

Healing Words

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A RECOGNITION OF BEING

The savage onslaught of colonialism focused its most crushing and long lasting oppression on Aboriginal women, dealing them a triple blow. Aboriginal women lost their position of high esteem first to the dominant power of the colonizing forces which reduced both Aboriginal men and women to the status of savages, then they lost it to the dominant hierarchy of the European patriarchal system and were brought down to the general subservient position held by European Women, and lastly they lost it in their own nations through the abolition of traditional forms of governance and social decision making, which relegated them to the lowest social rung in their communities.

In the Western world access to education has always been, for women, a means to rise above the shackles of stereotypes, to fulfil their aspirations and to play a respected and useful role in their society. Residential schools, for the vast majority of Aboriginal Women, have been none of that. Residential schools devastated whole communities, whole families; it inflicted deadly wounds to Aboriginal cultures and languages, and almost eradicated from the landscape of civilisations a spiritual and societal paradigm based on the interconnectedness of all things.

Originally, despite differences in the ways the numerous nations structured and governed themselves, Aboriginal women occupied a central place in this web of life. At the very least they played a complementary and respected role in the survival, peace and prosperity of their communities. Today, the picture is very different. This issue is meant to offer a glimpse both of the losses endured and of the strength, hopes and achievements that distinguish Aboriginal women in Canada. Like most of the issues we bring forward in Healing words, the questions related to Aboriginal Women and Healing are overwhelming vast and

complex. We have chosen to examine more closely the situation of incarcerated Aboriginal women, and also through the Report from the *Femmes autochtones du Quebec*, the factors that lead to devictimisation and enable women to lead a freer life. We hope this will encourage you on your path, and inspire you to tell us your story.

A few months ago, I came across a book by Kim Anderson entitled *A Recognition of Being*. At the time, I was trying to frame some fundamental questions I had about Aboriginal women and healing. Knowing the losses and the suffering of women in their communities, in urban areas, in prisons, in their homes, and also knowing their indomitable strengths and their dreams, I wanted to ask them how they saw their role in advancing healing in their communities. What would a healed, healthy community look like, and how did they see themselves in it?

I did talk to women, and some of what they said is in this issue, but Kim did provide an answer about the role of Aboriginal women:

The role of Women? I would have difficulty with the word role, actually. More and more as I get older, I see this sort of recognition of being as more important than role. (Elder Shawani Campbell Star, from *A recognition of Being*, by Kim Anderson.)

Today, many Aboriginal women are struggling against enormous odds to find a sense of identity, both as a woman and as an aboriginal woman. This issue is dedicated to all of you: may your voice become ever stronger and clearer, may you walk tall and assured, may your eyes reflect the power and dignity that has always been yours, and may the children that you bring into this world take their rightful place on mother earth. -GR.

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letters

Received by e-mail:

Hey

I am interested in obtaining copies of my residential school records from Shingwauk and the Mush Hole. Can you help me?

Lila.

*

Dear Lila,

We have received a number of requests from Survivors for school records. These records are not in our possession, and we have very limited abilities to get them. Most records of the sort you are seeking are held by the Canadian government, specifically the Department of Indian Affairs.

Mush Hole (Mohawk Indian Residential School) and Shingwauk Survivors also have recourse to organisations that possess other kinds of information. For questions about Shingwauk, contact Don Jackson at (705) 949-2301 extension 216 (jackson@shingwauk.auc.ca). For Mush Hole materials, contact Tom Hill at the Woodland Cultural Centre, (514) 759-2650 extension 243.

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Healing
Words

To receive Healing Words, write to us at Suite 801, 75 Albert Street, Ottawa, Ontario, K1P 5E7 or phone 1-888-725-8886. (In Ottawa, phone 237-4441). Our fax number is (613) 237-4442 and our email is grobelin@ahf.ca or wspear@ahf.ca. Keep in mind that the newsletter is available in French and English and is free. Also available on-line! <http://www.ahf.ca>

submissions

You may submit your articles, letters, or other contributions by fax, mail, or email. We prefer electronic submissions in Corel Word Perfect or MS Word. Please send your writing to:

*The Editors, Healing Words
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Our fax number is (613) 237-4442 and our email addresses for submissions are:



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Please send email submissions of photos in TIFF grayscale format, if possible. We ask for a resolution of 300 dpi. We cannot be responsible for photos damaged in the mail.

Please include a short biography with your submission as well as a return address and phone number. We may need to contact you about your submission.

The AHF does not pay for published submissions, but we do provide contributors with copies of the newsletter.

The views expressed by contributors to *Healing Words* do not necessarily reflect the views of the AHF.

There is no set length for manuscripts, but please try to keep submissions to a reasonable length (under 3000 words). All submissions are subject to the approval of the editorial team and may be edited for spelling, grammar, and length.

**A SPECIAL THANK YOU TO
ALL OUR CONTRIBUTORS !**

S . O . S . P O E T S

Thank you also to those poets whose work we publish here. Do you know how hard it is to find you? PLEASE, to ALL poets out there in communities, young, older, already published or not – send us your thoughts, your work, in poems, prayers, chants or songs.

It is especially difficult to find poems that we can publish in our French newsletter. But we would love also to get poems and songs in your own language.

Do you see signs of this happening?

I see some signs of it. The greatest deterrents, and there is a couple of big ones... People not healing from sexual abuse because it is a big issue. When you have been sexually abused, it is impossible to trust other people if you've stored a lot of that pain and damage from such abuse. It's very very devastating and it gets so painful, it keeps coming up. It's almost like in the old days, there was a spiked ball that they used as a weapon, with spikes on it. It keeps turning and slashing inside. It is an awful image but it's like that. It's deep, deep, vicious pain. Some can rise above it easier, others have a really hard time. So we need to have our women heal from such things ... men as well. To look at the real issues that are underlying the community problems and deal with those. Then there's hope for the future. But everybody can't go galloping off with pockets full of money, saying we're going to have a great future but then they just wind up in the bars and the bingos. I've seen it happen. I've seen out west, our communities get dumped with a million dollars and you go back two or three years later and it is all gone. There's no community centre... Around south of Edmonton, non-native guys marry girls about seventeen years old, get them pregnant. When the girls turn eighteen, and they get all the money, the guys buy a new truck, stereo, new leather clothes, beat their young wives up, beat her baby up and take off. It happens over and over and over. So somebody is not paying attention, where is the link between the mothers, grandmothers and daughters and the aunties, where is the link? This is why I say rebuild the links, that is the women's responsibility—a woman's prerogative. Then men will see us at work, that we are building and not blaming, they are going to come, the ones that are getting well and we will get respect. It really is a big job, rebuilding a community... and it's not going to happen overnight

Isn't this the generation that will turn things around?

I think so, I remember an Elder told me one time that when something happens... it's like a coin. A coin has two sides, it has edges too. The coin lands in the middle of your life, you look at it, you say «oh my gosh – this is bad... boo hoo hoo»... But then if you pick it up and turn it over – on the other side there is the positive, there is always a teaching, there is always a learning possibility. Something good emerges from that terrible thing that happened and I guess that holds true for something really wonderful that comes into your life too, there it is, “oh wow, great”. There's always something on the other side, so this is why we talk in the native world about being holistic in our approach, and to me that's not just looking at things from the perspective of the circle; it is looking at the whole entire picture. It is considering all the aspects of the question before you make a decision, and this is why traditionally our decision making process took months because issues that are very complicated require a lot of minds. They require a lot of debate, they require careful consideration because if you do this, this is going to happen, these are the ramifications, the effects.

So changing the processes, building more circular forms to the way we communicate with each other, this is honoring traditional ways. It is kind of pulling back the energy into that natural healing spiraling movement that is a natural path. It is natural, because it works and I believe one of the greatest inventions in the history of man is the wheel. I'm sure a lot of people tried with square stones– “oh no – not working”.

But we still live in a world full of squares, though...

Yes, and what this means - let's take a group structure as an example - is that we get into a situation where there is one corner here, one corner here, and what you have is a boxing ring. It's not a ring at all, it's square, corners oppos-

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letters

November 19, 2001

Dear Editor,

I just recently read your paper and it was very informative and detailed as to the Residential School situation. I am a newer generation but can remember similar situations even in our Public Schools of Sandy Lake First Nation during the 70s. Getting strapped with a belt or whip was common until parents got mad and did the same thing to the Principal. Then the abusive behaviour stopped. I am happy to see that your readers are getting the Full Monty on the articles you publish. I am elated to hear the people speak out and breaking the code of silence, because this silence is killing even our youth today, and these survivors may hold the answers for our youth's problems today. Once the youth of today see the trauma our ancestors went through, they might reconsider getting on with their lives and face the world in a positive manner and to walk in balance. What I would suggest is that if any articles are done of a particular Residential School or Reserve, you should notify the Reserve of the story and give copies to the Chief and Council of the Reserves. The reason why I ask this is that most of the Northern Reserves have limited access to media and funds.

I am convinced that your newspaper has a positive and constructive meaning for the Survivors of the Residential School systems and is an avenue for voicing these and other related incidents within our Culture and where it is leading to. Our leaders and Elders should be more receptive in pursuing the Survivors' recommendations and implementing them into our society, especially the Education systems.

Keep up the good work guys.

Yours in brotherhood,

GLEN FIDDLER
Sandy Lake, Ontario.

*

(Dedication to the Oppressed)

To a Nation.

In all aspects of life, in unity with the Creator of life on Mother Earth you are one, and not alone. May the gentle face of the Great Spirit guide you through hard times and good, and so keep the flame burning and the circle strong, be mystical as the eagle that soars high above the sky, also reflect in human nature mysteries, as nature in its natural form for whatever hurts deep inside (let go), give it to the wind, treat Mother Earth with respect and dignity. In return she will nourish and take care of your needs, and when the time comes to witness and acknowledge a true positive experience of a spontaneous crying child at birth, give thanks.

ARTHUR PAUL HAWKEYE
Membertou First Nation,
People of the Dawn,
Mi'Kmaq.

*





Received by e-mail:

Please add my name to your list of subscribers for the *Healing Words* Publication.

I recently read the Fall 2001 publication and found all of the articles to be very interesting and educational. After reading "Breaking the Code of Silence" I wondered why my Dad never talked about his school days at the Mount Elgin Residential School in Southwestern Ontario. My siblings and I knew he went to school there, but never once did he relate to us stories about school or school mates. He is gone to the Spirit World now, but maybe other students who attended The Mount Elgin Residential School in Southwestern Ontario would write their story.

As an educator, I would like to encourage all of my Red brothers and sisters who survived residential schools to continue to talk and record their stories. I firmly believe we need to be authors of our history. I'm sure the Government and Churches have recorded their versions, and if history is to replay itself, their stories will be exactly the opposite of ours. More important, generations yet to come need to know and hear the truth from our own lips. I wish I had my Dad's stories.

SHIRLEY MILLER
Mount Brydges, Ontario.

*

Received by e-mail:

The Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association will be hosting their 5th Reunion August 2-5, 2002. The Gathering is in Sault Ste. Marie at the old Shingwauk School location which now houses Algoma University College 1520 Queen St. East, Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The gathering is for all former students and staff and their descendants. We address the impacts of the former residential schools our way. Please plan to join us, we are quite welcoming.

For more information:
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*

Received by e-mail:

Aanii,

I am coordinating a gathering titled "Mushkiikimowin" (Medicine Talks) on March 7, 2002 for the Northeastern Ontario Family Medicine program. This program is part of Northeastern Ontario Medical Education Corporation (NOMECE) located on the Laurentian University campus. NOMECE is affiliated with the University of Ottawa medical school. ▶

Bulletin Board

The Children of Shingwauk Alumni Association will be hosting their 5th Reunion August 2-5, 2002. The Gathering is in Sault Ste. Marie at the old Shingwauk School location which now houses Algoma University College 1520 Queen St. East Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. The gathering is for all former students and staff and their descendants. We address the impacts of the former residential schools our way. Please plan to join us, we are quite welcoming.

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Dear Readers: please help other survivors by sending your response to *Healing Words*.

◀ The goal of the gathering is to raise awareness and inform the Family medicine Doctors in the program about First Nation's health issues. As a foundation to this there will be a historical overview to set the context for the subsequent presentations.

I would like to be able to provide a copy of the publication (Volume 3 Number 1 Fall 2001) to each participant as it has the Residential School Resource list. If you can provide other resources to supplement this we would be very pleased.

This is the first time First Nations health issues have been included in the family Medicine curriculum to this depth, and my hope is to establish ongoing inclusion.

To that end we would like to be included on your regular mailing list. We have 35 learners in 1st, 2nd and 3rd year Family Medicine, Emergency Medicine or other post grad specialities.

Chi-meegwetch for your help.

JOYCE HELMER
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Aboriginal women and their children suffer tremendously as victims in contemporary Canadian society. They are the victims of racism, of sexism and of unconscionable levels of domestic violence. The justice system has done little to protect them from any of these assaults. At the same time, Aboriginal women have an even higher rate of over-representation in the prison system than Aboriginal men.



Women in Traditional Aboriginal Society

Women traditionally played a central role within the Aboriginal family, within Aboriginal government and in spiritual ceremonies. Men and women enjoyed considerable personal autonomy and both performed functions vital to the survival of Aboriginal communities. The men were responsible for providing food, shelter and clothing. Women were responsible for the domestic sphere and were viewed as both life-givers and the caretakers of life. As a result, women were responsible for the early socialization of children.

Traditional Aboriginal society experienced very little family breakdown. Husbands and wives were expected to respect and honour one another, and to care for one another with honesty and kindness. In matriarchal societies, such as the Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk), women were honoured for their wisdom and vision. Aboriginal men also respected women for the sacred gifts which they believed the Creator had given to them.

In Aboriginal teachings, passed on through the oral histories of the Aboriginal people from generation to generation, Aboriginal men and women were equal in power and each had autonomy within their personal lives.

