Yuuyarag the way of the human being

The circle expands
A child speaks and a community Listens.

Harold Napoleon (1991) wrote his paper Yuuyarag: the Way of the Human Being from the Fairbanks Correctional Centre in Alaska. He says for the thirteen years he worked at his job as Executive Director of the Association of Village Council Presidents, struggling to provide services and programs to his people, 'something in my soul, in my background, in my family's and village's history, had preconditioned me to internalise and personalise every perceived defeat' (Ibid: 2).

He began to drink as he went to meetings in Anchorage, Juneau and Washington. Here everybody drank and he soon became alcoholic. He says his world ended in June 1984 with the death of his son, due directly to his alcoholism. His years in jail have been spent grieving, not only for his son:

> ... but for all the others who have died in this long night of our alcohol-induced suffering. I have also spent that time looking into my own soul and the souls of my fellow Native people (Ibid:3).

Napoleon writes of the time before westerners arrived, when 'the Yup'ik people were alone in their riverine and the Bering Sea homeland - they and the spirit beings that made things the way they were... they were free and secure' (Ibid: 4). They were ruled by the customs, traditions and spiritual beliefs of their people, 'shaped by these' and the environment in which they lived. They knew this world as a spirit entity, complete and old. It was the world of Yuuyarang: the Way of the Human Being. Although unwritten, laws of Yuuyarang could clearly be compared to the mosaic law because they governed all aspects of the people's lives. Correct behaviours between close and distant relatives were defined, as were acceptable behaviours between all community members. Yuuyarang 'defined the correct way of thinking and speaking about all living things', and it encompassed not just the physical world, but the spirit world. 'To the Yup'ik, the land, the rivers, the heavens, the seas, and all that dwelled within them were spirit, and therefore sacred' (Ibid: 5).

When the first white men came, Napoleon refers to a 'world that goes upside down', as diseases incubated in the slums of Europe, products of the industrial revolution and colonisation, were introduced by whalers, traders and missionaries early this century. 60% of the Yup'ik people perished in a cataclysm of mass death that changed the 'persona, the lifestyle, the world view', of the people (Ibid: 9/10).

> Too weak to bury all the dead, many survivors abandoned the old villages, some caving in their houses with the dead still in them. Their homeland - the tundra, the Bering Sea coast, the riverbanks - had become a dying field for the Yup'ik people; families, leaders, artists, medicine men and women and Yuuyarag: the Way of the Human Being (Ibid: 11).

As a child Harold Napolean heard references to this time, yuut tugurpallratni - 'when a great many people died'; 'the great death' which 'gave birth to a whole generation of orphans - our current grandparents and great- grandparents'. He now writes of 'the suffering, the despair, the heartbreak, the desperation, and confusion and trauma' of these survivors. They could not explain what had happened. They felt guilt because they could not stop it, and as the illnesses and the deaths continued, the missionaries labelled them 'wretched, lazy, listless', a people who felt they had no future (Ibid: 10:11).

Attempted cultural genocide occurred as priests, missionaries and government officials forbad parents to teach their children the cultural and spiritual ways and beliefs that had sustained them and ensured continuity across the generations, since time began. The survivors almost lost everything that was important to the way of the human being: their culture and spiritual beliefs were devalued; they were forbidden to speak their own languages; their songs, dances, feasts were discontinued. Their lands, independence and pride 'all their inheritances' were stolen. Children grew to believe that it was shameful to be Yup'ik, and felt an essential need to take on the persona of white people. These beliefs and feelings were passed down through the generations. The pain and shame was internalised and became the inheritance that one generation gave to the next.

Napolean believes the on-oing experiences of the Great Death explain in large part the persona of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren alive today. People, in trying to suppress, deny or ignore the unbearable trauma:

> ... have driven it further into their soul and it colours all aspects of their life. Without treatment, it will destroy the human soul just as any illness left untreated will in time cripple and kill the body (Ibid: 14).

The symptoms of this deeply buried trauma manifest themselves, when under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The pent up anger, guilt, sorrow, frustation and hopelessness explodes into violence on self and others. The sufferers and those around them, are then driven further into the deadly vortex of guilt and blame and further destructive action (Ibid: 15).

