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Postvention in Action

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Chapter 22

Promoting a Way of Life to Prevent Premature Death

Ojibway First Nation (Anishinaabe) Healing Practices

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Abstract: Indigenous peoples around the world have the highest suicide risk of any culture (or ethnic) identifiable group. It is a young people crisis. This is largely due to colonization and acculturation; this continues with the imposition of nonindigenous suicide prevention programs, including postvention, on indigenous people. This chapter describes Ojibway First Nation (Anishinaabe) healing practices employed with family and community survivors of unnatural premature death(s), a concept that includes suicides. It also presents the Ojibway worldview of postvention which uses concepts of Ojibway healing approaches. Culturally competent care is outlined, illustrated by the deaths of two young men from an Anishinaabe community. Decolonized from Christian dogma, our approach is revealed by rituals and releasing songs acknowledging the young men's lives and preparing them for a spiritual journey. Through the guidance of a Mide (a healer and spiritual leader of the Midewiwin society), the sacred sundown and sunrise rituals and interment practices are presented. The final send off, the memorial feast, is described. It is concluded that much of the rebuilding that needs to be done will occur by enhancing the traditional and cultural Ojibway life. In the words of our Elders: "Creator has given us all that we need to live good lives."

Introduction: Suicide Among Indigenous People

Suicide is a multidimensional event (Shneidman, 1985). Indigenous people around the world have the highest suicide risk of any identifiable culture (or ethnic group) (Hunter & Leenaars, 2002; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). In a special report, *Suicide Among Indigenous Peoples: The Research*, published in the *Archives of Suicide Research*, researchers (Leenaars, EchoHawk, Lester, Leenaars, & Haramic, 2006) presented the first international effort examining the global epidemic. Scholars, indigenous and nonindigenous, reported from the Arctic, Canada, Australia, Greenland, the United States, New Zealand, Brazil, and Siberia. It is a young people crisis. What was also learned is that some communities within these nations have low rates, and most noteworthy, for example, that within Norway, the Sami people have significantly lower rates than the nonindigenous population. International studies found

Since first contact with Europeans, First Nations people have recognized that there were two worldviews or perceptions of reality between themselves and the newcomers to this land. These worldviews consisted of different languages, cultures, beliefs, values, and lifestyles (Ross, 1992). Colonization of First Nations people, which has included residential schools and the child welfare system, resulted in loss of language, culture, teachings, beliefs, lands, and self-determination. All of this has contributed to the progressive disconnection from First Nations worldviews and weakened the ability to cope with tragedy, leaving us, First Nations people, vulnerable to the negative effects of crisis. Moreover, colonization in itself has been a traumatizing experience that has negatively impacted the health of indigenous populations for generations. The ongoing onslaught of assimilating policies and colonial forces has led to the transmission of trauma through generations (Wesley-Equimaux & Smoleski, 2004). Since 1884, Section 141 of the Indian Act prohibited the practices of First Nations ceremonies and rituals. Revision to this section created further restrictions until amendments were made in 1951 to comply with the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Leslie, 2002; United Nations, 1948).

Crisis (or tragedy) often creates increased risk for more crises (Figley, 1985; Meichenbaum, 2012; Ross, 1992; Krug et al., 2002). Trauma, we know, may result in prolonged and pervasive physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual harm. These imbalances may lead to suicide. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), for example, identified a relationship between early childhood trauma experienced in residential schools and higher suicide rates in First Nations communities. It has been postulated that these effects have been passed intergenerationally. In addition, colonization has weakened our positive connections and relationships within family, and community. These losses have also contributed to depleting our capacity to cope with tragedy and loss. A study conducted in 2012 supports these observations (Elias et al., 2012).

