

Reclaiming Language



Nicole Pablo Helping Her Sons with Homework, Polson, Flathead Reservation, Montana, 2016 by Sue Reynolds

The photograph above shows Nicole helping her sons Talon and his older brother Landon with their homework. They are studying Salish, their Native language, which has its own alphabet. The large book is a Salish textbook. Talon and Landon are part of the first generation in a long while that will grow up learning their Native language, which helps them understand and be a part of their cultural heritage. Once when Landon went to the county fair, he was called a “cute girl” by non-Natives because, at that time, he wore his hair long. For Native boys and men wearing their hair long in traditional style often causes problems. If they wear it long they face non-Native prejudice and if they cut it, they may be told “You’re not Indian enough,” by other Natives.

Reclaiming Language



Luke Brien Uses an App to Learn His Crow Language, Arlee, Flathead Reservation, Montana, 2016 by Sue Reynolds

The photo above shows Luke using an app to learn the Crow language. Luke's father is Crow and his mother is Blackfeet but they live on the Flathead Reservation in western Montana where few people speak or teach Crow. It is particularly important to Luke's father that he learn his Native language and he says Luke will understand the importance of this as he grows older. Like many Native languages worldwide, Crow is endangered. On the Crow Reservation in southeast Montana, the people work hard to renew their language through a partial immersion school, a Crow language dictionary and a language camp for teens.

Across the United States, many American Indian languages have disappeared. Of the estimated 154 Native languages that remain, half are spoken by only a few elders and are not being taught to children. On the Flathead Reservation, there are fewer than 50 fluent Salish speakers.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What does the U.S. Government's motto, "Kill the Indian to save the man" mean to you?
 2. Not so long ago many American Indian children were taken from reservations to live in boarding schools where they were punished for wearing their traditional clothing, taking part in Indian religious ceremonies and speaking their native languages. How would you feel if this happened to you?
 3. Why is having their children learn their tribal language so important to Native American parents?
 4. Do you think it is important for Indian children to know their Native languages? Explain.
 5. Does anyone in your family speak another language? Explain.
 6. Have you ever tried to learn another language? If so, who helped teach you the language? Do you think it's difficult to learn another language? Explain.
- Note:** Older children can research Native American language programs in your area to add to the conversation.
7. Long hair is a source of pride and tradition for Indian men and boys, yet it has caused prejudiced remarks and actions. Why do you think this happens?
 8. Do you think you would wear your hair long if you were an Indian boy? Discuss.

Reclaiming Language

This excerpt from Victor Charlo's **Poet's Statement** details how, and why - as a boy - Victor's family thought it best that he learn English, not his native Salish language.

"Like many other Native American parents of the time, mine didn't teach us Salish, thought it best that I attend White Man's schools and learn English so I would fit in and not struggle with being different. So I never learned Salish growing up. As a result, my work takes on a sense of loss about the sadness of tribal ways going away. My work reflects on Tradition and the necessity to honor and continue the Old Ways."

The poem below by poet Victor Charlo describes his attempts to speak Salish, the native language of his ancestors.

Discussion and Writing Questions

1. What are synapses?
2. How does the poet feel about his ability to speak Salish?
3. Why does he relate the Salish language to nature and his family's traditions?
4. Why would he like to speak Salish effortlessly, as his grandfather did?

The July, 1994

My Salish synapses firing the old Salish sounds as I try to
Talk perfect English to the Dame of Arlee Pow-Wow
I'm not doing good so I talk faster and faster
Trying to get a solid accent of some kind down
Not doing so good. My grandfathers spoke wonderful word
In fire, in sky, in wind, in rain,
In the heart of the chase.

Dirty Corner Poems and Other Stories, by Victor A. Charlo.

Reclaiming Language

Other Sections Inside this Chapter:

Reclaiming Culture Introduction
Reclaiming Culture
Reclaiming Ceremonies
Interpretation Strategies

Additional Chapters:

Reservation Life
Mother Earth Introduction

Other Resources

Rising Voices/Hothanipi, by The Language Conservancy. *YouTube*.

"Our Schools: Cuts Wood School." *The Piegan Institute*.