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## Elders' Teachings in the Twenty-first Century: A Personal Reflection

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*No one has the range and depth of knowledge that Jake had but there are many of us who carry some of his knowledge. If we work together we can do a lot to ensure that his teachings continue.*

Paul Williams, on the passing of Chief Jake Thomas, 1998

*The rapid decrease in the numbers of true Elders is most alarming. Who is to replace them? . . . The mantle will fall to those spiritual people, less evolved, of less ability and knowledge.*

Joe Couture

The request from the editors of this third edition of *Visions of the Heart* to contribute an article on Elders prompted the response: 'I'm not the person to write about Elders.' While I have taken to heart teachings received first-hand or by report over the years from various Elders, I do not have the authority to speak of sacred knowledge. I count myself among those 'less evolved' humans who are called upon to share what First Nations world view and knowledge have to contribute to well-being in the twenty-first century.

When I relay received wisdom, I carefully qualify my interpretations as coming out of the experience of a Mohawk woman and an academic, located in a particular context and generation, with no claim of authority to represent the real tradition. I know from reports of colleagues and friends that there are gifted individuals engaged in the rigorous and lengthy process of formation to become 'intermediaries between their respective cultural communities and the spiritual forces of the universe' (Couture 2000, 42). This essay is not about those successors of 'true Elders' described in Joe Couture's paper in this volume.

The pages that follow map some of the ways that knowledge rooted in traditions as received from Elders is being shared, interpreted, applied, and transmitted outward to effect transformation in multiple domains and, perhaps,

in society at large. Changes in modes of teaching are cited and in particular the concepts developed in written form.

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, a relatively small cadre of Elders firmly rooted in their respective indigenous cultures and communities in Canada and the United States became magnets for knowledge-seekers from many regions. As stories of their power to awaken identity and restore balance to body and mind were told, as kernels of their teachings were shared, these Elders reached iconic status. I suggest that with the passing of many of that generation of Elders we have entered a period of transition characterized by uncertainty about the authenticity of new messengers and hence the validity of the messages they bring.

Traditional ceremonies, indigenous languages, and community validation are proposed as reference points to help navigate through uncharted waters, complemented always by the personal responsibility of seekers to discern whether particular mentors are helping them move toward wholeness.

## Viewing the Landscape from a Particular Place

I speak and write from the vantage point of a Mohawk woman and an academic who has been a witness and participant in the extraordinary process of reclaiming and affirming indigenous ways of knowing that has engaged individuals and communities across Canada over the past 40 years. My direct experience with Elders, ceremonies, and cultural teachings has centred around the Trent University community, where I have had the opportunity of extended association with Elders on faculty and periodic meetings with visiting Elders and traditional people. My understanding has been stimulated and enhanced by exchanges with colleagues and students who are on a similar path of learning, and I have been challenged in particular to translate my insights and apply them to the practice of research.

Selecting terminology to represent streams of knowledge is difficult. Ceremonies and instructions come from specific peoples—Cree, Ojibway, Mohawk—but their relevance is much broader. Aboriginal is a collective term including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada, but use of the term may inappropriately gloss over the distinctiveness of peoples and their cultural heritage. Indigenous knowledge is used in international discourse to refer to the streams of knowledge from First Peoples around the world, but the term is not in common use in many communities. The adjective ‘traditional’ acknowledges the ancient origins of teachings but obscures the dynamic nature of those teachings as they are experienced and adapted in contemporary settings. My perspectives

have been greatly influenced by socialization in a Mohawk community, association predominantly with Iroquoian and Ojibway Elders, and interpretation through the medium of the English language.

I have learned from many people, but I am particularly indebted to Chief Jake Thomas, who was a colleague and mentor at Trent University for a decade and who shared many of the teachings introduced in this essay by way of illustration. Reflections and writing of Ross Hoffman and David Newhouse have contributed to articulating key ideas that frame the paper.

## Uncovering Layers of Meaning

My first remembered encounter with traditional teaching was in the early 1970s at Trent University. Chief Jake Thomas had been invited to deliver a series of public lectures on Iroquois traditions. Jake was later to become a Condoled (Hereditary) Chief<sup>1</sup> of the Six Nations Confederacy. He was already a linguist fluent in five Iroquoian languages and English, a speaker in demand to lead ceremonies in Canadian and American traditional communities, a carver of masks that had been gifted to royalty on behalf of Canada, an artisan who had devoted years of his life to replicating symbols of traditional life—wampum belts, the ceremonial condolence cane, and rattles—and a teacher with a wealth of stories.

