Roots of Integrity in Power

Indigenous Mindful Leadership for Wellness and Systemic Balance in Tribal VR

CANAR

December 3, 2025, 3:30-5:00 pm

Kimber R. Olson, PhD, MSW

My Storywork: Who I am and where I come from

Gratitude and Acknowledgements to those who have Walked on

Grandfather Ten Bears and the lineage of the *tish diyan*

Elder Uncle Walter Soboloff, Tlingit

Dr. Bob Morgan, Lakota

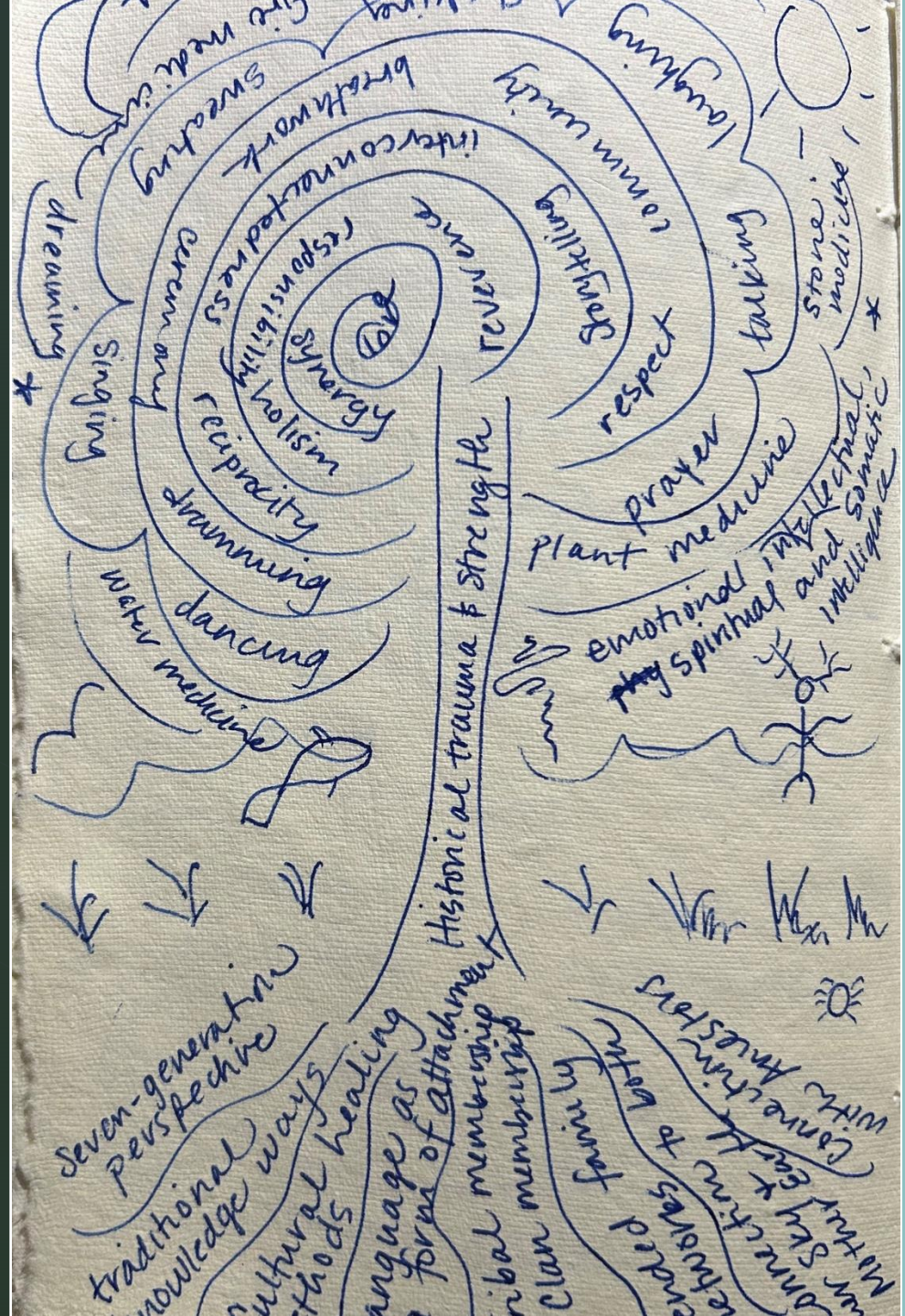
Grandma Dr. Rita Pitka Bloomenstein, Yup'ik

Alice Abraham Miller, Yup'ik

Diane Payne, Northern Cheyene (adopted)

The Leadership Root System

"Leadership is not a title.
It is a responsibility to keep the fire
burning."— Elder Teaching



Why This Matters

- VR leadership is more than administration
- Staff carry immense emotional burdens
- Systems are stressed and under-resourced
- Trauma compounds disability
- Burnout and lateral stress erode team wellness

