Seeking Mino-pimatasiwin (the Good Life): An Aboriginal Approach to Social Work Practice

Michael Anthony Hart

Aboriginal peoples have been utilizing their own approaches to helping one another for centuries. Many Aboriginal social workers have incorporated these approaches or aspects of them in their professional practice. However, such approaches have not always been respected on their own merits by the social work profession. In recognition of this concern, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (1994) have acknowledged the need for greater understanding and respect of Aboriginal practices. In order to contribute to the development of this understanding, and in turn, respect for these approaches, one approach is outlined here.[1] It is important to note that Aboriginal peoples vary extensively in their world views, thus it is possible to determine a variety of Aboriginal helping approaches. This approach has been developed through a literature review on Aboriginal helping practices with a focus on literature addressing Aboriginal peoples in Canada, particularly the prairie provinces. With these points in mind, this acts as an Aboriginal approach and does not declare itself as the only approach.

Background

One of the models that guides this outline of an Aboriginal approach and which is frequently mentioned in the literature is the medicine wheel (Absolon, 1993; Bopp, Bopp, Brown, & Lane, 1985; Garrett & Myers, 1996; Regnier, 1994; Young, Ingram, & Swartz, 1989).

The medicine wheel is an ancient symbol of the universe used to help people understand things or ideas we often cannot physically see (Bopp et al., 1985; Hart, 1992). It reflects the cosmic order and the unity of all things in the universe (Regnier, 1994). It can be expressed in many different ways as there is no absolute version of the wheel (Bopp et al., 1985; Calliou, 1995). Indeed, many Aboriginal peoples, such as the Anishinabe, Cree, and Dakota, have utilized the medicine wheel and given it their interpretations (Regnier, 1994). Thus, as a central symbol used for understanding various issues and perspectives, the medicine wheel reflects several key and interrelated concepts that are common to many Aboriginal approaches to helping. These concepts include wholeness, balance, connectedness or relationships, harmony, growth and healing.

Wholeness

In order to understand the concept of wholeness, it is important to recognize that the medicine wheel has been used to express many relationships that can be expressed in sets of four and represented in the four cardinal directions: east, south, west, and north (Bopp et al., 1985; Calliou, 1995). These relationships that have been associated with the medicine wheel include the four grandfathers, the four dimensions of true learning, the four races (red, yellow, black and white), the four aspects of humanness (emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual), the four cycles of life (birth/infancy, youth, adulthood, and elder/death), the four elements (fire, water, wind, and earth), and the four seasons (spring, summer, fall, and winter) (Bopp et al., 1985; Hart, 1992; REgnier, 1994). Each of these relationships are part of a single whole; therefore, we can only come to understand one part of the medicine wheel if we can understand how it is connected to all other parts (Bopp et al., 1985). Furthermore, Regnier (1994) stated:

Wholeness in the cycle of the year requires movement

> through all seasons, wholeness in life requires movement
> through the phases of a human life, and wholeness in human
> growth requires the development of all aspects. The year life
> and human growth can come to completion through this
> movement to wholeness. This movement is natural and
> fundamental to all living things. (pp. 132-133)

Thus, wholeness is the incorporation of all aspects of life. In order to
focus upon the whole it becomes necessary to give attention to each
part. This attention is reflected in the next key concept, balance.

Balance

The concept of balance implies that each part of the whole
requires attention in a manner where one part is not focussed upon to
the detriment of the other parts (Clarkson, Morrissette, & Regallet,
1992; Young, Ingram, & Swartz, 1989). Balance occurs when a person
is at peace and harmony within and with all other living things,
including the earth and natural world (Longclaws, 1994; Malloch,
1989; Zieba, 1990). Balance also includes paying attention to both
positive and negatives aspects of people (Absolon, 1993; Briks, 1983;
Nabigon, nd.). While balance is periodically achieved, it is never truly
achieved for an indefinite period of time. Therefore, it is constantly
pursued (Ross, 1996). When there is an unequal focus on one part of
the medicine wheel, there is an imbalance. Such imbalance is
considered the source of a person's disease or problems (Canda, 1983;
Malloch, 1989; Ross, 1996). Furthermore, a person who does not
achieve balance will not be able to develop their full potential (Bopp
et al., 1985). In order to restore balance, each part of the medicine
wheel must be addressed in relation to all of the other parts (Peat,
1994).

