

# One Story of a Spiritual Research Journey

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*This article relates the story of a spiritual research journey that was both personal and academic. What began as a personal search for healing led to the completion of a dissertation. Two distinct forms of learning were integral to the pursuit of this spiritual research journey: traditional community-based experiential learning under the guidance of a gifted Elder, combined with the academic pursuit of the knowledge related to Indigenous research and scholarship. In this article, I address the ontological and epistemological nature of spirit in Indigenous research, and how, in the process of conducting my research, I maintained my connection to spirit through the use of Plains Cree protocol and methods of inquiry.*

## *Introduction*

The story of my spiritual research journey that I am going to share with you has encompassed twenty years of my life. This story contains aspects of both my personal spiritual journey and the academic research that formed the basis of my dissertation (Hoffman, 2006). In many instances, they were one and the same.<sup>1</sup> My doctoral research documented a recent aspect of Plains Cree oral history that had significant ramifications for Aboriginal peoples throughout Canada. It focused on the impact of Raymond Harris, an Arapaho traditional teacher from Wyoming, who worked with Cree people from Alberta and Saskatchewan, beginning in 1969 and ending in 1981. Many of the people whose lives were profoundly influenced through their relationship with Raymond Harris were at the forefront of the emerging movements of that time. These movements were centred on the reclamation of Aboriginal rights, cultural renewal, and Aboriginal healing. Through a ripple effect, this core group of people facilitated and supported positive change at the individual, community, and national levels. Today, this legacy continues through the work of the living members of the core group and through the work of individuals whose lives they impacted. My years of personal work within one of the spiritual communities that originated out of Raymond Harris's work in Canada is what prepared me to undertake a study of this nature; it allowed me, a non-Indigenous person<sup>2</sup>, the opportunity to gain an understanding of Indigenous knowledge as it pertains to this particular cultural context.

## *The Beginning Stages*

The seeds of this journey were first planted within an academic context in 1975 when I was an undergraduate student in Native Studies at Trent University. The late Joe Couture was the new chair of the department and one of my professors. I was captivated by the stories he would tell about his

experiences with Raymond Harris. When Joe returned to Wyoming to attend ceremonies the following summer, he was accompanied by Don McCaskill, another member of the Native Studies faculty. Don, too, returned home with stories to share about his experiences. As a young man thirsting for an understanding of Native spirituality, I was eager to listen to them both. After completing my studies at Trent in 1978, many years passed by before I would once again hear anyone speak of Raymond Harris.

The spring of 1990 was a time of great personal upheaval in my life. In the midst of this transition, I was struggling to find meaning and balance. On one particularly dark morning, when I was overwhelmed by the sense of loss arising out of the breakdown of my marriage, I cried out for help. I asked the Creator to help me find a spiritual teacher. I promised to devote myself to a spiritual way of life.<sup>3</sup> Then it occurred to me that I should contact Joe Couture. I went to work<sup>4</sup> that day with a renewed sense of hope and meaning. That evening, after digging out an old phone number I had for Joe and mustering up enough courage to actually ask for help, I made the call. The answer I received was simple and direct: "I am sorry, the number you have called is not in service." Undaunted, I phoned the telephone directory services for Alberta in the hopes of finding his new number, but there was no listing. That was a beautiful moment for me because instead of feeling defeated, I experienced a deep sense of faith that I would somehow receive the help I had cried out for. I calmly accepted the fact that I had no way of contacting the one person who I thought would be able to help me in my quest. Four days later, while I was visiting a colleague at an elementary school in a community an hour and a half away, she introduced me to an Aboriginal RCMP officer, Jack Lacerte. In the conversation that ensued, I learned that he was also a spiritual knowledge holder.