In a lecture on male and female roles, Jake talked about the protocol for gathering medicine:

When you go out to gather medicine you must prepare yourself with prayer and cleansing, otherwise the medicine will hide from you. When you find the medicine it will be growing in families and you must leave the babies because they are the next generation. You must be careful to gather both the male and the female, otherwise your medicine will have no power. When you collect water to prepare the medicine you must dip your bucket with the flow of the stream. Otherwise your medicine will have no power.<sup>2</sup>

Jake's words resounded deep within me. I had a sense of knowing that what he said was true, with meaning on multiple levels. He was providing a prescription for harvesting medicine plants, acknowledging the spirit of the plants and the conditions on which they would share their power. He was consciously presenting a metaphor for ordering respectful, complementary relationships between men and women. He was relating the particular human act of preparing

medicine with a flow of power in the universe with which humans can align themselves. And he spoke with authority that was not his own but that of the law of life that he was conveying to us.

Jake subsequently joined the faculty of Native Studies at Trent and became a teacher of teachers as well as of students. After a lecture one day, when Jake was being bombarded with questions about traditional teachings, he chuckled: 'Everyone has so many questions about culture, and it's so simple. It's all about respect and appreciation.'

The words stayed with me but without any rich unfolding of meaning at the time. They came back powerfully in a dream. I was invited to lead a three-day workshop involving a class of social work students at the University of Manitoba, comprised of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners. At the end of the first day of professionally organized content, the students informed me that this was not what they had come to the workshop to learn. They wanted to know how traditional culture could help them in their work. I went to sleep that night with the dilemma of what to do with the next two days unresolved.

At 3:00 a.m. I awoke with a visual image of computer paper unfolding (as it used to do) to reveal lecture notes, headed by the titles 'Respect' and 'Appreciation' in bright letters, sketching out how these Iroquoian principles correlated with good practices I had learned in social work training. At the workshop, I announced that with reassurance in a dream I was ready to share some teachings from my own culture but I would need help in connecting them to the experience of the students who were working in Cree, Ojibway, Saulteaux, and Dakota settings. One of the participants revealed that she too had had a dream in which she was instructed to do what was asked of her that day. The seven or eight First Nations students, who had scarcely spoken the previous day, accepted my invitation and took seats on each side of me to become co-leaders for the rest of the workshop.

Learning from that experience has stayed with me. The meaning of a teaching may not be evident immediately, but it will come into focus when the time is right. We need to be ready to let go of our preconceived notions of what will work and take some risks. Help is available if we are willing to reveal our need. Teachings that we receive don't tell the whole story; we have to discover the sense that they make in new circumstances. Something that took hold in my own teaching was the approach of speaking from where I sit, not trying to project my insights into others' experience. Aboriginal people, especially those of older generations, are adept at lateral learning, absorbing messages imbedded in a story and transferring them to their own context to make meaning.

When the capacity to listen deeply to stories has been disrupted by schooling that asks direct questions and demands direct answers, students of any age may need lengthy or abrupt re-orientation to actually hear the teachings of Elders.

## Sites of Learning

When Aboriginal people lived on the land, members of a community from childhood and throughout their lives were instructed in the laws of life through daily experience. Language that has evolved over many generations carries the code for interpreting reality. Language is learned within the family, and the world view embodied therein is reinforced by relationships and practices of the community. Public ceremonies and private rituals give shared expression to understandings that are implicit as well as explicit. In turn, communal experiences become incorporated in the language of family and community. The mutually reinforcing influence of each of these learning sites—language, family, community, and ceremony—is like a medicine wheel, always in motion, with each quadrant drawing from and enriching all the others.

A central feature of experience in traditional Mohawk society was the recital of the Thanksgiving Address, the words that come before all others, at the opening of any communal event. After acknowledging those who have come from different directions, the speaker invites all the assembly to put our minds together as one and give thanks to Mother Earth who supports our feet and brings forth all manner of life upon the Earth. The speaker then proceeds to give thanks to the waters that are essential to life; to the plants that give medicines, nourishment, and shelter to the people and all other life; to the birds that mark the passing of the seasons and please our ears with beautiful songs; to the animals of fields and forest who sacrifice their lives for our sustenance; to our elder brother the Sun who gives warmth and light to all creatures and marks the times upon the Earth; to our Grandmother the moon whose concern is for the faces of future generations coming to us from the Earth; to the stars and unseen forces of the four directions.

