

Vision Quest: The Intersection of Native American Spirituality and Family Therapy



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This chapter offers a description of a Native American vision quest and provides suggestions about how family therapists might support clients who may have had such an experience. It challenges readers to consider the unique insights of Native American culture in the area of spiritual development. It offers a glimpse into a much maligned, persecuted, and ignored spiritual/psychological ritual path of health and healing. Family therapists would do well to consider that for traditional Native Americans, indigenous traditions for healing must always come first and that Western Psychological approaches should be supplementary. At the end of this paper, family constellations, community involvement, spiritual crisis, specific types of questioning, and cultural identity themes for therapy are considered.

More specifically, the following narrative describes a vision quest, a spiritual experience, which I partook in about 15 years ago. I had lived a life in both Native American and the White worlds. I had had many spiritual experiences during Native American dances, chanting, purification ceremonies, and peyote ceremonies. When I went to college, I began to read theology and religious literature from which I borrowed terminology to interpret my spiritual experiences. While the Western concepts were never fully adequate, they did help me to use words to at least understand them partially, and they enabled me to talk to people of other religious perspectives who had had similar experiences. I am convinced that only by sharing some of our unique cultural capital are we able to come to know and respect each other. Nonetheless, I have always been careful to limit my descriptions of my Native American spiritual experiences because as other religious groups attest, when we share too much of the esoteric of our traditions, the sacredness of the rituals may be profaned to such an extent that they become commonplace and consequently lose

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their sacred character. For the most part, what I share here are the psychological dimensions of my experience that occurred within Native American structures. I attempt to share some of the knowledge of our tribal/cultural ritual to allow readers to connect with us but not so much to lose beautiful, secret, esoteric aspects that give us our unique experiences.

A Native American vision quest (the Lakota call it *hanblechia*) entails spending time alone, usually on a remote hill, seeking visions that will guide one in one's future. Each tribe conducts the vision quest ritual differently. My vision quest was guided by a sweat lodge and Sundance group of Lakota, Cheyenne, Cherokee, and Choctaw people. Each summer, tribal Sundancers gather in groups at designated sites to dance for 4 days under the hot sun. Sweat ceremonies and vision quests are often conducted in preparation for the annual Sundances. While my group's primary approaches to sweating and conducting a vision quest were Lakota, they welcomed elements of Choctaw and Cherokee ways. For instance, Choctaw and Cherokee songs were sometimes sung in the sweat lodge, a construction consisting of a frame made of willow branches covered with tarps and blankets where water is poured over hot rocks as participants pray and sing during the sweat or purification ceremony.

Let me contextualize in theory the following account of my uncanny experience. In Lame Deer's (1972) widely recognized description, vision quests entail seeking visions and power to guide and help questers in life. The quester's blanket and pipe, filled with tobacco, provide companionship, protection, and a connection with previous generations. Not merely physical objects, they are part of Spirit, the vitality that imbues every living thing. One whose religion is limited to believing dogma and doctrine and hearing preachers is gravely mistaken to think that he or she can have a vision. To have a vision, one must know that Spirit is everywhere and is communicating to us all the time through inanimate objects, insects, animals, and so on. Lame Deer wrote of spirits of unknown origins who speak with him. He specifically mentioned fear as an emotion that he had to deal with on a deep level while on his vision quest. He explained the importance of support from the persons belonging to his lodge and especially his grandmother in his endeavor. Everyone involved believes that without having a vision the quester will be directionless.

Let me juxtapose Lame Deer's account with the ideas of Western thinkers Carl Jung (1961/1983), Rudolf Otto (1958), and William James (1902/1982), which may help non-tribal people understand the following narrative of my vision quest. Jung wrote, "The symbol is not a sign that veils something everybody knows.... On the contrary, it is an attempt to elucidate, by means of analogy something that still belongs to a domain of the unknown or something yet to be known" (p. 287). Instead of the symbol and/or dream that veils a wish or anxiety or an eruption of something repressed from the past that Freud proposed, Jung added a teleological lens onto symbols in dreams and visions, as representing something that pulls one toward self-actualization. He also added a transcendental element, suggesting that some symbols may be associated with something larger than our individual selves. Jung's perspective resonates both with Lame Deer's vision and with the one I will recount.

One of the most revered theologians of the twentieth century, Rudolf Otto, enumerated a concept of “mysterious tremendum” that is directly related to my vision quest. Mysterious tremendum refers to experiences that are beyond ordinary understanding or explanation. They always entail tremor or fear, but not fear proper. It is a primal fear that is closer to “feeling eerie and uncanny dread” (Otto, 1958, p. 14). He linked it with experiencing something that is not part of everyday ordinary experience. He argued that it has been these spiritual experiences that have prompted myths, symbols, and rituals (p. 64). William James argued that it is not the moral and ethical that is the foundation of the religious experience but the uncanny, unintelligible, wonderful experiences that have perpetuated ongoing religious expression century after century (James, 1982). Many Native American people believe that these types of experiences are invaluable, and continue to utilize rituals to incite heightened awareness. Although the rituals have solitariness as a vital element of the experiences, they are often conducted in the context of family and community.