Within a couple weeks of meeting Jack, I would experience a sweat lodge ceremony for the first time in my life. I became a regular at Jack's weekly sweats. He was my first teacher and the one who welcomed me into this way of life. I soon learned that Jack ran an Arapaho sweat and that he had earned the responsibility to run a sweat after many years of fasting under someone whom he described as 'a powerful medicine man' from Wyoming. I did not make the connection between these stories and the ones I had heard fifteen years earlier, until later that same year at the coming-out feast after my first fast. Jack and the Cree Elder who had led the fast, Joe Cardinal from Saddle Lake, Alberta, were reminiscing about the past, remembering stories about the person who had opened the door to this way of life for them. The details of one of their stories led me to realize that they were referring to the same man that Joe Couture had talked about more than a decade earlier. Upon asking, it was confirmed by Joe Cardinal that he and my former professor, Joe Couture, had "made many spiritual journeys together."

At the end of that same year, I had a deeply personal experience that led me to the understanding of what is meant by a 'calling.' The following excerpt from my journal describes that experience:

Dec. 27, 1990

After experiencing another bout of pain and confusion I took the time to meditate yesterday morning. Sweetgrass smudge, eagle feather in hand, the calming had begun. As I traveled inward I managed to let go of the menial thoughts that were hindering the process.

I don't know why, or how, the thought came to me, but it did. It was not a flash of insight that came from beyond me, it flowed from me in a gentle peaceful way.....

Who was the Holy Man, Raymond Harris, who taught Jack, the two Joe C.'s and many, many others? He kept the spiritual knowledge alive and made sure it didn't die with him. The world should know the story of this man. I could be the one to write this story.

This thought excited me as I put my feather and sweetgrass away. I was starting to think about some of the things that a task like this would involve, when the Eagle came to me. Glancing out the kitchen window I saw him soaring towards me from the south, so close, so low. I ran to the dining room window and had to look up because he was so close as he soared past the house. I ran outside as he circled above the deck and then swooped down and soared past, right above me. He was large and mature. He returned the way he came and I watched him disappear out of sight.

That experience sprouted the seed that would eventually grow into my dissertation. Since that time, I have heard many stories about the 'Old Man' and the teachings he shared with the people.<sup>5</sup>

At the time of the eagle's visit, I was not yet ready, on several levels, to turn my life towards this work. At the same time, this work had a way of finding me and reminding me. On two occasions during the summer that followed the eagle's visit, people whom I had just met and who had no idea who I was, told me a story about Raymond Harris. The first time it occurred was between rounds at a sweat lodge ceremony in Lethbridge, Alberta. I was sitting outside the back of the lodge with the Blackfoot Elder who was leading the sweat, who turned to me and said:

My life wasn't always like this. I was pretty wild in my younger days. One day this guy offered me some money to drive him to Wyoming to see a medicine man. I didn't know anything about that stuff. I only took the guy because I wanted the money. When I got to Wyoming and met this medicine man it changed my life.

In that moment I knew that he was speaking about Raymond Harris but, just the same, I asked if that was the case. Being conscious of knowing something in a deep way was new to me at that point in time, and I had not yet learned to trust it.

In the spring of 1992 prior to my third fast, I approached Joe Cardinal in a traditional way in order to ask what he thought of my idea to record the story of Raymond Harris and the impact of his work. Joe told me that he thought it was a good idea. That evening, much to my surprise, Joe announced in the sweat that I was going to do this work. In that moment, what had up until that time been a personal and, for the most part, private

vision became a public commitment. From that day forward, I received ongoing support in so many ways from Joe<sup>6</sup> and his wife Jenny. They took every opportunity to share with me their personal experiences with Raymond and his wife Ambey. They opened their hearts and their home to me. Most importantly, they provided me with the opportunity to live the way of life that Raymond shared with them. For that, I will always be grateful.

It was not until 1997 that I began acting upon my commitment to do this work. At that time, I saw the writing of this story as a personal research project, something that I hoped would one day be published in the form of a book. Though at that time I did have a lingering dream of one day completing a doctorate degree, it never occurred to me that these two visions were in any way related, since one was rooted in the personal and spiritual aspect of my life, and the other arose out of my professional ambitions. That year I journeyed to Alberta and began to ask people, in a traditional manner, to share with me the stories of their experiences with Raymond Harris. By this time, I had made contact with Joe Couture and visited with him at his home at Calling Lake, where he agreed to conduct a pipe ceremony with me. Through the pipe ceremony, he received the message that I would complete the work.

