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Deborah E. Bowen

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

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Honoring the Elders: Interviews with Two Lakota Men

DEBORAH E. BOWEN

University of North Carolina
at Wilmington

The beliefs that honoring the elders, commitment to family, and the connectedness to all creation are paramount are intrinsic to Lakota culture. Two Lakota elders, Albert White Hat, Sr. and Sylvan White Hat, Sr. are interviewed for this article. They express their concerns with major social justice issues, and offer hope for future generations of Lakota children. A strengths-based perspective of social work practice is compared to traditional Lakota customs and practices.

Key words: elders, connectedness, social justice, Lakota, strengths-based, traditions

Albert was telling about when he was a boy. He and other boys would go along the creekbeds in winter. The creeks were frozen over long periods of time, and the ice would be buckled up. Sometimes crawling, the boys would go through the tunnels under the snow made by the ice lifted up from the creek. I could see him then, a Lakota boy. When he got older he said he worked for ranchers around here, around Rosebud. He became a cowboy, he was a Lakota cowboy. Now, Albert's a teacher. He's taught at the college for several years and other places. He's older now, and, needless to say, he is Lakota and always will be.

Simon Ortiz, 1998, p. 66

In the culture and tradition of the Sicangu Lakota people of South Dakota, honor and strength are paramount. To be honored, to be singled out of the tribe, is the greatest gift that can be bestowed upon a tribal member. To bestow honor upon another by verbalizing his deeds and personal characteristics is the greatest gift one can give. This is particularly true when it comes to

honoring the Elders. Respect for Elders is not only expected, it is an integral component of tribal culture.

“Life demands that we exercise perseverance, face adversity with courage, demonstrate fortitude in the midst of temptation, tell the truth no matter how painful, walk in humility, sacrifice for our families, practice generosity to be truly rich, respect all who are a part of the Great Circle of Life, choose honor above personal gain, act with compassion toward the needy, strive for harmony in personal relationships, and otherwise demonstrate the virtues that give meaning to life,” (Marshall, 2001, p. 202).

Marshall’s notion of honoring is coupled with the concept of the connectedness of all life. The idea of such connectedness is the basis for the Lakota term *mitakuye oyas’in*, one of the cornerstones in the belief system of the Lakota people. It means that everything that has ever been, or ever will be, created—every person, every animal, every plant, every stone, all the waters, Father Sky, and Mother Earth herself—are related. Coupled with the concept of *mitakuye oyas’in* is the notion of the *tiospaye*, or a group of people who live together or who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption (White Hat, 1999; Marshall, 2001).

The concept of strength among the Lakota people means not only physical strength, but strength of character, strength of self-sufficiency, and strength of the bond of the *tiospaye* (White Hat, 1999). Saleebey’s (1992) strengths-based model of social work practice in many ways parallels the Lakota beliefs of empowerment, connectedness and synergy. Thus, social workers would do well to study Lakota beliefs as a way of honoring both our clients and the traditions of a great indigenous people.

While Saleebey (1992) speaks of empowerment and membership as hallmarks of the strengths perspective of social work practice and interpersonal relationships, the Lakota people have been living these concepts for hundreds of years. Thus, the terms *mitakuye oyas’in* and *tiospaye* were central in my recent interviews with Albert White Hat, Sr. and Sylvan White Hat, Sr.

I have been acquainted with Albert and Sylvan for several years. In my work at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, I accompany students on service-learning trips around the United States and Central America. My students have traveled

to Rosebud Reservation several times to work for Habitat for Humanity and to learn Lakota traditional arts and crafts and culture from the faculty and staff at Sinte Gleska University, the tribal college on the reservation. Additionally, I have had the privilege of attending a Sun Dance ceremony with the White Hat family.

Although they are biologically cousins, Albert White Hat, Sr., 66, and Sylvan White Hat, Sr., 57, consider themselves brothers in the way of the *tiospaye*. Each also is considered *wicahcala*, or a man who has reached an age of wisdom, by many of their people, (White Hat, 1999).