Current Western research supports the positive benefits of First Nations knowledge, recognizing that indigenous communities that maintain and support traditional cultural practices, beliefs, values, and self-determination experience less crisis and trauma and cope more effectively with these events (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008; Levy, 1965; Van Winkle & May, 1986; Warren, 1885/1984). In other words, First Nations worldviews appear to increase our capacity to cope with and benefit from *Maazhise*, a reality in all lives, so that trauma and loss occur less, and when they do happen they are less likely to produce enduring harmful effects. Simply put, we learn good things from bad experiences. Ritual follows a structure that allows the whole person – mind, body, and spirit – to adjust to the experience. Today, we refer to this capacity as resilience. Resilience is a multidimensional concept. The well-known Canadian psychologist, Dr. Donald Meichenbaum (2012), no stranger to the study of suicide, defines resilience as “the capacity to adapt successfully in the presence of risk and adversity” (p. 3). Perhaps, the concept of resilience was best captured by Anishinaabe spiritual teacher, Arthur Solomon (1990, p. 24), when he taught:

*My brothers and sisters, this too the vision gave:
Those prisons of soul and mind are fashioned
By cutting off the true knowledge, from the Great Mystery,
And replacing it with mistaken ways of seeing
And understanding that don't belong.
There, my people, is where we start.
We must turn back to the wheel of life agdin
And help it to renew.
I give thanks for the new day.
Kitchi meegwetch.*

In short, traditional indigenous cultures contain the strengths that create the capacity to cope effectively with crisis, trauma, and loss.

Culturally Competent Care

Recent developments in health care have included the promotion of *culturally competent care* (or what is also called *cultural safety*). Culturally competent care is defined as follows: “Cultural safety (or cultural competency) within an indigenous context means that the educators/practitioners/professionals, whether indigenous or not, can communicate competently with a patient in that patient’s social, political, linguistic, economic, and spiritual realms” (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008, p. 4). This concept promotes recognition of the person’s/patient’s/client’s personal worldview and supports providing care that is also consistent with, and respectful of, that worldview. Research into culturally competent care indicates that this approach to care results in improved health outcomes (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008).

Nonaboriginal prevention programs have not been developed with cultural competency or safety. One ongoing onslaught of culturally not competent care has been the imposition of nonaboriginal prevention programs onto our communities (Martin, 2002; Ross, 1992; National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008). It is important to note, in fact, that recent research into suicide prevention gatekeeper programs concludes that there is no evidence that these programs prevent suicide and caution academics and organizations not to overstate the positive impacts of these programs when the evidence is lacking (Wei, Kutcher, & Leblanc, 2015). Also of concern is a relatively recent research finding that nonindigenous suicide prevention assist training with First Nations populations where suicide rates are high, might be contraindicated because of a trend toward increased suicidal ideation among participants who receive this training (Sareen et al., 2013). We believe, like many indigenous people around the world, these nonindigenous programs may even be suicidogenic (causing or promoting suicide), in fact. Considering this outcome, researchers caution against the widespread implementation of these programs with high-risk First Nations communities, until evidence to support safe use is produced (Sareen et al., 2013).

In light of these developments, we propose that additional approaches to suicide postvention with indigenous populations be explored. We offer another approach to suicide postvention, from a First Nations worldview. This perspective presents a *life promotion lens* to replace a suicide prevention viewpoint. Accompanying the life promotion lens is a language that supports this perspective. For example, it is proposed that *suicide* be replaced with *preventing premature unnatural death*. This concept refers to life that ends in advance of its fullest potential and the fact that this early death is contributed to by the individual’s behaviors. By definition, this includes death that occurs as a result of behaviors that fail to protect and promote optimum health or life-promoting conditions (e.g., addictions such as alcoholism, smoking, and overeating). Through this life promotion lens, we also act to encourage relatives of those who die a premature and unnatural death to enhance their connection to life (Connors, 1996; Connors & Maidman, 2001).

