



NATIVE HOPE

UNDERSTANDING THE HEALING POWER OF STORYTELLING



Why Does Storytelling Matter?

Most of us are surrounded by stories. The movies we watch, the books we read, the news we hear, the talk with an old friend, the history of a place or people, all of these are stories. Whether we think about our lives in terms of stories or not, we are being shaped by them every day.

Here at Native Hope, we have made it our mission to focus on storytelling as the path to healing for Native Americans and Native communities. This emphasis on storytelling comes from a desire to honor and continue the oral tradition of Native peoples. Our [mission statement](#) declares this boldly:

We believe in the power of storytelling to dismantle barriers, bring healing, and inspire hope for Native people.

This is a bold claim, one that we are exploring at Native Hope. When we look around at our families and communities and see the challenges that Native Americans are facing, it's easy to think that telling stories isn't top priority. Shouldn't we be working to stop sex trafficking, working to provide basic necessities like food and shelter for all Natives, working to provide Native children access to better education, better work opportunities?

Of course, we want to do all of these things. But storytelling comes first.

The purpose of this resource is to explore the concept of storytelling: what it is, why it matters, and how it can be the most powerful tool to allow deep healing to take place in our minds and hearts. While we write this as an organization that focuses on healing Native Americans, we know that people of all ethnicities and backgrounds have stories and wounds and hope to share. Storytelling offers a common thread across all peoples and cultures.

"A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things." -**N. Scott Momaday, Native American author**



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Our Stories Are Medicine and Tell Us Who We Are

“Tell me the facts and I’ll learn. Tell me the truth and I’ll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.” -**Native American Proverb**

We use stories to help us understand where we fit in the world.

Stories come with a structure. There are beginnings, climaxes, and endings. The imaginative world of a story helps us organize our life experiences and connect them into a meaningful whole.

All humans think in terms of stories. When we meet someone new, we may give them a quick story of our life, picking out the moments that are most important and organizing it so that another person can understand.

When we do this, we are building our own identity. We tell the story, and the story then shapes and places us in relation to our families and our world. We are the heroes of our stories, the characters in our stories are the other people in our lives, and the experiences we have either can be told as a tragedy, a comedy, or something in between, an epic drama.

When we share our story, what we share is about our history. We tell our personal history, and we learn about the history of events; statewide, nationwide, internationally. History is an important component of storytelling as it influences how we perceive events, and how we want to act upon them in our future. In this way, we learn from what worked and what didn’t in generations before. We pass this historical knowledge on to next generations through stories.

When we hear the stories of other people, they tell us more about our own stories as we discover common ideas and common experiences. Sometimes we hear stories that make us think very differently about something than we had before, and this unsettles our own story until we can find a way to make the pieces fit back together.

Simply put, stories are how we understand who we are and teach others about what they ought to and can be. **They connect us to our pasts while also giving us the wisdom we need to guide our futures in fruitful ways.** They are healing medicine.

We need stories to understand our identity, dignity, worth, and our place in the world.



Wisdom of the Elders: The Importance of Storytelling in Native American Culture

Native Americans have long been known as oral storytelling peoples.

Native elders taught the next generations by passing down the legends, stories, and myths that made and that still make life meaningful. **Stories were used to convey morality, life lessons, traditions, and hope.** The ability to tell powerful stories is an artform that persisted among Native tribes even after the popularity of the written word spread. Oral stories weaved common sense understandings and teachings with the great mysteries of the universe and did so in a way that fascinated and engaged the listener.

Tribal stories come in many forms. There are creation stories that explain how the world and creatures came to be. There are educational stories that pass on the histories of tribal members who have long passed. There are stories that are purely to delight and entertain, spreading humor and laughter across generations.

Native storytelling was always a way to connect the past, present, and future, and to give new generations a sense of where they belonged in the history of their people and in the history of the world.

Studies have shown that traditional storytelling continues to play an important role in Native American wellness today.

Here's the Science Behind the Power of Storytelling

While this affinity for storytelling may have been cultivated over generations of Native Americans using it as a tool to share knowledge and wisdom, there's more going on when a story is told than simply speaking and listening. Neurons are firing, brains are organizing and engaging — **there's now science that explains the power behind the tradition.**

The most **scientific explanation** of why storytelling is such a powerful medium comes down to the release of hormones: oxytocin and cortisol.

Oxytocin

Oxytocin is the hormone mothers release during and after birth, bonding them to their offspring. It plays a role in social bonding as well. When you empathize with someone, oxytocin is released. This holds just as true for characters in a story as it does for real-life friends. When you hear a story told well enough to make you relate to a character in a story, you produce oxytocin, thus bonding with the character and becoming invested in the story.

Cortisol

Cortisol is a steroid hormone your body releases when it's stressed. Again, this hormone often reacts as we listen to and tell stories. Once oxytocin has been released and you've formed a connection to a character or person, if that character encounters any sort of trouble, you'll release cortisol in response to the stress you feel over their situation.

These two hormones together, oxytocin and cortisol, both being released throughout the course of an impactful story, are powerful. They can move a listener to action. And those are just the hormones released when the listener relates to a character — think how many times the impact can be magnified if the listener relates not only to the character, but the character's situation. What if the person in the story you've come to care for so deeply faces a moral dilemma, a spiritual crossroads, a life-changing decision that aligns with what you are personally facing? How much more weight will the story's outcome hold?

Historical Trauma Changed Our Story

For all Native Americans, **trauma is part of our legacy**. We lost our homes, our rights, our animals, and our loved ones. We encountered genocide, disease, and oppression. **We were hurt** on all the most fundamental levels: mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically.

