

Speaking our Truths in "A Good Way"

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Each of us connects to spirit in our own personal way. The following thought piece represents two people (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) coming together and articulating their own spiritual engagement within research practices. The paper is given a voice from a traditional Talking Circle format, thus providing each individual with an equal opportunity to be heard. It is from this place of mutual respect that both participants embrace being able to speak their own truths. Hence, this discussion is lead by the collective energy of author and, in doing so, demonstrates that working collaboratively and engaging the spirit realm can build new pathways for tomorrow's researchers.

Sun is bright and laughing today and Wind gently pulls me outdoors. All the Spirits are playful as we know we must soon be restful and enter into the time of reflection. It is mid-December and Winter Solstice will soon be upon us, and Mother Earth will cover Herself in a soft white blanket to rest for another season. I step outside and walk over to *Mtig* (Tree). I offer my majestic old friend tobacco and ask for guidance, as I have never been asked to write about my own Spirituality in my research before.

I have been working alongside a non-Aboriginal professor for the past few years, and so it is from this perspective that I speak. Together, we will address connecting to spirit, ceremony, and "the good way" in the positive relationships we encounter and forge, while working within the confines of academe and Aboriginal communities. Further, we will both give voice to enacting spiritually within research endeavours and our self-discovery throughout this process. Dr. Lorenzo Cherubini has always been respectful of our traditional ways, making room for our thoughts and words to be shared within a Talking Circle format, and to share of ourselves from an equal disposition. In a Talking Circle, all who participate are welcomed and made aware that it is a place where each can offer and share whatever they so choose. There are no direct questions or probing of thoughts; instead, the circle provides a safe place to speak personal truths. The person who is sharing either holds a stick or a feather, and no one is to interrupt, as this is her/his time (Graveline, 2002).

With feather in hand ... I begin ...

Boozhoo, Lyn ndishnikaaz. Sagamok Anishnawbek ndoonjibaa. Anishnawbe'kwe. Migizi N'dodem. Hello, my name is Lyn Trudeau. I come from Sagamok Anishnawbek Territory, descendant from Ojibway bloodlines, Eagle Clan.

I first present myself in the old language to the Creator, acknowledging this Great Presence before I speak, as this is the tradition of my Peoples.

My Ancestors tell me that everything is interconnected, held together in mutual respect of all living entities. It is with this understanding that I approach my life, and so my research endeavours must be aligned with my beliefs and ways of knowing. I prefer not to use the word research. I prefer to use the word search. While searching for the Truths of our People, *Connecting to Spirit* must be practiced and be as much a part of the searching process as possible. It is a way of bringing the medicines forth and letting our Old Ones guide us. We ask for this guidance so that we do not lose our path and are led in a good way. Before I can continue on, I must say that I can only speak for myself and present this "good way" as I understand it through my Anishnawbek culture. This understanding is one of good relations—relations to and with all beings. All beings are kindred spirits since the time the Creator brought us all together, so now we must acknowledge all life and move forward with peace in our hearts and a calmness of the mind. "A good way" is not only words, but also an experience each must have and a journey each must make on their own. With this in mind, and because everything is connected, it is a collective responsibility of Aboriginal Peoples to give back to our own communities to assist in healing processes as there is still much trouble and strife alive. We have come to a time when we, as Aboriginal *researchers*, need to do our own *research*. In the past, our Peoples have been the studied but we have never done the studying. Now that more Aboriginal scholars are working in this arena, we must put ourselves in a position where we can attempt to bridge the dichotomy between our worldview and the rest of the greater populace, in order to find balance upon this landscape. The first place to begin is by establishing relationships that are mindful and deferential of our ways.

With this thought, I pass the feather ...

Thank you, Lyn; I am thankful for the opportunity to listen to your words. I am especially grateful for your willingness to share how you *connect* spirit to research.

The question of how researchers *connect to spirit* in their research is a compelling one, particularly because I am a white mainstream scholar who has the honour of working with and learning from Aboriginal colleagues, Elders, and the community at large. Since I am not of Aboriginal descent, I do not feel entitled to understand the profound sense of spirituality that exists in the traditional teachings of Aboriginal Peoples. I have, however, listened attentively and reflected genuinely upon the manifestations of spirit as they are practiced and embodied through my Aboriginal brothers and sisters, and in turn, through our work together. It has been a journey of observing and learning and, by virtue of being an active participant in

research with Aboriginal Peoples, my travel has not only shed light on what it means to conduct research, but also on the various agencies that influence the engagement in research. The issue at hand, therefore, necessitates a different avenue of *re-search* in terms of, first, recognizing the sensitive and complex interplay in the ecology of ways that my Aboriginal colleagues and partners enact their spirituality, and, second, thinking carefully about how I negotiate the connection of research and spirituality in this progression of understandings.