Relationships

Balance involves more than just paying attention to each and
every part of the medicine wheel. If it did, one could take a
reductionist view and attempt to give equal time to each part to achieve
balance. Balance includes giving attention to what connects each part
of the medicine wheel; in other words, the relationships between all
the parts. Several authors have stated that people are imbedded in

interconnections where they are not only relating to one another, but more accurately, they are in relationship with all the other people at once (Janzen et al., 1994; Nelson et al., 1985; Pepper and Henry, 1991). On another level, Aiken (1990), Hallowell (1992), and Zieba (1990) stated that relationships are also made with "other than human beings" and that these interpersonal relationships are essential to their well-being. Other authors have emphasized that there is just as much concern and attention given to looking at connections within individuals (Ermine, 1995; Nabigon, nd., 1993). Thus, in order to achieve balance, people need to constantly foster the relationships between entities outside of, as well as within, themselves. It is this fostering of relationships that is central to the next key concept, harmony.

Harmony

Harmony is frequently mentioned as a key concept to be achieved, whether it is with others (Brant, 1990); Ellsion, Williams, & Ellison, 1996; Herring, 1996), with the world (Canda, 1983), with the universe (Regnier, 1994; Johnston, 1976), for a good life (Dion Buffalo, 1990; Longclaws, 1994), or within one's self (Odjig White, 1996). Nabigon (nd) suggested that harmony includes respect for our relationships with others and within oneself and the give and take between entities. According to Longclaws, Rosebush, and Barkwell (1993) "when one is in harmony with nature, one is in harmony with the Creator, at peace with oneself and with the whole tribal group" (p. 16). Peat (1994) gave an expanded outline of harmony: it involves the relationships of all the various powers, energies, and beings of the cosmos, and when everyone, human, animal, plant, and planet, fulfills their obligations and goes about their proper business, they are in harmony. Aiken (1990) focussed on the metaphysical level and suggested that to be in harmony with the spirits, in other words, the life around, people have to live within the cycles that move life. Pobihushchy (1986) has suggested harmony is finding a fit between the components of life through collaboration, sharing of what is available, cooperation, and respect for all elements of life. Overall, harmony involves peace, respect, establishing connections, and sharing. It is through trying to achieve harmony that one fosters the next key oncept, growth.

Growth

Growth and learning involve developing the body, mind, heart, and spirit in a harmonious manner. Bopp et al. (1985) have outlined a view on growth which suggested that all people have the capacity to grow and change and that their growth is dependent upon using their volition to develop their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects. Thus, growth is viewed as a lifelong process which leads people to their true selves. Regnier (1994) and Longclaws (1994) have viewed growth as movement through life cycles towards wholeness, balance, interdependence or connectedness, and harmony with oneself and other living things. They further noted that growth is reflected in the medicine wheel or the sacred circle as the movement towards the centre of the medicine wheel. Longclaws (1994) refers to the centre of the wheel as oda aki, which is an Anishinabe term he has interpreted as meaning centredness, while Absolon (1993) refers to the centre of the wheel as the sacred fire. For both Absolon and Longclaws, when one is centred, one is balanced and in harmony with creation, connected, and whole; this is the place of optimum growth and healing.

Healing

Within an Aboriginal perspective, healing is not defined as something that is done when an illness or a problem is present. Instead, healing is viewed as a journey; it is something that is practiced daily throughout our lives (Absolon, 1993; Ross, 1996). Illness and problems are viewed as disconnections, imbalances, and disharmony (Canda, 1983; Malloch, 1989; Pepper & Henry, 1991; Ross, 1996). Thus, "healing is the transition that restores the person, community, and nation to wholeness, connectedness, and balance" (Regnier, 1994, p. 135). In other words, healing is developing centredness (Baker and Kirkness, 1994; Clarkson et al., 1992; Ellison, Williams & Ellison, 1996; Longclaws, 1994; McCormick, 1995).

