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Reclaiming my Indigenous Identity and the Emerging Warrior: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

This autoethnography describes the Natalie St-Denis' four-year journey in Indigenous social work, characterized as: awakening, exploring, indigenizing, reclaiming, belonging, and emerging Warrior. *Awakening* began with seeing herself as an '*Indigenous woman*' and is retold through remembrances, reflections and conversations. In the second phase, guided by Elders, she embraces ceremony to *explore* her emerging identity. Adopting Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing serves to *indigenize* -- the third phase of the journey. *Reclaiming*, the fourth phase, is the actor's reconciliation of both indigenous and Western worldviews, and in *belonging*, she describes the reconstruction of an Indigenous community. The final phase, *emerging Warrior*, concerns the integration of her personal and professional social work practitioner identity. St-Denis' journey is revealed within the complicity of the social work profession in historical and ongoing colonization of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Warrior is offered as a pathway to decolonize social work praxis.

This autoethnography describes my four-year journey of Indigenous social work. When I began practicing social work and doing my Masters in Social Work part-time at age 45, I had no idea that I would be propelled into an unexpected, empowering, and, at times, unsettling journey. I came to the field with the idea of giving back to society by working with refugees and immigrants – but the Creator had a different plan. My foray into social work reconnected me to my Indigenous heritage, transformed my identity, and informed and directed my evolving social work praxis; the subject of this inquiry.

I chose to share this journey through an autoethnography to better understand my place within an Indigenous social work praxis. Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe that writing and researching an autoethnography requires the author to “systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” Witkin (2014) discusses how autoethnography allows for the gathering of knowledge from a postmodernist approach, suggesting that knowledge production is grounded in one narrative among many possible narratives. Consequently, “autoethnographic enquiry seeks to enrich our understandings, expand our awareness, increase our sensitivities, and provide insights that can lead to practical action” (Witkin, 2014, p. 10).

Harris (2013) explains, “an emergent identity is an evolving integration of self and ‘other’ (or what is outside of self) through participating in activities that give meaning to who we are” (p. 20). Weaver (2001) describes three facets of Indigenous identity: (1) self-identification; (2) community identification; and (3) external identification. She further cautions that Indigenous identity is complex and that “many measures of cultural identity are actually measures of acculturation (into the dominant society)” (p. 6). In reference to how Māori peoples negotiate their identities in contemporary times, Rata, Liu and Hutchings (2014) acknowledge that “Western psychological theory remains scarce on how Indigenous individuals and collectives might promote cultural connectedness and secure identity development” (p. 292). They propose the Pōwhiri Identity Negotiation Framework, which is a “dynamic process” that “allows for individuals to make identity transitions, and it affirms multiple identity positions” (p. 316).

For this autoethnography, I have deconstructed my journey into “phases” which I characterize as: awakening, exploring, indigenizing, reclaiming, belonging, and emerging Warrior. My journey however has not been linear; it is dynamic, interactive, interconnected and evolving process, which has, at times, transcended time and space.

AWAKENING

My awakening began, when like most mornings of my adult life, I was getting ready for work, fixing my hair and applying make-up in front of the mirror. As a 33-year-old, my face was no longer something I consciously acknowledged. However, on that

morning, I was shocked by my reflection – an Indigenous woman was staring back at me. Although nothing in my external world had changed, something within me was stirring and awakening. However, a week later, the Indigenous woman in the mirror had disappeared. It took another 12 years for her to reappear, to take a stand and challenge my identity. This surfacing and submerging of my Indigenous identity was not unique to my journey as Weaver (2011) writes, “cultural identity is not static; rather, it progresses through developmental stages during which an individual has a changing sense of who he or she is, perhaps leading to a rediscovered sense of being Native” (p. 244).

Four years ago, when I started working in the field of social work alongside Indigenous families, I felt a deep kinship with them. Some asked me if I was Indigenous, a difficult question to answer in the beginning, because this part of my identity was just beginning to surface. Before my awakening, I understood my cultural identity as a white French-Canadian woman: my father was born and raised in the province of Quebec and my mother is an Acadian woman who grew up in the province of New Brunswick.

