

## **Relearning Lenape: A Holistic Approach**

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Before learning a language, a person must first learn the way of the people. The way they see the world: Creator, family, government, religion, the elements, the seasons, the cosmos, connections with all of our relations in nature. Once everything encompassed in this vision is seen through the eyes, minds and hearts of the people, only then will a person walk a true path with the language. Conversely, language itself is a reflection of its culture: phrasing, inflection, diction, concepts, devotions, inferences, idioms, respect and protocol, humor - all of these elements are woven into the structure of the language, and they reveal, in a more direct and real way than any historical dissertation, the true personality of a culture. The language contains no misinterpretation, no bias, no imposition of foreign values, no revisionist or any other "theory". It is what it is. An artifact. A portal to the accurate history of a people. This in itself is an adequate reason for the preservation of endangered languages. A more important reason, however, is that the preservation of the language will restore to Native people so much that has been lost of their own culture.

The Lenape, whose ancestral home includes New York, New Jersey, Eastern Pennsylvania, and Northern Delaware, have for many years settled in small communities in those areas. Recent interviews conducted with elders from these communities reveal that many Lenape in Pennsylvania at the turn of the twentieth century still spoke their original tongue with some degree of fluency. Likewise many others did not. A number of factors contribute to instances both of loss and of preservation of the language in these areas.

The vast majority of Lenape in Pennsylvania descend from intermarriages between Lenape natives and European, most specifically, German immigrants who settled in Pennsylvania. These settlers were, for the most part, farmers, and their connection to the land made them close friends with the Lenape. This relationship is well documented, not only in our own oral histories, but also in the histories and diaries of the German immigrants themselves. The following excerpt from [A History of the Early Brobst/Probst Families in Pennsylvania](#). (University of Pennsylvania Press) is just one example:

*Not all Indians were unfriendly, and there are stories of some unusual relationships. Dean Cunfer tells of a story that one young settler, plowing his cleared field, drew closer to the forest each day. A young Indian watched him and one day when the settler was close to the trees, the Indian rushed out of the forest to engage him. They grappled for some time, but the Indian got the best of the fight. He tied the settler to a tree, and took his bow and arrow as though to shoot him. As he pulled back on his bow, the settler cried out, "Schuss nicht, schuss nicht!!" ("Shoot not, shoot not!!") The Indian eased up on his draw, threw the bow and arrow to the ground, ran to the man and said "Kanst du Deutsch sprechen?" ("Can you speak German?") Evidently the Indian discriminated against other nationalities.*

The early ties between the Lenape and German settlers may involve more than merely a common connection with the land. The German language, itself, inherently has much more in common with the Lenape language conceptually and structurally than does English. In any event, it is clear that linguistic and social relationships were forged very early on between the two cultures. Recent genealogical research and oral histories collected from descendants of these early marriages indicate that once a

German/Lenape line was established, more often than not, those descendants married into the German/Lenape lines of other families with which they came in contact, that even into this century their parents knew which families were Lenape, and that they encouraged their children to "associate" with those families. Many of the Lenape in Pennsylvania today are descendants not of just one far removed Lenape ancestor, but of a long carefully woven cloth of many bloodlines.

Oral histories relate that not only were the Lenape deliberate in maintaining bloodlines, they were also deeply concerned about passing traditions along from one generation to the next, usually from grandparent to grandchild. It is evident, given the monumental social pressures and prejudices imposed upon these families throughout the 1800's, why some of them were successful in this endeavor and others were not. The historical accounts of the injustices imposed upon Native Americans in general are well-known, and it is not necessary to recount these events. Although the Lenape in Pennsylvania were often subject to the same treatment, their situation is unique in that they intermarried and "assimilated" rather than having been removed to reservations. This afforded them, in many cases, but not all, some degree of social stability and acceptance so long as they, at least outwardly, became part of the status quo. No doubt there were those who wished to do just that. But many Lenape held on to their ways and beliefs. All of the particulars involving how they accomplished this is the subject of another paper. Of most significance and consequence is the fact that much of the spoken language and traditions survived, and that the Lenape people who were adamant about passing these practices along were ingenious in finding ways to show one face to the world and another in secret. This practice gives a whole new meaning to the term "two-faced" and accounts for the fact that certain traditions that could be passed along "incognito" survived while other more outward expressions of the culture, such as language, declined.