From this perspective, an individual's healing is not only necessary for that individual, but it is also important for all people around that person since they are all interconnected (Longclaws, 1994, p. 32). However, healing for an individual begins with that individual. According to Aiken (1990), "the old Indian way of healing was first to know the illness and to know one's self. And because the individual

participates in the healing process it is essential that a person needed to know themselves, their innermost core, their innermost spirit and soul, their inner most strength" (p. 24). As such, healing is about people taking responsibility for their own learning and growth (Ross, 1996).

It is through the taking of responsibility for their own personal healing and growth that individuals will be able to attain *pimatasiwin*, or *minopimatasiwin* (Cree)--the good life. Rose Auger (1994), a Cree Elder, has reflected on this concept and stated:

> When you choose to make your life good, it will be good . . . The Creator gave you a sound mind and a incredible spirit and a way of being so that you can do anything right now [sic]! You can change that attitude same as you wake up in the morning and it's a new day. Your mind and everything else can be new. I've lived through hardship and horror, and I'm a loving, caring, and giving person because I choose to be that way. I choose to listen to the other side to guide me. (p. 138)

Several authors noted that the good life is the goal of healing, learning, and life in general (Aiken, 1990; Bopp et al., 1985; Longclaws, 1994; Longclaws et al., 1993; Hallowell, 1992; Ross, 1996). For example, Overhold and Callicott (1982) recognized that ""the central goal of life," which the Ojibwa designated by the term *pimadaziwin*, is to have "life in the fullest sense, life in the sense of longevity, health and freedom from misfortune"" (p. 151).

This growth and attempt to reach the good life is not just an individual focus. It also involves the family and community. Herring (1996) spoke of self-actualization in a manner which reflected the idea of reaching *pimatasiwin*. He suggested that "Native cultures emphasize cooperation, harmony, interdependence, the achievement of socially oriented and group goals, and collective responsibility. Thus, the goal [of self-actualization] is more akin to family and tribal self-actualization" (p. 74).

Key Values: Sharing and Respect

To reach *pimatasiwin*, particular values have been emphasized. Benton-Banai (1988) noted that the values that were to

be cherished by the Anishinabe people included the values of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth. Nabigon (nd.), and Briks (1983) have outlined several values emphasized by a Cree Elder. These include respect, caring, faith, honesty, kindness, and sharing. On the other hand, there are some opposing conditions that stem from an individual's fears and which affect a person's ability to reach a good life. These conditions include envy, resentment, uncaringness, jealousy, a negative attitude, and feeling inferior (Absolon, 1993; Briks, 1983; Nabigon, nd., 1993). Joe Cardinal, a Cree Elder (Cited in Meili, 1991), suggested how these opposing forces are addressed: "If the positive aspects of the self are taken care of, the negative side will die a natural death" (p. 253).

In light of all the values emphasized, sharing is one of the values extensively mentioned (Auger, 1994; Boldt & Long, 1984; Brant, 1990; Nabigon, nd.; O'Meara, 1996). O'Meara (1996) noted that practical and sacred knowledge, life experiences, and food were some of the many things shared between people. She further noted that sharing was the most natural way of developing human relations. Smith Attimoyoo, a Cree/Saulteaux Elder, shared his thoughts on sharing at the Plains Cree Conference in 1975. He stated:

> We may have a little piece of bannock, the only piece in the cupboard. We don't say, "Well I'm going to save this for tomorrow, I may want this tomorrow." But instead my mother or my wife, makes that tea and serves this little piece of bannock that she has. That's the kind of sharing that we have to take to our young people so that once again they may be able to tell the values that we have, to maintain this sharing and this living together. (cited in Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1979, p. 52)

According to Brant (1990), sharing is tied to equality and democracy in that everyone is considered as valuable as any other person and treated accordingly. It also reduces such conditions as greed, envy and arrogance that may cause conflict within the group. Zieba (1990) suggested that sharing is so fundamentally important that any breach would result in sickness.

