

# Reverence for the Ordinary

*Christina Mader*

*John D'Or School, Alberta*

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*For two decades I have heard the lament "We are not meeting the needs of our Native students. School has no meaning for them." I want to know what does. My inquiry takes me to a northern Alberta Cree community. Since 1993 I am a periodic visitor, researcher, and friend in the lives and stories of traditional educators. Inspired by Trinh (1989, 1991) I ask, "What is important for people to know around here?" Because the work is in a culture where answers to face-to-face questions are not always spoken, participants respond in various ways through photography (like me), modelling, storytelling, intuition, the metaphor of a Giving Circle, or doing ordinary tasks. As we examine local knowledge (O'Brien & Flora, 1992), Connelly and Clandinin's (1994) narrative research methods complement our reciprocal learning/teaching relationships. What emerges is a reverence for ordinary Bush Cree way of life and some useful home-to-school connections for teachers and teacher educators.*

A story [is] a living thing, an organic process, a way of life. What is taken for stories, only stories, are fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves. (Trinh, 1989, p. 143)

When a Cree Elder<sup>1</sup> and I first speak about teaching teachers, it is because I want to learn what is important to people on her reserve. The findings would help me as teacher educator and be useful to the staff of her band-controlled school in the remote community of Moosetrack, northern Alberta. Would she help me? Agnes Moberly, a Native aide and preschool teacher for nearly 20 years, answers, "But we want to get to know you too!" (Mader, 1996, p. 9). I hear her request for reciprocity and offer to share with her a slide show; pictures from all over. The photographs tell what I know and who taught me. They explain my ancestry. She is curious. She says "I suppose it's alright" (p. 9).

## *Reciprocal Relationships*

Several years later I use the slide show and learnings from the moment described above in a teacher education course. My students comment, "I was very moved by your photographs," "The words you read were like a poem," and "I never believed I could do what you wanted us to do while we were watching, but it was fantastic! I will do this lesson with my own students."

Inspired by Agnes and teachers like her, I ask my students to reciprocate learning and teaching. I say something like, "I will be reading from a script and show photos from my past. They reach a couple of times around the world and span the last 30 years of my life. As you watch and listen, focus on connections that come up from *your* past. What stories tie my pictures on the screen to pictures in your memory?"

In response to my early childhood in the Black Forest of Germany, a student talks about growing up on a chicken farm. A photo of my master's work in Texas

elicits someone's *own* transnational corporation story. Closeups of women from various cultures breastfeeding their babies—dramatically juxtaposed with one of my newborn and I, produce links difficult to describe.

I came back to Vancouver to give birth to my own girl. I didn't stay long. What a culture shock to see how we sterilize ourselves and our babies. And our healing places.... hospitals are supposed to be healing places! And our teachings! What was I learning about being a young Canadian mother when I had to get dressed up like this [hospital gown and cap] to [bottle-] feed my baby which was kept in an incubator for me? (Mader, 1994, pp. 17a-18a)



*Bottle feeding my daughter.*

In response, a student talks about her daughter's work in Africa teaching women about the hidden costs of canned baby formula. Another conversation is ignited by a skiing picture of my family with only me, my brother, and my dad. The script adds that my mom is the photographer who frames that picture and hammers home its setting. She insisted we (mom, dad, and the kids) be actively engaged with nature every weekend. I explain to the students how I "frame" the remaining slides and choose what students see and don't see (Mader, 1994). Photographs and curriculum are both edited and cropped. My student teachers go on to make repeated home-to-school connections that show how they can influence the mandated curriculum by their own experience. My one regret is that I did not tape-record those classes. They could have let Agnes hear the influence she has on teacher preparation miles from her home community. The following is my description of that community.

### *The Community of Moosetrack*

Moosetrack is located in a northern prairie, which is a natural clearing in a boreal forest, a hard, tough-grassed, open space surrounded by spruce and poplar trees. In 1991 nearly 600 Woodland Cree people lived there (Statistics Canada, 1991). The name Woodland Cree was given to them by anthropologists. They call themselves Bush Cree.

#### *Moosetrack*

The homes—a few log cabins; mostly frame houses or trailers—are arranged into family groupings. Footpaths through prairie grass connect them; so do gravel and dirt roads. Two small towns lie within an-hour-and-a-half drive over gravel roads.... A popular pastime is visiting family and friends and driving with them to "town" ... [the nearest center], "Fort" ... [another nearby town] ... or "The City" (Edmonton, 1,000 kilometers south). The weather is hard on vehicles travelling those roads. Sometimes heavy mud, high water, dust, or snow isolates small car-owners for a day or two. But many people own pickup trucks, 4x4 vans, all-terrain vehicles, or skidoos.... Basic modern necessities are available and generate some jobs.... There is one grocery and hardware store, one confectionery store with a videotape outlet, a laundromat, a health center ... [and] a unique teepee church. (Mader, 1996, pp. 22-24)

In 1995 everyone has electricity, but only the communal center area of the reserve has sewage and indoor plumbing. The local Cree Nation (Moosetrack is part of that nation) is the biggest employer.

