

Editorial

Giving Voice to Our Ancestors

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I thank you Great Spirit for allowing us to call upon you in our times of need, asking you to bless these beloved people who walk in this world of your creation. Oh good Creator, help us all as we stand looking toward you in our own way. (Joe Washington, cited in Garnier, 1990, p. 40)

The elders used to teach the children a lot. I might be speaking to a nephew, talking about a direction in life. At the end of my talk, I might say to him, "That's what I have to offer you. If I didn't care for you I wouldn't offer you anything like that. It's my duty to offer you something, and if you want to go on and separate yourself away from our teachings, then we haven't driven you away—then you have separated yourself." That's the kind of sharp thing that was taught to our young people, and it made those children feel at home. [Our elders would say]: "I'm your uncle, I'm your grandfather, we care for you." To raise a child and give them something to be proud of [they would say things like]: "One day I will be dead and gone, and you will think about me and all the things I tried to tell you." Those were the teachings that came from our old people. They never gave up. (Gabriel Bartleman, cited in Neel, 1992, p. 41)

It has been an honor and privilege for me to be the guest editor of this edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education* for the First Nations House of Learning, University of British Columbia. The theme of this edition "Giving Voice to Our Ancestors" is a timely introduction to the 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples. Our editorial group wanted to honor the ancestral voices and the teachings of the indigenous people of Canada, with the hope that these words would educate and inspire those who read them, as they have educated and inspired the Ancestors. We admire the courage and commitment of the journal authors and researchers who accepted the challenge of giving voice to Elders in ways that honor cultural protocols through respectful practices. This journal edition truly reflects First Nations discourse (Urion, 1991, p. 7).

The first two articles open the journal by focusing on talks given by Verna J. Kirkness and Ellen White—*Kwulasulwut*. In the oral tradition of many First Nations cultures, important knowledge is conveyed through talks or speeches. Verna J. Kirkness shared her words with educators at a national conference sponsored by the Mokakit Education Research Association. Her powerful way of presenting important philosophical teachings of those who were here before us; ways that contemporary educators

are practicing and perpetuating that knowledge; and the challenge to continue this important work had to be shared with a wider audience.

Ellen White's talk began with one educator: me. However, we both intended our collaborative work to be for educators working with First Nations people. Our article contains much of Ellen's talk and my process of thinking and gaining understanding from her words as a learner and researcher. Ellen beautifully transcends time and languages in her remembrances of her family's teachings to make us think about the essence of knowledge and learning and how Elders can be helpful in this regard. Decisions to edit sections out of the original transcript were made in consultation with Ellen. These few sections were either not applicable to the theme, inappropriate for the reader, or culturally inappropriate for public presentation. My part is still a work in progress, as I have only begun to get at important research and learning issues. The beauty of this kind of work is that it is never complete, there is never an end, only a circle of expanding awareness, knowledge, and wisdom.

Shirley Sterling, *Sseepeetza*, recalls the stories and pedagogy of her grandmothers and recognizes their influence on herself as an educator and mother, and now on her children. Many times these words have been said by various speakers: *"To know who we are now, we must know where we have come from, to be able to walk forward—in the future, in strength and dignity."* *To know where we come from:* we must acknowledge history and gain an understanding of how historical events such as epidemics, residential schooling, and interracial marriage affected generations of families, the community, and the nation. Despite a historical legacy of assimilationist attempts, *we the Aboriginal peoples have maintained, revived, and transformed cultural knowledge and traditions for the contexts in which we live today.* By recognizing the grandmothers' ways of teaching and learning as pedagogical models, Shirley Sterling has introduced an educational possibility of bringing school, family, and community closer together. Her courageous reflection, research, and talks with her mother and children raise important pedagogical questions for teacher education.

Sophie Robert's story is true. A pseudonym is used out of respect for the family members. Sophie Robert survived the social damage done to her Ancestors who went through a residential school system. Through her talk, her remembrances, she uncovers the hurt and shows how the wounds have healed over time. Today Sophie Robert is a well respected teacher, mother, and grandmother. Her path to healing and overcoming hate and anger are lessons that need to be shared. Her strength is the strength of the Secwepemc Nation. Celia Haig-Brown's response to Sophie's talk/story about her Secwepemc life experiences shows that sensitive, respectful non-Aboriginal educators and researchers have a role and responsibility to place Elders' knowledge in academe. The collaborative work between Celia and Sophie could not have happened unless a

relationship of trust and goodwill existed between the two women. The time is now and the time is right for this kind of collaborative-coalition work.

Alfred Manitopeyes gave Linda Akan something to share with the readers of the journal. Her translation from the Saukteaux language takes a reader only part of the way to an understanding of what this respected Elder gave us for reflection and action. He gave her the additional responsibility and privilege of collaborating with him to bring you the concept of the good talk, by encouraging her to comment on how to listen to an Elder, to point out the concepts that he had focused upon and implied, and to tell of his talk's meaning for her. All the works in this issue share an aspect of Elders' talk that is particularly well exemplified in this collaboration between Alfred Manitopeyes and Linda Akan; talk is personal, there is a unique intimacy in the meeting of the minds on the occasion of a good talk, but there is no compromise of that privileged intimacy in the sharing of it. This aspect of Elders' talk reminds us that when we speak of education we are not discussing social and cognitive processes that can be left at an abstract level, but that such abstractions originate in the living experiences of individuals and that their ultimate application is in the interactions between living individuals.

Walter Lightning shares the careful process of making meaning with a Cree text prepared by the late Elder Louis Sunchild who left a rich legacy of knowledge to educators. Walter Lightning lifts the first layer of meaning for us by sharing his cultural interpretation of metaphors and invites us to "listen" to the dialogue he and his colleague-friend have about the meanings of the text. This article calls me back time and time again. Each reading and each inward thinking challenges me to bring together the heart and the mind. I want to join in the conversation, add to the stories of learning, and share this process with others. This is quality education. Walter has begun a research learning process that is based on respect, humility, love, and compassion. These were fundamental teachings and gifts given to him, and ultimately to us, by the late Elder Louis Sunchild. If these gifts are honored in the same manner as they were given, then one truly will be a good educator with a "compassionate mind."

In the Sto:lo tradition, I raise my hands in thanks and respect to the speakers and authors who came forward to share their particular ways of hearing and re-presenting the Ancestors' voices. Their open but careful sharing of stories, research/learning processes, questions, ponderings, anxieties, excitement, and reflections contain an opening for the readers of these texts to join the circle, to join in the conversations begun in this journal edition. Our conversations can become one with those who came before and with those yet to come. And this is *Giving Voice to Our Ancestors*.

References

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