

7

“I Came to Tell You of My Life”: Narrative Expositions of “Mental Health” in an American Indian Community

Joseph P. Gone

In the summer of 1994, I inaugurated a series of scholarly investigations concerning the relationship between culture and mental health among my own people, the Gros Ventre of the Fort Belknap Indian reservation in north central Montana.¹ Since then, whether formulating Gros Ventre cultural identity in distinctively Gros Ventre terms (J. P. Gone, 1996, 1999, 2006b; J. P. Gone, Miller, & Rappaport, 1999) or comparing Gros Ventre community discourse with dominant professional discourse regarding psychological distress and its amelioration (J. P. Gone, 2004a, 2006c, 2007, 2008b), narrative representations of self, identity, social relations, community history, and persistent spirituality have figured centrally in my endeavor to “give voice” to an indigenous tradition. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that this tradition—my community’s tradition, my own tradition—was all but decimated by Euro-American colonization. Thus, the significance of recovering our collective voice and making it resound on the northern Plains once more lies in the transformative power of self-expression. For it is self-expression,

¹ These investigations proceeded in the context of several years of superlative mentorship offered by Julian Rappaport in his capacity as my graduate advisor at the University of Illinois. My other formal graduate advisor, the developmental cultural psychologist Peggy J. Miller, similarly played an extremely significant role in shaping and directing these investigations.

as just one manifestation of self-determination, that retains the power to refashion coherence in the plan and purpose of a people, to rebuild connectedness between community members and with outsiders, and to rechart lines of cultural continuity to an indigenous way of life across the colonial abyss of history. Insofar as the epidemic of distress, despair, and demoralization that afflicts so many in my community emerged in the wake of a strategic extermination of the bison, a punishing confinement to our reservation, and a coerced assimilation to Euro-American values and beliefs, some of us audaciously imagine that our restoration to wellness will occur through processes of “decolonization” (Wilson & Yellow Bird, 2005). Decolonization is simply the reflective, intentional, and collective self-examination undertaken by a formerly colonized people that actively sustains their reassertion of continuity with the pre-colonial past toward a distinctive and purposeful post-colonial future.

As one contribution to the decolonization effort, this chapter will literally recover the voice of one of our people’s most influential 19th-century ritual leaders. In doing so, I intend to recapture the contours of social, psychological, and spiritual experience that once constituted distinctive kinds of Gros Ventre subjectivity (i.e., lived and felt engagements with the world) and that might today inspire the formulation of therapeutic practices and processes uniquely suited for our vibrant restoration to wellness. More specifically, in this chapter I will first recount an extended vignette concerning the final days of our most accomplished Gros Ventre medicine person, Buffalo Bull Lodge. Next, I will undertake a cultural analysis of one genre of Gros Ventre narrative exemplified by the final words of Bull Lodge—namely, the recounting of war stories as a particular instance of the narrative recirculation of *vitality*. In doing so, I will contextualize such *communications of vitality* in terms of several features of Gros Ventre cosmology and associated ethnopsychology, some of which persist among contemporary Gros Ventres today. Subsequently, I will explore how a proper appreciation of this indigenous ethnopsychology might give rise to an alternative construal of the “therapeutic” among mental health professionals and related service providers who work in our community. Finally, I will conclude with a few general observations regarding the promise of community psychology—especially in its recognition and celebration of narrative and empowerment—for assisting contemporary Native American communities in their efforts toward collective decolonization and communal healing.

CONFRONTING DEATH: THE FINAL WORDS OF BULL LODGE

In the winter of 1886, the prominent Gros Ventre leader Bull Lodge (ca. 1802–1886) was informed in a dream that his “time here on this earth”

had ended, that he had but 8 days of life remaining, and that he should put his affairs in order (F. P. Gone, 1942). On the night that he was to die, Bull Lodge gathered his family in his lodge, nestled his infant granddaughters on the bed beside him, and began to talk (*see* J. P. Gone, 2006a, for an extended treatment). According to his favorite daughter, Water Snake, "he told many stories of his escapades and the many thrilling experiences he encountered during his past ..., as if reviewing his life." To be sure, there would be many thrills to recount in a "review" of his remarkable journey, including perhaps how Bull Lodge was reared in poverty but nevertheless sought to advance his station through childhood devotion to the community's sacred Feathered Pipe. He was "first contacted by the supernatural" at the age of 12 years and obtained assurance that he would be "powerful on this earth," only later to receive instruction at the age of 17 years to begin fasting, praying, and sacrificing atop seven buttes for gifts of "supernatural" power. At the age of 30 years, he was directed to lead a series of war parties that established his renowned military record, and at the age of 40 years he was inspired by compassion (or "pity") to "doctor" a relative using the ceremony gifted him by the Butte Beings. At this stage of his life, he was recognized as one of the most powerful medicine persons on the northern Plains, able even to control the weather. In his later years, he was appointed as the ritual Keeper of the sacred Pipe to which he had devoted himself as a boy. It was not until closer to the end of his life, however, that he was gifted with the ritual knowledge to ensure his own resurrection. Finally, at the age of 84 years, he was notified that he would travel to the Big Sand (i.e., pass away) before daybreak 8 days later. Even among the Gros Ventre, these were thrilling experiences indeed.