Women figured centrally in almost all Aboriginal creation legends. In Ojibway and Cree legends, it was a woman who came to earth through a hole in the sky to care for the earth. It was a woman, Nokomis (grandmother), who taught Original Man (Anishinabe, an Ojibway word meaning "human being") about the medicines of the earth and about technology. When a traditional Ojibway person prays, thanks is given and the pipe is raised in each of the four directions, then to Mother Earth as well as to Grandfather, Mishomis, in the sky.

To the Ojibway, the earth is woman, the Mother of the people, and her hair, the sweetgrass, is braided and used in ceremonies. The Dakota and Lakota (Sioux) people of Manitoba and the Dakotas tell how a woman—White Buffalo Calf Woman—brought the pipe to their people. It is through the pipe that prayer is carried by its smoke upwards to the Creator in their most sacred ceremonies.

The strength that Aboriginal peoples gain today from their traditional teachings and their cultures comes from centuries of oral tradition and Aboriginal teachings, which emphasized the equality of man and woman and the balanced roles of both in the continuation of life. Such teachings

hold promise for the future of the Aboriginal community as a whole. We have been told that more and more young Aboriginal people are turning to the beliefs and values of Aboriginal traditions to find answers for the problems which they are facing in this day and age. Aboriginal author Paula Gunn Allen points out:

Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital: it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past.

This revival is necessitated, in large measure, by the assault that Aboriginal culture has experienced during the last century.

The Attack on Aboriginal Culture

Women were never considered inferior in Aboriginal society until Europeans arrived. Women had few rights in European society at the time of first contact with Aboriginal people. Men were considered their social, legal and political masters. Any rights which women had were those derived through their husbands. The law of England, for example, held that women did not have the right to vote, to own property or to enter into contracts. This attitude was ultimately reflected in the Indian Act, which blatantly discriminated against women.

This attitude toward women continued until relatively recently in Canada. Women had to fight battles in this century to win the right to vote and to be recognized as legal persons, and it was only within the past few decades that the final legal restrictions upon their right to contract and own property were lifted.

The imposition of new values and cultural standards brought about tremendous historical, social and economic changes which, for the most part, were destructive to Aboriginal communities. Dr. Sally Longstaffe of the Child Protection Centre has written:

The razing of Indian societies and their traditions is well-documented. Symptoms of this dislocation are evident in high rates of unemployment, suicide, alcoholism, domestic violence, and other social problems. This loss of tradition has seriously damaged the oral



◀ means of preserving cultural norms, and the values which prohibit deviant behaviours have been obscured and often forgotten. Native peoples often appear reluctant to adopt "white" solutions to problems that stem from the latter's apparent destruction of their societies.

Economic factors served as the initial catalyst for change within Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal people were first directed away from hunting into the economic order of the fur trade society. Gradually, more and more of them became removed from the land and went into settlements with a welfare economy. These changes to Aboriginal lifestyle distorted the traditional Aboriginal male and female roles.

[W]ith the loss of Indian male roles and as a result of being reduced to a state of powerlessness and vulnerability which their own culture deemed highly inappropriate, Indian men came to experience severe role strain.

Cultural changes resulting from the economic factors at play had their greatest impact on the role of Aboriginal women.

Cultural Changes—The Impact upon Aboriginal Women

For Aboriginal women, European economic and cultural expansion was especially destructive. Their value as equal partners in tribal society was undermined completely. The Aboriginal inmates in Kingston Prison for Women described the result this way:

The critical difference is racism. We are born to it and spend our lives facing it. Racism lies at the root of our life experiences. The effect is violence, violence against us, and in turn our own violence.

It is only in the past decade that writers have acknowledged the very important role Aboriginal women played in the first centuries of contact with Europeans and their descendants. Yet, while their role within Aboriginal society remained relatively stable for some time after contact, all that changed completely with the advent of the residential school system.

The victimization of Aboriginal women accelerated with the introduction after Confederation of residential schools for Aboriginal children. Children were removed from their families and homes at a young age, some to return eight to 10 years later, some never to return. The ability to speak Aboriginal languages and the motivation to do so were severely undermined. Aboriginal students were taught to devalue everything Aboriginal and value anything Euro-Canadian.

Many Aboriginal grandparents and parents today are products of the residential school system. The development of parenting skills, normally a significant aspect of their training as children within Aboriginal families, was denied to them by the fact that they were removed from their families and communities, and by the lack of attention paid to the issue by residential schools. Parenting skills neither were observed nor taught in those institutions. Aboriginal children traditionally learned their parenting skills from their parents through example and daily direction. That learning process was denied to several generations of Aboriginal parents. In addition to the physical and sexual abuse that Canadians are now hearing took place in residential schools, emotional abuse was the most prevalent and the most severe.



The damage done by residential schools is evident today as Aboriginal people, long deprived of parenting skills, struggle with family responsibilities and attempt to recapture cultural practices and beliefs so long denied.

Not only did residential schools not support the development of traditional parental roles among the children, but they taught the children that they were "pagan"—an inferior state of being—and should never use their language or honour their religious beliefs. These messages were imparted to Aboriginal children in a sometimes brutal manner. Several presenters also pointed out that residential schools not only removed children from their families, but they also prevented any closeness, even contact, from occurring between siblings and relatives at the same school.

The damage done by residential schools is evident today as Aboriginal people, long deprived of parenting skills, struggle with family responsibilities and attempt to recapture cultural practices and beliefs so long denied.

Grand Chief Dave Courchene Sr. put the experience succinctly:

Residential schools taught self-hate. That is child abuse.... Too many of our people got the message and passed it on. It is their younger generations that appear before you [in court].

We believe the breakdown of Aboriginal cultural values and the abuse suffered by Aboriginal children in the schools contributed to family breakdown. This began a cycle of abuse in Aboriginal communities, with women and children being the primary victims.

The Canadian government also undermined equality between Aboriginal men and women with the legalization of sexist and racist discrimination in successive pieces of legislation. In 1869 it introduced the concept of enfranchisement, whereby Indian people would lose their status as Indians and be

◀ treated the same as other Canadians. For Aboriginal women, this process of enfranchisement had particularly devastating consequences, because the role assigned to Canadian women was one of inferiority and subjugation to the male.

Upon becoming enfranchised, Aboriginal people lost their status under the Indian Act. An Indian woman lost her status automatically upon marrying a man who was not a status Indian. This was not true for Indian men, whose non-Indian wives gained status as Indians upon marriage. Under subsequent Indian Acts, Indian agents could enfranchise an Indian if he were deemed "progressive." In cases where a man became enfranchised, his wife and children automatically lost their status, as well.

While Bill C-31 (1985) addressed many of these problems, it created new ones in terms of the differential treatment of male and female children of Aboriginal people. Under the new Act, anomalies can develop where the children of a status Indian woman can pass on status to their children only if they marry registered Indians, whereas the grandchildren of a status male will have full status, despite the fact that one of their parents does not have status. Chapter 5, on treaty and Aboriginal rights, discusses this problem in detail and outlines steps that must be taken to remedy it.

Aboriginal women traditionally played a prominent role in the consensual decision-making process of their communities. The Indian Act created the chief and council system of local government. The local Indian agent chaired the meetings of the chief and council, and had the power to remove the chief and council from office. Aboriginal women were denied any vote in the new system imposed by the Indian Affairs administration. As a result, they were stripped of any formal involvement in the political process.

The segregation of Aboriginal women, both from wider society and from their traditional role as equal and strong members of tribal society, continues to the present day. This is due partly to the fact that the effects of past discrimination have resulted in the poor socio-economic situation applicable to most Aboriginal women, but it is also attributable to the demeaning image of Aboriginal women that has developed over the years. North American society has adopted a destructive and stereotypical view of Aboriginal women.

The Changing Image of Aboriginal Women

The demeaning image of Aboriginal women is rampant in North American culture. School textbooks have portrayed Aboriginal woman as ill-treated at the hands of Aboriginal men, almost a "beast of burden." These images are more than symbolic—they have helped to facilitate the physical and sexual abuse of Aboriginal women in contemporary society. Emma LaRocque, a Metis woman and professor of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, wrote to the Inquiry about such demeaning images.

The portrayal of the squaw is one of the most degraded, most despised and most dehumanized anywhere in the world. The 'squaw' is the female counterpart to the Indian male 'savage' and as such she has no human face; she is lustful, immoral, unfeeling and dirty. Such grotesque dehumanization has rendered all Native women and girls vulnerable to gross physical, psychological and sexual violence.... I believe that there is a direct relationship between these horrible racist/sexist stereotypes and violence against Native women and girls. I believe, for example, that Helen Betty Osborne was murdered in 1972 by four young men from The Pas because these youths grew up with twisted notions of "Indian girls" as "squaws" ... Osborne's attempts to fight off these men's sexual advances challenged their racist expectations that an "Indian squaw" should show subservience ... [causing] the whites ... to go into a rage and proceed to brutalize the victim.

In order to address the underlying problems that give rise to this perception, the public generally, and those within the justice system specifically, need to be educated about those issues by Aboriginal women.



Racist and sexist stereotypes not only hurt Aboriginal women and their sense of self-esteem, but actually encourage abuse—both by Aboriginal men and by others. The Ma Mawi Chi Itata Centre's Family Violence Program attempts to help both victims and offenders to see beyond the stereotypes. In a book used by the program, Paula Gunn Allen explains "recovering the feminine in American Indian traditions":

For the past 40 or 50 years, American popular media have depicted American Indian men as bloodthirsty savages devoted to treating women cruelly. While traditional Indian men seldom did any such thing—and in fact among most tribes abuse of women was simply unthinkable, as was abuse of children or the aged—the lie about "usual" male Indian behaviour seems to have taken root and now bears its brutal and bitter fruit.

The colonizers' revisions of our lives, values, and histories have devastated us at the most critical level of all—that of our own minds, our own sense of who we are.

Image casting and image control constitute the central process that American Indian women must come to terms with, for on that control rests our sense of self, our claim to a past and to a future that we define and that we build ... images must be changed before Indian women will see much relief from the violence that destroys so many lives....

The Canadian Coalition for Equality and the Manitoba Women's Directorate say that the media today continue to employ stereotypical images of women. Both presentations compared lurid newspaper coverage of the Helen Betty Osborne murder in The Pas to the more straightforward and sympathetic coverage of the killing of a young non-Aboriginal woman in Winnipeg. ▶



We consider societal attitudes to be an issue that this Inquiry must address. There is a perception among women's groups, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that abuse of Aboriginal women is more acceptable to the courts than abuse of non-Aboriginal women. While we do not subscribe to the view that there is differential treatment, we are disturbed enough by the perception to suggest that it needs to be addressed. At the heart of the problem is the belief that, fundamentally, justice authorities do not understand, and do not wish to understand, the unique issues facing Aboriginal women.

In order to address the underlying problems that give rise to this perception, the public generally, and those within the justice system specifically, need to be educated about those issues by Aboriginal women. Elsewhere in this report we have recommended that cross-cultural training be provided to a variety of individuals involved in the justice system. We would like to make it clear that Aboriginal women must play a central role in the development and delivery of those programs. Unfortunately, Aboriginal men, over the centuries, have adopted the same attitude toward women as the European. As a result, the cultural and social degradation of Aboriginal women has been devastating.

According to the Manitoba Women's Directorate, the average annual income for Manitoba's Aboriginal women is less than 75% of that for other women. The labour force participation rate for Aboriginal women is 40%, while 72% of Aboriginal women do not have a high school diploma.

The status of Aboriginal women in the city of Winnipeg is particularly disturbing. Forty-three per cent of Aboriginal families are headed by single women, compared to 10% of non-Aboriginal families. In her presentation on behalf of the Women's Directorate, Janet Fontaine said,

Poverty is an unmistakable factor in the lives of Manitoba Native women and children. Poverty has been shown to be positively correlated with conflict with the law, low levels of education, decreased opportunity for employment, and a low level of health.

While the "official" unemployment rate has been estimated at 16.5% for Aboriginal women, official statistics typically do not count those who are not actively looking for work. Many Aboriginal women do not actively seek work because there is no employment available to them, or because it is impossible for them to work, due to their family circumstances or for other reasons. The actual employment rate for female status Indians age 15 or more has been estimated as low as 24%. These numbers appear to be due, in part, to an absence of educational and employment opportunities for Aboriginal women. §

AHF *interview*

◀ *continued from page 22*

Of course no one can sit here and say it is going to be perfect... with no conflicts ever. That wouldn't be real but I'm going to magnetize my heart so that the person that I'm going to invite into my life is going to treat me with respect and I think that is part of empowerment, to encourage people to dream their future. To me dreaming and visioning is very traditional, although I am working with my hands tied because I grew up with only pieces of tradition because my grandfather was raised by his grandmother and she was not very educated. She taught him how to live in the woods, taught him very simple things but the spirituality part had already been fractured through colonisation. I'm originally from the east coast in West Virginia – so colonization happened 500 years ago and so they had already lost much, the christian faith had already moved in there so the spiritual part that was left was strongly connected to a respect for nature – nature was alive, alive and loving and powerful – you had to be very careful. Although my grandfather died when I was 7, he was a huge influence in my life, even the fact that I've always been helping people. All my sisters married men who are involved in healing. My mom and my aunt were both nurses.

We talked about the medicine wheel before the interview. How do you incorporate traditional teachings in your healing approach?

There's many different teachings using the medicine wheel but what I do is I show it like a wheel, a real wheel, with spokes. That wheel will always be progressing forward even though it may not feel like it. You know a wheel is like a pie, with slices. We might come to a crossroad and have to make a decision, do we go forward or do we go this way? So we may go down this side of the pie and we have experiences down there and they are either positive or negative. But the positive thing is that these experiences are still part of our forward journey and eventually we learn whatever it is we learn. Or eventually we get tired... one or the other and we run back out, we come back to the main plan and we continue on. My feeling is that absolutely everything that happens to us in our lives, whether positive or negative is a part of our growth, that there are obstacles placed in our path so we may learn to overcome them, that our spirit guides our steps. This life is for us to learn and grow. So if we can start looking at things that way, it kind of takes the sting away a little bit.

