Native American Medicine

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As part of this ongoing series, I have reviewed diverse healing approaches, none of which has been more intriguing yet initially alien to my Western-trained scientific mind than Native-American medicine. As a scientist who uses physical laws to further dissect the microcosm, it was challenging to metaphorically absorb the spiritual, cosmological, and ecological views of the macrocosm that shape Native-American healing.

In The Way of the Scout: A Native American Path to Finding Spiritual Meaning in a Physical World (1995), Tom Brown, Jr. describes how when he was a child an Apache elder taught him to use an “expanded focus,” where the task (i.e., any of life’s pursuits) is but a small part of the whole picture. When we relax an absolute focus, we become more aware of life’s flow around us, and, as a result, assistance in many unanticipated forms becomes available.

For most of us who view the world through the conditioning of Western thought, an expanded focus fosters a greater understanding of Native-American wisdom. In my case, as I relaxed the rigidity of my scientific beliefs, an understanding grew that complemented - not negated - these beliefs. (photo: The author next to a petroglyph of “Thunderbird,” a mythological being who speaks in thunder and lightening and teaches us how to use its power to heal.

Contributions:

Throughout our nation’s history, Native-American societal contributions have been immense but often unrecognized. A few examples include Benjamin Franklin’s modeling the Articles of Confederation on the Iroquois Nation’s constitution, World War II’s Navajo code breakers, tribal donations of over $200,000 for post-9/11 relief efforts, and, the first servicewoman killed in Iraq being a Hopi Indian.

Such contributions hold true for medicine, also. For example, more than 200 Native-American herbal medicines have been listed at one time or another in the US Pharmacopoeia; many modern drugs have botanical origins in these medicines.

Indigenous Medicine:

Native-American medicine is classified as an indigenous healing tradition. Because 80% of the World’s population cannot afford Western high-tech medicine, indigenous traditions collectively play an important global healthcare role - so much so that the World Health Organization recommended that they be integrated into national healthcare policies and programs.
Although Native-American healing reflects the diversity of the many Native nations or tribes that have inhabited “Turtle Island” (i.e., North America), common themes exist not only between them but with many of the World’s geographically diverse, ancient indigenous traditions.

**Role of Spirit & Connection:**

A major difference between Native-American and conventional medicine concerns the role of spirit and connection. Although spirituality has been a key component of healing through most of mankind’s history, modern medicine eschews it, embracing a mechanistic view of the body fixable pursuant to physical laws of science.

In contrast, Native-American medicine considers spirit, whose life-force manifestation in humans is called, *ni* by the Lakota and *nilch’i* by the Navajo, an inseparable element of healing. Not only is the patient’s spirit important but the spirit of the healer, the patient’s family, community, and environment, and the medicine, itself. More importantly, healing must take in account the dynamics between these spiritual forces as a part of the universal spirit.

Instead of modern medicine’s view of separation that focuses on fixing unique body parts in distinct individuals separate from each other and the environment, Native Americans believe we are all synergistically part of a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts; healing must be consider within this context. Specifically, we are all connected at some level to each other, Mother Earth (i.e., nature), Father Sky, and all of life through the Creator (Iroquois), Great Spirit (Lakota), Great Mystery (Ojibway), or Maker of All Things Above (Crow).

This sense of wholeness and connection is implied by the concluding phrase of healing prayers and chants “All my Relations,” which dedicates these invocations to all physical and spiritual relations that are a part of the Great Spirit. To metaphorically describe our universal connection, the Lakota use the phrase *mitakuye oyasin* – “We are all related,” while Southwest pueblo tribes, who consider corn as a life symbol, state “We are all kernels on the same corncob.”

In *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence* (2000), Dr. Gregory Cajete uses modern science’s *chaos theory* to support the Native-American concept of connection. Sometimes called the “butterfly effect,” this theory postulates that a butterfly’s wing flap may initiate a disturbance that ultimately leads to a hurricane or another phenomenon across the world. Whether it is this flap, a prayer for healing, or one’s stand against oppression, chaos theory, as well as Native American philosophy, implies that everything is related and has an influence no matter how small.

Moreover, we all have “butterfly power” to create from the inherent chaos of our universe, which Cajete describes as “not simply a collection of objects, but rather a dynamic, ever-flowing river of creation inseparable from our own perceptions.”

**Cultural Rebirth:**

Although you cannot appreciate Native-American medicine without its spiritual dynamics, surprisingly, the practice of Native-American spirituality was banned in the land of religious freedom until the 1978 passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. For example, in *Coyote Medicine: Lessons from Native American Healing* (1997), Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona tells how he risked jail for attending an early 1970’s healing ceremony.
Because of this ban, which forbid congregating and keeping sacred objects, much of Native-American healing was driven underground or to extinction. It is the equivalent of telling physicians they can’t practice medicine if they do surgeries or prescribe drugs. Since the prohibition’s lifting, however, world-wide interest in Native-American wisdom has soared, in part, because it is perceived as an antidote to modern society’s soul-depleting and environment-damaging aspects.

