# Indigenous Healing: Mental Health and the Path of the Condor


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> *Alverto Taxo, a Quechua Medicine Man from the Andes Mountains in Ecuador sang in Spanish a lilting, enchanting song to Creator. Then he spoke of the condor of the south and the eagle of the north, a reference to the ancient Incan prophecy that one day the great sacred birds of South and North America would fly together and embrace a new, healthier future: merging intelligence and precision with open, feeling hearts.*
>
> —McFadden (2012)

## Introduction

There is a two-thousand-year-old legend found within various indigenous/first nations communities about two possible paths humanity can take. These paths are represented by highly symbolic images within indigenous traditions, the eagle and the condor. "An ancient prophecy, shared by indigenous people throughout the Americas, says when the Eagle of North America and the Condor of South America unite, the spirit of peace will awaken on Earth. After waiting for millennia, many native peoples believe the time is now" (Crowley, 2007, p. 1). These two symbols represent fundamentally distinct worldviews that have historically been in conflict. In the prophecy, the eagle represents the North, masculine energy, the mind, and industry. The condor, in contrast, represents the South, feminine energy, the heart, and intuition. In the prophecy, it is predicted that those who choose the eagle's path will become so powerful that those who choose the condor path will be at risk of being driven into extinction. The prophecy also suggests, though it is not assured, that in time these two paths may find a balance where both the eagle and the condor

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are able to share the sky. Yet, in our present world, and isomorphically within the field of family therapy (FT), these two paths are out of balance.

Perhaps the eagler and condor prophecy held meaning for me (DC) because I was born in and raised in the United States (USA) but my parents are first-generation immigrants from a small village in Goa, India. I was shaped by the modern, westernized world in which I was immersed, but also by the eastern spiritual traditions and teachings of mystical Christianity that I was introduced to at home. For me, coming of age meant, in part, finding a balance between vastly different worldviews, not unlike the eagle and condor. I suspect that this has contributed to my passion for exploring and studying the different lenses through which humans make sense of their worlds. I have traveled extensively throughout my life, seeking to learn from as many different cultures and healing traditions as possible. Most recently this led me to pursue my master's degree in Mexico City, where I had the opportunity to provide systemic therapy to local Mexicans as well as English-speaking expatriates and currently, I reside in the USA, providing community-based therapy in North Carolina, to individuals and families affected by severe mental health issues, substance abuse, and human trafficking.

I (JJP) am a Caucasian male from a Latter-day Saint (LDS) background, who was born in the USA but moved to Mexico City for work. I opened a mental health clinic where I have worked with both local Mexican and international couples and families, both in English and in Spanish. I provide therapy to clients from significant economic extremes, from recently arriving refugees (primarily from Venezuela) to those among most economically advantaged. I often work with binational couples that are negotiating national, economic, and cultural differences that in some ways mirror many of the value differences highlighted in the eagle and the condor prophecy. The eagle and the condor prophecy also resonated with me because it was reminiscent of an influential conversation he had with a shamanic healer during a time when I was thinking of making a significant change in my life path. In 2005, I was first considering moving to Mexico full time to open a new mental health-training program. When I shared his struggle to make the decision with a local healer, the shaman simply commented, "The United States is sort of like the head. Mexico is more like the heart. My guess is that you have spent enough time in the head and that being in the heart would be good for you." It has been well over a decade since I moved to Mexico and it still feels like no truer words could have been spoken. Every day Mexico continues to teach me heart wisdom that feels like a fundamentally different fountain of knowledge. Also, perhaps the prophecy of the eagle and the condor resonated so much for me because for 12 years I have struggled with how to run a program that has to meet US accreditation and licensing requirements, hence the influence of the eagle, while doing so within a Latin American context, hence the influence of the condor. In many ways, the challenge has been to find a way to create a space for both the eagle and condor paths to coexist.

Mental health practice in the USA, including FT, is heavily influenced by the eagle's path, which is synonymous with a Western worldview. Unfortunately, the condor's path, synonymous with an indigenous worldview, has had far less influence, and as a result, the field has been missing out on the opportunity to benefit

from the insights and wisdom associated with this worldview. In this chapter, we address one particularly salient aspect of the indigenous worldview, namely the focus on and reverence for nature. The field of FT, because it is so heavily dominated by the eagle's path, has devoted scant attention to considering humanity's relationship with nature and the role nature can play in the addressing human sickness and suffering. We also examine how the Western and indigenous worldviews each think about and relate to nature, followed by a discussion of the implications for clinical practice. We conclude by presenting a variety of clinical interventions informed by an indigenous worldview and suggestions for how therapists can employ these as a way of utilizing nature in clinical practice and in so doing, honor the path of the condor.

