

THE MEDICINE HORSE WAY: THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF THE AMERICAS AND THEIR TRADITIONAL HORSES

By Yvette Collin



Comanche man with herd of Native-line horses at Sacred Way Sanctuary. (Photo taken by Goode Dethero.)

“... Wind Horse knew that the wound that the Boy had was one that could not be fixed or healed. He was taking the boy to the place of the Indian Hunting Ground. This place was where all were made whole and had no fear or need. Wind Horse felt sadness that one as young as this Boy had to go to the Ground ... As they traveled, the Boy noticed that the trail was always changing. First it was as it was when the Boy had been hurt, then it was as it was when he had been happy. Then it was the time when he had not been born. Soon he saw things that he did not recognize... Wind Horse turned his head and nuzzled the Boy’s head. He began to slow, for the end of the journey was near. The Boy looked up and saw the home of those who had gone before ... the Boy realized that he had two good legs and that all of his wounds, hunger, need and hurt, were gone.”¹

Excerpt from the Choctaw story called *The Tale of the Wind Horse*, (Pinti, p. 2).

¹ The full story of the Wind Horse addresses both the acquisition of the horse for the Choctaw Peoples (as a wild horse made a choice to give itself in friendship to the Native Peoples long ago) as well as detailing the way in which the horse would serve to help The People to spiritually find their way “home” to the next world, a place where the boy “had two good legs and ... all of his wounds, hunger, need and hurt, were gone.” The injury from which this young boy suffered was serious, as his foot was cut off. Such an injury was often fatal at the time. It has been documented that the horse was considered so important to the Choctaw Peoples, that they buried the deceased with their horses “so that they would have something to ride in the afterlife” (Carson, p. 504).



The Ute Indians were believed to have created these horse petroglyphs, which are located in Segoe Canyon, Utah. Such depictions were usually created during prayer ceremonies, such as vision quests. (Photo taken from: <http://www.scienceviews.com/indian/segocanyon.html>)

In the Beginning...

Before colonization and for a period thereafter, “Horse Medicine” or “Spirit Horse Medicine” played a predominant role in many Native American societies and cultures. Today, this concept is often represented in paintings, drawings, and Native arts and crafts, yet few people remember what it was or how it worked for their ancestors and this four-legged companion. Many years ago I experienced this traditional medicine for myself, and have made changes in my life in order to make it available to others. This paper will detail some of my

understanding of how this medicine works, provide first-hand examples of Spirit Horse Medicine, as well as cite and provide context for other textual references to “Horse Medicine” in Native America.

Although the dominant culture’s written history has thus far assumed that the Spanish and Portuguese explorers and conquistadors reintroduced the horse to the Americas and its original inhabitants, the oral history of many tribes claims otherwise.² Likewise, there are ceremonial songs³ and stories regarding the horse that predate the arrival of the Europeans to the Americas,⁴ as well as horse petroglyphs and artifacts that have been found in many sacred Native American sites throughout the continents that are also pre-Columbian (before 1500 AD).⁵ What was this medicine, how did it work, and what did it mean for the Peoples who carried it?

² “Dakota/Lakota Elders as well as many other Indian nations ... contend that according to their oral history, the North American horse survived the Ice Age, and that they had developed a horse culture long before the arrival of Europeans, and, furthermore, that these same distinct ponys (*sic*) continued to thrive on the prairies until the latter part of the XIXth (19th) century, when the U.S. government ordered them rounded up and destroyed to prevent Indians from leaving the newly-created reservations” (Henderson, p. 1).

³ A description of the “Horse Men” and their songs is provided in a Cheyenne Indian account as detailed by John Stands In Timber: “He said one time the Horse Men came together to worship in their way. This Horse Worship had come from the Apaches who originated it. The Cheyennes say they were together with the Apaches in the South at some time, and a few of them went through the ceremony and became members of that Lodge. *Na-a-mo* they called it – Horse Men... these men came together and put up a big tepee and had a lot of food there, and they sang the Horse Medicine songs. There were words in them mentioning the buckskin and blue horses that were the first obtained by the Cheyennes” (Stands In Timber and Liberty, p. 102-103).

⁴ According to Cheyenne Indian oral history, the prophet Sweet Medicine foretold the coming of the horse to The People: “... there will be another animal you must learn to use. It has a shaggy neck and a tale almost touching the ground. Its hooves are round. This animal will carry you on its back and help you in many ways ... so fear him not” (Stands In Timber and Liberty, p. 40).

