

5-25-2003

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Recommended Citation

Harder, Cameron (2003) "The Healing Power of Weakness," *Consensus*: Vol. 29 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol29/iss1/4>

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The Healing Power of Weakness

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Weakness in Western Society

"Nature abhors a vacuum" my friend says when his wife asks him to clean the carpet. In a similar way it seems, humans abhor weakness. The non-religious might attribute that to an ancient instinct for self-preservation. It's natural, biologist Richard Dawkins would say – just our "selfish genes" bent on hindering their inevitable demise.¹ Luther might say it reflects the pervasive curved-in concern for self that Christians call "sin."

Whatever the source, it is clear that Canadians work hard to *avoid* weakness, *hide* weakness and *overcome* weakness. The avoiding and hiding are the essence of shame. The overcoming is at the heart of our competition for social honour.

Shame is the desire to hide our fragile and unpresentable parts. We protect our vulnerabilities and cover our wounds. Courting lovers are reluctant to talk about a painful past. CEO's don't want their boards to discover that they have made errors in judgment. Insolvent farmers try to hide their financial problems, even from their families. Clergy are ashamed of their addictions and carefully protect them from public exposure.

We abhor weakness in ourselves because it threatens our ability to control our lives. When we are weak we are at the mercy of others. And others often seem more interested in tending to their own advancement than to our needs. We also abhor weakness in our neighbour. The weak cannot shoulder their share of community responsibilities. They appear to be a "burden," making demands on our own resources or failing to add to the resources of the community. They may be seen as bad models for community behaviour. Oftentimes they are subtly isolated from community life. Weakness is cause for shame.

We value “strength” on the other hand because we assume it will guarantee our own and our community’s future. Middle-class Canadians like me, for example, send their children to an endless succession of lessons and camps hoping to give them enough skills to ensure a bright future. Most assume that only the fittest will survive and they prepare them to get on top.

In previous centuries and still in some societies today, much social status was inherited on the basis of bloodlines. But in modern western society, honour is doled out according to strength. Strength of mind is assessed and honoured in schools and universities. Strength of body is honoured in various amateur and professional sports. Strength of character, moral virtue, is celebrated in much of our art, movies and literature.

Most obvious perhaps is our elevation of *economic* strength. Desire for it fuels the engines of a global capitalism increasingly dominated by massive multinational corporations. The concentration of economic power has been accelerated by the dropping of technological and political barriers to world trade. With computer-integrated financial markets we can sell our wheat, our electronics or oil equipment to the whole world. But as Thomas Friedman points out in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* it also means that consumers can pick among the world’s offerings for the very best. The winner tends to take all; massive corporations form around them. Second place is often far behind.²

Living in a globalized economy means that on a variety of levels we are in competition with the whole world. As I have interviewed people in rural and urban communities over the last decade they have told me that they feel deeply vulnerable. They know that their position in the bank, or the business, or on the farm is precarious, threatened by hordes of seen and unseen competitors. They said it is important that they keep any weaknesses well hidden so that competitors can’t take advantage of them.

But of course that also makes it very difficult to do any sort of cooperative work. You cannot enter a partnership with others if you are afraid to open your books to them. It makes it tough to ask for help or share wisdom when it is needed. It is hard to talk specifically about the real problems in one’s personal life or in the community in a way that might lead to real solutions.

In this article I want to offer an alternative way of looking at weakness and challenge the assumption that it is necessarily a hindrance to human well-being. I will suggest, in fact, that the healing of our world depends both on welcoming the weak and recognizing the vital role that weakness plays in keeping our relationships to God and each other healthy.

Biblical Perspectives on Weakness

The Bible sees great potential in weakness. Before it ever speaks of a damaged or fallen world it tells us that some forms of weakness were built into creation by God.³ According to Genesis 2 the first humans felt a sense of incompleteness, an ache or void that we would call loneliness. That weakness drew them together into intimate embrace, to be “fruitful and multiply.” Still today, the propagation of human life and its expression in family structures depends upon the relational “gravity” precipitated by such weakness.

