

## Our “Circle of Courage” Philosophy of Education

*Founder/C.E.O. Address to Orenda Education Employees*

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What is the purpose of K thru 12<sup>th</sup> grade education for children and youth? Is it to help our youth know themselves? become a proper citizen for a democracy? To gain the basic knowledge needed for survival? attain happiness and self-worth? To become a productive worker for a functional economy? Or.....to learn how to learn, thereby making oneself an independent critical thinker? In other words, SELF- EMPOWERMENT?

If we must choose just one purpose from this list, we choose the latter. That is, to help our students become independent, Anti-Fragile, critical thinkers. That is what we do at Orenda Education.

So, with this in mind, I went searching for an instructional framework that aligned with my understanding of education's primary purpose. After much thought, reading and deep research, I turned to an unlikely source [Slide # 1] Dr. Martin Brokenleg, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, a sociology professor, a Director of a Neighborhood Youth Corp, and also a Divinity School graduate and chaplain.

He co-authored a book Reclaiming Youth at Risk, that had a big influence on me. His view of raising and educating children was based on positive empowerment and discipline. Using the heritage of Native American child rearing terms and images, he wanted to create what he called a “Circle of Courage” culture in the school setting. [Slide # 2] Here we see how Lakota Sioux artist George Bluebird portrayed this philosophy in his use of the medicine wheel. Native peoples see the person as standing in a circle surrounded by the four directions: North, South, East and West. This philosophy is an integrated holistic approach to child development and learning that promoted a sense of **Belonging - Mastery - Independence & Generosity**.

Let's look at little deeper into the concept of [Slide # 3] **Belonging**. At the core is a commitment to provide a school culture where students feel welcomed and know they are a vital part of the school community, and accepted just as they are. Belonging is like glue, it binds us. But it takes the right kind of surface for adhesion to take place. Glue won't stick to the wrong surface.

All of you listening probably feel like you to belong to at least one or more groups. It is important that we understand and accept that what makes a group, a team, a family, a tribe, a club different and unique is that different groups have different languages, customs, cultural norms and idioms, organizational routines, and milestone events that make that group special and unique. You are not going to fit into every group and feel like you belong.

From the mid 17<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the United States operated American Indian Residential Schools, with the primary purpose of “civilizing” or assimilating Native American

Children and Youth into Euro-American Culture. [Slide # 4] Between 1819 and 1969, the U.S. operated or supported 408 of these Indian schools, some government run, and others run by religious organizations. Here we see Native Sioux boys arriving at the famous Carlisle Indian School in 1879. Although in most cases, **well intentioned**, these schools were mostly a disaster.

We now know that terrible abuses occurred at these schools and that most of the Indian students resented what they had to endure in class. How can that happen? What went wrong? First and foremost, the Native American students were compelled to attend. Second, the values, beliefs, practices, dress and attire, and languages of the Native American students were not respected by the school administrators. Worse, these Federal run schools thought their values and way of life were far superior to the Native students and their families. The Native families could feel the scorn.

Schools don't work for students until the students attending, and the teachers teaching, get aligned in their most basic beliefs and understandings of each other. It is our job as school leaders, to establish the schools mission, purpose, values, routines, rituals, expectations -- the school culture that make our schools unique.

Not all students are going to feel like they belong in the school they attend. Especially at first. For you see, adults cannot make a student feel like they belong. We can love and accept all the students in our care, just as they are. That is our job, but only the student can feel like they belong, and that can only happen when the student and their family accept and identify with the school's mission, purpose and culture. Sometimes that takes time, but eventually it must happen for the student to thrive.

[Slide # 5] **Mastery.** The belief that each student has unique talents and gifts that must be discovered before the student can begin to feel competent. Increased competency enhances self-esteem and provides the motivation for further learning and achievement.

