

Importance of Métis Ways of Knowing in Healing Communities

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(With input from Tom McCallum, Albert Desjarlais, Alma Desjarlais, George McDermott, and Mila Morris)

Indigenous research draws upon Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and connecting with self and spirit. This position is evident in a research program focused on examining Métis storylines, histories, cultural contexts, and pedagogies with four Métis Elders. Three grandfathers and one grandmother shared understandings of storytelling. Each of these Elders is involved in healing and spiritual ceremonies and all are Pipe Carriers and spiritual leaders. Within their discussions of storytelling, these Elders share understandings of spirituality and ways that it is understood in communities and in ceremonies. This paper explores spirituality as sources of strength for Métis Elders, the importance of ceremonies in Métis communities, and challenges to maintaining spiritual practices that exist in communities. Elders suggest that there is considerable resistance in communities to ceremonies and spiritual practices because of residential schools, Christianity, and government policy that have restricted and limited belief in the traditions and have separated people from these spiritual practices. But scholars must open themselves to hear the voices of those they are in relation with, including the Elders and the traditions of the ancestors.

Introduction

Indigenous research draws upon Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and connecting with self and spirit. This position is evident in a research program focused on examining Métis storylines, histories, cultural contexts, and pedagogies with four Métis Elders. Three grandfathers and one grandmother share their understandings of storytelling. Each of these Elders is involved in healing and spiritual ceremonies and all are Pipe Carriers¹ and spiritual leaders. Within their discussions of storytelling, they share understandings of spirituality and ways that it is understood in communities and in ceremonies. This paper explores spirituality as sources of strength for Métis Elders, the importance of ceremonies in Métis communities, and challenges to maintaining spiritual practices that exist in communities. Before exploring these questions, I will introduce the author and Elders and provide an overview of the research process.

Introducing the Author

I am Judy Iseke, a Métis woman, researcher, and scholar, from St. Albert, Alberta, once a strong Métis community that has changed over the years into a mixed urban centre. I am a descendant of the Métis families that

founded this community. In my academic work, I have been working with Métis Elders to explore storytelling traditions. I teach graduate-level academic courses on Indigenous Education at the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. I have spent many years working in Ontario and Alberta, learning about my own beliefs of spirituality and Indigenous traditions. I consider myself a beginner in these practices and defer to the Elders as the experienced ones. I have heard many stories and am interested in the power of storytelling.

Situating Research and the Importance of Elders in Research

Kovach (2005), a Nèhiyaw and Saulteaux researcher, cautions that conceptions of research are “so entangled with haughty theories of what is truth” (p. 32) that we may forget that research is truly “about learning and so is a way of finding out things” (Hampton, 1995, p. 48). Linda Smith (1999), a Maori academic, suggests that “researching back,” like “talking back” for Indigenous people, is a form of “recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (p. 7). Research that engages in this resistance, recovery, and renewal is central to Indigenous peoples as it supports our lives and work in communities and in academic settings.

Elders are important in this process of recovery and resistance to colonial realities, and in re-insertion of the importance of remembering our past and remaking our futures. Elders as mentors provide support and have systematically gathered wisdom, histories, skills, and expertise in cultural knowledge (Smith, 1999). Their role as Elders is based on their knowledge and the way they use their knowledge for the collective good (Smith, 1999).

The word *Elder* in English may be a reductive concept because, in some uses, it may not capture the complex and sacred understandings of the many different ways that Elders, teachers, and gifted peoples use their own gifts to work in our communities for the good of the people. However, it is the closest English term to convey the aforementioned multi-faceted role. This understanding is reflected in Indigenous languages. For example, in *N’hiawuk* (sometimes referred to as Woodland Cree or the four directions people) the word *Kihteyayak* “are people who are called the mature ones, in reference to their age” (Métis Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008, p. 21). *Mahtawasitwew* “are different kinds of talking, like bringing the news, storytelling, telling stories or teachings” (p. 21). *Mamah-toenow* “is a sacred person, one who can do paranormal things” (p. 21). *Ohnatawewiwak* are the healers. *Ohnekanapew* “is someone who sits at the head or at the front during a ceremony” (p. 21). *Otsapahcikewenow* “is a person who sees into the future, someone who performs ceremonies or conjures up spirits” (p. 21). Many of these very distinct ways of working in community may be intended when we use the term *Elder*, or any particular way of working in community may be implied in the term *Elder*. Despite the imprecise English term *Elder*, it is used in the academic literature and so it is used here.