From a contemporary perspective it is tempting to conclude that Bull Lodge, in these final hours of his earthly existence, undertook these narrative excursions to celebrate his distinguished achievements in life, to summarize his life's "experiences" for the sake of his assembled progeny, or to consolidate his diverse "escapades" into a coherent account one last time. Elsewhere, I have expressed my reservations about these potential motivations (J. P. Gone, 2006a), at least to the degree that they emerge from and depend on forms of selfhood grounded in modernity. That is, I find it unlikely that this remarkable "narrative event" (Jakobson, 1971, as cited in Bauman, 1986) was the simple expression of what might be called the autobiographical impulse, a modern rhetorical formation involving the desire and obligation of the individual to reflexively represent self and experience in accordance with the aesthetics of consistency, comprehensiveness, and continuity. Instead, Bull Lodge hailed from a society in which the path to status—living "like a man," in words attributed to him—required almost relentless public consideration (and ultimate ratification) of one's actions and achievements. Indeed, within pre-reservation Gros Ventre society there was little differentiation

between the public and private domains of life (which has become a hallmark of modernity). Thus, there would appear to have been little need within this close-knit community for the crafting of one's autobiographical narrative to summarize in reflexive terms a personal history of self-relevant events. As an alternative, I have suggested that this final event of narration served the instrumental purpose of extending good health and long life for his loved ones. I believe the key to understanding the generative power of this sort of narrative will become readily apparent through careful consideration of the actual stories that Bull Lodge was reported to have recounted.

Once the family had assembled on the final evening before his appointed death, Water Snake explained that her father first related a story in which his long-time rival (or "enemy-friend"), Sits Like A Woman, had led Bull Lodge and some other Gros Ventre warriors on several days' journey across the Montana prairies to raid the Crow people to the southeast. This war party had yet to encounter the enemy, and so had hidden in a coulee for a night's rest. As apparently recounted by Bull Lodge, the story described how an owl—a harbinger of death among many Plains peoples—warned the party of imminent danger (and here, for the sake of concrete illustration of the kinds of narrative with which we are here concerned, I will quote words attributed to Bull Lodge rather extensively):

We had already settled for the night, and had made a temporary shelter out of dead falls of small poles and brush and rye grass, and had a fire going, when out of the near brush we heard an owl hoot. This owl would say my name, then would hoot, and after the owl had repeated this two or three times, I told the party, "That owl you hear is saying my name." So Sits Like [A] Woman called a retreat. He said, "Get your things together, and we'll get out of here. That owl ain't doing that for nothing." So we got ready, and all went out as careful as we can without making much noise. And the night was cloudy and exceptionally dark, so in order that no one would stray off, he ordered us to hold one another's hands. We had camped on a small stream some distance away from the mountains. So he, Sits Like [A] Woman, was on the lead, and he led us to the mountains. When we reached them we came to a cliff of rock. So we looked around and found a nice secluded spot, and sat down to wait for early dawn.

As we sat there for a little while, we noticed dirt and small rocks rolling down on us. So one of the men said, "I'll look around." He went along the cliff a ways, and pretty soon he shot [his rifle]. After he shot, we could hear something rolling down near where we sat. And [it] rolled on down past us. No one moved or paid any attention to it. The man returned and sat down. And when

daylight was so we could see pretty good, one of the men went to the spot where we heard [that] the rolling thing [had] stopped. He called and said, "It's a mountain goat." By then, the light was good enough so we could see quite a ways. Then we heard a commotion at the spot where we were early that night and [had] left from. Shots could be heard, and war cries, and yells. And all of a sudden the noise stopped. It must have been when [the enemy] found out [that] there was no one there. As we watched, we seen them ride away from there, and we could recognize them as Crow Indians. After the Crow Indians had gone their way, we butchered the mountain goat and had a big feed.

(F. P. Gone, 1942, pp. 8–10)

At the conclusion of this narrative, Bull Lodge ordered a meal for everyone and then requested fresh attire for his infant granddaughters so he could receive and kiss them. Calling them by name—an unusual formality, as kinship terms were the customary form of address—he carefully arranged them upon his own pillow before proceeding. It was then, with his grandbabies beside him, that Bull Lodge recounted his "escapades." Curiously, however, the story that Water Snake later recalled in the greatest detail from that night barely involved her father but focused instead on the heroic tenacity of a Gros Ventre warrior named Bobtail Horse, who joined a raiding party against the Piegan people to the west. Following an act of almost reckless courage, Bobtail Horse—left for dead by his companions—barely escaped from the Piegan, only to spend the next several weeks making his way on foot (and, eventually, on hands and knees) across an ocean of prairie to the Gros Ventre camps. Three revenge raids later (making four engagements in total), Bobtail Horse was killed in battle. Interesting. Here was unquestionably another "thrilling experience" related by Bull Lodge to his family, but this particular "escapade"—comprising nearly half of what Water Snake later reported when recalling her father's final words—contained very little self-referential content. Instead, what seems to fuse these particular "narrated events" (Bauman, 1986) into a recognizable speech genre is their characterization not as representations of reflexivity but as communications of vitality.

COMMUNICATING LIFE: AN EXPLORATION OF ETHNOPSCHOLOGY

The extended historical vignette just reviewed affords the opportunity to explore and to systematize the genre of Gros Ventre narrative that I characterize as the *communication of vitality*. Moreover, nuanced appreciation of this genre requires analytical attention to 19th-century Gros Ventre cosmology and

(for my purposes here) aspects of an attending ethnopsychology of vitality. The English word *vitality* is not really adequate here. Indeed, English-speaking Gros Ventres actually invented an adjective more than a century ago for the concept I mean to denote: “moose” (which has nothing to do with the animal). This adjective denotes that quality of experience in which difficulty, hardship, and overwhelming odds are met head-on with gusto, talent, energy, and ambition, such that individual agency ultimately prevails. Not surprisingly, the metaphor for such triumphant agency is drawn from the battlefield and exemplified by a “fierce” warrior charging into the enemy despite being outnumbered; it was this ascribed ferocity that the word “moose” was intended to preserve once the Gros Ventre language began its abrupt decline in the face of strategic Euro-American suppression. I choose here to tentatively translate this notion as *vitality* rather than *ferocity* because the former connotes less in terms of violence than it does in terms of *animus*. To fully appreciate what Bull Lodge was up to in choosing to recount exploits of war to his assembled family during their final gathering, I must first attempt to explicate the cultural significance of animus or vitality—and its communication—within historical Gros Ventre experience. The reader should note, however, that I am necessarily summarizing, synthesizing, interpolating, and extrapolating from my first-hand experience in the community as well as the extant ethnographic record in an effort to reconstruct the largely implicit philosophical and religious underpinnings of pre-reservation Gros Ventre life—I am aware of no other source (whether living or departed) or resource (whether oral or written) that has addressed these questions at this level of abstraction and in summary format.²

