Blending Native American Spirituality with Individual Psychology in Work with Children

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Abstract

The Native American tradition of the harmonious balance of mind, body, and spirit with the natural environment can be blended with pet therapy, nature therapy, and group counseling techniques to assist children to heal the disconnectedness that they feel and act out. This interrelatedness can assist children to reconnect to society and to themselves. The authors provide numerous examples of how to use practices from Native American traditions to facilitate counseling with children.

Experiencing harmony through group work can facilitate a healing for those who experience a sense of disconnectedness and lack of social interest. Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Bockern (2002) suggested that the unmet needs of belonging can be corrected through the development of trusting, intimate relationships. Research on culturally diverse group work emphasizes the blending of content, process skills, and exercises to promote trust, cohesiveness, and in-depth feedback as well as individual work toward self-assigned goals (Brinson & Lee, 1997; Furr, 2000; Gladding, 1999; Haley-Banez & Walden, 1999). In this article we draw from the philosophy and activities of the Native American tradition and expand Garrett and Crutchfield's (1997) unity model to blend group counseling, pet therapy, and nature therapy as psychoeducational group techniques to address the needs of students who are suffering from a sense of disconnection from their families, schools, peers, and selves.

Introduction

The need for social connection is deeply rooted. The need for social inclusiveness is a deep-seated part of what it means to be human (Brendtro et al., 2002; Brokenleg, 1996; Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004a; Maslow, 1943; Melson, 1990). Individual Psychology proposes that social and community interest promotes a sense of belongingness and striving for the improvement of the community for all humanity: As individuals feel more
socially connected, feelings of alienation diminish (Corey, 2005; Kefir, 1982). Those who experience social disconnection do not feel that they belong and, thus, they feel anxious, worthless, and insecure (Adler, 1938/1964). Humans experience social pain not only from psychological distance from an individual but also from the perception of psychological distance from a social group or even from the possibility of social distance (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004b).

Stein (2003) contended that all forms of psychological dysfunction are directly related to disconnection from the feeling of community. Stein outlined that, according to Adler, individuals should possess the following characteristics in order to develop the feeling of community and connection:

- Attitudinal capacities [that] include: feeling at home on the earth; a sense of harmony with the universe; a deep identification with others; a letting go of a preoccupation with self; and a profound feeling of belonging and embeddedness in social evolution.
- Behavioral capacities [that] include: making contact with others; relating to others in a useful way; and contributing to the common welfare. The ability to cooperate depends on the degree of the feeling of community.
- Emotional capacities [that] include: empathy for others (to see with their eyes, to hear with their ears, to feel with their hearts); feeling connected to others; and the ability to feel and express acceptance, liking, and love for others (sequence-characteristics).

Many children often feel disconnected from themselves, their families, their peers, the school system, and society. They often have no sense of their "place" in society and feel lost, not only geographically but also emotionally. This sense of separateness and disconnection is often displayed in academic and legal difficulties, acting-out behavior, and emotional disturbance. Maslow (1943) cited the need for belonging as secondary only to physical needs and the need for safety. Brendtro et al. (2002) and Brokenleg (1996) proposed that when the four basic needs of all humans (belonging, mastery, independence, generosity) are not met by the family, community, and other cultural institutions, children become alienated and act out their senses of disconnectedness. Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004a, 2004b) suggested that the need to be accepted as part of a social group is an innate quality and that avoiding the emotional pain of separation is as important to humans as avoiding other types of physical pain. Social exclusion of any sort, such as abandonment, exclusion from social activities, discrimination, separation from family or friends, or even being lost geographically, could cause both physical and emotional pain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004a, 2004b).
Salomon (1995) stated that low-performing children tend to have fewer friends, experience more feelings of loneliness, confide in others less, and ask for help less than their higher-achieving peers who seem to have the ability to connect with animals to fill gaps in companionship. Children with disruptions in their attachment tend to experience emotional loneliness and inability to develop appropriate relationships. They often see themselves as powerless, worthless, empty, and loathsome, while children with more secure attachments tend to possess the abilities to self-soothe, to form intimate relationships, and to develop higher levels of empathy toward others (Cunningham & MacFarlane, 1996; Hanselman, 2001; Levitt, 1991).

