

A Healing Journey and Huckleberries: One Person's Experience

By Rodney Frey

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A short time after being first diagnosed with cancer in December of 2005 I was having lunch with Cliff SiJohn, a Schitsu'umsh elder and "brother," sharing the situation with him. His words helped initiate the critical path in my journey over this landscape. Cliff emphasized the importance of appreciating the distinct, though interrelated, processes of both the "exterior



Cliff SiJohn, 2002

healing, that of head knowledge" and the "inner healing, that of heart knowledge." Cliff said "pay attention and listen with your heart, that's where you can take responsibility." While putting my full confidence in my oncologist, my surgeon, my family physician, my nurses – the external healing and head knowledge, I would need to particularly attend to my inner healing and heart knowledge. But in what ways? Where, within, should I look?

In my particular healing journeys, I would pull two critical huckleberries from my own basket of experiences. These huckleberries would offer a map, a means to meet the challenges and chart a path through a perilous and dark territory. The first huckleberry was to be found in Tom Yellowtail's most cherished narrative, the story of Burnt Face. It would be a young Native boy who would help chart the course of action for an adult Anglo man. And a second huckleberry would be found in Tom's "Wheel. It navigated a course of action so I could simultaneously travel what seemed "mutually exclusive," the spoke of Western biomedicine and the spoke of the Indigenous Sundance way, and in so doing, a new huckleberry was discovered at the hub of that Wheel.

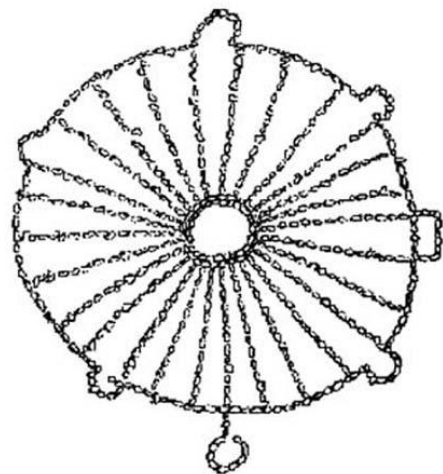


Tom Yellowtail offering a prayer at the Crow Sundance, 1974

Without warning, any one of us could “stumble and fall, landing in the hot coals of the fire,” a healthy state taken away from you or me, or someone we love. **It’s evening. Over there, they’re running through camp, chasing each other, and a boy stumbles and falls, his face landing in the hot coals of the fire.** For a young Apsáalooke boy a face is hideously scarred after falling into a fire pit. And for me, it was a body infested with malignant cells. In December of 2005, I was diagnosed with third-stage Hodgkin Lymphoma. I was a fit 55, or so I thought, happily married with a wonderful family, professionally successful, and about to begin a most unanticipated journey that threatened it all. I blamed no one. In fact, felt no anger. But it could not be ignored. The cancer had to be acknowledged, and dealt with.

Confusion and solitude resulted. **After some time, he comes out of his tipi, and they gather around, they see the scar and someone calls out, “hey, Burnt Face!”** For a young boy it’s a life of ridicule and rejection, of living alone, as if without family, orphaned. For me it was the awkwardness of others not knowing just quite what to say, how to relate to someone with cancer, or perhaps it was going incognito, as my bushy eyebrows along with my dark though graying head of hair vanished, along with my identity. But for both of us, the isolation was soon replaced with the loving support of family and friends. Prayers given, preparations made.

For each there awaited a long journey of humility and perseverance, of sacrifice and offerings made. **He travels alone to those high mountains of the Big Horns, wearing out each four sets of moccasins his mother had made. There, high on the mountain, the Sunrise and Sunset clearly seen, he goes without food and water, offers daily prayer with tobacco and Pipe his father gave him. Under the watch of the Sun, he moves huge rocks, there, that one, and there, to form a great Wheel offering, twenty-eight spokes with a rock hub, like the Sundance Lodge. It takes him awhile. It’s an offering, showing his sincerity; a gift to whoever might come, perhaps to the *Awakkulé*, the Little People, who inhabit this area.** My own journey involved travel to Lewiston in 2006, and



