

# Nine Virtues of the Yakama Nation

## Incorporating Native Values into Education

### Levina Wilkins (Yakama)

**I**N 1997, LEVINA Wilkins, a school counselor in the Mount Adams School District in Washington State and a Yakama elder, was asked by the district to make a “cultural contribution” to her school’s nine-month calendar. In collaboration with the *Ay yáyat T̓in* Native Youth Club (“the beautiful people”), she and her students decided to share a “virtue” for each month of the school year. The school was approximately 80% Native, and the Native Youth Club often produced performances to raise cultural awareness among students. The calendar seemed like one more way for the group to reach out to the larger school community. In the end, though, it was the students in the club that put the virtues to the test and used them as the scaffolding of a rich support system for helping one another overcome hardship.

In the Yakama Nation, virtues (there are many more than nine, as Levina is quick to remind you) are taught to children by elders, parents, and extended families. They are taught on a daily basis, as children grow into adulthood. Virtues are living habits, practiced and reflected upon every day and incorporated into the fabric of life. But many of Levina’s students had missed out on that traditional education because their parents or grandparents were absent or had lost their way. The *Ay yáyat T̓in* students instead taught these virtues to one another, absorbing their lessons and applying them to life in the classroom and beyond.

Levina presented these virtues and discussed their importance in the daily lives of students in her community at the Indigenous Ways of Knowing conference in Portland, Oregon, in November 2007. She also discussed her memories and knowledge of the importance of children and learning to her people. Her thoughts provide important insights for educators of all stripes to consider as they approach the delicate task of teaching human beings how to live and thrive in the company of others.

#### Thoughts on Teaching

Our people of a long time ago were taught that when a child is born, that newborn is sacred. The teaching was that all the children are sacred, as well as the women of the Nation. I believe strongly in history and I listened closely to my grandmothers and my elders when I was little.

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We have within our communities elders and parents who speak in the dialect, who will ask a

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LEVINA WILKINS was raised and educated traditionally (*t̓inawit*), speaking only Sahaptin. Her tribes and bands include Wiinatchapam, Pshwanapam, Tytnapam, and X’washx’wypam. Her formal education (*pashtinmami*) includes a master’s degree in education and a bachelor’s in sociology/psychology. She is certified as a counselor in Washington State and is the manager of the Yakama Nation’s Language Program.

child to do something and say “nye” at the end. A lot of people interpret that as “please,” but what you’re really doing is asking permission from the young person—would they do this? Can you have their permission to do this chore? And if they respond with, “Oh, *ni*,” they’re giving you permission to ask them to do that. The children were never commanded or ordered; permission was always asked for, and if it was answered with a polite “*ni*,” and the youngster went and did the chore, all was well. This is a very important unwritten law: “Respect the child and respect will be given back to the elder or parent.” By working with this type of social behavior, there is no harsh feeling of belittlement or superior attitudes displayed.

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From infancy, you’re taught the way of life. You’re taught—on a daily basis—virtues, how to live, who you are, what your bloodline is, where you are from, what area you are from. We all come from different areas, we all have a language that we call our own. The longhouse ceremonies are different, to a certain point, but the sacred songs are all the same, though they may be sung in different languages. We have our own way of doing things and that is to be respected.

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Everything that was being taught to me had a reason. The language [Sahaptin] was beautiful because it was descriptive, not specific. Grandmother used to say, “When you speak the language, you can see it in your mind. What you speak of you are describing, and can picture it. With the English language, it is harsh, cold, and ugly. There is no beauty in it.”

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This is what I want to contribute: Something from the past that you need to re-teach to a lot of our children. A lot of us who are elders, we move around and we see our children out there—maybe not our immediate families, but other children—that are caught up in drugs and alcohol, caught up in dysfunctional families, caught up in living with their grandparents. The changes are too great for them. They have no guidance, nobody to turn to help them in school, to understand what they’re going through. It seemed like every school where I worked—and it breaks my heart to think about it—but when I

would leave, the children, a lot of them, would cry. They were losing their grandmother. A lot of them went so far as to try to manipulate me into staying [laughing]. But it’s sad. Our teachers, our educators, need to be aware of our problems, what our children need to be learning. Who can they go to, to talk to? We need more teachers, we need more counselors, we need more speakers. We need to regain our self-identity.

