

Acculturation, Alcoholism and Indian Style
Alcoholics Anonymous

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INDIAN PEOPLES Of the Northwest Coast of North America, including the Coast Salish living in Southern British Columbia and in the State of Washington, did not know of alcoholic beverages before contact with Western man. When the first explorers appeared at the end of the 18th century, they did not want to expose the Indians to alcohol and offered them only tea and coffee to drink, using muskets, ammunition, blankets, iron and copper for barter. But once it became known that a lucrative fur trade was awaiting adventurers along the western coast of North America, exploitation of the Indians by whisky traders could not be prevented. When fur traders and settlers reached the coast overland in the early 19th century, the Indians were already demanding alcohol in trade for their goods. Knowing the "miraculous" effect of "firewater," they would hardly accept anything else and newcomers had to follow suit (1).

A brief introduction to traditional Coast Salish Indian culture will help explain why these Indians have been particularly vulnerable to the impact of Western ways of life, including the use of alcohol. Thanks to the favourable ecological conditions of the coastal strip of the Northwest, its river deltas and fertile offshore islands have been inhabited for thousands of years. Archeological findings suggest a continued cultural growth throughout the centuries, and societies reaching peaks of artistic expression unparalleled in any other North American culture(2). The abundance of sea mammals, salmon and other fish, game, edible plants, fruits and berries, gave the Coast Salish leisure to develop and refine their culture in a democratic way, unheard of by other, less fortunate Indian tribes. The lush forest contained huge cedar trees, which were easily split even with stone tools, enabling the people to build large plank-houses. In precontact times it was the custom to shelter as many family members as possible under one roof. Barnett (3) describes how such plankhouses "grew" by accretion so as to accommodate an increasing number of relatives. A bilineal kinship system recognized both paternal and maternal relatives, but the system was patriarchal and usually patrilocal so that the household would consist of a headman, his sons and grandsons and their wives and children. Around this nucleus were grouped uncles and nephews of both lines with wives, children, parents, grandparents, widows, orphans and other kin. Together with a number of visiting relatives, and the slaves, a single such household could number several hundred people; the more numerous, the higher was the prestige of the whole family (4,5). Coast Salish Indians still love to gather their relatives and to "live in each other's houses." Unfortunately the government-built houses on the reservations are of modern Western type, designed to

house only a nuclear family; at the most, grandparents or a few guests can be comfortably accommodated. Indian homes are therefore often overcrowded, resulting in unhygienic and uncomfortable conditions. Lack of space and privacy can lead to intrafamilial tension and personal unhappiness.

Traditional Coast Salish society did not have higher forms of tribal organization with paramount chiefs. One of the elders of a household was the "chief" (sie'm) of his extended family, but nobody was compelled to obey him. Each man was free to leave the group, build a new house and attract whoever of the old house group wanted to follow him; he could also take his wife and children to live with his parents-in-law should their clan happen to have more prestige. The Coast Salish sie'm was accepted as a leader because of his personal qualities and his ability to accumulate goods which were distributed at potlatches. Such a chief was expected to be highly democratic, living and working just like any other person (6). In times of crisis he was asked to give advice and provide leadership. His authority was, however, solely based on his personal wisdom and integrity (3,7,8).

Coast Salish had three classes (9): (a) People of high rank or nobility, i.e., those who had the right to inherit privileges and to possess wealth. High rank could be obtained by any free man through personal achievement and strong spirit power as possessed by shamans, skilled hunters, great warriors and artists. (b) Below this relatively small group were the common people, those who did not live up to the expectations of nobility, who "did not know" the customs, or were just people of low ambition. (c) The lowest class consisted of captives or people sold into slavery and the children of slaves.

Any man could at any time lose whatever prestige or rank he had inherited or achieved if he misbehaved or committed a shameful act. Children were relentlessly taught good behavior and could be threatened with relegation to commoner status if they did not listen. Young men were admonished to be self-reliant, independent and proud.