Most Present Day Stories About Native Americans Are Negative

It is so easy to see only the negative stories about Native American communities as a whole. The suicide rates and living conditions on reservations, the health challenges, the lack of access to jobs and resources, all of these things are the stories that mainstream news outlets tell about what it means to be Native American.

This means that the vast majority of Natives grow up hearing about and living in the negative challenges of their people. This emphasis on the tragedy can contribute to a sense of hopelessness and despair.

It is not enough to tell only the tragic stories.

The Repercussions of Trauma for Natives and Non-Natives

The repercussions of historical trauma can still be seen and felt today in Native communities and individuals around the world. This trauma is not something that can simply be forgotten. We can't sweep it under the rug and hope things get better.

Among Native Americans, the rates of poverty, suicide, addiction, unemployment, and more are extraordinarily high. Why? Because of the aftereffects of all the trauma that hasn't been processed and healed. There is pain ingrained in the lives of Natives that is hard to overcome unless it is confronted, discussed, shared, and accepted.

All Native Americans need to be aware that this history impacts their present story. **The present moment is an extension of the past, and the legacy of trauma runs deep.**

Even if you didn't experience the horrors of genocide and dislocation yourself, trauma is passed down over generations. The study of **epigenetics** shows that pain is imprinted on your cells and passed along to offspring.

The wounds are real, and they are deep, but they are not unfixable.



Reclaiming Our History: What Native Hope Is Doing to Tell a New Story

To heal the wounds that plague us from our pasts, we need to tell our stories, the tragic ones and the hopeful ones.

The mission and vision of Native Hope is born out of a desire to reclaim Native history and redeem the stories we tell about ourselves.

It's not enough to talk about the pain and trauma of the past and the challenges of the present in our lives and communities. It's time to tell **a new story about what it means to be Native American in the 21st century in American**: stories of inspiration, positivity, and hope.

Here's what we're doing on the ground to offer Native Americans a new vision of who they are and what they can do.

Native Hope Fellowships

The [Native Hope Fellowship Program](#) empowers creativity and leadership in Indigenous Peoples and their communities. The initiative creates and supports opportunities and funding for individuals to develop their vision and improve Indian Country.

Check out [our Fellows page](#) for stories and videos of our inaugural class of Fellows.

Native Hope Media Team

[Native Hope Media](#) is the production company of Native Hope founded on an ethos of fairness, representation, support, and empowerment for Native filmmakers, artists, brands, and creators. The Native Hope Media team visits reservations, pueblos, and other Native communities in both rural and urban areas in order to capture the lives and stories of Native people.

[Follow the Native Hope Media team on Instagram.](#)

Native Hope Ambassador Program

Our ambassadors are a group of Native and Non-Native Americans who are dedicated to helping Native people heal through the power of storytelling. They are determined to change the perception of Native Americans by educating about Native issues while helping others find a way to be a part of today's society—still keeping their Native American heritage alive.

If you are interested in one of our ambassadors speaking at your school, conference, forum, or other event, please [contact us](#).

Native Hope Leaders' Society

The [Leaders' Society](#) is a group of Native Hope team members and volunteers who dedicate 5 hours a week to partner with like-minded organizations serving the needs of the most vulnerable in Indian Country. These partnerships help to empower children on and off reservations, inspiring the next generation to have a voice, take positive action and become strong leaders for their tribes. This powerful on-the-ground work gives many important stories an opportunity to be heard.

Social Media, Voices of Indian Country and Other Resources

Through [activity on social media](#) and through the Native Hope blog, [Voices of Indian Country](#), and other longer pages that dwell on the [past](#), [present](#), and [future](#) of Native American life, Native Hope is working to offer a space for Native voices, share beautiful stories of hope, and expose the importance of healing through storytelling.

The Future of Native American Life Depends on Each of Us

We all have pasts, and sometimes these pasts are pain-filled. Many Natives and non-Natives have been through significant trauma. Our histories can feel pockmarked and bleak.

But each of us has a choice to make a difference, to ask for help, to offer help. This movement toward hope needs all people, Natives and non-Natives, to remember who they are, where they come from, and where they are going so that they can give hope to those who are a little farther behind in the journey while healing their own internal wounds.

So we need you to tell your story. Convey your wisdom. Share what you've learned. You never know how it might help heal someone else's wounds.

Rising strong is what Native Americans do. Native strength and Native pride are alive and well in many parts of the country. We have learned so much from everything we've been through. Native Americans are also good at telling stories. We're known for it. We excel in this time-honored artform that connects human souls like nothing else can. Time is our canvas, words are our paint, and we're crafting a masterpiece.

It's time that Natives share that wisdom. It's time we acknowledge our pain and boldly claim our modern place in the long line of ancient legends and tales of courage and honor.

We've spent centuries living the story it's finally time to tell: a story of hope and healing over evils and challenges that have tried their best to destroy our people and culture.

All Natives and all peoples deserve the healing that can come from launching into a greater, more hopeful story. This is not one person's or one people's story, and it can't be told alone. We are here, as a family and community, united in our dedication to recognizing and changing our personal stories and patterns to recover our sense of value, dignity, and worth and to share the unique wisdom and beauty of Native tradition with the world.

Will you join us?



Connect with Native Hope

We hope that this resource has been helpful as you consider the story of your life, the stories that surround you, and how you can reach more peace, more healing, and more inspiration by reclaiming the story about who you are.

At Native Hope, we are passionate about dismantling barriers, bringing healing, and inspiring hope for all Native Americans and our non-Native friends.

Connect with us today to join this movement of healing and hope!

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