Judy Pasternak’s monumental book, *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed*, is written as investigative journalism, yet it reads like a novel and is beyond belief. The health disparities of native peoples of North America are commonly associated with the Westernization of diet and sedentary habits that contribute to diabetes and cardiovascular disease. This is different; the health problems unique to the Navajo people who lived in areas of uranium mining are shocking. The ongoing ordeals and lack of recognition by the corporate and governmental authorities discount the enormity of their health problems by looking at the situation through their own eyes. They cannot conceive of people gathering water from sacred pools for drinking or using the earth to make their homes. The intergenerational trauma described in this book begins in the 1940s and continues today.

The gripping and heart-wrenching stories of the real people in this book recount how the “toxic legacy” continues on through to the younger generations. Interviews by the author contribute to her extensive research and detailed history of the unsafe conditions experienced throughout the Navajo Nation. Despite
the so-called “self-determination” of the Navajo people, the issues of poverty and self-sufficiency create a tension between those who want to practice traditional ways and those who want jobs. The absolute dismissal of those who are suffering is an ongoing problem compounding struggles with health and premature death. Pasternak brings to light the power of corporate executives and the bureaucratic red tape of government that has led to the suffering and intolerable living conditions of the Navajo people who helped build corporate empires and followed the government directives.

Reading this book brings to mind when the classic book, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down (Fadiman, 1997) first became a popular text for health professionals to read. The embarrassing disregard for health and cultural traditions were eye-opening just as Pasternak’s writings exemplify extreme examples of cultural imposition and ethnocentrism. The story of the Navajo people is on a much larger scale with the senseless withholding of information, irreversible health problems, and, in many cases, preventable death. The vivid images of the effects of environmental radiation such as cancer, lung disease, kidney damage, birth defects, and Navajo neuropathy causing “clawed and suffering” children are moving (pg. 171). Reading this powerful book is likely to spark feelings of cultural desire (Campinha-Bacote, 2002) and may prompt healthcare professionals to become better listeners and advocates for their clients. The final chapter of this book provides a sense of hope as it is entitled, “Beginnings.” The voices of those who are left behind are finally being heard.

References

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