The Anishinaabe People

There are 617 First Nations. As of the 2006 census over 1 million Canadians identified themselves as indigenous. Within First Nations, there are more than 50 indigenous languages. Although there is a common holistic worldview that binds indigenous populations together, there

is also great diversity in languages, beliefs, and cultural practices throughout the country. The Anishinaabe people are a group of related First Nations tribes who share languages that have evolved from the Algonquin language. It is believed that these people migrated from the Atlantic coast and separated into distinct tribal groups who inhabited vast territories of central Canada and the United States extending as far west as the Rocky Mountains (Anthony, 2007). The Ojibway (also known as Chippewa) are the largest group of the Anishinaabe peoples and the second largest First Nation in Ontario, next only in number to the Cree Nation. The Algonquin, Odawa, Oji-Cree, and Potawatomi are also branches of the Algonquin language family who are considered Anishinaabe-speaking peoples.

Within the Anishinaabe worldview, the teachings that reinforce a life promotion lens and accompanying behaviors are referred to as the Miikaans teachings. One of the times when these teachings are provided to community members is in a ceremony that is conducted in the wake of premature unnatural deaths. The Miikaans teachings identify that the journey through life consists of many natural transitions during which one's spirit can be tempted to leave life and return to the spirit world. It is the teachings that help individuals to become aware of this possibility and to recognize what steps they and their relatives can take to hold their spirit to life so that they can complete their full life journey.

Send Off

The Anishinaabe *send-off ritual* occurs over 1 calendar year and involves three elements: assisting/encouraging the spirit on its journey to the spirit world, interment of the vessel (body) that has carried the spirit through life's journey, and a final release of the spirit to the spirit world. The ritual follows the Anishinaabe belief that the spirit journeys through life in physical form and that there are three parts to life: prelife, life, and postlife. The spirit is immortal.

Prelife

The spirit has a conversation with the Creator. The content of this conversation is unique to each individual spirit. When the spirit is satisfied that it is prepared for life, it leaves the Creator and enters the human body created for it in its birth mother's womb. The birth is regarded as the doorway into life and is chosen by the spirit.

Life

Birth begins the spirit's physical journey through life. Life is viewed as being made up of seven main physiological changes. Each change brings about a change in perception as the mind adjusts to each physiological change. At each change, an individual may ponder, "Why am I here?" This question is viewed as spiritual, and the individual is questioning the purpose of their life. The seven stages of life teachings state that when an individual takes only what the natural earth offers, they live long enough to see Haley's comet three times (i.e., 150 years: Haley's comet is visible from earth every 75–76 years).

Postlife

Death occurs when the Creator sends an emissary to call the individual home. When an individual spirit leaves the Creator to come to life they receive a spirit name, this is the name that the Creator calls when the life journey is finished. Usually an individual will have a naming

ceremony during life, and if not, a naming ceremony is performed postlife. Knowing one's spirit name is important to the spirit journey. As close to the moment of death as possible the ritual to release the spirit from where the body fell is performed to release the spirit from the vessel to begin the spirit journey.

Obituaries for Anishinaabe and aboriginal people will wish "a safe spirit journey." The spirit remains in life for 4 days, and it is incumbent upon the bereaved to prepare the spirit for the 4-day spirit journey back to the Creator. The ritual generally takes 8–10 days in total. The first four days of the ritual ensures a safe spirit journey.

The Premature Unnatural Deaths

Two young men from an Anishinaabe community who were first cousins and very close friends died premature deaths in a recent year. The 27-year-old succumbed to a drug overdose, and the 30-year-old took his life on the evening of the 27-year-old's interment. At that time, there were statements by the family that the older cousin may have been the last one to see his younger cousin alive. In both events, lives ended suddenly and the deaths were self-inflicted.

In recent years, this community has revived rituals and ceremonies and decolonized from Christian dogmas. The grief process has moved from condemning the method of death to preparing the spirit for its journey back to the spirit world regardless of the manner of death. In the past, Christian dogmas often prevented the conducting of last rites rituals and interment in sacred ground when death occurred by suicide. In both of these instances, the family requested the traditional rituals over Christian burial rites.

