

Finding Face, Finding Heart, and Finding Foundation: Life Writing and the Transformation of Educational Practice

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Other people's stories are as varied as the landscapes and the languages of the world; and the storytelling traditions to which they belong tell the different truths of religion and science, of history and the arts. They tell people where they came from, and why they are here; how to live, and sometimes how to die.

J. Edward Chamberlin. *If this is your land, where are your stories?*

The truth about stories is that that's all we are. "You can't understand the world without telling a story," the Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor tells us. "There isn't a center to the world but a story."

Thomas King. *The truth about stories: A Native narrative.*



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Indigenous peoples throughout Canada and the world have sustained their unique worldviews and associated knowledge systems for millennia, even while undergoing major social upheavals and transformations. Many of the core values, beliefs and practices associated with those worldviews have survived and are beginning to be recognized as having an adaptive integrity that is as valid for today's generation as it was for generations past. The depth of indigenous knowledge, rooted in the long inhabitation of a particular place, offers lessons that can benefit everyone as we search for more satisfying and sustainable ways to live on this planet.

Indigenous epistemologies acknowledge the individual journey of lifelong learning as a pathway, a sacred way of moving toward completeness or fully becoming one's potential. Through our journey toward wholeness we are gifting our essence to the multitude of unique essences, which make up our world. This profound reciprocal sense that "We are all related, we are All related, we are all Related" is central to indigenous ways of knowing, being and participating in the world. In this process we are at once poised between an environmental ecology and a spiritual ecology (Cajete, 1994). Together they create our one world.

We embrace and enact a pedagogy of place within landscapes of the natural surroundings, family and community, and the affective foundations of a life lived in a respectful reciprocal relationship with the world. In this relationship we are interwoven with our own ecologies and the places we are "indigenous" to. These complex ecologies involve the four elements of earth, water, air, and fire; our relatives the plants and animals; our sisters and brothers around the world; as well as the Manitous that co-inhabit these places with us. They fashion and form unique natural patterns that ultimately become our patterns. Our own understanding of our indigeneity in relationship to our place and our interconnectedness with our environmental ecology leaves a qualitative signature deep within our physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual identities.

We also embrace and enact a subtle pedagogy of the imagination through our participation in the spiritual ecological foundations of our lives in art, myth and vision (Cajete, 1994). Those stories, artistic images and emerging visions that accompany us on our journey create psychological landscapes, soul spaces and unique ecologies where we dwell. These are the ecologies that nourish our learning spirits.

The implicit goal of indigenous education is *Finding Face* (identity), *Finding Heart* (passion) and *Finding Foundation* (vocation); this is the destination to which the various pathways of indigenous pedagogy lead; we are endeavouring to "look to the mountain" (Cajete, 1994).

Environmental relationship, myth, visionary traditions, traditional arts, tribal community, and Nature-centered spirituality have traditionally formed the foundations of indigenous life. These elements formed a context for discovering one's true face (character, potential, identity), one's heart (soul, creative self, true passion), and one's foundation (true work, vocation), all of which lead to expression of a complete life. (Cajete, 1999, p. 77)

The journey toward wholeness and the good life follows the tradition of "looking to the mountain" and the ancient pathway or sacred way that meanders through or



traverses our environmental and spiritual ecologies. However, it is through life writing that I began to understand the true value of “looking from the mountain.” In writing I was engaged in the act of stopping and attending to the lived landscapes of my life from a distance in time and space. I began to read the patterns in new ways because distance created perspective and an achieved height of land allowed me to trace my meandering. It was as though I was looking from the mountaintop and could clearly see both the landscape and my own pathway. I was following my own act of navigating through life. I was witnessing my wayfinding by tracking my lived experience. Though life writing I began the practice of re-membering and dwelling in specific places within my lived landscape. I began tracking my own story. As I heard my own voice tell the story and as I relived the experiences through the writing I noticed new patterns emerging. I then began to follow the threads of connection. I was engaged in the traditional practice of tracking and using the skills I had acquired as a child now in the pursuit of living inquiry (Meyer, 2006). Indigenous traditions honour the act of hunting or the searching for sustenance as a profound discipline. “The hunter of good heart is a metaphoric ideal that reveals the nature of journeying toward completion” (Cajete, 1994, p. 58). It requires great skill to follow the spoor or track left by a living creature. I was being schooled as I engaged in the practice of tracking and in the sacred art in hunting or finding life’s meaning. Cajete indicates that at the heart of an Indigenous pedagogy is the act of tracking the concentric circles of relationship (Cajete, 1994). This act of tracking allowed me to follow the pathway of my own lived curriculum and to explore both my environmental ecology as well as my spiritual ecology from a new perspective. I was “looking from the mountain.” This is the conceptual framework that informs my living inquiry (Meyer, 2006).