In each cycle of thanksgiving, the speaker affirms that all of those named have been faithful to the instructions given to them at the creation. The Thanksgiving Address concludes with the words: 'So we look deep into our hearts and find the finest thoughts and the finest words, and we put all of these together as one and give thanks to the Creator of all.'<sup>3</sup>

The Thanksgiving Address now figures centrally in language learning in communities where learners of multiple generations are engaged in recovering

facility in the Mohawk language. Students are not only learning a mode of communication: they are gaining awareness of their place in an interdependent web of life; they are learning that, like all creatures, they have responsibilities and that they benefit from the responsibilities fulfilled by others; they are being reminded that 'putting our minds together as one' is a sacred act; they are being affirmed as persons who have deep in their hearts 'the finest thoughts and the finest words' that are worthy of offering up to the source of life. They are learning the deep meanings of respect and appreciation.

The devastating impact of colonialist interventions in Aboriginal lives is addressed elsewhere in this volume. Political structures, land-based economies, family cohesion, languages, and cultural transmission from one generation to another have been systematically undermined. Over the past 40 years, Aboriginal individuals across Canada have been returning to the teachings and ceremonies of their own ancestors or of related cultures.

The sites of learning extend beyond the family hearth and the village council of former times. Language instruction in elementary and secondary schools and oral history and culture courses in colleges and universities reinforce or re-introduce elements of cultural education to students. Sceptics say that such fragments of cultural education are only shadows of the real thing. Jake Thomas's response to critics of his taking traditional knowledge to the university, in classes open without discrimination to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, was: 'I can only give our own students a taste of the culture. It will be up to them to go back to the Longhouse to learn more. According to the Great Law of Peace<sup>4</sup> anyone of any nation is welcome to follow the White Roots of Peace to their source and take shelter.'

For instruction situated in traditional contexts, adults and whole families from reserves and cities make pilgrimages to camps to take part in ceremonies, fasts, language immersion, and teaching sessions. Then they return to daily lives that may be quite distant from the tribal past. Whereas in the past Elders were reluctant to have their words recorded, oral histories and interpretations of symbols carved on rock and wood or etched on birch bark are now published. The texts of speeches are transcribed and studied. Knowledge deemed to be sacred, particularly that of a ceremonial nature, is still not disclosed except to those who have been initiated into the sacred circle.

As teachings of Elders and the impact of ceremonies are carried outward from the traditional camp and integrated into contemporary lives, the shape of the knowledge and the means of transmission change, as anticipated by Joe Couture, referring to both Native and non-Native seekers:

[S]o many are not grounded in a sense of the real but mysterious power of nature in mountains, rivers, lakes, rocks, life-forms, all as enmeshed in the web of the universe. So, the legends and stories require pedagogical adaptation. The stories have to be retold, reshaped, and refitted to meet contemporary seekers' changed and changing needs (Couture 2000, 43).

Selected examples of the ways in which Elders' teachings are being adapted and applied are presented in the next section.

## Teaching Methods and Key Concepts

In a traditional, land-based lifestyle, the student learns about reality by direct encounter with his or her environment and personal observation. Older relatives are available to model behaviour and to help make sense of perceptions. Stories recounted in the lodge present social and historical context and ethical imperatives.

When learners are immersed in an environment that lacks experiential reinforcements and tends to contradict the world view represented by Aboriginal traditions, teachers have to be more explicit in their approach to affirming Aboriginal ways. Formal learning in public schools is secular and directed to preparing students for social and economic participation in settler society. The disconnect between Aboriginal culture and formal education has been identified as an impediment to learning and development of positive identity. In response, a number of urban and reserve communities have introduced 'survival schools'. The Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon is one these schools, which builds its program around the cosmology of the regional culture, in this case Plains Cree.

The school's spiritual perspective is sustained by daily sweet grass ceremonies, feasts on special occasions, special ceremonies, and sweat lodges. Teachers conduct talking/healing circles to build trust so that students can speak about their feelings and lives. . . . Drumming and dancing circles introduce students to aesthetic dimensions of culture that unify psyches and social relations through celebration. Support circles for students generate peer backing in dealing with abuse (Regnier 1995, 314).