For Coast Salish Indian men it has been particularly difficult to adjust to modern ways of life. Fishing and hunting are restricted, and in order to survive they have to supplement their traditional livelihood with seasonal wages earned in White-owned industries. "No man has the right to order me around," is often the reason given by Indian workers for quitting a job. They cannot tolerate taking orders from White bosses whom they neither understand nor respect. Coast Salish people also find it hard to accept modern Indian leaders who are not traditional elders but hold their position according to modern political process. Such jealousy, suspicion, bitterness and tension are created among the older people on reservations when such leaders try to gain authority and influence over the young people.

For the Indian there are other obstacles to becoming regular wage-earners. Traditionally a man of status knew his genealogy in the hundreds, even though his relatives were scattered over large areas. Kinship ties are still very strong and the Coast Salish keep track of their relatives on other reservations, in towns and in cities. There is considerable pressure on every family member to

travel from one place to another to attend marriages, funerals and other family functions. This takes time and often interferes with the work schedule of modern society. The Indian who holds a job is often confronted with the dilemma of either losing it or facing the disapproval of his relatives; both prospects cause tension and anxiety. Friendly, cooperative and nonaggressive behavior, so important for adjustment in the crowded long-houses of the past, is still highly valued by Coast Salish Indians. Disapproval, gossiping and shaming are feared more than physical coercion. "We were taught by our grandparents to respect anybody older than ourselves, and rather to walk away than to fight," is an explanation often heard when an Indian leaves his job to avoid a personal confrontation with somebody at work. Indians trying to live up to the "old Indian ways" are at a disadvantage in the competitive modern society.

In traditional times every Coast Salish Indian, regardless of social standing, would seek supernatural power. Ardent and vigorous training led to the acquisition of guardian-spirit power, considered essential for success in life (10,11). Christian missionaries of all denominations tried to destroy this "pagan" custom. The revival of Coast Salish spirit ceremonial in recent years demonstrates that Christianity in all its currently declining forms was never able fully to substitute for the indigenous religious system with its full emphasis on individual spirit power rather than on a distant God shared by everybody. Jilek's chapter (12) develops this point in more detail.

No description of Coast Salish life, social structure and behavior could be complete without including the potlatch. Everyone, nobleman, commoner or slave, would look forward to a potlatch, and work hard to produce goods for that occasion. Nothing spurred ambition and cooperation more than the thought of the coming feast; nowhere was there a better opportunity to become known to friends and neighbours than during potlatch-time and nobody could acquire social prestige without giving a potlatch. Artistic skill, religious ceremonies, trading and gift-giving all centered around these highlights of Coast Salish life. Missionaries and government agencies fought the potlatch and when it was finally prohibited in 1884 a major incentive to work was undermined and the paraphernalia used in the ceremonies no longer held so much meaning. To a large extent, therefore, when the potlatch disappeared, Indian culture disintegrated and life on the reservations became dull and boring; apathy and despondency took hold of the Indian people.

Efforts by the Department of Indian Affairs and by the band counselors to improve life on the reservations through cooperation of the people are hampered because the Indians' exclusive loyalty is toward their own extended family, even toward those living in far-off localities. Due to marriage and traditional property rights, social ties were extended over wide areas and formed a complicated social network with boundaries no outsider could ever fully discern (13). When the White authorities laid out the Indian reservations, they unwittingly destroyed much of the intricate aboriginal social system, and the Indian people living on the newly assigned lands were not motivated to join forces to improve conditions. Since the reservations allotted the Coast Salish are

small and scattered, Indians could not avoid close contact with the surrounding White settlers. Decimated by imported contagious diseases and weakened by the loss of their traditional way of life, they now realize that in order to survive they have to come to terms with their white neighbours.

It is in this atmosphere of fatalism, frustration and tension that alcohol has come to play an important role. White people offered Indians alcohol not only in trade, but also as a gesture of friendship. The White farmers, loggers, fishermen and labourers living and working among the Coast Salish taught the Indians the pattern of heavy, rapid drinking - drinking for the purpose of becoming drunk (14,16). Drunkenness gave the Indians a feeling of self-confidence he sorely lacked when dealing with Western man; he could again experience visions taking him back to the world of his ancestors. When the potlatch was outlawed, Indians held whisky feasts instead, where barrels of whisky and rum were substituted for food. Nowadays beer and cheap wine are bought, and people come together for drinking, singing and story-telling. Unfortunately, these feasts often continue for days and after the initial friendly spirit has waned, people often display anger and aggressive behavior. Not only do these parties drain away hard-earned money, but pent-up hostility, generated in daily contact with Whites, is discharged in fierce fighting. Assault charges, injuries and car accidents are frequent and consequences which perpetuate misery and bitter feelings. Some Indians, especially those who still identify with their proud heritage and follow traditional pursuits, often refrain from drinking during work days. They recognize the dangers of alcoholism and warn others, reminding them of what Indians were like before. One Salish friend put it this way:

"Indian life was a spiritual life, that's the only way I can explain it. Everything was spiritual about the Indians. Before the White man came they had power within themselves. The priests that came West said Indians power was the Devil's power. The Whites gave us alcohol, power from outside. My grandfather said it was the Devil's power. They called it firewater; it made the poor people feel rich, the old feel young, those who drank felt happy again. My grandfather said, 'throw away that White man's power, the false spirit of alcohol.'"

Alcoholism among the young Coast Salish has become an ever-increasing problem. Overcrowding, unemployment, alienation, identity confusion, bitterness over alleged or real discrimination, poverty, family disintegration, all those harmful conditions which are exacerbated and perpetuated by alcohol abuse, keep the Indian frustrated and alcohol provides an illusory escape from a seemingly hopeless life situation.

Indian women, in traditional society nonaggressive and submissive to men, their chastity protected by strict moral codes binding both sexes, have always been at loss as how to handle the sexual aggressiveness of White men. Exploited, abandoned and left with their "half-breed" children, they feel this disapproval of their own relatives and are exposed to contempt and violent behavior by jealous Indian men. Surrounded by poverty and repeatedly faced with accidental deaths of loved ones, women often join men in drinking sprees. The resulting promiscuity and neglect

of home and children only deepens their misery, and alcohol, which was resorted to as a help against depression, makes them still more unhappy.

Alcoholism sooner or later creates conflicts with the law and causes physical and emotional ills. Indian alcoholics, channelled into medical or correctional institutions, find only temporary relief. Coast Salish Indians deeply resent being incarcerated together with White criminals, especially when their only crime was excessive drinking and disturbed behavior. Defying White authority by provocative acts, and getting in and out of prison, become a "heroic" way of life for young Indian men. Correctional rehabilitation is rarely successful, and excessive drinking is resumed upon release. With their traditional love of personal freedom, Coast Salish Indians dislike any form of institutionalization. Even in the friendly atmosphere of a general hospital, they feel uncomfortable. Often embarrassed when having to eat together with White patients, unfamiliar with hospital foods, misunderstanding hospital rules and resenting the authoritarian attitude of the staff, they want to leave as quickly as possible, hardly ever accepting any form of follow-up. Mental hospitalization is regarded as the ultimate violation of freedom, and contacts with psychiatry are therefore avoided. As one Indian phrased it, "The White man has two ways of getting rid of INDIANS who make trouble for him; he puts them in prison or in the mental hospital. Stay away from the mental hospital! In prison you know how much time you have to do, but you never know when they will let you out of the mental hospital."

Christian organizations have always tried to help INDIANS who have problems with alcohol. Established churches and evangelical sects have at least at times been successful in converting drinkers and have helped them to start a new abstinent life. But Indians easily become disappointed with the religious practices and social attitudes of white congregation members and usually become disenchanted, leaving the church and again taking up their old drinking habits.

One of the most interesting forms of proselytization among the Coast Salish Indians was the so-called "Indian State," created by the Oblate Fathers under the leadership of Bishop Durieu during the period from 1868 to 1910. Bishop Durieu was convinced that, in order for an imposed social control system to work, it was necessary to incorporate aboriginal culture traits and to reach natives to control their own people. By ascribing important new roles to members from high-ranking families, Durieu allowed preexisting status differences to continue. Chiefs of households and Indian "watchmen" reported on the people's behavior to the priests. Old Coast Salish taboos and rituals were respected insofar as they did not directly compete with Catholic dogma and practices. Those Indian rituals which offended Catholic beliefs were substituted by colourful Church festivities. For decades Bishop Durieu's Indian State was a great success. The congregations were described by independent observers as consisting of honest, industrious people of high morals, free from alcoholism or other vices (17). But the Oblate Fathers misjudged the intensity of the Coast Salish Indian's aversion to the imposed authority and the

