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Discerning Poisons and Medicines of Modernity

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I am from a family with Indigenous Brazilian and German ancestry. I have been to many different countries and lived in different places. I believe this is partly because the Indigenous tradition where my family comes from is nomadic. They see the Earth as a living entity. If they stay in one place, they believe the land gets sick. Therefore, they travel to where their ancestors send them, and this and other important messages are conveyed through dreams. I have been married into a Cree and Blackfoot family, where ceremonies are performed with the Blackfoot in Alberta. My son is married into a Maori *whanau* (family) in Aotearoa, New Zealand.

This inter-weaving of bloodlines gives me a perspective of many different Indigenous communities. I am no expert in any of them and I do not speak for any of them. I also find it difficult to pinpoint only one place where I "come from." In part, this is because I believe that the earth is alive and upset about fences and divisions. It is also because the tradition of being always on the road, crossing many different types of borders, means one has to feel the pathway itself as a place too: a pathway that enables you to see different patterns, different connections, and many similarities, too, and that offers a different kind of contribution to the whole.

It is in this spirit, as a visitor who belongs to the path and in-betweens, that I would like to acknowledge the ancestors and Elders in the room, both human and more than human. I would like to acknowledge Cash Ahenakew, who has walked part of this path with me and inspired my thinking and scholarship. I would like to acknowledge Cash's grandfather, who comes from Ermineskin reserve. And I would like to acknowledge the people who have invited us here: both the students and the organizers, especially Jeannette Sinclair who has been very generous and very honouring. Because we live in institutions that do not normally acknowledge the kind of work we do, having the opportunity to engage in a welcoming

space that also welcomes deep and challenging conversations is a real gift.

I had prepared a presentation showing how humour can be an essential strategy of resistance, but after the healing moment we have just witnessed, I will allow myself to be present to what needs to emerge in this space. The story that came to my mind when I was hearing your stories happened two weeks ago. I think it speaks a lot to what you have been talking about in terms of education.

I was coming out of a meeting at UBC, the University of British Columbia, where I work, and I found on the floor a dead hummingbird. It looked really fresh, and I did not know what to do, because I did not want people to step on the tiny bird. I also thought that Cash would know what to do, so I decided to take it home. So, I wrapped the dead body of the hummingbird in my scarf, I sang it a couple of songs, and I put it in my bag, because I was going to a lunch meeting and I could not go straight home. I went to the meeting, had lunch, and really forgot about the hummingbird.

As I was leaving the restaurant, I remembered the hummingbird and decided to show it to a friend. I took my scarf out of the bag and I exposed the body of the hummingbird. As we were looking at it, to my greatest surprise, the hummingbird started to flex one leg. At this point, the hummingbird's heart started to race very fast, and I thought that if I did not do the right thing, I would end up killing it. I decided to go straight to my office. I got on Skype with Cash and I showed him the hummingbird. I asked him what I should do. He said, "I'll come with food for the hummingbird. In 20 minutes, I'll be there."

The hummingbird was slowly awakening and started flexing his wings, but his feet were entangled in my scarf. I took him outside in the scarf but he would not fly. I thought, "I better take him back to the tree where I found him and then maybe he will know what to do." I started walking on campus and, to get to the tree, I had to go counter-current through a lane full of people. It was a busy time when students had just finished their afternoon classes. I was carrying a scarf with a hummingbird flexing his wings on top of it. I had a miracle in my hands, going through that crowd. What really broke my heart is that *nobody looked* at the hummingbird. Nobody saw it. As I approached the tree the hummingbird flew away. And that was my encounter with the hummingbird.

I went back to my office and I started to research where those UBC hummingbirds come from. They come from Mexico. I also found information about the state that the hummingbird was in when I found it. When the hummingbirds find an external threat, they go into a state of sleep where just eight percent of its metabolism keeps it going. This state is called torpor. In this state, they look dead. They take about an hour to wake

up when the threat has been overcome. Maybe being in my bag protected by the scarf just gave him again the warmth to come back to life.

But as Cash arrived, disappointed that the hummingbird had not waited for him, he drew my attention to the teaching of the hummingbird. He asked me to pay attention to what it came to teach me. Reflecting on the hummingbird teachings took me back to the people walking without the ability to notice the miracle I had in my hands. I believe the hummingbird was trying to teach me about torpor—the state of torpor of the people who could not see him. If we cannot see the hummingbird, it is because we are sleeping. People were so much in their heads, in their minds, that they could not really notice: they were in torpor.

