

# **THE ESKETEMC (ALKALI LAKE) COMMUNITY STORY: A CASE STUDY**

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## **Introduction**

In this case study, you will read of the nearly legendary story of Alkali Lake, a Shuswap Indian Reserve near Williams Lake in north-central British Columbia. You will read of how the Alkali Lake people brought about dramatic transformation from the depths of severe alcoholism and social devastation, to become an inspiration, a role model, a helper and a teacher to hundreds of other communities.

The community's story was first told to the world by Alkali people in a film entitled "The Honour of All: The Story of Alkali Lake," released in 1986.<sup>1</sup> While the film was in every way faithful to the story as the people had experienced it up to that time, the real Alkali Lake quickly transformed into something of a myth in "Indian country," metaphorically representing the possibility that healing could come to all communities suffering from similar conditions. Yet, the story of Alkali Lake is not a fairy tale in which everybody lived happily ever after. There was indeed a dramatic turnabout in alcohol consumption. But more than twenty years after the movie was made, Alkali Lake people are still struggling with underlying issues. While the use of alcohol was overcome in one generation of people, many of their children are now engaged in struggles of their own. The healing process is far from over.

It is also important to note at the outset, that although this case study focuses on a single community, Alkali Lake did not happen in a vacuum. We now know that there were dozens of other tribal communities which were undergoing similar struggles at around the same time. Without in any way diminishing the achievement of Alkali Lake people, it is critical to understand the origins and the ecology of the Aboriginal healing movement, and how Alkali Lake was both influenced by and how they impacted that then embryonic movement. Our purpose in writing about Alkali Lake goes beyond recounting what happened to one community, and even beyond shedding light on the Aboriginal wellness movement (which we certainly will try to do). Our purpose is focused on the problem of community health practice, and more specifically on what is entailed in helping traumatized communities to transform their health conditions from within.

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<sup>1</sup> Produced jointly by the Alkali Lake Indian Band, Phil Lucas Productions and the Four Worlds Development Project. The film has two parts. Part I is a dramatic reenactment of the events leading up to the remarkable turnaround resulting in a sobriety rate of over ninety-five percent. In the film, Alkali Lake people are the actors playing themselves. The script is their words, taken from hundreds of hours of interviews. The film can be ordered from the Alkali Lake Indian Band, Williams Lake, British Columbia, Canada.

## ***The Problem***

The Alkali Lake Indian Band (now called Esketemc) is a small fragment of the great Shuswap Nation, which traditionally occupied much of north-central British Columbia prior to European settlement. Between 1940 and 1960, this tiny community of then approximately four hundred people experienced what seemed to everyone within the community as an irreversible slide into alcoholism, physical and sexual abuse, cultural brokenness, economic dependency and communal despair.

By the mid-1960s, virtually every man, woman and child over the age of twelve years were practicing alcoholics. Ultimately deaths by accidental fires, drowning, gunshot, vehicle collisions, as well as by murder, suicide, and alcohol-related disease such as sclerosis and diabetes were so common that funerals became one of the primary focal points of community life.

Beneath this constellation of presenting problems was hidden a fundamental disintegration of human capacity to successfully address the determinants of health. While it may seem at first to be a chicken-and-egg argument, we will show in this study that alcohol abuse was a symptom, and not really the core problem. Beneath the chaotic surface of personal, family and community life in Alkali Lake, an even more fundamental breakdown of cultural meaning-making systems; of spiritual connectedness to the Creator, the earth and one another; of the economic foundations that make livelihood possible; of people's participation in the political processes shaping the world within which they lived; and eventually of social capital itself, and particularly bonds of trust, patterns of collective cooperation, mutual support and collective identity and pride—all of these gradually crumbled away. What was left made it difficult for even the most intimate of human relationships to work. While all parents really do love their children, many children in Alkali Lake had to live in constant fear of physical and sexual abuse, abandonment, neglect, and even hunger. At its worst, Alkali Lake became an Aboriginal "Mad Max" nightmare for the people who lived through it. For them, the world had come unglued.

## ***A Many-Layered Story***

Anyone who tells a story does so from a point of view, and almost always with intentionality beyond the mere recitation of "the facts". In our telling of the story, we have relied on the following sources.

1. The in-depth personal interviews collected from some eighty community members in 1984/85 during the making of the film "The Honour of All: The Story of Alkali Lake".
2. Our own (considerable) personal interactions with the community in providing training and technical assistance between 1983 and the present.
3. The observation of our professional colleagues and associates who have worked consistently with Alkali Lake through the various phases of their healing and development process.

4. The observations and comments Alkali Lake people made to us, or to others. [We note with deep respect that Esketemc people have been and continue to be profoundly honest about what is (and what is not) happening in the continued process toward community wellness in Alkali Lake.]

What we have shared thus far may be compared to the experience of staring into a deep pool of water. There are several ways to look at the pool. One way provides us with a reflection of the sky, and perhaps of ourselves. The other, which requires looking deeply beneath the surface of the pool, reveals a whole dynamic world of aquatic life, filled with drama, beauty and mystery.

Thus far we have told a story that, while true, has skimmed over the surface of what really happened in Alkali Lake. What is reflected back to us fulfills our desire to see the possibility of human transformation and the triumph of the human spirit against seemingly impossible odds.

What is not told in our recounting of the Alkali Lake story has to do with the underlying dynamics of disintegration and of human transformation for health. Thus far we have only provided a two-dimensional sketch of the visible. We have not yet uncovered the “software” that makes those surface dynamics possible.

### **Origins of the Problem**

The determinants of health may be abstracted and classified for purposes of technical analysis, but in the lives of real people in real communities the determinants of health comprise a complex web of relationships and conditions that continuously influence each other, and which cannot be adequately understood from outside the ecology of the system within which any particular determinant is only an interactive variable.

While we do know that some tribes to the south used alcohol for carefully prescribed ceremonial purposes, there is no (recorded) memory of alcohol used by Canadian Aboriginal people before the coming of Europeans to the North American continent. The shadow of European presence preceded Europeans themselves in the gradual push from east to west across the continent. Western Canadian tribes encountered this shadow presence in the form of disease, trade goods, and in some cases in the form of economic colonization, or even slavery.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in the 1980s, missionaries, fur traders, voyagers and gold seekers penetrated what are now the western provinces and territories of Canada, and gradually established a chain of missions, trading, and military outposts, and eventually villages and towns.

As it became necessary to do so, a series of treaties were negotiated between the Canadian government and the Indigenous tribes encountered during the push westward. These treaties generally provided the government with what

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<sup>2</sup> For example, interior Athabaskan tribes of the Yukon and northern British Columbia were enslaved by the more powerful Tlingit's of Alaska and forced to hunt for furs in order to further enrich wealthy Tlingit leaders eager to trade with the Russians.

it regarded as the “legal right” to take over control of tribal territories, and to turn sovereign tribal nations into “loyal subjects of the crown”. Usually the native people’s right to perpetual use of the land for hunting, fishing and other subsistence activities was “guaranteed,” and, as well, the government promised to provide a basic “medicine chest” (now interpreted as health services), as well as access to basic education and a dependable supply of certain commodities such as flour, sugar, coffee, tobacco, fishnets, steel traps and axe heads.

The history of the relationship between the Canadian government and the Aboriginal nations of British Columbia followed similar patterns to what occurred a century or more earlier in eastern Canada, but there were important differences.

We do know that Simon Fraser sought help from the Shuswap people in his search for an overland trade route to connect eastern Canada with the Pacific Ocean. That contact occurred in the spring of 1808 (Ormsby 1971). In 1811, another explorer, David Thompson, also traveled through Shuswap territories. Both of these men were working for trading companies (Fraser for the Northwest Company, Thompson for the Saskatchewan office of the Pacific Fur Company). Both men claimed Shuswap lands for Great Britain. Several American companies also laid claims. None of these groups consulted with the Shuswap, Carrier, Lillooet, Bella Coola, Chilcotin or any other Indigenous nation about these claims. The sentiment of the day was that these powerful “Indian” nations would never tolerate such a land claim, and might well expel all foreigners from their territories (Drake-Terry 1989).

In 1812 the Northwest Company established Fort Kamloops on the confluence of the North and South Thompson Rivers in the heart of Shuswap territory. The scanty trading records that survive show that furs were traded for tobacco, guns and ammunition, cloth, blankets, metal traps, cooking pots, tea, sugar, flour and many other things (Ibid.:20).

