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“To me, Indigenous research means listening with the heart.”

A CONNECTION TO NAAHSIKSI THROUGH THE EYES OF PONOKAOMITAA

Okii Nikso'kowaiksi Niisto nitaniko Sippiimyniakii Niksissta aannistawa Inukukii Ninna aanistawa Thomas Nitommo'toto Piikani Nitommo'toto Saikuz Hello friends/relatives. I am “Woman who travels by night sky,” a Blackfoot/Carrier Mom, Daughter, Sister, Friend, and Student, learning here within the unceded Tk'emlúps te Secwepemc territory.

This article is written in a first-person narrative, recalling memories, dreams, and feelings at moments of uncertainty, which are highlighted in *italics*. Reciprocity grounds my holistic perspective of healing, which guides my connection to the next seven generations. This story requires “patience and trust” in the words that are left unsaid, but felt with the heart (Archibald, 2008, p.8); it is a story which holds many different meanings for many different listeners.

This story is about the role of horses in my healing and how I will share that with others. This is my third year at Thompson Rivers University in the Bachelor of Social Work Program. I have encountered a reluctance to share this profession. In my experience, the lasting effects of Child and Family Services' unwanted presence within our communities contribute to my hesitancy. I explain it to my children as a superhero role, advocating for Indigenous rights to self-determination through “social justice and social action, both of which support a human rights agenda”; we learn how government structures and institutions work

so that we can target the inequitable, oppressive policies that prevent people's right to self-determination and autonomy (Connelly & Harms, 2015, p.168-171).

My hope is to bring positive awareness about how a sense of belonging is vital after the genocide that I feel looms over our people. Intergenerational trauma, colonialization, and assimilation have disrupted my family dynamics. Healing is supported by acknowledging those harms of the past to change them for the future.

“Alice... It's okay. You are here with us. Call yourself. Everything is going to be okay.” Memories of being left alone, drew on anxiety and a piece of me drifts off into some other consciousness, into star dust. Into whatever comes in the next life. Her voice will always soothe me, reassuring me that I am not going anywhere.

It was a cool, crisp fall morning. A warm startle in the pit of my stomach reminded me of the dangers in what I was about to do. Six years into recovery and I understand those responses differently. The craving for nature and the spontaneous feeling of galloping at top speeds, through an open field, drive the bitter cold away. The feeling of a 1,000-pound animal working in collaboration with you builds confidence, the type that challenges potential. That is how it began; who knew that balance would bring a shift to healing and wholeness?

Looking back in time is a way of healing. Blackfoot methodology uses critical thinking; Little Bear (2009) says we need to analyze information for meaning. Inner conflicts haunt my soul and horseback riding helps put things into perspective: “the challenge of controlling the movement of a 1,000-pound creature requires concentration, creativity, and resourcefulness and that success in doing so improves self-esteem, confidence, communication skills, trust, and boundaries” (Fredrick, Hats & Lanning, 2015, p. 810). Elders say, “You must first understand where you have come from, to know where you are going.” In the years to follow I began to explore healing as a journey, like stimulating critical thinking through this story.

Adaptation strategies become a way of survival. Viewing time as cyclical helps a “natural processes of reconfiguration following traumatic loss” (Salzman, 2019, p. 668). Looking back now, the internalization of past historical trauma surfaced when I witnessed a courageous life come to an end.

*“Good idea, hey my girl. Fresh spring water...”
In agreement, I began to fill my container from the spring, as I watched his feet walk away. Only moments later I heard the beauty of his gratitude silenced by the squealing of hot rubber on stone cold cement. This type of traumatic experience brings unimaginable grief.*

Differentiating between grief and trauma does not come easy. I found myself in a dissociative state, watching myself from the outside in. Standing in a small clearing, with a stallion who clearly knew I was invading his space. The slamming of his front hoof woke me up. I felt alive, and only then did I second guess my choice of crossing that fence.

Coping through substance abuse, I “came to” in many strange places, and oddly enough, this was one of those places. The traumatic experience of witnessing the accident that took my dad’s life left me numb. Later, I learned that this was a normal psychological adaptation after experiencing a traumatic event (TIP, 2013, p.70). It felt as though I was screaming at the top my lungs and nothing was coming out.