## Nature and a Western Worldview

Western thought is structured around the concept of dualism that leads to an either-or conceptualization of reality. Dualism leads to constructing reality in terms of binaries, such as light/dark, male/female, and spirit/flesh, which are then assigned oppositional values whereby one is superior to the other. Hence, light is better than dark, spirit is superior to the flesh, males are more valuable than females, and so forth. One of the most significant ways that dualism shapes reality within Western culture is with respect to the relationship between human beings and nature. From a Western perspective, there is distinct divide between culture and nature, between human animals and other animals, and between human beings and nature as a whole. Moreover, human beings and culture are viewed as superior to other animals and nature. This perceived separation and assumption of differential values are the basis for much of the present day exploitation and abuse of the earth.

A Western worldview fosters the idea that human beings exist outside of and above nature, and hence, the land and all other living beings on the planet are viewed as resources to be used by humans. These ideas have deep historical roots. For example, the concept of dualism and the idea that humans are separate from and superior to nature can be traced back to the ancient Greeks and philosophers like Plato and Aristotle who were proponents of transcendental dualism. Later, dualism was further reinforced with the emergence of Judeo-Christian principles that conceptualize human beings as separate and distinct from other animals and from nature in general. The bible describes humankind as the only being on earth that is made in God's image, and it advances the notion that humankind is separate from and above nature. The origin story in Christianity is that humankind is placed within nature but is not a part of it. According to these scriptures, God created the world and gave humankind dominion over nature and charged humankind with tending or cultivating the earth. "In Genesis man is the crown of the creative process; he is in the image of God and thus sharply distinguished from the remainder of the creaturely world. He is told by God to 'have dominion over the animals, and to subdue the earth'" (Barr, 1972, p. 11).

Nature, in the bible, is framed as wildness that is dangerous, hence humans need to exert influence and authority over nature lest it get out of control and destroy humanity. This idea that nature is wild and dangerous, and in need of being tamed and mastered, underpins much of how Western society has, for centuries, interacted with other animals and the earth. This perception has been used to justify many of the domineering and exploitative tactics humans have engaged in relative to nature (e.g., domesticating animals to exploit their milk, eggs, wool, and flesh, establishing governmental agencies charged with managing and often manipulating natural processes so humans can extract as much as possible from the earth and other animals, etc.).

## Nature and an Indigenous Worldview

Whereas a Western worldview perceives nature as existing separate from and belonging to humans, an indigenous/first nations worldview perceives humans as inextricably connected to and a part of nature. Indigenous communities across the globe devote significant attention to cultivating human–nature relationships based on respect and reciprocity. They see their lives as deeply interconnected with the lives of all other living beings, the land, and the whole of nature. While humans and nature have distinguishable boundaries, these boundaries are fluid, thus, the well-being of humans is embedded in the well-being of the natural world. To harm or reject nature is to harm or reject oneself, because whatever actions we take ultimately affects the entire web of life. Some indigenous cultures think of the earth as their larger body, giving rise to a relationship whereby one needs to care for the earth with the same respect and wisdom that one would care for the physical human body (Davis, 2013). From an indigenous perspective, many actions commonplace within Western society are illogical and destructive. For example, polluting a river for financial gain is as senseless an act as an individual knowingly drinking poison. Because nature and the connection between humanity and nature are fundamental to an indigenous perspective, nature plays a primary role in how health and illness are understood (Davis, 2011). Within an indigenous worldview, the relationships that people have with nature, or do not have, inform their degree of health or illness, and nature plays a pivotal role in fostering healing whenever there is sickness and suffering.