When the Hudson’s Bay Company took over Fort Kamloops in 1821, a more aggressive push for profits led to problems. In 1822, Indian trappers traded two thousand two hundred pelts. By 1825 the number had plunged to nine hundred. The beaver population was being exterminated.

The deliberate system used by the Fort to promote high levels of trapping involved advancing trade goods on the promise of furs. When the supply of furs declined, Shuswap people could not repay their “debts” and no new credit was extended. The frustration level grew intolerable and the Fort was burned (by the Shuswap according to Fort employees) just as the Hudson Bay Company was preparing to leave the area.

### ***Why the History Lesson?***

This early history reveals important clues as to what might have happened to the complex web of relationships Shuswap people had with each other, the natural and spiritual worlds, and other peoples that had sustained them for so many centuries. How is it that a once self-reliant and proud people were reduced

to abject poverty and addiction? More specifically, what happened to the foundations of Shuswap human wellbeing that might have contributed to the total collapse into alcoholism that occurred between 1940 and 1973?

Thus far we see that by around 1812 the political and economic foundations were already being laid for alienating Shuswap people from the traditional land based upon which they depended for survival. As well, the traditional subsistence economy was subtly undermined as the attraction and convenience of trade goods induced Shuswap people to shift valuable time, energy and resources from traditional hunting, fishing and gathering activities to the single-minded pursuit of furs. This shift led to a gradual yet inevitable dependency on trade goods and eventually on the money economy.<sup>3</sup> Independent hunters and gatherers became labourers, guides, gold miners, railroad and agricultural workers, and woodcutters for the non-native people who had displaced the Shuswap from their homelands. By around 1840 the fur supply in Shuswap country was so depleted that trade almost completely ceased. (Johnson 1937:185).

## **Gold**

In the late 1850s, gold was discovered in interior British Columbia. With the gold seekers came new waves of settlers, missionaries, bureaucrats and military units. It was during the rush for gold that political pressure to legalize the seizure of Native lands came to a head. The British colonial governor of the day, James Douglas, tried to settle disputes over land arising between Native people and white newcomers by having surveyors mark out a parcel of land as an Indian "reserve". Unfortunately, these lands were often too small or not suitable for agriculture, and there was a great deal of resistance to the practice from Indian people, who found it difficult to accept that they should be ghettoized on inferior parcels of land assigned to them by a foreign governor in their own traditional territory (Drake-Terry 1989:82).

## **Starvation, Disease and Death**

Millions of dollars in gold was extracted from interior British Columbia's "Indian Territories" in the late 1850s and early 1860s. But amidst this new-found wealth, many Native people starved, died of disease or committed suicide during the same period (Drake-Terry 1989). The hardest hit were those families and groups that had learned to depend on trade and employment with the white settlers for their survival. Records of Shuswap groups that did not become heavily involved with trading and employment, and instead retained their traditional economic patterns during that period are scanty, largely because the

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Asch (1974, 1976, 1978) documents a very similar pattern occurring with the Mackenzie Valley (now part of the Northwest Territories) Dene people. Their dependency became so great when the bottom dropped out of the European fur markets during and just after WWI and WWII, trappers arrived at trading posts with a winter's catch of furs, only to find the post abandoned. Some people starved and many others had to ask for help from missionaries and the Canadian government. A once self-reliant people had been reduced to economic clients of a very unreliable system.

few records that do exist were kept by traders and government officials (and to some extent, missionaries). We do know that the late 1850s and early 1860s was an extremely difficult period for interior British Columbia tribes.

In 1862, a smallpox epidemic swept British Columbia and killed approximately sixty percent of the entire population of the interior tribes<sup>4</sup> (Drake-Terry 1989). It is difficult to imagine the impact of such a catastrophe. Whole families and clans were completely wiped out. The four out of ten individuals who did survive could no longer turn to the supportive embrace of traditional family and community for comfort. Orphaned children, widows and widowers, the elderly—everyone clung to their grief, to the broken pieces of a nation and a way of life that would never be the same as it had been.

Many of the interior tribes believed that the spread of smallpox was not an accident of nature. One Lillooet elder testified as follows.

*When the white people came in the spring [of 1812] they had sealed Hudson's Bay blankets with them. When they opened them, they handled them with gloves. From here, the smallpox epidemic started. The white people's intention was to kill us all, but we were saved by the great Indian doctors. (Ritchie 1972)*

Whether or not it was true that the smallpox epidemic was induced by whites to rid themselves of the “Indian problem”, there can be no doubt that the lust for gold and Indian land certainly did bring waves of white newcomers to Shuswap Territory, and with them came diseases, as well as fundamental social and economic change for Shuswap people.

## **Reserves**

The Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867. While British Columbia agreed to join the new federation, the tensions surrounding the appropriation of Indian lands continued. In 1876, an agreement between Ottawa and Victoria set up a special commission to finalize the boundaries of Indian reserves with British Columbian tribes. The commission was charged with the task of striking a balance between the needs and claims of Indian nations and the demands of white settlers. The province of British Columbia claimed all lands not designated as “reserve” through this process as “crown land,” to be disposed of as the government saw fit. Approximately five percent of all reserve lands allocated to Indian Nations through this process were suitable for cultivation.

Indian leaders made many attempts to redress the injustice and discrimination their peoples were experiencing, and to gain some recognition and support for their right to a viable land base. In 1910, after years of collaboration between tribal leaders, a joint declaration was issued by the Chiefs of interior

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<sup>4</sup> Estimates of how many Shuswap died range from thirty percent (Jack et al 1993) to sixty percent (Drake-Terry 1989). The impact of the epidemic ranged from group to group, depending on the nature of their contact with other groups through which the disease was spread. Exact figures are not available for the Alkali Lake Band, but it is safe to say that a minimum of about forty percent of the people died, and probably more.

British Columbia. In it they demanded treaty rights such as those which other Canadian tribes lived under and which guaranteed the people land, water, timber, hunting and fishing rights, health care, education and various kinds of social services. They demanded compensation for lands seized by settlers, miners, and other intruders to their territory. They asked for a reasonable enlargement of their reserves (most allotments were too small to support a viable economy), and they demanded to secure title to their lands so they could be protected from future land grabs (Drake-Terry 1989:247-248).

The political struggle for a return of their land base was long and discouraging. Daily life was increasingly filled with policies and laws that restricted Shuswap people's freedom and their human rights within the emerging nation of Canada. They were prosecuted for hunting or fishing, discriminated against in seeking employment, denied the right to vote (though they were subject to military conscription) and continuously harassed by the police and courts in the name of "justice" for whites wanting still more land, water rights, timber rights, etc. They were segregated onto the reserves, forbidden by law to practice certain religious and cultural traditions (such as the potlatch among tribes near the coast), and eventually forbidden the right to raise money for political purposes (i.e., to pay for their inter-tribal lobbying work which was attempting to secure justice and human rights for tribal people).<sup>5</sup>

### **Loss and Change**

As we explained briefly above, the point of summarizing these long-ago events is to show some of the root causes of Alkali Lake's slide into alcoholism and poverty. Along with other Shuswap communities, Alkali Lake people were heavily impacted by the following.

1. The gradual shift in economic activities from subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering to dependency on cash-based trading and employment and on store-bought goods.
2. Alienation from their traditional land base, upon which they had depended for survival since time immemorial, and their subsequent ghettoization on a "reserve".
3. The gradual imposition of rules, regulations and policies to control the daily lives of the people through the Canadian Indian Act and the policies of the Department of Indian Affairs, totally overriding traditional values, practices and patterns of governance.
4. The legal and social assault on their culture, language and traditional forms of spirituality through bureaucratization, missionization, the education system and the blatant apartheid-like social reality of life in white-dominated British Columbia.

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<sup>5</sup> Interior tribes met openly until 1927, when fundraising by Indian political organizations was made a criminal offence under Canada's Indian Act (Drake-Terry 1989:259).

5. Denial of political rights within Canadian society under the legal guise of “protecting” the interests of the Native people.
6. The death of at least forty percent of the population from smallpox and other diseases (such as tuberculosis and influenza) in the early 1900s, which left the shadow of massive grief and loss hanging over two successive generations.