From that point on, I started to think about an education that can awaken us all from torpor. I also started to think about this state of torpor in relation to what we are protecting ourselves against: what has created the state of torpor. If there is a poison or threat that is prompting us to fall asleep, if we do not understand this threat, it is going to be extremely difficult to wake up from that state. And if we do not see the implications of being asleep, we might not want to be awakened, because we may be afraid of being awake. I imagined all these people coming to me with huge sleepy heads and very little bodies—heads that scale up our sense of importance, our sense of entitlement, our sense of control of everything, our sense that we are in a bubble that separates us from each other and protects us from the world. It is this sense of separation that presents the world as a threat, as something we need to be protected against, and this creates our existential poverty. Existential poverty is a denial of relationship (Donald, 2012), a denial of entanglement, a denial that our lives (both human and non-human) are all inter-woven. This denial leads to torpor and to the fear of awakening. Existential poverty also leads to material poverty because, by trying to protect ourselves from each other, we start to accumulate stuff as walls between ourselves. We think that "stuff" is going to give us the affirmation of individuality and security that we believe we are entitled to.

I started to think about what has been scaled down so that the head could be scaled up. What has been scaled down for me is our sense of connection, of visceral connection with each other. We have been told that thinking is everything, that "we are" because "we think": that reality is only what fits our enlarged bubble thinking heads. We have been taught to think about ourselves as much smaller and more limited than we actually are. I started to think about an education that could scale up what has been scaled down, which has the sense of visceral connection and the responsibility that this entails. But also, the idea that we can scale up and

connect our hearts, so that a huge collective heart can take and heal all the pain in the world, all the pain we have inflicted on each other.

We tend to think about hearts as limited, and to be afraid of the pain that we are going to face in the world because we may feel that our hearts are not strong enough to take it in. But as I was thinking about the teachings of the Elders that have been in our lives—and I have had the privilege of having Elders in different traditions—I realized a common pattern. They have taught me through different stories and by example that we can scale up and connect our hearts. The same way that we can scale our hearing, so we can focus our hearing on something that is near or something that is far in our sight, we can make our heart smaller or our hearts bigger, enormous. Our sense of identity can also be perceived in the same way. We can be just this body, this ego, a defined identity, or we can be unbound spirit, we can be part of everything. Our sense of land could be just our home, our reserve, our country, or it can be the whole earth or the whole universe.

Therefore, part of the problem with the kind of education we receive at university and at schools is that we forget how to scale up the important things. And we scale down things like generosity, compassion, and humility to be able to participate in a system that has given us a few gifts, but that depends on violence to be maintained. So, here I draw on Cash's (Ahenakew, Andreotti, Cooper, & Hireme, 2014) work to talk about this paradox that we face as Indigenous people all over the world. This paradox has two sides. On the one hand, there is the necessity to survive in a modern capitalist context that is inherently violent and completely unsustainable. But we have to survive in that; otherwise, we cannot sustain life, unless we are "off the grid." We have to fight for our lands, our rights, our languages, and our cultures using the language of the state, if we want to be successful.

On the other hand, and *at the same time*, if we know that system is unsustainable, we have a responsibility to give our children an alternative mode of existence that might not be defined by that system. So, how do we do the two things together, knowing that the first system tends to define our existence very quickly? Do we as Indigenous people, as Indigenous scholars, as people who are here to support young people, do we just get them through the system and then they become one of the people who came towards me and could not see the hummingbird? Or do we just train them in traditions where the hummingbird is one of the most important things to be seen? Can we train them to be successful in the existing system and to be awake, to be able to see the hummingbird? If they are awake and within the colonial system, will they be able to survive the pain?

I think these are discussions that we need to have. We have been thinking about an education for walking both worlds, but we have not yet really

talked enough about the difficulties and the complexities of doing that, in the sense that young people feel torn or sometimes fall through the cracks of this idea of both worlds (Battiste, 2000). Perhaps one way to think about it is through the concepts of material and existential poverty, and material and existential wealth. We need to think about the ways that material wealth, which has been associated with affluence, competition, and individualism, has caused a lot of existential poverty. So, how do we pass a notion of existential and material wealth to our children that upholds the dignity and well-being of everything, both human, more than human, and non-human, a notion of wealth that does not harm other people or the planet, and that honours ancestors as people who have come before and of people who are yet to come?

This is the kind of education that I have been thinking about in terms of working at a university that, after this experience with the hummingbird, feels very much like an ivory slum in terms of the existential poverty it promotes. Within this context, I also wonder about what reconciliation means and what it looks like. When I get really frustrated, part of me starts thinking about exiting: I just want to get out, get into the community, and forget about the university. Another part of me remembers that the process of reconciliation requires us to be where the problems are. I am not talking just about the reconciliation related to the effects of colonial violence, but about the sense of wholeness and oneness that we must have if we want to open the possibility for another form of existence in this planet. It is a reconciliation that starts in our guts and stretches out to recognize our inseparability. In many ways, being in the ivory slum is extremely important. And it is also really hard. And it is very difficult to see that existential poverty and not know what to do.

