

Book Review: Point of Departure

Book Review of “Point of Departure: Returning to a More Authentic Worldview for Education and Survival” by Four Arrows (aka Don Trent Jacobs)

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Abstract

Four Arrows' new book, according to his Wikipedia page, is his 22nd book. Prolific in his life work as a professor, Indigenous educator, writer, musician and activist, he describes this book as his most honest and most radical. It is radical in how it reveals the damage inflicted by what he labels the Dominant (Western) Worldview. He urges us to return to the primal healing ways of the contrasting ancient Indigenous Worldview in order to limit the largely anthropogenic 6th mass extinction on planet earth. The good news that Four Arrows highlights at the opening of the book is that whether we have lost connection to our Indigenous roots or not we all possess them. To assist this critical reconnection he traces a path back to the time of departure from the Indigenous Worldview that functioned in harmony with ecological wisdoms. Although not a book on arts education *per se*, its rootedness in the Indigenous Worldview, based in the language of art, songs, drumming, and words through ceremony and visioning to create new realities, is the foundational recommendation for the arts and education.

Review of Point of Departure: Returning to Our More Authentic Worldview for Education and Survival

by author Four Arrows (aka Donald Trent Jacobs)
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Book Review by Barbara Bickel

Fortunately, many of the lost traditions of our ancestors are still available in the remaining Indigenous cultures and individuals from around the world who have managed to hold on to their traditional knowledge. They still know the wisdom that guided humanity in relatively [sic] harmony for most of our time on this planet. – Four Arrows (2016: xv)

Four Arrows' (aka Donald Trent Jacobs) new book, according to his Wikipedia page, is his 22nd book. Prolific in his life work as a professor, Indigenous educator, writer, musician and activist, he describes this book as his most honest and radical. It is radical in how it reveals the damage inflicted by what he labels the Dominant (Western) worldview, and in his urging of readers to return to the primal healing ways of the contrasting ancient Indigenous worldview in order to limit the largely anthropogenic 6th mass extinction event on planet Earth.

Unfortunately, cultural healing is a radical act in the world today. The good news Four Arrows highlights at the opening of the book is that whether we have lost connection to our Indigenous roots or not, we all possess them. To assist readers with this critical reconnection, he traces a path back to the time of departure from the Indigenous worldview – a view that existed within a time when humans still functioned in harmony with ecological wisdoms.

Although *Point of Departure* is not a book on arts education *per se*, its rootedness in the Indigenous worldview, based in the language of art, songs, drumming, and words through ceremony and visioning to create new realities, is the foundational recommendation for the arts and education. Indigenous ways of living the arts are not separate from all aspects of a lived life. Teaching and learning Indigenous art forms are included in the process of learning to live and walk the good path. Four Arrows prior book *Teaching Truly* (2013) includes specific pedagogical practices for teaching art through Indigenous ways in the classroom.

The book is based on the design of the five ancient components of the Indigenous Medicine Wheel; a sacred circle that can be traveled multiple times in one's lifetime. Four Arrows describes this as one of "the most effective metacognitive tools for helping people [to] authentically [return] to Indigenous worldview in daily life today (92)." Along with the center, there are four cardinal directions as part of a sacred Medicine Wheel. Each chapter is one of these five components, respectively: Trance-Based Learning; Courage and Fearlessness; Community-Oriented Self-Authorship; Sacred Communication; and Nature as All. Each chapter ends with a list of practices and suggestions for embodying the principles and teachings that are introduced to assist in re-achieving balance.

Chapter One: Trance-Based Learning

Although Four Arrows informs the reader that there is no one Medicine Wheel direction that needs to be read or travelled first, I chose to read the book beginning with chapter one because of my personal interest in *trance-based learning* (TBL). As a practicing artist, researcher and teacher, I have never found another educator or artist giving TBL the priority and clarity that he does. Trance has been defined succinctly by Starhawk (1979) as an ancient Indigenous practice where one can change consciousness at will.

Describing, defining and teaching TBL is thus radical and potentially healing and transformative. Four Arrows invites the reader to understand TBL as a phenomenon that is a "holistic, naturalistic shift of energy that allows for subtle but profound changes, which in turn open up extraordinary powers within us" (28–29). In framing it as a source for wisdom acquisition and deeper learning through the gathering of our intuitive, aesthetic and imaginal co-consciousness with the human and non-human world, he distinguishes it from the scientific therapeutic use of TBL such as in biofeedback, hypnosis, placebo or mind training. He offers steps that one may take to practice the art of TBL, which include utilizing all our seven senses of sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch, vestibular and proprioception, delving into our deepest selves and articulating them through sacred words.

