

## LEADER TO LEADERS: AN INDIGENOUS SCHOOL LEADER'S ADVICE THROUGH STORYTELLING ABOUT GRIEF AND COVID-19

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### **Abstract:**

This transcript presents a portion of a conversation that occurred on May 8, 2020 between Sia Elle Brown, a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and Ikal Fireseed (pseudonym), a leader at a school for Indigenous students in the American Southwest.

I met Ikal five years ago while I was visiting rural schools as a member of a leadership academy. We realized we shared similar experiences in the journey to understanding and embracing our Indigenous identities and we have remained close friends and thought-partners ever since. Through frequent exchanges of stories, we practice a communication strategy common in ancient peoples where participants share experiences, collaboratively make sense of those experiences, and make space for healing (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). I arranged the conversation below because I was compiling a series of motivational quotes for aspiring school leaders. I asked Ikal to participate because he has been a source of boundless wisdom in his community and his expertise lies at the intersection of mental health and school leadership. I have since asked Ikal if I could share his stories with an educational community more broadly and he agreed.

Through the process of storytelling, Ikal encourages leaders to practice positive thinking, grieve, and give grace as our world faces a global pandemic. Ikal's storytelling is a form of communication often viewed as a cleansing process, and one that encourages mutual respect and support between speakers and listeners (Lawrence & Paige, 2016). By reading this transcript, you become a participant in Ikal's storytelling process. As a "listener" in this conversation, you engage with the experiences of the "speaker," and process his grief, stories, and perspectives as you take meaningful steps closer to processing your own.

The transcript below begins at the end of our larger conversation after I posed the question, "Is there any way at all that COVID-19 might have given us something we can use, something we can look forward to, or maybe some new understanding from which we now grow?" This transcript presents Ikal's response to this question. I share with you his words of wisdom for this time and beyond.

**Ikal:** It's interesting that the communities that need *community* for survival are being largely excluded from the conversations about COVID-19 and its impacts. Many Indigenous communities have been devastated by the effects of the pandemic, you know, but those conversations, that information, has been glossed over in the news. Many First Nations peoples have already been displaced, have been hospitalized and doctors are asking, "Where's your records?" or, "When's the last time you came in for a checkup?" without understanding that there has been a long period of, or generations and generations of, a lack of investment in Indigenous bodies on behalf of local, state, and federal governments—

**Sia:** Right.

**Ikal:** —so the people who are surprised that we're being differently impacted by this virus are not us.

**Sia:** Yeah.

**Ikal:** We're not surprised at all. Not at all. I don't know how to be hopeful. You asked me to be hopeful.

**Sia:** I did not. I asked—

**Ikal:** Well, you know what I mean, Sia. I keep telling you negative stories. I've been telling you negative stories for an hour, you know? The question you asked is more about looking at the positives, the things that can grow from the ashes, the things that

we can hold onto. And I've been thinking about that and about how some people have always had the belief that technology expands opportunities and helps us unleash our potential but for some reason, we see virtual instruction as something that will, you know, hold us back and I'm not saying that I agree with virtual instruction, and especially not with Indigenous kids because that's just not how we feel we learn best, but I'm just wondering why we can't approach this like a learning experience for our educational communities? And yes, people will get hurt and teachers will get hurt and students we love will get... It's like this. At this point, the only way out is through and I guess I'm just saying that *we can reframe*. We have *the power*. You walk into a crappy house you're thinking about buying, you can say, "the roof needs completely torn down and redone" or you can say, "here's an opportunity to build the roof of my dreams." Both ways get you a new roof, you know, but only one of those mindsets is the way to get you to feel good about that crappy house and its crappy roof. I guess you're wondering when I got so... upbeat over these past few years.

**Sia:** I wouldn't say upbeat [laughs].

**Ikai:** [laughs] Hey, I'm trying here. [mumbles] Positives. Positives. What's something positive to close this conversation?... Oh, my great grandmother used to tell me about how her mother used to tell her about when we would have these terrible electrical storms around here, you know—

**Sia:** [laughs] Is this your positive story?

**Ikai:** No, but I think it will have positive stuff, you know [laughs].

**Sia:** [laughs] Okay.

**Ikai:** Okay, you know, so these storms, with hail and floods and the winds that uprooted trees and tipis, and they would happen pretty often and fast, out of nowhere, so you couldn't really predict them but none of the Indigenous people in the area ever died from them, and the storms were pretty deadly overall.

**Sia:** This is the story with the "positive stuff," right? [laughs]

**Ikai:** Well, yeah [laughs]. But it's more so about *why* which I guess I should have added to the story in the first place. Indigenous people didn't die from these storms because they listened to their bodies and the land and they weren't afraid to be wrong, you know? They went for safety. Every time they thought they should, they would pack up and leave and head for safety. There were plenty of times they all packed up and left and the storm never came, but they never blamed each other or themselves for having to move. They just took it for what it was. I think that COVID-19 is our ongoing, like, electrical storm, you know, and we're trying to decide if we should pack up and move to safety or if we should wait it out because we think, "Well, the storm has to end sometime."

**Sia:** Yeah. So what would *you* do?

**Ikai:** Are you kidding me? I'd pack up and leave, you know? That's what my ancestors did and that's why they're smart. Aren't you listening to me, *yidiits'e* [do you hear me]?

**Sia:** [laughs] I am but I'm struggling. So what does "packing up and leaving" look like for you, in your community, in the context of COVID-19?

**Ikai:** Well, It starts with an acknowledgement that you might not have something to come back to. Or if you come back, things might not look the same. It might look different or feel different, you know? You have to acknowledge that you're prepared to do the work to rebuild when you're packing up and leaving. You have to acknowledge that you might not be able to rebuild alone when you're packing up and leaving. You have to make peace with the, with the fact that some people will lose everything and decide how you're going to support them when you return, you know? You have to understand that it might be *you* who lost everything and prepare yourself, you know, to humbly lean on your community. And you have to grieve these losses. You have the right to openly grieve the life you had and would have had and make peace with the life you'll potentially come back to, and commit to making that life better if your Spirit feels compelled.

**Sia:** Yeah.

**Ikal:** So those are my positive pieces. And I hope that helps you with your—

**Sia:** —school leaders. I'm trying to compile some words to send them some motivation to start the school year since we had such a weird and upsetting Spring. So I'll tell them.

**Ikal:** You'll tell them that they need to positively reframe because we've been dealt this hand and it is what it is, you know, and tell them that they should and can grieve and that they can and should give grace. And that's all I've got.

**Sia:** Thanks, Ikal. I'll tell them.

Sia Elle Brown is a third-year doctoral student in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania where she recently completed the School Leadership Program. Her research focuses on both school leadership and instructional leadership.

**References:**

Lawrence, R. L., & Paige, D. S. (2016). What our ancestors knew: teaching and learning through storytelling. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*, 2016(149), 63-72. doi:10.1002/ace.20177

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