When something really, really bad happens, we can say "OK this hurts, this really hurts a lot," and allow ourselves to feel, but also to keep a conscious bond with our spirit : this will pass, the emotional pain and the way we feel will pass and then we can move on from there, and still take something good from that.

How can these individual life-learning experiences be transformed into collective healing energy?

OK, you know what? we're all on an even keel now, whatever you did before, forget it. We are moving forward here and really working on rebuilding traditional values, respect in the community, community projects that involve children, awareness and educational projects for the young women, because some of the young women are stuck with 2, 3, 5 or 6 children and six different fathers, no marriage, no stability, no self respect. Social Services drive in there – right in there and that's what I see for the future as far as reserves are concerned. In the urban areas, it's basically the same thing. But if you go and look there, you see a lot of strong women, and you just have to keep looking harder. It's hard to spread ourselves thin, but whatever we find that we are really passionate about, if we put our heart and soul into that and share it with others it's like the flu : when you sneeze, you give other people your cold. If you're committed in your heart and your spirit the truth comes out. So if you start telling the truth to other people, they catch it, they start telling it to other people, and attitudes change. Young women will catch that and will start working on their own boundaries and their own relationships and eventually young women will come and men will come to us and say "I get what you're talking about." I see men responding to this. My own husband is different with me, my children are different with me, my sons and my daughters. I have an older daughter who has two children and her relationship is much healthier now that I have progressed toward my own healing, because when she comes to me for advice, all the things I'm sharing with her are strong and healthy, so it has a ripple effect. That's what I'm hoping will happen in the future.

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Healing the pain of violence

Healing Lodge Vision

● The Pizoniwikwon, from the Waubaneau People of the Eastern Doorway of the Maliseet Nation.

There is an urgent need to bring together our past, present, and future as reflected in the social, political, and economic conditions that we experience in many of our communities today. Crippled by government indifference, political powerlessness, inadequate land base, non-existent economic opportunities and racial hostilities, we have to question what the future holds for Aboriginal people. The physical reality lies in the excruciating pain brought about by alcohol and drug abuse, indifference, poverty, crime, imprisonment and suicide.

Because our Creator has ensured our survival of this painful history we have endured the assault, injustice and repression brought upon us. We send out our gratitude for all of these things that are so. The time has come to return to the Sacred Laws. The healing of Aboriginal People has begun and must continue. The way back to restored dignity is with our unique humanity. The door to authentic development and healing is unlocked from within.

An opportunity exists through the Vision of the Healing Lodge to re-ignite the Spirit of Federally Sentenced Aboriginal women as the Healing Lodge is central to the empowerment and healing of women. Through the teachings of the Elders' Circle, Sacred Laws of Women will be rekindled to provide a spiritual base for life's challenges.

This responsibility to federally sentenced women and the Seven Generations [The Ojibway teaching on the Seven Stages of Life] to come will be an overall objective of the Healing Lodge.

The Healing Lodge will enable federally sentenced women to:

- restore their pride and dignity as women and mothers,
- restore a sense of worth, dignity, and hope;
- rebuild their families and their communities;
- build bridges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies;
- promote the healing of the Earth and all her creatures.

More specifically the Healing Lodge will be a place to:

1. Have seasonal gatherings for the celebrations of the Four Directions.
2. Conduct ceremonies, including the Sweatlodge, Fasting, Pipe Ceremonies, Feasts, U-Wipi Ceremonies, Shaking Tent, Cedar Bath Ceremony, Give-A-Way Ceremonies, Sundances, Rain Dance Ceremonies, and all other ceremonies related to Spiritual and Cultural well-being.
3. Share the teachings of oral traditions where ceremonies can be protected, where rebirth of language, customs, beliefs and traditional methods of teachings and healing can take place in a natural way.
4. Redevelop relationships with all creatures who share the Earth.
5. Promote traditional methods of teaching and learning.
6. Provide on-site accommodation for children of parents who are residents of the Healing Lodge.

7. Provide a setting for shared learning experiences for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.
8. Create an economic base that will provide for agriculture and self-sufficiency of the land, i.e. growing and gathering of herbs and plants for food and medicine, and organically grown green house produce.
9. Create an economic land base that will provide for self-sufficiency and encourage Aboriginal crafts such as hide tanning, etc. that would result in an authentic craft store.

Philosophy of the Healing Lodge

For as long as our people can remember, the Aboriginal people of Turtle Island [Known to Non-Aboriginal people as North America] have lived in balance with the Sacred and Natural Laws of Creation. We have lived here long before history was written.

The Aboriginal people were never in a hurry. There was virtually nothing we needed that we could not have, and have in abundance. We were rich in identity and culture. We were sovereign. Our work was conducted in an atmosphere of respect for the Creator and respect for ourselves. We had time for each other, and our success was living in the way the Creator intended. Our emphasis was placed on co-operation and sharing. In Cupertino, we experienced peace between nations, people, animals, and their spirituality. There was infinity in the Circle of Life.

We lived by a principle that was based on the Power, the Beauty, the Sacredness and the Harmony of Creation. The Principle of Life is to walk in Balance with Creation. At the centre of our universe was the teaching of peace: peace within ourselves, with our families, with our communities and within our nations.

Our relationship to the Earth is integral to our healing; for healing is the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual connection of all people to the Creation. Healing is to regain peace and tranquillity within ourselves and is a process, not an event. As Keepers of the Sacred Circle of Life, we are devoted to the preservation of the endangered Earth Mother, and the continuation of all Life.

As we watch Wasabainoquay, (Wa-sa-ba-no-quay), the Morning Star Woman, begins her walk before the Grandfather Sun begins his journey. At first light ceremony, we are reminded once again of the original instructions given to us by the Creator. Aboriginal people of Turtle Island are the Keepers of the Land. As women and mothers, we understand our connection to Mother Earth. Our Elders tell us that only when we returned to our spirituality and when humankind rekindles deep respect for nature will we find our health and balance with the Earth Mother and within ourselves.

The way to our Spirituality is the teachings of the Circle of Life. The Circle represents life as it is, or as it can be experienced. Unity is the Circle, for there is harmony in unity. It represents the holistic belief of Aboriginal culture. The circle shows that we are only a small part of Creation. Within Creation, we can discover ourselves.

Healing the pain of violence Healing Lodge Vision



Through the teachings of the Medicine Wheel, all things are part of the Creation. We begin within the Centre of the Circle of Life, the Creator, and the Creation. The Centre is also ourselves where we find Vision, our direction on the Spiritual Path in Life.

At Creation, we were given four Sacred Gifts of Life: From the East, the gift of Fire; from the South, the gift of Rock; from the West, the gift of Water; and from the North, the gift of Wind.

The gift of Fire is for warmth and growth, and the Grandfather Sun is the fire that protects us by day.

The gift of Rock is for physical contact with the Universe. Mother Earth is the sacred gift of Rock. She is home and nourishment for our physical bodies, our Spirit and our foundation of Life. We honour her in the Sweatlodge Ceremony with the Sacred Rock Spirits. The gift of Water cleanses and purifies and is essential to all living things. The Grandmother Moon controls the water, the ebb and tide, protecting us by night.

Our relationship to the Earth is integral to our healing; for healing is the emotional, physical, mental and spiritual connection of all people to the Creation. Healing is to regain peace and tranquillity within ourselves and is a process, not an event.

The gift of the Wind is the Sacred Breath of Life, the air we breathe. It gives us direction, just as the stars do at night. Each of the Sacred gifts have Spirit, Life unto itself. Then the sustenance of Life was created: from the East, Plant Life that included flowers for medicine and beauty; from the South, Grasses for food for all Creation; from the West, vegetables for food and nourishment; and from the North, Trees for protection and shelter.

Then the animals came: from the East, the two-legged (humans), from the south, the winged ones from the West, the waterlife, and from the North, the Four legged. Our humanity is connected to the animal world as humans are part of the animal world. All animals are gifted with a Sacred Direction and there is a link between humans and animals in the Circle of Life.

All things go through the Four Hills of Life which represent the Four Stages of Life: In the East Infancy and its gift of Innocence; in the South, Childhood and its gift of Freedom; in the West, Adulthood and its gift of Responsibility; and in the North, Old Age and its gift of Wisdom.

We were given the Sacred Laws of the Creation to provide natural flow with the Universe. Sacred Laws is the balance between physical and spiritual world. We are responsible to walk in balance with the Sacred Law of Creation.

In the East, the Law of Control over self—which provides the freedom of choice that the mind has in choosing positive or negative thoughts and actions. In the South, the Law of Order—which is the natural order of Creation in its entirety. Natural Order is how things would happen and is the Sacred Balance between all things; physical, mental, spiritual and universal.

In the West, the Law of Balance is contained in the natural cycles of all Life. Mankind has created worldly imbalance with the Creation; therefore, Mankind has the responsibility to restore and maintain balance.



In the North, the Law of Harmony combines the Four Sacred Laws of Creation. Together, they provide control, order, balance and harmony with the Creation.

As Aboriginal People, we have the responsibility to walk in balance with Creation. This balance is to recognize the Sacred Law of Creation, as well as the physical laws. The way we carry out our responsibility is to recognize, as one, our Spirit, our Mind and our Body. The walk is for all nations, but it is a personal responsibility to begin the first step.

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A Snapshot of Issues *General Statistics*

In 1996, the female Aboriginal population was 408,140, comprising roughly 51% of the total Aboriginal population in Canada. Aboriginal populations (First Nations, Inuit, Métis & Non-Status First Nations) have a noticeably different age structure than the non-Aboriginal population of Canada. While the general Canadian population has been ageing at a progressive rate, the Aboriginal populations exhibit a youthful structure. Nearly 42% of the female Aboriginal population is between the ages of 0 to 19. The health of Aboriginal women has improved considerably over the past few decades, yet significant inequities remain in relation to the general population.

Violence Against Women

Over 80% of Aboriginal women surveyed have been victims of violence and/or sexual assault.

The nature of violence against Aboriginal women is not limited to violence in relationships.

Violence also takes the form of victimization at the hands of police officers and the judicial system.

When a police officer attends to a “domestic dispute,” and the woman has been battered, it is mandatory for the police officer to lay charges against the offender. Inconsistencies, lack of accountability, jurisdictional disputes and racism often prevent the implementation of this policy.

The rampant rates of violence, abuse and incarcerations are rooted in the multi-generational effects of the residential school experience.

Child Apprehension

Of all children in government care, over half are Aboriginal children.

Support services need to be increased for Aboriginal women, especially because we are the highest group of single and teenage mothers. The federal government’s agenda for residential schools must be acknowledged as the contributing factor.

Mothers are continually at risk of losing their children if they disclose they are either battered or using drugs or alcohol, yet support services, facilities and treatment are inadequate.

There are increased pressures for social workers to apprehend particularly in light of the recent Government Inquiry and the formation of the Ministry of Children and Families.

This increased scrutiny leaves Aboriginal women particularly vulnerable to deeper stereotypes and thereby more targeted for child apprehension.

Once a woman’s children are apprehended, the chances of getting them back are minimal because of the systematic abuse and demands and conditions made by the Ministry staff.

The courts’ determination of the “best interests of the child” interferes with the cultural interests of the child.

Employment and income

Aboriginal women over 15 years of age are less likely to participate in the paid labour force and more likely to spend substantial amounts of time car-

ing for children and seniors on an unpaid basis. They have a different pattern of paid and unpaid work compared to non-Aboriginal women. This, in turn, has an impact on their incomes, which are lower than those of non-Aboriginal women.

Education

Aboriginal women have made some significant gains in terms of educational levels. Between 1991 and 1996 there was a substantial increase in the percentage of Aboriginal women holding university degrees. And although they may not have yet graduated, forty per cent of off-reserve First Nations women and 42 per cent of Métis women had some post-secondary education in 1996. This compares to 49 per cent of non-Aboriginal women.

Health

Current Situation

- Life expectancy for Aboriginal women is 76.2 years, versus 81.0 for non-Aboriginal women.
- Aboriginal women experience higher rates of circulatory problems, respiratory problems, diabetes, hypertension and cancer of the cervix than the rest of the general female population.
- Current evidence shows that diabetes is three times as prevalent in Aboriginal communities as in the general population. Most Aboriginal diabetics are women (approximately 2 to 1).
- Aboriginal women represent a higher percentage of cases of HIV/AIDS than non-Aboriginal women (15.9% vs 7.0%). Within female Aboriginal AIDS cases, 50% are attributed to IV drug use, in comparison to 17% of all female cases.
- The birth rate for Aboriginal women is twice that of the overall Canadian female population. Aboriginal mothers are younger – about 55% are under 25 years of age (vs 28% for the non-Aboriginal population) and 9% are under 18 years of age (vs 1% for the non-Aboriginal population).
- Mortality rate due to violence for Aboriginal women is three times the rate experienced by all other Canadian women. For Aboriginal women in the 25 to 44 age cohort, the rate is five times that for all other Canadian women.
- Women are often the victims of family dysfunction which results from alcohol or substance abuse. Hospital admissions for alcohol related accidents are three times higher among Aboriginal females than they are for the general Canadian population.
- Over 50% of Aboriginal people view alcohol abuse as a social problem in their communities. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) and Fetal Alcohol Effects (FAE) have emerged as a health and social concern in some First Nations and Inuit communities.
- Suicide rates remain consistently higher for the Aboriginal population than the general Canadian population as a whole, in almost every age category. Over a five year span (1989 - 1993), Aboriginal women were more than three times as likely to commit suicide than were non-Aboriginal women. §

Health data from: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/women/english/facts_aborig.htm

Aboriginal Women: No Rights to Land or Children

BY MABEL NIPSHANK



At one time Aboriginal women did not have to worry about child custody and access. Women shaped the social structure and held decision-making power. Every family member held important responsibilities in the well being of the children. It was an honour and privilege to have such significant roles in a child's life, so every one took their responsibilities very seriously.