## Links Between an Indigenous Worldview and Family Therapy

While most FTs are guided by a Western worldview, the values and beliefs reflected in an indigenous worldview are more congruent with many foundational systemic concepts (e.g., interconnectedness, wholeness, reciprocity, circularity, and contextualism). Indigenous communities around the world are diverse with complex and

unique histories, beliefs, and practices, yet they are united by an overarching set of values and beliefs regarding the relationship between humanity and nature, and how to conceptualize and approach healing through nature. In the following section we discuss several concepts held among indigenous communities with respect to nature that are compatible with family therapy, and that can help to guide FTs in how to incorporate nature in clinical practice and life.

## *Wholeness*

An indigenous worldview is rooted in the concept of wholeness, which is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In the West, one sees a person, a dog, or a tree, and the perception of these individual parts forms an end point. But among indigenous communities, recognition of the parts leads to seeing how each part is tied to other parts and how together they form a whole that is greater than these parts. Hence, the person, the dog, and the tree are interconnected, and whatever health and wellness any one of these parts has, is linked to the overall health and wellness of the other parts, because ultimately, they form a whole. This notion of wholeness is highly systemic and is therefore highly compatible with FT theory and practice.

While both indigenous communities and FTs believe in the concept of wholeness, FTs have yet to apply this concept to its full logical extension by recognizing that all life is interconnected, and what we do to the earth, and to all other beings, we do to ourselves. Norwegian philosopher and deep ecologist, Arne Naess (2008), referred to the expanded sense of identity that indigenous communities experience as the "ecological self." He argued that developing a notion of self in ecological terms is an important part of ensuring the health and well-being of individuals, communities, and the earth as a whole. Because of the systemic basis of FT, the field is ideally positioned to follow examples indigenous communities set through their understanding of the ecological self that recognizes that health and well-being require that we live connected to and in balance with nature.

## *Communication with Nature*

From an indigenous perspective, nature is a source of deep wisdom and can generate essential healing in the face of illness and pain. In one of his landmark works, *Dream of the Earth* (1988), cultural historian and eco-theologian, Thomas Berry, draws on the indigenous knowledge and practice of communication with nature, calling attention to the human need, "to go into the earth, as the source whence we came, and ask for its guidance, for the earth carries the psychic structure, as well as the physical form of every living being upon the planet" (p. 195). For instance, consulting an ancient oak tree or a rushing river can be a pathway to finding insight and

guidance. Through the use of song, dance, ritual, ceremony, prayer, and guided states of altered consciousness all in relationship to nature, indigenous people seek and avail themselves of the depth of wisdom offered by the land, animals, ancestors, and spirits, and through this open communication with nature, they gain what is needed for healing and health.

FTs understand the vital role communication plays in both fostering and helping to resolve problems. An entire sub-theory within FT explains how disordered communication patterns are tied to family dysfunction, and many other sub-theories emphasize the importance that clear, direct, open communication plays in healing relational injuries and supporting healthy system functioning. The appreciation that FTs have for the importance of healthy communication is compatible with the importance that an indigenous worldview places on humans communicating with nature in clear, open, and congruent ways. In particular, being able to listen and hear is a key to healthy relating and functional living and learning how to listen to and hear nature is a critical part of being able to heal and repair illness and pain. When people open themselves to communicate directly and authentically with nature, they can hear the wisdom nature has to offer for how to heal and live peacefully. This openness also makes it possible to hear nature's warnings about behaviors that we may be engaging in that are causing sickness and suffering. Nature's lessons are not always gentle. Like human beings, nature can be dark, turbulent, irritating, and ugly. Nature can also be downright violent. Every year thousands of lives torn apart and many are lost to hurricanes, flooding, mudslides, and other extreme weather events. Rather than simply dismissing these occurrences as natural disasters, perhaps we also need to consider why there is an escalation in this kind of nature communication. What are the messages that nature is conveying and what lessons might there be for us to learn and apply both to our relationships with the ecosystem, and within our other relational systems as well.

## Interventions

Indigenous knowledge and perspectives that engage both the mind and heart can be employed by therapists to help individuals restore balance and harmony both internally and within their families/relational systems and communities. I (DC) first learned about many of these practices while participating in an environmental, social, and spiritual justice training hosted by the Pachamama Alliance, an organization that advocates for indigenous rights and the rights of nature. I participated in an intensive week-long training deep in the mountains of New Mexico with others from all over the world. Many of the practices I learned there were deeply transformational and I have enjoyed integrating them into my work as an FT. These interventions offer creative ways to guide individuals and families toward a deeper sense of connection with nature, with each other, and with themselves. My learning of these interventions occurred both through my direct experiences and through my study of the work of general systems scholar and deep ecologist Joanna Macy. Her

book *The Updated Guide to the Work That Reconnects: Coming Back to Life* richly details a variety of healing and transformation interventions that draw from indigenous roots. FTs, with their understanding of systems theory, are well positioned to utilize these ideas with couples, families, and other groups.

