



# ***THE WELLBRIETY JOURNEY***

**NINE TALKS BY DON COYHIS**





## *The Wellbriety Journey*

Nine Talks by Don Coyhis

White Bison, Inc.  
An American Indian non-Profit Organization  
Colorado Springs, Colorado



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Originally published in 1999

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# What is Wellbriety?

By Don Coyhis

From March until May of 1999 the White Bison organization traveled over 11,000 miles to Indian communities around the US and Canada to talk about addiction recovery and Wellbriety. As we traveled through the communities and conducted our Wellbriety Awareness Day presentations, many people asked us, “What is Wellbriety? I never heard this word. What does it mean?”

In talking about Wellbriety, and exactly what it means, I think we have to talk just a moment or two about *stigma*. Stigma, to me, means something that over a period of time was labeled. You use a label to think of something and pretty soon you believe it. It could be something like, “An Indian can’t handle alcohol,” the drunken Indian stereotype, or the stigma of a reservation with its poverty. There are many other possibilities. I also think there are stigmas when we talk about sobriety because these words have been around for a long time.

Suppose you are drinking, and you are a jerk, but you quit drinking and get sober. But that’s all—you just quit drinking. What’s left? Well, you are a sober jerk. If you have been around people who have gotten sober but not gotten well, you might really wish that they’d start drinking again because you can’t stand how they are.

When we started looking at our experiences with the NANACOA’s (Native Americans who are adult children of alcoholics), and talking to people who had been sober for a long time, we realized that many people have been *stuck* in sobriety. They get sober for two, three or four years and —now what? They just seem to float along, but something’s missing. Because we noticed so many of those experiences, we didn’t want to call what we were involved in a *sobriety* movement because what does that really mean? You could end up with a community of jerks, or people who are stuck. There is much more to it.

One of the things we observed is that very, very few people get quality sobriety. Quality sobriety means that you come back to some kind of a value system which respects people and is responsible. You become willing to grow and willing to change, willing to own your own stuff, willing to forgive, and willing to learn to take setbacks from life. You become resilient in that you keep getting up and coming back when hardships strike. Hardly any one that I know of attains that without contact with the Creator, or God, or higher power. I’ve never seen anyone just quit and make it. I’ve seen them just quit and be jerks. And I’ve seen some quit drinking and drugging but become lost. I’m talking about coming back to be an influence in the community, someone who contributes to the society or the system, or someone who comes back and helps in the movement.

When we talked to some elders about naming what we were doing, we had a funny feeling about using the word “sobriety.” We actually got the word from one of the tribes in Maine. The elder was explaining a word and he was trying to explain in English what that word meant. He was talking about the whole person, about a balanced person. When he described it, he said it he said the word meant *both sober and well*. We tried to find a word which said both sober and well. Out of that came the word “Wellbriety.” I see it like a teeter totter with sobriety on the one end and wellness on the other. So it felt really right to say “Wellbriety.”

The neat thing about the word “Wellbriety” is that it is not in the dictionary. It doesn’t have any stigma attached to it. There is no established meaning to it. When you say *Wellbriety*, people say, what does that mean? So you say, let me tell you what it means. It means sober and well. Not addicted to substances or dysfunctional activities or patterns—that’s the sober part of the teeter totter. But also healthy in a mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually way. Hearing that word does something to people who are interested in healing. Who are interested in the sobriety movement.

People who are sober, but are still jerks, know themselves that they are not well. So in some sense it gives you hope. You realize there is more to sobriety than just not drinking. It’s wellness. This whole process and the new word allows creation of a dialog. You can’t just go to Merriam Webster’s dictionary and say, “Merriam, what does Wellbriety mean?” Because he doesn’t know. We translated it from an Indian word which means a balanced being, a balanced warrior with both a developed male and female side, strongly connected to the principles, laws and values of the universe, someone who walks the Red Road.

We are grateful to all of you who we met on the recent Wellbriety Awareness Journey and invite others to become involved in the sobriety and Wellbriety movement.

# Wellbriety and Dysfunctional Behaviors

By Don Coyhis

We want to talk about the relationship between sobriety and Wellbriety and think about the many dysfunctional behaviors that we find in our Indian communities, in our families, and in ourselves. What is the connection between sobriety, our dysfunctions, and wellness? The first step is always to get sober and to quit drinking. But when you do that it doesn't mean all the problems are solved. If you are a jerk, and you are drinking, when you get sober and quit drinking you are still a sober jerk. Wellbriety is to deal with that jerk part.

When you listen to our elders' teachings they always tell us the Creator made the universe with two paths. There is a plus and a minus, a man and a woman, honesty and dishonesty, up and down, this and that. And the way it works is that in order to understand the honesty you have to understand dishonesty. You have to understand that when you are dishonest there are consequences. If you lie you are guaranteed fear. You have to experience fear sometimes in order to realize that you have to be honest. But you would never know what honesty was unless you experienced dishonesty. So from the eagle's point of view in looking at growth, both sides are sacred. You have to visit the negative side in order to know the positive side. Both sides are there. I think when we define what Wellbriety is and what it means for each individual, you almost have to visit the other side first.

Suppose you are a codependent. First, you have to get clear what a codependent is. A codependent is somebody who is dependent on a man, or dependent on a woman in a relationship. Each member of a codependent couple can't function well separately. You tend make something your god and you cannot live without it. If you are very codependent you will stay in a sick relationship because you believe that if you lose that partner or that relationship you might just die.

Once we understand about how this particular dysfunctional behavior works we have to ask if there is something on the other end of the teeter totter. If you have a relationship with a man or a woman what is on the other side? Well, a relationship with the Creator. If I go and build my relationship with the Creator, or that higher power, or what ever each chooses to call that, *that's* the type of dependency we need to have. That's the positive side of dependency.

