

When we walk the halls of a hospital – An Integrative Personal Story

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In dedication and with a heartfelt thanks to Tom and Susie Yellowtail

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As a lay chaplain, this personal essay will relate how my experiences with Native American mentors and a vow I made for the health of my son, along with my own journey with cancer have molded an approach to jumpstarting relationships with perfect strangers. I'll also explore how those influences informed my teaching and research, and the General Education curriculum at the University of Idaho, with implications for all of us. Considered will be some of the values and aspirations, elements and capacities that contribute to effective interpersonal relationships.

Key words: empathy, diversity, shared-in-common, and intentional.

I suspect most of us, if not all, have experienced *walking the halls* of a hospital. Hopefully as a visitor, to bring support, perhaps a little joy to a loved one or a friend. As you've done so, have you wondered about those you pass by, with doors open, open to perfect strangers?

In my capacity as a volunteer Lay Chaplain at Gritman Hospital, in Moscow, Idaho, I've been doing some *hall walking*. Walking that leads me into the rooms of perfect strangers. Each is in some stage along a journey, a journey inevitably involving a crisis, some getting better, others, not so. And I ask myself as a novice chaplain, how can I create a relationship in a moment's notice to best serve them, offer an ear, make a connection, speak the right words, even a prayer? Wanting to do so with honesty and sincerity, with as much meaning as I can, how can I jumpstart a relationship with a perfect stranger?

So, I listen and try my best at being attentive, picking up this cue, that reference. I discover a range of crises, each stranger's healing journey different from the next, each expressed uniquely. A feeling of *joy* or simply *relief* upon being notified that he or she is about to be discharged after a surgery or long illness. Or in one's final hours, *resignation* or perhaps *fear*, and then there's the *grief* of his or her loved ones. From *calm* to *heightened anxiety* – a

multitude of possible human expressions. And with each stranger, he or she carries a range of possible worldviews, of possible stories with them. From atheist to no affiliation or agnostic, to Catholic, Protestant or even Muslim, to spiritualist, a Buddhist, evangelical, to Jewish, a fundamentalist “end-days is upon us,” to someone practicing a Native American tradition, to even a “wizard.” And within each of these stories are other distinct sub-stories, for example, a Quaker or Seventh-day Adventist. Each different from the next, each unique from myself. So, I ask, what is the quality, the capacity, the stuff that I need to bring with me when I enter the rooms of perfect strangers to help create a relationship meaningful to each?

Doesn't it all begin with a story? At the very core of our interactions with one another, are we not the stories we tell? Are we not the weavers of narratives – *Homo narrans*? The following is a story spotlighting what I try to bring with me when I enter the room of a stranger. The Apsáalooke, translated as “Children of the Large Beaked Bird,” also called the Crow Indians of Montana, have a term, *basbaaaliíchiwé*, “telling my story.” The term speaks to the importance of re-telling the special events we've experienced that have transformed us – sharing them with friends and family, even with strangers, such as yourself, you the reader. In the act of re-telling, the experienced lessons and any insights can provide possible gifts for a listener, something meaningful he or she can hold onto. This is not to say that my story is any more noteworthy than another's. There are always choices we make at each juncture in our unfolding stories, each of us digging deep with integrity. This is my story of choices, a story from me to you.

It began 44 years ago, in 1976. I was *walking the halls* of another hospital, but totally oblivious to the strangers in the rooms I passed. On that occasion I was only concerned about one room, one person, Matt, my one-year-old son. Matt had suddenly become unconscious, and his mother and I rushed him to the hospital. As I held him in my arms, close to my heart, this 25-year-old father reached out in the most meaningful way I could think of at that moment. I made a pledge to the Creator to go without food or water for three days, in the Apsáalooke manner of supplication and sacrifice, for my son. To fast on an isolated hill, alone, in prayer.

While Matt soon recovered, I sought to keep my vow. With little comprehension and no experience in the ritual process that I had pledged to do, my love for a son and trust in a father would lead the way.

Now this needs a little history as well, my story going back two more years, to the summer of 1974. I was brought up in a loving, white middle-class family, raised and baptized in the Methodist Church, with the teachings and parables of Jesus remaining vital, and while in graduate school, discovered the Unitarian community. But that summer of '74 changed everything for me, unequivocally expanding the possible forks in the roads of my world. I was a young ethnographer, working with the Apsáalooke on an applied project sponsored by the Crow Tribe and the Indian Health Service. As I looked to interview tribal members, two names consistently came up – Tom Yellowtail and his wife Susie. They agreed to help, and graciously introduced me to their lives and to the *Ashkísše* Sundance Way of Life. Tom was a humble, self-effacing man, in his early seventies, who chose his words and actions with deliberation. Never a harsh word was spoken of another. A healer, always attentive to those in need, one who leads the Sundance rituals, Tom was an *akbaaliak*, “one who doctors.” Susie was a renowned advocate of Indian issues, particularly regarding Native infant and child adoption, who spoke her mind with ease. She traveled widely, speaking before different audiences, serving as a chaperone for Miss Indian American, as well as an advisor on U.S. Presidential Commissions. Out of those initial insightful interviews grew something special.

