

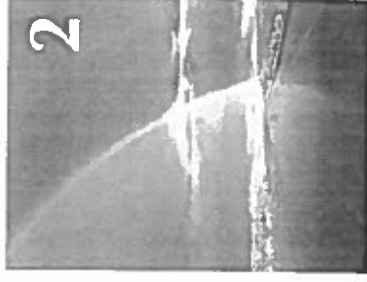
# Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care

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2013

Published by Pandora Press  
Kitchener, Ontario

In collaboration with the SIPCC  
Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counseling  
Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Seelsorge und Beratung  
Düsseldorf, Germany



## Journey toward Creator and the realm of peace

Two voices on Aboriginal spiritual caregiving

Melody A. McKellar and Roger Armitte

Native spirituality is indistinguishable from Native cultural life. It is a holistic way of life that has evolved over centuries and has been transmitted primarily through oral tradition from one generation to the next. Cultural and spiritual life are grounded in the belief in the fundamental interconnectedness of all forms of life and all natural things with primary importance given to the land, "Mother Earth." Native spirituality is further characterized by a strong experience of community in direct contrast with the key values of individualism and private ownership of things and wealth in the dominant North American cultures. In this tradition, therefore, health care always has strong spiritual and communal dimensions. These and other features of spiritual care in an Aboriginal perspective are presented in this chapter, which is divided into two parts with the reflective testimonies of two Aboriginal Elders.<sup>1</sup> Both of them share from the wellsprings of wisdom and experience as professional spiritual caregivers.

**Melody A. McKellar**

*It is late in the afternoon, and I receive a call from the nursing staff on one of the wards. An elderly man with dementia is very restless, and his family won't be able to sit with him until early evening. This man is slowly making the transition from this world to the spirit world. As I enter the room, my eyes*

<sup>1</sup> Wisdom is the main virtue and competence of Aboriginal (or First Nation) Elders, acknowledged as such by their communities. Elders may be either women or men. They all have authority to perform different kinds of ceremonies; however, some Elders might have special gifts for inter-

*gaze upward to the eagle feather that his family has placed on the wall and the dream catcher<sup>2</sup> beside it. I greet him and ask his permission to sit with him for a while. We hold hands and I offer a prayer for his peace of mind, body, and spirit. His restlessness continues as he looks about the room and tries to climb out of the bed.*

*A nurse comes in and considers giving him a medication to decrease his restlessness and asks for my opinion. I suggest that we wait and see how he is doing while I sit with him. When the man and I are alone in the room, I bring out my traditional hand drum and begin to softly sing him a "traveling song." This will help his spirit make the transitional journey home when the time is right and when he is ready.*

*The sounds of the gentle heartbeat of the drum must bring some comfort as I note he is slowly beginning to relax. He understands the words of the sacred song because they are sung in his language. Regardless, his spirit understands and recognizes the prayer song no matter the language.*

*The fire marshal for the health care institution comes to the door of the man's room to let me know they have isolated the smoke alarm in his room, and they have shut it off for the next hour. (When I had arrived on the ward, I had asked the nursing staff to request that the smoke alarm be shut off.)*

*I take out my smudge bowl and prepare the ceremony as our ancestors have prepared it for millennia. I take out my eagle fan and ever so gently smudge this elderly man with the smoke from the shell. As I do so, I offer prayers of blessing and comfort. He has now fallen asleep. I find a CD of fiddle music in the lounge and leave it playing softly in the background for a man who loved to play the fiddle for his family.*

*A teaching from the Dakota people says that there are only two sacred times in a person's life: the moment we are born and the moment we die. It is I who receive such a blessing as to be able to sit with one who is ready to make the journey back to Creator. I leave the elderly gentleman sleeping peacefully while a nurse on the ward comes to sit with him when it is my time to move on.*

*I would have time to sit with him once again before he passed. For now his mind, body, and spirit are peacefully taking a rest . . .*

I am a Métis woman, one of the Aboriginal groups in Canada, and have French and Mohawk roots. I have lived most of my life in the province of Manitoba although my birth relatives come from Quebec. I am very thankful to have had amazing Elders who have guided me on my adult Aboriginal spiritual journey. They are Métis, Ojibway, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, and Dakota. In what follows I highlight first of all some of

<sup>2</sup> See description of the dream catcher below.

the main beliefs and values dear to my tradition. I then make reference to the practice of spiritual care from my perspective and identify some of the core competencies necessary to care well for all people.