Or say you are an ACOA, an adult child of an alcoholic. If you are an ACOA you can live your adult life without drinking and yet have those negative attributes just like you were drinking. We have to understand what it means to have been affected by alcohol that much, or what the characteristics of an ACOA are. Am I a control freak, or someone who must always save someone? What exactly does an adult child of an alcoholic do? Then once you understand those characteristics, you can begin to ask the question, "What would it look like if I weren't one? If I

were a healthy human being?” But you usually can’t get the vision of that part of Wellbriety if you are an ACOA because in most cases you only have negative experiences.

For example, I was raised in a dysfunctional family. I thought that was normal. I didn’t know there was an opposite. I didn’t know until I looked at myself, and the consequences or results that were in my life, that there was a different way. I began to look at my relationships and ask, “Are they unmanageable?” But if I look at Wellbriety in relationships what does that mean? It means that your relationships are really a threesome. There is always you, the Creator, and the other person. Recognizing this threesome, if the other person gets you upset you’ll immediately have the feeling that instead of opening your mouth and moving your lips in response, you will go talk to the Creator first. You’ll tell him how you feel and what is going on in your mind. Ask him what you should do and what you should say to the other person. When you calm down you then go talk to the other person. That would be the style of relationships in Wellbriety.

Many of us in recovery don’t make a meaningful change when we get sober. Let’s say you smoked cigarettes for a long time. But one day you realize smoking is bad and you give up smoking cigarettes—but then you take up smoking a pipe. As you smoke your pipe you begin to say, “Ahhh those nasty cigarette smokers. Why don’t they stop?” Then after a while you say, “I am going to give up the pipe.” So you give up the pipe and start doing snuff. Or maybe you start chewing tobacco. When we make changes sometimes we don’t make *Wellbriety* changes—we substitute one addiction for another. And why do we fall into other addictions? Because we are in the delusion that they make us feel good.

As another example, take sex. You can say sex is love. If I give sex then the other person will love me. In that way we use it as a tool, but used in that way it’s really an addiction. What would be on the other side, the Wellbriety side? Well, we know sex is a God-given power. Sex is not bad, sex is very beautiful. Anything that is God-given is very very beautiful. So maybe we need to examine our out-of-harmony sexual behavior. We can ask ourselves what a sound and sane ideal for my sex life would be? How do I think the Creator would have me conduct myself? What would healthy thoughts be? Wellbriety is always tied to *what does the Creator think? How would he have me be?* That’s how you can tell if your actions are in Wellbriety. Wellbriety behavior is principle based. It is based on values and honesty, trust and caring. If I have that, then my sex life is going to be good.

Have you ever noticed that when something goes wrong, that’s when we go visit the dysfunctional behavior? When you get uptight, you’ll often go eat, go stuff yourself and eat more than you should. When you do that, pretty soon your body gets out of harmony. I think we substitute dysfunctional behaviors when we don’t rely on God. If we don’t go to God we go to something else—but we *will* go to something else. Some of us go to eating and some of us go to violence because of our insecurity. We think we are going to lose something. Most of our behaviors on the negative side have to do with fear. Fear is actually behind everything. Fear is the beginning of anger. All fear comes in two categories. No matter what the fear is, I can put it in two categories. Either I’m going to lose something I have, or I’m not going to get something I

want. If we live our lives without trusting in the Creator, and become like God ourselves, we will experience fear. As a consequence, in a relationship you might say, “I’ll lose her or I’ll lose him.” Then that fear of not getting what you want, or losing something that you have, will trigger and cause anger. Non-control of a situation will cause violence and we will hurt people, maybe even kill them.

We need to realize that the Creator is the one that gives us our needs. He is the one that makes our relationships successful. If we are just relying on ourselves then very often violence is the outcome. Or domestic abuse. Some of us will go to gambling. In all these cases we escape to a “thing.” So maybe you quit drinking but then you go to gambling. Or you quit drinking and you go to sex. Or you quit drinking and become a violent person. The progression from addiction to sobriety isn’t a place to remain. Sobriety isn’t a destination. It’s a door which you enter to gain access to Wellbriety. Wellbriety will be the opposite of what the negative side of your previous behavior has been. The opposite of codependence is dependence on God, or relationship with the Creator. We always get *him* to guide our life.

William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania in the 1700’s, said man is destined to be ruled by God or forever be ruled by a tyrant. This relates to what we are talking about. You are ruled by God; if not, the tyrant will be violence, or the tyrant will be alcohol. The tyrant will be drugs. The tyrant will be sex. And they will rule you. Our choice is either to be ruled by those tyrants, or to be ruled by God. Being ruled by God is where the freedom is. That is what Wellbriety is and that is how you find it. But you have to know both sides. You have to know the negative in order to understand what Wellbriety is. You have to come to it without judging self, but arriving at the understanding that it is like a teeter totter.

The secret to Wellbriety is to have an ongoing relationship with the Creator. First, you use his guidance to get you through your addiction. God is involved in all three parts. In helping us see the addiction, in helping us get sober, and he’s also involved in helping us to wellness. If you don’t ask for his help you will stay in the addiction. If you don’t ask for help towards sobriety you won’t get sober. If you don’t begin to ask about Wellbriety you won’t get a picture of it, especially if you were raised in a dysfunctional family. I think that if you don’t do it in that natural order, that flow, you might get sober but you’ll get stuck. You won’t be able to move on. You’ll get to a certain level and stay sober in that level for a long time. Suppose, for example, someone has been sober for seven years. But they might not really be sober seven years, they might be sober for one year repeated seven times. They don’t grow and go on to that next step.

