

# PERSPECTIVES ON HEALTH WITHIN THE TEACHINGS OF A GIFTED CREE ELDER

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Tansi, welcome to this written expression of what I know to be valuable teachings that were spoken and demonstrated by the late Joe P. Cardinal from Saddle Lake, Alberta. My name is Ross Hoffman. My family heritage is English on my mother's side and German on my father's side of the family. For many years I have been in the process of developing an understanding of Aboriginal healing and wellness. My learning, which has and will always be a work in progress, has arisen out of extensive research in both the western academic text-based scholarly tradition as well as experiential, community-based traditions of Indigenous knowledge. The most significant source of my understanding of these matters stems from my "work"<sup>1</sup> with Joe P. Cardinal; and as each day passes this fact becomes even clearer to me. My intent in writing this piece is to honour his work and pass on some of the teachings he shared, to those who are ready to receive them.<sup>2</sup>

One party may write a story, but one party's story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river. (Sarris 1993, p. 40)

I include the words of the Pomo scholar Greg Sarris, because I want to stress that what I have written here is "one party's story." I am sharing with you my understanding of Joe's teachings as they relate to individual health and wellbeing. Any lack of understanding is my responsibility. I am very conscious of the fact that as a non-Aboriginal researcher my choice to write

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1. My "work" with Joe spanned more than thirteen years and included more than ten fasts under his protective guidance.
  2. What I have experienced (and continue to experience) in my work with Joe, and other gifted Elders, is that as a learner I was not always able to grasp what was being said to me at the time that it was being said. In some instances it literally took years for me to come to a point in my life where I was capable of fully grasping what it is they were hoping I would understand. In my experience, these moments of "deep knowing" are part of the lived experience of Indigenous research as a way of life (Hoffman, 2006).

this piece certainly fits within the definition of a “Risky Story” (Davis, 2004). From my standpoint there is a far greater risk in choosing to remain silent and not honoring the relationship between Joe and I. My relationship with Joe was never based on research. In the beginning he was a teacher, a spiritual guide; later he also became a close friend; and further down the road our relationship deepened even further when he adopted me as his son.

### “IT’S TOUGH TO BE AN INDIAN”

Sometimes after a particularly hot round in the sweat lodge, Joe would proclaim, “It’s tough to be an Indian!”<sup>3</sup> In those moments, amidst the chuckling, there was a clear sense of both humour and truth in those words. No one knew that better than Joe himself. He understood that statement from two very different perspectives. First, from having lived through the decades when the oppressive actions of the Canadian government and the Christian churches, were most severe. Second, as a man who, later in life, was willing to earn and uphold the responsibilities of a spiritual leader.

Joe never sat me down and told me his life story. It wasn’t his nature to spend a lot of time talking about himself. My understanding of his life came in pieces that were for the most part intertwined in stories to help those who were listening to understand something, or to simply have a good laugh. Most often his stories were about his work with others, characterized by the use of the word “we” rather than “I.” There are two written sources where Joe was recorded speaking about his life story. One is a letter that I scribed for him in 2002 and the other is an interview he gave for a book on Alberta’s Native Elders (Meili, 1991).

Joe Patchakes Cardinal was born November 10, 1921 on his parents’ trap line in the Birch Mountains between Ft. McMurray and Ft. Chipewyan. Until the age of five, he experienced what it was like to live off the land. That ended abruptly when he was forced to attend an Indian Residential School for the next seven years. Joe didn’t speak a lot about his “boarding school” experiences, but when he did he spoke in terms of the loss of his freedom and being “brainwashed.”

When I got out of school, I guess I must have been about twelve, I honestly almost hated my parents because I’d learned they were bad people. I remember not wanting to have anything to do with them.

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3. This was one of the expressions/teachings that Joe learned very early on in his apprenticeship with the Arapaho Holy Man Raymond Harris.

We were not human, because we didn't know about Jesus. I can't believe how much fear they put into me. Everything was 'Jesus will punish you' and 'God will do this to you.' All I knew is I could never do anything right. (Meili, 1991, p. 252)

As a young man he experienced the same loss of freedom.