Epistemology Informing the Research Methodology

The research methodology for successfully working with Elders must be based on respectful relations. Lassiter (2000), a non-Indigenous Native American studies scholar, explains the importance of dialogic and collaborative texts produced within Indigenous communities that are based on human relationships which “produce deeper dialogues about culture” and “engender moral and ethical commitments” (p. 610) between collaborative participants in research.

Being ready to hear the stories when the tellers are ready to tell them calls the researcher into the relationship of listener, and reflects the holistic process of both parties and asks the researcher to remember that deep respect is required in a storytelling approach to research.

Winona Stevenson (2000) and Shawn Wilson (2008), both Cree academics, explain the complexity of putting oral stories into written texts. They both use a style of writing that shifts quite deliberately between a narrative style of experiences and a more analytical style of discourse, reflecting the stories. This article follows this style.

In an oral culture, story lives, develops, and is imbued with the energy of the dynamic relationship between teller and listener. The story can only exist within an interdependent relationship of the narrator and audience. Writing story becomes a concession of the Indigenous researcher (Kovach, 2009, p. 101).

Kovach (2009), a Cree scholar, explains that there are two forms of stories—ones with “mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories” and then personal stories of “place, happenings, and experiences” that are shared with the next generation through oral traditions (p. 95). Tom McCallum, a Métis Elder who informed this study, explains in a discussion that the name for the mythical kind of stories to which Kovach alludes are called *Atayohkiwina* in *N’hiawuk* (Cree) (personal communication, April 5, 2010). “These are not made up but come from the spirits. There are certain spirits known as *Atayohkan*”, thus the name for the mythical elements, but “these are not stories per se, but have been given to us as a people.” Tom further explains that the stories that Kovach called personal stories are called *Acimona* and are “stories about human life and events ... observations and things you may have heard from someone else – kind of like news”. Tom further notes that “*Atayohkiwina* don’t change, just *Acimona*” change. Telling stories is a practice in Indigenous cultures that has long sustained us (Castellano, 2000).

A Research Approach

“Research, like life, is about relationships” (Kovach, 2005, p. 30). The cultural context, just as in storytelling, positions the participants in research, including the one we might typically think of as the researcher (Bishop, 1998). Research in such a context becomes a collaborative venture with its effect being the shared development of new storylines (Bishop, 1998, p. 207).

Kovach, drawing on King (2003), suggests that “each story is alive with the nuances and wisdom of the storyteller” (p. 27) or, in this case, the multiple storytellers involved in the process, including the researchers who also tell the story of the research. This research story focuses on work with Métis Elders as collaborators to examine stories, histories, and pedagogies shared by Métis Elders in storytelling sessions. The objective was to undertake a collaborative analysis with Elders in order to understand the stories and histories of Métis peoples and the role of storytelling in the sharing of Indigenous knowledges, past and present. The intentions of the research were: (1) to respond to the need for Indigenous interpretations and representations of culture, history, pedagogy, and curriculum; (2) to provide increased research opportunities and publicize the work of Indigenous Elders; and (3) to generate better understandings of the relationships between Métis peoples’ knowledges and mainstream education and research practices.

