

OPEN SPACE – PERSPECTIVES

The Lessons in Our Blood: Reflections on Protecting Aboriginal Children

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Introduction

I share a dream with many Aboriginal peoples in Canada. Actually, it is many dreams, but perhaps the most crucial aspect of those dreams involves the well-being and vitality of Aboriginal children and families. I would like to share my own dreams with you, as well as some stark waking moments that intrude upon believing those dreams into reality. My own dreams, I suppose, are somewhat pitiful in comparison to the enormities of the intrusions, but what would happen if enough Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples experienced and followed the same kinds of dreams for Aboriginal children and families in Canada? It is wonderful to dream. I have faith in those dreams which, to me, are not simply some kind of chemical process within the human brain. Rather, dreams are aspects of the collective memory of the past, present and future of a peoples. To me, dreams are intuitive lessons that whisper in our blood.

Intrusions. When I refer to stark waking moments, I refer to stories that are all too familiar to indigenous peoples and other marginalized peoples across the earth. In particular, the historical and contemporary colonization of Canada has been largely characterized by assimilation policies meant to eradicate any sense of indigenusness, enacted through residential schools and Canadian child welfare practices which have systematically corrupted and attacked Aboriginal children and families. In attempting to heal and resume responsibility for the protection of our children and families from abuse and neglect, Aboriginal peoples are in danger of repeating the same actions that have devastated us. I will attempt to clarify those dangers and propose alternatives.

A component of the wisdom and peace-making process, in addition to time, knowledge and action, is vision. The dream I share with many dreamers, a critical aspect of self-determination for Canada's Aboriginal peoples, is to protect and nurture our children and families within our own communities which peacefully co-exist with other Canadians. My hope is to create conditions for us to set aside the stark waking moments that are a shame and tragedy to all Canadians and instead allow ourselves to dream, to try to build a common dream in which to immerse ourselves.

A Personal Dream

The year 1990 marked a fertile personal growth period in which I was awakening. You see, when I began to seek out Aboriginal elders and traditional teachers, it was not as if I was hearing things for the first time. When I heard our Creation stories, philosophies, or teachings, and participated in ceremonies, I had the profound sensation that I was experiencing these things *again*, that I somehow already *knew* them and was merely reacquainting myself with them, like distant relatives or old friends. It was like I was remembering a dream upon awakening.

This is one intuitive lesson that whispered in my blood:

I was walking up a hill, heading in a northeasterly direction. The sky was a clear blue and the sun was shining but I did not see it in my field of vision. It was springtime, and the hill which I ascended was covered only by the brown short grasses that are remnants of a covering of winter snow.

As I crested the hill, I looked out over a shallow valley that was part of a vast plain. As I reached the hilltop, I knew that I was heading towards a destination and that-- I was on the right track. I did not know where I was but I knew that it was not on the earth I walked during waking. I looked out over the shallow valley and began to walk down into it. The valley was much like the hill I had just passed in that there were no trees or growing plants of any discernible kind other than the brown grasses of the summer past. As I walked other details, previously unnoticed, revealed themselves to me.

Throughout this valley I saw mounds of earth scattered across it, each about two meters long and about a half-meter high. The length of all of the mounds ran along the same direction in which I walked. Protruding from each of the mounds was a staff, from which hung four eagle feathers which gently swayed in a breeze that I did not feel under a sun whose warmth I did not feel. Each of those eagle staffs leaned towards the same northeasterly direction that I traveled.

Around a number of the mounds, people gathered. They were arrayed in brightly colored regalia. The colors were vibrant and striking in a way that I had never seen before. Some mounds attracted only one or two people and others up to five or six people, all of whom were quietly focused on a particular mound. As I continued to walk in their midst, no one noticed my presence and I did not intrude because I knew that they were honoring their dead.

Just then, as I began to ascend the other side of the valley, my attention was drawn to my right. I was pulled in that direction, towards the east. When I changed direction, a wall of cedar was in front of me. The cedars ran off for a

distance on either side of me but I merely pushed straight ahead through the branches which slowed me down but did not stop me.

When I came out on the other side, I knew right away that I was back on this earth in this reality. The sun was still shining and the sky was still blue but the place was much different. I emerged from the cedars beside a ditch with still, fetid water mixed with the odd piece of discarded paper. I hopped across the ditch and landed on the side of a gravel road that ran off on both sides of me. I turned to my right and took in the rest of my surroundings as I began to walk along that road.

I saw that the road on which I walked was one of a number of gravel roads that intersected in a grid. Inside the squares formed by the network of gravel roads, high grass almost obscured rusted metal barrels and old junk cars. Some of the squares held wooden houses irregularly placed here and there. I knew that I was on a reserve.