⁵ Photographic examples of pre-Columbian (before AD1500) horse petroglyphs and effigies can be found throughout Farley’s book titled: *In Plain Sight: Old World Records In Ancient America*.



“Wind Rider” by Jd Challenger. (Photo courtesy of Barry Norris Studio.)

A Personal Journey:

Grandchild: “Grandfather, please teach me about the Spirit Horse.”

Grandfather: ... The Spirit Horse was one of Creator’s great gifts to mankind. When a person cannot connect to Creator for whatever reason, such a horse will spiritually take you on its back and carry you to Us, The Grandmothers and the Grandfathers ... Many of your People ... once understood this powerful medicine. They knew that the Spirit Horse could only help you to connect to Creator in this way if it chose to do so of its own free will. You cannot ‘make’ a Spirit Horse love you in this way. Nothing you can take from such horses can make them do this. Real ‘Medicine’ from Heaven cannot be taken, bought, or sold. It must be gifted from the heart. These sacred animals must love you and accept you as one of their own by choice.”

Excerpt from *The SpiritHorse: The Creator’s Gift to Mankind* (Medicine Road, p.1).

In 2006, my world would be forever changed. I was drugged (overdosed in an attempt to kill me), gang raped, and left for dead. Although my physical body would survive this tragedy, there was no promise of a “normal life” available to me after this occurred. I suffered from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), my nervous system was destroyed, the damage to my organs was severe, and I was unable to eat or sleep in any sustainable fashion. On top of this, there were times when I reached such a state of hopelessness that I could not see a way free from my pain, terror, and self-loathing.

The medical experts who tried to help me were kind, yet firm: modern medicine had no cure for people like myself, who had suffered the unimaginable and yet managed to survive. Panic attacks that started with rage and ended with me rocking back and forth, back and forth, and back and forth, were a norm. I was a mother to a young child, yet I could not care for him. I was a wife, yet I could not feel anything

but horror. I would look into the mirror and see a mere shell of a woman. Most of the time, I did not understand why I had survived the ordeal at all.

As I was not agreeable to taking the heavy sedatives that the medical professionals recommended and I was open to more holistic methods of healing, I accepted a gift from a friend who served his People as a medicine man on a neighboring Indian reservation.⁶ This gift was a four-day-old filly and her mother, a red roan mare. This mare was his “spirit horse,” which he had identified as mine in a vision. Although I knew nothing about horses, I seemed to be able to forget my hopelessness and self-loathing enough to cross the street to the reservation, feed them in a timely fashion, and to be concerned for their care and wellbeing.

Within a few months time my family was able to secure some land, erect fencing, and move “Nakota Wind” and “Cheyenne Faith” to their new home on our land in a mountain canyon meadow. Although I could feel little more than terror on most days, during my time with these animals I experienced moments where I was able to believe that I was loved and safe.⁷ During such times, I could access my memories more readily, my PTSD symptoms lessened, and my feelings of hopelessness were greatly reduced. My physical injuries also began to heal more rapidly. At times, the bursts of energy

that I felt coming through these animals and into my mind and body threatened to knock me to my knees.⁸

On page 149 of the book *Something Bad Happened and I Can't Feel God Anymore: The Resurrection of Women*, I offer a description of how these creatures helped me to heal:

The truth was that I was afraid of most things ... And if I was afraid, Heaven could not answer my prayers and perform the healing work that I needed done. My fear blocked their ability to enter me and fill me with God's love. Thankfully, Heaven knew that my fear would be replaced with love when I was around these beautiful and sensitive creatures ... I cried quietly to myself many times as I brushed Nakota's reddish mane and rubbed her face. In order to heal, it was critical that I allow myself to feel what had been done to me. Much of this part of the process occurred in this mountain meadow with this mare, her foal, and the eagles, ravens, and other birds that swirled above us.

⁶ My maternal grandmother was Mayan and had grown up in a small village community. As she was trained in her People's traditional medicinal practices, I was exposed to this from a very young age. Therefore, I was more comfortable seeking alternative methods of treatment that did not involve hospitals or mainstream Western medicine.