I find courage when I manage to de-centre and to trust that there is an ancestral vision guiding where I go, a vision that knows why I was sent to this place, even if I do not know. That is what I try to say to myself in moments of extreme frustration. This helps me remember that the process of turning towards existential wealth involves dealing with the existential poverty that we see around us and within us. And that the "us and them" mentality works for certain things to a certain extent, but ultimately does not really speak to that yearning that we have inside of us, which is a yearning for wholeness, for well-being, for connection. This can only be achieved when we are together.

As an Indigenous scholar from Trinidad, Jacqui Alexander (2005), has pointed out, we confuse this yearning for wholeness with a yearning to belong, or a yearning for identity, for individuation, or for affirmation. And that, again, works in certain contexts and has saved many lives. I am not

dismissing that. But maybe that yearning will only be addressed in the long term, not necessarily through more thinking or more dialogue, but through a renewal of our relationships, and our awakening to this visceral sense that we are individually insufficient and collectively indispensable. Regardless of what has happened in the past, if we use the same frames of being that create violence to resist violence, we will reproduce the same violence. If focusing on thinking alone is not the answer, what else can we scale up so that we can remember to listen and relate to everything, not necessarily through conceptual language, but through our bodies and our spirits? How do we go back to de-scaling our heads and scaling up our hearts?

I think that is what the hummingbird came to teach me that day. I am glad that I did not kill it accidentally, because I could have if I had not remembered. It would have been suffocated in my bag and I am really glad that we both came back alive. The ideas of torpor and of the university as an ivory slum have been very helpful, both in terms of understanding what my role is in that space and in understanding how my own frustration reflects the same existential poverty that I am trying to address. So, seeing the frustration itself as a trickster teacher, showing me that my ego also reproduces and has been trained in that same kind of thinking, has been very useful. Being able to let go and allow this other vision to come in is really hard, especially when you have to keep your webpage updated saying how great you are at competing with others: how much research you do, how much knowledge you have, how many articles you have written, how much money and how many awards you have received. I look at it and feel my stomach turn. But I trust there is something beyond myself that connects with every single one of you who has the answers and who says: that will take us there if we can renew our relationships, not only between ourselves, but with the land, with the animals, with the standing people, and with everything around us, including the colonizers (see also Cajete, 2015).

On the other hand, I do recognize that an anger is still there. And this anger takes me to these enclosures of thinking and to a sense of entitlement absolutely grounded in the "us and them" separation. I wonder when could this anger be useful? When can I use it productively without being overcome by its narcissistic effects? How can I identify the colonizer (obviously, I have to do that sometimes) without allowing that definition to determine my relationship with that person? These are the kinds of conversations that I think we need to start to have in education. When do we play the political game, in the political context, and when do we relate to each other existentially and spiritually? When do we centre ourselves for the benefit of our specific communities, and when do we de-centre to allow the land to imagine through us, for the benefit of all life forms (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006).

I must acknowledge the Elders who have taught me the most about this, and these Elders are Keith and Karen Chief Moon and Leroy English who are Blood Elders from the Kainai reserve where we sundance. Keith's story is a beautiful story. For the past six years, I have witnessed the process of him sustaining a Sun Dance created from a vision he had forty years ago: of people from the four directions dancing together to reconcile on the land's terms. According to the vision he received, people would arrive at the Sun Dance and he would not be able to send them away, because it is not the bodies that would arrive—it would be people's spirits asking to dance. I have witnessed people from other Sun Dances coming and telling him that what he is doing is wrong, because people in the dominant culture are used to appropriating Indigenous knowledge and using it in bad ways. I have heard people saying: "White people will come here, and in five minutes they are going to be bossing Indigenous people around." And, it is true, they are trained to do that.

However, Keith's response has been really interesting and has taught me something that I did not expect. His response is always that he agrees, on political grounds, but that the land is a sacred ground and that vision is also sacred. What he taught me is that spirituality trumps politics. Seeing him respond with generosity, with compassion, and establishing that distinction between what we have to agree to politically but how we need to live and exist in relation to each other, has been the most important lesson for me in the past six years. And if I can live up to 10 percent of what Keith and Karen teach us in that Sun Dance, I hope that the kind of education that will come out of these teachings might be able to awaken us from this numbness that we feel when we are in a state of torpor, when we cannot see the hummingbird.

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