Ethnopsychedelic Therapy for Alcoholics: Observations in the Peyote Ritual of the Native American Church

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Ancient methods of treating illness were rooted in a holistic concept of health that is largely foreign to the myriad of specialists who treat 20th century hospital patients. The scientific method, with its strict attention to the rational, intellectual aspects of man's nature, has dominated the development of Western medicine and psychotherapy. Holistic practitioners concern themselves not only with the rational and intellectual parts of man, but also with his inner self and his unity with mankind and nature. In departing from this holistic view, modern medicine has given up something of great value that it is only now beginning to rediscover. For example, when the principles of folk psychiatry, which has successfully cured physical and mental illnesses for thousands of years, are used in a modern context, the success rate compares well to that attained in modern psychotherapy (Thetford, 1952; Kiev, 1966).

The medicine man of the American plains uses a drug, peyote, to intensify the therapeutic experience and enhance the patient's insights. The Indians have used the peyote cactus in this way for centuries (La Barre, 1941; Malouf, 1942). Recently, modern medical researchers found that psychedelic medication, used in a properly structured psychotherapeutic session, is effective in treating alcoholics (Chuelos, 1959; MacLean, 1961; Smith, 1958). Today, the United States Public Health Hospital in Clinton, Oklahoma, uses peyote treatment in its alcoholic services program, with encouraging results (Albaugh, 1974). This is a beginning, but we have only begun to explore the use of pharmacologically-induced altered states of consciousness in clinical practice.

This paper describes an Arapaho peyote ritual, and relates the reflections of the authors who attended many meetings where peyote was used. The ceremony is an essential ritual of the quasi-Christian, Native American Church. Official organization as a church, in 1918, was necessary to forestall enforcement of Federal prohibitions on the use of peyote (LaBarre, 1938). Since the congregation is rich with recovered alcoholics, many of whom recovered after only one meeting, this approach deserves consideration by therapists who treat alcoholics. The meeting merges three powerful psychotherapeutic modalities: the master or guide, the ritual or marathon group session, and the psychotropic drug Lophophora williamsii (Lemaire), better known by the Aztec name, Peyotl (Myerhoff, 1974). The meeting frequently achieves quick and lasting changes in the attitudes and behavior of alcoholics. Many participants report unprecedented periods of mental clarity, during which they see visions of their future life as an alcoholic. It is as if they "hit bottom", and are then ready to begin the arduous task of adjusting to a drug-free life. The peyote ritual produces heightened awareness and enhanced perceptual ability that is lasting and that may account for the enviable recovery rate of alcoholics in

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STRUCTURE OF THE RITUAL

Each meeting is held for a particular purpose which all members know, and which serves as a unifying theme throughout the meeting. Regardless of its purpose, each ritual follows a similar pattern. Services generally begin at sunset in a tepee constructed solely for one meeting. An altar is made from wet clay or sand in the shape of a crescent moon with the closed end to the west. Participants sit around the fire, with the chief and his officers at the west side. The officers are the chief's immediate assistants: the Drumman, a Cedarman (who throws cedar chips on the hot ashes for blessings), and a Fireman who tends the fire through the night.

After an opening remark, the chief usually begins by passing tobacco around the circle. Each smoke is accompanied by a prayer. The sacramental cactus, peyote, is then passed to each participant in the form of fresh cactus, dried ground powder, "gravy" and "tea". The Drumman begins a repetitive beat while the chief, holding a staff strung with sage, feathers and a rattle, sings his choice of four peyote chants. As the drum is passed clockwise around the circle, each person plays it and then sings one of the four songs. Between songs any participant may ask for tobacco to "make smoke" and pray. The opening of the tepee is always to the east, and the rising sun streaming in signifies an end to the meeting. A breakfast of game, corn, berries and sweets is eaten and participants chat in a relaxed manner as they await the feast that will begin around noon.

COMPARISON WITH PSYCHOTHERAPY

Therapeutic techniques in the peyote ritual have analogues in individual psychotherapy, group process, family systems theory, psychedelic therapy, transpersonal psychology, and social networks. Kiev (1966) has outlined features that modern psychotherapy and healing rituals have in common:

> They include initial distress of the patient, arousing of hope through dependence upon a socially sanctioned healer, a particular repetitive ritualistic relationship with the healer, a socially shared set of assumptions about illness and healing (the existence of which cannot be disproved by the sufferer's failure to respond), mobilization of guilt, heightening of self-esteem, detailed review of the patient's past life, changes in attitudes and behavior.