It was the same thing on the reservation when I got out of boarding school. The Indian Agent and the priests were in charge. I needed to get a pass to leave the reserve. (Cardinal, 2002)

Everyone who knew Joe knows that he was a foot soldier throughout World War II. What I have always found interesting about this aspect of Joe's life, is the fact that within this highly regimented environment Joe clearly felt that he had regained a sense of personal freedom.

I joined the army after WW II broke out. Before going to the army, I lived in a tent. At first, I was kind of scared, having to live with all those other people. We were stationed in Edmonton, and then we were sent to Shiloh, Manitoba for advanced training. I gradually worked into this new way of life. For the first time in a long time I was free. I could go to town, shop, and go have a beer if I wanted to. (Cardinal, 2002)

The five years that Joe spent in Europe from 1941-1946, which included experiencing the horrors of landing on Normandy Beach on D-Day, had a profound effect on his life.

We landed on the beach at Normandy, France on D-Day. I didn't even know where I was. My comrades told me it was France. That was the time that I started to learn. I was told that white men were sober men, yet on that battlefield when I saw the blood and heard people screaming, I learned that was not so. Learning on the battlefield was a hard way to learn.

I always promised myself that I would never be captured as a prisoner of war. I was scared of being shot, if I was captured. I pulled through the war. Over there I was free. Being a Cree Indian didn't matter. There was no discrimination. (Cardinal, 2002)

The freedom that Joe experienced as a soldier in the Canadian army vanished when he returned home and left military service. His service to his country meant nothing. He was once again confronted with the harsh reality of what it meant to be an Indian, in Canada in the late 1940s.

When I got home I found out that I was a prisoner of war on my own reservation, in my own country. I wasn't allowed to leave the reservation without a pass. I tried to join the Legion, but I was told no. The man said that if I was ac-

cepted, I would spoil the Legion, nobody would come. I wanted to buy a trap line, but the Indian Agent wouldn't let me. He said I was supposed to become a farmer. I couldn't understand why Indian Affairs and the Legion were so mean. (Cardinal, 2002)

Joe married his wife Jenny in 1947 and over the years they raised eight children. During the 1950s and early 1960s Joe worked at a variety of jobs including farming and trapping. It was in the late 1960s that Joe began what became his life's work — serving others. Over the decades that followed this took many forms. He worked as a community developer with Alberta New Start, and was actively involved in the Indian Association of Alberta. He served as the elected Chief of Saddle Lake from 1969–1975. Over the years Joe was actively involved with the development of the Nechi Institute. Later in life, as a respected Elder, he served the Native Counseling Services of Alberta, the Aboriginal Multi-Media Society and the National Parole Board.

Joe Cardinal's life of service unfolded at a pivotal time in history, encompassing a variety of forms of revitalization within Native nations across Canada, the United States, and abroad. Beginning in the late 1960s, Joe and many of his friends<sup>4</sup> were at the forefront of much of the cultural, political, and social change that has given rise to what we refer to in Canada as the Aboriginal Healing Movement and Self-Governance (Hoffman, 2006). Intertwined throughout these pivotal times, as Joe was developing and being recognized as a strong and knowledgeable leader, he was also on a spiritual journey. This journey would lead him to a deep spiritual understanding of what it means to live a life in the service of others.

## DOING THE FOOTWORK

In 1969 Joe Cardinal drove to Wyoming with his friends Mike Steinhauer and Howard Cardinal to pick up Eugene and Alice Steinhauer who had traveled to the Wind River Reservation to have Eugene doctored by an Arapaho healer named Raymond Harris.

This was another seminal event in Joe's life. In his own words he said,

I didn't know anything about Native traditions. I didn't even know where Wyoming was! We drove for two days to get there. When I met Raymond he asked me, "Who are you?" I didn't know how to answer that question. I took out my wallet and handed him my Status Card. He handed it back to me and said, "You need to learn who you are. Out there [on the fasting grounds] is where you will learn that. (Personal conversation, with author.)

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4. Joe's friends included many other notable leaders, who like Joe have passed on. This includes the late Eddie Belrose, Harold Cardinal, Joe Couture, Eugene Steinhauer, and Mike Steinhauer.