So how can we move past those places of stuckness and into Wellbriety? Many times people who are stuck on a plateau of sobriety are in denial. If you are stuck, whenever something goes wrong you will blame somebody else. It’s always somebody else’s fault, it’s never your own fault. So I think it has to do with your intent. In the old days when our Native traditions were still strong you always worked on developing your character. A person was judged by their character as a human being. Now, in the European system, first you get your bachelor’s degree, then your master’s and then your doctorate as a way of achievement and recognition. But in our way it was

always development of character. The person who developed their character highest became a medicine person or leader. It wasn't only an educational degree which represented knowledge that was desirable, but it was development of character which counted.

As a guide to the Wellbriety journey you have to look at your intent. Is your intent to be a strong, powerful, balanced spiritual woman? Is your intent to be a strong, powerful, balanced spiritual man? Or are you going to just get sober, and that is good enough?

To my knowledge I think it's impossible for anyone to ever grow alone. You cannot grow without the help of other human beings. I think one of the things you need to do is to examine who your friends are. If you have friends who you go to when you are in trouble, and they agree it is somebody else's fault, then that's not really a friend. But if you go to a friend and they say, "I understand that what happened to you is wrong, but what is your part in it?" then that's different. A lot of times we don't want to go to those people because they will tell us what we need to hear and we don't always want that. I don't think you can get stuck if you have a support group of friends who will tell you what you need to hear.

I also think that watching people is a good way to be guided to Wellbriety. Always be looking. Say to yourself, "I like how this one does this. I like how that one is humble. I like how this one's happy. I like how that one's patient." They become your character models. You can especially do that with people who are really elders. Always be on the lookout for that quality which directs you to how you will grow next. This gives you the ability to look forward to your next level of character development.

Another guideline for Wellbriety is to pray regularly. Always do self-examination in your prayer. Not a destructive examination, but a constructive examination. Each day, look at *where did I lie, where was I dishonest, what were my thoughts at the time, what should I have done instead?* Wellbriety is really development of the being.

Suppose for example you are out having affairs. Then the next step in Wellbriety is to quit having affairs. And suppose you quit having affairs but you think about having them. Is that Wellbriety? No. that's sobriety. Wellbriety is when your mind is sound.

When we are working towards Wellbriety we are really like a committee. We act a certain way in front of our girlfriend, a certain way in front of our boyfriend, a certain way when a preacher comes over, a certain way when we are at ceremonies, and a certain way when we are wild. But it's when you are just one person and you don't have a committee that you are in Wellbriety. You are the same way in front of your wife or your husband. The same way in front of your children, the same way in front of everybody. You're true! You don't have a night person and a day person. You work on being one person night or day. It's almost like you have the ability to make your secret self public. You are just out there—being vulnerable, just being yourself.

These are some of the qualities or ways of working towards Wellbriety. It's a journey we can go on together. We can have Wellbriety buddies and friends to help us grow into this with one another.

# Healing From Suicide in Our Communities

By Don Coyhis

The high rates of suicide among youth in Indian communities is connected to the Healing Forest concept we always talk about. To understand the Healing Forest, the elders have said to think of a hundred acre forest in which there is a disease. Imagine it as a dysfunctional forest, like a sick community. The elders often use nature to explain things. They say if you take one of those sick trees out of the forest and take it down the road to a nursery and nurse the tree until it is well, and if you then bring that healthy tree back to the sick forest, then what will happen to that well tree? It will get sick again. In fact, if you are a well tree in a sick forest, the sick trees will try to convince you, the well tree, that you are the sick one. You will appear to be the outsider.

Let's take the idea of a sick forest and relate it to Native communities. If you describe the sickness a little deeper you'll see that some of those trees are alcoholic trees, and some trees are married to them. There will also be codependent trees, sexual abuser trees, those who are abused, the abusee trees, and all the other dysfunctional behaviors we see today. If that's the way our forests look, the elders have said you really need to look underground or in the "unseen world" in order to find solutions. If you have a dysfunctional forest (for example, high alcoholism) then co dependency, abuse and other behaviors will be there also. But alcohol is just a symptom. Underlying all of the dysfunctional behaviors you will find a layer of **anger**, and deeper than that a layer of **guilt**, and deeper than that a layer of **shame**, and deeper than that a layer of **fear**.

So for example, take myself as an alcoholic tree. Did I have any anger? Yes I did. Did I have any guilt, shame and fear? Well, yes, I did. Then you take the person I was married to—did that person have any anger, guilt, shame and fear? Well, they did. So let's just take that combination now and raise children. How are the children being raised? With anger, guilt, shame and fear. As a parent, or as a community, there is a guideline to keep in mind: **You can't give away what you don't have**. Our parents and communities couldn't give our children what they needed because we've left our traditional way of how we used to raise children. As a result, our children have been raised shame-based.

High levels of breakdown have gone on in our family systems increasingly over the last 20 or 30 years. Now we have children hurting and even killing children. I've watched, or even assisted in some of our Native communities where there have been large numbers of youth suicides, and chains of suicides. I came to understand some principles concerning suicide. The human being lives its entire life from about eight basic thought patterns. If you are a positive thinker, you will have that pattern in every area of your life. You'll have it in relationships, in family, in conflict, and at work. Even in fixing your car, you'll always have a positive attitude. In other words, you are looking forward to the positive.

If you are a negative thinker it's the opposite. You'll look for breakdowns in every area. Instead of developing the healthy thought patterns that we knew in the old traditional days, I think that our children are growing up with the presence of three predominant thought patterns arising from the roots of anger, guilt, shame and fear. They are forced to grow up in a kind of survival mode.

