

cultural beliefs and may actually shun those beliefs; certainly they do not fully embrace them. One thing we all have in common, however, is our intuition. Lionel Kununwa spoke of this as molecular or cellular memory. I have met many young Native people who have come to me and said, "You know, I've always felt different, but not in the sense that I was an Indian and I looked different from the rest, but there is something different deep down inside." I think as human beings we have a deep connection to our Indigenous roots. Young people in the cities or even on the reserves who do not have connections to their culture and traditions look for these connections.

My father took me out hunting and trapping when I was young, and from this I still have powerful memories: the experience of being in the bush for a month. I remember how time slows down and how you develop a relationship with a blackbird or a bear that you know is in the area, and suddenly the whole reality is different. You feel plugged in; you feel a part of everything. This is what you need to do with your research ideas. As Shawn Wilson says, "You need to develop a relationship with your research ideas." Essentially, I am saying that Indigenous research methods and methodologies are as old as our ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and have always been with us. Our Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships.

Situating Myself in Research

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I am a member of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation, which is located two hours northeast of Edmonton. I am the middle child of five. My parents are Walter and Genevieve Steinhauer. For as long as I can remember my parents owned the local convenience store in the small village of the reserve. As a child I was immersed in this reserve setting where social interactions were varied and many. When I was 6 years old my parents relocated our family to a new house six miles north of the village. We began to live a more isolated life in the reserve. With this move my parents chose to send us to an off-reserve school that was located in a small farming village about 20 miles away. When I think about what motivated them in sending us to this off-reserve school, I remain uncertain. It could have been a number of things. For both of them their residential school experiences were positive. I think that based on those experiences they thought it would be in our best interests to send us to an off-reserve school.

My initial experiences of elementary school were quite positive. However, by junior high things began to change. I began junior high with average and some above-average grades. However, by grade 9 I had taken a downward slide and was failing miserably in most subjects. At that time I did not realize I suffered from an identity crisis, but I knew that I had become too disconnected from my community. So I decided to return home and attend the high school in Saddle Lake. My intent was to take my grade 10 year there and then head back to the off-reserve school. I was convinced the education offered at the reserve school would be substandard and that the school I left offered a better education. I did not realize at that time how I had taken on this oppressive behavior and how I suppressed the many positive memories of those initial formative years when I lived in the reserve village community. I give credit to my parents for how they nurtured and raised us. We were given a good childhood. In particular I am appreciative that they raised us to have open minds and to make decisions by ourselves. Although they had been schooled in the residential school and accepted a lot of the religious practices from there, as a family we were encouraged to respect our traditions and were exposed to all those practices throughout our childhood. I am grateful now that I had that exposure. It is the force that provides strength and protection when I feel most weak.

When I decided to move back to the reserve high school, it was the turning point in a positive and meaningful educational experience. In that high school I met my first Native teacher, who put things into perspective for me and convinced me that postsecondary education was within reach. It was a year of growing, as I was involved in all kinds of educational initiatives, and more important, I was included and acknowledged as a member of the school community. I had not felt that sense of inclusion in a long time. In return I worked hard because I now felt

valued and respected as an individual. That summer, after my first year of high school, I was selected as one of 20 students to attend a university prep course at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The following year I returned to complete a university writing course there. All these experiences strengthened me, built me up, rebuilt me as a person, as an Indian person, and reconnected me to the community. My entire attitude toward school changed, and now educational goals, dreams, attitudes, and connections all became positive and purposeful.

After high school I attended the University of Alberta to pursue a Bachelor of Education degree in elementary education. After four years of study I returned home to teach. As a 22-year-old it was difficult for me to return home and play the role of an educator. I had to work through so many cultural negotiations and sometimes compromise the university education of the last four years. As an educator in my own community I felt honored to play the role and hoped in my approach that I would give all I could back to my community.