The belief was that no one owned the children. Each child was a blessing to be given every possible opportunity to be unique, and to receive the utmost best of teachings to bring forth a healthy and well-balanced individual. Human dignity was held in such high regard that there are no words in Aboriginal languages to differentiate gender: Words like him, her, she and he do not exist in many of the languages of the First Nations people.

Today in 2001, things are very different for Aboriginal women. Colonization has stripped Aboriginal Women of every conceivable right. Many of our Aboriginal leaders have bought into the patriarchal European structure and have chosen sexist and misogynist beliefs on which to model band rules and policies. Property rights on the Reserve determine the outcome of child custody and access rights. Most bands hold all reserve land and property in the name of the band for the use of all members. Before you could go to a court to apply for an order allowing one party to stay in the family home. Courts have now ruled that only the Indian Act can apply to property on reserve. The Indian Act does not deal with family law matters. Women make their requests to stay in the family home to the Band Council, Council of Elders or Chief, who have their own set of rules. The patriarchal structure of most band policies and procedures entitles property rights to the head of the family.

As a result, Aboriginal Women attempting to escape violence are often forced out of the family home and community and into cities, where they encounter a multitude of systemic barriers. They are con-

stantly being revictimized by racism in the system. Because of the complexities of band procedures and policies of who is entitled to what, Aboriginal Women are often forced to live in extreme poverty. With these additional barriers it is almost impossible to fight for Child Custody and Access rights. The Social Development Department within a band is modeled after the child protection act, and the "best interest of children" is seen through this lens - usually who has access to family home, extended family, and to traditional culture and financial stability. The patriarchal structure of today's band policies entitles men to all of these, leaving women with few resources.

The residential school syndrome and the destruction of the matriarchal system have led to the normalization of violence. Men can have a history of wife assault but their right to child custody and access is never questioned. This is especially true for men that have a position of power in the community. Allegations of child sexual abuse are being dismissed, without investigation, as false and vengeful charges. Children are being ordered by the courts to spend overnight visits with fathers who have abused them. Mothers have lost custody of their children because they dared to breach a court order by refusing unsupervised visits with fathers who have abused the children.

Custody and access issues expose the true values of our society. Men's rights of power and control over women and children still take precedence. We need a society based on fairness, and a system which accounts for the real social, political and economic realities for Aboriginal women. We need to put the safety of women and children first. §

Mabel Nipshank is a Métis woman of Cree and French descent from northern Alberta. She has been the Volunteer and Counselling Coordinator at Battered Women's Support Services in Vancouver for four years, and is a member of the Aboriginal Women's Action Network.

Article published in the Innuvelle newspaper,
December 1999,
By Yvette Michel



I always maintained that the Residential School had not destroyed my life. In fact, I had only kept some positive things on my training such as the sewing, the French and the good manners.

However, for many years a nightmare haunted me, a dream where a monster pursues a group of children (which I am a part of) as well as a group of adults. This dream takes place in a big multi-storied building. We run away from this monster. Impossible to see it, we can only sense it. It is present and we can hear its breath; sometimes it nearly succeeds in reaching us. This dream prevented me from sleeping soundly for years and made me live in fear of the night.

I asked myself these questions: "How am I going to identify this monster? Where can I go to get the courage to face it?" The answers that I received came, largely, from my healing journey. There are several stages to go through, because the healing doesn't happen in one day. The first time, I settled things with my immediate entourage. Then, I was at a stage where I had to understand why I drank for years. In another period, I faced and denounced the shame I felt during and after the rapes I had endured. Now, I am capable to face my nightmares. Having already done a large part of the work, I returned to my childhood. Two months ago, this dream came back in force and it came back two times. I understood that there was an important message that needed to be deciphered. I asked my Creator to show me the light in order to decipher this dream, because I didn't know how nor what to look for. A short time afterwards, I received the help of my companion as well as friends and they counselled me to face the monster in my nightmares.

Finally, I faced it. It was terrifying, because I faced it awake. I sat down before my Creator asking him to help and enlighten me. I shouted. I cried and I was afraid. I suspected that the big building had something to do with the Residential School of my youth. For two days, I didn't find what I was looking for. It was only toward the end of the second day that I began to understand something; they had lied to me somewhere. Someone had lied to me from the moment I entered the Residential School.

My heart was closed...

The monster in my dreams is the lie. The lie has been sealed in my mind because from that moment my heart was closed. Today, I don't remember entering this Institution, I don't remember my stay in this place, except some events that marked me personally. They lied to me about my identity, my language, my religion, my people, the food and the fundamental values of life. I didn't learn about sharing, the spirit of listening and communication, affection, love and family values. In its place, they put ice. They taught me a foreign culture, a foreign language, foreign religion. They taught me to live in the dark far from my family. The sun was never in my dreams. Consequently, I unconsciously passed on these new "values" to my children, by not passing on my INNU language.

Today, I have recovered Aboriginal spirituality and I found myself again. I recovered my identity and now I am treated as crazy. Yes, it is true that I led, in the past, a disturbed life that lasted a long time because I didn't know who I was. I drank for 25 years. I led my life without worrying so much about the disastrous consequences on my children, my relationship and my friends. I was often seen as cold and heartless because I was incapable of expressing my feelings and my thoughts.

Who am I to forgive now? Is it the government? Is it religion? Is it my parents? It matters little now. I recovered my identity. I recovered peace and finally I recovered my heart. Someone asked me: "Now, what's going to happen?" In fact, what I want to do is to direct what I learned to get in touch with my culture. To share, to help, to listen and especially to learn to love.

Today, the drum speaks to me, the METESHAN speaks to me and spirituality guides me, because it is the Creator that I found. Everyday, the Spirit tells me what to do and I rely on Him for all the actions that I take. I would like to tell all those who were students: It is our duty to undo the brain washing that we underwent in order to recover the purity of the spirit for future generations, for healing and for the restoration of the Nations. Otherwise, we will be the instruments of the destruction of our own culture. §



MALI PILI KIZOS— HEALING DEVICTIMISATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S LIVES

The following article was extracted from qualitative research conducted with twelve (12) Aboriginal Women, all former Residential Schools students and victims of profound trauma. The complete report can be obtained from Femmes autochtones du Québec (address provided on the resources page 28)

The aim of this research, financed by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, is to document the strategies they used to reconstruct their lives and their self-esteem, based on women's inner strength and their use of the external and cultural resources available to them.

THE FOUR INSIGHTS FROM MALI PILI KIZOS

With the healing of these women, we are attending to the reconstruction of the Aboriginal family and the institution of a new exchange between its members. This exchange takes into account the importance of cultural transmission by way of the children but it also takes into account the gravity of the past event, of the desire to remember and to persevere in a balanced and serene way.

Why MALI PILI KIZOS? It means Mary of the New Moon in Abenaki. The title of our research reminds us that the European missionaries gave the name Mali to the small girls they baptised. It was one of the first fundamental violent acts perpetrated against First Nations. Mali Pili Kizos testifies to the perseverance and hope that Aboriginal women have to rebuild their collective identity.

"Healing is a process of change that must take place within ourselves, our families, our communities, our societies – in that order. There are many different understandings of healing, each one borne of the culture and language of a people. In essence, to heal means to obtain a sense of wholeness or balance."

From HEALING, Selected Reports from the Aboriginal Peoples Collection and Technical Series, Solicitor General Canada.

(...) All things are interrelated. Everything in the universe is a part of a single whole. Everything is connected in some way to everything else. It is therefore possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else.

- (The Sacred tree)

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With the healing of these women, we are attending to the reconstruction of the Aboriginal family and the institution of a new exchange between its members. This exchange takes into account the importance of cultural transmission by way of the children, but it also takes into account the gravity of the past event, of the desire to remember and to persevere in a balanced and serene way.

◀ MALI PILI KIZOS mary of the new moon

Dear Readers,

MALI PILI KIZOS was inspired directly by research done on immigrant women from Africa, South America and Asia by the "Reseau d'intervention auprès de personnes ayant subi la Violence Organisée" (RIVO) (Intervention Network for people having suffered from Organized Violence). The work of RIVO deals specifically with organized violence in the participants' countries of origin (rape during wartime, torture, etc.). The MALI PILI KIZOS research project was adapted to the Aboriginal experience and deals with the different forms of violence encountered in the residential schools. Thank you to RIVO for having made their research documents available to us.

The emphasis of this research was put on moving beyond victimization. It goes without saying that we are not seeking a miracle cure or a "never-fail-model-to-be-followed-absolutely." We wish to learn about the successes (rather than failures) that Aboriginal women have had in their healing journey. The Aboriginal historical and cultural contexts were also taken into consideration. We know that frequently people adapt and survive even the worst of traumas. This research is interested in the optimal quality of life attained by the most traumatized victims of the residential school after a long process of devictimization.

The MALI PILI KIZOS project is a contribution to the entire collective work on the wellness of Aboriginal peoples. Quebec native Women Inc. has been working for the past 14 years for the promotion of non-violence. We have distinguished ourselves in the field through research, publications, conferences and seminars on the promotion of non-violence, wellness, justice, racism, the issue of sexual assault and mental health in the Aboriginal milieu.

We believe that the results of this research may be useful:

- To members of the Aboriginal communities, particularly victims of violence to find a message of hope in the material intended for them.
- To community workers who could, through these means, increase their knowledge on the subject of devictimization.

Ultimately, the children, the new generation, will benefit from the collective work presently being done on wellness. Already, many of them have grown up secure and confident because their parents have found peace. When a person finds internal peace, it radiates around them. Consequently, entire communities can return eventually to a much needed and wished for social peace.

We would like to thank the twelve women who so generously accepted to participate in this research. They are the experts, the creators of their own healing and they deserve the greatest respect. Their real names, as stipulated in the MALI PILI KIZOS Code of Ethics, "will not be divulged neither in the transcripts of the interviews, nor in the final documents."

Thank you to the members of our families; husbands, children and parents who support the work of Quebec Native Women from day to day.

TWELVE WOMEN IN SEARCH OF BALANCE AND RECONSTRUCTION

Four major themes guided our work in order to follow the journey of the former residents acquired during their early childhood, the survival strategies used at the residential school, the turning points that made them aware of the negative effects of the residential school on their lives and finally, the different steps they undertook to repair the trauma or to maintain their bal-

ance. Resilience is a person's capacity to resist the violent, destabilizing or annihilating effects of a traumatic shock. As we shall see, it is acquired in childhood. Survival strategies are all the means used to survive and resist the destructive effects of institutional violence on one's personal and cultural integrity. Finally, reconstruction is marked by different realizations, therapeutic undertakings, social involvement, spiritual and cultural re-appropriation. Reconstruction constitutes a healing process. For the former residents, liberating their present and their children's future from the legacy of the institutional violence remains an on-going daily struggle.

The former residents were the targets of violence sustained by the racist ideology of the Canadian State. They lived a collective trauma that, even today, has serious consequences for First Nations' cultures and histories. Many also suffered individual traumas in the traumatic context of the residential school. If they share a common heritage of resilience, a capacity for developing survival strategies as well as strategies to reconstruct their psychic balance, each of their testimonies reveals a unique journey told in their own words and based on their own personal story. Each had to compose their story with all the negative and positive aspects of their childhood, their residential school experience, and their adult life. In the face of the violence that was directed towards them, we find small girls who were terrorized and women who suffered. The residential school was a prison whose walls closed in on their Aboriginal identity. The residential school was the monster who deprived them of affection, who wounded them, crushed them and punished them for being who they were. They thought and behaved as a result of the emotional and cultural baggage that they inherited from the most significant people in their early childhood. This baggage was like "the house", the tent, cabin or shelter that they carried inside of them and that many of them drew or built during play in order to remember loved ones', places where they belonged and places where they were safe. Much later, in the hopes of reconstructing their identities, they would reclaim with conviction those elements that had been banned, forgotten or erased from Aboriginal cultures and histories. Spirituality for one, legends for another, the language and creation stories....

They all wanted to remember in order to make sense of the residential school experience and stop the intrusions from this traumatic past or to stop its repetition in their lives and those of their family members, their parents, their spouses and their children. All have nonetheless freely engaged themselves in their lives as women, as mothers and as members of the First Nations.



RESILIENCE INHERITED FROM CHILDHOOD

There are several reasons why one girl was better equipped than another to protect herself from the personal and collective trauma that occurred. For

each person, childhood resilience develops in its own peculiar way and is based on many determining factors. The testimonies of the former residents would indeed indicate that the capacity for childhood resilience, though apparently weaker in a child, can nonetheless take her beyond the trauma, that is to say, devictimisation. Each of the former residents, be they determined or submissive in the face of the institutional violence, forged ahead on their own painful journey towards devictimisation and reconstruction.

How was their internal world, their world as a child constructed so they could survive the hazardous separation from their family and the immediate violence of the institution towards them and towards their schoolmate? Here, then, is often what each could only bring with her, known and unknown, in her small suitcase when she entered the monumental and empty building that symbolised the Residential School.

A child's capacity for resilience is her capacity to move beyond traumatic situations. It is determined by different factors that we call the legacy of childhood resilience. This baggage for resilience is inherited from parents, grandparents and group interdependency. It develops first and foremost from the initial attachments – that is to say the physical and emotional ties woven between the mother, the father and the child. The mother and father play a different prevailing role that is indispensable. The care of the child from birth to childhood is significant, as is the quality of the cultural transmission for which the parents and community are guardians.

Memory of one's origins

Memory of one's origins is the ability to recall where one's ancestors came from, how they blazed a path, what traces, what language, what stories, what names and symbols they left behind so their traces are recognisable and followed or for setting new directions. When they were small girls, precious memories of their way of life abounded. They experience a real joy in recalling them and sharing them. Through their healing journey, they have developed an ardent desire to reclaim the history of their families and their original culture.

Attachment and separation

The women spoke about their family life and their first relationships with their parents. This period in a child's life is often called the primary attachment period because it is during this initial period of life as a family that the child's first attachments and his or her first vital links with his physical and human surroundings are formed. At this stage of the development of the psyche, not only their mother but their "house" is part of the child's being. The women tell how a simple move can be traumatizing for a very young child. They speak about a forced premature separation from their parents which is tragic for small children since they are literally torn from a part of themselves.

