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"To me, Indigenous Research means...Resilience for our Indigenous peoples"

HOLDING ONTO TRADITIONAL INDIGENOUS WAYS IN CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Ḱálhwáʔalap nsnekwínukwaʔ Wynona Edwards nskwátsitsa Tškwáylacwmekan.
Hello everyone, my name is Wynona Edwards. I am from Pavilion, BC.

I would like to give thanks to all of the many teachers in my life: my ancestors before me, my family, my grandmothers, my grandfathers, my mother, my father, my brothers Alexis and Dallas Edwards, My Grandmother Rita, my Godfather Jack, my 'Mister,' Charlene Cuthbert ("Aunty Chucky") and Rose, my St'at'imc language teacher Bucky, Thomas Terry, Kizzy, all my adopted sisters and brothers, all my nieces and nephews, adopted aunties and uncles within the powwow trail, the Elders from Cplul'kw'ten, and, most importantly, my daughter Sunshine. Kukwstumckálap.

Introduction

We were and are a peaceful people. We even welcomed the wasichu [white man]. Only when we saw them building roads, forts, killing off the game, committing buffalo genocide, when we saw them ripping off our land for gold, only then did we realize that what they wanted was our land. They took away our pride, our customs, our MEDICINE. Then we began to fight. For our earth, for our children. That started what the whites call the Great Indian Wars of the West. I call it the Great Indian Holocaust. - Leonard Crow Dog (as cited in Yerlilerinde, 2002, p. 1)

Indigenous culture has changed tremendously over time, but we have fought to save our peaceful nature and culture. Culture is always changing and adapting; Indigenous culture is no different, but it has been damaged by the effects of colonization. Indigenous people have been making many efforts to reclaim their traditional culture and values, I fought hard for the cultural knowledge that I currently have. It is a battle we are still fighting; many of us are trying to keep our culture alive, and that has been a long fight. This paper incorporates my own experience of resilience along with that of my Indigenous family across Turtle Island. With the cultural values and knowledge I hold dear to my heart and spirit, I have been striving to learn. It was not until I was in University that I learned the basics of my language. I grew up off my reserve, away from my "home," my traditional territory. I grew up not knowing where I came from, that is, not knowing the land and my community and distant family. All I know is that I have a laminated card with my picture telling me that I am from Tškwáylacw, which includes my tribal number: a status card. I remember when I was little, my mother would take me back "home" to go fishing and that is probably my greatest memory of being there. Strangely, a memory I cherish is the smell of fish guts, snapping the necks of fish after catching them, cutting them, and

making dried salmon. This is why I choose to write this paper: to reclaim some of the culture and community that I missed from living off-reserve.

I am from the St'at'imc Nation. I include my traditional language because our language demonstrates our resilience, the resilience not only of the St'at'imc Nation but of all Indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States. My language, and all Indigenous languages in Canada and the United States, have been targeted for extinction for over the past 152 years. Also, it has been only 69 years since we were lawfully allowed to practice our traditional ceremonies and traditional ways of knowing within Kanata¹. Using my language is an act of resistance to the genocidal attempts of governments over the past 152 years. I barely know my language but I am striving to learn as much as I can. I could not imagine growing up in a time where it was illegal to speak my language, to attend sweat lodges, sun dances, and different traditional ceremonies. I could not imagine not being allowed to attend powwows or round dances. As I grew up following the "Powwow Trail," I have fallen in love with dancing and singing. I love traveling to powwows and round dances. I love having the opportunity to attend traditional ceremonies without fear of being in trouble with the Government of Canada or without having to hide and be secretive about it. Sixty-nine years wasn't that long ago, but the change in that time has been immense. I have had the opportunity to sit with Elders who have shared stories of how they would sneak and hide from the White man to sweat and attend ceremonies to pray in our traditional ways. It has only been 69 years and here I am today, proudly wearing a ribbon skirt, proudly wearing braids, proudly speaking what little of my language I know. I fight hard to walk a sober life and to find balance between our traditional ways and contemporary times.

