

# CEREMONIA



SAMMY MYERSON

# L H E A L I N G



T R A D I T I O N A L   W A Y S   O F  
H E A L I N G   E X P R E S S E D  
T H R O U G H   N A V A J O  
C O N S C I O U S N E S S

*Integral Health and Healing*

NANCY C. MARYBOY  
AND DAVID H. BEGAY

The authors both live and work on the Navajo Nation. Dr Begay is a full-blooded Navajo and Dr Maryboy is Cherokee and Navajo. Both come from families of ceremonial and medical healers.

Navajo healing is a holistic and dynamic process with immense cosmic interrelationships. It is extremely difficult to describe such an indigenous holistic healing process through a non-holistic language such as English, especially when the worldviews are so dissimilar and so few people possess the detailed linguistic and monolingual knowledge in both English and Navajo languages.

Language is a reflection of consciousness and is reflected in worldviews—ways of viewing and being in a world surrounding, and acknowledged by people. The English language is heavily reliant upon the domination of nouns—being a language of separation and reductionism with dependence on static entities. Most indigenous languages, on the other hand, are communal, of verbs, process and motion concepts, ways of being and living in the here and now.

From a monolingual English point of view, it seems that different languages are just different labels for the same things in the world. From the perspective of consciousness, however, language is of extreme importance, carrying a worldview that is rich and different from the Cartesian worldview so dominant in European-based culture. >

## LANGUAGE AND LIFE

**W**hat do we mean by "carrying a worldview?" A culture's worldview cannot be expressed in its richness and complexity without the thoughts and words needed to articulate and support it. When you lose a language, you lose the intellectual and spiritual complexity of a way of being in the world. Among indigenous peoples, language is far more than a way of expression; it is also an internal manifestation of one's essence, life, and consciousness.

Knowing is consciousness. Native knowing is native consciousness expressed as a holistic, integral way of living. Native ways of knowing are native ways of being human as manifested through living. This knowing includes concepts of reciprocity, within a context of dynamic balance and harmony. Also included are social concepts of kinship and communal relationship, within a pragmatic ecological consciousness. Deep knowing is grounded in the native language. Because the native language is expressing a holistic native consciousness, both direct and indirect means of knowing are utilized. Means and knowing are intrinsically connected in the Navajo language. In Navajo one could say that knowing is not a static state-of-being but rather an ongoing state-of-being or ongoing flux-of-being.

Perhaps the closest approximation to indigenous holistic thinking today is occurring in quantum physics, where scientists are learning that the English language has no words to describe what they are finding. As they enter further into the subatomic realm, they are seeing that life is a process, a flux. They are finding entities that cannot be clearly defined as waves or particles, that are neither nouns nor verbs. The Navajo worldview has ancient terms for these scientific discoveries.

Author Gary Witherspoon, who has lived years on the Navajo Reservation, writes of the difficulties inherent in the translation of cross-cultural metaphysical concepts, by illuminating the very different foundations of reality between Navajo and Western consciousness. Here is what he says in his book *Language and Art in the Navajo Universe*:

An example of the kind of underlying metaphysical premise to which I am making reference would be the Western conception of the relationship between mind and body, or mind and matter. Especially since the Cartesian age of natural and mental

philosophy, and possibly even before, Western thought has been dominated by the basic and complete separation of mind and matter, idea and entity, and subject and object. To Western thinkers, what goes on in the mind is subjective, while that which occurs in the world of matter and energy is objective. . . . These basic metaphysical notions which are taken for granted by most Western intellectuals are denied in Navajo thought. Navajo philosophy assumes that mental and physical phenomena are inseparable, and that thought and speech can have a powerful impact on the world of matter and energy. . . . Navajo interpretations of the constitution of reality and the causation of events are all based on an unbreakable connection between mind and matter.

Gregory Bateson is one of a handful of Western scholars who have understood and articulated the vital importance of relationship thinking. "Relationships should be used as a basis for all definition," he argues in a passage cited in Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point*. Capra then paraphrases Bateson: "Anything, he [Bateson] believed, should be defined, not only by what it is in itself, but by its relations to other things." Traditional Navajo knowledge in its widest context is a dynamic process of relationship similar to Bateson's conception. Traditional ways of knowing are themselves an impetus to connect to further processes and relationships. Learning is thus never complete. It is a constant process of becoming. Knowing, too, is never complete. It is also an ongoing state of being.

