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nitahcâhk otâcimowin: My Grandmother Stories Follow Me

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Abstract
This story describes my journey as a *nêhiyaw-âpihtawikosisân* (Cree-Métis) woman reclaiming my identity and spirit through the use of *nêhiyaw* (Cree) storytelling, ceremony, language, and teachings within my social work education. My *âcimowina* (personal story) is structured to mirror a circular storytelling approach within the context of a written format. I begin with situating myself relationally to acknowledge my ancestors, family, and community and this relational practice serves as both an introduction and conclusion to the story. I share how I came to know, understand, and embrace my Métis identity by reflecting on Métis history and experiences of colonization, the stories of my Métis ancestors, the resulting intergenerational impacts, and how I reclaimed my identity through returning to ceremony and reconnecting to spirit. The *âcimowina* of my journey shares many lessons learned for understanding Indigenous identity and healing, transformative education, and Indigenous social work practice.

A^CIMOWINA[1]

my grandmother stories follow me,
spill out of their bulging suitcases
get left under beds,
hung on doorknobs

their underwear and love lives
sag on my bathroom towel racks

their Polident dentures in old cottage cheese containers,
Absorbine Junior, Buckley's and 'rat root' take over my bathroom counters

their bunioned shoes crowd my doorway

their canes trip me
and their Enquirers cover my coffee tables

their cold tea stains my cups and
teabags fill my garbage

their stories smell of Noxzema, mothballs and dried meat.

[1] a^cimowina: Cree for everyday stories

(Dumont, 1996, p. 70)

***nitahcâhk otâcimowin*: My Grandmother Stories Follow Me**

tânisi, nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw ekwa Kristina Kopp *nitsiyihkâson. amiskwaciwâskahikan ohci niya. niya nêhiyaw-âpihtawikosisân iskwew.* Diane Kopp (Corcoran) *nikâwiy êkwa* Kevin Kopp *nohtâwiy,* Mina Corcoran (Young), Sally Kopp (Kwasney), *êkwa* Muriel Stanley Venne *nohkomak;* Robert Gerard Corcoran *ekwa* Harold Kopp *nimosomak;* Elsie Esther Kopp (Littlechild), Karolka (Carol) Gulka, Ruth Lydia Young (King), *êkwa* Truman Kopp *nicâpânak;* Jessie Littlechild (Whitford) *êkwa* Rhoda Annah King (Perry) *nitanskotapanak.*

My name is Kristina Kopp and I am a Métis woman with Ukrainian, Irish, and Cree ancestry. I was born in Beaver Mountain House, now known as Edmonton, Alberta. My Métis family descends from the Alberta communities of Andrew and Whitford (which are named after my ancestral Métis uncle) and *paskwâwi mostos sâkahikan* (Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement). I have been gifted with the spiritual name Grandmother Mountain Woman. My beautiful mother and grandmothers shape and nurture who I am today. To be *iskwew* is to be connected to fire – *iskotêw.* These *iskwewak* have given me my fire, my *iskotêw.* I thank them for this gift – *kinânaskomitinawaw.*

awina niya: Who I am – My Introduction

> *Situating the self authorizes expression of the relevant narrative from personal experiences, those reminiscences of life rooted in our earliest experience that shape our understanding of the world.*
>
> (Kovach, 2009, p. 112)

By introducing who I am, my family, where I am from, and my ancestors, I am honoring an essential Indigenous practice of situating myself in relation to my community and identity. It is vital that I acknowledge my ancestors, locate myself within my community, and honor the *nêhiyaw* (Cree) knowledge system. In the *nêhiyaw* worldview, there are teachings on relationships and our responsibility to those relationships known as *miyo wîcetowin* (practicing good relations) and *wâhkôtowin* (relational accountability) (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Practicing good relations and relational accountability involves seeing myself in relation to others and how I am defined by my connection to my ancestors, my mother, my father, my family, and my community (Kovach, 2009). These relationships are my reality and an intricate part of my identity (Wilson, 2008) – my physical and spiritual connections to my ancestors, family, and community create me.

