other people. And*

*the hardest thing to do is to understand that we sometimes, just have to let go of our perceptions to understand other peoples' realities.*

### **Analysis:**

Wisdom Keeper four shared with me this powerful, first-person account about the complexities of his identity and his continual process of legitimizing it to others. This story exemplifies a reality that, as the Wisdom Keeper stated, is neither educated about or exported by America. When communities' experiences and perspectives are left out or not accurately represented in curriculum, it's not just students of this country who have an inaccurate perception of reality. These students will make up the next generation of business and media and marketing leaders. That produces worldwide consequences, as the business and marketing products they control or influence are major vehicles for how the rest of the world will perceive the United States. I again find myself wondering what a classroom can look like, if it supported the hugely diverse communities that students represent. And how can school and curriculum be used in a way that supports students' complex identities, so they are not needing to defend their existence? A big lesson I will continue to learn from was stated very simply at the end: sometimes we have to let go of our perceptions to understand other peoples' realities.

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### **Decision Makers**

The ideas surrounding a dominant culture's perspective lead me to wonder who, if anybody, is actually in charge of making decisions concerning how we educate and the educational materials we use? Looking into this, I found that the United States constitution largely puts responsibility on the state level for decision making in education. That being said, the federal government does provide funding to states. Attached to the funding are accountability requirements, often in the form of standardized testing. Overall though, the federal government accounts for less than ten percent of school funding. Individual states primarily rely on sales and income taxes, as well as individual districts receiving property taxes of the surrounding area. It made sense to me, then, when I discovered that in poor and economically disadvantaged areas, school districts require more state and federal level funding. This subjects schools to more scrutiny and stricter accountability set from the top down. Poorer districts needing more funding are following requirements set by people and agencies that are far removed from the communities where the schools physically exist. This creates a situation where decision makers may have little to no understanding of a community and what it defines as its values and its needs.

I wanted to further my understanding of this by exploring who goes to public school and if their communities are represented in the top decision makers within education. For one perspective of this, I reviewed the US Department of Education's 2016 report on *The Condition of Education*. This report often uses race and ethnicity demographics to describe their findings. This is definitely not the only way to understand inequities within education or society, but race and ethnicity can represent different cultures and certainly represent different experiences within society. The report states that half of the 50 million students enrolled in public schools identify as white. The other half represent a diverse range of other identities. When I contrasted this information with who I found to represent decision makers within the public school system, I discovered a blunt disproportion. The highest office in education in the United States is the Secretary of Education. Since the creation of this office in 1979, this position has officially been held by 11 different presidential appointees and two interim representatives. Of these 13 people, 11 have been white while only two were people of color. And unfortunately, no minority women have ever held this position. Although this group does not reflect the students served in public education, it does reflect the dominant narrative taught in history and social studies curriculum. I was interested to see if the racial demographics of the top state educational leaders was any different. It turns out not to be. The top leaders in 46 states today are currently white. There are only 4 are people of color in these positions. Further, the Department of Education's 2016 report in *The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce* acknowledges that, "Education leaders are... predominantly white... Only 20 percent of public school principals were individuals of color" (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, pg. 3). Now, I want to make clear that I am not asserting that any of these individuals have an intention to be culturally biased. But I do strongly believe that many of them are complicit in perpetuating an educational system that does not represent or value many communities outside of the dominant Euro-American culture. Respected author and social critic James Bladwin illustrates this sentiment beautifully during his interview in 1968 on the Dick Cavett show. Baldwin states:

*I don't know what most white people in this country feel, but I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions...*

*I don't know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me; that doesn't matter. But I know I'm NOT in their unions.*

*I don't know if the real estate lobby has anything against black people, but I know the real estate lobbies keep me in the ghetto.*

*I don't know if the Board of Education hates black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the schools that they have to go to.*

Baldwin posits that his cultural experience is indeed valid and should be taken as fact. Decision makers in public education may or may not be creating policy intended to be culturally biased. But intention is not necessarily what matters. What I believe matters is how it effects those it is imposed upon. I believe it matters if education recognizes and responds to the human experiences of our students.

