

HEALING THE NATIVE AMERICAN WAY: AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK PAUL

By Lucille Wood-Trost, Ph.D.
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He is a Native American man dressed impeccably in grey slacks, blue shirt and dark brown V-neck sweater. There is a dignity and strong presence about him even as he stands silently away from others. This is Patrick Paul, trainer for alcohol and drug counselors all over the Pacific Northwest.

The group falls silent as Patrick moves into the center of the semicircle of chairs. He holds an eagle feather in his hands, and in a soft yet strong voice explains the process of the sage cleansing ceremony. As Patrick then moves slowly about the circle, he carries a large shell of smoldering sage and fans it with the feather. Each person “washes” with the smoke as a purification.

The sage ceremony is followed by a traditional talking circle. This is a time of sharing from the heart as a rock passes from person to person.

It is only after both of the ceremonies have been completed that the more factual training begins, which includes insights of traditional Native American spirituality. Under Patrick’s guidance, the

training and healing of counselors—Indian or non-Indian—encompasses the mind, the body and the spirit.

The Native American philosophy and spirituality of Patrick Paul emphasizes a oneness and respect for all living things. It encourages a looking inward for causes of problems to heal them from the inside out. It also stresses an acceptance of self and others as spiritual beings learning and growing through life experiences. To Patrick Paul, the Great Spirit is always present and available for guidance and help in the healing process.

Patrick is a Canadian Indian of Cree and Kootenai descent. He spent many years of his life drinking heavily. He also spent time living a rough life on the streets of Seattle. He was in his 30’s when he finally accepted his problem, ceased drinking and focused upon the spiritual truths of his rich heritage. Shortly after this, he returned to school and quickly completed his B.A. and M.A.

Patrick has worked for the Seattle Indian Health Board and done training for the Northwest Indian Training Institute. He was Special Population Coordinator of the National Institute of Drug Abuse.

In the last few years, Patrick has expanded his work into more distant geographic areas. He recently has done trainings in Arizona, Alaska, and North Carolina. His plans include writing a definitive work on Indian alcoholism, working with indigenous peoples of other countries, and expanding into retreats and workshops for non-Indians who want to share in the traditional wisdom of his Native American tribes.

I spoke with Patrick in 1992 when he was still a professor at Northwest Indian College in Bellingham, Washington.

If you could summarize how Indian alcoholism is different from non-Indian alcoholism, what would you say?

We talk about generational grief. The Native American people lost a great deal with the coming of the Europeans. Our ways of life were taken away. We grieve those losses as a people, and healing that grief is part of the recovery from alcoholism.

What were some of those losses?

Families were broken up by sending the children into residential schools. There our language was taken away. Language is so important. When you take it away, you take a lot of the culture. Evidences of our spiritual beliefs were punished or ignored. For example, hair has a spiritual significance to Native American people, yet our children's hair was cut.

We weren't allowed to do our traditional Indian ceremonies. We weren't allowed to do our sweat lodges. We weren't allowed to do our sun dances. We weren't allowed to worship in our meaningful ways. It wasn't until President Carter signed the Indian Freedom of Religion Act that we were able to go back to our traditional ways.

The result is that we now have generations of people who have lost their identity and lost their ways. There have been generations of people getting stuck in that deep hurt and that pain of loss without the cultural ways of letting it go again. This is generational grief.

You said loss of language is loss of the culture. That's a fascinating idea.

Language is so important to people. We may need to get back to our language in order to let go of those generations of pain. An example of this might be a boy who went to a boarding school and lost his native language but gained a lot of pain in that process. Now he hasn't got a way to express that pain in the language of his childhood so he can let it go. That person may have to go back to the tribal language in order to do that.

When you are talking about generations that didn't grow up on the native tongue, are you saying that on a deep level, the language links to an archetypical experience that has been passed

on through the generations even though they no longer have the words to connect it?

That's right. Of course not all Indian people have lost their language, but for them there are other types of cultural losses. I'm just speaking of language as one way of trying to overcome that generational grief. I think other peoples have done it. The Jewish people are an example. A lot of bad things happened to them but they were able to go through the grief process. They did it through their own rituals and in their own language.

Patrick, I've attended your classes and know that ritual, sharing, and traditional Native American spiritual concepts are an important part of what you give to others. I gather it is an important part of your own life as well.

Yes. My native heritage is rich with ceremonies and symbols which help people to acknowledge and celebrate the transitions of life. A big part of my sense of wholeness and continuity comes from my knowledge and use of ritual.