In this article I explore the threads of a specific autobiographical inquiry and I braid these threads into strands that are woven into the patterning that emerges in the following Métissage. It is an in-depth study, a living inquiry (Meyer, 2006), in which a life writing method of life review, and an arts-based inquiry using visual arts practices and reflection are incorporated in order to discover formative experiences which have influenced my evolving artist/teacher/researcher self and chosen life path within the larger context of my personal narrative¹. By reflecting on one's life through a reverse review, backwards viewing or "looking from the mountain," key incidents emerge from the panorama of lived experience. These pivotal moments are threaded and braided, creating strands that are then woven into the emerging patterns of an evolving Métis sash, a Métissage. This living inquiry is intimately connected to finding face (identity), finding heart (passion), and finding foundation (vocation) on my life long journey and has been greatly deepened and broadened by my practice of life writing.

In my work with in-service teachers we explore their experiences of the visual arts, life writing, living and poetic inquiry during their action research projects while engaged in a Master of Education in Educational Practice. Using life writing, Métissage and other forms of autobiographical writing, they present their experiences of living inquiry within communities of inquiry. This practice of life writing by imaging and storying reveals the events that led to the development of a particular line of inquiry and how this eventually informs, revises and revitalizes teachers' educational practice. It awakens and enables them to Find Face, Find Heart, and Find Foundation through engaging in a pedagogy of place in an emerging environmental ecology of being, and nurtures a spiritual ecology by cultivating personal mythology, artistic practice and spiritual vision to the end of transforming educational practice. The teacher research explored in these courses emerged out of my own living inquiry and life writing. In the following Métissage I share examples from my own living inquiry and life writing. I describe moments in my life-long journey of finding face, finding heart, and finding foundation. For it was through the following experiences that I came to know the profound impact that autobiographical inquiry and life writing can have on an individual and how it can ultimately transform one's educational practice.

Now, listen...I will tell the tale of my finding face, finding heart and finding foundation...Listen to my telling....

I was placed on this earth in a particular place. My being entered a particular ecology and it was in this location that my senses and sensibilities were schooled. I came open to all the impress of the world ready to attend to her, to bend and blend with her. She in turn guided not only what I bumped into but shaped how I encountered it. The pedagogical relationship of the senses to a particular environment creates the finely tuned instrument, the organism for perceiving and ultimately for knowing in that place. It is a process of enacting of the subtle pedagogy of place within a particular environmental ecology.

I also grew up within the context of competing cosmologies. I was born into two creation stories, one that honoured life and the Creator, Kitché Manitou, through the reading of signs in the book of nature while the other found truth and God through reading words in the printed pages of the Bible. Later I encountered a third creation story, one I learned at school and one in which the world was initiated by a random anomaly.



You see, I am Métis, Irish/Scotch and Anishinabe. The Métis are people of mixed marriages, mixed blood and mixed heritages. As a nation the Métis are also one of the Aboriginal Peoples recognized by the Canadian Constitution. As a half-breed my life is woven through and through by the various threads of mixed and mixing identities. It is a living Métissage. In what follows I will begin by sharing with you a creation story that you may not know, the Anishinabe story of creation. I will then tell some of my own creation stories. I will describe key events, which arise out of the vital patterning of my life, the braiding of my various selves into a Métis Sash, creating a living Métissage. The first pair of stories tell of being seen, the second describes my first encounter with art making, with creating, and the third describes the moment when I decided to follow this pathway that I am now on as an artist/educator, my way of finding identity, passion and vocation. Ultimately this Métissage is about seeing and being seen, of knowing and being known.

Now, listen...I will tell the tale of my finding face... Listen to my telling....

Kitche Manitou, the Great Spirit, beheld a vision. In this dream he saw a vast sky filled with stars, sun, moon, and earth. He saw an earth made of mountains and valleys, islands and lakes, plains and forests. He saw trees and flowers, grasses, and vegetables. He saw walking, flying, swimming, and crawling beings. He witnessed the birth, growth, and the end of things. At the same time he saw things live on. Amidst change there is constancy. Kitche Manitou heard songs, wailings, stories. He touched wind and rain. He felt love and hate, fear and courage, joy and sadness. Kitche Manitou meditated to understand his vision. In his wisdom Kitche Manitou understood that his vision had to be fulfilled. Kitche Manitou was to bring into being what he had seen, heard, and felt.... (Johnston, 1976, p. 12)