In the summer of 1998 I journeyed to the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming for the purposes of continuing my research, and in order to meet Raymond and Ambey Harris's children. I wanted to explain my intentions and hopefully receive their blessings for the work that I had begun. Once again, I was allowing myself to be led by that deep knowing that I have come to realize is Spirit, not by reason. I arrived at Wind River, one of the largest Indian reservations in the United States<sup>7</sup>, with no previous directions as to where I would locate the Harris family, filled with a certainty that defied logic. It never occurred to me that it might be difficult to find them. Within a couple of hours, I would have the pleasure of sweating with Raymond and Ambey's son, Patrick, and his family, in their prayer sweat. A couple days later, Patrick arranged a meeting at his home with the other members of his family who were living in the area.

#### *Bringing My Research Into the Academy*

I made the decision to apply for entrance into the Native Studies (now Indigenous Studies) PhD program at Trent University in the autumn of 2000. Though I hoped, one day, to be able to bring together my goal to continue to research and write the story of Raymond Harris's work in Canada with my academic goal of earning a doctorate degree, at the start of doctoral studies I kept the two separate. In my entrance application, I made no mention of my ongoing research. It was not until I was six months into the program that I spoke about my primary research interest. My initial choice to remain silent about this work stemmed from the fact that I wasn't sure if bringing it into the academy was the right thing to do. There were

many things that I was unsure of. Was it safe? Would the information be respected? Would I be expected to feed this story in order for it to be palatable within the western academic world? Could I find the support I needed to do this work in a manner that respected the teachings that Raymond shared? It soon became apparent to me that it might be possible to pursue this research as the topic of my dissertation but, in order to have my questions answered, I would have to open up and share my 'true' research interests with a couple members of the faculty. Their response was very positive and reassuring. From that point on, the two goals became one.

My location in relation to this research required me to undertake it from as close to an Indigenous perspective as is possible for a non-Indigenous researcher like myself. In order to conduct my work responsibly, it was imperative that I continued to learn and respect the Indigenous ontology and epistemology within which the work was grounded.<sup>8</sup> This required me to balance my lived experience within, and my understanding of this particular Indigenous paradigm, with the academic pursuit of completing a dissertation.

In bringing my spiritual research into the academy, I was faced with two challenges. First, I needed to find a way to conceptualize the ontological and epistemological reality in which my work took place, in a manner that would be both respectful to its place of origin and at the same time meaningful to the reader who might be unfamiliar with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Second, I needed to find a way to articulate the nature of the Indigenous research methods that arose from within this particular cultural tradition. In order to accomplish these tasks, I turned to two broad sources of knowledge, traditional and academic. Throughout this research journey, my primary source of understanding originated out of my lived experience within this particular spiritual community. I also followed an academic trail that had been established by other scholars, including Dumont (1976), Couture (1989, 1991, 1996), Battiste (1988), Colorado (1988), Haig-Brown (1992), Lightning (1992), Sarris (1993), Ermine (1995), Archibald (1997), Simpson (1999), Smith (1999), Struthers (1999, 2001), Brant-Castellano (2000, 2004), Cajete (2000, 2004), Weber-Pillwax (2001a, 2003), Newhouse (2002), Steinhauer (2002), Fixico (2003), Wilson (2003), and Meyer (2003).

