



Let Us Begin with Courage

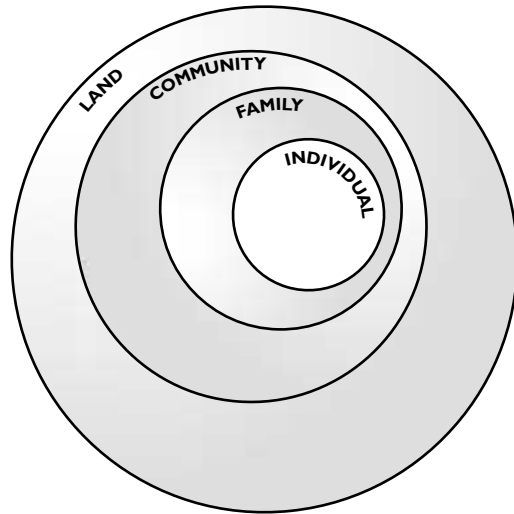
Jeannette Armstrong is an Okanagan Indian who was born on the Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia where she has lived for most of her life. She is a fluent speaker of the Okanagan language and has studied traditional teachings for many years under the direction of the Okanagan elders. She is Director of the En'owkin International Writing School and author of a number of books, film scripts, and a collection of poetry. Her commitment to the development of Native creative expression in literature and the arts, together with her astute insight into social and political issues is well known and respected among First Nations people.

The word *En'owkin* comes from the high language of the Okanagan people and has its origin in a philosophy perfected to nurture voluntary cooperation, an essential foundation for everyday living. The term is based on a metaphorical image created by the three syllables that make up the Okanagan word. The image is of liquid being absorbed drop by single drop through the head (mind). It refers to coming to understanding through a gentle integrative process.

En'owkin is also the name given our education center by elders of the Okanagan; it is meant to assist and guide us in restoring to wholeness a community fragmented by colonization.

To the Okanagan People, as to all peoples practicing bio-regionally self-sufficient economies, the knowledge that the total community must be engaged in order to attain sustainability is the result of a natural process of survival. The practical aspects of willing teamwork within a whole-community system clearly emerged from experience delineated by necessity. However, the word *cooperation* is insufficient to describe the organic nature by which members continue to cultivate the principles basic to care-taking one another and other life forms, well beyond necessity.





Having been born into such a living community, albeit one becoming more fragmented, I have come to the conclusion that its philosophy is supported by an infrastructure that governs the imperatives by which choices are made, and that this structure solicits desired results. In this particular living community, the structure that implements the principles could be described as an organizational process, one profoundly deliberate in insuring an outcome that results in a community strengthened by the dynamics of deep collaboration—that is, collaboration at all levels over generations.

En'owkin, practiced as a rules-to-order technique, solicits voluntary deep collaboration. As such, En'owkin is engaged in by the community as a customary procedure in order to insure that the principles of sustainability will be incorporated in decision-making. The customs are cultural traditions arising as a worldview. In the En'owkin process, we do things in a way that enables us to experience collaboration as the most natural and right way to do things.

To me the principles of the process seem simple: because they are so deeply imbedded, I cannot see how community could operate other than within these principles. Yet, through articulating them, I have come to discern the complexity and depth of their significance. The principles are most easily represented in a schematic, rather than in words, displaying the structurally integrative nature by which they intersect all levels of human experience.

What can we come to expect from practicing these life principles? First, we can expect each individual to fully appreciate that, while each person is singularly gifted, each actualizes full human potential only as a result of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual well being, and that those four aspects of existence are always contingent on external things.

Second, as an individual, each person is a single facet of a transgenerational organism known as a family. Through this organism flows the powerful lifeblood of cultural transference designed to secure the best probability of well being for each generation.

Third, the family system is the foundation of a long-term living network called community. In its various configurations this network spreads its life force over centuries and across physical space; using its collective knowledge to secure the well being of all by the short- and long-term choices made via its collective process.

Finally, a community is the living process that interacts with the vast and ancient body of intricately connected patterns operating in perfect unison called the land. The land sustains all life and must be protected from depletion in order to insure its health and ability to provide sustenance across generations.

It is imperative that community—through the family and the individual— be seen as a whole system engaged in maintaining the principles that insure its well being.

En'owkin is, to me, a philosophy expressed in the process of being part of a community. The idea of community, as understood by my ancestors, encompassed a complex holistic view of interconnectedness. Within a contemporary Okanagan context, En'owkin achieves a process of inquiry and decision-making intended to continuously challenge complacency and rigidity.