Modifying and transferring selected practices from the traditional camp and inviting Elders into the classroom are means of introducing successive generations to the contemporary value of traditional teachings. Another adaptation is the articulation of key concepts and processes inherent in indigenous

knowledge. David Newhouse of the Department of Indigenous Studies at Trent University makes the point that learning *about* indigenous knowledge is not the same as engaging experientially with indigenous ways of coming to knowledge (Newhouse 2008). Nevertheless, the discourse proceeding in the literature and seminars and the introduction of structured field-based learning with Elders pave the way for further direct engagement with indigenous knowledge. A new generation of students and graduates is in the forefront of demonstrating that higher education can open a path to deepening consciousness of indigenous knowledge and identity.<sup>5</sup>

Joe Couture, a Cree Métis trained as a psychologist, and Leroy Little Bear, a Blackfoot scholar and lawyer, have been very influential in translating indigenous world view into conceptual, philosophical language. Joe quotes anonymous traditional sources as declaring: ‘There are only two things you have to know about being Indian. One is that everything is alive, and two is that we’re all related’ and ‘The centred and quartered Circle is the sign of wholeness, of inclusiveness of all reality, of life, of balance and harmony between man and culture’ (Couture 2000, 36). His experience and insights are elaborated further in the same article.

Leroy sets out the axiom that ‘In Aboriginal philosophy, existence consists of energy. All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and in constant motion.’ He goes on to explain:

The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns. For instance, the cosmic cycles are in constant motion, but they have regular patterns that result in recurrences such as the seasons of the year, the migration of the animals, renewal ceremonies, songs, and stories. Constant motion, as manifested in cyclical or repetitive patterns, emphasizes process as opposed to product (Little Bear 2000, 78).

Marie Battiste, a Mi’kmaq educator whose research has focused on the patterns of Mi’kmaq language, confirms the concept of constant flux reflected in verb-based linguistic forms that emphasizes the centrality of relationships, whether between humans or with other members of the natural order (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 73–85).

A common feature of the knowledge systems of diverse Aboriginal peoples is the responsibility of humans to contribute to maintaining balance in the world. Little Bear explains:

Creation is a continuity. If creation is to continue it must be renewed. Renewal ceremonies, the telling and retelling of creation stories, the singing and re-singing of the songs, are all humans' part in the maintenance of creation. Hence the Sundance, societal ceremonies, the unbundling of medicine bundles at certain phases of the year—all of which are inter-related aspects of happenings that take place on and within Mother Earth (Little Bear 2000, 78).

In the field of Aboriginal health, the holistic understanding that well-being flows from a balance among physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of the whole person has become widely recognized, although biomedical treatment continues to focus on physical interventions. As in education, alternative, culture-based services give a place to spiritual dimensions of healing.

The medicine wheel, which brings together several key concepts of Aboriginal knowledge systems, has become probably the most recognized and widely used symbol in conveying traditional understandings. The centred and quartered circle can exemplify balanced awareness of wholeness that encompasses particulars, the holistic nature of well-being, the multiple domains of learning, the repeating cycle of life from infancy through youth, adulthood, and old age to a return to dependency and the spirit world.

Elders' teachings are concerned with personal development of apprentices as well as knowledge acquisition. Moral precepts for personal behaviour and ethical precepts governing relationships are codified in principles such as kindness, honesty, sharing, and strength in Anishinaabe tradition (RCAP 1996, 1:654) or the Good Mind that is fundamental to achieving peace, power, and righteousness in personal experience and community relations, as prescribed in the Iroquois Great Law of Peace (Newhouse 2008). Unbundling the meaning of moral and ethical values encoded in ceremonies and traditional teachings is the lifetime pursuit of those who are destined to become Grandmother and Grandfather to the whole community, not just to their own kin.

Interpreters of indigenous world view and ways of coming to knowledge consistently affirm that traditional teachings do not advocate an insular mind, shutting out alternative ways of perceiving reality and organizing perceptions. Battiste and Henderson encapsulate the tension involved in being open to new knowledge and maintaining the integrity of indigenous knowledge:

Indigenous educators . . . must balance traditional ways of knowing with the Eurocentric tradition. . . . They must embrace the paradox of subjective and objective ways of knowing that do not collapse into either inward

or outward illusions, but bring us all into *a living dialogical relationship with the world* that our knowledge gives us (Battiste and Henderson 2000, 94; emphasis added).