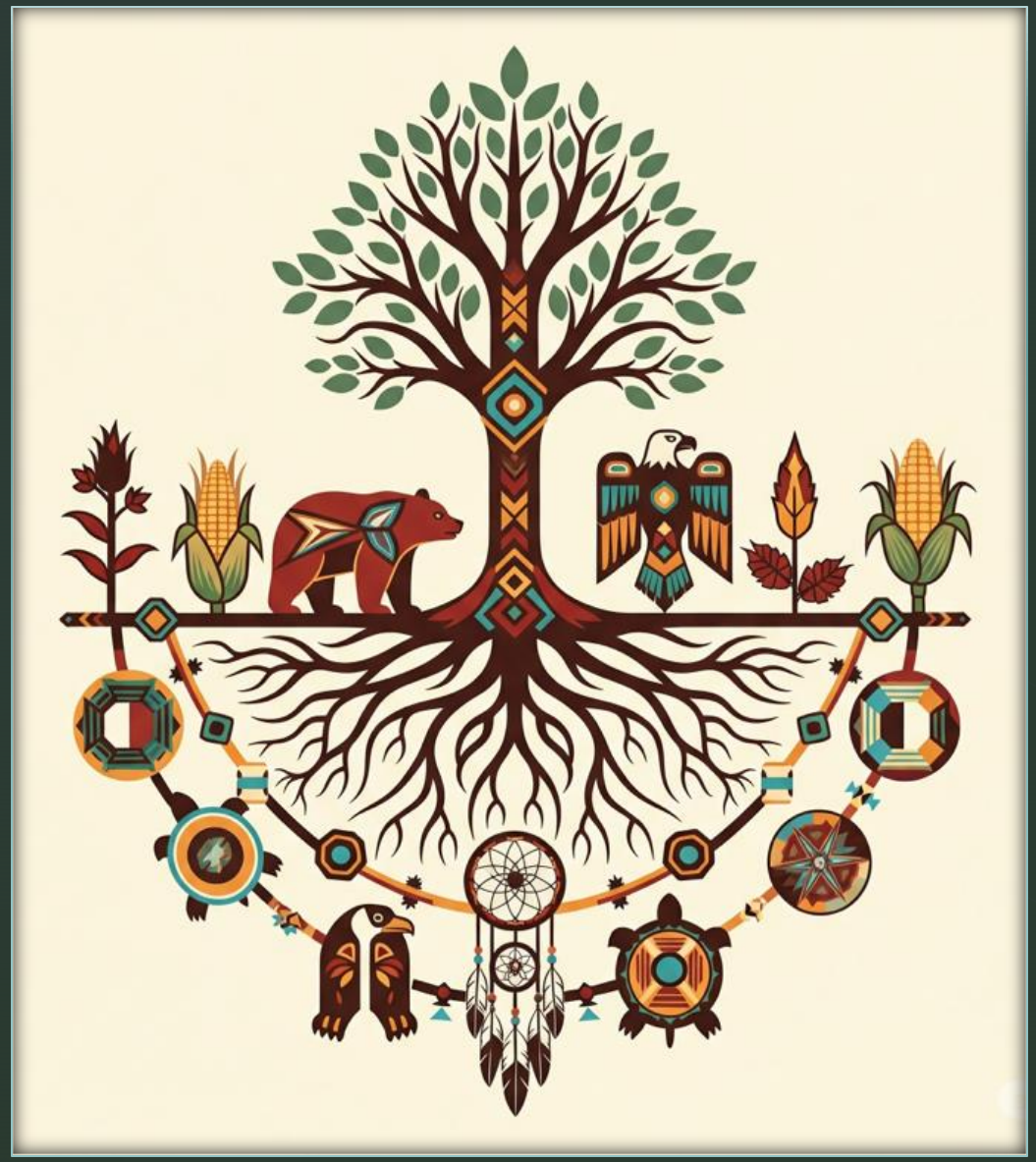
Indigenous mindful leadership restores balance.

Leadership as Ceremony

- Presence
- Integrity
- Reciprocity
- Story
- Community
- Ancestral accountability

What Happens Without Balance

- Reactive decision-making
- Staff overwhelm
- Emotionally unsafe workplace
- Lateral violence
- High turnover
- Reduced consumer engagement



What Balanced Leadership Looks Like

- Calm nervous system
- Transparent communication
- Predictability & rhythm
- Cultural safety
- Shared power
- Values-led supervision
- Centering community voice

