

Presentation at the Board Weekend, "Carrying the Message to Native Americans"

My name is Rod, I am a grateful alcoholic. It is my honor and privilege to serve as the Pacific Regional Trustee on the General Service Board.

I have been sober 27 years and been involved in General Service work for about 23 of those years. I am Dineh, a full blooded Navajo, born on the Navajo Reservation, Tuba City, which is in Arizona and is the largest reservation in size and population in the nation; parts of it are in Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. I was raised in northern Utah. I have been asked to share on Carrying the Message to Native Americans. I think that it would be fair to say that this is a topic we know that 10 minutes is simply not enough time for, so I hope that this sharing can begin some thoughtful reflection that could lead to more understanding and hopefully leading to sobriety for Native People and for all people. First some demographics from Working with American Indian/Alaskan Native Clients: Perspectives for Practitioners to start with : There are 555 Federal and State recognized tribes, 208 not recognized; Alcoholism rates 579% greater, Suicide 212% greater, homicide 41% greater than national rates; About 2/3 of native people live off the reservation; The life expectancy is 59 years old; Poverty rate is 3 times the national average; 1/3 of all outpatient visits to Indian Public Health Services were related to substance abuse; and in the top ten leading causes of death, four are directly connected to alcoholism: accidents, cirrhosis, homicides and suicides.

I believe that in fulfilling this responsibility of carrying the message to Native Americans it is helpful to understand as much as possible about the culture, tradition, and history of Native people.

This can be a very challenging undertaking, especially when you consider that there are over 500 tribes on the North American continent. This could mean over 500 different languages, 500 different philosophies and 500 different belief systems, trying to understand all of that can be overwhelming. Perhaps it would be easier to start with beliefs that are common to all Tribes such as their belief in the connection with Mother Earth and that each tribe manifests those beliefs in ceremony and tradition. I have 3 writings that exemplify some of these beliefs in the Mother Earth connection:

First: We should understand well that all things are the works of the Great Spirit. We should know that He is within all things: the trees, the grasses, the rivers, the mountains and all the four legged animals, and the winged peoples; and even more important, we should understand that He is also above all these things and peoples. When we do understand all this deeply in our hearts, then we will fear, and love and know the Great Spirit, and then we will be and act and live as He intends.

Black Elk, Manderson, S. D. The Sacred Pipe

Second: All Things are interrelated and an equal part of the whole, that we are like drops of rain which one day will return to the ocean, that we are like candles lit by the fire of the sun, forever part of it.

- Steve Wall & Harvey Arden 1990 (Wisdom Keepers)

And Third: ...everything on the earth has a purpose, every disease an herb to cure it, and every person a mission. This is the Indian theory of existence.

~Mourning Dove, Salish, 1888-1936

Another important commonality is the literal translation of the names for many tribes. That is, the name of the tribe usually translates to the Human Beings, Us or the People. For instance Dineh means the People and the original name for the Cherokee (tsis tsis tsas) means the Human Beings. This leads to another factor of understanding that may help in carrying the message to Natives: how some cultural beliefs are similar to the principles of AA, such as the way tribes believe in taking care of the safety and welfare of the People, of each tribal member; this is similar to the AA principle and I paraphrase a fellowship of men and women.. Who help other men and women to recover from alcoholism. Many tribal leaders are asked to consider this question when making a decision for their people's future, how will this affect the tribe for the next seven generations? This is similar to the question asked at the GSC, how will this affect the newcomer? How will this affect the future of AA?

I want to remind you about what happened at the board weekend last year during the introductions . I introduced myself in this way I would like to introduce myself the same way when attending a sweat lodge. My name is Rod, I am of the Dineh tribe, I am a full blooded Navajo, My mother is of the Towering Rock clan and my father is of the Edgewater clan. Then I said, this is probably the first time words like this have been spoken in this setting. I chose this way to introduce myself as a way of bringing these two circles together, because I believe both circles are about healing and joy. I want to share with you a reading by Black Elk, a medicine man for the Teton Dakota. He was born in the moon of the Popping Trees (December) 1863.

He was related to the great chief, Crazy Horse, he knew Sitting Bull and was at the Battle of the Little Big Horn. This writing comes from his dictated autobiography in 1931, it is about the importance of the circle and how fundamental it is in Native philosophy. I hope it may help in understanding how profound I believe it is to join these two circles:

You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because, the Power of the World always works in a circle, and everything tries to be round. Everything the Power of the World does is in a circle. The sky is round and I have heard that the Earth is round like a ball and so are the stars. The Wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The Sun comes forth and goes down in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing and always come back to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves. Our tipis were round like the nests of birds and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children.

Another factor to be mindful about are the barriers in Carrying the Message to Native Americans. One of the biggest is the way many Indian people have suffered from discrimination, bias and racism, on an individual basis, from other groups, from the government and from society. Some members of AA may believe that this is an outside issue and yet I believe whatever may get in the way of any newcomer's

sobriety is relevant to our twelfth step work. The painful, tragic history of Indian peoples, some have even called it genocide will need to be considered. It isn't as important whether you believe that or not, what is important is that you are mindful of that history and then hopefully become more empathic and understanding of how that history can affect a Native person now, today; how it can affect their ability to stay sober, let alone sober in AA. The Trail of Tears of the Cherokee, the Long Walk of the Navajos were both forced relocations of these tribes and are symbolic of what all tribes went through as they lost their lands and their way of living. The confiscation of lands sometimes through treaties that some tribal leaders signed under the influence of alcohol resulted in much distrust of this dominant society and contributed to a basic distrust of white people that may have led to the native belief that this is a white man's program and not for Indian people. Imagine your bottoms, remember the fear, frustration, anger, maybe you were suicidal. Now imagine that for a whole race of people, believing that for 3 or 4 centuries. I believe that an understanding and awareness of these issues can be helpful in carrying the message to the Native Americans. I believe it is very important to keep in mind that as we do our 12th step work that respect and honor translate and transcends any language or culture.

In 1999, there was a special Forum in Window Rock, AZ on the Navajo Reservation. I remember there was a Native gentleman who told of his struggles to stay sober and for many years he was unable to.

The medicine man told him that alcoholism is a white man's disease and requires a white man's cure. Years later he came to believe that the medicine man was talking about AA.

I was born on the Navajo Reservation but raised in the Salt Lake City area away from my culture, language and tradition. When I started drinking, and during the whole time I drank, I didn't care about any of that. It wasn't until I started getting sober that I began to think about those things and saw how important they are for me. Many natives have their culture first then AA. I had AA first then my culture and I am still learning. I began to see how devastating alcoholism has been to Indian people and to me personally, this understanding of my culture and tradition has enhanced my sobriety and Alcoholics Anonymous has enhanced my culture and tradition.

I want to end with two readings that show the similar miracle of sobriety for two different people, one a man and one a woman, one Caucasian and one native, one recently and one over 70 years ago.

First: My life is filled with honesty today. ..I am in love and proud to be a Native American. At an AA meeting on an Indian Reservation, I heard the word Sobriety is traditional. I stand at the top of the Sacred Mountain and I listen to the wind. I have a conscious daily contact with my Creator today, and He loves me. From the story, Listening to the Wind Alcoholics Anonymous, pg. 458

Second: I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through. God comes to most men gradually, but His impact on me was sudden and profound. Bill W. Alcoholics Anonymous, pg. 14

My name is Rod and I am an alcoholic, Thank you.