Being Seen: Finding Face

I had the opportunity to visit a few sessions given by David Bouchard, a Métis author a while back. He spoke to secondary students about his own journey as a student and educator, both in the role of teacher and principal, with dyslexia. With the educators attending a professional development day he spoke of the personal journey with

dyslexia and of his experiences as a person who learned of his Métis heritage late in life. He found out he was Métis when he was 40 years old. Before that time he did not know of his Aboriginal ancestry, and thus had lived his life without this knowledge, a whole part of his identity was silenced, a whole side of his face was not seen. When I sat there in the audience hearing him play the Native flute and speaking his words I was aware of a whole flood of emotions simultaneously demanding attention. I felt my heart twist painfully in resonance with his pain and my feelings swelled like a tsunami wave and tears welled in my eyes. Then he said: “I tell my own story for those others who share this journey. I am proud to be Métis. I tell my story for all those who live the reality of my story. And the stories I write are for all those known and unknown grandmothers, our Kokums.”

Unexpectedly, I was transported back to Sioux Lookout when I was 16 years old and I was sitting with friends celebrating a birthday in the Old Sioux Lookout Hotel. I was up for the summer staying with my grandparents in the same town where my parents grew up. I was working as a lifeguard on the same lake around which their community nestled, swam where they used to swim and rode my bike past were my dad played hockey. Lac Seul is one in a long series of lakes that runs from Sioux Lookout as far west as Ear Falls where my parents were living when I arrived in this world. Ear Falls is almost 100 kilometers by water on the other side of the lake from where my parents were born. My father drove 2 hours on a bush road to take my mother to the Red Lake Indian Hospital where I was born. Northwestern Ontario and the boreal forest dotted with thousands of lakes is my home, it is the place I am from, my place and the place of my people.

Yes, there I was underage sitting in a bar because my friend the head lifeguard was turning 21. I was sitting there listening and joining in the laughter when an Aboriginal man suddenly sat down beside me at the table. Startled, I looked at him questioningly, but he just sat there silently looking at me. I sensed his presence and was drawn to look at him, and as I did our gaze met and he captured my full attention. I felt like his intense gaze met mine and that his seeing penetrated deeply into my soul. I felt like he was looking into the centre of my being. No one had ever looked at me that way. When something distracted me and I looked away or joined the casual conversation at the table, I could hear him humming and then quietly singing: “Oh the games people play now...every night and every day now....” When I returned my gaze to his he would stop singing. He introduced himself as an Oji-Cree artist from Sandy Lake, one of the fly-in communities north of Sioux Lookout. I began to feel more comfortable and studied him intently. His name was Carl Ray and he told me he was unveiling a large mural depicting the creation of the world the next day. He invited me to attend the unveiling. Throughout our conversation I felt looked at or seen in a way I had never experienced before. I felt seen and known for who I was. He saw and awakened my aboriginal self, lying deep within me. He recognized and honoured my indigenous identity as no one had ever done before.

I went the next day to the unveiling of the mural. Kitche Manitou, as a Thunderbird with outstretched wings, glided across the painted portrayal of the creation story I knew so well. Flowing out of the tail feathers of the Great Spirit flowed the gift of life. It pulsed into all creation, into the bear, the wolf, the moose, the crawlers, the swimmers, the wingeds, all the plants and animals. Carl unveiled the magnificent mural not once



but three or four times. Humbly he would climb the ladder and cover and uncover his creation as the CBC reporter filmed. The reporter did not seem to see the greatness of the vision nor the magnitude of indigenous insight depicted in the creation scene. He did not seem to notice the intense and astonishing artistry before him. He did not honour Carl as the great artist I now know him to be. He did not see, respect or know who and what lay before him.

It was only much later I learned that Carl Ray (Cree) was born on the Sandy Lake Reserve in 1943. The Sandy Lake area was known as the birthplace of the Woodland School of Art, founded by artists such as Norval Morrisseau, the Kakegamic brothers and Carl Ray himself. Primarily a self-taught artist, Carl's early images were heavily influenced by the secret legends of the Ojibway/Cree people. These legends, held sacred by his people due to tribal custom, were previously unrecorded. He also learned much about Ojibway legend from his grandfather, one of the most revered medicine men from his area. As a young man Carl spent much of his early life hunting, trapping and fishing. Through these experiences he gained an appreciation for his natural surroundings, which also contributed to his imagery.

Carl Ray was a friend and apprentice of Norval Morrisseau, the Ojibway Shaman artist. Together they painted the large mural for the Canadian Government representing their vision of Native People in Canada for Expo '67 in Montreal. Carl Ray had a unique x-ray style of painting, often showing the inner organs and energy lines inside an animal or figure. His subjects were often shown in turmoil with the elements. To Carl life was full of conflict and redemption. Towards the end of his life his focus grew more personal and reflected his own inner turmoil. He had shared the creation stories and the legends of the Sandy Lake Cree with an outsider, a researcher, and as a result had been ostracized by his community. Soon after my meeting with him Carl Ray was fatally stabbed at 35 years of age, at Sioux Lookout, during a domestic dispute in 1979.