This paper is an opportunity to explore how traditional ways have grounded me and guided my actions. I want to ensure future

¹ Huron-Iroquois word meaning "village" or "settlement."

The name "Canada" likely came from the word "Kanata". (Canada.ca, 2017).

generations have understanding. By sharing my own experience and the words of my teachers, I hope to give others a path forward, especially our children.

The Battle of Colonization

Since colonization, it has been a constant battle to be an Indigenous person. We were forced onto Reserve lands, pushed off traditional territories to "meet the perceived needs of the imperial powers" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission [TRC henceforth], 2015, p. 49). The TRC (2015) discusses the attempt to assimilate Indigenous people that was justified by forcing "Christianity and civilization," but "it does not stand up to legal, moral, or even logical scrutiny" (p. 49). When the Indian Act was created, it stated who could and could not be an "Indian," using restrictions like blood quantum. The government used laws to decide who could obtain Indian status and who could not. These laws were sexist to Indigenous women; for example, women who married non-Indigenous men lost their status.

As discussed earlier, another element of this battle was stripping Indigenous people of their traditional languages; this is a significant loss, as language is an integral part of any culture. Language is necessary for our songs and storytelling, and for keeping our culture alive. As stated in the TRC final report (2015),

Some Survivors refused to teach their own children their Indigenous languages and cultures because of the negative stigma that had come to be associated with them during their school years. Many of the ninety surviving Indigenous languages in Canada are under serious threat of extinction." (p. 155).

Many of our traditional teachings are communicated through our traditional stories and songs. These teachings, these stories, these ways of knowing that we share as a people are all expressed through our traditional languages. Many of our úcwalmicw words cannot be translated into English, and there are a lot of words in English that are not in our Indigenous languages. As the residential schools took our languages away from us, so did the Sixties Scoop, where our children were placed in non-Indigenous homes where they were not allowed to speak their languages.

Government policies like the Sixties Scoop and residential schools removed Indigenous children from their families and communities (TRC, 2015). This attack on families still affects Indigenous people today. The Sixties Scoop placed Indigenous children into non-Indigenous homes. Adoptions of Indigenous children into non-Indigenous families often took place without the child's birth family's consent. Like the residential schools, this was clearly an attempt by the colonizers to terminate Indigenous culture; as General Richard Harry Pratt, a U.S. cavalry captain, said, "Kill the Indian in him and save the man" (as cited in Little, 2018). These schools stripped Indigenous people of their only ways of knowing by forbidding them from speaking their traditional languages and practicing their cultural ways and values. Howard (2011) speaks of "power imbalances and colonial agendas," and residential, day, and industrial school systems served those agendas and reinforced power imbalances: "[t]he loss of traditional lands, enfranchisement, internalized colonialism, cultural and linguistic genocide, and community divisiveness are but a few of the detrimental consequences of federal education policy" (p. 123). To our Indigenous peoples family is fundamental to our culture and our communities. Family is of huge importance to our people, we not only include our 'immediate family' as family but we also uphold the same love and importance to our vast extended family as well. We often at times have many adopted family members as well. Our Indigenous families are big and extended.

I was raised and taught, like many Indigenous people, that children are our future and they depend on us to teach them our traditional ways. This ensures our Indigenous teachings will live on from generation to generation: "it will be up to [us] to believe in the old stories, even when the world around [us] says they are wrong, they are weak, they are dead... That will be the time when [our] people will come forth with the old stories and offer them up again" (Valente, 2019, p.33). Our ways of knowing require that we take care of and love the land, listen to the heart, and look forward to a better future. The foundation is ensuring

that we take care of our children; they are the future generations. Postcolonial times are a time for change, a chance to better ourselves and to educate others to understand and move on from disenfranchisement and colonialism.