## The Nine Virtues

The goal of the nine virtues was to start the students thinking of their heritage, versus their present-day “learned behavior.” There had to be a concept planted in the minds of the younger generation as to their self-identity and what traditional values were about. These virtues, values, were an everyday teaching—not as a religion, taught only on Sunday—but as everyday, living habits.

### *K’wyáamtimt*

(Honesty, being truthful)

To be honest and truthful in talking about yourself and your opinions, to avoid any behavior that could even appear to harm the honor of yourself or your family by being dishonest.

### *Timnák’nik*

(Extending from the heart, compassion)

To show kindness and care at all times to others whether in listening, speaking, helping, or performing a service for them. To consider the feelings of others, to avoid hurting them, and to show concern for their feelings.

*I know a lot of you younger generation people go to community meetings and you go to General Council and you’ll hear an elder speak and they’ll say, “Oh, Timnák’nik nash itchi sinwisha.”*

*They’re speaking from their heart. They’re not speaking from a piece of paper. Their sincerity, their honesty, is from what they’re feeling about the situation. And they don’t have to look at a paper and talk about big words that you learn in the schools. You speak with honesty.*

### *Ítmááákshá*

(Cautious and careful of all things and others; restrained, peaceful, and responsible)

To be careful in your speech and other behavior so as to avoid harming or hurting anyone, including yourself. To be responsible and accountable for your behavior. To show care for maintaining peace and harmony with all people.

### *Yáych'unal*

(Not afraid of any type of challenge; courage; heroic perseverance)

To show courage. No matter how hard life gets, to never give up. To be willing to put up with negative behaviors and pressure from others in order to do the right thing. To be a leader when other hesitate to do something positive.

### *Pina'tma'áakt*

(Taking care and being aware of one's total being; balance and harmony; integrity; honor; nobility in crisis)

To take care of yourself and to know yourself. To constantly seek to understand yourself. Self-respect. To stay in balance with what you believe. To behave with honor and refuse to get involved in behaviors that would hurt you or others.

### *Tma'áakni*

(Respect)

To maintain harmony and cooperation with all people, including those who have differing opinions from your own. To show care and regard for preserving and protecting the cultural traditions, beliefs, and unwritten laws of Native people.

*This one was a big one: "Tma'áakni." Growing up, that's all I heard. You hear it for the plants, you hear it for the water, you hear it for the animals that feed you. You hear it for the air you breathe, that breathes around you. "Pik' ink tiicham nan, ii inx'am, Tima'aakni nam wata tlawx ki wakishwitki." It was told to you on a daily basis—you show respect for all that is living, for they are giving their lives for you. They are here for you. Then they had us say, "Shuuktam tiicham nan kun am tiicham nam I shuktam imanak," which means, "You recognize the country, the earth, and the earth will recognize you." So, what goes up comes back to you.*

### *Átaw p̄xwini*

(Deep thought and feeling; meditation and mindfulness)

To practice looking at yourself, your thoughts and

feelings. To meditate and pray regularly. To be constantly aware of all that is around you and within you. To grow in using your mind at all times, especially in getting an education.

### *Piná'íwaat kw'aláni*

(Self-denial and gratitude, humility)

To be humble. To be grateful just to be helpful to others. To give away all feelings of conceit or arrogance. To be the first one to apologize, to correct your behavior, and to forgive others.

*This is where your humility comes in. Your self-denial and gratitude, your humility.*

### *Wapítat Ttáwaxt*

(Help family growth; service to others)

To serve others by offering to help others in as many ways as you can think of. This might include helping elders and other family members and friends. It also includes taking part in positive community events and activities that prevent violence, helping people to heal from traumatic experiences, eliminating substance abuse and chemical dependency, promoting positive understanding and involvement in your Indian culture, modeling and encouraging education and the pursuit of life goals for others, and working to increase the unity of all people.

*This was always taught to you: think of others before yourself.*

## **Īyánc̄hī mī Sapsik'wat (The Elders' Teaching)**

Those were the nine virtues that the Native group of kids voted to give to the school to teach the others what they were learning. I needed to talk about that because of the importance of honoring our heritage, preserving our past. I wrote it in our language:

*Mūn pá sinwix'ána iyánc̄hīma mīyanash mīpá.*

When the elders spoke of our children

*Pá natx'anax'ána mīyanash ma páwa I k'ix̄t̄h na mi'*

They all spoke of our children as precious and sacred

*Anawx'it pá yanawūxá itchin tūchim yaw, ma'la wakishwit, ku chow t̄in wīyash't'ikī.*

Our children come into this world with a pure

soul and without sin.