Meeting Carl and honouring his legacy has profoundly impacted me as an artist and indigenous scholar. I am left wondering if his life journey would have been quite different if others had seen him and truly honoured his finding face as he had honoured me.



There was one other time when I was truly seen and had a deep sense of my identity awoken within me. I was in Nova Scotia guiding for Coastal Adventures, which offered eco-tours with sea kayaking and hiking. We were a group of thirteen or so paddling around the tip of Cape Breton Island having departed from Cheticamp on our way by Bay St. Lawrence to Cabot Landing. As we were paddling along in small groups our attention was gradually drawn to a pod of whales swimming parallel to our course along the shore but some distance from land. We rafted up and decided that those who wanted to would go out to whale watch while those who would rather not would paddle to land, beach the kayaks, and wait on shore. I took the latter group to a lovely pebble beach and got them all settled with snacks and juice. Then, unable to miss this amazing opportunity, I headed off to join the others. As I paddled along I suddenly found myself surrounded by a small pod of whales. One of the largest ones surfaced right below my paddle stroke so I quickly lifted my paddle. The whale glided along beside me, not making a ripple, and then slowly rolled over on its side and looked at me. I sat motionless as I gazed back at this enormous animal floating on its side and looking at me with the one eye raised above the surface of the water. Gradually, I dared to return the gaze and found myself seeing, eye to eye, with a presence that felt so ancient, so wise. I was conscious of being seen, being truly perceived in a way I had never before experienced. This being looked so deeply into my being that I felt seen and known in a remarkable way. I felt I was looking into the eye of a vast primeval being. We looked into each other's eyes, reached deep into the other, and I felt that even though we encountered entirely different worlds of experience, we felt deeply connected. I felt like the truth of me was known by this being. We were related in reciprocal relationship. We are all related on Mother earth and within the weaving world of the Creator.

I had not been seen like this before except for the moment long ago while sitting in the bar in Sioux Lookout. Carl Ray had looked me in the eye in a similar fashion. I was being seen. Understood as a sister being in creation, I was being recognized as indigenous to creation. My indigenous self was seen and honoured—the part of my Métis self that so often went unseen by others, unknown in the world, the part that only felt at home in the wilderness where I grew up. My face was now twice seen and recognized by an-other. I was indeed finding face.

Now Listen...I will tell the tale of finding heart...Listen to my telling....

In his wisdom Kitche Manitou understood that his vision had to be fulfilled. Kitche Manitou was to bring into being what he has seen, heard, and felt. Out of nothing he made rock, water, fire, and wind. Into each he breathed the breath of life. On each he bestowed with his breath a different essence and nature. Each substance had its own power, which became its soul-spirit.

From these four substances Kitche Manitou created the physical world of sun, stars, moon, and earth.

To the sun Kitche Manitou gave the powers of light and heat, to the earth he gave growth and healing, to the waters purity and renewal, to the wind music and the breath of life itself.

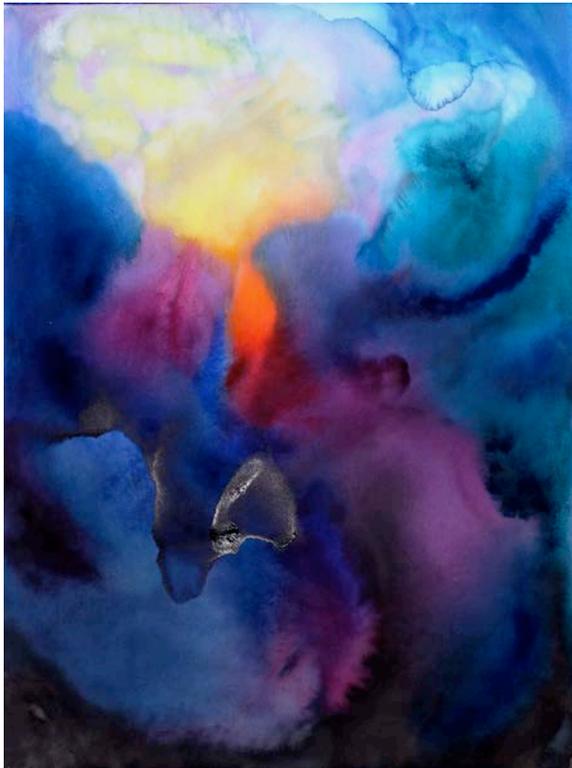
On Earth Kitche Manitou formed mountains, valleys, plains, islands, lakes, bays, and rivers. Everything was in its place; everything was beautiful.



