

Chapter 2

WALKING THROUGH COLLAGES

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MY INTEREST IN American Indian psychology literally began as a child listening to stories my great-grandmother used to tell. Each time she came to stay in our home she would share memories of her own childhood in entertaining and instructional stories. For me, those visits with my maternal great-grandmother, who was descended from the Miami tribe of Indiana, were windows into another world. Although the stories I remember her telling were not only about various customs and traditions, they were the reminders of part of my heritage that were necessary given my acculturated upbringing in an unsympathetic southern Indiana town. I found myself wondering what it would have been like to grow up around Indian people.

I don't think my great-grandmother could have anticipated the result of her influence. She not only imparted pride in me being of Miami descent, she also sparked my desire to contribute something meaningful to the American Indian community. This desire crystallized during my college days in the late 1960s when I came upon American Indian scholarship on historical and contemporary Indian issues and witnessed media accounts of Indian protests that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement (such as the occupation of Mt. Rushmore in the sacred Black Hills by Lakota and Ojibwa militants and the invasion of Alcatraz Island by an intertribal group of Bay Area Indian community organizers and college students). I was intrigued by the deep double meaning of the governmental and historical targets of Indian protest and the patient manner of the people who were making the plight of native people known. I was idealistic and naïve. I wanted to be a part of efforts aimed at rectifying genocidal injustices and improving Indian life.

My professional work with American Indian people began the week after I graduated from college in 1971. I knew that one of the greatest areas of need and possibly easiest means of entry into Indian communities was teaching. I first inquired about jobs teaching language arts in reservation

schools through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and received no response. I then contacted my first-grade teacher in Catholic school who was Mother Superior of St. Ann's Mission on the Turtle Mountain Ojibwa reservation in Belcourt, North Dakota. She invited me to interview for one of the many vacant slots in either the mission or government school. So I boarded a plane from Indianapolis, Indiana, headed to Grand Forks, North Dakota, the morning after receiving my bachelor's degree from Butler University. For two years I taught junior high, adhering to an open classroom approach and involving most of my students' parents in daily classroom projects and activities. I also married a man from there and enjoyed not only teaching but also being a part of the community. In the spring of the second year, he decided that it was time for us to leave the reservation in order that he complete his undergraduate education.

I quickly became disillusioned about how effective an agent of change a teacher could be when, in my next job, I worked as an Indian culture teacher with Saginaw Chippewa students at Mt. Pleasant High School in central Michigan. The dropout rate of students from this reservation was 80%—a figure not unlike that of many tribes at the time. I found myself focusing more on student retention than on pedagogy. I was on the reservation in committee meetings or home visits after school almost daily, spent a lot of time with students in extracurricular activities, and frequented the school counselor's office with both parents and students in efforts to act as a liaison between the tribal community and the conservative and often racist school administration. Many tribal members felt overwhelmed by the extent and impact of poverty and substance abuse in the community, but most wanted their students to graduate from high school. In their homes I heard the hopes and dreams of parents for their children as they nourished all at the table with beans and fry bread and stories. I repeatedly heard accounts of the many years that had passed when not one Ojibwa student walked across the stage at graduation to receive a diploma.

I also grew increasingly disgruntled about the negative attitudes of the townspeople toward tribal members, so I established an alternative classroom for Indian students within the public high school and worked with the tribe to find funding for a position for a middle school counselor. I knew that these students needed more than a sympathetic teacher's concern. I also knew that I needed to learn to do more than just listen to students' worries and complaints if I were to help them. Once the position was funded, members of the community asked me to apply for the job. I did apply and was rejected due to my lack of formal counseling training and my supposed enmeshment with the community. I made a commitment to myself at that point to pursue a Ph.D. in counseling psychology so that the next time I was turned down for such a position it wouldn't be because of my lack of educational qualifications.

