



Pick Your Path to Health

Mitakuye Oyasin, All My Relations

By Cathy McCarthy
Anishinaabe - Metis (Non-status)

On my drive into work, I see my cousin walking down the street, and pick her up. She tells me she's on the way to the store to buy vegetables for Grandma who is back home looking after my sister's kids. My sister works at two jobs in order to make enough to support Grandma and two elderly aunts as well as her own family. I drop my cousin at the store knowing that some other family member will pass by and give her a lift back to Grandma's.

Meanwhile Grandma has organized the younger kids to go blueberry picking while she and the older ones make a big pot of venison stew with the veggies that my cousin has brought her. By the time I get home, which is just down the road from my sister's place, an army of kids with pails full of blueberries are playing in my yard. They have a message from Grandma, "Come for supper." Before heading up the road, the kids and I wash the dirt and dust off my car.

It's a case of Mitakuye Oyasin, which means All my relations, in action.

Mitakuye Oyasin is the Lakota phrase that begins and ends all their ceremonies. In the language of the Anishinaabe, we say, Indiniwemaahganag. And, like so many of my people, I know very little of the language of my ancestors, but I do know this phrase, and it knows me.

Everything being related to everything else is the foundation of all Indian culture and life. It defines and unites all Indian People, wherever we are. It is how we all join hands here on Turtle Island.

So when I think about what I want to say concerning family, my first thought, and all the rest of my thoughts turn to, Mitakuye Oyasin or Indiniwemaahganag.

Black Elk, perhaps the most famous of the Lakota Holy Men, summed up the view of family in these words. "Our tepees are round like the nests of birds and these are always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests. Where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children."

For me, family isn't just people who share a blood relationship. Family includes the greater circle of the community, of the tribe, and of the world. And it has the potential to include all of the people who touch my life in some way.

Terry Cross, of the Seneca Nation, is a social worker and the Executive Director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA). Because his work plants him in the middle of dominant culture institutions and systems, he has spent a lot of time explaining the concept of Mitakuye Oyasin to non-Indians. For the rest of us, who are sometimes at a loss for words to describe how our families work and what exactly Mitakuye Oyasin means, I would like to offer some thoughts from Terry Cross. If you want to read more about Terry Cross' ideas you can go to the following Internet address: <http://www.casenet.org/program-services/tribal/relational-worldview-Indian-families.htm> or you can call NICWA at 503-222-4044, and ask for a copy of his paper.

Cross calls the thought process of a people or culture their worldview. The European worldview is based on cause and effect and is rooted in a direct kind of logic. It is a **linear worldview**, according to Cross. The Native worldview, on the other hand, is based on ever-changing relationships among many things (in other words, Mitakuye Oyasin). Cross' own term for this is **relational worldview**.

For Indian people, family is at the center of our relational worldview. To keep our families healthy is to keep the four major forces of context, mind, body, and spirit in a state of balance.

Anyone who has ever watched a squirrel on a telephone wire or has ever tried to cross over a stream on a fallen tree, knows that balance involves always adjusting and shifting, first one way, then another. So balance is action, balance involves constant change.

When a family member is experiencing problems, it is only natural to consider the bigger picture, the complex set of inter-relationships that have disrupted the balance in the individual and the balance in the surrounding family. The best treatment plan for individual members of a family lies in fixing the relationships around them.

The good news is that dominant culture agencies responsible for providing family-based services to Native communities are beginning to adjust their thinking and work within the Native relational worldview. This means keeping Native children at risk in their own communities rather than

adopting them out, especially to non-Indian families. It means getting family, community, and social services involved in a team effort to solve the problems that surround the individual client. And it means involving the Elders and spiritual leaders of the tribe as key players in restoring the balance of the four major forces within the individual, the family, and the community.

As Indian Women, we see ourselves at the center of the circle of all that is related, especially when it comes to family. In fact, there is saying among Native people that if the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of the woman is intact, so too is that of the family, community, and society. So our role in making sure problems are fixed in a relational way is one of leadership and the passing of wisdom.

You might be saying, as you read this, that words are cheap. What really counts is action. In this spirit, I would like to offer some possible ideas for making your actions count.

The first thing is to arm yourself with good information. For me, The NICWA research page on the Internet is a good starting place. Here is the Internet address, <http://www.nicwa.org/policy/research/index.asp>. And here is the street address and phone number:

NICWA

5100 SW Macadam Avenue, Suite 300

Portland, OR 97239

Telephone: 503-222-4044

You will find a number of thoughtful papers on setting up effective family support systems in Native communities. After that, you may want to gather community members together to discuss how to develop a support system that reflects the community's specific values and traditions. Once your community has a good idea of what is needed, you are ready to approach the non-Indian helping organizations that surround you. You might give them the resources you have been reading to help them understand what you want to achieve. You might want to tell them about Mitakuye Oyasin and how important it is as a foundation for any action. You can even ask them to help you find the money to set the plan up.

It might take some time and effort to get things rolling. There may be bumps and barriers along the road. But, just as unspoken systems, like the one at the beginning of this article, somehow get set up, your vision will become a working reality too. After all, what you want to do in a bigger circle is no different from what you are already doing everyday in your

smaller circle. It might take some time to get things rolling along the path to healthier community but with our strong family support systems we'll make steady progress.

Ah Ho

Mitakuye Oyasin, Indiniwemaahganag

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."