Then Kitche Manitou made the plant beings. These were four kinds: flowers, grasses, trees, and vegetables. To each he gave a spirit of life, growth, healing and beauty. Each he placed where it would be the most beneficial, and lend to the earth the greatest beauty and harmony and order.

After plants, Kitche Manitou created animal beings conferring on each special powers and natures. There were two-leggeds, four-leggeds, wingeds and swimmers.

Last of all he made the human beings. Though last in the order of creation, least in the order of dependence, and weakest in bodily powers, human beings had the greatest gift—the power to dream. (Johnston, 1976, p. 12)



My Creation Story: Finding Heart

My first experience of art making was when I was 19 years old. I had left home and set off on a train, travelling southeast. All night long I sat in the sky-car watching the northern lights as they swirled, spiralled, pulsed in a cosmic dance across the heavens. It was a very moving beginning to a journey that would be profound in its synchronicity, a journey that would deeply impact my developing self for years to come. I arrived in New York City startled by its strangeness and waited for what seemed like hours in the Port Authority Bus Depot. I then proceeded over the George Washington Bridge into the countryside along the Hudson Valley. My final destination was Spring Valley where I worked in the garden, learned about organic agriculture and during a summer institute had the opportunity to take a course with M. C. Richards, the potter, poet, and educator.

I was somewhat intimidated that first afternoon, I had never done art. However, M. C. quietly dispelled this fear by beginning the session with a fairy tale concerning the enchantment of Tamlayn. I sat spellbound as I listened, the whole story unfolding vividly in my imagination. For years I could not find the text of the story that haunted my memory but I remember her artful telling of it, even today.

Now listen...I will retell the tale...Listen to my telling....

A long time ago in a far off land a Fairy Queen had charmed Tamlayn and he lived captive in her enchanted forest. One day a Princess wandered from the castle into the forest and found a lovely clearing where she picked a wild rose. Tamlayn suddenly appeared to ask her if she had lost her way. They sat by the well in the beautiful enchanted forest and eventually he told her of his plight. The Princess asked how she might help him and was told he could only be freed from the Fairy Queen's spell if someone who cared for him would undergo the trial. They had to love him enough to hold onto him, no matter what he became. They were to hold fast as he underwent a series of transformations and when he became like burning molten iron they were to throw him into the well. The princess agreed and when she took hold of Tamlayn he first became a writhing snake like an adder, then changed into ice, then fire, and finally became a dove. The Princess had to discover how to hold him regardless of what he became. She managed to do so and at the moment he became like molten iron she threw him into the well. Out of the rising mist he emerged cloaked in a splendid garment. Thus, Tamlayn was released from his enchantment and the Fairy Queen's spell. Soon after there was a great celebration in the kingdom. Tamlayn and the Princess were wed and lived happily ever after.

After the telling, M. C. Richards directed us to take something from the story and to sculpt it. I tentatively began to knead the clay. Gradually the image that fascinated and took hold of me was the trial. More specifically it was how the Princess was able to hold Tamlayn through all his transformations. I began to form the Princess as a sitting figure, not unlike the Maria in Michelangelo's *Pieta*. She had long flowing hair under a hood and sat circled by the folds of her long cloak and flowing skirt. At her feet on one side was the undulating form of the snake, on the other, flaming tongues of fire. She had a winged dove resting on one thigh and cold crystalline ice formations on the other. Her earnest gaze was intently focused on her cupped hands wherein lay the power and gentleness to hold Tamlayn steadfastly regardless of the transformations he underwent. She managed to hold him through all the changing embodiments of enchantment so as to eventually free him from the Fairy Queen's spell and allow him to emerge in his true human form. I sat silently amazed and wondered: How had she managed to hold a shape-shifter in her bare hands? How had her knowing heart been able to undo the trickster's enchanting magic?



I worked with intense absorption as I humbly tried to give this image form. Even after I left the studio, the image stayed with me. I turned it over and moved it around, pondering it deep within me. The next day I reappeared at the modeling class. We were instructed to take one of the aspects or images that interested us, concentrate on that, and develop another sculpture. I had been fascinated by the hands of the Princess and started to model a hand in a relaxed, open position. I modeled it from my own hand and as I worked I did not know what I would lay delicately in the palm of the hand. Finally, I decided on a little bird's egg. In the heart of the hand I placed the egg, which represented all the unborn forms, embodiments of enchantment, all the un-hatched possibilities of transformation that Tamlayn could be metamorphosed into. These hands of the Princess had the possibility of embracing Tamlayn with the kind of love that was so malleable that it morphed, allowing her to be so adaptable that she could hold him appropriately even when he became fire and ice. Again, I was absorbed into this world of concentration where I lived with the developing imagination, oblivious to all else as hours went by.