At this time of loss, I questioned my identity and anything that had to do with faith as I understood it then. He always told me the

same story, of how I came to be. The story is highlighted in my childhood memories as a place of belonging. This all came crashing down the day his life here on earth ended. Who was I without the affirmation of my dad’s story of how I came to be? What did it mean to be an Indigenous woman in a “White settler” world? Little Bear (2000) suggests that understanding the concept of Aboriginal and Western worldviews brings understanding to “the paradoxes that colonialism poses for social control” (p. 77). Conflicted by ingrained values, my soul felt bound by the limitations of Eurocentric beliefs.

Reflecting on my life drove me into a spiral of emotions that were easier suppressed than faced. Growing up, I was blessed with two hard working parents who always reminded us of how much we were loved. They followed a Christian faith and it grounded them in tough times. My siblings and I attended a Christian school; trying to find my place in these spaces always left me unsettled. My parents were challenged with intersecting acts of oppression. They would face it with the faith that they believed in something greater than themselves. My parents struggled to make ends meet and it always confused me, because I saw how hard they worked.

“They came and told my dad that if I didn’t go to school, he was going to go to jail.” She was five years old. Inukukii is her name.

My mom, Inukukii, comes from a large family and many of her family members have passed on. “In 1894, amendments to the Indian Act empowered the Governor in Council to establish its own residential schools and to make regulations imposing fines or prison sentences on First Nations parents whose children did not attend government-controlled schools” (Anderson, Miller, & Newman, 2018, p. 314). They came for my mom and she attended Indian Residential School for 10 years. Although she feels that her experiences do not reflect others’ more serious experiences of abuse, Renate Eigenbrod (2012) writes that, for all involved - the child taken, the parents left behind - the damage of Residential Schools “contribute[s] to upholding the continuance of traditions against the discourses of loss and

vanishing” (p. 278). My mom’s and every person’s experiences at these schools are valid. Historical trauma is described as a “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations” originating from vast group experiences (TIP, 2013, p. 6). These definitions validate the experiences of injustice that people live with today.

People who live with survivors of Indian Residential School experience intergenerational trauma. The Trauma Informed Practice Guide (2013) describes it as “psychological and emotional” effects which can influence “coping and adaptation patterns” developed in response to experiences (p. 6). Mom would tell me stories of how her mom was a seamstress and how her dad, my grandpa, worked hard as a pickup man and all-around cowboy. These are the stories that she highlights as her childhood memories.

The school influenced a series of cyclical events. My mom carries her Blackfoot language in her heart, never really losing it, just protecting it. When she speaks, she embodies more than just words; the language portrays experiences and actions of those who have gone before us. Language connects us as “one of the most important tenets... our languages guide us in our relationships” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 22). The family dynamics interrupted by these schools are irreplaceable. The way we go forward should be an act of awareness and solidarity for the ones who did not make it home.

Mom likes to share stories with me, and I love to listen. We sit, and she will tell a story as if she is drawing a picture, talking with her hands. The more details she gives, the more colorful it becomes. The stories about her time in Indian Residential School are not very colorful. There are so many stories; I remember these stories and think of all the missing colors. I have always felt like there were missing pieces of me, too. This is how I understand it. We lost our colors in that school, our colors being our spirit, what makes us whole. This part of healing brings great courage to face feelings of the unknown.

My memories of school are not good. After five years in a private school, two years into the public-school system my attendance was minimal to nil. Racist remarks and judgmental behavior prevented me from engaging

in academic learning. In grade five, a youth pastor mocked my appearance, as did a seventh-grade elementary peer. Internalization of these types of events can notably be signs of “anxiety guilt” or “reflexive mechanism to cope with oppression” (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 123). It was easier to simply accept the things for which people looked down upon you. It did not take long for me to become that “careless, drunk Indian” that people pretend not to see, but are quick to judge.

He was calling from across the street, “Penny, Penny Girl!!” and he laughed. Intoxicated and bewildered he followed at a distance. “Leave me alone, and never call me that! She is not my mother...,” I yelled back. A week later he passed on, from “an alcohol induced incident?!”

