

The Sense of Art: A First Nations View

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This article explores the role of the arts in whole and healthy development for Aboriginal people. It presents a concept, "the sense of art," as an important aspect of our experience, a sense that can help us to survive and thrive. It proposes that our sense of art is experienced and expressed in "qualities" in our daily life, as well as in our art forms, which give us a feeling of coherence and beauty. An example of the application of these concepts is presented through a description of a pedagogical approach in the Professional Development Teacher Education Program at Simon Fraser University's Kamloops, British Columbia, community-based site.

Over one hundred years ago, Metis leader, Louis Riel said, "my people will sleep for one hundred years and when they awaken, it will be the artists who lead them." (John Kim Bell, President, National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, February 1997)

In his 1996 keynote address to the Fourth Annual Conference of the Canadian Aboriginal Science and Technology Society at the University of British Columbia, "Celebrating Aboriginal Scientific Successes: Maintaining Cultural Integrity," Douglas J. Cardinal said: "We can use science in different ways, but also the Elders said, make it from the heart, make it beautiful. We always did things beautifully, even our clothes, everything. Art was not a separate world in our language. It was the way we lived" (p. 13).

Cardinal tells us that art is not a separate language, but rather the way we lived. Make it beautiful. Make it from the heart.

As First Nations peoples we experience and define beauty in relation to the way we live. Our relationship to Mother Earth and to each other, the way we live together in a place, our appreciation of holistic aspects of life all coalesce to give a sense of coherence to our worlds. It is our ability to sense this coherence that can give us the confidence to express ourselves fully, define ourselves authentically, and assist us in the creation of our own stories. Through this sense of coherence, we know who we are and we can see the visions of who we might become in the future. This visionary landscape is rich in image, metaphor, symbol. It is punctuated by texture, song, color, story, prose. It is implied in the patterns of a basket, the shape of a carving, and reflects the lands that we inhabit, our experiences on it, and the knowledge that we acquire because of our respect for place. This is our sense of art as First Peoples.

Aboriginal peoples best sustain themselves in cultures rich with their own arts. Our traditional cultures are abundant in dancers, singers, drummers, carvers, image makers: artists of all types.

Chief Leonard George (1997) of the Burrard Nation has said that our songs and dances are the essence of our spiritual life as Aboriginal people. I believe that our song, dance, art, carving, basketmaking, and other art forms can provide the

foundation for our autonomy, solidarity, self-determination and the means for keeping our spirit alive.

If we agree with the words of Chief George, and if we believe the prediction of Louis Riel, it is important for us as First Nations educators to begin the articulation of the important role of the arts in whole and healthy development.

It is time for the sleepers to awake.

The Continuum of Health

In his study on indigenous healing, McCormick (1995) found that *expression* was the most important factor for healing among indigenous people. In Aboriginal communities, expression occurs in many forms. The people express their knowledge and their human conditions through ceremonies, rich in arts such as song, dance, mask. They express their knowledge also verbally in storytelling and oratory. In analyzing responses from First Nations study participants, expression rated the highest (35%) in his list of categories on themes of healing.

In my experience as a music therapist who uses many different arts in my practice, I have to concur. I worked as a music therapist over a 27-year period and with a range of clients from age 3 to age 102, from many cultural backgrounds. This work has been documented in several articles and texts (Kenny, 1982, 1987, 1995). As well, I have spoken about my work in Canada, the United States, and overseas at conferences and gatherings.

Though many health practitioners still approach healing through a symptoms-based perspective, we now know that illness begins long before symptoms are present. In order to understand the deep and often hidden dimensions of the initiation of illness, we might ask questions about the deprivation of certain opportunities for expression that serve to keep a person healthy over time.

In 1979 I completed my studies at the University of British Columbia, with an interdisciplinary degree in four departments: Educational Psychology, Anthropology, Ethnomusicology, and Special Education. My thesis was entitled *The Mythic Artery: The Magic of Music Therapy*. In my studies I was able to learn about Salish Guardian Spirit Dance ceremonials. My research informed me about the important role of expression, music, myth, community, and healing in the Musqueam Nation.

I learned that the continuum of health is long and complex. And I had to wonder about some of our problems, some of the symptoms of illness, some of our sorrow. Would we as Aboriginal people be suffering so much if we had been able to keep our cultural arts intact, without interruption, continuous? Although we may consider this question rhetorical, it must be asked.

In the Navajo culture a person's wealth is judged by the number of songs he can sing (Witherspoon, 1977). This eloquent Navajo philosophy reminds us about the value of song in healthy traditional cultures. If a man's wealth is judged by how many songs he knows, then he is a wealthy man even if he doesn't have money. In our ongoing struggles against negative colonial influences, we must remember our own values. A Navaho elder reminds us about the power of song. We might gather large sums of money, but does that mean that we have true wealth if we cannot sing? This is a question we must ask in a contemporary context, which in many cases emphasizes the power of money over song. Now that we are experiencing a renaissance of our arts in contemporary society, health is returning. Although our

experiences in the arts are not the only reason for the strengthening of our communities, they are perhaps fundamental to our health if, as Chief George tells, they are the essence of our spiritual life.