The Eruption of Liveliness

Vitality then is that agentic quality of persons that is demonstrated through distinctive acts of courage, tenacity, aspiration, and industry—it is the eruption of liveliness that prevails over frightful ordeal or bitter circumstance. Among the Gros Ventres there was no more revered personal attribute, and rank and status within the community depended on publicly ratified expressions of such vitality (as accompanied by habitual practices of generosity and redistribution; for more detail, *see* Cooper, 1957; Flannery, 1953; Fowler, 1987; and J. P. Gone & Alcántara, 2010). More specifically, Gros Ventres recognized three distinct means to uncommon expressions of vitality: ability,

² My attempts to systematize and consolidate these rather abstract relations within Gros Ventre cosmology are inspired and influenced by the important work of Jeff Anderson (2001) concerning knowledge and “life movement” among our tribal kin, the Northern Arapaho.

prayer, and power (Cooper, 1957). Ability was simply an individual's inherent strengths, skills, and talents as perfected through exercise and attention. Prayer was the relatively routine personal expression of desires and requests to the Supreme Being, the One Above, Who maintained active influence in human affairs. Power was the means by which human persons might exercise extraordinary—that is, superhuman—prowess in war, doctoring, gambling, or seduction, usually as the result of extraordinary gifts of ritual knowledge to individuals from other-than-human Persons (Who were all ultimately accountable to the One Above). Ideal expressions of vitality depended principally on ability, as augmented by the efficacy of prayer. Power as a means for expressing vitality and realizing ambition was frequently sought but (as we shall soon see) entailed a rather undesirable consequence.

If *expressions* of vitality were the means to rank and status among the Gros Ventre people, they also signified by implication the most coveted gift of all: *extensions* of vitality, or long and prosperous lives. All tribal ceremonies included petitions for long, abundant lives for members of the community; personal devotions were just as likely to involve such entreaties. The Supreme Being, the One Above, the "Owner of Life," actively determined how long individuals would live, deciding to "cut off" life for those who transgressed the moral order or to extend life on behalf of those for whom He felt compassion (or "pity"). According to one of my ancestors, a former Pipe Keeper named Lame Bull, "a man lives, not his own life, but according to what is given and wished by [the Supreme Being]; a man has what he has by the wish of the One Above" (Cooper, 1957, p. 6). Thus, life is not endogenous to humans—we do not possess even our own lives—but life is gifted by the One Above, the Original Vitality, if you will. Furthermore, the means of life's allocation to humans is the Supreme Being's *wish*. That is, the Original Vitality distributes life through the exercise of will or thought; not surprisingly, then, the Owner of Life was also known to the Gros Ventres as the "One Who Controls All By Thought." And although this instrumental quality of "thought," "will," or "wish" clearly originates with the Supreme Being (perhaps as the Prime Thinker and Archetypal Agent), it similarly applies to human thought or wish, albeit to a much less potent degree. In sum, life itself is controlled, distributed, and sustained by wish of the Prime Thinker. The essence of power, then, is the efficacious concentration of thought or will or wish for either generative or destructive purposes in the world.

The Power of Thought

Within the philosophical explications of elderly Gros Ventres who reflected on their "old way of life" in the mid-20th century (Cooper, 1957, p. v), there

remained evident ambiguity regarding whether this instrumental power of thought, when exercised by humans, was properly characterized as a form of action or a form of supplication. Certainly, Gros Ventres acknowledged instances of association between the two, as when a young man in this age-graded society would, in tears, approach very old individuals with the gift of a pipe and receive in return these elders' especially powerful prayers to the Supreme Being for long life on the young person's behalf. These elders' prayers were deemed unusually efficacious because their own long lives—their uncommon vitality—attested to their knowledge of how best to move the Owner of Life to grant extensions of vitality. Here, then, is an example of human wish or thought, channeled to the One Above through prayer on behalf of another, that could effect *a redistribution of life itself*. In contrast, Keepers of the sacred Pipes (such as Lame Bull or Bull Lodge), who by virtue of their specialized ritual knowledge regularly interacted with powerful other-than-human Persons, were admonished upon their selection to these high offices to strictly control their thoughts and words so as not to *inadvertently* harm others who might give relatively innocuous offense. As ritual authorities, these most knowledgeable of humans were deemed potentially dangerous because their facility with power—that is, with the efficacious concentration of thought for instrumental purposes—might amplify their otherwise commonplace annoyance, resentment, or jealousy into “bad luck” for others. In this instance, at least, it seems unlikely that inadvertent harm wrought by the power of undisciplined thought would involve direct supplication of other-than-human Persons as such.