How American Indians listen and how they are listened to became an important part of my research while undertaking my doctorate in

counseling psychology, which I received from the University of Oklahoma in 1979. I spent a good deal of energy in courses searching for the relevance between Western psychological approaches and effective clinical work with people raised in traditional cultures. I knew from living with the Ojibwa people that they held negative attitudes toward non-Indian psychologists who were presumably insensitive to the hardships of Indian life. As I listened to lectures on various counseling theories and interventions I would recall conversations with women friends about the grief and anger that accompanied experiences with governmental agencies, such as their last childbirth when they discovered that they had been involuntarily sterilized during the procedure. I remembered the near-tragic delivery of my daughter when the Indian Health Service doctor on duty was too busy at a party upstairs to examine me or tend to the birth but, instead, issued orders to ship me across the state to another Indian Health Service hospital where a willing obstetrician was on duty. Even more sadly, I recalled an elder relative's account of her sister's return to the reservation from boarding school in a coffin after a bout of pneumonia and her brother's untimely and tragic death due to an encounter with a drunk driver just a quarter-mile from her home. For many Indian people to talk about these issues with a professional counselor was often considered treasonous if not pathetic for exposing personal pain to an outsider.

Nevertheless, I plowed through the counseling psychology program and was fortunate to work with urban adults in a counseling practicum at the Oklahoma City Indian Center. I was eventually hired by the Center to establish a counseling service for Indian youths who had been recommended for treatment by school counselors and judges within the juvenile justice system but who refused to enter therapy. This program, christened Oklahoma Indian Youth Services, was originally designed to be an agency to refer youths to clinical services while also advising professional service providers throughout the city in ways of being more culturally sensitive. However, despite numerous attempts at referral, our targeted clients refused to enter into conventional therapy. Instead, they joined groups run by paraprofessional Indian leaders who emphasized group conversations along with participation in cultural and athletic events.

I eventually came to terms with the contrasts in clinical procedures between the university counseling center and the Indian Center and came to believe in the potential for new models in counseling with American Indians. I thought the disconnection resided in the process. I felt that if the counseling process could be made more effective with American Indian clients, they would increasingly seek services to deal with their problems. I worked with psychologists Wayne Rowe and Paul Dauphinais on a number of counseling process studies to identify aspects of relationship-building techniques that could be seen as noninterfering and helpful. Despite our findings of the efficacy of certain social influence variables and styles of counseling with Indian clients, I often sensed that the differences between

a counselor's ethnicity and upbringing and those of American Indian clients overpowered the effectiveness of most clinical interventions.

For my dissertation, I adapted culturally appropriate assertion-training procedures with American Indian adults. To do so, I traveled around the country conducting workshops with staff from Indian community agencies. The work on bidialectic communication or message matching by Donald Cheek in *Assertive Black . . . Puzzled White* served as a guide for a kind of assertive code switching, depending on when, where, and with whom one was speaking. In these workshops I began to appreciate the skills of many participants who easily alternated between being quite assertive in advocacy efforts for Indian clients to being rather demure when stating their wants or needs with another Indian person, especially while addressing an elder. Through the assertion training and related consultation with numerous intertribal and tribal groups like the Michigan Indian Homemaker Aide Program, the Indian Child Welfare Act Program, and the Seneca Social Services Program I learned a lot about the therapeutic aspects of humor and self-effacement and the additive effects of biculturalism. It was at this time that I became more intimately aware of my own personal process regarding my ethnic identity as a mixed-race person. People both outside and inside the Indian world challenged me as they sought to understand my mixed background. This reality moved me to a deeper level of self-reflection and became a part of the foundation from which I would work as time moved on.

