

FROM THE ROOTS UP: THE STORY OF THE THREE SISTERS

Story-telling is a time-honored method of teaching and inspiring critical thinking amongst Native people. This story is one of the inspirations for the "tree" graphics created by Sacred Circle to illustrate program development and the dynamics of violence and non-violence.

The first sister responded to the immediate, obvious crisis. Her crucial action is similar to crisis intervention, crisis line and shelter work done to assist women who are battered. Sometimes we *jump into* action with different kinds of programs trying to help our people, because the crisis is so drastic. This is a life-saving response, but not one that has a wide-sweeping impact.

The second sister's actions are less geared to the immediate crisis. She places responsibility on the babies for saving themselves. This approach represents an individualistic, mental health response to violent crime, i.e., battered women are "*dysfunctional*," if women "*fixed*" themselves they wouldn't be battered. The accountability of offenders and community for violent crime is ignored or discounted. There is no political analysis making critical connections between colonization, oppression and violence towards Native women.

The third sister seems to not respond to the overt crisis; she looks past the immediate and seeks the **root cause** of why the babies are in the stream. Her course of action requires her to step back in order to see the larger picture before choosing an effective response that will end the crisis. This is the goal of *social change* work: transformation of society. This sister does program development that ensures individual needs are met and supports personal transformation while framing the issue in an accurate historical and cultural context that encourages the transformation of our Nations. She understands the connections between the roots/philosophy of the program and its outgrowths/results.

Another way to look at the necessity of doing critical thinking to address root causes of violence and other forms of oppression is to consider the most overt form of violence – war. MASH units, like the first sister (and shelter), are necessary to save lives, but this response is after the occurrence of violence. They do not stop or end violence.

Relief efforts sent to countries after war, similar to the second sister, can save lives. Again, this response happens after the violence occurs. This response also does not end or stop the violence. In fact, shelter, MASH units and relief efforts, like the actions of the first two sisters, are *reactions* based on a belief system that assumes that violence is an unavoidable aspect of reality.

One spring morning three sisters left camp with their buckets to get water from a nearby stream. The stream was narrow, but deep and fast flowing. The sisters were enjoying the warm weather and visiting as they walked to the stream. But as they got closer to the stream, they began to hear cries and screams. They were the cries and screams of babies. The sisters dropped their buckets and ran to the stream. To their horror, there were dozens and dozens of babies floating in the currents of the stream; many of them were drowning.

The first sister jumped in and began catching and throwing babies on to the bank of the stream as fast as she could. The second sister yelled "You're not saving enough babies!" She jumped in and began teaching the babies to swim, so they could save themselves.

The third sister began running up-stream. Her sisters yelled at her to help. She turned and hollered "I am. I'm going up stream to see how the babies are getting in the water in the first place."

The third sister understands that the "drowning babies," analogous to violence against women (war) and violence in general are not inescapable realities for us as Native people. The third sister knows through critical thinking that social transformation, harmony and respect for others is possible. She knows that people can live non-violently.

To end violence against Native women, we must *jump in*, like the first sister, and provide shelter, food and care. We must also *jump in*, like the second sister and help each other deal with individual experiences. However, unless we come to an accurate understanding of the root causes of violence against Native women and reclaim our roots as Native people, the social transformation necessary to end violence will not occur.

It is important we examine our past and know where we were, understand how we got to be where we are today and celebrate that the solutions to the problems of today can be found in our traditions. ☺

Produced by Sacred Circle, National Resource Center to End Violence Against Native Women