According to Hill and Pargament (2003), rituals can trigger emotions that strengthen psychological and physiological health and healing. I knew that planning and reasoning about my spiritual predicament could not help me with my emotional and spiritual confusion. Only ritual and symbolism had provided me with the spiritual awareness to move through difficult times in my life. Up until the crisis I had before the vision quest I am about to describe, I had relied on sweat ceremonies and the Native American Church (Peyote Church). Still, I yearned for something more. I felt an emptiness, and needed direction to help me move more in a direction that would lead to greater contentment in my daily life. I realized that my life in general as a professor had congealed into a planned and controlled life that inhibited my spontaneity and connections to the immediate surround.

From the many details that I remember of my first vision quest, I extract here the merest skeleton of a series of events that appear as most important in my own and my family’s current spiritual life. My hope is, that as readers read the events I describe, they will have flashes of their own memories, and in recalling them, they will be able to make connections with spiritual movements in their lives. In recalling the succession of challenging apparitional events in which I was immersed at the time, I was able to identify patterns and themes I had heretofore not recognized.

I had already attended a couple of hundred sweats at various lodges across Oklahoma. In this particular sweat lodge group, I was usually asked to lead one or two songs and had carried the rocks into the lodge a couple of times, but mostly I simply sweat and brought food for the feasts that followed. Each year, in early June, the 12–25 persons who sweat every 2 weeks at this lodge would have a person or two “put on the hill” for a vision quest. I was happy to attend each vision quest as a “supporter.”

One summer evening after a sweat ceremony, I was unexpectedly gifted a pipe. The stone from which it was carved came from Pipestone, Minnesota, and the stem was made out of ash wood. Taking the pipe, I knew I was assuming great responsibility. I was to pray with it regularly, keep it clean, and handle it properly (always holding the stone in my left hand which is closest to my heart). It was suggested that I keep liquor out of my house and that I was to lead a good and pure life.

Soon after I took the pipe, I began to have dreams of “going on the hill.” I dreamed I was at a school I attended as a child. Several children and I were on a small mound in the back of the country schoolhouse. We were playing “king of the hill,” pushing each other off the hill. As soon as I pushed one child down the hill someone would push me, and I would find myself rolling down the hill. Ultimately, when I climbed back to the top, I found myself alone. I sat down cross-legged and looked up into the sky where I saw a hawk circling. I awoke with an inexpressible yearning for a connection to the inner unseen world. I wanted to know the deeper meaning of my life and the obstacles that kept me from evolving as a human being. I considered how I was a professor at a major university and was recognized as being knowledgeable, but lacked the wisdom to know a meaning that would give my life substance and spiritual direction. I talked with my wife and son about the dream and prayed with my pipe about what I should do.

I brought my pipe to Wiley Coyote, who ran our sweat lodge, and offered him my pipe four times. The fourth time he received it and said he would support me on a vision quest. It would begin with preparations on a morning, a sweat on that afternoon and I would be put “on the hill” late on that afternoon. I would stay “out” through two nights and a morning and be brought back to a sweat ceremony about noon. He gave me instructions to: obtain a bucket, a hatchet, a knife, and a blanket, to take with me on the vision quest, tie onto one string, 100 black, 100 red, 100 white, and 100 yellow, three green and two blue tobacco ties (small pouches of cloth containing tobacco). I was to put a prayer into every tobacco tie. I was to make four flags with tobacco offerings, the appropriate colors for each direction. I was also to make a *walutka* (Lakota name for a red square cloth with a conch shell sewed into the center and four tobacco bundles in the four corners of the cloth, which acts as an object on which to meditate while on the quest).

I talked with several people whom I trusted about the vision quest and received what I thought was valuable advice. My extended family had little to say. My father was the person who I spoke to most about it. Though he did not “sweat” or participate in vision quests himself, he was supportive. He accepted that both Choctaw and Cherokee tribal people had practiced these ceremonies, which were originally the ceremonies of different Nations, but because he had become a Christian he was “careful not to mix the spiritual ways because it was “dangerous.” He was proud of me for practicing “Indian ways.” But he was afraid of them himself. Talking to me in his beaded Cherokee baseball hat, he told me that an “Indian friend of his had died of bad circumstances.” He added that they were often around Indians who practiced bad medicine. He told me that he often worried about me being in dangerous situations and that the vision quest was especially dangerous because I would draw both bad and good spirits. He told me that he would support me with prayers. I asked him for the hundredth time if he really cared that I practiced “Indian ways.” He said he was happy that I did. When I asked why, he said, “For selfish reasons. I will be able to come to you after I die and you will know I am here. I will come to the lodge and talk to you. Christians don’t really believe that.” He also told me that it was better to not talk to him about it when my mother was nearby. He explained

what I already knew—that she did not feel I treasured her White heritage as much as I did Dad’s Indian one.