During my seven years of teaching I struggled with the issue of low achievement among students in the reserve system and knew that other First Nations across Canada suffered similar problems. Five years ago I learned about the First Nations Graduate Education Program that had been created two years before. I became interested and hoped I could gain insight into reasons for low achievement levels if I returned to university. However, I knew that the solutions to our community problems lay within our community and could only be solved there. I did not have much faith in coming back to a graduate program and enrolled only on a part-time basis that first year. In the first course I took, an Aboriginal person was my professor. It was a true learning experience, an awakening to new ways of learning. He taught from an Indigenous perspective. I remember in the first class Stan asked our group what we wanted to learn. It caused us great difficulty. No one had ever asked us that before. We were now challenged to take responsibility for our own learning, and then direct that learning. So we struggled as a class. We struggled the first week. We wanted a syllabus and we wanted direction. We did not get it. So by the third week we finally decided that we would create an action research project and would hold talking circles as the basis of this research. The action research approach defined our research academically, and our basket and weekly talking circles honored our Indigenous traditions. This honoring of both systems made my learning experience very rewarding. I remember writing the final paper and recall the difficulty I faced in articulating the learning that had taken place. I had to approach it in a traditional way by first sharing who I was, and then sharing my struggles with education.

The following spring I took two back-to-back classes that became life-changing for me. The first was Revitalizing Indigenous Languages. The instructor was our late uncle and grandfather Lionel Kinunwa. The love, the embrace, and the nurturing that he wove into his approach affected my education and my life journey. His teachings continue to guide me today. I hear his words and I continue to learn from what he shared with us. I came away from this course with many gifts. He introduced to us this notion of cellular knowledge. I was excited by this notion. The excitement has remained with me, and I have become convinced that Indigenous people have cellular memory embedded in their molecular structure and that this

knowledge is what guides our peoples today. Now my experiences in the other course the previous fall term made sense. I was now given permission to acknowledge this wisdom and encouraged to continue in this approach.

The last course in that spring session was an Indigenous research methods course taught by another Indigenous instructor. Here we had several tasks. The first required each of us to select a living object somewhere on campus and to spend an hour with it. The second task was to spend half an hour each evening watching the moon. The final task was to make notes of our dreams. We were asked to write in a journal as we progressed through the course. I found the course difficult at first because it was all too different for me. Still, I decided that I would participate. On the first day I walked around campus and remember feeling how much I wanted to welcome this way of learning, but part of me still resisted. I selected a tree and sat with it the first day. I remember writing in my journal that I really had no idea what I was supposed to be doing or thinking. My initial resistance was evident as I also hoped others around me were not aware of my task. As I gradually accepted the process, I did not want to force the thoughts, but to allow the thoughts to develop naturally. By the end of the course I had discovered that there are teachings all around us. As an Indigenous researcher I became aware that our ancestors relied on these teachings and on their relationship to all living and nonliving things, including the cosmos. The discovery of this whole notion of teaching and relationships remains a powerful component that continues to impress my research today.

This leads me to the method I used for my master's study. This involved looking at students in the reserve community. I wanted to hear their perspectives on what factors they felt contributed to low academic achievement. I decided to work with both junior and senior high students who had attended the reserve school for most of their educational experience. I included young people (male and female) from different economic situations, some from single-parent homes, some from two-parent homes, some with the traditional upbringing and others anything but traditional. I selected talking circles as a way to gain access to the data. I asked all the students to meet one evening at the school. We gathered in a circle. I explained to them the research I wanted to be involved in and what my expectations would be of them. I offered each of the students tobacco, signifying my good intentions and paying honor and respect to their knowledge. On that first evening I explained to them the protocol of the talking circle and how we used the talking circle approach in our program at the university. I made the students pouches for their tobacco and made this offering to each of them.

The circle gatherings were a positive experience. I began to realize that students knew about protocol, they knew about Cree traditions, and they knew about important things we sometimes fail to acknowledge them for. I set up a schedule the following two weeks to collect the data and to start the interviews. They went smoothly. The students shared a lot of information with me, more than I needed. I had to think about where the boundary was as I transcribed the interviews. I wanted to capture the inherent wisdom that was coming through. As I transcribed the data, I began to understand how the negative and grim statistics in previous studies are presented in the literature. A shallow description would only reinforce

and validate them. The literature that I read neither reflected these young people nor their community. Only the negative and surface problems were finding a place in the research studies and not the real problems or roots of the problem. It was a difficult situation for me and I was not sure what to do. I felt that if I followed in the path of other research studies, this would be exploiting these young people, the community, and ultimately myself. For the next two months I did not know what to do with my research; I was stuck and was not sure what direction to take. Nonetheless, I remained committed to these young people and refused to move in the direction of exploiting them in any way. I was not making any headway in my analysis.