Another value extensively emphasized is respect (Aiken, 1990; Clarkson et al., 1992; Nabigon, nd, 1993; Nelson, Kelly, & McPherson, 1985; Niezen,k 1993; Waldram, 1997). In conversation

with a Cree Elder, Briks (1983) was informed that one of the foundations of the Elder's culture was respect. According to Calliou (1995) "a premise of the First Nations world is that we unconditionally respect all beings because we all begin as seeds from the same materials of this Mother Earth. In the circle no one individual (two-legged, four-legged, mineral, plant, etc.) is deemed "more than" or "less than" another, so that treatment which elevates or denigrates one of the other is ruled out" (p. 67). Respect has been defined as meaning to show honour, esteem, or to treat someone or something with deference and courtesy (Bopp et al., 1985). It is a central responsibility in all relationships, including spiritual relationships (Hampton, Hampton, Kinunwa, & Kinunwa, 1995; Zieba, 1990).

Aboriginal Perception

In an aboriginal approach, human nature is seen as good, although the existence and expression of bad attributes by people are recognized (Absolon, 1993; Waldram, 1997). According to Longclaws (1994) "it was believed that people were born good but that throughout life the teachings of the medicine wheel provided guidance and therefore protection from evil forces present in the universe that could lead people astray and off the good, or red, road" (p. 26). Furthermore, while everyone has a direction and purpose in life, they have to actively strive to develop themselves positively towards *pimatasiwin* (Bopp et al., 1985; Dugan, 1985; Longclaws, 1994; Regnier, 1994). On another point, Hampton et al., (1995) have stated that "while people develop to come to know their true nature, the traditional Native also nurtures the experience of being alive" (p. 259). Thus, an Aboriginal approach mainly views people as in the state of being (Nelson et al., 1985) but also includes them in a state of being-in-becoming (Regnier, 1994).

As previously noted, all people have a purpose and are active as they strive to grow towards *pimatasiwin*. This growth and their development takes place through people's active use of their volition (Bopp et al., 1985). However, this does mean that they are only future orientated. Brant (1990) stated that "the Native person has an intuitive, personal and flexible concept of time" (p. 536). Indeed, past personal and generational experiences are important, as well as how present events will affect future generations (Benton-Banai, 1988; Clarkson et al., 1992). According to Nelson et al. (1990), "life is experienced as a

series of circles, in which change is not an irreversible line, but a curve bending backwards toward its beginning. Time extends from far in the past to far into the future" (p. 237).

In regards to relationships, Johnston (1976) and Ross (1996) outlined that relationships are highly significant to each person's well being and purpose since people influence and are influenced by relationships. Ross emphasized that the "determination to place the primary emphasis on studying the relationship between things--and to try to accommodate those relationships instead of dominating the things within them--seems to lie at the heart of a great many Aboriginal approaches to life" (p. 63). Furthermore, these relationships are guided by good conduct, since good conduct leads to *pimatasiwin* (Hallowell, 1992; Ross, 1996). Good conduct in relationships also requires not interfering in and not judging the affairs of others because interfering and judging limit a person's self-determination (Janzen et al., 1994; Good Tracks, 1989; Ross, 1996). Non interference also promotes positive interrelationships since any form of coercion is discouraged (Brant, 1990; Waldram, 1997). Jim Canipitatao, speaking in Cree, addressed the importance of relationships and how they are to be maintained. The English interpretation of his words appears as "We must help each other. We must help each other and ask for God's help to understand each other, love each other and help each other. It is useless to confront each other, my relatives. It is better to ask for unity, to work together, to think of our grandchildren. This is the Cree way" (cited in Plains Research Centre, 1975, p. 43). Overall, positive relationships are central to an Aboriginal approach.