We reflect on ceremony and the good way ... Lorenzo offers me the feather ...
 I have often found myself in constant struggles within my own heart regarding whether or not I can even stay studying and working within environments that are steeped in Westernized ideologies. If not for the fact that I have drawn from truly believing that I will be where the Creator wants and needs me to be at a given time, I am certain I would have left the concrete world for softer ground quite some time ago. I have discovered that working collaboratively with those who are open-minded is one way in which we can situate ourselves to further our good works, and in the realm of academia, we, as Aboriginal Peoples, keep our ceremonies and culture alive. However, in saying this, perhaps I have this backwards as it is the ceremony and very essence of our culture that keep us alive. Therefore, we need to involve our Spirituality in everything and in every path we venture (Wilson, 2008). Through acknowledging and knowing the importance of Spirituality, I can keep myself rooted and remain true to what has been passed down to me.

Ceremony is a spiritual connection that allows our essential self to come alive, to be in the present. Hence, allowing this link to my essential self is how I let my Ancestors speak, give Vision, and walk with me when needed, while I find my own path within the sphere of higher education. It is my hope to sow seeds of a marginalized perspective and Knowledge within areas of academic influence, for it is here that Aboriginal Peoples and their work must be acknowledged—as having their own beliefs and ways of doing, rather than just being written into another world's history. However, if we keep our eyes and hearts open, we will see those who are ready, able, and committed to working and searching with us through our own methodologies. All of the search endeavours that I have been involved with have united our Elders, our ceremonies, our communities, and our non-Aboriginal counterparts, as one cohesive entity to search out our truths and stories. When we make good relationships, even those outside our traditional circles, and nurture them through Ancestral guidance, all of our communities benefit in ways of finding new paths, while furthering the healing within our own communities. Additionally, we offer the greater populace a better understanding of who we truly are instead of a misinterpreted fable. Within this better understanding, we, too, can lend

to all our brothers and sisters “the good way” in which we, as Aboriginal Peoples, wish to walk our paths while here on Mother Earth.

I pass the feather back to Lorenzo ...

My Aboriginal colleagues insist that our research, regardless if we are speaking to one Aboriginal teacher, surveying hundreds of educators in school boards across the province, or enlisting the perceptions of entire Aboriginal communities, be conducted in “a good way.” Our research endeavours, thus, begin with ceremony. While I am in no position to speak to the spectrum of experiences entrenched in these traditions, I have been taught that the respective ceremonies are fundamentally concerned with similar things: namely, evoking the spirit of ancestors, the land, and the human and animal world to guide the process of inquiry and all those participating in it. I understand that it is not sufficient to claim that research projects are intuitively legitimate; instead, conducting research in “a good way” respects the conceptual impetus for the research and, more significantly, honours the spiritual space from which we, as researchers, can participate. This process not only draws people into more of a spiritual realm, but inevitably fosters, in each individual, thoughts about the interconnection between the research agenda and the greater cause. Interestingly, both the research agenda and cause are often positioned in a paradoxical sense of knowing. From the mainstream perspective, the purpose of research abides by epistemic constructions, largely influenced by Western traditions. From an Aboriginal perspective, to the limited extent from which I can speak to it, research is more closely linked to a cause that safeguards a sense of self and community. In doing so, participants are free to communicate story and knowledge in reciprocal relationships between all those involved. This is, indeed, a paradigm shift on many levels for a mainstream researcher grounded in empirical and Eurocentric research traditions that do not generally evoke Judeo-Christian worldviews. Research, from the tradition taught to me, is apart and distinct from spirituality. In the Western tradition from which I base my practice, scholarship and research narratives rarely transcend spiritual boundaries. Further, the subjective dimensions related to spirituality and the perplexities of my own understanding of the spirit world are not necessarily considerations of the critical analysis inherent in my research. The focus of “a good way” rests not only on the eventual evidence-based research outcomes, but on generating a developmental flow of research practices that model sustainable behaviour and evoke the guidance of the spirit world.

As examples, my colleagues and partners offer tobacco to the research communities with whom we propose to engage. The tobacco, as I understand it, is the symbolic entry point from which to establish dialogue with the community, discuss the various issues and challenges of the research, and offer a clearer sense of the project’s goals. Yet, the details inherent in

the above discourse are rather intermediate given that the particular emphasis of the research objectives is based on the will of the spirit. It is the same sense of spirit that we honour in Sunrise Ceremonies¹ at the inception of the respective project's data collection. As a viable way to seek the guidance of the spirit world, a traditional Elder (who is a key member of our research team) honours the physical and spiritual environment, and in the process, positions us as peoples, first, and researchers, second, as multi-integrated beings in the lives of our participants, our work, and in each other. I am led to believe that a traditional Elder is, in many respects, a spiritual designation. In this case and in others, the Elder provides a level of richness of spirituality that enables the participants, the researchers, and the research project to continue in "a good way." The Elder also includes tobacco in the ceremonies as a means to transfer the research objectives (or as I now consider them, the *research energy*) to the greater cause that transcends human considerations and implicates upon spiritual ones. The myriad of spiritual complexities, that remain significant beyond my grasp of understanding, stimulates participant engagement.

