

## Healing: A Navajo Perspective Daniel Cozort

This chapter provides a religious perspective on health, one that is typical of the way human beings for many thousands of years have understood illness and healing. Like most religious perspectives, it includes the idea that illness may at least sometimes have causes that are spiritual rather than physical; that the patient him or herself may have brought on the illness by a failure to respect spiritual laws; and that a cure may have to do as much with the patient's attitudes and faith as with a physician's treatments.

An exceptionally clear and intriguing example of the religious perspective on health is found in the worldview of the Navajos, whose tribe is the largest in Native America and who have been able to maintain their healing traditions in the face both of Christian missionizing and the penetration of secular American culture. But before exploring the particular nature of Navajo healing practices, let us briefly consider the general relationship between religion and health.

In many cultures, the primary purpose of religion has not been, as in the Western traditions, the soul's eventual salvation, but rather has been immediate individual and social healing. Indeed, religion may have originated not as a means of quelling anxieties over death or providing an explanation for the origin of the universe, as is often surmised, but rather as a means to deal with the inexplicable and terrifying onset of illness. Whereas the causes of death are often obvious, to pre-modern people the causes of illness are often utterly mysterious. A perfectly healthy person is suddenly stricken with fever, or develops a tender lump, or is doubled over in pain. For many thousands of years, human beings have attributed these frightening occurrences to the work of invisible, external agencies, to what we generally call spirits. In response, they have developed rituals in which they themselves or their priests address the spirits, or they have sought the help of shamans, specialists who can dramatically enter and return from the spirit world. In either case, the patient's belief in the existence and nature of the spirits, and in many cases, his or her capacity to be drawn into trance states in which they are experienced directly, has much to do with recovery.

As outsiders, we might attribute such a cure to the well-known "placebo effect" (we know that patients often improve without real medicine as long as that's what they believe they are receiving), although our science does not understand the placebo effect any more than it understands spirits. That is, it is clear enough that a positive attitude, such as one arising from confidence in a healing method, boosts the natural immune system, but *why* it does is not apparent. From the perspective of faith, of course, there actually *are* spiritual entities who affect health.

In any case, religious belief affects health. Some scholars think that modern human beings are so religious precisely because their ancestors were; that is, those pre-historic people who strongly believed in the spirit world, and especially those who were able to enter into trance states, probably had a higher rate of survival than those without those propensities (McClenon, 2002, p.\*\*). Studies continue to show that religious faith, or even an originally religious activity such as meditation or yoga taught to patients without its religious framework, can be an important factor in recovery and survival rates (\*citation needed). This is true not only in the West, but

throughout the world, where at least 70% of the human population turns first to non-allopathic medicine (Kreitzer & Jensen, 2000, pp. 7-16). Traditional medicine is almost always embedded in a religious system.

### **Diagnosis**

Navajos believe that illness may have many causes, some of which are more physical, and others that are spiritual. It is accepted that one's own excesses in behavior, such as belligerence, drunkenness, and disrespect for elders, leaves one open to disease. Over-exposure to heat and cold may also bring on illness, as will exposure to other environmental phenomena—such as wind, lightening, and thunder—that would never figure into a Western diagnosis (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 36). In addition, contact with the human dead requires careful subsequent rituals of purification, which if not done correctly will lead to disease. Similarly, contact with certain animals such as bears, deer, coyotes, porcupines, snakes, eagles, fish—which may be inevitable if one hunts or fishes—can be fraught with danger and requires the correct performance of ceremonies of respect and thanksgiving (Sandner, 1991, p. 33). Finally, contact with ceremonial paraphernalia that one is not authorized to handle may also lead to disease.

Such “physical” causes are not simply so, in many cases, because spiritual entities (the Holy People) are co-extensive with environmental phenomena and animals and it is really contact with the spiritual entities that brings about disease. But in other cases, there is no visible or tangible cause. Navajos believe that ghosts and werewolves exist and may possess or infect victims. They believe that sorcerers or witches can shoot them with invisible spirit darts that will work illness from the inside (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 36). They also believe that they can be affected by the figures that appear in dreams (Reichard, 1950, p. 80).