In my interviews with Albert and Sylvan, they discussed several major social issues faced by elder men on the reservation, and those are presented below. More important, however, they also discussed the growing movement toward a Lakota sense of pride and a never-ending respect for their elders, their traditions and their way of life.

Both men teach at Sinte Gleska University in Mission, South Dakota. Both are full-blood Lakota from the Sicangu subtribe. Both grew up on the reservation, in Christian churches and attended Christian boarding schools, and both began to practice Lakota ways and traditions extensively as adults. However, their lives have taken many divergent turns over the years. Albert is the author of a textbook of the Lakota language and a respected scholar of Lakota culture and tradition. Sylvan, like many people on the Rosebud and other reservations, has struggled with alcohol addiction and has come to sobriety and higher education later in life. His passions are his grandchildren and coaching children's basketball teams. Both have learned that living within the *tiospaye* is the key to survival in a land that is extremely harsh physically, emotionally and spiritually.

Rosebud Reservation is located in south central South Dakota, bordering Nebraska to the south. It roughly comprises Todd County and is home to 10,368 people, about 800 of which are over age 60. Only Shannon County, to the west, home of Pine Ridge reservation of the Oglala Lakota, is poorer in per capita income and higher in unemployment rates. For example, U.S. Census Bureau figures for 1999 (latest data available) put the per capita income of Rosebud residents at \$5,967 (as compared to \$7,971 on

all other reservations except Pine Ridge) and the poverty rate is 57 percent (as compared to 39 percent on all other reservations except Pine Ridge), (US Bureau of the Census, 1999). There is no industry on the reservation. The largest employers are federal-government organizations, the hospital (operated by the Indian Health Service), and Sinte Gleska University.

While the rolling landscape is indescribably beautiful, winters are brutally cold and summers are unbearably hot on the reservation. Many families live in government-built housing that is poorly insulated, heated by expensive propane, and not air-conditioned. Others live in tar-paper shacks or mobile homes ("house trailers" as they are called on the reservation). Many homes have old tires on the roof to weight the roof down as the unrelenting winds wail across the plains. Often, many relatives, and usually three generations, live together to conserve money and for physical, emotional and spiritual support. It is the responsibility of members of the *tiospaye* to care for each other, particularly the sick and the elderly (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Health Care Issues Faced by Elders on Rosebud Reservation

Albert stated that the greatest concern experienced by male elders is lack of health care, or, more specifically, inability to pay for health care. Health care on the reservation is provided by Indian Health Services (a division of the Department of Health and Human Services), and Albert's perspective is that there are "never enough" resources from this agency to adequately deliver services. While state-of-the-art technology is available at the reservation hospital, it is difficult for the agency to hire, and retain, qualified physicians and other health care professionals. Albert noted that, "like all other large government agencies, the paperwork comes first. If paperwork is lost, the patient pays the bill," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Albert noted that, as with the general population, heart disease, cancer and diabetes are primary killers of elder men. Additionally, substance abuse, particularly alcohol addiction and its related illnesses, is devastating to Lakota people, particularly elder men who are addicted. "My relatives who are alcoholics

have stayed in my home many times. They sober up and are gone again. Then they come back again when they need to dry out. It's a vicious cycle," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004). Although there are Alcoholics Anonymous groups and treatment programs on the reservation, a sense of hopelessness prevails among elders who are substance abusers. "With no jobs, no money, and often, no home, drinking is the only alternative elder men see. These guys are pretty stubborn. They accept that this is how they are going to die," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Krech notes that alcoholism among Native men is related to a sense of not being useful or having a purpose. This lack of self-respect is changing, he states, as Native men gain a "respect for the self [that] is grounded in a healthy respect for others, emphasizing the importance of being connected with a community," (2002, p. 78).