The *Ashkísše* Sundance is an annual ceremony involving from 75 to over 100 men and women, who, for three, sometimes four days pray, dance, blow Eagle-bone Whistles, and go without food or water under the 100-degree heat of the July sun in eastern Montana. Each has made a vow, each vow distinct from the next; each dances with his or her own style and pace, each slightly different from the next. Their vows put to action are understood as a “gift” to the Creator so a loved one might be helped, or a challenge met. Invited by Tom to look on, I watched from outside the Sundance Lodge, at its door, which opened to the east, aligned to the morning sun. On the faces of the dancers and in their actions were revealed to me something

altogether self-effacing, authentic and sincere, faces and actions focused and intentional. The Apsáalooke call it *díakaashik*, “doing it with determination.” In front of that door, as I witnessed within, I fell to my knees and tears filled my eyes.

Tom and Susie introduced me to the Wheel, a Way of Life, by which they and so many others lived their lives. Imagine the sight seen from an Eagle’s eye, while flying high over the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming, looking down upon the ancient Medicine Wheel. Seen are 28 rock spokes radiating out from its rock cairn center, enclosed within a circular rim some 80 feet in diameter. It was a young Apsáalooke named Burnt Face who during a ritual fast placed these small boulders in alignment, as an offering to the Sun or to whomever might listen to his prayers. His sacrifice was responded to most meaningfully. Today, pilgrimages to the Wheel continue, with “tobacco prayer tie” offerings left beside the rocks.

From the view of the Eagle, flying to the valley below, now look down upon the contemporary structure of the Sundance Lodge and its dancers. Seen is a huge forked cottonwood tree, the Center Pole. Cut from its roots just days before, brought to the sacred site and ritually planted in a four-foot hole as the Song of the Tree was sung, the Center Pole is tightly anchored to the Earth. Its two soaring forks, left green with leaves, pierce the Sky, one fork flying a blue flag and the other a white flag. Represented at the Center are “Night” and “Day,” and “Earth” and “Sky,” inclusive of all that is the world. At the junction of the Tree’s fork, interlaced one on top of the other and extending out, are the tips of 12 lodgepole pines, each left green as well. Attached to the branchless trunk of the Tree is a mounted head of a Buffalo, facing west, and a mounted Eagle, with outstretched wings, facing east, their spirits ready to listen and give. Having been stripped of their branches, the pine rafters radiate out some 40 feet from the Center Pole, their butts anchored to smaller forked posts, defining the perimeter of the Lodge. The entire circular structure is enclosed by cut trees laid upright against its structure, except the door, open to the morning Sun and its possible gifts. From beneath, aligned with the overhead rafters, the dancers charge the Center Pole and dance back from it to their places against the inner wall of the Lodge, charge again and dance back, charge

and dance in step with the beat of the drum and song of the singers. Their vows and prayers are directed at the Center Pole, with eyes focused on a knot on its trunk, or perhaps on the Eagle or the Buffalo, and through them those vows and prayers are received by the Creator. Heard also are the sounds, "the cries," in unison with the beat of the drum, coming from the Eagle-bone Whistles, while the Eagle circles above and responds, as does the Creator. The rock and the tree and the human configurations, each in approximation with the others, together archetypal of the whole. The Sundance Lodge is called *Ashkíshe*, "Representative Lodge."

As Tom explained to me, the world is like the great Wheel, made up of many different spokes. The spokes are the different traditions of the world, each with their own language, own rituals, own way of life. Each built upon and expressive of integrity. While each is distinct and unique, each is equal in importance and worth, none greater than another. No one spoke should dominate the others, nor should any be eliminated. Yet all these different spokes radiate from and are anchored to a singular source, the hub. While the spokes are each specific and defined, the hub is necessarily non-specific, is inclusive, all-encompassing, that which connects all, that is in all, is ubiquitous. The hub makes all possible, is renewing, is life-giving, is transformative, is what the Apsáalooke call *Baaxpée*, "Medicine," coming from the spirit and the material, coming from the heart and the mind and the body, coming from inside and from out, from the Infinite.

While a traditional Sundance healer and elder, Tom also lived a life as a devout Baptist, who knew his Gospels well. He kept the traditions separate, Sundance songs and Eagle Feathers in the Big Lodge, and Christian hymns and the Bible in the Little Brown Church, never blending or mixing the two in each other's homes. Nevertheless, his distinct Sundance songs and Baptist hymns, were heard and answered by the same source. For Tom, the hub was addressed by the name *Akbaatatdía*, "the One Who Made Everything," the Creator, and by the name Jesus Christ, the Savior. While the words emanate out of the separate spokes, their limitless essence is shared and imbued within the hub. And then there was Susie, who blew the Eagle-bone Whistle and prayed with Eagle Feathers in hand while in the Sundance Lodge, but

also listened with a stethoscope in the other hand while in the hospital. Susie was one of the first American Indian registered nurses in the country, receiving her medical training in Boston. Spiritual Sundance and scientific bio-medical healings going hand-in-hand, though like her husband, one in the left hand, the other right. The differing, distinct paths Susie traveled, the differing spokes, all led to the same ubiquitous, healing source, the hub. As Tom and Susie traveled with deliberation, sincerity and competency, each spoke aligned equally with the others, each anchored to the hub, the Wheel is in symmetrical balance. As they did so often, both were accomplished in *walking the halls* of the Indian Health Service Hospital, or any hospital, and entering the rooms of perfect strangers. Where Eagle Feathers, Crucifix and stethoscope could be applied with equal hands.

In 1993, just before his passing, Tom was selected to represent all Native Peoples, the first to do so, at the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, meeting in Chicago. There, at the podium, in full regalia, with Eagle Feathers in hand, before 5,000 people, Tom prayed for world peace. Next to Tom were priests, rabbis, imams, ministers, monks, among them the Dalai Lama, the many different spokes, all praying in their own languages, in their own ways. Yet together, as Tom and others would hold, ultimately offering prayers to the same ubiquitous source. What a sight that must have been!

