

## Project North Star

### Family and Community Session 4

### Traditions and Values—What They Mean to Us

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## Foreword

The topics for these community forums were chosen with input from a variety of stakeholders in Project North Star. We understand that these topics are significant in parenting and educating gifted children in rural areas, but that they are just a handful of important topics families, educators, and communities need to discuss when nurturing the gifts and talents of young people. **These are a tiny lens on very large topics, and are intended to be a starting point for discussion and further exploration.** Please use these forum guides in whatever way makes sense in your community, and feel welcome to use them as a template for addressing other important topics.

The contents of these guides have been chosen using a number of criteria. We asked:

- Are they relevant to people who live in rural areas?
- Are they current and/or timeless?
- Are they respectful?
- Are they universal? (Some resources reference specific cultures, regions, or traditions. We know the readings cannot be specific to every group, but do the selected resources spark important questions that are relevant to our target audience—communities, educators, and families in rural areas who are actively engaged in creating opportunities for growth for gifted and talented children?)
- Are they thought provoking?
- Can we show alternate points of view with multiple readings, in order to help start a positive dialogue?
- Are they readily available in complete form? (Most sources are available online. We felt the need to include excerpts from several books whose authors' wisdom we felt necessary to include in our work. All sources are cited.)

We understand that not all readings will ring true to all people. Please read with an open mind, and the understanding that multiple points of view are helpful, even if the specific information offered does not apply to your situation. Analyze the readings with an eye for finding similarities, differences, and commonalities of purpose to your own experience. Feel welcome to disagree respectfully, or to champion another point of view with equal respect.

The content of these sessions are not intended to reflect the opinions or beliefs of the Project North Star staff, contractors, consultants, or participants. In fact, resources were chosen with an eye to presenting multiple points of view, with the intent of providing a lot of scope for conversation.

Above all, the Project North Star Team applauds you for engaging in discussions that bridge the divide often found between education, family, and community. We know that this collaborative spirit is very often a strength of rural communities, and is something we seek to share with others. We sincerely thank you for your contributions to this work.

## Suggested Reading #1

### “Who Am I?” – Identity Formation in Adolescence

By Rachel Sumner, PhD

ACT for Youth

<http://www.actforyouth.net/adolescence/identity.cfm>

**What is identity?** People can identify with lots of different groups, like their gender, race, nationality, or political party (just to name a few). A **personal identity is a cohesive sense of self**, and it includes ideas about all of these group identities, in addition to values and goals. If asked about their identity, someone might say something like “I’m an American woman, I want to make the world a better place, and I take care of my family.”

**Identity in Adolescence** Many adolescents begin developing a sense of identity. They’re trying to answer the question “Who am I?” Lots of the things that teens do, like trying new activities or wearing different kinds of clothes, are part of their search for an identity. Even though identity development often begins during the teen years, it can be a life-long process; people can change the way they think about themselves when they experience changes in life, like starting a new job or becoming a parent.

**How do teens develop an identity?** Psychologists who study identity have described two processes that are involved in identity development: **exploration**, which involves trying out different roles or options, and **commitment**, which involves committing to some aspect(s) of identity.

**Identity Exploration** In order to try out different roles and options for themselves, teens might try things like:

- Hanging out with a new group of friends
- Trying new activities
- Learning more about something that interests them

**Identity Commitment** There are lots of benefits associated with identity commitment. People who have committed to some aspect(s) of identity tend to experience **more self-esteem and life satisfaction, and fewer symptoms of depression or anxiety**.

### Consequences of Engaging in Identity Exploration

#### Benefits:

People who report high levels of exploration *and* high levels of commitment usually have the best outcomes

Researchers have found that having engaged in identity exploration in the past is associated with facets of adaptive psychological functioning, like self-esteem and purpose in life

**Pitfalls:**

Exploring one's options for identity is associated with identity confusion, or feeling a lack of certainty about one's identity.

People who are currently engaging in identity exploration and experiencing identity confusion might experience increased symptoms of depression or anxiety.

There are benefits associated with having explored one's identity, but the process of exploration can be unsettling and uncomfortable. Adolescents should be encouraged to explore their identity, but they might require some additional social and emotional support while doing so.