But why are some stricken, while others are left standing? Illness is an inevitable part of life, since it is not possible in practice to avoid all of its possible causes. Indeed, Navajos strongly emphasize life's changeability, so much that they consider it necessary continually to recreate beauty, order, and balance. Illness is only a special case of what is a universal phenomenon, namely the tendency toward entropy and error.

However, much illness occurs because people act incorrectly, or act with the wrong motives, or fail to rectify their mistakes by ceremonies, or draw the attention of malevolent entities. Therefore, it could be prevented or minimized by cultivating the right attitudes and habits. The Navajo purpose of life is to “grow old in beauty (*hozho*),” beauty being the harmony between oneself and one's environment, including the living beings who inhabit it, whether they be human, animal, or spirit. “Health” is a holistic state of being rather than merely being the absence of symptoms in the physical body; healing is a by-product of the restoration to harmony (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 35).

Because many symptoms can be produced by more than one cause, and because the causes may be supernatural, the diagnostician must be a man or woman of extraordinary sensitivity. Some diagnosticians are also chanters—those who conduct ceremonies for the cure of disease—but many are not. One diagnostic technique is a form of divination called “hand trembling” in which the diagnostician passes his or her (more often her) hand over the body of patient while praying

to the deity Gila Monster. The way in which the hand trembles indicates the nature of the disease; or the shaman/diagnostician receives a direct revelation from Gila Monster (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 40). Other diagnosticians use a powder made from the dried eyes of night birds, applied to their own eyelids, or a powder made from the dried eardrum of a badger, applied to their own ears, to enter a visionary state in which their visual or auditory abilities are magnified and the causes of the disease can be discerned. The “star-gazing” diagnostician, on the other hand, may gaze at the stars through a crystal and “see” the cause of illness (Reichard \*; Sandner 30-33)

### **Chant Ways**

Once an illness has been identified, a patient or his or her relatives seeks out a person who knows the specific cycle of chants, or chant way, that is appropriate to that ailment. Most chanters are men, and the most common time to learn the chants is middle age (Reichard, 1950, pp. xlv-xlv). Chanters have no particular qualifications; one becomes a chanter if one wants to be one and has the memory and perseverance to spend several years learning a chant way. A certain degree of personal spiritual power is also necessary, as otherwise one might be harmed by the chant’s power (Reichard, 1950, p. 82). However, chanters are not shamans; they do not meet and interact with spiritual entities but only invoke them through prayer. On the other hand, they have experience the healing power of the spirits themselves, albeit as patients. Like western psychoanalysts, who are themselves analyzed in the course of their training, a chanter must not only learn chants, but at least four times must act the part of patient (Reichard, 1950, p. 88).

There are many chant ways. At one time about fifty distinct chant ways were in use, but only about seven “complexes” are performed now (Wyman, 1983, p. 20). A “complex” is a chant way that can be performed in multiple ways, such as to promote goodness and attract the power of the Holy People, to exorcise evil spirits, or to rectify accidents. and then are said to be respectively in the Holy Way, Evil Way, or Life Way (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 41). The most commonly performed chant way is the Blessing Way, which does not require lengthy and expensive ceremonies; it can be done in a single night. It has broad applicability, covering not only diseases but house blessings, the purification of the household of a diseased Navajo, etc. (Reichard 88). Other chant ways still performed include the Shooting Way, Beauty Way, Mountain Way, Night Way, and Wind Way (Wyman, 1983, p. 20). The length and complexity of the chant ways make it difficult for any chanter to learn more than a few in a lifetime. The Shooting Way, for instance, incorporates hundred of songs and requires the making of more than fifty sand paintings (Newcomb and Reichart 1975: p. 10) from which the medicine man or woman will choose those that are most appropriate to the patient and illness.