That summer of 1974, upon first meeting and visiting with Tom, despite the great differences in our backgrounds, perfect strangers, we felt as if we'd known each other all along. Though I had no idea at the time, so began a mentoring relationship, as a father to a son. We shared, laughed and occasionally cried together. A few years later, Tom in prayer, with Eagle Feathers in hand, bestowed on me the name, *Maakuuxshiichilish*, "Seeking to Help Others," and with it came the guidance, the spirit and the responsibilities of an "Indian Name." It would be a relationship with Grandpa Tom lasting until his passing some twenty years later, at the age of 90, though his mentoring is still very much alive.

Two years later, in 1976, when I told Tom of Matt's sudden illness and my pledge, he, without hesitation, offered to help. Tom prepared me and offered instructions for the ritual

fast on an isolated hill. Three days of prayer and contemplation, under the watch of the Sun and many others, without the distraction of food and water. Alone, though not really alone. It was a powerful experience, with three most unexpected events, indeed gifts, received. When I came down from that hill, we took a Sweat Bath and we prayed and talked together. Following the Sweat, Tom turned to me and asked if I'd like to join him, to continue my prayers for Matt, blowing the Eagle-bone Whistle in the upcoming Sundance. So began a most unanticipated journey, a path totally unimagined just a few weeks before, with more precious gifts awaiting, which continues to unfold.

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Then 33 years after my first Sundance for my son Matt, our roles would be reversed. In 2005 and again in 2009 I experienced my most consequential rite of passage to date. I was diagnosed with cancer, with its reoccurrence a few years later. As it turned out, in 2009, I, along with my adopted Shoshone family, were to sponsor the Sundance, a huge honor and undertaking. But instead, my healing journey would take me from the Crow Reservation in Montana to Seattle, Washington. Matt would step up to help sponsor the Dance, which he did with his full heart. This time Matt, along with many family members and friends, would pray and sacrifice, as his father lay in a hospital room.

When I was first diagnosed, I shared the news over lunch with a close friend, Cliff SiJohn. Cliff was of the Schitsu'umsh people, meaning "The Ones Found Here," referring to Lake Coeur d'Alene their place of origin, who are also called the Coeur d'Alene Indians of Idaho. His words drew me back to Tom's Wheel. Cliff said, "You've got to trust your doctors and what they'll do. Put it in their hands. But you must do your part. There's work to do; do it with your heart. They'll be responsible for the Head Knowledge stuff and you'll be responsible for the Heart Knowledge stuff," as Cliff knew I was spiritually engaged. And he said, "Be attentive." I suspect the advice offered by Cliff could apply to any of us when confronted with a serious health crisis, regardless of our backgrounds. Each of us can and should take responsible for our own Heart stuff, from whatever story it arises. Each should be attentive. It is what each of us can do.

I prepared for the journey, awake and vigilant, asking myself just what I would bring along with me? I tried to sort through and leave behind all the irrelevant and immaterial in my life, leave behind my distractions, and tried to reflect and focus and hold tight to what I most cherished in life. Upon stilled reflection, my cherished were of three – love of family, an Indian Name, and a special gift received while Sundancing. And with Tom’s Wheel of diverse spokes showing the way, a guide, offering me a path, I found that I could embrace surgery, chemotherapy, full-body radiation and a stem cell transplant, while also praying to the Creator, with Eagle Feathers in hand and Song of the Tree in my voice, in conjunction with my family doing the same in the Sundance Way. Despite their significant epistemological differences, their differing ways of knowing and doing, I could travel the scientific and the Spiritual spokes without them being mutually exclusive. So began my journey, embracing my most cherished, on paths now lit, a journey lived deliberately.

In July of 2009, on the exact same four days I was undergoing full-body radiation in preparation for the stem cell transplant, the Sundancers were blowing their Eagle-bone Whistles. While my body was being bombarded by certain rays in a lead-lined chamber, solar rays were bathing the bodies in the Sundance Lodge. Who could have scheduled that?

As I began walking the path now shown, still one question remained. I asked, just what was “it?” If I’m going to address my cancer, I needed to understand it, know it, as best I could. I needed a definition, a name, that I could grasp, to allow me to relate to it. Of all the doors I had as yet walked through and rooms entered, this would be the room occupied with the strangest of strangers. Back in 2005, I had an elective surgery to remove what was supposed to be a benign lump in my groin. It wasn’t. More tests were taken, and the cancer was identified as a unique form of third-stage Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. I remember distinctly, the afternoon when the pathologist explained, in far too much detail, the nature of my cancer. Many of his words were blurry, incomprehensible. But it was a start to an awareness of it. I also recall on his face and in the words he spoke, the pathologist’s excitement in coming upon a configuration of a cancer he’d never seen before. I was less enthusiastic.

I continued to listen to my oncologists, read pamphlets, and searched the web, trying to bring some meaning and definition, attempting to understand it, so it would be less a stranger. On this journey, remembering Cliff's words, I was attentive, attempting to listen to my body in ways not before attempted, a body now infused throughout with this malignancy. It was a deep attentiveness. Though I could never say I had gone so deep that I could understand it, from its perspective. I could never say I had some sort of full-on empathy for my Lymphoma. But I tried to view it deep from all angles. I began to define it medically, its physical, chaotic properties. I certainly appreciated the Lymphoma's existential meaning – a direct threat to my life. While I didn't want to personify it with human qualities, I always respected it as a sort of living entity. Apprehensive, I accepted the cancer.