**Disability:**

The idea of wholeness is paramount in understanding Native-American perception of disability. Unlike many cultures that shun people with disabilities, Native Americans honor and respect them. They believe that a person weak in body is often blessed by the Creator as being especially strong in mind and spirit. By reducing our emphasis on the physical, which promotes our view of separation from our fellow man and all that is, a greater sense of connection with the whole is created, the ultimate source of strength.

Overall, in treating physical disability, Native-American healers emphasize quality of life, getting more in touch with and honoring inherent gifts, adjusting one’s mindset, and learning new tools. By so doing, the individual’s humanity is optimized.

**Distinguishing Features**

In addition to these overarching philosophical differences, there are many other features that distinguish Native-American from Western medicine. In *Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native American Healing* (2003), selected as the National MS Society Wellness Book of the Year, Kenneth “Bear Hawk” Cohen summarizes some of them in a table (p 307):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WESTERN MEDICINE</th>
<th>NATIVE-AMERICAN MEDICINE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on pathology &amp; curing disease.</td>
<td>Focus on health &amp; healing the person &amp; community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reductionistic: Diseases are biological, &amp; treatment should produce measurable outcomes.</td>
<td>Complex: Diseases do not have a simple explanation, outcomes are not always measurable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adversarial medicine: “How can I destroy the disease?”</td>
<td>Teleological medicine: “What can the disease teach the patient? Is there a message or story in the disease?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigate disease with a “divide-and-conquer” strategy, looking for microscopic cause.</td>
<td>Looks at the “big picture”: the causes &amp; effects of disease in the physical, emotional, environmental, social, &amp; spiritual realms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellect is primary. Medical practice is based on scientific theory.</td>
<td>Intuition is primary. Healing is based on spiritual truths learned from, nature, elders, &amp; spiritual vision.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physician is an authority.</td>
<td>Healer is a health counselor &amp; advisor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fosters dependence on medication, technology, etc.</td>
<td>Empowers patients with confidence, awareness, &amp; tools to help them take charge of their own health.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health history focuses on patient &amp; family: “Did your mother have cancer?”</td>
<td>Health history includes the environment: “Are the salmon in your rivers ill?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intervention should result in rapid cure or management of disease.</td>
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Part 2 will summarize specific Native-American healing modalities and their application to individuals with physical disability.
NATIVE-AMERICAN MEDICINE: PART 2 - HEALING MODALITIES

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Part 1 discussed key characteristics of Native-American medicine. It focused on the paramount role of spirit, including not only in the patient but also the healer, family, community, environment, and medicine, and the dynamics between these forces as a part of the Universal Spirit.

Part 2 summarizes specific healing modalities, some of which can be understood, at least superficially, through conventional biological mechanisms (e.g., herbal remedies) and others that must be understood, once again, within a greater spiritual context.

Basically, the fundamental goal of all Native-American healing is to establish a better spiritual equilibrium between patients and their universe, which, in turn, translates into physical and mental health. [Photo: Rock art (Utah) of medicine person with large eyes and snake spirit helper.]

Medicine is Spirit

Marilyn Youngbird (Arikara and Hidatsa Nations), an international lecturer on native wisdom and former Colorado Commissioner for Indian Affairs, emphasized Spirit’s overriding role to me: “It is difficult for the average American, who thinks medicine is merely swallowing a pill, to understand that medicine does not live outside of us. Medicine is a part of Spirit that exists in, animates, and connects all of us. Spirit is life, and its healing energy is available to us if we learn to know, live, breathe, walk, and speak it.”

Native-American Disability

Eighteenth-century records suggest that paralysis was rare among Native Americans before contact with whites. Today, however, their SCI incidence is two-four times that of whites because they face more of modern society’s injury-aggravating downside (primarily mediated through motor vehicle accidents) combined with the historical suppression of mitigating cultural support systems.

Native Americans traditionally believed that a person weak in body is strong in mind and spirit. According to The Native Americans (2001), such conviction is “related to the all-pervasive regard for differences…the curtailing of some ability, whether physical or mental, was more than compensated for by some special gift at storytelling, herbal cures, tool-making, oratory, or putting people at ease.”
Traditionally, Native Americans thought that many inherited disorders are caused by parents’ unhealthy or immoral behavior (fetal alcohol syndrome would be a good example in today’s world). The Delaware and other tribes believed paralysis results from a patient or parent taboo breach, and the Comanche called it a “ghost sickness” created by negative spirits or sorcery. Because some diseases or disorders are the result of the patient’s behavior, treatment may interfere with important life lessons.