The chant ways can be used for very specific ends. For instance, the Night Way is performed for diseases of the head, such as blindness, deafness, or insanity, or for rheumatism caused by “deer infection.” The Shooting Way counteracts infections from lightning, snakes, and arrows and can also be used for fevers, rheumatism, paralysis, and abdominal pain. (citation). A chant way can even be prescribed to counteract behavioral flaws. The so-called “Prostitution Way,” for instance, counteracts lust and in a positive way helps lovers, traders, and gamblers (Reichard 139-140); it actually has nothing to do with prostitution. The Enemy Way counteracts infections caused by contact with non-Navajo humans.

Each of the chant ways is grounded in a myth of origins, which is chanted, depicted in a large painting made of colored sand, and to some extent acted out in the course of the ceremony, which usually lasts for five to nine days. The myth recounts the heroic deeds of the Holy People in ancient times and in particular explains how they came to learn the chant way that would cure certain diseases, chant ways they in turn taught to the Navajos. The recitation of the myth can be richly evocative for the participating Navajos. The mythic landscape often is not some far-away celestial domain, but is comprised of the familiar mountains, canyons, lakes, and mesas among which they live. The gods are similarly not distant abstractions, but may be physically present (in the form of masked and costumed dancers). The performance of the chant at night, lit by fire or lamp light, the strange rhythmic vocalizing of the chanter, and the hushed expectation of the spectators all contribute to the creation of tension and heightening of emotion.

We have now come to the heart of how Navajo healing ceremonies work. The Navajos believe that the cures for specific diseases were revealed long ago by the Holy People themselves and are embodied in myths that have been told and re-told for countless generations. The re-creation of the myths by way of images and sound over a series of nights re-creates the circumstances in which healing power was *first* experienced in sacred space and time. All that remains is that the patient be prepared to participate in the re-creation of the myth. In the ritual, the patient, who has been purified, sits on the images of the Holy People in the sand painting on the floor, listens to the recounting of the myth in the chanting of the medicine man, and receives the sacred power of the Holy People through applications of sand from the painting and the touch of other sacred objects from the medicine bundle of the chanter. The patient, typically, has been prepared for these healing touches by a lifetime of listening to the myths, but knowing that other people have been cured by the same means, and by the confidence of his or her family, who take on the expense of the ritual.

The patient is, therefore, “re-created” along with the re-creation of the mythic past and thereby is restored to balance with the Holy People. That, ultimately, is what Navajos mean by “health.” Consequently, although it is perfectly possible for a sick person to go to a modern hospital and receive treatment that apparently cures, Navajos would maintain that without the proper chant way, no real and lasting cure has occurred, for the formerly afflicted patient remains in a state of disharmony and imbalance.

### **Preparations**

The medicine man prepares for a healing ceremony by fasting and praying, often using a sweat lodge (a hut with a central pit full of hot rocks on which water can be ladled to create a hot, steamy environment). The patient, too, is ritually purified.

Healing ceremonies are held in ordinary hogans; the Navajo do not have special ceremonial buildings. The hogan is a family dwelling that is built to certain specifications to imitate the original hogan of the Holy People. It cannot be built in places unattractive to Holy People, such as near battle grounds or the sites of lightning strikes; it should be round, made of earth and wood, and its beams should come from certain trees associated with certain Holy People; it must be properly anointed and blessed. During the ceremony the humble hogan symbolizes the entire cosmos.

When a ceremony is going to occur, the belongings of the family are moved away from the center so that sand can be spread and smoothed on the floor. Then the medicine man's assistants begin the first of the dry paintings over which he will chant through the night. These are usually made entirely of colored sand and other mineral substances such as ochre and charcoal, although some paintings also incorporate pollen, cornmeal, and flower petals (Wyman, 1970, p. 65). (Since they are usually made of sand, however, and are well known as "sand paintings," we will use that phrase here for all dry paintings.) String and even tape measures can be used to establish straight lines for the design, but it is sprinkled by hand, using the thumb and first two fingers (Gill, 1983, p. 71).

Navajo sand paintings are beautiful and distinctive creations that use dramatic and rather abstract symbols. Smaller versions of the ones used in ceremonials (but with alterations that make them non-sacred) are sold in sizable quantities to tourists and collectors. Those on a hogan floor must be large enough for a patient to sit upon the figures there depicted.