Although we were not connected to our Indigenous heritage during my childhood, it is important to provide context on the original peoples of the territories upon which we lived because they have played a role in our genetic makeup and are part of our family history. The province, now known as Quebec, was mainly colonized by France and is home to the largest French-speaking population in Canada today. Quebec’s original peoples are the Abenakis, Algonquian, Attikameks, Crees, Maliseet, Mi’kmaq, Innus, Naskapis, Hurons-Wendats, Mohawks and Inuit (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2014). Today, about 141,915 Indigenous peoples live in Quebec, 37 percent of whom have Indian Status (Statistics Canada, 2011). The *Indian Act* defines who is eligible for Indian Status; the Indian Registry is the official record identifying those with Indian Status in Canada (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 2015).

New Brunswick, situated on the East coast of Canada, was colonized by France and England. This coastal community is home to the original peoples known as Mi’kmaq and Maliseet. Approximately 22,615 Indigenous peoples live in New Brunswick today, 45 percent of whom have Indian Status (Statistics Canada, 2011).

I currently reside in Blackfoot Treaty 7 territory in Southern Alberta, which include the Kainai, Siksika, and Piikani Nations, as well as the Tsuu T'ina and the Stoney Nakoda First Nations. Alberta is home to 220,700 Indigenous peoples, 44 percent of whom have Indian status (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Before my father passed away in 2008, he was exploring his Mohawk ancestry. The Mohawk are part of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, or people of the long house. My father's desire to uncover his Indigenous heritage was spurred by contact with a long-lost cousin who had recently obtained her Indian Status. While my father was eager to reconnect with this part of his heritage and explore his Indigenous lineage, it is highly unlikely that he would have qualified for Indian Status. As Palmater (2011) explains:

The *Indian Act* and its previous incarnations have resulted in many groups and individuals being excluded from legal recognition as Indians or band members based on grounds of gender, marital status, family status, race, age, and blood quantum or descent. (p. 28)

My maternal great-grandmother, Marie Godin, passed away when my grandfather was nine years old; sadly her story and identity were buried along with her. Her maternal and paternal parents' surnames Comeau and Godin are common names among the Mi'kmaq and Maliseet peoples of Eastern Canada (New Brunswick Church Records, 1998). My journey to identify my heritage started with remembrances, reflections and conversations with my family. In response to inquiring about our ancestry, a maternal aunt told me that Marie Godin's sister looked like a "real Indian." Photographs of my mother and her siblings reveal phenotypes typical of Indigenous peoples. One family anecdote concerns an incident that happened to my mother while travelling through Navajo territory – she was asked about her tribe affiliation. A maternal cousin shared that she is often asked if she is Aboriginal, and would respond, "my grandfather was an Indian and I'm very proud of my heritage." In response to how she knew our grandfather was an Indigenous man, she stated: "I just know; it's obvious."

Recently, my cousin and I spent an evening together reminiscing about our childhood. She offered a memory: "it was late at night and we were out alone looking at the aurora borealis and you shared an 'Indian song' you had learned at school. You said that that we had to dance for the spirits in the sky." At the time, I did not recall the event

and wondered if she was misremembering. The next day however, I began to sing the same Indigenous song, an Iroquois children's song *Ani Couni*.

I also tried more formal methods to uncover my Indigenous roots. I joined a genealogy website and found the wedding certificates for Marie Godin and her parents. I have not been able to locate any birth or death certificates for them. I emailed the closest reserve to where they lived explaining my quest, but didn't get a response; I telephoned and e-mailed the Mi'kmaq-Wolastoqey Centre in New Brunswick for guidance or leads, but again received no response. I believe that I need to go to New Brunswick in person to uncover our family history. However, records may not exist and would require prohibitive amounts of time and money.