I've enjoyed reading your paper on the Medicine Wheel. In it you talk about how it plays a daily role in your life. Is it possible to give a short definition of this very complex concept?

The Medicine Wheel is also called The Sacred Circle of Life. It is perhaps an abstract of many cycles: the cycle of life, of creation, of seasons, directions, events, one's life, growth, development. Basically it encompasses everything and it includes the concept of the wheel being in constant motion in space and time.

How do you use such an abstract concept in daily practical ways?

To keep the Medicine Wheel of myself whole, it is necessary for me to examine my health and physical self. Next I examine my psychological self. Then I consider the social/cultural part of me. This includes the balance I have regarding my family life, my work life, my school life, my cultural practices, and my social or fun life. Each must be health and balanced both in itself and with the others. Then the last, but certainly not the least, is my spiritual self. In leading an holistic life, I must examine all of the above on a daily basis. The trick is to consciously keep the circle in balance as I develop. My elders tell me that my journey through

this life will be a good one if I practice the concepts of the Medicine Wheel. I believe this is true.

What is the meaning of the word medicine as you are using it?

The concept of medicine means good. Anything can be medicine. You can be medicine and I can be medicine and the food that we eat can be medicine. The talking together can be medicine. Even bad things that happen can be medicine because everything is good in relation to the whole picture. This goes on for generations. You and I are just one small part of this Medicine Wheel of life.

How does the Medicine Wheel help you in your work with others?

These ceremonies which I perform with others are medicine: the medicine of expression and sharing. Also the Medicine Wheel gives a sense of perspective. No matter what the people in my groups are feeling or doing, I realize this is a part of the journey. I tell them, "You can allow yourself to stay there in that pain or you can continue your journey." This is what we call the black road and the red road. The black road represents the pain and the hurt, and the red road represents the good parts of life.

Are the black road and the red road always available?

They're interchangeable. That is again part of the Medicine Wheel concept. The black road could be the painful side but at the same time the black road is good for you. It enables you to have introspection. It's not good for you if you stay there too long.

How long is too long?

For me it was 32 years of my life. Today I can look back and say, "Well, it was a great learning experience." But when you're in it, you wonder whether it's worth it to stay in this pain or whether you want to leave this world. By the grace of my Higher Power, I was able to get out of that and on to the red road which is a good good road, a happy road, a wonderful place to be. But that's unbalanced too if you stay there. You have to go back and forth. I have to go onto the black road every once in a while to keep that balance.

When would you decide to do that? If, for example, you are feeling happy and good today, why would you choose to move onto the black road?

It's not my choice. I might be moved into that black road and I'd stay there until there's some resolution.

So it would be something painful coming into your life that would move you onto the black road?

Yes. It could be a small painful situation. It could be a big painful situation. It could be something like getting stuck in an airport for the day. Maybe I'd have to learn patience. This would give me time to contemplate who I am, what I'm doing and why I'm here. Last winter, for example, I was pulling out of Round Lake in British Columbia when I got a flat tire. The wind chill factor was 35 below zero and I had to start using some skills I never would have had to use otherwise.

Would you describe the traditional Indian rituals and concepts you use in your classes?

My groups are always arranged in a circle. I begin by talking about the meaning of that. The circle is a metaphor for equality. It means we've got no leaders here. Then I tell the people that we're gathered here to do some work together and that we have to start in a good Indian way. I like to start with a cleansing ceremony.

For this I burn sage in a shell and I fan the smoke with an eagle feather. I say to the group, "I will move around the circle to each of you. As I do this, you will symbolize the cleansing of the negative things that prevent you from healing and being together with us in good ways. Do this by using the smoke to wash your hands or your face and brush yourself."

When this is done, I bring the elements back to the center. Then I ask people to hold hands and either I'll say a prayer or I'll ask somebody else beforehand to say a prayer. We pray about being here. We pray about being kind to each other and we pray about being in this circle and being together. Once the prayer is said, we all sit down.

After this I give them the rules of the talking circle. "Don't leave. Listen. Have patience. Don't interrupt. Only the person with the rock can talk. Wait until it's your turn with the element."

In the circle, I use the element of a rock. It is my talking rock. Some people use the eagle feather. Other people use a talking stick. I start by handing the rock to someone. I say, "Make an expression. Any kind of expression you want." It gets very powerful. People start to get into their feelings. The circle and the ceremony seem to give people permission to do this. It's a very spiritual thing.

You are using the word elements. What does that mean?

The elements are the living creatures of the earth. Everything is alive. This rock is a living element. So is this flower and that tree over there. We've got all kinds of elements around us right here. You just have to be aware that those elements are alive and around you and use those elements.

