

The Native American Wellbriety Movement: An Interview with Don Coyhis (2007)

One of the great joys of involvement in the New Recovery Advocacy Movement is the people you get to meet along the way and the profound influence they can exert on your life. One person who has had such an influence on me is Don Coyhis.

I first met Don in early 2001 at a meeting hosted by Jeff Blodgett of the Recovery Alliance to discuss the possibility of a national summit of recovery advocacy leaders—a meeting that some of you will recall was held October 4-6, 2001 in St. Paul, Minnesota. That initial meeting with Don led to many subsequent collaborations, including work on two books, *The Red Road to Wellbriety* and *Alcohol Problems in Native America: The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery—The Truth About the Lie*.

Don Coyhis represents the soul and the heart of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement in America. No one has given more of themselves to that movement. No one has exerted a greater influence on that movement. In July and October of 2007, I had the privilege of interviewing Don about his life and his work. I think you will find great inspiration in his words.

Bill White

Bill White: Don, let me start by just asking you to talk about the life experiences that led to your involvement as a recovery advocacy leader.

Don Coyhis: The story of that involvement begins August 10, 1978--my sobriety date. As I got into recovery, I was fortunate to have people in my life who influenced my recovery and my later mission in life. When I first got into recovery, I was working for a corporation, and I had an experience that forced me to ask myself, “What are you doing here?” That question came to me in a recovery support meeting. I think it was at that moment I decided to leave corporate life and spend the rest of my life working with Indian People.

As I started to get better myself, I started sponsoring lots of people nobody else would sponsor--some of the real rejects. And there got to be so many of them, I knew I had to find a better way to work with them. A guy told me I could save a lot of time by taping a lot of what I communicated to those I sponsored. So I got a tape recorder, but I couldn’t think of nothing to say. He then said, “Get to AA and get a couple of people around the table

that you can talk to and tape it.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll do that.” I got scheduled a room and put out an invitation for a few people to come. When I went down there, more than 125 people showed up. I went to the bathroom and threw up. I didn’t know what to do, but somehow I got through that first session.

One of the people at that first talk was a friend of a person from Idaho who invited me there to do a workshop in one of the prisons there. I kept putting him off and finally I just did it to get him out of my hair. When I got there, they asked if they could videotape it and I said that the taping it would be fine. The quality of that first tape was really poor but it generated a lot of interest, and we finally ended up getting a good video of what I was doing in the prisons there in the early 1990s.

At that time I was starting to have these weird spiritual experiences and to meet with several Indian Elders to make sense out of them. One day, one of the Elders told me to climb this hill, and it was there that I had the vision of a White Bison. When I described this vision of the White Bison staring inside me to the Elder who had taken me there, he interpreted it as meaning it was my time to do something. The first manifestation of what that something was turned out to be the work with the Passamaquoddy tribe.

Bill: Could you describe this work?

Don: We visited the Passamaquoddy tribe every month for three years through the support of a small grant. We had to start with just the basic teaching because they believed that they didn’t have a lot of their old ways left. It took them a while to discover that this was not really true. We learned many important lessons from the Passamaquoddy. We discovered there that the knowledge we were seeking didn’t exist in heaven; it actually existed inside of the people themselves. This was our first lesson—that the solutions for communities comes not from outside but from within the communities. We also learned that conflict precedes clarity. In other words in order for anything to really change, it must be preceded by struggle. We found that conflict was the very thing that we needed. And we kept coming back to the talking circle as a place to express conflict and to find solutions.

As solutions began to emerge, we asked tribal members, “How will you know if this is working or not?” Of course, there were objectives for the grant that could be measured and number counting of different varieties, but we wanted to know how the people would evaluate the process. They give us 40 ways of looking at what would be a measure of success. For example, they said it would be working if the young people started singing the old

songs. They said they would know it was working when the children walked down the road with their heads held up and when the teenagers could be seen down by the water at sunrise doing the old ceremonies. Each year we had a celebration and a review from the previous year and we used some of these ways of measuring our success.

