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Fathers in Recovery

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I came to the Circle to find my father. As a child I remember seeing him, dark skinned, black curly hair, mole on the right upper lip, bedroom eyes, and a lean muscular body. He worked the mines as a boy, learned to drink and romance women. He romanced my mother into marrying him. I don't remember ever having an intimate time with him, an elder's lesson, a "consejo", or a warm memory. My father was fire that was ignited with firewater. He drank, used drugs, and caused pain and havoc on my mother and our household. I remember being in my bed and listening to my father yell and my mother scream as he broke her bones. The sounds were so pervasive that they literally went through my body.

My father was murdered over a drug deal. I listened as he burned to death in our Mission District flat in San Francisco. When he died my mother said, "you're the man of the house now, mijo." I proceeded to help raise my brother and sisters, with no training or role modeling. There was no one around that could

teach me how to be a father. When I started to have children myself, I was terrified of creating the same havoc on them that had been committed to me. I learned to use narcotics to dull the fear, pain, confusion, and terror that I felt inside.

One day, my son, Naldo, and I were listening to the Stylistics sing, "Have You Seen Her." Naldo said, Dad that's a sad song huh? Yes it can be, I responded. Well, Naldo said, Mary is my girlfriend and we are going to get married. He was all of six years old. I was shocked and speechless. What moved me was the fact that he and I were having a conversation that I had never had with my own father. Years later, after Naldo's mother and I divorced, he came to live with me. He had changed. He was moody, sullen, depressed, hostile, and withdrawn. We were not speaking. He was failing all of his classes at school, had very few friends that were also failing at that time. I asked him after repeated attempts to talk to him, what happened? What happened to the way we used to be? What did you do with the little boy that used to talk to me that used to share with me? Naldo replied, he left when you did.

I came to the "Circulo" to learn how to be a father. In turn I learned how to be a man, a son, a husband, an "Hombre con Palabra" (a man of my word). I brought the "Cargas" (baggage) from my trauma filled past and left it in the fire of the Altar, the

sacred place of order, to become free of them. In my father's absence, his horrible death, the loneliness of carrying that baggage alone, the fear of never succeeding, the overcompensation by attaining a graduate degree, and never being satisfied. In the "Circulo" I learned to have a place, just because I am human. I learned to love and be loved by men who also shared the same "cargas," and in that journey learned that we all have "regalos" (gifts) to share. I learned that I was someone, I had the medicine. All of the pain and suffering had a purpose. That purpose was to help other men heal. I brought Naldo to the "Circulo" and we healed together. We cried, laughed, shared, and asked for permission to love each other openly, truly, and without reservation. We learned that these ways have always been here. We are on a path of re-discovery.

Naldo graduated from high school in 200), he is an accomplished Mexican Folklore dancer, an uncle, and my best friend. Most importantly, he is a balanced and loving young man who does not carry his father's "cargas". I am grateful for that.

We men gathered, together, in *El Circulo* (the Circle) to deal with pain, confusion, and our relationships with our children, our spouses, our addictions, our loss of fathers, our loss of country, culture, and to pray for direction. In the

tradition of our indigenous culture we began by praying to the four directions: to honor our Ancestors, the women who are the heart, the givers of life and the first warriors; the children and their laughter and innocence and the ones who will carry our baggage if we don't heal; and to ourselves. A song is then offered (*El Amor de Este Hijo*, The Love of this Son) in gratitude. With this *El Circulo* (the Circle) begins. This ceremony of gathering in circles

Insert Box with *The Love of this Son* here

to heal, strengthen, teach/learn and refocus, is an ancient way of our ancestors that we have re-integrated into our lives to help *Fathers in Recovery*.

The “coyote spirit” or negative influences and behaviors remain a constant threat to individuals, families and communities. It was in this *Circulo* way that guidance and healing took place and where reprimands were shared, the first priority always being the respect and safety of everyone, but especially the woman and children. In the *Circulo Way* we passed the *Palabra* (the word) recognizing that everyone has a voice and that everyone has a story.