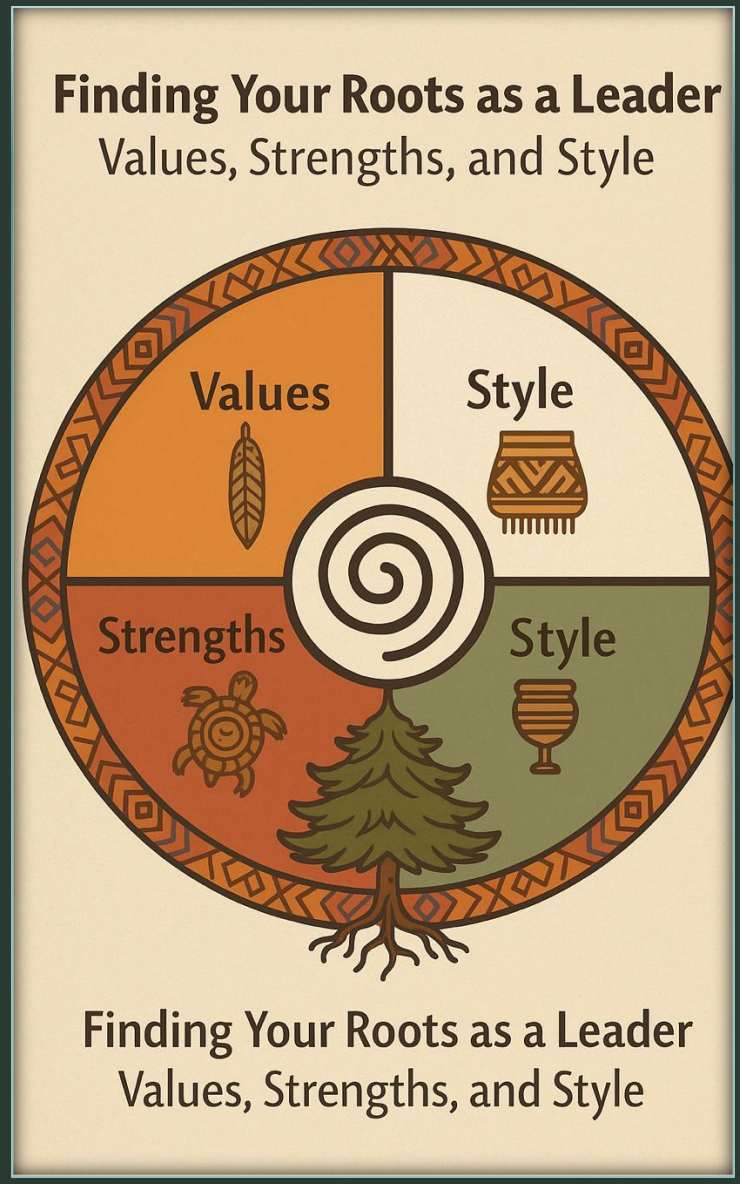
The Integrity Root System

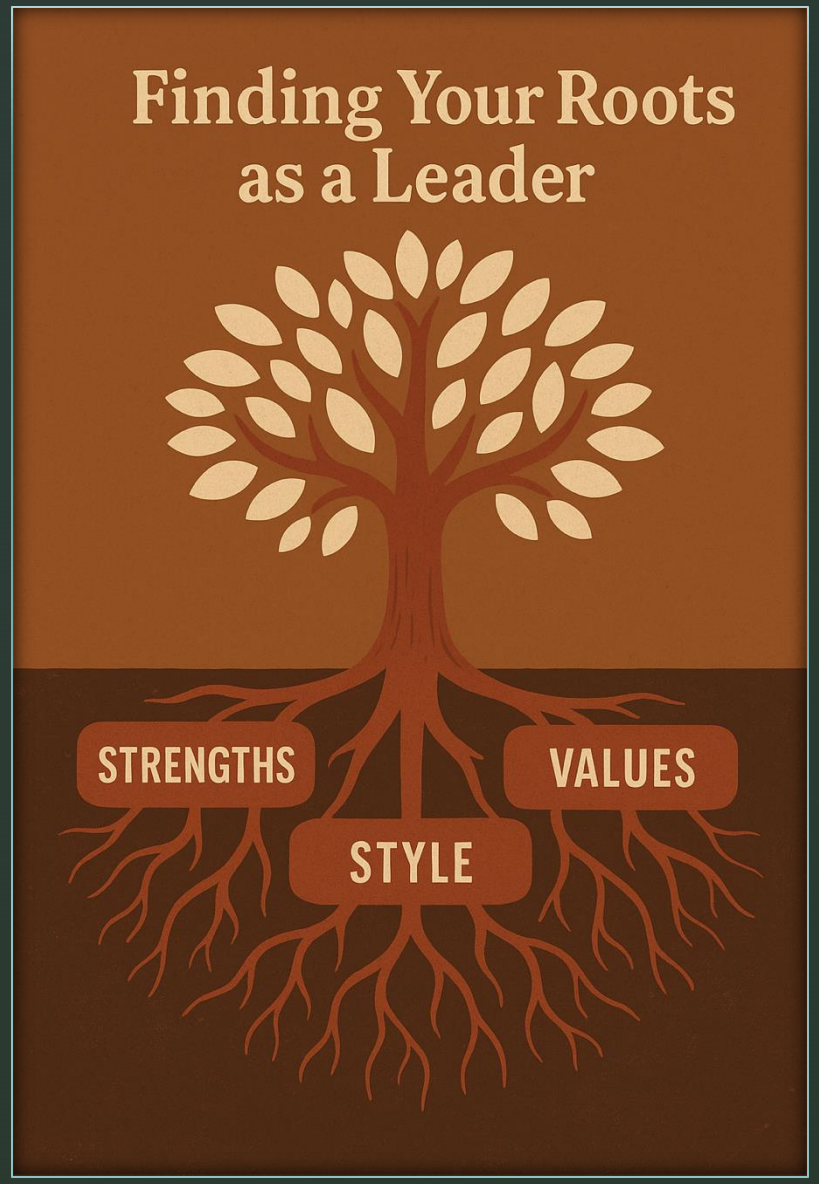
Roots: values, land, ancestors, teachings