Sylvan agrees with Albert that substance abuse is strongly related to unemployment, lack of education, poverty, and living conditions on the reservation. However, he sees some of the issues surrounding substance abuse somewhat differently from Albert. He grew up in a single-parent home, where his mother struggled to make ends meet, even with the support of the *tiospaye*. His alcoholism led him to unstable marriages and frequent absences from his family. As he gained sobriety, his strong participation in Alcoholics Anonymous has taken away the bitterness and anger he has felt toward himself. He has asked for, and received, forgiveness from his family as he tries to walk both the sober road and the Red Road daily. "Today, I am very grateful for my life," (S. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, November 4, 2004). Sylvan also sees much of the alcoholism on the reservation related to lack of services for veterans. False-positive tuberculosis tests precluded his acceptance into the military during the Viet Nam war, so of course he receives no veterans' benefits. "Many of the guys who have drinking problems or who are homeless on the reservation are vets," (S. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Health care services for veterans also is an issue. Many Lakota veterans, for a variety of reasons, have no benefits, and those who do receive benefits often are subject to poor treatment, according

to Albert. The nearest Veterans Administrations Hospitals are in Hot Springs to the west (about a three hour drive) and Sioux Falls to the east (about a five hour drive). "Most veterans, many of whom are homeless, just depend on their families to take care of them—somebody will take them in," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Lack of Affordable Housing

As noted, most homes on the reservation are small houses, tarpaper shacks or mobile homes. The houses are constructed to meet minimum government standards, and often are crowded with family members in an effort to reduce living expenses. "Relatives take care of each other just to survive. However, the number of people living in a home is often not reported to the Bureau of Indian Affairs because benefits would be cut if it was learned that so many people were living in the same house," said Albert.

Living together in close quarters is a Lakota tradition, with three, and sometimes four, generations living together. "A long time ago, elders were the foundation of the home, sharing wisdom, and teaching the grandchildren. Government housing programs separated the families. Now, we live together again, and the elders teach the children; we just don't tell the government," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

There are circumstances, however, that force families into moving elders into apartments or nursing homes. Just as in other American families where adult children work, there is sometimes no one available to care for the elders. There is an apartment complex for elders on the reservation, with meals provided. Also, one meals-on-wheels for home-bound elderly operates on the reservation. Revenue from Rosebud Casino provides some money for emergency heating fuel for elders. "Government programs for the elderly are too rigid, inflexible, and not innovative enough to honor our traditions. There are no programs for the homeless. Elders who live off the reservation have it worse. They often end up in nursing homes, subject to rules and regulations and customs of non-Native people. There is no respect by the system for our ways, and certainly no respect for elder men," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Need To Reconnect with Traditions, Values, Culture

Both Albert and Sylvan were educated in part by the boarding school programs. Albert attended St. Francis Jesuit Mission School in St. Francis, SD between the ages of 16 and 20. Sylvan was educated at the Episcopal Bishop Hare Boarding School in Mission, SD between the ages of 12 and 17 (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004; Sylvan White Hat, Sr., personal communication, November 4, 2004).

The Christian boarding school movement was initiated on the reservation at the turn of the 20th century in an attempt to assimilate indigenous peoples into mainstream white culture. Children were forbidden to wear traditional clothing or speak their native language. Their hair was cut, and they often were not allowed to visit their families for a year at a time. Only after the enactment of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1974 were children allowed to return home and most boarding schools began to close (Marshall, 2001; Young Bear & Theisz, 1994).

Sylvan's mother was a devout Episcopalian who did not outwardly follow Lakota teachings, although she carried long-held Lakota beliefs in her family. When Sylvan stated his desire to learn Lakota ways, his mother said "When you are old enough, you can participate, but it's dangerous. Your behavior can come back on you if you don't follow through on a promise you make in the Sun Dance circle." Out of respect for his mother, he did not become involved with traditional Lakota beliefs and practices until after she died. Today, like many elder Lakota men, he follows both traditional practices and Christian customs. For example, he is a lay reader in his Episcopal church, and he attends sweat lodge ceremonies. Ironically, it is his children who have led Sylvan's way back to Lakota beliefs, because they practice Lakota ceremonies. "Prayer of any kind always helps," (S. White Hat, personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Unlike many men of his age on the reservation, Albert grew up in a family that followed the traditional Lakota ways. For self-preservation, many people of his parents' generation adopted Christian beliefs out of fear of retribution from government agencies and Christian missionaries if they followed Lakota ways.