At the right time of year some people like to go into the bush for several days. There families hunt and prepare their kill to provide a basic meat diet of moose, deer, duck, geese, bear, or rabbit for their extended families. The right time of the year depends on which animal is in season. Knowledge about such seasonal rhythms is passed on through generations.

### *Research Process*

I travel to Moosetrack in the role of researcher with a lengthy career in education, consulting and administration from around the world, but mainly from British Columbia. For two decades I have heard the lament "We are not meeting the needs of our Native students. School has no meaning for them." I want to know what does. I come to Moosetrack as would any teacher new to the area, with no prior knowledge and no local connections. I speak with people and try first one proposal approved by the Regional Board of Education of the local Cree Nation and then others. When all the tangles are smoothed out and all the silences interpreted, what emerges is that I will be the teacher who is being educated. I will document my own education. I hope to find out for teachers—all teachers, but especially those who work with Native students—how to use age-old teaching techniques in contemporary classrooms. From my own experience I know that traditional educative techniques tie home and school together. I use *traditional* in the general sense that Native people themselves do when they say someone is steeped in the cultural way. Bull (1991) writes, "Traditional ... means those Native people who are maintaining and living according to Native traditional values and are usually more spiritually oriented" (p. 9). *Traditional education* as I use the term, also applies to old European practices where people educated each other by telling stories, listening to them, playing games, copying masters, and practicing.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the fall of 1993 I study how I gain local knowledge and make sense of it for teachers and teacher educators. By local knowledge I mean a shared way of life that teaches a set of values through action—and stories about those actions. I include the sense of place O'Brien and Flora (1992) describe. They say that local knowledge "is context-specific ... accommodating the global variety of people expressing and generating such knowledge: Turkana herds-people, Colombian peasants, and Kansas farmers are thus similar in their common ability to produce context-specific knowledge" (p. 97). I draw on past work with Native peoples. I make new friends. I participate in their daily routines. I go to pot-lucks. I organize my own. I attend community dances, take part in ceremonies. I give my food for theirs, my story for somebody's, my time for others'. I analyze my every move and thought as I write, draw, photograph, and tape-record my interactions with six traditional educators. Systematically and with academic rigor I study three Bush Cree women plus another who suffers a fatal heart attack, a white Catholic nun, Cow Moose, and me. Time and again I take my work back to the people of Moosetrack for their input and correction (e.g., this article has local input and approval). The sharing and verifying is written into the dissertation when I describe how we publicly share our research findings during a traditional ceremony,

and how my Moosetrack landlady makes a formal presentation on my behalf of the bound dissertation to the local Cree Nation Regional Education Committee.

### *Research Methodology and Research Findings*

I use narrative research methods the way Connelly and Clandinin (1994) describe them, as a way of examining lived and told stories to understand how the researcher and the researched experience the world. In Moosetrack I become a periodic visitor, researcher, and friend. I ask, often silently, "What is important for people to know around here?" In a culture where answers to questions are not always spoken, participants give away local knowledge in their own fashion through photography (I am the only one using this method), storytelling, modelling, intuition, or simply going about ordinary tasks. They show me how to learn local knowledge in face-to-face relationships.

Once I have analyzed my data (diaries, field notes, sketches, photographs, tapes, interviews, documents, books, etc.) and begin putting local knowledge onto paper, I am heavily influenced by Trinh (1989, 1991), who points out that traditional storytellers communicate a story so that it can be passed on. "*Tell it so that they can tell it. So that it may become larger than its measure, always larger than its own in/significance*" (Trinh, 1989, p. 149). I think of how the storytellers in our study make the medium (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) become the message in every generation. The medium, of course, is the research participants themselves. In our larger than life stories, Cow Moose represents direct learning from Nature, The Woman Who Passed Away represents knowledge from the spirit world, three Bush Cree women represent contemporary Elders, an Acadian nun represents women who love their lifework in a culture different from their own. And I represent a change agent for my own society (i.e., I take what I learn in other cultures to improve mainstream teacher education). Central to our story, the one we want to become larger than its measure, always larger than its own in/significance is a message of reverence for the ordinary. (Oh my, this paragraph is difficult to write—I stumble over *our* and *we*. Wooed by readers who encourage me to tell an insider's perspective, I am tempted to take myself away and write *they*, to write *their story*. But the old people, like the mythic Little People some talk about, are sitting on my shoulders. They shake their heads. It's never easy they communicate, and one of them says quietly, "It's your story now" [Mader, 1996 p. 97]. The responsibility to care for what I now own seems never more difficult than at this very moment.) Again the research findings: reverence for the ordinary.