Trunk: boundaries, consistency, presence

Branches: communication, guidance, support

Leaves: growth, learning, healing

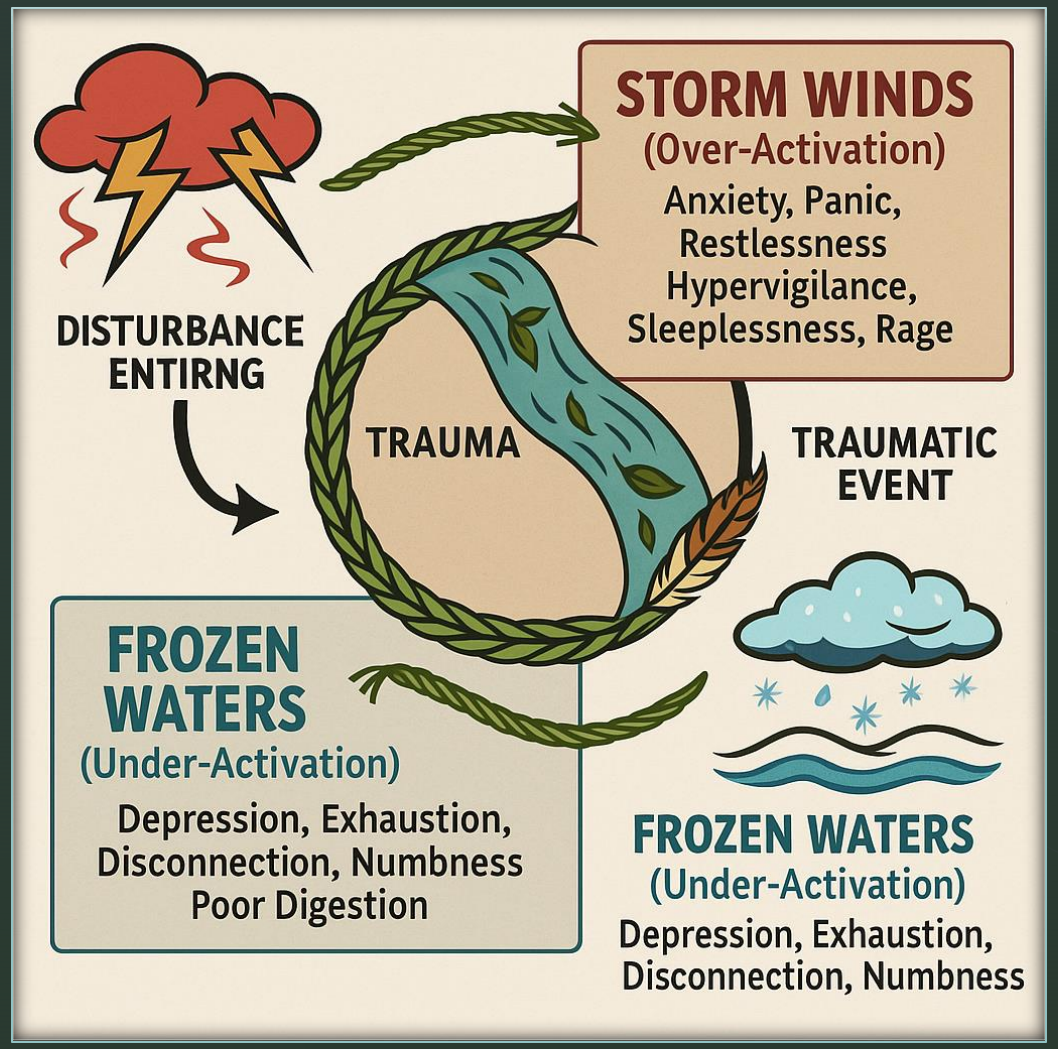




Guiding Values

- Reciprocity
- Consent
- Respect
- Connection
- Humility
- Compassion
- Truth-telling

Values are not statements. Values must be lived.



