

A CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY PROCESS

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Abstract: We have been told by the white men . . . That God sent to men His Son . . . And we have been told that Jesus the Christ was crucified, but that He shall come again at the last judgment . . . This I understand and know that it is true, but the white man should know that for the red people, too, it was the will of Wakan-Tanka, the Great Spirit . . . To bring the most holy pipe to His people.

— *Black Elk*

The purpose of the traditions of American Indian people is to affirm life, harmony, dignity, and the place of the individual within the circle of life. War and its consequences take away from that harmony. To regain the wholeness of the person, native people developed specific traditions, practices, and processes. Examples of such practices include the Navajo enemy way, the Sun Dance, the pipe, veterans' dances, and the sweat lodge. However, it should be noted that none of these practices were universal among all tribes and that they *only* were done under the direction of a trained native practitioner within the sanctions of the community.

If one is to look at the cultures of Indian people across time, it can be seen that most, if not all, groups had rites of passage from one phase of life to another. In some traditions, the umbilical cord and placenta is buried, which ties the person to their land. This also implies a responsibility for the land and the people of that land. The acculturation process was done by the community so that each person could assume a functional role within their family, community, and tribe.

Each group had healers that provided medical care, spiritual guidance, and leadership for their people. It was assumed that every individual had some type of healing ability, but the medicine people were those who were recognized by their tribe as having special abilities, dedication, and humility. It took years of training and a total commitment to this way of life to become a healer. These people were treated with respect and reverence. As signs of this, gifts were given to the medicine person. No one within the group would assume to take on the role of the healer or

to call themselves a healer aside from the recognition and sanction of the tribal group. To do so would be to act like the trickster, to act as Coyote did, and to set up oneself and others for bad things. There is power in ceremony. This power can be used, or it can be abused, bringing destruction to all involved.

These people were not healers of their own free choice. Rather, this was a role assigned to them by the Grandfather by virtue of their skills, talents, and life experiences. In contemporary Indian culture these rules still hold true regardless of the picture painted by the popular media, or the strong tendency of the majority culture to view whatever is Indian as free for the taking.

There is a seductiveness about Indian culture and beliefs for those lonely souls looking for a niche, a safe place. However, it should be remembered that being Indian is not simply wearing buckskins or sitting in sweat lodges. It is something that comes from the blood of Indian people, connecting them across time and space through the sinews of tradition. It is a connection of the Spirit in present, to the past, and into the future. There is no single American Indian culture. This generic term encloses groups as diverse as Aleut and Seminole, Mohawk and Apache, Aztec and Lakota, Chinook and Shoshone. Our traditions and ceremonies are as different as our geographies, climates, resources, and histories. While we are enriched by our generosity, strengthened by our honesty, enlivened by our ceremony, sustained by the love of our sisters and brothers, and emboldened by the traditions given us by the Creator, we are not willing to be robbed by those who see only the reflection on the surface of our collective sea of culture.

That war causes disharmony was well recognized among American Indian people. It was understood that posttraumatic stress disorder was something that would have to be lived with for the rest of a veteran's life. It was a given that war changes the person in subtle and major ways. To help facilitate recovery, the entire community participated in the healing ceremonies. The medicine person directed the procedure but relied on the community to give support to the person both during and after the healing ceremony.

It must be clearly understood, acknowledged, and accepted that many of the healing ceremonies are not cures but simply a part of the healing process provided through the entire community. The trauma is a point on the circle of life that must be passed through over and over again. The power of the healing ceremony is that it is a part of the life process that begins in primordial time, enters the person's life at birth and continues past death in an ongoing circle.

Those of us who follow the tradition of the medicine circle experience life as a circle. Illness, in our present case, trauma, deflects one out of the circle. The medicine person takes the circle and the community's support to the injured person through the appropriate ceremony, whether