**Tips for Supporting Identity Formation**

Role models can help adolescents imagine different roles or options for their future selves. Look for role models in your family, schools, or community.

Talk about values, goals, and identities with teens. They may be interested to know how you made decisions about the kind of person you want to be.

Try to support commitments that have been made. Identity commitments can help someone feel grounded and less confused while they engage in identity exploration.

*Rachel Sumner is a post-doc at Cornell University. Rachel's research explores topics related to purpose in life, identity, and diversity.*

*[http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n\\_identity-handout.pdf](http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_identity-handout.pdf)*

## Suggested Reading #2

### What Does Traditional Mean?

by Anton Treuer

excerpt from *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians But Were Afraid to Ask*, Minnesota Historical Society Press

What does traditional mean? That's a loaded question. Defining tradition is a very subjective process. People from Pittsburgh who happen to be of German heritage might have a very different idea of what is traditional compared to the Pennsylvania Amish. Tradition is about much more than biology. Because cultures, languages, technologies, and values shift far faster than most people realize, it is hard to define what is truly traditional.

For Indians, defining what is traditional gets further tied up in a sometimes-contested discussion of identity. For example, the community of Ponemah on the Red Lake Reservation in Minnesota has 100 percent traditional Ojibwe religious belief and funerary practice. No one has ever been baptized in that community. And the fluency rate in the tribal language there is the highest of all Ojibwe communities in the United States. Across the lake, in the community of Red Lake, on the same reservation, the tribal population is predominately Catholic. People in Ponemah define tradition by religion, traditional lifeways, and language. But people from Red Lake tend to emphasize heredity (blood), hunting and fishing, and reservation affiliation as more central dimensions of identity, Indianness, and tradition.

This example demonstrates how contested political discussions of tradition can be. Personally, I find the customs, practices, language, and beliefs of my ancestors to be defining features of tradition and central to my identity. But I also live in a modern world. I drive a car and wear manufactured clothing. Although my life differs from those of my ancestors of a few hundred years ago, I find much more in common with them in my own religious choices, cultural beliefs and practices, and language. It is important to recognize that the tension between old and new, modern and traditional, is ongoing and intense in Indian country.

*Anton Treuer (pronounced troy-er) is Professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University and author of 14 books. His equity, education, and cultural work has put him on a path of service around the region, the nation, and the world.*

## Suggested Reading #3

### Different Worlds, Different Views

*excerpt from Another Culture/Another World, by Father Michael Oleksa*

Different cultures see the world differently. Different cultures structure, understand and play the game of life differently. These are not differences of right and wrong, good or bad, practical or impractical. They are just different, in the way baseball, football, basketball, hockey and tennis are different ball games. Comparisons do not equate with moral judgments. It is useful to understand what game you are playing before interacting regularly with another person. Otherwise, one risks playing a sort of “tackle basketball” in which both sides get annoyed, confused, frustrated or depressed.

We often assume that everyone understands and plays the game of life exactly as we play it, and it can come as a shock to realize that they don't. Initially, this can lead to one group accusing the other of being incompetent, deceitful, rude or stupid. Whenever you are tempted to think that way about an individual or a group, consider the possibility that you may have just experienced another impromptu, unexpected round of “tackle basketball.”

While thinking of cultures in terms of different ball games with different rules may be helpful when comparing two or more cultures we don't belong to, this approach becomes less useful when we start to look at ourselves. Because we have been internalizing the rules and conventions of our own cultural ball games since infancy, when asked to outline the “game of life” as we understand and play it, none of us seem readily able to articulate the basic structure of our culture, the thousands of norms and rules that govern it, nor the way players demonstrate competence or expertise on our playing field. While we know rationally as well as intuitively how to play the game we have been playing all of our lives, to write down all of its rules would be a tedious and formidable task. We may know how to play baseball well enough, but explaining it to the exchange student from Pakistan can prove frustratingly difficult.

So, while thinking of culture as the game of life as we understand and play it may help us gain a greater appreciation and tolerance for cultural differences, it does not help us much when it comes to reflecting upon or articulating anything very insightful about our own culture.