Role of history and individual development

According to Duran and Duran (1995), Janzen et al. (1994), LaDue (1994), and Morrissette et al. (1993), Aboriginal peoples' histories have greatly affected them. Specifically, the process and effects of colonization have to be understood, not only as a structured relationship but as a personal experience (Morrissette et al., (1993). McKenzie and Morrissette (1993) have suggested that the spiritual aspect of Aboriginal people have suffered the greatest stress due to colonization and that this aspect requires special attention. Duran and Duran (1995) discussed colonization in relation to psychology. Their statement applies equally to social work. They stated:

> The past five hundred years have been devastating to our
> communities; the effects of this systematic genocide are
> currently being felt by our people. The effects of the genocide
> are quite personalized and pathologized by our profession via
> the diagnozing and labelling tools designed for this purpose.
> If the labelling and diagnosing process is to have any
> historical truth, it should incorporate a diagnostic category
> that reflects the effects of genocide. Such a diagnosis would
> be "acute and/or chronic reaction to colonialism." (p. 6)

Thus, an Aboriginal approach incorporates historical factors such as
the effects of colonization on the person.

Equally important as the effects of colonization on people's
functioning is the cyclical nature of life. This cycle has been viewed in
relation to the medicine wheel where life is seen as having four key
phases (Bopp et al., 1985; Calliou, 1995). Within each phase there are
tasks that can be developed. However, these tasks are not limited to
particular phases in life but are ever present for people to address
throughout their life time (Bopp et al., 1985). Thus, while it is possible
to describe particular developments and achievements in relation to
particular life stages (Longclaws et al., 1993; Longclaws, 1994), these
phases are primarily significant to people individually so that they may
be able to better understand their own development.

Consciousness and Unconsciousness

Dion Buffalo (1990) recognized the importance of the
unconscious for the Plains Cree. She stated that they heal individuals
by bringing the unconscious conflict and resistance to a conscious level
where they can work with the issues. Often this process incorporates
spiritual dimensions that are reached through dreams and visions.
There is great attention given to the unconscious via spirits, altered
states, dreams, and visions (Dugan, 1985; Hallowell, 1992; Irwin,
1994; McPherson & Rabb, 1993; Niezen, 1993; Peat, 1994). Irwin
(1994) noted that among the traditional Plains peoples, dreams are
given a strong ontological priority and are a source of knowledge and
power. Hallowell (1992) discussed the importance of other than human
persons, in other words, spiritual beings who offer guidance or
pawaganuk in Cree (Dunsenberry, 1962). He suggested that these other
than human persons are contacted through dreams and that these

contacts enhance a person's ability to reach *pimatasiwin*.

In a discussion of the vision quest, Dugan (1985) has suggested that it was initiated for two reasons: when people approached a significant moment or undertaking in their lives and when they felt need for help beyond human power in order to cope with what was to come. Dugan (1985) also suggested that "one of the principle motives for a person to undertake a vision quest was to discover direction and meaning for his life. This search had always included the communal dimension, for it was especially true in Indian society that the individual was defined in the context of the Tribe" (p. 156). Ermine (1995) reviewed the process of learning, securing power, enhancement, and help through such events as dreams and visions. He stated:

> In their quest to find meaning in the outer space, Aboriginal people turned to the inner space. This inner space is the universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being. The priceless core within each of us and the process of touching that essence is what Kierkegaard called inwardness ([1846] 1965, 24). Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and that the whole enmeshed that being in its inclusiveness. In the Aboriginal mind, therefore, an immanence is present that gives meaning to existence and forms the starting point for Aboriginal epistemology. (p. 103)

Ermine noted that Cree people refer to this process as *mamatowisowin*. It is important to note that this inward looking process is not only essential for individuals but also for the community. Overall, Aboriginal philosophy is a spiritual philosophy that strongly incorporates the unconscious and conscious (Aiken, 1990).