We learned the laws of change—that change must start within. And we learned how change ripples—how a dad’s sobriety changes his attitude toward his wife and changes their relationship and how that changed relationship alters the past violence in the home and how children sleep better when domestic violence leaves the home and how better sleep changes school attendance and school performance and on and on. Our early work with the Passmaquoddy taught us many of the great lessons that would get incorporated into the Wellbriety movement.

Bill: Don, how did the Hoop Journeys begin?

Don: I woke up at exactly 3:00 one morning and had the vision of a Sacred Hoop. I saw a beam of light come down to the earth cycling slowly through the air to the ground, and it started to form a circle and then turned into an eagle. I didn’t tell anyone about this and the more I tried to forget it the stronger the feeling got inside me of its importance. So I went to tell the Elders about it, and they told me to tell the story of my life. I told them as much as I could remember and when I got done they said. “We’ve been waiting for you.” They told me I needed to make a Sacred Hoop of 100 eagle feathers. So with their help I did that, thinking I was building the Hoop for them. But when the Hoop was done, they made me chief of the Hoop, which I didn’t feel worthy of, and they talked to me about the Hoop. They told me that wherever the Hoop would go, healing would happen. From that period in 1994 and 1995, we started the gatherings of Elders, then the women, and then men. Over the next couple of years, the Wellbriety Movement came alive as we carried the Sacred Hoop across the country.

We have all been part of the Elder’s prophecy that such a movement was coming. We tend to think of prophecies as something that will happen in the future, but we don’t realize that if we live long enough we may be a part of what has been prophesied. I feel fortunate to have been allowed to be part of all of this.

The first Hoop Journey was in 1999. Now that journey started with the Onondaga Nation at the Long House, and we were there four days. The Onondaga people are what you could call the keepers of the eastern door. Then we made a journey to 32 of the tribal colleges--going from east to

west. It was on our journey that we started to recruit people who were in recovery and who made a commitment to get Firestarter recovery groups going in their communities. In that first Hoop Journey, we recruited about 35 people to go through the Firestarter training.

In the second Hoop Journey, in 2000, we took the Hoop to Los Angeles, CA and then, under the Elder's guidance, we walked the Hoop from LA to Washington, D.C. There was a core group of 25 of us with people joining us all along the way. We walked and ran 4,290 miles in a 109 days. When we got to Tahlequah, OK we decided to follow the Trail of Tears back to the Cherokees in North Carolina. So we actually went from LA to North Carolina up to Washington DC. We stopped in Indian communities and talked about the prophecies, talked about the movement, and recruited people to get trained.

In 2002 we realized that over 67% of our people live in cities and that we had to address the urban Indian issue. So we made a third Hoop Journey to 16 urban Indian centers again talking about the movement, talking about the prophecies, recruiting people to do the 12 Steps and going back and training them. And the following year, in 2003, we did a similar Hoop Journey East of the Mississippi. Here we made 20 stops at Indian centers.

Each of those journeys was dedicated to learning about the gifts of the Sacred Hoop. In 2003 we had around 700 Firestarters trained, and we had 250 or so groups that were going, but this all started to accelerate. By 2005, we had 1500 fire starters trained and 800 groups. Then we made the fifth Hoop Journey to Alaska in 2006. So we took the Hoop up there because we had not been in the state of Alaska with it. What happened with those five journeys was it created an interconnected web. We were able to use the Internet to get everyone from all of these communities talking. We then hosted the sixth Hoop journey in Montana. There we made a circle of all the 8 tribes in Montana during the summer of 2007.