In 1979, I began my first academic position at the University of Nebraska, worried about how I might teach counselor trainees empathy and interviewing skills for competent work with clients from other cultures. I had accepted a faculty position that called for a specialization in cross-cultural counseling, yet I had no formal training in the subject matter. I had come upon only one book on the subject—*Counseling Across Cultures* edited by Paul Pedersen, Walt Lonner, and Juris Draguns—while reviewing the literature in cross-cultural communication for my dissertation. That year I witnessed Derald Sue reporting on the Cross-Cultural Competencies to Division 17 at the very first APA convention I attended. I remember being quite surprised at the lukewarm reception by counseling psychology academics to his report, despite its clear challenge to the field. Luckily, I secured a grant to attend a summer cross-cultural workshop at Stanford University where I was exposed to the emerging literatures on racial identity development and social policies of community empowerment. The instructor in that workshop was Chalsa Loo. I was impressed by her warmth, teaching style, and clinical acumen, not to mention her manner of leading class critiques of videotaped cross-cultural counseling interviews. My excitement for teaching in this area was invigorated. I returned home eager to make a difference in the field. I pursued further mentoring from Paul Pedersen by arranging for him to come out to Nebraska to co-teach the cross-cultural counseling course with me the following summer.

In the course of my work in Nebraska with Omaha and Winnebago people, I experienced numerous contrasts between conventional approaches to mental health and traditional community-based practices. Shortly after my mother passed away, I was asked to chair the board of directors of Lincoln Indian Center, and I accepted the position in her honor. During that time, an Indian women's inpatient substance abuse treatment center was established. Administrative work with this model program allowed me to see, firsthand, the transforming influence that traditional ceremonies have on community responsiveness and mobilization for change. I witnessed extensive informal caregiving and the psychological support that extended families provide one another. This familial closeness was so special to me, as it reminded me of the days when my own large family on my father's side would fill up our grandparents' home for card games and meals. It was during this time, too, that I learned that an event's success depended on whether proper procedures were followed in extending invitations to elders for their involvement. I was impressed with how naturally the traditional values of kindness, patience, generosity, humility, respect, caring, and honesty were incorporated into treatment by culturally grounded staff.

As I continued to move between the worlds of the Indian center and the university, I continued to struggle with how to contribute to what is now called the multicultural counseling movement, yet make an impact in American Indian psychology. I became troubled by the definition of cross-cultural counseling as a counseling encounter where there are differences between counselor and client based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and physical disabilities. It seemed to me that students often opted for simulation experiences, interviews, and research papers focusing on clients representing person variables and avoided race or ethnicity when given license to do so through such a broad definition. I continued teaching counseling courses at the university but whenever possible taught cross-cultural counseling courses to American Indian and European American professionals at tribal colleges and universities in Indian country. In these courses, I could incorporate my research and the growing literature on American Indian psychology with experimentation on natural Indian helping styles and cross-cultural counseling techniques. I also required that there be an equal number of students representing American Indian and European American perspectives in these courses to maintain a cross-cultural rather than an ethnic-specific focus. Had material on critical White studies been available, it would have been included.

When I moved to Stanford University in 1983 I had the privilege of working with students like Roberto Gonzales, Don Pope-Davis, Sandy Foster, and Hardin Coleman, individuals who had considerable national and international diversity experiences. I found that my research in the area of American Indian counseling was readily received as a model for applied counseling research with special populations. Fortunately, these students

did not wish to wander away from matters of influence on racism but were willing to take counseling diversity to another level. Their subsequent contributions to the field in theory development and research attests to their strong commitment to social justice.

I also tried to keep up the ongoing community service by establishing a Saturday drop-in mental health clinic at the Indian Health Clinic in the tenderloin area of San Francisco. My caseload filled within two weeks, proving to mental health professionals in the city that American Indian people would avail themselves of services when they occurred in an Indian community agency and that the need was great. I also worked as a therapist at the Stanford Student Health Center. As part of my duties I ran an Indian women's support group consisting of some of my individual clients and other Indian female students. Again I was struck by the spontaneous disclosures of women in the group setting compared to their labored revelations in individual work with me. However, as a single parent trying to get tenure, I soon felt I couldn't keep up with the clinical demand and be effective in my position at the university. I had to resign from the position in San Francisco.