How would you use them?

I could talk with them just like I'm talking to you. In that way I am connecting to the Earth. I am connecting to the Great Spirit. I can use the element to bring myself to that connection and to talk about the pain and the hurt that I am going through.

Is it correct to say that when you are burning the sage or holding the rock you are feeling this oneness with the Great Spirit and it is opening a door to the communication? Is it right to say it's a way of praying?

Prayer is a good word. As human beings we are spiritual beings who need to understand the connectedness and interrelatedness of all things in the universe.

We are spiritual beings having a human experience?

Yes, and that can be painful and hard at times. The elements and the ceremonies help me continue to have a thankfulness—a gratefulness—in my heart no matter what is taking place. As you are doing a ritual you are showing respect as you give respect to the elements. This is an important part.

So respect is a very important part of spirituality in all of the ways you use the rituals?

Yes. Respect of the Great Spirit, of yourself and others, and all living things.

Do all of the elements have the same meaning?

No. The different elements have different meanings. The eagle feather has the properties of strength and wisdom. So does the rock, and it also has the property of ages. It's been around for a long long time so it knows. It's also strong and it can absorb. As I being the talking circle I tell people that this rock can carry their pain, and when we're finished I will cleanse this rock with my sage so that the pain and hurt will go away. It's another metaphor for releasing the pain the hurt, and basically that's what ceremonies and rituals do.

What are some of the other ways you help people release the pain?

I can brush. I'll say, "Sing your song in your tongue. Start singing your pain out and in the meantime I'm going to have a glass of water and I'm going to be brushing the pain from you and putting it in this glass of water. Later I want you to take this glass of water and do something good with it like go out and water the plants."

Would you give an example of a specific case where you used this?

There was a woman who was having recurring dreams about a person who had died. The problem was that she couldn't let this person go because she hadn't grieved fully. If this woman was to grieve about this dead person in the old way, she would go through the process of cutting her hair. She would go through the process of burning the clothes. She would go through a process of crying and praying and singing. What we did was condense an old grieving ritual. I told them, "We're going to do the songs. We're going to do the prayers. We're going to do the actions. We're going to use the elements. And we're going to get that grief into this little glass of water and then we're going to do something positive with it.

It sounds like your classes are a powerful putting together of both healing people personally and the intellectual material of being trained as a drug and alcohol counselor.

It's all experiential. The experience that they're going through is an empowerment experience. You see everybody has to work. Everybody has to participate. Everybody has to be on the team and that's part of the class. It's part of what we learn. It's learning the respect for each other. It's the working together. They have the permission now to take risks—to take the initiative—to make mistakes and go ahead and do what they need to do. The bonding and the caring of the group is there and they know it. It's the first time for some people that they've really known, "I can make a mistake and no one's going to laugh at me. No one is going to ridicule me. It's okay to make mistakes and I can learn from these mistakes." It's life transforming. It's a spiritual happening.

Do you end your classes in any special way?

Sometimes I do a hugging circle. I call it my Circle of Two Hugs because the people have to go around and hug and then they stand while the people follow them and hug them so they have to hug and be hugged twice. I'm careful about using that one, however. It can be upsetting to people who have been sexually abused as children.

How can Body, Mind, & Spirit readers use some of what we've been discussing in their own lives to help deal with the anguish of alcoholism and hard road of recovery? For example, if I were in the process of recovery and I couldn't go to your classes, how could I use what we've been talking about to help myself?

One way would be to focus on the respect and the oneness and connectedness of all living things.

Are you saying that if you truly respect anything—as for example your child or the beauty of a sunset—you can no longer abuse yourself with alcohol because they are part of this whole of which you also are a part?

Yes. That is it. And it is important for people to realize they always have the choice of whether or not to stay stuck in the pain of the black road or to face into that pain and do the healing required to move onto the red road and continue the journey. We need to remember we are always spiritual beings no matter what emotion we may be feeling.

What about some of the rituals we have discussed? Are there ways people can use these for themselves even if they are not Native American?

The rituals are symbolizations. They are metaphors. All of the things I have said can be used by individuals or by groups as ways of transforming pain into the good feelings and understandings of life. I can use the element of water myself. I can take that glass and I can sing my pain and I can brush myself and put it into the glass. Then I can use it to water the plant on my porch. Or if you are feeling caught in the struggle and pain of recovery and you are feeling alone, you can find an element—maybe a rock in your yard that speaks to you, or you can take a flower in your hand—and with these things you can remember and feel your connection to the Great Spirit. You can talk through them to the Great Spirit so you are no longer alone and you gain the understandings you need. We can all do these sorts of thing anywhere and anytime. They are always available. We are never alone. No matter how much pain we may feel, there is always that help, and these simple elements of the Earth help us to remember that.