Vignette 1: First youth – Male, 27 years

Releasing Song: In a recent year, the 27-year-old man was discovered in the morning, collapsed in a basement recreation room. A family member (a Mide, a healer and spiritual leader of the Midewiwin Society: the Midewiwin are the formalized spiritual teachings of the Anishinaabe.) schooled in rituals was summoned, and songs were sung acknowledging the young man's life and preparing him for his spirit journey.

Consultation With the family: The Midewiwin Mide consulted with the family, asking their input for the 4-day send-off ritual. The community has roots in three Anishinaabe nations: Ojibway, Potawatomi, and Odawa. Families in this community have varying recollections of life rituals. This meeting was held to encourage inclusivity and participation by family and community. The family agreed to follow the process described below. The family was encouraged to allow the grief to be immediate and flow from the nature of each individual.

First Sundown: The Anishinaabe regard men as firekeepers. Men in attendance from the family and community lit a sacred fire to give the spirit a reference point that it soon will be walking away from, towards the west – to the spirit world. A significant number of family and community attended (estimated 50–60 out of a community of 400). Explanation was given that day and night reverse for the departed – our day is now their night, and our night is their day. A song encouraging the spirit to attend a feast in his honor was sung, and a spirit dish was burned (the spirit dish is a small dish of the person's favorite foods prepared by family members and placed in the sacred fire for the spirit to enjoy and feast with living relatives). Attendees feasted and were encouraged to tell good stories about the young man. Men stepped forward volunteering to tend to the fire at all times over the next 4 days.

First Sunrise: A song was sung to encourage the spirit to rest for the day, and tobacco offerings were burned. Immediate family attended. Tobacco is a sacred medicine that when burned is believed to carry our prayers to the Creator as the smoke rises.

Second Sundown: Similar to the first night, a feast was prepared, a spirit dish was offered, and good stories were encouraged. Newcomers to the ritual exhibited deep grief and in turn were consoled by participants who had attended the night before.

Second Sunrise: A song was sung to encourage the spirit to rest for the day, and tobacco offerings were burned. Immediate family attended.

Third Sundown: A feast was prepared, a spirit dish was offered, and good stories were encouraged. Again, newcomers were consoled by those who had attended previously. The mood changed as participants understood that the young man's spirit was preparing to leave this plane and embark on his spirit journey. There was now a sense of purpose among the participants.

Third Sunrise: A song was sung to encourage the spirit to rest for the day, and tobacco offerings were burned.

Fourth Sundown: This night the family gathered in a circle preparing to share a feast with their beloved for the last time in this part of the send-off ritual. Community members in attendance prepared plates of food for family members, demonstrating the community's caring for the family during this time of grief. A spirit dish was prepared and offered to the fire to feast the spirit of the departed. Participants in this feast were encouraged to forgive past transgressions done by the departed and petition for forgiveness from the departed if they had hurt the departed in the past. This "final forgiveness" ritual released the departed from any remaining obligations to this life. The departed were given instructions by the Mide. This prepared the spirit of the departed for the 4-day journey to the spirit realm.

Fourth Sunrise: Final songs were sung at the fire, final tobacco and prayers were offered to the sacred fire, and the fire was built up one last time. The fire was allowed to die out naturally.

Fifth Day – Interment: A great many friends and community joined the family in the interment service at the local community center which has a capacity of 250 people; as there were people standing, that number was easily exceeded. Attendees were encouraged to let the spirit of the departed go and if possible try not to speak about him by name for a year. This practice is related to spiritual teachings that the spirit is journeying back to the Creator for 1 year after the death and that in speaking of them by name, we interfere with the journey. It is also believed that this assists the family in their "letting go" during the year. Thus, this action is meant to enable the spirit to continue its journey into the spirit world and not hold it unnaturally to this physical world. In a year, there would be a memorial feast acknowledging the young man's safe journey to the spirit world. This is why their name is called once again at the releasing ceremony and can be used after that because we know at that point that the spirit has completed this journey back to Creator.

