

# Anishinabemowin: A Way of Seeing the World Reclaiming My Identity

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Stories are enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experiences; but they also renew, awaken, and honor spiritual forces. Hence, almost every ancient story does not explain; instead it focuses on process of knowing. (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 77)

I arrived home from the Pine Creek Residential School after being away for 10 months and not being allowed to speak my language. I recall vividly getting off the plane and even what I was wearing. I do not remember what language I used to greet my father and the rest of the family (I suspect it was English), but I do remember what happened at the supper table that evening. We always ate together and that night was no exception. I asked my sister to pass the salt and pepper in English, and without looking at me my father said, "*Intanishinabemowin niin awind oma biiting.*" We speak *Saulteaux* in this house. He did it without chastising or embarrassing me; he simply wanted to remind me that the language spoken in our home was *Saulteaux*.

I often think back to this lesson I learned from my father, and it surfaced again when I read Linda Akan's (1992) interview with a respected *Saulteaux* Elder Alfred Manitopeyes. Mr. Manitopeyes described the *Saulteaux* world view in several ways, but I address his third point, which has to do with learning. He suggests that "learning involves thinking hard who you are; learning is good thinking" (p. 192). Although I did not realize it at the time, I have come to accept that my passion for maintaining my language, my identity, who I am, where I come from, and my view of the world stems from innocently asking for salt and pepper in English. Harris (1990) contends that "the real challenge in terms of language maintenance is not primarily in the basic communication function or the cultural function, but it is in the social function, and we might add, the identity-making function" (p. 82). Greymorning (1997) maintains that "our languages have been a reflection of those cultural distinctions that have made us who we are as a people and in a sense have been the element of the many things that have made us strong" (p. 1).

In my first year at the university of Winnipeg, my mother wanted to know what I was taking, and asked, "*Way konaysh waytapinaman, weti ka*

*kikinoamakoyan?*" I told her psychology, English, history, and anthropology. She knew what psychology, English, and history were, because her next question was, "*Way konaysh ii i Anthropology?*" What is Anthropology? Because this took me by surprise, I did not know how to answer, nor did I know I was going to be tested so quickly on my understanding of what anthropology was and what it entailed. After a while I said, "*ki ma mikow ina Mrs. Bradshaw?*" Do you remember Mrs. Bradshaw? "*Ayaak.*" Yes (Mrs. Bradshaw spent a couple of summers in our community). "*Mii anish kainanokiit. Miiwenji nasinay ka onji kakway shi mikoyang kakina kego. Iwayne kaka kway shimiko yangwa, iki wayte Anthropologists ka ishi nika so waat, ki kanawapami konanick anin eshi pimatissiyang mii eshi oshiiipii amooowat masinaiganing.*" That is the kind of work Mrs. Bradshaw did. Anthropologists spend time in communities and you remember all those questions, Mrs. Bradshaw used to ask? Well, that is what they do and they also observe how we live and then they write it down in books.

These two stories are examples of my understanding and my belief in the uniqueness not only of the Anishinabe language, but all Aboriginal languages and the Aboriginal world view embedded in them (Battiste, 1998; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Littlebear, 1997; Kirkness, 1998). I have also come to understand that our Elders teach by telling us stories, and we listeners make up our own conclusions on what the teachings or the stories mean. I have also come to understand the difference between a lecture (my father could have lectured me but he didn't) and how we were corrected if we were wrong or made a mistake. The term that comes to mind is *nana coome owin. Ingii na na coomic*. The best way to describe this is that my father presented me with a lesson in the most respectful way. Battiste (1998) suggests that

Languages are the means of communication for the full range of human experiences and critical to the survival of the culture and political integrity of any people. Aboriginal languages provide a direct and powerful means of understanding the legacy of tribal knowledge. They provide the deep and lasting cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Aboriginal life. Through sharing a language Aboriginal people create a shared belief of how the world works and what constitutes proper action. (p. 18)

My perspective is *Kawiin awiya ota kashkitosiin kwayak shi Anishinabemoot, masinaiganing onji*, which means that I do not believe anyone can learn to speak and fully understand the Anishinabe language because it contains the world view of the Anishinabe people. This is not to say that dictionaries do not have a purpose. They can be useful in preserving Aboriginal languages. In 2000 I attended an international conference on Indigenous languages because I wanted to know what others were doing to maintain and teach our languages. I met some good instructors, strong advocates, who believed in maintaining and saving our languages, but I was disappointed in the session Dialogue on Native Languages. All those on the panel spoke in English, and none spoke any Indigenous language during the sessions. Instead of discussing language issues, they

talked about the dictionaries they were producing. One Aboriginal panel participant commented that if she did not know the word, she was comforted that she could ask the anthropologist for the word. I was astonished and could not believe what I was hearing. I would like to believe that we have not totally given up on our Elders, our parents, our own brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles to help us to maintain our languages. I also think we should not rely solely on academics to do the linguistic work that needs to be done such as writing grammars and developing dictionaries. I also do not doubt that a person can learn Anishinabemowin words from a dictionary, but I do not believe the spirit of the language can be learned in this way. Battiste and Henderson (2000) suggest that