## Foundations

All things originate from the Creator and have been given life and a purpose for existence. In the Medicine Wheel teachings, it is Creator who is in the Centre of the circle of life and from which all of life revolves. One of my former Elders spoke of the fact that it is only the human race that has forgotten our purpose. All other parts of Creation—the willow tree, the tiny ant, the hawk, the water, the grasses, and every other part of Creation—are still carrying out their original instructions given by the Creator. The main difference between us as humans (or two-legged creatures) and the rest of Creation is that Creator has given us the ability to make choices.

All of Creation is interconnected and all parts rely on one another. If the waters or the trees disappeared on the planet, could we as humans survive? What if all the animals disappeared? What if we, two-legged beings on the earth, disappeared? What would happen to the rest of Creation? There are so many times when we as human beings see ourselves as the most important part of Creation out of our own arrogance. We are not the most important living creatures in the Universe. We are just one part of Creation, no more or any less important than any other part of Creation.

We often refer to other parts of Creation as our relatives. This helps us remember our place in the Universe and that we are related to every living thing. We will refer to the earth as our mother or the rocks as grandfathers/grandmothers, the sun as grandfather, and the moon as grandmother. We may call the bear our brother/sister. We know that there are parts of creation much older than we are, and so we refer to them as our relatives, "All Our Relations." It is a reminder of the teachings of Respect for all of life. We cannot take any part of Creation for our own use without the offerings of prayers and giving something in return. We would never think of picking a plant without first offering our prayers and letting the plant know our purpose for using it and giving thanks for its medicine. We have certain teachings that we need to follow when we use other parts of Creation for health and healing.

We have travelled from the Spirit World to this physical world and will return to the Spirit World upon our death. When we take our last breath on earth, our next breath will take place in the other dimension. I have never heard of the concept of "hell" in our traditional spiritual way. When we return to the Spirit World, we will have a chance to "review

our choices" that we made in this physical plane and have an even greater understanding of how our choices affected those around us (including the rest of Creation). While we are living in this physical plane, we should admit to mistakes we have made and ask forgiveness from those we have hurt. It is a sign of a humble person to be able to own one's mistakes and then to learn from those mistakes to make different choices. That is a part of our spiritual growth while we are in the physical form. Our greatest teachings come from our challenges.

Regarding the seven Sacred Teachings also mentioned in the second part of this chapter—love, respect, courage, humility, truth, honesty, and wisdom—we claim that we cannot know any of them without having known their opposite. Those things that we see as painful, difficult, or challenging will sometimes have the deepest meanings for us later on in our journey. For example, I cannot know what love is unless I have experienced the opposite of love. It is only then that I can begin to understand the teaching of love.

Community is essential to us. I often hear people from the dominant society talk about "I" or "me," and it seems as though the world should revolve around their individual wants and needs. This is not how we as Aboriginal persons understand community. Each infant, child, woman, man, and elder has a significant role and part in the development of our communities. Again, no one is less or more important, for all have a role to play. When a person is ill or injured, extended family and community members gather round for support. That is often difficult to understand for those staff in hospitals who are not part of an Aboriginal community. Decisions are to be made for the welfare of the whole community.

In Aboriginal communities, one of the greatest attributes a person can offer is the gift of sharing with others. In traditional societies, the hunters shared the meat amongst Elders and children first, then other community members. Sharing what you have, even if it is your last, is important. When you are in need, then there should be others to share with you as you have shared with them.

We have many ceremonies that we can use to help us in our healing journey. There are several natural ways of healing: sweating, talking, yelling (in the form of releasing energy; this does not mean yelling at someone else), shaking, crying, laughing, and yawning. Any healing that occurs is not through the power of the man or woman leading the ceremony. All healing comes from the Creator, who uses the leader of the ceremonies as a conduit.

Our Elders are given teachings and wisdom from their Elders. In this

way teachings, stories, songs, and ceremonies are passed down through oral tradition from generation to generation. Stories are shared that hold wisdom for how one might live life or learn from the experience of an animal in the story. Our Elders are very connected to the spiritual realm and are shown things in a variety of ways: dreams, visions, etc. Our ancestors knew that people with a paler skin were coming to our lands before the very first Caucasian person arrived. They were shown these things in ceremonies, dreams, and visions.