During the months leading up to the vision quest, for about an hour on a daily basis I held my pipe and prayed for others, nature, and about local and world situations and sang Native American songs, mostly Cherokee and Choctaw but also Lakota that I had learned from people who participated in our lodge. I also attended every sweat lodge ceremony we had, which were conducted regularly every other Saturday evening. Every sweat lodge gathering involved prayers for the success of the vision quest for the three of us who were being sent.

In February, I began work on my string of 405 tobacco pouches. I always began by praying with my pipe to the seven directions. Each day, I sat my pipe next to me, laid out five 2 in. square pieces of cloth, put tobacco in one after the other, praying a prayer for someone I knew. I prayed for their successful individual journeys and for their connections to their families, tribe, and others. One after the other, I tied the pouches onto a long string. I always faced the appropriate direction for prayer.

For the first 400 prayers, I envisioned all sorts of people, many whom I had forgotten long ago, arising in my mind. To my surprise, never once did I have to make an effort to conjure anyone up to pray for. I thanked each person for the time and experience they had given me. Then, I quite easily recalled a struggle they had in their lives, which came automatically. A little boy in the first grade showed himself. I remember telling my mother that I loved him because he was so sweet and he had such a country accent. He often wore a red cowboy shirt. He was physically small and weak and was pushed around and looked at the bullies with terrified eyes. He never fought back. I thanked him for the deep sensitivity he demonstrated and prayed that he learned a healthy way to deal with bullies. I saw a boss I had worked with who always thought someone was talking about her behind her back and stealing from her. I also remembered how profound her feelings seemed to be for the welfare of Native American people. I thanked her for helping me develop an even more profound heartfelt connection to tribal people, and I prayed that she would learn to trust the kind people she worked with more and thereby enjoy her life more. Close to the end of making the prayer ties, I thought of my mother. I thanked her for making our Christmases so wonderful with her cooking and her gifts and for supporting me when I chose the life journey of a scholar, which led far away from home. I prayed that we both might connect on a human level that transcended disagreements about religion and cultural lifestyle.

I knew I was learning a great deal praying for an hour each day. It was as though *Unelanvhi* (Cherokee for God) would not let me think self-interestedly. I found myself able to love every person who came to mind truly without judging them. I knew that every person I had ever met was my loving teacher, even if they hated me. I knew without a doubt that we were all helping each other to grow more aware of ourselves as being parts of something more loving and larger than we could imagine.

Summer came early. Temperatures were hitting near 100 °F, and June had not yet arrived. I remember as we were walking down a hot sidewalk in town, my wife told me to be sure to get in a shade. She did not have to say she was talking about the

upcoming vision quest. I loved her so much for her concern. A week before the event, my son went with me to help chop the wood for the sweat and the fire that could not go out while I was on our hills. I remember a rattlesnake crossed the path in front of my son, a Lakota man, and me. The Lakota man said it might be a bad omen. My son quickly looked at me and said, "Not for Choctaws, huh, Dad. They are our most sacred animal. It's going to go well. The spirits are with you." I appreciated his words. Later as we stacked the wood, my son and I began to rush to complete a rick. A Cherokee man said, without looking at us, "Be gentle with these logs. Lay them down easy just as you would grandfather rocks. They are sacred." I thought, thanks for reminding me that everything is holy.

The day before our vision quest, my wife had begun to gather all the things she would need to support me. She had all the ingredients she would need to make fry bread. She and my son had laid out all the parts of the tent they would need for the encampment. They both had their wooden boxes filled with their pipes and tobacco put out on the coffee table. Occasionally, each of them would ask me how I was feeling, but the closer the event came they gave me more and more space.

The day of the vision quest arrived and I had already gone a day and a night without eating or drinking. I told Wiley Coyote and he sternly told me that I should not have done that. He explained that while this ceremony was highly communal, my experience would be solitary. No one would be with me when I was experiencing the extra anguish I would experience because of the extra sacrifice. At about 11 a.m., he told me to get my hatchet and knife. He brought me to an expansive cherry patch and advised me to find four cherry trees about 5 or 6 feet tall and to offer tobacco to earth before cutting them down. Then, I was to bring them back to his pick-up truck. It was swelteringly hot and I quickly became soaked in sweat. After I put them in the pick-up bed, he told me to find a five- or six-foot tall cedar tree and to do the same. He offered me some medicine tea when I came back to the truck but I shook my head. When we returned to the lodge, he and I built the fire in the traditional way we had been taught. The other two questers would not arrive until time to sweat. They had gone through several vision quests before and had their own unique ways of doing it. He told me that I was not to sleep and to never under any circumstances put my pipe down. I replied that I might have to use the bathroom and he said, "You won't need to. You are already depleted of water and food." He told me not to look at or speak to anyone from that moment until the vision quest was over. He had me sit about 30 yards north of the lodge.

