

## **Connecting to the Spiritual and the Sacred through the Straight Path: Advancing the Helping Professions through Connections with Indigenous Nations**

Joseph E. Trimble

*Center for Cross-Cultural Research, Department of Psychology, Western Washington University*

When I saw the cover of the book authored by the clinical psychologist Richard Katz (1999) titled, *The Straight Path of the Spirit: Ancestral Wisdom and Healing Traditions in Fiji* lying on the floor of a local bookstore, I was quickly drawn to it; the book must have fallen on the floor before I walked down the slender aisle in search of another book. Maybe it was waiting for me and somehow or other ‘mysteriously knew’ that I would follow the path to it. I knew of Richard Katz’s passion and interest in traditional healing through his earlier work, titled *Boiling Energy: Community healing among the Kalabari Kung*, published in 1982. In his first and subsequent books, Richard explains and elaborates on his firm belief that healing is a process of transition towards meaning, balance, wholeness, and connectedness and that these key elements are deeply rooted in the healing traditions and practices of countless traditional shamans and healers.

In the opening chapter of ‘The Straight Path,’ Richard leads us into the book with a brief conversation with the Fijian healer, Ratu Noa’ who said,

*Sometimes our story must be told by one of us—from the inside; sometimes by one of you—from the outside. Today our story must be told by someone like you. And I’m happy about that because you know our story. You look like one of them, but you’re really one of us.* (Katz, 1999, p. 3)

In his writings, Richard repeatedly points that traveling along the straight path requires constant struggle and vigilance. The journey is not a clear and linear process but rather one filled with ambiguity, confusion, and temptation, sometimes leading to wrong turns on the

way to understanding. Specific behaviors may be necessary to travel a straight stay. The path is a way of being and not so much an exact guide for the way that life should be lived. Critical to this way of being are fundamental values and attitudes needed to find and stay on the path, typically including respect, humility, love, sharing, and service (Katz, 1983, pp. 6-7).

Belief in the 'straight path,' a way of living the ideal life espoused by Fijians, is a lifeway common to numerous indigenous cultures worldwide. In North America, the Dine (Navajo) emphasize harmony and beauty in relationships and connections with others and nature, while for the Lakota, one can choose to follow the Red Road or the Black Road, each of which presents unique challenges for the proper way to live (Mohatt & Eagle Elk, 2000); for the Inupiat Inuit, 'ahregah,' or 'well-being,' is a state of being in which one experiences a healthy body, inner harmony, and "a good feeling within" oneself (Reimer, 1999, p. 6); and for the Anishinabe, the Seven Council Fires of Life mark significant transitions through life.

Numerous North American Indians and Native mental health practitioners and scholars maintain that Native American Indians believe that individuals choose their state of wellness. If one stays in harmony with all that embraces them, follows all the tribal and sacred laws, one's spirit will be strong, and thus negativity will be unable to influence it. If harmony is broken, the spiritual self is weakened and one becomes vulnerable to physical illness, mental and /or emotional upsets, and the disharmony projected by others. The 'path' or 'way of living' provides the individual with traditionally grounded directions and guidelines for living a life free of emotional turmoil, confusion, animosity, unhappiness, poor health, and conflict-ridden interpersonal and intergroup relations.

American Indian and Alaska Native tribes and villages developed and maintained sophisticated and elaborate systems or collections of principles, beliefs, or practices that have guided individuals along the straight path. Healing practices were also well established to assist individuals who strayed from the straight path. Shaman or healers were delegated or inherited by birthright the responsibility to conduct healing ceremonies, and healing traditions were handed down from one generation to the next following highly regulated rites of transmission and passage. Healing practices as well as the specifics concerning the 'ways of living' no doubt varied

considerably from one tribe or village to another. Moreover, many of these practices likely changed over the centuries through exchanges of practices, rituals, and ceremonies generated by contact with other groups and new insights gained by healers through personal and spiritual experiences. Traditional 'ways of living' continue to be endorsed and practiced by most North American Indians and Alaska Natives, although some vary considerably from the ways they were practiced and carried out centuries ago.