In this research program, Elders were contacted by Iseke, the author and researcher, based on their previous involvement with a research program involving Métis Elders. They consented to come to Thunder Bay in Northern Ontario, to be with other Elders and to be video- and audio-recorded in a sharing discussion of storytelling. They were told of the storytelling research focus and invited to participate via telephone. When they arrived in Thunder Bay, a student, known for his thoughtfulness, was assigned to meet the Elders at the airport and take them to their hotel rooms near the research site, and to ensure they were comfortable in their accommodations. The Elders knew each other and went to dinner together, as it was good to meet old friends. The next morning, they met for breakfast at a local restaurant and then came to the research location, where they were greeted by Iseke and met the video crew members responsible for video-recording their discussions. The Elders were then invited to a welcome ceremony, where a local Elder from Thunder Bay welcomed them to this territory. Gifts of tobacco and cloth were given by Iseke, and the Elders were asked to participate in the discussions. Tobacco was given in respect to Elders. It acknowledged that Elders were involved in research and understood that this was the process they had agreed to participate in. It acknowledged that the Elders’ words would be treated with the utmost respect, as they would become part of the social and historical understandings of Métis peoples that would be honored in this process. Further, it acknowledged that speaking untruths would upset the relational balance and so truth would be spoken in the research process.

For Iseke and the Elders, the tobacco also signified the relationship and responsibility of the researcher to respect that relationship with the Elders and the knowledge that they shared. It suggested the responsibility to the integrity of the stories told and to respect and honour the Elders throughout the research process. It was also a commitment to continue to work with the Elders in representing their stories.

These Elders had worked with numerous organizations that conducted research, including the Métis Centre of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) in Ottawa; they were familiar with the process and expected information and consent letters. Elders were given an information letter about the research and asked to sign a consent form indicating they consented to the research, as this research was being conducted in conjunction with a university and the university ethics committee requested signed consent forms.

The Elders were given a copy of the research questions that would guide and focus the discussions. They were then free to respond in whatever way they wished. A talking circle format was used to encourage discussion and to ensure opportunities for full participation of each Elder. Elders were audio-and video-recorded while sitting in circle. All Elder discussions were transcribed and roughly sorted into topics. Video scripts, papers, and chapters were written based on the transcripts. Iseke visited Elders in their homes in northern Alberta, at Sun Dance ceremony, and during local visits to British Columbia to discuss the films, papers, and chapters. Ongoing dialogue via e-mail and telephone has helped to ensure that the research continues to be respectful of the ideas Elders shared. Three videos have been produced, with one in production, that draw together some of the ideas that Elders shared. Versions of the videos have been provided to Elders for ongoing comment and feedback.

This kind of video-making and research is as much about the process of community relationships as it is about the development of video products and research outcomes. The Elders wanted to see their stories on video and wanted to ensure that their ideas were shared with the next generation, and that these videos are welcomed as ways to do this within Indigenous communities. Elders also understood that their ideas would be shared in academic papers. The researcher has been in contact with the Elders, and shared a version of the paper and sought feedback from the Elders.

To ensure that we had a good research time together, the Elders held a pipe ceremony. They were asked, with tobacco, to do this ceremony. All present were included in the ceremony. The ceremony was held in the research space where the ongoing work of producing videos and papers would continue. A closing ceremony was provided by the Elders, in giving thanks for this opportunity together. This was followed by a feast. The closing ceremony and feast allowed us all to be a part of a complete cycle of ceremony over these nine days.

Introducing the Four Elders

Albert Desjarlais was born and raised on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement in northern Alberta and later moved to High Prairie, Alberta. Grandfather Albert learned traditional Indigenous spiritual and healing practices from his grandfather who lived these traditions in the 1800s. Albert has the honour of being the sixth generation healer to receive the teachings passed

down in this family. Albert has been married to grandmother Alma for over 40 years.

Alma Desjarlais was born in Frog Lake, Alberta, a First Nations community in northeastern Alberta. Grandmother Alma's parents were Cree. She was stripped of her First Nations status by the Indian Act, upon marrying a Métis, and became Métis. Her son indicated that her children are not being allowed by Indian Affairs to return to First Nations status. Alma's Cree grandmother and family were healers and they helped her to become a healer herself. Alma is fluent in Cree and has become a Pipe Carrier, works with healing medicines, and is part of the healing lodge that she and Albert have on their land. She also oversees a cultural camp for young people to help them learn Cree traditions.