Echoing the seminal work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross on what happens to people who suffer the loss of a loved one (Kubler-Ross 1969), Peter Marris wrote an illuminating essay on the subject of loss and the role which the human response to loss plays out in the process of disruptive social change (Marris 1975). Marris’ work suggests that when a whole people experience a major loss, or a succession of losses that radically alter the world within which they lived, they experience dynamics of grieving similar to those experienced by individuals who lose a loved one set in (i.e., denial, anger, blaming, numbed emotions, confusion of thinking, etc.).

More significantly, Marris’ study suggests that the loss of context (i.e., way of life, familiar places, significant individuals and groups, etc.) such as occurred to the Shuswap people.

*...impairs the ability to attach meaning to events, and hence to learn from them how to survive. At the same time the loss is usually threatening: the victims recognize that unless they learn to understand the situation and cope with it, they will be helpless to secure a tolerable future. The disorientation of purpose is therefore a source of profound anxiety, as well as desolation...(Marris 1975:59)*

Marris goes on to make a highly critical observation. Referring to a debilitating pattern of loss occurring to a group of people, he says, “It undermines the structure of meaning upon which learning depends” (Ibid.)

The clear implication is that human and community development, *which are inseparable from learning*, may be seriously impaired and even blocked by a severe loss of context experience. For Alkali Lake (now Esketemc this means that, in the face of wave upon wave of loss and change, the usual challenges of social and economic recovery may well have been compounded by a deep need for personal and cultural healing which would again make whole what had been decontextualized and fragmented.

In other words, it is likely that **the long-term impact of the waves of changes and shocks that occurred to Alkali Lake people weakened the overall resilience of the culture, and undermined the capacity of the people to learn and adapt to the changed situation that they faced.** In our experience, the capacity of any community to recover from trauma and to flourish depends on such illusive elements as spiritual anchoring, hope, social solidarity,

locus of control, personal empowerment and effective mechanisms for community learning.<sup>6</sup>

We suspect that these capacities were seriously weakened among Alkali Lake people by the historical process which occurred to them between 1800 and 1940, and that as a result, they were highly susceptible to alcoholism and social breakdown when the right trigger mechanisms were achieved.

### **Living Memory**

From interviews with seven Shuswap elders (five of them from Alkali Lake), conducted in the mid 1960s, it is clear that Alkali Lake people remained relatively free of widespread alcohol abuse and other signs of major social breakdown until well into the 1950s. For example, the elders were asked the following. "Were there injurious fights or assaults among the people of Alkali Lake?" Celestian Johnson's response, given in 1966, is virtually the same as was given by all of the informants.

*There was very little fighting either within or between the bands. There were no quarrels over fishing or hunting and no fights over women. There may have been a few quarrels between brothers, or between a man and his wife. They wouldn't have been drunk because there wasn't any alcohol in those days. (Celestian Johnson cited in Brow 1972:113)*

In contrast, another Alkali Lake elder commented

*There's quarrelling now. They're always quarrelling, especially when they've been drinking. They would never have allowed that in the old days. (Ibid. 110)*

From these observations it seems clear that despite all that had occurred of a traumatic nature to Shuswap people, Alkali Lake people were able to recover enough to retain a relatively healthy community life until after 1950.

### **So What Happened?**

In 1985 we interviewed nearly two hundred Alkali Lake people in preparation for the making of the docudrama film "The Honour of All: The Story of Alkali Lake," which reenacts the events leading to the dramatic reversal of community alcoholism which occurred between 1978 and 1981. The generally agreed-upon trigger point was the introduction of alcohol to community members by a European who opened a trading post at Alkali Lake in the 1940s. Esketemc people say that this trader used alcohol to soften the process of negotiation over the price of furs, and that once alcohol took root in the life of the people, there was a gradual slide into the devastation of community addictions.

There are several important questions to ask at this point. We know that Alkali Lake people were exposed to alcohol since at least the mid 1800s through the trading system centered in Ft. Kamloops. Why did this particular introduction

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<sup>6</sup> These observations are based on our field experience over a twenty-year period in Four Worlds work with several hundred different traumatized communities across Indigenous North America, as well as in South America, Africa, southeast Asia and the Pacific.

have such an impact, when nearly a hundred years of exposure did not? One obvious answer is accessibility. The people could now obtain alcohol without making a difficult journey. But we know that Alkali Lake people had been making regular trips to the town of Williams Lake (some thirty-five miles away) for generations to purchase supplies. While it was illegal in Canada to sell alcohol to “Indians” during most of the 1900s, bootleg alcohol sales were common. They could have obtained it and they could have manufactured “home brew,” as many other Canadian Native people eventually did. Why didn’t they?

We believe there was another catalyst that combined with the gradual introduction of alcohol into community life to generate an insidious decay of the community system: residential schools.

### **Residential Schools**

By the mid 1940s, Canadian law required Native people to send their children away from home to attend a residential school if schooling was not available in the community. The blatant intent of this policy was to remove Indian children from the influences of traditional family life, and to educate them to function in the white man’s society. The Williams Lake school only went to grade eight, and also taught practical arts related to labour and semi-skilled work, largely because the Canadian government of the day believed Indians were not capable of anything more advanced. Indeed, providing a high school education to Native people was considered a “waste”. Most Alkali Lake children were sent to St. Joseph’s Mission in Williams Lake, a school established in 1891 and run by the Catholic Oblate Fathers until it closed in 1981.<sup>7</sup>

Children of six-years-old and up were forced to leave the warm embrace of their family, community and culture, and to enter an alien world. The school was a gigantic building by village standards, with “throng[s] of people...stifling steam heat...[a] strange language...unfamiliar food and...soft beds where one sleeps alone between white sheets” (Hobart 1965:2).<sup>8</sup>

Children were divided from siblings and friends according to age level, issued clothes and assigned a bed number. The supervisor (often a Native person) spoke only English to force the children to learn. This for as long as a year, children were unable to express to anyone in authority what their basic feelings and needs were—loneliness, sickness, fear, confusion—all had to be born in lonely silence.

In 1995, the former inmates of the Williams Lake School from Alkali Lake and other communities were able to face their former keepers, and to lay charges for physical and sexual abuse. Many cases of horrendous abuse were reported, so many that it’s difficult to imagine how such ugly secrets could have been kept for so long. It was only through the healing process ongoing at Alkali Lake that the

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<sup>7</sup> Some children were also sent to a school in Kamloops.

<sup>8</sup> Hobart was writing about schools in the Northwest Territories, but conditions were virtually the same in residential schools across Canada from 1920-1960.

wall of extreme shame was finally broken, and the true story of what had happened to Alkali Lake children (boys and girls) so many years ago emerged.

While over twenty charges of sexual abuse were substantiated by the courts, we know from the direct testimony of Alkali Lake survivors that there were many more cases that were not reported, for which no “evidence” could be provided.

In summary, we believe that the residential school experience had the following impacts on Alkali Lake people.

1. A generation or more of children were raised outside of the community. They returned alienated from traditional values and strangers to many of the ways of their own people. Many children learned to regard their own language and culture as “bad” or “inferior”. They began to see themselves as their white caretakers saw them. The internalization of cultural oppression gradually turned into cultural self-hatred.
2. The extreme humiliation and shaming that occurred at the schools left life-long emotional scars, feelings of unworthiness, depression and rage.
3. A generation of children were “parented” by institutions and this they never experienced stable family life or the process of growing up with parents and siblings. When the residential school generation became parents, there were large gaps in their understanding and experience.
4. Sexual abuse came back to the community with the residential school generation. The presence of traditional prohibitions and stories warning against various kinds of sexual misconduct would seem to indicate that sexual abuse was not unheard of in the traditional past. Nevertheless, Alkali Lake elders say it was exceedingly rare. Some twenty years after the residential school generation returned to the community (about 1985), over ninety percent of the (then) current generation of young people said they had been sexually abused, and further, many of them reported that they had abused others. Their cycle of abuse and shame was being perpetuated.

In summary, we are suggesting that a very complex chain of traumatic historical processes gradually undermined the resiliency of Alkali Lake people to cope with the social, political and economic pressures they confronted. More deeply, *the spiritual and cultural foundations of the Shuswap Nation were weakened to such a degree that Esketemc people were not only buffeted about by horrendous events, but were also partially uprooted from the soil of their own collective identity. Within this collective trauma was nested layer upon layer of individual shame, hurt, confusion and loss.* While none of this can be said to “cause” community alcoholism, we are arguing that all of these factors (coupled with easy access to alcohol as it gradually became a part of community life) conspired to make the slide into alcoholism virtually inevitable.

