



The Medicine Is Sacred

Henry Niese

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Layering the big picture of cultural history with personal anecdotes accentuates Niese's Native American wisdom.

For Native Americans, a Sundance is a ceremony in which certain traditions are passed down by way of dancing, fasting, eating traditional foods, and, in many cases, skin piercing. Henry Niese, who is still Sundancing at age ninety, offers a glimpse into these practices in *The Medicine Is Sacred*, with a range of observations and stories that describe how ancient healing practices are still used today.

Focusing on the rituals of the Lakota Sioux, Niese begins with his own experiences in a “ground-flattening and give-away” ritual that involved four days of dancing without any water or food. “That sacrifice teaches a lot about will,” he writes. “Without an iron will, nobody makes those four days.” Eventually, he undergoes a piercing ceremony and expertly describes its importance, both personally and in the Sioux culture.

This layered style, in which Niese shares firsthand experiences with a broader perspective on meaning and history, works well as a framework for the collection. At times, Niese seems to wander around his stories, distracting their focus with irrelevant details. But in general, his straightforward accounts can be fascinating and give non-Native Americans a window into holy practices that aren't often recounted—much less shown—to outsiders.

Particularly striking, Niese notes how many of the participants in these ceremonies aren't medicine men but “ordinary people,” as he describes them, who are able to concentrate their intentions and connect them together for the healing of another participant. He recounts one tale of a newborn child who seemed to be dying but was revived through a ceremony, and another about a young woman whose legs were atrophied by disease but who ended up walking a week after a healing ritual was performed.

Though many of the stories are from the 1970s and '80s, Niese describes how profoundly affected he remains, even decades later. Still unsure if he chose the path of the Lakota Sioux or whether it somehow chose him, he expounds on the gratitude he feels to have been part of so many Sundances.

“The path is like a spirit,” he writes. “It shows itself when we are ready, but we don't even know what it is, till we overcome our ignorance. Only then will we find that it likes us and we like it.”

By sharing his own journey and emphasizing the importance of the Sundance rituals, Niese provides a compelling perspective on healing, spirituality, and Native American wisdom.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (Summer 2014)

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