

BUSINESS MIND OF THE ECONOMIC WARRIOR

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Wanda Wuttunee

Greetings, Elders, brothers and sisters.

For me when I reflect upon value(s) added, I think of what has been brought by my passion and my desire, my heart and my emotions to my work. Part of that connection is a spiritual connection and is most honestly shared through song. [A song is sung honouring the children.]

Now for the matter at hand, I am the last keynote speaker and I want to address some issues that we have not had time to examine in the three prior presentations. Some of the things I am going to tell you because they caught my interest as a researcher observing Aboriginal economies, and some follow from issues raised by colleagues.

For me, it is most important that we honour the things that we as Aboriginal people can bring to the business table. I do not think that the mainstream has a lock on the best way to do business. The best way is for us to learn and share together. We have to take time to reflect on our decisions to enter into the mainstream economy. The costs and implications must be clearly understood for us in relationship to our visions that we have for our communities. That was really very nicely set up at the beginning of the conference. It is not a question of whether or not we will develop our economies. There

is clear successful development occurring across the country but now, it is more a question of how we want to develop our economies that must be reflected upon by our leaders, elders, and our citizens. I think that there are ways to honour our own culture as we seek to develop our economies.

Please remember that I am not particularly prescriptive. I like choice and I like diversity and that is what we are all about as a community. For example, while I do not gamble, many communities are taking advantage of the opportunity to build casinos. There are employment opportunities and economic spinoffs, but we have to go that extra step to value the social costs to our communities so that the integrity and strength of communities are not undermined. It has to be part of the way that we look at business.

We need to support diversity in the education options we offer our students. In my work as director of the Aboriginal Business Education Program at the University of Manitoba, I work with Aboriginal students seeking a B. Comm (Honours) degree. As a professor in Native Studies, I teach a variety of students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who want to understand our history and current passions as

Dr. Wanda Wuttunee, Associate Professor, Department of Native Studies, and Director, Aboriginal Business Education Program, I. H. Asper School of Business, University of Manitoba, is a Research Associate, Arctic Institute of North America, University of Calgary. After a Law degree at the University of Calgary, she became the first Aboriginal woman in Canada to earn her MBA before completing her PhD on Aboriginal economic development. She is an editor of the *Journal of Aboriginal Economic Development* and author of *In Business for Ourselves: Northern Entrepreneurs* (1992).

Aboriginal people. We also reach out through an Aboriginal Business Studies major that is part of the commerce program. We were thinking about Aboriginal students who wanted to go back and work in their communities or who wanted to go back to work in the mainstream usually with companies that are working with Aboriginal customers. We also have much to offer any student who wants to develop an edge in a very competitive marketplace. The major is relatively new and is slowly gaining support. The point for me is that there is a lot of work to be done, not only in our communities but also in the learning institutions.

The commerce program at the University of Manitoba is fairly mainstream but yet they saw value in this type of major and in the support program for Aboriginal undergraduate students. Diversity of choice is critical. It goes hand in hand with offering our students the opportunity to support a choice such as the First Nations University of Canada. I support quality choices for our students in a variety of institutions. I think we need that diversity but am I going to go work there? Probably not. I am entrenched, I admit, after eight years at the University of Manitoba and there are really cool things that are happening there. I would like to be a part of it. My role in the mainstream institution there is quiet yet critical so we cannot forget that there are voices, Aboriginal voices, in all walks of life.

As an Aboriginal scholar my tradition does not include the terms that have been used throughout this conference such as colonization, decolonization, or post-colonization. These were not part of the mainstream business education that I received in my undergraduate and graduate work. Just did not do it. When I talk about history with my Native Studies students, I am drawn to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples that conceptualized Aboriginal peoples' and the newcomers' experiences in terms of relationships. That does it for me. Listening to these incredible presentations today about terms and their meanings underlines the value in trying to conceptualize our experience but there must be understanding that there are Aboriginal scholars who come with different perspectives and deserve to be encouraged as well.

We need definitions. When I was doing my PhD, one of my elders was talking about the term "sustainable development". He said, "Well

that is Aboriginal wisdom. It is not sustainable development and anyway what does that term mean? We do not use it." I think we really do need to begin to develop terms that better define our experience and build on what we know. I listened to a presentation recently by a master's student. She is not my student but our students get a chance to make presentations in Art History and it was on Aboriginal Art. I did not understand a word she said. Not one. The terminology and the jargon of that particular way of understanding Aboriginal art was obscured to me, though I am sure my cousin, Dr. Gerald McMaster at the Smithsonian Institute, might have understood.