different concepts the INDIAN had of sin and crime. Because the local chief and his helpers could not well suppress behavior which neither they nor the people regarded as wrong, the punishment for infractions tended to pass directly into the hands of the Oblate priests. The strangers therefore became the executive authority, in spite of the theoretically autonomous system. The priests constantly decreed rules which the Indians resented, such as, "You must give up Indian dancing," "You must shun the shamans," "You must stay away from potlatches," "You must give up alcoholic beverages and gambling." Latent hostility plagued Bishop Durieu's Indian State, and punishments became increasingly unpopular and, in the eyes of the Indians, out of proportion, especially for drunkenness, nonattendance at Church services and adultery. By 1910 the system fell apart, as the Indians had become acquainted with English-speaking Whites who at best laughed at the Catholic priests and taught the Indians the rough but freer manners of loggers and fishermen. At the same time the French speaking Oblate Fathers withdrew from the region, and the younger English-speaking priests were less ascetic. The Indians quickly lost respect for Catholic teachings, and their allegiance turned into disappointment and bitter accusations against the clergy. The young Indians who saw their parents' frustration, rebelled against both them and the priests. Pointedly refusing to obey Church regulations, they started to drink alcohol and break the moral code of the Catholic Church.

The first effective attempt at self-healing of alcoholism among the Coast Salish occurred in the same period that Bishop Durieu had his Indian State. In 1881, John Slocum, a Coast Salish Indian of Washington Territory, was believed to have died and come to life again with a message from Heaven for the Indians to get rid of their newly acquired vices. When he fell ill again, his wife Mary went into a violent trembling spell and, laying her shaking hands on her husband, cured him instantly. Shaking thus came to signify healing power and the disciplines of the developing religious movement became known as the "Shakers." That the Shakers were at first extremely successful in their control of alcohol abuse was reported by Wickersham in 1892: "They practice the strictest morality, sobriety and honesty. Their 500 or 600 members are models, and it is beyond question that they do not drink whisky, gamble or race and are more free from vices than any other church" (18).

At first the Shakers were an amorphous group without formal leadership. Shakerism was a form of personal salvation - anybody could come and go at ceremonies and whoever was most impressive in terms of personal qualities was looked upon as a leader according to traditional patterns. Persecution and bitter personal experiences, however, taught the followers that no Indian religious movement could survive without the approval of the White majority. In 1910 the Shakers, therefore, asked to be given the status of a Church "under the Laws of the State," and consequently needed the support of a White lawyer. One of the main weaknesses of the now legal Indian Shaker Church was that its hierarchical structure - bishops, ministers, elders and missionaries - "has been superimposed upon a native religious movement by a White man whose

model was a generic Protestant Church" (19). The Coast Salish Indian of the Shaker congregations found it impossible to accept a bishop or minister as a leader, just because he had been nominally elected. The consequence was that several congregations had different bishops. Bitter quarrels evolved among them about the doctrines of the Church. Rather than facing controversial issues by a demand for unity, the alternative of avoiding friction by dividing the group was preferred, as this was custom in Coast Salish culture. In the 1930s came a final split into two factions; those who wanted to emulate Christian Churches (long ceremonies with Bible reading, "White" hymns, piano music and English language) and those who wanted to keep the Indian tradition (short services with more shaking and dancing, use of indigenous language and strong emphasis on healing practices). The former group maintains friendly relations with the Pentecostal Church and other Western evangelical sects; they invite White members of these sects to their church and often attend White services. This branch of the Shakers has practically disappeared as a specific Indian Church (20). The other branch subscribes to anti-White attitudes. There is a pronounced feeling among these Shakers that their religion belongs to the Indians. But currently even this brand of Shakerism is losing adherents. Indians who want to stress their Indianness are apt to participate in the revived spirit-dance ceremonial which holds more prestige among the Indians of today than the Shaker Church.

It was not until the early 1960s that the friendly members of Alcoholics Anonymous suggested inviting Coast Salish Indians to participate in their meetings. The positive response they received was of great surprise to many A.A. members since experience in other areas had shown that North American Indians are rarely interested in A.A. It has been reported that they generally dislike the religious overtones of A.A. and the confession-like speeches expected from members. There seems to be a general agreement among investigators that North American Indians - except for those completely Westernized - tend to have a strong disinclination to talk publicly about their personal problems and weaknesses (21-24).

