



**We are
Called**

TO HEAL. TO UNITE. TO JUSTICE.

Team Reflection

No. 15 Trauma and Hope: Behavioral Health Among American Indian and Alaska Natives (AI/AN)

“We knew that an already traumatized people were going to be retraumatized, so we wanted to create that safe and brave space to best give what we knew we had,” commented Shalene Joseph of the Native Wellness Institute, based in Oregon. The organization brought online resources for healing and wellness connected to the ancestral traditions of Native Americans. The Navajo National Vice President, Myron Lizer, urged, “Please stay connected with relatives and neighbors by phone or video chat and remind them that they have support.” [15.1]

Such efforts were critically important as AI/AN communities experienced some of the harshest outcomes of the coronavirus, with mortality the highest of any race/ethnicity. The messages from tribal leaders resonated with many as vaccinations in Native communities was ahead of the general population in March 2021. There is “a strong sense of responsibility to protect the Native community and preserve cultural ways, [and vaccinations are] enough to give our people real hope,” said Jonathan Nez, Navajo Nation President. [15.2]

Hope is so important for a population that has experienced intergenerational historical trauma and today has disproportionately higher rates of mental health problems than the general U.S. population. Some of these mental health matters directly link to historic wrongdoings.

Among AI/AN populations, behavioral health research finds a high prevalence of risk factors and high rates of suicide, PTSD and substance use disorders. More than a quarter of the population experiences poverty, more than 10% above the national average. While about one-third live on reservations and a majority living in urban areas, they lack available services, culturally trained providers and shoulder much stigma when accessing mental health services. [15.3]

One person who saw great hope among Native peoples was Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, a Catholic Bishop in the Mexican state of Chiapas. His years of living with the Mayan people for four decades until 1999, touched him so deeply he often said, “the

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indigenous converted me!” Don Samuel, as he was affectionately known, saw the presence of God in the cultures and the people he served. His unending commitments to inclusion gave the people great hope. Joy swept through a town when he would visit. His joy stemmed from the beauty he noticed in the Native cultures that gave respect and recognition for difference. This enabled seeing diversity as integral to the richness and growth in the human family. [15.4]

Don Samuel followed a similar path as the first bishop of Chiapas – Bartolomé de las Casas, a Dominican priest and native Spaniard in the 16th century who famously argued against the justification of Spain’s conquest invasion of the Americas. Civil and religious authorities did not all agree with his firm view of the human dignity of the Native peoples. For years he travelled through the Caribbean and present-day Latin America. He cherished this first-hand experience with the beauty of Native cultures, their craft, music and livelihood, all of which influenced his impassioned plea that war could not be waged against them.

A full 400 years before our modern Catholic social tradition, Bartolomé articulated the fundamental dignity of people — most specifically the Native populations — and called others to protect and ensure their well-being. He preached that a commitment to justice must be the hallmark of the Christian life. [15.5]

Consider

- How do I see and look for the dignity in Native peoples?
- What histories have been passed on to me about Native peoples or anyone from a different ethnicity?
- How might those stories impact how I might approach the way I care for that population, consciously or not?
- What strikes you about the brief vignettes of Don Samuel or Bartolomé de las Casas?

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Let us pray together,

“We need to realize that we have a role to play in overcoming our own discrimination which is sometimes very subtly held, but that we do need to overcome it and see our indigenous peoples as brothers and sisters, not because we are legally mandated to do so, but because we genuinely see them as our brothers and sisters in the struggle for a better world.”

- Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia

[15.1] <https://cronkitenews.azpbs.org/2020/06/19/native-american-mental-health-coronavirus/>

[15.2] <https://theweek.com/articles/970243/covids-assault-native-americans>

[15.3] <https://www.psychiatry.org/psychiatrists/cultural-competency/education/mental-health-facts>, see also: <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=39>

[15.4] https://www.ncronline.org/news/finding-seeds-word-bishop-ruiz?_ga=2.228211353.523143246.1616530169-1671986588.1616003053

[15.5] Word on Fire, <https://videos.wordonfire.org/lascasasfilmscreening>; See also: <https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=2613>

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