

## Development of The River: A Story of Dementia

*Adapted from Dementia Friends Minnesota*

YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT\\_2CZ89TZY&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT_2CZ89TZY&feature=youtu.be)

As part of the community engagement process for becoming dementia friendly, community members are interviewed about perceived strengths and gaps in their community. In 2018, when Native Americans<sup>1</sup> were interviewed and when their ally organizations hosted Dementia Friends Information Sessions, it became clear that the Bookcase Story about how dementia progresses lacked cultural identity for Native Americans. Using a culturally appropriate story on memory loss was one solution. The language, style, and use of symbolism would need to reflect the oral traditions of Native American culture. What follows is background for understanding The River story.<sup>2</sup>

For many indigenous cultures, the cycle of life is represented in four seasons, four directions, and four life stages (child, young person, adult, and elder). Many tribal cultures use a Medicine Wheel to image and symbolize this understanding.

- Yellow represents: East, Child and Spring
- Red represents: South, Youth and Summer
- Black represents: West, Adult and Fall
- White represents: North, Elder, Wind and Winter



*Note: Other things can be used with the Medicine Wheel, such as elements of nature, animals, ceremonial plants and aspects of life.*

Here's how the Medicine Wheel applies to The River story:

- Paragraph one connects the four seasons and the four stages of life to the flow and experiences of a river.
- In paragraph two, the author describes dementia as a "brutal blizzard." Within the Medicine Wheel, a blizzard falls within the white section, which represents the elder stage of life. For a "brutal blizzard," imagine a fierce wind, being unable to hear, freezing cold temperatures, and not being able to see too far ahead because the snow is blinding. The word "brutal" reflects the straightforward style of communication common among many Native American traditions and avoids "sugar

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<sup>1</sup> Although Native American is used to name the intended Dementia Friends audience, it's important to note other culturally preferred names, including American Indians, First Nations, Indigenous, and Natives. Tribes have unique languages, cultures, traditions, and viewpoints, so it's helpful to connect with the local tribe before delivering an Information Session.

<sup>2</sup> The River was written by Dr. Anton (Waagosh) Treuer, Professor of Ojibwe, Bemidji State University. In Dementia Friends Information Sessions that include Native American participants, use The River story as a replacement for the Bookcase story. Dr. Treuer developed The River by applying a Native American cultural analogy to the topic of dementia.

coating” important aspects of life. This paragraph captures the struggle of dementia and the way things used to be.

- Paragraph three describes “experiencing a growing blizzard without end,” reflecting how difficult it is to navigate the storm and how the prolonged exposure begins to take its toll.

This analogy of a river in a blizzard helps explain the experience of dementia and the different stages. As a person moves through each stage, his or her facts, recent memory, and complex thinking become hard to reach in the ice. Eventually, emotions and feelings can be affected.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As part of becoming a Dementia Friend, being patient and present in the moment is important when someone needs extra time to express their emotions and feelings.