There are historical reasons for the support A.A. has received among the Coast Salish Indians. In traditional Coast Salish culture a person's social position depended to a great extent on his knowledge of the moral code and his personal conduct. The moral standing and behavior especially of high-ranking persons was of public concern; their vices and virtues were often publicly discussed during potlatch gatherings. Reporting on a "Confession Dance" among the Okanagan Salish tribe, Spier (25) tells how a chief in times of stress would gather his people in a house. There he would place them in a circle and while they were singing and swaying rhythmically, he would confess his wrongdoing and call on each in turn to do the same. The Confession Dance was part of the Prophet Dance of the plateau which spread to the Coast Salish region shortly before the arrival of the first missionaries. Hill-Tout (26) describes similar customs of the Coast Salish, practiced generations before their first contact with Whites. Here, as in the Okanagan, the occasions for these religious ceremonies were either public calamities, such as epidemics, famine, earthquake, violent

storms and the like, or the anticipation of some sort of deprivation, such as loss of status and goods, imposed sociocultural changes or conquest by a more powerful tribe. The chief would lead the prayers and confessions of the people to invoke the pity of the supernatural forces or to strengthen his own position. At the close of the dancing the chief would challenge others to place their hands on the breast and repent of evil deeds and thoughts.

The "dreamers" of the Smohalla region (1850-1892) had similar rituals. While people were dancing in a circle, clapping their hands, anyone who wished to speak could step forward and "tell his story" (27) or his dreams which were commented upon by the "high Priest" (28). A form of confession is also practiced in the Shaker Church. When a novice at a Shaker ceremony feels his conversion coming and begins to shake, he will step in front of the congregation and testify on his "sinful" life, revealing whatever he intends to do in order to deserve a new life in the Shaker Church.

One can therefore conclude that confession-like public speeches were not new or offensive to the Coast Salish, but rather were traditionally known to have a self-healing purpose. The fact that A.A. is a voluntary and rather loosely organized group of people without established leaders appeals to the free-spirited Coast Salish Indians. The only requirement for becoming a member of A.A. is that person's desire to stop drinking. One is free to join and leave as one wishes. "Nobody stands up in A.A. and tells you what to do," explained an Indian A.A. member. "If you want to be the leader in a meeting, you take over; next time it might be another guy."

Why then have Indian members shown the tendency to split off from the general A.A. to form new, specifically Indian groups? Several reasons can be discerned for this. Indian men usually have a long history of alcoholism before they come to A.A. Their lives have been marred by charges, loss of jobs, prison terms and other conflicts with society. Their motive for seeking abstinence is not so much seeing anything wrong in being drunk, as having the desire to stop the constant interference by White authority into their private lives. Full of resentment toward the Whites, but shy without alcohol, Indian men usually remain quiet and withdrawn in A.A. meetings and most non-Indian members are unaware of their presence. Thoughtless "jokes" by White participants such as, "It's harder to sober up an Indian than to drink tomato juice for a whole year," or "A dead Indian is better than a drunken Indian," suffice to shatter any goodwill the Indian has built up.

Since the disruptive effect of alcoholism on family life is even more pronounced when women drink, there is a tendency for Indian women to seek help earlier than do their male counterparts. But while Indian men are easily overlooked in A.A., the sudden influx of Indian women into the predominantly male audience of most A.A. groups is certainly noticed. The old pattern of White men seducing Indian women with the help of liquor is difficult to break, even when liquor is only talked about. Indian men look with suspicion upon the A.A. friendships between their women and White members. Remarks by Indian women regarding their White sponsors,