## *Medicine Walk*

The Medicine Walk is a form of pilgrimage practice that can invite individuals, couples, or families to explore and deepen their relationship with nature as they seek insight and guidance preceding and during challenging events and life transitions. Many indigenous communities around the world utilize some form of pilgrimage practice that is meant to lead to vision, clarity, guidance, and purpose. Traditionally this process is done individually but following the exercise, it can be powerful for couples or families to share their experiences and debrief with each other. Each participant is instructed to find a wilderness area, ideally where there are few if any opportunities to interact with other humans. They are to try to find a space away from the commotion and noise that often comes with living in urban settings. Participants are then asked to identify and write into a journal that they will carry with them, a question, concern, or intention that they are carrying in their mind or heart. Couples or families/relational systems can be instructed to ask a question, raise a concern, or state an intention that is relevant to their relationships. It is recommended that participants spend at least 10 min meditating or quietly focusing on their question, concern, or intention before setting out on their walk.

When participants feel ready, they are to start wandering; after which their only instruction is to be present, attentive, and to allow themselves to be guided by the signs that nature provides. If they find that a butterfly or a tree catches their eye, or they notice a cluster of mushrooms on a dead log in the distance, they are encouraged to move toward it and to listen for the guidance being offered. As they continue to wander, they are to pay attention to what they encounter along their path; and to the emotions, yearnings, and insights that surface as a result. All of this can be received as "medicine" that is helping move them toward the answers and healing that they seek. It is highly recommended that they stop to write about their sensory experience and the visceral feelings that move them as they complete their medicine walk since these may provide insight, courage, and wisdom for the future. Alternatively, during or immediately following the walk, participants may write a letter to themselves about the perspective that emerged while immersed in the wilderness setting (Davis, 1998). When working with couples and families/relational systems, therapists can have members share with each other the insight they gained during their medicine walks and how it may relate to their relationships.

### *Solo Time in Nature*

This simple practice invites individuals to connect with nature on a sacred and intimate level. It offers a sensory experience of being in relationship with the land and nonhuman life. Over time, it can cultivate a sense of belonging. At least a full day is suggested, although this practice can be extended, if desired. In preparation for this experience participants should be instructed to pack what they may need for a full day, including emergency items, light, food, and water. They should also bring a journal to note observations.

Participants are instructed to go to a wilderness area and wander until they identify a specific space, on the bank of a river, amidst patch of trees, in the middle of an open field, etc., that inexplicably draws them or seems to capture their attention. They are guided to not settle on the first place that they come to, but to really pay attention for a space that seems to draw them in, as if with an unexplainable magnetic pull. Once they have found the space, they are first asked to sit silently and observe. They can allow their focus to be drawn in by the insect moving across a blade of grass, the rock peeking out from underneath the leaves, or the red tailed hawk soaring above. The instruction is simply to become comfortable and familiar with the space, as if getting to know a new friend. When they feel comfortable, they are to begin engaging in conversation with the space. There may be thoughts or questions that arise as they pay attention to the sights and sounds around them and the emotions stirring within them. It is suggested that they have these conversations out loud as this helps to bring the experience of connection to a deeper level and can truly bring the relationship to life. The heightened attention and willingness to be fully present to the space allow communication to happen, though it may take some time for participants to be open and receptive to this communion. For this reason, sometimes it takes engaging in this process several times or over a longer period of time.

As the end of their time in their nature space participants are asked to make an offering to the space, as you might if you visited someone's home. This offering can take the form of a poem, a dance, words of gratitude, drops of water, prayer, etc. This component of the activity helps to cultivate a practice of reciprocity in the person's relationship with nature.

