

Imagine My Surprise: Smudge Teaches Wholistic Lessons

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Imagine My Surprise is a poetic and metaphoric rendition of “data” collected during a several-year journey as an Aboriginal academic exploring the usefulness of traditional knowledge and ceremony in contemporary Western university classrooms. Through the method of autoethnographic narrative research, I am able to contextualize my own experiences given current and historical sociopolitical and cultural factors. Over the years I have selected and been spontaneously provided key informants—people who have inspired me to think deeply about my classroom practices through their critical inquiry and Elders who have counseled me as I have tried to make sense of the often difficult and painful lessons I have encountered. This piece, both in form and content, intentionally challenges and expands the commonly held Eurocentric notions of what constitutes academic research and discourse. I write to engage, clarify, and support teachers, healers, and scholars who struggle to make room for Aboriginal realities in all contexts. This narrative is a collection of experiences throughout my lifetime as a faculty member in various institutions across time and space.

Imagine My Surprise: Smudge Teaches Wholistic Lessons

Imagine my Surprise

when my ears were asked to hear
that I

Metis Traditionalist

“should”

or pardon me
could

ask “permission”

—that is—see if anyone minds—

before I Burn Smudge.

Even if

I speak my intention clearly

invite participation

work, based on group consensus

respect the Right to choose not to Smudge

Still some Assume

I have Not respected

Other’s spiritual boundaries.

Spirit asks

Did any One Ever ask Aboriginal peoples

Permission
 to engage in White cultural practices?
 For generations
 schools
 churches
 hospitals
 governments
 all "services"
 have been forced upon us
 Literally.

Why does Eurocentric mono-cultural reality
 Guide all Expected norms
 on our once Traditional Ancestral lands?
 in All of our classrooms?

Why do I find myself frequently counselled
 by those in positions of institutional power
 "it will be less trouble
 if you don't burn Smudge."

What about educational equity
 in uni-versity?
 where is di-versity?
 Inclusivity?
 another false promise?

My heart beats
 a painful Thud.
 inside the Cage of my Ribs
 a metaphor of my Confinement.

Smudge is a deeply significant
 teaching tool.
 Who will understand
 my Right/Responsibility/Desire
 to enact a simple Smudge
 to prepare my Self
 my teaching space?

I am chronically amazed
 how one five-minute experience
 Smudge-burning
 can surface prejudice
 unmask personal/systemic racism.

Smudge as Ceremony
 will always teach us
 wholistic lessons.

Eastern Door: Mental Lessons

Smudge prepares the mind
 to be receptive
 aware.
 to focus our thoughts.
 "Stop.
 Slow Down.
 Focus on what is happening here and Now.
 Be open to what is to come." One commented.

We shift from the hustle and bustle
of everyday fast-paced lives
manifest in overcrowded
tech-invaded
scattered
confused Minds.

Imagine my Surprise
some desire to be taught
Only in the Expected mode.
Talk about a topic
continuously separate Head from Heart.

"Tell me Again," I say.
"What do you mean?
If I Smudge
when it is Not a Native Studies class
it confuses students?"

I hear Trickster's Voice
Speaking to me
Smudge is to clear
not cause confusion
"I need Smudge right now," Spirit says.

"But I already took Indian Studies 101"
Another tells me
certain he is in the wrong classroom.
Are you trying to tell me
you believe
taking One course
means you know all
you need to learn?
My eyes open wide.
How many classes do Aboriginal students
take in White Studies?
Spirit wants to ask.

"This wasn't listed as a Native class
I came here to study
(counselling, teaching, social work etc.)
Not burn sweetgrass"
she insists
to any and all that will listen
arms crossed
voice deepening into
demanding tones.

What about the need
to develop Respect for cultural diversity?
to embrace alternative forms
of teaching and healing?
I want to know.

Could Vine Deloria Jr. be right?
"Education and religion apparently do not mix"
he concludes (1994, p. 247).

My Elders teach
 true knowledge is derived
 from Experience (Bowers, 1983)
 acknowledges Spirit (Longfish, 1992).

Smudge helps us
 Revitalize
 Spiritual
 Wholistic
 Ecological
 Replace
 Rational
 Mechanistic
 Colonial mentality.

An Elder speaks her story of Smudge
 "All people need to know
 how to Honor our Traditions" she says strongly.
 "They come to our homes.
 If they show no Respect
 won't Smudge with us, I throw them out!
 I go down and complain to their supervisors
 I fire them!"
 she nods briskly
 affirming the Truth in her words.

"What good are they to us?
 to me and my family?" she asks.
 Assuming we both know the answer
 she continues.