Contemporary writers assert that mental health may be directly related to the relationship between people and nature (Hogan, 1999; Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Nebbe, 1995). As North American society has become increasingly urban, crowded, and devoid of contact with nature, so has the physical and mental health of the inhabitants of the city declined. The further society has moved away from contact with nature, the more distant society has become from meaningful interactions within the family, schools, and each other. Hogan (1999) described susto, a common modern societal condition, as a sickness of the soul caused by disconnection from the world of nature. The only cure for susto is to look outside the self, to the rivers, the forests, and animals for the healing powers of nature.

Profound positive effects have been observed on participants in environmental education, school camping, and wilderness camping experiences. Increased self-esteem, self-confidence, self-concept, and pride are among some of the effects of interactions with nature, as are increased levels of responsibility and development of physical skills (Nebbe, 1995).

Human identity and personal fulfillment somehow depend on our relationship to nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development. . . (Kellert & Wilson, 1993, pp. 42–43)

Native American tradition places value on maintaining harmony and balance of mind, body, and spirit with the natural environment (Deloria, 1994; Hirschfelder & Kreipe de Montano, 1993; Oswalt & Neely, 1999; Reyhner, 1992). The essence of Native American spirituality is about connection. The Lakota frequently speak the phrase mitakuye oyasin ("all my relations") during ritual ceremonies to remind them that they are personally related to all that exists, including all people and animals, air, water, rock, and everything green (Black Elk & Lyon, 1990). In the symbolic Native American Circle of Life, all things are connected, all things have purpose, and all things are worthy of respect and reverence.
They say we could talk to the trees and all the green. They say we could talk to the wind-people, the four-legged, creeping-crawlers, mammals, and fish people. They say that at one time we could all talk to each other. No matter how many countless languages, forms and shapes, and symbols there were, they say we all spoke the same mind. (Black Elk & Lyon, p. 33)

Relationships are primary to the Native American philosophy and are highly influential on individual growth. This philosophy is reflected in the following cultural values:

- Individuals' behaviors are expected to be in harmony with nature;
- The person is valued above and beyond his/her possessions;
- Child rearing emphasizes self-sufficiency, which is always in harmony with nature and respect for the elderly is absolute.

(Axelson, 1999)

This ancient wisdom provides a way of thinking and behaving, which facilitates the connection of the individual to himself or herself, others, his or her community, nature, and a great universal spirit. All of these points of connection aid the person in surviving and thriving physically, emotionally, and spiritually in a hostile environment, whether ancient or current.

The Medicine Wheel, symbolizing the cyclical nature of the world and of the self, depicts four directions, each representing an aspect of life as necessary for a harmonious and functional way of life: mind, body, natural environment, and spirit. Native American philosophy asserts that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts; likewise, the inner dimensions of mind, body, and heart are not separate parts, but connected dimensions flowing from one another. This interrelatedness of all living beings is symbolized by the Circle of Life and is expressed in Native American art and customs (Dufrene, 1990).

The interrelatedness of Native American philosophy can be used to help students harmoniously to reconnect to themselves, to society, and to nature. This philosophy emphasizes that the family of Mother Earth includes animals, plants, and minerals. Animal-facilitated therapy, horticulture therapy, and natural environment therapy are all versions of this philosophy (Beck & Katcher, 1984; Bryant, 1986; Crompton & Sellar, 1981; Cusack, 1987; Davis, 1986; Fogle, 1981; Kaplan, 1992). There is a growing literature on the therapeutic use of the human-animal bond in education, psychology, and counseling (Ascione, 1992; Blue, 1986; Bryant, 1986; Melson & Peet, 1988; Paul, 1992). Kaufmann (1999) stated,

With the appropriate preparation and supervision, the opportunity to play with and care for animals can provide even the most relationship resistant youth in our schools and facilities with what they most need: a sense of connection or creature comfort. (p. 12)
Humankind has tilled the soil, tended plants, and gathered nourishment from the earth since the beginning of recorded history. This practice has provided people with an intimacy of the wisdom inherent in the land, a deepened acuity toward nature, and an internalized understanding of the cycles of nature (Lange, 2001). Both traditional and non-traditional gardens flourish in all cultures of the world and invite mankind to nourish and be nourished through this connection with the earth. Nebbe (1995) emphasized the role of plants as a symbol of positive thoughts, celebrations, and good wishes. For example, plants and flowers are sent to offer apologies, as remembrances at funerals, in celebration at weddings, and for life's special occasions.