Change and Motivation

According to Peat (1994), Aboriginal peoples see the universe in a constant state of flux that has an order of alliances, compacts, and relationships between the energies and spirits of the world. This order, being in flux, is always in a state of transition between order and

chaos. As such, balance lies in flux, transition, and change. In parallel with this transitional view, Chief Simon Baker (Baker & Kirkness, 1994) suggested that change occurs in cycles. In relation to people, they are always involved in transitional processes either directly or indirectly, internally or externally. When individuals are not balanced within, disconnected in their relationships, or in disharmony with their environment, change is required. At other times, when an individual attempts to remain in a "stuck" balanced state, their growth is hindered because the world around them continues to change. Therefore, the nature of change is that it is an ongoing transitional process of balancing and connecting relationships within the individual and between individuals (Longclaws, 1994; Regnier, 1994; Ross, 1996). This process is not limited to the individual but also involves relationships on a familial, communal, and tribe or nation level (Briks, 1983; LaDue, 1994; Longclaws et al., 1993).

The primary motivation for growth and change lies in the desire to reach *pimatasiwin* (Aiken, 1990; Hallowell, 1992; Overholt & Callicott, 1982). Therefore, the motivation to change rests upon the individual (Bopp et al., 1985; Ross, 1996). Ross (1996) emphasized this personal responsibility for change:

> Only you can find the will to take those first stepts towards trusting others, towards taking hold of the hands that reach down to help you. The healers can show you how they trust each other, how they don't let go of each other, but they can't force you to reach out yourself. They can only demonstrate, teach, encourage and receive. Everything else must come from the individual who needs the healing. (p. 190)

Helping Process

While a few authors (Nelson et al., 1985; Niezen, 1993) have suggested that an Aboriginal approach is person-centred, passive, and supportive, it is evident that this view, similar to the view of many other authors', focuses on the relationships of the people being helped. Duran and Duran (1995) have stated that:

> Any psychology [or social work practice] of Native American people must have a direct impact on the way that any type of relationship is experienced. The experience of therapy or

Nishnaabe Kinoomaadwin Naadmaadwin

healing is no exception to the experience of being in the world. The need for healing can be explained by the fact that the client/community has lost the ability to be in harmony with the life process of which the client/community is a part. (p. 15)

Ross (1996) and Malloch (1989) have also expressed this view by suggesting that the focus of the helping process is restoring relationships that have become out of balance. Ellison Williams and Ellison (1996) included a spiritual aspect to the focus and stated "an intervention will need to restore physical well-being to the body and harmony to the damaged social and spiritual relationships" (p. 148). LaDue (1994) noted the social aspect and suggested that the focus can be on an individual, familial, community, or nation level of relationships. Clarkson et al. (1992) and McKenzie and Morrissette (1993) outlined how the relationship focus has parameters that extend to include people's relationships with the Creator and Mother Earth. In recognition that the persons offering help are in a relationship with the people receiving help, Canda (1983) and Nelson et al. (1985) emphasized that the people offering help are required to focus on maintaining their own balance, connectedness, and harmony, or, in other words, centredness.

The helping relationship is one where the helper and the person receiving the support are involved in a shared experience of learning and growing (Hampton et al., 1995). In this shared experience, the helper is fundamentally a supporter involved in an interdependent relationship with the person receiving the support (Nelson et al., 1985). Aiken (1990) described this as being helpful rather than as being a helper. Miller (1996) and Longclaws (1994) noted that people offering help have to be non-coercive and indirect in their helping practices in order to respect individual autonomy. This reflects Boldt and Long's (1984) point that no human being has control over another's life, and Good Tracks (1989) discussion around Aboriginal people's value of non-interference. On the other hand, some healers have been noted to be very direct and have used direct interventions (Malloch, 1989; Young et al., 1989). However, most interventions that are parallel with social work practice involve a relationship of interdependence and support, and remain fairly indirect.

There are specific techniques that reflect this relationship.

