

READING CRITICALLY

Thinking Aloud As You Read

As you did with the previous essay, “think aloud” as you read this essay by Michael Arredondo. This process will give you some good insights into the author’s approach to his topic. Write down any new ideas you discover. As you continue to read critically, you will deepen your understanding of this essay. Read the essay at least two times. Discuss with a classmate the types of ideas you had as you read (focused or random). Which one of you did more focused reading?

CHOOSING THE PATH WITH HONOR²

by Michael Arredondo

1 I get my Shawnee blood from my mother’s side of the family. Her father was Shawnee, and her mother was Turtle Mountain Chippewa. My father’s family is from Mexico. My great, great grandfather, David Dushane, was chief of the Eastern Shawnee in the 1940s, who died in 1976 of a ruptured appendix. The Shawnee were involuntarily placed in Oklahoma. But of course we were promised the land would always be ours and it would never be owned by whites.

2 As we all know, in 1907 Oklahoma, land of the Red people, home of the Red people, became the 46th state. The Shawnee were fragmented into three tribes—the Loyal, the Absentee, and the Eastern extreme.

3 We have about 1,000 tribal members, and if my math is correct, it’s only two to three percent that are fluent in our language. There is no way to learn our language unless you go home. There is no other way to learn the language. You have to go home and attend language class on Wednesday nights. Being a student here at Cornell, it is just impossible for me to be in Oklahoma on Wednesday nights. I understand the elders reasoning for doing that. However, it is a difficult thing to accept.

4 The Shawnee never received a reservation. Instead, we received offers to buy tracts of land for individual ownership.

5 I have two older sisters, and my father took a look at the poverty, high unemployment, poor health, and the welfare system and said, “I cannot raise my family here. I need to go where I can do the best for them.” So he moved us to Albuquerque, New Mexico. You know, they say if you don’t like Mexicans and you don’t like Indians, don’t go to Albuquerque.

² Michael Arredondo, “Choosing the Path with Honor,” *Native Americans*, vol. 19, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 2002). Reprinted by permission of the author.

So we fit right in there, and that is where we grew up. My mom's parents were also there. My grandfather sat me down as he would from time to time and told me about all the bad things I would hear about being Native.

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As my life unfolded, I saw that it was indeed true. I did hear those things. In paralleling Sitting Bull's words, in his time, he told me that I had been born into a white man's world and that I would be walking on a white man's road.

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He said, "You should acquire the white man's medicine and his skills and his planning, and you bring them back to us. We will be waiting for you."

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I have been trying my whole life to get to college. It has been quite a long road. I learned about college while watching TV. I caught about the last five minutes of a TV program, and I went and found my mom after it was over, and I asked her what an Ivory Leaf school was.

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She was chuckling for about as long as you are, and she told me that it was a school that you could go to if you had a lot of money. I asked her if we had enough.

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She looked at me, and she said, "It might be a little while." So this college thing sounded pretty good, and if I was going to go, I was definitely going to go to the best, because that was what the TV program said.

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So I went out, and I got all the jobs a little kid can get at that age. I raked leaves and picked up old cans and that sort of thing. They were all too happy to pay me to do odd jobs to contribute to my Ivory Leaf school fund. After some time, I put all this money together and took it to my mom, and I asked her if I had enough yet to go to the best school.

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She didn't bother to count it. She only looked at me, and she said, "You know, it might be a while." So this continued for some time, but I noticed that a very indirect and subtle message began to appear. Over time as I got older, it came to be a very direct message. I was told by various people in the school system that certain programs, institutions, and educational opportunities weren't for me. Weren't for Indians. Weren't for people of color. And that perhaps I should make other plans.

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So I quit talking about it so much, and by the time I got to high school, I quit talking about it altogether. In four years of high school, I did not have one teacher, one administrator, one coach, one advisor, one counselor ask me if I wanted to go to college. Not one.

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So after high school, I joined the U.S. Navy to get the G.I. bill so I could go to college, because I knew my parents couldn't help me. Shortly thereafter I was deployed to the Gulf War. Being medical personnel in the Gulf on the USS *Iwo Jima* put me in a pretty bad position. We had what was termed the worst accident in the history of the Gulf War. I had never seen and I hope I never see again bodies that were burned that bad, beyond recognition. Using their dental records to identify their remains, preparing them to be shipped back home, I could only stop and think, this is not what I had in mind. I just wanted to get money to go to school.

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But you know what they say, join the service, see the world, get money for your education. When I got back from the Gulf, I applied and was accepted to the cardiovascular school of medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. To give you a very brief idea of what a cardiovascular technologist does, we function in place of a physician's

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assistant to the cardiologist. We scrub in with the physician at the table in the OR. We are a cross between a physician's assistant and first assistant in the operating room.