Sand paintings can take many forms, but there are two basic layouts: the linear, in which figures stand in a row, and the mandalic, where the circular space of the painting is divided into quadrants and objects in the painting radiate from a central point. When this occurs, however, all of the figures will "face" the center, where the patient will sit. Thus, the patient, and the patient alone, receives the full impact of the mythic vision expressed by the painting.

The iconography of sand paintings can be quite complex. The Holy People, whose bodies are invariably narrow and rectangular, may be decorated with headdresses, may have neck-stripes corresponding to the four colors of the day (white, yellow, blue, and black for dawn, midday, twilight, and night), may carry medicine bundles, may be armed and armored, etc. They may be accompanied by holy animals, plants, mountains, messengers (Bat, Big Fly) and even celestial bodies such as the sun and moon.

Around the perimeter is the outstretched body of a guardian whose body is sometimes constructed of overlapping arrows or feathers but is more often a rainbow. However, there is always a gap at the eastern side and other guardians (such as Bat, Fly, or Medicine Pouch) will be stationed there. This "broken circle," which like the ceremony itself, lets goodness in and pushes evil out, is a motif found throughout Navajo art (such as on pots and carpets). It is open to the east because that is the direction of the rising sun and the greatest force of positive energy; therefore the east is also the direction of the door of the hogan and the direction from which the patient approaches the painting.

The sand painting, which may be finished only moments before a patient sits on it, is a temporary masterpiece at best. At the conclusion of the ceremony, it will be completely destroyed, and the sand, charged with the potentially harmful energy of the Holy People, will be taken to a remote place to be strewn back upon the earth.

### **Chants**

During the day of the chant, the hogan is consecrated so that it may function as a sacred cosmos. Just prior to its start, the patient's family and selected others file into the hogan and take places near the wall. They will only observe the proceedings. The one-sung-over enters and may bless

the painting by sprinkling cornmeal on it; this “activates” it so that the Holy People will complete their descent into the corresponding sand figures (Gill, 1983, p. 72). Other participants may include dance groups who will personify the gods.

Following acts of worship and invocation of the Holy People, the chanter turns to actions that help a patient identify with the spirit world. They apply to places on the patient’s body various objects from their medicine pounces such as rattles and bull-roarers, which attract Holy People; they feed their patients herbal medicines and other “sacred food”; and they pick up and apply sand from the sand painting of the Holy People to corresponding parts of the patient’s body. In all of these ways they invite the Holy People to descend into the patient and infuse his or her body.

Navajos recognize that there is danger in dealing with the Holy People. The Holy People are much more powerful than human beings, but in the first place, they too have emotions and faults and unless handled respectfully may turn against us; and in the second place, their power is neither good nor bad in itself, and can be wrongly channeled. Thus, the chanter exercises his or her actions with great care, and still may from time to time be adversely affected by working with the holy power.

Chanters also perform acts to remove evil. Bundles of feathers, herbs wrapped in yucca, or miniatures bows and arrows are pressed against the patient, and then yanked off. Emetics (bitter, nauseating drinks) are sometimes administered to induce purging by vomiting. The chant describes an arc over the days its performance that chanter and patient expects will parallel the arc of the patient’s recovery. The focus of the first days (or first part of a shorter chant way) is on the purification and protection of the area, the patient, the chanter, and the observers. By the midpoint, it shifts to invocation and blessing. As Trudy Griffin-Pierce write, “By this time, the patient has begun to take control of his own mind over his illness as he is filled with a sense of inner peace” (1992, p. 37).

At the conclusion of the chant, the patient is again returned to his or her family, but remains in a “liminal” state (that is, suspended between the profane and sacred) for another four days, during which he or she abstains from particular foods and activities (depending on the chant) and reflects on the blessings of the Holy People (Griffin-Pierce, 1992, p. 37).