A once hard-working people now lived in a village strewn with years of accumulated garbage and broken down cars. Their once well-tended houses now had holes in the walls, paint peeling off the outside, windows broken and

covered with cardboard, furniture broken and dirty, and a general spirit of sadness that filled up all the spaces.

Children often came to school (when they came at all) hungry, bruised and numbered by neglect, psychological humiliation, or the prolonged terror of physical and sexual abuse. It became commonplace for them to see their parents and other adults staggering from house to house in search of a bottle or the next party. Children learned to cower and hide when their parents got into screaming matches, which often ended in physical or sexual abuse, or worse. And with the alcoholism came poverty, hunger, sickness, suicides, and layer after layer of loss as loved ones died in accidents, from violence or from largely unnecessary disease brought about by constant abuse or neglect of the body.

As one prominent community member put it, "We had become what others called us: the Indians of Alcohol Lake". Most of the people were so immersed in this reality that they were unable to "see" any other possibility for themselves. As another young man put it, "I thought that was how Indians lived".

### **The Intervention**

The term "intervention" (from the Latin roots "inter" meaning between plus "venire", meaning to come) literally *means to come between as an influencing force, in order to modify a situation* (Webster). Most health professionals think of an "intervention" as something that is done to people. The primary actor is the professional. The passive recipient of the action is the person or people whose health is to be influenced.

The intervention that occurred in Alkali Lake was a much more complex multi-dimensional process that happened over a period of years. There were no health professionals who analyzed the community's dilemma and systematically intervened to bring about change. Indeed, one of the most striking features of the Alkali Lake story is that it illustrates how change happens from within. But to say that what happened in Alkali Lake was like spontaneous combustion would also be misleading. What happened from within was catalyzed and nurtured by influences from the outside.

### **Grounding Experience**

In order to even begin to explain the process of transformation which occurred (and is still occurring) in Alkali Lake, we will first describe our general understanding of how healing and development processes unfold in Indigenous community health development.

All studies related to the transformation of human conditions reflect the experience and perspectives of the people who carry out the study. Our study is grounded in more than thirty years of continuous healing and health development work carried on by the authors and by the Four Worlds Institute for Human and Community Development in Canadian and American Aboriginal communities, as well as in related experiences with Indigenous communities in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the South Pacific. We know from direct experience that

Aboriginal community healing is possible even in the most difficult of circumstances.

We also know that the journey of health development cannot proceed unless and until certain fundamental principles are respected. These principles have been articulated in various ways by Aboriginal elders since time immemorial. Their function has always been to aid us to harmonize our action and strategies with who we are as human beings and with how human beings heal, learn, grow and develop. A process of systematic consultation with elders, followed by community action, reflection and documentation constitutes the foundation from which our understanding has developed. This process has entailed at least nineteen formal gatherings at which elders were consulted on fundamental problems and principles related to Aboriginal community healing and development between 1982 and 1998, as well as numerous consultations with individuals and small groups of elders related to particular challenges arising out of community practice.

Examples of these principles include ideas such as the inter-relatedness and connectivity of all aspects of life, which, among other things, tells us that an integrative holistic approach is required, and that we should be seeking to understand and solve difficult human problems by looking at the web of relational patterns, rather than by focusing on isolated issues resulting from a linear chain of causes. Another example of these ancient principles is that human beings are both spiritual and material in nature, and so solving human problems and transforming human conditions will always have both a material and spiritual dimension to the work.

Our thinking is grounded in principles such as these that we have had the opportunity to test in a wide variety of community healing and development processes over many years. We will list and briefly discuss many of these principles in a section to follow. While we are guided by principles, we are not attached or even particularly influenced by any particular models or approaches. Rather, we have learned that healing and development strategies have to emerge out of living processes. We begin our study with the assumption that because (as many elders told us) “healing and development comes from within,” what is always needed is a process of engagement and learning that assists people who are on a healing and development journey to make their own path by walking it (Horton and Freire 1990).<sup>9</sup>

### **The Esketemc Story**

In our section entitled “Origins of the Problem,” we have already recounted something of the historical process which we (and Alkali Lake people) believe contributed to the crisis in wellbeing that occurred between 1940 and the late 1970s. We have listened to thousands of hours of community dialogue in many Aboriginal communities with strikingly similar stories. The critical difference in

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<sup>9</sup> Horton, M. and P. Freire. We Made the Road By Walking: Conversation on Educational and Social Change. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

Alkali Lake is that someone decided that the story was not over; and that there were other chapters to write.

In 1985, well after the critical turning point had already occurred, Four Worlds was invited to work with Alkali Lake people to make a film that would tell their story to the world. One important reason for making the film was to inspire other Aboriginal communities to embark on a similar path, and even more fundamentally, to plant the seed in the hearts and minds of people living within devastated communities everywhere that healing is possible. By this time, a significant portion of the key community leadership in Alkali Lake were already involved in a fairly heavy travel and workshop schedule, spreading the news of what had happened in Alkali Lake to other Native communities across North America. It was hoped that the making of the film would enable key community leaders to stay home where they were needed to continue the healing work. In reality, the film had exactly the opposite effect, catapulting Andy, Phyllis and Ivy Chelsea, Freddy Johnson and others into something close to celebrity status in "Indian country".

For Alkali Lake, however, the making of the film was an important process, which already demonstrated that what happened there could not be understood as the story of how a handful of interveners "fixed" Alkali Lake, but rather it was the story of hundreds of individuals and families, of struggles fought, of a great deal of suffering, and of a widespread emergence of community courage and commitment.

As it turns out, what happened in Alkali Lake was that a small core group of people decided to become healthy and to support each other in building a better life. That core group gradually began intentionally to intervene in the lives of others. As others decided to sober up, they became part of the ever-widening core group circle, and themselves became interveners. While this may sound like the "Pack-Man" theory of community development, it is a fairly accurate rendition of the story as Alkali Lake people tell it.

As the "new" Alkali Lake community began to emerge in the midst of the old one, a new story was also being told by members in recovery. Instead of being "the Indians of Alcohol Lake," hopelessly tangled in a web of addictions, abuse and misery, they became like star trekkers of "the next generation," going "boldly forth where no one had gone before". Their story became a road map for anew life for themselves, and a source of hope for many other Native communities.

We believe the presence of the new "story" in the midst of a community still in the process of recovery is an important beacon of hope for some and also a critical source of tension between old destructive patterns (and the people who are invested in those patterns) and new transformative ones. As the new story emerged and developed in Alkali Lake, it became increasingly clear to the interveners that: a) healing and change were possible; and that b) while change needed to come "one heart at a time" (as some Alkali Lake people put it), the process needed was not merely one of persuading and helping individuals to change, but also one of creating a new set of relational dynamics between

people, a new community “culture” that moved beyond the culture of poverty and addictions and instead animated the collective life of Alkali Lake people with life-preserving, life-enhancing values and practices.

### **Situation Analysis**

In this section we describe a broad range of intervention strategies that were used in Alkali Lake to: a) catalyze and initiate change, b) to support individuals through difficult healing and learning processes, c) to transform destructive patterns of human relations and community dynamics, and d) to build a community system that supports movement toward health for all.

### **Brother Ed**

At a very basic level, a small handful of five individuals sobered up with the support and encouragement of an Oblate Brother and AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) counselor named Brother Ed Lynch from nearby Williams Lake. Brother Ed had been visiting families within the community for about five years. As Andy Chelsea put it, “people generally ignored him. Some of us knew he was right, and we would let him in and listen to him, but nothing ever changed until Phyllis [Chelsea] had her turning point”.

Phyllis explains that her turning point came about because her daughter (Ivy Chelsea), then age seven, refused to come home with her until she stopped drinking. From Phyllis’ point of view, Brother Ed provided support and encouragement through a critical and very difficult period, but he was not the primary source of her inspiration to change.

When Phyllis stopped drinking, Brother Ed continued to encourage her, and the two of them held AA meetings together. Within a few months, her husband Andy Chelsea joined them. Brother Ed kept visiting and encouraging, but he knew full well that change would have to come from within Alkali Lake people. What he could do was to provide a consistent supportive presence (or what some people call a holding environment) around which people struggling to maintain their sobriety could gather.