The following third approach may prove more helpful in defining one's own cultural identity. I arrived at it, I must confess, after reading a very challenging fantasy entitled *Ishmael*—the story of a wise gorilla who advertises in the classified section of a large metropolitan newspaper for a human being who desires to help save the world. An unemployed journalist applies for the position, subsequently entering telepathically into a conversation with Ishmael. The ape first instructs him to, “Bring me your myths.” The journalist at first brings in Greek and Roman stories about gods and goddesses, which Ishmael summarily rejects. The journalist then comes back with the sacred texts of the major religions of the world, which Ishmael also refuses. When, after several more false starts, the newsman protests, “Explain to me what you want!” the gorilla answers, “Your myths are the stories you tell yourself about how things got to be the way they are.”

“Oh,” says the human, “you mean science, astronomy, chemistry and biology!”

“That's what you call them,” replies the ape, “From a gorilla's perspective, those are your myths!”

“No,” the human protests. “Those are the facts. Science is true!”

The great ape and the man go on to get into a long debate, but for our purposes the gorilla’s initial point is valid. Myths are the stories we tell ourselves about how things got to be the way they are. And culture is the enactment of those myths. Another way of defining culture, then, is the “enactment of your story.”

*Father Oleksa is a leader in the development of cross-cultural education in Alaska, an educator of Alaskan teachers, and a student of Alaska Native languages and cultures.*

**Discussion Rules**

1. You cannot change other people. We can share ideas, resources, and opinions, but we can't make other people think the way we do. This community forum is all about finding common ground.
2. Compromise. Talk about the goals underlying your ideas and plans. When you see why people want to do things, you often find you are working toward the same goals in different ways. Meet somewhere in the middle.
3. Practice acceptance. When we accept others' differences, we give them a gift. This is great role modeling for our children.
4. Realize your contribution. Just by being here and participating in this discussion, you are making a difference in the lives of your children and the future of your community. Well done!



## Project North Start - Discussion Notes Page – Traditions and Values

<i>Discussion</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<p>Meanings behind Traditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Values</li> <li>• Honoring family</li> <li>• Habit</li> <li>• Societal influence</li> </ul>	
<p>Roles and Relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generational roles</li> <li>• Changing times, changing roles</li> <li>• Protecting the relationships</li> </ul>	
<p>Interconnectedness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History</li> <li>• Culture</li> <li>• Traditions</li> <li>• Respect, values, moral code</li> <li>• Response to societal influences</li> </ul>	
<p>When Children Challenge Tradition</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity formation</li> <li>• Curiosity</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Ownership</li> </ul>	
<p>Evolving Traditions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Should traditions evolve? Why or why not?</li> <li>• What are some examples you can identify in your family? Your community? Your state?</li> </ul>	

## Discussion Questions

*These questions are included for your convenience, and should be considered a suggestion, not a requirement. You can choose to use some, none, or all of these questions as you facilitate your discussion. Keep in mind that there are no right answers—all opinions are valid, and the purpose here is to open lines of communication.*

### Questions for Suggested Reading #1

1. The first suggested reading, *Identity Formation in Adolescence*, looks at the process young people go through to discover their identity. Traditions and values play a large role in identity formation, as some are embraced and some discarded, and all are transformed in some way by the individual. What do you see as the role of families during this process? What about educators? Community mentors and advisors?
2. How can families, schools, and the community support young people socially and emotionally as they struggle through identity formation?
3. What is on your ‘wish list’ for cultural identity for young folks in your community? How can you foster these values? Revisit this question at the end of your discussion. Have your thoughts changed?

### Questions for Suggested Reading #2

4. What impact does language have in your community? The excerpt from Treuer’s book (suggested reading #2) references language as an important component in cultural identity formation. How many languages are represented by your collective ancestry? How many generations are you from ancestors who spoke a different language than the one your community uses as its basis for communication? How many languages are spoken in your community? How many are taught in the schools or in after-school programs?
5. Thinking of the cultural heritage of the young people in your community, how many of them see their ancestral language and history represented in the home, school, and larger community? How can you give them opportunities for exploring and sharing their heritage?
6. In *What Does Traditional Mean?*, Treuer talks about the tension between “old and new, modern and traditional.” How does this tension play out for the different generations in your community?
7. Is part of the evolution of cultural identity in your community an effort to revitalize older traditions and values? If so, how is your community adapting these older ideals to suit modern times?