### *Reverence for the Ordinary*

By *reverence* I mean what Webster does: "an attitude of deep respect mingled with affection" (Finnegan, 1975, p. 1285). I am delighted by the simplicity of our research findings. Pleased by how they connect with Walter Lightning's (1992) work—"One thing that I am beginning to comprehend is that, in basic terms, all Elders are saying the same thing. The message is all one and the same, but expressed from many different perspectives and from multiple angles" (p. 84). Trinh (1989) adds "The same story has always been changing, for things which do not shift and grow cannot continue to circulate" (p. 123). My perspective of what is important for people to know around Moosetrack I express as *Reverence*

for the Ordinary. Local people often use the word *respect*. I express it in four postcards as well—reverence for young people and their education, reverence for the land, reverence for spirituality, and reverence for old people and their old ways.<sup>3</sup>

It's your story now, the women say or model, and having indicated that, continue with their lives and with their other stories. Thus what is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission (Trinh, 1989). Repetition adds power (Silko, 1977; Allen, 1986; Trinh, 1989). It's my story now. My responsibility is to take care of what I now own. I watch how others do it. In the ordinary living of their daily lives the research participants take care of all aspects of their culture, including passing it on.

I now show how the various educators in our study learn and teach "traditional." In every case learn/teach is a unified concept. One such case is a slide show (Mader, 1993, 1994), another case—the postcards. With every story I make connections for classroom teachers and teacher educators. I try to tell it so that they can tell it. I begin with one of the postcards, that of the two little girls.

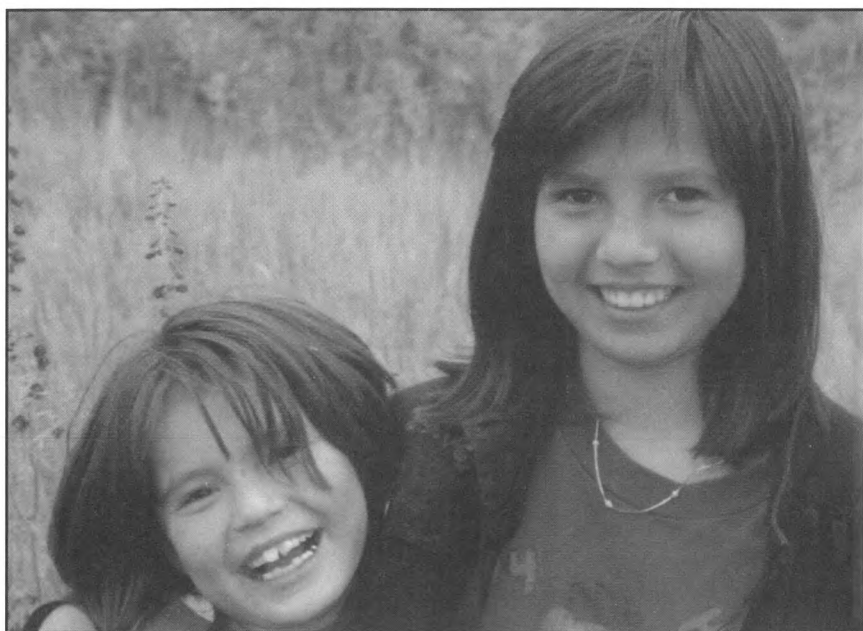
### *Researched Stories from Traditional Educators*

*Fragments off/in life from Christina Mader.* Bush Cree culture teaches children to learn to be quietly observant, to listen carefully, to appreciate beauty in silence, to acknowledge their relatedness to animals and plants, whereas mainstream<sup>4</sup> culture prepares children to expect that adults "test" and monitor their learning. In small groups I ask students to discuss what they learn from the photo of the two youngsters. As mentioned above, I summarize for them what the girls represent in the context of larger-than-life-stories. Then I listen to my students notice how the two little girls communicate their love for each other, how they communicate their love for the photographer who is only inches away, how they communicate my love for them and their love for me as that photographer. To their observations I contribute a quote from Patterson (1986):

Photographs are what happens when you and the subject matter meet and you use a camera to describe a meeting. A photograph is a visual description of the relationship between a subject and the photographer; and a good photograph is one which clearly shows the character of the subject while revealing the photographer's response to it. (p. 10)

Like the women I learn from in Moosetrack, I do not intrude into their small groups. Without correcting their responses I let my students discuss the photographs. Most of what they say I cannot hear. Nonetheless, they learn from each other. In that process I model as teacher educator what my students can model when *they* teach—the courage to value one's own experiences and trust that students take responsibility for their own learning. My contribution as traditional educator to the research participants and to my students is to show how such knowledge can be expressed nonverbally. I use my own love for photography to teach this concept.