David Newhouse uses the concept of ‘complex understanding’ to elaborate how traditional knowledge fosters harmonious relationships in a social and physical universe in constant motion.

Complex understanding occurs when we begin to see a phenomenon from various perspectives. Complex understanding doesn’t seek to replace one view with another but to find a way of ensuring that all views are given due consideration. It doesn’t work in an either-or fashion. A phenomenon is not one thing or another but all things at one time. Complex understanding allows for our understanding to change depending upon where we stand to see or upon the time that we look or who is doing the looking. Complex understanding is grounded in a view of a constantly changing reality that is capable of transformation at any time (Newhouse 2002).

As traditional teachings are carried outward from the tribal camp and village, across geographic space and generations, the modes of transmission are being adapted to the needs of learners who may not be grounded in an ecological consciousness, who need guidance in interpreting the stories and applying teachings to their life situation. Core concepts are being articulated in publications and integrated in teaching approaches and professional practice of Aboriginal professionals and non-Aboriginal colleagues. Symbols such as the medicine wheel, which were developed in specific contexts, are being shared and adopted across tribal and cultural boundaries. The content of traditional knowledge and the processes by which it is transmitted are becoming a focus of research by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars.

## Catalysts for Institutional Change

Ross Hoffman is an apprentice in traditional ways, of English and German origin. In his PhD dissertation (Hoffman 2006), Ross researched the impact of the teaching and ceremonial guidance of a gifted Arapaho Elder and healer located in Wyoming. For more than a decade, from 1969 until his passing in 1981, Raymond Harris welcomed knowledge-seekers from Alberta and Saskatchewan, principally Cree individuals and families, to his camp. Hoffman

documented how the first wave of apprentices became catalysts for re-introducing ceremonies that had been suppressed in their communities by prohibition under the Indian Act and aggressive resocialization of children in residential schools. These apprentices in traditional ways also became key figures in transforming the values and practices of Aboriginal organizations and services. The roster of Cree leaders in social change interviewed by Hoffman is not proposed as a representative sample; it is derived from personal contacts pursued by the researcher. Nevertheless, the individuals' activities and recorded thoughts illustrate the rippling impact of Elders' teachings across geographical boundaries, institutions, and generations.

Harold Cardinal was a prominent figure in First Nations politics from the publication of his book *The Unjust Society* in 1969 until his passing in 2005. He was an advocate for the necessity of cultural and spiritual rebirth as a complement to the recovery of self-government and self-determination of First Nations. In interviews recorded by Hoffman, Cardinal recalled the influence of his encounter with tradition and ceremony under the guidance of Raymond Harris:

I remember having a conversation with him one morning in Wyoming at the breakfast table, over morning coffee. Raymond said 'I'm only giving you a start so you can go back and find out the ways of your people, because they exist there. I can't make you an Arapaho—you are a Cree. You must go back and talk with your own people, the traditionalists'. . .

[T]he traditions were still alive. Some of the old people had kept them underground because of the pressure of the church and law. People had kept them alive secretly. It was the generation, like myself who had been to residential school, the one or two generations who had been indoctrinated and who were Christians who felt that those traditions were evil because we had been separated from them, the culture, the spiritual traditions. . . .

For many political leaders the Harris/Smallboy<sup>6</sup> influence was that it validated our core identity. It legitimated who we were. It validated that our direction was the right one—our political direction. Not only in this province, but nationally (Hoffman 2006, 114, 111, 145).

Others mentored by Raymond Harris had public impact. Eric Shirt, one of the founders and executive director of the Nechi Training Institute in Alberta was a key figure in the movement breaking new ground in culture-based treatment for addictions. Douglas Cardinal, a Cree–Métis architect, has acknowledged that his vision for the Canadian Museum of Civilization was received in a sweat lodge

and that ceremonial practice is an ongoing source of personal renewal. Pauline Shirt was a founder of Wandering Spirit Survival School in Toronto, one of the first urban-based survival schools in Canada.

