

# Native American Recovery Programmes<sup>1</sup>

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The majority of Native American-led addiction recovery programmes incorporate pan-Native American rituals into the Twelve Step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous. However, this is not without some controversy. Nevertheless, within this context, a distinctly Native concept of wellbeing also emerges, that of living in 'balance'.

## Source of pan-Native American practices

I had previously researched the sharing of pan-Native American rituals among First Nations in Eastern Canada. It is of little surprise that the practices employed in alcohol recovery programmes tend to be pan-Native American as well, namely talking circles, medicine wheels and sweat lodges (more on these later). As a consequence, treatment programmes may be fuelling their popular use more widely.

A prevalent argument found in much of the literature on addiction recovery is that alcoholism among Native Americans is due to the impact and legacy of colonialism, with the article 'The Red Road to Wellness' by clinical psychologist Joseph Gone being a good example of this (2011, p. 189). The choice to employ traditional ceremonies and frameworks may then be part of a wider decolonizing effort to both overcome cultural traumas and reclaim Native American traditions and identities.

The most commonly practised rituals derive from the Plains Indians. *Black Elk Speaks*, the story of a Lakota holy man, originally published in 1932, was reissued in 1972 (with further editions) and became a 'bible' for Native Americans wanting to reconnect with their 'roots' (Deloria 1979, p. xv), even if they were not Lakota. Also in 1972, leaders of the American Indian Movement turned to the Lakota for spiritual guidance. Thus, Lakota cultural practices were shared and popularised among many tribal nations (and beyond) and provided a model for pan-Native American ritual practices employed in recovery programmes. This was before the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act. As Laurence French noted: 'The Sioux traditions of the sacred pipe, purification sweat, vision quest, and the Sun Dance, all once outlawed and their practitioners severely punished, have emerged as treatment and training processes for native healers among both the Plains Indians and pan-Indians' (2000, p. 92).

## Pan-Native American practices

In a **talking circle**, a person can speak when he or she is holding a designated object (often an eagle feather, or a carved stick, usually called a 'talking stick') that is passed around the circle. The others in the circle listen without interrupting. Usually there is no requirement to speak and one can pass the object to the next person. Typically, the object is passed around four times.

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It is a method that is quite wide-spread, also within non-Native groups, and may simply be referred to as a 'sharing circle'.

The **'medicine wheel'** represents the four directions. In contemporary usage, the four quadrants symbolise different areas of life, such as infancy, youth, maturity and old age. It can take any number of concepts, as long as they come in groups of four, which makes it eminently adaptable across different cultures each with their own language and symbols. One administrator at a Canadian treatment centre told Joseph Gone: 'The medicine wheel takes in everything that we know, have known, and can accommodate what is to be known.' (2011, p. 194). In the treatment centre the medicine wheel's four quadrants were linked to four aspects of human experience, the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. The therapeutic project, according to Joseph Gone, 'was to promote client awareness of all four aspects of the self and to facilitate the pursuit of balance among these facets of experience through healthier lifestyle choices' (2011, p. 194). However, it incorporates a Western notion of the 'self' as a project to be developed in the four areas of life represented by the four quadrants of the medicine wheel. This works against traditional, communal ideas of self.

The **sweat lodge ceremony**, as it is known, involves bringing in heated stones and pouring water on them to create steam. There are usually four 'rounds', which, like the medicine wheel, represent four ages and areas of life, providing the focus of prayers, but otherwise is mainly a purification ceremony that can occur at the start of other ceremonies. Many centres include the sweat lodge ceremony as a part of the treatment programme.

There is room for more tribal-specific content and Christopher Ringwald gives an example of an Alcoholics Anonymous group in Minnesota where residents 'learned to drum and chanted Ojibwe songs from a tribal elder' (2002, p. 84). 'Rather than being strictly tribal or sectarian, the rites and rituals are portable and adaptable, say practitioners.' One said, "When I go to a Sioux sweat lodge, they ask me to call to my own Ojibwe ancestors" (in Ringwald 2002, p. 89).