Remorse left me in shock: “he didn’t know.” He spoke of a mother who orphaned her child at birth. “Was that me?... I didn’t want to know, not now.” The Indian Act continues to retraumatize and assimilate Indigenous people through “cultural imperialism” that perpetually degrades the autonomy to which we struggle to hold on (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 189). Historical Oppression is passed on through embodiment that comes from internalization, which can be expressed as horizontal violence (Burnette & Figley, 2017, p. 40).

When “I came to” for the last time, I had a beautiful baby boy. His need woke me up out of my numbness. And things changed. I changed. I began to live for tomorrows. Because in his eyes, I was more than all those things I had internalized. I vowed to always do right by him, even if it made me look bad. He was not going to go through as many dark days as I had. So, I began to work on myself, listening to the Elders and learning where I came from.

First I had to recognize that acceptance and gratitude are the foundations to love and life. Believe it or not, I learned this by looking through the eyes of my child, his eyes teaching me my responsibility to make the right choices. The reciprocal nature of life gives me awareness that what I do influences him, and if I cannot take care of myself, I cannot take care of him. This looked different for me over the years; the toughest part was exploring the different feelings of unsettlement.

Caught deep in thought, we came to an abrupt halt. He tilted his head to the side and looked at me out of the corner of his eye, as if to say, "Are you here to ride or shall I take you for a ride!?" He is an Arabian named Sox, the biggest motivator to reach deep for my own potential.

In the beginning, it can be scary. A culturally-based family treatment program helped me explore the roots of Indigenous Knowledge, and what was taken away through cultural assimilation as a result of the Indian Residential Schools. Community is the biggest influence on my connection to culture and balance; the "recognition of a group's collective history is often necessary to make sense of the current health and social conditions" (Bombay, n.d., p. 333). Having a chance to learn our "history provides a context for understanding individuals' present circumstances, and is an essential part of the healing process" (Bombay, n.d., p. 333). Through ceremonial practices that acknowledge the cyclical nature of life, I embrace spirit and a connection to a higher power, bringing back the innocence of faith.

It has been 14.5 years that I have been working through the accident that took my dad's life. The accident was a turning point for me to define my own "way of knowing," by a discovery of my own autonomy. Incorporating the medicine wheel to balance life's obstacles challenges me to strive for potential. With an understanding that healing is a process, I may never fully recover from the grief that trauma holds. What goes into my medicine wheel looks different with time, it is forever evolving, but the foundation is where I find peace.

I caught the twinkle in her eye. She wants me to dream. Because when I dream, she dreams, and we all dream; and we all reach that place of inner peace. "Researchers have reported a significant inverse relationship between hope and depression: as hope increases, depression decreases" (Frederick, K. E., Hatz, J. I., & Lanning, B., 2015, p. 810).

My mom, Inukukii, was always aware of the love I held for horses. As my children grew older, I began to work hard on myself, physically, mentally, spiritually, and emotionally. Doing yoga and weight training connected me to spirit in a grounding way that increased my self-respect. With a heightened

self-awareness I met one great friend, S.R., who continues to help me build on my own potential. We began riding every other day and the first time Mom saw me ride confirmed my connection to the horse. The benefits of riding are obvious as my mood and behaviour change drastically, affecting those around me in a positive way.

When I began riding, I was severely overworking myself. Then I began to have more self-awareness and to recognize my value. I began to focus on my own wellbeing before supporting others effectively. Collaboration went beyond riding. The horse-and-rider relationship is based on reciprocity, as I see it. You learn mutual respect, to make the best decisions for safety in partnership. I learned this at the top of a narrow trail.

Shale rock slid down both sides of the trail as it came to a dead end. Anxiety threatened to control my fate; I had to let Sox take the lead. He turned on a dime and we headed back down the hill to safety.

