story as it would if it were specifically involved in the communication of knowledge. What is given willingly is much more valuable than what is demanded as a matter of force.

Since many Indian students will be working for their tribes once they receive their professional degrees, it would pay them to give traditional technology a careful look. Tribal lands and resources have always been used on a sustained yield basis and this attitude is in distinct contrast to the American propensity to exhaust resources for short-term gains. Modern technology might indeed be useful in repairing the damages already done to tribal lands so that the lands can once again be put on a traditional use pattern and become productive again. And even this possibility can be learned from the world as it responds to ceremonies and human societies that understand their place in the larger cosmos. As science progresses, so do the ceremonies and as we look ahead there is considerably more to be gained by combining insights than in ignoring them.

Transitional Education

Education has a transitional function of moving individuals from one status or condition to another. In the old days we used to mark these transitions by giving the individual a new name, a name that would more accurately summarize his or her achievements. Today we award certificates, diplomas and degrees to mark each step the student takes. But education itself is transitional. New theories and concepts are continually intruding into established patterns of teaching and institutional organization so that the experience of education changes radically from generation to generation. For American Indians there is an additional element to be considered because Indian school systems are at best transitory. There is no predictability in the actions of Congress that would reassure the people that a decent education will always be available to them. Indian education is conceived to be a temporary expedient for the purpose of bringing Indians out of their primitive state to the higher levels of civilization. Presumably when this ill-defined status is reached, there will be no more use for special programs in Indian education.

The goal of much of modern education seems to be socialization. That is to say, with some few exceptions, we are training people to present an acceptable profile to the corporate industrial world. Our undergraduate degrees actually certify that the student has a smattering of knowledge about a number of fields, is fairly well acquainted with one particular field, and can accommodate himself or herself to institutional life. We pretend otherwise but this goal is what we actually have in mind. Indian education
is somewhat unique in that it has always been premised upon the idea of assimilation without regard to socialization. From the very beginning first missionaries and later government teachers sought to erase the cultural backgrounds of Indian children with the naive belief that once a vacuum was created, western social mores and beliefs would naturally rush in to replace long-standing tribal practices and customs.

A review of Indian education programs of the past three decades will demonstrate that these programs have been based upon very bad expectations. In 1960 there were approximately 2,000 Indians in higher education, financed primarily by private scholarship funds and individual and family efforts. In 1990 best estimates show that we have something like 70,000 Indians in various forms of higher education, financed by a bewildering variety of sources including colleges and universities, private groups, state scholarships and several forms of federal assistance. In spite of our continual complaints, it should be obvious that Indian education has made some major progress since 1960 and that while funds are hard to come by for many students, the overall picture appears very bright.

Yet we are all discontented with what is happening in Indian education and we cannot quite put our finger on it. The majority of funds in Title IV and other programs have concentrated on the sciences and administration and management and yet as we look around at both reservation programs and the distribution of Indians in private industry, we find little evidence that the efforts of the last thirty years have made a difference. We still need many Indian educational administrators and we have a pressing need for management personnel and we still have great difficulty finding Indians working in industry. Reservation and border town schools appear to be falling even farther behind the national norms and many schools are simply thinly disguised holding-pens to keep the young people institutionalized during the day until they reach a certain age when we can demand that they behave like adults. The outbreak of devil worship on some reservations and the growing drug problems on other reservations demonstrate the inadequacy of the present situation.

So What Problem Are We Actually Facing and How Do We Deal With it?

Education has generally been misunderstood by its practitioners. It is defined as both process and content and it is exceedingly difficult to tell from educational behavior and philosophy whether or not the educator is making the proper distinctions. We can divide Indian education into two basic periods: the period of content and the period of process. From the beginning of the republic, in fact from the beginning of contact, education was primarily a matter of providing content, new ways of thinking of things and new facts. From the Meriam Report of 1928 until the present we have been living in the age of process—which is to say, we have been more concerned with how children learn than with what they learn. During the past thirty years we have been exclusively concerned with how they learn and have almost studiously avoided asking what it is they are learning.