### **Symbolic Healing**

Thus, we can see that although it is directed at the patient’s body, the principal effect of the ritual is to change the patient’s *mind*. Donald Sandner, in *Navajo Symbols of Healing* (1991), has compared the therapeutic process of the Navajo healing ceremony to Jungian psychotherapy. In both cases, archetypal images are manipulated that correspond to those in the patient’s unconscious mind. The “archetypal images” are symbolic figures that represent psychic realities; the Warrior Twins of many Navajo myths, for instance, are hero figures who can be understood to represent the general human need to establish a discreet identity.

The chant ways (and psychotherapy) do this in three ways: by returning the patient to the origin or course; by managing sources of evil; and by taking the patient through an experience of death and rebirth. The Navajo patient is “returned to the source” by the re-enactment of myth. The

process is enhanced by the chanting itself, which may place the patient in a light trance, and by the length of the ceremony, which provides ample time for the striking primal symbols of the painting to connect to the patients' inner reality. Psychotherapists, on the other hand, help patients connect to their childhoods, often through the medium of dreams, which Jung once called our "private mythology" because they may be populated by the same kinds of symbolic figures—archetypes—as myths. In either case, the source of one's present suffering is located in a mythic past.

The Navajo medicine man or woman "manages evil" in several ways. In the context of the sand painting, it may be symbolized by beings who oppose the heroic Holy People. The latter are represented by none other than the chanter and the patient, who are able to neutralize and eliminate the evil. A Navajo medicine man or woman has another method as well: evil is ejected by symbolizing it as an object, and then struggling with it and ejecting it. This occurs in a "sucking cure: where a medicine man or woman extracts a "dart" that has been shot into a patient's body by sorcery; in the process, he or she will use slight-of-hand and hidden props to make it seem that the dart is a physical thing that can be so extracted. In psychotherapy, the patient often projects god-like attributes onto the therapist, in a process called "transference," thus ceding to the therapist the power to make changes. "Evil" is whatever the patient understands as evil, and sometimes the therapist also takes it on.

Finally, the chant way puts the patient through an experience of death and rebirth. The patient is initiated into the world of the sand painting, and like all initiations, this demands that the old self "die" so that a new identity can be forged. In the chant way, the old self must be abandoned in the moment of identification with the Holy People; the rebirth, the healed Holy Person whose healed status flows into the restored patient. In psychotherapy, the patient's own unconscious mind produces symbols of death and rebirth that are discussed with the analyst.

While these comparisons are useful, one major difference between Navajo symbolic healing and psychotherapy is that most psychotherapy seeks only to restore a patient to normality, which as we know all too well does not necessarily mean a state of contentment and happiness. It is hoped that the process of psychotherapy will reconcile the patient to the aspects of his or her personality which are shameful (the "shadow") and unite the masculine and feminine. Ultimately, however, it is the patient who must find the inner resources to change. The analyst is a passive guide who does more listening than talking.

On the other hand, the Navajo healer seeks to help the patient "walk in beauty," i.e., to be restored to an optimal life in a stable universe. One of the most celebrated novels about Native Americans is Leslie Marmore Silko's *Ceremony*, set in New Mexico after the Second World War. The protagonist, Tayo, is a Laguna who is suffering from what now is called post-traumatic stress syndrome. He had witnessed the death of his brother and experienced the brutality of Japanese guards as part of the Bataan Death March in the Philippines near the beginning of the war, and he suffers now from nightmares, sleeplessness, and hallucinations. Upon his return, he received help from the white medical establishment, but the treatments of his white doctors failed to work for him. His family finally takes him to a Navajo medicine man, who chants for Tayo and helps him to connect the mythic world of the sand painting to his own existential crisis. Tayo follows the ceremony with actions that he understands to replicate the actions in the myth,

and this proves to be what he needed to re-create himself and find peace.

The Navajo medicine chantways are unique in many ways, but they perform the function that healing systems in the pre-modern world have performed for many millennia and still have the potential to perform today: they make a patient's suffering comprehensible in cosmic terms and they provide a way to get well based on having a right relationship with his or her environment, both the immediate physical reality and the larger spiritual reality that envelopes and pervades it. In this way they make the goal of "health" the same as the goal of one's whole life.

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