Most of the former residents speak of having lived their childhood in secure family surroundings.

The quality of the first bonds prepares the child to meet the necessary challenge that every child must ultimately face, that is to say the eventual absence of his or her parents to meet their emotional and physical needs. According to the English psychologist Winnicott, the separation of children from their mothers when they are too young is always a tragedy.

Precise rituals were part of the Aboriginal culture in North America which marked symbolically the passage from childhood into the adult world. The Algonquin ceremony of Small Steps is an example.

The small residents were violently catapulted out of the continuum of what constituted for them the period of their first attachments. The forced separation constituted a catastrophic rupture in their lives and a significant emotional trauma.

The inheritance of the cultural legacy

Several women have specific knowledge about the organisation of their family's life, the land and the people in the community before the reserve was established. Most of the former residents had a relationship with one person, a woman in their family in most cases, who had knowledge of traditional medicine using plants.

Preparation for the departure to Residential School

The quality of the preparation of the child in view of the perilous adventure will permit each one to deal easily with the different levels of anxiety caused by the separation from their families and the unknown experience that will prepare them to live alone. Generally, none of the participants was prepared to live with this rupture which will be disruptive for each one and catastrophic for the family unit.

The former residents taught us many things: their parents had not received adequate information so they could have talked about it to their children before their departure. Some parents, notably those who had already had one or two children leave, did not talk about these things to their families. Talking about it represented a significant threat. We must believe that the near total silence was aimed at protecting themselves from the pain of never being together again. Silence and forgetting, which ruled in the families surrounding this question, were aimed at protecting the unity of the family which would once again be reunited.

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES AT THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

The young residents were confronted with alienating and abusive conditions imposed by the violence of the institution. Inside the walls a racist ideology of assimilation spread by the religious authorities was translated too often into sadistic and perverse acts directed against the children and by an indifference or negligence towards the basic needs of the children and young girls. Already wounded by a premature and violent separation, they were overworked, molested, humiliated, abused, neglected or punished. They served as an example to others who were not apparently spared. Witnessing the traumas can also be as deadly for the child who was directly affected. All the young residents had to live on a daily basis with personal traumas whose wounds ran deep for each one.

How does one act in order to survive? What forces enabled them to face the isolation, the powerlessness and the denigration? Whom would they choose to support and accompany them? Where did the necessary strengths come from?

In order to survive the little girls adopt strategies that can be passive and protective or more active and dynamic, sometimes to the detriment of other schoolmates.

RELATIONAL STRATEGIES

Conserving and creating ties

The links they formed in the past allowed the former residents to develop in relation to their entourage and to find thousands of possible solutions to confront or protect themselves from that which threatened their physical



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and emotional integrity and their identity within the institution. In order to do so, they benefited from different conditions which could lighten or complicate the journey which they accomplished in an unfamiliar space and language, with strange people and rules which were very strict.

Choosing to be by oneself or being paired

Some younger students benefited from the protection of older ones in a spontaneous way, but the pairing of younger girls with older girls was strongly institutionalised in the residential school. It could occur spontaneously, but for the most part it was imposed.

Under the pretext of stimulating the learning of the younger students, the religious authorities in the schools had put in place a system of pairing the children in a framework whereby the older girls were named to look after the younger ones. This practice was not intended to create an emotional bond between students, but instead, was intended to maintain order and to teach values of hygiene and discipline. Because they had neither the conditions nor the means to do so, the older girls in charge of younger ones were forced to assume responsibilities that were beyond them.

This system of pairing had perverse effects. The nuns off-loaded onto the older ones their parental responsibilities, particularly when rules were broken. This system encouraged denunciation, exploitation of children, stress and frustration as a normal way of behaving. The older ones beat the younger ones and the nuns separated those who became friends.

Joining a gang

To counter the loneliness, terror and adversity, the residents grouped themselves together in groups of three, four or five. Their groups allowed them to get together to confront the institutional violence, oppose or rival enemy gangs or even terrorise a schoolmate. Looking back, no former resident says that they had found any real friendship in their gang but found rather a means of allying themselves to have the ability they otherwise would not have to mock authority, to steal food, share the booty and to plan escapes and play tricks. These gangs provided the children with a kind of identification, protection and fun. Each could count on their entourage to guarantee a spirit of fun and through this not remain prisoners to trauma.

PROTECTIVE AND REBELLIOUS STRATEGIES

Dreaming of running away, voluntarily keeping silent, being loyal or complicit with friends in adversity, profiting from secondary benefits of illness, having or finding release through a significant object are passive strategies used by young residents to survive the Residential School jungle. In their active strategies, they ran away for real, they proved their loyalty and creativity, they broke the school's rules, they confronted school authorities or they fought with their schoolmates aggressively. Briefly, they had passive and active resistance.

Silence

The small residents generally remained silent about the abuses that they suffered with their family and amongst themselves at the Residential School. Many ignored that other children like them were sexually abused. It was a code, the law of silence. They did not speak amongst themselves, did not speak of it to their families, and they did not speak to adults who might have helped them. The silence of some children was accompanied by humiliations that undermined their self-confidence and caused great anxiety.

The silence of these children can express itself in empathy for the suffering on another student or it may be a gesture of childhood solidarity.

Solidarity and transgressions

Despite the rules, the restrictions, the beatings and threats from the nuns, the small students managed to find solidarity to gain enough courage and psychological and physical strength to go on. Some found solidarity to neutralise the system of pairing. Others found solidarity through sharing and through transgressions. In some cases, the transgressions were committed to the detriment of their companions or themselves.

Aggressiveness

For girls as for boys, in a cruel context of multiple frustrations and emotional deprivation, fighting was a means of getting the closest possible to the other person's body. It was also an outgrowth of anger, a means of measuring oneself, of being recognised by one's entourage, of defying authority or of scaring off eventual abusers. In other cases, anger was expressed through fears and turning inwards or through fits.

Creativity, resourcefulness, humour

In accordance with their own story and their respective personality, the girls used creativity, inventiveness and humour on a daily basis. They had fun with some games. They investigated the residential school spaces and especially its external environment. They got involved with the occupational activities and they were creative. They dreamt and thought in their Aboriginal language.

Illness

Most of the former residents spent time in the infirmary when they were suffering from a benign illness. They benefited, then, from a different treatment. The food was better and they had real juice. The staff in the infirmary was proof of greater humanity towards the children. Some students were able to find moments of solace. For others, however, the experience was different. They were sexually assaulted and traumatized, which made them ill.

Internalization

In the context of the residential school, the internalization of the Law is the conscience that the child uses or has used for the irregularity, the abuse of trust, authority or power, or of the perversion in a situation in which they find themselves against their will and with which they debate in order to survive. Elizabeth was aware that her parents were deprived of their power to decide anything concerning the lives of their children, and that this deprived her of her life as a child in her family. If Sunshine Aki describes the residential school as a jungle, it is because she is conscious of the perversion of the Human Law which ruled. The nuns who threatened to punish them constantly for having "sinned" closed their eyes to the abuse that they and others like them exercised over the children. This insoluble problem imposed on children deprived of their reference points for their identity could be the origin of the aggressiveness and social violence and victimisation hatred that developed among many girls. Based on the evidence, they could not direct it against the real abusers.

Social violence and victimization

Social violence, according to Rene Kaes, establishes a link between the protector and a being without any defense. This link seeks to annihilate the



weaker one. This is also true of parents who live under the yoke of the Indian Act as for the young ones who grew up in the residential school under the yoke of the religious authorities.

For the former students, the reconstruction process towards healing aims to go beyond the label of victim, which has been imposed by the force and violence of the institution. The alternating identification deprives the individual of a voice and the capacity to think about reality as it is. We have seen how many of the small students struggled against the insidious attacks on their personal integrity and on their membership identity. Whatever the intensity of these struggles, be they silent, cheerful, dreamlike, or excited, the victim remains captive to an abuser, an offender, a torturer and a racist ideology which inhabits, masters or annihilates their own desires and internal world. It is a suffering that is tied to a painful loss and that is not yet named. Rage and shame live there from that moment on. The heritage of childhood resistance has been redoubled with a new cultural legacy, that of rage and shame, destabilizing and destructive at the same time.

AWARENESS OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

The taking of Aboriginal children in order to place them in Residential Schools was part of a process of destructurement that Aboriginal families and communities had to confront in the 1950s and later. Since it constituted a theft, a violation of the maternal and paternal functions of Aboriginal parents, the Residential School was an attack against the integrity of Aboriginal families and communities. It has long-term traumatic consequences on these families and communities.

Family balance

The physical, psychic and cultural rupture between them and their parents had grave consequences on the family balance as such and on the relationships between them and their parents. The forced placement of their children in Residential School provoked the break-up of the family and conflicting relations between the parents and the children.

The parents were suffering and humiliated for being dispossessed and abused in their role as educators. The cultural and traditional therapeutic reference points being scattered around them, and between them, they were limited in confronting the loss of their children with the support of their culture to face it. During a social and psychic catastrophe such as that of the Residential School on Aboriginal peoples, the trauma was intensified by the impossibility for those touched by it to find shelter in the social institution conceived to receive and contain the suffering. When they returned to their home during the holidays, the young students began to notice changes in their family's organisation, in the behaviour of their parents between them, and towards them.

REPAIRING THE TRAUMA

By the end of adolescence, some already had found in delinquency, or even in violence and excess, an exit, a logical continuation to the suffering of the internal dislocation and loss of identity. After all these years of frustrations, of emotional deprivation, of rejection, of humiliation, of discouragement, of the abuse of power and of racist aggression, the efforts and the strategies to survive, the quest for balance is these women's life work.

It will be necessary to face an extreme disarray and painful suffering before accepting to reclaim a past blemished by shame and despair, to make true sense of it.

A limit was reached by those who after several years of various substance abuses, transgression and self-destructive behaviours and sexual promiscuity, came close to dying. Most chose de-intoxification. This, however, allowed them to see quickly its limitations. First. It was necessary to go deeper to know the origins of the problems. Today, they identify those turning points that brought them to reconnect with the Residential School inside of them and to undertake the steps, based on their wishes and suitability, to come out of the decadence where they recognise having fallen in over the years.

Freedom and transgression, Intoxication and self-destruction

Dependency on alcohol and to various toxic substances was the answer that former residents found to suppress the images or the emotions that would otherwise have been too invasive and unbearable.

Treatment appears for several former residents as the emergency exit for their dependence on toxic substances and the personal decline connected to it. Most pursue more intense therapy in order to get back to the origins of their illness.

All former residents will come to an important realisation regarding their family of origin, their parental responsibility and the passing on of values through re-establishing and maintaining family ties. They have already undertaken a serious dialogue with a parent, a child, or a spouse. They have the desire to open up and to maintain a dialogue that was smothered inside. With the healing of these women, we are attending the reconstruction of the Aboriginal family and the institution of a new exchange between its members. This exchange takes into account the importance of cultural transmission by way of the children but it also takes into account the gravity of the past event, of the desire to remember and to persevere in a balanced and serene way.

From the moment when the reconstruction process started, the women questioned and renewed their relationships with those close to them. They met and developed relationships with new significant people. It might be a new spouse, workers in a treatment centre, new friends, but also many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people that several met outside their community. These people are, to varying degrees, supporters and important guides for them.

Socio-political involvement and the social role

For the same reasons as their reclaiming of Aboriginal spiritual values, the socio-political involvement of the former students appears to be the outcome of the realisation of the effects of the Residential School on their married and family life, and therefore, of the effects of the cultural genocide on the destruction of families and nations. All these former residents had a spiritual, social and political journey that brought them to actively involve themselves, individually and collectively, in order to make sense of their suffering and that of their loved ones. Beside the socio-political involvement, spiritual involvement was one of the ways that some chose to invest in.

RECONSTRUCTION

Through the numerous reconstruction strategies that they have either adopted or updated, the former residents have invested in two major kinds of healing: the family and cultural identity under the guise of its re-appropriation and cultural transmission.

The former residents figure as builders since they are rebuilding their families. They figure as guardians because they want to reclaim and pass on the cultural knowledge and values to future generations. In order to sustain the

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process of reclaiming and passing on of the Aboriginal culture around them these women have renewed their contact with a precious heritage. Through remembering the past and due to the significant people who gravitated around them in the past and today, they have renewed the resilience and family values inherited from their childhood. They have recovered a large part of their self-esteem. They call themselves resourceful, determined, confident, serene, independent and creative.

In concrete terms, the reconstruction strategies of these woman who testified first manifested themselves as a hunger for freedom and self-affirmation in response to the deprivation, where their aspirations have been ridiculed and denigrated. This period of their lives following the residential school saw the introduction of fun, challenges and transgressions in their lives, but, through the years, they were driven into a self-destructive dead end (multiple addictions, rapes, suicide attempts, conjugal violence) because the women could only rely on forgetting and turning inwards, including shutting down in complete silence (for some) in order to survive. When they realised that their personal suffering or that of their loved ones had reached its climax, they put an end to the free fall.

The turning points are most often influenced by the children of the former residents: loss of a child to suicide, legal sentencing of a child and crucial comments from a child. Finally, the aimlessness, the proximity of death and suicidal thoughts that had constantly obsessed them drove them to seek urgent treatment. Through the devictimization journey, the women rediscovered a freedom to speak, to think, to choose and to act that brought them to become socially or spiritually involved in the community to which they belonged. They have different realisations and commitments in the family, spiritual, community and political spheres.

Family commitment:

Despite certain conflicts or certain difficulties unique to the history of each, they re-established essential true dialogue with several members of their original families, members of their personal families, spouses and children. Sometimes a family tragedy, loss of a loved one, a serious charge brought against a son, will bring a former resident to undertake a profound journey with regard to their family commitment. Although they recognise the painful impact that their time in the residential school has had on their children, all see themselves, now, as good mothers. The benefits of devictimisation and reconstruction have thus been turned towards repairing the social community link. This, starting with the quality of the bonds with loved ones, and more particularly from the bonds with the children that have been transformed and to whom they are really committed.