⁷ One day while I was delivering their hay, filling their water tank, and preparing to brush them, I noticed that the mare's body was tense and her ears were “at attention.” She positioned herself in front of her filly and me. My husband motioned to me and yelled, “Bear! Get back into the cabin!” As the boar bear stood on his hind legs and roared, she stomped her hooves into the earth and charged once, twice, and three times. The bear sniffed the air, roared again, turned to leave, and headed deep into the high mountain canyon.

⁸ Years later, in an attempt to better explain to others the powerful waves of energy that came from my horses into me, I began researching modern-day science around equines and/or the brain. Scientists have discovered that horses emit “alpha waves” – the same waves emitted by humans during prayer - and they are beginning to recognize that the emission of such waves can be beneficial in treating brain injuries. They call this type of therapy/treatment “Neurofeedback,” which is defined as: “biofeedback for the brain and the body. It is a painless and drug-free way of helping an injured brain return to a healthy state ... Faster brainwaves focus attention, enable planning, organization, and quick wits.... After trauma, fever, bad diet, or exposure to drugs/toxins, brainwaves may slow to whatever energy level can be supported based on available nutrients ... Neurofeedback can reawaken and help the brain, and the body it controls, along the road to recovery” (Noble Acres: Horses Helping Humans, p. 1-2).



“Cheyenne Faith” and author at Sacred Way Sanctuary in Florence, Alabama. (Photo taken by Goode Dethero.)

Healing Work with Equines Today Versus Traditional Native Practices:

Utilizing horses to help people with mental health and/or behavioral issues - especially children or young adults - has become popular in today’s world.⁹ Equine Assisted Therapy (EAT) is defined as “the practice of using horses for emotional growth” (Equine-psychotherapy.com, p. 1). A description of this type of health service is offered on page 1 of *The Hope Youth Website*:

A powerful and effective therapeutic approach that has an incredible impact on individuals, youth, families, and groups ... It addresses a variety of mental health and behavioral issues, including Attention Deficit Disorder, Substance Abuse, Eating Disorders, Abuse

Issues, Depression, Anxiety, Relationship Problems and Communication.

However, many Native cultures traditionally developed a much deeper relationship with the horse than simply utilizing them to help “[build] confidence, [improve] communication, and [give] personal insights ...” (Equine-psychotherapy.com, p. 1). For many tribes, the horse was understood to be a gift from the Creator that served as a spiritual companion and an amplifier for powerful healing energy and divine messages.¹⁰

⁹ “Currently there are over 800 programs employing equines in assisted learning, couples counseling, individual therapy, organizational leadership, addiction counseling, trauma counseling, at-risk behavior, and developmental and physical disabilities” (McConnell, p. 4).

¹⁰ A Nakota Indian Elder, who has given me permission to pass this information forward, once explained to me that it was traditional practice for those tribal medicine people or Holy People who understood “Horse Medicine” to place or stake four “medicine horses” around the area in which they were praying or spiritually “working.” One horse would stand to the west, one to the north, one to the east, and one to the south in order to “hold” the space while healing work was taking place. Doing this served to protect the person praying to be used as a vessel for the Ancestors (the medicine person/Holy Person) and the person receiving help, from anything that might seek to prevent the healing from occurring. It was preferable to place the animals’ favorite feed in piles located in each of the four directions, rather than staking the animals to the ground. This way the animals were present “by choice,” which strengthened the ability for the Ancestors (or The Holy Spirit in Christian terms) to fully use the horses as vessels.

Black Elk, a Lakota Holy Man who was born in the 1860s, describes the way in which the spiritual essence of the horse came to him in a vision and helped to heal him from his fear. Neihardt describes the way in which Black Elk's vision was interpreted on page 123 of *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*:

I was so afraid of being afraid of everything that I told him about my vision, and when I was through he looked long at me and said: "Ah-h-h-h!", meaning that he was much surprised. Then he said to me: "Nephew, I know now what the trouble is! You must do what the bay horse in your vision wanted you to do. You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see. Then the fear will leave you ... So we began to get ready for the horse dance."¹¹

Another example of the use of the horse in traditional Native American healing ceremonies is detailed in pages 65-66 in Deloria's book titled *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men*:

A horse, which had flannel tied around his neck and calico and feathers around his mane, was tied to the pole. Paint was put on, beginning from his mane and passing down the entire back, and the top of his nose was reddened ... After several songs, the performer walked to the horse, untied him, and brought the rope to the lodge (tipi)... the shaman unpinned the front of the lodge, so that the horse could enter.¹² At the next intonation of the song, the horse walked into the lodge and began smelling the sick man ... Whenever the horse took a breath, smoke of various colors – blue, red, black – issued from his mouth ... The horse walked out to the pole and stood facing the lodge entrance. The patient suddenly felt like rising...

