



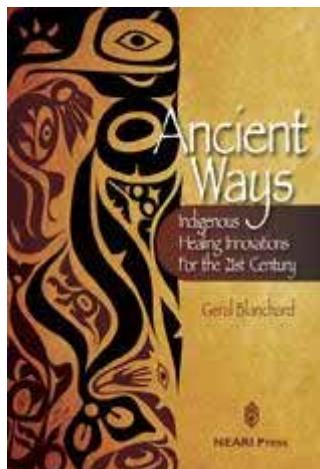
## Book Review: *Ancient Ways*

### Ancient Ways: Indigenous Healing Innovations for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

By Geral Blanchard  
Foreword by Rupert Ross  
NEARI Press  
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Review submitted by David Prescott, Forum Review Editor

*Ancient Ways* is a completely new twist in the literature of our field. That may seem ironic, given that material on indigenous healing is not normally considered new. The extent to which this book can inform practice, however, ensures that it will be as influential as it will be controversial.



Even a passing glance at the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers' listserv shows that the vast majority of clinical discussions involve the tools used in our field. Questions about scoring the Static-99 and debate about the polygraph can dominate our discussions for days on end. Very few questions seem to consider how professionals can improve the interpersonal aspects of their work. A quick review of the major developments in our field in the past 20 years suggests that most of them are technological (e.g., actuarial scales, viewing time measures, electronic monitoring systems, polygraph). Meanwhile, there is an ever-emerging literature regarding the roles of the therapeutic relationship, hope, and expectancy that too often goes unnoticed. Our field has focused very little attention on how change actually happens.

Geral Blanchard has practiced in the assessment and treatment of sexual violence for four decades. He has written about his experiences learning from the *Hollow Water* aboriginal community in Manitoba, and his book *The Difficult Connection* was the first text exploring therapeutic relationships with sexual offenders. He was an early advocate of understanding sexual abuse from a public health perspective, co-authoring influential articles on the topic with the likes of Joan Tabachnick and Rob Longo. More recently, he chaired ATSA's conference in Phoenix. Those who know Geral and have seen him present are already aware that he is a brilliant model of hope and compassion.

Here is the new twist: In *Ancient Ways*, Blanchard takes his understanding of humanity to an entirely new level and reacquaints the reader with long-forgotten elements of human experience. Make no mistake; this book takes author and reader alike very far from their comfort zone. It will be easy for those who read only the cover to dismiss *Ancient Ways* as empirically uninformed. For his part, Blanchard points to aboriginal cultures who have several ways of knowing and anticipates complaints by observing that many aboriginal methods are as foreign to westerners as PET scans would be to the aborigines themselves.



Involving autobiographical as well as descriptive elements, the book is a journey exploring traditional healing from numerous perspectives. The reader quickly discovers that Blanchard has studied his topic intensively for many years. There are few, if any, in the field of psychology who are better informed or more thoughtful about their subject than Blanchard. Topics include healing in nature; myth, faith, and belief; spirit worlds, guardian animals, and ancestors; sacred humor, tricksters, and humility.

A glance at this list might lead a professional to wonder about applicability to modern practice. With a little time and imagination, implications can become clear. For example, the second chapter is titled "Sacred Ground". In it, Blanchard reminds us that across time and place:

Carefully selecting and thoughtfully assembling a healing site is one of the first requirements of indigenous healing... (It) can set the stage for a super natural event. Participating in a lengthy pilgrimage to the site gradually prepares the minds of each participant for a powerful event. The time spent in travel suspends them in a lengthy period of positive expectation. Opening sacred space in the healing setting is a way to further sacralize an environment before commencing specific healing activities. (p. 13)

Meanwhile, a recent study described in the *New York Times* describes how the decorations of psychotherapist's office can have a dramatic effect on clients. It is easy to forget how important the seemingly simple elements of treatment programs can be. Those who have worked in prisons and civil commitment centers know that all too often the sweat lodges are more important to clients in treatment than the rooms where group therapy take place. Scanning the research on process variables in sexual offender treatment should remind us that how and where treatment happens, matters.

With this historical knowledge, any reader will wonder how we ever wound up having our own physical healing take place with a long wait at the doctor's office, reading *People Magazine* and listening to office gossip. Throughout the book, Blanchard challenges us to examine our systems of understanding, which emphasize disease and pathology at the expense of growth, healing, and community.

Likewise, Chapter Three focuses on "Rituals and Ceremonies". As Blanchard describes it, common elements include the preparation of the sacred place - often with an invocation that invites spirits in. A purification ceremony may set the tone for what follows. Transformation and healing take place amid a release of emotions: "Usually this is accompanied by a sense of awe, feelings of psychic unity, and the experience of otherworldliness... (Finally) the sacred space is closed. This is done with words of thanks and acts of gratitude. Then the spirits are released."

Again, at first glance, this may appear strange to the uninitiated, until we return to the literature on group cohesion and process: Regardless of what we may call them, healing rituals have worked for thousands of years and all around the world. Blanchard's text reminds us that the "layouts" clinicians use in group treatment have a long history. The challenge to all is whether we can use them in a truly healing and transformative way.

Blanchard's writing style is engaging, and the production of the book well crafted. Given the exhaustive work that went into its creation, it is safe to say that no one else could have produced such a work. *Ancient Ways* will doubtless be controversial, and that is but one of the factors that make this an excellent book.