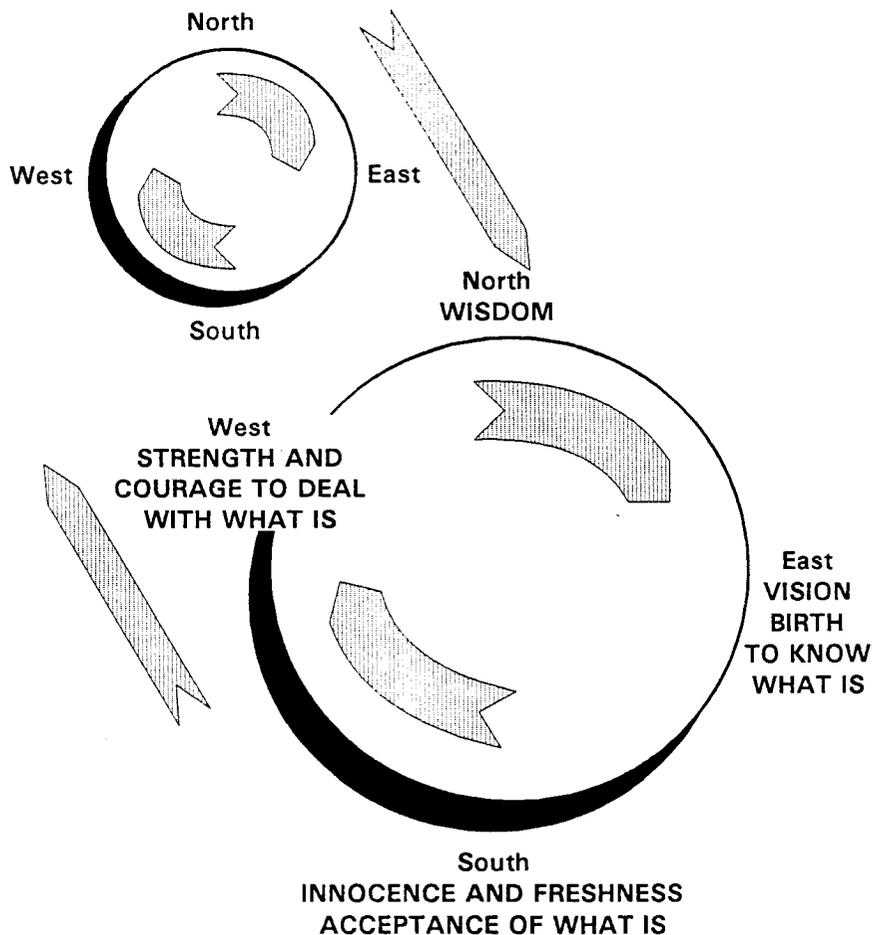


Figure 1

Trauma takes people out of the circle, healing takes them back

the sweat lodge, the pipe, or other. It is recognized that each time one returns to the trauma point on the medicine circle there will be some deflection of the path. Here we depend upon the effects of past healing and repetition of appropriate ceremonial healing. Thus, some ceremonies and rites are seasonal, some are ongoing, and others are unique to specific experience such as birth, passing from one life role to another, or traumatic events such as war (Figure 1).

The problem with being part of a ceremony done without respect for tradition and the support of the tribal community is that an illusion is created in the participant that the ceremony will cure their pain. Unfortunately, when the cycle of life returns to the trauma point, the individual is

disillusioned and may be defenseless against the rebound effect and increased trauma symptomatology. Consequences of reaching the trauma process would be repeated over and over again. Communities helped the individual make preparations to cushion against the rebound effect. People conducting these ceremonies outside the realm of the tribal community frequently lack the knowledge to understand the cycle of trauma. They also are missing the community continuity and support vital to helping the veteran's healing.

Finally, there is a limited range of people who might be reasonably expected to benefit from participation in traditional healing ceremonies. We would find it difficult to imagine that someone who was not born into the tradition and who has not been trained in the sacred ways would apprehend and benefit fully from such participation. This would, on the face of it, severely limit the advisability of a non-Indian offering such ceremonial healing, or of a non-Indian beneficiary realizing a curative effect. Even within the community of American Indian people, there are those who, either by virtue of conversion to another system of spirituality, isolation from teachers by relocation, rejection of teachings through alcohol and drugs, or any other of a myriad of other reasons, may not be appropriate for or benefit from traditional ceremony. It is also important to distinguish between what might be called public-display celebrations and sacred ceremonies. While American Indians regard our gatherings as sacred, there is a qualitative difference between a pow-wow and the Sun Dance, or between a healing sweat lodge ceremony and a cowboy sweat where everybody just gets naked, gets sweaty, and probably gets a bit macho also. Everyone is welcome at our pow-wows. Cowboy sweats usually require an invitation. Sacred ceremonies require training and deserve respect.

Epilogue

Once, when we were traveling to Lapwaa with an elder who was an Indian veteran of the Nez Perce war, we asked why he always swerved and slowed down at a specific place on a relatively straight segment of the road. He stopped the old, forest-green, Oldsmobile pickup truck and took us to a large, flat, basalt rock in a field west of the road. It was May, the month when ponies shed in this part of the world. The grass was lush, coming halfway to our knees. The sun was comfortably warm and the shady side of the basalt was cool to the touch.

He told us to hide behind the rock. He had us look. Swinging his arms in a wide arc he said, "Tell me what you see." We described the slope, the mountain beyond, the magpie brothers arguing over some scrap of carrion, and the American flag that took its place over the Lolo Pass when he was 17 years old. He and a brother were "scouts who came behind" to help anyone having trouble keeping up. They looked

back and saw the American flag coming up over a ridge "that looked just like this one." His brother stayed behind a rock "like this one." He gently touched the basalt. The brother was killed there.

"I remember him every time I come by here and see that flag sticking up there," he said. "So, I slow down and my heart remembers his name and sings his song and feels the hurt a little bit again. So, I go to the sweat and pray and the hurt gets smaller for awhile."

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