*Úyt kink mun pa yanawū́ǵá tū́chim pa, iksix  
mī́yanashma páwa sapsik'wanū́ wak'ishwitk'i  
kū́ tanamū́útímtk'i.*

From the beginning of their infancy, they are taught the virtues of life.

*Alax nawa sapsik'wat wask'ishwitk'i kū́ tī́nawit,  
lkw'I, lkw'I pá wátcha sū́u-sū́unī.*

There are so many virtues in our culture—it was our daily life structure.

*Aw ikuūk mī́yanashma pá wa sápi'k'wanū́ p'ashtin  
mamī́ sinwit, chow pa shukwásha pámi  
tī́nawit.*

In this day and age, with assimilation, we no longer follow many of these virtues.

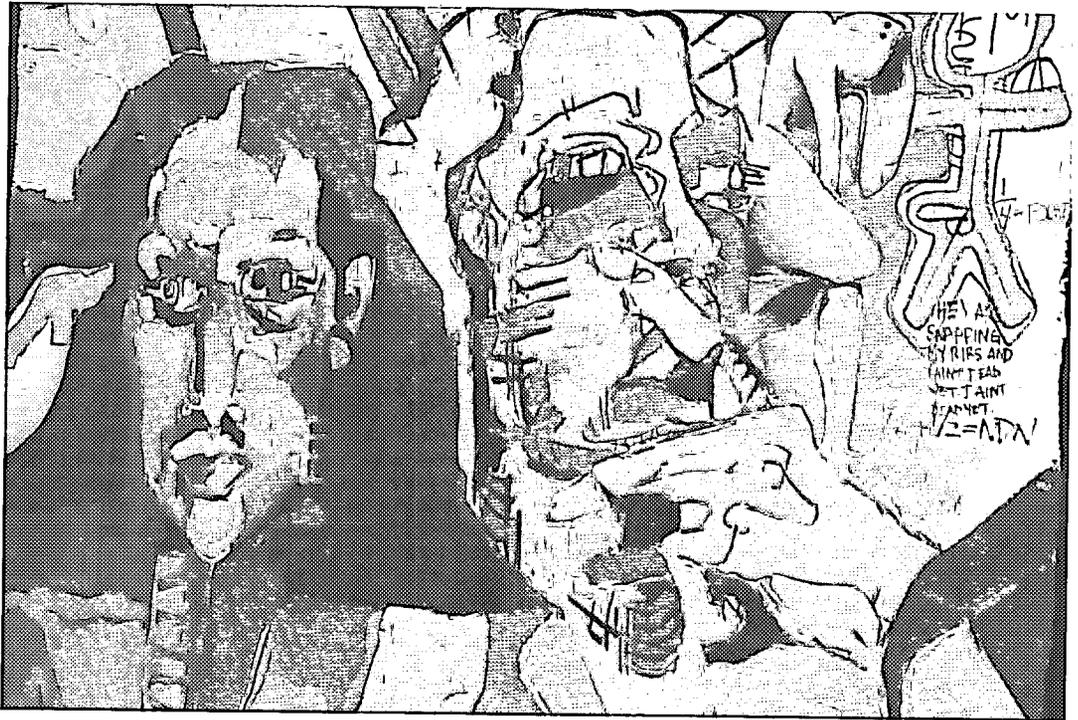
*Pa tū́nxū́sha mī́yanashma kū́ pá k'wū́ta tū́nx  
ashitpá.*

Therefore, because of this change, and our children veering off their life paths, I feel it is very important to get them back on the right pathway. Thank you.

*K'walanī́ másh itchí tāmū́nsha.*

## Note

It should be emphasized here that there are many dialects for the Yakama language and the Yakama Nation. While the phonics and pronunciations of those presented here derive from the Wiinatchapam dialect, they are not intended to dominate or disrespect alternative pronunciations; word forms may differ from the virtues among the diverse members of the Yakama Nation communities.



Reload

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