Eventually I was asked by community leaders of the Zuni pueblo to assist them in addressing the problem of youth suicide. Along with Stanford students Mary Jiron Belgarde, Benadette September, and Gary Lichtenstein and Zuni teacher Stephanie Antone I developed a school-based suicide prevention curriculum titled *American Indian Life Skills Development*. I truly believe that this intervention study would not have survived if not for the backing of religious and political leaders there. We were alternately challenged and supported by tribal members throughout the implementation and evaluation of the curriculum.

Our first hurdle came as we traveled into Gallup, New Mexico, en route to Zuni from Stanford to introduce the curriculum and begin teacher training. We were greeted with a newspaper article in the *Gallup Independent* that covered a quarter of the front page featuring a posed picture of a young American Indian girl sitting on her bed with a rope by her side with the following caption above it: "Stanford Researchers to Solve the Zuni Suicide Problem." Needless to say, the teachers, all of whom were non-Zuni, were very afraid to be involved in light of this yellow journalism and the cultural taboo that prohibited any Zuni person from thinking about, much less mentioning, the word suicide. To offset teachers' fears and also strengthen community resources, Zuni pueblo council members and school administrators participated in the teacher training on suicide prevention and use of the curriculum. Soon afterward, the on-site coordinator for this project, a non-Indian school counselor, left as a result of buying and selling a Zuni ceremonial mask. To make matters worse, the only other school counselor, a non-Indian woman, immediately resigned from her job, leaving an empty counseling office at the beginning of the crisis intervention section of the curriculum that relied on immediate referral of suicidal youths to help

givers. Again the community responded by setting aside agency rivalries to allow Zuni mental health technicians to team-teach the curriculum with the teachers. The way the community coalesced to offset complications that occurred in the implementation of the curriculum reaffirmed my faith that the intervention was on the right path.

Between 1990 and 1994 I worked in the Department of Counseling Psychology at the University of Wisconsin. Just as I was leaving for Madison and terminating with the clients I had seen in the Stanford Counseling Institute, I invited one of my clients, an Apache woman in her late 40s, to attend an acorn festival hosted by Mc-Wuk people. My client and her sister joined me in Yosemite Valley where the feasts and dances were held. I had been seeing this client for one year for major recurrent depression and prolonged grief reaction due to her mother's death. I chose to invite her to this particular ceremony because it occurred near the first anniversary of her mother's passing. The first evening that we were in the night dances, shortly after the closing intertribal dance, a woman came up to my client and began praying over her and smudging her with her eagle feather fan. People that gathered around them eventually started crying. Not knowing my client and never having spoken to her before, the medicine woman told my client to "let her go." She repeatedly told her, "It is time to let her go." Shortly thereafter, my client and her sister came to peace with their mother's death and my client's depression lifted. Here again I saw proof in the transformational power of collective support that is often found in ceremonial ways.

My continued encounters with healing experiences and community-based intervention development has strengthened my faith in the tenets of community empowerment. As we find unique applications for the *American Indian Life Skills Development Curriculum* like teen pregnancy, violence, and AIDS prevention or substance abuse prevention, I encounter more and more helping professionals who espouse multicultural competence ideals but still become impatient with the notion of intervening in a manner respectful of community mores and time frames. My experiences in ongoing relationships with spiritual leaders and community advocates has provided me with invaluable assistance in finding ways to intervene yet develop choice. I believe that by waiting for individuals and communities to seek one out rather than actively market to their needs shows respect for tribal sovereignty and self-determination. I feel strongly that psychologists can be seen as helpful in treating symptoms when they work in tandem with traditional support systems to provide adequate resources and manage the central issues needed for change.

I have received great satisfaction and hope from the success of the life skills intervention work and am pleased to know that the curriculum is now being implemented with indigenous people in Australia and New Zealand. My experiences in the field thus far leave me with the desire to continue to strive for balance in my research, practice, and service—balance

between attention to developmental processes leading to resilience and the cultural adaptation of treatment modalities. My journey has been composed of a series of collages. Each picture reflects an experience and no experience tells the whole story.

RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

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