How Trauma Shows Up in VR Leadership

- Hypervigilance → urgency
- Freeze → indecision
- Fight → controlling behavior
- Fawn → over-functioning
- Collapse → disengagement

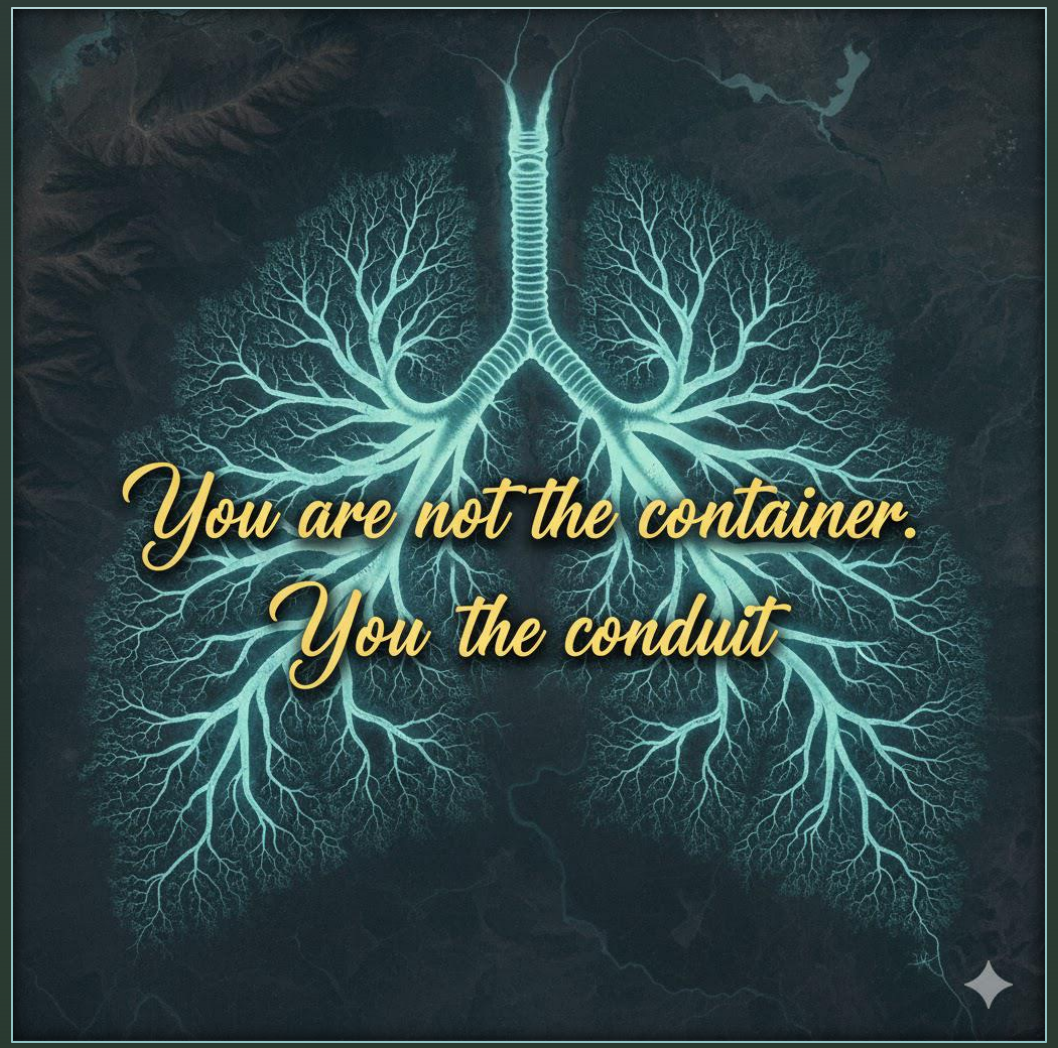
Leading from the Nervous System

Regulated leadership = regulated teams

- Breath
- Pause
- Rhythm
- Movement
- Grounding
- Co-regulation

Mindful Leadership Practices

- 2-minute centering before meetings
- Integrity pause during conflict
- Weekly reflective supervision
- Listening walks
- Boundaries as care



Boundaries as Care

- Not harshness
- Not withdrawal
- Not authority

Boundaries are medicine and they:

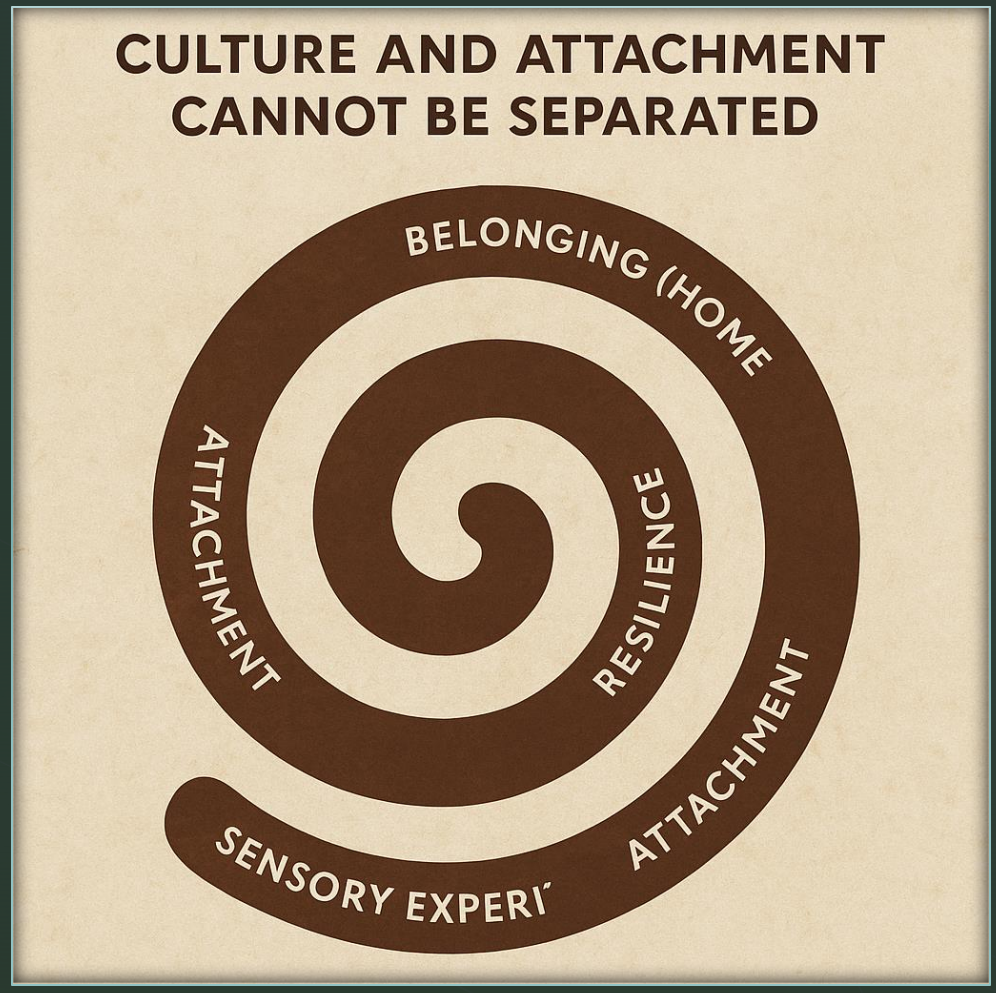
- protect relationships
- prevent burnout
- maintain integrity

Relational Stewardship

Leadership roles as caretakers of:

- People
- Culture
- Process
- Spirit
- Story

Stewardship asks, “What conditions help my people/staff/team thrive?”