My attention was drawn towards one house in particular. I approached the open doorway but could not see inside the darkened interior of the house. Pausing on the threshold, I entered as my eyes adjusted to the dim light of a living room.

Once inside, I could see two children off to the right of the living room, a boy and a girl of about six or eight years of age who were quietly playing together on the floor. The children were oblivious to the two adults, their parents, who were having a heated argument directly opposite me towards the back of the living room and I knew that the children regularly witnessed this kind of occurrence. As I stood there, no one paid me any attention. I knew I was present in that scene but it did not appear to me that to the four people recognized my presence.

The argument between the two adults began to escalate: their voices became louder and filled with emotion; their gestures became broader and their faces contorted with anger. It was at this point that the male tried to pull the female through another doorway into a separate room, probably a bedroom. I knew that the argument was about to grow into physical violence. Just before the man slammed the door, the women turned to me and implored me, "Take them," indicating the children with her glance. Then the door slammed shut and I could hear the sounds of flesh hitting flesh and muffled cries.

I turned towards the children who were still sitting quietly playing on the floor. In the dim, blue light of the room I walked towards them. They both turned their heads to look up at me. They raised their arms towards me. I bent slightly and gathered them up and cradled one in each of my arms. They put their arms around my neck; I turned towards the door and walked out into the sunlight.

Stark Waking Moments

The Indian Act

In 1867, Canada formally became a nation state, and subsequent to Confederation entrenched its colonial relationship with Aboriginal peoples in the 1876 passage of the Indian Act.

The Department of Indian Affairs has been referred to as a total institution, in that it was intended to address every aspect of Aboriginal peoples lives, much like a jail “serves’ the needs of its inmates. The Indian Act was and is the legislative means by which Canada identified Indians and regulated the segregation of Indians onto reserves, dispossessed us from use and control of traditional territories and outlawed the cultural customs of governance and equitable redistribution of resources for sustenance (Manitoba, 1991: 62; Canada, 1996: 44).

The Indian Act was wielded to implement the Canadian government’s assimilation policy. This policy was an implicit goal prior to Confederation and was elaborated and clarified in the early twentieth century. If you have ever seen the “Friday the 13th” series of horror films, you may be familiar with the main purveyor of gore and mayhem in those films, the character Freddie Kruger. Well, consider the successive Superintendents of the Department of Indian Affairs to be the various incarnations of Freddie Kruger and the impact of the Department’s actions on Aboriginal peoples to be a horror show.

The assimilation policy of the federal Canadian government was infamously described by one Superintendent, Duncan Campbell Scott. While Scott wrote poetry which romanticized Aboriginal peoples as a vanishing, noble savage, he was also responsible for the administration of one of the most repressive regimes in Canadian history. Scott, in one of his less poetic moments, summed up his department’s ultimate aim:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that this country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone. That is my whole point. Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Department and that is the whole objective...” (Titley, 1986: 50)

In conjunction with Christian churches and the complicit ignorance, apathy, racist beliefs and land-greed of the Canadian public, the Department of Indian Affairs and Canadian governments attacked Aboriginal peoples and their cultures.

Residential Schools

A key means to effect the goal of assimilation was the creation of residential schools. Aboriginal peoples during the colonial period of the latter 1800s were not unaware of the political and social changes that were going on around them. During treaty-making and then subsequent to relocation onto reserves, there are numerous examples of Aboriginal leaders approaching representatives of Indian Affairs with requests to build schools in their communities (Miller, 1996: 83; Miller, 2000: 135; Milloy, 1999: 16). Aboriginal peoples recognized that future generations would need to be able to function in non-Aboriginal society. However, the aspirations of Aboriginal peoples were clearly to educate and prepare children for life, not to assimilate.

Residential schools were grossly misnamed. Aboriginal children already happily resided with their own families in their own communities which, up until the colonizing of Canada, were wholly coherent, nurturing locales that provided children with learning opportunities to develop and excel according to their individual capabilities. Equating the concept of "residence" with "home" does not apply when speaking of residential schools. Nor were those institutions "schools" in any conventional sense. Residential schools were only marginally concerned with academic literacy.

From the late 1800s until the last residential school closed in 1986, the express purpose of those institutions was to remove children from the influence of their parents and communities and to "civilize" them into Christianity and a final denial of all traces of Aboriginal cultural identity. Although Aboriginal parents frequently tried to resist, they were compelled by law to send their children to residential schools knowing that they would not see them again for ten months or, in some cases, years. Children were told that their parents would go to hell if the children tried to escape or if they misbehaved. Children were essentially used as slave labor to maintain the schools. They planted and harvested crops, performed janitorial and laundry duties, prepared and served food and the older ones often were charged with orienting and supervising younger children into the routine of the schools. Many boys and girls were emotionally and physically abused for merely speaking their language; many were sexually abused by priests, nuns and lay personnel. Many others died trying to escape to their home communities.