Revealing Ourselves to One Another

In our poems, our art, our dance, we reveal ourselves to one another and to society at large. Or as Celina Quock, Shuswap student in one of my classes in the Professional Development Teacher Education Program at Simon Fraser University has said, "Through our poetry, we share ourselves, our hearts, our spirits."

This revelation helps us to define ourselves individually and collectively and therefore has many important healing aspects. We build community. We share our hopes and dreams. We participate in the creative spirit. We create our identities. We participate in the creation of our destiny as individuals and as communities.

The Power of Creativity

Douglas Cardinal (1996) reminds us that in the land of the eagle, the Great Spirit has given us the power to create a new life. He says that Elders remind us to face the future with a computer in one hand and a drum in the other. In the land of the eagle, "There is only tremendous possibilities if you're willing to stand out there and leap off the edge. Because that's where true creativity exists; that's what we have to do to create a new life not only for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren, but to make a contribution to other people living in a small little world" (p. 15).

In a study of 20 Ojibwe Native Canadians, Irwin and Reynolds (1992) emphasized the importance of expression and creativity.

Many of the Native people interviewed spoke of the special feelings they had when they were involved in a creative endeavor. This feeling was characterized by a sense of satisfaction and pride in accomplishing something that was different from others. These expressions often reflected an aesthetic nature: woodcarving, painting, storytelling, beading, sewing, and creative music. (p. 91)

In our experiences with the arts we can feel the creative impulse. I have found this to be true over many years of experience with people who were suffering a great deal. As a therapist I always wait for the creative impulse, the spirit from within, which moves one to better health. Each person has an inner vision of health. My role as a creative arts therapist has been to assist people in finding that vision so that they can take charge of their own destinies.

In 1981, Blackfoot/Cherokee artist and scholar, Jamake Highwater wrote:

The existence of a visionary aspect in every person is the basis for the supreme impact and pervasiveness of art. Art is a staple of humanity ... Art is so urgent, so utterly linked with the pulse of feeling in people, that it becomes the singular sign of life when every other aspect of civilization fails. (p. 15)

Highwater does not limit his concept to Aboriginal peoples.

By associating the primal mind with an innate art impulse in humanity, I am talking not simply about American Indians, for whom this impulse is the entire life force, but about everyone in whom the marvelously ordinary capacity for vision survives. (p. 16)

In her beautiful and complex work *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*, Dissanayke (1992) makes a case for the necessity of the arts as food. Dissanayake studies tribal societies and has witnessed the powerful effects of what she calls "making special," arts expression that is intricately woven into issues of identity and survival not only for tribal societies, but for all societies. As a respectful witness and collaborator with Aboriginal peoples, she reminds us that the arts are not merely life-enriching. They are life-sustaining. Put simply, if we do not eat the food of the arts, we die.

Qualities

Sometimes I worry that we will lose our qualitative sensibilities. My qualitative sense is my sense of art. And yes, as Chief George suggests, the movement, the sound, the sight of these subtle senses supports the essence of my spiritual life. Without Beauty of this sort I could not survive. The experience of qualities assuages my fears and gives me a sense of hope in the world. The sound of the drum is a constant rhythm in my heart and soul. In a seemingly fragmented world, my spirit, in partnership with my senses, reminds me of the interconnectedness of all things.

When I listen to an Elder, I do not always understand what is said. Yet there is a presence that holds me in aesthetic arrest. I do not move. I attempt a deep listening. I sense qualities. I perceive the many lines on a face. I open my heart to voice, to tone. I watch arms move and laughter flash. I pay attention to regalia. When Elders depart, not only have I gained information on practical things, but I also feel rejuvenated by their qualities, the echo of their spirits. No one can steal this from me, and this sense does not diminish over time, nor is it altered by new ideas, new technology. It is constant and persists.

With this sense of coherence we can more than survive. We can thrive because we are nurtured by the essence of our spiritual life.

The Knowledge is in the Land

In the Shuswap territory I teach, as part of a team, a course in our Professional Development Program for Teacher Education at Simon Fraser University. This is one of our community-based programs. The theme for our studies is *the knowledge is in the land*. We attempt to assist our students in grounding their teaching practice in "The Sense of Art." Of course, the best way to accomplish this is to listen to the land.

Shuswap territory is a special place. Quiet mountains caress two rivers that converge in the town of Kamloops. The Secwepemc Education Institute/Simon Fraser University program is offered in a complex that is built around the former residential school, beside the Thompson River. A team of three First Nations educators employed by SFU work with many Elders and Shuswap community members to prepare our students to teach with an Aboriginal perspective. We encourage the sense of art in all subject areas, with a drum in one hand and a computer in the other. Our themes evolved from a deep reflection on the healing arts, a serious review of related literature, and consideration for the practical needs of our people in contemporary society.

