**The Three Sisters**

*One spring morning, three sisters left camp with their buckets to get water from a nearby stream. The stream was narrow, but deep and fast flowing. The sisters were enjoying the warm weather and visiting as they walked to the stream. But as they got closer to the stream, they began to hear the cries and screams of babies. The sisters dropped their buckets and ran to the stream. To their horror, there were dozens and dozens of babies floating down the stream; many were drowning.*

*The first sister jumped in and began catching and throwing babies on to the bank of the stream as fast as she could. The second sister yelled, ”You’re not saving enough babies!” She jumped in and began teaching the babies to swim so they could save themselves.*

*The third sister began running up stream. Her sisters yelled at her to help. She turned and hollered, “I am. I’m going up the stream to see how the babies are getting in the water in the first place.”*

The first sister responded to the immediate, obvious crisis. Her action is similar to crisis intervention, crisis line and shelter work done to assist women who are battered. Sometimes we *jump into* action with different kinds of programs trying to save lives, because the crisis is so severe. These actions save lives. But these actions are *reactions* – we respond after the violence has occurred.

The second sister’s actions are less geared to the immediate crisis. She places responsibility on the babies for saving themselves. This approach represents the typical individualistic, mental health response to violent crime, i.e., battered women are “*dysfunctional;”* if women “*fixed”* themselves they wouldn’t be battered, or they would make themselves safe. The accountability of offenders and community for violent crime is often ignored. These reactions minimize the violence and can be victim-blaming.

The third sister seems to not respond to the overt crisis; she looks past the immediate and seeks the **root cause** of why the babies are in the stream. She seeks to understand the larger picture before choosing an effective response. She works to end the crisis. This is the goal of *social change* work: transformation of society by addressing the root cause. This sister understands the connections between the *roots* – the philosophy of the program, and its *outgrowth* – the results.

The reactions of the first two sisters assume that violence is an unavoidable aspect of reality. The third sister understands that the drowning babies, i.e. violence against women and violence in general, are not inescapable realities. The third sister knows that by understanding and confronting the *root cause* of violence, we can end violence through social change and transformation. She knows the solution lies in reclaiming the tradition, natural belief systems of Native people.

The *root cause* of violence against women (and Native peoples as a whole) is an unnatural belief system. This unnatural belief system was imposed on Native communities through colonization, resulting in Native women being denied the right to control their own bodies and lives. This unnatural belief system condones and encourages violence against women, endorses misperceptions of male superiority, ownership of women and children, and men’s rights to control women, children and the environment. Battering cannot occur without these unnatural beliefs that objectify women and justify violence against them. Throughout history, attempts to destroy tribal sovereignty began with the destruction of women’s sovereignty. Destroy the women – destroy the culture. The major tactic of colonization was to destroy the family, especially targeting women, the backbone of Native cultures, and children, the future of Native nations.

Before colonization, the vast majority of Native peoples had non-violent life ways based on an understanding of the natural world. This natural belief system requires and encourages non-violence, respect and compassion, and supports the relationships between all things in Creation. This natural belief system recognizes women as sacred. Reclaiming the life way that this natural belief system fosters is the goal of social change.

Battering does not occur within a belief system that acknowledges and honors the power, role and sacredness of women. When Native women are respected as sacred, and their safety is a priority, the safety of Native families and all tribal citizens is positively impacted. Understanding the root cause of violence against women helps direct our work for social change to end violence against all members of our community.

Our work must move beyond the limitations of a “direct services” approach of mental health or social services. Our work must become advocacy and social change. As we move forward, program development must make consistent connections between the root cause of violence and the way programs do their work.