Storytelling is a technique frequently mentioned as a method of addressing issues directly and indirectly (Bruchac, 1992; Dion Buffalo, 1990; O'Meara, 1996; Peat, 1994; Ross, 1996). Another technique is the use of humour (Bruchac, 1992; Peat, 1994). According to Aiken (1990), "humor to our people is probably one of the greatest medicinal strengths" (p. 29). He considered it an indirect nurturing approach that is non-confrontational and non-interfering. Role-modelling is another technique that can be indirect, non-confrontational, and supportive (Brant, 1990; McCormick, 1995; Pepper & Henry, 1991; Ross, 1996). Katz and St. Denis (1991) described the role-modelling process as "teacher as healer" where a person lives the life that is to be taught and waits for the student to come seeking knowledge. This person is referred to as *okiskinohamakew* in Cree, which translates to ""a person who teaches what he has learned from life and people" and "one who serves as a guide"" (Aiken, p. 31).

Related to role-modelling is another helping process: the referral to or support of Elders. Significantly, Elders are often seen as people who have learned from life and are able to transmit the culture (Baker & Kirkness, 1994; Malloch, 1989; Stiegelbauer, 1994; Waldram, 1997). Transmitting the culture is considered a key aspect of the healing process for Aboriginal people (LaDue, 1994; McKenzie & Morrissette, 1993; Morrissette et al., 1993). Elders are also utilized as counsellors, offer spiritual guidance, and conduct ceremonies (Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1979; Niezen, 1993; Stiegelbauer, 1994; Waldram, 1997).

Conducting ceremonies and following rituals are other significant techniques utilized in an Aboriginal approach (Aiken, 1990; Benton-Banai, 1988; McCormick, 1995; Peat, 1994; Regnier, 1994; Ross, 1996). According to Longclaws (1994), "ceremonies assist individuals in centring themselves and give them strength to participate in a lifelong learning process" (p. 26). Ceremonies are not rights to be exercised but obligations to be fulfilled in order for renewal in the life cycle. They are ways to facilitate healing and to discharge emotions through crying, yelling, talking, swearing, singing, dancing, and praying (Ross, 1996). The discharge of emotion in-and-of-itself is seen as a healing method (McCormick, 1995). Overall, ceremonies are significant and are to be regularly used, even by the healthiest people (Ross, 1996).

The Helper

Part of the reason Elders are respected as sources of help is because of their experiences and how they have learned from those experiences (Stiegelbauer, 1996). Teachers as healers need to live the life they wish to teach (Katz & St. Denis, 1991). People who conduct healing ceremonies go through a learning process that incorporates years of intense study (LaDue, 1994). In light of these points, the knowledge required to fully work as an Aboriginal healer is exhaustive. Utilizing an Aboriginal approach in the helping process at least requires the ability to appropriately use the basic knowledge and skills that reflect and respect Aboriginal world views and the lifestyles that stem from these views. These include: expunging the expert role, maintaining humility, demonstrating centredness, acknowledging the spiritual, listening, being patient, using silence, and speaking from the heart.

People offering help need to recognize that they are not experts in the healing process (Ross, 1996). According to Nelson et al. (1985), "there is no inherent distinction between the helper and the helped" (p. 241). Humility, not judgement, should be emphasized (Ross, 1996). Helpers should incorporate personal experience to demonstrate alternatives for healing and therefore should be active in developing their own centredness (Nelson et al., 1985; Ross, 1996). Since centredness involves the spiritual aspect of people and since the helper role includes acting as a mediator between the physical and spiritual aspects of creation, helpers need to acknowledge the spiritual (Absolon, 1993; Malloch, 1989). Bruchac (1992), Peat (1994), and Miller (1996) have emphasized the importance of listening and patience. Broken Nose (1992) related these virtues to helpers: "The professional may need to alter his or her communication style, learning to sit patiently through long pauses and to listen rather than to be directive or to interrupt the speaker" (p. 384). Related to listening and patience is the use of silence. Peat (1994) stated that "coming-to-know arises out of silence. It is this same quality of silence that strikes so forcefully when you meet with a Native person. Native people love to gossip and will talk right through the night. Yet, at the same, each person has a quality of silence" (p. 75). Silence is related to another skill that should be developed according to Peat (1994):