## RITUAL AND HEALING

**H**ealing too, according to traditional Navajo understanding, is never complete. One seldom reaches a static plateau of perfection, a completely optimal state. Healing is a process, often a lifelong process. A healing, as differentiated from a symptomatic cure, can be temporary or more permanent. It can be a temporary alleviation of pain or a cluster of pain symptoms, or it can be a more permanent elimination of symptoms. However, a weak spot or mark may remain and the illness can remanifest in another guise, sometimes years later.

In a discussion of Navajo healing, the English word "healing" itself must be clarified. In English the words

## DIYIN

In traditional Navajo consciousness, everything is part of a sacred wholeness, everything is *Diyin*. There is no literal translation for *Diyin*, since trying to describe it is like asking someone to define something holistic through reductionistic terminology.

*Diyin* is an organic process with life and movement implicit in the meaning. This life process is universal. It is an extremely complex order of relationships with multiple recursive processes within processes and patterns within patterns, somewhat similar to a visual fractal matrix. It is an orderly process with a dynamic and never-diminishing, never-ending self-organizing order. The order is tremendous and cosmic and the order itself is *Diyin*. Implicit in this process is a complex dynamic balance, *as'ah naaghai*. The balance is achieved through the interaction of negative (*sa'ah naaghai*) and positive (*bik'eh hozhoon*) relationships. Notice the order, the negative is expressed before the positive, in contrast to Western thinking. The interaction and relationship is *Diyin*. It is not separate from the human being nor from the human life experience, which is the process. The process generates the order which is *Diyin*, and the order is the process. —NCM and DHB

“healing” and “curing” are somewhat interchangeable. They most often imply a cessation of symptoms. The origins of the word “healing” are similar to those of the word “healthy,” which in turn are related to whole, wholeness (and even holiness). The way we use the word “healing” in the context of Navajo healing is based on these ancient definitions, implying wholeness and health. Thus when we say healing, in relation to Navajo healing, we mean a holistic and dynamic process, interrelated with cosmic energies, that is never-ending, and deals with far more than idiopathic symptoms.

This traditional healing can be examined in terms of onset of symptoms, diagnosis, and therapeutic restoration (a restoration to a dynamic state of harmony and balance). Traditional holistic healing is rooted in the natural cosmic process and order. Healing can occur across time and space. Symptomatic illness can manifest in an individual, in generations of a family, or as in the case of multigenerational grief, in a longitudinal post-traumatic stress of an entire people (coming from harrowing historic events such as the

Navajo Long Walk or Cherokee Trail of Tears).

This healing is a therapeutic and efficacious process emphasizing the importance of diagnosis, followed by corrective treatment to initiate restoration of balance (healing) within a holistic, curative perspective. The process may be instantaneous, but most healings require time and some effort on the part of the patient after the initiation of healing by ceremonial means. Navajo healing is associated with concepts of nonlocality, and it is said that a prayer or offering can have instant effect, both locally and to the furthest reaches of the universe.

To many non-Navajos who have some familiarity with Navajo healing, the most outstanding and unique aspects of this indigenous practice contain some version of ceremony, with rituals such as elaborate sandpaintings, song, and prayer. Most healing takes place through proper diagnosis and ceremonial restoration. Song in the ceremonial language is an integral part of the ceremony. When traditional Navajos put emphasis on song, they are actually articulating and singing the creative activity and workings of the universe. The Navajo knowledge and transferral of the universal forces that are expressed through song are expressions of vibration in tune with universal healing energies. The cosmic order provides processes and organizational principles inherent in ceremonial song. Thus songs must be sung properly and in order. Mistakes in songs can negate an entire ceremony.

The cosmic order is a cyclical experience. The dynamic order within the cyclical movement of the cosmos is a universal occurrence based on natural recursive systems and immutable energies. Traditional Navajos perceive the universe as all-inclusive, each element being a holographic component of a self-organizing holistic system. The traditional organization is somewhat similar to concepts utilized in contemporary systems and chaos theory.