One elder told me that throughout the years they were at the school, the children were constantly told that if they heard the church bell ringing, it did not matter what they were doing or where they were, they were to come running to the school. The school and church were adjacent to our reserve. The elder told me that one summer, when school was not in session, they heard the church bell ringing. He said fear of the priests and nuns drove the group of boys he was playing with to follow orders and run to the church. Upon arriving there, they

found the priest waiting for them. At his feet were hoes, spades and rakes. The boys were expected to weed the potato gardens and that is what they did.

My mother was placed in that same residential school when she was four years old. Her mother and father had died of tuberculosis and she had been in the care of her aunt and uncle. Her aunt and uncle were still trying to live off the land in a traditional manner, but it was increasingly difficult and the naked truth was that she was another mouth to feed. It was a terrible, difficult decision to make but her aunt and uncle felt it was her best chance to survive. Unfortunately for my mother, because she did not have parents, she would stay in the residential school year-round over the next ten years while other children went home in the summer months. She recounted her loneliness as she stood on the shore at year-end, watching families arrive by boat to enthusiastically greet the boys and girls with lavish affection and then watching the families leave one by one. Also, since she did not have parents, other children and the priests and nuns were often cruel to her without fear of recrimination. The year-round internment is a phenomenon that was not uncommon across the country, although in most like cases, the children were kept there because school administrators did not want to bear the cost of sending the children home.

Apparently the “civilizing” of Indian boys and girls was not supposed to occur at the expense of fiscal frugality. Children were fed poorly, medical services were scant or non-existent, clothing was usually ill-fit and threadbare, and personal possessions (most children like toys, for example) were considered an unnecessary luxury. Children did not have the benefit of consistent loving, patient guidance, nor did they see it modeled for them. So the harsh conditions under which they lived often cause them to mistreat one another. Below is a poem I wrote from some stories my mother told me. The poem speaks of how children could have treated one another, but it also speaks of the ways children resisted the cruel lessons of the schools.

Laugh in an Indian Way

James saw my father eating an orange one time
and said, “Hey Gordie, if you give me the orange peels,
I’ll stick up for you all week.”
And they both laughed in an Indian way.

Kids would return on Sunday afternoons and the lucky ones
would bring fruit that their parents had given them.
One girl would always slurp and hum to a circle of girls
while she ate every piece by herself.

The younger ones would make an offering
to the older girls and ask, "Will you stand for me?"
If the older one accepted, none of the others
would pick on the gift bearer for a while.

Not everyone was so lucky
to get fruit or have parents.
James was lucky enough and so was my father.
My mother never got fruit except once.

There are pouches of time where
the blood of our ancestors
will boil to the surface and pierce the shells
that were created in that school.

Those ancestors boiled and churned the blood
of one girl enough to notice my mother's empty hands.
Suddenly my mother's arms were full,
and she did not know what to do.

Her shell made her ask Sister if it was okay
to share her bundle with the other kids, but it was
her own frothing blood that gave her the idea,
and which also made her laugh as she told me all this,

Laugh in an Indian way.

There are an increasing number of texts that describe the residential school experiences of boys and girls from Aboriginal perspectives. Often these texts include the direct testimony of those who survived and provide a depth of understanding that is not possible to convey here (Assembly of First Nations, 1994; Bull, 1991; Chrisjohn, Young and Maraun, 1997; Fournier and Crey, 1997; Furniss, 1992; Haig-Brown, 1988; Jaine, 1993; Knockwood, 1992; Nuuchah-Nulth Tribal Council, 1996).

I would say that there is not one person who considers himself to be Aboriginal who has not been adversely affected by residential schools. I will say more later about why these particular stark waking moments invade the dreams of Aboriginal peoples and threaten to stem the flow of the intuitive lessons that whisper in our blood.

The 60s Scoop and Child Welfare Practices

In the 1950s, Canada was developing and expanding its social welfare system, a process that had begun in the 1930s. Authorities at the Department of Indian Affairs saw the development of provincial programs and services as a further opportunity to continue its assimilation policy. Also, the Department recognized an opportunity to offload some of its fiduciary responsibility for Indians - a responsibility it assumed in the Canadian Constitution and in the treaties it signed with Aboriginal peoples - onto the provinces.

Aboriginal peoples were thus slowly and incrementally subjected to provincial elementary and secondary education, social assistance and child welfare services. Prior to this period in which the federal government negotiated cost-sharing arrangements with the provinces and legitimized this action through the Indian Act, various provincial authorities largely ignored Aboriginal communities. That was to change.