My conceptualization and articulation of the ontological and epistemological reality in which my research took place resulted in *A Conceptual Framework of Indigenous Knowing* (Hoffman, 2006). As illustrated in Figure 1, *The Centrality of Indigenous Knowing within my Research*, this conceptual framework was at the centre of the Indigenous research methodologies that composed my research. An explanation of the entire *Conceptual Framework of Indigenous Knowing* is a lengthy discussion. For the purposes of this paper, I will limit my discussion to how I addressed the ontological and epistemological nature of spirit in Indigenous research, and how in the

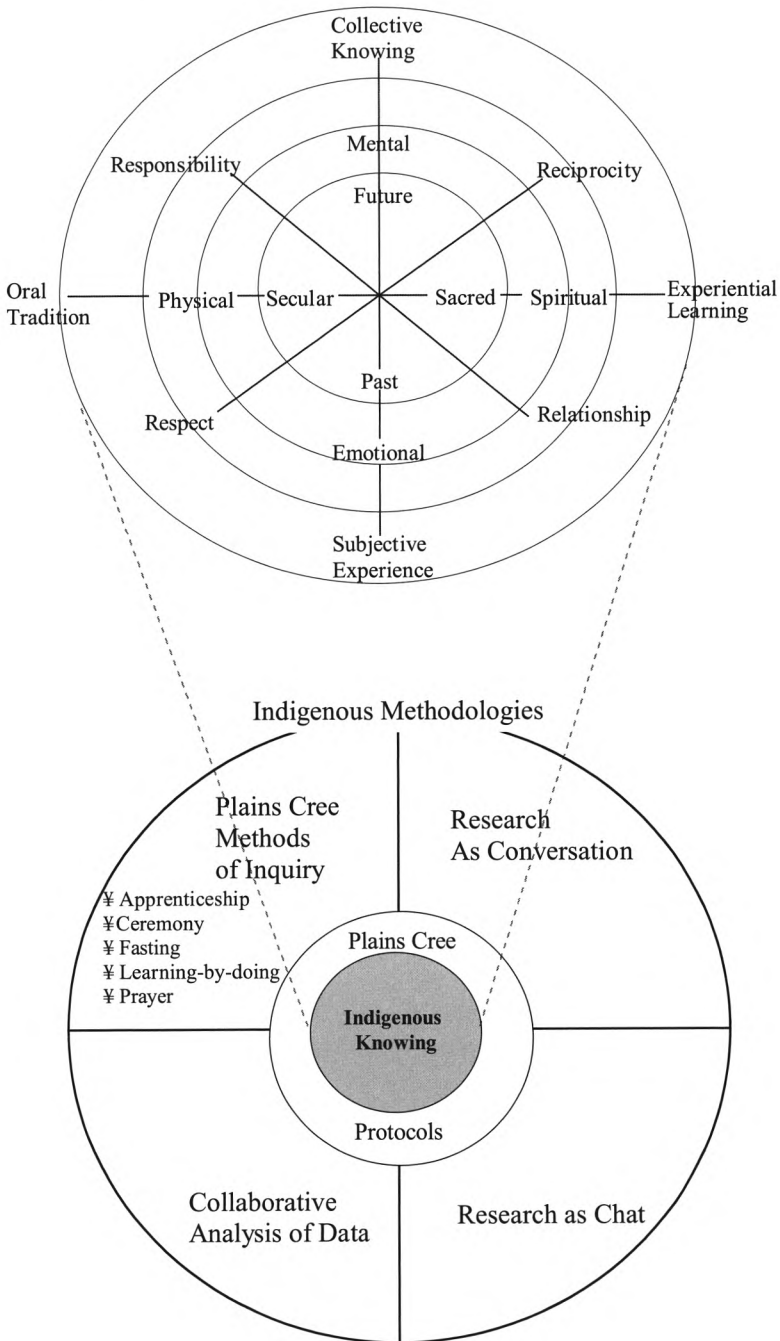


Figure 1. The centrality of Indigenous Knowing within my research

process of conducting my research, I maintained my connection to spirit through the use of Plains Cree protocol and methods of inquiry.