In the end, what seems indisputable is that Gros Ventres recognized thought or wish as *instrumental*—that is, potentially generative or destructive—in the lives of humans, depending on *how it was exercised* and by *whom*. Allow me to suggest that the *how* of such efficacious activity is explained in part by *who* was understood to exercise the power of thought most potently. The identification of Pipe Keepers and elders as especially influential in their thoughts and prayers for others indexes a hierarchy of social relations in which certain humans enjoyed greater facility with the instrumental power of thought than others. This facility was most closely associated with age, owing to the specialized knowledge—especially ritual knowledge—that was required for the activities and responsibilities that characterized later life in this age-graded society (comprised of seven ranks for males). Nevertheless, within this hierarchy of social relations, human beings as a group occupied the lowest orders of efficacy or influence in the cosmos, whereas the Prime Thinker ranked highest in the hierarchy, and a host of other-than-human Persons—the Four Holy Old Men, the Sun, the Thunder Being, and so on—ranked in-between. This ordering of beings by their agentic influence implies certain normative principles of interpersonal

interaction: relatively less knowledgeable (and therefore less potent) persons (especially humans, particularly the young) must demonstrate *respect* (through deference, supplication, sacrifice, ritual obligation, and so forth) to more powerful others (including older, more knowledgeable humans, but especially the much more knowledgeable other-than-human Persons), who in turn respond with *pity* (that is, compassion accompanied by the obligation to give) (*see* Anderson, 2001). Expressions of pity thus involve gifts of knowledge—often ritual knowledge—to those who otherwise lack adequate means for amplifying thought or wish for generative (or destructive) purposes. In sum, social relations throughout the cosmos are determined by rank in accordance with agentic potency (or power of will)—respect is properly conveyed upward through this graduated hierarchy, whereas pity is expressed downward, resulting in the redistribution of knowledge to humans for achieving increased agentic efficacy.

The Role of Ritual

If this hierarchy of agentic efficacy structures social relations within the cosmos and explains who is best positioned to exercise the power of thought, how is it that such thought might be most potently exercised by relatively powerless humans for instrumental purposes in the world? I suspect that the means are by now self-evident. Because unaided human thought is limited in its instrumental efficacy, individual efforts typically require amplification to most reliably influence everyday affairs. Such amplification occurs most effectively through the application of specialized knowledge in the form of ritual practice. Such practice was central to Gros Ventre life, particularly in the annual rites and ceremonies involving the two sacred Pipes (known as the “Flat Pipe” and the “Feathered Pipe,” respectively). As a result of the routine respect shown these Pipes through devotion and ritual by their knowledgeable Keepers as well as the community more generally, these other-than-human Persons, gifted to the Gros Ventres by the One Above and the Thunder Being respectively, helped to ensure the longevity, abundance, and vitality of the community. Additional rituals were gifted to the community for similar purposes, including the Sacrifice Lodge (or so-called Sundance), the six men’s lodges that structured the age-grades, the Old Women’s Lodge, and so on (Cooper, 1957).

Beyond these officially sanctioned ceremonies, and owing principally to the ethos of pursuing ambition and expressing vitality, many Gros Ventres independently sought personal gifts of specialized knowledge from other-than-human Persons to get ahead in life (whether by doctoring ability,

gambling luck, romantic influence, or war honors). Not surprisingly, these less conventional solicitations of ritual knowledge for personal (and perhaps even "selfish") achievement (after the manner of Bull Lodge's vision quests) were actively admonished among the Gros Ventres, for although knowledge obtained in this fashion might lead to the efficacious amplification of thought toward esteemed achievements of various kinds, such endeavors also represented a compromise of vitality, a crutch (so to speak) that Gros Ventres believed might literally shorten one's lifespan. This is the deleterious consequence I alluded to earlier—namely, that power is dangerous, even life-threatening, precisely because it requires such sophisticated knowledge to manage appropriately. In this regard, Lame Bull observed, "It is not good to ask that kind of career. It would be a life misspent and would be dearly paid for. Man's dearest possession is life, and this would be cut off" (Cooper, 1957, p. 266). Evidently, then, it is important to distinguish between two prospects for the amplification of thought. On one hand, amplifications of thought through applications of authorized knowledge formally gifted by the One Above were consistently generative of life itself. On the other hand, the extra-conventional (and perhaps self-focused or selfishly obtained) knowledge individually solicited from a variety of other-than-human Persons, although temporarily useful to its human "owners," was corrosive to life itself.

And yet, this efficacious amplification of human thought or wish was not *solely* the product of high ceremony or applied ritual knowledge. As we have already seen, the prayers of more knowledgeable people—that is, older people—to the One Above were seen to be efficacious in obtaining blessings, especially long life. In addition, personal devotion and supplication to the One Above was also valued in this regard. Furthermore, *collective* thought against an individual might be potently instrumental. According to Lamebull's son, The Boy, "If a man does something of which the people disapprove very much, their *thought* is against him. They *think* badly of him. Against this mass thinking, his own thinking cannot stand" (Cooper, 1957, p. 366, italics in the original). Lamebull's grandson, Thomas Main, added, "The Gros Ventres thought the psychological effect of public opinion is so great and intense on the one on whom it was trained that it shortened his life... . It was definitely known by the Gros Ventres that they actually thought people to death" (p. 367). Clearly then, human thought did not require ritual amplification to achieve instrumental purposes. Even The Boy acknowledged that "two people may have a battle of thinking; the outcome will depend on how each is developed in his thinking, on their respective powers of thought" (p. 366). Thus, although ritual amplification of human thought may have been the most potent method for ensuring its instrumental effects in the world,

practiced or disciplined human wish might realize its potential through other means of expression as well.

The Communication of Vitality

As the vignette of Bull Lodge's death illustrates, one such alternative means of expression appears to have been the previously described communications of vitality—that is, narratives of agentic triumph in which thought or wish or will had become *instrumentally manifest in human action*. This genre of speech was best exemplified in the “war story.” The occasions in Gros Ventre life that required the recitation of war stories were so numerous that those without such honors necessarily receded to the shadows of society (Flannery, 1953)—indeed, the prominent man was one whose “wrist would be made slim” from being pulled to his feet in gatherings to recount his experiences in battle. War experiences were recounted when men returned from successful raids to a jubilant community; when scouts returned from their dangerous expeditions with news of the enemy; when men's societies publicly competed with one another for attention or accolades; when the large tree chosen as the center pole for the Sacrifice Lodge was felled; when a new lodge was erected for the first time; when an individual, in contravention of protocol, desired to take unconsumed food from a Pipe Keeper's lodge; when names were first bestowed or changed; and when children's ears were first pierced. Common to many of these occasions was the neutralization of potentially destructive power (e.g., in the encounter of war dangers, such as the felling of the center pole for the Sacrifice Lodge, which symbolized the killing of an enemy) or the dispensation of potentially generative power (e.g., the naming of a child, which was accompanied by prayers for long, abundant life). Above all, as commemorations of triumphant agency in which mortal danger had been neutralized by overwhelming vitality, such narrative events retained some capacity to circulate and redistribute to the assembled audience *at least some measure of that same vitality*—the generative manifestation of thought or wish—that had made possible the very actions portrayed in the narrated events themselves. So it was that among the Gros Ventre, certain kinds of narratives—and the efficacious power of thought these tellings simultaneously commemorate and express—*literally imparted life*.