The Battle Continues

It is heartbreaking that in 2016, Indigenous people (including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people) made up only 4.9 percent of Canada's population, but the Indigenous population is growing at a higher rate than the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada, 2018). My Elders have always taught me that children are our next generation and change starts with them; they are the future. With our ever growing population we are gaining the opportunity to fight for all that was lost from us.

We now have the chance to reclaim our traditional cultures and languages. This is not an easy fight but it is a battle that we are going to win.

First Nations families are investigated more frequently than non-Aboriginal families, which leads to more Aboriginal children and youth being taken away and placed in non-Aboriginal foster homes. They lose their cultural values and the opportunity to practice and learn their languages and traditional ways. "The Sixties Scoop has now given birth to what some call the 'Millennium Scoop,' referring to the high rates of Indigenous children in care today" (Hick & Stokes, 2017, p. 283). It is sad that there are more Aboriginal children and youth in the foster care system than any others; there are more children in care now than there were in the residential Schools. "The doors are closed at the residential schools but the foster homes are still existing and our children are still being taken away" (TRC, 2015, p. 138).

"Indigenous culture has changed tremendously over time, but we have fought to save our humble ways of life and we have held on to our traditional cultures and beliefs."

—
Wynona Edwards

The loss of First Nations culture is still ongoing:

Today, the effects of the residential school experience and the Sixties Scoop have adversely affected parenting skills and the success of many Aboriginal families. These factors, combined with prejudicial attitudes toward Aboriginal parenting skills and a tendency to see Aboriginal poverty as a symptom of neglect, rather than as a consequence of failed government policies, have resulted in grossly disproportionate rates of child apprehension among Aboriginal people. (TRC, 2015, p. 138).

As the Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers who were interviewed for the TRC report indicated, healing can be facilitated by “using spiritual ceremonies and peacemaking practices, and by retelling oral history stories that reveal how their ancestors restored harmony to families and communities” (TRC, 2015, p. 44). We must break the ongoing cycle of assimilation and cultural genocide. Indigenous people believe in holistic ways of healing. Moorehead (2015) states,

Native Americans have increasingly expressed their power to act in their own interests, grounded in a shared belief that healing from historical injustices and continuing inequalities might be found through Indigenous cultural practices. Specifically, participation in traditional healing practices is thought to strengthen cultural identity, bolster community support systems, and promote political empowerment, all of which have been recognized as potential hallmarks of resilience for Indigenous communities. (p. 384)

I have been lucky to have been able to participate in culture practices and build my resilience.

ti wa7 tsunámcáł

I carry with me the words of many Knowledge Keepers in my life who have shared their stories and teachings with me. I once asked someone I admire, “Why is culture important?” They told me that culture is what grounds us; it is the foundation which holds us together. They once told me that we as Indigenous people strive to find belonging, powerfully

stating that “some of us find powwows and some of us find gangs.” We are warriors and we are searching for a sense of belonging and a place to call home. But, as all cultures change and adapt to new ways over time, I believe that First Nations culture is on the right track to preservation. To me, this means finding a balance of living in two worlds, holding onto traditional Native ways in contemporary times. As stated in the TRC report (2015),

Indigenous peoples' world views, oral history traditions, and practices have much to teach us about how to establish respectful relationships among peoples and with the land and all living things. Learning how to live together in a good way happens through sharing stories and practising reconciliation in our everyday lives. (p. 18)

It is easy for a First Nations person to get lost in this world, to lose their traditional ways of knowing and their culture. As Lawrence (2004) asserts, “Anyone with a Native background who wants to learn about their culture and who hasn’t had access to it - which is most of us, including a lot of people on reserves - there’s some sense of loss” (p. 131). Some people may have the opportunity to learn but choose not to, and some people may have been living off-reserve their whole lives and have no knowledge of their culture whatsoever, but wish to learn. Whether it is Aboriginal peoples living in urban areas or those living within a rural community, many do not wish to be culturally knowledgeable. And we are all struggling to live in two worlds, so those wanting traditional ways fight to keep their culture alive. Howard (2011) writes that cities are “rootless, temporary constructs disconnected from a natural world” (p.4). That disconnection leads to Indigenous people searching to find their place, an experience Howard (2011) calls “Culture loss or between-two-worlds syndrome” (p.4). The constant interaction with non-Aboriginal culture and lack of access to land, Elders, Aboriginal languages, and ceremonies are assumed characteristics of Aboriginal urban existence.” (Howard, 2011, p. 4). Living in the city away from the land, away from what we now call “home” on our reservations, can be difficult at times when all

