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Indigenous Healers and Healing in a Modern World

Anne Solomon and Njoki Nathani Wane

Is there a space in our contemporary society for indigenous healers and healing? Do Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples require the services of indigenous healers? These are some of the questions we consider in this chapter, which explores the healing practices of Indigenous Peoples. Indeed, indigenous healing practices are not homogeneous, being in some cases very specific to a particular group, and therefore facile generalizations are problematic. Clearly, our interpretations are colored by our own personal experiences and contexts. However, the general backdrop against which our analysis takes place is within the context of the colonial experience, as well as the cultural specificity of the people. We also offer a broad overview and analysis of conversations we had with three indigenous healers—two Canadians and one African American. We begin by asking if it is at all possible for indigenous healing to be conducted in a colonial context.

❖ COLONIALISM AND INDIGENOUS HEALING

In recent decades, Indigenous Peoples¹ have suffered from the consequences of some of the most destructive aspects of global “development.” However,

Indigenous Peoples over many centuries have maintained a unique and judicious balance between human needs and the needs of nonhuman nature. Many indigenes have growing interest in returning to their sacred teachings and ceremonies and will continue to follow their traditions to sustain themselves and to help the generations to come. Many of us are beginning to more fully recognize that the ancient ways of our Ancestors are valuable, reliable, and more sustainable than the present-day methods of living in the universe.

However, we must ask ourselves: What are the implications of using indigenous methods in contemporary times? Are these methods transferable to non-indigenous therapists who want to employ them? Indigenous healing practices are usually accompanied by certain rituals, and each methodology has within it specific relevance to sacred teachings held by the Indigenous Peoples. This is not to say that some things cannot be shared; however, it is important to understand that the practices and lessons learned by centuries of colonized, oppressed Indigenous Peoples are different than the practices and lessons of the dominant society.

It is paramount to acknowledge that our societies have gone through tremendous change as a result of colonization, and this affects present practices (Churchill, 1995, 1998; Drinnon, 1997; see also Poonwassie & Charter, Chapter 2 of this volume). This chapter attempts to make understanding these interrelationships more accessible to people in the helping professions and introduces some of the concepts of orality used to maintain and sustain Indigenous Peoples as individuals, communal groups, and nations. During the preparation of this chapter, its coauthor, Anne Solomon, was given specific instructions on what she could share about her indigenous sacred teachings. It is therefore with the consent and approval of her Elders that she shares enough information for others to understand indigenous ways of healing without breaking protocol on sacred teachings and the processes of sacred ceremonies. In many indigenous societies, some of the questions they are constantly asking are: How much of the sacred healing practices can they share? Would these practices work out of context? Is it possible to re-create rituals of healing outside the healers' community? Each healing practice is unique to the individual requiring healing and to the healer.

One of the problems with sharing practices is that indigenous methodologies are not always respected for the integrity inherent in them. Scientific paradigms are often used to deny or refute our time-tested, reliable, valuable, and successful practices. People may not understand the significance and responsibility associated with an invocation to the spirit of a plant, an animal, or an ancestor. When the spirits of the beings respond, if untutored, unapprenticed people are performing the invocation, they may not understand the manner of language, the process, or the practice of communication. They may not understand that a distinct and defined ritual is to take place, or they may not fully understand

the consequences of not carrying out the ceremony or practice properly. Furthermore, they may not fully understand the responsibility, the necessity, or the appropriate methodology to bring closure to the process invoked. Our traditional healers, on the other hand, will be aware of the intricacies of these practices and the contexts in which they could be applied.

It is safe to say that our indigenous healers are interdimensional interceders who carry the responsibility and the directions to intervene on our behalf, with our consent and awareness, to help bring healing, balance, peace, and harmony in the present, with the Ancestors, and for the generations of the future. For the Anishinabe and Embu traditions (respectively, of the authors) and in most Indigenous Peoples' traditions, this responsibility extends for at least seven generations (Cajete, 2000; Dei, Hall, & Rosenberg, 2000; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Wane, 2000). The words of renowned Elder and Carrier First Nation woman Maggie Hodgson (personal communication, 2004)² assure us that reclaiming and maintaining our old ways must continue. "It's known that on a global scale, the First Nations Peoples of Canada are the fastest growing group of peoples doing their healing work, and it's making a difference. And, we are doing it *our way*. This is amazing."

❖ INDIGENOUS WORLDVIEW

There is a communal ideology and unique worldview between and among the Indigenous Peoples of the world. This common thread is inherent in most indigenous cultures despite the severity and sustained duration of the colonial impact or the variance of spiritual practices. In Indigenous Peoples' worldview of societal and cosmological relationships, there is an acute understanding of respect for self, other people, and all of nature, especially the land and the water. This philosophy is the pivotal element of sustainability and balanced harmonious living, grounded in a spiritual relationship to the land. We are taught, shown, and instructed in our responsibility to learn to (re)connect with the land. We are held responsible for the care of the water. It is through this understanding that we are able to support each other with the sacred medicines, ceremonies, and the use of our indigenous methods of traditional counseling.

