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Living the Life of a Lie

By Erich Longie

Prior to going back to school and earning my three degrees, like any other Dakota Hoksina (Indian Boy) growing up on an Indian reservation in the 60's and early 70's, I fell victim to the many pitfalls of reservation life. I became an alcoholic while still in my teens. As most alcoholics do to continue drinking, I stole, lied, manipulated everyone around me, and lived a life of a lie to justify my alcoholism.

Looking back, I now realize several events took place that eventually made me look at the life of a lie I was living.

The first was going through a six weeks alcoholics anonymous (AA) recovery program while I was in the Marine Corp. Although I went back to drinking a couple of months after completing the program, I came out of that program with the realization I was a hard-core alcoholic. I could no longer lie to myself anymore. Every time I picked up a can of beer, I knew it was wrong for me.

The second event happened several years later, when I was 29 years old. While driving drunk, I rolled my car and ended up with a broken back. I became 40% permanently paralyzed from my arm to my leg on my left side because of the accident. During my long



recovery period, I thought about what had happened and I could not lie to myself. I knew it was because of my drinking. Nevertheless, I kept on drinking.

The third event happened soon after my 30th birthday. I began to recall my mother's words to me when I was a kid during the times when I was hung over. My mother was always so proud of me and had high expectations for me. She would say things like, "You're going to finish [high] school." Finishing high school was a big accomplishment back then. She would also say, "you are going to make something of yourself unlike those Indian men..." who fell victim to a life of alcoholism, and she would constantly remind me of how smart I was. Lucky for me, I was committed to treatment for the third time shortly after I turned 31.

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Living the Life of a Lie (continued)



The recent memory of my mother's words made me committed to getting and staying sober this time. However, I was scared. I knew the hold alcohol had on me – or I thought I did. It was during this third time in rehab that I would hear the words about self-honesty that would literally change my life. A counselor told me something to the effect, "When something goes wrong in your life instead of sitting on the pity pot and feeling sorry for yourself try to trace the origin of it, and if you do, you will find out that 9 times out of 10 at some point you could have prevented it from happening. If you continue to be honest with yourself you will have no problem staying sober."

For whatever reason, the counselor's words had a profound impact on me, and I realized I was lying to myself all along about my alcoholism (and other issues as well). Once I admitted I was truly "powerless" when it came to alcohol, I began the long road to recovery.

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Several years after sobering up, I read a book titled, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil*, by M. Scott Peck. The gist of his book was that evil was a tangible force in the universe and flourished through people living the life of a lie (lack of self-honesty). Peck pointed out how people who appeared to be living a righteous life often were, in fact, living the life of a lie. In a nutshell, the message in Dr. Peck's book meant that you either lived a life of a lie, or a life of truth. There is no in between.

Partly due to reading Peck's book, I ended a dysfunctional relationship (which was in itself a lie), and became a responsible single parent to my daughter and three sons. I have never regretted that decision, and I now have many fond memories of when my children were growing up.

Do I think I, and anyone else for that matter, will ever achieve total self-honesty? Absolutely not! Self-honesty is a continuous, on-going process. Some issues are easier to be self-honest with than others.

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Living the Life of a Lie (continued)

I look around me and see widespread dishonesty and many ethical violations happening in Indian country, and I am amazed at the lack of self-honesty. We have an excuse or reason for every unethical act we commit. What's worse is the extremes we pursue to justify our behavior and/or to avoid the consequences that would be a result of our behavior. Again, total lack of self-honesty.

What was our ancestor's view of self-honesty? In his book, *The Soul of an Indian*, Charles Eastman talks about the honesty of Crow Dog, convicted of murder, and the dishonesty of his victim, Spotted Tail, a Sioux chief who came into power through deceit.

"He [Crow Dog] made no attempt to escape or to evade justice. That the crime was committed in the depths of the forest or at dead of night, witnessed by no human eye, made no difference to his mind. He was thoroughly convinced that all is known to the "Great Mystery" and hence did not hesitate to give himself up, to stand trial by the old and wise men of the victim's clan. His own family and clan made no attempt to excuse or to defend him, but his judges took all the known circumstances into consideration, and if it appeared that he slew in self-defense, or that the provocation was severe, he might be set free

after a thirty days' period of mourning in solitude. It is well remembered that Crow Dog, who killed the Sioux chief, Spotted Tail, in 1881, calmly surrendered himself and was tried and convicted by the courts in South Dakota. After his conviction, he was permitted remarkable liberty in prison, such as perhaps no white man has ever enjoyed when under the sentence of death. The cause of his act was a solemn commission received from his people, nearly thirty years earlier, at the time that Spotted Tail usurped the chieftainship by the aid of the military, whom he had aided. Crow Dog was under a vow to slay the chief, in case he ever betrayed or disgraced the name of the Brule Sioux.

There is no doubt that he had committed crimes both public and private, having been guilty of misuse of office as well as of gross offenses against morality; therefore his death was not a matter of personal vengeance but of just retribution. A few days before Crow Dog was to be executed, he asked permission to visit his home and say farewell to his wife and twin boys, then nine or ten years old. Strange to say, the request was granted, and the condemned man sent home under escort of the deputy sheriff, who remained at the Indian agency, merely telling his prisoner to report there
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*Making Life
Better*

Living the Life of a Lie

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on the following day. When he did not appear at the time set, the sheriff dispatched the Indian police after him. They did not find him, and his wife simply said that Crow Dog had desired to ride alone to the prison, and would reach there on the day appointed. All doubt was removed the next day by a telegram from Rapid City, two hundred miles distant, saying: "Crow Dog has just reported here." The incident drew public attention to the Indian murderer, with the unexpected result that the case was reopened, and Crow Dog acquitted. He still lives, a well-preserved man of about seventy-five years, and is much respected among his own people."

Interested in learning more?

Read about the traditional Dakota values of honesty, courage, generosity and perseverance / fortitude, Native American history and how it has shaped ethical (and not so ethical) behaviors on reservations today.

See a sneak preview of the new on-line course debuting December 6

<http://www.spiritleakeconsulting.com/TLI/intro/index.html>

You can sign up for a free trial this week at the link below.

<http://www.spiritleakeconsulting.com/join.html>

Login name and password will be sent to all registered participants on December 6.

Don't want to take a course but just want to read discussion on reservation ethics?

Go to the Tribal Leaders Council forum. You can register and join for free any time. It just takes a minute.

<http://www.spiritleakeconsulting.com/tribal/>