then, upon a relapse of the cancer, to Seattle and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Institute in 2009. It entailed undergoing days, weeks and months of chemotherapy and total body irradiation (TBI), of their chaotic side-effects – fatigue, nausea, neuropathy – and of an autologous stem cell transplant, all augmented by my own “rock offerings.” Among the “rocks,” the gifts I held tight to and laid out in daily prayer were my Indian Names – *Maakuuxshiichíilish*, “Seeking to Help Others,” the name Tom bestowed on me during a Medicine Bundle ceremony in 1977 when he brought me into his family, and *Kw’lk’íl Sqqj*, “Little Red Hawk,” the name Cliff bestowed on a brother during a Jump Dance in 2006, the name referring to the Red-tailed Hawk, who carefully watches and then swoops down to gather his catch, in so doing providing for others, others in need. I also held tight to my gift of Medicine – *Bishée*, received during my fourth Sundance in 1978. This was a journey that called on me “to be attentive” to what I most cherished, and, with renewed vigor, to what I must do with these special gifts, now and throughout my life’s journey. This segment of the journey was one of sacrifice and perseverance, in the hope that a healing would come, always holding tight to the special gifts.

There are no guarantees. As Tom noted in his re-telling, Burnt Face could have perished high on that mountain. But the healing journey can also meet with success, with transformation. **And they do come, the Little People; they’d been watching him. They take him in, adopting him; he calls them “Medicine Fathers,” and his scar is removed. It’s like a new born child’s face.** For me, I too was “reborn” as if “a child,” the malignant cells destroyed. The power from the prayers and songs of family and through the feathers of the Eagle had entered my being and pulled from it that which can knock one off their path. And assuredly, the journey continues, thankful for each day, living each to its fullest. Following the stem cell procedure I lost a life-time of built up immunity, the chemo and radiation destroying the malignant cells, along with my resistance to what seems the most common of afflictions. I had to re-take all my childhood immunization shots, as if a 6 and 12, and 18 and 24-month old child, with my last series of shots, my mumps and measles vaccination. I was indeed “reborn as a child.”

Immediately following the stem cell transplant, something else was lost, and something else realized. As alluded to, as part of my 2009 stem cell transplant, I underwent two days of intensive chemotherapy and four days of Total Body Irradiation (TBI), in order to purge my body of cancer. Most intriguing, those four days of irradiation in Seattle were the same four of the Apsáalooke Sundance, held in Montana, that my son Matt was helping sponsor. As I stood before and underwent a certain type of medically induced rays, so too did my family and friends dance and undergo the rays of the Sun. In a chamber of lead-lined walls, I too heard the songs and stories of the Sundance and Burnt Face, re-sung and re-told in Tom Yellowtail's voice, played on a CD player. For an eight day period, following the effects of this traumatic and radically chaotic rendering of my physical being from the TBI and chemo drugs, my bone marrow was totally compromised, shut down – I could no longer produce the life-giving fluids my body thirsted. I was no longer a viable living being, but dependent on transfusions of the red blood cells and platelets provided through the generosity of others. I was at the threshold none of us seek, but inevitably we must all cross over.

But out of this chaos emerged another sort of time and place. There emerged a liminality, a “betwixt and between,” what Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1967 and 1969) have perceptively identified and articulated for us in the anthropological literature. It's a “timeless-spaceless” domain, betwixt and between the temporally and spatially-defined spokes. It's where-when you get one of those rare opportunities to truly and deeply listen, with few extraneous distractions, devoid of mundane sensibilities and concerns, as in the Big Lodge or atop a hill, or perhaps while on a healing journey. You get an opportunity to see what is right before you, but normally veiled by convention and establishment, to sort through to what is most vital and essential, a chance to take “being attentive” to an altogether new level.

Out of the chaos, during this liminal period following my stem cell transplant, it was not fear or anxiety or even apprehension I felt. It was an overwhelming and crystalline sensation of what I can only identify as akin to “empathy and compassion.” As I continued to walk the halls of my hospital ward, with life-giving IV fluids attached and my Medicine Bundle close at hand, I felt my heart palpitating, literally reaching out to those around me – some patients on the road to health, others moving in another direction. I had never before experienced such an

innate connectedness, such an outpouring of care for others – at a place transcending my physical viability, at a place eclipsing either Sundance or biomedical ways, yet inclusive of both.