World Indigenous Peoples manifest a magnificent diversity in sound, size, culture, custom, practice, ritual, ceremony, and domain. However, there is a mysterious and powerful "homophonic rhythm" (Provost-Turchetti, 2002) to the practices and the purpose of the practices we have sustained and maintained since time immemorial. This way of knowing, understanding, and being in the world originates in the simplicity and complexity of our psycho-spiritual-socio,

behaviorist-ecological cosmological worldview (Solomon, 1994) commonly known in North America as the Medicine Wheel philosophy (Gunn Allen, 1986; Solomon, 1990). Indigenous Peoples the world over follow the rhythm of the cosmos with distinct relationships to the sun, moon, stars, animals, plants, sound, wind, water, electrical and vibrational energy, thunder, lightning, rain, all creatures of the land and water, the air, and the rhythm of the land itself. Relationship to the spirit world has been a primary value to tribal people to maintain relationships with our ancestors (Gunn Allen, 1986; Yellow Horse Brave Heart, 1995).

Our foreparents introduced us to the spiritual legacy left to us by their Ancestors. The ancestral teachings provide spiritual guidance embodied in the Creator, the giver of life, harmony, balance, cosmic order, peace, and healing. Our spiritual guidance is also embodied in the Great Mother Earth, spirit and culture giver, who represents truth, balance, harmony, law, and cosmic order (Solomon, 1990; Wane, 2002).

❖ INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES

Our Ancestors have taught that if any of our actions results in disequilibrium, we have to find ways of healing and purifying the environment, our relations, and ourselves (Solomon, 1990; Wane, 2002). This understanding and the teachings that carried the wisdom were and are so valued that the Indigenous Peoples scripted the knowledge within their hearts to be shared with each other and with future generations. In reality, this knowledge is embodied because it is committed to memory. "Memory is recorded literally in the viscera, in the flesh" (Jousse, 2000a, [[p. XX]]). "Knowledge" for Indigenous Peoples means *know*-ing the legend stories. Consequently, one must know the legends completely, to the ends of the stories, or the knowledge is incomplete. When we speak of legends, we are also speaking of what are known as sacred teachings and the mythological foundations of our cultures. We maintain relationships with the cosmos through stories. The stories and memories are held in the bodies of people, the bodies of water, and the bodies of land. Consequently, it is pivotal to know the stories of the land in order to attain healing in the indigenous ways (Solomon, 1990).

It is our responsibility to know, understand, and respect the healing power of the "performed knowledges" (Chamberlain, 2003) used by the traditional teachers, Elders, ceremonialists, and traditional healers. Performed knowledges, therefore, relate to indigenous ways of healing, which are living texts. Our performed knowledges and texts, in orality, exist in three-dimensionality, compared to the two-dimensionality of written knowledge and texts in literacy. The songs, dances, ceremonies, sacred medicines, and traditional languages serve as the

vehicle and tools of the healer. Consequently, it is with certainty and caution that the Elders and spiritual teachers remind us not to write or record the ceremonies: To do so would take the life out of them. We now turn to three of these healers and spiritual teachers with whom we talked.

❖ HEALERS

Terry Swan, a Cree-Saulteaux woman originating from Cold Lake First Nation in Alberta, Canada, who identifies herself as a two-spirited lesbian woman (Gunn Allen, 1986; Roscoe, 1988), was, at 2 years of age, taken away from her single-parent mother and adopted by a Dutch family who came to Canada after World War II. Terry grew up totally immersed in non-Native culture. While living in Nova Scotia, she began, with the help of a Mi'kmaq woman, her search for her birth mother. Eventually, Terry's maternal uncle came forward.

After meeting her uncle, and with the help of other Natives, Terry became acquainted with her traditions. Tom Swan was a medicine man. Terry reports, "After hearing my voice on the telephone, he went into the sweat lodge and put up flags, and he asked the spirits about me." Through the ceremonies, Terry's uncle learned about the kind of difficulties she had experienced. Over the years, Terry came to know herself and many of the sacred teachings. She later committed to follow the path of Native spirituality, because "that's where I get my courage and my strength." Through the development of a relationship with her uncle, Terry inherited a sacred item she uses for personal healing. She goes out onto the land to fast; regularly attends sweat lodge ceremonies; and participates in a variety of other ceremonies, such as the purification ceremony, which is intended to open the mind, heart, and feelings of the individual(s). It is used to symbolically wash the negativity and pain from the body, mind, and spirit of a person and of the room or space. When Terry does her ceremonies with clients, by herself, or with her community, she uses the four sacred medicines of sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco. Each of the medicines can be used in ceremony on its own or in conjunction with any of the others. Frequently, sacred feathers from an eagle or another special bird will also be used while sharing, to remind participants of the sacrifice of the eagle as a special helper to the people.