As much as I loved riding with my good friend, the balance I find in holistically grounding opens my perspective to healing as a journey. White Plume (2016) shares,

[T]he horse is gifted with a sensitivity that helps us by mirroring our emotions. Our interactions with a horse will reflect what is true in our lives, and help us to rebalance ourselves. At the same time, their way of being, and our interacting with them in nature, makes this process natural and easy. In the Medicine Wheel Model, we recognize this is because when we are working with the horse, we are working spirit to spirit. (p. 3).

I felt I had to challenge myself more as a parent and role model to my children, my nieces, my nephews, and their peers.

Searching my options with my husband's support, we both stepped into post-secondary education. The course I took grounded my knowledge in social justice for Indigenous communities. At the end of my first program I was blessed with a practicum opportunity to be of service in a trauma recovery group

that was equine-facilitated. I knew this was the direction I needed to take.

Equine Assisted Learning (EAL) is an experiential group-learning process; no riding is necessary as the focus is ground activities (Dell, 2008, p. 91). We look at the horse as a teacher. A professional mental health counselor will facilitate reflection on participants' experiences and understanding of their interactions with the horses. The benefits are endless, with plenty of opportunity for participants to build positive relationships. The horses immediate intuitive response support, "an approach aimed at increasing life skills through hands-on doing, and has been identified as useful in building communication, problem-solving, and team building skills, as well as enhancing personal awareness and a sense of self" (Dell, 2008, p.92). When I look into the eyes of a horse I see a reflection of myself looking back at me.

"I feel so angry at him, he sold all the horses...& for what? ...alcohol." Powerless, she confessed her frustrations. Offering a reframe, I suggested, "Mom..., maybe Grandpa was just as angry as you. He probably felt just as powerless. How was he supposed to pass on our Blackfoot traditions? How was he supposed to pass on our relationship to the horse?"

With the sharing of stories, our experiences connect us to greater purpose. I could feel that it hurt her to say these words aloud. We all internalize differently. It takes courage to express what lies beneath the surface. I am grateful that she shared her feelings of loss with me. It helped us both to understand. The extreme calling from horses goes deeper than we both comprehended. They were a big part of our family's history, a big part of our way of life before "the schools." This understanding gives me more opportunity to give back.

People tend to look at me in disbelief when they hear the roles I play, leaving me feeling disdained. Babies are a blessing and I was gifted with four beautiful children: Cohen (14), Cierra (10), Patience (9), and Wyatt (5). They all inspire me to leave this world a better place. An Elder once explained "existence as a link, in a chain of

many before and many to come."

I grabbed my daughter's hand, just as he had done to mine. I felt a great sense of pride for the responsibility she was showing. Then his words came out of my mouth: "ngessi my girl. I'm happy you are here with me."

We were coming from the barn. She finished hauling hay and mucking out the stall. We got our first horse. His name is Trey. He is a 7-year-old strawberry red roan mustang who has become the foundation of my medicine wheel. The coping adaptations have changed: in the beginning, I was jumping fences to be with horses unconsciously; now, I am more aware of the benefits that I receive from being with a horse in safe spaces.

A grounding of stories and knowledge takes reflection of "Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit" in a natural holistic sense (Archibald, 2008, p.9). Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity, Reverence, Holism, Interrelatedness, and Synergy guide my reflection in writing this narrative. My dad was the one who always told me the story of how my parents came to pick me up in Jasper, Alberta. The day I lost him, I felt like I lost that story. But I did not; I was given the opportunity to learn more about the days before Jasper and the days before my biological mother's days.

What I learned is that I was not an "orphan" and I am not an "intergenerational survivor." I am not those derogatory labels that are racist and discriminating. I am the best parts of my birth mom Marlene (*Penny*) One Owl, a warrior before her time, in a world that only wanted to diminish her light. I have artistic abilities that have been passed down from my Great Grandpa Mike One Owl.

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Alice George

Inukikii states, "He had a creative way of sharing knowledge." The stories my Inukukii shares with me will soon be the stories that I share with my children. The knowledge that I pass on will be the knowledge of star dust travelling from years before me to years ahead of me.

"It's when you can take all that knowledge... Bring it down ten inches and apply it to your heart, then you will truly understand..."

– In memory of Aba'
(Thomas Willie George:
May 20, 1933 – August 11, 2004)

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