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# Perspectives on Wellness: Journeys on the Red Road

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Wellness is a topic currently receiving considerable attention in Native American communities and among service providers who work with indigenous people. Through many professional programs and grassroots efforts strides have been made in shifting from a deficit focus to one of resilience and strength. However, substantially less has been written from a strengths or wellness perspective. Much of the positive work that has been conducted for years has never been reported in the literature and goes unnoticed by all but those directly involved. The literature on Native Americans includes primarily discussions of social and health problems including poverty, violence and alcoholism. This volume reports the efforts of professionals and Native American communities to restore balance and wellness in indigenous nations, thus, giving readers an opportunity to learn about Native issues from a perspective not often reflected in the literature, that of resilience. Even issues commonly thought of as only approachable from a deficit perspective such as suicide and gambling can have wellness dimensions, as explored by the authors of the articles contained here. We invite the reader to consider the topics in this volume from a fresh angle.

In the dominant society, wellness is often associated with prevention of illness or disease. This Westernized perspective based on a medical model of health is a more narrow conceptualization of wellness than that embraced by First Nations communities. The idea of wellness as discussed in this volume is a holistic concept that encompasses all aspects of individuals and communities including physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Balance

among these different dimensions promotes both prevention and healing.

The path to wellness in indigenous communities is often referred to as the Red Road; a journey and way to well-being that First Nations people must travel in order to be truly well and healthy human beings. The Lakota traditionally embrace the Red Road, a holistic philosophy that integrates health-related phenomena in an inclusive, circular path of living and dying (Kavanaugh, Absalom, Beil, & Schliessmann, 1999). Likewise, the philosophy of the Red Road is embraced by many indigenous people from all nations as the proper way to live according to the traditional instructions received by Native people. For many, it is seen as the only way that Native people will continue to exist as nations, communities, and human beings, distinct from other surrounding cultures. The concept of the Red Road is so prominent in contemporary indigenous thought that it has been the subject of books, articles, conferences, workshops, and compact disks. Likewise, the resurgence of commitment to wellness across Indian country can be seen in the inception of magazines such as *Wellbriety* and *Well Nations*.

### Defining Wellness and Balance

Balance, wholeness, integrity: these are just some of the terms associated with wellness in First Nations/Native American communities. Because the concept of wellness is multifaceted and complex it is difficult to define. On the other hand, wellness is something that is simple, natural, and when understood, needs no words to define it.

Although there is tremendous diversity among the indigenous peoples of North America, most have a concept of balance as integral to well-being. Wellness consists of a balance and symmetry among different parts of a whole. The Medicine Wheel, a concept central to the cultures of many Native Nations, illustrates the importance of balance for wellness. While the Medicine Wheel has many different levels of meaning, its basic elements are a circle divided into quadrants. The quadrants are usually depicted in red, black, yellow, and white. There are many different layers of symbology associated with the different parts of the

wheel. For example, the quadrants are associated with different spirit beings, the four directions (North, East, South, and West), different stages of life, different races of people, different aspects within individuals, and different roles that people play within their communities.

Wellness is a holistic concept, as illustrated by the different elements of the medicine wheel. All areas must be in balance and harmony for true wellness to exist. A problem in one area upsets the balance and affects other areas. Wholeness or integrity of individuals, families, communities, and nations are all facets of wellness. Wellness and spirituality are inseparable. In the traditional belief system of the Muscogee people (also known as the Creek)

Wellness is harmony of the body, mind, and spirit; illness is disharmony in one or more areas . . . To the Muscogee (Creek), humans are threefold- body, mind, and spirit. The mind is the link between the body, or physical world, and the spirit. While the mind and body are ephemeral, the spirit is eternal. It existed before coming into the body and continues to exist after the body dies. To maintain wellness, one must have harmony in all three areas (Wing, Crow, & Thompson, 1995, p. 57).

The Muscogee conceptualization of wellness is closely related to the traditional teachings I received as a Lakota woman that tell me I must have balance in my mind, body, spirit, and heart in order to be a well and complete human being. Among other First Nations groups the elements of wellness may be defined somewhat differently; however, the basic concept is constant. Similar ideas about balance between complementary elements such as hot and cold, and male and female, are also found in many Asian cultures.