### **The Core Group**

Approximately two years after Phyllis Chelsea had stopped drinking, a tiny core group of five sober people were meeting regularly. Very gradually, this group began to shift its attention from merely supporting each other increasingly to that of playing the role of an intervention team. Many of the interventions that were carried out in the years that followed were developed and implemented by members of this group (both the original members and others who later joined them) and yet it would be very easy to focus on those actions and outcomes and to miss the critical role the group itself played in the process.

For someone who has not lived in a socially devastated community, it may be difficult to imagine what day-to-day life is really like for the people living there. Alkali Lake is physically isolated. The nearest town (Williams Lake) is thirty-five miles away on a gravel road. The community is therefore a world unto itself in many ways.

In the mid 1970s, as the core group was forming, Alkali Lake was a community of some seventy-five households. Except for those five individuals, virtually every other person over the age of twelve years was a practicing alcoholic. By this time, the full impact of the abuse that had occurred in residential schools (deep shame, rage and recycled abuse), as well as the erosion of culturally based patterns of parenting, social support and mutual responsibility had generated a climate of hopelessness and despair. When Alkali Lake people talk about that period in their recent history, it is always in terms of tremendous sadness and pain. The “culture of alcohol” seemed to override most other patterns of community life with its deadly protocols that have often been characterized (for example in Alanon) in terms of three “rules”.

- i. *Don't Trust* – Trust no one. Everyone can and probably will betray you.
- ii. *Don't Talk* – Share nothing. What you say can and probably will be used against you
- iii. *Don't Feel* – Don't allow yourself to feel in response to the people around you. You will only be hurt. Better to remain numb.

These “rules of the alcoholic family” had become the social norm for many Alkali Lake people. Add to this picture the reality that most able-bodied adults were on welfare and did very little productive work of any kind, the relatively continuous presence of tragedy and death, all of it overridden by a never-ending cycle of drinking, violence, oblivion, shame, rage and more drinking.

Such was the turbulent sea within which that tiny island of hope (the core group) struggled to cling to what they achieved. Without the mutual support and collective resolve the group gave to its members, it is difficult to imagine how it would have been humanly possible to move to the next step of reaching out to engage others and in building a community movement toward health.

As we understand it, the core group we refer to was not officially organized as a strategic line of action. Its founding members did not at first (as a group) consciously make plans to bring change to the community. But individual members did take many steps, great and small, and did receive help and encouragement from other group members as they did it.

## **Leadership**

In 1973, Andy Chelsea, the second person to stop drinking on the reserve, ran for election as Chief of the Reserve on an anti-alcohol ticket, and won. In close partnership with his wife Phyllis, he immediately set out to use his formal authority as well as the informal leadership status that came with his office to intervene in the dysfunctional patterns of life then so prevalent in Alkali Lake.

*“Speaking of leadership—I know it's got to start from the top down. If a Chief is still drinking he shouldn't be holding office...I know our Elders, and our Elders way before us, never did drink. They made clean decisions. When those decisions are made then they're kept. I guess the way I was thinking, and that's they way I heard it from my Granny and*

*my Mother, that as long as you're Chief you'd better not drink..."* (Andy Chelsea, cited in Furniss 1987:126)

We believe that Andy Chelsea's role-model leadership (i.e., in maintaining his sobriety) lent considerable moral authority to his interventions. Andy Chelsea walked his talk, and that alone had a marked impact on his fellow community members.

*i. Education and Counseling Program*

One of the first steps taken by the newly elected Chief was to set-up weekly alcohol awareness meetings. These gatherings were run by Alcohol and Drug Program staff from nearby Williams Lake, and consisted of presentations, discussions, films and tapes related to the nature and impact of alcohol abuse on individual and family wellbeing. The intention of this strategy was to provide a non-threatening influx of new thinking which would gently challenge the community's habitual ways of seeing the problem. Counselors who ran these meetings also provided counseling services to individuals and families in their homes. These regular meetings were later (1976) to be reorganized into an Alcoholics Anonymous group on the reserve, which was run entirely by Alkali Lake people (Abadian 1998).

*ii. Community Newspaper*

Another step taken by the Chelsea's and their supporters was to launch a small community newspaper, "Alkali Speaks". Beyond serving as a community events bulletin, "Alkali Speaks" was used as an educational tool and as a platform to generate dialogue about community wellbeing. In a community where "the problem" was not honestly and openly discussed (largely because of widespread denial), simply increasing the flow of open, honest communication was already a movement toward health.

*iii. Facilitative Leadership Approach*

Most Canadian First Nations communities hold fairly regular (often quarterly) public meetings between Chief and Council and community members to allow political and program leadership to report on what they have been doing and to invite community input on important issues. Such meetings are often poorly attended, especially in severely dysfunctional communities. In such communities, the last things anyone in power wants are transparency, authentic accountability, or the meaningful participation and empowerment of community members. When the "don't trust, don't talk, don't feel" rules operate as software to the political life of the community, they often translate into lies, manipulation, self-serving corruption and secrecy.

Andy Chelsea tended to approach the challenge of political leadership as a facilitator, more than as a boss. He therefore expended a great deal of time and energy just listening to people. By asking people what they really thought and by actually listening to them and trying to implement their ideas (to the extent practicable), we believe Andy gradually began to awaken the collective will and

identity of a people that had been for so long paralyzed by trauma and despair. Andy's daughter, Ivy describes how her father operated.

*"When Dad was Chief—all the time he was Chief...Dad called a meeting for all the youth at least once a month...and when the Chief called a meeting for all the youth, you went. And he'd say, 'O.K., this is what's going on in Alkali, what do you guys think?' And he'd listen to us. And he'd say, 'Well, this is the moneys that are coming in. What would you guys like to see in Alkali? Because we're not going to be here forever, and we're building this for you guys and your kids, so what are some of the things that you would like to see.' So we told him, a store, a school, a logging company, a Laundromat, swimming pool, a hockey rink, recreation center, things like that. And he went and did those things for us." (Ivy Chelsea, 1986, quoted in Abadian 1998:272)*

#### *iv. Stopping the "Dog Creek Stage"*

The Dog Creek Stage was a taxi service that ran between Williams Lake and the Native reserves in the area. One of the challenges the Chelsea's faced was slowing down the flow of available alcohol coming into the community. The Dog Creek Stage provided door-to-door delivery of alcohol to anyone on the reserve (of whatever age) who had the money to pay for it. Regular shipments came in twice a week and special orders were accommodated any time (as long as there was money to pay for it).

Backed by his Council, Andy ordered the Dog Creek Stage off the reserve, never to return. When the driver protested, saying it was "his living," Andy had "no right," Andy told him, "Your way of living is our way of dying". The order stuck (field notes for the "Honour of All" video).

#### *v. Challenging the Bootleggers*

"Bootlegging" means selling alcohol illegally. The term comes from the practice of vendors hiding bottles in their boots to escape detection. There was no legal alcohol sales outlet on the Alkali Lake reserve. Consequently, most adults who could legally purchase alcohol also sold bottles to others. We know that underage drinking was commonplace, and the only way young people could purchase alcohol was from bootleggers.

Andy used his formal authority to announce that bootlegging would no longer be tolerated on the reserve. Since such warnings had made no impact in the past, some concrete action was needed to drive the point home.

The Chelsea's met with the RCMP (Royal Mounted Canadian Police) and worked out a plan. Confidants were sent to purchase bottles using marked bills. The bottles they purchased were then marked with the name of the bootlegger, and the RCMP was informed as to where the bootlegger had stashed the money. The bootlegger was immediately raided, the marked bills were found and the person was charged. Seven bootleggers, including Andy Chelsea's mother were

shut down this way. The message that bootlegging would not be tolerated was given loud and clear.

In many Canadian First Nations communities, taking such actions could easily be perceived as “siding with the enemy”, especially when one’s own family members are singled out. To take such a step undoubtedly required a great deal of courage and conviction. The fact that neither the Chelsea’s nor the RCMP ever intended to send people to jail, and all charges were eventually dropped, did not diminish the impact of the message on the community.