The first thought pattern which our young people who are headed for suicide exhibit is **strong feelings of worthlessness**. They feel worth-*less*. This is different than unworthy. One day they feel worth-*less*. The next day they feel worth *less* even more, and the following day worth even *less*. Pretty soon they have the feeling of worthlessness.

The next thought pattern to develop out of the eight is the sense that **the world is a hostile place**. It's not safe, and the youth must be always on guard. Kids in the inner city know this well. But in our communities it is often hostile at home, it's hostile with friends, it's hostile in the community—it's just hostile. Pretty soon that's how you perceive the world.

When feelings of 1) personal worthlessness, and 2) a hostile world are connected to the feeling that 3) **there is no hope for the future**, many of our kids head for suicide. For many of our kids there is no possibility for school or for a healthy family—pretty soon you just don't care. When those three patterns are present it triggers a chain of events which you can kind of predict.

Inside of our minds we have a system which controls our awareness called the *reticular activating system*. This system controls what information gets through to me and what doesn't. It has the ability to block out information or to absorb information. If you are a positive thinker, when someone says *there is no way to do this*, your mind will say, *well how about this?* It triggers the ability to always see an opportunity. If you are a negative thinker and someone says *you can do it*, you'll block out the ability to look for the possibility. What comes through to you is the understanding that you can't do it. This filter system is constantly blocking out information according to what your thought patterns are.

If someone's thought patterns run to **worthlessness, the world is hostile, and there is no hope for the future**, the filter system will shut down any information that is positive in nature because that information is contrary to what it believes. For example, if someone who really cares for a person with that kind of filtering or blackage says, *why don't you try this*, or *let me sign you up for this class*, or *let me mentor you*, that usually won't work if those three patterns are present. The person we're trying to help won't hear it. They are unable see the possibilities.

What you will see happen next is a revolt against people in power or authority. Teachers, parents, tribal police, government officials—any one who appears to be a power or authority figure will be revolted against in a very emotional way. In this natural order of *going off track*, what happens next is isolation or hanging out with people who support their belief system. As this clustering takes place it's a downward spiral. The thought patterns are getting stronger. Feelings of hostility increase, along with feelings of worthlessness and no hope for the future. These three patterns result in unresolved self pity. Once those three thought patterns are present,

the filter system shuts out any information that could turn it around. Unresolved self pity then leads to depression and pretty soon you'll commit suicide.

I think there is a great connection between the state of our communities and the high rates of youth suicides. There is a high rate of sexual abuse in teen agers who have committed suicide. They are either abusers or abusees. If you were sexually abused, would that make you feel worth *more* or worth *less*? If you were sexually abused, would you feel the world was safe or not safe? If you experienced sexual abuse would you say there was hope for the future or no hope for the future? We see suicide rates higher in Indian country because it is so easy to develop those three patterns. Those patterns even prevail among the adults.

How can we heal from this state of affairs in our communities? If you work with teen agers who are potentially prone to suicide, it is easy to train your ear to listen for the danger signals. To break out of those patterns we must become aware of the self-appraisal process. We are constantly doing self appraisals and judging our abilities. For example, we appraise our bodies, our looks, our abilities in school, whether we are a good worker, and so on. In working with young people, we have to help them create a new self appraisal in any of the three thought patterns: **worthlessness, a hostile world, and no hope for the future.** To make positive changes with our youth, you have these three doors to enter. But it's not in *your* appraisal of *them* where the work must be done. You've got to get them to make the change. How can you help with this?

The self-appraisal activity enters through our self-talk. Self talk is that conversation which you are having with yourself even as you are reading this. And you are probably not talking to yourself about what I am saying, you are talking to yourself about what you are thinking about what I am saying. If you are working with a person to create feelings of worthiness, even though you are telling them something that you see them doing it's important to understand what they might be telling themselves while you are saying that. Even if someone nods their head, it may mean they heard your words but they do not believe you. In helping youth with a re assessment of themselves in these three areas, you have to realize that they may come from family settings, as many of our Native kids do, in which the families are hostile environments. Dad's drunk, there are violent situations, and so on. So how do you make an environment safe? And how do you believe in hope for the future if you live in a community in which the unemployment rate is 70%?

There are certain things that can be supported on a community level. For example, sports, the local traditions, dance, the drum, the songs, the language, connection to elders, circles of healing and recovery, sweat lodges, and prayer. There are many ways to get a negative self-appraisal to change. Changing the appraisal to a positive re-assessment is what breaks the cycle. I've had some success by starting with the mind map process. Teach your kids how to make and use mind maps. Mind maps are drawings which individuals or groups make together to learn what they are thinking or what issues are up for them in their lives. This will help you see what they are seeing in somebody else.

For example, you could ask the question, “If a person were worthy in your eyes, who would that person be?”

And they might answer, “Well, so and so.”

“And what makes you think they are like that?”

“Well, they have this quality or that quality.”

You have to lead them to see who their positive role models are or what they want to become in order for their self-talk to change.

Healing individuals and our communities is not only about instituting activities or programs. We also have to work on understanding and changing our very thought process itself. I think the solution to youth suicide among our people its very strongly connected to the concept of the Healing Forest in our communities. We have to work with the whole community as well as with individuals.

# Recovering Together

By Don Coyhis

We live in a world that is constantly evolving and changing. The earth itself is constantly evolving and changing. I believe that, in the long run, we and the earth are headed in a direction which is under the creator's plan. We are down here making choices and decisions but he is making things evolve. The bigger system, the earth, including people and animals, and plants, or what have you, runs by a set of principles, laws and values. We have a lot of freedom as long as we can function within those guidelines—those principles, laws and values. For example, there are the laws of aerodynamics which say you can design a plane any way you want, but you had better keep within the laws of aerodynamics if you want it to fly. And that applies to us, too.