Napoleon asserts that the 'primary cause of the epidemic is not physical deprivation. Native people have never had it so good in terms of food, clothing and shelter' (Ibid: 20). He says that in spite of the fact that the government has spent hundreds and millions of dollars on the indigenous people of Alaska, for improvements in health, education, to combat alcoholism and alcohol abuse 'the carnage goes on' (Ibid:20). For example:

> From 1977 to 1988, the last year for which complete data are available, 1789 Native Americans died violently in Alaska. These figures include 394 deaths by suicides, 257 by homicides, and 1138 by accident out of a total population of only 64,000 (Berman 1991: quoted by Napoleon 1991:20).

The individual and collective intergenerational trauma continues. He asks: who is to blame? Is it the offending youth of today who do not respect others? They do not respect themselves, as they abuse and self-abuse. Is it the parents who were drinking and abusing themselves and their children, during the child's learning years, or the grandparents or

greatgrandparents, themselves traumatised by the Great Death? He believes his people must move beyond blame into healing action. He asserts:

> We who are also the survivors of the Great Death must end it. We must activate all our energies and resources [for] every human life is sacred. We are not so many that we can endlessly absorb the trauma each tragic death inflicts on our physical and psychic body (Napoleon 1991: 24).

Harold Napoleon believes the beginning of the healing will occur when people start to fully listen to themselves and each other, to acknowledge and share their feelings and experiences, to tell the truth that is theirs, leaving nothing out, beginning from within themselves and their families. The stories, he says, must be told: those of the living elders who must share their knowledge of experiences which have affected the whole community, across the generations. The next generations must also speak, down to the children of today. All must listen to each other. The stories are the stories of the feelings, angers, fears and frustrations that have prevented people from knowing each other. He believes that when this happens, for a while, more hurt, misunderstanding and pain will come out as more layers are uncovered. But people must persevere with honest communication, and deep listening from the heart, for the ongoing dysfuntions have come from the inability of people to face and speak with each other about what they have seen and lived through (Ibid: 26).

Mozambiqan healers have also shown understanding of this need when they say:

> Wounds can be easily healed. That is, the physical wounds. Some of these kids have wounds because they have seen things they shouldn't see, that no child should have to see - like their parents being killed. They change their behaviour. This not like being mad; that we can treat. No, this is from what they have seen; it is a social problem, not a mental problem. They beat each other, they are disrespectful, they tell harsh jokes and are delinquent. You can see it in their behaviour toward each other; more violence, more harshness, less respect ... One of the most important things they need is calm - to have the violence taken out of them (quoted by Nordstrom 1993c:29: 1993a: 36).

Napoleon rejects that the road to healing involves greater government funding. It is true that for human survival, all people need basic essentials like clean water, nourishing food, and safe shelter. But he says, more fundamentally they need dignity. They need to come to an understanding that there are reasons for their pain, that they are worthwhile, with something valuable to share with others. They need the loving touch of others who, in listening will acknowledge the sacred in what seems to be profane, strength in what appears to be weakness. The first steps must come from that level of community where people live, in Talking Circles, where elders, parents and the young can come together to share, strengthening themself and others within the circle (Napolean).

The Circle Expands – a child speaks and a community listens.

Andy Chelsea of Alkali Lake, talks of being invited to sit in his grand-daughter's Talking Circle at kindergarten.

> The children lit up the sage and used the eagle feather and when they started to share everyone of them cried as they talked about how come Dad got mad, swore, or Mum said things that hurt. After the circle finished, the children prayed, then looked at each other all serious, waiting for the first to laugh. Once the first one laughed, they all laughed. To laugh, and to cry is natural and good. All adults should have to sit in such a circle and hear the things we as adults do that hurt their spirits. We should hear and experience their capacity to forgive (Chelsea quoted by Atkinson: 1991b).

Seeing a family/community through the eyes of a child gives a different and often clearer perspective of our responsibilities as adults.