The mood after the interment service appeared to be one of relief, and participants commented that the young man was safely on his way.

Vignette 2: Second youth – Male, 30 years

The second youth, first cousin and a very close friend to the youth whose interment was completed earlier in the day, ended his own life later that evening. Family later made a statement that this young man was the last one to see his cousin alive. As the family and community had returned to the activities of an average summer weekend, the news of this suicide was shocking, and reaction to the news of the event was extreme. A contingent of family and friends undertook to check in on community members advising them to keep each other safe and let no one be alone during this time. The fear was that the spirits of other youths may be tempted to leave life upon hearing the news. Anishinaabe beliefs indicate that the spirits of close relations can be tempted to follow their departed at these times.

Releasing Song: Due to the nature of the death, this ritual could not be attended to until the morning following the death. Immediately family gathered at daybreak when the body was released by the police. Two songs were sung acknowledging the young man's life and his preparation for the spirit journey. With the recent death of the first young man and now, the death of his cousin in such a short passage of time, the grief experienced by all in attendance was at an extreme.

Consultation With the Family: Later in the morning after the family had been encouraged to rest, a meeting was held to discuss the rituals involved in summoning the spirit of the young man from that place in between life and death where it is believed that spirits go who have left from life by ending their lives prematurely. The family was encouraged by the belief that the Great Spirit is a loving and forgiving spirit. With the love and efforts of the surviving relatives, their rituals would petition the Creator to accept the young man's spirit regardless of the manner of his death. The family agreed to follow the process described below. The family was encouraged not to dwell on the manner of death but to focus on the task of preparing for the spirit journey.

Sundown – Retrieval: Family and community gathered to light the ceremonial sacred fire, and again within a week of the first death, men from the community lit the fire that would burn for the remainder of this part of the send-off. A song to call the spirit of the young man from that place between life and death was sung, and participants were encouraged in their own way to pray or think thoughts that would encourage the young man's spirit to leave that place and come to his sacred fire. During and after the song, participants stated that they felt him come to his sacred fire. The regular 4-day ritual for the sending off to the spirit world could now be followed. Again, it was mentioned that the work is the responsibility of family and friends.

First Feast: The first feast was not considered the normal part of the send-off ritual; rather, it was an acknowledgement of the spirit's journey from that place between life and death back to this world from the spirit world for the purposes of the send-off ritual. Participants were encouraged not to dwell upon the manner of the death and that that would be a conversation between the young man and the Creator when the young man makes it back to the Creator. The purpose of his relatives within the ceremony was to fulfill elements of the send-off ritual that support their relatives' spirit journey.

Ritual: The 4-day send-off ritual, as described above, was employed for this young man, with the added element that participants were encouraged not to dwell upon the manner of death and that the purpose was to prepare the body for interment and prepare the spirit for its spirit journey. This sense of purpose appeared to facilitate the process of healthy grieving as the 4 days passed.

Fifth Day – Interment: A great many friends and community joined the family in the interment service. Attendees were encouraged to let the spirit of the departed go and if possible, try not to speak about him by name for a year. The atmosphere at this ceremony was solemn, and participants exhibited signs of fatigue. At the interment the final instructions for the spirit's journey were given, and the spirit was encouraged to continue on his spirit journey. At this time, the relatives and friends were also instructed to turn their attention back to their life journey and their life purpose. Family and community were reminded that in a year there would be a memorial feast acknowledging the young man's safe journey to the spirit world.

Final Send-Off – The Memorial Feast: The Memorial Feast completes the send-off ritual occurring on the 1-year anniversary of the death of the departed one. (To be mindful of other cultures, there are more similarities than differences between 1-year rituals that appear to be universal. The differences likely lie in the meaning associated with the rituals by different cultures.) Since the interment, family and friends of the departed were encouraged not to think too much or speak about the departed loved one as this may interfere with the departed's adjustment to being a spirit again.