You see, child welfare agencies picked up where the residential schools left off. At least with the residential schools, however, the children knew who their parents and families were (Manitoba, 1985: 220). As the residential school system declined, the large-scale removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities by child welfare agencies constituted "a new modality of colonialist regulation" (Kline, 1992: 382): Aboriginal peoples refer to this infamous period as "The 60s Scoop".

The story was the same in every province in Canada. The numbers of children removed from Aboriginal communities went from virtually nil to anywhere from 50-90% of all children taken into the "care" of child welfare authorities. It has been a standing source of grim humor among Aboriginal people to say that child welfare really means "farewell child".

In 1983, Patrick Johnston prepared a document for the Canadian Council on Social Development entitled *Native Children and the Child Welfare System*. It was one of the first comprehensive statements available to governments and the Canadian public which recounted the impact of the incursion of provincial child welfare authorities into Aboriginal communities.

In 1955 there were 343 children in the care of BC's child welfare branch. Of that number, it was estimated that 29 children, or less than 1 per cent of the total, were of Indian ancestry. By 1964, however, 1446 children in care in BC were of Indian extraction. That number represented 34.2 per cent of all children in care. Within ten years, in other words, the representation of Native children in BC's child welfare system had jumped from almost nil to a third. It was a pattern being repeated in other parts of Canada as well (Johnston, 1983: 23).

York notes that by the early 1980s,

Aboriginal children were being taken from their families almost five times more frequently than non-native children. By 1980, about 15,000 native children were under the control of child welfare agencies across Canada, and three-quarters of all adopted Indian children were placed in non-native homes (York, 1990: 206).

Aboriginal children, who were supposedly apprehended by child welfare agencies because their natural families were abusive or neglectful, were most certainly widely subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse in non-Aboriginal foster and adoptive homes. Foster parents often took in Aboriginal children for the wrong reasons. Aboriginal children became sources of income and were ill-fed, ill-clothed and ill-cared for to maximize profit. Aboriginal children were often considered to be indentured servants of the non-Aboriginal foster families, often cooking, cleaning, caring for children and serving as scapegoats for the dysfunction in the non-Aboriginal foster families. They often did not receive the affection, nurturing and love that all children should expect. Growing up in Aboriginal communities may afford some protection from the inevitable racism Aboriginal people face in Canadian society, but even this thin veneer of protection from discrimination and racism was denied Aboriginal children placed in non-Aboriginal homes. Aboriginal children did not have any real power to articulate these issues nor were they in any position to be believed by child welfare authorities who found it easier to believe in the nobility of non-Aboriginal foster/adoptive parents.

It was common practice to not inform Aboriginal families who the foster or adoptive parents were or where their children were living. Aboriginal children were purposely not given any information about their Aboriginal families and it was also common for siblings to be separated from one another. Foster and adoptive parents were predominantly non-Aboriginal peoples and, through ignorance or outright racism, did not have the capacity or will to guide Aboriginal children towards a positive Aboriginal cultural identity.

Of course, not all foster or adoptive homes were so blatantly harmful to Aboriginal children. Personally I have encountered a number of Aboriginal people who were foster or adoptive children of non-Aboriginal parents and who asserted that they were treated lovingly by their foster/adoptive parents. These stories are rare but not unheard of. Regardless of the positive experience of a minority of Aboriginal children who were apprehended by Canadian provincial child welfare agencies, however, all of these Aboriginal children have been affected.

The values of child welfare workers, primarily white Euro-Canadians, have led them to impose their cultural, ethnic or racial perspectives on the lifestyle, socio-economic standing, or parenting abilities of Aboriginal peoples. In a report done in Manitoba which investigated the impact of placement of Aboriginal children in non-Aboriginal homes: the provincial court judge leading the review found that many Aboriginal children were removed by non-Aboriginal child welfare workers in Manitoba simply because they were poor. Judge Kimelman also observed that non-Aboriginal workers “seem abysmally uninformed about native value systems” and that they seemed programmed to regard Aboriginal peoples ‘as carriers of the symptoms of social pathology rather than as fully rounded human beings with weaknesses and strengths’ (Kimelman in York, 1990: 216).

The interaction of the value systems of individual child welfare workers and the ideology which informs child welfare law and practice have made for a devastating combination for Aboriginal peoples. Child welfare law and practice revolve around the concept of the “best interests of the child”. As an example, this principle in Section 4 of British Columbia’s *Child, Family and Community Services Act* states:

- 1) Where there is a reference in this Act to the best interests of a child, all relevant factors must be considered in determining the child's best interests, including for example:
 - (a) the child's safety;
 - (b) the child's physical and emotional needs and level of development;
 - (c) the importance of continuity in the child's care;
 - (d) the quality of the relationship the child has with a parent or other person and the effect of maintaining that relationship;
 - (e) the child's cultural, racial, linguistic and religious heritage;
 - (f) the child's views;
 - (g) the effect on the child if there is delay in making a decision.
- (2) If the child is an Aboriginal child, the importance of preserving the child's cultural identity must be considered in determining the child's best interests.