**Mastery is what builds self-esteem and confidence. It's not the other way around.** In other words, we do our children no favors when we give them trophies just for participation, and don't require true mastery before giving them recognition. Oh I know, our students should feel they are unconditionally loved, but to build self-esteem, resiliency and fortitude, our students need to learn to do at least one thing really well.

We at Orenda Education are fighting what I call the "Tyranny of Indulgence". False praise that distorts a child's sense of himself/herself. Kids know when they are really good at something, or not. Fake self-esteem building does not help build Mastery, it crushes it.

[Slide # 6 ] Musician Stevie Ray Vaughn was a master at playing the guitar. If you've ever heard him play the song Texas Flood, you can't help but be amazed at his talent and skill. Can every kid become a Stevie Ray Vaughn if they practice and try hard enough?

A study published in Cerebral Cortex in 2015 shows that unusual activity in specific neural areas can predict how easily musicians learn their chops. It looked at how music instruction and

practice affect the brain. Researchers found where in the brain that advantage was located. Some people have it, but others don't. So they could predict who would be the best music learners. In other words, yes, it takes lots of practice, but great musicians **have a “neural head start”**. So, it's important that we understand and appreciate that not every student has the same aptitude and ability.

Here is just a partial list of different types of intelligence our students may or may not have. “Musical Intelligence” such as what Stevie Ray Vaughn had to discern pitch, rhythm, and tone. “Logical-Mathematical Intelligence” to calculate, quantify, consider hypothesis. “Existential Intelligence” to tackle questions about human existence, philosophize and think in systems. “Athletic Intelligence”, to run, jump, throw and contort the body in special ways. “Linguistic Intelligence” to think in words and use language to express oneself. To make people laugh. “Spatial Intelligence” to think and operate in three dimensions, create and manipulate images, and “Interpersonal Intelligence” to accurately read other people's emotions and intent.

As educators we should be like good detectives, seeking to uncover each students unique gifts and talents. Let them know you know they have it in them. Expect great things, but don't offer false praise.

[Slide # 7] **Independence.** That you must provide a stimulating academic experience where students can grow, develop and have ownership over their learning. Schools are to be a place where students can have the freedom to learn in their own style, at their own pace and through their own interests.

Our Circle of Courage Philosophy places a premium value on **Independence.** It is such an important spirit to instill in our students. For our students to take ownership over their learning. **To think for themselves – To discern, to test, to discover it themselves. A mind-set that questions --- that maybe what your telling me is not true, or not the best way, so I will find out for myself.**

One high school student became famous with that mindset in the late 1960's. Dick Fosbury won a gold medal at the Mexico City 1968 Olympic Games in the high jump competition (leaping over a bar above his head) with a completely new approach. [Slide # 8] Prior to Dick Fosbury all the top high jumpers used techniques ranging from a standing jump to a straddle over the bar, scissoring your legs by clearing one leg and then the other, or rolling over the bar.

But Fosbury had a unique and independent idea. While in high school he was a struggling athlete with little success in anything he tried when he began to question the physics of the high jump that had long been assumed. Armed with this independence mindset -- he came up with the idea that [Slide # 9] by going head first, turning backwards and arching his back at the top of his jump, his center of gravity can stay below the bar, even as his body sailed over it, landing on the back of his neck. He won gold in dramatic fashion, the packed stadium crowd riveted as a they watched him beat the last remaining competitor using this unusual backward style, in what

became known as the “Fosbury Flop”, clearing the bar at 7’ 4 1/2”. He changed the entire event forever. Now all the high jumpers use it.

Fosbury later reported how he was challenged and encouraged by his school teachers and coaches to think outside the box. It is this independence mentality that will inoculate our students from the Robotic Revolution and False Indoctrination.

[Slide # 10 ] And finally, the value of **Generosity**. Today we live in a culture of self-absorption with our Iphone, Ipad, Instagram, TicTok, and Facebook accounts, leading to more selfishness. It seems that little is asked of young people except to be consumers. To combat this idolatry, we should teach our students how to be generous and unselfish, and expect them to serve their communities through participation in various service projects. By doing so, children learn they are needed, and to be counted on. Our children’s self-worth will increase when they learn to give to others. The more generous you are, the more grateful you become. And when people receive your generosity they become more gracious. While Selfishness produces Entitlement, Generosity produces Gratefulness.