We learned an important lesson in Montana. What we found out was if a father and husband started to work in the recovery, it actually made the family worse. A family trauma was created when dad started to get sober. So then we started to get some insight into the Fourth Law of Change: A great learning must take place. We found out we had to address the whole family system. So then it evolved into the 12 Steps for Men, the 12 Steps for Women, the 12 Steps for Children of Alcoholics and then we developed the Families of Tradition, Sons of Tradition, Daughters of Tradition and Children of Alcoholics trainings. We found out we could do all seven of those trainings simultaneously. We call this the Seven Trainings. So for

example in Montana in November 5-7, we'll be doing the Seven Trainings for all the tribes there.

Bill: Could you talk more about what has guided the Wellbriety Movement?

Don: What I was relying on in the early years was a combination of my corporate training, organizational development training, and service technology, but most of this didn't work in Indian country. So it was then that we created a gathering of Elders to talk about what we were trying to do. They talked to us about the old days when there was a structure in place to instruct the people--what we would call today *culture*. Each tribe had its own culture. We had to be reminded that what we were searching for had existed at one time but that we had forgotten it. So they told us, "We're going to tell you how you can find it again."

They said that the guiding force that you need to know is what the teachers of the old days were once given. We once had an understanding of the significance of our creation, all our laws, principles, and values that were part of who we were as a People. And they said we're going to give you a start, no matter how hard it may seem. But we gave them a picture of communities that are dominated by alcoholism and domestic violence and all the other issues that flow out of generations of trauma. We actually thought it could not be done, that the problems were too complex and too ingrained. So they said, "We will tell you over a period of years about certain laws, and if you are guided by these laws, you will succeed."

So they talked to us about change and that change had to come from within. They told us that change had to be preceded by a vision. Each community in order to change itself had to do so from within and had to have its own vision created by the people. And tied into that also was a teaching all parts of the cycle of life—baby, youth, adult and elder—had to participate in a great learning if change was to occur. Then they talked to us about the need to create a healing forest.

Suppose you have 100 acres full of sick trees who want to get well. If each sick tree leaves the forest to find wellness and then returns to the forest, they get sick again from the infection of the rest of the trees. The Elders taught us that to treat the sick trees you must treat the whole forest—you must create a healing forest. If not, the trees will just keep getting sick again. The community forests are now filled with alcoholic trees, drug-addicted trees, co-dependency trees, domestic violence trees, and trees with

mental issues. The soil in which those trees are growing is missing the ceremonies, the songs, the stories, the language, and the wisdom of our Elders. When we lost these things, we no longer knew who we were and we were left with anger, guilt, shame, and fear. These were the understandings that the Elders communicated in the early days of the Wellbriety Movement.

And when they gave us that model, we detected for the first time these laws that we needed to guide us, and they told us we would have to test them to make sure they were dependable. They gave us knowledge of the old ways, telling us we couldn't just jump in there and do it any way, that we had to follow the natural order. They said all the harmony of the natural order will come back when we follow the natural order. The whole universe runs together so you have to work with it. So all my corporate training meant nothing. It had hardly any value. The Elders gave us an alternative way to work with our communities.

Bill: Wellbriety has been a central concept of in your work. Could you describe the difference between sobriety and Wellbriety?

Don: Let's say that you're drinking but you're also a jerk. If you simply stop drinking, you will now be a sober jerk. Wellbriety is more than not drinking. When we talked to the Elders about what this meant, they said that each of us is surrounded by water like a cocoon that is before me, below me, above me and around me. This cocoon represented the directions in which the human being develops itself emotionally, mentally, physically, and spirituality. Wellbriety is sobriety enhanced by all of these other dimensions of growth, and it embraces the individual, the family and the community.

Bill: What do you think are some of the important milestones in the Wellbriety Movement?