Similarly, we smudge at the onset of our research meetings in hopes that the focus and depth of our conversation transpires in "a good way." At first, the smudging ceremony, in particular, was rather bizarre to me as an outsider. It was, after all, very much a practice that thrust me in an entirely different social and spiritual location. I realized that the spirit world was being evoked through the smoke since my Catholic tradition uses incense to do the same. Yet, the experience of smudging within the circle was very much outside the frame of my perceptual references as I wondered why my colleagues directed the smoke towards their heads, hearts, and bodies. As I observed, my thoughts shifted from apprehension to engagement. Over the ensuing years, however, I have arrived at an appreciation of the fact that the rising smoke resonates in relevance to different manifestations of spirituality; in other words, the valorization of the ceremony rests in the concept of the encounter that each individual experiences with their own very private and personal understandings of what constitutes transcendence. The management of the experience, in the very smoke that represents the invisible realm of the spirit, in a sense moralizes the marriage of research, energy, self, community, and intent. The experience positions all members in a similar frame of mind and allows the research to begin in "a good way."

Enacting spirit and ceremony in research ...

I speak ... holding the feather tenderly ...

Connecting to spirit in my searches most certainly stretches beyond this physical plane and often enters into the dreaming time. In this time of dreaming, I (Lyn) have been given teachings, songs, messages, and encounters that have been more profound and meaningful for my spirit

than anything here in the physical realm. I carry these gifts within my heart every day, in everything that I do. Aboriginal Peoples have always looked upon this temporal space with great respect. We know that we are often given messages that come to us in the form of dreams that we must heed: it is through this place that our Ancestors have guided and continue to guide us from the Spirit World. I have been aware of this for some time now, and so I always welcome the time of dreaming. I let it influence my walks and my searches for ways to heal our Peoples (including me); it is a doorway that I will always keep open. In the winter of 2008, I was fortunate to participate in a gathering that brought together Aboriginal teachers from all over Ontario, for three consecutive days of ceremony and talking circles, under the auspice of an Elder. I dreamt the first night there. The Old Ones came to tell me that they acknowledged these teachers and their seemingly endless workdays, fraught with worry for our children as they try to instruct their classes and instill our culture, in the hopes that it will not fall by the wayside. I was honoured to pass on these kind words.

Original Peoples of this land have always had a special relationship with the natural world; being able to incorporate this element of peacefulness into my works is something I strive to do. Doing ceremony and asking for guidance out on the lands keeps this connection alive while I continue to follow the path of Spirit. As a two-legged, walking and feeling the kinship with the natural world is a gift I accept with great honour, for Mother Earth is our greatest natural companion, unwavering and unaffected by time. We should be at one with Her in all the works we do, especially when searching out Truths of and for our People. She has been with us since our very beginnings, sustaining us, so we need to acknowledge Her, giving thanks for Her friendship. Another way I walk in tune with the natural world is by keeping my hand drum nearby. I must drum and sing throughout all my searching ventures because I find a deep spiritual connection. Through drumming and singing, my heartbeat is at one with Hers. It is believed by many Aboriginal Peoples that the drumbeat is the heartbeat of Mother Earth. Once, when our heartbeats fell in time together, She whispered to me, "Stay close, sing softly, and sing from your heart and one day you will return to me ... a child returning home."

Lorenzo accepts the feather and gives voice to ceremony through his eyes ...

Just as ceremony allows researchers to connect to spirit in their research, so, too, does the decolonizing methodology that we employ in our research practices. The Wildfire Research Methodology (WRM) has certain similarities to Talking Circles (Battiste, 1998; Castellano, 2000) where participants share their experiences and perceptions of a particular topic in a supportive and safe environment. In various Aboriginal traditions, the circle is symbolic of respect and holism. Our use of the WRM, in many ways, complements what we believe is a communal research atmosphere because

it is based on some traditional Aboriginal beliefs. As I have learned, such an approach is significant for Aboriginal participants who see the value of their norms embedded in the research process (Cherubini, Niemczyk, & McGean, 2008). The Talking Circle is often considered to honour the spirit of the subject and affords participants a sense of belonging (Restoule, 2006). We and our other colleagues have used the WRM (Kompf & Hodson, 2000) across a multi-national demographic that included Anishinabe, Hotinonsho:ni; Nishnawbe-Aski, and Métis peoples. Ceremony is an integral part of the WRM: it attests to the necessity to respect a sense of inclusivity across all participants as it was designed to provide a sacred (research) environment (Hodson, 2000). As Hampton (1988) suggests, it is critical to engage Aboriginal Peoples in research that entails genuine spiritual significance as they "build [their] thoughts together in a cumulative or some time exponential way" (p. 13). Guided by the traditional Elder, the WRM establishes an instrumental connectivity between Aboriginal participants, researchers, and Aboriginal epistemology (Battiste, 2002; Iseke-Barnes, 2002). The Elder represents the element of spirituality that allows participants the security of telling their stories in a healing environment.