#### *vi. Redirecting the Flow of Money*

The primary source of funds with which alcohol was purchased by Alkali Lake people was social assistance. Upwards of ninety percent of the entire reserve was dependent on regular government assistance cheques. A large portion of that money was spent every month on alcohol. An additional wrinkle in the pattern had to do with the Alkali Lake Ranch Store, an off-reserve, non-Native enterprise that was notorious for charging Alkali Lake Band members exorbitant prices for groceries, reluctantly paid because the alternative was a long trip to town. Social assistance cheques were occasionally distributed through the store. The store is also said to have cheated some Alkali Lake people out of their cheques, and of arranging cheque cashing services tied to liquor sales.

In addition to controlling the flow of alcohol onto the reserve, it became clear to the Chelsea’s and their supporters that the entire system which authorized, organized and monitored the flow of finances into the community was contributing to the ever-worsening pattern of dependency and addictions.

At that time (1973) social assistance was administered by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs through local offices in Williams Lake. As Furniss pointed out, the program officers responsible for this work rarely, if ever, made visits into the communities they served to monitor the use of funds, or even to update their files. When the Chelsea’s pointed out the direct connection between welfare and addictions at Alkali Lake and the general problem of social assistance funds not being used for what they were intended, department officials were unwilling to make any changes in the system (Furniss 1987:32).

Using the formal authority that came with political office, a decision was made by Chief and Council to take control of the Social Assistance Program. In order to achieve this, Phyllis Chelsea trained to take over the responsibilities formerly held by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs officer. In 1974 she officially became the Band’s “welfare aid” (later called Band Social Worker). Invoking a clause in the B.C. Region Social Development Policy Manual (1981:79-80, section 10-2) which states that a welfare aid is empowered to take over the management of welfare funds “if for any reason assistance is not being used in the best interest of the recipients and dependents,” the Band initiated a voucher system; which in practice meant that instead of receiving money, individuals who were drinking heavily received vouchers that could be exchanged for food, other goods and certain services.

During the first month of the voucher system, vouchers were given to all social assistance recipients on the reserve. Furniss comments, "given the high unemployment rate on the reserve, this action was felt by almost the entire population" (Furniss 1987:33). When social assistance recipients came to the Band office to collect their regular cheques, they were informed by Phyllis that social assistance recipients who were either "drinking up their money" or "bootlegging" would henceforth be receiving vouchers (and not cash) for food, clothing and other necessities.

Social assistance recipients were told they could "get off the voucher system" when they stopped bootlegging, or when they made sincere efforts to stop drinking. In principle, it was entirely a judgment call within the powers of the welfare aide to decide when the enforced management of a person's social assistance funds were no longer necessary. In practice however, there was already a small but determined group of sober people working together to heal the community, and their collective assessment of each family's circumstances, as well as their support for decisions taken by "the authorities" was always an important part of the equation.

Nevertheless, Andy and Phyllis took the brunt of the opposition to these tactics, which were seen by many, both on and off the reserve, as far too draconian and as a violation of basic rights. The Chelsea's endured bitter personal attacks, threats on their lives, vandalism of their property, public vilification, and plots to oust them from community leadership. Through all of this, the Chelsea's and their supporters hung on.

In order to institute the system, agreements had to be made with various merchants in the area, guidelines regarding the limits of use of the vouchers were developed, vouchers were printed, and clear protocols were set up to allow merchants to easily collect payment on vouchers that had been redeemed.

The entire process of taking over the Social Assistance Program took more than a year. During that period, the Band took another important step in regaining economic control, and that was open to a grocery store on the reserve. These two initiatives were important for several reasons. First, the abuses, unfair prices and the monopoly of the Alkali Lake Ranch Store could be directly challenged by community-controlled competition. Not only would social assistance dollars be able to buy more, but there would be an end put to any profiteering from the pattern of addiction with which the community was struggling. Secondly, in the larger scheme of things, Alkali Lake people had learned to be passive dependents on whatever systems they found themselves living within. We believe that the opening of the store and the subsequent takeover of the social assistance programs constituted important first steps on the path toward regaining back a collective sense of agency and economic self-reliance.

#### *vii. Electing the Path of Health*

Apparently the community agreed that important progress was being made despite the fact that only a handful of people had actually stopped drinking. In

February of 1974, Andy Chelsea was re-elected for a second term as Chief. The election took place only six months after Andy first took office, because the first election had been held to fill the vacancy created by a previous Chief who had resigned before the end of his term. The 1974 elections were therefore well within the period of community anger and backlash for the bootlegger sting and the introduction of the voucher system. The Chelsea's were unrepentant during the election campaign. They spoke clearly and courageously about the possibility that the community could really change, could again become a place where it was safe and healthy to be a child, and where there was hope and opportunity for everyone. At the election meeting, influential people who had previously expressed public outrage at the tactics being used, spoke in favour of Andy's re-election, arguing that he was exactly what the community needed. Furniss quotes one of these people, an elder woman whose son had been arrested for bootlegging. When asked why she supported Andy, she said, "He was mean. That's why we chose him." (cited in Abadian 1999:252)

While on one level people resented the continuous pressure being applied by the Chelsea's and their small circle of supporters to move the community toward health, on an even deeper level there was clearly a readiness and even a hunger for change. How else can the simultaneous occurrence of a widespread protest against the Chelseas' methods and the re-election of Andy as Chief on an anti-alcohol ticket be explained?

#### *viii. Leadership as Enforcer*

Within the Shuswap cultural framework, leaders were expected to allow individuals plenty of room for individual choice, but at the same time they were expected to be tough on violations of community norms.

In interviews with Alkali Lake elders conducted in the early 1980s, the elders talked about Sxoxomic (otherwise called Chief Samson) who ruled Alkali Lake with strict discipline in close collaboration with the village priest, Father Thompson. The elderly people described the three cardinal sins as drinking, dancing and gambling. The Chief did not permit these activities in the village. "The Chief would tell people if they want to drink, go up into the hills to do it". Immorality was also punished. If a young unmarried man and woman were caught "playing around," or frequently seen "running around together," they would be called up in front of the Chief, who would "make them get married or stop."

According to these informants, Sxoxomic had two or three "constables" at his disposal who would occasionally patrol the reserve at night. The constables would report any instances of wrong-doing to the Chief. The offenders would then be called up in front of the Chief. They were made to kneel down in a line in front of the Chief then imposed a fine. If an offender had no money, the Chief would take a valued possession, such as a gun, until such time as the offender was able to pay the fine. (Furniss 1987:130-131) When the old Chief died (traditional chiefs occupied their positions for life), his next two successors were

unable to retain the discipline Sxoxomic had imposed, largely because they themselves drank heavily and were known violators of the norms.

By the 1970s, the Canadian government had forced the Band to change to and elected Chief and Council system modeled after the municipal mayor and council system used in other Canadian jurisdictions. But Andy's approach to leadership echoed that of his ancestors, in that he called the people to higher ground, which he firmly believed they themselves desperately wanted (else why would they keep re-electing him?) but lacked the internalized discipline to attain.

Sousan Abadian reports that community members "often expected Andy Chelsea to play a policing function and the keep order" (Abadian 1999:312-313). She quotes Andy's daughter Ivy.

*"People would come knocking on our door in the middle of the night and say so and so is beating up so and so, and out the door he'd [Andy] go."* (Ibid.)

Ivy spoke of a 9 PM youth curfew imposed by Chief and Council.

*"...the church bell rang and you had to be home at 9:00. All your kids were home at 9:00, and Dad and Irvin [the former Chief] walked around with a big stick. O boy, if you weren't home at 9:00!"* (Ibid)

#### *ix. Leadership as Personal Counselor*

As Chief and Welfare Aide, Andy and Phyllis Chelsea were the front-line intervention team for nearly every crisis that came upon the community, and these were frequent and numerous. Every incidence of family violence or child abuse, every fight or community-endangering conduct becomes an occasion for intervening about alcohol (which was almost always a factor in such crises). Andy and Phyllis often speak about the approach they used.

*"We would say we really care about you. We're very worried, especially when things like this happen [referring to the present crisis]. We want you to go to treatment. We made an appointment for you to go in two weeks. Will you go?"* (Phyllis Chelsea, 1985, from the "Honour of All" field notes)

Very often such approaches were initially rebuffed, but as time went on, Andy and Phyllis would become increasingly more persuasive. The strategy was to make it more and more difficult for the person to keep drinking. Regular visits by an alcohol counselor, concerned relatives and community members, the Welfare Aide, and the Chief kept up a steady flow of pressure. Finally, when an incident occurred, the person would be confronted with a choice of going to treatment or suffering carefully thought-out consequences such as the loss of a job, the loss of housing, or having charges laid against them in court.