Don: The first milestone was figuring out that you can't do a movement from long distance. You have to go to the people. So we set about developing a grassroots movement in Indian communities. Another milestone was learning to place people in a circle. The circle helps people get out of their set ways. And then we had to learn that Wellbriety must come as a gift—to achieve it, we had to give it away and be patient with the results. If you think about it, that's nature's way. Everything unfolds in its own time. The process of creating and publishing *The Red Road to Wellbriety* was an important milestone for the movement. That started people thinking in a new way. Indians have long thought that AA was a

white man's program. I took the 12-steps to this group of elders and I was explaining to them about the white man's ways and Indian way. They asked me to explain the 12 Steps and so I did. When I got done explaining it to them, they told me, "That's not a white mans way; that's the Indian way." But they explained how steps 1-12 had to be done in that order. They said they said to put the steps in a circle. So we put three steps in the east—the direction of finding the relationship with your higher power. We placed steps 4,5, and 6 to the south—the inventory steps where you find yourself (your strengths and weaknesses). Steps 7, 8, and 9 were placed to the west—that's when you make your amends as you re-establish your relationships. Finally, steps 10, 11, and 12 were placed in the north. That gave is the basic structure of the Red Road to Wellbriety—a way to translate the 12 Steps in terms of Native culture.

And so then we wrote the draft of Red Road to Wellbriety. It took about five years, and to collect the recovery stories from tribes across the country—and they all had different concepts and language for which we had to find common ground. And then we sent out drafts and got feedback from the tribes and integrated all the changes that were suggested. We finally got it done, and we called it the Red Road to Wellbriety. We had no funding to print the 5,000 copies we wanted. What then happened was a woman walked in the door and she was familiar with what we were doing and she said, "I got my income tax check return—I got \$4,000. Do you have a project or something that you could use it?" And shortly after that I got a call at 3:00 PM from this man in Washington who said, "I have \$12,000.00 here that they want me to get rid of but I have to allocate it in the next two hours. And he gave me an invoice so that at ten minutes to 5, we got the invoice back and we got the check for that amount which was \$52.00 over what we needed. The day the boxes of printed books arrived on the pallets, I cried. We spread news of the book buy word-of-mouth and in 90 days we shipped 1,000 copies out. Today, we are still shipping about 1,000 copies of that book a month.

Bill: What role does the Seven Trainings play in the Wellbriety Movement?

We developed the *Seven Trainings* for men, women, families and children in the early 2000's. We didn't know that you could go to a community and people would show up to do all these trainings

simultaneously. This helped people to work together and then began to spread to other communities. We found out that if you're not careful, you could end up causing conflict in a community because some people were starting to heal and some were not. There is a consciousness in a community like a fog that is very, very powerful in stopping positive change. Yet the Movement is changing our culture like you can't believe. It's the truth about the Four Laws of Change. And, I mean kids are reading it now, they're starting to use these concepts in high school. It's beginning to happen in the Native studies in the colleges and universities. It is critical to lift that fog of negative consciousness. So it was important to offer something to all segments of the community at the same time—the Seven Trainings. To be a community-in-healing, you need to have the Seven Trainings Program take place in the community. You need to have a community coalition in place and that coalition must build a vision book. The coalition gathers the community members to build a book and this is presented to the Tribal Council for their approval. This is the vision we are going to implement in each community. The vision is that when this is done and the Tribal Council members have delivered their approval, and when the Firestarter group, the Seven Trainings, the Coalition Building, and the vision book is complete, then they are ready. The coalition has the power to implement the vision in the community.

Bill: So there are 100 communities targeted for this work with four completed and 25 currently in process?

Don: Yes, we now have 25 communities in process across the United States and that number is accelerating.

Bill: One of the programs I have been impressed with is the Warrior Down Program. Could you describe that?