Returning then to that remarkable winter night in 1886, occasioned by the fading vitality of an unusually knowledgeable human being, I suspect it now seems evident why in the intimacy of his family lodge, Buffalo Bull Lodge, would—mere hours before he was to die—assemble his relatives, place his grandbabies beside him on his bed, and recount tales distinguished

not by their reflexivity but by their vitality. Indeed, as communications of vitality, these tellings both collapse and transcend the distinction between semantics and pragmatics by concurrently (1) representing specific historical events, (2) inspiring his beloved kin to similar acts of triumphant agency, and (3) enlivening or empowering his cherished relatives for an abundant and accomplished longevity. In this light, we must recognize that Bull Lodge himself had been the prior recipient of so generative a gift.

More specifically, Water Snake reported that her father had earlier received "supernatural" instructions for conducting ceremonies that his followers could use to achieve his resurrection from the dead:

One night my Father had a vision in his sleep. He saw an old man standing at a distance on the horizon of a low hill.... Then the old man spoke, saying, "I came to tell you of my life. I give it to you. You will live until you die of old age, but before that [appointed] time you will [first] pass away in order that you may demonstrate the [superhuman] power which I am giving you, the power to arise after you have passed away [to then live out your allotted lifespan]."

(F. P. Gone, 1942, pp. 2-3)

In this resurrection vision, it is significant that the old Person Who appeared to Bull Lodge expressly stated: "I came to tell you of my life. I give it to you. You will live until you die of old age." Here we see that *telling equals giving*. This then is the essence of such communications (in both senses of the word): *expressions* of vitality, recounted in narrative form in the presence of others, yield *extensions* of vitality for them as well. Moreover, the cultural residue of this speech genre—reflecting both its cosmological and ethnopsychological underpinnings—endures among some contemporary Gros Ventres and suggests important possibilities for collective decolonization and communal healing today.

COMMENCING REVITALIZATION: CONTEMPORARY MENTAL HEALTH CONSIDERATIONS

The thrust of the preceding cultural analysis was to demonstrate how nuanced scholarly attention to facets of indigenous ethnopsychology can be seen to necessitate an alternative construal of the therapeutic project within the context of broader decolonization efforts. To be sure, it would be difficult to *overemphasize* the havoc wreaked among the Gros Ventre by processes of Euro-American colonization.

The Demise of a Cultural Legacy?

Subsequent to his account of the heroic saga of Bobtail Horse on that historic night, Bull Lodge shifted his talk to the revelation of disturbing news. According to Water Snake, "When my Father ... got done telling this story, he began talking about the Feathered Pipe" (F. P. Gone, 1942, p. 14). Recall that Bull Lodge had achieved his remarkable status among the Gros Ventre owing to his childhood devotion to the Feathered Pipe, one of two ritual Person-objects entrusted to the community from Above. It was the Person of the Feathered Pipe Who first appeared to Bull Lodge in his youth and assured him that he would indeed be "powerful on this earth." Moreover, Bull Lodge's power for war and doctoring was closely associated with the rainbow, just one manifestation of the Thunder Being Who had originally gifted the Feathered Pipe to the Gros Ventre. Later in life, Bull Lodge became the ritual Keeper of the Feathered Pipe and to this day he continues to signify the power of this Pipe more than any other Gros Ventre leader in tribal memory (Cooper, 1957; F. P. Gone, 1942; J. P. Gone, 1999). As a result, the final words of Bull Lodge were unusually privileged—and therefore unusually distressing—for he was reported to have said:

The Feathered Pipe—and Its purpose among the tribe—has run its course, and It's now all gone. I was the last to receive those powers, and there will be no more supernatural powers attached to it. I pity [i.e., feel and act compassionately toward] it, my Son, the Feathered Pipe. Its days are finished. It shall change hands not more than two or three times after me.

(p. 15)

Following this pronouncement, Bull Lodge bade farewell to his kin person by person, sent them away to their own lodges, and died.

Of course, the reader may recall that Bull Lodge had been gifted with the knowledge to achieve his own resurrection. That is, upon his death in 1886, he could expect to rise again to live out his full allotment of life so long as the necessary rituals were conducted appropriately. Unfortunately, by then, American pacification of the Plains tribes was nearly complete, with the last vestiges of the great northern bison herd having been exterminated by 1884. Because Gros Ventres had not seen a buffalo in years, the materials for the resurrection ritual could not be obtained. Some whispered that Bull Lodge's extra-conventional pursuit of power, or even his misuse of such power, had resulted in this tragic "cutting off" of his life. Whichever interpretation one adopted, all who looked for the revitalization of Bull Lodge were forlorn. But worse was yet to come.