This was Joe's introduction to what became, for him, a way of life. It was also the beginning of a thirteen-year apprenticeship under the guidance of Raymond Harris, who he often referred to as "the Old Man."<sup>5</sup> Learning by doing was the central component of Joe's training. This involved yearly fasts under Raymond's guidance and participation in Raymond's doctoring sweats and night lodge ceremonies,<sup>6</sup> in Wyoming and in Canada when Raymond and his family were invited into communities in Alberta and Saskatchewan to conduct these ceremonies. It is important to note that Joe was in his late forties when he started to fast with Raymond and he continued to fast into his sixties. Within this tradition the fast is total, meaning the faster does not eat or drink for the specified length of time. Under Raymond that was usually four complete days. In some instances it was even longer.

The Elders keep telling us to keep on the path, to try to stay on the path, and they say that it is a difficult path to follow. (Lightning, 1992, p. 247)

Another essential point (teaching) to note is that Joe did not take his spiritual journey alone; except for his initial unplanned introduction to Arapaho spiritual traditions when he met Raymond Harris and his wife Ambey, Joe was accompanied every step of the way by his wife Jenny. From the very beginning she walked beside him. They supported each other as they both learned and in fact earned through deep faith, commitment, and personal sacrifice, the responsibilities that are part of becoming a ceremonial leader.<sup>7</sup> Those who have chosen to walk this path know that, "It is tough to be the wife of a medicine man" (Mohatt and Eagle Elk, 2000, p. 125).

Joe was given the responsibility of a prayer sweat in 1971. He took on this spiritual responsibility through his work with Raymond; therefore he conducted his sweat in the manner he had learned from him. This meant

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5. This was a term of respect, since Joe Cardinal was himself two years older than Raymond Harris. In turn those of us who studied under Joe's guidance refer to him as "the Old Man."

6. A prayer sweat, doctoring sweat, and a night lodge have similar purposes. They all facilitate healing at the spiritual, emotional, physical, and mental levels. In extremely simplified terms, the difference between them can be explained in terms of the degree of spiritual intervention that takes place. In a prayer sweat ceremony a sacred space is created in order to facilitate communication between the individuals present and the "Grandfathers" and "Grandmothers" who watch over them. In a doctoring sweat, an individual, or individuals have requested doctoring for a specific "sickness" and the "Grandfathers" and "Grandmothers" who guide the ceremonial leader, work through him/her to facilitate the healing process. In a night lodge ceremony, the "Grandfathers" and "Grandmothers" who guide the ceremonial leader, enter the room and work directly on the individual(s) who have asked for help. The night lodge is sometimes referred to by its Lakota name, *Yuwipi*.

7. The teachings that Raymond shared emphasize the balance of men and women's roles and the importance of both. In this tradition the conducting of Sweat Lodge and Fasting ceremonies requires men and women to be living and working together in a healthy balanced way.

that men and women, as well as children, were expected to sweat together, unlike the traditional Cree sweat lodge ceremony where men and women do not sweat together. Another of the responsibilities that came with running “one of Raymond’s sweats” or “an Arapaho sweat” was a commitment to have a sweat every week. This meant that for many years Joe and Jenny served people from their home community, from neighbouring reserves, as well as those who travelled from the city of Edmonton, on a weekly basis. Over time Joe earned the added responsibility of a Doctoring Sweat and later the responsibility of overseeing Fasting Ceremonies.

Joe and Jenny’s spiritual service to others involved not only hard work and sacrifice, it also led to difficult challenges in the personal and community aspect of their lives. In 1971, the year Joe began to openly run a sweat lodge in his home community of Saddle Lake, the spiritual traditions of the Plains Cree were for the most part only practiced in private by some members of the oldest generation. The government ban against the practice of spiritual ceremonies had only been lifted twenty years earlier in the 1951 revisions to the Indian Act. The more than sixty years of prohibition and the psychological processing of two generations in the residential school system had led to most of the ceremonies being relegated to the recesses of Plains Cree society. Even more harmful was the fact that many community members continued to believe the dogma of the Catholic Church that labeled these traditional spiritual practices as being anti-Christian, or “the work of the devil.” It was this mal-informed belief that led to Joe and Jenny being ostracized by the local priest and some of the members of the Catholic Church that they attended. It took many years to heal this painful wound.