No one is totally powerless. Some of us have more power than others however. In colonised societies, the colonisers have power over the colonised. In patriarchal societies, men hold power over women and children. In most societies, adults have power over children. Generally therefore, children are the least powerful within a family or within society. The story of Alkali Lake is an important affirmation that even the least powerful have some power, and this small amount of power can create great change. At Alkali Lake a significant moment occurred when the least powerful spoke out, and the more powerful, listened.

Alkali Lake is a Shuswap community of approximately 450 people located near Williams Lake in the interior of British Columbia, Canada. Over the last 20 years the adult population of this community (and many youth and children) have moved from being 100% alcoholic to 95% sober (Video: the Honour of all).

Ivy Cheslea was seven years old when she told her mother she would not return home with her because she did not like her drinking. Her mother listened. Not just to the words, but to the pain implicit in the words of that small child. The power of this child was that she expressed her feelings in words. She spoke her truth. The next significant step for the Chelsea family, was that somebody listened. Phylis Chelsea walked to the sink and poured her alcohol down the sinkhole. Three weeks later, Andy Chelsea, the father of Ivy and husband of Phylis, also stopped drinking. Over the next twenty years they worked to help their community become sober. Ivy Chelsea's words were significant for many people. Andy and Phylis Chelsea have since taken the story of individual and community healing to many reserves and communities in Canada, Alaska as well as other states of the USA, England and Australia.

The road to alcohol abuse at Alkali Lake is similar to many other stories from colonised countries. Individual stories are collective stories. Sometimes the trauma and the recovery

process, can be seen more clearly through the story of the individual. It is always however, a collective story being told.

When Andy Chelsea was eight years old his grandmother fulfilled her responsibility to him. She took him out to fast, each time for four days. In his first fast he had to concentrate on his hearing. When he was tired or lost concentration she would sing to him. He listened, to the wind, a leaf falling, the footsteps of animals across the mountains, birdsong and grass music. The second fast concentrated on smell. He learned to smell, the scent of the trees as they released oxygen at sunset, the perfume of different wildflowers and grasses on the breeze. The third fast taught him how to see. He strained to see the detail of animal and plant life down in the valley, or the feathers on eagles high in the sky, of individual leaves on trees. Finally, he had to put all these together and learn how to withstand pain and fear while he used his senses to understand what he was capable of, what power he possessed in his body and mind. These experiences were fundamental to his culture, these were the traditions of his people, the continuity of heritage across generations.

Then, at nine years of age Andy Chelsea was removed from his family and sent to residential school. Residential schools were a major part of Canadian assimilation policy. His braids were cut off, he was made to speak English, and he was not allowed to practice his culture. He says he grew to hate himself just as much as he hated the people who did this to him. He had his first drink when he was nine years old, and he says, 'you haven't seen hate unless you have seen me when I was drinking' (Atkinson: 1991b). During his married life, he says he gave his wife many a black eye, and spent many nights in jail.

Residential school experiences and the reserve system played a major part in the development of much of the alcoholism, drug addiction, family violence and other problems in Aboriginal Canadian communities like Alkali Lake. These schools were direct tools of the colonial process. At these schools children were often told, and treated like, they were savages:

> Most of the people who inflicted this terrible pain meant good. They knew no better. Europeans have carried their own garbage, their own cesspool around with them for centuries. And we Indigenous people have taken on this garbage. Our energy has been used to keep the hurt in. We were oppressed. And after a while we become oppressors in the things we did to ourselves, our families and people. No one is born an oppressor - they are made that way (Andy Chelsea quoted in Atkinson 1991b)

Children watching alcohol-induced violence were fearful, angry, frustrated and revengeful. They learnt to drink by watching the adults. Teenagers were rebellious, self-destructive, apathatic, resentful towards parents, society and the system. They reinforced alcohol and drug use by supporting each other in the use of addictive substances. Adults, products themselves of residential schools, were caught in a cycle of anger, shame, alcohol misuse, abuse, remorse and shame. The highest level of alcohol misuse was among in those accultured people who must closely identified with non-Indian values.

The lowest levels of alcohol misuse are in those who were bi-cultural. The Chelseas said they saw a clear connection, in Native Canada, between alcohol misuse, violence in the home and community, child abuse, family breakups, and neglect of self and family responsibilities. Crime and imprisonment rates are part of that cycle.