There are many of our Elders who share their wisdom and teachings with us about the coming times and how we should be preparing and living. When we need to work on an aspect of ourselves that needs some healing, we respectfully seek out those Elders who have such knowledge and understanding. An Elder does not push him/herself on you but will wait for you to come and seek help when the time is right. The Elders know the ceremonies to offer in order to seek the guidance and direction from the Spirit world. Elders know other Elders who might "specialize" in a specific area, as they have been given those gifts by Creator.

The old adage, "you can't change anyone but yourself," is so true. We must work on ourselves to facilitate positive change. That is our responsibility. When we do that, we help facilitate positive change for our communities. When we are able to live in balance and harmony with ourselves, then it becomes easier to live in balance and harmony with all living things and to emanate love and respect.

### Caregiving practice

As a spiritual care provider, I work with all peoples regardless of race, creed, nationality, etc. One of the most important foundations for me in my everyday walk is to show respect and to be present. I ask Creator to work through me so that I may be open to whatever is needed in the moment. I need to ensure that I remain centered and grounded in my work. That is why it is important for me to continue to work on my own healing so that I can be present for others. Sometimes people just need someone present with them and to hold the sacred space for them so that they might be able to cry or share their hurt or pain. Oftentimes, the answers will come to them as to their next step. Sometimes I will provide a ceremony that will help facilitate the space needed for the answers to be given.

Traditional medicine and ceremonies can work alongside allopathic medicine. I would never advise persons to leave allopathic medicine or their allopathic physician. When I myself had a serious illness a number of years back, I made certain that my physician knew I was using

traditional medicine and attending traditional ceremonies alongside the allopathic modality.

Our traditional practices are very rich in experiential and sensory forms. We remain connected to the earth and all of Creation. For many persons that connection has been forgotten when they live surrounded by pavement and cement. The “re-membering” of connection to the land assists our spirit and energy to re-connect to the life cycles and natural rhythms of the universe. If you ask folk to remember back to their fondest times in their lives, they often recall the times of connection to community and to the land, in whatever form that takes.

### Qualities of spiritual caregivers

Spiritual caregivers need to live out the seven Sacred Teachings of love, respect, courage, humility, truth, honesty, and wisdom. These seven Sacred Teachings are foundational for any culture. We must practice from the heart and not offer spiritual care from the head. It is through the heart that we connect with one another.

It is essential for spiritual caregivers to be grounded and to have some life experience. They must have worked on their own healing journeys and continue to do so. Although they are solid in their own practices, it is important to be open to others, thereby having flexibility for what might be required in the moment. Knowledge does not always come in the form of a PhD. The recognition of life experience and wisdom passed down through oral traditions is equally important. Living out the seven Sacred Teachings from any spiritual practice is vital.

Spiritual caregivers need to be able to listen fully, not just with their ears, but with their whole being. They must be nonjudgmental. I have only walked in my shoes, no one else's. Although I may have similar experiences to others, I cannot possibly know everything that has led to this moment in this person's life. To that essential guideline, I wish to add that to become competent spiritual caregivers they must:

- be open, accepting, and respectful;
- practice patience and compassion (sometimes it may seem like a revolving door when working with persons in a health care setting. When I see the same person coming over and over again through the emergency department, then it is probable that support systems, social services, and other needs may be missing in that persons' life);
- communicate well, both verbally and in writing;
- know ourselves, both gifts and limitations;

- continue to work on our own healing journey and admit when we have made a mistake.