Tom McCallum was born and raised in Ile à la Crosse, Saskatchewan, a Métis community, and is fluent in Cree and Michif.² Grandfather Tom has a passion for the Cree language and promotes its use, as the language has shaped his way of seeing the world. Tom grew up on the land and has a close relationship with it, and works with medicines. Tom uses traditional teachings to work with inmates, youth, men's healing circles, and in cross-cultural workshops. Tom is a Sun Dance lodge keeper.

George "Lonewalker" McDermott was Métis from northern Alberta and lived in Lumby, British Columbia until his passing in 2009. He travelled throughout Canada and the United States in order to share his knowledge of traditional medicines. George learned about life on the land, picking medicines, and healing practices from his grandparents and Elders in Métis and Cree communities in northern Alberta. George shared his knowledge of plant medicines and healing, as well as his knowledge of the land, in healing the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of people.

Spirituality is a Source of Strength for These Elders

All of these Elders have a spiritual path and direction in their lives. Albert Desjarlais, a spiritual leader and healer who lives in the East Prairie Métis Settlement, explains that it is important to "Thank the Creator and his helpers ... We're just as weak as you or anyone else. As soon as there's something that's hard to do for ourselves we can't do it because we're too weak as humans, as human beings. We got to go to where there's more power, to the Creator and his helpers."

Winona Laduke, an *Anishnawbe* (Ojibway) scholar and activist, explains that Indigenous spiritual practices are frequently "reaffirmation of the relationship of humans to the Creation" and are expressed through oral traditions that focus attention on the relationships between humans (little brother) and the larger Creation (2005, p. 12). Gratitude for our part in Creation and the gifts from Creator are central tenets of all Indigenous spiritual practices and are "reinforced in Midewiwin lodges [healing and teaching lodges amongst the Anishnawbe], Sundance ceremonies [com-

mon to all plains Nations], world renewal ceremonies, and many others” (LaDuke, 2005, p. 12). In a discussion of spiritual practices of the Seneca, Parker (1909), a Seneca anthropologist and archaeologist and museum administrator between 1900 and 1920, suggests that if the ceremonies were faithfully performed that “they would cure disease, banish pain, displace the causes of disasters in nature, and overcome ill luck” (p. 172).

Alma Desjarlais is Albert Desjarlais’s long-time partner and a healer, too. She explains “that’s the way we were raised...Both me and Albert had medicine people, like our ancestors, grandfathers, and parents. That’s what we were trying to pass on to our children and our grandchildren”. Ridington (1982, p. 470), an anthropologist, explains that all people have a place in the circle of community that is honoured and respected. With this place comes responsibility to the role they practice and the place in the circle they hold. For example, storytellers teach and share their understandings of life’s events and lessons while listeners learn and create understandings that translate into everyday life. This continues the circle of life and the act of reciprocity.

George McDermott picked herbs to make into medicines and shares these for the healing of many people. He also performed ceremonies. In explaining his work, he said “spirituality is the bottom line. To me, without the spirituality, I wouldn’t be out there picking herbs...I have to respect myself.” Irwin (1996), a professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, College of Charleston, examines Cherokee prophecies in recorded narratives. Spirituality, in Irwin’s discussion, is “connectedness to core values and deep beliefs”; further, it is “a pervasive quality of life that develops out of an authentic participation in values and real-life practices meant to connect members of a community with the deepest foundations of personal affirmation and identity” (p. 311).

Laduke (2005, p. 13) draws upon Vine Deloria Jr. (1998), who characterizes Indigenous spiritual practices as being focused on creating a sense of order in the chaotic physical present so that it is possible to experience complete fulfillment in a universal moment. George McDermott further explains:

To me spirituality is a belief in God. Is the only way of life there is. I have many reasons to (inaudible word) to know that there is a higher power Just to even think for a moment that I would last a day out there without my god or my own belief. I’d perish for sure. I’d be dead. I have many reasons to believe that the Great Spirit has saved my life many times.