*The Ontological and Epistemological Nature of Spirit in Indigenous Research*  
 Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies are rooted in worldviews that are inclusive of both the sacred and the secular. The fundamental ontological principle is that the world exists in one reality, comprised of an inseparable weave of secular and sacred dimensions. Stemming from this is the epistemological principle that knowledge is gained through interaction with the physical as well as the spiritual aspects of the world (Battiste, 1988; Beck and Walters, 1977; Bopp et al., 1984; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1989, 1991, 1996; Dumont, 1976; Ermine, 1995; Fixico, 2003; Meyer, 2003; Irwin, 1994; Kawagley, n.d.; Simpson, 1999). Dumont (1976) describes this way of seeing the world as “primal vision.” Couture (1991) refers to physical and spiritual reality in terms of “inseparable realities” and “multidimensional knowing.”

Similarly, Battiste (1988) uses the expression “complementary modes of knowing” in order to describe the nature of the world and how it is known:

Fundamental to Aboriginal knowledge is the awareness that beyond the immediate sense world of perception, memory, imagination, and feeling lies another world from which knowledge, power, or medicine is derived, from which the Aboriginal peoples will survive and flourish. The complementary modes of knowing in the tribal world form the essence of tribal epistemology (p. 18).

Speaking directly about the practice of research, Dumont (1976) informs us that it is only through this “fuller way of viewing the world” that we, as researchers—especially non-Indigenous researchers—are ever to “understand and sensibly appreciate” Indigenous ways of knowing.

Indigenous ways of knowing and being also acknowledge four aspects of the self and four ways of knowing: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual. These inter-related aspects of the self comprise a whole individual and the ways in which they are able to acquire knowledge. The spiritual nature of the self and the spiritual dimension of knowledge are addressed throughout the literature (Battiste, 1988; Beck and Walters, 1977; Bopp et al., 1984; Brant-Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 2000; Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1989, 1991, 1996; Dumont, 1976; Ermine, 1995; Irwin, 1994; Kawagley, n.d.; Meyer, 2003; Simpson, 1999). Spiritual knowledge is revealed through a variety of means, such as prayer, meditation, intuition, dreams, visions, and ceremonies. Simpson (1999) refers to spiritual knowledge as the “foundation of Indigenous knowledge.” According to her, “It is at once context, content and process” (p. 60).

*Maintaining Connection to Spirit Within My Research*

Indigenous research methodologies are processes that originate from, take place within, and honour Indigenous ontological, epistemological, and ethical realities. In Indigenous research, the process must be considered specifically in relation to the values and principles of the people the researcher is working with (Bishop, 1997; Martin, 2001; Slim and Thompson, 1993; Smith, 1999). It was essential for me, on both a personal and an academic level, that I worked within the ethics and the protocols inherent to this particular context. The methodologies I chose to conduct my research are ones that reflect my understanding of Indigenous epistemology and ethics in practice. As stated earlier, the primary source of this understanding was derived from my experience within a specific spiritual community, as well as my personal and professional experiences within a variety of other Aboriginal communities over the last thirty years. Academically, I learned from the work of other scholars who led the way in the field of Indigenous research.

As illustrated in Figure 1, my methodology incorporated a variety of strategies. It began within a Plains Cree traditional approach to learning through the use of traditional protocol and the development of relationships built on the principles of respect, responsibility, and reciprocity. It included a variety of forms of data collection, including: Plains Cree methods of inquiry; research as conversation (Haig-Brown, 1992); research as chat (Haig-Brown, 1992); and formal interviews. The information gathered was analyzed through self and collaborative analysis. It is important to emphasize that Indigenous Knowing was at the centre of the research methodologies that were implemented throughout the process of conducting this research. A complete acceptance of this way of knowing and being in the world was the fundamental starting point for all that followed. It was not a point of departure from which I moved away. It was at all times ubiquitous within the context, process, and content of this research. It was the way of being and knowing that guided my actions as I entered into the various methodologies that comprised my work.

It is also important to understand that what I describe as Plains Cree methods of inquiry are research methods in the sense that they are ways of coming to knowledge; at the same time, their cultural, social, and spiritual significance within this way of life is far greater than that. Therefore, I never considered my relationship with Joe and Jenny Cardinal, my participation in pipe, sweat lodge, and fasting ceremonies, my experiential learning, and my daily prayer, as research. Yet, at the same time, all of these things were essential to my understanding within the contexts and processes of knowing how to go about this research, the actual process of doing it, and my ability to grasp what the research participants shared with me.