I was brought into the lodge and seated across the dug-out hole, facing West. After preliminary remarks, Wiley Coyote asked my son, the rock carrier, to bring in seven stones to create the world. He picked out each rock carefully and with tenderness put them into his pitchfork and slid them into the lodge where they were placed in the sacred directions. The smell of sage and cedar filled the space, participants wiping their bodies with sage and a person tossing cedar on the red-hot stones. Soon, Wiley Coyote told my son to close the flap, then immediately offered a formal prayer, at first in Lakota and then in English, for all living things, including four-legged and winged ones. We all sang along to the songs we had sang in the lodge together one hundred times before, calling in the thunder beings and other spirits.

After four songs, Wiley Coyote called out to open the flap on the west side. A breeze broke through the haze and we were refreshed.

The second round was extraordinarily hot. One of the seven new rocks brought in was the largest I had ever seen in a sweat ceremony. As the pourer flung the water on the rocks, the steam splashed onto and burned our faces. Many prayers were offered during the second round and Wiley Coyote asked me explain why I had chosen to “go on an *Hanblechia*.” I told them that I had found myself in a spiritual crisis that had manifested in several areas of my life. First and foremost I felt that my inner spiritual life had been neglected leaving me spiritually directionless. I wanted help to deal with my inner turmoil and feelings of meaninglessness.

At the end of the second round, everyone except me crawled out clockwise out of the lodge. Then, I was taken out of the lodge and wrapped in a Pendleton blanket. Even my face was covered. Wiley Coyote took my arm and led me into the darkness. All those who were supporting me followed, carrying the cherry trees, cedar tree, my bucket, and its contents and my prayer ties, flags, and *walutka*. As we walked, I smelled the cedar bucket carried by my son and heard the 25 or so supporters walking through the leaves and broken branches of the densely wooded area. On the way to “my place,” Wiley Coyote, stopped me four times, turning me all the way round to pray toward each direction. The last part of the walk was more of a blind climb. My feet slipped several times but Wiley Coyote caught me each time and pushed me up the hill.

Once in my place, I heard digging all around me until each of the sacrificed trees was planted around me. Then, I could hear supporters tying the direction flags on each tree and then walking the prayer ties around and around the outside of the trees. I knew I was inside a circle of prayer ties about 5½ feet in diameter. Next, a few participants chose to walk up to just outside the prayer circle and give me words of encouragement or prayers. I appreciated every person’s comments, but, for the life of me, I could not recognize their voices, which at first distracted me from thinking about the content of what they were saying. Eventually, I found myself simply letting go of my need to know. I was eventually able to simply enjoy the sounds of their voices and receive their kind words. The last person who spoke to me was my wife. She is very tender-hearted and after telling me that she would be praying for my protection, she started to cry. I heard Wiley Coyote take her away whispering sweetly, “No, no, no.” Lastly, the supporters sang Choctaw and Cherokee songs for me. I loved them dearly for it. They were such a wise and accepting group. Everything about the lodge was Lakota; even the other Cherokee man had “gone Lakota.” But, they had always given me a little space for my tribal ways. As they sang the last song, a Cherokee one, I heard them leaving, not to return for me for 2 days.

I pulled off my blanket and spread it out below me. It was probably about an hour before sundown. I sat down in the middle of my prayer circle. I was alone. There was an elm tree to the North on my left. I could tell it probably would give me little if any shade. It had been 97 °F at 2 o’clock that afternoon. It was still probably that hot now. Already I was dehydrated. Having surveyed my situation, I felt my pipe in my hand and I was comforted. In fact, I was content, secure, and hopeful. I heard a voice in my head that told me to quit thinking and simply be where I was and to be present.

Soon after dark, tree frogs began croaking. At first, only a few sang. I was entranced. But, I began to think of them doing a symphony. I noticed the silent pauses. Then, there were so many singing, there were no pauses. Gradually, I think I began to hear them for what they were, frogs croaking, or maybe just as rhythmic sonorous noises in the night. I was wafted away. I lost track of time. When I became self-conscious again, I remember thinking, “those were not frogs croaking, that noise was all that I was. I became that noise. It was all there was in my awareness for an unknown amount of time.” Again my mind took over, and I began to ruminate about time and identity. Then, I worked at trying to quit ruminating about it.

Late in the night, while my mind was jumping from one thing to the next, I heard a yelp of a coyote. Then, quickly the yelps of a whole pack began a cacophony that moved closer and closer to me. At first, I was arrested by what I thought was a beautiful energy emanating from their interaction. But, as they got closer, seemingly within 10 or 15 yards, I found myself pressing my pipe to my heart in fear. The closer they came, the more aggressive their yelping became. Suddenly, there was total silence. For a while, I could not even hear the breeze through the leaves. The short pause seemed like an eternity. I held my breath to hear. Then, I heard movement of maybe one coyote in the bushes and grass at a very close proximity. Then, suddenly I heard the pack run away toward the southwest. I was drenched in sweat. I reflected that I never had anything to fear from the coyotes. Whoever heard of scrawny coyotes hurting anyone? But they could be aggressive in packs. My mind wanted to make meaning of the experience. I was a little afraid and I had become alert and focused for 10–30 min while the coyotes yelped. I remembered that Edgar Allen Poe said somewhere that the times we are terrified are the most real moments of our lives. I tried to relax into and appreciate the “realness” of those moments without bracing myself.