I finished the piece and began to walk in the forest. I was bursting with energy as I walked. I pondered what had just happened. Suddenly I realized that the hand I had just sculpted was not unlike the nature of knowing or understanding in the way we hold objects and experiences close to our hearts. It was similar to the unspoken mystery that I sensed within the story itself. We embrace things of the world, which we take into ourselves holding them as unique and precious. We take them to heart, impressing them there, each in its own unique way abiding in our hearts; there each one echoes, resounds, and resonates. Gradually we come to know each object or experience intimately as we hold its living impression within us. We know intuitively we must

hold each rightly, in an appropriate fashion. We learn how to cherish each, experiencing it in its own individual way. If we manage to do so, each is gradually freed from enchantment to exist as living meaning in our soul. No longer is it clasped in the fetters of the fleeting mortality of the moment; instead it joins the developing imagination of understanding that travels with us our entire life long. Each then transforms us and we become more than we were, more of who we are to become in our essence by embracing the essence of the object or experience. Our essential self, our spirit, is like the un-hatched egg in which such mighty metamorphoses are happening unknowingly and un-seen by the eye of the world. Our soul is like the hand that knowingly transforms itself to hold each and every thing or moment. It has the required gentleness or strength, the courage and loyalty in the face of the trials of life, to hold fast, to be steadfast in our becoming.

With this thought, I stopped walking, breath caught, suspended for a moment and then I felt the impact of the realization: This is a thought, an objective thought which is not me; it lives separate from me as a reality beyond my subjective world. This experience of the story of Tamlayn was and is a picture, an imagination of understanding of how the world is com-pressed, pressed with compassion into our hearts. This imaginative metaphor revealed a living truth to me and I sensed that although I could perceive it, it lived in essence free of my ability to perceive it.



I remember at the time I was so excited because I felt that I was developing thoughts for the first time. I was aware of how I lived in the world predominately with my feeling life. This was how I experienced the world: through feeling, through doing; I didn't reflect much. I always said that if the room was blue, I turned blue or was blue. I had such profound experiences in nature as I grew up and was sensitized, made more sensible, to subtle mood changes. In the midst of the intense experiences in the wilderness I felt I had to be able to withstand them, I had to find the strength to bear them. At such times, however, I did not think much; I always tried to silence the chattering of my head in the presence of such profound beauty. My knowing was experienced as resounding deep within me and not an echoing in my head. This was the first time I was able to follow the process, the movement from experience to thought. I was ecstatic at the power of illumination, the enlightenment that the modeling had given me. It was a treasure that I was to cherish for years to come.

During the modeling course, I did three more variations on the theme that held me enthralled. One was a vessel, a crucible standing on a foundation with its form of cupped concavity flowing in waves. It was open, receptive and listening. It was fired in a dark shining glaze. The second was a tall round box with a sculptured lid, fired in the primitive outdoor sawdust kiln that we made as a group and which burned throughout the night. I burnished this piece by rubbing it with a spoon until there was a rich shining quality to the burnt black colour. It was designed as a place to put treasures, the dwelling place of wonderful things and cherished happenings. The final piece was a form that rose in flowing undulations and sculptured forms to a point. It stood strong, vertically victorious, and reminded me of "The Winged Victory" sculpture of which I had been given a photograph the year before. I can say now that the sculpture was an image of becoming and the rising up of the human spirit, majestically like the phoenix from the ashes in the crucible of life.

The imaginations that I arrived at through the experiences of sculpture were like a portal, a doorway through which I moved into a universal realm where truths lived incarnated as a living spiritual reality. They were embodied for a fleeting moment and hovered about me as I tried to grasp them, bring them down, struggling to reveal a glimpse of them through the medium of clay. Out of the most humble beginnings mere shadows appeared on the table before me, but the experience resonated in my soul with a magnitude of vast proportions. I had touched the hem of an experience that would lead me filled with longing on a life long journey. I was finding my passion in the arts, I was finding heart.

Now listen...I will tell the tale of finding foundation...Listen to my telling....

Kitche Manitou then made The Great Laws of Nature for the well-being and harmony of all things and all creatures. The Great Laws governed the place and movement of the sun, moon, earth and stars; governed the powers of wind, water, fire and rock; governed the rhythm and continuity of life, birth, growth, and decay. All beings lived and worked by these laws.