During both my healing journeys, I never really feared the Lymphoma, never got angry at it, never depressed, never saw it as somehow an enemy, to be fought, battled and defeated, though it certainly represented the antithesis of my existence. I knew that a dominant metaphor in our society for cancer was, "fight it as an enemy." But I recalled Cliff's comments, "You must do your part," reaffirming to me that I had a voice and a choice in the matter. As I came to this impediment, this "huge yet vague, shadowy boulder" in my path, as I saw it, was I to attempt to crush it with equal or greater force, with my own rocks? At this most critical moment, at this crisis, with everything at stake, was this how I would define myself, something akin, reducible to that of my enemy? Or would I choose to engage it with something else, my own most precious gifts – with love of family, with a Name, with a gift from the Creator through the Buffalo? Familiar with the *Tao Te Ching* from a course I taught, I was reminded of passages inspired from it. There's no greater misfortune than feeling, "I have an enemy," for when you and your enemy are alike, there is no room left for your own treasures. When two opponents meet, the one without an enemy will triumph (verse 69). The softest things dissolve the hardest things, as water runs over, around, and through a mountain, rendering it but sand (verse 78). For me, this approach to my cancer helped bring clarity and conviction. My treasures had nothing to do with Lymphoma, and everything to do with my life.

The Lymphoma was as different as different could be. I accepted it as something potentially destructive that would accompany me in the months and even years ahead, indeed, for the rest of my life, as there is only “remission,” the door to this strangest of strangers even if once closed could at any time reopen. “You have to do your part, . . . Be attentive” Cliff said. So, I sought to live each day as a gift, thankful, and with the resolve that it would be a journey shared with my cancer. It remained a bit of, but less a stranger, holding it at arm’s length. In a sense, we shared this alike, my Lymphoma accompanying me in each stage of this unfolding journey, an unwelcomed, fellow journeyer. Ironically, and I know how odd this might sound, but I would owe this difference my gratitude for a special gift that was about to be bestowed. With my attentiveness, out of the *difference* would come *all the difference*.

Following those four days of full-body radiation in Seattle, there would be days and nights that for me seemed without end. I was no longer viable; my red and white blood cells and my platelets were no longer being produced deep within my bones. At this juncture in my rite of passage, I entered what is called a “liminal state,” of “betwixt and between.” Where all the superficial and superfluous in my life seemed lifted away, left behind, revealing a state not of anxiety or fear, but of complete calm and heightened attentiveness. As if a door opened to a great hall, like none other, full of stillness and void, other than walls lined with closed doors.

Each day, as I got out of my bed, I found myself *walking the halls* of the University of Washington Hospital, hooked up to life-sustaining IVs. As I passed by opened doors, anything but oblivious, as I gazed into the rooms of perfect strangers. Each was on their own journey of crisis, some getting better, others, not so.

On one of those walks, while in that liminal stillness, which I can still vividly remember, out from the rooms flowed a totally unanticipated experience. With crystalline clearness, I had a sensation I’d never experienced before. An experience that would forever change me. Difficult to put into words; it was a feeling, an understanding, of some intimate connection to another’s condition, which minimized if not removed any separation with a perfect stranger. It was as if removing the distinction between “self” and “other,” as if dissolving the “self” into the

“other.” An openness and keen awareness of another’s situation, almost as if two hearts beat as one. The words that best describe the sensation are *a profound empathy*.

It’s interesting to note that the roots of the English word “empathy” are in the Greek derivation of *empathia*, ἐν and πάθος which refers to “in suffering.” And totally unrelated linguistically, Schitsu’umsh, have a term for empathy, *snukwnkhwtskhwts’mi’ls*, that literally translates, “fellow sufferer.” Empathy, to truly feel another’s suffering.

Out of the stillness of that great hall, through an opened door, if only momentarily, flowed an intimate awareness, a deep connection with the journeys of so many others. A connection whose possibility, even if only a shadow of the former, I hoped would await future encounters with perfect strangers. With the superfluous and superficial removed, at the core of our shared humanity, I felt an essential essence revealed. Initiated by an unwelcomed *difference came all the difference*.

Days later, on July 24th, from deep inside my bones, life-nurturing fluid was again being generated. A boulder had been turned to sand and my body restored, though as a baby, without any built-up immunities. Truly a rite of passage bringing forth a re-birth! And I give thanks for each new day, and for each new year, as I am most grateful to be able to celebrate two birth days annually.

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Upon reflection, this story of the differing and ubiquitous, of empathy reminds me of another story, a precursor, a warm-up run if you will. I’d gone to an inner-city high school in Denver, with a graduating class of some 800, a quarter of whom were African-American, with significant numbers of Asian-American and Hispanic students. It was a wondrous mix of stories, in the classroom, throughout our community, and on the track – a well “integrated” high school experience. I was a runner, and for this “white boy,” pretty good, a member of a predominantly-Black, state-champion track team. My senior year, I anchored our mile relay team (similar to the 1600-meter relay today). We traveled together to meets throughout the

state, practiced hard and depended upon each other. Together, we endured disappointments and celebrated accomplishments. Together, attentive to each other, even as teenagers having some capacity to listen to each other, we told our diverse stories, and yet we were in sync. On a team imbued with what I now identify as empathy, I participated in *difference*, yet in those seamless moments as the baton was handed off, there was *no difference*, and it made *all the difference*.