Discovery of spirituality:

The former residents freed themselves of the influence of the representatives of the Catholic Church and its institution that was inexorably bound to the violence imposed by the residential school. They are, for most part, believers, in the sense that the monotheistic religion (only one God) grants to such a term, but they have themselves journeyed to reclaim a God, a divine source, a spiritual energy (Creator or TSEMANTU, as they call it) in keeping with the traditional values that were passed on to them, that they try to apply in their lives and pass on to their children. Above all, they are happy to speak to "God" freely according to their own personal spiritual convictions.

Community involvement and community:

Although they generally adopt a critical view of the problems and the weaknesses of their communities towards the residential school experience,

towards the socio-economic problems and towards the reconstruction of their identity, most have a deep commitment and a service of long-standing to their community. They have an ardent desire to participate in the work of reconstructing the identity of their respective Nations. They would like to see more community awareness strategy.

Political awareness:

Over the years, some have undertaken a profound questioning of their personal and cultural identity. They have acquired a strong political awareness. They know that since their childhood, they were the targets of white racism. They were later to work and sometimes even live in their own community of origin where they were blamed and rejected for having married White men. For those, the work of reclaiming their culture goes together with awareness about membership. The First Nations have a place in Quebec and must take their place in Canada and in the world. For a former resident, the place of the First Nations in the world is a spiritual place. However that may be, the freedom to decide for oneself is a major aspect.

Here are first the signs of the healing according to those that journey towards wellness and the important points in the reconstruction strategies adopted by the former residents. These two complementary avenues constitute a path in the multiple avenues to devictimization and successful reconstruction.

The signs of the healing

- Healing is a work of every day.
- She comes with the courage to face her fears.
- She comes with her own voice.
- She comes with the capacity to talk again to certain people who have contributed to the suffering of former residents or those who have endured a similar experience.
- She comes with good communication between her spouse and loved ones.
- She comes with the capacity to recognize her losses; loss of her childhood, her family ties, her sexual innocence.
- She comes with the capacity to accept her past as it was, to forgive herself and to appreciate herself.
- She comes with the capacity to talk about her problems in order to find some solutions.
- She comes with the capacity to consider herself to be a good mother.
- She comes with the capacity to speak about the experience at the residential school.
- She comes with the awareness of origins of these emotions.
- She comes with the awareness of her vulnerable points.
- She comes with the capacity to cry and to laugh about the experience at the residential school.
- She comes with the capacity to move away, to distance herself from the "abuser" as a priest, nun or institution, in order to be at peace with herself.
- She returns to spirituality according to her own personal aspirations.
- She comes with tolerance for herself.

Paths to reconstruction

- 1) Recognition of significant people: a source of inspiration and motivation

Some former residents recognize a mother, a father, a grandmother, a husband, a child, a friend, as a source of inspiration and motivation in their path to reconstruction. For some, certain significant people marked their childhood positively. For others, some significant people gave them the strength to get up and ask for help or to undertake an initial journey. In some cases, the spouse, also a former resident, will have shared with them the traumatic



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childhood experience of the residential school. He understood in the face of renewed fears and resistance. (For others, on the other hand, the spouse who was a former resident could be a major obstacle to devictimization.)

Those who could not have family members assume this role fell on the elders who guided them. Some found certain Aboriginal spiritual guides outside to initiate them about the link between health and spirituality. Finally, some former residents from the same community supported themselves through bonds of friendship and they were loyal to each other through their social commitments.

2) Undertaking Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal psychotherapy individually or in a group

They nearly all had one (or several) treatment(s) directly related to addictions (AA, NA), to non-Aboriginal therapy or to the Aboriginal spirituality movement. They went from one to the other depending on its suitability, while realizing that the essential detoxification was the detoxification of the residential school. They undertook a journey to find the origins of their uneasiness to prevent its repetition in their lives and to stop the violence from affecting their children.

Some will only have the support of their friends and members of their families. Most will be sustained by organizations and by the staff of these organizations, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Some had to be hospitalized for depression or entered into an addictions treatment clinic attached to a hospital. Several chose Aboriginal treatment centres. Those who also had addictions problems and who worked in the health and social services field in their community recognized the inherent contradiction in their lives of helping others while continuing to poison themselves. All these former residents underwent treatment to preserve what was healthy for them and their loved ones and for people who consulted them or who used their services.

3) Helping oneself while helping others

For some, this orientation was beneficial but for others, it was not effective. They first needed to understand themselves in order to be able to understand others.

4) Use of Aboriginal medicine and spiritual tradition

The former residents resorted with more or less intensity to Aboriginal medicine and spiritual tradition. Some possess the knowledge of the use of medicinal plants from their families or their communities. Others are very involved in the Aboriginal spirituality movement while others want to harmonize in their lives these two forms of spirituality, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, that have shaped them since their childhood. They don't necessarily want to reject the values that they acquired from the Catholic or Protestant religion. They wish to journey with both but differently with complete freedom. Some do not want to have traditional rituals that do not correspond to their view of reality imposed on them. Some however do try to work with the elders in their community in order to acquire, to perfect and to preserve the knowledge of their traditional culture.

For some, reclaiming for themselves and supporting the Aboriginal medicinal, spiritual and cultural traditions constitutes a long term commitment for which they have either been initiated or trained.

5) Awareness of one's potential and social commitment

All these former residents are socially committed within their community or in the socio-political Aboriginal movement on a national scale. They have

developed a realistic view of the socio-economic problems in their communities. Some are aware that their personal and community healing are bound together.

6) Having fun, and getting involved in creative activities

The former residents continue to go into the bush to look there for peace and serenity. These women know how to have fun and are involved in creative activities. They write, paint, do photography, and crafts. They are perfecting the knowledge of their language or are pursuing their academic or professional training.

7) Establishing or re-establishing a dialogue with loved one, the community and the outside world

Several former residents faced relationship problems with their parent, sometime due to divorce, sometimes because of their political or religious convictions. They had to sever their ties with their family or family members. Others had relationship problems with their family because of some members' drinking problems. All the former residents are aware that the relationship problems had to do with understanding the bonds that they had established with loved ones and with their surroundings. For some, parents remained role models whereas for others this relationship remained problematic or there was not enough time to re-establish it. For some, their personal relationships were beneficial while for others these have been marked by separations. Two former residents established a family that corresponds to their wishes for tenderness, serenity and sharing.

8) Recognizing one's strengths and one's vulnerability

All the former residents expressed with great conviction that they recognize that their strengths can co-exist with their vulnerability. It exists as the best way for them to share the results of their search for insight about themselves and their relationships with others. The Aboriginal memory of this knowledge (or Aboriginal collective memory) passed on by previous generations, often without anything being said in the family, is alive and well today. Although some had thoughts about taking their own lives, they see themselves as strong and well-balanced women. They know their vulnerable points. Going into the woods, fishing, hunting can be a means of finding peace. One mentions that she is learning to treat herself kindly rather than judge herself severely as at the residential school.

9) Reclaiming one's past

To move beyond the trauma of the residential school they needed to reclaim for themselves their individual and collective history. These former residents have not stopped doing so since undergoing therapy, their journeys, and after having committed themselves to talk about these events in order to make sense of it to themselves, their loved ones and for the future of their Nation. It is necessary to free the past in order to free the present and the future.

10) Recognition and understanding of the personal and cultural differences, and awareness of colonial violence

The question of their personal and cultural identity is, as in the case of all Aboriginal peoples, tied to one of the cultural genocide of which these former residents were victims. Understanding the effects of their own subjection during their stay at the residential school in order to explain and publicize the scale of the historic consequences of the assimilation of Native by White, has been imposed upon them. Their testimonies reveal women who struggle for their freedom and their balance and who struggle to understand the sense of the personal and cultural differences in the world today. ▶

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mary of the new moon

These women want to recover in themselves their own strengths and to share them with others by organizing workshops, talking circles, healing circles, and healing programs which will integrate their parents, their spouses and their children. They also want to give a sense of forgiveness and a visibility to the residential school experience by planting a tree, by erecting a commemorative plaque, and by creating a place of commemoration of the event that represents the forced assimilation of Aboriginal children in the residential schools.

In addition to being the experts of the Aboriginal residential experience, the former residents have assumed the roles of builders and guardians of their "Aboriginal house" that had been dismantled by the violence of the separations, by the violence of the cultural disruption and by the violence of the institution during their stay. It is understood that "the Aboriginal house" is not an individual. Although it is personal and marked by each one's reconstruction journey, it is collective and it is identity.

In light of the recommendations of the former residents one final question remains for several of them: what place will the male former residents take in this house in order to rebuild the Aboriginal identity? §

AHF interview ◀ *continued from page 3*

ing factors in each corner and everybody fights whereas if you change the form and you change it into a circle then what you have is a flow of ideas and energy. Yes, you do need a facilitator, a person who is going to be the Head, who is going to facilitate the company or organization or whatever, and they should have strong people skills. But one of their main jobs is to recognize the talents, to encourage people to show their talents, and then you have collaboration, you get good brain storming, and all the other team's spin-offs... If the person has really good people skills, she will also have a mechanism where a conflict can be resolved in a healthy way. I mean there is no such thing as a perfect situation, but the more that energy is encouraged to flow, the healthier the organization is going to be. Then most of this energy can be spent developing and facilitating the programs that have been created... rather than fighting against each other and jockeying for position and all that kind of thing.

Can the concept of the circle win over?

I see an enormous future for aboriginal concepts and thoughts in all areas of the world. The concept of healing, reparation, rebuilding, justice. I think so much about Afghanistan, these days, and what is happening over there. I saw something on TV this morning and it was really very touching. It showed this little girl, this beautiful little girl and with all these colored little rags twirled and wrapped around her, she was just covered in bits of fabric that she kind of tied together and she was so lovely. She had some food in her hands and what looked maybe like a drink box. She was just eating, little, little bites and her face was glowing and I thought there is nothing better in the world that I could have given than to give a meal to a child and it made me feel so good. The world is in great need of Aboriginal values, including those in the Aboriginal concept of the circle. §

Healing the pain of violence

Healing Lodge Vision



◀ *continued from page 10*

To live in balance with Creation, we are to follow Four Spiritual Principles.

From the East, the principle of Love is to love oneself, to love others, to love Creation, unconditionally. When we have done all three, then we have found Love. From the South, the Principle of Honesty is when we have found the Truth in Sacred Law. The Truth is reflected in how we live within that Law. From the West, the Principle of Unselfishness is the gift of sharing. Sharing your abundance, sharing what you have, sharing your knowledge, sharing for the well-being of others, and therefore the well-being of Creation. From the north, the Principle of Purity is the freedom from negative thoughts and feelings. To live by this Principle means remaining positive, so only good things come to you.

These gifts are brought together in the Medicine Wheel of Life which is the Sacred Circle composed of the Four Directions of the Universe. These represent the Four Origins of Humanity and their gifts to the Creation.

In the East, the gift of Birth and re-Birth and the Spring of new growth. From the East comes the Red Woman and her gifts of Vision and Prophecy. These gifts are found in the Spirit animal of the Buffalo, the sustainer of Life for the Red Nation.

In the South, the gift of Learning and the summer of Fruitfulness. From the South comes the Yellow Woman and her gifts of Enlightenment and illumination. These gifts are found in the Spirit animal of the Golden Eagle, the one who sees all and flies to greatest of heights.

In the West, the gift of Looking Within and the Autumn of Cleansing. From the West, comes the Black Woman and her gifts of Introspection and Reasoning. These gifts are found in the Spirit Animal of the Thunderbird. The thunder that comes before lightening to bring about change.

In the North, the gift of Serenity and the Winter of rest.

From the North comes the White Woman and her gifts of Wisdom. These gifts are found in the White Buffalo, the Wise Visionary that has attained purity.

These Sacred Directions come together in harmony with the Creation, within the Circle of Life, and the Spiritual path we walk. Through this, the people can find their walk in Life and begin to heal in the Love and Kindness of the Creation.

In conclusion, the Pizoniwikwon, (From the Waubaneau People of the Eastern Doorway of the Maliseet Nation), this Healing Lodge, a safe place or power spot, is the pathway on which a holistic approach to healing and human development will take place. §



AHF interview

Sky Bellefleur works as a Family Care Worker at a Montreal women's shelter. She is part Cherokee, part Lakota, and part Irish.

Sky, you have chosen to help others on their healing path. Has this brought changes in your own life?

I have been in the helping profession a long time now. When I began, in my counselling career I thought I had the right tools and the right experience, as a human being and as a qualified professional. It took me a few years to realize, though, that there were some things that did not feel right for me. Each time I was in a helping situation, I felt that I had plugged into something but once the process started happening, I became disconnected from that something important, so I came to realize I couldn't keep doing that because it was not healthy for me. I didn't feel as though I was not being effective. I felt I was like these paper dolls that come with a nice outfit. You cut the outfit and you stick it on and it looks good but there's nothing behind it, really.

I felt like I was part of something that had no real substance – I could make an impression on people with my philosophy or with whatever messages I had to bring but I couldn't stay long enough to really make it hold – make it sustainable for the people in the program,s and so I really started thinking more and more about the concept of healing. I think everybody has to come to that place on their own – in their own time.

Has anything in particular brought you to this realisation?

I'm almost 53 and a mother and a grandmother. But I can trace my journey to my grandfather, who had a great influence on my life. His whole philosophy on life was to help people. The reason I stumbled into counselling was that I wanted to help people. It's just a part of who I am. But as the years went by, I started realizing that no matter how much I wanted to help people, people had to be ready to help themselves. This came slowly to me as a message – through elder counsellors, through experiences working in the prison system, though all the mistakes I made as a young counsellor, trying to produce something from my own efforts.

I had to let go of all those attitudes and work really hard on dealing with my own issues. I know that term is used a lot these days but what I mean is that I have to face my own past in order to come to terms with it – to make amends wherever I go – to work on becoming stronger, getting rid of some of the bad stuff. And the more internal work I did, the stronger I was – the more I learned about healing from the inside out so that when I would start to talk to somebody about the process of healing there was a ring of truth in what I had to say.