Kitche Manitou had brought into existence his vision. (Johnston, 1976, p. 13)



Communion with the Creator: Finding Foundation

I once visited Wells Cathedral, and as I wandered through the majestic building, I came to stand under the transept where there was a crossing or intersection of the different segments of the cathedral. There, in that place, one finds an upright figure eight uniting the upper sections of the roof with the floor. This lemniscate sweeps up in a graceful line embracing and uniting heaven and earth. There are moments in our biographies in which we stand poised between heaven and earth, like living intersections; we are conduits transfixed at a crossroads in the flow of time. These moments then become turning points or fulcrums around which revolve the resolution of the past and promise of the future. In these moments of communion we pledge to or enter into sacred vows dedicating our very becoming to the acknowledgement of the larger reality with which we converse. The following is a description of just such a moment, which had the potential to unite all dimensions of my previous experience into one spiraling vortex of becoming as I stood, a simple creature before the Creator. I was finding foundation.

I made the decision to study eurythmy, a form of dance, on an island in Poohbah Lake while I was on a canoe trip. We had spent the day portaging, wrestling our way through dense forest and up steep embankments to finally arrive at this pristine place. After dinner I sat there as the sun set, grappling with a deeply urgent, yet unresolved question. What should I be doing with my life? And how was I going to set about doing it? I was canoeing with my sister and two friends who had withdrawn to the tents after the long day and had fallen asleep. All was still as I sat there watching the wash of rose fade from the treetops, eventually the evening translucent turquoise gave over to a deep midnight black. Gradually the small radiant light of the stars of the Milky Way slowly illumined the night sky. I sat there asking the Creator woven into the world around me

what it is that I should be doing, knowing that places such as this wilderness landscape were gradually disappearing. I knew that in the future I would have to go to the ends of the earth to find such potent places in nature where Mother Earth was as she had been from the moment of creation on the turtle's back, when the Creator, Kitche Manitou, the Great Spirit, breathed the living essence of his vision into all creation. I had come to recognize that these sacred places where one can experience the resounding spiritual presence of the Creator in nature were receding before the invasion of modern culture. Was I going to be a pilgrim longing after this presence, pursuing these vanishing places all my life? I was well aware that all that I had received through the subtle pedagogy of my experiences in such places, the rich environmental ecologies of my childhood and youth, were not going to be there for others who came after me, that such pristine nature would vanish before the next seven generations could experience the profound pedagogy of place that I had come to know. I had experienced a heritage that would not necessarily be available to others, and I knew that its legacy had formed the firm foundation of my being. Mother Earth had given birth to my being in this place; she nurtured the substance of my morality and forged my faith in the processes of becoming in life; she had shaped my identity, the very contours of my face. Out of these eyes I could look into the world and the future with a richness of soul that would welcome a new creation, a vision fired by my passion in the crucible of life. I was finding heart and recognized that because of this heritage, the environmental and spiritual ecologies of my life, I trusted the process of being wrought. The pedagogy of place and the pedagogy of imagination shaped my experiences like I was a lump of clay or a piece of stone being worn by the waves of experience washing over me.



With the sense of a coming epiphany I sat on the shore enveloped in darkness. My heart strained and quivered, and the mood of the moment filled my soul with anticipation. The event to come would touch my yearning soul like an annunciation. As if to reply to the question posed by my spirit, the whispering began. It was so distant and ephemeral that I was not certain if the horizons to the north and south danced with light. I waited, and the pulsing increased in strength, miraculously it began to swing and sway suspended overhead. The whirl, twirl and swirl of spun light seemed to hush, brush, and gently caress my soul, it moved along my blood even to my heart's core. It was as if I was no longer separate in body lying on the sun-warmed rock but expanded and spread across the sky. I mingled with the pulsing, dancing light; the spiral became a circle that throbbed and radiated around a dark centre. My breath caught, my heart stopped, I was suspended between the horizon of my soul and the vast horizon of the heavens. The light gathered and intensified, suddenly it became an enormous eye, the eye of the Creator, looking down penetratingly into my soul, caressing my heart, and touching my spirit. I was being seen. I gazed into the radiant iris and the fathomless darkness of its pupil; it opened inwards into an infinitude of being.

Midst the patterns of light and dark I moved like someone blinded, feeling like I was reading a Braille script with the fingers of my spirit along the movements and outlines of coloured light in the heavens. The experience was so immense and powerful I felt overwhelmed. I quivered, trembled and vibrated. I felt like my soul sang, straining, vibrating like a string strung taut over the breast of the cello that begins to move as the pipe organ chords sound, resound and reverberate. It felt like the ringing shook and rocked the world, causing entrainment; aftershock waves began to rumble and echo in my soul. It was singing or speaking a language that I had the ears to hear and understand. As the great eye above me faded and the cosmic choreography in the heavens ended, I gradually became aware of my self sitting on the cold granite beside the silent lake, its still surface mirroring the starlight. It was also like an eye, a jewel in the kingdom of Mother Earth mirroring back the tenderness in the gaze of father sky, the eye of the Creator. The earth and the heavens met eye to eye and I had sat between the two witnessing the dialogue, listening to the conversation. I too had been seen, heard and known.