#### *x. The Carrots that Balanced the Stick*

In addition to pressure, the Chelsea's also used their formal ability to create an incentives and support system in order to make it easier for a person to

decide to cooperate with a treatment plan. For example, Band monies were used to:

- arrange for child care while parents went to treatment;
- to paint and fix up someone's house while they were away (alcoholic households are very often disaster zones, with holes punched in doors, walls and windows, paint peeling off the walls, roofs leaking, plumbing broken—an exterior environment reflecting an interior condition); and
- to provide employment for someone who returned from treatment and maintained their sobriety.

Beyond these incentives, a great deal of energy was invested in building a positive social, economic, political and cultural environment that would be supportive of people's healing journeys. That community restoration process constituted a second and equally critical constellation of interventions as those taken by community leaders from the top down, described in this section. In this section to follow, we will describe some of the important steps that were taken.

### **Personal Healing and Community Restoration**

Going away to alcohol treatment programs was nothing particularly new for Alkali Lake people. In the past, individuals had gone to programs in Williams Lake and elsewhere, always the same results. Shortly after the person returned to Alkali Lake, they were dragged back down into the negative vortex of community addiction.

It was apparent to the Chelsea's and their supporters that simply attacking alcoholism as a disease and attempting to root it out alcoholic-by-alcoholic would never work in Alkali Lake. Their way of seeing the problem was that, as much as alcoholism manifested itself in individual breakdown, it was also a community disorder, and that until its root causes were addressed in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the community, the pattern would persist. It was equally evident that the trauma-inducing pattern of life as it was being lived in Alkali Lake in 1970 had yielded a population of wounded and dysfunctional people in need of a healing process. Put simply, the healing of individuals and that of their families and community had to go hand-in-hand. Neither aspect could be addressed without dealing with the other.

The mainstream health system of the day was generally unable to comprehend community trauma, and the only solution it could offer was an individualized treatment for what it tended to regard as a medical condition. In addition to what might be called a methodological handicap, the public health system simply did not have the trained personnel or the resources to deal with the scale of social devastation in process at Alkali Lake. One area psychologist and a few alcohol counselors were supposed to cover the needs of some twenty Native reserves, all of them in much the same condition as Alkali Lake. We estimate the ratio of helping professionals to Aboriginal people needing intervention and support on reserves in Western Canada between 1975 and 1985 ranged from between four hundred and two thousand to one, and that

roughly ninety-eight percent of these were low-paid para-professionals with little or no training.

It is therefore not surprising that, in addition to working hard to sober up individuals, the Chelsea's and their core group invested considerable energy trying to build relationships, opportunities and an environment that nurtured and protected the emergence of a new pattern of community life. Following are selected examples of interventions undertaken in support of these goals.

*i. Cultural Renewal*

It is a documented fact that the process of colonizing the lands and resources of the Shuswap people was paralleled by a kind of cultural and spiritual colonization, calculated to uproot whole generations of Shuswap children from the soil of their cultural heritage, in order to bring them into the Euro-centric cultural mainstream of Canadian society. The primary instruments of this process were the churches and the residential schools.

The churches (Roman Catholic in Alkali Lake) were successful in convincing many people to abandon traditional spiritual beliefs and practices, and to become church-going Christians. The priest became one of the most powerful people in community life, and during certain periods even co-governed the community in partnership with the Chief.

During Andy Chelsea's time as Chief, the priest was an alcoholic who openly opposed the efforts the Chelsea's and their supporters were making to bring health to the community. At one point he even tried to organize a Band meeting to get Andy removed as Chief, but he did not receive community support and the meeting was never held. After repeated efforts to win his cooperation in the community healing process, Andy ordered him to leave the reserve. Following initial resistance, he did leave, and the nurse (with whom he was having an affair) left with him.

In the mid 1970s almost everyone thirty years of age and older spoke fluent Shuswap. Embedded in that ancient language is a way of seeing the world in which aspects of creation from stones and trees to eagles and salmon are animated with spirit and inseparably connected to each other. Despite more than three generations of continuous Christian propaganda against the "pagan practices" of the past, many Alkali Lake people still sought the help of traditional medicine practitioners when they were sick or in some kind of trouble. In many small ways, at least parts of the roots of traditional Shuswap culture were still visible above ground, even though the primary ceremonies and practices seemed to have been lost.

The Chelsea's, and other core group members such as Freddy and Irene Johnson, had been traveling to other communities to try to recover traditional Indigenous knowledge and practices that could be used to help Alkali Lake people in their journey back to health. They invited Albert Lightning (Buffalo Child), a renowned Cree elder and spiritual teacher from Alberta to come to Alkali

Lake. Mr. Lightning taught them how to set up the sacred sweat lodge, and how to use it for healing and strengthening the people.

During this same period, practices such as drum dancing, traditional singing, the use of a pipe for prayer; the use of sweetgrass, sage, juniper and other herbs as a smudge (like incense); and special ceremonies to mark important passages and commitments were re-introduced and became quite common.

The re-introduction of traditional Native culture and spirituality had a profound impact on many Alkali Lake people, resonating with something deep within that had been asleep for generations. We believe that more than any of the other aspects of the historical process Shuswap people experienced, the assault in their traditional spiritual identity was the most devastating to their overall wellbeing because the very core of who they were as human beings was set adrift. As people began to rediscover that core, and were able to anchor their lives in relationship to it, they were also gradually able to re-establish the basic foundations for healthy living in human relations, in family life, and in the process of community building. Not everyone in Alkali Lake took this route. There were also a significant number of people who remained Catholic, but these distinctions became increasingly blurred. The priest who eventually replaced the exiled former pastor was himself a pipe carrier, a regular participant in sweatlodge ceremonies, and an open advocate for the continued strengthening of Shuswap culture and spirituality.

When asked about the role traditional practices were playing in bringing health to the community, one Alkali Lake resident said, “When we are in the sweatlodge together, there are no secrets. We are just ourselves, for everyone to see. We pray together and we sing, and the spirit heals our hearts. And we find that we really love each other, and we can forgive each other for whatever happened in the past.” (from Four Worlds field notes, 1986) This is the restoration of trust and cooperation and harmony. It is rebuilding of social capital from the inside out.

## *ii. Learning Opportunities*

One way of understanding the challenge of facilitating a transformation in what had become a dysfunctional way of life in Alkali Lake is to focus on learning. Alkali Lake people had learned, through many generations of trauma, to live their lives in ways that led to a great deal of misery and even death. What was now needed was for the people to learn how to live their lives in new ways that led to life—ways that were free of addictions and abuse and were productive of wellbeing and prosperity.

Alcoholic Anonymous meetings were a primary source of learning for many Alkali Lake people in the early years of their sobriety. People would travel in caravans to Williams Lake, Clinton, Round Lake, anywhere within striking range, just to be able to listen to other people and learn.

In 1979 and 1980, ten individuals from Alkali Lake took basic training related to Native addictions at the Nechi Training Institute, a center dedicated to capacity

building for healing work in Native communities, located outside Edmonton, Alberta.

Most Alkali Lake people agree that the training that had the most influence on the most people at Alkali Lake was the “Lifespring” program, which focused on personal growth, improved human relations and positive living. Andy and Phyllis took an introductory course in the “Lifespring” series in 1980, and when they returned their obvious enthusiasm and the joy the program had introduced into their lives was infectious. Between 1980 and 1982, the majority of the adult population of Alkali Lake attended “Lifespring” training courses at a cost of up to four hundred dollars per person, bank rolled by the Band (Abadian 1999:259).

In general, Alkali Lake people developed a thirst for learning during this period, and our own experience in working in the community was that the people were open to learning from anyone who might be able to offer them new ideas or methods for addressing key community issues. In Andy Chelsea’s own words, “I don’t care if someone is blue or pink or lime green. If they have something to teach me, I want to learn.” (from Four Worlds field notes, 1985) The critical shift that been made was from a lived culture of mistrust and suspicion of outsiders (especially white professionals), to one in which learning became a primary and continuous feature of community life, and in which all aspects of that life were held up for reconsideration. During that period, Alkali Lake people took training related to personal growth, addictions counseling, elder health, leadership development, cross-cultural awareness, Native spirituality, community development, human sexuality, youth development, youth leadership, sexual and physical abuse, effective board and committee functioning, community enterprise development, and a variety of other specialized training that met the specific needs of various individuals and groups.