such as, "I love him A.A.-wise, not otherwise," or "The White guys find it difficult to distinguish between the old love and the clean brotherly love they're supposed to have for us in A.A.," intensifies the anxiety felt by Indian men. To avoid further complications, Indian men advocate separate A.A. groups, preferably located on the reservations where they can better control their womenfolk. They will justify their desire to organize Indian A.A. meetings by criticizing the attitude of White members: "The Whites may be friendly in the meetings, but they never greet us Indians on the street," "White people joke too much, they even make fun of God, they laugh at us when we cry in A.A." Another obstacle to joint A.A. meetings is the Indian indifference toward anonymity: "Anonymity does not bother me; it makes no difference whether it gets out of this room or not, because most of my people know I am here anyway. Our people always know what's going on." The general A.A. group is accused of being seclusive and cold; anonymity is regarded as a negative principle. An Indian A.A. member explained, "In our [Indian] group it seems like a family sharing everything with each other. Sometimes we take our teenagers along, they come with their parents. We like them to take part in our problems; they should know about it. The White A.A. is too anonymous; it's easier that way, but it is against our principle of openness."

By holding A.A. meetings in small localities on the reservations, a natural segregation began to take place. Accustomed to travelling long distances to meet with family members, Indian do not mind going from one reservation to another to attend A.A. meetings even on short notice, whereas non-Indian members like regular meetings in one location, preferably in the town or in the city where anonymity is better preserved.

General A.A. meetings start at a certain hour and members are expected to arrive on time. There is usually a short coffee-break and meetings are terminated after 2 hours. At Indian A.A. meetings, members come and go as they please. The meeting is constantly interrupted by people entering and leaving, mothers bring their babies and small children, teenagers their friends. Young people having private fun in a corner, or children crying and doors being slammed, irritate non-Indian speakers, while Indian members feel relaxed and at home. Coffee-breaks are drawn-out affairs and the chairman often has difficulty getting the meeting going again. There is no time limit to speechmaking and people will disband only when overcome by fatigue.

When the INDIANS are among themselves at A.A. meetings they feel able to discuss their difficult relationship with Whites and to ventilate their hurt and bitter feelings, something they would be reluctant to do in general A.A. meetings when White people are in the majority. An Indian woman, when asked to speak in a general A.A. meeting, stood in front of the audience unable to say a word. Embarrassed and with tears in her eyes she finally gave up and returned to her seat. Later at an Indian A.A. gathering she admitted,

"I was too shy to speak in front of White people. That's why I started to drink in the first place. I feel more relaxed here and I can talk about the degradation a woman goes through when on booze. It is very pitiful. White men

abuse Indian women more than the Indian men would abuse White women. We have felt discrimination for a long, long time. That's why we close our mind to the White people. I can't see any way to fight. When we get hurt we slide back into our shell, into that old 'Indian feeling,' that bitterness about what the White man has done to us."

Steps 4 to 9 of A.A. encourage the members to take personal inventory and call for a fearless review of their wrongdoing toward others. According to custom, Coast Salish women readily take these steps and their speeches often have a flavour off self-accusation. For example,

"We used to get the White guys down to the reservation, and then we would chase them away and take their beer. I would drink and drink until I forgot everything around me, until I felt no hunger and no pain. But I also forgot my children. I became a slut not worthy to be called a human being. I am sorry to say that my children were ashamed of their own mother."

Self-accusation often turns into a sort of bragging when Indian men are telling their stories. An example is,

"That was poor old me, you know. The house burnt down; I lost my wife through booze. I was two years on Skid Row, several times in the bucket, in prison and in correctional camps. I am trying to find a camp where I have not yet been. I always did everything the hard way; hard work, hard drinking. I tormented myself; I went through many hospitals. No White doctor knew how to help me. They thought I would lose my mind completely. But I still have enough brain left to stay sober in A.A. Any man who has been through what I have been through learns something. It might be hard, but it might be useful. I think I have become a better Indian man for it."

As the Coast Salish Indians are becoming more experienced in articulating their feelings in their A.A. meetings, they have become bolder in their criticism of the White man. But in the process of rejecting Western man and his way of life, Indians have had to turn inward and look for strength within themselves. The new pan-Indian ideology and the revived spirit-dance ceremonial remind the Coast Salish Indians of their half-forgotten cultural heritage. Increasingly the rehabilitated Indian alcoholics are beginning to shape their A.A. meetings according to traditional patterns. In their A.A. speeches one can recognize a mythical theme: the motif of redemption through death and rebirth. A.A. speeches have become dramatic accounts of alcohol's nearly having killed the drinker before he found his new life in A.A. To many Coast Salish with alcohol problems, Indian A.A. has become a substitute church, combining elements of the former guardian-spirit quest and the Catholic Church, as well as the Shaker religion. They regard the so-called "Big Book" of A.A. as their new Bible and the Twelve Steps to Sobriety as their Twelve Commandments. At the end of a meeting when the "Serenity Prayer" is said, INDIANS, who call it "sobriety prayer," often stand up and, with folded hands, closed eyes and bent heads, pray as in church, ending the prayer with a loud "Amen," which is not customary in general A.A. meetings. The belief in one Christian God, remote and impersonal, has never held