In the Native American Church, selection of a "socially sanctioned healer" to lead the ritual is a gradual process. The chief, or Roadman, is generally an elder of the tribe who has profound understanding of the Indian culture. He is a stable figure who possesses a working knowledge of the ritual and of peyote. Just as psychotherapists define sanity and insanity, the Roadman defines the Indian way ("this peyote way") and "that other way." He deciphers directional "signs" and crossroads, hence the name Roadman.

THE ROADMAN AS THE THERAPIST

Unlike traditional Western psychotherapists, the Roadman openly discusses his own feelings, and offers reassurance, verbal suggestions and encouragement. He generally begins each meeting in a humble tone, requesting the support of the participants.

> "... I feel honored that each and every one of you people would come over here this evening. My son-in-law over there is going to carry drum for us tonight, and I want all of you to help him out with this meeting. I am going to keep the smoke right here, and when you want to make smoke, just ask for it. So everybody here will be able to speak, like that, you know. I want all of you to help me out, each and everyone. I want to enjoy good fellowship, each of us is going to help the other person out, like that, so we can all feel good, that's what I want, but I will need your help. I can't do anything by myself, 'cause I don't know nothing, but I try to help out when you ask me. I have been coming to these meetings all my life but I still don't know nothing. I don't know how to talk good, so I want all to help me out, like that, you know."

On one occasion a Roadman gave a detailed account of his own history of alcoholism. Another chief related his deviation from the Indian way of life:

> "This is my home place here, my children are here, grandchildren, my wife. You know my mother just passed away last month. She was 99 years old. I have been traveling a lot lately and did not take enough time to sit and talk with her, like that, you know. I loved to sit and talk with her even though her voice was weak and slow, but I did not sit and talk with her much the last few months. Now I feel sad that I did not sit with her. In my own way, I am going to pray for her. I want each person here to pray the way you like; pray for your parents, your children, and pray for yourselves, any way you like, that's the way I like it. If we all think about these things together, maybe something good will happen for each of us."

The Roadman may skillfully interject parables from Indian legend or personal experiences to mobilize guilt

or increase self-esteem, but he rarely offers specific solutions to problems. His skillful application of these recollections stimulates dramatic confessions from participants long before peyote has taken effect.

> "It also seems to affect their mood. It is very difficult to assess the role of pharmacology in producing the group feeling of a meeting. Emotions are deeply felt and freely expressed. Speakers often cry and there is a great sense of communion with God and the other worshippers. It would be easier to assume that these phenomena were caused by peyote if they were not frequently observed in the part of the meeting before any medicine is eaten." (Steiger, 1974).

The leader often facilitates group interaction to help new members feel more comfortable:

> "Vernon, you have been away a long time and had much trouble. Now you are trying to change and it's hard, but you talk to David over there, and he will tell you about this peyote. You just keep coming to these meetings and take this medicine, this wonderful herb, peyote. There is a full moon up there tonight. You stay home now, we need you here to help us out with your good thoughts. You just stay behind this holy sacrament, peyote, and it will lead you the right way."

With the Roadman's permission, other members frequently encourage new participants:

> "Joseph, that's good what you said, I know how the white man's world makes you feel small and that alcohol makes you feel big. I used to drink and fight all the time. Then John invited me to come to his meeting. So I did and I've been coming here for eleven years now. You drink that medicine and stay with your people, it will help you, make you feel good and make you think good. It's good, this peyote way."

EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS AND CONFESSIONS

The expression of deeply held feelings or confessions is an integral part of any therapeutic group process and is a dynamic means of stimulating emotions and expiating guilt. Frank (1961) believes this procedure brings the patient's vague, chaotic, conflicting and mysterious feelings to the center of his attention and places them in a self-consistent conceptual system. LaBarre (1966) has described confessions in peyote rituals of the Algonquian, Sioux, Crow and Winnebago, and notes that the Iowa formally call for confessions at midnight.