The first humans were weak in other ways as well. Like us they had enough intelligence to imagine many possibilities for action, but not enough to assess all the possible *consequences* of all their actions.⁴ That weakness makes it necessary to rely on God’s wisdom and the accumulated experience of others in deciding how to act. Only in those relationships can we come to know what is appropriate for our species. It is there that we learn to identify our limits and live within them. Out of that shared wisdom we develop moral consciousness and construct moral order. As Genesis 3 describes so vividly, efforts to gain such wisdom apart from a relationship to God and others have deadly consequences.

Because we cannot predict all the outcomes of our actions, nor the effects of others’ actions on us, we must also live with the element of surprise. We cannot predict the future and so are not able to control it. That weakness generates an anxiety that draws us to develop social structures of care. We collaborate to build hospitals – not simply because our hearts go out to the sick and injured but so that the hospital will be there for *us* when we need it. We pool our resources in insurance plans and pay into welfare programs. Most importantly, anxiety over the unknown may push us into the arms of God, training us to trust in “the One who holds the future” – the One who *is* able to see all the consequences and work all things together for good. Weakness engenders faith.

In fact the Bible gives the people of faith a name – *Israel* – that reminds them that weakness is essential to their relationship with God. Rebellious, running from God and his family, Jacob is finally cornered at the Jabbok ford and God wrestles with him. Jacob “wins” the match in the sense that he wrests a blessing from God, but his hip is permanently put out of joint. In fact the injured hip *is* the blessing. For Jacob is no longer able to run away from God or from his brother. His weakness compels him to face Esau and reconcile (Gen 32-33).

The history of Israel turns out to be a series of such wrestling matches. Israel enters the new land but the tribes forget their dependence on God. In their arrogance they become prey to surrounding nations. They establish a militia to protect themselves but under Gideon God reduces the militia’s strength to one percent of their original numbers, ensuring that any victory can only be attributed to the presence and power of God (Judges 7).

Israel acquires a king, raises taxes and builds a bureaucracy to centralize its power. It sets up an army and holds hostage the daughters of foreign nobility to ensure that other nations will keep the peace. But the taxes destroy the economic infrastructure of Israel’s rural economy. The political alliances lead to her destruction by Assyria and Babylon. And only in exile, by the waters of Babylon, in the lion’s den and the furnace mouth do her people remember that God’s great opportunity is in their weakness, not their strength.

The New Testament tells a similar story. The Gospels are a continuous recitation of the capacity that weakness has to bind us to God and to each other. “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says (Matt 5:4). Why? Because they are the world’s great lovers. We truly weep only over those we love. The word “passion” carries the sense of it. Passion means “desire” but it also means “suffering.” If we love someone we desire to be close to them, intimate with them. But that very closeness makes us vulnerable. To love is to open an unprotected space, a weak place in our hearts where another may have unrestricted access. We bind ourselves to others in love, and are hurt by them as a result, and hurt deeply when they are taken from us by death or circumstances. A foolish thing, such love – yet it is the foundation of Christian faith and community.

For Jesus the weak model a healthy relationship to God. He insists that “ whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). He tells a story about a

poor man who ends up in Abraham's bosom rather than a rich man – not because the poor fellow was particularly *good* but because he knew his need for God and his neighbour. Jesus tells of a tax collector who throws himself on God's mercy and is declared righteous when a devout pharisee is not. The difference seems to be that the tax collector claims no honour on the basis of his own moral or religious strength but leaves the honour-giving to God. In his weakness he is able to let God be God.

Jesus chooses the weak and wounded to join his company and to be his public spokespeople. Some are disreputable – tax collectors Matthew and Zacchaeus for example, the demon-possessed Mary Magdalene, the five-times-divorced woman of Samaria, lepers, the blind and so on. Most are nondescript folks of little influence in his society – fishers, women, peasants mostly. Those who do have economic strength – the rich young ruler for example – are invited to divest themselves of it. Jesus does not even choose people of faith or courage. Judas betrays him for greed or political gain, Peter turns out to be a coward, James and John are in it for the glory.