The evidence gathered to date suggests that these Lenape families were originally bi-lingual, but that German, and eventually, English, gradually became the dominant language in the home. One elder, now 70 years of age, states that her grandmother spoke English in the home and resorted to Lenape only in private for prayer and in cases where the expletive was required. This and other accounts seem to indicate that the vast decline in attempts to pass the language along occurred within a decade or so preceding and after the turn of the century. It is not difficult to envision such a rapid decline in fluent speakers, since just one or two generations experiencing a lapse in speaking the language, would produce this effect. Of the language that is extant, a good deal has been passed along among those families that have continued to carry on other traditions, in particular, ceremony.

Recent attempts to collect and document oral histories of the Lenape in Pennsylvania indicate that ceremony was one area of Lenape life in which the language would not be compromised. Fragments in a number of dialects have survived in various ceremonial rituals, prayers and songs. Second in importance of the words that have remained in tact are those addressing friends and family members: the words for "mother", "son", "grandfather", "friend", etc. For an English speaking person, this may not imply much more than a tendency toward familial love and devotion. But in a culture whose usage of certain terms depended upon whether a sibling was older or younger or whether, among friends, a man was speaking to a man or a woman was speaking to a woman; in a culture where the word for "cousin" was the same as the word for "brother" or "sister" and the word for "great uncle" was the same as "grandfather" and

where an entirely different term for "uncle" was used if he had departed; in a culture where the usage of one word or another depended upon and portrayed an entire notion surrounding a relationship, the language reveals a wealth of information about the intrinsic values of the people. In my endeavor to collect as much language as possible in our community, I found that although any working vocabulary was absent among the general population today, random words pertaining to these relationships and ceremonies were known by most of the people. And in that small remnant of the language lies a history lesson. The fragments of language that have survived reveal much about the values and practices of an ancient culture. But the question remains, how much of this culture has been lost among the native population as a direct result of the loss of the language?

Thus far, I have related events leading from the past to the present. Now let's take a journey from

the present to the past through the language. I will take you on this journey backwards by discussing what I know best, my own journey. Only Creator knows precisely how the blood of the ancestors passes through the veins from one generation to the next - like a river whispering and carrying all that has happened before. I suppose that many studies have been done regarding displaced persons and the cultural tendencies that they continue to exhibit despite the detachment incurred by removal and dispersal. Let it suffice for me to say that in my case, although certain Native practices and values had been passed down to me, the language had been long forgotten in my family by the time I was born and raised. But although the words had been forgotten, I know now that the "notions" or "whisperings" of the language remained. The difficulty that I had in learning the language initially was that the English words had drowned out and fragmented these underlying whisperings and notions. Only when I was in the woods for a long time, where there was no English, where there were only the sounds and voices of all the relations, did the whispering return. The story of that experience is best told in Lenape.

*when i was young often i go in the woods and i listen long.*  
*weskiane mikwi nta tekenink ok nkelsetam kweni*

*i listen and all my relations the way they speak*  
*nkelsetam ok wemi elankumakik lixsuwak*

*i don't understand it with words what they speak but i understand it*  
*ku nenustamuwen wichi aptunakana keku pemetunheyok shek nenustamen*

*in my heart. i desire i know it lenape language.*  
*ntehemink nkata nuwatun lenape lixsuwakan.*

*one day i saw it the book with language and i read it.*  
*kweti kishku nemen na lekhikan wichi lixsuwakan ok ntahkentamen.*

*it is difficult. in the book they are there just words.*  
*ahchi lekhikanink hateyo leni aptunakana.*

*again and again i try to do it i understand it but i cannot.*  
*lapi ok lapi nkwechilayhosin mpentamen shekw ntala.*

*i thought like english, but then i forget english,*  
*ntite tat english shekw na nonin English,*

*and i think only lenape words, and i begin i understand it.*  
*ok ntite leni lenape aptunakana, ok ntalemi pentamen*

*so now again i go to the woods with the words and i listen,*  
*yukwe lapi nta tekenink wichi aptunakana ok nkelsetam*

*and when i i return from the woods i can speak lenape.*  
*ok nтели nkwetkin tekene alenixsia.*

These whisperings of the Lenape language are in the blood of all Lenape people and they are best expressed when confronted with nature - with all that they hold sacred in their homeland. The language will come to them when the two are reunited.