The earth system is interconnected. There is nothing here that does not depend upon something else in the system. We exhale, the trees take what we exhale as food for the tree and make oxygen so we can inhale. It's all interconnected. In the old days, everything functioned in an interconnected manner. The individuals, families, clans, and various tribal groups made up an interdependent, interconnected society or system—that was the natural Indian way. Nobody was isolated. Our way was always to share, always to help. It was all interconnected.

When we were educated by the Europeans, they taught us to think in boxes of separation. For example, the organization charts of corporations show how separate departments are in charge of separate functions. It's an isolating approach which always isolates. It's a method that gets something going and isolates something else. And this always works for a while. In the 1930's, society became aware of the disease of alcoholism—there weren't a lot of drugs around in those days. At that time a couple of Euro-American guys got sober in New York City and they formed AA. In keeping with the separation-thinking of the people of that time, AA is based on the premise that *only alcoholics can help alcoholics*. But in the case of the many addictions we have today, what happens when somebody is sick with another addiction?

It wasn't long after the formation of AA that those who were living with the alcoholics formed Alanon. Following the idea of separateness, Alanon functioned apart from AA. Soon, other addictions began to become a problem and people with drug problems were asked to talk about their drug problems at NA (Narcotics Anonymous). As society went off track, more and more separate recovery groups formed. But what happens if I'm an overeater, smoke marijuana, and I ate a pie, drank some beer and smoked some joints all in one night? Where can I come to talk about my experience? They would say go to OA (Overeater's Anonymous) and talk about that experience, NA to talk about that experience, and AA about the beer experience. But what if it all happened the same night? Then I can't tell you my story.

At the present time, AA has open and closed meetings, and that is good. Alanon has a point of view, and that is good. NA has a point of view, and that is good. One of the things we have in

common is that the creator gave to all of us the same 12 Steps. The history of all these recovery groups is that if you go to the 12 Steps you can recover.

Right now the whole planet is merging in a coming-together time. The elders said there would come a time when a spider would build a web around the whole earth. They said you could talk on that web and everybody around the whole earth would hear you. We believe the fulfillment of that prophecy is the internet. Now the world, which still runs by the same set of principles, laws and values, has an interconnected communications system. Those wires do not stay inside of boxes. Instead of separating, they cross every boundary, every country. No human being knows how to shut that web down because the nature of interconnectedness shares all with all, and hears all from all.

It's a time of merger. Telephone companies are merging with TV systems. You can hardly be in a health plan for one month without it merging with another one. There is a big merging going on. The prophecies say the time will come when the merging brings us together. But one thing that has not merged is the idea that only alcoholics can work with alcoholics, Alanons can only work with Alanons, narcotics addicts with narcotics addicts and so on. Our addiction thinking has still maintained a separateness.

I was at a meeting in Idaho where, on Sunday mornings, alcoholics and Alanons come together taking turns to chair the meeting. The meeting felt good. As I sat in that meeting and listened to the Alanons speak, I heard stuff which I wish I could have heard 10 or 15 years ago. That's what I wished. I realized I had to go back and re-look at things in my life, in particular, things with my children which I didn't know had caused hurt. I just didn't think about it. Before then I could tell you how I hurt them, but when I heard it from Alanons it made a big difference. So I went back to my children and asked them what I was like to be around when I was drinking, and even when I had sobriety. They told me things that I never knew. All those years of sobriety that I was still hurting them. I wanted to be able to sit in a place where I could hear those kinds of comments as I work the Steps.

I'm not saying to merge AA and Alanon. I'm saying that the next level of recovery is to create a place where I can come and share my experience. I see these types of circles, we call them *circles of recovery*, as places where I can say my greeting this way: "My name is Don, I work the 12 Steps." Would I still go to AA, to my closed meetings and open meetings as well? Yes. Would Alanons or NA's still go to theirs? Yes. But I want a place where I can hear all of the hurt, not just the hurt from my point of view, but the hurt from their point of view. How I hurt them. And I want them to hear what my thoughts were, and are. I think the recovery community has to go to that next level of change. Everything else is merging—now we need to merge. It's a part of the coming-together time so I can accelerate my growth. So I can build my family stronger, more quickly.

When I began to hear other viewpoints, I remember asking one of my children this question: "Why didn't you ever tell me this?"

And she said, “I thought I had such a little bit of you that if I brought it up I would have lost even that little bit. And I just didn’t want to bring it up, dad.”

Well, I didn’t know that. So I said, “No baby, let’s talk...!”

I want to create places where we can hear others in that way early in our recovery process. Places where people say, “My name is so and so, I work the 12 steps,” regardless of their addiction or dysfunction. I want to hear everyone’s experience so when I work my program I can do it from maximum input.

## Recognize, Acknowledge, Forgive and Change

By Don Coyhis

We've talked about the coming-together time which is happening throughout the whole planet now. Representatives from the four directions, the red the yellow, the black and the white, are coming into contact as never before. But it is also a waking-up time. Communities across the country are awakening at this time. They know something is not right and they know what it is. Communities are getting sick and tired of being sick and tired. There are small circles of people in our Indian communities who are saying, "This is enough. We have enough suicides, we have enough children dying, and we have to do something about it." We need to do community-wide work at the community level. This is in keeping with the healing forest concept which says if sick trees are taken from a sick forest and healed, they will become sick once again when they return to a forest which is not in active healing. Part of that cleaning-up process is dealing with boarding school issues, dealing with abuse, and being willing to admit that sexual abuse is still going on in our communities. We also have to admit that domestic abuse and violence is going on in our communities. It might look like things are getting worse, but when you own something, when you admit that we have a problem, then we can begin to work on it.