Our next story is by a traditional educator who has spent 20 years working in local band schools as teaching assistant (TA), teacher, principal, and once again TA. Marie Nanooch, who has given birth to 11 children, who is now also raising grandchildren, Marie who in two years would retire blessed with the love and



*Young people are important.*



*The land is important.*



*Spirituality is important.*



*Old people and their old ways are important.*

reverence from three generations of Bush Cree people begins to talk about what she would like young people to know.

*Fragments off/in life from Marie Nanooch.* On May 13, 1995 I turn on the tape-recorder, and for two hours Elder Marie Nanooch speaks about life on the trapline after she leaves boarding school as a 15-year-old. When I transcribe her words and show them to her, she likes how I mark her breath stops with a tilde. She likes how it looks like a poem; that it looks the way she talks. She changes her mind about some of what I have transcribed, and I make those changes. All her talking is one story. I am the one who adds titles so I can more easily write about a segment.

*In Fall People Walk to Their Winter Cabin*

Well, it was like this~

Long-ago when~

When people used to~go up on the trapline~

And this was in the fall~late in September~

Well~we used to go up~using horses~

The horses used to pack [carry]~all the heavy heavy stuff~

Like flour and~most of the things that are heavy~

So the people used to you know~to stop and have lunch~

That's what they used to pack~

And then we used to have~dogs that used to do packing too~

They had pack sacks, you know~

People used to make them~women used to make them~

They'd~put little things in there~a few things~like~

Bannock<sup>5</sup> or something, you know~dry meat maybe~

You know, to just~keep it in hand~

Instead of~unpacking the whole horse pack.

But they used to take the~horses' pack down~

So the horses would have a rest

Yeah~and they used to stop about an hour~or an hour and a half~

And everybody's rested~

And then~they start packing the horses again~

And then~they go on again~for a long ways~till it gets dark~

And then we'd make camp~

And then~some men would~go ahead~....

So the noise~you know~and the horses won't scare the

Moose or anything that's~at the head~

And at the same time they used to do hunting~

So that's what they used to do~

And then if they have~killed a moose or something~

Then we used to stop there for~maybe a couple or~three days~

Then the women used to make dry meat~

They work on the meat~And work on the hide~

(Mader, 1996, p. 87)

Connected from Marie's trapline to school are seasonal rhythms of family life. People and animals pack up and move when the time is right. The right time is the best time to trap—in fall and winter when the animals' fur is warmest. But the concept of right time can be much smaller than a season. It governs all community members and events. It includes every individual, the group as a whole as well as dogs and horses. No one is considered a drain on the village and left behind. A



study by Sheppard (1983) shows this—local values of autonomy and self-reliance protect the individual; generosity and reciprocal obligations protect the group. Now as in centuries past, being quiet in the bush means a moose won't run away and hunters can shoot it. Now women continue to make bannock and dry meat for hungry people. Although each generation follows customs and trails similar to those of long ago, nowadays graduation from school is stressed as a way of reaching economic independence. Nowadays traditional stories continue to be told by some when the time is right—in winter only.

For young Marie seasonal rhythms mean hard but satisfying work. Certainly there is money when the furs are sold or a paycheck cashed. But in the meantime, travelling the slow and unhurried trip to the trapper's cabin is enjoyable in itself. Her reverence for the ordinary makes Marie smile when she remembers those days "We used to take our time. Look at everything. It's so nice early in the fall" (Mader, 1996, p. 90).

When she and I sit down with the transcripts and Marie adds a word or takes some out, when we have done all that and she is satisfied the poem says to the next generation of young mothers who have husbands who are hunters what she means it to say, she tells me, "It feels okay what I'm telling you. It's your story now. I've never written a story before. I just always tell it and then that's it" (Mader, 1996, p. 97). However, the way she always tells it lets *it* continue!

*Fragments of/in life from Cow Moose.* I now turn to a story about Cow Moose. She is in our study quite simply because she does not go away. Everywhere I meet Moose. My research is wound through and through with activities and images of moose—hunting moose, moosehide, moccasins, dry meat, moosemeat, moosetracks, mooseracks, and the animal itself—male, female, alive, and dead. What does this mean besides the obvious that moose is an important animal to Bush Cree people? I receive Cow Moose's teachings by being actively still. Like Raffan's (1992) land-as-teacher, Cow Moose represents nature-as-traditional-educator.