**Medicine Wheel/Unity Model of Group Work**

Garrett and Grutchfield (1997) synthesized contemporary counseling techniques and traditional Native American wisdom and developed a unity model of group work. Using the Greater Circle (Medicine Wheel), this comprehensive approach to developing self-esteem, self-determination, body awareness, and self-concept focuses on the objectives of the four Great Circle directions. It emphasizes the universal characteristics of the need to feel a sense of belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. This model focuses on the inner dimensions of mind, body, and spirit as connected dimensions flowing from one another, whose interrelation may be disrupted by dissonance or discord (Garrett & Carroll, 2000). In Native American spirituality, healing ceremonies are conducted to “keep oneself in good relations”: Individuals strive to honor or heal a connection with the self, between the self and others (e.g., family, friends, and community), between the self and the natural environment, or between the self and the spirit world (Garrett, Garrett, & Brotherton, 2001). Garrett and Crutchfield’s model draws upon these healing ceremonies and suggests that group exercise can accentuate relationships and their influence on individual growth.

**Adding the Component of Pet Therapy**

The Native American philosophy of being one with all beings ties in easily with the use of pet therapy, which assists the child to form strong emotional bonds and to develop empathy. Through interaction with animals, children learn to understand not only the feelings and needs of animals but also the feelings and needs of fellow human beings. Levinson (1978) stressed that associations with animals can reduce alienation and increase self-esteem,
empathy, self-control, and autonomy. Multiple studies have found that children who own pets feel more empathy toward other people and that animal-based education relates to higher empathy scores. Melson (1990) stated, “Experiences of interconnectedness with animals and with nature may be an important context within which more nurturing children may grow to be more nurturing adults” (p. 15). Melson also stressed that society needs to promote nurturance and that developing positive interconnections with animals and nature may be a key to the development of this nurturance. Morrow’s (1998) research stressed “children treat their pets as they themselves would like to be treated” (p. 218). Vidovic, Šteć, and Brathko (1999) concluded that there is a significant positive relationship between pet ownership and level of attachment, empathy, and prosocial behaviors in elementary school children.

Counselors and teachers can promote nurturance by keeping pets in the classroom and in the counseling center. Working with an animal enhances self-esteem (Bergesen, 1989) and early adolescent self-esteem is enhanced by pet ownership (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985). Interacting with animals gives children the opportunity to learn to give and receive affection, while pets substitute for human attachment by reducing loneliness and providing love. Children deprived of positive, nurturing human affection and attachment can reduce loneliness by substituting the unconditional love given to and received from a pet. Children can project their own feelings onto the animals, which facilitates expression of feelings.

Learning to read and responding appropriately to an animal’s nonverbal cues can help the child learn to interpret the body language and non-verbal cues of humans (Melson, 1990). The unconditional acceptance and love demonstrated by an animal promotes a strong sense of worth, lovability, connection, and belonging to children that feel unloved and disconnected (Levinson, 1978). Most pets do not live as long as humans and they therefore give children the opportunity to learn coping and grieving skills necessary for losses later in life (Blue, 1986). Even the death of a pet can serve as a reminder of connection between the child and the natural cycle of life. For instance, in the traditional goldfish funeral, children and adults acknowledge the loss of the pet by gathering around a toilet. The “service” permits each “mourner” time to speak highly of the contributions of the deceased, after which the children ceremoniously flush the spirit to the next world.

Adding the Component of Nature Therapy

Gardening, planting in the earth, creating or maintaining an environment for wildlife develops a child’s confidence in his or her ability to interact
competently with nature and allows modern day children to acquire the mastery that their Native American peers were able to achieve naturally. In nature therapy, gardens can be developed to produce vegetables and flowers, which then can be shared. Both the skill of gardening and the internal reward of sharing the products of gardening are sources of pride for the student.

