

Journey within another Culture

During the last three and a half centuries, many religious communities have worked with and ministered to Aboriginals in hospitals and other health care facilities. Although this was a time of governmental forced acculturation for them, many Aboriginals became Christians and benefited from western schools and medical services. It appears that First Nations have begun to come full circle. A people who was voiceless in the past is now coming into its own.

Entering a Foreign Culture

In the late 1980s, the Canadian Association for Pastoral Practice and Education (now Canadian Association for Spiritual Care) held a conference at the Empress Hotel in Victoria, B.C. Aboriginals were invited to address gathered participants on issues which would benefit their sick during a hospital stay. Six Aboriginal speakers agreed that, like most people admitted to hospitals, they experience anxiety, alienation and fear because everything is unfamiliar. Add to this the experience of entering a foreign culture that does not understand your culture, customs, values and practices and you have an Aboriginal's experience of a hospital stay.

The Medicine Wheel

In order for non-Aboriginals to understand what Aboriginals need, some cultural elements must be considered and understood. The four directions of the medicine wheel are important to Aboriginal spirituality. While the circumference represents wholeness, North signifies wisdom personified by the buffalo and the color white; South gifts one with innocence signified by the mouse and the color green; East's gift is illumination and it is represented by the color yellow; West gives introspection represented by the bear and the colour black. What does this have to do with hospital stays of Aboriginal people? Direction of beds – these should not face East, the direction of the Morning Star, Christ, who comes to take the soul to its eternal home. Even though a patient might be terminal, chances are they may not. Rather than evoke death, healing and wellness should be called forth.

Life is Communal

For Aboriginal people, life is communal. One is born into family, clan, tribe – one is never alone but part of a larger whole. Bearing this in mind, visits should not be unduly limited. Talk is not necessary but wordless presence is of paramount importance.

At times, simple Aboriginal rituals will be celebrated. All who are present surround the sick person's bed. Each one breathes or gently chews on the invalid's exposed navel, sharing their life-giving spirit, breath and wellness with the sick. For Aboriginals, the navel is the seat of consciousness. Often medicine bags contain a small section of the umbilical cord whereby life and breath were first shared in the mother's womb before and during birth. Visitors share their life-breath with the sick so they may continue to heal and share their life-spirit with others.

Returning to Spirit¹

Throughout Canada "Returning to Spirit," a program for personal healing between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, has been offered since 2001. It is a tripartite process wherein all participants see themselves in need of healing. Residential schools, abuse and other issues may be addressed. The first week grapples with where each one is stuck and unable to heal. The second week has both groups meet separately to review the first week, assess how one

¹ For more information, go to www.returningtospirit.org

listens and receives, so that each may come to conversation open to receive. Aboriginals take the initiative in the third session, approaching non-Aboriginals inviting them to one-on-one intentional conversations. Here there is no blame; all share the truth of their experience to become freed from past hurts so reconciliation might begin and new possibilities arise. Many members of religious communities who worked in residential schools, in hospitals and on reserves have participated in “Returning to Spirit” since they too were scarred by the forced acculturation of which they were wittingly or unwittingly a part. No one could have foreseen or anticipated the devastating and long-lasting results.

A New Future

In the last five years, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission² travelled across Canada to discuss the emotional, physical and mental damage resulting from Canada’s residential schools. At the same time as the Commission was held in B.C., B.C. First Nations were making final adjustments to take over health services on all reserves in the province. Sto:lo Tribal Council Grand Chief Doug Kelly, chairman of the First Nations Health Council, views this as a great departure from colonialism and as real progress. Now a new future stretches out before our Aboriginal brothers and sisters and non-Aboriginal people who were involved in the Residential Schools in Canada.

Questions:

1. If you or your community have been part of the residential school system, lived on a reserve or worked in health care for First Nations people, what was the richness of the experience?
2. Did you ever live within a culture other than your own? What was it like?

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² For more information, go to www.trc.ca.