My great grandfather, Frederick P. Gone, who was born in the year of Bull Lodge's death, and who later made it his business to salvage this extraordinary life story "in order to explain what those supernatural powers [of the Feathered Pipe] were and how they worked" (p. 1), interviewed Water Snake and composed *Bull Lodge's Life* in the early 1940s.³ Not long thereafter, Fred Gone was hastily summoned to the cabin of old Iron Man, where this contemporary "caretaker" of the Feathered Pipe bundle (who had been charged with this duty by the last official Keeper of the bundle, Bull Lodge's son Curly Head) confirmed with evident distress that "the Feathered Pipe Itself was gone" (J. P. Gone, 1999, p. 423). In response, Fred Gone attempted to comfort this anguished elder with an inspired explanation for the disappearance of the Pipe:

Being as the Supreme Being gave us this Pipe in a supernatural way to protect, guide, and take care of us all of these years since we got It, why shouldn't He take It back when He thinks we don't need It anymore? You know yourself [that] It's an orphan. It didn't leave a successor to Bull Lodge. Ever since Bull Lodge died, this Pipe's been an orphan.... So, it stands to reason that the Great Spirit came and got his Child.

(pp. 425–426)

This acknowledgment of radical discontinuity with ancestral Gros Ventre ritual tradition—the "taking back" of one of the community's most sacred ritual Person-objects—was precipitated by the coercive conversion of most Gros Ventres to the Roman Catholic faith (and the accompanying criminalization of indigenous ceremonial practice). In sum, it testifies to the existential magnitude of the cultural devastation wrought by the colonial encounter.

Today, at the dawn of a new millennium, many Gros Ventres still struggle to put the pieces together. Our tribal community reels from an epidemic amalgamation of demoralization, dysfunction, drinking, depression, dependency, and domestic violence, together sedimented in protracted poverty. Within the professional discourse of "mental health"—an altogether foreign concept that emerges from the Cartesian legacy of the West—a large proportion of us lack it. But the professional clinicians who appear in our midst with talk of "genetic predispositions" and "chemical imbalances" and

³ F. P. Gone's manuscript was later edited for publication by tribal member George Horse Capture (F. P. Gone, 1980). Throughout this chapter, I quote material from the earlier manuscript in order to retain fidelity to F. P. Gone's original English intextualization of Water Snake's oral narratives concerning Bull Lodge's life.

“posttraumatic stress reactions” and “poor parenting skills” generally fail to get it: our problems are primarily existential and spiritual in origin, not biological or behavioral—they result from over a century of thwarted ambition and depleted vitality. Indeed, even the most sincere efforts by such professionals, steeped in Western therapeutic discourse and bound to the “rule of the tool” (or Kaplan’s [1964] “Law of the Instrument” as cited by Caplan and Nelson [1973]) threaten to inadvertently displace what remnants of indigenous subjectivity we might still celebrate as “traditional.”

Nevertheless, given the visibility of such radical change within just a few generations, it is in fact quite remarkable what has persisted in terms of historical Gros Ventre subjectivity. For example, sometime in the 1990s, a community member recounted the following to me:

I guess I see myself as righteous, giving with no ulterior motive, and with high expectations of those I know (and [that I] am involved with enough to know). And [I am] very afraid of God or the One Above. These traits [that characterize me are] based upon that fear. One time I was very angry, and spoke of the person I was angry with in [my son’s] presence, and [I] said I *wished* [italics added] that person would die (in some form or another). He told me it was a moral wrong. Just that, stated it matter-of-factly. Yet, his opinion brought all the fears I had to a head and I realized how wrong I was.

And so, even today, recognition of the potent power of human wish or thought to alter the world—for good or for ill—remains in evidence. It is well beyond the scope of this chapter to articulate a *contemporary* Gros Ventre ethnopsychology, and indeed, such would require systematic empirical inquiry beyond my own previous experiences and investigations. Nevertheless, to address briefly the clinical practices of mental health providers as they intersect with modern Gros Ventre lives, allow me to elucidate a few facets of contemporary subjectivity among many Gros Ventres that necessitate, I think, an alternative construal of the therapeutic endeavor.

The Revitalization of a Cultural Legacy?

For the present-day Gros Ventre community to secure a truly post-colonial recovery, it remains crucial that therapeutic efforts within our midst reinforce, rather than subvert, enduring ethnopsychological phenomena (for more on the ideological dangers of mental health services for Native American communities, see J. P. Gone, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c,

2009, 2010; J. P. Gone & Alcántara, 2007). I will tentatively offer here four implications of this commitment for the therapeutic endeavor. First, a Gros Ventre person's social status within the community may more significantly shape their subjectivity than the idiographic psychological attributes that are characteristically considered by mental health professionals. Several sources of intratribal diversity—including age, gender, generation, kinship relations, familial reputation, and ritual participation—may reveal more about a person's hopes, expectations, and prospects than individual personality factors, developmental history, or avowed goals or intentions. In sum, contemporary Gros Ventre subjectivity may be less "open" to the individualistic fashioning of the self that many middle-class Euro-Americans take for granted. Thus, in this context, the therapeutic endeavor would benefit from a more searching contextualization of individual "client" lives as formulated within larger semi-otic frameworks by which community members structure social meaning.

Second, a Gros Ventre person's communicative expressions may be much more carefully circumscribed than the cathartic self-expressions that are regularly observed or actively elicited in the workaday practice of psychotherapy. The power of thought, will, or wish may well persist in an emphasis on positive thinking, an aversion toward rumination on the painful, ugly, or distressing, and the reluctance to give voice to strong "negative" emotion in the therapeutic setting (especially within a face-to-face community in which virtually no word or deed ever remains truly "private" or "confidential"). In sum, contemporary Gros Ventre subjectivity involves tremendous care in regulating what is said at all. Thus, in this context, the therapeutic endeavor would benefit from a decided shift away from a requirement or expectation that talk—especially talk between community members and non-Native therapists—will be the chief means for healing or recovery.