There are four steps or four directions to working issues like these. They are to RECOGNIZE, to ACKNOWLEDGE, to FORGIVE and to CHANGE. We have to begin to recognize community dysfunction at the community level. You have to know what unhealthiness looks like and feels like. I think that's where the community is right now; we are able to recognize that. The second part is to acknowledge. You have to say, "This is us. This is a true picture of how it is and what is going on in our community." We must recognize that we need sober leadership and acknowledge that we are off track. The next part of the healing process is to forgive or to let it go. Many hurtful things were done to us as individuals, families, communities and nations. But we can't take the healing journey until we let go of the grudges we carry. Then we must change back to our culture, to begin to bring back the culture. That is how we see the movement in our communities at this time.

We know that in communities which are bringing back the culture—the spirituality, the songs, the drum, and the ceremonies—positive change starts to happen. Across the country, communities are in various stages of recognizing, acknowledging, forgiving and changing. Now we are using the words healing and Wellbriety. There are many movements now supporting the original sobriety movement. It is getting deeper than it was before.

I also think that we are building healing infrastructure. For example, AISES (American Indian Science and Engineering Society), NANACOA (Native American Association of Adult Children of Alcoholics), AIHEC (American Indian Higher Education Consortium), White Bison, and the many individual Indian trainers who are working in Indian communities, as well as Indian publications and other organizations, all provide our communities with healing opportunities or

information. A few years ago those organizations and individuals were all separate, but we're starting to see a *coming together*, they are starting to form a big circle made up of little circles. The movement now is towards unity. As that comes together I think we'll see an acceleration of healing take place.

White Bison uses the Hoop of 100 Eagle Feathers to help in the healing of communities. The Hoop has been to hundreds of communities or gatherings where it brings the gifts of healing, hope, unity and forgiveness to the people. White Bison's new mission is to have 100 communities in healing by the year 2010. Each one of the feathers on the Hoop will be assigned to a community which goes into healing. We'll be using the Hoop to accelerate healing and look forward to hearing from your community so it may find its role in the Wellbriety movement.

## Native Leadership in Healing

By Don Coyhis

In the future I think we'll see an increase of the use of technology to transmit traditional data about healing. I think we'll also see a coming-together of tribes helping tribes in the healing process. I think it will even go so far that other cultures will come into our communities to help us to heal. We need to get that knowledge from the four directions. We need knowledge of the Red Way, the Yellow Way, the Black Way and the White Way. As we heal, all of our communities are going to pass through and deal with the issue of forgiveness, even to the point of learning how to forgive the unforgivable. I think we will see a widespread spiritual awakening in all four directions. All cultures will begin to honor the spiritual paths much more than in the past.

I was told a story about an Indian man who was standing on top of a hill. As he looked all around, he saw many little trails going in different directions. Some went on rough roads and some trails were pretty smooth. He looked around the whole circle and he saw it was a circle of various paths. He wondered which path he should take. Pretty soon an Elder came over to where he stood. He said to the Elder, "I can't figure out which path to take." The Elder looked in the full circle and saw all these paths. Only one of them was a black road, or a real dark path.

The Elder said, "All these paths go to the same place, they're all going to the Creator. It doesn't matter which path you take. But that one path which is painted black takes you to destruction, it doesn't go the place the other paths go. Too many of us have been on that black road," he said. "We need to get off that road. Any of the other ones will work." A different Elder, Lakota Frank Fool's Crow, said that alcohol and jealousy are the two biggest enemies which Indian people have. They keep us off-track and are a black road for us.

In the future I think we'll see communities come into crisis. The crisis could be teen-age suicides, bootleggers in our communities, children selling their bodies for drugs, acts of violence and other things like these. As the first sign of healing I think the community will see a crisis; and that community crisis will be what wakes everyone up. We are starting to see a movement take place where people realize it isn't about money nor is it about blaming someone, but it is about getting our communities ready to heal. So I think first you'll see a crisis at the community level and then that community will go into healing. In the future I think we'll see community healing going on like we've never seen it before. When a community goes into healing development, then other communities will follow it. Communities will begin to work with communities on the healing journey.

I believe that Indian people will set the tone, pace and model for community healing which the other directions, or non-Indian communities, will follow. I think this is true because our model always involves a spiritual component.

## *The Circles of Recovery Journey*

By Don Coyhis

We recently completed an 11,000 mile journey undertaken with the purpose of encouraging grassroots sobriety and addictions recovery commitments in Indian communities in the US and Canada. From March until May of 1999, White Bison staff members and supporters traveled to over 30 communities centered around the tribal colleges and their surrounding communities to speak of our Circles of Recovery program. In each community we conducted a Wellbriety Awareness Day presentation which allowed local people to speak about sobriety, and White Bison to describe its “Firestarters Training,” through which anyone can become involved. As participants on this historic Journey, we had the opportunity to feel the pulse of Indian country and learn about the progress of sobriety among our people.

In our 11,000 mile journey we interfaced and talked to people in various levels of leadership, to grassroots people, mental health workers, Indian health services personnel, and the staff of treatment centers. One of the things we found is that there are thousands of Indians sober. Not just a few. There are thousands sober, and on a long term basis. By “long term” I mean 8, 10, 12, 14, and 20 years. I personally know a couple of Indian people who have been sober for 45 and 49 years.

We have tended to create a stigma and we sometimes believe it is like it was 20 years ago regarding alcoholism. But that’s not true. We also noticed on the Journey that our women are becoming highly educated. More educated than the men. We have a higher education factor within our communities than just a few years ago.