A way to adapt this for couples can be to have them find a secluded place in the wilderness where they can completely disrobe, sit facing each other, and take each other's hands.[1] Their directive should be to sit in silence and observe nature while recognizing that this includes themselves and their partner. When they feel sufficient time has passed and they are fully present, the couple can discuss what nature might have to communicate about their relationship. They also can talk directly to nature. When the couple feels it is time, the exercise should culminate in making an offering. For example, they might make a promise of how they will seek to live

[1] Obviously the disrobing part of this activity is contingent upon weather conditions and possible regulations about nudity on public lands. Being aware of local laws and regulations is advised.

together in harmony with nature. After returning to therapy, the therapist can facilitate a dialogue aimed helping the couple to connect the insights and lessons they took away from this experience to their relationship and how they may navigate relational difficulties.

## *Truth Mandala*

This is a ritual that can provide a unique structure for acknowledging, owning, and honoring difficult or intense emotions that individuals may be holding. I (DC) first learned about the Truth Mandala as an attendee of Joshua Gorman's "Generation Waking Up" and Joanna Macy's "Work That Reconnects" trainings and workshops. It was introduced as a ritual for honoring pain about the multitude of environmental and social injustices happening around the world, which can be a powerful first step toward fully recognizing how the state of the natural world impacts our own mental health, relationships, and well-being, and how reconnecting with nature can lead toward healing and wholeness. However, I have found that the Truth Mandala can be useful to address many different forms of pain and injustice. This activity can work well with groups as well as with couples, families, and even individuals.

The Truth Mandala creates a unique and safe opportunity for the expression of the deep suffering that participants may be quietly and often silently enduring. It can be a tremendously healing experience to have non-judgmental others who bear witness and hold space for this expression as it may be the first time that participants are being invited and encouraged to give a voice to their emotions and truth, whatever they may be.

The Truth Mandala can be used in both indoor and outdoor settings depending on the size and type of group or family. The facilitator/therapist directs participants to sit in a relatively tight circle, creating a safe container that can hold what is going to be shared. If this experience is being conducted with a small family/relational system, facilitator/therapists can create a circle using sticks or stones and have participants stand on the outside of the circle. The facilitator/therapist then marks four quadrants within the circle which can also be done with sticks or stones that can be returned to their place after the ritual is closed (if performing the activity in a natural space). The facilitator/therapist then places a different, symbolic object from nature in the center of each quadrant and one in the center of the larger circle. After the objects have been placed, the facilitator/therapist goes to each item, picks it up, and explains what it represents. For example, the four quadrants commonly represent fear, anger, sadness, and emptiness, but the facilitator/therapist can select these based on the needs of a given group. The space in the center of the circle is left open so that it can represent a space for an emotion or feeling that does not quite fit in the designated four quadrants. After explaining what each object and quadrant represents, the facilitator/therapist invites participants to spontaneously, one at a time, enter a quadrant, pick up the item, and express in some what they are feeling.

It should be made clear to the group or family that the Truth Mandala is intended to be a sacred space for expression, not for argument, debate, or even dialogue. Additionally, what is said inside the circle during the activity is not to be processed or discussed outside of the sacred space of the Mandala. Setting these guidelines up front can help participants feel more comfortable about sharing without the fear that they will be in any way silenced or judged. Time allowing, an individual can enter the circle to share more than once, and they can enter as few or as many of the quadrants as they want. Individuals who are not in the circle speaking are asked simply to be fully present for their fellow group or family members and to bear witness to what is being shared. When an individual feels their turn is complete and exits the circle, the group can acknowledge them with a simple phrase or gesture chosen by the group ahead of time, and the next person may then enter the circle (Macy & Brown, 2014).

### *Council of All Beings*

This group ritual aims to illuminate and strengthen awareness of the interdependence between humans and the natural world. It offers a creative way for individuals to connect and empathize with, and also speak on behalf of other life forms. Giving non-human beings a voice for us to empathize with them may enhance our inclination to treat them with greater compassion and respect. At its heart, this activity fosters a true communion with the natural world and increases awareness of the emotional and environmental degradation caused by our disconnection from it. It is recommended to do this activity with participants in a quiet, outdoor nature setting. This activity works well with both couples and families.