Wellness reinforces and is reinforced by a sense of cultural identity. Far too often, indigenous people have been and continue to be defined by others. When you are defined by external entities, it is disempowering, demoralizing, and often devastating to your sense of self. It is crucial to the well-being of Native communities that we retain the ability to define and name ourselves.

For centuries, many of the names used for First Nations people were names applied to them by others. These names often have

negative connotations. Frequently during westward expansion, European explorers used indigenous scouts to guide their travels. When they came to an unfamiliar community the explorers often asked their guides to identify the people there. The scouts, sometimes from communities hostile towards the groups in question, often identified them by derogatory terms, and these names have remained in use. For example, the term Apache means enemy. Other names, given by European explorers, were not specifically derogatory like the French terms Nez Perce and Coeur d' Alene, but still were not the true names of these First Nations people. Many First Nations communities are seizing the opportunity to return to the names they historically used for themselves rather than the names given them by others. Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota people emerge from the imposed label Sioux, the Dine' reclaim their name rather than calling themselves Navajo, the Ho Chunk reject the term Winnebago. The list goes on and on. While not all indigenous people choose to return to traditional names, this is a trend followed by many.

The right to choose the label that you use to refer to yourself is empowering. In the spirit of this important principle, readers will find no attempt to standardize the names used throughout this volume to refer to indigenous people. First Nations, indigenous, aboriginal, American Indian, Indian, Native American, and Native are all terms that have been used to refer to the original inhabitants of North America and their descendants. Many people have strong opinions about which term or terms are preferable but none are "right", per se. It is the opinion of this author and co-editor that to place restrictions on other authors or worse, to edit their choice of terms after the fact to conform to some artificial ideal, would be a violation of the integrity of their work and would be anathema to the spirit of wellness.

### Wellness in Historical and Contemporary Times

Many authors and researchers in the helping professions have spoken eloquently on the social problems in First Nations communities. Often the disruption caused by colonization and the resulting massive historical trauma are viewed as the root cause of contemporary dysfunction. Some even go so far as to suggest

that prior to European contact, indigenous societies had a Utopian existence where balance, harmony, and wellness were the norm.

People in all First Nations communities received original instructions from the Creator that guide them in living their lives in balance. While each community probably had periods in which these instructions were followed more fully, thus leading to balance and wellness, traditional teachings of many First Nations also tell of periods of dysfunction and massive troubles. It is often in these dismal times that new teachers and visionaries come to guide the people to renewed states of wellness.

During the last century there are many clear examples of alternating periods of bleakness and renewal in First Nations communities. The beginning of the 20th century is often cited as the nadir of First Nations communities: the population was at its lowest ever, vast amounts of land were being lost under the federal policy of allotment, cultural knowledge and traditions experienced growing threats from boarding schools. By the 1930s the situation began to improve as allotment was stopped and indigenous populations expanded. Threats increased again in the 1950s as the federal government advanced policies of terminating indigenous nations and relocating Native Americans to urban areas.

As activism rose in the late 1960s and into the 1970s the federal government began to promote policies of indigenous self-determination, the boarding schools began to close, and the Indian Child Welfare Act was passed to protect the future of Native children and nations. This time, however, was still marred by substantial conflict such as the violence on Pine Ridge reservation that led to deaths of both Whites and indigenous people and the incarceration of activist Leonard Peltier. Additionally, this era saw the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, a particularly devastating piece of legislation that dissolved the indigenous nations of Alaska and created corporations thereby turning approximately 44 million acres of indigenous land and the natural resources on it into U.S. assets.

By the 1990s previous gains became threatened as the Supreme Court ruled against religious freedom for members of the Native American Church and New Age exploitation of sacred traditions grew. The current President of the United States,

George W. Bush has publicly stated that he does not recognize any sovereignty for indigenous nations.

