

# Take Flight: Guided Imagery to American Indian Flute Music



## THE TRADITION AND THE SCIENCE

To most American Indian people, healing is a spiritual process that involves and recognizes the connection between “spirit” and body. Spirituality and healing are viewed as one in the same. They cannot be separated. Traditional American Indian healing often includes cultural concepts of reopening the connection between spirit and body to restore health and complete the individual. This reopening is important on several levels and is recognized as an important step that can be taken to actively participate in one’s own healing. Many American Indians hold the belief that each of us is sacred, our bodies are sacred, and our ability to heal is sacred.

Numerous medical studies indicate a connection between the physiologic functions of the body and a person’s emotional state, with each affecting the other. Additionally, music’s impact on a person’s emotional state is well noted in medical literature. Studies indicate many potent effects of music on physiological functions, such as a reduction in anxiety, heart and respiratory rates, cardiac complications,



*Eagle “breath feather” found at the front of the wing and used to steer the bird in flight. Eagles, which are considered sacred to American Indians, are said to bring messages and to help people.*

blood pressure, stress hormones, and an increase in immune cell messengers and natural opiates. In cultural comparison, and from the standpoint of traditional American Indian beliefs, one’s emotional state is connected to one’s “spirit” and, thus, one’s body. To aid in this reopening of the connection between spirit and body, the drum and flute often are regarded and used as healing instruments.

Physicians and others use music, especially of low to mid-

tonal quality, in “guided imagery” work. Guided imagery is a way of exploring and visualizing thoughts, perceptions, and feelings; the inner-self that unconsciously may be affecting a person’s emotional and physical health. The resulting awareness allows for negative states of being to be addressed positively. Coupled with sound, imagery is a powerful healing tool.

Guided imagery is used to achieve a state of deep relaxation, which allows the body’s natural healing abilities to work best to attain maximum physical and emotional health. Deep relaxation occurs when one establishes three factors: a focused mind, relaxed muscles, and breathing that utilizes the full capacity of the lungs and is calm in rhythm.

Guided imagery with music is documented to have an improved effect on emotional and physical states, such as a sense of calm, heart rate, blood pressure, and brain wave activity. People, American Indian and non-American Indian alike, whether undergoing chemotherapy, surgery, medical tests, other illnesses, or simply due to stress, often experience a physically and emotionally damaging sense of helplessness and loneliness. Thus, culturally contextualized narration coupled with American Indian flute music can serve as a vehicle for guided imagery sessions designed to positively address and impact the emotional sense of helplessness and loneliness, as well as the physical state of the listener.

## GETTING STARTED

Recognizing the powerful impact of guided imagery, the North Dakota Council on the Arts (NDCA) developed a two-CD package with user manual for health and healing work. *Take Flight: Guided Imagery to American Indian Flute Music* was developed with Dr. Linda Gourneau, who guides the imagery with narration, Keith Bear, who performs the flute music, and NDCA folklorist Troyd Geist. *On the Edge of the Wind: From the Mythic Landscape of the Dakotas* solely features Keith Bear’s flute music with sounds of nature and was produced by Troyd Geist.

A number of *Art for Life Program* activity plans were developed utilizing these CDs. One plan, *Take Flight to Family*, addresses the sense of loneliness many elders and other people in care facilities are known to endure. Another, *Take Flight to Freedom*, addresses the sense of helplessness that many of those same people also experience. Other plans include the CDs in dance and visual arts activities.

It is suggested that both CDs be used together as a unit whenever possible. The guided imagery of the CD *Take Flight* couples culturally contextualized narration with American Indian flute music to assist in the visualization process. The exercises are designed so that the listener may stop after 20 minutes or continue on for 42 minutes. The narration includes concepts that are culturally identifiable to and associated with American Indian belief systems, including traditional

procedures for healing. For example, part of the visualization narration describes facing the four directions. Another part identifies colors by referencing foods that are popular among American Indians, like juneberries. Yet these visualizations are applicable and accessible to people of diverse backgrounds. Once the guided imagery procedure is introduced, practiced, and mastered via the *Take Flight CD*, the imaginative and meditative process may continue without narration with the use of the purely instrumental CD, *On the Edge of the Wind*.

#### **WHEN AND WHERE**

Make a commitment to utilize the CDs regularly to achieve longer lasting effects. Schedule sessions daily or weekly in a quiet, undisturbed environment. Lower the lights. Turn off or mute any electronics that could disrupt the session or the participants' visualizations. Sit or lie in a position where the body is supported as much as possible and the back is kept straight.

#### **THE JOURNEY**

Establish a space where the meditations can be exercised without judgment or performance expectations. Create in the mind an understanding of curiosity and acceptance of what is about to be experienced and observed.

#### **THE RETURN**

Upon completion of the guided imagery or meditation exercises, the listeners should slowly bring their awareness back to the world around them. Alternatively, the listeners may choose to simply rest or sleep at the conclusion of the exercise. Making an effort to commit an appropriate amount of time to engage in the guided imagery and meditation process will allow the listeners to more fully realize the full effects of these tools.

#### **AUTHOR • DR. LINDA GOURNEAU**

Dr. Gourneau graduated from the University of North Dakota Medical School in 1989, completed her Family Practice residency in 1992, completed a Bush Leadership Fellowship in 2002 involving a self-designed study of Native American healing methods in North Dakota, and completed an Integrative Medicine fellowship directed by Andrew Weil, MD, at the University of Arizona School of Medicine in 2002. She was certified in Medical Acupuncture through the Helms Medical Institute and UCLA in 2005. In 2005, Dr. Gourneau also opened the Natural Journey Center for Integrative Medicine in Bismarck, North Dakota, which provides medical acupuncture, family medicine, and integrative therapies that include guided imagery.

#### **AUTHOR • PRAIRIE ROSE SEMINOLE**

Prairie Rose Seminole is an enrolled tribal member of the Three Affiliated Tribes of ND, descendant of the Sahnish/Arikara, Northern Cheyenne and Lakota Nations, and of German-Russian heritage. She serves on the Midwest advisory council to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, advising on labor, nonprofits and tribal government. In 2014, the Bush Foundation recognized Prairie Rose as a Native Nations Rebuilder, a program that recognizes individuals who have a passion for learning about innovative tribal governance practices, and how they can take these ideas and approaches

to their own Native nations to make a positive difference. She writes for the MHA Times and hosts a radio show on KMHA called *The Voice* that emphasizes community building and prevention efforts. Prairie Rose was formerly the Cultural Advisor to the Sanford Health System's One Care Initiative, developing culturally relevant care models that improve the patient experience.

#### **AUTHOR • TROYD GEIST**

Troyd is the state folklorist with the North Dakota Council on the Arts who is charged with encouraging the preservation and continuation of folk and traditional arts, heritage, and culture. He holds a Master of Arts degree in Sociology/Anthropology from North Dakota State University, and has participated in and conducted projects involving the impact of folk art and folk traditions on personal health and well-being. Those efforts include traditional storytellers working with fetal alcohol research and prevention programs, Bell's palsy as viewed and treated in traditional cultures, familial Alzheimer's disease tracking using anthropological methods, and the use of culturally infused narrative and traditional music for guided imagery. He directed the original *Art for Life* pilot project in 2001-2003, which measured the effects of long-term folk arts and artist interaction on combating the negative impact of the "Three Plagues" (loneliness, boredom, and helplessness) that many residents in elder care

facilities experience. Subsequently, he developed the *Art for Life Program*. With Dr. Timothy J. Kloberdanz, Troyd co-edited, co-compiled, and co-authored the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*.