The limited lexicons and dictionaries have deluded Indigenous peoples into thinking that Eurocentric languages and worldviews are a shared heritage and are complimentary to their languages. They begin to think there is no difference. This may be true of daily conversations. Yet, the more an Indigenous person learns and tries to express Eurocentric ideas in his or her Indigenous language, the more the person realizes that Eurocentric languages constitute an imposed context that Indigenous have neither authored or experienced. (p. 81)

Harris (1990) further suggests that

literacy may broaden the domain of usage of language, and will certainly increase its status, but the vital everyday life of a language is in its oral functions. This means for language maintenance, oral use is more important in school than reading and writing. (p. 81)

In March 1999 I was requested by the First Nations Student Council to present at the University of Winnipeg on issues in education. After my presentation I sang a song in Anishinabe. When I finished a participant who is an anthropologist said,

Nice song, but you have no *ki* in your language. I know it is present in the Cree language, but I didn't think the Ojibway had it. By the way, who taught you your language and where did you get the words of your song?

Not only was I insulted, but this comment also erased the good feelings and spiritual connection I had felt with the Great Spirit moments before. This incident illustrates how it feels when a non-Aboriginal person tries to tell us that they know the language better than we do. As Aboriginal people we must be diligent about taking responsibility and control of how we maintain and retain our languages.

In September 1999, for the first time, the University of Winnipeg offered Cree and Ojibway courses. They were concerned that perhaps not enough students would be interested in taking the courses. Both classes filled up relatively quickly, and the students in the Ojibway class asked me if I could tutor them. I tutored approximately eight students every Wednesday evening. When I asked them to read what they had to learn for the next class, I realized they were simply memorizing the words. I also found myself reading the words as I would read English, and I had trouble saying the words. However, when I closed my eyes and did not read the

word, it would come out much clearer and with feeling. In simply asking the students to read the words, I was ignoring the spirituality of the language. I then changed the way I tutored: I asked them to not read the words, but to close their eyes and say them. I wanted them to experience and feel the essence of the language, not simply to recite what *chair* is in Ojibway. As I tutored and listened to the students having fun learning the language, I remembered how important it was for me to speak it always. I silently promised myself I would, even if people did not understand me. It would be my small contribution toward saving our language. Kirkness (1998) said, "if we lose our languages, we do not merely lose a lexicon of words, but we lose our culture and essence of who we are" (p. 94).

Littlebear (1998) asked, "Why we should save our languages since they now seem to have no political, economic, or global relevance?" He continued, "that they seem not to have this relevance is exactly the reason why we should save our languages because it is the spiritual relevance is that deeply embedded in our languages that is important" (p. 1). Fulford (1998) stated, "Algonquian languages are the products of a worldview which is different from that of European peoples" (p. 11). I agree that the world view of Aboriginal languages is different from that of European peoples, but I disagree that the languages are products of a world view. I believe the world view is embedded in the languages. I think Fulford misses the point, although he attempts to elaborate by offering the following two quotes by an Ojibwe editor Alex Mckay. "In my language, breath and language are connected" and, offering a more elaborate explanation,

The way one speaks is the way one breathes. It's what we call *izhikiizhwe*—the nature of one speaks is related to the sound of breathing. But it is more than just that. The way one speaks is also connected to the way one thinks. And that is connected to the way one is raised. It is the *Izhiki* of a child to be an adult.... If your children are not permitted to learn and grow within their language then they will become indifferent. They will become incapable of knowing themselves and understanding about becoming. (p. 11)

This second quote demonstrates the world view in the language. "Aboriginal languages have a spirit or a soul that can be known through the people themselves, and renewing and rebuilding from within the peoples is itself the process of coming to know" (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 25). For me as an Aboriginal woman, *Anishinabe kwe*, the relationship between language and identity, is not so different from that between language and world view. I see it as one in the same, and I further suggest that as Aboriginal people we were blessed with a special gift, the sacredness of our languages (Battiste, 1998; Greymorning, 1997; Kirkness, 1998; Littlebear, 1997). I describe sacredness as *kego aamanitowang*. Akan (1992) described Mr. Manitopeyes' 11th characteristic of the Saulteaux world view as:

The responsibility of using the gifts that were given to us in the best way we can goes without saying. In this way we live out our tasks by being true to ourselves. This is

Pimadizewin, or a worthwhile life. Pimosatamowin, or our walk of life, is how we arrive at that knowledge or make sense of that task. (p. 193)

The uniqueness and sacredness of the language can also be affirmed by the fact that it cannot be translated into English or French. Littlebear (1997) would refer to this inability to translate as omitting the “spice words” in the translation; therefore, “the illusion of translatability between Indigenous languages and English or French devalues the uniqueness of Indigenous languages and worldview” (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 81).