Clearly, uncovering one's Indigenous heritage and identity can be challenging, especially if one has been disconnected from this part of their heritage. According to Palmater (2011), the creation and purpose of the *Indian Act*, which controls who can legally be an Indian, is to "assimilate all Indians through legislative extinction" (p. 29). As a result, many Canadians are unaware of their Indigenous roots and are disconnected from their Indigenous heritage. This aligns with the Federal Government's agenda of cultural genocide with the goal to end treaty responsibilities and ultimately control the land and its resources (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005; Bastien, 2004; Lawrence, 2004; Palmater, 2011; Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015; Weaver, 2001). Lawrence (2004) notes the impact of cultural genocide on Indigenous peoples of Canada:

Urban mixed-blood Native people are not extraneous to Indigenous communities [...] they represent the other half of a history of colonization, the children and grandchildren of people removed, dispersed, and continuously bled off from native communities as a result of ongoing colonization policies – residential schooling, termination and relocation, the theft of Native children into the child welfare system, and a century of removing Indian status from Native women and their descendant. (p. 14)

As cited in Dion & Morin (2011), Jerome explains that throughout colonization, Indigenous people have lost their identity in three stages: (1) before colonization, pre-contact Indigenous people were grounded in their way of life; (2) when Europeans arrived to Canada, they described Indigenous peoples as savages that needed to be

educated and civilized, this is when a myriad of assimilation strategies were developed by the government such as placing First Nations people on reserves, prohibiting ceremony, and removing children from their families and placing them in Residential Schools; (3) these tactics destroyed families and communities, and as a result, many Indigenous peoples lost their way of life, their languages, their stories and traditions which led to a loss of identity.

EXPLORING

Exploring my Indigenous identity, has led me to engage in ceremony with Blackfoot and Cree Elders, the goal of which is to “reconnect and harmonize the individual with the Creator, family, nations, society-at-large, Mother Earth, and the universe” (Dion & Morin, 2011, p. 102). Ceremony, according to gkisedtanamoogk and Hancock (1993) “is basically a way of communicating, a way of living. [...] [All ceremonies] have something to do with thanking the presence of the Creator” (p. 17). In the last year, I have engaged in sweat lodges, face painting ceremonies, pipe ceremonies and a vision quest. This has strengthened my Indigenous identity, helped me connect to the Creator and to an Indigenous community.

In particular, I have found sweat lodges to be a very important part of my journey. A sweat lodge is a dome-shaped hut made of willows covered in blankets with a pit in the centre where rocks that have been heated for hours in a fire are placed and splashed with water throughout the ceremony. The purpose of this ceremony is to help purify and heal the body, mind and spirit and provides a sacred space to reconnect with our ancestors and the Creator.

SWEAT LODGE

Last winter, while sitting in my third round of a sweat lodge, I saw a green stream of light hanging above our heads and I became aware of my great-grandmother’s name screaming in my head – *MARIE GODIN, MARIE GODIN* – over and over again. I started weeping, my body almost convulsing with deep-rooted pain, and then it felt as if a truth was revealed to me – that Marie Godin was murdered. In that instance, Marie Godin was real. I felt completely and utterly connected to her. While I will likely never have

confirmation of the circumstances that led to my great-grandmother's death, this experience was very powerful for me.

VISION QUEST

Before for my vision quest (a four-day fast in the woods), I experienced two powerful dreams, which, I am told, were meant to prepare me for my quest. As Bastien (2004) explains "Akaitaiwa [ancestors] prepare and guide us through dreams; sometimes these dreams reveal the future" (p. 79).

In the first dream I am walking through a thick forest at night accompanied by many children when majestic grizzly bears slowly appear from all directions to surround us. I become fearful, start running, yelling at the children to come with me. Running blindly through the darkness, we come across a large mansion. I frantically search for the front door and, once I find it, start banging on it. My deceased father opens the door, and as the entrance widens, a bright warm light greets us. The children and I race into the house. As I make my way into the next room, one of the grizzly bears pokes his head through the window and gently speaks to me: "You can be one of us; you can join us now." Although part of me wants to join, I am reluctant and respond, "I can't," "I must find and take care of my daughter." I then wake up.