## Wisdom Keeper five:

*True teaching and deep learning nurtures one to be curious and to trust their “inner voice.” It engenders a confidence in the process, and of one’s own ability to interact, deduce and succeed in life. Trusting one’s inner voice is to have trust in one’s lived experiences and deep held beliefs.*

*The first time I remember really fully understanding this knowledge about self-trust was at a lecture years ago. I sat in a dark auditorium listening to the lecturer’s thickly accented voice. She shared her beliefs about how she related to dying patients and their ultimate deaths. Tears ran down my face. For the first time since early childhood with my grandmother, I was in the presence of another individual who perceived the world in a way very similar to me. Her topic and attitude about it were not accepted in the greater world as truth. Her comments made me feel as though she had peeked into my brain and pulled out my thoughts and feelings to use in her lecture. As a young person with little confidence, I kept my thoughts and insights to myself for fear of being judged or ostracized by society. This lecture confirmed for me that I was not crazy, and that I had a deep intuition and place of knowledge that I shared with someone else. I realized that I was not alone in my experiences, and that my beliefs were valid.*

*In raising my children, I was able to rely on my inner guides. When my first born son was diagnosed with cancer, those guides became my life line. Twenty years later, I can still conjure the visceral feeling of a profound connection to a deeper intelligence when I recall the conversation I had with my young son that day at the doctor’s office. His pediatrician told me that the ultra sound revealed a tumor in his left kidney. In an instant, the rug was pulled out from under my world and I saw myself standing in thin air with no hand holds. I told the doctor I wanted to settle my five year old son in the waiting room before we had any further discussion or made any plans. In the waiting room, I explained to my son that I needed to talk with the doctor some more. I told him I wanted to ask him some questions first, to which he agreed. I instructed him to close his eyes and see himself in the room. Ok Mom. Next I asked him if he could see himself as an older boy? Yes. As a teenager? Yes. As a young man? Yes. His dad’s age? Yes. An old man? Yeah, but why? With this, I knew he would survive whatever came of this diagnosis.*

*Years earlier, the women whose lecture I attended told me that her favorite population with which to work was kids. They are so clear and in touch with their spiritual side. She told me that an individual knows deep inside whether they will survive or not. But I had no training or experience with this type of situation. Nor did my son. At that juncture, we knew nothing about pediatric cancer or how to manage a potentially devastating report such as this. I had never seriously considered that one of my children would die before they reached adulthood. Much later, I came to understand what happened in that waiting room exchange. From some deep place within both of us, using another language, I had asked my son if he would survive cancer. He answered me in the affirmative: YES, I will survive.*

*I held fast to the confidence of his answers as the experience evolved. Throughout the entire process of diagnosis and treatment, my deep, inner self was in charge. It was finding the right ways to discuss this adventure with family, friends, doctors and most importantly, with my son himself.*

*I truly believe that my five year old son's response to my questions and the events that followed, reflected the fact that he was also in touch with and guided by his innate inner voice. He had not been taught to ignore it. He was connected to the world in a very different way from adults, and certainly different from the doctors and the medical miasma he was entering. I called it our grand adventure. Not an ordeal, not a crisis. An adventure. I did visualizations with him. We created chants about fever and counts. I gave him massages and positive messages about his physical, emotional and mental abilities to get through this. I always talked to him simply and clearly about what was going on, what we were doing and why. We had prayer meetings and sweats. And we had LOTS of Lego building.*

*I never planned any of the conversations nor did I have a support group feeding me technique. There was nothing written about how to truly deal with this. I believe the shock of the situation allowed my inner voice to take control. When my son fell very sick from chemo around Christmas, I had a dream that he had died. He was so sick from the chemo that they withheld treatment for several weeks in order for his immune system to respond. One night, as the head of oncology and I discussed the current situation, I was told to keep doing whatever it was I had been doing. He told me that this is what was keeping my son alive. He told me that the medical world had nothing else to offer.*