Joe Couture, another member of the group journeying regularly to the Harris camp, was a towering figure, stimulating cultural awareness and renewal in post-secondary education, mental health, restorative justice, ceremonial practice, and philosophy over a period of 35 years. His influence continues after his passing in 2007. As chair of the Native Studies (now Indigenous Studies) Department at Trent University from 1975 to 1978, Joe encouraged faculty and students to explore culturally based experiential learning, which is now part of the department's academic approach, represented specifically in the vision and mission of the PhD program. Joe's background in psychology and philosophy moved him to make connections in his writing with parallel streams of knowledge in contemporary philosophy and theology. His assertions that perceptions of reality opened up by traditional teaching are on a par with the great religious and intellectual traditions of the world have been taken up by younger scholars, providing a complement to the exploration of traditional environmental knowledge (TEK) that also gained recognition in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

The ongoing exploration of traditional perceptions of reality and application of these insights in contemporary life is evident in the work of scholars and teachers across Canada. Willie Ermine, a Cree from Saskatchewan who is an apprentice in traditional ways, wrote in 1995:

The being in relation to the cosmos possessed intriguing and mysterious qualities that provided insights into existence. In their quest to find meaning in the outer space, Aboriginal people turned to the inner space. This inner space is that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being. . . .

Aboriginal people found a wholeness that permeated inwardness and that also extended into the outer space. Their fundamental insight was that all existence was connected and the whole enmeshed the being in its inclusiveness. . . . The tribal ceremonies display with vivid multidimensional clarity the entries and pathways into this inner world of exciting mystery that has been touched by only the few who have become explorers of sacred knowing. Rituals and ceremonies are corporeal sacred acts that give rise to holy manifestations in the metaphysical world. Conversely, it is the metaphysical that constructs meaning in the corporeal (Ermine 1995, 103, 106).

Currently, as an ethicist and faculty member of the First Nations University of Canada, Ermine envisages the possibility of creative dialogue between Aboriginal knowledge systems and researchers operating from the perspectives of Western scientific culture. He proposes that a pre-condition for such exchanges is the creation of ethical space where the undercurrents that have disrupted reciprocal exchange are addressed by acknowledging differences in history, modes of thought, and values. In this ethical space, the assumption that norms in Western society are appropriate models for knowledge creation in different cultural environments is deliberately suspended. Re-orientation of ethics of engagement is essential, because 'Western mind' incorporates images of indigenous peoples that are rooted in oppressive historical relationships (Ermine, Sinclair, and Jeffery 2004, 22–34; Ermine 2008).

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, a communications specialist of Chippewa and European background, elaborates on the implications of the identities constructed by outsider perceptions of Aboriginal peoples:

North Americans' representations of themselves and of Indians are linked in articulation to ways of knowing and experiencing otherness. . . . Drawn in literature and art, social imaginaries emerge and recede, inscribing Indians as primitive and pagan, heroic and hostile, exploited and defended. These politicized images are woven into policies—colonial and current—that not only isolate and identify Indians but also construct and position Indian identity, creating unsteady circles of insiders and outsiders (Valaskakis 2005, 213).

In his doctoral dissertation, John-Paul Restoule, an educator of Ojibway and French ancestry, explored identity formation by Aboriginal men in urban contexts. He documented the multiple identities of participants who juggled, negotiated, and adapted their presentation of self to themselves and to others as they moved from city to rural reserve, from private to public domains, and back again, fulfilling varied social roles (Restoule 2004).

Communicating wisdom of the Elders requires at least two-pronged initiatives to affirm Aboriginal identity in an environment that offers fragmented and distorted images of Aboriginal people and devalues traditional ways of knowing. Engaging in discourse with the non-Aboriginal public can effect a shift in the mindset of the majority society and create a more hospitable environment for Aboriginal people struggling to give expression to their core identity. New formulations of Elders' teaching can also affirm for Aboriginal people themselves the legitimacy of their exploration of language, tradition, and inner space.

In his research on the impact of Raymond Harris's work with the Plains Cree, Hoffman describes the core group of Cree traditional practitioners that he interviewed as 'the first wave' who learned from 'the Old Ones' and went on to become respected as Elders and mentors in their own right. Similar movements were emerging in other regions and Aboriginal communities across Canada. The social and institutional change initiated by the first wave of reborn traditionalists in the latter part of the twentieth century has been taken up by a second wave of knowledge-seekers and knowledge-holders who are animated by the conviction that indigenous ways of knowing have intrinsic value for non-Aboriginal as well as Aboriginal peoples in Canada and around the globe. In discourse and practice in politics, health, education, the arts, and research in every domain, these new traditionalists are working to give indigenous knowledge *visibility* as a way of being that is entirely relevant to the twenty-first century.