Food is prepared for this feast. Individuals who might carry a heavier grief prepare an individual dish to speak to their grief at the feast. The feast is held after sundown, acknowledging that for the spirit our night becomes their daytime. The ritualistic songs and prayers acknowledge that while the loved one has left this realm and is missed, they will never be forgotten. The songs and prayers encourage the spirit to be present. Before the food is eaten, individuals are encouraged to speak about the departed. For some, this is the first time that they have done so in a year. The speeches include stories about life's struggles without the loved one, to humorous anecdotes about the departed. Generally there is a range of emotions and sentiments expressed. After the speaking, a spirit dish is prepared to be offered to a sacred fire lit for this ritual. Participants share this feast with the spirit of the departed. When the feasting is complete, the family of the departed

will have a giveaway ceremony. Possessions of the departed, sacred and personal, are distributed to those in attendance. This sharing of material items reinforces the belief that the departed spirit has finished the life journey.

The memorial feast concludes with a dance. The lights in the venue are turned off, and a song is sung to encourage the spirit of the departed to dance one last time with family and friends. Participants will see or sense the presence of the loved one dancing with them. The loved one is dressed in their finest clothes/regalia and appears shining or glowing. The completion of the song concludes the ceremony. The spirit dances out of life at the conclusion of the song, life's journey finished. The spirit of the loved one will not come back into life; however, they may look in at times through "window" dreams. The fulfillment of this ritual gives the family and friends of the departed reassurance that the spirit has completed the journey to the spirit world safely. It also reinforces to individuals that they may continue their life journeys with the knowledge that they will someday be reunited with their loved ones.

Memorial Feast: In the instances of the death of the two cousins, the family elected to have a simple feasting. Family and close friends gathered at the home of an uncle to feast on food that was prepared for the day. A spirit dish made of birch bark was made for each of the young men. Participants each placed a tiny portion of the feast food into each dish. An invitation song was sung to invite the spirits of the two young men to be present, and spirit dishes were offered to a sacred fire. The conversation was light and convivial. The manner of the deaths of these two men did not enter the conversation; rather, the stories covered about how the upcoming hockey and hunting season would be good ones with these two spirits watching over the lives of their relatives. Participants appeared to have a peaceful resolve and reassurance that the two spirits were safely with the Creator and that the life journeys of their relatives could continue now.

In the past when Christian burial rites were prominent in this community, suicides were often experienced in clusters, suggesting that a contagion effect might have occurred. Since the community has reintroduced traditional grieving and burial ceremonies, it has become uncommon for clusters of suicide to occur among families who have been living an Anishinaabe worldview.

The Time of Healing

Despite the many assaults that have occurred on the Aboriginal families of North America during the past five hundred years, native people have survived and are ... [recovering from the impact of colonization]. While it is a travesty that some First Nations did not survive to see this time of healing, it is a testament of the resilience and strength of the tribal family that so many Aboriginal families remain. Today, many Aboriginal people are beginning to realize that most of the strengths that enabled our survival lie within our cultures. Those ways that the colonizers regarded as primitive and from which they attempted to separate Native people are what many First Nations and Non-native people now realize contain the tools that will likely ensure the survival of all peoples and all of creation on this planet. This is why today there is a strong resurgence of native culture and native pride. Aboriginal families are now coming full circle to redefine the principles from our past that will help us to form a healthier future. (Connors & Maidman, 2001, p. 415).

Conclusions

In short, much of the rebuilding that we need to do is from within ourselves, in balance with some of what is offered from others. Some First Nations people refer to this process as decolonization or "reclaiming much of what we have lost." This reclamation also includes incorpora-

tion of our cultural practices and knowledge into our community programs and policies, which will enhance our ability to be self-governing and self-determining. Our Elders often remind us that the "Creator has given us all that we need to live good lives. We need only to attend to these gifts and use them well for our benefit and the benefit of all of creation."

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