One day, as I was driving through a small town on my way to Saddle Lake, I was overcome by a strange feeling. I remember the day clearly. It was May 14, 1999. I became angry and felt extremely frustrated. The feeling persisted during the remaining hour of the drive home. I have been lucky in this educational journey to have my sister, who has guided and supported me both in teaching and through graduate school. We had been involved in this process together for many years, and her research was similar to mine. When I arrived home, I told her about my strange feelings. I told her how much I felt like a bigot. It had become so clear to me that now I was an oppressor and that I had perpetuated the oppression of the students whom I had taught. It was a depressing and sad time for me.

I felt fooled and tricked into playing the role I had had as a teacher. I was saddened and hoped that this was not true. Yet I was convinced in the bigger picture that I was the problem and that there was no pride to be taken in being a teacher in my community. The service that I gave to my community had been in fact a disservice. I needed time away from my research and time away from the university. I needed time to collect my thoughts and understand what my purpose and direction was as a Cree educator.

Four months later I resumed my research. I felt it was time. I started to think about how I could incorporate the knowledge that the students had communicated to me. I wanted to use an approach that expressed the good parts of the study. I knew they were there, but also that they were difficult to articulate. I began to look more closely at the three courses that related to Indigenous ways. I believe that these courses provided a foundation for my thinking, helping me through the process and helping me to understand and analyze the data. The students had spoken with strength and wisdom. In my own writing and analysis, I wanted to convey this notion of inherent wisdom that I felt from each of them. I thought about my methods class and I remembered the tree. As I thought more about this tree, I began to realize that this was it. The tree represented the key.

Trees have roots that are firmly rooted in the ground. Their creation and growth involves a long nurturing process. When I think about this natural process and of how the tree evolves, it becomes easier to articulate the notion of inherent wisdom. I think of how solidly the roots are rooted in the ground and how they provide the life food, the knowledge, for the rest of the tree. I see these roots as representing our ancestors. Our ancestors play that role of rooting us to our place and keeping wisdom strong and alive. The whole metaphor came to life. Our ancestors bear this knowledge and continue to feed this knowledge upward. The

trunk represents the community, the way knowledge is passed on in this upward spiral. The branches represent the families of the community. The leaves represent our young people. With the metaphor it all made perfect sense to me.

I took the risk of sharing this concept or approach to my work with Peggy Wilson and asked for her thoughts. I feared that perhaps this approach was too different and somehow unacceptable. She was excited by it and encouraged me to continue. The whole process required me to have complete faith and trust in myself. This was difficult because I continually doubted myself. In the end, however, it was an extremely rewarding experience, prompting personal growth in many directions. The metaphor of the tree helped me greatly as a means of presenting the students and their knowledge. When I finished the writing, I felt good about it. I was no longer worried about fulfilling university standards. The most important aspect of the process had also been fulfilled: the work honored and respected inherent wisdom and how it has remained strong.

I went to my mother to ask her what title I could give to the thesis. We talked about inherent wisdom, and I told her, "I have this tree and with it I want to express how students have connection to this wisdom." She told me, "*Inisiwin*. This is the word that will let you know we are talking about knowledge." We tried to think of a word that would convey the notion of *being carried on*. She sent me to my uncle who knew higher Cree and said that he would eventually find the word I needed. My uncle and I talked about different words, but he wanted to find the specific word that captured the essence of being carried on. It was a couple of days before he gave me the word: *ekasis'pohtahk* captures the specific essence of carrying on this knowledge that is also related to something more sacred. To incorporate the notion of the tree, *watichkwanihk* is the *tree* and *ohci* is *from*. I decided that in honor and respect of the students involved in the research, the thesis title would be a dedication to them: *Inisiwin ekasis'pohtahk watichkwanihk ohci*.

This research process has been life-changing. It forced me to move toward an acknowledgment of a part of myself that I had allowed to be suppressed. At my thesis defense I recall shaking hands with my committee members and sharing with them how this experience had been so rewarding and unexpected. I had not known that graduate school would be such an emancipating experience. I felt an acceptance in being Cree without having to qualify myself in any way. I realized that I was born Cree, and therefore I am Cree. It is important in our graduate school experiences as Indigenous peoples that we do not lose sight of our own ways of being and knowing. We must embrace these powerful and living traditions of our ancient ways and realize the strength they continue to give to us. On my own journey I have much to learn and discover about Cree wisdom and knowledge. The graduate program to which I have returned encourages and nurtures this growth, an important reason for me to be back. I hope my story is of some help to you in your own journey. Hiy hiy.