David Gehue, a Mi'kmaq man from Indian Brook First Nation in Nova Scotia and 1 of 13 siblings, learned of his ability to do healing work at the age of 9. At 17, a wrestling accident with his brother caused total blindness. When he lost his eyesight, it was predicted he was going to do special work and that he had to be blind to do it. Consequently, it is believed the loss of sight served to direct and speed up

his spiritual training. He remembers that as a child he had different privileges and responsibilities than his siblings. He recalls that the “Indian schooling” he got from his grandmothers and grandfathers was valued more than the compulsory mainstream education. He received subtle and specific spiritual training from his grandparents in their traditional language. He also received specific training from other renowned traditional healers. In addition, after he was introduced to the traditional fasting³ ceremony, he went into the sacred sweat lodge every day for 1 year and did many more sacred fasts without consciously knowing why. He acquired an inexplicable, insatiable interest and unquenchable thirst for traditional ceremonies.

One of the foremost pieces of information shared by David was that in spite of his interest in and attendance at ceremonies, he did not begin to practice the specific ceremony he has been given—the shake-tent lodge—until after a period of 11 years. Although he does not speak his traditional language, he still has clear recall and use of the language when doing ceremonies. David’s gift and ability to be an “empath,” also known in the Sioux traditions as a “translator,” informs him on what is happening to others; for example, he has been able to work with people who have been comatose for 3 to 5 years. Through his intervention in ceremony, the people became conscious enough to say their final good-byes.

David is a medicine man. He is a sweat lodge keeper, has X-ray vision, and carries the shake-tent lodge. He is also a certified hypnotist, has the ability to communicate telepathically, and interprets dreams. Each of these gifts and responsibilities can be used independently or together. As a medicine man, David is able to determine the client’s ailment and its cause and advise a remedy. As a shake-tent keeper, he can directly intervene with the spirits and the Creator on behalf of the client(s). Requiring total darkness, the shake-tent lodge is known to be the highest of sacred ceremonies, in which all manner of healing is possible.

Zulu, a woman of African ancestry, is a traditional healer. She explained in her interview that her ability to heal is a gift passed down to her from her grandmother. She can still recall the many times she witnessed her grandmother healing people through touch. Zulu explained that indigenous healing takes different forms depending on each situation. She said that some healers might prescribe a spiritual bath, which is a formal acknowledgment that something needs to be done about your physical, mental, or emotional well-being. She explained, “Beyond the submission in the water and the candles, there has begun a submission for help for oneself. The spiritual bath is not just a beginning for help, but a solution of help.” She continued to explain, “The type of bath taken depends on healing needed. Whether it is bath salts; floral herbs; gem stones; spices; nature items such as rocks, pebbles, sand, or leaves, et cetera, all depended on the healing

needed.” She concluded the interview by stating: “I cannot give you a step by step prescription of what needs to be done because you may apply some of these sacred practices without the respect and integrity passed down by our Ancestors.”

❖ CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The first two healers spoke of their own personal healing as having been the pathway to becoming healers. Both Terry and David have made great personal sacrifices with the understanding that this is simply the route they must follow to fulfill their responsibilities. Zulu has undergone great transformation through not succumbing to the oppression she has experienced growing up in North America.

It is difficult to convey how the transfer of the gifts of these healers might happen, because each of them has been apprenticed in a variety of ways according to ancient traditions. Their apprenticeships have taken place over a number of years and will continue for several years to come. It is atypical within mainstream culture to instruct a person on a life path as a result of listening to a dream. Becoming a traditional healer is not a conscious independent personal decision: It is a responsibility inherited or determined by the community. It is also a gift that is earned. Each culture and society must determine their own healers based on the commitment, sacrifice, skills, abilities, and gifts of the prospective healers. They must also seek to learn the ancient ways of their ancestors. Finally, in closing, we cite the words and wisdom of Maurice Strong, who reminds us of the following: “As we awaken our consciousness that humankind and the rest of nature are inseparably linked, we will need to look to the world’s more than 250 million indigenous peoples” (quoted in Burger, 1990, p. 6) for the sustainability of peace, health, and healing. This does not mean that we have the liberty to appropriate, assimilate, or acculturate ourselves to the ways of Indigenous Peoples: It means we must take individual and collective responsibility for ourselves, each other, the earth, and the universe if we are to sustain life and the universe. The universe is not ours to destroy.

❖ NOTES

1. The term *world Indigenous Peoples*, wherein “Peoples” is capitalized and plural, was adopted by the United Nations after long, hard discussions just prior to the Decade of Indigenous Peoples 1994–2004. We are capitalizing the word *Ancestors* out of respect and reverence for our origins.

2. Elder Maggie Hodgson, former director of Nechi Institute in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, is a Carrier Indian with the notable distinction and recognition of Elder and is one the recipients of the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards.

3. The fasting ceremony can last from 1 to 4 days. It entails abstaining from eating or drinking in order to reach a heightened level of awareness known as “visiting the spirit world,” and it occurs four times a year or once a season.

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