## **Community**

Referring to a treatment centre, one client told Joseph Gone: 'This is where I started my healing journey. And this is where I practiced my Native culture... It's a good feeling when you're starting to find your identity. To have that sense of belonging...' (2011, p. 192). Gone noted that lecture topics included both Aboriginal cultural orientation (e.g., a medicine wheel, community values, residential schools) and mainstream 'life skills' instruction (e.g., alcohol and drugs, self-esteem, communication skills)' (2011, p. 191). Additionally, there was an effort to serve the local community: 'program counsellors were involved in sponsoring cultural activities for the community' (2011, p. 193).

Several places employed full-time traditional leaders who facilitated additional cultural activities. As a result, client encounters with Native culture and tradition were routine—even though full participation was strictly optional. Some clients had never participated in these activities prior to their time in the program (Gone 2011, p. 193). Another significant dimension of Native-led recovery programmes are the roles played by Elders from the local community.

The importance of community cannot be overstated as personal healing is always in relation to others. This is illustrated by the sweat lodge ceremony. When Lakota and many others enter the lodge, they say ‘all my relations’, acknowledging that healing requires co-operation from others (not all of whom are human). Native-led programmes often make ‘community’ central to their philosophy, such as ones run by White Bison, a successful Native American charitable organisation founded in 1988 based in Colorado Springs. In their statement, they say they believe that ‘change comes from within the individual, the family and the community.’ The ‘solution resides within each community.’ ‘Interconnectedness—it takes everyone to heal the community’. At a Canadian First Nations treatment centre, Joseph Gone was told that ‘program staff also hosted cultural activities for the community, including powwow dances, pipe ceremonies, and an annual fasting camp. Although clients were always encouraged to participate, staff strove to engage community members at large in these activities as part of a collective healing process’, adding that confidentiality about being on the programme was not an issue for clients as it was not easy to keep it a secret anyway in such a close-knit community (Gone 2011, p. 192).

### **Adaptations to Twelve Step**

Looking at Native American adaptations of the Twelve Step programme in more detail, it is usual to find an alteration to both the format and wording. Regarding the format, Laurence French states that ‘sessions are usually circular and incorporate elements of the medicine wheel, purification sweat, and sacred pipe as healing devices’ (2000, p. 89). French describes the standard version of Alcoholics Anonymous as ‘rooted in the protestant ethic’, while the ‘values of harmony ethos’, emphasising group cooperation and respect for nature, are attributed to Native American cultures (2000, p. 4, 89).

As an example, French contrasts so-called Western attitudes with Native American ones, such as ‘Competition’ with ‘Cooperation’; ‘Ownership’ with ‘Sharing’; ‘Honor self’ with ‘Honor elders’; ‘Verbalism’ with ‘Silence’ and ‘Individualism’ with ‘Tribal values’ (2000, p. 89). The wording of the Steps has been changed to reflect these values. Where Step 11 in the standard AA version states: ‘Seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out’; in the Native American version, according to French, it states (my emphasis, to show alteration): ‘Seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with *the Equality and Brotherhood of all Mother Earth’s children and the Great Balancing Harmony of the Total Universe.*’ (p. 90). The concept of ‘balance’ is central.

### **Controversies**

Integrations of Twelve Step and similar models into Native American cultures have led to some concerns by scholars and members of Native communities. Not only are these Native-derived practices absorbing the language and values of ‘therapy culture’, treatment centres are effectively institutionalizing them (Gone 2011, p. 193).