I have found that it solicits a non-adversarial approach to collaborative decision-making culminating in true consensus making, which in turn encourages both harmony and empowerment.

The holistic parameters of En'owkin demand our responsibility to everything we are connected to — the heart of sustainability. I have most often observed its workings as a governing process, because En'owkin was most visibly engaged during decision-making in my community.

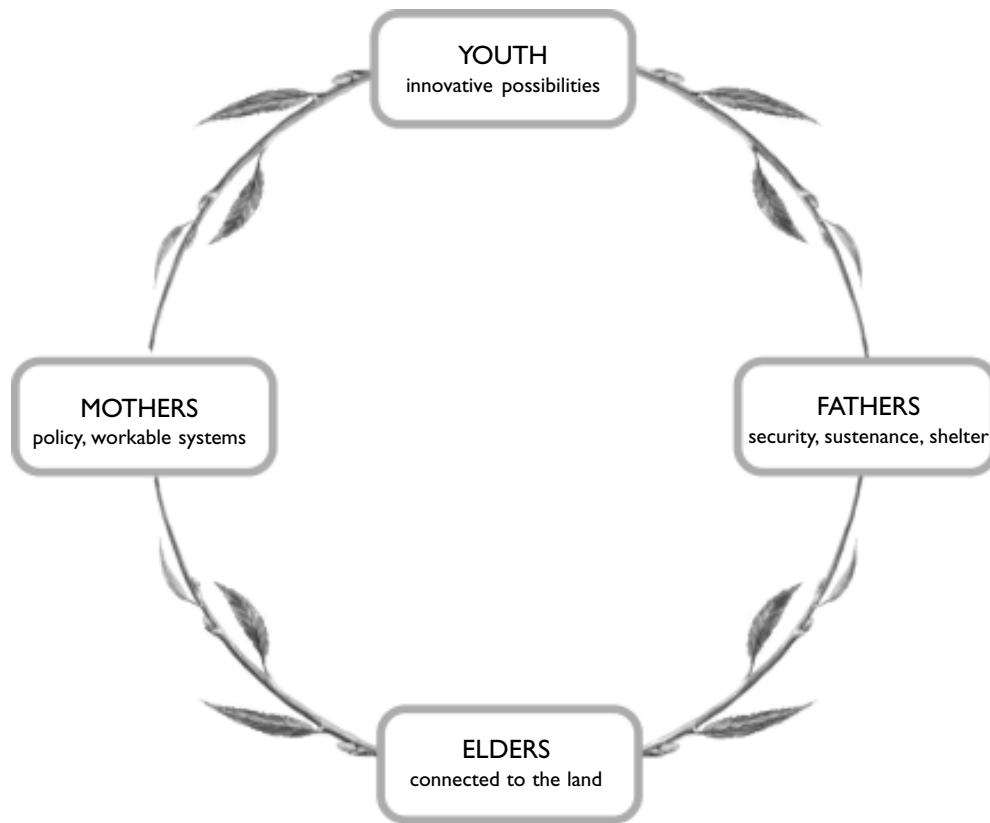
The word *En'owkin* in the Okanagan language elicits the metaphorical image of liquid being absorbed drop by single drop through the head (mind). It refers to coming to understanding through a gentle process of integration.

The Okanagan people used this word when there was a choice confronting the community. An elder would ask the people to engage in En'owkin, which requested each person contribute information about the subject at hand. What took place was not so much a debate as a process of clarification, incorporating bits of information from as many people as possible, no matter how irrelevant, trivial, or controversial these bits might seem, for in En'owkin, nothing is discarded or prejudged.

The process deliberately seeks no resolution in the first stage. Instead, it seeks concrete information; then inquires how people are affected and how other things might be affected, both in the long and the short term. It seeks out diversity of opinion. Persons with good analytical skills or special knowledge are usually given opportunity to speak, as are spokespersons for individuals or families. Anyone may speak, but only to add new information or insight.

The next stage “challenges” the group to suggest directions mindful of each area of concern put forward. The challenge usually takes the form of questions put to the “elders”, the “mothers”, the “fathers”, and the “youth”. Here, the term *elders* refers to those who are like-minded in protecting traditions. The group seeks their spiritual insight as a guiding force of connection to the land. The term *mothers* refers to those who are like-minded in their concern about the daily well-being of the family. The group seeks from the mothers sound advice on policy and on workable systems based on human relations. The term *fathers* refers to those who are like-minded in their concern about the things necessary

for security, sustenance, and shelter. Usually the group seeks from the fathers practical strategy, logistics, and action. The term *youth* refers to those who are like-minded in their tremendous creative energy as they yearn for change that will bring a better future. Usually the group seeks from the youths their creative and artistic prowess in theorizing the innovative possibilities and their engagement in carrying it out.