Third, a Gros Ventre person's success in life may depend a great deal more on respectful beseechings of more knowledgeable others—both human or other-than-human—for guidance, direction, assistance, and knowledge than the mere individualistic exercise of innate talent or creativity that might be clinically encouraged. These beseechings—that is, *prayers*—follow from a recognition that human beings are themselves inadequate for realizing their ambitions absent guidance and direction from powerful Others. In sum, contemporary Gros Ventre subjectivity often entails the routine petitioning of God, "Our Heavenly Father," the "One Above," the "Grandfather Spirits," and family and community elders for guidance and blessings. Thus, in this context, the therapeutic endeavor would benefit from (and may actually require) the facilitation of sacred encounters (rather than secular self-actualization), which are seen to be the source of vitality, longevity, and prosperity.

Finally, a Gros Ventre person's well-being is likely to depend a great deal on the competitive realization of personal ambitions that resonate more with

longstanding community values of honorable achievement than with idiosyncratically adopted ideals or (especially) Euro-American indices of success (Gone & Alcántara, 2010). Competition with others is likely to be pursued with relish and valued as an essential means to demonstrating one's vitality and realizing one's wishes, though such wishes might be more closely tied to local reputation, familial honor, and the ability to be extravagantly generous with non-kin community members (as opposed to accumulating great wealth). In sum, contemporary Gros Ventre subjectivity depends on the eruption of liveliness in a variety of modern venues that continues to prove the efficacy of agentic expression in an uncertain world. Thus, in this context, the therapeutic endeavor would benefit from the identification—or even the creation—of circumstances wherein community members might competitively exercise their talents and abilities toward pro-social outcomes that simultaneously accrue honor to the individual even as they empower or enliven the community.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE PROMISE OF COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

The therapeutic alternatives just described emerge from and depend on specific facets of a distinctive Gros Ventre ethnopsychology. This ethnopsychology gave rise to and renders intelligible the speech acts attributed to our most famous medicine person in his dying hours some 125 years ago. Vestiges of this ethnopsychology persist today among contemporary Gros Ventres. As a clinical psychologist by training, I have proposed that these vestigial facets of Gros Ventre ethnopsychology—particularly in the context of collective decolonization and communal healing efforts—require an alternative construal of the therapeutic project relative to the clinical services provided by mental health professionals at Fort Belknap today. Moreover, I have suggested that an alternative therapeutic approach committed to reinforcing rather than subverting enduring Gros Ventre subjectivity probably requires the contextualization of client lives within enduring local semiotic frameworks, the abandonment of therapeutic talk as the principal means to healing and recovery, the facilitation of sacred encounters for obtaining guidance and blessings, and the identification (and possible creation) of modern circumstances for pro-social competitive expression. On the off-chance that the full implications of these alternatives have been obscured, allow me to clarify that *none* of these approaches routinely appears in the job descriptions of health service providers even among the psychological and counseling professions. Not surprisingly, then, as I have elsewhere observed, in order to

heal our community requires "a great deal more of the kinds of professional mental health services that do not yet exist" (J. P. Gone, 2003, p. 228).

What I have in mind is a radical programmatic alternative based on the very concepts that Julian Rappaport reviewed for us over three decades ago, namely, the reframing of professional roles and relationships in alignment with the principles of contextualization, collaboration, diversity, empowerment, relativity, accessibility, prevention, and (above all) critique of the status quo (Rappaport, 1977). Additionally, Rappaport's (1995, 2000) more recent emphasis on narrative extends this able assemblage of guiding precepts toward a community psychology that is ideally suited for advancing the causes of liberating self-expression and empowering self-determination for marginalized communities. More specifically, attention by community psychologists to the narrative practices of such cultural collectivities will help to ensure that collaboratively designed programs, services, and interventions designed to facilitate communal well-being might avoid the subtle but pervasive "West-is-best" cultural assumptions that structure the human services more generally (Gone, 2008a). In the case of the Gros Ventre, examination of the final act of narration evidenced by Bull Lodge among his gathered kin afforded insight into the distinctive genre of Gros Ventre speech in which the recounting of extraordinary expressions of vitality literally imparted extensions of vitality for those who hear such accounts. The means by which words literally realize prosperity and longevity for others depend on the instrumental power of thought—whether human or other-than-human—throughout the cosmos. Thus, it follows that "giving voice" to this particular narrative tradition may effect empowerment for the modern Gros Ventre community in multiple ways.

The most obvious form of empowerment achieved by "giving voice" to Gros Ventre narrative tradition is the now widespread (and increasingly co-opted) notion of facilitating oppressed people's experience of and success with the escalating exercise of autonomy and self-determination. The assumption, of course, is that a people exercising greater control over its own destiny is more likely to improve its material situation and to experience the "good life" as a byproduct of living a purposeful and valued existence. In this sense, there can be little doubt that Euro-American recognition of and regard for a distinctive and persisting Gros Ventre voice relative to our understanding and negotiation of the world would greatly assist in the project of collective decolonization and communal healing. The material consequences of such recognition and regard might even include a radical reconfiguration of the local "helping services" on the reservation in response to a visionary and autonomous exercise of local self-determination. Beyond the escalating exercise of autonomy that is contingent on "giving voice"

to indigenous Gros Ventre tradition, however, lies a more compelling sense of empowerment—namely, the potential for a revitalization of ancestral ritual practice that might once again convey our communal respect to Those Above and efficaciously amplify our collective thoughts in service to a renewed recirculation of longevity, abundance, and vitality among our people. In this latter sense, attention to ancestral Gros Ventre voices might literally empower community members to realize our shared wishes for a viable and prosperous future.