During the meeting, participants often confess their guilt with nuclear and extended family members present. Frequently this is the first opportunity the family has had to confront these issues in the presence of friends:

> "I was raised in this church but then I got a big job in the city and stopped coming to these meetings; you know I thought I was like a white man and went to his church; thought I would never come back to the tepee, sit on the ground, like that. I was a big shot, too big for Indian ways. Then I started fighting with my wife, started drinking and almost lost my job. Tonight I heard you were having a meeting and we came over here to ask all of you to help us. I got a terrible problem here, my wife is ready to leave me and I'm about to lose my job if I don't do something. I came here tonight to drink this medicine and maybe it will do me some good (crying) . . ."

The feeling of extended family is heightened by the practice of addressing old and dear friends as though they were blood relatives. Elders frequently refer to younger members as "son" or "nephew"; an intimate friend becomes a "brother". Indeed, from their attitude toward each other, it is impossible to differentiate friends from biological relatives.

During a meeting the Roadman spoke to the younger Fireman:

> "I want to thank my nephew over there for poking fire tonight. I call him nephew, he calls me uncle. I ask him to come here tonight and poke fire for us. Thank you nephew for a good fire on this cold night. My nephew kept us warm all night and for that I want to thank him, like that, you know."

In another conversation concerning the ritual experience, a young Arapaho related:

> "You ask me what this ritual is like but I say go in that meeting, take the medicine and learn to pray. Maybe the chief (Roadman) will ask you to talk, maybe you will drum or maybe an Indian will give you a family name."

THE INTROSPECTIVE JOURNEY

Periods of silence, personal prayers, peyote chants and drumming guide meeting participants on an introspective journey. The steady, pulsating beat of the waterdrum can be heard for miles. Many participants describe going into a trance state whenever they hear the deep monotone of this ancient instrument. The sliding, agglutinative peyote chants are sung in the native tongue. Like Christian hymns, the medodious chants praise God or nature and elevate the hearer's mood while

diminishing intellectualization. Furst (1972) translates a peyote chant:

"For we are all
we are all
we are all the children of
we are all the children of
A brilliantly colored flower
A flaming flower
So pretty, so pretty."

Tribal chants, many so ancient they predate the peyote ritual itself, are sung with great emotion and volume. Many Indians say that if one suspends all thought and only listens to the drum, letting its rhythm merge with one's heart beat, a song comes forth and one sings it spontaneously. Long periods of drumming and singing are interrupted only when someone calls for a smoke and prepares it in meditative silence. Most members spontaneously whisper a long, repetitious prayer, much like a Hindu mantra or Catholic rosary, in their tribal language. During these periods introspection leads on to insight and awakening.

The power of introspection and awakening is well-known to another organization that is notably successful in work with alcoholics – Alcoholics Anonymous. A co-founder of AA describes a spirited awakening in the following words:

> "Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind, not of air but of spirit, was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness . . ."

Awareness, that encompasses self and universe, and is termed transpersonal appears to be a turning point on the path to recovery from alcoholism. In an experience not unlike a religious conversion, the toxic veil of alcoholic encephalopathy lifts and is replaced with a universal consciousness.

In the peyote ritual, meditative processes that lead to transpersonal consciousness are encouraged. The Roadman refers to the fire as a symbol of the higher mental communication of the physical with the spiritual. He suggests this image: Negative thoughts, regrets or guilt flow from the participants through their eagle-feathered fans into the fire and the flames rise through the top of the tepee to merge with higher planes of consciousness.

The meditative techniques have much in common with Eastern forms of meditation. The Zen Buddhist meditation form of ZaZen is generally performed "sitting in stillness, eyes open and gaze non-receptively directed, body and mind unified through breathing, posture and unbiased, non-reactive collectedness of mind" (Shimano, Roshi and Douglas, 1975). This perfectly describes the Indians as they sit quietly erect around the fire. The strict discipline of Zen meditation is also echoed in the peyote ritual. Participants are not allowed freedom of movement and speech during the ceremony, and distracting activity is discouraged. Participants are fully aware of the beneficial effects of meditation in the meeting, and able to describe the clarity and peace it brings them.

> "Some say we take peyote to escape reality. They continue to suffer with their idea of reality. In that tepee that's real. Some people say this is real out here and that the meeting is illusion, that peyote creates illusion, but they have it backwards. If this is reality, why is it so confusing, why all the anxiety, why the continual struggle in your mind? In the tepee it is all clear how to live day by day. When you come out in the morning you have watched all your troubles go away and you feel good."