The lesson I learn from the Elders and the authors is that it is important for me to continue speaking my language because if I do not, I contribute to the loss of the language and undermining of the Anishinabe world view. This is why as Aboriginal people we need to be prepared to undergo a decolonization process. As we work toward maintaining and revitalizing our languages, we must keep in mind that we can in our languages define self-government and self-determination and cannot be swayed by having to explain these terms in English. When we do this, we succumb to the notion that English is a superior language. To reiterate this point, Littlebear suggests, “Our landbase and sacred practices are passed on through our languages, not by English, the language spoken by people who killed our people and oppressed our languages” (p. 2). Battiste and Henderson (2000) further state that insisting

on analyzing Indigenous thought from a Eurocentric point of view is cultural racism and cognitive imperialism.... Indigenous languages and worldviews must be strengthened and developed within their own contexts. Thus every Indigenous language has the right to exist without conforming to Eurocentric languages or worldviews. (p. 74)

I state above and wish to reiterate that it is possible to learn words in Anishinabemowin from a dictionary. However, I do not believe anyone can learn and fully appreciate and understand the language by simply memorizing words. For example, Gardner (2000) writes,

I once tried to learn the Halq’emeylem by listening to audiotapes of word lists, which featured a linguist who would say the words in English, and then an Elder would translate the words into Halq’emeylem: not a good way to learn a language. But it gave me exposure to how the language sounded, so the exercise was not completely useless. (p. 9)

I see and believe that the Anishinabe language is alive and that the Anishinabe world view is embedded in it. I agree that dictionaries can help in preserving our languages, but as Anishinabec, we must write them. We also need to keep in mind that our languages are oral. Our challenge in writing our languages is that we need to write our languages from our perspective, our way of knowing, from our world view, and not from the translation of the words from English. It is true that many of our languages have disappeared, but we are responsible for preserving those that are left. Sachedev (1998) stated, “The fact that Aboriginal languages have not been completely eradicated ... is testimony not only to the depth

of Aboriginal resistance, but also the importance of Aboriginal languages to Aboriginal identity in Canada" (p. 109). So I urge you to continue to resist and to speak the language.

I begin with a story about my father and I end with another. When I was a little girl, my mother and father would take my brothers and sisters fishing every Sunday afternoon in the summer. One Sunday afternoon—I am not quite sure why, but I was the only one who went with them. My dad gave me my own fishing rod, and I found a spot where I thought I might catch a fish. I cast my rod over and over again. Nothing. Suddenly I felt a jerk and started yelling and called my dad to help me. In his quiet way he said, "*Kikwaashquepina na?*" I was expecting him to come and help, but he continued to fish. Occasionally I would look at him, but he was not paying attention (I thought). I tried to reel in the fish, but I couldn't: it was too strong for me. My rod just kept bending, almost touching the water at times, and I was getting tired. I was also scared I would fall in or that the fish would pull me in. My father must have been watching me all this time because out of the blue he said, "*Eshcum paki ta piigin.*" Release it every once in a while. "*Taani ayaakosi. Ki kaki kane dan anapi shiwii ko pinaat.*" You will know when it is tired and you can reel it in. I was getting impatient and getting more tired. I now knew he was watching me, but he still did not come over to help me. Finally, I could tell whatever was on my line was getting tired because it was not pulling so much. Ever so slowly I reeled in the line—until I could drag the catfish onto the rock formation I was standing on.

Why do I tell this story? My father was a hunter, trapper, and fisherman, and he had years and years of experience. The lesson I learned from this true fishing story is that by not running over to come and help me, he honored me by trusting and believing that I could bring that fish in myself. I see this event as the first time I learned about perseverance and that you cannot quit because you are scared of something or because somebody is going to beat you. That fish did not beat me that afternoon. My father taught me what to do, because if I had just kept trying to reel it in, my line would have broken. My father knew in his head and in his heart how the fish think, how the animals think, and what to do when you wanted to catch them. *Naasinay, intipachim oway ka gi ishisake; miigwetch intina impapaipun, kwayak aki pikiki inaw a mawit.* I often tell this story not only because it is one of my fondest memories of my father, but also because in the story lies an example of the Anishinabe world view, a memory I can hold on to, to remind me where I come from and who I am.

*Ayangwamissick.* Walk in beauty, walk with care, walk with love.

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