Schiff and Moore (2006) [Schiff is an associate professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary and Moore draws on her Métis understandings] explain that in the ceremony of the sweat lodge there is an often-repeated expression: “all my relations”—this expression is an affirmation of the relationship we share with all of creation, including the fourleggeds (animals), crawlers (insects), swimmers (those that live in water including the microbiological), and flyers (birds and insects) This

also includes the sun, moon, earth, and water that are animate and have a spirit unlike the Euro-Canadian view of seeing mountains and rocks as inanimate objects. With the words 'all my relations' we are reminded that in recognizing "this connection comes the responsibility to take care of and respect all creation" (p. 59).

Tom McCallum provides an explanation of the *Nihiyawuk* expression *nitotemuk* in the editing of this paper (personal communication, April 5, 2010). He states:

Nitotemuk comes from the word *otot*, which translates to his or her canoe. The *nehiyaw* see life as a journey on water using a canoe or *oosi*. All your immediate blood relatives, *kitotemuk*, are in the canoe with you. This refers to your lineage, as opposed to your relatives or relations, which include all of the universe. When people say 'all my relations' it refers to all of Creation. This term 'all my relations' comes from the Lakota saying *Mita Okuyasin*, which kind of translates to 'all my relations'. Traditionally, Cree did not use the term 'all my relations'. This saying is contemporary. *Otoot*, which refers to his canoe, is the foundation of *ototemuk* and means all the ones in the canoe with you, or your lineage. I hope you understand this. The word *Totem* comes from this and is used contemporarily to describe spirit helpers. The Cree, as far as I know, do not use this term other than to refer to their lineage. I hope this helps. The 'all my relations' aspect of the wind, rocks, sun, moon, etc. would be *niwahkoomakumuk*, or my relations.

Betty Bastien (2004), a Blackfoot scholar, reflects upon her experiences of coming into connection with the *Sikiikaitsitapi* whole through interactions in the natural world. She relates that she could "begin to encounter the ancestors" and that she came to understand that they would guide her process and she began to "trust the universal intelligence" as she began to deepen her "understanding of the immanence of a cosmic world" (p. 176). Encountering this deepening understanding is a challenge for initiates but is aided by a "process [that] involved ceremony" (p. 176).

Importance of Ceremonies in Métis Communities

Alma explains about spirituality and the pipe:

To me spirituality is one of the great things we believe in. I got my pipe when I was 50 years old. My brother gave it to me the year before he died. But, we didn't realize he was getting us ready. He gave the sweat to our younger brother who runs it now. He gave me the pipe. He said 'you're old enough now to have a pipe.' I didn't think I was quite ready but I accepted it. That's about the same time that I really started working with the medicines too. The grandmother spirit is with us when we're praying. And the grandfather rock, and the eagle, and the four-legged grandfather.

Morris (1996), a psychologist, artist, student, and teacher of Indigenous traditions suggests that the pipe is part of a sacred bundle and with the sacred pipe the Pipe Carrier, will acknowledge the relationship to the sacred Mother Earth and walk on the earth like a prayer (pp. 101-102).

Tom McCallum explains about the relationship to Mother Earth in his discussion of spirituality and that ceremonies value and honour this relationship. He explains:

Traditionally, Aboriginal³ people looked at the earth as their mother because we got all our nourishment, everything that we needed, we got from the earth. We gave thanks every time we harvested anything from the earth. We gave thanks ... to the earth for giving us that opportunity to harvest whatever it is that we took. And also, the element that we took, whether it be a root, whether it be a tree that we use, the bark off trees. We give thanks. We ask for permission to be able to use that, so that we will create harmony and it will continue to grow so that we didn't deplete the resources. Those are the kinds of things that we were taught traditionally. That respect that we needed to accord our mother the earth.

Portman and Garrett (1996), both Cherokee scholars, suggest that it is in the celestial or spirit world that spirit beings live. These spirits watch, help, heal, and guide. In some Indigenous traditions, for example the Sun Dance lodge, there is the understanding that there is a Sacred Tree planted by Creator for all peoples of Mother Earth. In this tree there is "healing, power, wisdom, and security" (p. 455). The tree is rooted in Mother Earth, its trunk and branches growing from these strong roots "giving thanks for all life. The fruits born would be the sacred teachings showing the path to love, compassion, wisdom, justice, courage, respect, and modesty" (pp. 455- 456).