17 Along with the doctor, we know all the procedures that clear out the blockages in the heart. We know how to program and implant internal fibrillators that will restore an abnormal heartbeat. We know how to map the electricity inside the heart, find the abnormal pathways, and fry them out with radio frequency ablation to restore normal rhythms.

18 I really love what I do, what I have been doing for ten years already. When I got out of the Navy five years ago, I was 26. I had to stop and think, do I still want to be assisting physicians in ten years? In ten years, I could be a physician.

19 So I had three goals ahead of me. I needed to get out of debt. I am a skydiver. I have been skydiving for six years now, and I stopped counting jumps at 200, which is a whole other story. But I had to master a significant amount of debt. I needed to get in school, because as we all know, being outside of the school system and getting to the point where you are sitting down in the classroom and taking classes can be quite a hurdle.

20 I also wanted to find a way to finance my education and cost of living. I looked around for about six months. I found a job in Seattle, and I moved up there. In a year, I pounded down about \$17 grand worth of debt, and I got into school.

21 I reduced my hours to part-time at work, which in my field is about 30 hours a week. And while taking chemistry, calculus, physics, organic chemistry, biology, and all those sorts of classes, I found that it was becoming just too much, the stress of my work and my classes.

22 So I wrote a letter to the richest man in the world, explaining my plight to accomplish my third goal. The richest man in the world wrote me back and said, I understand your situation. I understand what you have been up against. I understand that not very many people have given you a chance. I'll take a chance on you.

23 It's really been quite a thing to think that somebody that I don't even know has decided to back me like that. For every semester that I successfully complete, along my pathway, I get funding from the Bill and Linda Gates Foundation, and it covers my tuition, my books and my fees, cost of living, groceries and electricity bill, food plan. It's really quite a deal. It is one of the most empowering things that has ever happened to me.

24 So, this last spring, a letter came in the mail from an Ivory Leaf school.

25 I opened that letter up, and it told me that the dream that I had inside for 25 years, the dream of a six-year-old child, had finally come true.

26 This past summer, I sold most of what I owned and loaded the rest in a U-Haul and took six days to drive out here to Cornell, to finish my pre-med requirements. I am here at Cornell.

27 The Native students here, we face our own issues. We wonder if we got accepted for our blood. I've talked with other Native people, not here at Cornell, that feel perhaps we have sold out, come to a predominantly white institution, that what we need is to attend our own schools and tribal colleges.

28 When you look at all the physicians in the United States, divide them up by race, and point to all of them that are Indian, it's one tenth of one one-hundredth.

When you look at everybody that the average 81 percent of institutions.

I came chance to accomplish I blow my ride

I imagine Mexico. But I the Creator and difficult path,

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When you look at all of the applicants in the Cornell pre-med pool every year, out of everybody that applies to medical school from Cornell University every year, on the average 81 percent get in. Those are huge numbers when you compare that to other institutions.

I came here to increase my chances, to take the road that gives me the best chance to accomplish my dream. Unfortunately the reality is that if I blow my grades, I blow my ride. It's that simple.

I imagine with my heritage I could just as well work for indigenous people from Mexico. But I wasn't nurtured that way. I know that in the end, when I stand before the Creator and look him in the eye, I know that I have chosen the more narrow, more difficult path, but one with great honor.

That will be my message to those that are yet to come, not to be self-serving. To pick that most difficult path, to come back and serve your own, to be proud of who you are, be proud of being Indian and where you come from. To be humble before the Creator, to listen to the children, for they will be sitting where you sit and I will sit. They'll be the only ones.

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Thinking Critically About Content

1. What race is the author? When do we learn this fact?
2. What is the author's dream for his future?
3. According to Arredondo, what was "one of the most empowering things that has ever happened to me" (paragraph 23)?

Thinking Critically About Purpose and Audience

4. Explain your understanding of this essay's title.
5. Who do you think is Arredondo's primary audience?
6. Arredondo uses a very informal tone in this essay, which makes the readers feel he is actually talking to us. Do you feel this is an effective way to get his message across? Explain your answer.

Thinking Critically About Paragraphs

7. Find four details in Arredondo's essay that help us understand the difficult time the author had getting to college.
8. How does Arredondo organize his details in paragraph 22? Is this an effective order for this paragraph?
9. Why does Arredondo focus on children in his final paragraph? Is this an effective ending to his essay?
10. Write a paragraph describing what you think Arredondo's mother was thinking the first time he asked her about college.

To keep track of your critical thinking progress, go to Appendix 1.