*I learned so many valuable lessons through that adventure that still ring true today. As parents, my partner and I consistently made choices that nurtured our children's innate intelligence, while supporting and encouraging their curiosity and self-trust. What this offered my kids was an environment in which to educate their whole person.*

*The most important things that I learned outside the classroom is to listen to my inner voice and trust myself and the being of who I am. The journey of that discovery is what it is all about.*

### **Analysis:**

Wisdom Keeper number five has shared so many lessons throughout the course of my relationship with her. But I have never heard the details of this story until a little more than a week ago. I appreciate the lessons towards validating one's own inner voice and innate intelligence. The valuing, trusting and honoring of the knowledges within ourselves should not be overlooked. They are often reflections of the communities and the cultures we come from. I truly believe what the head of oncology told this Wisdom Keeper. That she needed to keep doing whatever she had been doing, because that is what was keeping her son alive. And she did continue. And her son, one of my great

friends, survived. When she was told the medical world had nothing else to offer, she continued to trust her inner guides in providing her son what he needed. I think it is also worth looking at the role anxiety played in this story. This Wisdom Keeper's trust in her inner voice and innate intelligence was initiated under severe anxiety. And it helped carry her through an ordeal that, when it was finally over, had undoubtedly contributed to additional confidence she had in her identity and her deeply held beliefs (and a deeper confidence in the communities and cultures she comes from). I wonder how I, as an educator, can help transform anxiety my students feel, into confidence in themselves, confidence in their communities, and confidence in their own cultures. I believe that would impact education in profound ways.

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## Science

As I'm coming to understand how subject material taught in our public schools reflect the cultural perspective of those who produce it, I want to also understand the processes of evaluating knowledge that is considered "Truth" with a capital T. For this I looked to western science, as it is taught in our schools, and as it is believed by many to produce indisputable facts through following a specific process. The scientific method as it is practiced today is heavily influenced by the thoughts of prominent European scientists and philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> century such as Rene Descartes, Francis Bacon and Issac Newton. The scientific method seeks to isolate subjects through controlled testing, proceeded and followed by observations. By using the protocols of this method, scientists can replicate an experiment anywhere on Earth and yield the same results. This process is a powerful language in and of itself that can transmit valuable knowledge across the world. I recognize many benefits of this process of knowledge creation and validation. But I am troubled by how it seems to sometimes exclude other ways of knowledge creation exercised by cultures that may not solely rely on the scientific process as a primary source of authority in creating knowledge and understanding of the world. I have been exploring for some time now, Indigenous knowledges, and ways of coming-to-know. As I partake in some of these processes, I find the results are often at odds with what western science dictates as being able to be deemed "Truth" with a capital T, or fact. Western science and the scientific method is practiced by many with the belief that those involved can do so objectively. A belief that in following this method, an individual can remove them self from most biases (or at least "control" these biases) . This is one of the arguments as to why western science can produce or illuminate universal Truths and knowledge. But scholar and philosopher Jeremy Hayward, who holds a PhD in physics from Cambridge University, states the following:

*The so-called scientific method which, [students] learn, is how scientists work is fabrication... It is extremely unlikely that there can ever be such an event as a pure, unprejudiced observation. Observations are always made, first, within the historical and cultural context which has given someone the reason for making the observation at all and,*

*second, within the context of the person's own belief system and [their] own organism which in turn affects the result of [their] observation. (1984)*

What Hayward describes poses a problem for many communities and their understandings of the world. For many cultures Indigenous to this continent, education, ways-of-knowing, science and knowledge creation are embedded in forms of ceremonies, art, observations and storytelling (this is by no means an exhaustive list). Relationships between learner and knowledge creation are often encouraged and valued in a way that necessitate subjectivity. In his book *Look To The Mountain*, Gregory Cajete, a prominent Tewa educator and research faculty member at the University of New Mexico, states:

*The ultimate aim [of Native science] is not explaining an objectified universe, but rather learning about and understanding responsibilities and relationships and celebrating those that humans establish with the world. (pg. 55)*