great appeal for the Coast Salish Indians, and has gradually been incorporated into more familiar concepts. According to one recovered alcoholic, "In olden days it was spirit power, my Indian Power, who told me what to do. In English it is God, so I can take it both ways. IN the Shaker Church it is my Shake which gives me power to heal; in A.A. it is my Higher Power who helps me stay sober; it is all the same thing."

As does the Coast Salish spirit-dancer, the Indian A.A. member counts his age from the day he was "reborn" into the new way of life. "A.A. way of life is like the Indian way of life - it was here long before the White man came." Each year the reformed alcoholic has a "birthday" in A.A., on the anniversary of the day he stopped drinking, and it is celebrated during an Indian A.A. meeting much like the old potlatch feast. The birthday celebrant will bring along to "his" meeting as many relatives and friends as he can muster. Female relatives take along food and offer it to everybody present, while friends try to outdo each other in speeches praising the celebrant, his virtues and new way of life.

Having become abstinent, some young Indians might join traditional Indian summer games and canoe races, which require abstinence. Others seek initiation into spirit-dancing or at least attend as spectators at the ceremonials where drunken behavior and alcohol consumption are strictly forbidden. In this way certain elements of traditional Coast Salish culture are reintegrated into the life of Indian A.A. members. Precontact times now symbolize to the young a "golden Age" when Indian life was happy and free. The memory of the great past helps to reestablish the self-respect which had been dealt a shattering blow by the impact of Westernization. INDIANS in their A.A. meetings have been able to create a genuine atmosphere, different from that of general A.A. "Our White friends trained us in A.A. and gave us the knowledge about how to run the meetings. Now we have reshaped it and adapted it to our culture." Once Indian A.A. groups were firmly established, Indians began to invite White A.A. members to their meetings where the Indians now feel confident since they are in the majority. Here is a constellation resembling the era when Indian culture was at its zenith, when proud Indian hosts invited the first White men into their homes. Simon Fraser (29), the first White explorer to meet the Coast Salish Indians, wrote, "these Indians showed us every possible mark of kindness; having taken up our quarters with them for the night, they gave us plenty to eat and entertained us with a variety of songs, dances, etc. during the evening."

From a position of strength, the Indians can again offer the White man a helping hand and meet with him on an even footing. The attitude of the non-Indian A.A. members reinforces the Indian's feelings of equality and self-respect, because most Whites who accept their invitation do so for a positive reason. One White A.A. member noted,

"I used to go to our own A.A. meetings for years. I would listen to the speeches and despise the speakers. I felt lonely even in A.A. and I could not stop drinking. When I came to your [Indian] group it was different. I feel you are true friends. Your talks really sink in. I feel that what you say is honest.

Through you people I have gained sobriety. You have taught me to be honest within myself. Your friendship has kept me from killing myself. I thank every one of you Indian friends for my sobriety.

Indian A.A. members have found a new cultural identity in their Indian A.A. groups. They have shown a way of resolving the Indian - White conflict, which in itself is one of the major factors in Indian alcohol abuse. At the onset of Indian - White contact, it was the Whites who introduced alcohol to facilitate acculturation of the Indians to the Western life-styles. Now the Indians are beginning to show the non-Indians a different way of coexisting. With the mutual recognition of their cultural distinction, a basis for friendship and cooperation between the two groups is laid, this time in their common rejection of alcohol. The development of a therapeutic Indian-style A.A. again demonstrates that any antialcoholism program in order to be successful must be based on the Indian's own initiative. Only when the Indian people can regain their cultural identity will they have the inner strength necessary to fight alcoholism.

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