The conversation between spirit world and the learning spirit of the individual, I believed then and know now, is also the intent of our human endeavour. The arts act like this mighty medium that also allows for the intimate conversation between the soul of the world and the human soul: eye-to-eye, being to being, essence to essence. Their created gifts, like the gifts of the Creator, can be discerned or are heard by each of us, in a unique way, in a particular moment. Through this meeting eye to eye with the Creator, I found my foundation, my vocation. Since that moment I have found myself on a vision quest and my pathway or sacred way of questing is through the arts.



Gradually, over time, my soul learned to dance and flow into movement through eurythmy, visible song or visible speech. I loved this art form and cherished the ability to sing or speak through the instrument of my humanity. My whole being was engaged, body, soul, and spirit, in the doing of the art. My path was to learn of the world through movement and my knowing was deeply connected to listening to the movement and following the reverberating songlines in my soul. The world told me of itself by my trying to create its reality through the language of gesture: to become earth, water, air, or fire, to become the landscape painted through the voice of imagination in the poet; to sing the tonal imagination of the composer; to be actively searching and creating through the movement that was condensed within the work of an artist in word or tone, poetry or music. As a dancer, one strives to speak with one's feet, to sing with one's hands, and to be receptive to the imaginations painted by the Creator in the sensing or attending of one's spirit.

The movements of the northern lights are like the choreography in eurythmy, in dance. The sounding of music and language are made visible in gesture and resound within the movement. The instrument of our humanity, body, soul, and spirit join in the dance and give answer to the call: to have vision and create. I was finding face, finding heart, finding foundation, and finding vision.

Since the experience on Poobah Lake I have continued the journey and remained the hunter of good heart. On my pathway of finding face, finding heart, finding foundation, and finding vision I have been schooled in dance, the visual arts, and in music. I have found that the various arts enact a subtle pedagogy: a pedagogy of place, creating an environmental ecology within the art form that schools the senses and our sensibility; as well as a pedagogy of the imagination, creating a spiritual ecology that

through creating art, story and vision nourishing our learning spirits. The arts and the artist's way have become my pathway, a sacred way of finding sustenance by finding life's meaning. They lead me as a hunter of good heart towards completion, towards becoming fully human.

Now Listen...I will finish the tale...Listen to my telling....

The Creator had a vision and out of nothing he created earth, water, air, and fire and breathed into each a vital nature. He then created the plants and the animals and conferred on each special powers and natures. Last of all He made human beings. Though last in the order of creation and least in the order of dependence, and weakest in bodily powers, human beings have the greatest gift—the power to dream...

Kitche Manitou then made the Great Laws of Nature for the well-being and harmony of all beings. The Great Laws of Nature governed the place and movement of sun, moon, earth, and stars; governed the powers of wind, water, air, and fire; governed the rhythm and continuity of life, birth, growth, and decay. All things lived and worked by these laws.

Kitche Manitou had brought into existence his vision. (Johnston, 1976, p. 13)

Finding Face, Finding Heart, Finding Foundation, and Finding Vision.

In the writing, or through life writing I have found that lived experiences began to braid and weave together. They created a Métis Sash, a swath of cloth woven of multi-coloured threads and braided into varied strands. In the midst I began to see patterns that revealed and honoured my pathway of finding face, finding heart, finding foundation, and finding vision. These formative experiences when tracked became part of a living inquiry that deeply informed my work as an artist/teacher/researcher within the academy. This inquiry has also led me to share with others in a community of inquiry: how through the arts and autobiographical writing, through tracking life and life writing, there is a way of finding face, finding heart, finding foundation, and perhaps in our times most importantly finding vision. As the Creator created out of his vision, may we also learn to create out of our visions honouring the fact that:

We are all related...we are All related...we are all Related....

“Looking to the Mountain” and “Looking from the Mountain”

My engagement with the arts is deeply interwoven with my way of tracking and orientating in life, it is my way of “looking to the mountain.” My practice of life writing is deeply interwoven with my journey as a hunter of good heart, it is my way of finding meaning by “looking from the mountain.” My work with Métissage is my way of seeking life and becoming complete by weaving the patterns of my Métis Sash, my Métissage. It is my way of honouring my Métis self and the reality that I am a living Métissage.

Now listen...I have finished the tale...Thank you for listening to my telling....
Miigwetch



Notes

ⁱ All images are original artworks by Vicki Kelly. This series of 12 artworks entitled, *Finding Face, Finding Heart, Finding Foundation*, was created in 2006 as part of a transformative art making and learning process.

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