Another difficult challenge surfaced in their own spiritual community. Joe was the first of the group of Cree people from Alberta and Saskatchewan who had apprenticed under Raymond, to change his sweat so that it incorporated the Cree ways.<sup>8</sup> This took place in 1983, more than a year after Raymond had passed away. After running an Arapaho sweat every week for twelve years, Joe was directed by the “Grandfather”<sup>9</sup> who guided him to change his sweat to be more reflective of the ways of his people. When he changed the way he conducted his sweat, some of the people felt that

8. Joe’s sweat continued the Arapaho tradition of being a family sweat. The seating remained the same. The Cree traditions he blended into it changed the direction it faced, the timing of the pipe ceremony within the larger ceremony, and the use of primarily Cree songs.

9. The “Grandfathers” and “Grandmothers” or “Old Men” and “Old Women” are the spirit entities that assist and guide people. Individuals who are gifted spiritually have a personal connection with specific “Grandfathers” or “Grandmothers,” who assist them in their work. The more powerful spiritual knowledge holders have a number of “Grandfathers” or “Grandmothers” watching over them.

the ceremonies Raymond brought to them should not be changed, and saw what he was doing as a violation of Raymond's teachings. This misconception resulted in Joe and Jenny being ostracized by some of the people they had worked closely with for years. Though this schism initiated a very difficult time in their lives, Joe held strong in his resolve to bring the Cree traditions into his ceremonial practice. That original tension has long since subsided, but I know, through my conversations with Jenny and others who witnessed these events, that this was a particularly lonely time in their lives.

### “IT'S UP TO YOU”

I first met Joe P. Cardinal in 1990 when he was asked to come to British Columbia to lead a fast. His calm, gentle and open manner helped alleviate some of the fear of the unknown that I carried into my first fast. I remember quite clearly the first two questions that I asked him after completing that first fast. One was, “Is it okay for me to ask questions?” To which he replied, “If you don't ask questions how will you learn the answers to what it is you want to learn?” The other was, “Is it all right for me, a non-Native person, to learn about these traditions?” To which he replied, “It's up to you to figure that out.” Throughout the years I would hear him speak those words, “It's up to you,” many times. Sometimes he was speaking directly to me and other times I was present when he was giving that nondirective direction to someone else. Even when he was relaying information from the “Grandfather” he often said, “The Grandfather says \_\_\_\_\_ ... but it's up to you.”

Those four simple words, “It's up to you,”<sup>10</sup> contain a powerful and deep teaching about personal agency and individual responsibility. Though we exist in an astronomically immense, interrelated realm, that is simultaneously physical and spiritual, as individual beings we can affect our personal future through our cognitive choices and our actions. Our lives are not entirely predetermined by either physical or spiritual forces. Nor are we in complete control of the outcomes of our lives. This teaching reminds us that as adults, at any given moment, we have the personal power to influence our life journey. We have been given the gift of choice and with that

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10. As it is in other ancient spiritual traditions, great teachings have long histories. It is my understanding that this specific teaching was passed on to Joe P. Cardinal through Raymond Harris. That same teaching was first shared with me by the late Joe Couture, who I studied under when I was a young student at Trent University in the mid 1970s, though at that time I did not grasp the depth of its meaning. Throughout the 1970s Joe Couture was also one of a core group of “Canadians” who apprenticed under Raymond Harris (Hoffman, 2006). This same teaching was also shared by the late Abe Burnstick (Hodgson, 2008).

gift comes responsibility: responsibility to ourselves, to others, and to “all our relations.” A personal understanding of the relationship between choice and responsibility is relative to everyone’s health. This teaching is deeply understood within the lives of gifted Elders and traditional healers (Couture, 1989; 1991; Lightning, 1992; Mohatt and Eagle Elk, 2000).

## “OUR GREATEST ENEMY IS OUR SELF”

Prior to starting out on our walk to the Fasting Grounds, the men and women fasters are lined up and there is an opportunity for family, friends, and other community members to offer up their encouragement, support, and thanks to each of the fasters. This is the time when Joe would give us our “marching orders.” He often spoke about the battle each of us would face out there. He never spoke of a battle with hunger, or with thirst, he would say, “for some of you, the battle you face will be with your greatest enemy ... your self.” In personal conversations with him he would say that the hardest thing for people is not going without food or water, it is being alone with themselves. On several occasions Joe shared with me the basics of the process that he had individuals go through when they arrived on his doorstep (sometimes after travelling great distances) anxious and stressed, in need of what they themselves described as “healing.” The first thing Joe would ask them to do was to stay for a few days. Joe said they needed time away from the behaviours that had led them to the unhealthy place they were in. They needed a safe place to stop and reflect on their lives. Over a few days of talking and putting them in sweats, they began to see how they got to be where they were, then they were in a position to know what they needed to change in their lives.