Patrick, would you talk about your childhood and your tribal background?

My dad was Cree. He didn't speak very good English, or learn to read or write. What I learned from my father was a lot of the Indian ways.

My mother went to residential schools. She's Kootenai. When I was a child I was able to speak both Cree and Kootenai. My mother and father separated when I was 10. She dragged me along to Vancouver but she was drinking so heavily that I was taken away and put into a foster home. I stayed there until I was 15, then I ran away to see my sister. When I got to Calgary, I found out my sister was dead.

My sister's death was a big shock to me. She was near and dear to my heart. I'd run away to find her and now she was gone. I felt a lot of pain. I also felt abandoned and angry but I didn't deal with those feelings for a long, long time. Later I went through the traditional rituals and cleansing to let that go. That was an important part of my recovery.

You speak of being in recovery from drug and alcohol addiction yourself, yet I also know you have a long history of creating treatment programs. How do these two fit together?

My professional involvement began while I was still in the stages of chronic addiction. A couple of drinking friends and I put together a halfway recovery house. I guess the Great Spirit spoke to us and said, "Do it," and we didn't know we were supposed to be sober before we did it. But we started a house that's still going today.

Did you sober up shortly after that?

About a year and a half later.

How did you get from chronic drinking to where you are now?

I went to a treatment center.

You just work up one day and decided to do that?

It wasn't me that decided. It was my Higher Power. I was just following what I was supposed to be doing. I had a contracting firm and was making money. I liked working—renovating places—whenever I was sober enough. But at the same time I was drinking heavily and starting to use heroin and other drugs. Finally I ended up down on the streets. There was one day I was drinking heavily in a little hotel in Seattle. I had all the windows closed and the blinds drawn and the door locked. I was afraid and I didn't know what I was afraid of. It was at that time that I knew I'd better get myself into a treatment program; otherwise I was going to kill myself.

There was a counselor downstairs and I told him, "I want to go to a treatment program." Right away he had me in the van to a center.

How long ago was that?

That was in 1973. Twenty years ago.

You went on with your education then?

I went to a vocational training institute in Renton, Washington. They had a brand new counselor training program there. It was a one-year program in which we worked as a group for six hours every day. During that time I had to look at my issues and myself.

After that year I got a job with the Seattle Indian Health Board. They sent me to the University of Utah for another year. That was through the Western Region Training Center. After that I decided to go on to Evergreen State College and I got my B.A. degree there, then an M.A. at Antioch in Seattle.

Are you still involved with the boards in addition to the college?

Yes. We've had an Indian certification Board since 1978 and we're now very much accepted both regionally and nationally in the non-Indian world.

Where have you trained recently?

This quarter alone, I had 45 people from the Nez Perce reservation in Idaho. I've had 25 people from the Duck Lake Reservation in Owyhee, Nevada. That's a Shoshoni/Paiute group. In addition there have been 30 to 40 people from the Northwest Indian Council training. Last year I trained in Arizona—a special contract with the Navajos and one with the Tohono O'odham tribe. Then we had an Indian Health Service contract to work with about 45 native people going through three or four courses to get themselves ready for certification. They were from many different tribes in the Arizona area.

You trained in Alaska too?

Yes. I did Introduction to Chemical Dependency there. Most recently I've done some work in North Carolina and North Dakota.

So where do you go from here in your work?

I think there is a need to write a book that is a basic course on chemical dependency and Indian people. It would include historical perspectives, what it's like now, what we need to do, what are some of the things we need to look at, the recovery process and many other aspects of the unique problem of Indian chemical dependency.

That's a big project and I am sure it is more than worth the effort. As far as your actual training work is concerned, do you think you will continue that in the same form as it is now?

No. I think I will be turning this over to others more and more. I would like to extend my work into other

countries with the indigenous peoples there. I am also developing workshops and retreats for non-Indians in which to share some of the traditional wisdom of my rich Native American heritage.

Thank you, Patrick for sharing your work and your spiritual concepts. It has been a pleasure talking with you.

Since the time of this interview, Patrick Paul has worked with indigenous peoples in Micronesia, and in other ways is moving toward the actualization of his professional dreams.

Lucy Wood-Trost lives in Bellingham, WA where she teaches and directs the Individualized Studies Program at Northwest Indian College. She has a doctorate in human behavior and has been a psychotherapist. She authored seven books and numerous articles—one an award winner.