

A Collective Wound: Addiction in Native Americans

James Francis



BEFORE YOU READ:

1. What is a “collective wound”? How is it different from an individual wound?
2. Share what you know about colonialism. What role does colonialism play in U.S. history?

My Story Is Not Just a Personal Story

For 14 agonizing years, I faced a relentless struggle with drugs and alcohol. What began as fun and recreational use at parties quickly spiraled into a devastating cycle of dependency. But three years ago, at the age of 38, I was able to find sobriety. It sounds like a personal journey: I got addicted and then I got better. But addiction is more than an individual struggle, especially in Native American communities.

Alcohol Separates Us from Our Traditional Ways

Alcohol is a weapon that has disabled our people, limiting our ability to learn, grow, and thrive as we once did before colonizers arrived. European colonists introduced alcohol as a trade

commodity. Native Americans were not familiar with its effects, and alcoholism became a new disease. It was part of a larger strategy of disempowerment, separating us from our knowledge systems, disrupting our traditional ways of living, and weakening our ability to pass down cultural teachings.¹

Many of our youth today are left vulnerable to addiction, not because of personal weakness, but because they have been deprived of the cultural roots that once provided strength, direction, and purpose. When I struggled with addiction, I unknowingly abandoned the teachings of my ancestors. It was not until I found a practice called Wellbriety that I was able to reconnect not only with my community but with my Higher Power. In doing so, I regained a sense of self that had been taken from me.



Recovery and Cultural Identity

What is Wellbriety? Wellbriety means achieving wellness and sobriety in balance, living as our ancestors intended, with a clear mind, a strong spirit, and a deep connection to our community. Walking the path of Wellbriety is akin to walking the Red Road, a way of life rooted in balance, respect, and cultural identity.²

The Wellbriety movement is based on the 12-step recovery model of Alcoholics Anonymous but reframes it within Native American cultural values and beliefs. As someone in active recovery, I have walked this path for three years. In that time, I have learned that I can only keep what I have by giving it away. To me, this means that I must now reach out, educate, and help others, just as I once needed help myself.

A key teaching within Wellbriety that deeply resonated with me is the Four Laws of Change:

1. Change is from within.
2. Development must be preceded by a vision.
3. Great learning must occur.
4. Healing must take place within a community, just as a forest heals itself.

We Are All Connected

This last teaching is especially important. Addiction is not just a personal struggle; it is a collective wound. When one of us suffers, the entire community suffers. That is why healing must happen together. As the Wellbriety movement teaches: To injure one is to injure all; to heal one is to heal all. We are all connected.

My passion for counseling comes from this understanding. The Wellbriety movement has shown me that true healing is not just about stopping substance use; it is about rebuilding the cultural foundation that colonization sought to destroy. Our group is still new, but we are committed to sharing these teachings in the hope that they will continue to grow, spreading a message of recovery, strength, and renewal.

I was fortunate to have people in my life who never gave up on me, and I now see how

crucial that support was in my own healing. That is why I am committed to promoting a sense of family within a strong community. We do this by reinforcing cultural traditions and strengthening our bonds with one another.

Growing up, I was taught that our ancestors survived for countless generations because they lived in harmony with Mother Earth. They knew she was sacred, and that all things should be treated with respect. Colonization disrupted this understanding. It is time to undo the colonial legacy that has disabled our people. It is time to reclaim our knowledge, our traditions, and our future.

Healing begins today.

AFTER YOU READ: According to the author, how did colonization disrupt and harm Native American communities? Be specific.

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Sources:

1. Lesley, Elena (2019) "Cultural Impairment and the Genocidal Potential of Intoxicants: Alcohol use in Colonial North America," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1: 88-97. <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol13/iss1/10/>
 2. *The Red Road to Wellbriety in the Native American way*. (2002). White Bison, Inc.
- Photo of Acoma Pueblo by Hasselblad 500CM, CC4.0, from <https://upload.wikimedia.org/>. Other photos courtesy of the author.