Cajete states an Indigenous relationship to science takes an explicitly subjective approach. In the processes of western knowledge legitimization, including the scientific method, vast sources and quantities of Indigenous communities' knowledge are disqualified from representing "Truth". I find it concerning when I begin to understand that communities have existed on this continent for tens of thousands of years, intimately connected and knowledgeable about this land and its relationships, and in the span of a few hundred years, their enormous breadth of knowledge is largely discredited by a now dominant, Euro-American culture and its narrow understandings of science and how knowledge can be created. I want to make clear though, that I do not point out these differences to devalue the western approach to understanding creation and practicing science. Instead, I only seek to understand how this approach excludes other ways of formulating knowledge by communities. I believe the effects of this are played out in schools when we have students whose cultural identities and deep held beliefs are discredited by the sometimes rigid process of western-practiced science.

## **Wisdom Keeper 6**

*In 1972, I walked into my first Botany class. On the chalk board was the life cycle of a basidiomycete – a mushroom. I fell into awe. The intense complexity of how this seemingly simple organisms made its way in the world, reproduced, spread its spores, and connected almost all of the unseen world in the soil simply mesmerized me. The image of this is as vivid in my mind's eye today as it was that day. Each day I attended that class and looked to the board for the next miracle, I fell more into awe. From Algae, to fungi, to flowering plants – each took me a heartbeat away from ecstasy. These were the plants that give us food for our bodies, medicine for healing and beauty to inspire our hearts. Some were barely classified as plants – more like an animal/plant creature. Co-evolution, genetics, paleo*

*botany, pollinators, toxic predators, nitrogen fixing soil enhancers, photosynthesis, all the sweet and precious inexplicably interwoven relationships - each was a revelation and with every new story, I fell in love with this world.*

*That same semester that I took that botany class, I also was enrolled in what we called a natural resources class. There were no environmental majors. No environmental education. No programs in environmental law. And a very young environmental movement. In fact, we didn't even call ourselves environmentalists - we called ourselves ecologists.*

*I remember vivid images and stories from this natural resource class. I remember explicit photos of old growth clear cuts in the forests from Canada to northern California and narratives about how the pesticide DDT thinned the shells of Brown Pelicans and Osprey causing their precipitous declines.*

*Those images and narratives changed my life. They sheared my heart, split my soul and galvanized my life into action. The beauty and awe I enjoyed from one class was tempered by grief from another. I felt then and continue to feel now, the responsibility to attend to the desperation that destroys beauty in all of its forms and processes.*

*The year of my awakening was 1972. It was also this year, that this country passed some of our most innovative and visionary environmental laws. The Federal Water Pollution Control Act, the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act were passed. The Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act were being amended. The Endangered Species Act was being formulated for passage for the following year. Many of us felt optimistic that the tools were in place to fix our environmental transgressions. But that did not mean we were able to give up paying attention and reminding ourselves and others what was at stake. In the many years since, all of these laws have faced scrutiny and opposition and attack.*

*I went on to graduate school which offered up a new kind of revelation in learning. By conducting my own research, I felt for the first time not just the joy of learning, but experienced the humility and satisfaction of adding to the knowledge of the world. I was experiencing knowledge as beauty, joy and revelation.*

*I believe it is not just the work of graduate students, but of all human beings to continue to honor the process of learning. While it seems cliché, I began to experience education, learning and indeed life itself as truly a journey. Our work is not just to memorize what is already known, although we use what is known and the people who got us there as stepping stones to our own pursuits and studies. In this way we understand that all learning is an incomplete and communal activity.*

*I strive every day to balance my fear and grief with beauty and resilience. In that way, I can continue to learn and take action. It is not easy. In 1989, I was living in Prince William Sound Alaska when the Exxon Valdez ran aground on Blight Reef, spewing 11 million*



*gallons of Alaska Crude Oil into the pristine waters of the Sound. So much has been written about this event. Suffice it to say, it was worse than reported and continues to impact herring, sea birds and the way of life of every person who lived and lives there today. We endured a summer of chaos, dry communities going off the wagon, communities torn apart by money, eventual suicides and many other life forms suffering oil-saturated demises. This paragraph alone is an entire book of experiences and newly ordained activism. I knew then that I could never be silent when speech was needed. And that the kind of speech needed, was to be powerful, deep and accurate. It was then I started an 18 year career coordinating interfaith environmental activism. Working with Muslim, Christian, Jews, Wiccans, Sikhs, Native elders and others, we worked on climate change, clean car legislation, protecting the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and other environmental issues. It was a true labor of love that I continue today because I believe that strength is in unity.*