When I was really little I spent a lot of time with Abuela. We planted Johnny Jump Up flowers. I would go out in the yard and pick them and give them to her for a present. Then they turned brown and died. I cried, but Abuela said don't worry, they'll come back next year. Then Abuela died, and we didn't plant any more flowers. But in the spring, the Johnny Jump Ups came back anyway. They come back every year. I like to think Abuela plants them for me every year and she is still in our back yard. I like to pick the flowers and talk to her. (A., personal communication with counselor, 1999)

Observations of the environment while working in the outdoors can also contribute to the feeling of oneness shared by the group. A group sighting of a red-tailed hawk, a close study of the intricacies of a spider's web, or an inadvertent visit from a mouse or garter snake can bond children together in the natural environment:

One time, we went camping and the leaders told us not to take food in our tent. We didn't listen and we all ate cookies in our sleeping bags. In the middle of the night, we woke up because we felt something wiggling inside our sleeping bags. We turned on a flashlight and there were little mice eating our cookie crumbs. We jumped out of the sleeping bags and we all ran screaming to the leader's tent. It was so funny all of us trying to get into the leader's tent at once because we were so scared of those tiny little mice. Every time we get together now we laugh about the “mice trip” and how much fun we had. I wish we could all go camping together again even if there are mice there. (B., personal communication with counselor, 2004)

**The Need for Belonging**

An exploration of the core of Native American spirituality (giving, sharing, cooperation) can open many doors in the lives of alienated individuals as they discover that they can find balance and harmony through the philosophy of the Native American Greater Circle (Garrett & Carroll, 2000). As the cohesiveness and the sense of connection within the group develop, individual self-esteem and empathy increase. Focusing on the need for belonging attempts to help the child answer the questions, “Where do you belong? Who's your family/clan/tribe?” (Garrett & Carroll, p. 382). When the need for belonging is met and the child is comfortable with his or her place in the family and community, the child becomes cooperative, friendly, affectionate, respectful, trusting, and sympathetic.
The talking circle. This group activity introduces the sense of belonging as well as respect and acceptance of self and others. The purpose of the talking circle is to bring people together in a respectful manner for sharing and for teaching to occur through listening and learning. All who are within the circle have an opportunity to talk with equal respect and no interruption. An instrument is introduced, such as a decorated stick or other totem, and only the individual holding the totem speaks. After speaking, the individual hands the totem to another group member and then listens while that group member speaks. Individuals in the talking circle are not required to talk; if they are handed the totem, they may choose to hand the totem to someone else without speaking. Those who choose to talk are encouraged to communicate, not only from the mind, but also from the heart, sharing innermost feelings. When all have spoken, the circle is closed with the reminder that all that is said in the talking circle is to remain within the circle and that the identities of group members and spoken words are confidential. In this traditional way, there is a coming together to connect with each other and all living things in order to find strength and live harmoniously.

My pet, my family. The use of pets in the counseling setting provides the opportunity for the students to build self-esteem and confidence by working with and caring for the animals. In a pet-based group, the counselor has the unique opportunity to explore global relationships (i.e., each member of the group breathes the same air that the animals breathe and the same air touches each element of nature; thus all individuals are one with nature and they all belong to Mother Earth) as well as quieter, more intimate relationships between the child and his or her pet. Through guided group discussion, children can explore their personal relationships with the animals, project their own needs onto their pets, and discuss ways they can fulfill the needs of their pets. In the pet-group setting, for instance, a noisy group might learn to respect silence in order to get a parrot to share a few words or an abused child may share with the group that his or her Labrador Retriever fears being alone in a storm (projection) and the dog needs to sleep at the foot of the child's bed each night; thus the dog is safe with its "protector" and is available for mutual comfort if the child awakes in the night.