The language of the Lenape is a living language through which the web of life flows, and it is permeated with the notions of interconnectedness, humility, reverence and a deep sense of where each individual belongs in the scheme of things, from family relationships to relationships with the natural world. A non-Native person may observe a Native who appears to be speaking to the spirit of a tree and walk away with a notion of how "primitive" such a practice is. In his world, and language, trees don't have spirits, and so the trees will ignore him.

The very basis of usage in Lenape depends upon whether an object is living or non-living, in much the same way that some European languages base their structure on the masculine and feminine. The difference being that a bear is surely a living thing and a knife is not, and as such deserves the proper usage. In the French language, for example, I still find it difficult to understand why a chair is feminine and a sofa is masculine. The concepts of animate and inanimate reflected in the language reveal much about how a Native views the world.

In my attempts to learn and collect extant language in Lenape communities, I found that most among those who maintained some degree of vocabulary had no concept of animate and inanimate usage. They had completely lost sight of the animate and inanimate properties of the language. More striking was the fact that they seem to have dropped the animate altogether and innocently used the inanimate to refer even to living things. Given how intricately these distinctions are used in the language to express significant spiritual concepts, it seemed to me that the very soul of the language had been lost. And with it, a part of their own spiritual core of existence. The language of the Lenape people contains in its spectrum ways to express all of the intricacies unique to their own world view, spiritual view and sense of purpose. No other language can do that for them. No other language can teach them to "think" on a subliminal level, like Lenape. For many who have lost their language, the words they do know are just words

that they fit into English sentences in a linear, fragmented pattern. This is a great loss, for the Lenape language is far from linear. Lenape words contain perceptions related to the objects they represent. The language is poetic. One word most often expresses an entire thought...it contains a whole sentence, as well as an inference related to that subject. Translating Lenape into English using a linear English pattern of thought bursts the conceptual bubble, transforms the spiritual to the mundane, and destroys the intricate web that connects all things in their world.

So how do we begin to restore the natural order with regard to re-teaching the Lenape language to the Lenape people? Current available resources that I have consulted in the language, although their vast contribution cannot be underestimated, either take the form of dictionaries, which provide a wealth of vocabulary but no devices to show how the language is structured, or of courses inundated with complex grammatical structures and specialized terminology that can be useful to grammarians and linguists, but that leaves the common person largely at a loss. The few courses containing audio recordings of Native speakers are invaluable, but are equally limited in scope. Although animate and inanimate distinctions are noted, when presented in such a context their broader implications are largely neglected. These courses are pertinent and valuable resources for teachers and grammarians who are trying to get a grasp of the structure of the language, but can such a method be of any use in aiding Native speakers with the complete assimilation of the language? I think not. In my teaching of the language, I have observed that the average "student" of the language doesn't remember anything about objects and subjects if he or she ever knew them at all. And what about teaching the language to children? Must they first pass a course in grammar prior to learning to speak their language? Many teachers of English, in truth, have made the same observations regarding such a disconnected and analytical approach to teaching language in general and have developed systems based on sentence models rather than grammar. I have found it beneficial in teaching the language to do away with the term "grammar" entirely and, in discussing how Lenape words work, have invented a Lenape word, "Aptonahanne" which simply means "flow of words".

Recent surveys conducted among the Lenape community in Pennsylvania, indicate that there is widespread interest for a reliable Lenape language program. They also overwhelmingly indicate that a major setback in learning the language is the lack of communication with other Lenape speakers in a

dispersed society. In order to achieve the best results, a holistic program must be developed which provides strategies for overcoming social, perceptual, and linguistic barriers to a more complete assimilation of the language.

There were a number of obstacles to surmount when I first began to conceive of a program that would work in our community. The fact that people were widely dispersed and the lack of a comprehensible written program have already been mentioned. Among the written courses that were available, many were in various dialects, and those that were in similar dialects used a variety of spelling systems to represent unique Lenape sounds. I struggled through all of these courses and painstakingly re-learned phonetic systems of each. My first goal was to come up with or decide upon one system that could be presented to our people so that they would not have to go through such a confusing ordeal.