The WRM provides a new configuration to research practice and, more intriguingly, gives significant recognition to the aforementioned notions of healing. By restructuring relations around a circle based on respect and mutuality, the WRM acknowledges the adverse effects of colonialism upon Aboriginal Peoples and allows each participant to share, in this sacred environment, what have often been painful experiences of marginalization. Research aside, these environments allow the spirit to be present and complement peoples' words, as participants figuratively navigate through what are visibly different terrains. Guided by spirit, participants find expression in their collective and individual voices. It is captivating to witness healing, even if one is undeniably from the proverbial 'outside.' Research, under these conditions, is truly a *re-search* of our sense of self as human and spiritual beings. Feeling safe, past WRM participants exercised their vulnerability, recognized each other's stories, and attended to their healing. The (research) environment seemed to invite *peacefully painful* expressions of displacement and disadvantage, while simultaneously celebrating participants' resistance to being dominated and defeated. Participants experienced spirituality on a level that allowed them to cry, laugh, empathize, and applaud each other's stories, as they seemingly represented their own. Re-search, in these capacities, not only connects to spirit but, I dare suggest, very much depends upon it.

Staying true to self ... Lorenzo continues ...

Ceremonies and culturally-sensitive research methodologies have certainly bridged the worlds of spirit and research. These experiences have contributed to my own self-discovery that it is very much in the suspension

of one's innate beliefs and values that the most sincere connection occurs. As a mainstream researcher, I connect to spirit by engaging in Aboriginal spiritual practices in a state of mindfulness. I resist any initial tendencies to subject notions of Aboriginal spirituality to my own traditions, for fear of merely problematizing the emerging differences. Instead, I suspend the familiar and exist (albeit often momentarily) in this state of mindful commonality. My focus is on the impression of spirituality in the context of Aboriginal traditions. For obvious reasons, I do not attempt to deconstruct the language and nuances of spiritual traditions that are emotionally and aesthetically different from my own. Yet, this does not prevent me from localizing a spiritual experience for how it affords and generates meaning for me as a person and researcher, amidst the respective relationships of all those involved in the research projects. With a mindful focus on commonality, I connect what I believe to be a very intimate communion with the spirit, and through this communion I connect to all those with whom I share this journey. The process nurtures an inner activity and harnesses the sense of spirituality that I share with the other individuals who contribute to the research energy. It is, in many ways, a connection that harbours curiosity. In another way, my own connectedness represents the blessing of being invited to be present in a world that is not one's own. In still other ways, these experiences are what bind me to my Aboriginal colleagues, for though I cannot speak first-hand of their varied experiences and traditions from socio-cultural perspectives, I am able to engage profoundly in the experience. It is, therefore, my belief that the complexities of spirituality, connectivity, and (research) energy exist in this world and beyond (regardless of peoples' race and culture), but it may be that we simply call them different things.

Lorenzo offers me the feather and upon accepting I say in closing ...

In the past, so much has been taken and/or appropriated from Aboriginal cultures, resulting in many of our Peoples losing their spirituality and their self-identity/worth. Because of those who possess darkness inside and prey upon us, we cannot allow anyone of this sort to, once again, betray our trust, especially in research practices where it is important to keep our customs alive. However, having said that, I, too, have had the distinct pleasure of working side-by-side with non-Aboriginal Peoples who do not wish to conquer or even let go of their own beliefs and culture, as well it should be. We are all Peoples, of all different nations, of all four colours—red, yellow, black, and white—and there are different roles we need to fulfill and should be aware of, such as the unique gifts the Creator has given each of us. Because I have seen this in some of the good people I have spent time with, I know that by nourishing these relationships and by searching together we can all find a path upon which to journey: a path respectful of contemporary and traditional knowledge that offers mutual benefits to all

those involved, wherein Aboriginal Peoples can keep their state of Spiritual Being whole. Having seen this possibility, we no longer journey just side-by-side, but hand-in-hand.

Off to the side sits my smudge bowl where the sweet smell of our Medicines linger in the air, as the smoke rises to the skies above ...

Chi'miigwech.

Notes

¹Sunrise Ceremony is a gathering of people to greet Brother Sun at the break of dawn, to give thanks to the Creator for all creation and another day of life on Mother Earth.

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