Examples of resilience and wellness are rooted in all cultures and communities across Alaska. We can learn a lot from the wisdom and traditions of these diverse cultures that incorporate connection, belonging, and healing into community practices. Whatever land you are standing on holds cultural knowledge and traditional practices and there are culture bearers in the community that can share that knowledge with you. All human beings in all cultures experience challenges in life. Many traditional practices and ceremonies function to both prevent and restore balance back to the individual and community and nurture wellness. These practices plant seeds of wellness that can be used to regain balance throughout life when faced with overwhelming challenges. Presented here are three examples of traditional practices that enhance wellness and healing.

The spirit of these traditional practices are what will be shared with the understanding that for each community the practice and ceremonies may differ and incorporate sacred knowledge and processes that are not shared outside of the community. Over the last few centuries colonization, genocide, institutional oppression, and racism has forced many healing traditional practices and ceremonies, language, and medicine under the table in order to preserve and protect them and the people. It’s time to put these practices back on the table, take them out, let them be seen, let them guide us, let them be shared and taught and adapted so that future generations can benefit from these restorative healing practices.

**Tea Partner (Sixoldhid):** This is a Deg Xit’an, Athabascan traditional practice that instills a responsibility toward the welfare of others in the community and beyond. Other cultures in Alaska may have similar versions of this practice. Elders and parents connect tea partners together, someone older with someone younger, and a male with a female. These partnerships are not romantic; they are described as friendships, mentors, or as godparents. The spirit of the tea partner means that you share your best food with your partner, king salmon, moose, fish ice cream (vanhgig), that you help your tea partner and offer them support when they come to your community, and that you gift them with things like beaver mittens or a warm marten hat and in turn they will share their catch with you. It is about sharing and caring for others, about reciprocity and balance, and survival. Your tea partner is someone you will honor throughout their lifetime and in turn they will honor you. It’s about responsibility for others. You can imagine the strength these connections create. A grassroots safety net built into and across communities.
**Potlatch:** The potlatch is a traditional practice that can be found among many groups within Alaska. Potlatches include community celebrations or coming together in times of tragedy and healing. The Athabascan Memorial Potlatch is a traditional practice that pays respect to those that have died and is a process for healing from grief for the family WITH the community. The family and community prepare together for one year or more for a memorial potlatch to say the final goodbye; throughout the year food is hunted and gathered, beading and sewing occurs, and songs are created. This grieving process is not done alone; instead it is done with the community and is a very powerful process for sending the deceased away in a good way and healing from the loss together. During the potlatch the family gives away many gifts to the community for all their support and together the people eat food from the land, and sing and dance together, sometimes for days.

**Naming practices:** Naming practices occur in many cultures in Alaska. A Yupik example could be that when an Elder woman’s husband passes away a newborn baby in the family or community will be named after the Elder that passed. In a spiritual way this child is now the husband of the Elder woman and will grow up with the responsibility to help her when she needs it, packing water or wood, hunting for her, etc.; in turn the Elder woman would knit socks or sew warm clothing for the child as he grows. This reciprocity ensures connection and support and a loving tie to one another, and new relatives are created, strengthening the community as a whole.

Wellness of individuals and communities is contextual and incorporates values, beliefs, knowledge, and practices. As one Deg Xit’an, Athabascan Elder shared, “Wellness is the way we live our lives”…a simple but profound statement. Cultural practices teach about safety (Elders model love, compassion, and forgiveness), and self and co-regulation (Elders teach about the importance of relationships, to people, land, animals, nature, and spirit. Healthy self-regulation starts with our relationships.). Drumming, Native dancing, beading, and being in nature all enhance our ability to connect to others, ancestors, and spirit, and bring us back into balance and into the present moment. Indigenous knowledge and practices offer significant insights into wellness and healing and we can start creating solutions, programs, and policies that incorporate within them ways to build connection, show compassion, understand the importance of ceremony, and nurture strengths of both the individual and the community together. Our traditional practices are a part of our DNA and model connection, compassion, and ceremony, let’s learn about them and from them and pass them on as gifts to our future generations.

**References**


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