Later, sometime in the early morning hours, I heard something moving in starts and stops in the rustling leaves, again moving toward me. I breathed as quietly as I could, attempting to discern any noise that might help me identify what it was. I considered that it might be some person, but then thought why would a person walk through these briars and thickets to get to the top of this hill. Then, I heard a bleat like a young deer. But, I considered it a deer only for a moment because the image of *Uktena*, the mythic Cherokee snake of the mountains emerged in my mind. The monster snake was known to make herky-jerky movements in the grass and make a sound like a deer in order to lure hunters into its lair. I chastised myself for allowing my imagination to run away with me. Maybe, it was a spirit. I spoke my name and asked who it was. No answer. After a few moments I heard it move away from me. I thanked it for its company.

The darkness seemed to last for hours and hours. I considered how my sense of time was considerably “off.” When I lay back, I enjoyed the view of the stars, as they moved across the sky. I found the Milky Way and the Big and Little Dippers. But, I realized that I would become drowsy unless I sat up Indian cross-legged. The early morning was quiet. I became enveloped by the darkness and experienced a mindful sense of simply being. I did not get sleepy.

Eventually, I began to see the natural environment around me. I first felt disappointed because I was expecting to see the sun climb up over the eastern horizon. Instead, gray clouds lined the horizon. It was an hour or two before I saw the sun, which was a bright yellow light instead of an orange globe. Nonetheless, I began singing a Cherokee sunrise song when I saw its first bright rays. During the first verse, I felt happy but during the second verse, I closed my eyes and was terrified with a series of images of Cherokee families being jerked from porches by cavalry soldiers. I saw Cherokees dressed in “White people’s” clothes of the 1830s sick and dying in wagons, some being buried in shallow graves along trails. I was crying as I finished the song. I sang a Choctaw Walk song as I turned counterclockwise to the south. I saw similar horrific nineteenth century scenes of Choctaws on their Trail of Tears. I turned to the West and saw nineteenth century soldiers burning peach trees and herding Navajos away from their homes. I recited a Navajo “Walk in Beauty” chant. As I turned to the North, I considered that I had no more tears to offer. I was dehydrated and exhausted. But, I heard an inner voice that told me to hold the pipe toward the north and to sing a Lakota *chanupa* (pipe) song. I did not want to close my eyes. When I did, I heard gunshots and I felt cold. I saw Indians lying dead on a cold winter day. A man’s hair was long. There was a woman shot through the chest. They looked cold, left there on the frozen ground. I wanted to cover them. I heard my voice singing the pipe song and it was profoundly mournful. I wanted to stop singing but a voice told me that it was healing for them and for myself to complete it. I was utterly exhausted as I collapsed on the earth. There was a hawk high in the sky above me, the first of many I would see throughout the vision quest.

Again, time stopped. The sun seemed to stay in the same place. The hotter and thirstier I became, the more frustrated I became with *Hashtali* (Choctaw word for sun). There I sat, my head ducked down, protecting my eyes from the bright light. There was absolutely no shade. I guessed it was near 100°. I was pretty tanned, having made a point to wear the same gym shorts in the sun the last couple of weeks, hoping to protect myself from sun burn, but I felt like my skin was melting away. As the sun hovered interminably, my thirst grew in intensity. At one point, I had the epiphany that the sun, *Hashtali*, was much more than a ball of fiery energy. Choctaw elders had told me the truth of this awareness many times during sweat lodge ceremonies but I never really considered what they were taking about. They called the sun the Governor sometimes. I suddenly experienced the sun as a living, feeling, and conscious entity. Choctaws had been called sun worshippers. And, I had always corrected those who quoted this idea from books like it was a fact. But now, I did not think it was so blasphemous. An inner voice told me that people who thought they worshiped the true God typically worshiped a lower demigod who was many levels below God. I was moving in and out of experiencing a relationship with the sun and then feeling that I was the sun. Its light as well as its heat seemed to penetrate me. Its light illuminated everything, not only allowing me to see other things in nature but also filling my awareness with an extraordinary purity and intense ecstasy. For as long as 30 min or more, my breathing was energized by euphoria, until I became exhausted.

