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Multiple sites  
of healing:  
Developing culturally  
appropriate responses

by

Kiwi Tamasese

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Here at The Family Centre, over many years we have responded to Samoan families in situations where a member has been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. By acknowledging the multiple sites of identity that inform the Samoan world view, we approach our work with Samoan families with an openness to multiple sites of healing. If the Samoan understanding of self exists in relationship to other people, to land, sea and forests, to the Gods, to the ancestors and so on, then all of these relationships can be sites for significant healing.

If it is believed that mental ill health is due to a disruption to relationships with people who are present and alive, then the work we are involved in is to re-establish those relationships. If the disjuncture is in relationship to land then we are involved in reconnecting people with their lands. If the disjuncture is with ancestors, or with the Gods then this is one place where healing can take place. While we can only help so much with this, we will call in appropriate people from the community to be involved in the processes that will be required.

The first step in creating culturally appropriate responses to mental ill-health is to make it possible for the family to be able to talk about what they believe is occurring. We take care so that people will feel free to tell us what they think is really going on. We try to ensure that they know that we are not interested in imposing upon them any descriptions of life / health / self that we might have, and that we wish to hear from them their understandings, according to their own frames of meaning. If the family is believing that something very frightening is taking place then we must take great care with this. We try to provide the spiritual safety for them to talk about that which is most frightening.

An example of a situation that requires extreme care is when a family might believe that it is suffering from the effects of a curse. In such a situation, we don't try to reconstruct and enforce upon the family an alternative meaning from the outside. Instead, we are interested in providing a context in which they can talk about and explore these frightening things. If, within the course of conversation, someone mentions their grandmother who has died, we might say something like, 'Shall we take some steps to protect this conversation? Shall we say some prayers together before we talk some more about this.' By taking these steps we are honouring the significance of the conversation and

are making it possible for the family to share their beliefs with us. This process is not without dilemmas. We are very conscious that if we are creating a context for prayer then we must take care not to imply a particular version of a Christian worldview that would imply that the family had 'sinned' in some way. Instead, we are concerned with creating a spiritually safe context for people to talk about their experiences in ways that are congruent with their cultural traditions, and we are trying to ensure that we are not imposing any form of outside interpretation upon what they are going through. In our experience, taking this sort of care makes a big difference to families at a time of crisis.

We use particular words to signal to the family that we are willing to engage with their beliefs and worldview and that we are not frightened. We might say something like, 'You have mentioned to us these experiences with your grandmother and, if you feel safe to do so, we can help you talk about these. But there are also other people in our culture who could help you and us to find peace with grandma again, to seek her forgiveness. We cannot do this. We are too young and we are not of the right status. We are not from the village from where you come. But we know some people, some elders who may be able to help, if you would like this to happen.'

Invariably the family will take us up on this invitation and together we begin planning a ritual that will make a difference. We talk with the family about material things that may be needed for the ritual, and we also talk about spiritual, emotional and mental preparations that will need to take place. This becomes a focus for conversations and for different family members to play different roles. These cultural processes provide a context for conversations and they honour the significance of what is occurring. This process also provides the opportunity to call upon people in the community who are greatly respected and who have considerable experience in addressing crises. Many people become involved in what are collective processes of healing and the restoration of relationships. It is not possible to convey here the intricacies of these rituals and community processes, except to say that these rituals can play a significant part in the healing process for Samoan families.

In every culture there are healing traditions. We are interested in engaging with these to create culturally appropriate responses to families in crisis. Just as in the Samoan worldview there are multiple sites of identity, we

are interested in working with multiple sites of healing. Rituals and ceremony might have a part to play in some circumstances, as might reconnection to land, family meetings, conversations with an elder and so on (even western medicine may have a role to play in responding to symptoms of mental ill health). What we are interested in doing is honouring the cultural meanings and understandings of the families who are seeking our assistance and responding appropriately and respectfully.