Vivian Jimenez Estrada (2005), a Mayan doctoral student at the University of Toronto, proposes a research methodology based on a Tree of Life or *Ceiba* methodology in her Mayan orientation to life, drawn from the teaching contained in the "cosmovision contained in the Maya sacred book of Creation, the Popol Vuh" (p. 45):

The *Ceiba* encompasses understandings of the Four Sacred Directions and the Wheel of Life. The concepts I will refer to revolve around the Mayan concepts of duality: east/west; north/south; above/below; sky/earth; good/evil; shadow/light; male/female; life/death; beginning/end; emptiness/fullness.... This concept of a unified dichotomy, not in the Western sense of binaries that divide entities but rather as dualities that highlight the interconnectedness of opposite energy forces, highlights the manner in which research needs to balance the information that is disclosed with a way to make the information useful for the lives of the members of the participating community. (p. 47)

Tom explains, in regard to the sacred tree and spiritual practices in community, that "it's more than believing. It's much more than that word believing ... it's almost you have gone through with it and been a part of it. It's in you. That's the teaching, what we call teaching." Portman and Garrett (1996) suggest that the concept of spirituality addresses "walking the path of Good Medicine" or, as they explain, "living a good way of life" (p. 457). They suggest that this life needs to be lived "in harmony and balance" (through the harmonious interaction of mind, body, spirit, and natural environment) "with all our relations" (with all living beings in the Circle of Life)" (p. 457).

Regnier (1994), an associate professor at the University of Saskatchewan, draws upon a Hopi prophecy from 1850 and suggests that when the eagle has landed on the moon then Indigenous peoples will awaken from their midnight and come into the daylight. This prophecy was interpreted to be about the first lunar landing when the astronaut stated "The Eagle has landed." This signalled the beginning of a time of

healing from disease, destruction, and domination for Indigenous peoples. Regnier (1994, p. 134) gives an example of the community of Alkali Lake, British Columbia, that moved from 100% alcoholism to 95% sobriety as one benefit of returning to traditional Indigenous spiritual practices.

In an article about "Living and Writing Indigenous Spiritual Resistance" (Iseke-Barnes, 2003, pp. 218-219) I describe:

In Cree *mom-tune-ay-chi-kun* means 'the sacred place inside, where we can dream, imagine, create and talk to the grandmothers and grandfathers' (Verral, 1988, p. 7). *Mom-tune-ay-chi-kuna* in English is translated as mind or wisdoms or 'the thoughts and images that come from this place...[which] can be given to others in stories, songs, dances, and art.... All these are gifts that come from that sacred place inside' (Maria Campbell, a Métis grandmother, video-maker and scholar quoted in Verral, 1988, p. 3). Lanigan (1998) based on Verral (1988, p. 7) explains that sacred stories of Indigenous peoples 'provide insight into relationships through the understanding and appreciation of life and culture' and encourages 'creativity and imagination that lead to the comprehension of the moral order inspiring the search for truth and wisdom' (p. 107) (in Iseke-Barnes, 2003, pp. 218-219).

Challenges to Maintaining Spiritual Practices in Communities

There are many challenges to maintain spiritual practices in communities. Alma discusses that community members sometimes engage in resistance. She explains that "when they started [education of children in the community] here this one young woman was smudging downstairs where they had the kids and the other one came down and said, 'No smudging here. This is a Métis building'." The effect of this reprimand was significant, as Alma explains that "The young woman ... just quit doing that for the kids. She quit smudging because she was told that." Struthers and Eschiti (2005, p. 79) report a story told by Rose Auger, a Cree Elder and medicine woman, who explained that her grandfather, a medicine person, hid in the hills so he could keep on healing people. She explained that the dreamers of the nation had seen the epidemic of tuberculosis in their dreams and knew they could help. They were not allowed to practice their healing ways under the colonizing regulations of the Indian Act.