Spiritual caregivers need to be trained in their calling. That does not always mean in a formal educational system. Most of our traditional Elders have a PhD in life experience; they just do not have the paper hanging in the frame. It is important to recognize that and to know that their unique qualifications will contribute to the health care team in a special way. In any event, it is important for all spiritual caregivers to further their education as they practice spiritual care. As days are set aside for medical staff to take continuing education, so it should be for spiritual caregivers. Counseling skills and ability are an important aspect of spiritual care, and formal training in these areas is indeed an asset. Having some formal training in the area of interfaith care is also beneficial, as the following vignette illustrates.<sup>3</sup>

*A young non-Aboriginal woman approaches me in my office to ask when I will offer another sweat lodge ceremony. We talk about the possibilities open to her in light of her scheduled appointments with various professionals in the health care facility. She has been in the facility for nearly a year and has found that Aboriginal spiritual ceremonies bring her peace and comfort for her mind, body, and spirit.*

*This will be her eighth sweat lodge ceremony since I have come to know her. We have a separate sweat lodge on the property just for women. Since the building of the women's lodge, many of them come to my door to ask specifically for a ceremony.*

*Like so many others, this young woman comes with a history of having suffered various forms of violence and abuse. It has been difficult for her to find a place in the world where she is accepted for who she is and where she feels she “fits in” without judgment. Self-harm is still very evident and is part of the past cycle of abuse.*

*She clearly demonstrates a deep inward knowing of when it is time for her to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony. Being able to request that for herself is a positive step in her recovery and an indicator of growth in self-confidence.*

*Healing work is not for the saint-hearted, and the road to recovery is often a long one that requires great patience. One step forward, two steps back, two steps forward, one back. Spiritual care is vital. The physical body mends itself much more quickly than the mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of our*

<sup>3</sup> The vignette is meant as a testimony of my being available and willing to offer spiritual care to any care receiver, with resources from my Aboriginal tradition. It shows the potential value of those resources to help care receivers in terms of their own spirituality or faith.

*selves. For today, this young woman, like so many others, has taken another small step toward her road to recovery. Tomorrow she may experience another fork in the road. Whichever direction she moves, there will be spiritual care offered and we will once again travel the road together . . .*

## Roger Armitte

### Foundations

As a Medewin, I believe that everything that exists has life and comes from the Creator—everything and everyone. The earth is our mother, our provider. The sky is our father, providing water. Both supply what is necessary for life. Everything has a spirit. Each tree has a spirit. Therefore, we ask the spirit of the tree for permission and forgiveness before we chop it down. And we tell it that we are grateful for it. We follow this procedure when we hunt and fish, when we pick medicines, or cut grass. We say “thank you, we are grateful,” and we ask for forgiveness and permission. Even rocks are seen as a life-form; they too have a spirit. In the sweat lodge,<sup>4</sup> for example, even the rocks are considered “grandfathers” or “grandmothers.” We are all connected. We are all one. We are related to the four-legged as well as the two-legged creatures, and to all the creatures of the air and water. Although humanity is the only species that is able to know, no species is superior to, or less than, any other—all have gifts. Some may have more and some may have fewer, but all have equal value. Some people literally bow to me because I am an Elder, which I do not like at all. If a child bows to me, I know that I may have more knowledge than that child at the time, but that does not mean that the child will not have equal or greater knowledge as they grow up.

Our belief is that we all originate in Spirit, spend some time in human form, and then return to Spirit. We believe that we are only partially alive on earth. When we die our spirit is released and we are freed to return

<sup>4</sup> The sweat lodge is one of the fundamental ceremonies consisting in a purification procedure which precedes spiritual quests. Many lodges are for communal prayer purposes, but others are for healing. Usually a sweat lodge is required both before and after the fast. An appropriate site is a virginial section of ground which has not been desecrated by the trampling of feet or the disposal of waste matter. After an Elder has selected a site, it will be blessed with tobacco and sweetgrass. Construction details vary from tribe to tribe and can only be considered on an individual Elder basis. It takes about one and a half hours to erect a five-foot high, igloo-shaped structure from bent willow branches tied together with twine. The structure is covered with canvas or blankets to exclude all light. It can accommodate eight persons at a time. Stones are heated outside the sweat lodge, traditionally in a fire. Four stones are admitted four times each to the sweat lodge, representing the four directions. There are prayers and singings as well as pipe smoking during the two-hour ceremony. Ontario Multifaith Council on Spiritual and Religious Care (OMCSRC).