At first glance, this is a just and egalitarian principle which can be applied universally and neutrally, and it frequently is interpreted and enacted in exactly that way. However, the values held by child welfare authorities, including the judiciary which legitimizes their actions and decisions, means that the interpretation of this principle may have deleterious repercussions. This has most assuredly been the case for Aboriginal peoples since the 60s Scoop.

To begin, no one will likely be found who disagrees with the relevance of safety, developmental needs, continuity of care or quality of relationships. Yet, the relative importance that a worker, supervisor, legal counsel or judge ascribes to "all relevant factors" is highly subjective, as is exactly what is meant by "must be considered". Thus, when highly subjective definitions act as filters for determining continuity of care or any of the other factors, the value-agreement of child welfare authorities may place those with differing value sets at a disadvantage in claiming authority to keep children in their care. Again, this has been the case of Aboriginal peoples as child welfare authorities have consistently minimized or denied Aboriginal peoples' claims that maintaining and nourishing an Aboriginal cultural identity is equally as important as other factors. In this way, one person's truth becomes another person's tyranny, particularly if you consider the stories of the "Split Feathers" to be truth of Aboriginal people.

Marlee Kline states that "there are ideological dimensions of child welfare law which make decisions arrived at within the system to appear natural, necessary, and legitimate, rather than coercive and destructive" (Kline, 1992: 390). Child welfare law constructs the interests of a child as a "*decontextualized individual* whose interests are separate and distinct from those of their families, communities and cultures" (Kline, 1992: 396), which renders an Aboriginal cultural identity irrelevant or unimportant. This rationale means if a child is conceptually separate, it is less difficult to actually separate that child from her community. Kline's analysis is more in-depth than can be rendered here and is worth seeking out.

Research and literature on the impact of transracial fostering and adoption of Aboriginal children in Canada is a sparse field at present. I can cite two different kinds of studies that are representative of the basic findings of the research to date. Christopher Bagley and Carol Locust have taken a quantitative and qualitative approach respectively.

Bagley's work was a comparative longitudinal study to examine the adjustment process of adopted Aboriginal adolescents in comparison to their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The 1988 study involved 37 Aboriginal adolescents and 20 children from varied non-Aboriginal ethnic groups.

Bagley's main findings were:

- Aboriginal child adoptions are significantly more likely than any other parenting situation to involve problems and difficulties and nearly a fifth of them had separated from their adoptive families by age 15;
- two-year follow-up indicated that nearly half of the Aboriginal adoptees (and none of the non-Aboriginal adoptees) had separated from their adoptive families; and
- Aboriginal adoptees had significantly poorer self-esteem, and were also more than three times as likely than any other group to have problems of serious suicidal ideas or acts of deliberate self-harm.

His analysis led Bagley to conclude that Aboriginal children do have significantly poorer adjustment than white adoptees. "The exact cause to this poorer adjustment is unknown, but conflicts over ethnicity might be a factor" (Bagley, Young and Scully, 1993: 226).

A preliminary qualitative study concluded by Carol Locust in 1999 was able to clarify Bagley's supposition through analysis of the life stories of 20 Aboriginal adults who had been foster or adoptive children to non-Aboriginal families. One of the adults referred to herself as a "Split Feather", a reference to the spiritual significance of eagle feathers for Aboriginal people. If an eagle feather can be considered a symbol of wholeness and strength, you may understand why the participants in this study came to be referred to as "Split Feathers".

Nineteen out of 20 participants had moderate to severe emotional, psychological or social problems as adults. These problems included mental health problems such as depression, difficulties with intimate relationships, alienation from any kind of family, incarceration.

Locust found that:

- All 20 experienced negative feelings of being different before the age of nine.
- All but one had academic and social problems in school. All of them failed at least one grade in school and each said that they had difficulty learning the way other children learned. Failure in school spiraled into further academic failure, poor self-esteem and often either withdrawal or aggression. Only five out of 20 completed high school.
- Ten out of the 20 had contact with youth corrections authorities by age 15.
- Seventeen out of 20 had problems with alcohol or drug abuse.
- All of them expressed feelings of hostility toward their adoptive families for

denying them their cultural heritage, although half of them also said they appreciated that the adoptive family took care of them.