*Plains Cree Protocol: A Guiding Force*

... protocol, refers to any one of a number of culturally ordained actions and statements, established by ancient tradition, that an individual completes to establish relationship with another person from whom the individual makes a request (Lightning, 1992, p. 216).

In doing this research work, I was at all times cognizant of the personal, cultural, and spiritual nature of the information that I was asking others to share with me. Another important consideration was the fact that the majority of the research participants were considered Elders and spiritual knowledge holders within their respective communities. Therefore, I respected and followed the cultural protocols inherent to Plains Cree tradition that relate to approaching others for information. These included: waiting for an appropriate time to approach a potential research participant; making a tobacco and material offering to them; and respecting their decision in regards to whether or not they wished to talk about their experiences, and what and how much they chose to share.

The Plains Cree protocol that I followed to initiate all of my research relationships included the offering of tobacco and material. The fundamental and underlying understanding that guides this protocol is that the acquisition of knowledge is a sacred process. It is a gift from one being to another. Therefore, it must be respected. Respect for knowledge, the act of acquiring knowledge, and the person that may give the knowledge, is demonstrated through the act of offering tobacco. Tobacco is a sacrament. In the same way that the burning of tobacco is a means by which an individual makes their intentions known to the Spirit World and to other non-human beings, a tobacco offering from one individual to another makes it possible for the recipient of the tobacco offering to become aware of the intentions of the supplicant. Because the giving and receiving of tobacco is a sacred act, it allows Elders and spiritual knowledge holders (as recipients) the opportunity to sense beyond the supplicant's spoken words, to gain an understanding of whether or not the request should be granted. Is this person ready to receive this knowledge? Are they responsible enough? Can they be trusted?

This protocol initiates a relationship between the researcher and research participant that is best viewed as that between a teacher and a learner. The research participant is the teacher and the researcher is the learner. Archibald (1997) stresses the necessity of establishing research relationships with Elders that are based on this form of respectful relationship:

This is where the researchers' role of outside "experts" ought to quickly change to one of "learners" and where their job begins with getting to know the teachers and learning to listen, learning to watch, and then being challenged to make meaning and gain understanding from the Elders' talks and actions (p. 65).

In the initial stage of this relationship, the research participant has more control of the research/learning process. It is the research participant who decides what the researcher needs to learn about the topic at hand. Sarris

(1993) articulates this form of relationship very well in his descriptions of his work with the Pomo Elder, Mabel McKay.

It is the researcher's responsibility to demonstrate that they are capable of taking on the responsibility for the knowledge that may be shared through the learning process. For both the researcher and the research participant it is an act of faith. The researcher hopes to learn enough to fully understand what he or she seeks to know, and the research participant hopes that the researcher will use the information that has been shared in a respectful and responsible manner. It is an organic process, a living protocol that cannot be prescribed by research outcomes and time frames:

When you seek knowledge from an Elder, you offer tobacco or other appropriate gifts to symbolize that you are accepting the ethical obligations that go with received knowledge. In each case, the exchange confirms a relationship that continues beyond the time and place of the exchange (Brant-Castellano, 2004, p. 104).

Lightning (1992) speaks to the importance of protocols from an even deeper perspective. His work with the Plains Cree Elders of his community has led him to the understanding that traditional protocols are more than an act of respect—they are a means of ensuring that the truths the Elders share remain with the recipient forever.

#### *Plains Cree Methods of Inquiry*

Simpson (1999) and Struthers (1999, 2001) provided me with two examples of Indigenous scholarship that began and remained rooted within their respective Indigenous paradigms. In the context of my research, Plains Cree methods of inquiry included: apprenticeship with an Elder; participation in ceremony, such as fasting, sweat lodge, and pipe ceremonies; experiential learning; story-telling; collaboration; self-reflection; and prayer. These methods of inquiry are inter-related and, to various degrees, are inclusive of the other. Within this method of inquiry one learns certain knowledge when one is ready, open, and sufficiently knowledgeable to learn it. An individual can gain knowledge, or the responsibility to hold certain knowledge, through experiential, spiritual acts, such as fasting. My personal, cultural preparation for this research involved more than a decade of apprenticeship with spiritual knowledge holders and more than ten fasts. It is through these ways of learning that I was given the opportunity to begin<sup>9</sup> learning this 'way of life'.