#### *Figuring Out Cow Moose*

"Friend, follow me." Her soft nose nudges me to reread Meili's (*Those Who Know*, 1991)... I notice with interest the list of things people get from moose. Besides food and clothing there are glue and intestine carrier bags. In a flash the last two make new connections for me ... "We put food in it [the dried intestine], and it kept pretty good in there" (p. 121). So that's what Cow Moose does—she holds it all together! That quick insight re-connects me with Le Guin's (1989) short story "The Carrierbag Theory of Fiction." In it she says, "We have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained. That is a new story. That is news. (p. 167)

That's how I figure out Cow Moose. Her message fits and satisfies. Female lives and stories carry the culture in their gut. For 30,000 years, give or take a few millennia, it's keeping pretty good in there. That is indeed news stuffed full of new understandings I want to ask Marie about—in their own quite ordinary ways the women hold it all together! (Mader, 1996, pp. 115-116)

"Figuring Out Cow Moose" illustrates a technique I call "intuitive impact assessment." Teachers can use it with students to solve problems. One simply relaxes and invites images from familiar medium of expression to float past in a systematic way. I begin with my own experiences, then turn to readings, dreams,

songs, stories, films, and so on. Finally, I apply reason to connect them and build a story. I do what Le Guin (1989) writes, "Only the imagination can get us out of the bind of the eternal present, inventing or hypothesizing or pretending or discovering a way that reason can then follow into the infinity of options, a clue through a labyrinth of choice" (p. 45). It is a technique that works as long as I don't hurry it. When old people say "sit with it" or "stay with," that is what I take their words to mean. "Stay with the snowy meadow" is what I imagine Richard Wagamese's (1993) grandmother to have said when she left him alone and told him to come back to the cabin for tea and tell what he had learned once he had figured some things out. And he could too, once his mind was free to imagine himself a part of the landscape. Such a technique taught in schools could help bring ancient ways of solving problems from the reserve into classrooms.

Our next story shows local knowledge in Moosetrack from a different angle. Nelly Nanooch shows an improved carrierbag: a better way to haul water in contemporary times.

*Fragments off/in life from Nelly Nanooch.* A great deal of Nelly's and my lengthy conversations are confidential. Exchanges about how she is raising five boys as a widow and how I handle being a single mom. Much of the local knowledge I receive from Nelly comes by working on moosehide together. She teaches by how she lives. Our story begins when I am at her home and we are getting ready to tan moosehide.

*We've Always Done It Like This*

This morning the first thing Nelly and I did was pack water from Lawrence River. "The water from the reservoir has chemicals in it. It's no good for the hide" Nelly told me. I remember how Agnes refuses to let her family drink it. Nelly puts two white plastic buckets in my trunk. On ocean kayak trips I use that kind, to stuff my sleeping bag into, because the lid seals so tightly it keeps the down from getting damp.

I didn't want water spilling all over my car and quietly looked around for lids. There were none. Nelly watched me and nodded to two big garbage bags. Because the dirt road to the creek was very bumpy I wondered how two garbage bags alone would keep the water in the buckets. I waited and watched Nelly work without a word. What she did so totally astounded me with its simplicity.

At the river Nelly lined a bucket with the plastic bag. She folded the edges over the rim of the container. She put the water into the garbage bag. When the [garbage bag inside the] bucket was 3/4 full she knotted the bag and carried the heavy pail into my car. Nothing spilled. (Mader, 1996, p. 64-65)

From that moment on my experience with packing water includes plastic bags. One simple home-to-school connection from Nelly's story is that another culture may have a better way of doing some contemporary chores.

*Fragments off/in life from Sister Bernadette Gautreau.* Sr. Bernadette Gautreau's stories tell about teaching as a young nun in the very first community school of the region, as teacher, then principal, and later working with area teachers as a consultant. Although she is long retired, one-time students and their children still visit for tutoring and counselling. For three decades Sr. Bernadette has shared her time with northern Cree people. To this day she continues to do this in Moosetrack. She is often invited to school.



*Filling her waterbucket.*

*Respect is to Not Suffer Loss of Face*

Now as far as the teacher aides are concerned, they're still very much of the mentality that "The teacher is the boss and I can't tell the teacher how to teach—they will suffer [loss of face]." I've had teacher aides tell me that "you know this is ridiculous what the teacher is doing here." But too polite to say to the teacher, "This is really not what you should be doing" [always yelling] because that would be making that teacher lose face. You see, the thing of losing face is very very very important.... For example it's not a good idea for a teacher to scold a child in front of a class. Never. This should always be done in private. And teachers are scolding the kids all the time.... Walk down the hallway and you'll hear them screaming. (Mader, 1996, p. 199)

Sr. Bernadette makes home-to-school connections. She tells teachers and teacher educators to "listen to the people." If pressed, she'll give advice, "If you knew how many people have come in here and have interviewed me in 30 years you'd be amazed.... My advice for reserve teachers is to get to know the people. If they do, they'll learn as much as they teach" (p. 175). My experiences are similar to hers.