First, participants are asked to allow themselves to be chosen by a being from nature for whom they will speak during a Council that will take place later. The facilitator/therapist can suggest that participants walk quietly around the nature space they are within, paying attention to the nonhuman life forms that they see or that come to mind until they identify which one they will represent at the Council. Once they know which being they want to speak for, they are asked to create a mask that somehow represents that being. Participants are instructed to create their masks in silence so that they can reflect on their being and on preparing to speak on their behalf. When all the masks are ready, participants are asked to gather together in a circle and put on their masks. As the masked participants move into a circle, the facilitator/therapist welcomes everyone and the Council of All Beings is called to order. Members of the Council are asked to go around the circle and identify themselves and who they speak for (e.g., “I am Great White Oak, I speak for all trees.”). After the roll call, Members of the Council are then invited to speak for the beings they represent by describing what it is like to be that particular life form and explaining the positive and negative aspects of their relationship with humans. Finally they are asked to share what unique perspectives and strengths they offer to help bring healing to the planet (Macy & Brown, 2014).

## *Sunrise Offering*

In indigenous cultures around the world, gratitude and reciprocity are key principles that guide the human–nature relationship. Expressing gratitude and offering reciprocity are integral steps toward recognizing that nature is not a resource or object for humans to exploit, but rather is an integral part of the larger web of life. This can be a powerful way to help affirm and strengthen a couple's or family's relationship to nature. Moreover, expressing gratitude and reciprocity are also healthy qualities to embody in human–human relationships as well, and hence these learnings from this exercise also apply directly to couple/family dynamics.

Sunrise Offering entails clinical participants waking up as close to sunrise as possible and going outside. The instructions are to pay attention to the nature that surrounds them and inspires or touches them in any way. As they feel themselves being moved, they are invited to express gratitude for what they are seeing, smelling, feeling, and/or sensing. Though this may feel foreign and uncomfortable to some clinical participants at first, it is important that they attempt to be authentic in their expression of gratitude, offering words, song, dance, or gestures. The intention with this practice is to acknowledge interdependence and to consciously offer praise to the nonhuman life that surrounds us.

## *Rock Talk*

This is an intervention that can awaken and strengthen a couple's ability to communicate with nature. Clinical participants are instructed to silently wander alone in a wilderness setting, holding the perspective that they are a part of the nature that surrounds and supports them. They must wander slowly until they find a small rock that they can hold easily in their palm. When I (DC) was first introduced to this intervention at an "Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream" training, group members were instructed to find a rock that they felt particularly and inexplicably drawn to. Participants should be encouraged to be mindful; not to rush this process or to choose a rock solely based on aesthetic attraction. Once they feel that have found the rock, they are asked to sit quietly and observe it for a while, to hold it in their hands and become familiar with the colors, edges, and textures. When they feel ready, and this may take some time, they are asked to begin having a conversation with the rock. The conversation can begin by introducing themselves, sharing their intention for initiating the conversation, and expressing a genuine desire to connect. Once participants begin to feel comfortable the words usually begin to flow, but as a prompt, therapists can suggest sharing fears, pain, sadness, or giving voice to a question they may be holding in their mind and heart. The content is less important than staying present and receptive. Once participants feel they have shared what they wanted, they turn their attention to the sensual, intuitive, imaginative part of themselves and in a journal, they are directed to record all aspects of what emerges

(e.g., feelings, movements, words, and images). Upon rejoining each other therapists then guide members of the couple or family system to a secluded spot together where they introduce their rocks to each other and share what they have gained. While this practice is intended to be a way of reconnecting with nature, it often leads to the emergence of thoughts and feelings that therapists can use to promote insight and healing relative to participants' relationships with themselves, each other, and nature.

## Concluding Thoughts

It is a divisive and polarizing time in the history of the world. Industrial waste, massive over-consumption, a throwaway culture, and global warming denial all signal that the prophecy of an Eagle path dominating the world has already been fulfilled. We are just beginning to recognize the emotional, psychological, and relational implications of increasing natural disasters, contaminated water, pollution, and pure technological saturation. We believe that both therapists and clinical participants stand to benefit tremendously from an expanded, biocentric perspective that acknowledges the human–nature relationship as an integral factor of mental health and wellbeing. We hope this chapter opens up way for considering what can be learned from an indigenous worldview with respect to our relationship with nature and how to incorporate nature into how we think about sickness and suffering and the interventions we use to foster healing and healthy, balanced living. In short, we hope this chapter provides an opening for family therapists to begin incorporating the path of the Condor into our clinical work.

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