"You are not paid to be Christians,"
 I tell them,
 "but to help us."
 "How can they help us heal
 if they are Afraid
 of our Traditions?"
 she wisely asks.

Southern Door: Spiritual Lessons

Smudge prepares us
 for Ancient Spiritual Ceremonies
 for encounters with/in daily life.

As the sweet Smoke
 encircles all
 our Spirits sing
 in oneness.
 Our Ancestors
 Grandmothers and Grandfathers
 gather with us
 to pass on Sacred teachings
 to give guidance on matters
 beyond our comprehension.

Many are Honored to be Gifted
to share a Sacred moment
Together.

Imagine my Surprise
when she said,
"I saw the Spirits come in and I was afraid."
How Sad
I mused
She cannot recognize her Gift
to see Spirits.

Christians have taught many to fear
all but one God
He is the Supreme Spirit Being.

She is afraid
because this is Not the Tradition
she has been indoctrinated to follow.

I can Respect her feelings
can help her name their source
can offer her the choice to not participate.

I will Reject her wishes
that her discomfort
will control my actions
will disallow me my Freedom
to burn Smudge on these Lands
the lands of my Ancestors
to burn Smudge in my classroom
even in a Eurocentric context.

All too smugly
arms crossed tightly on his puffed out chest
he states:
"If We are Not allowed
to start the day in our classrooms
with the Lord's prayer
then why should You be allowed
to burn Smudge?"

I can Not believe
after all these hundreds of years
of religious conversion
indoctrination by brain washing
strapping
rape

some "rational" scholars
human rights activists
union stewards
school boards
"concerned" parents
equate Smudge
with the "right" to preach
do prayer
in classrooms.

"After all,"

one union official says
as he leans towards me
to emphasize his learned point,
"even if a Christian fundamentalist thought
starting class with a prayer
was a good learning tool
it would not mean
it was his right to do so."
"Perhaps,"
he lays his finger along side his hairy chin
stroking it ever so deeply,
"if he did it once
and explained the significance
he would get away with it.
but Not as a way to begin Every class."
He sits back in his chair
exuding confidence
in his rational unbiased analysis.

I find myself surrounded
enmeshed
in an ongoing
dilemma
a double bind.

Do I Surrender to what people Expect
or continue my work
and be harassed?

Surrender is not a Language
easily spoken by my people
or by me.

I find Domination
by an overriding culture
a pain-full experience.

I do not wish
to unwittingly perpetuate
cultural submission.

What about freedom?
academic freedom?
cultural freedom?
empty words?

How can we reclaim Freedoms
after generations of Repression?

I will Resist.
Means tells it
"it is natural to resist extermination, to survive" (1980, p. 31).

In Eurocentric contexts
Traditional teachers
need All the help
we can get.

Spirit is Necessary
for wholistic paradigms.
How many teachers, healers
talk the "wholistic" talk?
How many do the Spiritual walk?

Western Door: Emotional Lessons

Smudge can bring us together
a feeling of caring
sharing a physical
metaphysical experience.
Regain community
connectedness
long shattered
through imposed
competitive
individualism.

Ceremony
is intended
to integrate
to restore "conscious harmony with the universe"
says Allen Gunn (1986, p. 62).

Elders teach
All ceremonies must be entered into
with a Good Heart (Broden & Coyote, 1991).

Imagine my Surprise
How can such a small ceremonial Act
produce such a large re-Action?
I recoil as I feel daggers at my Heart
cold and accusing
anonymous statements
express
veiled hatred.

I am accused by some
of "pushing" my beliefs and Traditions.
They tell me
teaching based on "my" value system
is "not fair to the group."

Our Selves are ever present
"like a garment that cannot be removed"
says Peshkin (1988, p. 17)

Other Teachers
who bring their value systems
to classrooms
most frequently
remain invisible
unnamed
unchallenged
happens to coincide

with dominant hegemonic Reality.

“(Whiteness) acts as an invisible veil
that limits many people from seeing it as
a cultural system”

says Katz (1985, p. 616).

Freire teaches

“educators that do their work uncritically
just to preserve their jobs
have not yet grasped
the political nature of education” (1985, p. 180).

I am political

I challenge All
to acculturate to Aboriginal norms
I will not sit in rows
I will not leave my Spirit Guides at the door
I give Voice
to societal structures
that serve to oppress some
privilege others.

Anxiety

Insecurity

Disorientation

“dissonance” (Brown, 1990; Chau, 1989)
are produced
when we have to Adjust
to Unfamiliar cultural demands
to competing worldviews.

Some experience “dissonance” daily

for lifetimes
over generations.

Some experience it

for the first time

with Smudge.