The essential lessons or rooted principals of childhood are traditionally called *La Educacion* (the development of the spirit or character of a person). Our ancestors realized the importance of this foundation to the extent that volumes

were written on these teachings. These teachings were called the *Hue Hues* (the teachings of the elders). At their core are the dual teachings of *Ixtl* and *Yollotl* in Spanish translated as *Cara y Corazon* (Face and Heart). The *Cara* carried the dual values of *Dignidad y Respeto* (Dignity and Respect) and the *Corazon* carried the values of *Cariño y Confianza* (Love and Interconnected Compassion or Trust). What is not understood is that in order to be a good father you must first be a responsible man. We attempt to re-root men in these principles thus allowing them to discover the true essence of *Machismo* (honorable manhood). With this as a basis, we are then be ready to “Recover” the fatherhood skills that we never experienced from our fathers and are now ready to learn to be an honorable father as well.

So we employ a four-stage process for healing and development that seeks to re-root the men in these teachings:

- *CONOCIMIENTO*; Acknowledgement (*Dignidad*, Dignity)
- *ENTENDIMIENTO*; Understanding (*Respeto*, Respect)
- *INTEGRACION*; Integration (*Confianza*, Trust)
- *MOVIMIENTO*; Movement (*Cariño*, Love)

In this first phase of recovery (*CONOCIMIENTO*) it is important to acknowledge the men by honoring their spirit, respecting their lessons and embracing both the gifts and baggage that they bring. We begin this process by giving a man his voice to tell his story. He is able to see (face) himself - maybe for the first time. Telling his story serves as a way to allow other men in the

Circulo to see their reflections as well. More importantly, men are given a *lugar* (a place) as a man and/or father (Dignity). The men who find their positive purpose and dignity are able to treat their children and relations positively and with dignity.

As we enter the second phase (*ENTENDIMIENTO*), men's understanding of the role multigenerational oppression has played in their lives becomes evident. The understanding that the burdens that they carry are generations old brings much insight and a sense of respect for their issues. It also points to the negative result of not finding a positive way to face life's *cargas* or baggage/challenges in their lives. As a result, many times, the men in these groups have a distorted view of men and authority. In their view fatherhood is perceived as being the authority over decision-making and many times using violence and force to discipline or oppress others. Teaching men to separate authority from effective administration of family affairs is a major task of any fatherhood education instruction for this population. This phase also includes having fathers understand their journey in learning the false values of manhood and fatherhood and relearning relationship enhancing values of sacred relationships that come from their culture. Pre-Colombian texts document a different understanding of how fathers and mothers should raise their children and is an excellent example of behavioral administration with clarity about the values of a society (see Leon-Portillo, 1988). In this phase men also learn about child and life development that gives them insight into what they did and did not receive in their own childhood and includes

instruction in the role of the father in the child's development, guidance, direction, discipline, love and care.

As we move to the third phase of Fathers in Recovery, (*INTEGRACION*), fathers are guided through a process of integrating these teachings in their life with a sense of *Cara y Corazon* (Face and Heart). This concept of face and heart was the basis for healthy child development in some traditional societies. Parents were expected to participate in their child's development with an understanding of *Cara Noble* (noble face) and *Corazon Firme* (firm heart). One was an honorable parent if he or she demonstrated the values of *Cara y Corazon*. *Cara* reflected respect and dignity for all life and relationships. *Corazon* was the summary of *cariño* (warmth) and *confianza* (trustworthy). If children demonstrated these values they were acknowledged as *bien educados* (well mannered), and the parents congratulated them on their achievements.

The teachings of *Cara y Corazon* change with each developmental phase and Tello and his colleagues use four seasons and four directions to delineate a life span framework for parents to use in raising their children. The *destino* (destiny) of fathers is likely to change with each stage of development. As they explore how to re-integrate themselves into their children's lives, fathers can begin to learn to rebuild the spirit of trust within them. They learn, maybe for the first time, to rely on others for guidance and advice which points to the importance of listening to other men that have been through this journey

successfully. Through this process they may begin to learn how to develop a healthy relationship based on trust between their children and themselves.

