

Week 12 – **Appreciating Diversity and the Challenge of Social Justice**

From Diversity and Multiculturalism to Social Justice
Incorporating the Larger Context of Race, Class, and Culture

A Student's Response to "Culturally Specific Addiction Recovery for Native Americans"

In "Culturally Specific Addiction Recovery for Native Americans," Don Coyhis (2000) presents issues that are remarkably similar to the issues in the powerful film *Once Were Warriors*. The history of the Maori parallels the history of the Native American. Like the Native American, the indigenous populations of Australia and New Zealand were deprived of their lands, their language, and their culture. Many of the Native American and the Maori children were adopted by whites with the idea of assimilating them and protecting the children from a supposedly barbaric culture. Others were forced into schools that demeaned their way of life. As a result of governmental and social forces, the indigenous populations knew little about their traditions, or if they did, they did not respect them. Then, too, within the native population there was also discrimination against those who were mixed breeds.

Like the Indians Coyhis depicts, the Maori had poor educational and economic opportunities and high rates of alcohol use and violence. In the film Grace's friend lived in an abandoned car and was unable to read. Her alcoholic father, Jake, had lost his job. Money was scarce. Her brother, Jason, along with Jake, believed that violence was an answer to problems. Coyhis also refers also to the high rates of sexual abuse and suicide among Native Americans. These problems followed the characters in the film. Jake's friend, Uncle Bully, did not find it difficult to rape Grace, and she, in turn, having little voice did not know any other way to deal with the situation but to commit suicide.

Coyhis recommends ways of approaching recovery for the Indian people, ways that resemble the recovery methods used in the film. First there is an assessment of the client or clients to determine his or her knowledge and understanding of tradition. Then there is the integration of commonly understood traditional ways, such as the Medicine Wheel teachings for the Indians. Mark's counselor realized that Mark knew little of his people and worked to acculturate him. The dance and song traditions for the Maori boys like Mark served the same function as those Coyhis recommends. Coyhis observes that the group leader or the counselor must also understand and respect the native values, particularly their spirituality and their connection to the group. In contrast, without this respect and

understanding, Beth, Grace's mother, lost her world and, therefore, her children's world when she left her home and her extended family group. She was controlled by her husband, who resented both her background and the way her family rejected him. Once Mark assimilated his native heritage and she returned to her family, there was hope for her and for the other children. The same hope is offered in the article. Coyhis states, "We have the ability to be peaceful warriors, even just to have peace of mind" (p.109).

There is much in this chapter that could be useful to many groups or to different individuals. Counselors should remember that not everyone speaks rapidly or looks everyone directly in the eye when conversing and that such pattern of interactions are not necessarily unhealthy. Many Asian cultures see the downward glance as a sign of respect. Many Latinos, like the Indian, value the group more highly than the individual. Furthermore, the section on rewording the 12 Steps is helpful to women and to other groups that may not feel empowered. Certainly that lack of empowerment was visible in the women in all the films we witnessed: Beth, Lana, Angela, the voiceless mother in *Affliction* and even the Judge's wife in *Traffic*. For those who lack power, the 12 Step revisions may be more suitable. Instead of using the word powerless, changing Step One to admitting that we have become "unable to care for ourselves" is much more appropriate in these situations. Certainly this brief chapter has resonance far beyond the treatment of the Native American.

Work Cited

Coyhis, D. (2002). Chapter 3: Culturally specific addiction recovery for Native Americans. *Bridges to recovery: Addiction, family therapy, and multicultural Treatment*. (ed. Krestan, J.) New York: The Free Press.