I learnt from Elders that when you can understand from the inside, the same thoughts are carried in your heart and tongue and breath and you open your mouth – the truth comes out. So I decided to work on that, to get myself balanced up here, you know. I am still working on the physical part. The physical is a little bit of a challenge for me. I come from a long line of good eaters, I'm still working on it. It is bringing me physical problems. I have to carry around too much weight, it kind of holds me back, I don't have as much stamina as I would like to. So healing to me is always an ongoing process – it's not so much a destination as it is a journey.

How has this changed the way you approach those who need your help?

When I'm talking with clients, in a healing circle or in a workshop setting, I always try to express things so that people can connect with the message, to give them images of the healing process they can hold on to. If you're hiking through the bush, you scrape your arm on the same branch where a moose passed by a couple of hours before. That same branch scraped him and then it scraped you but you are busy and you are hurrying so you don't stop to take care of that wound and you leave it. Then later, you see everybody faces change and all the hunters in the group say, "oh! you better look after that wound."

If you leave that wound untreated, a scab will form but underneath the scab it's

dirty – underneath it will form an infection – and left long enough, it can kill you. And it is the same with the spirit. This is the way I relate it in my work – that those wounds are there, but they are scabed over and underneath the infection festers. They are the wounds of abuse, the wounds of abandonment, the wounds of family violence, wounds of scenes of father and mother fighting with each other, hurting each other, abandoning the children, hurting the children. Those are wounds that are in our spirit, in our mind and hearts and it is still making us sick. So the holistic approach is to go in there and start telling the truth. This has to be done in a place of safety where other people can share what you are feeling. I do a lot of work with women, and I never tell them what to do or try to fix them or anything like that, but I strive to empower them, to let them know that healing is possible, that it is a matter of sharing but also of hard work. Prayers, pipe ceremonies, sweat lodge, all of these things help.

How do you know a person is really ready to heal?

When a person is ready to start healing, they have reached a point of being sick and tired of being sick and tired and they are tired of feeling pain, so when they learn about the concept of healing they are interested. They want to be healed, and what they will say is "I want to heal this ... I want to talk about this" and they'll grab somebody and they'll start talking about it and you won't be able to stop them. That is like a thick layer slowly melting and cleaning that wound until eventually that wound will be pretty much healed up. But that scar will be there and will always be there. It will always remind us of what happened in the past, but this remembering makes us stronger, healthier.

A lot of abuse in the past was done in secret and once we are on our way to healing and we understand, we won't allow that anymore. We are now standing up and we are talking about it. We realise that the more people know, the less predators and abusers will do what they do. If people are watching they won't do it and if people are healthy they won't do it. Because often they're looking for a certain look in the eye, a look that says, "hit me I deserve it." It doesn't mean that we are giving them permission, I want to be careful about that. Many women would feel from that statement that they invited the abuser themselves. This is not what I mean. But it is hard to express the dynamics between a predator and its victim. It is just that the victim has been wounded, so she has this wounded look in her eye. A person that is a predator and who is often wounded himself but who is aggressive, his antenna is often looking for someone that has that look in the eye.

How can you change this dynamic between predator and victim?

The predator will possess a certain sense that will lead him to a victim, and so it is important to empower a woman, to help her becoming more aware. Empowerment is the means by which she will be able to leave a different message. It is to encourage and support her : you can heal - I can listen to you, you can do it, I can encourage you. If you stand next to me and you hold my arm, you're still standing on your own, you're still standing beside me – I'm only encouraging you. I'm not your master, I'm not your teacher. I'm not standing over you. It is important to get that person feeling that she is on the same level as others, that she has the same rights and the potential to heal. Once you can get that idea across to that person, that she can do it for herself, then she doesn't need you. You can encourage women by showing them what other resources are there. And their lives are going to change, their own antennas are going to start sprouting: "Oh look at that one over there..... I want to hear what she has to say."

I also like to tell people, "You have a magnet here, and if you're magnetizing it for pain, then you're going to be stuck with that pain until you start peeling it away and say *No more*. But when you start working on your healing, then you are magnetizing your heart for positive. When your heart is positively magnetised, you can say, 'I want to have somebody in my life, but I want that relationship to be to be positive, respectful.'"

continued on page 8 ▶



This report is a reflection of interviews that took place between December 1997 and February 1998 in Springhill Institution, Prison for Women, the Regional Psychiatric Centre (Prairies) and Saskatchewan Penitentiary. The report presents opinions, observations and suggestions of federally sentenced maximum security Aboriginal women and CSC staff on the procedures, policies and programs that CSC has in place to help reduce the security levels of Aboriginal women. It states what needs to be done to help them achieve a reduced security level, in order to transfer out of maximum security and eventually be released into the community. Of the Aboriginal Women interviews (data extracted from the complete report)...

- 100 % identified the need for "one to one" counselling and identified the need for more contact with Elders. Elder counselling must be made available on a full-time basis and be recognized in the Correctional Plan. Elder intervention must also be available when disagreements arise.

Federally-Sentenced Aboriginal Women in Maximum Security WHAT HAPPENED TO THE PROMISES OF "CREATING CHOICES"?

Creating Choices: The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women

SkyBlue Morin, January 1999

<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/skyblue/tocf.shtml>

Creating Choices was adopted by the government in 1990 and was the basis for the development of the women offender program. *Creating Choices* recognized that a comprehensive approach to the unique program needs of federally sentenced women is required. *Creating Choices* lists the following "Principles for Change" which have guided the implementation of the regional women's facilities and the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge:

- Principle #1: Empowerment
- Principle #2: Meaningful and Responsible Choices
- Principle #3: Respect and Dignity
- Principle #4: Supportive Environment
- Principle #5: Shared Responsibility (among levels of government, service agencies, volunteer organizations, businesses and community for the development of support systems and the continuity of service).

This comprehensive approach needs to include federally sentenced Aboriginal women (FSAW), as the research data shows that they have been neglected. FSAW are not dealt with in a manner that is empowering to them. Their contact with staff has been one of feeling powerless. They have not been provided with meaningful and responsible choices, as they have had to repeat the same programs and take some programs that they believe were not necessary. They indicate that their institutional environments have not been supportive. Many FSAW asked "What happened to the promises of *Creating Choices*?"

- 76% identified the need for individually based Intake Assessment and Correctional Plans. Some Aboriginal women have special needs such as: fetal alcohol syndrome/effects, battered women's syndrome characteristics, suicidal tendencies, etc. that require individual assessment and a specialized correctional plan.
- 76% stated that parole hearings are delayed or waived because the Intake Assessment information was dated and Correctional Plans were incomplete.
- 76% indicated security levels are not explained to them.

Programs and Delivery

- 100% stated that Aboriginal ceremonies need to be recognized as part of the Correctional Plan (for their healing effects in dealing with the Aboriginal women).
- 100% stated that programs facilitated by Correctional Officer II's (CO2's) do not work. CO2's as facilitators only creates anger and animosity among prisoners.
- 94% indicated the need for intensive treatment programs for alcohol and drug abuse, similar to a 28 day treatment centre program with an intensive relapse prevention program as follow-up.
- 76% stated that Aboriginal women need a specialized treatment program to address slashing and suicidal behaviour and need specialized programs based on individual needs that address grief and loss, living without violence and the effects of family violence, dysfunctional family systems, the cycle of abuse, a couples counselling program to address co-dependency and self-esteem building.
- 76% stated that CSC needs to provide more culturally relevant programs that are recognized in the Correctional Plan and facilitated by Aboriginal people.
- 76% stated that programs need to be completed in phases or steps.

◀ This allows the Aboriginal women to deal with specific areas, finish them and have a sense of accomplishment. Positive behaviour needs to be recognized, not only the negative behaviour.

- 24% stated that Aboriginal women need to access post secondary or university education. And that they need a parenting skills program, to learn to parent their children during visits and upon release. Many Aboriginal women have been absentee parents because of incarceration and have not been able to learn parenting skills through family role modelling or support.

- 12% stated that Prison for Women needs to address delays in providing the required programs and stated that Prison for Women needs to increase Native Liaison services and Elder counselling, both of which need to be recognized in the Correctional Plan.

Needs: Physical, Emotional, Situational, Societal, Etc.

- 76% stated they want better health care and, at times, the staff disregards their requests. In some instances, for Aboriginal women to get medical attention they take extreme measures, like slashing themselves.

- 76% stated they need to be assessed by an Aboriginal psychologist who is culturally sensitive. Some psychologists are difficult to understand due to language barrier; others are hard to connect with due to a cultural barrier. This would eliminate the prejudice that the Aboriginal women believe occurs with a non-Aboriginal psychologist.

- 58% stated that Aboriginal culture needs to be treated with respect. Some women reported that time limits have been put on the ceremonies. It was reported that food offerings from ceremonies have been thrown in the garbage when it is to be respected and burned.

- 24% stated that "Independent Living Programs" need to be established to assist those who have become institutionalized and cannot live beyond the confines of an institutional environment.

- 18% stated that Aboriginal women want peer support counsellors and a "Breaking Barriers" program.

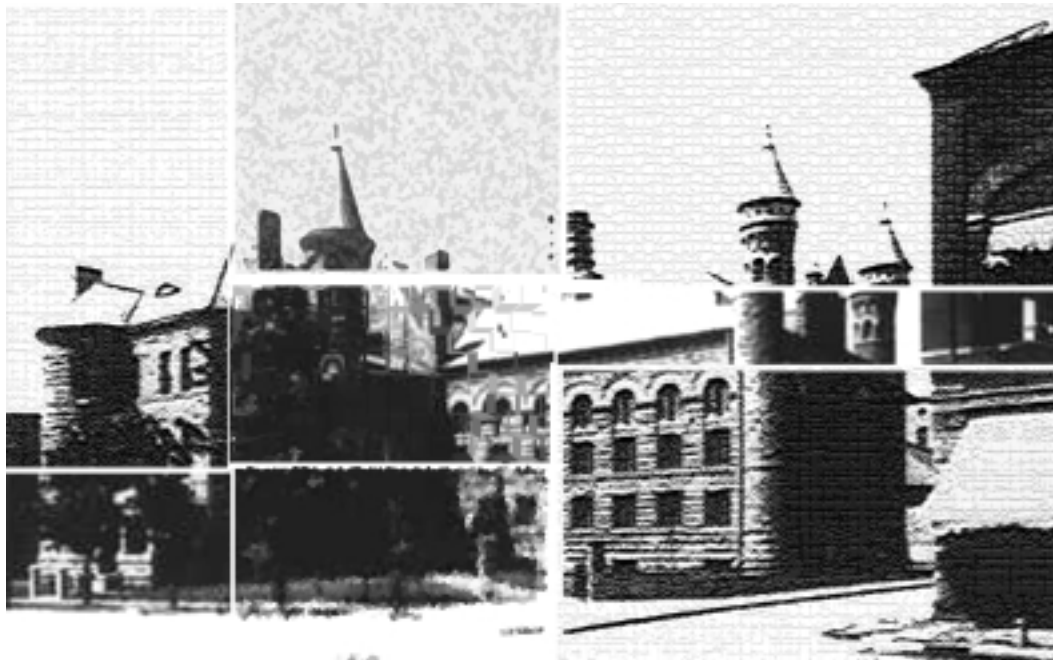
Obstacles in Reducing Security Level

- 100% stated that there is a lack of communication between management, the primary worker and the prisoner.

- 100% spoke of swearing and angry outbursts when staff "push their buttons." They indicated that swearing is used as a coping mechanism by the women, for which they receive numerous charges. If they cannot swear to release anger, this anger is stored, and usually results in violence against others or in self-injurious behaviour (slashing).

- 100% stated that CSC staff do not take slashing seriously.

- 76% stated that being straightforward, direct and speaking their mind are seen as being manipulative and argumentative.



- 76% stated that they were not given a chance. An application for transfer to the Healing Lodge was never processed.

Statements Regarding Staff

- 100% stated that qualified facilitators (not social drinkers) are required for substance abuse programs. Correctional staff, present or former will not be accepted as facilitators. Facilitators with similar experiences or backgrounds (e.g. ex-prisoners, poverty and/or having lived on the street) would be appropriate.

- 88% stated they had taken steps to reduce their security levels but were not supported by staff for various reasons.

- 76% stated that CSC needs to hire more Aboriginal staff who practice their culture and are not judgmental. They felt pre-judged by staff, citing a lack of empathy and compassion.

- 76% indicated they had controlled their behaviour and had requested programs but staff did not respond to their needs or provide the programs.

- 53% indicated that Correctional Plans delays were due to CMOI staff not working with them more closely. CMOI staff must be readily available to the Aboriginal women.

- 12% reported receiving support from staff and program facilitators in reducing their security levels.

Institutions and/or Environment

- All of the Aboriginal women at the Regional Psychiatric Centre, at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary, at Springhill Institution, stated that this institution needs to increase Native Liaison services, Elder counselling and recognize the healing benefits of Aboriginal ceremonies in the Correctional Plan.

- 100% stated that medium security women's facilities need to expand so they can also house Aboriginal women in maximum security.

- 100% wanted more yard space to allow more sports activities outside their respective institutions.

- 76% wanted more access to sweatlodge grounds for quiet time.

- 35% believed that there is a need for a women's facility for Aboriginal women who are maximum security instead of warehousing them in maximum security prisons for men (e.g. Saskatchewan Penitentiary and Springhill Institution). These institutions do not provide the women with the required programs to attain lower security.

- 24% required access to a telephone to contact the Correctional Investigator, but were not allowed the access by staff.

- 18% have accumulated charges for talking to their boyfriends or common-law partners incarcerated (Saskatchewan Penitentiary and Springhill Institution).