## “IS THAT RIGHT?”

The teachings, “it’s up to you” and “our greatest enemy is our self” are intertwined and relate to what some would refer to as “personal empowerment.” This nondirective approach with people was an essential aspect of Joe’s work as a healer. I never witnessed him telling a person what to do in terms of his or her own healing journey. He never prescribed how change should, or could, occur in another person’s life. In ceremony, when response to an individual’s request for guidance necessitated that he speak about that person, he usually ended his statement with the question, “Is that right?” The responsibility and power to confirm one’s own story, one’s own truth,



always rested with the individual.<sup>11</sup> Therefore the power to bring about change, to heal, is also vested in the seeker. Joe clearly understood and demonstrated in his words and his actions, that his gifts, his responsibilities, entailed facilitating a stronger, more conscious relationship between those who sought healing and the spiritual entities who are there to help.

There is another important side to this teaching that Joe reinforced, which speaks to all of us on the journey of healing, as well as those who also find themselves in the role of “healer.” Joe said, “Some people say I healed them, but it wasn’t me. It was the Creator. Maybe they healed themselves, but it wasn’t me.” It is important that we as individuals are aware and acknowledge the role we play in our own healing process. To attempt to transfer that responsibility to another person is in itself an unhealthy act. At the same time it is extremely unhealthy, and perhaps dangerous, for an individual who facilitates the healing process in another to begin to believe that they are responsible for the healing that takes place.

Sometimes the responsibility for healing was diffused even further when, at the end of a Doctoring Sweat, he would ask all of the participants to line up outside of the sweat and take turns laying their hands on the person who had received doctoring, because in his own words, “Maybe someone here will be able to help this person.”

## LEARNING BY DOING

... learning is not a product of transferring information between a teacher and a student. It is a product of creation and re-creation, in a mutual relationship of personal interaction, of information. (Lightning, 1992, p. 232)

Learning by doing is both a traditional teaching and a traditional method (Couture, 1991; 1996; Ermine, 1995). Like his own teacher, Raymond Harris, Joe never sat us down for the purpose of sharing a teaching. Information, stories, knowledge were always shared in the context of doing something together with him. What he chose to share with us was a reflection of what he thought we could grasp as a result of the understanding we had developed through and within our own acts of doing, our own learning process. On one occasion, as we drove together, he turned to me and his son-in-law and said, “You just can’t talk at people, they have to do the journey

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11. This way of being in relationship with others is found in many cultural traditions indigenous to North America. Lakota traditions include the following philosophical stance: “We should remain as neutral as possible. We should take a position that allows the maximum opportunity for every person to choose, make meaning, and apply knowledge to himself or herself” (Mohatt and Eagle Elk, 2000, p. 25).

themselves, they have to be involved in the process, you don't just talk at them." There were many times when he knew "without knowing" what I needed to learn — even when I myself did not know. My realization of these important lessons was often a result of him asking me to do something. In the most profound examples, the very act of asking forced me to face certain fears and get over limiting assumptions that I held. That, coupled with the act of doing, led me to some powerful learning experiences that moved me forward within my own healing journey.

## “THE JOURNEY FROM THE HEART TO THE MIND CAN BE A LONG ONE”

Like other gifted Elders, Joe often talked about the importance of our heart and its essential relationship to our mind. He said, “We have lost touch with our heart. For many people their mind is in control.” Joe certainly respected the mind and understood it to be a “very powerful thing” that was capable of developing “wonderful things.” The negative potential of the mind, according to Joe, is that, “the mind moves very fast.” Before he passed away, Joe recorded and left behind for his family a teaching on the significance and powers of the Creator's gifts and our relationship to them. As he approached the close of this teaching he expressed the following:

I guess I am discussing all these things as I observe how much people are in such a rush everyday and although he goes to work, it is with a racing mind. Once there, sometimes his work stresses him out. But perhaps he does it to himself by not appreciating his job; so as his work doesn't count for much, he also does not run his life properly and he does not do his job properly. Maybe that is what is stressing him out these days; today a man's mind is racing, and he raises his children in a rush. As a result the children are perhaps not raised completely because of how rushed a parent is. And all work, some jobs are poorly done by people. That is not how our Father wanted us to be, that is not how he did his job of creating. But also many people just make themselves think, “Oh, I wonder if I can do this. I can't do this!” That is how people think. Everyone is trying to finish things right away, then when he falls short at times to make it look a certain way, to make it look nice, he cannot do it; he doesn't control his actions properly, he can't think for himself properly and his feelings are not right, his heart is not in the right place, he is unable to appreciate anything. Perhaps that is the reason why man is having a difficult time. And man is also creating his own illness. Perhaps it is the result of our not praying properly, that we don't understand our Father although each day we look at his creation.

What I hear Joe describing in these words he shared, is an unhealthy

state of disconnection that is the result of a “racing mind.” A “racing mind” creates a life that is rushed. Through this state of being in a constant rush people can become disconnected from their work, and their loved ones, and over time they become disconnected from themselves: “He can’t think for himself properly” and “his heart is not in the right place.”

Ultimately this level of disconnection, this dis-ease, can cause us to become ill. True to Joe’s style he left us with an open-ended thought, a possibility that directs us to think about not only the possible “reason why man is having a difficult time,” but also a potential solution, rooted within our spiritual selves and our relationship with the Creation.<sup>12</sup>

So how does one avoid the unhealthy pitfalls of the “racing mind” and the possible disconnection with our heart? What I have learned through my work with Joe is that the most powerful form of prevention and insight is realized through daily spiritual practice — in my case prayer. Taking the time to express my gratitude and appreciation to all that sustains me and for the many blessings in my life, supports me in my daily effort to have a clear mind and a good heart in my relationship with myself, others, and all my relations.

In the first round of the sweat lodge ceremony in the tradition I practice, we are encouraged to pray for ourselves. This form of self-care is an essential prerequisite to helping others. Whether it be in ceremony, or in the day-to-day practice of a health professional, or a human service worker in the broadest sense of the word, we are far more likely to assist in the facilitation of positive change in another if we, ourselves, have done our own “footwork.”

## “LOVE IS THE GREATEST GIFT OF ALL”

So what is spiritual growth? Perhaps it is a feeling, an emotion, but one that has a physical, interactional, mental complement: perhaps the ultimate goal is for one to function totally with unconditional love. (Lightning, 1992, p. 248)

Those who knew Joe will undoubtedly remember him saying that, “Love is the greatest gift of all.” From my perspective, this teaching is one he wanted us all to understand. Love is the greatest gift to give and the greatest gift to receive. Gifted Elders like Joe, those who have taken on the responsibility of facilitating the healing process in others, work from a place of deep understanding, compassion, and love. According to Lightning (1992, p. 230), this

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12. In the first part of the text, Joe shares with us his understanding of our relationship to the Creation. It is not within my prerogative to place that portion of the text in the public domain.

“makes the Elder vulnerable because she or he has the responsibility to speak the truth.” As we all know, sometimes the truth, especially our own, is difficult to hear/see. In articulating my own experience of this I have found the metaphor of a mirror to be useful.

When a gifted Elder speaks, their words are like a mirror being held up. They provide people with an opportunity to see them selves as they are now and to see what is behind them, both their personal history and the collective history of the people. It is up to the individual whether or not, or to what extent, they are able and willing to look and learn from the *mirror* that is being held up. (Hoffman, 2006, pp. 192–3)

This gift of love that Joe so often spoke of, also relates to the relationship we have with our self. When we face ourselves, when we look in the *mirror*, do we love what we see?

If we are unable to love our self whose responsibility is it to change that? Where do the answers lie?

## CLOSING

At the conclusion of his last published text, the Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr. posed the following question: Do certain sets of circumstances lie ahead of us wherein we change the world radically by the choices we make? (2006, p. 212) I would answer yes to this question. The common thread that is woven throughout these teachings is that the old man was always directing us towards our self — our mind, our heart, and our spirit. We come to this way of knowing through our own personal, subjective experience within it. It is a journey we take by ourselves but we are never alone — we are surrounded by those who love us. Whether they exist in the physical or the spiritual domain, they are always there to assist us on our personal journey to health.

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