For modern observers to assume or claim that mental health healing practices are new to Indians and Natives would be presumptuous. In one form or another, healing those who stray from the straight path has always been a part of the holistic fabric of the lifeways and thought ways of indigenous peoples. Most American Indians and Alaska Natives know something about contemporary versions of these practices. However, not all Indians or Natives choose or have the opportunity to participate in them, owing to a number of factors, including orthodox religious convictions marked by conformity to doctrines or practices held as right or true by some authority, standard, or tradition; geographic distance of traditional healers from their home villages or communities; distrust of traditional healers and their practices; lack of access to traditional healers, especially in urban settings; lack of awareness of the presence and effectiveness of traditional practices; and confusion concerning the choice between traditional healing and use of mental health counselors and clinicians. Certainly, the reasons vary from one individual to another. For those who choose not to seek the services of traditional healers, the only available alternative is to seek the assistance of professionals in the conventional mental health fields; that choice, too, can be compounded by numerous factors, including distrust, misunderstanding, apprehension, and the real possibility that mental health practitioners may be insensitive to the cultural backgrounds, worldviews, and historical experiences of Indian and Native clients. The main issues for these clients are concerns that their 'presenting problems' may be distorted by the results of psychological tests that are incongruent with their cultural worldviews and that professionals may arrive at clinical diagnoses grounded in psychological theories that do not value and consider culturally unique perspectives.

Distortions of everyday human situations are frequent in interpersonal exchanges; however, when such exchanges take place between unfamiliar people from differing cultural backgrounds, distortions can intensify and result in erroneous judgments and generalizations. For many Indian and Native clients, interpersonal and interethnic problems can emerge when counselors' lack of experience and knowledge, deeply held stereotypes, unwitting racist attitudes, and preconceived notions interfere with the counseling relationship and thwart counseling effectiveness. Yet there is ample evidence that by using person centered empathic techniques, counselors can promote client trust and improve the counselor-client relationship, both in general and with American Indian and Alaska Native clients.

Recognition and interest in the traditional healing beliefs and ways of American Indian and Native people is increasing in the mental health fields (Gone, 2016). Not long ago, my life-long interest in spirituality was sparked by the contents of the January 2003 edition of the *American Psychologist* that was devoted in part to spirituality, religion, and health. Attention also should be given to the highly stimulating and insightful work of the Nobel laureate physicist and mathematician and physicist at Northeastern University, Albert-Laszlo Barabasi—in his best-selling 2002 book, *Linked*, where he takes the reader on an exciting journey describing how everything is connected to everything else. And then there is the extraordinary survey research findings of Edward Canda and his colleague, Elizabeth Smith (Canda & Smith, 2001). In 1999, the researchers surveyed members of the National Association of Social Workers and found that 71% of respondents work to support their clients' search for spiritual meaning and purpose in their lives; 63% assist clients in creating their own religious and spiritual rituals to support their treatment; and 15% reported incorporated physical touch in their healing practice.

Psychology and psychiatry are at the edge of a cultural revolution in the way we view fundamental and conventional philosophies of knowledge. Empiricism, the hypothetical-deductive method of investigation and the tenets of the 'scientific method' are being challenged and questioned. Emerging knowledge grounded in a multitude of the lifeways and thought ways of ethnocultural groups form the basis of the challenges and the dissenting voices.

Challenges emanating from the mental health and helping communities in general illustrate the political influence and power that holds sway over challenges to epistemology and research empires crafted by those who continue to believe that psychology must emulate the methods of the physical sciences to achieve credibility. Ethnocultural and gender based cognitive, behavioral, perceptual, and affective compartments conflict with the findings of the dominating Euro-American ethnocentric bias.

As the flow of ethnocultural knowledge increases and findings continue to challenge psychological traditions, a glimmer of light—an opening enshrouded in a misty blue haze—has been exposed and is ever widening. Scientific colonialism and its long-standing traditions in the helping professions are under assault. Proponents are digging deeper trenches to staunchly defend a perspective and a method that has gone unchallenged in any significantly way in the last century. With the first light of the new millennium upon us small knowledge gains have given ethnocultural and gender perspectives increased credibility. Along with the victories, identities are being reified and strengthened. What many acquired through legends and ceremonies are being validated. The revolution continues as it spires upward to greater heights as represented in the growth of multicultural, indigenous, ethnic, cross-cultural, and cultural psychology.

The greatest challenge though comes from our passionate convictions about spirituality and the sacred—a formidable challenge that can no longer be viewed as ‘fodder for mysticism’ in the humanities. Spirituality and the sacred is an intimate and integral part of all of us and our communities—a ‘boiling energy.’ Ethnocultural groups have been picked at, excluded from the flow of academic discussions, prodded, surveyed, saturated with questionnaires and interview probes, deceived, and ignored. Through most psychological and psychiatric studies, the academy has all but ignored spirituality, the very foundation upon which all ethnocultural lifeways and thought ways are connected.

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