Clearly, contemporary times once again raise the need for Native people to seek a restored balance and respond to continued threats to their existence. Leaders are arising from various groups of indigenous people. Chiefs, Clan Mothers, members of Tribal Councils, and other political leaders seek culturally viable forms of economic development that can restore wellness in Native communities. Social workers, nurses, and other helping professionals are working to develop interventions and programs that will help individuals and families to restore balance torn asunder by substance abuse, violence, and loss of traditions. Spiritual leaders are remembering and reinstating traditional ceremonies and teaching the youth so our traditional ways will not be lost. First Nations schools work to incorporate indigenous values and languages as integral parts of education. Indeed, there are many people throughout Indian Country that work to promote wellness. While all would agree that this renaissance does not mean that we have achieved or reinstated a Utopian balance, nevertheless, the direction toward wellness is a positive one.

In many First Nations communities, traditional ways of healing have gone underground, rather than vanishing. The Sun Dance, a sacred tradition of nations of the Great Plains, is necessary for the renewal and well-being of these First Nations communities. Although outlawed for almost a century beginning in the 1880s, it continued to be practiced in secret for the well-being of indigenous people. Indigenous ways of doing things are often still vital and practical. Traditional health practices focus on reintegration of basic aspects of personhood as well as restoring balance, harmony, and coherence (Buchwald, Beals, & Manson, 2000). Many Native people pursue wellness through traditional healing and spiritual practices. It is not uncommon for Native people to seek help from traditional and professional sources simultaneously in their quest for wellness (Buchwald, et al., 2000; Novins, Duclos, Martin, Jewett, and Manson, 1999).

Much must be done to assist Native people to restore balance in their lives and communities. While Native youth are clearly the hope for the future, many are filled with self-doubt and know little of their cultures to sustain them. As one Native youth noted,

the materialism they see all around them leads many Native teens to lose their balance (Hairy Chin, Jr., 2001). Another Native youth, an Ojibwe, currently a junior in high school, eloquently speaks of the pain of growing up in a community filled with addiction.

I know the pain of seeing family die because of overdoses or their bodies shutting down on them because they have been drunk too long. It impacts me, no, it scares me to see that these people want help but are too weak to go out and get it- that these people are slaves to something that isn't theirs to begin with. Alcohol isn't the "Red Way." It is the way to killing yourself slowly, painfully. I have seen this happen. I have also seen the children following in their parents' footsteps, saying one thing, then believing another. Lying to themselves, cheating themselves out of a future because all they know is what their parents showed them (Isham, 2001, 7).

The pain that permeates this statement reminds us that we have a long way to go in our quest for wellness. Striving for wellness and balance is the only way to survive the struggles found in many contemporary First Nations communities.

With the events of September, 11, 2001, the whole world seems to be spinning horribly out of control. In the wake of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, talk of war and violence and threats against Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. escalate. This is a time we all need to strive for wellness and balance. In the Lakota philosophy, the phrase *mitakuye oyasin* emphasizes that we are all related. The well-being of one group of people necessarily influences the well-being of others. The medicine wheel teaches us that all kinds of people, red, yellow, black, and brown, are needed to have a world that is in balance.

Some groups of people have been given special responsibility for the well-being of the world. Hopi teachings say that they must continue their ceremonies or the world will end. Conversely, their special role in praying for the well-being of all of us gives the world hope. First Nations people, while still members of their own communities and citizens of their own nations, are also members of the world community. First Nations iron workers, particularly from Mohawk communities, use their specialized skills to remove twisted steel from the rubble of the World Trade Center that they were instrumental in building. This is a time



when we all need to strive for wellness. For many Native people, striving for wellness means returning to traditional teachings and traveling down the Red Road.

### A Journey to Wellness Down the Red Road

Wellness is a holistic concept that includes connections among various aspects of a whole. Connections exist across generations including ancestors and people yet to be born. The sacred and secular are two parts on a unified whole.

Perhaps the best indication of the significance of wellness and the future of Native people can be heard in the voices of First Nations youth. They are the ones that hold the future in their hands and they are the ones that face the current struggles and day-to-day choices of whether or not to live their lives according to centuries of traditional teachings, to make choices that place them entirely in the world of the dominant society, or to try to find balance as a traditional person in a contemporary world. These issues of balance and wellness are articulated clearly by Duane Meat, an Anishinaabe and Southern Arapaho youth. At the time he wrote his reflections he was a senior in an Eastern private preparatory school planning to attend Harvard University in the fall of 2001.