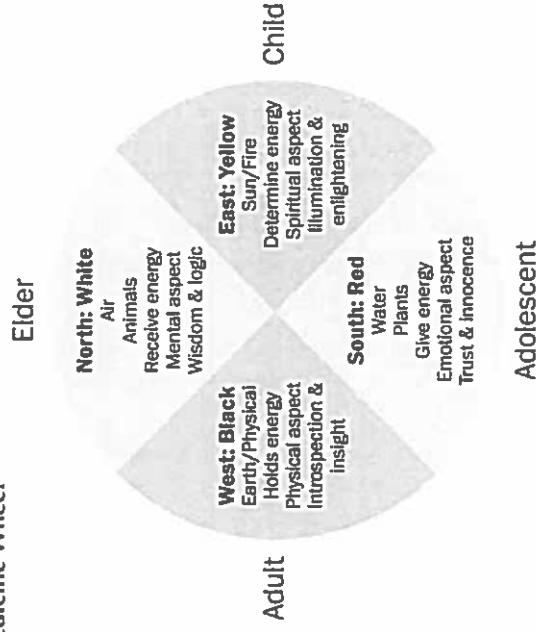
to the fuller realm of Spirit. When we return to the Spirit World, we reclaim our full lives and selves. Therefore, we do not see death as final. On the contrary, death is only a beginning, a transition. In fact, in most Aboriginal languages a word or term for death simply does not exist. Death is not a punishment but a reward. As a young child, I was not afraid of death because I was taught to not be afraid of death but rather to embrace it. Children were taught that we had more to fear in life than in death. Death is a transformation. I celebrate the transition from this life to the next, and accompany people on their journey into the Spirit World, from the first breath to the last within this cycle of life. Aboriginal experience of the Spirit World is very present and practical. Dreams and visions play an important part in this. There are various traditional, ritual, and symbolic approaches to the end of life. They include use of grandfather/mother rocks, cutting of hair, star blankets for burial, and the symbolism of colors of clans and of beading.

We believe that our destiny is already laid out for us. Everyone is born with certain tasks that we are given to complete in this life. Even though it is laid out for us, we can change our destiny by the choices we daily make. We are in control, to a certain degree, and can strongly influence the course of our own lives. For example, many in my culture have a hard time understanding that alcohol is taboo. It is not beneficial for life, and the body does not require it. It is a choice. We understand it to be a poison, yet so many are affected by it. Some studies have even suggested that Aboriginal people might have a gene which makes us more susceptible to alcohol.

We do not see ill health as a punishment but as a natural part of our life cycle. Everything gets diseased, including trees, fish, air, and earth. Ill health is part of the flow of nature. We believe that we are all responsible for our own health. When we are sick, we can look to ourselves and question ourselves—what did I do or not do? Sickness does not just happen—there is a reason for it, perhaps even a purpose.

Community is a big part of our society. Ill health and dysfunction ultimately stem from lack of community. Community is our foundation, our structure, our connection to life. We have a responsibility to members of our community. All members are equal, and all communities are equal. All play a part—one within the other. All contribute to life. There are several fundamental beliefs that are central to our communal culture's worldview, as briefly presented below.

## The Medicine Wheel



We hold that each of us has a Medicine Wheel that describes who and what we are.<sup>5</sup> It represents the four directions, the four seasons, the four races (yellow, white, red, black), the four stages of life, and the four areas of our human self—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. Used as an analytical tool, the Medicine Wheel can function as our guide to life; and when considered properly from the time of our birth, it can help us live a life free of major problems. There is a reason for everything in life—a root cause. The Medicine Wheel helps us stay centered and balanced. Take, for example, a toothache. If we do not attend to it, the physical pain can begin to affect us emotionally and even spiritually. If we care for the root cause, we can avoid the pain growing into the other areas. If we return to it and pay attention to it, we are healthier in all dimensions of life. Life never stays the same, and we are changing every second. If we are out of balance, our emotions can also affect our physical well-being.

### Sacred Teachings

We hold to seven central Sacred Teachings: love, respect, courage, humility, truth, honesty, and wisdom. The importance of the Sacred

<sup>5</sup> The Medicine Wheel is an ancient symbol arising from within many Aboriginal communities, and there are diverse Aboriginal views and practices related to it. The Medicine Wheel can be adapted to many uses; however, the emphasis is always on the need for harmony and balance within oneself, with others, and with all creatures on earth. It provides a graphic reminder that change is inevitable, life is a developmental process, and seeking wholeness is a most valuable goal.