These methods of inquiry provided me with the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual learning experiences that led to an understanding of this 'way of life.' These methods of inquiry are the means by which I was able to come to a fuller understanding of the content, context, and the process of my research. Within the context of apprenticeship, ceremony, experiential learning, and collaboration with others, I learned about Raymond Harris, his teachings, and the impact that they have had on others. As well, it was through these methods of inquiry that I experienced the transformative nature of these teachings and processes.

In Plains Cree methods of inquiry—such as apprenticeship with an Elder, participation in ceremony, and experiential learning—watching, listening, and doing are the means through which one learns. Recording what is taking place through the taking of notes, audio recordings, photographs, and such is not allowed.<sup>10</sup> During ‘research as conversation,’ I usually made notes of what was being said while the conversation was taking place. In some cases during my initial meeting with a research participant, I did not take notes during the conversation because I sensed that it may not have been respectful<sup>11</sup> and I did not want to detract from the establishment of a positive relationship. In each case, I relied on my intuition to guide me. If it felt right, I took notes; if I felt that it was inappropriate, or if I was unsure, I would listen deeply and then, immediately after our meeting, make notes from memory, or record my memory of what had just taken place on an audio tape that I would transcribe at a later date. I found that making notes from memory, immediately after meeting with a research participant, was a reliable method of recording data. This was validated through the collaborative analysis that took place with the research participants later in the research process. Though I have the gift of good memory, I believe that it was the use of Plains Cree protocol and the spiritual nature of this work that allowed me to listen at the necessary depth and accurately retain what was being said.

#### *Spiritual Research as a Way of Life*

Working from the understanding that spiritual research is a way of life meant that, throughout all the aspects of my work, my responsibility was to do my best and to work from the point of balance at the centre of the *Conceptual Framework of Indigenous Knowing* (Figure 1). This guided all of my actions, not only in my work with the research participants, but also in my relationships with the members of my dissertation committee. I had followed traditional protocol in asking each of them to provide guidance to me as I undertook this research journey. This included two gifted Elders, both of whom are respected as spiritual knowledge holders: Edna Manitowabi, as co-supervisor, and the late Joe Couture, as a committee member.

Throughout this research, my level of readiness—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—was an important factor in the determination of whether or not the time was right to initiate research relationships. I was most aware of this at the times when I was at either end of the spectrum of readiness. Often when I was in good balance, I intuitively knew that the time was right to go and visit someone or to pick up the phone and arrange a visit. When I was able to act from this place of faithful knowing, the research process accelerated and was most fruitful.

In those times when I was not ready, my awareness of that reality was usually precipitated by a lack of success in making contact with research participants.

Ultimately, my overall readiness to undertake this research was directly related to my own personal spiritual journey within this tradition over time. My 'being ready' was the result of many diverse, subjective, and collective learning experiences that occurred within a variety of contexts over many years. These varied contexts included my relationship with Joe Cardinal, my participation in ceremonies, my life within a spiritual community made up of many teachers, and my personal practice. This myriad of learning experiences facilitated my acceptance and understanding of the sacred nature of reality. It also led to my realization and experience of the spiritual nature of my self and my ability to act from a position of deep faith and to respect my intuition as another way of knowing.

