

## **IYESKA: Notes from Mixed-Blood Country...**

I am an Iyeska, a mixed-blood – Oglala Lakota and bits of European nationalities; mostly Irish and English. Over the years we were called half-breeds, breeds, as well various other names from both sides of our ancestry, many of them unprintable.

Iyeska in Lakota translates “speaks white,” but through the years has taken on the generic term for “mixed blood.” What I write here comes from my own experiences as an Iyeska, and from what I have observed among Iyeskas I have known.

Whether or not we admit it, most of the mixed blood kids that I knew in the Indian boarding school I attended and in my home village on the Pine Ridge Reservation through the 1940s and 50s wished sometimes that we were not Indian at all. That came perhaps from seeing movies and reading books in which the white guys always won, had all the money, nice cars, and girls. Indians were always the bad guys, killing innocent settlers who only wanted us dead and our land theirs. And in most towns on the reservation, the stores and other businesses were owned by whites. In reservation border towns, we often faced discrimination. In short, our futures sometimes didn't look all that promising as Indians.

So we bought into what was being pushed on us anyway: assimilation; and we acted out what was expected of us to get jobs and fit into the larger society.

But in the 1960s, minorities all around us were breaking out of the prison that was racism and discrimination. Encouraged by this, Indian people, especially in the urban areas, began to demand equality and justice. The media started to pay attention to Indian people – their needs and demands. And responding to demands, federal and foundation sources made funds available for new programs in the inner cities where relocated Indians tended to collect, and in the reservation communities. This required new leadership to handle the programs (at least in the eyes of federal and foundation bureaucrats), and exposure to the world of industry and commerce invited many “lapsed” Indians see themselves in those positions. It became cool to be Indian, and many who had been washed away in the mainstream “went back to the blanket,” as it used to be said.

But most of the new would-be leaders had to convince the outside white world, especially the media, that they were real Indians. More importantly, they had to establish or reestablish themselves among their own people to be accepted. The white man's appearance, behavior and surname that had given many Iyeskas the lions' share of Indian opportunities in the past, now had to be disclaimed or abandoned. And this brought about a whole generation of ethno-cultural makeovers.

The cosmetic changes were no problem. Stereotypical Indian apparel was easy to come by, and even physical appearance could be changed. Hair could be darkened, and wraps could cover skinny braids and give a reborn Indian that chiefly look the public and the press were looking for.

But the inner changes were more difficult. Sometimes this required a total rewrite of one's life story. The new life story usually included being born into grim poverty on the reservation; and,

depending on whom you were telling it to, being born in a log cabin or tipi (or hogan, or wickiup, or whatever).

Then it was important to have been raised by tribal elders, having sat at their feet to learn the lessons of life and culture, always in the native tongue (which, of course, was the only language spoken in the home). In short, one had to claim to have been immersed in a traditional life.

But the quickest way into the hearts and trust of Indian people was to have suffered for the cause of Indianness. This, of course, required mission or government boarding school experience, where traditional language, religion and culture were beaten out of the students. Having his traditional language beaten out of him provided the Iyeska an excuse for not being able to speak the native tongue. It is interesting to note that Iyeskas are mostly the ones who tell about getting their native language beaten out of them. Full bloods and traditionals tend not to complain about it because they still can speak their tribal language fluently, this despite the fact that, where there was pressure to adopt the English language, and punishment to discourage speaking the traditional language, the full bloods would certainly have gotten the worst of it.

And, finally, Iyeskas tend to inflate their tribal blood quantum, never correcting some white friend who proudly introduces them as “full blooded Indian.”

It pains me to read or hear someone I knew in my youth lie that he couldn't speak a word of English when he started school. Or tell that the Christian religion was alien to him when he first attended a mission school, especially when he carries a family surname of three or four generations of Catholic or Protestant forebears.

Perhaps it's time for us mixed-bloods to be honest with ourselves, if not with the rest of the world.

Contrary to the impression that Iyeskas often try to convey, we were not, as children, little holy people sitting at Grandpa's feet being instructed on the secrets of life, or walking around contemplating nature. We were mischievous and sometimes mean, often making fun of older people or full-blood kids who spoke broken English.

In the schools, there was often a sense of superiority among Iyeskas over the full-bloods, and sometimes there was tension between them. “Buck” was a common term used to describe a person who the Iyeska considered backward -- mostly full-bloods. But an Iyeska didn't say it too loudly, because many of the best athletes and the toughest boys were full bloods.

It seems to me that during our growing-up years we used our white characteristics to our advantage in getting scholarships and employment opportunities, and now that there are more opportunities for Indians – especially from Casino earnings, we want to take back our Indianness, at least in our fantasies.

Admittedly, what I have written above could be seen as cynical or even mean. I admit that the scenario applies to me to a greater or lesser degree, or I would not have written it. It is true that most Iyeskas who stayed on the reservation are very comfortable in their status, and their

relations in their communities. And many Iyeskas are very serious in their search to find their roots, and a culture they may feel to have been deprived of. For whatever reason they may have “returned to the blanket,” some are happy in finding that special goodness and peace that can be found in traditional life.

But for many of us Iyeskas, I think that perhaps it’s time to quit lying and trying to impress white people and younger generations of Indians with fantasy stories of another life, or blaming someone else for having given up a culture that was largely peripheral to our lives anyway. We need to take pride in our Indianness, no matter how thin our tribal blood quantum; but we also need to give some credit to our White or Latino or Black forebears.

We need to come to terms with our unique situation brought about by the love of forebears of difference races. The inner peace of living a real life, with a true life story, is worth it.

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Charles E. Trimble is an Oglala Lakota from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He was principal founder of the American Indian Press Association in 1970, and served as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians from 1972-78. He is President of Red Willow Institute in Omaha, Nebraska.