McKellar, Armitte / Journey toward Creator and the realm of peace | 25

Teachings is to direct our life well and lead us to a good outcome if we follow them. Following these teachings leads to a balanced path. It is important to live one's life in light of all seven teachings—spiritually, physically, and psychologically (that is, emotionally and mentally). All are equally important and interconnected. All seven teachings should be equally balanced in life. None should be neglected. The teachings are a guideline and offer instructions as to how we should live our lives. Different peoples have similar, though somewhat varied, sacred teachings. These vary between tribal groups. Often the Sacred Teachings are spoken of at rituals and ceremonies—sometimes one or two are focused on. These Sacred Teachings are introduced in childhood. As we mature, we take them to the next level. For example, a child's concept of love is different than an adult's—but as the child grows older and more mature, their conception of love expands and develops as well.

### Oral teachings/life teachings of Elders

Life—how does one live and how does one view life itself (work, sleep, eating, drinking, interaction with people and with land)? A big part of First Nations belief is that we spend a lot of time connected to the earth because the earth is our mother, the mother of everything. The earth sustains our life. Many First Nations people have traditionally not been formal gardeners, because we believe that everything we need the land provides. Food can come directly from her, and does not need to be planted by our own hand. Likewise, we will not cut down a tree if we can wait for it to fall on its own or use wood from a tree which has already fallen.

### Dream catcher

The dream catcher is a tool that was given to First Nations people through a vision, to assist the children in separating bad dreams from good dreams. Dream catchers hang over babies in cradles and over young children in their beds. The webbing in the dream catcher allows the good dreams to go through and the bad dreams to get caught and held there. The webbing catches nightmares, which filter down and get caught in the feathers hanging below. And then these nightmares get burned by the sun when its rays touch the feathers in the morning.

I was told a story about a Kokum (grandparent) who was taking her little grandson for a walk. They walked along the path for a while, and then the boy saw a spider web along the side of the path. The boy picked up a stick and was ready to break the web. But the boy's Kokum said, "No," and explained that this web was Grandfather Spider's home, and that it

was important to let Grandfather Spider live in peace. Later that night, Grandfather Spider came to the home of the Kokum and her grandson while the grandson was sleeping. He gave the dream catcher to the Kokum in thanks for saving his home from the little boy.

### Drum

The sounding of the drum is the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Its rhythm reconnects us to the earth, our own mother, each time we hear it. The drum is a sacred object, and we use the drum often. There are specific drum teachings and singings that we use to assist with healing. In addition to the drum, rattles and whistles are often used in healing ceremonies.

### Life

Life is sacred. We are dependent on it. It is not to be taken for granted. The sun, air, water, fire, and all elements of nature are essential to life. I see cities, sidewalks, and concrete as scabs on Mother Earth. They prevent Mother Earth from breathing well; they smother her. A sacred prediction talks about the eighth and final fire; that within that time the earth will become sick, children will be attacking parents and vice versa, earth will crumble, and waters will rise. This will start in the east and proceed around the earth, to the north. Earth will be cleansed and renewed. First Nations people will reclaim their sacredness. Others will seek them out to rebuild equally. Some traditional people have been preparing for this.

The sources of our beliefs and values come from revelations. These revelations come to Elders and to medicine men and medicine women. They are then passed along. Much wisdom is contained in sacred scrolls which are held by shamans. One of these scrolls resides in the Manitoba Museum.

My Kokum (grandmother) first introduced me to the teachings as a young boy. Kokum would tell me these stories from the same rocking chair. She would sit down in that chair and ask for a cup of tea, and I knew that that meant it was "story time." So I would come and sit with her and listen, and the rest of my family would leave us alone. My Kokum would tell me stories knowing that I would not understand fully until later. Wisdom from these stories did come to me as I grew. Over time, I learned also from others' grandparents, and then from connecting with people in the world, and from other Elders, shamans, and medicine people.

I had a strong awareness of being on the "Elder path" from a fairly young age. This was why intentional wisdom was shared with me by my

Kokum, who had this awareness of my "Elder path" as well—though I had to grow into it. The status of Elder is never sought; it is bestowed. Although I knew for many years that this was my path, I was surprised when the title was bestowed upon me. I was not sure I was yet ready for it.