In 1982, after most people in Alkali Lake had stopped drinking, Phyllis Chelsea and a small group of partners began exporting training from Alkali Lake to other Native communities. Their enterprise is called “New Directions”, and was modeled after “Lifespring” but with a specific Native focus. Through “New Directions”, Esketemc people have helped many other Native communities across North America to learn their way toward health.

### *iii. Community Economic Development*

One of the key incentives used to help people both to initiate and to maintain sobriety at Alkali Lake was the promise of employment. In 1973-1974, when Andy Chelsea first took office, there was very little employment available to Esketemc people within the community. Nearly every household was on social assistance. By contrast, in 1984 and 1985, Band employees estimated that somewhere near eighty percent of all adults on the reserve had a job, and that everyone who wanted to work was working.

Band-initiated enterprises included a green house, market gardens, a piggery, chicken and egg production, a logging operation, a grocery store, a Laundromat and cattle ranching. As well, jobs were created for community

people in the school, health center, the Band office and in a new community recreation program.

Employment became a very tangible inducement to sobriety, but also a powerful motivation to remain clean and sober. Many Canadian Native communities have attempted to use jobs as an inducement to better health. What was different in Alkali Lake was that employment was tied to the maintenance of sobriety, and was regarded as one link in a chain of interventions. First a person was challenged to stop drinking, and given a great deal of love and support as they went through a treatment program and returned to a new social circle (the core group of people in recovery), a refurbished physical environment, and a steep learning curve in terms of building a new pattern of human relations, family life and community responsibility. Employment was fitted into a renewed pattern of life, and not expected to magically generate that pattern.

#### *iv. Alternative Social and Recreational Opportunities*

When a person's life completely revolves around alcohol consumption, and her entire network of family and friends are all practicing alcoholics, to stop drinking is not merely a matter of leaving alcohol behind. It is also to make oneself a social exile. In Alkali Lake, this was one of the strongest reasons for not giving up drinking. Unless viable alternatives could be created to the vacuum left by the loss of one's primary reference group, it was unlikely that many people would be able to maintain sobriety for long enough to allow a new pattern of life (new goals and activities, new relations, shapes, etc.) to develop.

Holiday periods such as Christmas and New Years, and the anniversary of the death of a loved one were particularly difficult times for Alkali Lake people who were struggling with alcohol. From the earliest days of the sobriety movement in Alkali Lake, Andy, Phyllis and their supporters invested considerable energy into organizing alcohol-free gatherings, and in visiting people in their homes who they knew were making an effort to stop drinking.

AA meetings were an important rallying point for many people, providing a therapeutic as well as spiritual outlet. Cultural activities such as sweats (sweatlodge ceremonies), pow wows (a gathering for traditional singing and dancing), and healing circle meetings were very important for some. For others, involvement in church-based activities, rodeo, or outdoor pursuits such as hunting, fishing and horseback riding were important. A recreation center was opened, a hockey rink was developed, a summer baseball league was organized, and many alcohol-free parties, dances and social gatherings were held, all to provide people with healthy environments that would support their recovery processes.

#### **Institutionalizing the Intervention Process**

At first, the interventions undertaken in Alkali Lake were carried out by individuals (primarily Andy and Phyllis Chelsea), whether in their official capacity as Chief and Welfare Aid, or as community members extending care and support

to others. As more and more people stopped drinking and became part of the group trying to bring health to the community, intervention (whether in confronting and supporting individuals or in introducing community development measures) increasingly became a process owned by the core group, and less by Andy and Phyllis alone. In 1976 (three years after Andy was first elected) an official “intervention committee” was formed under the authority of Band Council, and consisting of the Welfare Aid (now called Band Social Worker), the Chief, several Band Counselors (equivalent to aldermen in the municipal government model), and the Community Health Representative (a para-professional health worker). The function of this group was to confront practicing alcoholics, to impose negative sanctions on those who did not cooperate (such as putting someone on vouchers) and to support and assist those who made efforts to stop drinking.

When Andy stepped down as Chief in 1978, Phyllis also retired from her job as Band Social Worker, but by this time the mechanisms and processes of a continuous intervention and support program were institutionalized within the community governance system, and the community health development process had crossed a critical threshold and was moving rapidly toward a total turnaround in the pattern of community addictions.

### **Sexual Abuse: The Crisis Beneath the Crisis**

Almost as soon as the “fog” of alcoholism was cleared away from the minds and hearts of Alkali Lake people, the issue of sexual abuse dawned on the horizon. As difficult and stubborn as the disease of alcoholism had been to face up to and resolve, on one ever dreamed that an even more difficult challenge would arise so quickly.

The fact that most Alkali Lake people had gone to treatment and stopped drinking did not mean that their healing process was complete. Years of accumulated loss and hurt do not simply disappear as a result of one therapeutic experience. What remains is a life-long journey into wellness that is exceedingly demanding, because it requires that the traveler learn beliefs and values and new habits of thinking, feeling, acting and being in relationships with others. As explained above, Alkali Lake people became avid learners, involving themselves in many different kinds of training to strengthen their capacity to make this journey.

As discussed above, a strategy that became very much part of life in the “new” Esketemc community was healing circles, AA meetings and other kinds of support groups. These meetings contributed significantly to rebuilding bonds of love, trust and acceptance among the people. Gradually, as people began to feel that it was safe to do so, they began to talk about some of the deeper hurts they were carrying that had been covered up by alcoholism. It soon became clear to community members such as the new Chief (Charlene Bealeau) that some way had to be found to address the issue of sexual abuse. There had been a significant number of disclosures (all of which were women disclosing how they had been victimized), and there was mounting anger and denial of other community members (mostly men) refusing to really look at the issue.

With the help of trusted and experienced specialists (such as Maggie Hodgson from the Nechi Training Institute near Edmonton, Alberta and Dr. Cruz Acevedo from the Four Worlds Development Project out of Lethbridge, Alberta), a series of community workshops were held that eventually uncovered a startling revelation. It appeared that upwards of eighty percent of the entire community (women and men) of Alkali Lake had been sexually abused and many had become the victimizers of others. Nearly every household was affected. Among the younger generation, community estimates say that as many as ninety percent of the children and youth had been the victims of sexual abuse.

In response to this challenge, new approaches to addressing sexual abuse had to be developed. The dominant (Euro-Canadian) justice system required all disclosures be reported to the police (and in the case of child victims to Child Protection Services). That system also required that perpetrators be prosecuted to the full extent of the law. As a Manitoba First Nations leader dealing with the same issue quipped, "What are we supposed to do? Build a fence around the whole community and turn it into a concentration camp?"

What Alkali Lake people wanted was a process that promoted healing (defined as the restoration of balance). The Euro-Canadian legal system (and the intention behind the law) is driven by a desire to punish. Early on in the process, Alkali Lake people realized that abusers were very often people who had been victimized themselves. As they saw it, the real need was to interrupt the cycle of abuse, and to restore healthy relationships between their people. This culturally-rooted philosophical difference eventually led to the development of a very different kind of approach that combines the involvement of a forensic psychologist, a therapeutic counselor or psychologist specializing in sexual abuse, a community-based counselor, participation in a survivors or abusers support group, and the family of the abuser.<sup>10</sup>

### **Final Remarks on Intervention**

As we indicated above, the process of community health development still continues in Esketemc. Current issues include sexual abuse, youth in crisis, and a continuing pattern of alcoholism among about twenty-five percent of the population, mostly young people. We have chosen to stop our discussion of intervention at this point, but one of the surest signs that a community is in fact regaining its health is when it is able to maintain a constant self-driven process of learning and change over time. Alkali Lake's intervention story is still unfolding after fourteen years of continuous work.

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<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth examination of the community sexual abuse intervention team approach, see Bopp, M. and Bopp, J. (1997) Responding to Sexual Abuse: Developing a Community-Based Response Team in Aboriginal Communities. Government of Canada, Department of Solicitor General, Ottawa, Aboriginal People's Collection - Technical Series. (Cat. No. J55-2/1-1997 E)

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