“If she initiates a process challenging the worldview

and view of self of her students,

she will surely—if she is doing her job—

become the object of some students

unexamined anger,” theorizes Culley (1985, p. 213).

Anger and guilt missiles

are projected at me

a never-ending arsenal

stockpiled throughout years of blind obedience

to the status quo.

The thin veneer of polished politeness

political correctness

goes up in Smoke

when they realize

I, Metis woman, am “Authority”

I say what knowledge

what processes

are pedagogy
in this classroom.

I see how Smudge
can become a focal point
a weapon for some
who seek to put me in "my place."
"She should not be 'allowed' to burn Smudge
to hold Circle
to teach the way She does," they cry.

Read between the lines—
I have pushed too far.
Smudge becomes a contested topic
when colonial attitudes are challenged.

Bad enough to be a Native female
in an authority position
but to openly contest Eurocentrism
unveil White privilege
and revitalize Traditional practices
Is this simply too much to take
in a Western educational context?

Northern Door: Physical Lessons

Smudge is an embodied experience.
As we bring Flame
to light Herbs
nestled in Shell
fan with Feather
Cleansing Smoke encircles us.

A time to breathe deeply
ground ourselves
empty ourselves
release negativities
receive learnings.

Imagine my Surprise
some are Repelled
lurch back as I approach
"Cough, cough, cough. I don't know what it is about the ...
what did you call it?"
"Smudge ..."
"But, it closes in on my throat.
I can't seem to breathe ...
gives me a headache."
"Are you allergic to other smoke?" I ask.
"A bit" she says.
"Do you go to bars?
Shop in malls?
Sit in traffic?"
I want to know.
"Yes, all the time" she laughs

"Of course I do" she exclaims.

"They are all necessary parts of life,"
she laughs again.

"No smoking
no perfume
this is now a scent-free environment"
I read on email.

I don't think to consider Smudge burning
to be smoking
or perfume
Smudge is healing herbs
burned in a Sacred manner.

Until
notices are posted
on all fours walls of my teaching space
placed in my mailbox
announced at staff meetings.

"No burning of Any substances"
I am explicitly told.
I am puzzled
devastated
then resistant.

I question why
those who wear toxic hair spray
are not banned from class
some duck out the front door to smoke cigarettes
non-biodegradable butts litter Earth Mother
for generations to come
car exhaust seeps in my open window
as someone runs in
for "a few minutes."
rooms and bathrooms are "cleaned"
"deodorized"
with toxic chemicals.
buildings and furniture are built with formaldehyde
which takes at least two years to de-oxify
then where does it go?
most eat chemically processed
irradiated
hormone injected
bacterial infested
genetically modified
"foods"
wrapped in "disposable" plastic waste.
we are shot with radiation through copy machines
computers
scanners
televisions
microwaves.

Yet, some Authorities
enforce regulations
 against Smudge burning
 because of “health and safety” concerns.
Security guards
 fire marshals
 bust into rooms
 with scowls and remarks.
 Officials throw Smudge bowls
 into back alleys
 (O’Hallarn, 1999).

If Authorities choose to backlash
Smudge again becomes
 a form of spiritual Activism.
 Grandmothers are present
 They know battle is ongoing.
 I hear Their quiet chuckles.
 They light up friends
 dark cloud foes
 Swirl and twirl
 Try my patience
 Mock my perseverance.

Good Grandmothers I pray
 why has this Violence ensued
 almost everywhere I go?
“You are a teacher
 healer
 warrior”
 One wise Grandmother counsels
“You actively chose academic spaces
 as your site.
You are bringing healing
 cleansing energy
You are channeling immense pain
 recovering systems
 long immobilized
 unbalanced.
You see the dis-ease.
 Did you think it would be painless
 easy work?”
 She rhetorically asks.

Visioning in Lodge
 ThunderSpirit voice feeds my Soul
 “Place your struggles in context
 Earth changes are happening
 Right Now—
 you are awake
 aware
 healthy
 well fed.

That is more than can be said
for most of your brothers and sisters
two-leggeds
four-leggeds
winged-ones
crawlers
swimmers
stone people
green and growing ones

Think again.
Think gratitude."

Thank you Grandmothers
for the gift of this Day
for Life
for Spirit
Spirit of Resistance.

Thank you Grandmothers
for Nourishing me
nourishing my Desire
Desire to Revitalize Tradition
in this modern context.

Thank you Grandmothers
for Feeding me
Body and Soul
Feeding me what I need to Know
what I need to Do
to remain Strong
Committed to Life.

Thank you Grandmothers
for Supporting
to recover
survive and thrive
in an unbalanced world.

Thank you for these Words
Thank you for Listening.
All my Relations
Megwetch.

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