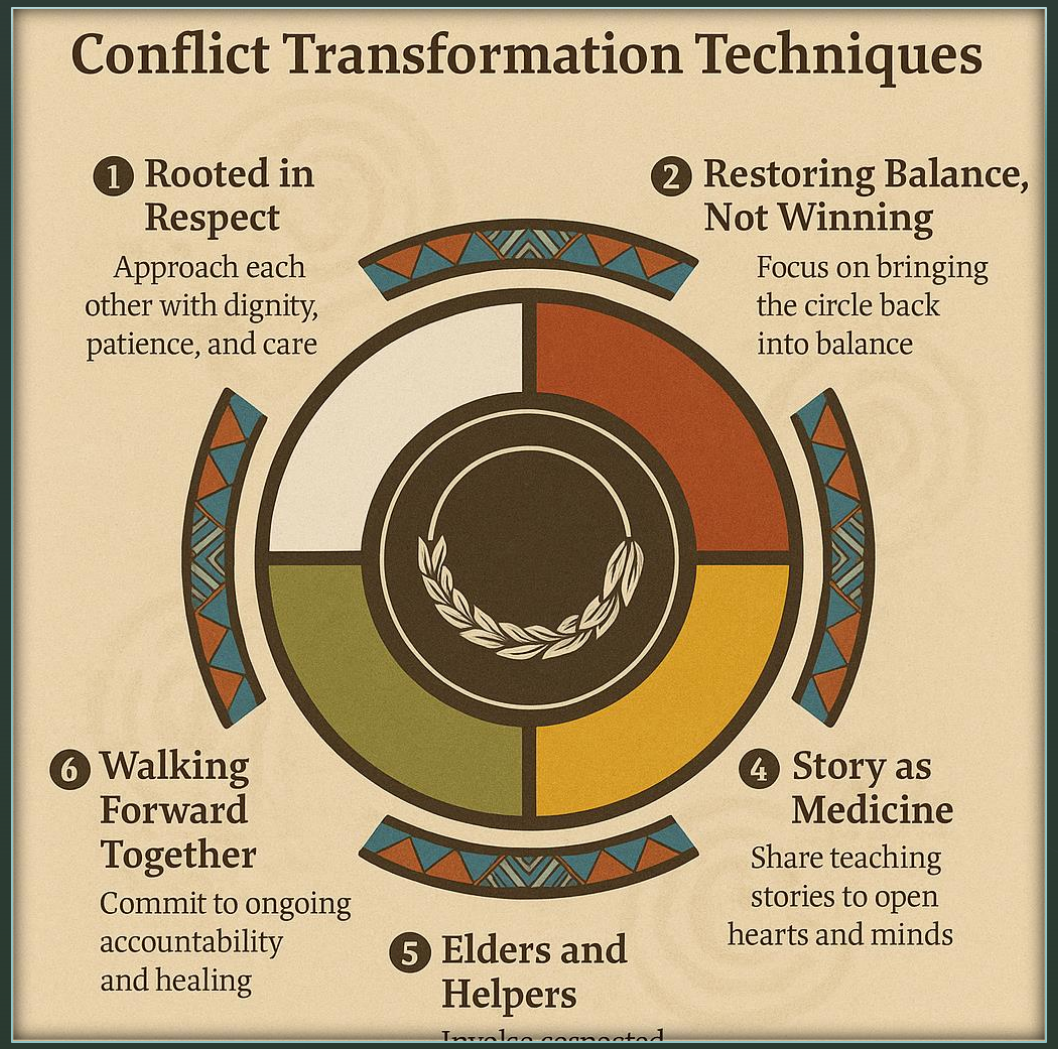
Healing Organizational Patterns

Common stress patterns:

- Urgency culture
- Multitasking as identity
- Role confusion
- Crisis-driven decision-making
- Emotional exhaustion

We replace them with:

- Rhythm
- Clarity
- Communication
- Presence
- Reflection



Reflective Supervision

- Safe space
- Co-regulation
- Story sharing
- Pattern recognition
- Cultural alignment
- Healing accountability

Two-Row Medicine Leadership Model: Gasweńdah

Western knowledge:

systems, policy, evaluation, structure

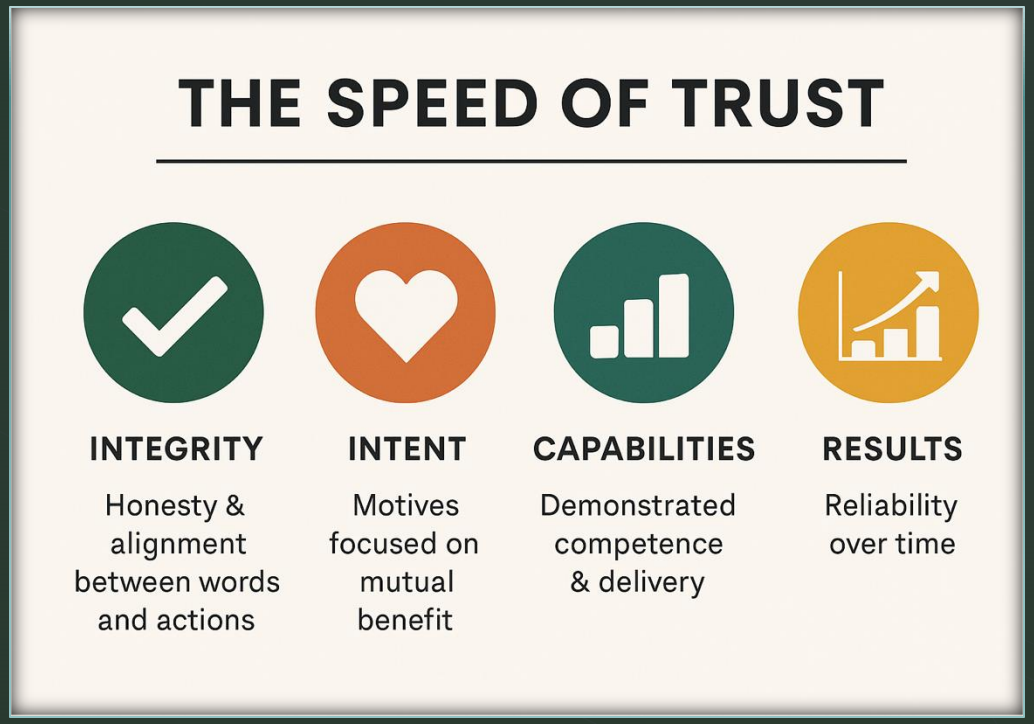
Indigenous knowledge:

relationship, ceremony, spirit, language, and land

Two can walk side-by-side without one dominating the other.