Chief (a large dog) is really scared of thunderstorms. He doesn't like the flashing light and the noise. It really scares him. My parents don't understand because, well, they're grown ups and they just don't remember what it's really like to be scared during a storm. They just tell him to settle down or go back to his bed and go lay down but he can't because he is too scared. When we have a storm, Chief gets in bed with me and we pull the blankets over our heads and we talk about other things until the storm is gone. I don't tell my parents because I don't want them to think Chief is a wuss. He's my best friend and I'm there for him when he's scared. (C., personal communication with counselor, 2003)
Another child might also be able to whisper the details of a traumatic event to a purring cat who tells no tales while avoiding eye contact with the peers and counselor.

The night my father left, he just yelled at my mom and me and then he got in his car and went to his friend's house. My mother started screaming at me that it was all my fault and get out of her sight because she hated me and I was lazy and stupid. I know it was all my fault because I made bad grades on my report card and I forgot to empty the dishwasher. My dad wouldn't let me say I was sorry. No one in my family would talk to me except Missy [cat]. Missy [child is hugging and stroking the cat], you understood, didn't you. You knew I didn't mean to make my dad leave. At least you didn't hate me. (A., personal communication with counselor, 1999)

Need for Mastery

Children develop a sense of mastery through opportunities for developing competence and acknowledging their effort achieved as they strive to accomplish various tasks. Native American children are taught that someone with more competence is not a rival but a resource and that achievement is sought for personal reasons, not out of competition.

Creating medicine shields. Clients can creatively address the need for mastery and acknowledgement of their efforts in a group setting by making medicine shields. This activity starts with a discussion of a medicine shield as an expression of the unique gifts that the maker wishes to share regarding his or her life-journey. Native American medicine shields can serve as tangible exhibits for this discussion. Highlights of this discussion should include the following:

1. The four directions illustrated by the Medicine Shield depict the harmony and balance of the cyclical nature of the world. The East stands for self-esteem, how one feels about self and the ability to grow and change. The South stands for self-determination, the ability to use one's own will to explore and develop potential. The West stands for body-awareness, the experience of one's physical self. The North stands for self-concept, what one thinks about oneself and one's own potential.

2. The medicine shield can be used to depict the four components of mind, body, spirit, and natural environment.

3. Every shield carries "medicine," or powerful energy, through art and self-expression.

4. Each shield demonstrates the lessons the maker learned from the four directions (north, south, east, west) of the Medicine Wheel.
5. The medicine shield symbolizes the individual journey each person is taking to find his or her own path.

After the discussion, each member of the group then creates a shield, representing his or her own life-journey. Clients are invited to include any of the following on their shields: three personally important people, a place which provides security, two enjoyable activities, three words the client would like to have said about him or her, or a personality trait of which the client is proud. Each client is provided with the materials and time necessary to create this shield within the group setting. After all have completed their shields, clients share the contents of their shield with other group members and are then invited to hang their shield in a visible place to remind them of the accomplishments experienced on their life-journey.

The spirit animal. The Native American practice of renaming the child with an animal name or name from nature denotes values of strength and courage and demonstrates respect for each child. Folklore often presents animals as possessing virtues valued by human society, such as loyalty (dog), perseverance (turtle), watchfulness (hawk), cooperation (ants or bees), and thriftiness (squirrel). In this activity, each child is asked to consider what animal or aspect of nature (a totem) they admire the most and why. As they explore the strengths and abilities of this totem, they can assign the same traits to themselves. The children then create a mask to represent the animal and write a poem or essay describing the qualities of the totem and how they relate to these qualities. The child then wears the mask while sharing the poem or essay with the group. The following essay, written by a quiet, withdrawn fourth grade boy, exemplifies the power he gained by this activity:

Bang! Bang! Bang! Kckckckckckck! That is the sound of the mighty buffalo. I want to be a buffalo because it has horns to protect him from predators. It has speed and strength for walking along with the herd and it has intelligence. Just because he is big doesn’t mean he is stupid or weird or gross and if he talks weird it doesn’t mean he’s not as good as everyone else. (F., personal journal entry, 1999)