I have chosen to communicate my story in a circular storytelling approach and as such, this section serves as both an introduction and a conclusion. The sharing of my story in relation to the teachings I have learned is reflective of a ceremony-centered, relational approach to healing and the process of storytelling within ceremony, language, and relationship creates healing. Throughout this article, I interpret my story and the ceremonies and teachings I experienced within the *nêhiyaw* language to capture their depth of meaning; however, it is crucial to note that the actual teachings can only be shared in ceremony by offering protocol to an Elder.

Throughout this story, I also use Indigenous language-specific terms and concepts that are situated in the *nêhiyaw* (Cree) worldview and language – and reflect the teachings of the land that I and my ancestors call home. I have also included an appendix with a glossary of *nêhiyaw* terms.

Before sharing my story, protocols require that I acknowledge the Elders and Knowledge-Keepers or the *kehtayak êkwa nôcokwêsiwak* – I am beyond grateful for the many teachings you have shared. Through ceremony, teaching stories, and personal stories – *isîhcikêwin, atayohkewina, êkwa âcimowina* – you have provided me with all that I need to travel well on my *mêskanaw* (journey). I would like to acknowledge Ricki Makokis, Jeff Wastesicoot, Leo McGilvery, and Bernie Makokis – thank you all for modelling humbleness and kindness. I would

like to acknowledge Leona Makokis, Eva Cardinal, and Alsena White – thank you all for filling your homes with love.

âcimowina – Stories and Storytelling

> *When approached with a question or problem, the Elders often respond: "I will answer you with a story" and the listeners take the meaning they need from the story.*
>
> (Makokis, Shirt, Chisan, Mageau, & Steinhauer, 2010, p. 41)

This section includes teachings on the importance of stories and the process of storytelling through ceremony, relational accountability, and language. In the Indigenous universe, stories and the processes of storytelling are vital methods for learning, meaning-making, and healing (Johnson, 2016; Kovach, 2009: 2019; Tachine, Yellow Bird, & Cabrera, 2016; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2010; Wilson, 2008). As the storyteller, my hope is that the listeners or readers derive meaning from the story of my Métis identity – story is both method and meaning (Kovach, 2009).

Within the *nêhiyaw* worldview, there are levels of stories. For example, there are stories that contain sacred and ancient teachings that are passed down from the ancestors across generations of knowledge keepers (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; Tachine et al., 2016). These are the *atayohkewina* (sacred creation and teaching stories) that are only meant to be shared in certain seasons by the knowledge keepers, in ceremony, and in the language (Makokis et al., 2010; Kovach, 2009). There are also *âcimowina* (personal stories) that are reflective accounts of places, happenings, learnings and experiences (Johnson, 2016; Makokis et al., 2010 Kovach, 2009). Through these personal narratives, one is able to share who they are, describe their sense of belonging, and the significance of their relationships and experiences (Kovach, 2009; Tachine et al., 2016; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2010).

A story is more than a personal narrative, it is a teaching narrative that contains many protocols and opportunities for self-reflection and personal healing (Anderson, 2011; Johnson, 2016). It is customary and expected that a storyteller will situate themselves within their story by first introducing themselves to convey a sense of belonging and establish a connection to people and place (Kovach, 2009; Wesley-Esquimaux, 2010). A storyteller can offer words of self-reflection and self-healing acknowledging the process of how they either stayed or became connected to their identity, family, and community (Johnson, 2016). It is the ability to look within, practice introspection, and reflect upon lived experiences that supports healing (Archibald, 2008).