Terminology and language are critical for sharing ideas and building meanings that are useful. I am sensitive as an academic not to get caught up in our own academic language. Labels are important because there can be clarity for people. Still, I believe that we have to question our choices and revisit them. For example, the term "colonization" means many, many things including power relationships. I want to include everyone in whatever that term is for our history because our history is so critical and all of those people have such a strong impact. I think that Auntie Mae was not included in the current defining of that concept. She was a fighter, she had life and she survived. Actually, Auntie Mae was not related to me. I met her before she passed away. She was an incredible woman, a trapper woman who lived in northern Manitoba. I think she had her thumb and her pointer on one hand. She had a great sense of humour, outlived three husbands; just a fighter and you know we all have those people in our history. The term "colonization" is too narrow, comes out of victimhood, and does not capture our heroes and their legacies. We need to develop our own more meaningful and comprehensive terms.

The underlying theme is our quality of life that points to the children who sit at the centre of our families and communities. In economic development, we can think about the impact of our decisions on the children. For many communities, this is not too difficult. For other communities, meeting the dire needs of those in the present has overwhelming consequences that overshadow the needs of the future unborn. It is important to recognize those leaders who have limited resources, where development of those resources will have serious impacts on the

environment but it means that some citizens will have employment opportunities. It comes down to survival. I was impressed to hear the speakers today who are beyond basic survival issues. We are rising to challenges in ways that we never had the opportunity to use in the past.

Companies are noting the possibilities of working with our communities in a business context. They have to develop their programs and persuade the leaders, shareholders, and fellow employees or these projects fail. They are serious. What I think was fascinating was a group that were up at 7:30 in the morning to hear me and some other people talk about building relationships and strategies. Many choices exist again for skilled Aboriginal people to work in mainstream companies with a particular business culture. We have to know what that culture is and accept it so we are prepared to work in it. It is good to have those kinds of choices to participate in mainstream society. If you choose to work in an Aboriginal-owned organization or corporation, you hopefully have some additional choices that are somewhat different and reflect the values of your community.

For example, consider the experiences of the First Nations Development Institute (FNDI) out of Virginia. Rebecca Adamson who is Cherokee and Sherry Salway Black started it more than twenty years ago. Those women have done an incredible job. I am very impressed because they developed a model that identifies critical elements of development that build on the strengths of the Aboriginal approach to development and community and considers other aspects besides the bottom line. Bottom line has a place but there were other elements and they are actually trying to measure them qualitatively.

One of the big projects that they are working on right now is called the Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative. They are focusing on a secure food system because development for many communities is about dealing with poverty first. These projects bring up empowerment and ability to focus on economic development. FNDI is very successful at fundraising; they act as the middle person and approach all of the huge foundations, which is much different than in Canada. This year (2002) they attracted the Kellogg Foundation that funded this initiative and now communities with traditional food projects come to FNDI for funding. FNDI is making concrete efforts to create target project objectives that are sensitive to Aboriginal

values and our own type of success. So, think of the projects in your community. Now consider health, safety, and the sense of security in the community. A food secure indicator might be the way in which the project increases the availability of nutritious food resources or introduces new food sources into the community, the amount in pounds produced each year, or an increase in access of community members to a nutritious food resource.

The qualitative side highlights important aspects of projects that we miss when we focus only on profits. Another indicator is social respect. This refers to the networks and partnerships formed between the community and others present in all Aboriginal communities. Building social capital is critical to a project's success and can be measured by the number of new partnerships or networks formed by a project.

A third indicator is hope and future orientation. In all my years of business school, we never talked about these. The level of community investment in its future and people is what we are talking about in this particular measure. One measure is how elders and youth are involved in the project: that is, actually bringing that into the evaluation of the project rather than talking about it as something good but removed from the overall analysis of success.

Finally, there are productivity skills — matters of employment, knowledge and skills. One indicator of change is an increase in employment opportunity so we are not ignoring the usual kinds of indicators of success. Another indicator is an increase in the skills and knowledge of the community in a very specific and concise way.

For those of you who are not familiar with the rest of the model they have a great article on their website. I will just talk briefly about some of the indicators that they thought were critical for Aboriginal people and development. One set, of course, is economic and financial changes in the development process. So, indicators for income, trade and exchange and productivity skills, informal trade networks are critical. The second set of elements refers to leadership, community and institutional capacity and security. The third set focuses on social, political and cultural changes. The fourth set refers to planning opportunities and sustainability. Finally, a set of four major linkages ties the whole model together and includes control of assets, personal attitude, kinship, family and spirituality.