**Healing Approaches**

Because it is difficult to succinctly summarize a subject as involved as Native-American medicine and do it justice, interested readers are encouraged to review *Honoring the Medicine* (2003) by Kenneth “Bear Hawk” Cohen (adopted Cree Nation), selected as the National MS Society Wellness Book of the Year.

**Plants**

Because of Native Americans’ intimate relationship with nature, many therapies emphasize plants’ mind-body-spirit healing potential.

**Herbs:** Native-American herbalism is much more complex than herbs merely serving as a plant matrix to deliver physiologically active chemicals. First, because numerous plant components affect bodily functions and bioavailability, the entire remedy is considered the active agent. Second, because plants are believed to possess spirit and intelligence, they are consulted to determine their best healing relationship with patients, and permission is obtained before and gratitude expressed after harvesting them. Third, intricate procedures are used to harvest herbs, considering factors such as plant part (e.g., flower, stem, root, etc), time or season of harvesting, sun exposure, and much more obscure factors. Fourth, native herbalists use plants that appear in dreams, a form of communication by which the plant’s spirit can guide the healer. Finally, the plant’s healing potential is empowered by ritual ceremony, prayer, song, or chants. Cohen notes that although herbs can treat symptoms without such empowerment, they will not reach the deeper causes of illness.

**Tobacco:** Ironically, the most spiritually powerful plant is tobacco, modern society’s substance of greatest abuse. Tobacco is the herb of prayer, placed on earth by spirits to help us communicate with them and nature. All tobacco use, ranging from ceremonial to cigarettes, should be treated with respect and awareness. Specifically, the famous elder Rolling Thunder (Cherokee) taught Cohen: “After you light tobacco, with your first puff, you should think a good thought or make a prayer. With your second, quiet your mind; rest in stillness. With your third puff, you can receive insight related to your prayer – perhaps an image, words spoken by spirit, or an intuitive feeling.”

**Smudge:** Other sacred plants are used for smudging, a purification procedure in which a plant’s aromatic smoke cleanses an area of negative energies, thoughts, feelings, and spirits. Smudging is a key component of healing prayers and ceremonies. The most commonly used plants are sage (not the food spice) and cedar, which drive out negative energy, and sweetgrass, which invites in positive, healing spirits. Cohen believes that all healers should smudge between clients to prevent the transfer of pathogenic energy. [photo: Cohen smudging from shell]
Prayer, Chants, and Music

Prayer is pervasive in Native-American healing. As reviewed previously in this “Healing Option” series, substantial scientific evidence exists that prayer can affect health. As Cohen notes, Native-American prayer concentrates the mind on healing, promotes health-enhancing emotions and feelings, and connects people to sacred healing forces. In contrast to more familiar whispered prayers, Native Americans robustly proclaim, chant, or sing prayers. Singing is often accompanied by drumming or rattles, which, by synchronizing group consciousness, greatly magnifies healing impact.

Lewis Mehl-Madrona (Cherokee), an emergency-room physician and author of Coyote Medicine (1997), told me that prayer should be incorporated into overall therapy after any major injury: “At the time of acute injury, enroll everyone - patient, family members, friends, doctors, nurses - in a prayer circle with the expectation of the best outcome.”

Therapeutic Touch & Energy Work

Native-American medicine includes many approaches with similarities to today’s alternative bodywork or energy-related techniques, including massage, therapeutic touch, and acupressure-like stimulation of body points.

Counseling

Counseling helps patients find a more health-promoting, mind-body-spirit balance through, for example, developing a better understanding of a life path and purpose or the role that the disease or disorder plays. Because the counseling is based on spiritual wisdom, Cohen likens it more to pastoral counseling than psychotherapy.

Ceremony

Native-American ceremonies incorporate a variety of healing modalities into a ritualized context for seeking spiritual guidance. According to Cohen, one of the ceremony’s chief goals is communicating with the spirit of a disease to gather information that can lead to the release of pathogenic forces.

Mehl-Madrona indicated to me “at one time in their history, all cultures have had beneficial healing ceremonies; unfortunately, most modern, white-culture ceremonies have become so sterile they are not conducive for healing.”