Our history is based almost entirely on oral tradition—stories and songs—handed down to others via the elders. Teachings regarding healing and wholeness depend somewhat on the various tribal groups or societies (i.e., I am from the Medewin Society). These rules and wisdom teachings are handed down by the elders, including teachings about healthy living—i.e., how to live, build a home, ensure the home is balanced and well, and not sick. Teachings about how to be healthy and stay healthy are embedded in our wisdom. The Medicine Wheel encompasses all teachings, and they all interlock and speak of health.

Each person is equally important, and has duties and commitment to life to be the best they can be. It is good to be reminded to live life to the fullest and to keep in mind the balance of wellness. Take water for instance. It is essential to remember its importance and how it nourishes us. Understanding and appreciating the simplicities of life are also very important. The sun rises every day, the moon sets every day. We should let life flow. But we always want to alter, change, or fix it. Because we are not happy with ourselves, we want to change our surroundings. We think it is easier to change our surroundings than to change ourselves. We would be wise to leave nature alone and live in harmony with it, rather than trying to conquer it.

### Caregiving practice

There is an assumption that I work only with First Nations people. That is not the case; I offer care to anybody who needs it. Many Aboriginal teachings actually apply to everyone. People are human. We take care of people as much as we can with the tools that we have. I look at similarities rather than at differences. We all have similar needs and wants. I can provide spiritual care for all. Many people are spiritual but not religious, and there is a difference.

Some specific teachings are geared primarily to First Nations (similar to how Sacrament of the Sick is a ritual of Roman Catholics). I try to be there to provide emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual support. I perform numerous ceremonies. These include medicine smudging, the pipe ceremony, the naming ceremony, the clan-giving ceremony, and the giving of traditional names. I care for people in trauma, for those who face difficult diagnoses, for those who often suffer from loneliness. I often care

for those facing end of life issues and assist the dying in traveling to the other side, through traditional songs and rituals. The traditional drum often plays an important part of the ceremonies. I care for the drum and provide for patient access to the drum. I am also involved in certain rituals for the hospital, such as naming of the library section for Aboriginal works. Apart from performing the traditional Aboriginal ceremonies, I basically practice just as other Spiritual Health Specialists.<sup>6</sup> When Aboriginal patients are reluctant to follow the suggestions of the health care, I also stress the importance of modern medicine in balancing traditional care.

It is never impossible for me to provide spiritual care as a Traditional Aboriginal person, yet there are challenges. It is only difficult when we allow certain things to interfere. I need to remember that I am just the conduit for the Creator. A true healer or medicine man or woman will not identify as such. I just need to be calm and care for anybody who needs my care.

It is hard sometimes to deal with the build-up of pain. I feel this very strongly on behalf of my people, especially youth and the incidence of suicide among them. I find it hard to know that so many are born into unhealthy environments full of despair, where the only means of escape is, unfortunately, escaping from the family, which then creates new problems. It is painful to watch this cycle which repeats itself in terrible ways. I want to say to my people: "Let's not do it this way. Let's not have our children killing themselves. We can rise as a community."<sup>7</sup>

There are numerous ways that the Aboriginal tradition can enrich and supplement the field of spiritual care. The Aboriginal tradition brings a balance and simplicity and overall comfort; also, the emphasis on ritual is particularly enriching, as illustrated in the following vignette.

*One day in the early fall, I was paged to companion and provide support to a family whose loved one was a patient in our Medical Intensive Care Unit. The patient was a brother, a husband, a father, and a grandfather to those gathered around the bed, and was clearly also a friend to many who were unable to be present with him in the ICU. The family gathered was a close-knit family, and it was obvious that the patient in the bed was beloved to each one of them, and that they were already feeling the ache of his dying.*

*As the patient was nearing the end of his life, and was not conscious, the*

*family was pleased to have me lead them in a ritual for this gentle man. I invited them to gather around him in a circle and place their hands on him, or on one another. I offered a traditional prayer and sang a song in Ojibway. The ritual then became a time of laughter, tears, and storytelling as I invited all present to share memories and words of their time with him. We heard a story from a ten-year old grandson, who talked about walking down the country roads with his grandpa and what it felt like to hold his grandpa's hand for so many quiet walks together. We heard various family members share words and stories of the time they had known and loved him. After each one had offered words and memories, the patient's granddaughter sang a song in Ojibway that her grandpa had sung to her many times.*