Spirit Horse Medicine ... How it Works:

There are a number of perspectives and concepts that serve as foundations for "Horse Medicine." First, most cultures that were indigenous to the Americas understood that the root of diseases or illnesses (such as the majority of those being treated by modern day Equine Assisted Therapies), was spiritual in nature. Therefore, in order for a cure to be obtained, the spiritual had to be addressed, as well as the mental and the physical, and a balance between



McKee Springs petroglyph, Dinosaur National Monument, Utah. This is an image of a being holding, carrying, or bringing a spiral (a Divine Being) for The People. (Photo taken from: http://www.tripadvisor.com/LocationPhotoDirectLink-g57155-d145736-i86078132-Dinosaur_National_Monument-Vernal_Utah.html)

¹¹ Black Elk's horse dance involved "four black horses to represent the west; four white horses for the north; four sorrels for the east; four buckskins for the south ... and a bay horse for [Black Elk] to ride, as in [his] vision" (Neihardt, p. 125).

¹² In the past, it was not uncommon for horses to enter the tipis and/or stay the night in the tipis with their human companions when healing work or spiritual preparation for ceremony or battle was taking place. Indeed, in some tribes even the standard tipi size changed over time to accommodate this. "Originally, [some] tipis were roughly twelve feet high, but when [certain] Native American [Peoples] acquired horses, they doubled the height in order to fit the horses" (people.ucls.uchicago.edu, p. 1).

these elements achieved. Okozi, Nael and Cruza-Guet describe this perspective of health on page 3 of their paper titled *Promoting the Wellbeing of Indigenous People in Mental Health and Education* as follows:

American Indians and Alaskan Natives, as many other indigenous peoples throughout the world, understand ‘wellness’ holistically, that is, in terms of a combination of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements (Patel, 1995; Rice, 2003).

Kawagley explains the worldview of his People in the following manner: “The original Yupiaq based

their philosophy and lifeways on maintaining and sustaining a balance among the human, natural, and spiritual worlds” (Kawagley, p. 13). Along with this holistic view of health and wellbeing, many Indigenous cultures understood that fear and chemicals in the system served to “block” or prevent a person from experiencing the state of being referred to by many as “Heaven,” or a “place of complete health, wellbeing, peace, and connection to the Creator.”¹³

Many Native American tribes traditionally have different names to describe the concept of “healing spirits,” or beings of light, which are sent by the



Native-line horse herd at Sacred Way Sanctuary. (Photo by Goode Dethero.)

¹³ Alcohol or drug use as is experienced today in modern culture, was not an element of the majority of Native American cultures before contact with European cultures. This was not because they could not figure out how to make it, but because it was understood to sever one’s spiritual connection to the Creator and/or the Ancestors (The Holy Spirit). My traditional teachings in this area from my culture and indigenous ancestors are as follows: “Mankind was perfectly designed by Creator to hold Him and what is of Him. Traditionally, our people understood how to create the conditions within themselves necessary to connect to Creator. His love entered from the top of our heads and exited from our hearts. It came directly from Heaven into us and from us into another” (Medicine Road, p. 76). Chemical substances, such as those used by recreational drug and alcohol users, offer a poor facsimile to this feeling. Once Native Peoples in the Americas no longer had access to their sacred places, the ceremonies they used to connect, and creatures such as their traditional horses (due to U.S. government policies), many believed that the only way they could achieve the feeling of “spiritual connection” was through the use of outside substances.

Creator to intervene on our behalf here in this world.¹⁴ However, one ancient symbol that has universally been used to depict this idea or concept by indigenous cultures throughout the world is the spiral. As these “beings of light” were seen to move at very rapid speeds (as light can), it was understood that in order to “stay” in this world and answer prayers most effectively, a willing vessel was needed that could “hold them” for a moment or a period of time. The “ideal vessel” differed from tribe to tribe. Anything that held life or once held life could be used, such as water, certain types of stone, animal skins, and wood. The most powerful vessels of all were understood to be those living animals or people who chose to serve in this manner out of selfless love, as their state of being was consistent with that of the “beings of light.”¹⁵



*Traditional Southeastern Native horses with young boy at Sacred Way Sanctuary in Florence, Alabama.
(Photo taken by Goode Dethero.)*

¹⁴In Christian terms, these beings are referred to as “Angels” or “The Holy Spirit,” in some Asian cultures they are referred to as “Enlightened Beings” (as translated into English), and in the Plains Indian cultures they are referred to as “The Grandmothers and the Grandfathers” (as translated into English) or simply as “the spirits” (as translated into English).