- All of them said the system that caused their adoption to be into non-Aboriginal families was wrong and four expressed hatred for the government that allowed it to happen.
- If they could choose to live their lives over again, none of them would choose to be adopted into non-Indian families again. Choices for adoptive or foster parents were (if their birth families were not a choice): first, staying within their families; next, with relatives; third, within the tribe; and fourth, with members of other tribes. (Locust, 1999: 9)

Locust's study also elaborated the participants' reasons for choosing to avoid non-Aboriginal placements. These reasons included in order of importance:

- the loss of Aboriginal identity;
- the loss of family, culture, heritage, language, spiritual beliefs, tribal affiliation and the loss of tribal ceremonial experiences;
- the anguish of growing up being different;
- having to experience discrimination from the dominant culture based on their physical appearance;
- cognitive differences, a term that comes from descriptions of "thinking differently", "being different in my mind", "not being able to learn like everyone else".

From this study, the researcher believes that every Aboriginal child placed in a non-Aboriginal home for foster care or adoption is placed at great risk for long-term psychological damage as adults.

Both Bagley and Locust illuminate how removal of Aboriginal children from the families and communities of their natural families leads to serious personal mental, emotional, physical and spiritual problems characterized as "identity crises" (Bagley, 1993: 224).

The Impact of Residential Schools, the 60s Scoop and Child Welfare Practices

The primary unit of social organization of Aboriginal cultures is the family or clan. Family is understood to include aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents in a close-knit integrated unit that at least parallels the bonds of the standard Canadian nuclear family. Traditionally, children are considered to be gifts of the Creator. We do not own children but we do own the responsibility to guide and protect them. Traditionally, entire communities were organized around that ethic and principle.

My own childhood memories evinced that principle. I would wander back and forth between my parents' home and my paternal grandparents' home: usually I went to my grandmother's when I was chastised by my parents for some transgression or when I knew she had candy. I would not tell anyone I was walking the half-mile or so between the houses and I would eat or sleep where I chose and none of the adults made much of a fuss about it. I knew that my grandmother would telephone my mother when it appeared I was not leaving by sunset. Also, when I was playing with a group of other children - who were cousins in our sense, but some distant relatives in another sense - we would all pile into whatever house was close at hand when we were hungry and I do not remember once being refused food. I know now, too, that we were not supervised very closely in one sense, but in another sense the adults, as a whole, kept on top of where we were and what we were doing (mostly). It was all natural. Thinking about how that has changed in my own community and in society at large, I realize that a child can be poor in some ways and rich in others.

In many Aboriginal cultures, the traditional parenting of children was shared among relatives. In some cultures, for example, parents might have gender-specific responsibilities for children depending on the child's development and maturity. In this way children would be exposed to and be educated in cultural gender relations.

Parents might have specific roles in shaping the behavior of their children. In some cultures, parents would be the main source of instilling discipline by prescribing or admonishing behavior. In some cultures that role might fall to aunts or uncles, leaving the parents to mainly focus on immediate needs for affection, sustenance or safety. Grandparents and great-grandparents would always have a principal role in the conveyance of cultural teachings about history, ceremonies, philosophies and values. Cousins or siblings were expected to play a child care role according to their abilities and subject to the supervision of adult family members.

The main point here is that the responsibility for children was shared within families, clans and communities and this responsibility was a primary source and measure of community well-being. This point is often difficult to comprehend for individuals, such as those in mainstream Canadian society, who have been socialized within nuclear families and who have come to expect "universal" and "neutral" mechanisms of the Canadian social welfare system to support them.

In many Aboriginal cultures, it is a common precept that everyone in an Aboriginal community is related to one another as family. The intimacy of community relationships as a whole is structured upon how community members relate to one another *through relationships with children*. Without children, it is impossible to have parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents. Clan designations among certain Aboriginal cultures may prescribe relationships, but even the internal workings of a clan are recognized according to family structure.

As a consequence, if a child is removed from a family, it affects the relationships within a family, within a clan, within an entire community. If large numbers of children, perhaps even the majority of children are removed from a community, the ways in which family, clan and community relationships are affected are profound.

Whether it was through residential schools or child welfare practices, generations of Aboriginal children have been removed from the care and influence of their families. This removal may have been for ten months at a time throughout childhood, a period of years throughout childhood and adolescence, or permanent. Children were thus irregularly exposed to Aboriginal languages, spiritual teachings and practices, or traditional economic pursuits. Some children grew to shy away from or mistrust these aspects of an Aboriginal worldview because of their indoctrination at residential schools. Parents sometimes made conscious decisions to avoid teaching these things to children because of the racism faced by anyone who was presented as an Aboriginal person. Thus, these dynamics have created an individual and collective denial of Aboriginal cultural identity.

The removal of Aboriginal children by these modalities of colonial regulation cannot simply be understood as an absence of cultural identity. Residential schools and child welfare practices have resulted directly in social disintegration characterized by multi-generational dysfunctions such as addictions, family violence, sexual abuse and suicide. These dysfunctions interweave with poverty, poor economic development or employment opportunities, poor health and poor education. Children who became parents, in turn, taught their own children the harmful or dysfunctional lessons forced upon them.