Chapter Four: Sacred Communication

Stepping next into chapter four, I was profoundly struck because of my own struggles with the limitations of language and words, by Indigenous worldview understandings of sacred communication, and the power of reclaiming Indigenous languaging – and, language as it is “instrumental in guiding our beliefs” (91). Indigenous languages are verb-based and thus Indigenous language speakers read the world as animate in contrast to English speakers of their nounbased language who read the world as object-based. This form of communication offers a crucial reframing of the role and purpose of language as sacred and Nature-based. Four Arrows also cautions the reader to be aware of the potential abusive power of words. Too often they are delivered through “shock and awe” in our world today, when one is not conscious of the powerful misuse of tranceinduction in their use. An example of this is fear-mongering rhetoric of leaders who en-trance and rally people towards actions of hatred and destruction against themselves, others and the world around them. In contrast, “traditional Indigenous knowledge clearly asserts that language was created to sustain our direct relationship with nature” (92). To interrupt dominant languages that are out of balance with Nature, and thus destructive, this chapter offers six conceptual areas of study and practice: (1) the power of words; (2) emphasis on movement and respect; (3) truthfulness; (4) decolonization; (5) telepathy; and (6) creative expression. Arts practices are forefronted in this chapter as they can draw us closer to the Indigenous worldview.

Chapter Two and Three: Courage and Fearlessness and Community Oriented Self-Authorship

Taking back steps now to chapter two, on courage and fearlessness, Four Arrows suggests that it is fear of Nature that instigated an evolutionary point of departure several millennia years ago, in that the powerful force of fear can “make you hyper-suggestible to perceived authority figures and their words” (68). Based on an Indigenous worldview, he offers theory and techniques of how to utilize fear as an opportunity to develop moral courage and action. Stepping next into chapter three Four Arrows engages a further area of human development that can become a needed grounding to counteract fear as he delves into the importance of self-authorship in the midst of community relations. Here he writes that “self-authorship in Indigenous ways of thinking comes from knowing that the highest authority of decisions come from honest reflection on lived experience in light of realizing that everything is related in life and this interconnectedness must be a part of all decisions” (74). To know how Indigenous communities live in community-oriented self-authorship, Four Arrows summarizes commonalities of the majority of American Indian social structures, describing them as “nonhierarchical, matrilineal, egalitarian, classless, gender balanced, without single authoritarian

‘chiefs,’ based on generosity and greater good ethics, guided by distributed leadership, individualistic and supportive of the community at the same time” (82).

Chapter Five: Nature as All

Chapter five, suggests the possibilities discussed in the prior four chapters are supported by precepts about our relationship with Nature found in the Indigenous worldview. It “perceives all of Nature as sacred [and] comes from observations and practices unique to localities that took thousands of years to develop into cultural wisdom” (137). In this last chapter we are reminded that this book is situated within a “pan-Indian” framework where the risk of the generalization of the Indigenous worldview, which Four Arrows has taken to write from in this book, can be criticized because not all Native Americans support this generalization, preferring to keep Indigenous worldviews distinct from each other.

It is in this chapter that Four Arrows reveals an additional theoretical underpinning of this book – that is, his own transformational TBL experience. His near death experience which was a visionary event in Nature that resulted in his theorization of the CAT and FAWN connection and the teaching of it in this book. These two animal words symbolize Concentration-Activated

Transformation as CAT, and Fear, Authority, Words and Nature as FAWN. CAT represents TBL and FAWN is the practice of understanding these words, which in the dominant worldview can cause destruction because of how they interact with CAT.

Written through the lens of one mixed-blood Indigenous and Irish man’s authentic exploration of the Indigenous worldview as community self-authorship, this book surely has much to offer those separated from Indigenous worldview teachings and practices. While reading *Point of Departure*, it struck me however – being both a woman and a spiritual feminist – that gender balance, although part of Indigenous social structures, is mostly absent in Four Arrows’ style of presentation. Similar to the Western dominant worldview scholarship, male scholar bias is present in the supportive scholarship citations; and as the book is based on Four Arrows’ own life experience, there is a strong focus on masculine quality experiences and practices for TBL. Indigenous women and feminist movements are briefly mentioned at times in the book. TBL work that I know of from my own studies is being practiced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and groups (e.g. by the International Council of Thirteen Grandmothers, Vicki Noble, Starhawk, and Luisah Teish). Although not present in this book, they would be great additions to the theory and practice of TBL. In addition, many spiritual feminists nurture qualities of the Indigenous worldview in their focus on relationality and interconnectedness and collective TBL and teaching (e.g., Reclaiming), rather than relying solely on individual learning and psychology. A stronger focus on collective TBL practices and the addition of indigenous women TBL practices are areas of articulation that would further extend this important work by Four Arrows.

This is a welcome Indigenous wisdom teaching and survival book, acquired through Four Arrows' own visioning. I am deeply grateful for this text and excited about ways it may impact the fields of education, the arts and beyond. I heartily agree with the explicit note of the publisher on the Amazon.com webpage for this book: "Without the resulting change in consciousness that can emerge from this learning approach, no modern technology can save us."

I end this review with lyrics from a song by Indigenous poet and musician Joy Harjo in her 2014 CD entitled *Red Dreams: A Trail Beyond Tears*. I believe her words reflect the courageous experience of trance-based learning through an Indigenous worldview, that does not separate the arts from daily life, so clearly articulated by Four Arrows in *Point of Departure*:

Two women sang this song on the Trail of Tears
one stood at the front of the people the other at the back
whenever one would falter the other would sing this song to hold them up
do not get tired
do not be discouraged
be determined to all coming
we will go the highest place
we will go together...

Book link: www.infoagepub.com

References

- Four Arrows (Don Trent Jacobs). *Teaching Truly: A curriculum to indigenize mainstream education*. New York: Peter Lang, 2013.
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