

Keynote Speaker
Traditional Healing among Alaska Natives

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Keywords: Alaska; Traditional healing; Inuit

In the best of worlds we like to think of ourselves as invincible, healthy, strong, and living the good life to a wise, old age. Sometimes we fool ourselves into believing these descriptions, until reality sets in and we find that, alas, we are just as mortal as any other ethnic group, with maladies that sometimes cripple us, or slow us down, and finally overtake us.

However, ours is not a history of just giving up and lying down to die, not knowing what else to do. We have had concerned people who have made it their life work to advise us on health matters; grandmothers who taught us to have the “will to live,” eating the kinds of foods to retain our good health; and tribal healers who help us to overcome our illnesses, restoring us to better health to resume our usual roles within the family structure and community.

Personally, I really hate tearing down other people’s reputations in order to promote my own. But at the same time, I feel I have to tell you the truth as I see it in order to have you understand the scope of this discussion.

Our people have had tribal healers from time immemorial. Before the Christian era—for us it was from about the turn of this century—some of the tribal healers used their shaman powers to effect cures. They were by no means the only ones who knew the healing arts, but if a shamanistic taboo was broken, the concerned family members took the “trespasser” to another shaman to effect a cure. The shamans were paid in advance by the people who requested their services, or they could not perform their services. Like any doctor today, a regimen was prescribed for the ill person to follow until his recovery. The illness was sudden, caused double vision, a swollen tongue, and an unquenchable thirst which plain water could not satisfy unless it was from a still pond.

Today, because of the influence of the religious community, our generation has not seen any shaman practices, although some of us have had shamans among our ancestry. Very often the current tribal healers are asked if they use shamanistic powers in their work. As far as we know, these tribal healers are very spiritual. They pray to God that their hands will be sensitive enough to find the source of the illness, and that they will be blessed to alleviate the pains of the sick person or refer him or her to medical doctors who are able to perform surgeries.

Our tribal healers have continued to practice their healing services in our communities, even though the Western medical profession frowned on it. We had interested people among ourselves who knew what to do to make enlarged livers shrink down to normal size and function well, set dislocated joints and broken bones, work on internal organs to make certain they were in the right place and functioning normally, stretch shrunken stomachs, and remove umbilical cords when they became hooked around the neck of the fetus. They are able to turn the baby in the womb to a head-first position for easier birthing. You must remember that it is only with their hands and massage that our tribal healers work on other human beings. One of the delicate procedures they have been able to do for both men and women is to remove obstructions in the tubes that prevent pregnancies. Their sensitive hands are able to guide the obstruction out of the tube where it no longer blocks pregnancy. Many grateful parents have named their offspring after our tribal healers who made it possible for them to experience childbirth and childrearing of their own.

In order to bring Inupiaq tribal healing out in the open and have it accepted as part of the healing arts, we used the strength of the late

Della Keats's personality and character, with her consent. She had had a premature baby of about five months who could fit into a shoe box even after he was dressed and covered, and she cared for him day and night. That son lived to maturity and is now retired.

Della had an abiding interest in the anatomy of the human being and learned the blood circulation system from an elementary school book. She continued to learn the body functions as she matured into womanhood, and continued to help others as the need arose, through midwifery and other services. She knew how to use the blood-letting puncture instrument to relieve certain areas of the body from pressures and obstructions.

When the sensitive hands of tribal healers found the beginnings of diseases in the body which required the attention of the Western medical surgeons, they referred their patients for further examination and sometimes surgery. However, the medical profession has been slow to refer their patients to the tribal doctors, except when requested by the patient.

It has been a long, slow process, but I think we have established a situation where there is mutual respect and trust, in some quarters, of both tribal doctor healing and Western medicine doctoring. The tribal doctors work with their hands, and cases which require surgery or drugs are quickly referred to the medical profession.

Today we hear a lot about cholesterol and appropriate diets and foods to prevent heart disease. I think the healing arts can make further progress by learning from each other. The sensitive hands of the tribal healers can find a blood vessel that has narrowed and, using their massaging techniques, break up the obstruction and let the blood circulation take care of it. But first they work on the circulation systems of the extremities to make sure that when the obstruction is removed it doesn't cause more serious illness in the body. With the flowing passages of the extremities opened, then breaking up the main obstruction to normalize circulation is attended to. Any narrowing of the circulation system is sensitive and tender, and initial work of massaging by the tribal doctor is gauged by the amount of pain that the patient is able to withstand. It is a real relief to get past the ini-

tial tenderness and into normalcy. Those of us who visit our tribal healers on a regular basis feel like we have been given a new lease on life, while at the same time following the Western medical doctor's instructions in areas where our tribal doctors cannot help us.

Today we are much more enlightened and have learned the English language well enough to express ourselves. But our people went through a miserable period, especially during the Contact Period. We have histories of devastating periods when flu epidemics caught on like wild fire and destroyed whole communities, leaving some children orphaned. Tuberculosis was a scourge, and many of us served as guinea pigs for new surgical procedures and drugs which affected our hearing and eyesight before the disease was under control. Measles and smallpox took their toll, and our people had no idea at the time where and how they were transmitted to us. Our elders are certain that the change in diet to refined foods has weakened our physical constitution and urge us to eat more Native food to keep our health and stamina up. Modern technology has taken away a lot of the hard physical work we used to do, and we are too weak and culturally accustomed to living in the easy way that we have today.

Reason tells us that we must find a happy balance somewhere. In order for the body to function properly it must have a good diet and exercise. But we are not all physical. Our spirit must be fed and be happy, too. My grandmother told me that hating is detrimental to the spirit and eventually to the physical body. She said that we must control our feelings, that hating eventually becomes apparent as a disease in the vulnerable part of the body. She always told me to control my words, especially if I should get angry, that words become very strong if propelled by strong emotion. And besides, some of my ancestors were shamans; therefore, I should be aware at all times of my personal actions. This is not an easy task; nevertheless, my grandmother made sure that I knew what I was supposed to know. I really thank her for that. She tried, and if some things happened on account of me, she is blameless. I am just a modern Inupiaq of uncertain stripes.

We talked of the future of tribal doctor healing with the late Dr. Bill Richards. We had plans to train more young people because we felt that tribal doctor healing was still essential and important to humankind. I know our tribal doctors would love to teach what they know while they still can. We had hoped to develop a unit and make it a strong component of the Physician's Assistant program. The late Della Keats and the late Andrew Skin passed on their knowledge of tribal doctoring to other interested younger people in whom they saw potential. Sometimes I feel that today too much emphasis is placed on Western learning with recognition by certificates, diplomas, etc. Our young Native people want to be accepted and recognized,

too, and I can't blame them. There must be a way to blend Western medicine with tribal doctoring to benefit all of us. Certainly we have people in positions of responsibility to help us, just as Dr. Richards was about to do before his untimely passing. All I can say is that the tribal healers would be there to pass their knowledge along in hopes that it might help someone who is suffering unnecessarily.

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