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The stories of the intersection of diversity and commonality, of empathy and intentional engagement traveled with me into the academy as an ethnographer. As a faculty member, with occasional administrative roles, I first taught and researched at the University of Montana (1979-80, as a sabbatical replaced for the revered religious studies scholar Joseph Epes Brown), then Carroll College in Montana (1980-86), Lewis-Clark State College in Idaho (1987-98), and finally at the University of Idaho (since 1998). The Wheel's sensitivities and capacities served me well in the classroom as I engaged my undergraduate and graduate students, planting seeds of spokes and hub, seeds to be nurtured with empathy. The Wheel's sensitivities and capacities served me well as I engaged perfect strangers, while conducting applied, collaborative, ethnographic research projects with the peoples of the Coeur d'Alene, Crow, Flathead, Nez Perce, Spokane, and Warm Springs Tribes. These were projects that ranged from the cultural impacts determined as part a Natural Resource Damage Assessment of the mining activities in a traditional Indian homeland, to Native perspectives on Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery and the forces of assimilation they brought, to developing an Indian language arts curriculum for a non-native school district, to identifying the nature of and applying Indigenous knowledge in helping address climate change. Each of these varied projects demonstrated the power of story, of the act of re-telling the sacred narratives, what the Apsáalooke call, *baa'éechichiwaau* and Schitsu'umsh, *'me'y'mi'y'm*. Stories such as those of Coyote or Salmon, of Chief Child of the Yellowroot or Burnt Face. Stories at the heart of each of these Indigenous communities, since time immemorial. Stories at the nexus of not only withstanding the hegemonic winds of the dominate society but of providing the adaptative, pliable fibers assuring cultural renewal

and persistence into the future. In these differing research collaborations, the empathy of the spokes and hub allowed me to travel together with those who sought to apply their voices and re-tell their stories, stories that inevitably sought a healing in the earth and with humanity.

It is interesting to note that my first ethnographic research project, during the summer of 1974, sought to aid in the delivery of health care. On the Crow Reservation, the government's Indian Health Service physicians, though well trained in the latest advances in medicine, often had difficulty in understanding and communicating with their patients, particularly the older, more "traditional" Apsáalooke. I worked with elders, key among them Tom and Susie Yellowtail, and we put together an introduction to Apsáalooke concepts and perspectives on illness and healing. With such knowledge in hand, it was hoped the physicians could better work with and deliver health care to their Crow patients, hoped that when they *walked the halls* of their hospital, they could better jumpstart relationships with perfect strangers.

Following my cancer journeys, in the summer of 2010, I was asked to serve on the University of Idaho's General Education Steering Committee. We were to review and redesign the core curriculum required of all of the university's undergraduates, representing about a third of their total course work, distinct from their courses in their major. With its noble intentions, general education typically entails broad learning in the liberal arts and sciences, building skills in communications, in analytical and creative thinking, and in problem solving, for life-long intellectual and aesthetic, civic and ethical, real-world engagement. And I ponder, is this not an *education* applicable beyond the academy, to the *general* public, its intentions important to all of us?

While serving on the steering committee, I helped initiate new course requirements in American diversity and assisted in refining the nature of the "integrative learning," which took the form of the Integrative Seminars – ISEM 101, ISEM 301 and the Senior Experience. Both diversity and integrative learning are pivotal components in a general education curriculum. The following summer, in 2011, I chaired the subcommittee that developed the specifics for

these seminars. Among other objectives, these seminars were to apply the university's Learning Outcomes and use multiple disciplines and perspectives, such as the humanities and social sciences, to explore a single topic, selected by the instructor, of contemporary relevance.

Over the years, I had the opportunity to repeatedly teach each of the three types of seminars. All were favorites, though the ISEM 101 holds a special place. Entitled "the Sacred Journey," it provided an introduction to four of the world's religious traditions – Native American, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist – while attempting to address the Learning Outcomes within its designed pedagogical structures. I asked my students, at the core of each of these four distinct religious configurations, were they not each in approximation with the others, and together archetypal of something grander? And I asked, how did they align, in spokes and hub, with their own tradition, their own unfolding story? In the questions asked of my students, there were no correct or incorrect answers sought. Rather, there was serious reflective engagement expected.

In 2011-12 I was awarded the College of Letters, Arts and Social Sciences' Distinguished Humanities Professorship. Having choice of topic, I elected to explore the intersectionality of diversity and shared experiences in the academic landscape. With generous funding I sponsored a year-long series entitled, "The Turning of the Wheel: The Interplay between the Unique and the Universal." The series brought together university students and faculty, along with community members from a variety of disciplines, such as the arts, literature, theatre, law, the sciences, and social sciences, asking them all, how and in what ways were the intersection of the unique and ubiquitous expressed in their discipline, and what were their implications. It included twenty-three colloquium talks, four dramatic performances, an art exhibit, and four interactive discussion panels. The series was a rewarding exploration, for participants, audiences and me, with many unexpected connections. See: <http://www.lib.uidaho.edu/digital/turning/index.html>.