Now I was thirsty, really thirsty. I imagined drinking an entire gallon jug of water. I typically drink a lot of juices and sodas but now I wanted water. I laid down in a fetal position hoping that the searing hot 100-degree rays of sun would have less skin to burn. But, the heat on my back and side coupled with thirst was making me crazy. I emptied my bucket and sat on it. I closed my eyes and concentrated on each breath I took. My monkey mind kept intruding and I thought of how difficult it must be for people with cancer to meditate when they are in such pain. Gradually, I began to turn off my obsessive mind, returning to a focus on my breath. I relaxed for a long time. But, eventually I rolled off the bucket, and I remember trying to lick my totally parched lips. Again, I wanted to be in charge of the situation. I wanted water and I wanted it now. Yet, something told me that I had to learn to surrender to the process and believe that everything would be ok. Though the experience was excruciating, I had the thought that I was going through a process of healing.

I heard drums of war in my head. The Choctaws only used drums in times of war. It was a loud, fast drumbeat, maybe a hundred times a minute. I started singing, "Hey, hey, hey, sac - ri - fice. Hey, hey, hey. Sac - ri - fice." Over and over I sang the song. I looked up to the sky and saw a hawk circling. Then, I heard a noise, a ruffling in the dirt coming up the hill. I closed my eyes. I knew it was Wiley Coyote bringing me the traditional small glass of medicine tea. I never opened my eyes until he was gone. I picked up the glass and drank it in the smallest sips, trying to make it last. It was so little, but I appreciated it. I had a deep appreciation for Wiley remembering me and believing in me. I appreciated the Cherokee quester for reminding me to see everything, even every sip of tea as sacred.

Just before it was growing dark, I watched at least a hundred bats slam into the limbs of a couple of oak trees about 20 yards to my south. They appeared to be coming out of a cave in a ravine 75 yards southeast of my prayer circle. They hung upside down. When they hit the tree limbs, they swung from an upside down position, back and forth. I was fascinated but a little afraid. Unlike my first vision, during which I knew what I was seeing was in my mind's eye, now I was not for sure if I was actually in a spiritual dimension. I was seeing the "bats" with my physical eyes. But, everything around me had an "air of unreality" about it. Wiley Coyote had specifically picked this place out for me for its sanctity, or its capacity to attune itself to me. I thought, "Are there supernatural entities who reside here." My tribal people contend that there are spiritual manifestations connected with certain areas of the living earth. I have heard elders speak of spirits emerging from underground. The bats appeared to come from a cave. I considered how the bat was a perfect symbol of a creature that bridged the physical and spiritual dimensions. Could they have emerged from a cave to reveal spiritual knowledge to me?

Sleep became too hard to resist. I dozed off. A vivid Technicolor dream vision came to me. I was playing left field, 250 feet from the batter. One hundred and fifty feet behind me there was a tight barbed wire fence held up by rustic fence posts. The teenagers and young adults playing on both teams of this softball game went to a Southern Baptist Church I once attended. Eagle Beak was at bat. He hit the pitch high in the air my way. I ran all the way back to the barbed wire fence but it soared far beyond, finally hitting in a level pasture land covered with short buffalo grass. I

quickly spread the top two prickly wires and climbed through the fence barely avoiding cuts. I ran behind the bouncing softball that traveled only slightly faster than my full gallop. I raced across a forty-acre grassland pasture toward an oilfield road where there was situated an old farmstead house. Its paint had vanished long ago and its porch and stairway were rickety. The ball hopped across the road, up each of the three stairs and then through the open front door. I halted before the house, considering the risks of entering this old “abandoned” house. I summoned up my courage and entered. There was a man in front of a bar and another behind it. They both wore old black suits and hats. The man behind the bar had the softball in his right hand. I stood speechless on bare floor planks in the middle of the room. No one spoke for several seconds. The man behind the bar assumed the voice of Groucho Marx and said with utter finality, “Rockey, it is not that you shouldn’t be afraid; it’s that there is nothing to be afraid of.”

Again, the morning sky was gray for the first couple of hours after sunrise. The bats were still in the trees. When *Hashtali* finally did break through with intense light and heat, the natural environment around me was illuminated unlike anything I had ever seen. In a tree east of me, there was a gigantic spider web, contained within a dead branch that had curved itself into an almost perfect circle. *Hashtali* shone through it. I was utterly enchanted by its beauty. I observed every detail for an unknown amount of time. Later, I found myself digging my fingers into the sandy brown earth. It felt cool between my fingers. I imagined how life had been emerging from the miraculous dirt. It was my mother, and she was always there beneath me, holding me, much like my human mother had always held me.

About noon, my supporters came back to retrieve me to the lodge. As before, I was wrapped up from the knees to the head in a Pendleton blanket. I pointed to the one hundred bats in the oak trees, wanting everyone to see such a spectacular sight. Nothing was said all the way back to the lodge until everyone was seated around the sacred stones. I told those who supported me of much of what I had seen. We sweat two rounds. We three questers then sat in folding chairs outside the lodge and drank bottled water. Then, we burned our prayer ties, letting the prayers ascend. At lunch, I could only eat watermelon. I did not feel like talking to anyone. In fact, I talked little for the entire day, even at my own house. I just sat in a sofa. I did not want to hear a television or radio. I remember at one point my son kept pressuring me for something, and I raised my voice at him. I immediately felt ashamed and thought of how contradictory my angry behavior was, having just sat in a spiritual space for so long. My wife had everyone simply give me space. They also fixed meals for me and talked quietly for the rest of the day. After 4 days, I found myself fully in the world again, though with a new perspective. I felt humbled, and I wanted to live in a more mindful way, careful to treat every person and animal I encountered as sacred.