Sr. Bernadette has a further observation for teachers and teacher educators. What I find is detrimental to the school system are all the photocopiers and all the workbooks.... It's a paper blizzard. They [teachers] use teacher aides and their time in the staff room running off reams and reams and reams of paper. And the kids, they never do any hands-on. There's nothing to manipulate. There's nothing to see, feel, touch.... So you colour this and cross out that.... It's like you never have enough worksheets and never have enough workbooks.... This is this year. Last year. This is what I've seen. (p. 185)

*Fragments of/in life from Agnes Moberly.* Like Marie Nanooch, Agnes Moberly, also did not learn her culture until she left boarding school at age 15. Agnes, who

has become a treasured friend, shares some of her traditional knowledge—skills connected to bush medicine, joking, dry meat, or putting up a teepee. But most of all Agnes *shows* me where Bush Cree culture exists in school. What she does is *let* me see how culture exists before a child enters school—culture exists in every Moosetrack home. In Agnes' home culture exists more traditionally than in many—she and her husband and the grandchildren they are raising all speak Cree. When Moosetrack children reach school, their culture may go unnoticed by some mainstream teachers. Occasionally local culture is withdrawn as when Bush Cree classroom aides stop volunteering information. By contrast, what Agnes does in her classroom is let the little ones learn in the same way they learn at home. "What Counts?" shows this. It shows how relationships count more than products. It shows that letting people work in peace counts more than helping someone. The story also shows local ways some people address each other.

#### *What Counts?*

About her classroom Agnes says "They play just like a family." I look if I can see that. I notice how gingerly five year old Barbara rolls plasticine snakes and softly talks with them. I hear how little Bobby enters the conversation with respect and affection. He matter of factly corrects her English, "It's not a 'basket baseball'. It's a 'basketball'." I see Barbara nod quietly and use the new word.... Bobby is satisfied and together they construct a complicated scene involving snakes and doors and basketball hoops. Other children join and leave again. One of them is Dianne.... Eventually.... Barbara gently takes the board and puts the sculpture in a safe place.... I record what is continuing to unfold: Barbara comes up and asks "What are you doing Christina?" She answers herself "Something?" I nod. She picks up my page and studies it closely. Dianne brings over the board with the plasticine that Barbara had so carefully put away. She smushes up the doors and snakes and hoops. I gasp in silence.

Not so the children. Barbara looks on as the smushing happens and talks with Dianne quietly in Cree.... Then Barbara turns to me, "I can write my name! Have you got some more plasticine?" I shake my head. I keep still. I wait.

"Teacher.... Christina wants some plasticine!" Agnes is busy at her desk. She looks up but does not respond. She is letting Barbara figure out the larger context that teacher is busy. The small girl sees this and does not ask again. (Mader, 1996, p. 173)

The most important connection here is that in this Moosetrack classroom what counts is the relationship. But the story also shows children learning/teaching each other and approaching a person on someone else's behalf. "Christina needs some plasticine" shows that the girls believe we need some with which to write our names. Note that they do not seek my approval. On-reserve it is common to phrase a request through a second party. I have seen children lower their heads in confusion and humiliation when an uninformed teacher responds to such a request with a correction: "If Christina needs plasticine she can ask me herself. You get on with your own work." That approach fosters competition rather than the cooperation shown in this story. What also counts is Agnes' right to not answer a question simply because one is asked. This allows her to complete her work without interruption. The story shows how an adult silently models how to exercise that right. Not to permit a child the same right would be to interfere with the autonomy of an individual. This rarely happens. The message from Agnes is the same whether small children want something or I do.

A final home-to-school connection in this story has to do with how Barbara addresses Agnes—Teacher. Bush Cree children come to school knowing that polite little ones call older people by their relationship and not their name. Principal, Auntie, Teacher, Cousin, and Grandfather all show respect. By the same custom the older one will use the young one's name.<sup>6</sup> I don't have an established role in this preschool classroom so the 3- and 4-year-olds copy their teachers and call me Christina.

*Fragments off/in life from The Woman Who Passed Away.* The final story touches on knowledge from the spirit world. Through *The Woman Who Passed Away* my intuition lets me understand ordinary messages from the world of intangibles. Before I meet this Elder who since passed over to the side of the ancestors, I spend hours in the abandoned homestead where she lived as a bride. I sit there to understand the meaning of the hide strips hanging in a nearby tree. I approach several people and show them my sketches of those ropes before I find someone (Marie) who knows their meaning and can tell me who might have put them there. A few days later I prepare a thermos of *oginee* (Cree for rosehip) tea and take my photographs of her old homestead to introduce myself. We laugh a lot though I speak very little Cree and she only a few words English. I visit her home four times, once with my camera. The last time is at her wake.

This home-to-school connection is for Bush Cree people. We (the research participants) believe simply having people read the following story and seeing the picture of *The Woman Who Passed Away* on the band office wall, may help revive the ancient custom of how to honor an animal that let itself be shot for food and clothing.