## IMBALANCE TO BALANCE

One might say that the initiating process of healing is a mental process, in which symptoms of dis-ease are illuminated. The entire process is stimulated by an internal and/or external stimulus that initiates the thinking process or consciousness. Thus a symptom of imbalance occurs, which can become conscious or can remain at an unconscious level. A grad-

ual, or in some cases immediate, dawning of awareness occurs, as a sense of discomfort or pain may manifest, through internal sensory perception.

As a more conscious realization occurs, through a growing sensory perception, one begins to realize that something is out of order and begins an assessment of the situation. The symptom becomes a conscious manifestation of mental and physical imbalance. The imbalance begins to take on additional implications. Certain environments may make the symptom feel worse. The irritation may be intensified by natural processes. In fact, natural processes will provide clues, if only one can sense them. The wind, the sunlight, the pollens, and environmental pollution may intensify a condition.

Other physical symptoms may attach themselves to the original imbalance.

One becomes aware of a multiplicity of invisible interconnections within the organic system. These complex alignments are visible and understandable to Navajo diagnosticians. However they are most often invisible and discounted by Western allopathic physicians who have been trained to deal with causality-factored diagnoses.

The complex linkages of what David Bohm terms the "implicate order" between mental, physical, social, cosmic and spiritual realms provide the holistic phenomena that Navajo refer to as indigenous medicine.

In the process of healing, the assessment that one has begun points out an imbalance manifested by discomfort or disease which is out of synchronization with the desired balance of what Navajos would call *hozhoo*, loosely glossed as "harmony." This imbalance is evaluated in terms of relationship to an earlier, more desirable state of being, the state of the well-balanced person.

In the Navajo way of thinking, the causes of imbalance (disease) and healing (restoration of balance) are intrinsically interrelated. Reconnection and restoration of balance with the natural environment need to be facilitated. The restoration of balance becomes an initiation process in and of itself, giving the patient spiritual authority along with increased understanding. Through the spiritual and ceremonial assis-

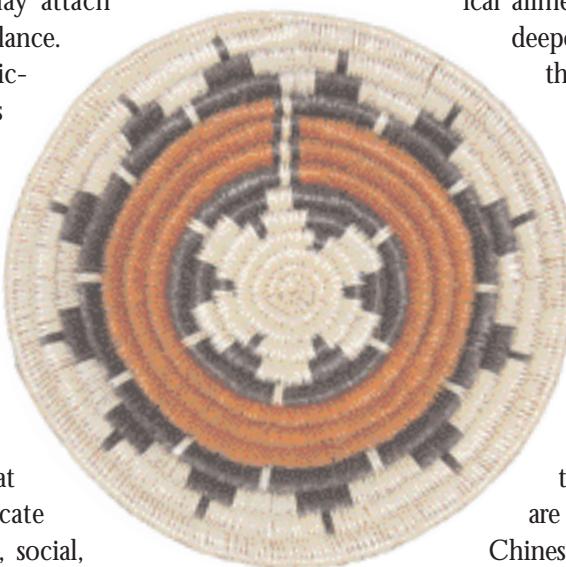
tance of a traditional practitioner, healing may occur.

The next part of the healing process is an articulation of the cognitive process through communication. The pain or symptom is communicated to others, usually to members of one's family, who will assist in assessing the proper procedures to be followed. One can go to a clinic for consultation with a physician. One can go to a traditional Navajo diagnostician. Dreams can be interpreted. Many options are available, but the thinking is generally set within a Navajo cultural context, spiritually connected to the natural and cosmic forces.

According to traditional Navajo healers, sometimes referred to as medicine men, but more correctly today referred to as practitioners of the healing arts, the physical ailment is merely a manifestation of a deeper, more holistic imbalance. Rather than treating the physical symptom alone, through what can be termed a Band-Aid approach, the entire holistic system must be evaluated before a comprehensive healing can be initiated. The use of herbal remedies is widespread. Herbs are normally acquired with extreme care and proper spiritual protocol. Remedies related to animals are often used for treatment. Some of these methods are similar to traditional Ayurvedic and Chinese medicine approaches.

There are many types of Navajo diagnosticians. One can go to a traditional hand trembler who diagnoses through personal connections with vibrations of natural forces. Hand tremblers use energies of certain stars as well as the energy and wisdom of the horny toad and thunder. The vibrations that come to the hand trembler in response to questioning lead to diagnosis of the cause and potential resolution of the patient's problem.

