

# Puspa Shrestha

Best Quality Resource Site for Class 11 And 12 Students  
(Based on Updated Curriculum 2077)

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Puspa Shrestha

*Frank LaPena***Before Reading**

Answer these questions.

- Do you share your cultural traditions with your friends?
- Did your parents tell you stories when you were a child? If yes, did they have anything to do with your culture or values?
- Should we preserve our cultural values and traditions? Why?

**Frank LaPena** (1937-2019) was born in San Francisco, California. He attended federal Indian boarding school in Stewart, Nevada. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Chico State in 1965 and a Master of Arts in Anthropology at Sac State in 1978. He lectured widely on American Indian traditional and cultural issues, emphasizing California traditions.



He was a professor of art and former director of Native American Studies at California State University, Sacramento. His paintings, sculpture, and poetry reflect a deep understanding and love of his native heritage. He was a founding member of the Maidu Dancers and Traditionalists, dedicated to the revival and preservation of Native arts. He also published several volumes of poetry and wrote a report on contemporary California art activities for *News from Native California*. He was quite interested in the arts and traditions of Native Americans. He coedited *Legends of Yosemite Miwok* (1992) with Craig D. Bates and wrote *Dream Songs and Ceremony: Reflections on Traditional California Indian Dance* (2004). The essay '*Sharing Tradition*' is about passing on culture and values from generation to generation through oral tradition. For this, we must listen to our elders' stories.

**Reading**

I was thinking one day about recent deaths of some of the traditional people and how

difficult it is to maintain tradition. I was also thinking how important oral tradition is in helping maintain the values of culture, and how in a sense oral tradition is also an art form. As the elders pass on, the young people fill their places. Even though we know no one lives forever, no one dies if what they have gained by living is carried forward by those who follow—if we as individuals assume the responsibilities. This is easy to talk and write about, but it is hard to practise.

Not everyone is capable of fulfilling the roles of the elders. On one hand, everyone who lives long enough automatically becomes an elder—it is something that just happens. Yet some elders have enhanced their lives by creating a special “niche,” and once they have passed on, that niche is hard to fill. Religious obligations for the ceremonies and dance, for example, were reflected in their knowledge and in how those elders lived and how they affected people around them in common everyday activities as well. In fact, after the elders passed away, their knowledge of the culture and the responsibilities they had in their community had to be assumed by several individuals.

Because longevity is the guarantor of becoming an elder, the young don’t pay too much attention to something that will happen some years down the road, but they regret it later. I have talked to individuals who were seventy years old or older, and even those forty and fifty years old, and they all expressed the feeling that they wished they had listened more, remembered more, or asked more about the things that the elders were willing to share with them.

The separation that exists between generations will always be with us. Each generation is faced with new technologies which replace the old; ever-growing populations make necessary new developments that replace fertile land with housing and impact on the natural resources of air and water. Part of tradition is tied to a natural world which is being destroyed. If we are not worried about the apocalypse, getting killed in the streets, or having the drug culture undercut our lives, we might wonder what kind of world it will be in the future. It is hard to live with all the stress, worry, and change that modern technology imposes on people. It is hard to maintain traditions in such circumstances. Our world is not the world of our great-grandparents.

So we have to remind ourselves that there are things that transcend generations, and the living force of that truth is carried by the person-to-person confidentiality of oral tradition. A lot depends upon the transmission of information from one person to another. Oral tradition is the educational tool of understanding the natural world.

Oral tradition is not, however, the way many people in modern society learn things. The

educational process of getting degrees to show how educated we are forces people to do things out of necessity and not necessarily out of interest, passion for the true story, or because it is good for the community. Sometimes modern researchers gathering what they think is “oral” material “in the field” are not always told the truth. I can still see the smile of my friend who used to tell people “whatever they wanted to hear. I let them figure it out later,” he said. Or a person doesn’t understand what has been told, so he/she corrects it by modifying the material so it makes sense. The result is that erroneous information is published and falsely validates one’s research. With the printed word there is a tendency to place the author as “someone who knows” what’s going on. As “experts,” writers and lecturers may be put into a position where they think they must have an answer, so they answer by making something up. We need to learn to say we don’t know the answer, and direct the question to someone who might know. We need to learn from the elders who sometimes say “I’ll sleep on it,” or who approach a problem by having everybody’s input come up with an answer—which can be changed. Logistically, it is harder to correct errors in a book if it is already published.

A living oral tradition, as opposed to a literary tradition, accommodates corrections, because the stories are “known” by the listeners—although today a story could be someone’s fantasy and it might be harder to validate. The source of one’s information and how it was given affects how correct it is. Only if one is patient and gains information over a long period of time is it possible to get a proper understanding of one’s information. If a person is one of the groups (an insider), usually the information is given correctly, because it relates to something the speaker and listener have a vested interest in or participate in. It is their life. It is worth doing right.

For an artist, the oral tradition has an impact on how one visualizes the stories, the characters, the designs and colour for art, the atmosphere, and other information which can be useful to an artist. If I think of these elders whom I respect and love and who were my teachers, I sometimes wonder—as I extend and alter the traditions—if I am somehow not doing right by them. If an artist’s work is abstract, is it true to the stories? At what time of doing one’s art does the artist begin to relate conceptually instead of representationally to his source, and is that good or bad? Ultimately being good or bad can refer to how we do our art—what’s included or left out, and how true the artwork is to the “real” Native American thing. Do our modern life and new things function independently of or holistically with the old ways and symbols? Each of us has choices in the outcome of our lives.

As an artist, I won't try to answer these questions because the answers will be reflected in artists' works, and how they explain their work and how they understand their work. Each of us makes choices in how we work and how we live. If one knows tradition and modifies how he/she presents it, I hope it is not only for one's ego but that more independently we are also paying attention to the source of our inspiration. And if it is tradition, I hope that we honour the elders and think of the responsibility they entrusted to us by sharing the traditions with us.

## **Glossary**

**alter (v.):** change

**apocalypse (n.):** a very serious event resulting in great destruction and change

**confidentiality (n.):** the state of keeping or being kept secret or private

**entrust (v.):** give responsibility for

**erroneous (adj.):** wrong; incorrect

**holistically (adv.):** relating to or concerned with wholes or with complete systems

**logistically (adv.):** something done in logical or practical way

**longevity (n.):** long life

**niche (n.):** ideal position; slot

**obligation (n.):** responsibility, compulsion

**transcend (v.):** rise above or go beyond the limits of something

**validate (v.):** check or prove the validity or accuracy of something

## ***Understanding the text***

**Answer the following questions.**

- a. According to LaPena, what is the importance of the oral tradition? To what extent do you agree with his opinions and why?
- b. Who preserve and pass on the oral tradition?
- c. What is the danger of not passing on information from generation to generation?
- d. What is the difference between oral tradition and literary tradition?
- e. How does LaPena establish a relationship between art and the oral tradition?

## ***Reference the context***

- a. LaPena states that the oral tradition helps maintain the values of a culture. If you believe that the oral tradition is important, how would you maintain it?

- b. “Not everyone is capable of fulfilling the roles of the elders.” Explain this statement with reference to the essay.
- c. What is the controlling idea or thesis of this essay?
- d. How do topic sentences guide the reader through the essay? What would be lost without them?
- e. What are the four major problems developed by LaPena with regard to maintaining the oral tradition. How are they used to structure the essay?

***Reference beyond the text***

- a. Write a paragraph or two explaining your attitude toward the oral tradition of passing along information.
- b. Our culture is our identity. Write a few paragraphs explaining how you intend to preserve your culture, values and norms.