What follows is also printed next to a framed enlargement of the photograph below. Both hang in the band office in Moosetrack. In a moment I will explain how they got there.

The important thing in this picture is how this Elder is choosing to carry on the old ways.... She carries on the culture by living it. Sure, she has modern tools like a chainsaw, Sunlight soap, a washing machine and a dryer. She likes the smell of sun dried clothes. Sure, she has propane. It saves firewood. That doesn't make her any less a Cree than earlier ancestors! In this picture you'll notice the crocheted blankets, the pole that holds up the laundry, the moosehides. But it's what's just off the edges of this picture that I want to talk about.

It's her hide scraps. Those long thin ribbons of scraps that she put high up in a tree! That's so the dogs don't get them. That's according to the law that Moose has. It's a way of showing respect to the kill. She took the piece that's cut away when the hide is fleshed and the hair is scraped off. She put it away safely. Some people don't do that, but maybe they will again. Out of respect to Moose. Out of reverence to this Elder. She lived in a way that showed what is important for people to know around here. I asked if I could take her picture for you. She said yes. (Mader, 1996, p. 232)

### *Sharing Our Research with the Community*

I now show how our research in keeping with a local custom was able to go back to where it came from. I wait many months for the time to be right. My faith in that process is rewarded at an annual Memorial Dance and Giveaway. One February day, when the temperature is well below  $-37^{\circ}\text{C}$  and school has been closed for several days, it happens. One night when it is so cold my nostrils stick together and snow squeaks underfoot, I help sponsor a community round dance. Like the

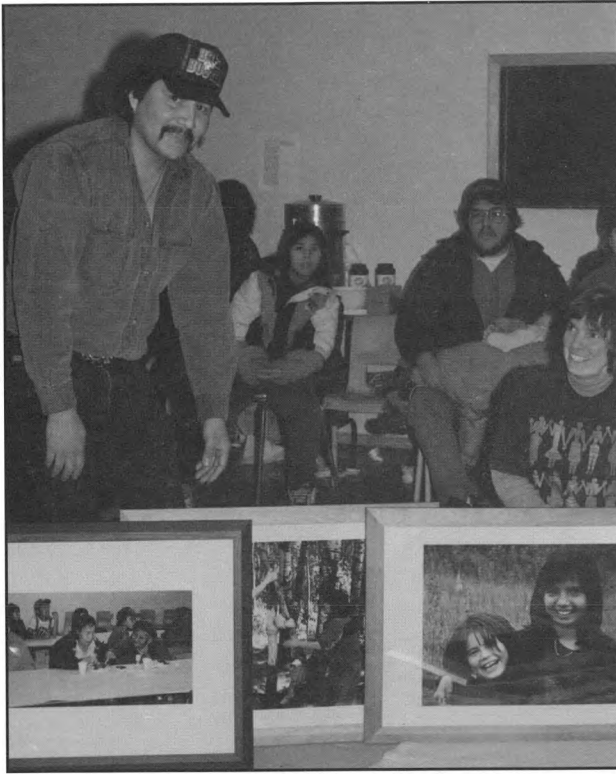


*The woman who passed away.*

sponsoring family, I also buy food. I also cook moosemeat. I also work closely with the local drum group leader. I help arrange a photo exhibit of 13 framed enlargements of the best of 900 photographs. We hang them in the Moosetrack Community Hall. It is where the feast is. It is where there are several hours of social round dancing to the songs and beats of live performers. Socializing and dancing are interspersed by fundraising raffles to which I donate additional enlargements. The proceeds go toward the drummers' and my expenses. I make a short speech to explain our research; an old man translates it into Cree. This is followed by more social round dancing. At midnight on February 3, 1996 the Memorial Dance described in detail elsewhere (Mader, 1996) takes place.

After this ceremony, several women sweep the hall, and I put two blankets on the floor. The first is piled high with the usual giveaway items—blankets, cups, hand-knitted mittens, and so on. The second is piled high with our picture dissertation—the large mounted and framed original photographs that capture *Reverence for the Ordinary* among the people of Moosetrack. I am delighted with how much the audience likes them. There are also boxes with 16,000 postcards. We give one card to everyone present; the rest are for the women who helped with the research to sell. I understand they have raised well over \$1,000. There is also a large carrying case for the director of education with pictures of ordinary community life. (They will interest people who apply for jobs in Moosetrack. While short-listed applicants wait their turn to be interviewed, they could look at them.)

In keeping with tradition, only certain people hand out the gifts. They ask me which pictures to give to whom. I tell them the emcee will call forward representatives of public buildings—the band office, church, school, and so forth to



*Picture giveaway.*

accept the pictures and put them on display. The giveaway ceremony is followed by more social round dancing. The celebration is over at 6:30 a.m. Sunday, February 4.