Joseph Gone also points out that part of the treatment is to ‘verbalise’ one’s pain. ‘More specifically, cathartic self-expression was expected to inaugurate a process of searching reflexivity and self-examination that could sustain positive and ongoing transformations of the self.’ (2011, p. 195). Since the ‘self becomes a ‘therapeutic project’, “working on’ oneself, one’s ‘issues’, or one’s life was emblematic of the healing journey that signified a lifelong process of introspection, transformation, and fulfilment’ (Gone 2011, p. 196). Referring to the view that Native Americans value silence over verbalism, Gone heard that it was often challenging to get clients to talk, and ‘the difficulties associated with eliciting therapeutic talk from clients was attributed in part to enduring community norms that devalued or proscribed such verbal self-expression’ (2011, p. 196). Thus, ‘healing discourse among staff and clients was... seen to depend heavily (but implicitly) on more familiar aspects of mainstream ‘therapy culture’” (Gone 2011, p. 197). In other words, Native American practices have been subverted to suit the mainstream therapy agenda. Treatment programmes, in effect, are engaged in a universalising appropriation of Native American cultural practices.

Another tension Christopher Ringwald highlights is that ‘Some Native Americans worry that their spiritual practices will be distorted even among their own people due to ignorance’ because many clients are unfamiliar with their culture’s traditions (2002, p. 101). They would not easily recognise how a cultural practice has been modified; however, all such practices have undergone continuous change and are adapted to each circumstance. ‘Will practicing ceremonies outside their original context or locale lead to misuse or even mutation?’ asks Ringwald (2002, p. 102). In answer, I would say there are no ‘pure’ practices. However, the debate over perceived misuse is more complex and connected to wider issues of appropriation.

## **Balance and Wellbeing**

One concept articulated frequently among Native American and First Nations healing discourse is that of ‘balance’. This is apparent in many Ojibwe accounts. Herb Nabigon’s, *The Hollow Tree*, an autobiographical account of his road to recovery, from a First Nations perspective, which is peppered with conceptions of balance. In his introduction, he says: ‘Our society can balance itself if more emphasis is placed upon spirituality in our everyday lives, for without spirituality we will perish. We will perish if we continue to over-emphasize the rational and logical sides of life, forgetting the need for balance’ (Nabigon 2006, p. xvii). The tool he uses ‘on a daily basis’ is a Cree version of the medicine wheel ‘to maintain balance in my life,’ he says (2006, p. 43).

An aspect of the Plains Indian medicine wheel teaching picked up by those in recovery is the ‘red road’. The wheel has within it a cross representing the two axes, the black and the red. The black ‘road’ is thought to represent difficulties and imbalance, at least in therapy discourse (it is also associated with power), while the red represents growth and balance. As Nabigon learned: ‘The people who walk the red road attempt to balance their lives between goodness and fear’ (2006, p. 47).

The idea of balance is often linked to conceptions of wellbeing, stemming from different linguistic terms to mean the ‘good life’ or similar. According to Manitowabi and Shawande,

'the Anishinabek of Manitoulin Island have no single concept of 'health' or 'wellbeing'. The closest term is *mnaamodzawin*, meaning a 'good, holistic way of life' (Manitowabi and Shawande 2011, p. 443; see also Hallowell 2002, p. 44). In Hallowell's highly regarded study of Ojibwe (or Anishinaabe) ontology, originally published in 1960, he relates the conception of 'wellbeing' to having 'balance' involving reciprocal relationships with others, including non-human persons (animals, stones, *etc.*). 'One of the prime values of Ojibwe culture is exemplified by the great stress laid upon sharing what one has with others. A balance, a sense of proportion must be maintained in all interpersonal relations and activities' (Hallowell 2002, pp. 45–46).

Manitowabi and Shawande also noted that 'balance' was a recurring word expressed by participants in their study at an Ojibwe health centre (2011, p. 452): 'Interviewees spoke about balance as key to wellbeing and healing, and the need to nurture one's body spirit... Clients stated that healing is tied to balance which suggests that imbalance is linked to a state of unhealthiness' (2011, pp. 453–54). In summary, they state that: 'In essence, wellbeing means a balanced way of life. If an imbalance occurs one must return to a state of equilibrium leading to a long healthy life' (2011, p. 454).

Many of these statements explicitly include the need for harmonious relations with non-human persons, including 'nature' and animals. This proposes a view that wellbeing is not personal, but collective, because what one does individually affects the wellbeing of others.

## References

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