This situation is particularly difficult for students who are studying science because, in most respects, science is content and not process. Consequently after educating Indian young people in schools which stress learning experiences we suddenly place upon them the demand that they accommodate themselves to the scientific enterprise, which is to say, to build scientific expertise on a secondary education which has very little content. The student has no choice except to attempt to learn the scientific curriculum as well as gain background in the mass of conflicting ideas that now passes for western civilization. When the social adjustment from Indian community-based culture to non-Indian urban networking culture has to be made at the same time, many students adopt a very rigid posture concerning personal, group, and community values. Too often they model themselves after the professionals in their academic field or their institutional situation. This adjustment then forces them outside their Indian circle and greatly inhibits their ability to draw from their own tribal traditions the lessons which could be profitably learned regarding both science and the social world in which they live. That we are producing any Indians in science at all is a tribute to the perseverance of this generation of Indian young people.

Where then do we start to make changes in Indian education so that we can deal with the problems we perceive? Perhaps the first step we can take is to admit that education is transitional and that it has both a beginning and an end. Indian education must certainly begin within the Indian community, be it a reservation, small town, or urban setting. Recent legislation, most notably the Indian Education Act, has attempted to deal with this beginning by requiring that schools receiving federal
funds have Indians on their school boards and advisory committees. Here Indians were placed within the process of education but not allowed to determine its content. In Indian survival schools, Indians were allowed to determine the content but generally isolated from the process of education. Consequently few schools at the primary and secondary level have been able to do very much about improving education as a whole.

When we look closely at the idea of a transitional process, we must note that the goal or result should have been contained within the beginning and should flow directly out of it as the potential to be realized. The old Indians saw this necessity at once. The famous saying of Sitting Bull to the effect that the people should take what is good of the white man and reject what is bad assumed from the start that Indians would begin in and always have recourse to their own communities and cultural traditions. The missing element here, or rather the conclusion that we always avoid drawing, is the context in which education occurs. Context is also the beginning; it is not only the place to start, it is the channel within which all other developments must occur. Modern Indian education too often looks at the present poverty context of Indian communities and then devises programs which are supposed to deal with and overcome the handicaps which present conditions contain. Thus we have educational programs for every conceivable kind of social and community handicap and disability. But the products of these programs are often worse for the wear and the best students emerging from these programs represent but a very small percentage of the total student population.

Compensatory programs fail because they take the Indian context as the immediate conditions under which Indians live. This analysis is a common characteristic of the western way of thinking but it is certainly not a traditional Indian way of thought nor is it the manner in which many Indian parents conceive of education or of their lives. In politics we always speak about the coming generations and anthologies are filled with clever sayings and quotations about the lands of our grandfathers and the next generation of Indians. The essence of these sayings is a view of the world which encompasses many generations of people. That is to say, the proper context of Indian education should be whatever existing conditions are plus the traditional manner in which the tribe has faced its difficulties. In other words the proper context is the history and culture of the tribe, regardless of the present location of its membership.

We do not have good present examples of how Indian education worked when the context defined both the content and the process of education, but the school systems of the Five Civilized Tribes certainly functioned in this manner—and they functioned very well indeed. Tribal college graduates could generally speak their own language and English and had a reading knowledge of a European language. These were school systems designed by the tribes themselves, funded by the tribes through annuity accounts in the federal treasury, and staffed and operated by tribal governments. The Creek school system invented the school warrant system of finance which was adopted by a good many of the non-Indian school districts in the western states in succeeding years. Additionally, the Five Tribes had seminaries which educated the young women of the tribe and orphanages to take care of the homeless children.

We have part of the message of the Five Tribes educational system today—tribal control—but we do not have the tribal concern to make education the primary function of the tribal government. In those days tribal officials made an annual visit to each school in the tribal system. Students were expected to recite what they had learned—to demonstrate that they had mastered the content of what was taught. Scholarships for higher education were not handed out on a tribal membership basis—students had to earn tribal support after their secondary school days were completed. At graduation whole families came to the school and listened to the students demonstrate their knowledge of the various subjects they had studied. The old tribal custom of reciting deeds done on war parties was translated wholly into a recitation of school work completed. School graduations were the big social event of the year. When we try to summarize the basic philosophy of these schools, we find that there was a general belief that education was something for the tribe, not for the individual. School became an integral part of tribal customs. It was not something imposed on the people.

