



Sober Leadership

(2004 & 2006)

By Don Coyhis



The **Principle** for this Teaching:
An **Application** of this teaching:

Sacrifice. Sacrifice means to make sacred
Leadership needs to sacrifice for the people to lead them to
wellness.

As the Wellbriety Movement unfolded it became increasingly necessary for us to start looking at situations in communities that could block community wellness because they did not support the vision for wellness. It is almost impossible for communities to have wellness unless you have leaders who are into wellness. We are now working with communities to help them start insisting on sober leadership.

Sober leadership means two things. It means for leadership that is drinking and drugging to either quit or else for the people not to vote them in. The second thing it means is our leaders, drinking or not drinking, need to start thinking about how we really can't lead our communities to wellness if the leaders are not working on wellness themselves. This applies to the sick forest idea, which comes from the Fourth Law of community change that says, "You Must Create a Healing Forest." Those who are in charge of leading our communities need to make wellness a significant priority. The priority of wellness has to be tied to the strategic goals of the community and show support for the hundreds of wellness organizations that are in our communities right

now. This has got to become a top priority for our leadership in terms of financial support, community planning strategies and investments, sponsoring wellness conferences, alcohol and drug-free powwows, and other trainings around wellness. And it has to include leaders who are working on their own wellness.

When you are leading people in Native communities there are certain sacrifices that need to be made. One of the sacrifices is that you don't ask people to do what you are not willing to do yourself. A social drinker usually won't have the problem of insisting that he or she has the freedom to drink while leading Indian people. A social drinker should have no problem in giving up alcohol while leading the people. That is their sacrifice. They have a reputation and are role models. They let our children see that even though they don't have a problem they are still taking a stand on alcohol and drugs.

Even our children are telling our leaders not to allow alcohol at our national Native conferences because it is not a good example for young people. The young people are the ones who are saying *don't do it*. Most national



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White Bison, Inc. • An American Indian non-Profit Organization
6145 Lehman Drive Suite 200 • Colorado Springs, CO • 80918-3440
877-871-1495 • (719) 548-1000 • info@whitebison.org • www.whitebison.org



Native organizations do not allow drug and alcohol functions at their National Conferences. It's time for all national Native organizations involving our leaders to take that same stand. That's part of the sacrifice we have to make as individuals. Our national organizations should not only ask our Native people at the national conferences not to drink, but the rule should apply to anyone attending it, no matter what direction you are from—Red, Yellow, Black or White. We should make our reputation as Native Americans that alcohol is not used at our national conferences. That's the way we keep a safe camp. This commitment should filter all the way down to our communities. Sober leadership should not allow our community functions to support the presence of alcohol. It's not cool anymore.

Social movements are like a pendulum swinging. The back and forth movement of the pendulum is part of a large system of correction that's operating now. First the social drift goes one way, and then the other. The outcome of some of the wellness programs in the non-Native community might be to allow people to drink once again after their recovery. But if we take a look at our history in Native country, it has always been the cultural-traditional-spiritual model, or way of abstinence, that our people have followed. In our traditions, the tolerance for the misuse of any plant was zero. Psychoactive plants were always used within the context of a ceremonial purpose. Traditionally, we didn't play with the dangerous consequences of any plant or drug that affects the spirit. It's more of a European model to use those substances for other than ceremonial purposes.

The Creator gave every individual a talent and a gift—that's not a secret. Likewise, every culture has a gift. Think of the Germans, the Chinese, the Japanese, the English—you can easily see what they are known for. That's their gift. But every individual or culture also has an enemy, which is the ego part of anything you do.

So, for example, suppose you are a writer, but all of a sudden you get judgmental and opinionated against certain things in your writing. Then you can never write about that in a healing way any longer, because even though your gift allows you to do it, the enemy showed up and your mind isn't open any more.

Or suppose I get a swelled head in my work. Then even though I have the ability to be involved in leading the Wellbriety movement, the enemy will show up and I will lose the gift I have. This is a natural system of feedback designed to keep us in balance.

I think that every community and every culture has a gift. It so happens that the gift of Native people is the gift of spirituality. That's what we are known for. We are a spiritual people but we have an enemy—and that enemy is alcohol. Suppose the enemy of a writer is anger. As soon as anger shows up, it doesn't matter if you justify it, it doesn't matter, because that's the enemy to your gift. It's the same in Indian country with alcohol being our enemy.

Other countries and cultures have gifts. They can drink and it wouldn't affect their gift.

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But our gift as Indian people has an enemy and it happens to be alcohol. One bottle can destroy the gift. Our sacrifice to the betterment of humanity is to keep that enemy out of our camp. Having Indian leaders who are sober and who are working on their own wellness is a way to support the gift of spirituality and to guarantee that we live in safe camps.

When an individual starts getting into wellness there comes a day when they get well enough along their path of wellness that they start to draw boundaries. They say, “I’m no longer available for abuse. I’m no longer available to be around harming behaviors. I’m no longer available for that.” This draws a boundary on the part of wellness. When you get a circle of people in a community committed to getting sober and well, the day comes when they have the right to draw a boundary on behalf of the community. They have the right to insist on sober leadership. The community can say, “We are not being led by a drinking leadership any more.”

You have to draw that boundary. It comes under the principle, “When the community leads, the leaders will follow.” When a small group of people advocates for sober leadership they have the ability to talk it up—even if it means they get involved in the political system. This means they don’t necessarily care who runs, they are not taking sides in that way, but they put the word out to the people that whoever is running, vote for them—but only vote for the ones who have made a public commitment not to drink. You have the right to do that. And you have the right to stop domestic violence in your communities. When a community starts

taking that stand, their leaders will follow. That will become their political agenda and wellness will come to the community.

Don Coyhis, Mohican Nation, is the founder and president of White Bison, Inc.

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