The same pattern persists after Jesus' resurrection. In 1 Cor 1:26 Paul says to the congregation "not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world ... God chose what is weak in the world ... God chose what is low and despised in the world"

Paul himself might seem to break the mould, being a well-educated, respected Pharisee. However Paul makes it clear that on meeting Jesus his hip, like Jacob's, was very quickly put out of joint. He is blinded, and though his sight returns it is weak. (He has to write in "large letters" when he does not have a secretary – Gal 6:11 – and he commends the Galatians for being willing to give him their eyes if it were possible – Gal 4:15). He makes a living sewing tents (and probably not a great living if he had poor eyesight!). Though he is called to a ministry of proclamation he is not much of a speaker (2 Cor 10:10; 1 Cor 2:4). He suffers from a series of hardships and persecutions ranging from hunger, shipwreck and cold, to beatings, betrayal by friends, muggings, and despair (2 Cor 11:24-30).

As Marva Dawn points out in *Powers, Weakness and the Tabernacling of God*, this theme persists through the rest of the New Testament.⁵ For example, the writer of Hebrews seems to take pride in listing the weaknesses of God's people. He says that they were

mocked, flogged, stoned, tortured and killed. They were homeless, destitute, persecuted, tormented. But they found strength in their weakness (Heb 11:32-12:2). Similarly the writer of James says that "God chose the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom" (2:5). The writer of 1 Peter says that following Christ, God's people live as "aliens and exiles" (2:11). In the book of Revelation it is the church at Smyrna which alone is commended – not for strength but for their "affliction and poverty" (2:8-11).

This does not mean that the early church was always pleased about its weakness. Paul pleaded with God to take away his infirmity (his "thorn in the flesh"). However God refused, saying "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." "So," Paul says, flipping his perspective, "*I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses*, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Why does Paul boast about his weaknesses? If one is out to start a new church it hardly seems good PR. Bragging about one's failings is not the sort of strategy that Paul Martin is likely to use in his campaign for the liberal leadership, or that seminary students want to employ in their colloquy interviews. Why does our tradition assume that God values weakness so highly?

We have already seen that weakness is essential to relationship, that strength often isolates through independence or separates through competition. The strong may appear to need no one else. Or they may function as our chief competitors for honour and goods. It is the weak who catalyse the formation of community when they reach out in need to others or others reach out to meet their need.

However Paul raises two other reasons as well. These are particularly relevant to the church's mission. He suggests that the weak are more transparent to the hidden working of God than the strong. In 1 Cor 2:4-5 he says, "My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but *with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power*, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God." In 2 Cor 4:7 he adds, "We have this treasure [the knowledge of God] in clay jars [that is, weak vessels] so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

Paul knows that if he is weak, *visibly* weak, and people experience new life in conjunction with his ministry they will realize that it was not due to some special quality in Paul, but to the work of God. Paul cannot save anyone – he is sure of that. So there is no point in getting people attached to him. He wants to be sure that they are connected to *God*. Because of the human attraction to strength, Paul's strengths can become an impediment, a distraction from God. His weaknesses are the true vessels through which God is able to work.

But here is where my own doubts begin to surface. "That's all well and good" I want to say. But who really thinks that putting the church and its God-given mission into the hands of the weak, the handicapped, the foolish and the suffering is going to move us ahead? More likely it will plunge us into disaster, make the church even more of a laughingstock in Canada than it already is. How do we dare entrust the mission God has given us to any less than the best?

Well, I think Paul would reply, whether or not we like the strategy it is the one God chose. God decided to engage the world in the form of weakness and humiliation, setting aside divine privilege and power. The ancient church spoke of it as "kenosis" – emptying (Phil 2). You know the story very well. The Messiah was born homeless and poor. He was a hunted refugee in Egypt by the age of two. For thirty years he did nothing memorable to advance God's cause. Then he left his widowed mother and a good job as a carpenter. He wandered around the countryside with a group of friends, dependent on women's welfare. He got in trouble with the law and was executed on the basis of highly respected religious and political laws for betraying God (blasphemy) and country (treason).