The first objective was to decide which dialect to teach. The two major distinct dialects represented in the materials available to me were Northern Unami and Southern Unami. In speaking with the general population I found that they had retained words from a mixture of both. This is not difficult to understand since Northeastern Pennsylvania marks the border between the two original linguistic groups. There was and still is much controversy regarding the dialect issue and which one to use. There are many sub-dialects even among the two major ones mentioned. Maintaining all of the dialects was an impossible task since there were so many and only fragments of the language was available in some. Here Nora Thompson Dean's work was a major influence. Since it was through her work that I originally began to learn how the written words were pronounced, since through the work of Jim Rementer and others, there was so much more material available in the Southern Unami, and since this was the main dialect spoken by the few Native speakers that I had come in contact with in this area, I decided to go with this system as a starting point in developing a program that would be appropriate for our people. However, since some words used and held dear in the community were of a Northern dialect, and since we are, once again on the border, I felt that it is only natural that our system should include some of those as well. In any event, it was inevitably necessary at one point to end the controversy and make a decision, otherwise the language would not survive at all.

There was also some controversy over whether an oral language should be taught as a written language or whether the written system should simply be used when necessary for educators in teaching the oral language. Once again, I made the decision to move along with a written system accompanied by audio tapes, since the major problem with previous written systems had been that there was no audio to consult and one could only guess from the phonetics provided how accurately to pronounce the words, and because the combination of both, should the language fall out of use, would make it easier for future persons to reincarnate the language. Some people are auditory learners and some are visual learners. It makes sense to provide the means to meet the needs of both. Also there are people in the community who do read Lenape and, in fact, who do create original works and songs in the language. So it was decided to proceed with a written language but to keep the audio a priority. Now that I had a clear concept in my head of how to proceed, I was able to begin.

My first concern was finding a way to communicate the language to the children, since our best hope for its survival lay in them. What do kids love to do? Sing and play games. So I began to devise and translate children's songs into Lenape making sure that words were not used in an isolated way, but using sentence models which involved inserting different vocabulary words. I made up coloring pages to reinforce the vocabulary words. I had the same objective when devising new or revising existing games. Lenape could be taught by using many games children already knew, hopscotch, twister, uno, etc. Some of the games that I created were ones that would reinforce words with Lenape traditions or concepts. For example a simple medicine wheel can be used to teach words for the directions, the seasons, the colors with which we associate them, the elements, as well as terms for grandmother, grandfather, Creator and Mother Earth, etc. At the same time the children are involved in a discussion of the native traditions associated with the medicine wheel and are encouraged to discuss and reflect upon how the words and phrases represent those perceptions. From this point we proceed to simple prayers, in which many of the same terms are used and new ones are added, as well as deeper discussions regarding spiritual issues. The

end result was that we had a lot of fun, invaluable quality time, and best of all, the children were learning the language. Much to my delight, I found that the adults also enjoyed these simple games and were able to pick up a good deal of language playing them. More important, they were able to share the teaching experience by explaining the traditions and concepts as they themselves made the connections between them and the words, and by telling the related stories.

The main hindrance continued to be and still continues to be that we are a dispersed people. It is difficult to get together often enough to the degree necessary to keep the language in use. Here the parents play an important part. Once the language is introduced it must become a part of a child's daily life. The children of those parents who reinforced these games and used the new sentence models and vocabulary in their day to day living were able to begin to assimilate the language and use it quite naturally. A sincere commitment on the part of parents is essential for the future success of reviving the language. In order to make this easier for them, I developed a home school curriculum which incorporated simple conversations, lessons explaining the flow of the language, stories to reinforce vocabulary and teach traditions, and supplemental songs, games, and coloring pages.

