

**Alternative Medicine:  
Powwowing as Therapy in an Amish Family**

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German immigrants from Rhineland and Switzerland brought with them a type of folk medicine they called "brauche". Although they did not borrow techniques from Native American folk medicine, they began to use the Algonquin Indian word, "powwow" interchangeably with the German term "brauche". In spite of witchcraft accusations and widespread availability of modern medicine, the practice of brauche, or powwow, persists today in pockets of rural German-American culture and among the Old Order Amish.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this paper is to describe the powwow techniques used in one Amish extended family and to consider how powwowing might serve some therapeutic functions in Amish life. My interest in powwow springs from exploration of my own Amish roots and my perspective on how powwow functions is influenced by my vocation as a clinical social worker, specializing in family therapy.

This study is based primarily upon interviews with the four surviving siblings of my deceased maternal grandfather. In addition, I interviewed two persons in their community whom they recognized as having special healing gifts. The interviews were conducted in home visits in the Arthur, Illinois Amish settlement in May, 1993.

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<sup>1</sup> See John A. Hostetler, "Folk and Sympathy Cures," in Amish Society, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), pp. 335-342; Don Yoder, "Twenty Questions on Powwowing," Pennsylvania Folklife 15 (Summer, 1966): 38-40; Wayland Hand, American Folk Medicine (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1976), pp. 235-258 (chapters by Don Yoder and John A. Hostetler).

## Powwow Technique

L., age 81, the oldest of her siblings, described several rituals she uses with her children and grandchildren. For burns and earache, she blows on the affected area while silently reciting a secret prayer. With a smile she recalled one little boy who, after being treated for burn, returned repeatedly for further treatment because he liked it so much.

For various unspecified ailments she measures the length of the child's foot seven times with a string. "That should equal the child's height," she asserts. Then the ends of the string are tied together and the child is passed through the loop three times. Next the string is tied to a buggy wheel or the hinge of a gate. When the string breaks, she announces with a laugh, the ailment will be gone.

How does it work? L. has little to say on this question. It works and that is enough. To this observer, these rituals beg for further explanation. In my impression, the string used in ritual measurement of the child becomes a metaphorical representation of the symptom. Shifting the focus from the symptom to the string may relieve pain and ease anxiety. By binding the string to a buggy wheel or gate hinge, hope is instilled that in time, just as the string will break, so also the illness will break.

L. described another ritual involving string. To determine whether an infant has sore stomach, a string is measured by looping it three times around the infant's belly, beginning each loop at the navel. The string is cut and transferred to an egg. The egg is wrapped securely in the string. Next, the bound egg is placed on hot coals. If the egg bursts before the string breaks, this proves that the infant had sore stomach.

How does this work? Setting aside questions regarding the physics of the selectively exploding egg, it is interesting to reflect on the symbolic

meaning of the ritual. The string is tied first around the child's stomach and then around the egg, thus suggesting a metaphorical link between the stomach and the egg. The egg that explodes upon contact with heat serves as an apt metaphor for a stomach disturbed by noxious pressure or gas.

C., age 73, was interviewed over lunch with her husband, a practicing bishop. When asked about use of powwow in her family, she recalled that her father could stop bleeding. Once, when C. was a child, a woman with bleeding came to their house. Her father asked the woman her name then recited a Bible verse. The bleeding stopped.

C. did not know the verse her father used, but another person in the community said bleeding could be stopped by reciting Ezekiel 16:6: "And when I passed by thee, and saw thee polluted in thine own blood, I said into thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live; yea, I said unto thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live."

C. said she never took her children to a powwow doctor or used powwow, however, she does believe in divine healing that resembles powwow. When a child has earache, her daughter-in-law can take it away by rubbing her hands together and putting them on the child's ears. In church, if babies have earache, she is called out to help them. C. views this ability as a gift of God, not powwow.

N., age 70 lives in the grandma house on the farm where she grew up and in turn raised her own children. She was interviewed in the main house with her daughter, M., 33 and M.'s four young children. N. said that although she never practiced powwow herself, she took her children to two powwow doctors, one for earache and another for sore mouth. Likewise, M. said that on one occasion when her daughter had sore mouth, she took her to a powwow doctor and the illness went away. Upon their recommendation i

visited the woman they go to for treatment of sore mouth, an in-law named M. K.

M. K., 81 welcomed me and shared her story. She treats only one ailment, sore mouth or thrush marked by white sores in the mouth that bleed when rubbed. She learned to powwow for thrush at age 16 from her much older stepbrother. She has treated countless cases and sometimes, when the case is too severe she refers to a medical doctor.

Her method is followed carefully. First, she asks the child's name. Then she takes a butter knife and puts it in the child's mouth while silently reciting a prayer. Next, she goes outside, digs a hole in the ground (or snow) and puts the knife in the hole while reciting another prayer. Then the hole is covered and the knife is wiped clean. The procedure is performed three times in succession.

Afterward, the child's mother is told that if the sores do not disappear in a week, she can bring the child back for another treatment. There is a limit of three visits. On rare occasions with severe cases, M.K. has acquired thrush herself. Often the sores disappear from the child within a few days and the grateful mother returns, wanting to give her some payment. She never accepts money, but she has accepted gifts of baked goods.

When asked what prayer she recited, she explained that it is a secret tradition passed down exclusively to younger persons of the opposite sex who promise to keep the tradition of secrecy. Then, without specifically asking for me to promise secrecy, she shared the prayer. Out of respect for my source, I will not reveal the formula verbatim.