In closing, I take solace in the fact that the ritual bundle that originally contained the Feathered Pipe, once “kept” or maintained by Bull Lodge but long abandoned in a dilapidated shack belonging to old Iron Man, was retrieved by his son in the mid-1990s. In fact, during the summer of 2005, Joe Iron Man hosted a community gathering in which the Feathered Pipe bundle was ceremonially rewrapped. Certainly, as I have shown, the potential for a revitalization of Gros Ventre ritual tradition harbors the possibility for a profound subversion of conventional mental health principles and practices. More importantly, such revitalization heralds a greater hope for transforming my community’s historical “tale of terror” into a future “tale of joy” (Rappaport, 2000), for actively rekindling Gros Ventre vitality and rediscovering our place in the cosmos. For now, I return to the words of Julian Rappaport (1995), who once observed that in our academic telling of stories about people, “we do not often hear their actual voices. The voices of the people we claim to represent,” he wrote, “often remain in the background” (p. 800). In hope of ameliorating such omissions, and with faith that some residual vitality might yet be circulated in their telling, I offer these words—their words, our words—in commemoration of Julian.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This chapter was revised during the author’s tenure as the Katrin H. Lamon Fellow at the School for Advanced Research on the Human Experience in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I thank Jeffrey D. Anderson at Colby College for his incisive review of an earlier version of this manuscript.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, J. D. (2001). *The four hills of life: Northern Arapaho knowledge and life movement*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- Bauman, R. (1986). *Story, performance, and event: Contextual studies of oral narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University.

- Caplan, N., & Nelson, S. D. (1973). On being useful: The nature and consequences of psychological research on social problems. *American Psychologist*, 28(3), 199–211.
- Cooper, J. M. (1957). *The Gros Ventres of Montana: Part II—Religion and ritual* (R. Flannery, Ed.). Washington, DC: Catholic University of America.
- Flannery, R. (1953). *The Gros Ventres of Montana: Part I—Social life*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America.
- Fowler, L. (1987). *Shared symbols, contested meanings: Gros Ventre culture and history, 1778–1984*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Gone, F. P. (1942). *Bull Lodge's life*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Gone, F. P. (1980). *The seven visions of Bull Lodge, as told to his daughter, Garter Snake* (G. Horse Capture, Ed.). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska.
- Gone, J. P. (1996). *Gros Ventre cultural identity as normative self: A case study*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Illinois, Champaign, IL.
- Gone, J. P. (1999). "We were through as Keepers of it": The "Missing Pipe Narrative" and Gros Ventre cultural identity. *Ethos*, 27(4), 415–440.
- Gone, J. P. (2003). American Indian mental health service delivery: Persistent challenges and future prospects. In J. S. Mio & G. Y. Iwamasa (Eds.), *Culturally diverse mental health: The challenges of research and resistance* (pp. 211–229). New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Gone, J. P. (2004a). Keeping culture in mind: Transforming academic training in professional psychology for Indian country. In D. A. Mihesuah & A. Cavender Wilson (Eds.), *Indigenizing the academy: Transforming scholarship and empowering communities* (pp. 124–142). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Gone, J. P. (2004b). Mental health services for Native Americans in the 21st century United States. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 35(1), 10–18.
- Gone, J. P. (2006a). "As if reviewing his life": Bull Lodge's narrative and the mediation of self-representation. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 30(1), 67–86.
- Gone, J. P. (2006b). Mental health, wellness, and the quest for an authentic American Indian identity. In T. Witko (Ed.), *Mental health care for urban Indians: Clinical insights from Native practitioners* (pp. 55–80). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Gone, J. P. (2006c). Research reservations: Response and responsibility in an American Indian community. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 37(3–4), 333–340.
- Gone, J. P. (2007). "We never was happy living like a Whiteman": Mental health disparities and the postcolonial predicament in American Indian communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 40(3–4), 290–300.

- Gone, J. P. (2008a). Introduction: Mental health discourse as Western cultural proselytization. *Ethos*, 36(3), 310–315.
- Gone, J. P. (2008b). "So I can be like a Whiteman": The cultural psychology of space and place in American Indian mental health. *Culture & Psychology*, 14(3), 369–399.
- Gone, J. P. (2008c). The Pisimweyapiy Counselling Centre: Paving the red road to wellness in northern Manitoba. In J. B. Waldram (Ed.), *Aboriginal healing in Canada: Studies in therapeutic meaning and practice* (pp. 131–203). Ottawa, Ontario: Aboriginal Healing Foundation.
- Gone, J. P. (2009). Encountering professional psychology: Re-envisioning mental health services for Native North America. In L. J. Kirmayer & G. Valaskakis (Eds.), *Healing traditions: The mental health of Aboriginal peoples* (pp. 419–439). Vancouver: University of British Columbia.
- Gone, J. P. (2010). Psychotherapy and traditional healing for American Indians: Exploring the prospects for therapeutic integration. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 38(2), 166–235.
- Gone, J. P., & Alcántara, C. (2007). Identifying effective mental health interventions for American Indians and Alaska Natives: A review of the literature. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 13(4), 356–363.
- Gone, J. P., & Alcántara, C. (2010). The Ethnographically Contextualized Case Study Method: Exploring ambitious achievement in an American Indian community. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 16(2), 159–168.
- Gone, J. P., Miller, P. J., & Rappaport, J. (1999). Conceptual self as normatively oriented: The suitability of past personal narrative for the study of cultural identity. *Culture & Psychology*, 5(4), 371–398.
- Jakobson, R. (1971). Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb. In *Roman Jakobson: Selected writings* (Vol. 2, pp. 130–147). The Hague: Mouton.
- Kaplan, A. (1964). *The conduct of inquiry*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- Rappaport, J. (1977). *Community psychology: Values, research, and action*. Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- Rappaport, J. (1995). Empowerment meets narrative: Listening to stories and creating settings. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 795–807.
- Rappaport, J. (2000). Community narratives: Tales of terror and joy. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(1), 1–24.
- Rappaport, J. (2005). Community psychology is (thank God) more than science. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 35(3–4), 231–238.
- Wilson, W. A. W., & Yellow Bird, M. (Eds.). (2005). *For indigenous eyes only: A decolonization handbook*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research.

Empowering Settings and Voices for Social Change

Edited by Mark S. Aber, Kenneth I. Maton,
and Edward Seidman

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2011