Let me tell you a very personal story to illustrate why I believe strongly in this.

On December 6, 1917 the most destructive man-made explosion in world history up until that time, occurred in the city of Halifax, a port city on the eastern coast of Nova Scotia Canada. On that cold day during the years of World War One, two ships were heading in opposite directions in the Halifax harbor. One a Norweigan ship Imo, was going unusually fast, while another, a French ship named the Mont-Blanc, loaded with high explosives for the allied war effort, including 3 kilotons of TNT, benzol, and picric acid -- was heading in the opposite direction. Also in the harbor that morning, among many other boats, was the Canadian mine sweeper ship the Stella Maris, captained by my Great Grandfather Captain Horatio Brannen.

According to the international code of seamanship all boats follow one simple rule: stay to the right of all oncoming boats, the starboard side. Accounts vary, but after exchanging steam powered whistle blasts to signal their locations, the Imo riding empty, high and fast, and the Mont-Blanc, loaded with 6 million pounds of high explosives, riding low and slow collided. Sparks from the impact started a fire on the Mont-Blanc, spreading across the foredeck. Within minutes thick, black smoke poured out of the gash and enveloped the entire ship. The men on the Mont-Blanc knew what was about to happen. They quickly abandoned the ship and started the swim to shore.

Captain Brannen aboard the Stella Maris was the closest witness to the wreck. One of the few who knew of the ships contents, he nonetheless directed his crew to tie up to the burning Mont-Blanc in hopes they could tow the fiery ship out of the harbor to the open ocean before it blew. Time was not on his side. They didn’t make it out to sea.

[Slide # 11] The blast from the Mont-Blanc blew out windows fifty miles away, rendered 50,000 people homeless, wounded 9,000, often horrifically, and

[Slide # 12] killed about 2,000 people, including many school children attending school that morning.

[Slide # 13] The destruction near the water was colossal, including the death of my Great Grandfather Captain Brannen who died that day giving his life to try to save the city of Halifax and its inhabitants. The ultimate act of generosity!

Within hours of the explosion a snow storm blanketed the decimated city. Most communication lines were severed and, as a mostly isolated city, help was far away. The suffering would last for days. A telegram finally got out from the city declaring a code red, asking for help. Fortunately, it was received by the city of Boston, Massachusetts, the closest major city to Halifax by sea. Quickly the city mayor and the governor sprang into action, assembling a relief train and ships with boxes of medical supplies, surgeons, doctors, nurses and red cross personnel. The medical supply chain pulled out of Boston 13 hours after the explosion. Medical personnel that arrived on the scene were shocked at the carnage, hundreds of people with severe facial injuries, many in shock and some still buried under the rubble from the blast.

For several weeks these relief workers from Boston helped put Halifax back together again.

To show their gratitude for the generosity they received in December 1918, one year after the great Halifax explosion, [Slide # 14] the City of Halifax sent a beautiful large Christmas Tree to the City of Boston, thanking them for their help, and they have been doing so every year since. If you visit the Boston Commons during the holiday season next year, [Slide # 15] you will see a beautifully decorated Christmas tree, especially picked out and shipped from Nova Scotia, Canada. A sense of gratitude still tied to the generosity they received way back in 1917. Generosity produces gratefulness.

Dr. Brokenleg gave us a philosophy of education that, if put into practice, fosters courage in our students. The courage to care, the courage to be an independent thinker, and it fosters a spirit of mastery that comes from hard work and discipline, and a spirit of belonging when our students receive acceptance, and learn that we count on them as well. That we need them, and that we know they are capable.

This “Circle of Courage Philosophy” is what creates a positive school culture for your children.