In the second dream, I am walking alone in the woods on a bright warm sunny day. Despite the dense forest of tall trees, the sunlight pierces through the branches illuminating my surroundings. A slow moving grizzly bear suddenly appears through the trees and I start running away in fear. I find a small old two-story wooden house with white paint peeling off the exterior and a long staircase leading to the second floor front entrance. I mount the staircase with the grizzly bear closing fast upon my heels, open the door and run in. I cannot however close the door because the bear's paw and snout are blocking the entrance. There are many people in the house mingling and chatting and my screams for help are ignored. I then start slapping the bear's snout telling him to go away; his nose is wet and soft. I expect him to be angry, but his demeanour is calm and I know he is forgiving. I then wake up.

I shared my dreams with Elders who advised that the grizzly bears represent my Indigenous ancestors calling me to join them. Bastien (2015) explains that our ancestors

are part of our cellular memory, and as our spirit guides they come into our dreams, which become transformative experiences.

During my third day of fasting on the vision quest, I was sitting in the tall warm grass and hyper-aware of my surrounding. That day, during long bouts of reflection watching insects crawl around, hearing birds chirping and flapping their wings, I saw brief moments of my life flash through my mind. The moments that appeared to me mostly dealt with those who have shaped my identity and reflect my quest to understand the Indigenous part of my identity and what this meant for me as a social worker.

By the final day of the vision quest, I no longer identified as a ‘white person’, but not ‘Indigenous’ either. I told the Cree Elder Patrick Daigneault in distress “I feel that I am nothing – I have no sense of belonging.” In response the Elder stated: “This is a good thing. You can see this part of yourself as an empty bubble and you get to decide what you put in it. It’s up to you.” This left me with the privilege of choice- to choose if I wanted to be Indigenous or not. I now had the opportunity to reclaim my Indigenous ancestry, a right taken from my ancestors as a consequence of colonization.

INDIGENIZING

I have separated the processes of exploring and indigenizing because I believe participating in ceremony without reframing one’s worldview is simply exploring. The process of indigenizing begins when one is connecting to the Creator during ceremony and adopting Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing.

In the beginning of my journey when still rooted in a Western worldview, I thought that the idea of ancestors – the grandfathers and grandmothers – visiting us in the sweat lodge was merely metaphorical. My worldview was reinforced by dominant ideologies through Western education and society. In order to reclaim my Indigenous identity, I had to deconstruct, in part, my understanding of the world. This aligns with Alfred and Corntassel (2005) notion of being Indigenous as “thinking, speaking and acting with the conscious intent of regenerating one’s indigeneity” (p. 614).

As I attend more sweat lodges and deepen my understanding of ceremony and the worldview through teachings, I have become more attuned with the cosmic universe and the presence of the ancestors while in ceremony. Bastien (2004) shares that her own

journey “of connecting to the alliances of Kipaitapiiyssinnooni (our way of life) started by connecting with Niitsi’powahsinni (the words that carry the breath of the ancestors) and by coming to know the ancestors through ceremony, offerings, sacrifices, and meditation” (p. 5). Practitioners of traditional knowledge, she asserts, have a responsibility to maintain and re-establish ways of life that respect the natural world. In a similar way gkisedtanamoogk and Hancock (1993) assert that, “Indigenous peoples everywhere understand and experience themselves as intrinsically and spiritually related to the land and all living things” (p. 4).

RECLAIMING

The process of reclaiming my Indigenous identity and merging it with my non-indigenous identity is ongoing. According to Weaver (2001), “developing a cultural identity consists of a lifelong learning process of cultural awareness and understanding” (p. 244). She also talks about the complexity of defining Indigenous identity, because of the many internal and external influences, such as social, economic, legal and political factors, that impact identity.

At this point in my journey, I am beginning to view myself as an Indigenous woman, but struggle in fully claiming this identity because I have neither lived on a reserve nor faced the hardships central to many Indigenous peoples’ lives. I also haven’t had the privilege of growing up with community, traditions, stories and ceremony. Palmater (2011) describes how individuals judge themselves and others based on where they fit on the “Indianness” scale, which is a creation of the colonizers. Colonizers, she asserts, created the image of what it is to be Indian based on “one Indian people who existed at a frozen point in time” (p. 32). Weaver (2001) further notes that the struggle among Indigenous peoples to fully claim their identity is due to internalized oppression, “a by-product of colonization” (p. 250). She further explains, “We fight among ourselves and often accuse each other of not being ‘Indian enough’ based on differences in politics, religion or phenotype” (p. 250). In order to counter this internalized oppression of who is Indian enough, Alfred and Corntasse (2005) argue that communities need to engage in the regeneration and decolonization processes:

They [decolonization and regeneration] are shifts in thinking and action that emanate from recommitments and reorientation at the level of the self that, over time and through proper organization, manifest as broad social and political movements to challenge state agendas and authorities. (p. 611)

BELONGING

Although I now assert my Indigenous ancestry, I am not connected to my ancestral communities. I believe that if I had a direct connection to a band or nation, I would have a stronger sense of my Indigenous identity, and therefore, a greater sense of belonging. Weaver (2001) confirms this, acknowledging that, “identity can only be confirmed by others who share that identity. The sense of membership in a community is so integrally linked to a sense of identity that native people often identify themselves by their reservations or tribal communities” (p. 245). Unfortunately, most, if not all, reserves do not accept members without Indian Status due to funding and allocation of resources from the government, hence, current external and internal structures, systems and processes continue to perpetuate colonization and oppressive practices (Palmater, 2011; Robertson, 2013; Weaver, 2001).

My sense of belonging has been nurtured by my relationship with Elder Patrick Daigneault who has embraced my journey and extended his support as my guide. His acceptance has had a profound effect on me, and I am developing a deep kinship with him, his family and the greater community. In the last year, in addition to attending ceremony, I was taught on how to make moccasins, bead, harvest traditional medicines, catch songs, and erect Tipis. In referring to the importance of tradition to Indigenous cultures, Palmater (2011) explains that they:

. . . are a connection between the present and the past. Traditions tie us not only to our ancestors, but to friends, families, and communities in the present. This connection, which helps form our sense of identity, can then be passed on to future generations, thereby completing the circle of relations necessary to maintain culture. (p. 189)

EMERGING WARRIOR

My first position in social work was in community development in a low-income complex that housed many Indigenous families. In that role, I developed and offered a wide array of children's after-school programs. After a few months, one child asked me: "Are you a teacher?" I naively responded with pride, "No, I am a social worker." The children gasped in horror as they fearfully moved away from me. "Oh?!" I said, "I'm not the bad kind, I'm the good kind," realizing in that moment what social workers represented to these children: social workers take children away from their families. Indeed, "many social work academics, researchers and practitioners – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous – have referred to social work as an arm of colonization" (Baskin, 2011, p. 135). It became evident to me, that carrying the title of "social worker" when working with Indigenous families and communities is another word for someone who is dangerous. Freeman (2011) states, "words have political as well as everyday meanings and have the power to create and recreate power relations among people. The words we use signal the kinds of relationships we want to promote" (p. 118). Big Plume (2008) advances the term, Warrior, as a way of decolonizing social work, she explains:

Many nations recognize Warriors as symbols of the fighting spirit. Warriors seek to become powerful and strive to empower others. Warriors stand up for others especially when it is most difficult to do so. Bravery, defiance, and the fighting spirit are key ingredients in the Warrior makeup. (p. 147)

The Warrior is explicitly linked to social work praxis and may provide an anti-colonial strategy that has "a focus on the recovery of traditional Indigenous knowledge" (Hart, 2009, p. 30). "Just as Warriors seek empowerment, social workers seek empowerment as an antidote for social problems related to dependency. Social workers must also be kind, loving, defiant, strong, and challenging as leaders and fighters" (Big Plume, 2008, p. 271). Similarly, Baskin (2009) identifies that new social workers are warriors as "they have a far greater understanding of the history and impacts of colonization, are not afraid to speak out strategically [...] they have the potential to create a true revolution" (p. 151). In taking up the Warrior role, Indigenous social workers can assist individuals, families and communities to reach the good life – *mino-pimatasiwini* (Hart, 1999). Challenging colonialism and postmodern imperialism and the resultant oppression forces

enacted at the personal, cultural and structural levels (Mullaly, 2010) is foundational to achieving *mino-pimatasiwin* (Hart, 1999).