The final phase is *MOVIMIENTO* (Movement) and provides a structure and process for men to establish an ongoing extended kinship network – a *Circulo de Hombres* - with other men who have chosen to rededicate their lives to their children. Men with histories of violence require experiences that allow them to demonstrate *Palabra* (trustworthiness) and need a support system that helps to maintain accountability. Men learn to give their word and follow through. For men who have multigenerational wounds, the challenge of maintaining this commitment in the midst of ongoing challenges and tests is difficult. For this reason, the *Circulo de Hombres* becomes a way for men to maintain this commitment. Finally, through these *Circulos* men begin to form friendships with other men who are also devoted to their children.

Conclusion

Recovering fathers need programs and service providers to advocate for them. For men that are committed and have demonstrated their motivation to be good fathers, it is imperative that programs be prepared and willing to assist fathers to deal with the societal and systemic barriers that present themselves. For the most part, the policies and programs of this country have not been developed with the Latino population in mind. For families that rely on government programs, it has created a dilemma as families attempt to maintain their cultural identity while complying with the system's requirements. The "voice" of Latino

fathers indicates that many public welfare program requirements are at best confusing to them. In many cases, these programs create additional barriers to the fulfillment of their fatherhood responsibilities. For programs to fully understand essential values of the Latino population it is imperative to explore the issues of cultural identity, language, extended family system, immigration, work ethic, self sufficiency and internalized oppression that impact the involvement of Latino fathers in their recovery process and their involvement with their children. Yet, many of the resiliency factors in the Latino family, which assist in their survival, are found within their primary cultural ties (*La Cultura Cura/culture cures*). Thus, finding a balance between the dual expectations of culture and society is a major challenge for Latino fathers.

Storytelling in the *Circulo* way has proven to a very effective approach to helping men develop a new legacy for themselves. The elders say that what we do today has an impact for seven generations. But we must first see a father as sacred as other human beings if we are to expect him to treat his relations that way. We must also start where fathers are developmentally. A good example of this is when we had an author sign free books for a group of fathers. As the author finished dedicating a book to the father's children the next father stepped up. He was asked whom he wanted the book dedicated to. The father was quiet and the author asked the names of his children. Then the father leaned over and whispered in the author's ear and said, "Dedicate the book to me, Antonio, because I've never had a book of my own." This experience highlights the importance of allowing a

father to tell his story and give him a place to hear other men's stories before we ask him to be a father and read stories to his own children. We are all on this road to healing and recovery and in the end we must be thankful for still being a part of the journey.

As men prepare themselves to close the circle we, once again, pray to the four directions; to give thanks to the Ancestors, "Los Hue hues", the Elders in the direction of the north, to give us wisdom as we try to maintain the balance, rhythm and harmony in our lives. In the direction of the west, we give thanks for and to the women who are the heart and the givers of life and to whom we give our "Palabra" to not bring harm to them again. To the east, we pray for ourselves the men of the "circulo" to be able to continue to show up and support one another in an open, honest and humble way that we may find our true "SONG" once again. To the south, we make a promise to the children to work on our baggage so that their laughter, their innocence and learning can continue. And finally to the above and below and the center where all relations come together we offer prayers to all our relations, for people of all roots that they too may find balance, rhythm and harmony in their lives. Aho!!!

References

Leon-Portillo, Miguel (1988) *HueHuetlahtolli: Testimonios de la Antigua Palabra*. Mexico, D.F. Comision Nacional Conmemorativa del Centenario de do
Mundos.

Box 1: El Amor de Este Hijo (The Love of this Son)

El Amor de Este Hijo

A mis padres les quiero decir,
Que muchísimo los quiero,
Que no se paga con dinero,
money,
Lo que hicieron por mi.

Los amo por la eternidad,
Estare siempre agradecido,
Por lo que han sufrido,
Por darme la vida.

Siempre tendran,
El amor de este hijo,
El amor que hicieron,
Fue amor de verdad.

Breed.

The Love of this Son

To my parents I want to say
That I love them tremendously,
That I cannot repay with
What you have done for me.

I love you for eternity
I will always be grateful,
For all you have suffered,
To give me life.

You will always have,
The love of this son,
The love that you made,
Was true love.

Recorded by Jimmy Edwards and the Latin