I strive to walk the Red Road everyday, trying not to be too bad or too good. It is harmful for someone to burden the spirit with malevolence or conceit. Everyday, before I go to breakfast, I walk outside into the cool morning air, and pray to the Creator. My elders say that we must respect life because everything in this world contains a life force. They say to put out tobacco every morning in appreciation for each new day, for those things that gave their spirits to the next world for our survival, and for the gifts that the Great Spirit has given each of us.

When I grasp the shreds of tobacco in my hand, the scent involves images of my ancestors sitting upon the ground in a circle, laughing and talking.

When I am so far away from home, I like to remember the elders conversing in Ojibwe, discussing our values, telling stories or giving encouragement. Usually, they must translate into English for me, but just the sound of my language fills me with pride. My elders say words are sacred. Every word we speak reaches the ears of the

Great Mystery and our ancestors. They watch over us, helping us through the tough times if we are willing to listen (Meat, 2001, 3).

### Writing about Wellness: An Overview

For many, writing about wellness is a description of a personal journey. Native people have many stories of resilience, difficult compromises, and survival against great odds. For me and many of my contemporaries, we recognize that we have survived as Native people because of the strength and sacrifices of our ancestors and elders. While many people look at Native communities and see poverty, overcrowded living conditions, or houses without electricity and running water, we know that this is not the sum of these communities. A closer look, in many cases, will reveal a core of cultural values and knowledge that continues to be passed through the generations. Even in the midst of many problems, the seeds of wellness remain fertile and are ready to be nurtured.

The authors in this journal present the readers with their perspectives on a variety of topics. Examining Native American issues from a wellness perspective gives readers an opportunity to look at these topics in a new light. At the heart of indigenous issues are the traditional values and cultures of First Nations people. Woods, Blaine, and Francisco examine traditional culture as a foundation for wellness. They also discuss the importance of incorporating indigenous values in tribal social services. Their exploration of cultural issues with the Tohono O'odham gives us a view of an indigenous population not often discussed in the social science literature.

Two articles explore wellness from the vantage of Native youth. The educational system, historically used by the federal government as a venue for assimilation and cultural destruction, is presented by Waller, Okamoto, Hibbeler, Hibbeler, McIntyre, McAllen-Walker, and Hankerson as a medium with the potential to foster cultural resilience and strength. This article depicts part of a growing trend; educational experiences that are grounded in indigenous cultural values. The article by Skye also examines how wellness and resilience can be fostered in indigenous youth. His article is an example of the sort of grassroots effort that is present in many First Nations communities but less commonly draws the

attention of professionals. This gives the reader a glimpse into a type of wellness activity that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Graham examines a mainstream tool designed to assess suicidal youth and analyzes its applicability to Native populations. This type of critical analysis deserves much more attention. All too often Western measures and models are applied to non-Western populations without questioning whether they are valid, reliable, or useful. This article examines the specific issue of Native suicide from a resilience perspective of identifying reasons for living.

Krech takes an important step in examining issues of Native American men from a wellness perspective. This is a good beginning to truly understanding the diversity within indigenous populations. Although the social science literature on indigenous people consistently notes the diversity among First Nations cultures, it is rare that authors do more than make note of this. In fact, not only do indigenous people differ by tribe or nation, they also differ in other key ways such as class, sexual orientation, and gender.

Napoli approaches a particularly controversial topic from a wellness perspective. Gambling on reservations is a heated issue for both Native Americans and non-Natives. When the topic arises, many people associate it with vice, addiction, and violence. This article presents the other side of the story. Some First Nations communities have made substantial profits from gambling that have been channeled in positive directions to support the wellness of indigenous communities and their members. Readers are challenged to understand an alternative view of this highly controversial topic.

The authors approach wellness from a variety of perspectives. They come to their topics as practitioners and academics; Natives and non-Natives. What they have in common is a focus on wellness and experience working with First Nations people. This volume represents perspectives on the current state of wellness in Indian Country. Clearly, we have a long way to go to reach the balance and wholeness described in the traditional teachings of the various First Nations, yet we still have teachings and teachers that can help us find our way on the Red Road. In contemporary times, a variety of helping professionals are also posted at intersections and can help us to make U-turns when we find we are

going in the wrong direction. The authors in this volume present snapshots of travels along or in search of the Red Road. The reader is now invited to join us on this journey to wellness.

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