Tom explains another reason why it is hard to maintain spiritual balance in communities: "We have what we call the broken medicine wheel, which means that our mental, and our emotional, are disconnected. Crying is frowned upon so that's...the system telling us you're not allowed to feel. And yet feeling and acknowledging that feeling is growth. So we have to balance those two. And that's the journey from here to here. It's very important."

Regnier (1994), an anthropologist, explains:

Nothing exists in isolation of the whole. Although parts are differentiated from one another, they are also interconnected with one another the way seasons are joined through the natural passage of time. Transition through the phases of life interconnects birth with death and infancy with adolescence. All creatures—the winged, the two-legged, the four-legged, and the swimmers—have their place and belong in the scheme of the whole. Through their interconnection, they establish balance in the universe. (p. 133)

Tom further explains the imbalanced ways we are living:

We're not living a clean life and it's what's affecting us and it's radiating out because we're controlling a lot of the direction of what is happening to the environment. We have to come back and look at how we're related to everything. And this ... here teaches us our relationship to everything. Newtonian physics, where spirit and matter are two separate entities. They're not. They're connected. From our spirit world, spirituality we call it, it's one in the same thing.

Regnier (1994) explains that, because human beings are conscious of themselves in the world, they understand themselves as part of a whole within the universe and within understandings of self in relation to others. Indigenous languages reflect the relationships "which sees all beings as family or relatives to humankind. Mother Earth, Father Sun, grandmother moon, and brother animals and sister plants reflect the realization that humanity is closely related to all things" (p. 133). How can we overcome these challenges to spiritual wellness?

Tom explains about coming to health: "We see it as a total balance of not only the individual but to their family, to their community, to their society, to the world, and beyond into the spirit world also." He further explains that "This is what we call in English, spirituality. And it's all inclusive. It's not exclusive to one race of people. There's many portions of it, but they're all intricately tied together." Portman and Garrett (2006, p. 456) suggest that it is the everyday practices of spirituality that are necessary to restore harmony, balance, and wellness to individuals, families, clans, and communities. They explain that the "health and wellness is not only a physical state, but a spiritual one as well. For example, behaviours involved in abusing substances, from a traditional perspective, are a sign of a deeper, spiritual lesson" (p. 456).

Martinez (2004), an assistant professor of American Indian Studies at Arizona State University, examines the retelling of the *Myth of White Buffalo Calf Woman* in 1947 to anthropologist Joseph Epes Brown by Lakota holy man, Nicholas Black Elk. In this retelling, it is clear that having a vision experience is a typical part of Lakota traditions and the development of young people; it was normalized in Lakota society such that there was a social expectation that one would seek such experiences. Martinez, in retelling the stories from Indigenous grandmother, Ella Deloria, explains that the experiences were understood as being able to aid in the development of the person into a worthwhile and contributing member of society, including making a man into "a good hunter, a good warrior, an effective and true medicine man, a diviner, or whatever. He wanted power to be useful in his tribe" (p. 17).

Bird (2007) describes Omushkego Cree traditions, in which young people went through fasting and practiced rituals that denied bodily pleasures while receiving instruction from Elders in order to condition themselves to dream scary dreams and to overcome fears and horrors, achieving mastery through a lifetime of practice. Through this dreaming and the practice

of rituals particular to the needs of the practitioner, they might develop mastery of the shaking tent ceremony, the use of medicinal plants, or be public defenders.

Bird (2007) provides an example of a healer who encountered a man who could no longer walk and so could not care for his family. The healer asked the man his usual routine and the man told him that he would crawl to a spot under a tree and sit there much of the day. The healer drove a branch into the tree at the height of the man's outstretched arms overhead so that he might pull himself up to a standing position and instructed the man to pull himself up and stand for as long as he could each day using his sore leg for a bit each day. The man followed the instructions and regained use of his sore leg and resumed the care of his own family. Bird poses the questions: "Was that a miracle? Was that an evil deed? Was [*sic*] is evil to do that? So it's up to us to decide. We can say that when our First Nations lived independently they had gifts which allowed them to survive on the land" (p. 68).

Morris (1996) discusses a woman who possessed a small stone on which there were inscribed seven circles that represented seven sacred ceremonies that serve to strengthen, restore, and sustain the relationships in the circle of life. In this discussion, ceremonies are understood to reflect the dynamic rhythm of life with the cosmos.