Don: Actually, programs like this have been designed and developed by conflict. The first programs we did were for men and the women questioned their exclusion. So then we developed programs for women. So then we have these people in recovery groups starting to get healthy, and it actually made the families worse. That's how we came to develop the family trainings. This learning process eventually led us to the Seven Trainings. The Warrior Down Program grew out of our recognition of the plight of Indian people in prison. We knew that 85% of Native People returned to prison when released. We didn't know exactly how to address that so we contacted some of the Elders and some with relatives of those in prison. It

was there that we learned the concept of Warrior Down—that when warriors were hurt or killed in a battlefield, other warriors would risk their lives save them. Now we know that when you come out of a prison, you come out with a hundred bucks, no social or recovery support, and a stigma to your name. We went to the community and identified community members who would help with this re-entry process. Some said I can drive them to AA meetings. Some said I can help them get a job. Another said, I can help people get a driver's license. We built these supports around 50 people coming out of prison and 39 never drank again and none of them have gone back to prison. One of them did drink, but those supporting him heard he had been drinking and got him sober and to an Indian recovery program where he stayed for three months. Now he's leading the group and helping others coming out of prison. In Montana, we've gone to all the prisons and are helping communities to go through the Seven Trainings and to help people return from prison to their communities.

Bill: Now you followed that with a history project. Can you talk about the project that led to the book, *Alcohol Problems in Native America: The Untold Story of Resistance and Recovery—The Truth about the Lie*?

Don: As you know, that project started with a conversation we had when we first met in Minnesota many years ago. You challenged me to write a book about the history of recovery among Native tribes, and I said I would consider it if you would help me. Now years later, that completed book is changing the consciousness of our Native communities and changing our response to alcohol problems. The book is helping our people understand that alcohol is the symptom not the prime cause. For the first time in our efforts of dealing with the alcohol problems, we are now working on the right stuff. The book is now spreading rapidly and forcing us to examine alcohol through the lens of historical and intergenerational trauma. It is exciting to see the two books White Bison has published used as texts in a growing number of Indian tribal colleges.

Bill: Don, you have witnessed a great awakening within Indian communities across North America. Could you describe this awakening process?

Don: There was a time you could host a meeting on recovery in an Indian community and only a handful of people would show up. That is changing. Awakening is something that happens when individuals and whole communities who are sick and tired of being sick and tired decide to do

something. Many of our communities have been waiting for this time of great change to come.

Bill: Don, what do you see as the future of the Wellbriety movement?

Don: Well, we're finding it isn't just an Indian thing, and it isn't just about alcohol, it's about nurturing the health of the whole person, whole families and whole communities—all communities. It's all interconnected. You can't address alcohol in a community without addressing mental health and obesity and diabetes. We're seeing all kinds of institutions wanting to be part of the Wellbriety movement and we consider that a positive shift. Last spring I had a college student spend 2 months calling everyone who ever had come to our training. We wanted to know what difference our work had made in their lives and communities. We found out that our material had a life of its own—that it got passed repeatedly between individuals, families and communities. We found out that we had planted seeds that had born unexpected fruit.

Bill: Yes, and I have the sense that these seeds are spreading outside the United States. Do you have any evidence of that?

Don: Yes, it is. We were first surprised to hear that many ethnic communities were using our material and approaches in the US. We knew this from requests to translate our material into Spanish and from requests we were getting from churches in African American communities. We then began to get requests for materials and training from England, Ireland, Nigeria, Canada and Australia. We have been inspired by how far beyond Indian communities our work has reached.

Bill: Don let me ask you a final question. Do you have any final thoughts or messages for other recovery advocates around?

Don: Yes, I think the force that has been behind my work all these years is a spiritual one. I think you've got to open yourself to that force and not wait for permission from the dominant culture to move forward. I think you've got to be radical—radical in your thinking, radical in your actions and radical in your faith in what is possible. We've got to reach out to the unknown--to the Great Mystery. We've got to help people search within themselves and find their own recoveries. In my recovery, I have witnessed

my children and grandchildren grow to be wonderful human beings—not wounded addicts. We have broken that cycle. When my grandchildren have children free of such wounds, we will have changed the world. I believe that the movement, the Wellbriety movement and the larger recovery advocacy movement is reaching a tipping point—a point where a small push can create a big change. Now is the time to push.