Two straightforward home-to-school connections conclude this article. Sometimes traditional celebrations—feast, dance, ceremonies—are far from home and people often do not get back until early Monday morning, often after an all-night drive. If it is a school day, children who participate in both dance and school may well be sleepy. A wise teacher might simply acknowledge that what their students did all weekend is as important as what they miss in school that Monday. I say this because the few teachers whom I have seen attend such gatherings leave well before midnight. They never experience the ceremonial parts and recognize their worth. They tell me they have to go and prepare Monday's lessons. "Don't worry about *teaching*," I want to say to those teachers. "Stay and *learn*." I would want them to know that this is what is important around here. What they could learn in that one night might help their teaching more than any lesson plan.

What they might learn if they allowed themselves to be open to it can be explained by the metaphor of a giving circle. They might learn that things and intangibles like food, time, song, or dance circulate freely among Bush Cree and

selected non-Cree people. As someone who was privileged in this manner, I offer for others what I was given—newcomers can join that circle. Teachers might join by simply giving away what they love doing. For me this is gathering and drying *oginee* for tea and taking photographs. Interested teachers might learn as I did—through experience. When we give to somebody, anybody, someone—maybe somebody else—will give in turn. A round dance is not a round dance unless drummers can give their songs away to dancers. A round dance is not a round dance unless dancers show up and give the singers a reason to drum and sing. Utensils or clothing, intangibles like affection or knowledge, are freely given away at such events. Emcees make a point of saying repeatedly, “This is for the kids. This is so they’ll learn our culture.” It is how Bush Cree people learn/teach young and old. While having fun they reaffirm their culture. Teachers and teacher educators, by learning as our students learn in face-to-face relationships—maybe by contributing potato salad, by holding hands with those we dance with, by helping to clean up the hall, or by taking someone home—newcomers could learn as much as we teach. And this could ease teachers’ workload. It is what *Reverence for the Ordinary* is all about.

I tell our stories to share the wisdom of Indigenous traditions. I tell our stories to pass on the pleasure and the satisfaction in ordinary lived, imagined, or told events. They are my stories now, those stories from traditional educators/research participants. I tell them with the conviction of someone who has shifted roles from research participant to friend. Five years after she said “but we want to get to know you too,” Agnes and I continue to talk on the phone at least once a month. “We got some moose,” she tells me today. “I cut it up. But it was hard work because of my arthritis” (1998-10-03). I tell her my own arthritis stories. Then I tell how I used the moosemeat she gave me last time to make a German family recipe called *Sauerbraten*.

In the ordinary living of our lives we take care of all aspects of our culture, including passing it on. I tell the stories to help keep the story going.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>An elder is someone who has lived many years. Elder is a title of respect for someone’s wisdom. To gain that honor Elders do not have to be very old. Joseph Couture (1991, p. 201) pays tribute “to their contemporary emergence.” He shows how their traditional values are dynamic and continuously reexpressed in new forms. *Old people* is ambiguous and refers to either Elders or elders depending on the context. According to Knudtson and Suzuki (1992), and I use their description, this is the Elders’ role:

They have painstakingly accumulated reservoirs of personal experience, knowledge, wisdom or compassionate insight and a sense of the enduring qualities and relationships around them. They freely offer this wisdom to living generations of their people in an effort to help them connect harmoniously with their past, present and future. (p. 179)

In my experience they freely offer it to newcomers as well. Using stories and living lives like stories (Cruikshank, 1988) old people point their students toward ceremonies and their own growth. Through old people I also know how ceremonies are a source of knowledge.

<sup>2</sup>“In Europe before there were schools as ... [western] societies know them today and before the Reformation made reading and writing a tool for the indoctrination of Christian ethics about work, women and nature through Bible study; back then, apprenticing locally then travelling, was how one learned” (Mader, 1996, p. 12).

<sup>3</sup>Sets of four postcards can be purchased from Box 608, Ft. Vermilion, AB T0H 1N0.



<sup>4</sup>*Mainstream*, as I use it, means dominant Canadian society. *Mainstream* also refers to the values and the groups who hold power in Canada's institutions, be they political, social, economic, religious, academic, and so forth.

<sup>5</sup>Bannock is Native homemade bread. There are many tribal and regional names and variations on a basic baking-powder biscuit recipe. Some bake it in the oven, some deep fry it, some wrap it around a stick and roast it over an open fire. Some put the dough in a cast iron frying pan over a campfire.

<sup>6</sup>I come by this information indirectly when my landlady asks for help in teaching her grandson to call me Kohkom Christina, Grandmother Christina (Reflections, 94-06-21). My landlady is combining protocol from two cultures. She adds the local title of respect (kohkom) as I might add Ms, but she adds it to the mainstream custom of calling a close friend by her first name.

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