Spirituality is the one that really keeps my interest. The closest we came to ethics, not even spirit, in my business school training was Machiavelli! So this is not something that you say in the same breath, “business and spirituality”. Kinship is another element that we do not pay attention to in mainstream approaches to development. Yet these are essential to our understanding of Aboriginal communities while bringing all of those things together in a concrete way for the development process. That is what I find really fascinating.

In considering the links with spirit, I was looking at an interesting book that compared culture, spirit and economic development in Third World countries including Latin America, Asia and Africa. The author spoke to over 200 people on the topic of spirit within their total rejection of the western approach to development, as we have talked similarly in the last couple of days. They talked about the total secular approach of the western approach to development that is at all times rational and reasonable. It is convinced of its belief in linear progress by which it defines development but yet cannot capture the fluidity of development. Now starting a development conference with a song, I found it fascinating that again spirit is important in this particular work. There is a challenge in trying to see where we can fit that in. For myself, it is my hope that it will be an important part of Aboriginal business when we come right down to it, when we actually stop and think, “Do we have to do it the same way as everybody else, all the time, in every situation?” Maybe we don’t. Family, spirit in its broadest sense, ethics, right to tradition, those are the things that are inspiring to me in terms of what we can bring to the business table.

I titled my talk, “Business Mind of the Economic Warrior.” I am sure you are all thinking about what I mean. My meaning comes from influences in these last couple of days and last October when I was thinking about the title. In some of our societies it is understood that a warrior carries the burden of peace. Economics, we heard, means to make a home. So, the economic warrior carries the burden of making a home in peace. Business for me is relationships. Mind is reflection. Nurture relationships in a good and thoughtful way. I think of that as the gift that we have to celebrate and honour as Aboriginal people. Just because they do not talk

about us in mainstream businesses does not mean anything. I think we have a lot to offer.

The connection to the land I find is a really interesting challenge. When we talk about communities, we mean discrete communities with land on reserves and when I talk about urban people it is often thought that they are disconnected from the land, that it stops at the city boundary and turns to nothingness. Community is a challenge in an urban centre. I am an urban Indian. Most of us, 50 percent, live in urban centres. I cannot believe that we have changed so much that we cannot have a connection to the land somehow and I think that is a challenge for First Nations people. I think diversity is critical. Urban people that I know do not act in ways disconnected from the land. They make their way to the land in their own way. The challenge is to think about urban-based Aboriginal people when we talk about development.

We also need to think about the children like mine who are second generation and removed from the reserve. That is evolution. That is change. They know my culture, as much as I can give them, they know how to pray in our language, and they know my songs. I married a Guyanese from South America. So they know Trinidadian calypso, Caribbean music and food. That is the reality and as a parent I want them to understand and be proud of their Aboriginal heritage. That is the reality that we are talking about here. It is always an interesting challenge.

So, who is the economic warrior? Each of us in our own way can look for responsibility, take responsibility, nurture relationships in a good and thoughtful way. Stop and say some of us are stuck in our history in ways that are not working and they need our support to move forward. The gift that my father gave me was the gift of seeing the beauty in our culture. He was born on Red Pheasant reserve here in Saskatchewan, left in grade twelve, won a scholarship to McGill University for law and ended up finishing law school here at the University of Saskatchewan.

The gift that he gave me and to my brothers and sisters was not to pass the burden of the pain that our people have been through to the next generation. I have always understood that I could do anything especially as a woman. I always understood that I could do anything and that was the gift that he gave me. I was talking to a colleague and she was very upset.

She just came from a house full of her friends who often talked about bombing Afghanistan. She said, "We have to stop this. Every time a bomb drops I think a thousand terrorists are born." We can only stop it in our own homes.

The challenge is to understand our history and, embracing all of the strengths and the beauty of what we have had and understanding our relationships and how we are moving to stronger relationships with our neighbours, know that we do not have to carry that pain or pass

that pain to our children. That was the gift that my father gave me and I did not appreciate that until a grad student said to me, "I have interviewed five or ten other women and you are the first one who does not have a problem with her identity, who did not have to deal with a lot of baggage." I phoned my Dad and said, "Thank you. Thank you." We have enough to deal with in this life. So it comes back to the children: we need to give them gifts of hope, strength and love — . Thank you.