Indigenous Evaluation Approaches

- Story-based outcomes
- Circle process feedback
- Community accountability
- Holistic indicators of wellness
- Integration of language & teachings



Culture as Leadership Infrastructure

- Greeting in local language
- Elder guidance
- Opening/closing practice
- Circle-based dialogue
- Seasonal approach to planning

Group Activity: Vision Mapping

- Identify the “heart” of leadership in your program
- List guiding values
- Map relationships that sustain you
- Identify policies out of alignment
- Choose one seed action

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VISION MAPPING TEMPLATE

COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP REFLECTION AND PLANNING TOOL

Purpose: This vision map helps leadership teams or workgroups move from reflection to action— identifying how mindful, healing-centered leadership can be embodied within Tribal VR systems. It invites participants to see leadership as ceremony and policy as a living expression of shared values.

Work together to complete the sections below.
Use short phrases, sketches, or symbols—whateveer helps your group visualize your path.

PATH FORWARD: SEEDS OF ACTION

REFLECTION: WHAT FEEDS OUR FIRE?
What will sustain us in this work.”

“Our vision grows through our relationships. Leadership is not held in one person—it lives in the circle.”

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Seed Actions for Systemic Balance

Examples:

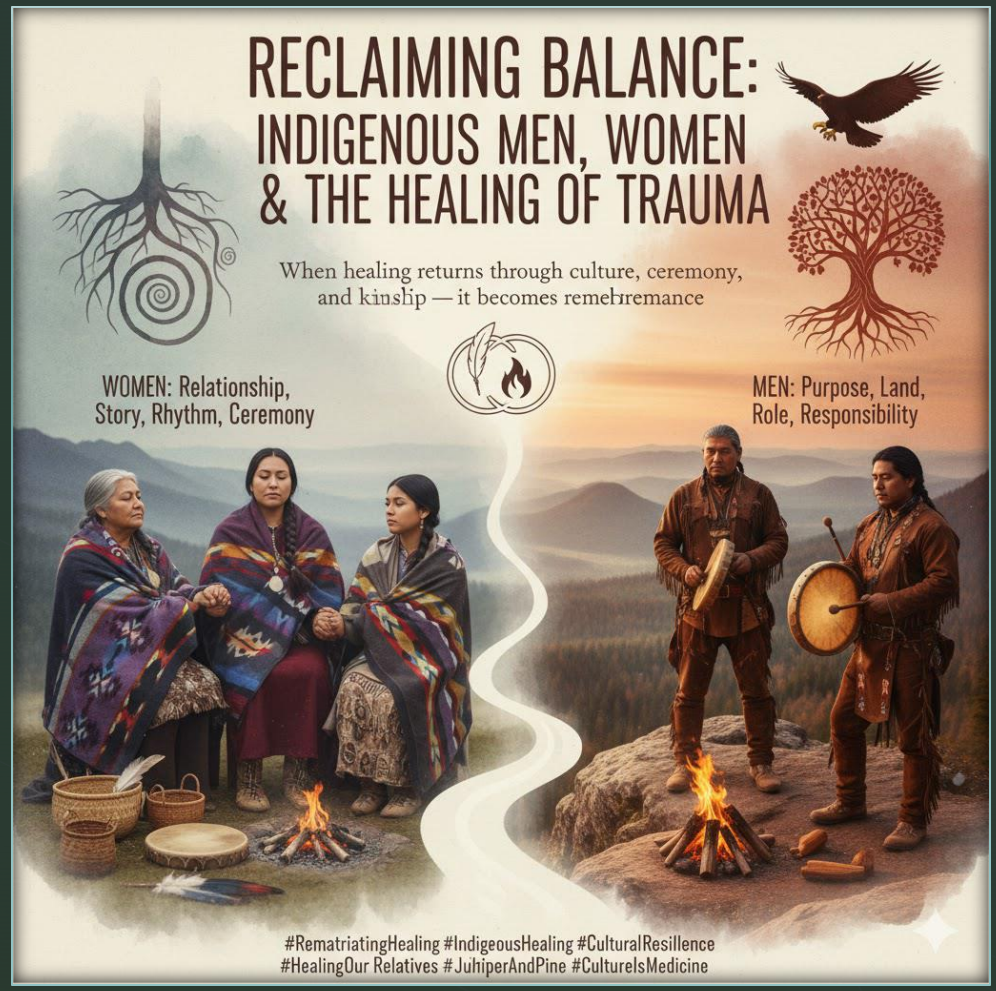
- Redesign intake for cultural resonance
- Weekly team reflection
- Monthly culture circle
- Collaborative policy review
- Staff wellness plan

Discussion

- What does leadership in balance mean to you?
- Where are you already strong?
- Where do you need support?
- What values need to be lived more fully?

Closing

Leadership is not power over. It is power with. Rooted in relationship. Alive in responsibility. And guided by the wisdom of those who came before.



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Thank you