*We then moved to the Hope Room,<sup>8</sup> where the ritual continued. I continued singing, chanting, and drumming, as the family gathered and prepared for the ceremony. In honour of the patient's life, and to help him along on his journey, we joined together in a smudging ceremony. I began singing a Traveling Song,<sup>9</sup> and the family joined in. All together, the family's voices joined as one as they sang their love to him, and as they sang their support for his journey into the next life.*

*Finally, we ended with each of them saying Ki-wa-ba-min, or, "we'll see you later." We left the Hope Room, returned to the MICU, and gathered once more around the bed. Once more I sang to the patient in Ojibway—and the family moved in very close. There was so much love around that bed! Twenty minutes later the patient passed away, and again we said, Ki-wa-ba-min. "We'll see you later."*

The Aboriginal tradition is about being very open and nonjudgmental. It allows a person to tap into their own spirit. Awareness of our purpose and place in life and in nature is important. It offers a unique perspective and a different kind of grounding. The Tradition also provides enriching contributions to the field of spiritual care in these ways: awareness of, and emphasis on, dreams and the meaning one might find within them; awareness of our connectedness to the earth, and remembering the sacredness of all that is around us; awareness of the cycles—of the seasons, of life, of the Medicine Wheel; following the cycles of nature as part of the natural rhythm; and remembering we are not here to subdue or change

<sup>8</sup> The Hope Room is a room adjacent to our Sanctuary space and is used often in ceremonies and rituals of many kinds. The Hope Room has direct ventilation to the outdoors, so smudging in this space occurs frequently.

<sup>9</sup> The Travelling Song is meant to accompany the patient on his walk toward Creator and as he prepares to enter the Spirit World.

<sup>6</sup> Spiritual Health Specialist is the name of spiritual caregivers at the Health Sciences Centre, the largest health care center in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

<sup>7</sup> On a personal level, I must add that from time to time I also experience racism from hospital staff. It is subtle—reflected in a look, in actions, or in speaking.

or affect nature—but that nature is what we follow. We will never succeed at changing the world; rather, we must look to ourselves to change.

### **Qualities of spiritual caregivers**

As I see it, there are several essential qualities of heart that a spiritual caregiver must have. They must have a pure heart that is willing to be there for anyone, with genuine love and concern, as well as respect and honor for all people. They must not be selfish, but genuinely respectful and comfortable with themselves for who they are, acknowledging their own gifts. They must believe that we are all here for a reason and have a place in life. They must be mindful that not all people are alike, but that we all have much in common. A spiritual caregiver must live with integrity and honesty.

A spiritual caregiver must have a good knowledge and understanding of what life means to them, while being respectful to all. They must understand that life is sacred and that their lives are intertwined with those of other people, including those to whom they are giving care. They must not seek to “take advantage” of life but to be receptive to where life leads. They must be respectful and especially be aware of respect that is owed to others, such as Kokums and the elderly. They must also be careful to respect the life journey of the patient and remember that they too could be in the same position someday. They must be willing to share their own knowledge and experience and realize that sickness can also be a teaching; that it is there for a reason. In any given setting, a spiritual caregiver must possess the qualities and skills of being nonjudgmental, open, accepting, kind, polite, compassionate, versed in “people skills,” able to listen (not just hear), and able to see (not just look at) someone.

Though there is no “training” to be an Elder per se, deeply rooted knowledge and life experience is crucial. Also crucial is training in communication skills, empathy, perseverance, understanding of human behavior, and counseling skills. A spiritual caregiver must seek education in these things, which can come in a variety of ways. They should seek formal training in many of these areas.

We are all human. We must move forward beyond our differences and our labels. No one is exempt from pain or sickness. We all have a responsibility to our fellow human beings regardless of whether we are rabbis, priests, or elders; that is what makes us human. We are one.

# Multifaith Views in Spiritual Care

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2013

Published by Pandora Press  
Kitchener, Ontario

In collaboration with the SIPCC  
Society for Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counseling  
Gesellschaft für interkulturelle Seelsorge und Beratung  
Düsseldorf, Germany