### Questions for Suggested Reading #3

8. In the third suggested reading, Father Oleksa talks about how difficult it can be to see our own culture through someone else’s eyes. Do his examples inspire you to rethink interactions you have had with “tackle basketball” players in your life?
9. How can your community, and you specifically, help young people understand their “game of life” in the context of the larger world? What are you already doing that helps give young people this perspective?

## Discussion Wrap-up Question

10. Thinking about the discussions the previous questions sparked, discuss how generational differences and prior life experiences affect your answers. Every opinion is valid—are they all the same? How do your opinions differ? Find something they all have in common.

## Practical Strategies

Children are questioners, explorers, and challengers. They take the wisdom of previous generations and look at it through eyes that see the world in a whole new way. Why do kids challenge our treasured traditions and values? Because they're there. Sometimes children come back to traditions that speak to them, and occasionally they embrace traditions of times gone by with a fervor that we find surprising. Other times, young people look for different ways of thinking, behaving, and celebrating milestones that have little to do with their own ancestry or upbringing. As the authors of the suggested readings included above all agree, culture is an important part of identity. How can we help our young people navigate the often confusing messages surrounding cultural identity, and maintain strong values, especially in the information age?

- Put it in context: When was the tradition created, and by whom? How has it been passed down? Tracing the history of tradition shines a light on the purpose behind it, and brings new life to old stories. This could make for some interesting research and sharing time as a family or a community. These stories are your common history.
- Keep an open mind: Traditions are important ways of holding on to people and times no longer with us. It's easy to feel offended or angry when traditions are questioned or not held in high esteem. Talking through why a certain way of doing things matters to you, and listening to why it doesn't seem to make sense in a young person's life can be stressful, but will give both sides important information. "Because it's the way we've always done it" won't satisfy bright, inquisitive children, and may even push them further away. If Sally doesn't want to wear Great Aunt Ruth's wedding dress on her big day, perhaps she can incorporate a piece of its lace into the dress she chose.
- Be creative: As human beings and societies inevitably evolve, so should our traditions. How can you incorporate old and new in ways that respect both and maintain strong values? A good example of this is music—older generations tend to deplore the younger set's musical taste, but every now and then modern and classic, or even classical, are combined in fresh new ways. We still listen to Mozart, and each generation finds his music for themselves. Ask, "How can we combine our ideas, and make them relevant to future generations?"
- Show respect: We want children to respect their elders, and so we need to teach them how. Showing our children that we respect them is an excellent place to start. Be respectful of new ideas, causes, and traditions, even if you don't think they are as good as the old ways. You might say, "I admire the way you are helping take care of the environment", or, "You are showing courage when you stick up for someone who has been picked on by others."
- Draw parallels: Thinking as objectively as possible, think about how a new idea is similar to an old idea. Find common causes, goals, and outcomes between new and old traditions. Celebrating milestones, life events, and the seasons of the year is important in every community. Food

choices for a holiday dinner might change depending on food preferences or allergies, but the meaning behind the preparations and sharing of the meal is the same.

It's important to keep a thread of the past continuing into the future. We learn from our history as human beings, and suffer when we forget important lessons from the past. This doesn't mean that all of our traditions need to stay exactly the same from year to year and generation to generation. We want our traditions to grow and evolve, not stagnate and become obsolete. The values behind our actions are what is important. Keep telling the old stories, teach the old languages, and embrace what each new generation brings to the tradition table.

### **Follow-up and Extension on Readings and Discussion**

The following excerpts, links, and research questions are included to begin to broaden and deepen your exploration of the topic. These, again, are suggestions, not required reading and research. This section is included for those whose interest was sparked, and who seek more information. This is not a comprehensive list of resources by any means. As you explore these suggestions, you will find many, many more. Follow your interest, build on previous knowledge, and share with your community!