One would assume that the cross was just the disposal of another social undesirable if it were not for his empty tomb. The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was God's sign that that weak, wounded, disgraced human being was God among us. Paul says "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:22-25).

There are a couple of significant implications for our mission. The first has to do with the face the church presents to the world. Paul

writes in Romans 8:29 “Those whom God foreknew God also predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son.” It is the weak, crucified face of Christ that God wants us to show to the world – not just in our words, but in our being. Why? Because we love to believe that working harder, sharpening our skills, developing our technologies, refining our laws will produce a superior humanity which will ultimately pull itself out of the morass of poverty and violence in which it has been mired so long. The cross puts the lie to that dream. It was not lawless thugs that crucified Jesus. It was the brightest and best of Rome and Israel, following the sagest wisdom available, who nailed him to the cross. Without God, the cross tells, us our olympian dream leads only to catastrophe.

Remember, in Greek mythology, who lived on Olympus? It was the gods. Our olympian dream is to be little gods – not to find God but to be independent of God, self-providing, in control. And that is a recipe for disaster. Because there is only One Source of Life, one God. To set ourselves up as competitors to God, to cut ourselves off from the Source is self-destructive. Our survival as a species is literally at stake. If human beings are to thrive in creation we must learn to let God be God. And that means that we learn to be weak, to be creatures, and to let God sustain us in our weaknesses, and work through our weaknesses.

There is more however. God wants us connected to the Divine life but for more than just our own well-being. Love seeks also a *responding love* from the beloved. To truly be love, that response must be uncoerced. So for the purpose of courting love the almighty power of God is worthless. We respect, obey or hide from power; but we don’t get close to it. It’s too dangerous. The intimacy love longs for can only be gained through weakness.

That’s the secret of the cross. Compelled by God’s own desire for *mutual* love God approached us with the lightning bolts laid down, heart bare, arms open, vulnerable. It was a huge risk. If we were offended, we could strike at that unprotected heart. God would be forced to withdraw or suffer. It turns out we *were* offended (and God knew we would be). But we have a *passionate* God – withdrawal was never an option. So, in Christ, *God suffered* – the nails, the mocking, the deep humiliation. God embraced us though we had knives in our hands, and used them. Shamed, suffering, dying at our hands, God’s love refused to let us go. That is how we are saved.

Here then is the second implication for our mission: we ought to be proclaiming *that* God – the “weak” (though highly effective) God of the Gospels. Yet too often the God we worship is little more than our own love of strength projected large onto the canvas of heaven. We have preached a strong, isolated God who loathes our sin and will not touch us until we have been cleaned up (making the incarnation seem like a strange anomaly).

Worst of all, we present God as One who responds to our violence with his own violence, destroying us (or at least Jesus) when we destroy others. Using a twisted understanding of Israel’s practice of sacrifice, we have turned the cross into an act of *God’s* violence instead of ours: the Father arranges the murder of the Son in order to appease the Father’s vengeful heart. Instead of ending the cycle of human violence, our proclamation gives it divine justification. God returns evil for evil so why shouldn’t we?

Such a God certainly engenders fear, often sends us fleeing, occasionally brings us to heel, but cannot, will never, engender love in us. It is a god effectively employed by the powerful in whose image he has been constructed. It is not a god much loved by the hookers, the sick, and the despised who shared Jesus’ company.

The Weak as a Healing Gift to Communities

What would happen if we looked at our communities with a biblical understanding of God and our mission? Our weak are often discarded, our own weaknesses hidden. But what if with Paul we saw “the members of the body that seem to be weaker as *indispensable*” and if “those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothed with greater honour” (1 Cor 12:22)? What if we regarded them as crumbs of bread, sips of wine that, taken up into the Divine life, could be means of grace in our communities? Let me share a few examples.