Children did not have healthy parenting modeled for them. Parents who rarely saw their children would, out of guilt or grief, often overcompensate for that absence by being impractically indulgent when the children were in their care. Individuals who grew up in residential schools or foster/adoptive homes where affection - physical, emotional or verbal - was not demonstrated, did not learn how to demonstrate the love they felt to their own children. Those who were exposed to violence as children, also learned to be violent towards their own children and helped to perpetuate a cycle of violence across generations. Children who experienced residential schools were so highly regimented in their day-to-day lives because they lived in an institution, that they had difficulty forming their own codes of self-discipline or formed inordinate expectations of discipline or cleanliness when they became parents.

Over successive generations Aboriginal families inconsistently applied the parenting ethics and practices of their traditional cultures because of the absence of their children and the interweaving of above-named social forces. In this way, the cultural ethics, beliefs and practices slowly broke down over time: because of the

removal of the *axis mundi* of Aboriginal social organization, those ethics, beliefs and practices concerning governance and redistribution of resources also broke down.

Generation upon generation of individuals in families or communities were hammered with racist beliefs about the inherent inferiority of Aboriginal peoples and Aboriginal peoples - including myself in my recent past - can come to believe stereotypes, accept discriminatory practices or simply not work to find it within themselves to address their life situations. I often refer to these manifestations of multi-generational effects as internalized racism or internalized colonization.

Without understanding the impact of multi-generational removals of children from Aboriginal communities, non-Aboriginal people are in a position to minimize, misinterpret or ignore the increasingly strident contention of Aboriginal peoples that residential schools and child welfare practices have caused damage on a scale of cultural genocide. Non-Aboriginal people - including administrators of the Indian Act, staff of the residential schools and child welfare authorities - have operated without that understanding. Or, if they did have that understanding, then their actions are not merely the result of good intentions gone bad but have been purposeful and intentional.

The Will To Dream

I mention the contentions of Aboriginal peoples; such contentions do not merely rest with naming the source of the stark waking moments which I have just described. Aboriginal peoples are far more creative, resilient and determined than that. Our cultures have been denigrated and attacked consistently over the past two hundred years. Aboriginal children - *CHILDREN MIND YOU* - have been purposely subjected to abusive indoctrination methods devised to eradicate Aboriginal peoples as peoples distinct from whatever it means to be Canadian. The fact is, assimilation has not worked because Aboriginal peoples did not let it work. We have survived as Aboriginal peoples and we will flourish.

With the emergence of ample literature describing residential schools and the testimony of Aboriginal peoples through the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, mainstream Canadians and their governments are more aware than ever before about the schools. Unfortunately, that awareness is constrained and tainted by an emphasis on the historical disjuncture (which somehow abrogates responsibility), or at the cost of civil litigation or government-supported healing initiatives. In some ways, it is a replication of the same rationale used to justify assimilation.

Despite these kinds of limitations, the federal Canadian government allocated \$350 million over five years to an Aboriginal Healing Foundation as part of "Gathering Strength", their official policy response to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. That amount sounds significant and undoubtedly the fund will contribute to its stated cause. Yet, even if we use the flawed statistics of the 1990

Aboriginal Peoples Survey which very likely underestimates the Aboriginal population at approximately one million people, that means each individual Aboriginal person would receive \$350 in total or about \$70 a year. From that perspective, the sum seems paltry if you accept my contention that no Aboriginal person has escaped the impact of residential schools or if you accept the notion of multi-generational trauma and grief.

Since the scope of this paper is the protection of Aboriginal children, I will not delve deeply into the manner by which Aboriginal peoples in Canada are healing from the impact of residential school experiences. Since approximately 1980, Aboriginal peoples have been increasingly exploring and discussing residential school experiences: the silence which was caused by and which perpetuates suffering among families is slowly being replaced by the sounds of sharing through talk, tears and laughter. To me, this dialogue is a cleansing of old blood and an infusion of renewed blood.

The challenge faced by Aboriginal peoples to address the impact of child welfare practices is different, in that for the most part, provincial child welfare authorities are still removing Aboriginal children from their families and communities at a inordinately greater rate than belies their minority status in Canada. Earlier I mentioned statistics from 1964 that identify approximately 34% of all British Columbia children taken into care as Aboriginal children, a gross over-representation: most recent statistics in British Columbia indicate that in 1999 that number was 37% (British Columbia, 2000: 4). Because this is still occurring, and because Aboriginal people recognize the importance of protecting and nurturing Aboriginal cultural identity as an aspect of protecting and nurturing children (and vice versa), Aboriginal peoples across Canada are asserting various degrees of similar authority. For many Aboriginal communities, child welfare is a significant aspect of negotiating the process of self-government.