Independence. The Native American practice of encouraging children to make decisions, to solve problems, and to be responsible is taught by adults who model and teach responsible behavior. These actions produce children who feel respected and powerful. Children who feel strong and independent have no need to disobey in order to demonstrate independence or to bully others for respect or to attain power. Group counselors can provide for this need for independence by teaching self-management as well as the recognition and the management of emotions, behaviors, and thoughts. Group exercises that allow children to decide on group procedures, permit unique contributions to the whole of the group, and acknowledge the value of diversity impart a sense of self-management and independence.
**Harmony circle.** The Harmony Circle (Garrett & Crutchfield, 1997) can be used to teach the blending of independence and belonging. In a harmony circle, each child selects an instrument to play from among wood blocks, bells, sticks, plastic bottles, and rattles. The children then follow the leader, who establishes a rhythm, allowing a song to be improvised. The concepts of cooperation and harmony can be discussed along with how important each person is to the creation of the whole song. This can be adapted through the use of various items that can serve as drums, including not only Native American-made drums but also trash cans, buckets, tubs, tubes, pots, or anything that can withstand a little pounding. One member of the group starts drumming and gradually each member of the group adds their pattern, which becomes interrelated with the other patterns. The contributions of each individual are acutely noticed when that individual stops beating. Group discussion should focus on appreciating the individual contributions as well as the depth of the whole.

**Medicine bag.** The medicine bag activity is another vehicle for teaching the concept of each child’s having a “special gift from Mother Earth.” The child makes and decorates a tiny cloth bag into which symbols of his or her own special talents are placed. For instance, the child might put into the bag a pebble that would be a reminder of a favorite animal or bits and pieces of plant life as a reminder of a favorite outdoor activity. The child is told that these special items symbolize his or her “personal way of life,” referred to as “medicine” by some Native Americans. The medicine bag is then worn on a thong around the neck under the child’s shirt as a reminder of his or her special talents and gifts.

**Walking the Dog.** Pet therapy provides the child with the opportunity to care for the animals in the group setting, giving the child a sense of control and responsibility. This can be accomplished by allowing children to take turns walking a leashed animal and then encouraging them to work in small groups, teaching their own pets to heel, sit, come, and the like. The children can also actively romp with their pet while learning to monitor their own energy levels so as not to overexcite the animals. Learning to set appropriate limits for the pet leads easily into lessons on how to set limits with peers and the self. Children who have learned to manage pets can be more assertive with peers, developing feelings of self-respect and independence. A child who learns to control his pet may also learn delayed gratification, patience, responsibility, and deference to the needs of others (Levinson, 1978). The logical extension of Walking the Dog is for the counselor to draw parallels between the child’s teaching the dog to execute a “long down stay” and learning to control and monitor the child’s own behavior.

**The new kid at school.** A child who is fearful or uncomfortable in a setting may be willing to venture out when accompanied by a dog (Levinson,
This concept can be used when a new child comes to the school setting. The new student is introduced to the counseling dog and is asked to "allow the dog to show you to your new classroom." A friendly counseling dog, familiar and comfortable with the school setting, can be an assurance to the child that the new school is a safe and accepting place. Group bonding occurs when the dog and the child appear in the new classroom: The other students enthusiastically greet the dog, and this welcome is then extended to the new student."

**Generosity.** Native American tradition asserts that youth prove their own virtue by helping other people: Power and purpose is demonstrated by contributing to others' lives. The group counselor can provide opportunities to build altruism, empathy, and caring.

**Earth's gift.** The gift exercise teaches the generosity of the Earth while building sharing, cooperation, and closeness within the group. As part of a counselor-led nature walk during which "a stick finds the group," children are asked to search outside for "something special" that each member can contribute to the decoration of the group's stick. Encouraging each child to make their own decision regarding the object of nature he or she will bring into the group provides the children with a sense of self-management and autonomy. The object they choose may be anything that seems special to the client. The children then bring their objects into the group, talk about them, tell why they have special qualities, and finally attach them to the stick. As part of the exercise, the children are reminded to thank Mother Earth for sharing this special gift with them and to remember the importance of protecting those gifts freely given by nature.