This realm of consciousness, often evaded by those who use psychedelics without guidance, is facilitated by the structure of the ritual. Carlos Casteneda (1972) has referred to this state of mind as "stopping the world" or ceasing the inner dialogue.

WHY PEYOTE WORKS

When the effects of peyote are at their height, ego functioning alters. The drug-dependent person who did not have the patience or willpower to attain the meditative state is able to attain it with the aid of peyote. Beyond this, there is no single explanation for the therapeutic power of the states of consciousness we have called meditative transpersonal, or introspective. The introspective state strengthens the power of the will, and can open the mind to new attitudes that are not normally received during the conscious state (Lettem, 1975). LaBarre, (1975) refers to this altered state of consciousness as "ego alien primary process mentation." Naranjo (1975) believes that certain psychedelic drugs enable people to face and resolve inner conflicts that they normally repress. He sees much neurosis as bondage to the past and uses psychedelic therapy to help his patients break into the unburdened present. Slotkin (1956) has stated that peyote increases sensitivity to relevant stimuli and lowers sensitivity to irrelevant stimuli, allowing mental peace from trivial but anxiety-provoking thoughts. Free-floating anxiety is

replaced by anxiety that relates directly to the person's problems and provokes constructive change. McGlothin (1967) conducted long-term studies of patients given LSD therapy and found their undifferentiated anxiety was reduced.

It is as if the psychedelic experience broadens the scope of one's consciousness, allowing escape from ego domination. Albert Einstein has called ego-oriented consciousness a prison:

> A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal decisions and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole nature in its beauty (Einstein, 1973).

Thus, universal or transpersonal consciousness makes possible a finer appreciation for nature and improved ability to make warm and fulfilling contact with others. For an alcoholic, enhanced appreciation of nature and supportive relationships with others are crucial steps toward recovery.

Although heightened perceptions are therefore essential to therapeutic success, these perceptions may be confusing or distracting persons who use psychedelic drugs without supervision. A skilled psychedelic therapist such as the Roadman directs attention away from distracting perceptions, and continually seeks to center the participants. He guides them toward the oceanic sense of oneness, that comes to those who sense both the quiet place within and an expanded universe. Under his guidance, awareness extends inward to the unfiltered solid self, the meditative state, the atman; and outward to the outer self of personal anxiety and neurosis, and to the whole of society. Extended awareness brings participants a new understanding of the world and their place in it, and this new knowledge is not consistent with their behavior as alcoholics. If they clearly perceive the inconsistencies, their attitudes and behavior may change immediately. A recovered alcoholic recounted how he underwent such change.

> "I want to thank you for inviting me and my dad to this meeting. I always enjoy coming over to your place, seeing your family, like that. Last year, or nearly two years now I only came in here to say hello and I planned to leave. My dad asked me to bring him over here because he had heard you were having a meeting. Then when we got here everyone was in the tepee and my dad asked me to come in and say something. I came in and sat down but never did say nothing until I drank some medicine. I was kinda scared since I was drinking that very day and I know this peyote doesn't mix with alcohol. Boy, I started crying and talking about myself. Then I felt good. I have been coming to these meetings ever since then and only been drinking one time in over a year, or nearly two years."

As we have seen, various Western investigators have advanced theories to explain peyote's power to cure. The Indians themselves are less interested in explanations. Often Indians will warn new members not to try to figure out peyote. They say, "don't get ahead of it," meaning, just experience the medicine and do not intellectualize about it. Indians may have good reason to take this position, since theorizing about peyote experiences may hinder development of one's intuitive and imaginary powers. A church maxim is "the only way to find out about peyote is to take it and learn from peyote yourself" (Slotkin, 1967). Indians are more willing to reveal their conceptions of the source of the transpersonal power manifested in meetings. To some participants questioned about this, the power is in the chief. To others it is in the peyote. Most, however, refer to a supreme energy source. Regardless of the perceived source of this power, all participants allude to it in confessions, statements or prayers.