*This last year, my activism has taken on another aspect. I am bearing witness. I believe if we don't look at the trees, mountains, and world to acknowledge its beauty, it will simply disappear. So I promise to pay attention. To witness it. To see it. All of it. The beauty and the destruction. And somehow keep hold of the vision of enduring beauty.*

*Paying attention helps. But it is still not enough for me. After hearing me recite my litany of political activities this last week, my best friend cautioned me to make sure I am taking care of myself. And I am. Daily meditation or spiritual practice, Yoga, skiing, time with those whom I love. But, my self-care also includes the melding of my awe with the abiding sadness I first encountered in that Natural Resources class with the taking of action. The cautionary tale for me is to make sure I am consistently replenishing my well with beauty. For without reminding my soul, I am apt to react with anger. We are told by so many that action in anger seeds its own destruction. I believe this but continue to experiment.*

*My experience is that anger is a personal, destructive eschewing communication, while Righteous indignation is the sorrow and shame the soul feels at injustice. Righteous indignation creates compassion. I ask myself, how can I contribute and create knowledge from a place of beauty, honor, and righteous indignation? I draw from past wisdom, but I am building reliance and confidence in my own. I don't want to be angry. Perhaps it is selfish but I just don't like it. I do not think my suffering helps. I strive to do my part to create a just world. I hope that by studying, questioning, revising, revering and living with my shattered but joyful heart, I can add to the body of human wisdom.*

*I'll end with a quote from Rabbi Tarfon: "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the work, but neither are you at liberty to desist from it" (Avot 2:21).*

## **Analysis:**

I do not doubt I will continue to pull lessons from Wisdom Keeper six's story every time I read it. She reaffirms for me that learning and knowledge creation is always

incomplete and always communal, as we build upon the experiences of those who came before us, and those after us will build knowledge on the experiences we share. If we truly embrace these processes as a collective endeavor, it should then reason that a classroom would benefit from a collaboration of insights, experiences and a diversity of perspectives that our students and their communities can provide. Wisdom Keeper six has a revelation when she experiences the humility, satisfaction, beauty and joy of knowledge creation. She identifies this as occurring during her graduate school experience. But I wonder under what circumstances this can occur at earlier stages in students' lives? I wonder how an educator can support K-12 students, so they too can experience revelations in learning and knowledge creation? So they too can experience joy that will carry their passions forward throughout a lifelong process of learning.

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***Moving Forward:***

I started off attempting to discover the purpose of public school education is. No clean answer has been revealed to me through my research. I think what the process has done is even more valuable though. It contextualizes education with valuable historic and contemporary realities. It uncovers barriers that I, and many other educators and our students, will need to push against to recognize our collective and community truths. My Wisdom Keepers stepped in and offered me guidance in this. They inspire me to consider different perspectives, to nurture and value community, to follow my inner voice, to stand up against oppression with kindness, and to look for teachers in each and every adult and child that I encounter. They embolden me to create space for my students' and their communities' realities and ways of being. I believe this approach can carry me and any other educator forward, towards genuine understandings of communities that are necessary to stop the disruptions of this beautiful earth and the people living on it.

Wisdom Keeper six provided me with exactly the lessons I needed to continue pushing forward in the work that I was doing before coming to graduate school, the work I did during my time here, and the work I will continue with in the future. As I stated at the beginning of this presentation, I believe that education is one of, if not the most fundamental, tool to building an equitable, peaceful and just society. Undertaking a job as an educator that realizes this potential is tremendously rewarding but also exhaustive. I want to thank all my Wisdom Keepers from the bottom of my heart, for replenishing the well I drink from, with beauty.

Mvto. Tack sa mycket. Gracias. Thank you.



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