



TRIBAL TRAINING:

INUPIAT ESKIMO COUNSELOR HELPS TO BRIDGE THE MULTICULTURAL GAP

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Catherine Swan Reimer has worked with Native Americans for more than 25 years, constantly taking notes on what has succeeded and what has failed in her dealings with this culturally rich population.

Through the decades, Reimer has served as an independent consultant for businesses, universities, schools and mental health agencies. She has worked as a counselor in all grade levels and has taught and counseled graduate university students. She also has her own practice and was a clinical supervisor for two treatment centers. In addition, she authored the book *Counseling the Inupiat Eskimo*, which is used by the University of Alaska. Now Reimer is drawing on all her experiences counseling Native Americans and pouring that knowledge into Swancircle Inc., an innovative counseling training program for those who work with American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Born in Kotzebue, Alaska, Reimer left her homeland with her parents at age 5 because of a tuberculosis epidemic after being transferred from a hospital in Nome, Alaska, to Los Angeles. Despite being raised away from her native culture and people, the Inupiat Eskimos, she knew she would reconnect with them someday.

After receiving her master's degree at the University of Arizona, Reimer worked as a clinical

supervisor for a treatment center. Many of the counseling clients were descendants of American Indian tribes. This proved to be the most difficult time in Reimer's career because she felt she lacked the skills to truly connect with this population. Although her academic knowledge of counseling was more than competent, she found traditional approaches such as talk therapy somewhat ineffective when used alone.

So Reimer began looking for alternative ways to relate to her clients. She dove into studying Native American cultures and wove those findings, rituals, symbols and activities into her own counseling approach. She found this new multicultural approach to be increasingly successful.

Reimer eventually returned to academia to earn her doctorate in counseling/psychology from George Washington University. It was then that she decided to return to Alaska and to the small village where she was born. "Being an Alaska Native helped me get my education, so I knew I wanted to give back and eventually work with my own people," she said. "While there, I wanted to learn how the Inupiat elders viewed counseling. What she discovered was that the tribal leaders wanted counselors to integrate Inupiat values into modern therapy, which was the exact approach Reimer had found to be successful in her own counseling career.

"You have these people who respond more to visuals and come from a long tradition of observation," she said. "They are very involved with nature and are very creative. For those reasons," she said, "it made sense to incorporate artistic and symbolic strategies into her therapy sessions. Reimer first learned from her clients what they liked and responded to, then began incorporating those activities and exercises into her therapy practices and teachings.

Passing it forward

Swancircle Inc. was developed as a training program for counselors, social workers and other mental health professionals to learn Reimer's methods. She meets with small groups of counseling professionals or hosts her own workshops in selected areas. The all-day workshops are extremely hands-on and energetic. Reimer has also collaborated with tribal counselors in small Alaskan villages, teaching them traditional counseling techniques that are meshed with their cultural history and values.

Reimer has recently teamed up with her son, Josh Thom, on the presentations. Thom is a music producer who is pursuing his education in music therapy. "Josh had worked at a few Indian rehabilitation centers doing music therapy," Reimer said. "I asked him to come and bring the music aspect to the workshops because I didn't have that piece yet. Thom brings a variety of tribal drums and instruments to the workshops and demonstrates how counselors can teach stress reduction, self-esteem improvement and spiritual connection through music.

Workshop attendees participate as "clients" so they can actually experience this method of counseling that has proved effective with Native Americans. This allows attendees to see how the work will impact their own clients, Reimer said. "You will learn purpose and theory behind the experience and activities of Native Americans," she said. "Counselors can then take these methods and use them in their own practices.

Workshop details

"The unconscious work of (Carl) Jung was aligned with our people's way of doing things through stories and actual directed activities," Reimer said, noting that most counseling work is "Westernized and directed to the conscious mind. "This is good," she said, "but many of our people want to be talked to and worked with at a deeper level where they get it - an 'Aha!' experience. We must talk to clients in their language. This is why stories, metaphors, drama, music, directed cultural activities and rituals are so meaningful and effective.

Reimer's workshops promise to delve into those deeper meanings. The hope is that even the participants' dreams will become expanded, opening them up to new possibilities as they become more fully involved in the learning process.