While difficult to put into precise words, the very essence and meaning of empathy, inlaid with a generous dose of compassion, was unmistakably felt and expressed during my betwixt and between. “Empathy” had something to do with my capacity to place myself in someone else’s position, in the shoes of another, and of having an awareness, of being attentive to their particular situation and condition. And “compassion” was having the capacity to unselfishly give support to another, to help overcome that which troubles. With both empathy and compassion resulting, if not in the elimination, at least in the blurring of the categories of “self” and “other” altogether, each to some extent an extension of the other. While on a healing journey quintessential and nutritious huckleberries were offered and placed into my basket.

I this place of clarity, I also realized that throughout my healing journeys I was able to transverse, with some degree of competency, the differentiated spokes of the Wheel, without them being mutually exclusive. I could travel the spoke of Indian Names, Eagle-feathers, the Sundance way and Heart Knowledge, while at the same time travel the spoke of chemotherapy, radiation treatment, a stem cell transplant and Head Knowledge – without discord, in balance, equally. I certainly brought to bear my own levels of competency in being able to dance the distinct and unique spokes of the Apsáalooke Sundance way and Western biomedical way, in my healing journey of 2006 and again following my relapse in 2009. I danced, or should I say, reclined under an IV connecting me to chemo drugs and then to a small pouch of my own stem cells, hopefully as easily as I did with the spirit of the Buffalo.

But in Tom’s Wheel there was also this hub and rim I transversed, that anchored and secured those head and heart-knowledge spokes, that emanated out of our “shared humanity.” While engaging with oncologists, surgeons and nurses, emanating out of head knowledge dualism, or while engaging with Sundance *akbaalíá* and family members, emanating out of heart knowledge holism, distinct from one-another in so many remarkable ways, they all so clearly shared and extended to me a universal human face of empathy, care and compassion, transcending their fundamental differences. That “pat on the back” can penetrate oh so

deeply, be it extended from the hand of a doctor in a white coat or from an *akbaalíá's* hand holding an Eagle-feather fan.

In reflection, it was a language I first experienced many years ago, with such sincere expression, on Tom Yellowtail's face. I can still vividly remember, in so many instances, when a family member and often, a perfect stranger, perhaps a non-Indian, would be seated next to and conveyed to Tom his or her particular illness or distress, just prior to being "doctored" during a Medicine Bundle ceremony. You would see in Tom's face, his eyes, indeed his entire being, a complete absorption, a degree of listening that it was as if Tom had himself entered into and was experiencing the pain and suffering of his patient. And then a few moments later, with the Medicine Bundle opened and facing East, the patient would be "doctored" by Tom. The Eagle-feather fan pulsed over the body, here and there penetrating so deeply, and then pulled away, and with it the affliction, pointing the fan to the East, "letting it go with the westerly winds." It's little wonder that Tom could connect so easily with so many diverse people, as he stood at that Chicago podium in 1993 next to the Dalai Lama, praying for world peace. And, do not all the great spiritual traditions of the world, each diverse in varied ways, Hindu and Buddhist, Christian and Muslim, all affirm the face and hand of Divinity, of the Infinite, to be ultimately that of empathy and compassion? A "pat on the back" now has such renewed and invigorated meaning; empathy and compassion omnipresent languages unto themselves, huckleberries to be cherished.



A sincere *ahókaash* (in Crow), *límlemtsh* (in Coeur d'Alene), *qe'ci'yéw'yew* (in Nez Perce), thank you, to all in the Indian community who have so generously facilitated for me my "re-telling one's own" – Tom and Susie Yellowtail, and John Trehero, and Cliff and Lori SiJohn, Rob Moran and Rose Spino, Josiah Blackeagle Pinkham and D'Lisa Penney Pinkham, Phillip Barnaby, Leroy Seth, Silas Whitman, Phillip Cash-Cash, Ed Galindo, Janet and Rayburn Beck, Valerie Jackson, Diane Reynolds, Mike Penney, Sarah Penney, the Native students at the university, and so many others. My heart-felt acknowledgment and thanks to all my family, friends, colleagues, and students in the non-Indian

community, and especially for their tireless support and prayers – my wife Kristine, mother, sister, uncle, and son Matt, who was given the Indian name, *Awakúikiiaateesh*, “Little Dwarf,” by Grandpa Tom, that the Little People always be a part of him.

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Frey Sundancing, ca. 1970s



At the Fred Hutchinson, Frey, July 2009