¹⁵ The Anasazi Peoples traditionally used clay vessels filled with water, the Mayan Peoples chose to build their temples out of limestone (which is compiled of fossilized sea creatures and could therefore hold these beings of light), and many of the Pueblo Peoples use crystals in their healing work. These materials serve as “vessels” to hold the Ancestors. Many other Peoples used the mineral known as gypsum for this same purpose.

I was taught by a Cheyenne elder, who has given me permission to pass this traditional knowledge forward, that there were creatures that were specifically sent by the Creator with the capacity to be spiritual companions to mankind. The horse was one of these animals, as it was created with the ability and capacity to love and respond to human beings as it would love and respond to its own kind. Horses in the wild commit to their herd mates for life, and a stallion will fight to the death to protect his mares and his foals.¹⁶ His commitment is absolute, and there is no hesitation on his part. The Native Peoples with “Spirit Horse Medicine” understood that if given the proper conditions to allow for this, the horse would also love and commit to a person in this way. When this occurs, the Ancestors, beings of light, spirits, or The Holy Spirit, have a completely open and willing vessel through which they are able to work. As long as the person receiving the help had no fear and possessed some love and/or faith while this was occurring, some of the most powerful healing of all could be performed.

Conclusion:

The world is beginning to understand that there is something special between horse and mankind, and that it is not just that the animal can be physically and economically useful. Today, there are many children, youth, veterans, and others in need of healing who are benefiting from being able to spend time with these creatures in safe and loving environments. In an attempt to measure and record, Western science is now endeavoring to understand what it is about the “horse and man” combination that is enabling certain patients to move forward, when other more mainstream treatments have failed.

Although most Native American cultures did not feel the need to understand everything about The Great Mystery (Creator), and they did not seek, feel the need, or see the value, in measuring and recording in the same manner as Western science, these tribes had thousands of years during which to perfect their spiritual and healthcare practices. They knew what worked and how to replicate the conditions for it to reoccur.

Personally, I am eternally grateful for the gift of “Spirit Horse Medicine.” For at a time in my life when I needed it most and was deemed incurable by Western science, the wisdom of my ancestors came through for me. Like my Cheyenne, Nakota, and Mayan ancestors, and many other Native Peoples before me, I was able to receive spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical healing to a level that modern medicine believed to be impossible. This miracle was through the love of a creature that much of the world still believes to be little more than property.

Pilamaya!

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¹⁶ My family lives among more than 100 Native-line horses. We try hard to simulate the conditions these animals would experience in the wild with regard to their ability to commit to each other and care for each other. Our stallions stay with their mares year-round, and once the mares have chosen their mates and family units, they remain there as long as they are willing and able. Due to this, we witness the love and commitment they have for each other on a daily basis. Contrary to what the mainstream culture believes, stallions will commit to their mares for life if they are allowed the opportunity to do so.



Yvette J. Collin is of Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Mayan descent on her mother's side, and Nakota, Choctaw, and European descent on her father's side. Mrs. Collin is a doctoral candidate and a Fellow at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Her research is focused on the historical, traditional, and spiritual relationships between the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and the horse. Her family founded Sacred Way Sanctuary (www.sacredwaysanctuary.org), which is located in Florence, Alabama. They have spent years tracing the oral history and spiritual practices of many of the Native American Peoples with regard to their traditional horse, and gathering representatives of what is left of these endangered creatures for preservation. She is a wife, and mother of five children.

Mrs. Collin received her B.A. from The Johns Hopkins University (Writing Seminars), and a Joint M.A. from New York University (Journalism and Latin American Caribbean Studies.) She has been the recipient of numerous scholarships, and was granted Fellowships at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks in 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. She is an award-winning journalist, and has held various executive positions at non-profit institutions around the United States. She practices her People's traditional ways, and strives each day to follow in the footsteps of her ancestors.

Mrs. Collin has lectured throughout the United States on these subjects, as well as in China and Vietnam. *The Spirit Horse Medicine Way* was first presented at the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) in May of 2014.

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