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From 2012-15, while continuing to teach, I also served as the University of Idaho's Director of General Education, responsible for implementing the work of the steering committees. It was during this time that I developed and added a formal definition for a critical component of the General Education storyline. It was based upon the insights gained from American Academy of College and University (AAC&U), the lead organization focused on general education, via its conference presentations and conversations with colleagues, and its publications, in conjunction with my own lived stories of spokes and hub. In the university's General Catalog, "integrative studies" is thus defined in the following manner:

J-3-f. Integrated Studies - ISem 101 Integrative Seminar (3 cr), ISem 301 Great Issues (1 cr), and Senior Experience. The purpose of these courses is to provide students with the tools of integrative thinking, which are critical for problem solving, creativity and innovation, and communication and collaboration. Integrated learning is the competency to attain, use, and develop knowledge from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, such as the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences, with disciplinary specialization (to think divergently, distinguishing different perspectives), and to incorporate information across disciplines and perspectives (to think convergently, re-connecting diverse perspectives in novel ways). It is a cumulative learning competency, initiated as a first-year student and culminating as reflected in a graduating senior.

In a broad sweep, aligned were the traditions, the diverse, the unique spokes, the *difference*, with divergent thinking, and the transformational, the shared, the ubiquitous hub, the *no difference*, with convergent thinking. All essential complementary processes in a balanced Wheel, in a winning relay team, or in life-long integrative engagement, making *all the difference*. Distilled were elements from the AAC&U and the spokes and hub, into one specific application, a pedagogy for action, "integrated studies."

As General Education director, I understood that if integrative thinking and behaving, as witnessed in the lives of Tom and Susie Yellowtail, and experienced in my own healing journeys, were to have any success in impacting students, the divergent spokes and convergent hub must be engaged with deliberation and purpose, through experiential learning. Tom and Susie *practiced and lived* that which they spoke. A relay race is *run*. I *experienced* first-hand the

scientific and spiritual applied to a healing journey. Integrative thinking doesn't occur passively, by just viewing it or simply talking about it, or simply by juxtaposing this and that course randomly, as if in isolation from one another, over a four-year period. If it were to have some success in sticking, integrative learning should involve focused, deliberate and purposeful learning activities, a pedagogy that spins, separates, reconstitutes, and reconnects the spokes and hub in a single experiential event. And in a sequence of events that extend and are reiterated over a number of years. Such is the intention of the ISEM 101 seminars, ISEM 301 seminars and the Senior Experience. Thinking beyond the university, I ask, shouldn't all our lives be lived continually with intentional action?

The students' learning activities of deliberate spinning, separating, reconstituting, and reconnecting should not only involve an external but also an internal journey. To impact students, I was convinced that integrative thinking should consider not only how we behave in relationship to others, but should also be directed within, exploring the self. It is a self that embodies a multitude of memories, identities and dreams, some more overt, others hidden deep behind veils of ego and ignorance, injury and prejudice. It is a self, parts of which are hard to crack open. But it is an exploration that can reveal to what extent one's actions are influenced, indeed governed, by one's own inner voice. An exploration acknowledging that if there is to be empathy for others, there should also be empathy of the self. A deep exploration that can help reveal aspects of one's uniqueness as well as qualities of one's shared humanity. At times of disappointment or even failure in one's actions, an exploration that can provide a self-critique, confirming or confronting. An exploration that seeks a sort of gestalt, with one's exterior behavior synchronized with one's interior landscape. Integrative thinking of the soul seeks an alignment of one's behavior with one's self to help one take ownership of and responsibility for his or her actions, for his or her telling of their own story. An exploration of the exterior without connecting it with the interior, can render integrative learning simply an academic exercise, something compartmentalized and separate from the student's personal experiences and thus his or her life-long unfolding story. Perhaps its cliché, but does not action without an inner compass render only a lost soul? This form of intimate exploration does take

deliberate and purposeful learning activities, a pedagogy in reflection and introspection, focused attentiveness to the self. Such is sought in the ISEM seminars. And I wonder, shouldn't all our lives be lived with intentional reflection?

As part of my Gen Ed responsibilities, I was to assist in helping assure that the Gen Ed curriculum, as an aggregate of courses, met the University of Idaho's Learning Outcomes. Greatly influenced by the AAC&U's "Essential Learning Outcomes," the university's were designed to provide the "best possible contemporary liberal education." Upon graduation, each student would be equipped, along with the skills of their specific major field of study, with these outcomes, at least that was the hope, our aspiration. As I closely reviewed and contemplated their meanings and ways of implementation, I was struck by one particular competency essential for the success in each of the five. That capacity was *empathy*. Consider each of them, with my added empathy-contingent skill in italics. 1. "Learn and Integrate – Through independent learning and collaborative study, attain, use, and develop *knowledge in the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences*, with disciplinary specialization and the ability to *integrate information across disciplines*." 2. "Think and Create – Use *multiple thinking strategies* to examine real-world issues, explore *creative* avenues of expression, *solve problems*, and make consequential decisions." 3. "Communicate – Acquire, articulate, create and convey intended meaning using verbal and non-verbal methods of communication that *demonstrate respect and understanding in a complex society*." 4. "Clarify Purpose and Perceptive – Explore one's life purpose and meaning through transformational experiences that foster an *understanding of self, relationships, and diverse global perspectives*. 5. "Practice Citizenship – Apply principles of ethical leadership, *collaborative engagement, socially responsible behavior, respect for diversity in an interdependent world*, and a service-oriented commitment to advance and sustain *local and global communities*." *Empathy*, through and through these aspirational relationships. I ask, are not these empathy-infused aspirational principles applicable beyond the university, could they not apply to all of us?