Family, Community Support and Re-Integration

- 100% of the Aboriginal women stated that CSC needs to arrange for Elder's counselling. There is a need for the continued participation in cultural programs and events prior to release. These can be arranged through Native Liaison services, Aboriginal staff, or community agencies, such as Friendship Centres.
- 88% need community re-integration programs prior to release and for a longer duration of time. Also required is follow-up, once the women are in the community.
- 76% need more Native Liaison services for counselling and assistance with family matters. In one of the institutions the Native Liaison is available only two half days a week. They expressed the need for a full-time Native Liaison officer.
- 53% needed more family and community contact with volunteers and agencies, through events and socials established by various individuals and organizations. This would prepare the Aboriginal women for connecting with family and establish community contacts for support.
- 24% stated programs not completed in the institution must be available in the community for completion and stated that intensive treatment for alcohol and drug abuse and intensive relapse prevention programs, as follow-up support, is required after release.

Conclusions

CSC has explicit policy and guidelines in regards to FSAW. This report demonstrates that CSC is not adhering to its own policies and guidelines with respect to Aboriginal women at the maximum security level. The Corrections and Conditional Release Act, Commissioner's Directives, CSC's Corporate Missions Objectives, and Creating Choices are policies and guidelines that recognize Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs; how-

ever, the Aboriginal women in maximum security are stating that these programs and services are either not available or are insufficient because they are not readily accessible. The Aboriginal women in maximum security facilities face many hardships due to the improper utilization of these explicit strategies.

The FSAW are not dealt with in an empowering manner. This situation contributes to instances such as self-injurious behaviour, substance abuse and behavioural problems. Strictly applying the various strategies available would provide for solutions and healing. Those being detained and those employed by the institutions must at some point have overlapping goals. These goals must be communication, understanding and respect.

Implementing the recommendations contained in this report will acknowledge the Aboriginal women and CSC staff's views as to what is required to assist the Aboriginal women in reducing their security level in order that they may transfer out of maximum security. CSC has a responsibility and an obligation to FSAW to review the recommendations contained in this report and implement them, so that correctional programming can respect the ethnic, cultural and spiritual beliefs of FSAW. Recognizing Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs and implementing the recommendations will address some of the discrimination and racism that FSAW face in the correctional system.

CSC's responsibility for prisoners is identified under its Corporate Mission Objectives: to rehabilitate inmates and get them out of their incarceration, as soon as possible, as well as to develop and implement research-based programs targeting the specific needs of inmates to promote successful reintegration into society. CSC and its institutions have neglected their responsibility of implementing specific programming that is culturally and gender specific.

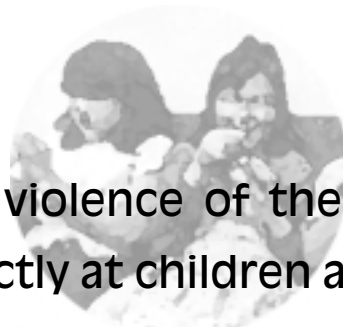
The Corrections and Conditional Release Act states that correctional programs must respect gender, ethnic, cultural, spiritual and linguistic differences among the inmate population; however, not all institutions have provided this for FSAW. Correctional institutions must have gender specific and specialized programming for FSAW that have Aboriginal culture and spirituality as the focus.

Creating Choices recognized that a more comprehensive approach to the unique program needs of FSAW was needed. CSC has not fully adhered to the recommendations of Creating Choices as it relates to FSAW, as the research data shows that they have been neglected. FSAW are not dealt with in a manner that is empowering to them. Their contact with staff has been one of feeling powerless. They have not been provided with meaningful and responsible choices, as they have had to repeat the same programs and take some programs that they believe were not necessary. The Aboriginal women also indicated that their institutional environments have not been supportive.

CSC's Commissioner's Directive #702 states the manner in which Aboriginal peoples are to be dealt with in federal penitentiaries. CSC has not been completely adhering to this policy when dealing with FSAW.

CSC's responsibility and obligation to FSAW has not been fulfilled, but has been remiss in respecting their ethnic, cultural and spiritual beliefs. Although the CSC Corporate Missions Objectives, the Corrections and Conditional Release Act, Creating Choices recommendations and Commissioner's Directives have mandated intentions to implement programs that recognize Aboriginal culture and spiritual beliefs, discrimination and racism against FSAW have been sited. Against these odds, FSAW have not been able to reintegrate into their home communities and society successfully. §

<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/fsw/skyblue/toce.shtml>



Talking and continuing to talk about the residential school will lessen the violence exercised on others or on oneself. It means putting an end to the transgenerational transmission of the trauma that weighs on youth today.

In order to allow Aboriginal women and other Aboriginal people who wish to get involved in testimonials about this historic episode, we are suggesting here some questions that can be used as part of a reflection prior to sharing or dialogue.

These questions have been developed based on the difficulties inherent in the trauma experienced by women in the residential schools. They take into account the long journey of the former residents to find their own voice. This devictimization journey brought them to express their desire and to testify as part of a responsibility they feel towards Aboriginal history and culture. Its transmission has become for them a commitment that must be maintained.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE TESTIMONY OF A TRAUMATIC CONTEXT AS EXPERIENCED AT THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL?

- **Freedom of speech**

The former residents reveal that, for some of them, the simple act of talking about the residential school experience, that is the act of talking about it in therapy, with their family, with their parents or with their children and in their community, proved to be beneficial for them and for their loved ones. Some have spoken publicly during conferences, others have published their story. Others have shared with their parents and their children. Some have even created private places for discussions where women are invited to share in a support group context. Whatever the chosen method, they have found the freedom to talk which had been killed over many years, have re-established true lines of communication with those around them and have supported other people to do the same thing.

All the former residents and all families used silence to protect themselves from the pain of being separated from loved ones or from the many assaults inflicted upon them in the institution. It was a choice to survive unacceptable conditions in such surroundings and the punitive rules that governed them. In the long-term, however, silence, denial or forgetting had some ominous consequences for them and their children. Those measures intended to protect them when they were in the institution drove them to adopt self-destructive behaviours. They also recognize today that silence and denial maintains suffering in the communities.

WARNING AND THE THERAPEUTIC IMPACT OF TALKING

However, to open up on this topic or to be informed in an inappropriate way can be damaging and can intensify the trauma. One must keep in mind that a prior journey with support was necessary for the former residents before unveiling the wounds from the past. This disclosure did not occur without suffering. Talking must remain open in order to be healing. The necessary time must be granted so it can develop and the flawed understanding can enlighten the basis of the trauma. So that the person is able to recognize themselves in what they say and reclaim their past, it is indispensable that they remain in charge of what they say. Talking and silence should never be imposed or forced as it was at the residential school.

The violence of the Institution was aimed directly at children and their families. These attacks were aimed at the social bonds woven between the members of a community, bonds maintained from one generation to another by the way of the passing on the spiritual traditions...

With these considerations in mind, testimonials and sharing have a therapeutic impact. They allow people to rebuild the truth based on their subjective and collective view of things. The significance, the interpretation and the understanding that they acquire about their history minimizes, to a certain degree, the negative effects of the experience on their lives. This work to elaborate it allows for the establishment of a real separation from the abuser. Therefore, talking delivers the past and opens up the future. For some, forgiveness can be the outcome of healing through talking. The former residents make the distinction between forgiveness and forgetting. Forgiveness is described as the outcome of a type of grieving whereby the former resident finally finds peace with herself after having decidedly left behind the residential school and the torture that had been internalized. It happens in such a way so as to free them to say no to the abuser who wanted to torment them. A break is made with the traumatic past and the people concerned that does not leave any room for hate or resentment. Anger, however, can remain a source for action. Therefore, testimonials allow those affected to recognize themselves as part of a collective experience. Through this, they break out of the isolation. Shared testimonials lessen the anguish linked to confusion, to black outs, and individual questioning that inhabited them as children and that confronted them again as adults.

Finally, these testimonials about their personal history allow them to rewrite and to recall for themselves the collective history under the light of day. By testifying, the former residents themselves have reclaimed their personal history by putting it in relation with their collective history, since the collective history is that of each one of the members of the community who builds it. Culture develops and is built from the relationship and the exchange of information between these two forms of memory. This is the way that all human subjects can live their feeling of belonging to their culture and rely on their cultural identity to open the future.

WHY CONVEY IT IN THIS CONTEXT?

- **To rebuild the family**

The violence of the Institution was aimed directly at children and their families. These attacks were aimed at the social bonds woven between the members of a community, bonds maintained from one generation to another by the way of the passing on of the spiritual tradition that played the role of an identification card. Through the attack on the family, the transmission and the memory of many characteristics of traditional life was deeply disturbed and disrupted. In addition to the serious personal traumas suffered by the children, family ties were shattered and parental functions were usurped or corrupted. When their children were in the residential school, several families abandoned the bush and the teaching of these skills and the nomadic customs in bush. Great hunters became workers, unemployed or alcoholics.



Without any real reference points (the land, traditional food, skills...) and essential cultural symbolism (language, rituals, myths, traditional medicine, conception of the world...) and key support people (father, mother, ancestors, elders) the traditional family organization as well as the customs tied to it deteriorated. Yet, the Aboriginal peoples always knew of the importance of passing it on. As demonstrated by the former residents' stories of their childhood, their parents knew how to recognize the efficiency of how to educate children as well as the efficiency of how to pass on the heritage of the past. Aboriginal peoples always recognized the value of talking as a powerful means for healing people. The practice of taking circles and healing circles is the best example.

The women who testify or who testified about their residential school experience have added this page of their personal history, to that of their family, their community, and their Nation. They have recreated the social bond that had been infected. Every story sheds light on the experience as well as puts the house back in order... The former residents do not try to deny or forget the violence and the abuses they suffered. They have moved beyond the victimisation, a consequence of the institutional violence towards them, while becoming aware and becoming more aware that the remembering of residential schools can be a tool to heal them.

CONVEY THE STORY OF THE EVENT TO WHOM?

"It is necessary to tell other women that we passed by there," said Niska. "We are the experts," said Sunshine Aki. The former residents speak from their subjective experience of the residential school. They know, however, the expert's role is delicate. It is not the same role when a woman shares her story as mother with an injured child, as member of her community during a public testimony or as a therapist with abused adults. In addition, the former residents want to speak not only to the other former residents, but also to the male partners who were in the residential schools.

The former residents who have a family believe that their children endured the trauma of the residential school. We cannot minimize the transgenerational repercussions tied to the institutional violence in the communities. The members of their families of origin as well as their children underwent the violence of the residential school in their turn. They felt the distress and assisted, powerless, the repercussions on their parents. Sometimes they developed symptoms tied to the parental uneasiness that had not been talked about or worked on in therapy.

HOW TO CONVEY THE STORY OF THE EXPERIENCE?

The means of conveying and distributing the residential school experience

The means of sharing and distributing the residential school experience are many and it is necessary to make a discriminating choice of these means while taking into account the people to whom they are addressed. The experience of the residential school can be conveyed through written documents, such as biographies or autobiographies, novels, news, poetry, essays or the newspaper articles, the oral document or the audio-visual document. The residential school experience can be distributed through school programs, publications and local or external newspapers, community organizations, community meetings in large or restricted groups, and through radio and television broadcasts. Some former residents have already begun to produce the documents that they would like to circulate in their area and outside of

their community. One has done research and has written a script for a documentary but there was not enough funds to complete it. She also writes poetry.

According to several former residents, the reunions to which they have been invited over the years are not always a means of conveying the residential school experience. By considering the reunions in the Aboriginal residential schools like any other happy reunion is, instead, a means of deferring the truth. For some, the site of the residential school ruins that are not completely gone can make them relive intense feelings of pain and anger. Those that live near these ruins are of the opinion that they should be burnt. They suggest that it be a symbolic act to keep alive the memory of the communities of this episode in Aboriginal history. In order to do so, they suggest that a monument or a work of art be erected in these places to remind future generations about the importance of this historic passage. In some communities a real commemorative celebration has taken place with the primary goal of sensitizing all generations about the events.

WHAT TO PASS ON?

Name, language, pride, spirituality and the means to heal oneself

Besides the need to talk with loved ones, the former residents described what transmission represents to them in their recommendations. We have organized them here. They are presented in detail in the MALI PILI KIZOS research report:

1. To reclaim for oneself, one's original name and understand its significance if needed.
2. To reclaim and to pass on one's native language not only because it is a major element for cultural identity, but because it allows for the creation and reinforcement of the ties with children and grandchildren. Some have a hard time to forgive themselves for not having passed on their language to their children.
3. To pass on the pride of being Aboriginal because they are not ashamed of their origins anymore. They want to share this pride by passing on the knowledge of their culture, and, more important, that which deals with the Native residential school episode, so as to contribute to the recognition of the First Nations here and elsewhere in the world.
4. They want the results of this research to be distributed to all the Aboriginal communities, and to make possible this kind of project for other Aboriginal women and men.
5. Most wish to reclaim and pass on Aboriginal spirituality in order to give to their children the open-mindedness and openness to others and to the world demonstrated by their ancestors to the same peoples and to new arrivals. In this sense, they are reclaiming for themselves the values and the meaningful words they were taught in their childhood. The former residents do not all give the same importance to the traditional healing rituals. But they all tell us that the reclaiming of Aboriginal spirituality will not take place without the freedom to think and to choose which had been rediscovered through the devictimization.
6. They want to share the means to heal oneself while creating tools that encourage solidarity and talking and by organizing therapeutic services where the counsellors would have specific training for former residents, workshops that apply to former residents and to other women, talking circles at the local level, technical resources for the youth, a ceremony involving the whole community and a awareness program for women. §



Resources for this Issue

The following resource list is provided as a public service. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation does not necessarily endorse these materials. Included are materials that address the topics covered in this issue. A resource list with new entries is presented with every issue. See earlier issues for other resources.

For a complete list of Residential School Resources, call Wayne K. Spear at the Communications Department:

1-888-725-8886 – extension 237.



Institute For The Advancement Of Aboriginal Women. 1-11205 101st st NW, Edmonton, AB T5G 2A4:
<http://iaaw.zip411.net/en>

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Aboriginal Women's Health Research Synthesis Project: Final Report
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