The necessity of giving expression to wisdom gained and the varied ways that it is communicated are underlined by Viviane Gray, a Mi'kmaq visual artist, citing Black Elk and Maria Campbell:

A human being who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after they have performed the vision on earth for people to see (Black Elk in Gray 2008, 275).

[I]n the Plains Cree language, art is part of the mind or *mon tune ay chi kun*, which translates to 'the sacred place inside each one of us where no one else can go'. It is [in] this place that each one of us can dream, fantasize, create and, yes, even talk to the grandfathers and grandmothers. . . . The thoughts and images that come from this place are called *mom tune ay kuna*, which mean wisdoms and they can be given to others in stories, songs, dances and art (Campbell 2005 in Gray 2008, 268).

## Preserving the Integrity of Traditional Knowledge

As traditional teachings become more widely diffused and incorporated in publications, practices, and statements of values in classrooms and organizations, applications of knowledge will become the responsibility of adherents who are physically and culturally distant from the 'true Elders' who led the process of renewal. As many observe, true Elders were always rare, and they are passing away at an alarming rate. Who can be trusted to interpret the wisdom of the Elders? Joe Couture quotes an Elder's prediction that these times of emergence are to be marked by chaos and confusion before changing into a time of light and peace (Couture 2000, 41).

While I have a sense that the quest for certainty in a universe characterized by constant change is doomed to fail, I suggest that there are touchstones that can help us avoid being tossed about by divergent and even competing interpretations of 'the way'. The touchstones are: ceremony, language, and community validation.

Ceremonies have stability over time. The reliability of oral tradition validated ceremonially has been recognized in Canadian law with the *Delgamuukw* decision of the Supreme Court in face of argument to the contrary. While particular features of protocol in a sweat lodge may differ from place to place, the core efficacy of sweat ceremonies to facilitate healing and transformation continues to be validated by participants. Jake Thomas, working as an oral historian of treaties and councils with ethnologist Michael Foster at the Museum of Civilization, demonstrated that his performance of council protocols illuminated what was recorded in colonial records reaching back close to 300 years (Foster 1984, 183–207). Participation in traditional ceremonies that reliably mediate connection to the Earth, to the community, and to one's own inner being are a critical counterbalance to the variability of concepts and interpretations that abound.

Indigenous languages reveal in their structure and content the values that have served the people over generations. Cardinal and Hildebrandt conducted research for the Treaty Commission of Saskatchewan on the language used by Cree, Saulteaux, Dene, and Assiniboine Elders in recalling and talking about the treaties. The researchers found a remarkable correspondence among the recollections, concepts, and terms of the different language groups. Based on collaborative interpretation with the Elders, they published a book exploring nine words or phrases that illuminated the view handed down in oral tradition of the sacredness of agreements undertaken, the means of securing good relations, and the commitments to respect future needs for a livelihood from the land (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 2000). Willie Ermine writes:

The idea of our progenitors was to try to gain understanding of many of the greatest mysteries of the universe. They sought to do this by exploring existence subjectively; that is, by placing themselves in the stream of consciousness. Our Aboriginal languages and culture contain the accumulated knowledge of our ancestors, and it is critical that we examine the inherent concepts in our lexicons to develop understandings of the self in relation to existence. The Cree word *mamatowisowin*, for example, describes the capability of tapping into the 'life force' as a means of procreation. This Cree concept describes a capacity to be or do anything, to be creative (Ermine 1995, 104).

In quite personal terms, Caroline VanEvery-Albert describes her own journey of learning her ancestral language:

The Mohawk language is polysynthetic. This means that it is made up of small grammatical elements each of which has a specific meaning. These grammatical pieces are linked together to create words, which are equal to an entire sentence in English. Another interesting element of the language is that it is verb-based and nouns are incorporated. Below is an example of the complexity and beauty of the Mohawk language. [Gives an example of the elements making up a word.] This word, which when translated into English means I want or need something, literally means the earth will provide for me or give me benefit. . . . I was amazed by the relationship between the Mohawk language and Rotinonhsyon:ni world view (VanEvery-Albert 2008, 43).

Having the facility to consider a teaching as it is expressed in our ancestral language is a fundamental way of reflecting on its meaning and its consistency with the values inherent in the culture and the language.