Out of this power of silence great oratory is born. When

Native people speak they are not talking from the head,
relating some theory, mentioning what they have read in
some book, or what someone else has told them. Rather, they
are speaking from the heart, from the traditions of their
people, and from the knowledge of their land; they speak of
what they have seen and heard and touched, and of what has
been passed on to them by the traditions of their people. (p.
75)

Ross (1996) noted that speaking from the heart also includes the
attempt to reach and touch the listener's heart. This process is
important because such actions honour the listener by having the
speaker sharing something that is truly meaningful and not just
information. Thus, it is by reaching inward and speaking from their
own heart that people are able to reach others.

Since the Aboriginal approach outlined here espouses
personal responsibility, goal setting would be determined by the person
being helped (Aiken, 1990; Nelson et al., 1986). Unless the person has
approached a traditional healer asking for a particular problem to be
cured, the assessment of what goals are to be sought is determined by
the person being helped as well (Nelson et al., 1985). It is significant
to recognize that some authors have suggested that all Aboriginal
people have a central goal. As previously noted, this ultimate goal is
also referred to as *pimatasiwin*, the good life. Overall, goal setting is
a personal responsibility. Helpers utilizing an Aboriginal approach can
only act to support the person being helped to develop their goals.

Application

In utilizing this approach in practice, social work helpers
begin with themselves. They would have to prepare themselves by
being aware of their own emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical
wellness, how these aspects are balanced and connected, and how they
move to establish harmonious relationships within themselves and
with others. Social work helpers would have to recognize that they are
role models of positive growth and wellness. They will need to
demonstrate respect and be prepared and willing to share their
experiences of growth.

In working with people seeking help and/or support, social
work helpers need to develop understandings of each person's

personal, family, community, and national histories and how these histories may be brought into play in the present. To develop this understanding, the helpers would have to listen to the stories the people share. They would have to hear about and support the persons seeking help to consider all the relationships they hold. Awareness of each internal component should be developed by the helper and the person seeking help. There should be consideration of such questions as are the persons able to express a full range of emotions appropriately, take physical care of themselves, meet cognitive challenges and actively learn, feel and express their sense of spirituality? All of these relationships, internal and external, should be considered in relation to each other, in other words, wholistically.

The positive growth for these components and relationships should be focussed upon as the helper supports the individuals to develop their own goals. An outline of how centredness can be achieved should be shared between the helpers and the persons seeking help. Ceremonies can be utilized, when appropriate, to support a person's development of centredness. These ceremonies may be within the session, for example, by smudging with cleansing medicines, or the ceremonies may be incorporated outside the sessions through such practices as sweats or sharing circles.

Finally, and importantly, the social work helpers and persons seeking help will have to decide on how to best utilize the support of Elders. Elders may be accessed by the helper to give advice and direction on how to proceed or on points to consider. Alternatively, the persons seeking help may wish to be referred to an Elder for support.

Summary

Aboriginal approaches to helping exist and are being utilized today. They have roots that stem centuries and are grounded in full and dynamic philosophies. This approach is one of many that are being utilized in various helping professions, including social work. This particular approach is based upon an ancient symbol--the medicine wheel--and has a focus on relationships within and between beings. The ultimate goal is growth towards *minopimatasiwin*. Hopefully, by sharing and advocating for approaches such as this one, we will begin and/or continue to address the concern raised by the Canadian Association of Social Workers and be able to work together with greater understanding. Perhaps, we may even move towards

minopimatasiwin.

Notes
1.This outline is based upon a chart developed by Turner, F.J. (1988) *Social work practice theories: A comparison of selected attributes.* [Poster]. Toronto, Canada: Dr. Francis J. Turner.

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NISHNAABE KINOOMAADWIN
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