At Alkali Lake, a number of significant cultural tools were used in the recovery process. As well, Native and non-native people with professional skills, were invited into the community to help.

The strongest tool for talking/sharing/healing, was the circle. The second significant event in the healing process of the people at Alkali Lake occurred during a healing circle, where for the first time, stories of child sexual abuse were told. Young people said, 'we are expected to respect you our elders, but you are the ones who have abused us'. At Alkali Lake the healing circle had become a safe place, where people could talk from their place of truth and be supported in the process of doing so. Since that time charges have been laid, as far back as the residential schools, and some priests and Bishops who abused their positions of trust have gone to jail.

These stories illustrate some important points. In the case of Ivy Chelsea, she was heard and her pain was seen to be real. Her parents moved to change the situation that was the cause of her pain. There are however layers of oppression, and some of those layers can only be addressed when we have worked to make safe places for people so they can speak to the pain that they carry. In the case of the sexual abuse, in the safety of the circle, the young woman was heard. She was believed. The community then moved to deal with the truth of what had been disclosed.

Healing stories are never single issue stories however. When an individual decides to stop drinking for example, other issues that supported or resulted from the drinking behaviours will also have to be dealt with. When one family member decides to acknowledge domestic violence, the dynamics of the family will shift, and invariably other individuals within the family or community will be forced to also begin to look at themselves. When a person stands up within the community and alleges sexual assault, the community can either move into denial, and therefore further traumatize the person disclosing, or it can move to meet their needs. If individuals, families and communities have the courage to believe the disclosure, layers of pain will be exposed. Meeting the needs of the disclosure, however, has the capacity to act as a catharsis, allowing cleansing and healing action to occur. As sexual abuse was disclosed in Native communities in Canada, the community moved to develop a framework for dealing with the 'problem'.

In a paper prepared jointly by the Nechi Institute; the Four Worlds Development Project; the Native Training Institute; and the 'New Directions' Training of Alkali Lake, a set of procedures was developed for community response to disclosure. Healing is Possible: A Joint Statement on the Healing of Sexual Abuse in Native Communities (1988) provides a sound alternate to the western criminal justice system for indigenous people. These procedures are summarized:

⇒ that the victim was to be adequately cared for, helped to process the hurt feelings, helped to realise that what had happened was not their fault, given adequate counselling from a trained sexual abuse counsellor, assured safety from future abuse, and was not pressured by the offender or other family members to deny what had happened;

⇒ that the focus of community attention would shift to the offender;

⇒ that the offender was given the clear choice of being confronted by the victim, and the victim's family in a special meeting, guided by a trained sexual abuse counsellor, to admit the full extent of what they had done; to take full responsibility for their actions, to apologise to the victim, (where apropriate as determined by the sexual abuse committee), and to promise never to do it again. That they listen to the expressions of rage, hurt, anger and contempt that the victim and family members may need to release, and accept to follow whatever course of treatment and reparation decided upon by the sexual abuse committee in consultation with a trained sexual abuse counsellor; OR

⇒ be prosecuted by the full extent of the law with charges pressed not by the victim, but by the family and community, who now assume responsibility to work to restore balance in the situation.

⇒ that the offender's spouse or partner receive personal support through the process (assign a counsellor or ally);

⇒ and that the offender receive personal support through the process (assign a counsellor or ally) (Nechi Institute et al 1988: 6-7).

I have taken the space to detail these suggested procedures because they contrast strongly with the western legal process which works to enable the offender to prove to himself that he did no harm. That if he acknowledges the act, she was at fault because she really meant yes when she said no, or her behaviour/dress was provocative. More importantly, however, I have included this to show an indigenous process of conflict resolution, which deals with the issue of abuse in a healing way, while allowing families and communities to rearticulate acceptable behaviours. In this process, power is given to individuals and communities instead of the generally white male lawyers within the criminal justice system.

Finally, the sequences show links between the significant event of a child standing in her truth, with responsible people demonstrating community leadership and eldership, listening and acting, with a general outcome that has extended the circle across communities, countries and cultures.