Another type of diagnostician is the crystal gazer or star gazer, who diagnoses problems through crystal and starlight. Just as the Western astronomer speaks of the ancient light from the stars that is just reaching the earth, so too do star gazers speak of the stars as "my ancient relation from whence I came" (*sitssooi yoo*). Stars are light. Crystals are stars. Crystals are light. Light is consciousness, according to traditional Navajo thinking. Just as the hand trembler



will identify the cause and probable restoration of balance for the patient, so will the crystal and star gazer. These types of diagnostic ceremonies are very popular today on the Navajo Reservation. Diagnosis can also be done by means of listening, use of charcoal, fire, water, and plants. Procedures are variable, as is the length of time, ranging from a few minutes to one or two entire nights.

## THE POWER OF CEREMONY

**T**raditional diagnostic ceremonies are very different from medical diagnostic procedures.

For example, the patient usually does not volunteer any information about his or her symptoms. The traditional diagnostician does not usually ask any questions of the patient. Instead the diagnosis comes from natural and cosmic information sources. There is no probing exploratory surgery, nor extensive, invasive testing.

After the diagnosis, a plan for ceremonial healing is usually set. There are many types of ceremonies. However, most of the ceremonies are classified as either protectionway or blessingway. Practitioners specialize in certain ceremonies, and often take lifetimes to learn them. Today, some ceremonies are going extinct, either from lack of apprentices to learn the ceremonies, or lack of appropriate herbs. Ceremonies can last one hour or up to nine nights. Some ceremonies will involve just the patient, and some will involve entire families and communities.

Many ceremonies involve a transference of spiritual healing essence through creation of elaborate sandpaintings (dry paintings) and oral narration of cosmological mythologies. The narrations and ceremonial materials are emphatically not symbols of bygone eras; the patient actually becomes the one who undergoes the cultural healing—a re-creation and a reconnection with age-old energies and beings.

The process that takes place after a healing through ceremonial means is often overlooked by non-Navajo scholars. Patients must often observe four days of "holiness" following prescribed behaviors, such as not bathing, not cutting meat, not chopping wood, not having sexual relations, not observing anything violent. This demonstrates a seriousness on the part of the patient, and a deep desire for healing to occur. There is a traditional way to wash after the four days have been observed. After this time one does

not discuss the healing or symptoms, and one behaves as if the healing has occurred.

For traditional Navajo, the emphasis is on the entire healing process that allows a revitalization to continue. Growth is implicit and intrinsic to this process. Healing thus implies natural growth, consequently providing a regenerative process.

## SELF AS SOURCE

**T**oday, more and more doctors on the Navajo Reservation are learning about the native ways of healing. Ceremonial hogans are being built at Indian Health Service hospitals to accommodate and respect native healing ways. It is not unusual for families to bring traditional healers into the patient's room.

At the same time, medical doctors such as Larry Dossey, Andrew Weil, and Deepak Chopra are integrating medical and alternative healing approaches through discussions of holistic healing and ancient approaches of Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine. Their work, along with that of David Bohm on the implicate order and "holoverse," share striking similarities to Navajo philosophy in the area of healing arts.

"Healing is holistic," said Dr Beulah Allen, Native traditionalist and chief of staff of the Indian Health Clinic, Tsaile, Arizona. In a personal communication, she explained: "It doesn't matter whether you utilize Western medical services or the traditional healing methods, the most important thing is that you are a participant in your own holistic healing. Both processes can only initiate healing, but the ultimate restoration of your health and harmony has to come from you."



**NANCY C. MARYBOY**, PhD, is the founding president of the Indigenous Education Institute, and former faculty member and administrator at Diné (Navajo Nation) College. Currently, she is a core member of the Native American Academy and adjunct professor of astronomy at Northern Arizona University, and can be reached at [maryboy@kanaka.com](mailto:maryboy@kanaka.com). **DAVID H. BEGAY**, PhD, is the former dean, assistant to the president, of Diné (Navajo Nation) College. He is adjunct professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at Northern Arizona University, and a research associate with the World Hope Foundation in Colorado.