IN DEFENSE OF PEYOTE

It would be a grave misconception to envision participants in the peyote ritual using the drug to passively retreat from reality, or to escape personal responsibility for their problems by entering a bizarre supernatural world. This point should be clear from the foregoing description of the meeting. However, given the widespread fear and ignorance concerning use of psychedelics, the true nature of the ritual is worth underlining. Although participants report that their sight and hearing are enhanced, they rarely mention having dramatic supernatural visions. They may speak of being "helpless as a baby," but always couple this with their intention to gain a new sense of purpose in life. One recalls the first step in Alcoholics Anonymous: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable" (Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 1974). Passivity is rare in the peyote meeting. Frequently, participants give vigorous expression to highly charged emotions. Emotions are not allowed to run unchecked, however, and participants do

not lose touch with the reality of their lives. As Caldwell (1968) states:

> This socially directed maneuver, the constant focus upon 'social reality,' that which one has to deal with in daily life, is the decisive counter balance to potential psychic mayhem that could occur with psychedelic use.

Nor is the ritual open to the criticism that its therapeutic effect dissipates for lack of continuing therapeutic contact with participants. The insights achieved and resolutions made by recovered alcoholics are reinforced between meetings by a supportive social network. Often members of the church come together during the week for a drum tie. This is an informal gathering, usually at someone's house, where members stretch animal hide over a three-legged iron pot to create a water drum and sing peyote chants. At such gatherings newly recovered alcoholics talk openly about their problems and receive support from their new friends. If a younger participant mentions a problem during the meeting, he may be approached at the Sunday meal or a few days later by a respected elder. The problem is briefly recounted and the young man is invited to a secluded place for a smoke. During this smoke, the elder will attempt to build a counseling relationship. Such relationships may last for years as the lad is guided along "the right way to live day by day, the Indian way, this peyote way."

Other criticisms of peyote therapy are based on fear that the drug's use might spread beyond the meeting, and suspicion that peyote may have harmful effects. There is little danger of peyote use outside the meeting. Peyote is considered a sacred medicine and its use is confined to the ritual. Bergman (1971) has stated that it is an uncommon practice for Indians to use peyote outside their meetings and these authors have verified the accuracy of his report. Bergman studied a population of over 200,000 people and uncovered no reports of peyote abuse or dependency. Nor is there cause to worry that peyote will be abused by whites. Peyote has an unpleasant taste and produces nausea, intestinal cramps and frequent vomiting. Only those committed to the seriousness of the meetings repeatedly ingest this cactus. It is possible for non-Indians to be committed participants, however. These writers visited many non-Indian church members who have dramatically improved their life-style, while radically altering their drug habits (Pascarosa, 1975).

The safety of psychedelic therapy has been adequately demonstrated over the past fifteen years. A chromosomal study of Indians with a life-long history, and a 1,600-year cultural tradition of peyote ingestion, failed to reveal any increase in abnormalities (Dorrance, 1975). Peyote is not used to cope with the pressures of daily life. It is only the white medicine man who maintains his patients on daily doses of mind-altering drugs, while offering psychotherapy in none-too-frequent interludes. Indeed, Western medicine's chief weapon against heroin addiction is another addicting narcotic, methadone; and Western physicians often employ tranquilizers and sedative-hypnotics to maintain alcoholics in peaceful stupors. Indians use the drug-altered state of consciousness only to facilitate insight and communication during the meeting. Their daily life patterns are in no way dependent on use of the drug. The Indian's attraction to peyote and the ritual corresponds to Western man's reliance on his psychotherapist, and does not constitute an addiction or chemical dependency. In addition to our own study, field studies by psychologists, physicians and anthropologists have documented the safety and effectiveness of psychedelic therapy. The authors fervently hope that the federal government will finally understand this and not continue to challenge the Indians' use of this highly useful medicine. We also hope federal agencies will relax their stringent restrictions on well-controlled medical research using psychedelic drugs, and allow this therapy to be developed, documented, and safely used by all races of Americans.

CONCLUSION

For a selected group of Indian alcoholics – possibly those in search of a personal, cultural and spiritual identity – peyote use within the confines of ritual meetings can have a lasting and permanent effect. This regimen offers more than a stable adjustment to life's frustrations and a cure for alcoholism. It promotes self-actualization, and a spiritual consciousness missing from most western alcoholic treatment centers. Indeed, a merger of psychological and theological disciplines may be the common factor underlying the success of such disparate organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous and the Native American Church.

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