#### *Faith and Trust*

Looking back on this spiritual research process, I think it can best be described as a journey of faith and trust. I brought both of these things to the process and, through it, my understanding of each of them deepened. I began with the faith that this work could be done and that it could best be accomplished within the ontological, epistemological, and ethical reality within which it exists. That led me to develop a respectful research process that was centred within that reality. Then I had to trust the process. There were instances when I let fear creep into my thoughts, and I wondered, "What if I disappoint Joe and Jenny and my friends? What then?" and, "Is it possible to balance my responsibilities to the research participants, their families, and meet the standards of the university?" By not allowing fear to interfere with my work, what I experienced in the process of conducting this research led to a deeper understanding of what it means to have faith and trust.

My faith in the inherent power of the traditional Cree protocol to initiate my relationships with the research participants was fundamental to the research process. Each time I introduced my self, my work, and my intentions in this manner to a potential research participant, it was a pivotal point in the research process. When my offering was accepted, the effect was immediate.<sup>12</sup> Total strangers welcomed me into their lives. Many of the deepest and most personal conversations that took place within the context of this research occurred the first time that I met with a research participant. I trusted that I would receive the guidance necessary to complete this work. I trusted the oral tradition. I trusted that if I listened deeply to the people's stories, my questions would be answered. I had faith that the many individual stories that I heard would form a cohesive collective story that respected individual truths. I trusted that if validation of this work rested with the research participants themselves, that validity would extend to the wider community and beyond.

### *Closing*

Looking back at my personal and spiritual learning journey, from the clearer perspective of hindsight, I can see times when I clearly did not understand. My inability to understand at those points in time were fueled by previously-held misconceptions, apparent paradoxes, and the limitations of my rational mind. Through a process that involved the recognition and letting go of these mental blocks, my learning became possible. In many instances, this has been a lengthy and ongoing process, facilitated by experience and reflection. At other times, it has been a much more direct, intense process. I remember clearly the crucible of my early experiences in the sweat lodge, the last night of my first fast, and my first experience in a night lodge. In the depth of those powerful experiences, I came to the realization that my ability to understand what I was actually experiencing rested on my willingness to let go of the very thing that I was relying on to preserve in those moments and what I believed to be my sanity, my futile attempts to make sense of what I was experiencing through analysis and reason. In those moments, I learned that embracing this other way of knowing involves a quantum leap of faith.

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup>The fusion of personal and scholarly work is not uncommon in the discipline of Native/Indigenous Studies, though it is not a widely accepted common practice across the liberal arts, with the exception of auto-ethnography.

<sup>2</sup>I am a Canadian of mixed heritage. My great-grandparents on my father's side immigrated to Canada from Germany in the 1880s. My mother immigrated to Canada from England in 1946.

<sup>3</sup>Looking back to that point in time, it is quite clear that I had next to no understanding of what it meant to live a spiritual way of life. The fact is that, after twenty years, I have learned that this understanding will hopefully continue to be an ever-unfolding work in progress.

<sup>4</sup>At that time, I was the principal of the community-run elementary school in the Wet'-suwet'en village of Moricetown, BC.

<sup>5</sup>Through these stories, I learned that the Eagle Spirit was one of the spirits that assisted Raymond in his work, and was often present in the ceremonies that he conducted.

<sup>6</sup>Joe Cardinal passed on in December of 2003.

<sup>7</sup>The Wind River Reservation is 2.3 million acres in size. At that time, the total population was 13,000 people: 6,000 Arapaho and 4,000 Shoshone, and 3,000 people not registered to either tribal group.

<sup>8</sup>By this time my 'work' with Joe Cardinal had spanned more than a decade and had included ten fasts under his protective guidance.

<sup>9</sup>Within this context I know enough to know how little I know. This learning is a lifelong process.

<sup>10</sup>An exception to this would be that sometimes, one is allowed to record a song outside of a ceremony, in order to help one learn it.

<sup>11</sup>In previous learning experiences with Elders and other knowledge holders, I had been told that taking notes gets in the way, or prevents one from fully hearing (physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually) and therefore understanding what is being shared.

<sup>12</sup>I must strongly emphasize that this protocol is much more than a physical act, or a gesture of cultural respect. It is a sacred act. Therefore, before initiating this protocol, a researcher needs to consider if they are prepared and able to act within the principles of relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity.

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