Over the next few years, both my wife and son would go on vision quests. We supported each other, participating in all the sweats leading up to them. The ongoing preparation and the event itself joined us in a common cause. It kept us in a special state of united mindfulness in regard to our attitudes toward each other and our everyday actions. The upcoming vision quests, which we regarded as spiritually significant, helped us to sustain a balance and restraint in our individual lives and a

kindness toward others. We also felt blessed that we could participate in such spiritual rituals, knowing that outside our community, such spiritual schooling is rare.

Community Embrace of Solitary Search

Much has been written about the communal character of traditional Native American life. Even the apparent solitude in the above narrative is embedded in fellowship. The vision quest actually demonstrates a balance between solitude and fellowship. To have sought solitude without embracing my connections would have been vain, pretentious, and self-delusional. On the other hand, to have never sought solitude would leave me with nothing unique to offer my community. My family members who shared tribal values pulled together to support me and I, having completed my vision quest, could contribute to the revitalization of our relationships.

My son and wife had to bear with my separation from them, and the requirement of the vision quest may at times have taken them away from things they wanted to do. They committed themselves to the involvement of my seemingly solitary reality with great patience and ultimately with joy. They not only prepared me for the quest itself, but supported me in my reentry in everydayness by giving me time and space to integrate my experience and eventually to facilitate my talking through many of the mysterious happenings.

Community members also supported me with advice and with careful, empathetic listening. When I was uncertain or discouraged, they were attentive. When I felt especially vulnerable, Wiley Coyote soothed me with comforting words. I learned to trust him profoundly. Those who stayed at the encampment praying for me helped me to cope with an experience that was too big for me alone. Further, their choosing to witness my precarious journey connected me more profoundly to them because it aroused deep appreciation. I realized that my life has and never will be solely dependent on my own resources.

Emotions and Mental Health

Emotions can become maladaptive when overlearned in response to crisis or reinforced in multiple, often paradoxical, ways. I was surprised that fear became a predominant theme through my vision quest. For most of my life, I have been a strong, muscular man, unafraid of any physical attack. Nor have I anticipated frightful things that might occur in my life. I was not really scared while I was on my vision quest, but I think I felt fear on a primary, often unconscious level. One of my gifts is in conceptualization and in analysis, involving making comparisons and judgments. Putting so much effort in controlling and predicting, I might have kept fear of the unpredictable and irrational at arm's length. As a consequence, this fear, unacknowledged, may have contributed to illusory perceptions that those I am

judging and objectifying are separate from me, making it difficult for me to truly love them. In addition to damaging my relationships, my fear also interfered with my peace of mind, as I tried to control things and people in order to keep them moving in predictable patterns. During the vision quest, I had no choice but to respond spontaneously to the unpredictable.

I wonder now about the role that pain played in the release of my inner secrets. I experienced physical privation, loneliness, and grief. Many mystics (Underhill, 1955) argue that we tend not to change characterologically except in response to pain. C.S. Lewis (1962) wrote, “Suffering is not good in itself... but the human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all is seen as well with it.” The disorientation I felt because of the esoteric as well as the painful nature of the ritual put me in a place where I was open to imagery and symbolism that was psychologically transformative. As long as my selfish self was in control, I experienced fear of individual destruction, but when I opened myself up to my more universal, interconnected self, I was released from that fear. During the vision quest, symbols emerged without my conscious manipulation and released deep inner fears and some of the physical pain. The images and symbols of my visions and dreams that lay behind my intangible emotions gave my mind something concrete to better understand myself and my relationship to family members and everything that lives.

Imagining Respectful Caring for Nonmainstream Spiritual Experience

As I reflect on my experience, I can imagine how culturally sensitive practitioners could have helped my family and me in the aftermath. The *DSM-V* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) lists “Brief reactive psychosis” in the Culture-Bound Syndromes section as potential reactions to spiritual practices. While this represents an advance in our helping professions accepting transpersonal experiences as potentially transformative, it does not sufficiently differentiate pathological from transpersonal experiences. Caroline Brett (2010) argued that the two types of experiences are similar but a therapist must take into account the context and outcome. Further, a person may be experiencing both pathological and transpersonal experiences. The extent to which therapists can successfully discern as well as appreciate the experience is vital. Success in therapy depends on the therapist’s capacity to validate the client in her/his experience. This is why, family therapy is crucial at least intermittently with persons who bring in this type of experiences to sessions. Family members can often help validate the relevance of the experiences to the cultures they live in.

