



## Native American traditions blend with AA principles

Basil Brave Heart's journey of healing began 31 years ago when a Lakota medicine man took him to a sweat lodge, made a circle in the dirt with a stick, then planted the stick in the center of the circle. "He told me, 'This is you in the center, and alcohol walks around you on the outside like the trickster coyote. You chase it up a hill, but it circles around and fools you. Don't let it sneak up on you. Turn around and embrace it so it can become one of your most powerful teachers.'"

Brave Heart says that alcohol has become a prolific teacher whom he can trust to remind him each morning that he must stay sober. Today he is a Lakota Elder and spiritual leader who holds a master's degree in psychology. Using an approach that incorporates western psychology, Twelve Step philosophy, and Native American ritual and ceremony, Brave Heart also works with alcoholics, drug addicts, and persons dealing with post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD).

"When I meet a person who is 'way down on the chart,' I first of all tell him my story. I remember in the late '30s watching my father and his friends get drunk. They were the first generation on the reservation, and I think they confused alcohol as a gift from the creator because it seemed like it changed the world. They even called it *minniwakan*--the Lakota word for "sacred water"--and they'd open a bottle and spill some of it on the ground like an offering. But alcohol doesn't change the world, it only changes the drinker. I think of alcohol as chemical warfare that was used to decimate and weaken us."

Brave Heart was raised on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation and, like many other American Indians, was placed in a boarding school where Indian traditions, beliefs, and values were discouraged. He started drinking as a sophomore because he wanted to "fit in." His drinking accelerated in the military service, where the events he witnessed as a combat soldier in Korea led to PTSD.

After Korea, Brave Heart returned to South Dakota to get a teaching degree, but his drinking got so bad that he lost jobs, got arrested for drunk driving, and contemplated suicide. It was then he met with the medicine man and subsequently entered treatment. "In AA they talk about alcoholism being a powerful, cunning, and baffling disease," he said. "It was another way to say what the medicine man had told me."

This ability to blend the tenets of AA with his ancestral teachings gives Brave Heart a way to communicate with young and old, regardless of their experiences. "I carry the message, show by example and story telling, and listen to the stories of others."

While Brave Heart may not use AA terms like "enabling" or "tough love" with a Lakota grandmother, he'll talk about "waouchila," the Lakota word for compassion, and explain how sometimes the most compassionate thing you can do for a loved one is to let go and trust that a higher power (or the Great Spirit, or Grandfather) will help them surrender to the mystery of healing.

Brave Heart often serves as a spiritual guide (which he likens to being an AA sponsor) for individuals who desire to become clean and sober. "If they want me to guide them, I ask them to prepare for a vision quest by being free from alcohol for one year." A vision quest is a spiritual "time out" where a person goes alone to an isolated place for a number of days to communicate with the creator and rediscover one's authentic self, explained Brave Heart. This agreement is sealed in a sweat lodge, where the person makes a commitment to certain members of the community. Water, earth, air and fire are used to engage all the senses and remind everyone present that they are connected to everything around them, as well as to each other. The sweat lodge symbolizes the womb. "It is a moist, safe, dark, and trusting place where people can bare their souls with confidence, just like at an

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AA meeting," said Brave Heart.

"I recommend that people do these rituals and ceremonies and also attend AA," said Brave Heart. "Alcohol takes over the whole person. Spirituality is one thing, but you also need others who have been sober for a while to help you understand about the numbing of feelings and relationships."

Ceremony helps you live within yourself; AA helps you live in the world, he explained.

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Alive & Free is a health column that provides information to help prevent substance abuse problems and address such problems. It is created by Hazelden, a nonprofit agency based in Center City, Minn., that offers a wide range of information and services on addiction. For more resources, [email](#) or call Hazelden at 800-257-7810 (outside the US 651-213-4200).