I feel fortunate to have experienced a rich social diversity at an early age, in my community and in a public-school setting. Be it in the classroom, in athletics, or a weekend social gathering, multi-racial interactions framed much of my life. So, I ask myself, was I able to effectively engage this diversity, to the extent I did, because I had empathy – somehow already endowed with it? Or did my empathy grow as I continued to engage diversity, in high school, college and professionally – is empathy somehow learned? If I had not had these pivotal multi-racial relationships growing up, in what state-of-affairs would my empathy capacity be today? I've come to hold that empathy and the relationships doors it opens are each mutually interwoven, co-created, a sort of positive feedback loop. While more nuanced and with other factors in play, empathy is greatly cultivated by experiencing a rich diversity in one's life, and diverse relationships are successfully engaged by one's heightened capacity for empathy. Rephrased, empathy, the animating fluid, is nurtured as relationships, the structural conduits, expand. In turn, those relationship expansions nurture the swell of empathy. And of course, the inverse is also the case. For me the General Education takeaway was in creating a pedagogical setting, such as the Integrative Seminars and American diversity courses, that was deliberate and rich with all forms of diversity, so even those students previously diversity-deprived had an opportunity to increase his or her own empathy capacity, as well as life-long opportunities for relationship expansion. "All forms of diversity" include such variants as in gender, race, ethnicity, religion, epistemology, sex, age, gender identity, socioeconomic status and class, mental and physical ability, as well as local, national and global cultural affiliation. It is necessarily a pedagogy of *deliberate* engagement with diversity, its meaning presented with some degree of depth, in historic and cultural context, with some degree of appreciation. Else it be a confrontation with a stranger that can misunderstand, unnerve, repel or even elicit fear.

This is not to suggest intentional diversity learning would ever result in some sort of culminating proficiency; there is no "diploma" awarded certifying competency to successfully travel the many spokes. Beyond one's own birth-spoke, in fact, I am not sure how many other diverse spokes one person can travel simultaneously or at least in consort, successfully?

Certainly, Tom and Susie could each travel two with ease. I felt I could negotiate two distinct paths during my healing journeys. The two distinct epistemologically disciplines – the social sciences and humanities – have been part of my own ethnographic research tool kit, along with attempting to impart the applications of both on to my undergraduate and graduate students. Prior to teaching the ISEM Sacred Journey seminar, I taught a year-long version that besides Native American, Hindu, Buddhist and Taoist religions, included the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While I feel I could personally travel two of those spokes with some degree of competency, for my students and for myself, even as the instructor, there would be no diploma awarded upon completion of the seminar, only an enhanced appreciation, an enriched awareness, and an ability to ask the next level of informed questions of each religion.

There are those exceptional few among us who can master competency in multiple languages and travel international or multi-cultural lands with fluency. But when most of us, with some semblance of aptitude and skill, attempt to engage multiple spokes in consort, with the point of saturation differing for each of us, the strain from cognitive dissonance can too easily overwhelm, our anchorings can crack, and our ability to make decisive judgement can become compromised or confused. With each new stranger encountered, perhaps the best diversity learning can do is but offer a starting point, bringing to bear an awareness and appreciation of the unfathomable depth and richness of each spoke encountered, as we engage each with human etiquette, respect and all our empathy, and with whatever level of competency thus far mustered. As the spokes are innumerable, each unfathomable, diversity learning is a life-long endeavor.

In hindsight, I wonder if, during that summer of 1974, it was something we, two perfect strangers, the overt differences so glaring, shared-in-common that brought us together, “as if we’d known each other all along.” Let’s not forget that to jumpstart a relationship with a perfect stranger, with empathy guiding our way, there is also the shared hub. We want to engage the stranger certainly by exploring the diverse spokes, but also by searching for what is

shared-in-common. Intentional integrative engagement entails divergent thinking *and* convergent thinking. In its year-long version, the Sacred Journey seminar explored the spokes of seven diverse religions *and* what they possibly shared at the hub. We should not let the spoke's different as different could be, its glare, blind us and get in the way of discovering what is right in front of us. A difference so different in one's own or another's politics, religious convictions, ethnicity, age, sex, nationality, status and privilege, gender identity, whatever "ism," and the list goes on, should not get in the way. If only for a moment, can we put the spoke on pause? This can be the greatest challenge, but with the greatest reward. In the diversity pedagogical setting, having students juxtapose the varied spokes alongside their reflective selves can facilitate the highlighting of the distinct as well as the shared contours of that stranger's and those students' landscapes. Finding common ground, if only a small parcel, is a start. With a pause and a juxtaposition, followed by reflection and action, comes the possibility of jumpstarting a relationship with a perfect stranger. Perhaps this is an argument for the value of intentional diversity engagement for us all?

And I ask, with empathy guiding our way, perhaps empathy is to be revealed upon arriving at our destination, at the hub? As conveyed in the words of the Indian Name Tom would bestow on me, *Maakuuxshiichilish*, a Name implicit with perhaps something he saw glimpses of in me and certainly a hope for what would become even more so, was that what two perfect strangers shared-in-common that summer of 1974? In sync, I know I felt and saw that same something, fully expressed, in Tom from the beginning. Empathy, a means to *and* the end itself? Empathy imbued throughout the Wheel, along its spokes and at its hub. Something at the core of our humanity, shared-in-common, revealed in its depth at the depths of my liminal state in 2009.