The third touchstone that I propose is community validation. While charismatic leaders and visionary holy men and women have existed in various cultures, Aboriginal societies value collective knowing rather than expert knowing. In another paper, congruent with Newhouse's description of 'complex understanding', I wrote:

The personal nature of knowledge means that disparate and even contradictory perceptions can be accepted as valid because they are unique to the person. In a council or talking circle of Elders you will not find arguments as to whose perception is more valid and therefore whose judgement should prevail. In other words, people do not contest with one another to establish who is correct, who has the 'truth'. If a decision affecting the well-being of the community is required it will be arrived at through a process of discussion considering the several perspectives put forward and negotiating a consensus (Castellano 2000, 26).

Women speaking to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples warned of the dangers of naively putting trust in healers who lack community validation:

We have also come across many self-proclaimed healers who have abused and exploited traditional spirituality in their own Aboriginal people. . . .

For controlling the spiritual malpractice, I guess it would be through all the Elders in each community. They would know the ones who are abusing the sweat lodge and abusing the medicines (Lillian Sanderson in RCAP 1996, 3:72).

Attachment to traditional lands formerly contributed to continuity of communities over generations. Mobility of individuals now makes the identification of persons and teachings that carry moral authority more complex, more dependent on effective communication networks.

## Conclusion

Over the past two generations, First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people, the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, have been actively engaged in conserving and recovering our cultural heritage. Cultural renewal is not about going back to living in tipis and longhouses or a hunting and gathering lifestyle, as critics would suggest. The goal is to uncover those deep life-affirming values that are part of our heritage and to reconstruct in contemporary form the relationships that give expression to those values. Resistance and reconstruction continue to be necessary to rebuild cohesive communities in which the stabilizing elements of language, family, community, and ceremony have been systematically undermined by colonizing forces.

Many of the Elders who gave vitality and guidance to the wave of renewal that gained momentum over the past 40 years are passing into the spirit world. It is not clear who will be their successors. Younger generations continue to look for 'the wisdom of the Elders', which is repeated, reformulated, and interpreted at many sites, by many teachers. Young scholars are turning their attention to probing the depths of meaning imbedded in the languages, ceremonial forms, and ethical instructions that have been passed on. Connections are being made with traditions of indigenous peoples in other parts of the world. A small stream of non-Aboriginal people are seeking to learn from the wisdom of the Elders in matters as diverse as the environment, restorative justice, conflict resolution, and holistic healing.

There is much work to be done to restore wellness in our own communities and just relationships with the peoples with whom we share this land. This paper is an attempt to broaden the basis for dialogue within our communities and with our neighbours on how to realize *pimatziwin*, living well in Anishinaabe tradition, and *peace*, the ideal of respect and mutual responsibility valued in Iroquois tradition.

Nia:wen. Thank you for your attention.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do Elders' teachings referred to in this article have relevance in the environment where you live, learn, and work?
2. Are there points of convergence between indigenous world views and other philosophies or belief systems with which you are familiar? Elaborate.
3. Is oral communication necessary to the transmission of Elders' teachings? Why or why not?
4. Who are the legitimate teachers of indigenous knowledge in contemporary times?
5. Do traditional teachings of particular indigenous societies constitute an authoritative canon of knowledge? Provide a rationale for your view.

## Notes

1. On the passing of a hereditary chief of the Six Nations Confederacy, a Condolence Ceremony for the clan of the deceased chief is held, and the candidate who has been endorsed in councils to assume the vacated title is then installed. Chiefs thus confirmed are called Condolent Chiefs. The condolence cane mentioned later is a symbol of the authority of the Confederacy Council. It is carved with mnemonic markings and 'read' in the roll call of chiefs at the opening of council meetings.
2. As with other teachings attributed to Jake Thomas in this essay, this is my memory of what I heard. While I acknowledge and honour Jake as the source of the wisdom cited, any error in interpretation is my responsibility.
3. Ernie Benedict, Mohawk Elder, speaking at the opening of a meeting of the Canadian Psychiatric Association Section on Native Mental Health on the Native Family: Traditions and Adaptations, London, Ontario, 1983. Transcribed with permission.
4. The Great Law of Peace is both the constitution of the Iroquois Confederacy and the formulation of how members of the Five (later Six) Nations should maintain peaceful relations. The centre of the Confederacy is symbolized by a great white pine tree whose roots, the white roots of peace, go out from the tree in the four directions.
5. See 'Indigenous knowledges and the university', special theme issue of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2008).
6. Robert Smallboy was a Cree Elder in Alberta who led a return to tradition and life on the land around 1968.

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