Another thing we noticed, and this was a surprise to me, was how many young people there are who have never tasted alcohol. I don’t think we stopped in any community where we didn’t talk to young people who had taken a stand on alcohol. When we spoke to them about how it was working out for them, I don’t think we found one who was not involved in culture. They were dancing, connected to their grandpas or grandmas, participating in sweat lodges and other traditional activities. We met one grandmother with 150 grandchildren who runs 3 or 4 sweat lodges each weekend for the whole family. These young people have a very strong spiritual base in the culture. And there are many of them.

Another thing that surprised me was the many pockets of people who are bringing the culture back. We saw that the eagles were endangered, but they’ve come back. The buffalo was endangered, and they’ve come back. I was surprised how strong the pockets of culture were. We were in one community in Wisconsin where they have a Wellbriety supper once a month attended by 350 people. And it’s growing. There are many things going on in Indian country that are working. But it’s perhaps a problem that we don’t know what one another are doing. If we could hear more about our successes in wellness, it would be really good.

As we went across the country we became aware of a web of people who are connected with others in sobriety and wellness. People are not working in isolation. There is a web of people involved in this movement. There was no community where we didn't find pockets of people who were dedicating their lives to this movement. What seemed to be missing in many of the communities were culturally-based recovery tools. A lot of the other tools were there, but they are not as meaningful as ones based in the culture.

I also remembered, as we traveled through Indian country from east to west and back again, that a few years ago we were blaming people because of our alcoholism. It was the white man's fault, the government's fault, the BIA's fault, ectetra. I think part of the power of this movement is the realization that we, as Native people, have to make this journey ourselves. The journey to wellness is ours. I'm seeing an increased accountability in that. We also noticed as we traveled that there seems to be a decrease in funding help. Many of the alcohol programs are being cut. Some of the treatment centers had long lines of people waiting to get into them. But many of the treatment centers which seemed to be effective were culturally-based treatment centers. They had regular sweat lodges, the involvement of elders, and regular prayer activities.

I think that more than any time in the 20 years I've been around our sobriety movement, Indian country is ready. I think that many of our communities have people who are sick and tired of being sick and tired. I know tribes which are taking a stand on alcohol. For example, the Blackfoot tribe is banning alcohol at social events, an effort coming right at the level of the Tribal Council leadership. It is really exciting to see tribal leaders figuring out how to take stands on alcohol and drugs. I think we in Indian country are at the point now where we are ready. We are ready to make this journey. Ready to make a commitment. Ready to put it as a priority.

I was really encouraged by what I saw as we traveled from community to community even though we still have a lot of issues. We have a high incidence of domestic violence to women and to children. I didn't see many communities giving priorities to men's programs. I noticed that the men's wellness part of the movement is way behind the women's wellness movement. I think we really have to put some effort into getting men involved. Compared to women, large numbers of men are not showing up at wellness conferences. If there's any one place I think we need improvement it's men's involvement.

## Wellbriety and The Hoop of Nations

By Don Coyhis

In 1991 there was a gathering of Native American Elders. They talked about the healing time that would occur in Indian country. They said there was prophecy that foretold the time of healing. This time of healing would begin when the sun became blocked in the seventh moon. Coincidentally, there was a solar eclipse in July of 1991. A week after this eclipse, the Elders Gathering took place.

In 1994, an Indian man had a vision in which he was told by a Native Elder that he was to build a Hoop of 100 eagle feathers. He was told that the eagle feathers would come from the various Indian nations. When the Hoop was complete he was to gather the Elders from the four directions. At this gathering, the Elders from the four directions were to put their blessings into the Hoop. The eagle feathers came from each of the four directions. They were put on a willow hoop during a ceremony performed in a sweat lodge in May of 1995.

During the same weekend that the Hoop was built, tobacco was taken to the Elders in South Dakota. The story of the vision and the Hoop was told to them and they said they knew that this was to be. The Elders foretold a sign from the north which would signify the location for a second Elders gathering. They said they would come and help to conduct the ceremonies at this gathering. They spoke of the White Buffalo calf which was born on August 20, 1994 in Janesville, Wisconsin. It was understood that this was the sign indicating where the gathering was to take place.

Indian Elders came from the great nations of North America. When their numbers were counted, over 27 different Native American tribes were represented. There were also Tibetans representing the yellow direction, and there were black Elders, some of whom came from Africa. There were Hispanic Elders, Aborigines from Australia, and Saami people from Norway and Finland who represented indigenous White Elders. I understand from the Elders point of view that the Elders had to meet first. It is very significant that the Elders had to meet first because that's the beginning. If the Elders come together from all those four colors, sitting together in the same circle, it sends a message to others. There was no prejudice. We experienced a meeting of hearts and minds at the Elders Gathering in Wisconsin.

The Elders told us that what we see on the outside of we human beings is an earth suit. That's the way the creator made everything. He made one race, the human race, but he made humans to wear different earth suits. The creator made different types of trees. He made different kinds of flowers. He made us as humans, different types of humans. The Elders told us that we are living in a coming-together time and that's what the Hoop represents. The Hoop represents the four colors and the many ethnicities, all in one circle. They said if you tell one color that it can't come to the Hoop, then you have to take that color off the willow branch which makes up the Hoop.

As soon as you take the white ribbon off there, or the black ribbon off there, or any color off there, it is no longer a circle. The creator made it that way: one race, the human race, one circle.

The Elders put four gifts into that Hoop. The first gift was **the power to forgive the unforgivable**. They knew that when we come together and sit in the circle there is a lot of hurt inside of us. They knew that one of the things which would allow us to come together is forgiveness. Indians forgiving Indians, Whites forgiving blacks, blacks forgiving whites, and so on. Forgiveness is one of the powers that we need as individuals and as communities or nations as we enter the coming-together time..