At the personal level, the Warrior engages in a supportive relationship “where the helper and the person receiving the support are involved in a shared experience of learning and growing” (Hart, 1999, p. 103). Indeed, my own growth as an emerging Warrior has led me to participate in ceremony along with those whom I serve in my professional role, and during which I have allowed myself to be vulnerable, to be a fellow human being. The shared experiences of crying, talking, praying and singing together have further strengthened these helping relationships. This follows Hart’s (1999) recommendation for social work practitioners “to recognize that they are role models of positive growth and wellness. They will need to demonstrate respect and be prepared and willing to share their experiences of growth” (p. 106).

At the cultural and structural levels, Warriors play a role in breaking down oppressive systems that have disconnected Indigenous families and communities from their culture, language and way of life. In order to regenerate culture and decolonize our environment within a social work context, Sinclair (2009) suggests that Indigenous social workers need to “address intergenerational and current impacts of colonization as manifested through colonial cultural and social suppression, intrusive and controlling legislation, industrial and residential school systems, the child welfare system, and institutional/systemic/individual racism and discrimination” (p. 23).

Alfred and Corntassel (2005) propose that the pathway to decolonization and indigenization starts “with people transcending colonialism on an individual basis – a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence” (p. 612). For example, when I support families meeting with government social workers I begin the session with a smudge, and through prayer set the intention for a respectful and meaningful conversation to empower families with a voice. During these meetings, I broker and advocate for families often reframing the conversation from blaming individuals for making bad choices to perceiving challenging behaviours as adaptations and responses to traumatic experiences. This approach changes the conversation to be more compassionate and provides space for respect, trust, safety, and empathy – and as a result – a therapeutic

alliance that supports the healing journey. Although, these are small steps in the scope of what needs to happen for decolonization, they embody a “movement, patterns of thought and action that reflect a shift to an Indigenous reality from the colonized places we inhabit today in our minds and in our souls” (Alfred & Cornstassel, 2005, p. 612).

In summary, reclaiming my Indigenous heritage and Indigenous identity is a dynamic process of awakening, exploring, indigenizing, reclaiming, belonging, and finally nurturing the emerging Warrior. This is more than an individual journey. Integrating anti-colonial theory with Warrior philosophy in Indigenous social work education could provide the foundation to empower Indigenous peoples, families and communities towards self-determination and agency (Big Plume, 2008). Decolonizing social work from an anti-colonial framework “allows us to dialogue with important questions of identity affirmation, yet at the same time bring to the discussion relevant issues specifically concerning the interconnections of power, difference, and resistance” (Simmons & Sefa Dei, 2012, p. 68).

During my studies, I explored Indigenous social work scholarship and engaged in ceremony to confront my colonial upbringing and education. Other students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, would benefit from similar opportunities to challenge their worldviews and social locations. A number of universities in North America have recognized the need to immerse students in diverse cultures through intensive field courses as a way to begin to decolonize social work practice. For example, Ives and Thaweiakenrat Loft (2013) explain:

Providing social work students with access to a curriculum which reflects Indigenous cultural and social realities, uses a range of pedagogical approaches, including the traditional ways of learning and knowing, involves guidance and teaching from community Elders, and is delivered in a community setting. (p. 241)

Classrooms and textbooks would not have been sufficient to challenge my worldview; I needed numerous and direct experiences of ceremony and Indigenous relations to decolonize my body, mind, heart and spirit. Coates (2013) supports this idea, when he states that decolonizing social work goes beyond piecemeal courses: “It includes the development of Indigenous social work education programmes and practice

frameworks” (p. 75).

Finally, a “key trait of anti-colonial resistance is culture revitalization for social transformation” (Hart, 2009, p. 31). In order for Indigenous and non-Indigenous social workers to facilitate social transformation at the political, economic, environmental and institutional levels, social work programs (and all other programs in educational institutions) across Canada need to decolonize and indigenize their curriculum to be inclusive of Indigenous worldview and traditional Indigenous knowledge. One can hope that the final report of *Honouring the Truth and Reconciling for the Future* (2015), along with its Calls to Action, will support the social transformation needed to empower and improve the lives of many Indigenous families and communities, not only through adequate funding, but also through higher levels of understanding, respect and compassion by all citizens.

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