The seminars cover a variety of skills (continuing education units are available upon request). These include: Creating lesson plans based on culture Exploring the American Indian concept of "soul loss" and the collective and individual ways of counseling Addressing dysfunctional family problems, including learning the role that history plays in perpetual family dysfunction and our ways of healing Discovering methods to end the self-sabotaging that is common among American Indians Learning about the Canoe Journey and methods of community healing Discovering effective ways to heal historical and personal trauma Expanding counseling by integrating spirituality, symbols, art, music, drama and stories Exploring the worldview of Alaska Natives and American Indians Learning about dreams and voice dialogue (created by Hal and Siddra Stone and based on Jungian and Gestalt psychology)

"One of the components I want them to use are the symbols that American Indians use," Reimer said. When attendees arrive, she said, they are asked to draw a symbol representing themselves on their name tags. Later in the workshops, she goes into greater detail about the use of symbolism. "I try to get them to understand the depth of symbols, and with that I may take them through a visualization process," she said, noting that Jung is a strong influence in her work.

Reimer takes workshop attendees on a journey to discover, explore and understand how life was "precontact, meaning before the historical trauma, or what it was like before the Europeans came over. Participants discuss what life was like during the integration and how things changed afterward, including both negative and positive events that took place. Attendees then break into groups of five to create murals that represent pre/postcontact. The murals are created using only symbols, and each group then shares its story. "This exercise can be very effective for clients," she said. "It becomes really rich with personal stories. We talk about what the experience was like for them and many things come out.

The workshop climaxes with a "celebration activity," a ritualistic ceremony that incorporates all the aspects of the day's activities. Reimer believes these celebration activities are key to positive human development across the life span. For example, she said, they can be used in schools to teach prevention and safety, aid in transitional times such as puberty or help people to heal from trauma and abuse.

The attendees are again asked to form groups, this time specific to their backgrounds - school counselors, mental health counselors, rehabilitation counselors, etc. "All of the things they have learned up to this point are in the celebration activity," she said. "It is a culmination. I teach them all the different aspects of the celebration activity - drama, music, art, storytelling, symbols, humor and metaphors. They are to bring all of those into the piece, so it's very alive, intricate and rich. They then present it to the (entire) group. Now they have a product they can take back and use.

In the last part of the workshop, the Talking Circle Within, Reimer focuses on voice dialog, which she believes is the most effective therapy to use in Native American communities. The method includes an in-depth study of the many selves or subpersonalities that make up the psyche, as well as work with dreams, archetypal bonding patterns and body energy fields.

"It's an integration of Jungian counseling, Gestalt transaction analysis and existential counseling dealing with various aspects of the self," she said. "It really combines everything together." Reimer noted that the "self" could be viewed as a diamond with many sides or facets. "But a lot of us get stuck in a certain aspect of our personality," she said, which can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety or depression. Working with energy and identifying the various parts of the self helps clients

to better understand both their behavior and themselves, she said.

Future plans

Reimer has plans to host miniconferences on her approach in Boston, New York, Oklahoma, California and Oregon in the near future. "I would like to host a national conference in 2007 called 'A Creative Journey: Working Effectively With American Indians and Alaska Natives,' she said, noting that her methods could also be used with other multicultural populations. "My goal is to take this to different reservations, villages and tribes to get this out there and working, training even paraprofessionals who may not have counseling degrees and those who are non-Indian to be able to do these activities.

Reimer would like to see more indigenous peoples use her approach, while also having these exercises taught in university counseling programs. "We need to change our multicultural classes, she said. "I would like to see our multicultural programs integrating creative aspects. We are not addressing the needs of counselors that have to go out into the field and work with indigenous cultures.

"The seminars, workshops and conferences I'm giving right now have been the most rewarding to me, she said. "The culmination of all the things I've learned - gathered through other Indians, my own life experience and my research - this has been the most rewarding. We have the capacity as counselors to change a whole people's view of themselves and bring back values that are really important for human development.

For more information about Reimer's workshops, visit her website at www.swancircle.com or e-mail her at Cathreimer@aol.com