I am convinced, that a General Education curriculum, with an integrative "back-bone" and arteries flowing with empathy-infused "blood," would result in graduates with "nimble minds – flexible bodies." In their intellectual and artistic endeavors, empathy and integrative thinking would lead them to be more adaptable, innovative, a creative thinker, a critical

thinker, with effective skills in communication and collaboration. As artists, not only be able to clearly and attentively feel, but *think*. As scientists, not only be able to clearly and attentively think, but *feel*. For both, able to clearly and attentively distinguish the pieces, the parts, while also reimagining and re-connecting the parts into new combinations, a new or a renewed whole. Empathy and integrative thinking facilitate self-awareness, and with it, clarity in and responsibility for choices we make. With empathy and integrative thinking, the graduates could better identify and address various forms of social schism, expressed in such behaviors as bigotry, scapegoating, tribalism or balkanization in a society. Integrative thinking, premised on empathy, promotes tolerance and respect for difference, the ability to feel and understand something of another's perspective, to listen and be attentive to the diverse spokes. Integrative thinking also facilitates making connections and re-connections, and finding common ground, the possibility of a ubiquitous hub, with once strangers, now opponents no longer. In living deliberately, with empathy-infused integrative engagement, would not each one of us be nimbler and more flexible in the world we now find ourselves?

* * * *

Now let me leave you with a few final thoughts and questions. When we *walk the halls* of a hospital and enter the rooms, or upon graduation, walk from the commencement stage and enter the many doors awaiting, or as we simply walk the streets of any town or city, I wonder if *empathy*, attentive to our *diversity* and our *commonality*, is not the key in helping jumpstart relationships with perfect strangers? Even, with only deep attentiveness, can come the possibility of finding gratitude for the strangest of strangers. Even with only focused listening can come the possibility of having gratitude for the different as different could be.

Doesn't it start with an empathy that is honest in its motivation and action to be deeply attentive to another, a self-effacing empathy? An empathy that, in its quintessential expression, removes separation and dissolves the "self" into the "other," as if two hearts beat as one. A non-discriminating empathy. And not an empathy that is in any way shrouded in ego, hubris or ulterior-motive, a self-serving empathy. Not an empathy imbued with a rush to

judgment. If ego over empathy is brought to the door of a stranger, surely that door would be closed. And isn't it only after gaining a sense of the stranger's perspective that we can begin to assess and critique the one now engaged, that we can bring the interests of the self to bear in the unfolding relationship, that we bring a helping hand, or simply walk hand-in-hand, or perhaps hold another at an arm's length, or even bring a stiff arm to the relationship, depending on the context? Of course, the first action the most likely option for a chaplain!

I wonder if it is not self-effacing empathy that is at the core of the various relationships sought in our aspirational principles – empathy imperative for relationships of acceptance, respect, and understanding – empathy a prerequisite for justice and equality, and above all, empathy, brought to its conclusion, into action, compassion? Compassion, without the guiding hand of empathy, can miss its mark. I wonder, if empathy, attentive to our separate traditions and our shared humanity, and attentive to the possibilities of transformation, is not essential in helping create and sustain all our most meaningful relationships? Something at the core that helps define the essence of our humanity? As asked and affirmed by so many traditions, in so many ways, when we lose our capacity to feel the suffering of others, we lose our humanity. And I wonder if empathy, born of diversity, growing into compassion for one another, maturing at the heart of our shared humanity, has the possibility of rebirth into . . .?

In today's society, stories that celebrate, bridge and reconcile differences, that speak to our shared spirit and common humanity, healing narratives of all kinds, sure seem to be in short supply. There are far too many strangers amongst us! But if there's truth to the old adage, doesn't it all start with each one of us, within us, with the stories you and I tell one another? One voice, then another, still another, and another yet can become an omnipotent choir. Let's re-affirm our highest and most noble aspirations, and each of us roll up our sleeves, and live our lives deliberately, intentionally, with *díakaashik*, re-telling stories akin to that of Tom and Susie Yellowtail's Wheel, with its diverse spokes and ubiquitous, transformative hub, emanating throughout with an outflowing of empathy. Truly integrative stories, truly *basbaaliíchiwé* stories. Stories, infused with *snukwnkhwtshwts'mi'ls*, that allow us to celebrate and respect

our *differences*, while also facilitating a harmony of those differences, revealing our shared humanity, as there are *no differences*, stories that make *all the difference!*

As a Lay Chaplain, with empathy having opened the door and now standing or seated beside the bed of someone less a stranger, I continue to listen with deep attentiveness. My hope is that the patient might feel welcomed and safe to share something, if only bits and pieces, of his or her own unique story, now in crisis. To do a little of their own *basbaaliíchiwé*. We continue in spoken and occasionally in unspoken dialogue; so much can be said in silence, as through the eyes. And I seek to bring to bear a helping hand. Eventually I'll offer the words of a poem, or of a parable, or of a prayer, as best I can, words aligned with and appropriate to the patient's spoke yet cognizant of our shared hub. And if those gently-spoken words bring a calming, a reassurance, a hope, if they touch the heart, there just might be seen on the face of someone no longer a stranger – a sparkle in an eye, a glimmer in the corner of a lip, or an eyelid closing in restful peace.

I remain affiliated with the University of Idaho, as Professor Emeritus in Ethnography, while continuing my involvement in my local church and hospital. Parts of this essay were inspired by previously published materials I authored in *World of the Crow: As Driftwood Lodges* (University of Oklahoma Press 1987) and in *Carry Forth the Stories: An Ethnographer's Journey into Native Oral Tradition* (Washington State University Press 2017), and with Tom Yellowtail and Cliff SiJohn in "If All These Great Stories Were Told, Great Stories Will Come" in *Religion and Healing in Native North America*, edited by Suzanne Crawford and Dennis Kelly (ABC-CLIO 2005). Core elements of this personal essay appeared in a sermon I gave at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse, in Moscow, Idaho, on the 16th of June 2019.