**Give away.** The Native American practice of give away (McFadden, 1999) can be adapted into a group activity to encourage children to honor others for their assistance and achievements and to promote the sharing of materials and self. Animals and nature can provide the materials for projects. The children are encouraged to create a token of their appreciation to another group member and to give it away as a demonstration that his or her efforts have been appreciated. The collection of feathers, leaves, and flowers can provide supplies for crafts to be made to share with others. Note cards, stationery, book covers, and bookmarks made with the objects donated by Mother Earth make gifts to be presented to parents, teachers, peers, and the elderly.

**Neighborhood garden.** Sharing flowers or vegetables from the garden the children have planted and tended through the experience of nature therapy gives the child the opportunity to feel the intrinsic benefits of being generous and to receive the extrinsic reward of verbal praise for sharing. The following excerpts from a therapist's case notes is indicative of the progress made by an inpatient anorexic client introduced to gardening in order to learn to nurture herself:
3/8: Met with client today. Affect is flat, very little communication, stared at floor most of session; Said she didn’t care if she lived or died and that she would just sit there until she died. Need alternate method for getting her to open up to discussion. Refuses to return to group.

3/10: Brought window box, soil, fertilizer, and seeds: Encouraged her to plant flower seeds in window box. Affect still flat; only communication was related to procedures for planting and watering flower seeds. Voice sounded physically weak and fragile. Still refuses to return to group.

3/14: We sat beside window box and stared out window together. Eventually she initiated conversation related to caring for flowers. Will consider returning to group.

3/18: Conversation initiated by client related to her impatience waiting for flowers to come up. Conversation included discussion about need for her to continue to care for seeds by providing them with water, sunlight, safe place to grow. Talking with peers in day room who encouraged patient to return to group.

4/06: Seedlings sprouting multiple leaves: Client asked if she could start other window plants because she enjoys watching them grow. She charts the number of leaves on the seedlings and talks about how fast they are growing. Re-enforced concepts that plants need care in order for them to grow. Client discussed fact that she has been asking for juice and small healthy snacks and that she needs to remind herself to eat so she does not feel so tired all the time. Talked in group about her plants and their growth.

4/28: Client excited that she “grew” plants by self and plans to give flowers to parent for Mother’s Day. Client is animated, excited about her power to make things grow; client actively initiates discussion with counselor, nursing staff, peers about her “garden”... planters containing both flowers and vegetable seeds. Client voluntarily eating vegetables and fruits; gained several pounds in past 10 days. Invited group members to her room to see her plants. (G., clinical notes, 1996)

The group’s cat or python or hamster or whatever. Taking care of animals within the group setting provides opportunities for the children to consider the needs of the animals and to feel the inner satisfaction of giving of themselves. Children develop self-esteem when they give of themselves to animals that need care and love. Group-owned animals can be used as a vehicle to teach the art of sharing and taking turns, as each child in the group hands over the animal to the next child in line. The Native American belief in the stewardship of nature can be emphasized as the children interact with nature and others who are in need. The children can plan an outing in which the group’s pet is taken on visits to nursing homes, senior citizen centers, or preschools. The generosity of nature’s gifts can be emphasized to the group, which then shares these gifts with the people being visited.
Conclusion

The innate human need for connection is not only an emotional and social need but a need which is also deeply rooted neurologically. Connected students feel more secure and tend to see the lesson in problems. They survive crises better, and they are less likely to see themselves as victims. They see the meaning in life, give more of themselves, and tend to think outside themselves. Connected children access and express their feelings more easily; therefore, they act out less. With improved self-esteem, they move between cultures more easily, feel and act more calmly, and accept others more readily. The ancient wisdom of Native American traditions can be used as a vehicle for the modern-day group counselor working from an Individual Psychology perspective to assist in the healing of children who feel disconnected from society, themselves, and nature. The harmony inherent in the Native American philosophy can be a group-counseling vehicle to help heal the disconnectedness that children feel and act out. This group experience of interrelatedness has the potential to assist children to develop social interest, which can help them to reconnect to society and to aid in the reconnection of their fragmented selves. Pet therapy and nature therapy are natural adjuncts to the use of Native American philosophy and activities. The use of animals and nature activities within the group process are ways to make concrete the Native American wisdom, which teaches the interconnected condition of all beings.

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