Central themes in our readings and experiences are:

- performance as ritual
- performance as healing
- the legacy of the arts
- the impulse to create
- the reenchantment of the senses
- developing aesthetic sensibilities
- the importance of aesthetic preference
- developing aesthetic preference
- the role of the arts in human development
- the arts and “biological fitness”
- reinventing ourselves through the arts
- the relationships between Nature, arts and culture
- the power of creativity and the imagination
- the function of aesthetic arrest
- the importance of elaboration and “making special”
- aesthetic preference and moral development
- revealing ourselves to one another through the arts
- building community through experiences in the arts
- expression of our human conditions through the arts
- the arts as the intelligence of the heart
- the arts and social change
- how arts experiences can help us to maintain a sense of connection
- how the arts can nurture us
- the simple act of beholding
- identity and the arts
- the arts and respect for Mother Earth
- metaphor and symbol as central to Aboriginal knowledge

Much of our pedagogy is composed of experiences on the land. We dance the Dance of the Four Directions on the land. We go onto the land and listen and write poetry. We attempt to listen to what the land is communicating to us.

Audrey Nielson, a member of the Kamloops First Nation and Faculty Associate for our Kamloops program, has compiled a “shopping list” as a practical guide for the students.

Audrey's Shopping List

Walking on the Land
A Cultural/Personal project (not paper and pencil)
Speakers and Elders
Dancing, leading, following
Musical inventory
Drawing spatial—guided
School observation
Interviews
Resource book (compiled)
Visual recording
Demonstrations
Hands-on juggling
Storytelling
Food

Field trips
 Gallery walk
 Accordion books
 Writing and sharing in pairs
 The Name Game
 Talking/Sharing Circle
 Games

- senses, physical
- cards
- math

 Micro teaching
 Poetry
 Free drawing
 Academic—textual analysis/reflection
 Journals—personal, academic
 Class readings
 Psychodrama
 Videotapes
 Class discussion
 Skits
 Experiences/interactions/relationships among class
 Safari trip in PDP (art and interpretation)

This list reflects the equal value given to both concrete and abstract experience as well as how we weave together our themes, our pedagogy.

Our goal is to have a constant dialogue between the abstract and the concrete, theory/concepts and practice. For example, when we are writing poetry, we are acting out the legacy of the arts, the impulse to create, the reenchantment of the senses, developing aesthetic preference. When we do psychodrama in the classroom, we are enacting performance as ritual, building community through experiences in the arts, expressing our human conditions through the arts, engaging in the arts for biological fitness, experiencing the power of the imagination.

In this way our pedagogy weaves itself together in a context of real life experiences with each other and in our communities. We become the sacred tree, which unites Mother Earth and Father Sky, the concrete and the abstract. Although we may characterize our tribal mythologies in diverse ways, we can come together to weave the world and our existence in it with each other. This is solidarity.

In a sense Audrey's Shopping List offers a little medicine pouch, which new teachers can access in their early teaching experiences. This medicine pouch is full of ideas of what to do, but it is also embedded with memories of our experiences together as an educational community. We hope that these memories will support the students in their work in the field by stimulating their creativity, but also through the memory of our experiences together as a group. When we remember our group experiences, we once again find the pulse, which we have built through trust, support, and feedback in our experiential learning together.

In one of our experiential sessions, students heard Wendell Berry's poem "The Peace of Wild Things" repeated three times.¹ They were then asked to take the first line of the poem and go outside onto the land, to listen, to write. The first line is "When despair for the world grows in me."

Students and teachers all participate and share in the learning environment.
My own poem had many healing images from the land. The last few lines go

The sacred mountain forces my eyes
To lift to the sun, takes my body
Into a dance. Offers me companions
In eagles and bears.

Small yellow flowers gain wings
And I can remember
What I seem to forget.

That Despair is a season
Which comes and goes
Like the River
Who embraces all things.

By encouraging empathy with the land and each other, we are able to receive the knowledge that was meant to be. We hope to instill a sense of art. We feel that this sense of art is what holds us together. Kau'i Keliipio, a Hawaiian and the third member of our teaching team in Kamloops, reminds us that art is the aesthetic and spiritual foundation of our experience as Aboriginal people. It grants us not only knowledge, but intuition, by which we can make healthy choices for a well-sustained life, which is in accord with all things, even in the rapidly changing context of contemporary society. This is a perspective and a way of life we hope to pass on to our students and to our children.

The Sense of Art

Blue is the shade
Of my anticipation. Dawn
Speaks in shimmering
Tones. Somewhere
An eagle flies

In this blanket of light
I wait

This is the time to dream.

Note

¹Wendell Berry is a poet and philosopher who went to live in the deep forest for many years. From this experience he began to have an affinity with our Aboriginal world view, especially the urgent imperative of maintaining and nurturing our spiritual relationship with Mother Earth.

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