The silent prayer is a command for the illness to leave the patient. The command is given in the name of God addressed in Trinitarian form. The prayer also elucidates the symbolic meaning the ritual gestures. The knife is put in the mouth to represent cutting out the thrush and put in the ground to represent burying the thrush.

M.K. reports that one of her nieces calls powwow witchcraft and avoids it for that reason. She tells her niece it isn't witchcraft. Asked how she knows it is not witchcraft, M.K. laughed and asked, "How does my niece know that it is?" Then she added, "Powwow has been around for a long time." M.K. does not believe that powwowing has changed her or made her different from others, she says she is just glad she can help.

The element of secrecy and the necessity of passing on information to the opposite sex are often viewed with suspicion. M.K. had no rationale for this pattern.

In my impression, secrecy creates an aura of power and mystery for the person who possesses the secret. The persons being treated can observe the outward symbolic gestures, but they are given no rational explanation for the symbol. Is this secrecy therapeutic? Perhaps so, under the assumption that the other-than-conscious mind can be called upon to promote physical healing. Symbolic gestures in the powwow ritual gain influence in a dreamlike manner, speaking directly to the non-rational, other-than-conscious mind. A child with thrush wants relief from thrush, not a rational explanation for the treatment.

Why must the secret be passed on from man to woman and from woman to man? In a culture divided by rigid gender roles, most of one's vocational education is passed down from same sex elders. One scholar, Barbara Reimensnyder, suggests that by crossing these sex role boundaries,

the powwow tradition promotes community wholeness. She speculates further that the tradition may have evolved to protect women practitioners from accusations of witchcraft accusations by men.<sup>2</sup>

E., age 67, the youngest of his siblings, is an ordained minister. He has a keen interest in natural healing. Particularly, he enjoys using herbal remedies, and finding therapeutic uses for "weeds".

E. differentiates natural healing from powwow. He says he generally avoids powwow, but he admits that years ago when his children had sore mouth he took them to a powwow doctor who put a knife in their mouth then buried the knife.

E. avoided calling powwow "bad"; instead, he said, "I'm slow to call it good." To elaborate his opinion, he quoted his paternal grandfather who wrote in a letter to his descendants, "Good and evil are mixed and it is difficult to divide them." Quoting further, he advised, "Seek a spirit of understanding and forgive those who do not understand."

Encouraging my further exploration, E. referred me to his cousin's son, J. who has a healing ability E. views as a natural gift. His nephew, J. welcomed my visit. J. said he learned by accident about what he calls, "the gift of electricity." On one occasion his wife had a headache and when he put his hand on her head to comfort her, he felt a pain shoot from the point of contact to his elbow. His wife said she felt relief and the pain in his arm soon disappeared.

Later he learned that he can take away earache and stomach ache from infants and children. If an infant is colicky, he holds it against his stomach

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Reimensnyder, Powwowing in Union County: A Study of Pennsylvania Folk Medicine in Context. (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1982) p. 288.

and he can feel the pain as it transfers to his stomach then goes away. He is often called out from adult church meetings to treat children.

Asked about the source of this gift, J. says it is from God. J.'s gift is not a novelty. He was able to name a number of persons in his generation and in the previous generation with similar gifts.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding how it works, J. likened it to "witching", that is, using a divining rod to locate underground water. John reports that he has excellent abilities in water witching.

J. is not averse to the use of powwow ritual. With J.'s approval, his wife described how with a string, an egg and hot coals they are able to tell if an infant has a sore stomach. The description of the ritual was virtually identical with the one given previously by C.

#### An Assessment of Powwowing

The various healers I interviewed each sought, with their own specialized treatments, to separate the illness from persons. Whether the ailment is drawn into the healer's body, carried metaphorically on a string, or symbolically cut out and buried, the goal is the same -- externalize the symptom and restore the afflicted person to wholeness. I have a number of accounts of people receiving symptom relief by being powwowed.

For powwow to serve a therapeutic function, those who practice it must at minimum avoid doing harm. In my assessment, the risk of doing harm is reduced when practitioners remain highly specialized and modest in their claims, accept no money for services and use time-tested traditions

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<sup>3</sup> Although E. and J. do not refer to J.'s gift as "brauche", similar abilities are labeled "brauche" in other Amish communities. Anna Frances Z. Wenger collected the following descriptions of "brauche": has "warm hands", "pulls out what is wrong" (results in transfer of symptom to the healer) and "like the force of electricity". See The Phenomenon of Care in a High Context Culture: The Old Order Amish, Ph.D. Dissertation, Wayne State University, 1988. p. 156.

passed down by experienced and trusted elders. In my interviews, I heard no accounts of people being harmed by being powwowed.

Relative to the ordained minister and the medical doctor the role of the powwow doctor is marginal and ambiguous. In the use of prayer and ritual, powwow is lay ministry and in the physical results obtained, it serves as alternative medicine. This function may be viewed favorably as spiritual healing or mind-body medicine, maligned as white magic or quackery, or dismissed lightly as ineffectual, but harmless. By readily referring patients to medical doctors and practicing humility and deference to ordained ministers, the powwow practitioners that I met were able to maintain a relatively favorable reputation in their community. Given these observations, it seems fitting to affirm that powwowing has some therapeutic value in Amish society.