The next objective was to make the language available to persons in our community who lived throughout Pennsylvania and, indeed, throughout the country. With the help of Chief Bob Red Hawk, I started an internet forum in which we could send out daily written lessons accompanied by audio files. The lessons took the form of conversations containing phrases used in every day life situations. It is based largely on the home school curriculum, complete with stories, games and songs, but modified slightly so as to be more appropriate for adults. We continually encouraged people to use the phrases and sentence models from the conversations provided from that point on in their daily lives, even if for the time being they would need to insert English words for the vocabulary they didn't know. At the same time we encouraged discussions on the group about all aspects of the language. In the process, we found that many people were inhibited about pronouncing words because either they were afraid of making mistakes or they were caught up in controversies over different ways to pronounce words. In truth, there are still some people who argue over how to pronounce certain phrases. For example, some insist that the correct pronunciation for the Lenape word that marks a question is "hech" and others say "huch". At a point where the language is in danger of dying out does it really matter whether a person says hech or huch? Even Nora Thompson Dean would pronounce words differently at different times. It is essential to provide an atmosphere where people are permitted to speak, experiment, make mistakes, and even make choices about how words will be used and pronounced in certain families. Let's look, for example, at the Lenape words for the term "friend". There are multiple ways to say it, as I mentioned previously, depending upon whether a man is speaking to a man or a woman is speaking to a woman. They had no word at all for a man speaking to a woman and vice versa. It is becoming more common these days to drop many of these distinctions in favor of a more universal term for friend. For the sake of simplicity, I chose to do so, but also provided all of the usages for the sake of educating students about the culture and in the event that they would prefer to use them. If a person feels strongly about using them, that's fine. The reverse is fine as well. Creating an atmosphere of mutual respect for and acceptance of each other's views is essential in order to work together not only for the preservation of the Lenape language, but for the preservation of all Lenape communities as well. All languages grow and change. It is the nature of the language to adapt to the needs and circumstances of the times. Language after all is essentially a tool for communication. Attempts to keep the language as it "was" are inevitably doomed to failure. They are limited as well, since there were no Lenape words at all for many of the objects and concepts that exist in the world today. One challenge facing "modern" Lenape language programs is to come up with words that will enable speakers to communicate in today's society.

The importance of gathering as a community to speak together as well as to discuss the language cannot be stressed too enough. It is necessary to bring the language experience full circle and to become once again a bilingual community now that social taboos have been lifted. We must make the commitment to use the language exclusively at community gatherings and ceremonies, at the same time, maintaining an atmosphere of comfort and acceptance, with a realization that we will all be speaking "broken"

Lenape for a while until we become more and more fluent. Language circles ideally should involve instruction using deductive rather than inductive strategies that encourage discussions regarding the nature of the language. Inviting individuals to ponder questions such as, "Why is a rainbow animate?", will allow them to rediscover and assimilate perceptions related to words and phrases on a deeper and more personal level. Situations must be presented, and we must take advantage of situations that are presented, to use the language, not memorize it. In our community, also, we have persons sincerely dedicated to becoming fluent who have been designated as "keepers" of the language, and who have assumed the responsibility of passing it along to others who will make the commitment to be keepers in the future. If all else fails, keeping this tradition alive will assure, at least, that the language does not die out entirely.

Recently, members of our community have partnered with a number of schools and universities in an attempt to modify history in existing curriculums and raise awareness about native issues and how natives are active in the community today. Discussions have begun with some of these institutions regarding strategies for preserving and teaching the Lenape language. Surveys indicate that an increasing number of people, both native and non-native, are genuinely interested in learning the language. In the process of teaching cultural workshops and performing native music for the general public, I have continually been asked about the meanings of Lenape words. Given that Lenape is the Native language of Pennsylvania, school curriculums would be vastly enriched by offering courses in the language. We have now observed that children, and adults as well, do, in fact, learn from interactive online activities and interactive games. The difficulties that Bob and I experienced in our online forum involved not having adequate space to upload audio files, and, admittedly, not having enough computer savvy to create the visuals, chat rooms and other devices that would compliment the forum. By providing the technology necessary to implement interactive activities, schools and universities could not only take great strides toward helping to preserve the language but would benefit from the programs as well.

There are a number of issues particular to the Lenape language that could be resolved by a cooperative effort among those communities currently teaching and developing materials: brainstorming strategies for teaching the language, discussing whether current systems for writing the language are adequate, sharing the wisdom and stories of the elders, providing exchange internships and opportunities for communities to gather and speak together. Cooperation of this nature would not only benefit attempts to preserve the language, but would also afford an opportunity for these communities to come together in a effort to raise awareness among each other regarding all of the issues, past and present, that effect their people today.

There is great encouragement for the future of the language in the knowledge that there is much interest on the part of various individuals, communities and institutions to work toward its preservation. Because of the efforts of a number of sincerely dedicated individuals and organizations within Lenape communities, it will be easier for the next generations to learn the language. Many of the issues along those lines have already been addressed and resolved. Equally encouraging are partnerships that have been forged in recent years with educational institutions, churches, environmental organizations, historical societies, and youth groups that open avenues for unlimited opportunities to raise awareness and create educational and cultural programs. Perhaps some day, future generations of Lenape people will be able to carry on these relationships with one added advantage: the ability to communicate in their own language.