The Red Road

Dr. A.C. Ross was a Lakota educator, philosopher, and collector of stories. As a boy, he was forced to attend a Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school where he was not allowed to learn about his culture or history. He later served in the military, went to college, and ultimately earned a Doctorate in education. As an adult, he worked to reconnect with his cultural heritage and learn the history and language of the Lakota people. He suffered from alcoholism and found that traditional Lakota beliefs helped him in becoming sober and maintaining sobriety. Dr. Ross described his recovery from alcoholism using the Lakota symbolism of the Red Road, which is a path of life, balance, and renewal that connects the people who travel it seeking to live a good life. He wrote that:

One night when I went to sleep, curious about the Red Road, I had a dream. A red road was in the dream floating in the air. It was floating in the middle of my dream. And I was walking on it. Some friends who were sober were on the left side of the road, and they were calling me to come join them. I said, “No!”

When I said no, there appeared, on the right side of the road, a group of my friends who were honky-tonking, really boozing it up. They called to me, “Come over and join us.” I said, “No! I want to stay in the middle. I want to continue walking this red road.” When I awoke the next morning, I quickly wrote down my dream.

This is what has helped me with my sobriety. When temptation comes, I don’t say, “Yes,” and I don’t say, “No.” I say, “Later.” I just keep walking the Red Road—down the middle. When you’re in the middle, you don’t go to either extreme. You allow both sides to exist...

Later when I studied Jungian psychology, I discovered Jung espoused a similar philosophy. He called it transcendent function....Dr. Jung claimed that to attain transcendent function, one needs to maintain a balance between pairs of opposites, between feeling and thinking, between sensation and intuition. He stated that the way to maintain this balance is to become aware of the mood that you’re in at all times. That’s harder than a person realizes!...

The Jungian idea of balance, coupled with the Red Road philosophy, is what helped me achieve sobriety.¹

This idea can also be helpful to people who are working to change harmful sexual behavior and to live a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

Think of yourself as traveling a road toward your goals in life. On the one side of the road are the harmful patterns of thinking and behaving that you had in the past. It can be tempting to leave the road and go back to those behaviors because even though they hurt you and other people, they filled a role in your life, temporarily made you feel better, distracted you from your own pain, or replaced things that were missing from your life. In the past, you probably devoted a great deal of time and energy to some or all of the following: having thoughts and fantasies about unhealthy sexual behavior, feeling guilty and shameful about your thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors, masturbating to unhealthy fantasies, etc...

setting up opportunities to act on unhealthy sexual interests, engaging in unhealthy sexual behaviors, or hiding or covering up what you had done.

On the other side of the road are many of the ways that people try to change their behaviors, especially the ones based on fear and running away from the past. They represent efforts to be good, but probably not realistic ones because they only focus on NOT doing wrong or harmful things. These are all of the things that you do when you choose to leave your old lifestyle and try to avoid your old thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors. This is better than doing things to hurt other people because you are trying to live a better live, but the problem is that you are still giving energy to the old, harmful behaviors by fighting against them. Thinking of yourself as constantly fighting against sexually unhealthy thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors and avoiding anything that might possibly trigger an unhealthy thought means that you are still engaged with and attached to your old thinking and behavior. Living in constant fear of these thoughts can also mean that you believe that you do not have the ability to control yourself and the only way to change your behavior is by running away from your old ways.

The third way, what Dr. Ross referred to as the Red Road, involves focusing on what you are moving TOWARD in your life. You are not ignoring your problems because can know that you will have times when you want to go back to your old ways and other times that your fear of going back will make you go off course in the opposite direction and feel out of balance. When you are living a more balanced life, you know that you can handle the times when you are tempted to go back because you can use your skills and ask for help from your support network.

The only thing that you can be absolutely sure of is the present moment and the only day that you can be sure you will have is today. That means that the hardest thing that you ever have to do is to be in control of your behavior and choose to live a healthy, safe, and balanced life for ONE DAY. That is a choice that you can make every single day and know that you have what it takes to be successful. It may not always be easy, but living a life that you can be proud of is worth the work.