First Nations argue that the jurisdiction for child welfare cannot be delegated to them, only acknowledged as their inherent right. Accepting the current arrangements as an interim measure to protect children from inappropriate services of non-Aboriginal agencies, they argue that provincial laws and regulations are inappropriate (Timpson, 1994: 23).

Most Aboriginal child welfare agencies operate under a provincial legislative mandate and are funded by the particular province and the Department of Indian Affairs. Funding has been based on the number of children taken into care which inhibits the development of preventive services. Assumption of a provincial mandate also creates distrust that Aboriginal peoples will simply "play the master's

game". The fear is that instead of non-Aboriginal agency workers, it will be Aboriginal peoples removing Aboriginal children from their own communities and that assimilation will become a tool of Aboriginal peoples themselves, completing Duncan Campbell Scott's grisly task.

The crucial flaw that makes this scenario a possibility is that Canadian child welfare practices are largely reactive, punitive and authoritarian and are operationalized with the ultimate threat of removal of children from the care of their families. The challenges of implementing a flawed model of practice is exacerbated by the complexity of the social conditions I described earlier. The need for protecting Aboriginal children is immediate and overwhelming and a model based on the removal of children from a problem situation may too easily seem like an ideal and timely solution. To me, the issue is not one of trying to better a bad way of doing things, but trying to do things differently.

Thus, increased autonomy as an aspect of self-government is one crucial aspect of doing things differently. A second involves a return to traditional, cultural values and customs including efforts to establish culturally appropriate child and family service standards. Political control over services does not automatically lead to quality services for children and families and the complexity of social conditions in Aboriginal communities means that Aboriginal peoples are currently in a deficit position when it comes to qualified human resources. This is true not only for emerging Aboriginal child welfare agencies, but for other social development initiatives such as economic development initiatives, education, health care and governance. Leaders and human service providers considered to be "healthy" are in high demand and under considerable strain. In my experience, and there is broad support in published and unpublished reports, discussion documents and Aboriginal media, the key is for Aboriginal communities to fuel our emerging capacity building from the well of extant traditional cultural beliefs and practices. The dream I shared at the beginning is an indication of how I began to listen to the intuitive lessons that whispered in my blood. I have shared similar experiences with many other Aboriginal peoples.

Solutions which focus on the development of cultural services for Aboriginal children and families must be located within a holistic strategy which embraces self-government and the development of economically viable, sustainable communities. Obviously, a comprehensive approach to re-creating well-being and autonomy in Aboriginal communities is required to face complex, deeply entrenched social problems.

Conclusion

What happened to the children in my arms after I carried them out the door? Where did I go? What did I do? What did those children want? What happened to their parents? Where were their cousins, uncles, aunts, grandparents from that community? Why did I not intervene in the fight between the parents? How did the first part of my dream, where I walked on another plane of existence, relate to the latter part of my dream which I “know” happen(s)(ed) on this plane of existence?

I have had many questions about that dream and sometimes I wish I had not awoken. Ever since that dream came to me during my own time of awakening to my Aboriginal identity, it has asked me to find answers to those questions. That dream has asked me to carry it forward in my blood, lessons for me which are not yet understood.

My dream tells me to honor our ancestors, to know the direction and purpose towards which we are traveling. My dream also tells me that we must figure out what to do with the children in our arms and how to transmit to them the lessons that course through our veins.

Personally, I think that the delegation of authority to deliver provincial child welfare services is someone else's dream. In this case, someone else's dream has been the Aboriginal people's nightmare. A nightmare offers no respite even if it is compelling and we feel there is no alternative but to follow its course. Drawing on a personal analogy, other people may find the dream I shared compelling or they may align with it. Yet, no one but I will ever know what my senses whispered to my heart and mind. An individual cannot live out someone else's dream; not unless they have had the same or a similar dream. The dreams may then weave together like a mist that seeps under our brown skins into our blood and become lessons.

My Aboriginal cultural group calls ourselves *Anishnabe* and we are known for our dreamcatchers. Threads of sinew are woven into a concentric pattern inside a hoop of willow to form a web. A leather cord with a feather tied at one end is attached to the hoop and the dreamcatcher is hung over the bed of a sleeping child. Bad dreams which visit a child in the night get caught in the web and they are dispelled with the coming of the morning sun. Good dreams find the center hole of the dreamcatcher web, slide down the leather cord and feather onto the sleeping child.

The stark waking moments of colonization of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada - residential schools and the Scoops by provincial child welfare authorities - have been caught in a dreamcatcher and have begun to wither with the coming of a new day. Yet, the dreamers among us must still find a way to catch the dreams that will help us renew our blood so our children may hear the intuitive lessons that make us who we are.