A therapist who works with persons experiencing spiritual crisis should know, at bare minimum, the levels of spiritual development proposed by Underhill (1955), Fowler (1981), and Wilber (2007). I would have felt uncomfortable with a therapist who simply assumed that they were able to ask intelligent questions and offer understanding support, if they were unfamiliar with writers who appreciated states

and stages of awareness. Underhill described state–stage challenges and achievements along a spiritual path from a mystical Christian perspective. Fowler objectively examined large numbers of peoples’ spiritual journeys and demarcated them into distinctive stages of development, from a Liberal Christian perspective. Wilber attempts to match up spiritual development with cognitive, moral, identity, and emotional developmental models. His integral model takes into account Eastern mystical spiritual development models as well. Though none of the models address Native American spiritual journeys, there are resonances, and if a therapist had knowledge of these models, they would have been more likely to articulate about the challenges I faced, to ask more relevant questions, and able to help me with a treatment plan.

While I was eventually able to get reconnected to everyday activities, talking to a competent family therapist could have been beneficial. For at least 4 days after my vision quest, I talked little to anyone, was tearful, and was zoned out or distracted much of the time. I needed to be reminded that the “spiraling” would gradually level out. I recalled that Wiley Coyote had told me to expect this, but that if I remained “zoned out” beyond 4 days, we would have to have another sweat to help me come back from the spirit world. But alas, my wife and son helped me to come back to this world. On the fifth day, they had me walking the dog twice a day, making salads, barbecuing, and digging the weeds out of our vegetable garden. While each of these activities was helpful in itself, it was my family members’ presence and conversations as they joined me in activities that helped to ground me. Therapists might recommend these types of joint activities to clients who may have had similar spiritual experiences.

While I wanted to be grounded, this did not mean I wanted to forget the lessons I had learned during the vision quest. As I look back at that time, I could have benefited from family therapy. I would have wanted to be able to talk about readjustments we might have to make and how everyone felt about it. I had new priorities and attitudes about my job and my spiritual perspectives. I wanted to involve myself in greater service for people of color. I also wanted to be more available and supportive of my family. I think many families could benefit from working with a therapist to help them work through these challenges of spiritual transition.

A therapist might also work with clients who wish to investigate the meaning of the symbolic language of their clients’ spiritual experiences. If I had gone to a therapist to discuss the meaning of my experience, I would have wanted a therapist who would allow me, for the most part, to construct my own meanings. Still, it would have been helpful if the therapist were capable of making parallel associations to Native American beliefs and stories, world literature, and religious writings. Again, allowing for my own interpretations, I would have also appreciated their insights about recurrent themes. I would not have appreciated a therapist who restricted and reduced the symbols to sexual and parental relational interpretations. For instance, a therapist may have helped me to connect the spider web I saw in the tree limb with my mother and I would have been fine with that, knowing that the spider recurs in association with mothers throughout the world literature, but should be careful not to impose meanings counter to my tribal worldview.

We might consider some of the questions that might have been helpful in understanding the dream I had during the morning hours of the last night of the vision quest. What do you associate with the pastoral setting of the softball game? What about the old house the ball bounced into? Why do you think a comedian told you that there was nothing to be afraid of? How do you think this dream is related to the bird that fell into your circle? Do you knock yourself out for anything? What recurring themes do you see in the dreams and visions?

Rereading my description, I see that several themes appear to run through it. I wonder, were you my therapist, if you might be considering similar ones to discuss in sessions: Family emotional dynamics, such as time and place for hard and soft feelings, balance of individuality and participation in tribal contexts, relationship to mother and father, geographic attunement, the supernatural, cross-cultural textuality, kinds of fear, death, visionary experience, mental and emotional flexibility, time and no-time, earth mother, reality–nonreality, control, community, atonement, being and becoming, thankfulness, good in apparent evil, pauses, and awareness in everything that lives.

To be a responsible therapist requires knowing enough about the client and their culture to support them intelligently along their cultural/spiritual path. While the client may teach a therapist some things about his/her culture, therapy must be more than a learning experience for the therapist. In fact, a tribal client may be hesitant to share tribal ways with someone not in their tribe and certainly with someone who knows nothing about their life world. Consultation with persons who have deeper knowledge of tribal/spiritual issues, e.g., tribal elders might be needed.

Conclusion

As you read my words, know that you and I stand on land where Native Americans once roamed freely. The time came when our cultural/tribal capitals were wrested away and we were often moved forcibly to areas far from our areas of ethnogenesis. The vision quest was miraculously preserved by many tribes, though I am especially appreciative of the generosity of the Lakota, who provided me with a space and a guiding ritual to attain a spiritual awakening. If my story has touched your heart, please recognize my trepidation and trust in sharing with you from our traditions that have been demonized, trivialized, and caricatured by colonialists who tried but failed to destroy us. Please make a place at the table of spiritual paths for our spiritual traditions.

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