we want is to feel connections with mother earth and our ancestors, our communities, families, and extended families.

Our people hold the utmost respect for Indigenous women. They are life-givers and the backbones of their families and their communities. As it is said in the Cheyanne Proverbs, "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is finished, no matter how brave its warriors, or how strong their weapons." This saying is a reminder of why the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) should not be taken lightly. Our people have been fighting to keep our languages and our cultures alive; we have been struggling to overcome the effects of the residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. Even today, we face the highest rates of our Indigenous youth and children in foster care. Amongst all of this in Canada there is the national crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Years ago, I was told a story by one of my many teachers within my travels, someone I met traveling throughout powwow country. They told me the story that on an eagle, the tail feathers represent the women because those tail feathers help the eagle glide through the sky and create balance. Like the tail feathers of an eagle, our women are the backbones of our families and communities; they hold us together.

Our Future

Our children are the future. I have a daughter and I am raising her as traditionally as I can, because I know that she is the next generation and will be a life-giver to future generations. When she was born in 2009, she was born into powwows, round dances, and ceremonies. She lives a life in which she does not know alcohol and drugs in her home. Her identity is strong, even from a young age. She told me when she was two years old that she was an "old-style jingle dress dancer." This remains true as she grows and still chooses to be an "old-style jingle dress dancer"; even though she has earned many eagle feathers and plumes, she does not dance with them. Holding strong to her decision as a toddler, she dances old-style jingle without plumes or feathers, and without an elaborately-designed dress. She wears her hair long because I have taught her the importance of our hair and how our hair holds our power,

which includes me teaching her how to take care of it and the importance of wearing braids. I have taught her what I know about traditional medicines and foods, and I will continue to teach her our traditional and spiritual ways. As I learn, I will continue to teach her. I am teaching her to create a balance between contemporary times and holding onto our cultural values and ways; I am raising a warrior, the next generation. As I fight to walk this life in a humble way, with humility and the importance of prayer and giving thanks, I am doing my best to teach her to hold on to these ways and the importance of living this life following our sacred teachings. I hope as she grows she will choose to walk this life in a good way holding onto our old ways as our grandmothers and grandfathers walked before us. I hope my daughter will walk this life with our teachings and I hope she will find a balance between these two worlds we walk.

Conclusion

Like many Indigenous peoples I have struggled to hold onto our traditional languages, culture and beliefs. Since colonization the sáma7 have made it very hard for us Indigenous peoples to hold onto our cultural traditions from the start of Residential Schools, the Sixties Scoop, and the Child Welfare system today. I am a decedent of intergenerational trauma survivors, the little cultural knowledge and language that I know today I fought very hard to learn. The traditional teachings that I uphold, and the way of life that I walk, have not been learned in a classroom, from a book, or from academic journal articles. I have learned these teachings from my mother, out on the land, from my grandmothers and grandfathers, aunties and uncles, brothers and sisters, and from my adopted family from all over Turtle Island. I have sat with the Elders many times, I have offered tobacco to hear the stories of the old ways, and I have listened. I have seen a Scwená7em for healing, I have prayed to our skélkla7, and I have prayed to Ku'kwpi7. I am proud to be úcwalmicw. By writing this paper, I am a Knowledge Maker, and I hope to be a teacher for the next generations to come.

Kukwstumčkálap for listening,
Tákem nsnekwnúkw7a.

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