Irwin (1996) cautions that it is no longer appropriate (if it ever was) to consider Indigenous spiritual traditions as objects of analysis or data to be processed, or reducible to a theoretical stance that may discredit, deny, or ignore Indigenous values. Kovach (2009) and Irwin (1996) recommend that scholars must open themselves to hear the voices of those they are in relation with and the willingness to hear the voice, to acknowledge its unique voice in relation to the collective vision, and to value the concerns and values expressed.

Conclusions

In considering the words of the Elders in this study, we come to realize that location in a sacred circle of life in relation to Mother Earth, while maintaining a relationship with the Creator and acknowledging and showing gratitude for this relationship, is a helpful way to become more balanced and able to live a good life. These relationships are acknowledged in ceremony and spiritual practices understood by these Elders. These practices support a good life and help with the healing and wellbeing of people, families, communities, and nations. Vine Deloria Jr. (1998) reminds us that this can aid in creating order in a chaotic physical world. Within the physical world are relations with all of creation including the cosmos. It is possible to acknowledge these relations in ceremony.

Ceremonies involving smudge, pipe, sweat lodge, sun dance, and sacred lodges aid in creating connection with creation and giving thanks

for these relationships. The sacred tree at the centre of the sun dance lodge provides healing opportunities and aids in the giving of thanks and life. Tom reminds us that one just has to be a part of it, going beyond believing.

Elders suggest that there is considerable resistance in communities to ceremonies and spiritual practices because of residential schools, Christianity, and government policy that have restricted and limited belief in the traditions and have separated people from these spiritual practices. It has also meant that people are not balanced as they used to be. Tom uses the expression 'broken medicine wheel' to indicate the disconnection that occurs between the mental and emotional selves. Acknowledging feelings is growth and can help create balance. But often our lives are not in balance, there is little connection to the environment, and little connection to the spiritual understandings of self. It is important to acknowledge relationships to all of relation to help to bring back balance not only to the individual but to the family, community, society, and world. Ceremonies such as fasting can aid in bringing a person into greater connection to spiritual practices and greater awareness of themselves as spiritual and physical beings. Healing can result from this connecting.

Personal Reflections

In Shawn Wilson's (2008) personal reflections of Cree life and research, he states that "if research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (p. 135). It was a huge undertaking to begin a research process with Elders. I have spent nearly 10 years working in the Toronto, Thunder Bay, Edmonton, and Vancouver area Indigenous communities, learning from Elders from many Indigenous nations. It has been a process of learning and discovery. I started this research process by fasting with an Elder who helped me to learn from this ceremony. I wrote the initial proposal about what I was to do immediately following the fast. I feel as if, somehow, the cosmos had instructed me to take this journey, set up a process that enabled me to accomplish it, and this process continues to guide my work with these Elders. As such, I feel as though a conclusion at this time is premature. It feels like this is a brief pause in an ongoing process to look back at where I've come, to review the progress to date, and to give further clarity to the ongoing work that is yet to come.

Before submitting this text it was forwarded to the Elders for comments and suggestions. Their suggestions and revisions have been included in this paper. I give thanks to each of them for their time, energy, and guidance.

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Notes

¹Pipe Carriers are spiritual people in communities that use a sacred pipe to pray and ask for assistance and to seek a greater connection with the Creator. One needs to develop to a level of spiritual awareness before being gifted a pipe.

²Michif is a unique language of the Métis people composed of an Indigenous language with French and/or English language nouns. Michif takes many forms, dependent on the peoples speaking it, their locations, and histories. Michif in the community of the author was “structurally Cree with syntax and grammar of the Cree language but with French words and sometimes English ones interspersed where a Cree word was not known” (Iseke-Barnes, 2004).

³The term ‘Aboriginal peoples’ usually refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

⁴Some Métis feel that smudging is a First Nations practice. Others recognize this practice as coming to both First Nations and Métis from the ancestors and see it as fully a part of Métis cultural traditions and practices.

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