Mother Earth

Shana Humphrey gets to the core of HIV

April 1, 1997 By Roy Oakes

“We know what you have. It’s good.” When Shana Humphrey heard the Arapaho elder’s words, she was comforted, sure of their centrality to the Native American healing process she’d undertaken.

It’s been a circuitous journey for the gentle, dark-featured daughter of a Kiowa mother and Pawnee father. As a child, she was “adopted out” to a white family, an ugly consequence of the Bureau of Indian Affairs’ cultural assimilation program that ended in the late 1970s. When she was 13, her physician foster father accepted a job in the Netherlands. At 18, her restless spirit brought her back to the United States to find her biological mother.

She attended sweat lodges run in the Plains Indian manner. “It felt so familiar to me. It was like coming home spiritually.” The feeling grew at her first Native American Church ceremony in New Mexico. When she didn’t find her mother in Oklahoma, she returned to New Mexico, where a family took her in and taught her Native ways.

Giving birth to her son at age 20 also elicited familiarity. “In spite of birth control, my pregnancy was a miracle. I knew this baby.” She’d sensed the baby’s spirit since she was 15. About a year after James’ birth, she entered into what might have been a long-term relationship: “He was Native. He’d lived in Holland. He was all I should have desired in a husband, according to the values I was raised with. After about a year, he proposed marriage.” When she declined, he announced he had AIDS. A few weeks later she tested positive, with a CD4 count of 189 and a viral load of 300,000. “I raged. The betrayal was overwhelming.”

She put aside how she acquired the virus, accepted that she was infected, digested the facts, available drugs and research being done -- and rejected the two-to-five-years-to-live scenario. She refuses drug therapies because she doesn’t like the language of warfare. “I don’t want death happening inside me,” Humphrey says. “I had a life grow inside my body, and I brought him into the world. Now I have another life inside me.”

Sitting in a rain-swollen pool near waterfalls with her son one day, she called a truce with the virus. “I introduced myself and said, ’You came into my body without my knowing it. You’re here and you’re welcome, but you have to understand that if you kill me by over-replicating, you kill yourself, because I can’t make T-cells when I’m six feet under.’” She sensed the HIV agreed with

her. “It didn’t feel like a demon coursing through my veins.”

Her innate trust in the wisdom of the elders emanates from the fact that Natives have been here for many thousands of years. “We’ve flourished and been diminished,” Humphrey says, explaining the elders have helped her understand that HIV comes from the earth. "People have done a lot to weaken the earth’s immune system, raping and pillaging its natural resources. The earth had no choice but to give us a mirror.

“Native medicine is a process that takes discipline and letting go of fear. Being at peace with the virus, that’s my reality.” It might be working. Her viral load is down to 60,000; her CD4 count is in the 200 range.

About a year after she started speaking in public about AIDS, her adoptive family severed ties with her. But even this burden had a gift. During one talk, she met a woman whose mother worked for an Indian agency in Oklahoma. She helped Humphrey realize her lifelong quest to find her biological mother. “She’s everything I thought she’d be,” Humphrey says.

“I’m not afraid of dying, but I’m not ready,” says Humphrey. “Although the thought of leaving my son in a world focused on fear scares me, creating more opportunities for love and peace in this world helps diminish that fear. I’m certain that if love is possible, healing is possible.”

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