

Introduction to the Wisdom of the Elders

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It is a great pleasure to be here at the launch of this journal devoted to Traditional Healing and Wellbeing, and of this section devoted to *Wisdom of the Elders*. We all have an intuitive shared understanding of what we mean by ‘elders,’ but there is a wide range of possible meanings of the term ‘wisdom’; are people referring to personal maturity, an elusive interaction between personality and intelligence, or simply one of a small set of culturally-constructed character types? Perhaps Powell (1901) said it best by considering wisdom the science of instruction about what is most valuable to learn, when instruction is considered broadly enough to include therapeutic spiritual healing—healing that inevitably relates to cultural meanings, necessarily incorporating philosophical and religious meanings about the proximal and ultimate nature of human life in society and the cosmos. No matter how we choose to define it, wisdom certainly spans, or is at least open to, alternative worldviews and their understanding of how to heal people who are suffering, as well as how to support effectively the researchers who have devoted their lives to studying these approaches to healing.

Wisdom is always sought after, elusive, and rare, something we will try to capture with two very different kinds of contribution to this section: (1) we will invite short pieces of about 1500 words from senior scholars in the field asking them to reflect on their careers and the lessons learned about alternative healing, mental health, and how to study this, and (2) we will include original commented interviews with healers themselves. Our hope is that the wisdom of elders in the field can help guide and improve the quality of interviews made with alternative healers so as to augment their impact and relevance for current practice in Western contexts, as well as to give a clearer voice to their understanding and vision of what is needed for effective healing. We also hope they will raise an awareness of issues that are rarely considered, but obviously important to those elders who have

long worked on these questions; for example, Vontress in his piece identifies cross-cultural ethics as an important topic that is rarely, if ever, addressed. We are off to a very strong start with the collection of articles we have for this section in our inaugural issue.

Joseph E. Trimble (*Connecting to the Spiritual and the Sacred through the Straight Path*) describes how healing involves a transition toward ever greater “meaning, balance, wholeness, and connectedness,” key elements with deep roots in healing traditions and practices of many traditional shamans and healers. Focusing especially on North American First Nations like the Navajo, Trimble reminds us of the importance of harmony and staying on the ‘straight path’ to living the best life, and advocates restoring these as a core aim of healing—a view more consonant and therefore more helpful to indigenous people than many modern therapy methods that do not align with their worldview. He reminds us that the value of spirituality in healing has been widely documented and is increasingly acknowledged in psychological and psychiatric practices underpinning Western approaches to healing. He suggests that we must go beyond the narrow bounds of impersonal empirical science and urges us to consider dissenting voices about the best ways of human life and thought from other ethnocultural traditions that are becoming increasingly respected as we enter a new century/millennium in which the limitations of Western approaches are becoming apparent.

In a very similar vein, **Clemmont E. Vontress** (*Traditional Healing Research in West Africa*) recounts how his experiences in Africa showed him the limits and inappropriateness of interview techniques he had learned in North America. Although the traditional healing methods that he encountered may seem exotic to Western readers, he points out that it is the only health care available to about 80% of the people in Africa; to understand such healing one must understand the animistic world view of people who use it, in which—as for North American aboriginals—a general spirit permeates and unites all things, in life and even in death. Known by different names, these approaches often use the same understandings, tools, and techniques for healing (e.g., communication with departed elders, touch therapy, advice, herbal remedies, shock therapy, music, drumming, fetishes, and tea made from sacred ingredients); blending these approaches with Western medicine is not always an obvious task: Concerns about ‘cultural authenticity’ are of paramount concern

(to be professionally ethical, these techniques must be used holistically, and with deep understanding of their cultural significance, and some traditional healing practices may be forbidden by law of professional guidelines). Cross-cultural ethics thus become an important topic, even if it is rarely directly addressed.

Uwe P. Gielen (*Healers and Counselors in Buddhist Ladakh*) explores in detail one example of a cultural context for healing from a career that spans 35 years, describing work he has done with indigenous Buddhist healers in the Northwestern Leh District of Ladakh, India—a region now undergoing rapid and stressful cultural changes. Gielen gives a fascinating account of the environmental and cultural ecology for their practices, the hierarchy of traditional healers we find within it, and how they position themselves vis-à-vis Western trained doctors now entering the region. It is remarkable to read that most Ladakhis, being pragmatically-minded, shop around among a variety of advisors-healers until they find the one most helpful for them, even if these healers themselves have very different (perhaps irreconcilable) worldviews. And while Gielen welcomes empirical research about these healers, he predicts that general factors involved in effective psychotherapy are probably the same worldwide, using the example of a young wife experiencing serious tensions with her new mother-in-law. Like Vontress, Gielen acknowledges that it is not entirely obvious how best to meaningfully integrate psychology into these beneficial traditional practices.

Finally, **Suman Fernando** (*Some Thoughts and Reflections on Therapy and Healing Across Cultures*) recalls his experience as a psychiatrist in and around London over the past half century, from his training in ‘mental hospitals,’ to his work in a London hospital, and—after deinstitutionalization became prevalent—as part of a multi-disciplinary team offering community-based service through a district hospital serving London. He decries the medicalization of healing that sometimes ‘loses the plot’ by focusing on technological fixes rather than of personal recovery and healing. Originally from Sri Lanka, Fernando reflects on the striking differences between understanding of ‘mental health’ and ‘mental illness’ he encountered in that country and in the West—a difference that sometimes compromised care for immigrants from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean now residing in the UK, as a result of culturally inappropriate categories applied to their experience of illness. This

was brought home for him by his return to Sri Lanka, as part of a research team from 2007-2012, where he noticed that Western terms for mental illness were now much more commonly used by locals than they had been in the 1950s, but with a very different meaning, often still tied to spirituality and healing rather than to something requiring biological intervention to fix.

In addition to these reflections by leading scholars, wise in their understanding and potential to orient and lead the field, we also include an interview by **Hyeyong Bang** with a South-Korean Buddhist healer about wisdom, karma, and their relation to healing. We hope that this section provides a space where both scholars and healers can be heard.

Reference

- Powell, J.W. (1901). Sophiology, or the science of activities designed to give instruction. *American Anthropologist*, (n.s.) 3, 51-79.