Using this process does not require a rigid meeting format in which information is solicited. Rather, it is imperative that each person play his or her strongest natural role, because that is how each person can best contribute to the community. Persons speaking usually identify the role they've assumed by saying, for example, "I speak as a mother," and proceed to outline what is understood that *mothers* are being challenged to contribute. Each role is then valued as indispensable to the unit. Stated and unstated ground rules of the process "challenge" each member



of the group to be considerate and compassionate to all others in the solution building. The process asks that each person be committed to creatively include in his or her own thinking the concerns of all others. It requires each person's understanding to expand to accommodate the whole of the community. The point of the process is not to persuade the community that you are right, as in a debate; rather, the point is to bring you, as an individual, to understand as much as possible the reasons for opposite opinions. Your responsibility is to see the views of others, their concerns and their reasons, which will help you to choose willingly and intelligently the steps that will create a solution—because it is in your own best interest that all needs are addressed in the community. While the process does not mean that everyone agrees—for that is never possible—it does result in everyone being fully informed and agreeing fully on what must take place and what each will concede or contribute.

The action finally taken will be the best possible action, taking into consideration all the short-term, concrete social needs of the community as well as long-term psychological and spiritual needs, because all are essential to a healthy community and to sustainability. This is where diversity of thought and ingenuity resides. The elders describe it as a decision-making process of the group mind at its best. The word they use means something like “our completeness.” It creates complete solidarity in a group moving in the direction

suggested, at the same time opening the door to a collaborative imagination and innovation much more likely to produce the best answer.

It seems to me that in diverse groups the En'owkin process is even more useful because there is a greater possibility of differing opinions. In modern decision-making, the "Roberts rules of democratic process," in carrying out the will of the majority, creates great disparity and injustice to the minority, which in turn leads to division, polarity, and ongoing dissension. This type of process is in fact a way to guarantee the continuous hostility and division that give rise to aggressive actions that can destabilize the whole community, creating uncertainty, distrust, and prejudice. Different religions and ethnic origins, inequality of income levels, and inaccessible governing are the best reasons to invoke the En'owkin process.

Real democracy is not about power in numbers, it is about collaboration as an organizational system. Real democracy includes the right of the minority to a remedy, one that is unhampered by the tyranny of a complacent or aggressive majority. The En'owkin process is a mediation process especially designed for community. It is a process that seeks to build solidarity and develop remediated outcomes that will be acceptable, by informed choice, to all who will be affected. Its collaborative decision-making engages everyone in the process; decisions are not handed down by leaders "empowered" to decide for everyone. It is a negotiated process that creates trust and consensus *because* the solution belongs to everyone for all their own reasons. The process empowers the community, creating unity and strength for the long term. Because land is seen as a fundamental part of the self, along with family and community, it requires and insures sustainable practice in its practice.

En'owkin as a community-building process makes even more sense as communities grow ever more diverse. While the human mind is naturally focused on survival; community-mind can be developed as a way to magnify the creativity of an individual mind and thus increase an individual's overall potential. A critical component of leadership today is the profit motive that affects us all at every level.



Zenobia Barlow, Executive Director of the Center for Ecoliteracy, and Jeannette Armstrong in Berkeley, California

Our original communities have disintegrated; the long-term condition of the human species, and other life forms, has become secondary to short-term profit for the few, allowing for poor choices that have altered the health and lives of millions.

I have come to understand that unless change occurs in the ways in which communities use the land, the well being and survival of us all is at risk. We can change this. For these reasons, I choose to assist in changing the paradigm by joining in a collaborative process to devise a better future.

My contribution in the En'owkin process undertaken by the Center for Ecoliteracy is to share my insight and to assist with my view of an ages-old technique perfected by my ancestors for building sustainability principles into community process. Today we human beings face the biggest of obstacles, and so the greatest challenges, to our creativity and responsibility.

Let us begin with courage and without limitations, and we will come up with surprising solutions.

Jeannette C. Armstrong, *Blowing Drifts Moon*, February 1999

This is an excerpt from the publication *Ecoliteracy: Mapping the Terrain*. For more information please visit the Center for Ecoliteracy website at www.ecoliteracy.org and the En'owkin Centre website at www.schoolnet.ca/aboriginal/enowkin