"Our ceremonies were held way off in the hills, in secret, because it was illegal to perform them," said Albert. Albert's father died when he was four years old, his mother when he was 17. The lesson he most remembers from his mother is "never depend on anyone, and remember your relatives." "I got my education from the Jesuits, then I went back to my traditional ways and beliefs. However, my older sister is still scared of traditional ways," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Ironically, it was Albert's Christian education that helped drive his desire to write a Lakota language textbook. Because so much of the language was being lost, and other concepts were being bastardized, he believed that it was important to put the language in writing. Additionally, Lakota had been translated by others, particularly the clergy, into English "in such a way as to put Christian values into the Lakota language, and this is not acceptable," (Albert White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Albert cites the Lakota phrase "I am in need of something" as an example. In Lakota, this term means "I need assistance with a specific problem or concern". The English translation of the term became "I am pitiful", which has a very different connotation. "This sort of translation of our language keeps people down; it turns us into dependents," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004; White Hat, 1999).

Albert stated that one of the ways the language and culture are kept alive is by the teachings of the elders who are consultants and teachers at Sinte Gleska University. Another way is through the honoring of elders at all community gatherings and ceremonies. "At our ceremonies, the elders are always honored first. When we have a community feed, elders always eat first. This shows our young people how important it is to respect their elders," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

A Strengths-based Perspective for Elder Men

In the Lakota way, everything is accomplished in a circle—traditional lodges were circular, one sweats in a circular sweat lodge, one dances in a circle, energy and all of creation is balanced in a medicine wheel. Therefore, wellness is accomplished in a

circular, non-linear fashion. The strength of the circle lies in its ability to support itself.

Implicit in the concept of *mitakuye oyas'in* are the notions of this circle, of wellness, strength, resiliency, balance, and holism. If everything is related to everything else, then each part of the whole comes together to create a synergy, a gestalt, so that the sum of the parts is greater than the whole. This can certainly be seen in the reciprocal relationship between elders and youth. While it is the responsibility of the elders to teach and guide youth, it is the responsibility of youth to care for elders.

More and more frequently, Native elders are overtly rejecting the medical model that maintains that Native peoples are in need (as Albert stated earlier). Native elders today are clearly stating a fact that has always been a premise of their belief system: "a holistic concept [that] encompasses all aspects of individual and communities including physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions," (Weaver, 2002, p. 5).

Such a concept is closely related to Saleebey's (1992) strengths perspective, which holds as "its key concepts the notions of empowerment, membership, regeneration and healing from within, synergy, dialogue and collaboration, and suspension of disbelief," (Voss, Douville, Little Soldier & Twiss, 1999, p. 238).

If social workers are willing to learn from the Lakota way of being, we need to approach our education with respect, humility, and honor. We would do well to heed Saleebey's (1992, p. 11) comment that the "synergistic perspective assumes that when phenomena (including people) are brought into relationships, they create new and often unexpected patterns and resources that typically exceed the complexity of their individual constituents." It is with this idea in mind that we come full circle to the concept of *mitakuye oyas'in*: everything is related, and the great circle continues to spin.

Hope for the Future

I asked Sylvan what legacy he wants to leave to future generations. "I have 12 grandchildren, because in the *tiospaye*, my brothers' grandchildren are mine also. I love teaching and coaching. I want to get all the knowledge I can and pass it on to the

next generation. I want them to learn about our treaties, about their citizenship in both white and Lakota culture. Most of all, I want them to learn to speak, read, write and honor our language," (S. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Albert's response was, "I want them to master western culture and the English language in order to strengthen and fortify our own. We must learn to write for ourselves—translations of our language are misunderstood and misguide people," (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

"I want them to become politically active, to learn to lobby." Albert closed our discussion with a joke. "Grandpa, the little boy asked, do all fairy tales begin with 'once upon a time . . .'? No, grandson, now they begin with 'if I am elected I promise to . . .'" (A. White Hat, Sr., personal communication, October 13, 2004).

Albert is approaching retirement, and I asked him what is next for him in his journey, "I'm still learning from my students. I am always learning," he said.

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