The second gift they put into the Hoop is **unity**. If you come to that Hoop with a hardened heart, it doesn't matter what color you are or what your gender is, but if you come there and your heart is hard it will soften your heart. If you come there, but you are prejudiced and think certain people shouldn't belong there, you will experience a change. When you come to the Hoop you will know unity. If you come there thinking disunity you will come to know it is not right.

The third gift they put into it is **healing**. When you come there, like thousands already have, you might start to cry. Those tears mean that pain is released from the mind and you can begin to heal. So tears flow by that Hoop. I've seen black people cry, yellow people cry, white people cry, Indian people cry. Men cry, women cry. The Hoop brings the healing waters of tears.

The fourth gift they put into the Hoop is **hope**. If you come there hopeless, when you leave the Hoop you will have hope. If you come thinking, "My community cannot change," after praying by the Hoop you'll think, *It can change*. If you come there seeing all the racial tension in the world, the gangs, the violence in our schools, and you think it is hopeless, when you leave that Hoop you will have the strength to work for change.

The Elders told us that the Hoop will go on a great journey. They said wherever that journey goes, the community will heal. Why would they know it will heal? Because the Hoop is like a radio antenna. It broadcasts—not noise, not music out into the circle, but it is broadcasting these four gifts of the creator. **Unity, healing, hope and forgiveness**. They told us that when the Hoop goes on a great journey it will attract people of all colors. They said this is the only instruction you have: no one can be refused that Hoop. The Hoop is not a Indian Hoop. As Indians, we carry the Hoop. We move it. We take it where the Hoop tells us to take it. We believe it is a magnet. It is something that will draw people who will then go back to their communities and start to make those changes. Throughout hundreds of communities, not one person has disrespected the Hoop. I've seen blacks respect it, I've seen different religions respect it. I've felt the respect that people of any background bring to that Hoop. It's something the creator put here. It's something really special. It is one of the things that is going to help in this healing time, this coming together time.

That's how I see the role of the Hoop: bringing together the four colors. Giving the four gifts to anyone who comes seeking. Those four gifts are the deep roots of any individual's tree of Wellbriety. Receiving those gifts of healing, hope, unity and forgiveness can help a person in

their recovery from addictions and their journey into sobriety and wellness. The more people who come to the Hoop and pray near it, the stronger it is. It carries the prayers of individuals and communities. It carries the presence of the creator. If you walked in front of the creator, would you have hate in your heart? Would you not want to be with your brother or sister? Would you not heal? And when you left the creator, would you be hope *less*? No. That's what I see the Hoop doing in the Wellbriety movement. We are honored to take it to different places.

## Wellbriety and Economic Development

By Don Coyhis

Economics and economic development is very, very significant for the wellness of communities, but I think we need to understand the natural order of things in considering this. I believe we always have to work with natural order. To me, the natural order or understanding is that we are spiritual beings trying to be human, we are not human beings trying to be spiritual. It's really important to try and understand that because if you want to be successful at economics you must first develop the inside and then work on the outside. In recovery it is *spiritual first, then material*. It's never the other way.

So for example, if, with good intentions, you bring in economic development opportunities and entrepreneurship to a community you are almost doomed to failure if part of the economic development plan omits developing oneself inside. In the business world you put energy into a business then you get a certain amount in return for doing so. For successful economic development you have to have a plan, you have to have goals and objectives, you have to measure them, you have to have work ethics. You need to have work habits. You need to be willing to put in the time—nothing's free.

Water always flows down a mountain through the path of least resistance. Suppose water flows down the mountain and hits a tree or a blockage. It will go around that tree until it hits a stone. It will stay there a little while and then go around the stone. Eventually it finds the path of least resistance because that's the nature of water. Business is the same way. It always follows the path of least resistance. Your goods or services must be easy to use. You've got to be faster, cheaper, better, quicker, or offer higher quality than any one else. But certain thought patterns have to be established inside a person before you can do that.

Suppose I drink, I party, I go out with friends, I come in late, and I have an, "I don't give a shit" attitude; is that going to affect my productivity or the outcome of any kind of a business I have? They say, "As within, so without." If you are clogged up inside, you will clog up the business. If you are judgmental to yourself then you are going to judge your customers. If you hate yourself, you'll hate your employees. If you are intolerant of yourself you'll be intolerant of everybody you run into. In an interconnected world, everyone will pick up on it. So it's kind of a catch 22. Which do you do first? Do you bring in the business and start that way? But if your thinking isn't right your business project is not going to work anyway.

Most economic development plans, I believe, use the European model which only focuses on the outside. They proceed like this: "Here's your goals, here's your charts, here's your spreadsheets, here's your money, now go and do it." In Indian country, I think that in order to make a plan work you also have to come in with a personal development plan to show people how you must think if you are going to run that business. For example, businesses don't start on Indian time.

Indian time is a delusion anyway. Indian time is really about being responsible. It's about being there when you say you are going to be there. That's Indian time. It isn't, "Set an agenda for eight o'clock and have everybody show up at 8:30 or a quarter to nine." That's an excuse for being irresponsible. Don't say the meeting is going to be at eight, oversleep, come in late, have coffee, and say it's Indian time and the Indian way. It's not. Our traditional Indian way was to say what you are going to do, and do it.

To sum up, in order for economic development to be successful in Indian country, part of the training for business needs to include the thinking skills that go with it. What thought patterns would it take for me to run a business effectively? At the community level, what work habits does a potential work force need to develop? You must define what is excellence. What is mediocrity? What standards need to be in place if the project is to succeed? What is it you want? I really think you have to have that balance of both: the inside look and the outside look, simultaneously, so that you can grow both.