I recently participated in a sweat-lodge ceremony in the traditional Lakota style. It was held in a dome-like structure covered by tarps and heated by pouring water over hot stones (the stone people). Tobacco prayer ties were hung inside, smudging herbs sprinkled on the stones, and sacred pipes ceremonially smoked. Participants prayed, sang, and chanted to obtain guidance, wisdom, and healing not only for themselves but for all who are a part of Mother Earth’s greater unity.
Overall, the sweat-lodge’s mind-body-spirit-purification, communion-with-spirit process helps people understand who they are, especially relative to any disease or disorder. With such empowering understanding, you start reclaiming responsibility for and taking charge of your own soul rather than relinquishing its direction to healthcare authorities.

Because the sweat lodge is totally dark except for the faint glow of hot stones, no one has a disability in the ceremony; everyone is an equal participant. The ceremony can target underlying emotional causes of substance abuse, a problem that plagues many with SCI. It can also promote healing at different levels by generating forgiveness, releasing bitterness, and busting apart the self-fulfilling belief pattern that is imprinted onto most patients after injury that they will never walk again. (Because the sweat lodge is, indeed, hot, it is not recommended for those with higher level, sweat-inhibiting injuries.)

Based on Native-American values and beliefs, Mehl-Madrona developed a ceremony-emphasizing program that targets non-natives with chronic disease or disorders. In the professional journal Alternative Therapies (January 1999), Mehl-Madrona reported that more than 80% of program enrollees accrued significant, persistent benefits.

**A Case Study:**

The following case study illustrates many of the previously discussed approaches. Specifically, Cohen used Si Si Wiss healing - an intertribal tradition from the Puget Sound area - to restore ambulatory function in Jon, an Icelandic man with multiple sclerosis (MS). Due to chronic knee pain, Jon could not place his full weight on his left leg and could only walk short distances using a walker. (see American Indian Healing in the Land of Fire and Ice posted on www.wholistichealingresearch.com).

Cohen believes that location played a key role in Jon’s healing. Native Americans believe that certain geographical locations possess strong healing energy (among Christians, the most well-known such site is Lourdes, France). Cohen was lecturing near Iceland’s Snæfellsnes Glacier, a legendary Nordic sacred area that author Jules Verne chose for his intrepid explorers to start their descent in Journey to the Center of the Earth.

From his audience, Cohen recruited participants for a healing circle that surrounded Jon and instructed them to sing a healing song to a drum beat.

Cohen relates: “I cleansed Jon with a smudge of local bearberry leaves and juniper. As I waved the smoke around his body with my hands, I also imagined that Grandmother Ocean (within view) was purifying him. I then placed my hands on Jon’s spine, one palm at his sacrum, the other above his seventh cervical vertebrae. I rested my palms there for a few minutes, to both "read" the energy in his spine and to focus healing and loving power.”

“I then held his knee lightly between my two palms, focusing with the same intent. After this, I did non-contact treatment, primarily over Jon’s head, focusing on the brain itself. I held my hands a few inches from his skull, one hand in front, one in back, then one hand to the left, one to the right. I continued, holding my
palms above his spine, moving them gently up from the sacrum towards the crown and then down the front mid-line of his body."

As I continued with non-contact treatment, I prayed in a soft voice, yet loud enough for Jon to hear me, and with a tone, rhythm, and intensity that harmonized with the sound of the background singing and drumming. … "Oh Creator, I ask for healing for this brother. Let him learn his lessons through your guidance and wisdom, not through pain. I pray that whether this condition was caused by inner or outside forces, whether originating from this time or any time in the past, whether intentionally caused by offended people or spirits or caused by chance-- let the pain and disability be lifted and released in a good and natural way."

At the ceremony’s end, “I helped him to stand and was about to move his walker over to him, when he said, "No, wait a moment. I feel something." He began to walk without assistance, slowly but with an apparently normal gait. He showed no sign of unsteadiness and was able to use his left leg easily. I walked along side of Jon, expecting him to lose balance and fall. Instead, he turned towards me, embraced me and said, tearfully, "Thank God! It's a miracle. I can walk!"

Residents of Jon’s village, who had known him for many years, later expressed their amazement to Cohen of seeing Jon walking about town normally.

Cohen’s treatment included therapeutic energy work. As such, it should be noted that his ability to transfer electromagnetic energy through intention, with and without direct touch, has been documented in rigorous experiments at the prestigious Menninger Clinic, Kansas. Because of his reputation, many of his patients have, in fact, been referred to him by physicians.

**Conclusion:**

The study of Native-American and other indigenous healing traditions is important because they have greatly influenced modern medicine in spite of major philosophical differences; collectively still play a huge global healthcare role; and offer solutions to modern society’s ailments that our spiritually-bereft science cannot.

Native Americans believe their actions must consider the welfare of the seventh generation to come. Perhaps this is why their ancient wisdom is not just intriguing anthropological residuum pushed aside by Western civilization but re-emerging in relevance to the present generation.

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