It is not possible for tribes to fund their own schools today. Indeed, most American communities do not support their own schools but receive federal, state, county, and private financial assistance so that, to a certain degree, no school district in the United States has the financial freedom to determine either the process or the content of its education. Funding is not the issue, however. The issue is providing the context in which what is taught and the processes by which it is taught make sense. Here tribes
have a very decided advantage over non-Indian school districts. An individual is a tribal member all his or her life, consequently the tribe always has a central core constituency of people who represent its interest. Non-Indian communities, on the other hand, are hardly what a person could call communities. Apart from small towns which have a greater resemblance to Indian tribes than to other non-Indian communities, most American cities and suburbs are merely places through which people travel. It is an exceedingly rare non-Indian who lives in the same town as his or her grandparents spent their adult lives. As a result, non-Indian communities are themselves in transition. That is to say, they lack context and consequently their educational programs are increasingly educating fewer and fewer people.

Without a context, science quickly becomes a technology, the application of theory to practical use without so much as a thought about the consequences of the application. This process has been determining the fate of American communities most of this century but now with increasing scientific knowledge we are coming to the end of the period when we can thoughtlessly apply science. In the next five years we will see a massive backlash by ordinary citizens against the use of technology for corporate and private profit in defiance of the health and living conditions of people in affected areas. A quick reading of any magazine or newsletter devoted to ecological, civil rights, animal rights, or agricultural concerns will reveal the scope of the modern reform movement. In short, for the first time since the beginning of the American industrial revolution which probably began in the 1880s, Americans are now trying to build a context in which the content of education will have some value.

Indian education can exercise a disproportionate amount of influence in the future if we can place it once again within the tribal context. Almost every book now published by the New Age movement is crammed full of quotations of sayings by Indians to the effect that earth's resources are limited, to the effect that people should have priority, and to the effect that there is an important spiritual dimension to human life, that human life has definite meaning that transcends the technological world in which we find ourselves. All of this attention is merely the exploration by non-Indians of windows into the Indian understanding of the universe. There is a deeply held belief that by appropriating a few wise sayings of Indians, longstanding problems brought about by the misuse of science and greedy capitalism can be solved. But merely appropriating ideas only provides slogans, not understanding.

Until the present time, the theory underlying Indian education was that it would provide a transitional process for turning the Indian child into an acceptable citizen. Education thus moved from an Indian context into a condition where the original context, the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world, was itself eroding because it was adopting an education of process and not content. If we now see the fallacy in this process and redefine Indian education as an internal Indian institution, an educational process which moves within the Indian context and does not try to avoid or escape this context, then our education will substantially improve. It will originate as part of the tribal perspective about life and pick up additional information on its return to Indian life.

Establishing the Indian context, in view of the absence of clearly defined tribal goals and philosophies, can be easily done by present Indian students. The primary question which they should ask themselves is whether or not what they are learning will have some meaning to tribal people. And the answer, at first glance, will be a resounding “No”. We presently do not know how to bring knowledge and information back to the tribe because we have not paid sufficient attention to the history and culture of our people. We have been deluded into thinking that there is no applicability of information on behalf of the tribe or no possibility of making our knowledge meaningful. So we must use what we learn about the scientific understanding of the world to ask questions of our people about how our ancestors understood the world, remembering that the tribe exists over many generations and possesses a cumulative knowledge that transcends any particular generation.

The answers that we will receive, when we ask elders and when we read recorded accounts of beliefs and practices, will often seem strange and many times irreconcilable with our scientific knowledge. But we must not use the scientific method to determine the truth or falsity of our comparison. We must learn to place the difference within the tribal context and there reconcile conflicting points of view. Black Elk told John Neihardt the story of how the sacred White Buffalo Calf woman brought the pipe to the Dakotas. When he finished he said “this they tell, and whether it happened so or not I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see