The frail elderly are often discounted when rural communities look at their membership. They long for young, strong bodies on the tractors and in the pews. But think about what these weak ones can do for us. They need care and so stimulate the development of caring institutions. They bring financial resources into the community from private savings and government pensions. They provide a pool of money for potential investment. They create service jobs without taking up jobs themselves.

The elderly have time to pray. In the parishes I've served it has been chiefly the bed-ridden elderly who I find spending hours in prayer, moving the hands of god to bring healing and support to our world. In an age that has seen several genocides, two world wars, widespread terrorism, regional conflicts and ecological destruction and has been on the brink of nuclear annihilation – it may just be the prayers of such people that are keeping us from going over the edge.

Law-breakers (particularly the non-white-collar kind) are some of the least appreciated weak ones in our society. They frequently have backgrounds of poverty, violence and addiction. Our normal response is to remove them from the community and lock them in prisons. In the process they learn to label themselves as criminals. They lose contact with their communities and lose some of the social skills necessary for community life. They spend long periods of time being trained in the thought patterns and skill-sets of other criminals. So it is little wonder, when they are released, that they often quickly re-offend.

Living and dealing with those who wound others is painful and difficult for a community. And there will always be some who are so dangerous that they must be isolated. But communities that take responsibility for working with their offenders gain some real benefits. The Hollow Water First Nation in Manitoba is one of a number of Canadian communities that have begun to experiment with new forms of justice-making that focus less on punishment than on healing victims, reconciling victims and offenders, and restoring both to healthy relationships with the community. It is a difficult process and the outcomes vary. But recidivism rates are found to be much lower.⁶

The people of Hollow Water report that the work benefits not only victims and offenders but the community as a whole. The four "circles" of confrontation and healing in which the process is rooted involve extended conversations in the community about matters that are often cloaked by denial and taboo. They report that their whole nation has gained courage as they have faced painful realities successfully. They have become much more alert to the ways in which community practices and attitudes reinforce harmful behaviour. They know better who they are, and what values they wish to support. They are able to make decisions about their future with greater clarity. They are able to take risks for growth and change in a

variety of areas, because they have faced their darkest fears with courage and grace.

Then there are the wounded ones among us. These are not only the victims of crime. The wounds may have been inflicted by a broken relationship, a business failure, a fall into addiction, by injury or disease. They may be self- and other-inflicted. Wounded ones too are a gift to a community. They can be agents of grace. If they are willing to tell their stories and if those stories are received with respect, a transformation occurs. People are freed to stop protecting their public images, because they know that others share their problems. There is less shame, and less fear of shame. There is permission to talk about hurts and share strategies for coping.

The wounded ones also teach us how to hope. The philosopher Ernst Bloch once said that all real change in human history is driven by hope. Hope reaches restlessly for a better world. Well who is it that hopes? Who are the catalysts of change in our world? They are generally not people who are comfortable or privileged. Those folks do not want to rock the boat. Who needs hope if you have health and good friends, a solid reputation, a nice house and a boat? You may not want change.

The catalysts of change are also not those who think that the way things are is inevitable, that the farm economy or my family situation, or Canadian politics is caught in a rut that we cannot get out of. Such ones are not able to hope, even if they are suffering because of the way things are. They just live with despair.

But people who suffer knowing the promise of the resurrection and the new creation – they are power cells of hope in a community. They have tasted the Spirit in their lives, they have heard the Gospel's promise. They know that the way things are is not the way they have to be. They know that God has more in store. And so they are restless. They groan, they yearn for the fullness of life. They long for God; they pray for God's coming. They stir up our hunger for God. And they stir up our hunger for wholeness and justice. An abused wife yearns for love. A homeless man longs for a home. A sick woman aches for the healing touch of God. Any community that wants to change must look to the hopeful sufferers in its midst.