### **Shared Wisdom**

*The Creative Personality: Ten paradoxical traits of the creative personality (excerpt)*

*By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*

***Creative people are both rebellious and conservative.***

It is impossible to be creative without having first internalized an area of culture. So it's difficult to see how a person can be creative without being both traditional and conservative and at the same time rebellious and iconoclastic.

Being only traditional leaves an area unchanged; constantly taking chances without regard to what has been valued in the past rarely leads to novelty that is accepted as an improvement.

The artist Eva Zeisel, who says that the folk tradition in which she works is "her home," nevertheless produces ceramics that were recognized by the Museum of Modern Art as masterpieces of contemporary design.

This is what she says about innovation for its own sake:

"This idea to create something is not my aim. To be different is a negative motive, and no creative thought or created thing grows out of a negative impulse. A negative impulse is always frustrating.

And to be different means 'not like this' and 'not like that.' And the 'not like'--that's why postmodernism, with the prefix of 'post,' couldn't work. No negative impulse can work, can produce any happy creation. Only a positive one."

But the willingness to take risks, to break with the safety of tradition, is also necessary.

The economist George Stigler is very emphatic in this regard: "I'd say one of the most common failures of able people is a lack of nerve. They'll play safe games. In innovation, you have to play a less safe game, if it's going to be interesting. It's not predictable that it'll go well."

*Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is Claremont Graduate University's Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Management. He is also the founder and co-director of the Quality of Life Research Center (QLRC).*  
<http://talentdevelop.com/articles/TCPTPT.html>

## Further Investigation

### Questions to Consider

#### *Culture and Tradition*

1. Do teachers take into consideration cultural issues?
2. How do 21st century skills align with (your culture's) philosophy of life and education?
3. How do youth relate to traditional ceremonies?
4. How do youth fit into the assumptions of tradition and culture?
5. How are cultural values changing with the generations?
6. What generalizations can be made across settings and what differences exist across settings (rural/urban/remote)?

Purdue University -- Important Areas for Research (Diné) (excerpt)  
<http://gerinari.weebly.com/research.html>

### Websites

- Harvard Family Research Project – <http://hfrp.org>
- Purdue GERI Native American Research Initiative -- <http://gerinari.weebly.com>
- Communication Theory -- <http://communicationtheory.org/cultural-identity-theory>
- Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) – <http://sengifted.org>
- American Indian IOC -- <http://aioic.org>
- Bemidji State University American Indian Resource Center -- <http://www.bemidjistate.edu/airc>
- Minneapolis American Indian Center -- <https://www.maicnet.org>
- Native American Community Development Institute -- <http://www.nacdi.org/contact>
- Phillips Indian Educators -- <http://www.pieducators.com>
- University of Minnesota Extension Family Programs -- <http://www.extension.umn.edu/family>

## Books

- Oleksa, M. (2005). *Another Culture/Another World*. Association of Alaska School Boards.  
Website and bio: <http://www.fatheroleksa.org>
- Treuer, A. (2012). *Everything You Wanted To Know About Indians But Were Afraid To Ask*. St. Paul, MN: Borealis Books.  
Website and bio: <http://antontreuer.com/about>
- Alexie, S. (2007). *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.
- Bruchac, J. (2016). *Talking Leaves*. New York, NY: Dial.
- Edwardson, D. (2011). *My Name is Not Easy*. Las Vegas, NV: Skyscape.

## Articles

- The Creative Personality: Ten paradoxical traits of the creative personality, By Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi -- <http://talentdevelop.com/articles/TCPTPT.html>  
Website and bio: <https://www.cgu.edu/people/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi>
- Cultural Identity Theory -- <http://communicationtheory.org/cultural-identity-theory>
- Talking Circles: Social/Emotional Impacts on G/T From Culturally Diverse Backgrounds, by Tiombe-Bisa Kendrick -- <http://sengifted.org/talking-circles-social-emotional-impacts-on-gt-from-culturally-diverse-backgrounds>
- “Who Am I?” – Identity Formation in Adolescence , by Rachel Sumner, PhD -- [http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n\\_identity-handout.pdf](http://www.actforyouth.net/resources/n/n_identity-handout.pdf)  
Bio: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/pryde/people/>