The wounded will also be ones who can put their fingers most precisely on the places where change is needed. Sufferers complain. They know there is something wrong with the world because they are

hurting. And they can generally be more specific than most about the cause of the pain. If I want to know what is wrong with the church who should I ask? The church council? Better to ask members who have recently left. The council may have no idea that there is anything wrong. But those who have been wounded by the church certainly will.

The complaints of the wounded wake us up. They help us to see that everything is *not* okay. We can be like the church in Laodicea which said, "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" (Rev 3:17). Though we may not appreciate hearing it, sufferers help us to realize when we are in fact "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked," as Laodicea was.

Let me give you an example. In my studies of farm bankruptcy I came across a congregation in which there were a number of young farmers that were going bankrupt. The pastor was trying to help these families. He had some financial expertise and attended their debt review meetings, organized a support group and so on. The congregation knew he was spending his time with insolvent farmers, but they did not know who those farmers were. They assumed it was folks outside the congregation because "good Lutherans" would never get into that sort of trouble. So they were upset thinking he should be spending more time on church work and less on helping these "losers." At the annual meeting several complained about it vigorously. At a break, the pastor spoke quietly to a couple of the young families he had been helping. He said, "If you don't let people know that you're the ones in trouble, they may not keep me here for long." When the meeting resumed a couple of those young farmers publicly admitted that they were the ones in trouble. When the initial shock wore off something changed in the congregation. They loved these young folks. They knew that they were decent farmers. They began to realize that there must be problems in the rural economy if folks like that were going under. They began to think more critically about it and to organize support. Public complaint helped real change to occur.

Finally, the wounded lead us to Christ. Jesus tells that well-known parable (Matt 25) in which people meet the Lord on the last day. He thanks some of them for caring for him in his homeless, naked, hungry, sick and imprisoned state. They are astonished, not remembering that they had ever met the Lord in such awful

circumstances, let alone having helped him. But he responds, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." When we care for someone who is suffering we may think that we are bringing them Jesus, being Jesus for them. And so we are. The surprise is that in them we also meet our suffering Lord. They are Jesus for us.

I remember being called out to Amy's bedside in the middle of the night. She was close to death and her children wanted a pastor. When I got there Amy was in some pain, clearly uncomfortable. But she smiled when she saw me. I asked her how she was coping. She said, "It hurts." I asked her if death frightened her. She said, "Sure. I've no idea what death will be like. But Jesus has been through it. He knows. He's been there for me my whole life. I guess he's see me through death too." I shared Jesus with Amy and her family, but nothing like the way she shared Jesus with me. In her pain and fear she introduced me to the Jesus of Gethsemane and the cross. And in her trust she led me to the Christ who conquered death. I discovered that the fellowship of the healthy and the hurting is one fellowship – embraced by our crucified and risen Saviour.

My experience with Amy reflects the deepest truth about our weakness: that it is not weakness as such that is the gift to us, but the God we may find hidden there. However we must be ready to see God. If we treat weakness as a matter for shame, or as something only to be overcome by hard work, if we allow it to lead us into passivity or despair, it can be as destructive as self-interested strength. The healing of the nations only begins when we *embrace* our weak, and our weaknesses, and allow the Spirit of God to draw us into life-giving relationships through them.

Notes

- ¹ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- ² Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York, NY : Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999).
- ³ Douglas John Hall speaks of the suffering that flows from weakness as being essential to creation in *God and Human Suffering* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1986), esp. chap.3.

- ⁴ Patricia Williams, *Doing Without Adam and Eve: Sociobiology and Original Sin* (Minneapolis, MN : Fortress Press, 2001) takes this human characteristic to be a negative factor in our lives – and it certainly can be. Our short-sightedness regarding the effects of our technologies is a good example. But I see it also as a powerful reason for the development of community.
- ⁵ Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2001). See pp.53-55 for additional examples.
- ⁶ Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit (eds.), *The Four Circles of Hollow Water* (Ottawa, ON: Supply and Services, 1997). See Also *Developing & Evaluating Justice Projects in Aboriginal Communities: A Review Of The Literature*, 1998, from the same source.