Stories are developed by coming to understand the multiple teachings and lessons embedded within personal lived experiences.

isîhcikêwin: Ceremony

The truth of a story is confirmed by the ceremony connected to the story. Storytelling is a ceremonial process and begins with a smudge, prayer, and song or pipe ceremony to honor the *nêhiyaw* experience of sharing truth (Johnson 2016; Kovach, 2009). When offering protocol in ceremony, the storyteller is acknowledging that seeking, speaking, and living truth is a sacred spiritual commitment (Kovach, 2009). The entire process is how truth is created and shared (Johnson, 2016). The narrative within a story has inherent meaning and the ceremonial practice of sharing a story imbues that depth of meaning (Kovach, 2019; Wilson, 2008). Storytelling is ceremonial truth-telling (Kovach, 2009: 2019).

The importance of ceremony to the process of storytelling is held within the *nêhiyaw* teachings on *isîhcikêwin* (ceremony). In ceremony, the ancestors and spiritual helpers are invited to join the conversation and be among the storyteller and listeners (Johnson, 2016). Storytelling entails spiritual knowing and the understanding that the presence of the ancestors guides the conversation. While the storyteller may be facilitating the discussion, they are also sharing the voices of the ancestors who embed spiritual and cultural knowledge within the story (Johnson, 2016). Stories are teaching narratives linked to ancestral traditions and experiences that exceed time and place –there are always stories within a story (Archibald, 2008; Johnson, 2016; Kovach, 2009).

miyo wîcetowin ekwa wâhkôtowin: Good Relations and Relational Accountability

Relationships are central in an Indigenous universe and are key to the process of storytelling. The creation and transmission of a story is a sacred trust as the truth and meaning within the story is determined by all who have created, contributed, and listened to the story (Anderson, 2011; Johnson, 2016; Kovach, 2009; Tachine et al., 2016). In ceremony, the storyteller and listeners form and commit to relationships, including the interpersonal relationship between them and the relationship with the ancestors, spiritual guides, themselves, broader community, and generations to come (Johnson, 2016; Wilson, 2008). These relationships determine identity, meaning, and reality – the utmost form of accountability exists to these relationships (Wilson,

2008). When telling or listening to a story, the participants must practice respect, reciprocity, and responsibility with these relationships, defined as good relations and relational accountability (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

nêhiyawewin: The Cree Language

Storytelling is integral to sociocultural belonging and is most influential when communicated in an Indigenous language (Makokis et al., 2010). Within the process of storytelling, the use of an Indigenous language is central to sharing and experiencing the spiritual knowing embedded within a story. Language influences knowledge, creates reality, and forms the foundation of a *nêhiyaw* worldview (Johnson, 2016). Concepts in *nêhiyawewin* (the Cree language) convey a sacred connection to spirit, creation, relationships, and thus, culture (Makokis, 2009). A sense of self and purpose is gained through understanding the spiritual descriptions *nêhiyawewin* provides for relationships, roles, and responsibilities (Makokis, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Language is essential to being – the use of language in story-telling is an expression and experience of truth.

The teachings on stories and storytelling within ceremony, relational accountability, and language affirm the responsibility I have to share my story. My lived experience of connecting to my Métis ancestry is a teaching narrative that displays the transgenerational consequences of colonization and the vitality of culture to healing and identity development. My story is not an isolated narrative – it is interconnected with the experiences of my ancestors, family, and community and is a part of our collective truth. Sharing my story is how I practice relational accountability and contribute to the wellbeing of generations to come.

My Métis History and Identity

> *Why should we care to what degree exactly of mixture we possess European Blood and Indian Blood? No matter how little we have one or the other, do not both gratitude and filial love require us to make a point of saying: We are Métis!*
>
> Louis Riel (as cited in Goulet & Goulet, 2006, p. 14)

From the extensive history of the Métis people, I have chosen to focus on the historical components that have impacted my ancestors, family, and identity today. I provide a brief explanation of these historical events before describing how these historical events impacted my ancestors. I then reflect on how my ancestors' experiences are linked to my process of self-identifying as Métis. Learning this history and having the ability to discuss it has been instrumental to my process of understanding my family, the disconnection to our Métis heritage, and becoming a proud Métis woman and an Indigenous social worker.

An Overview of Métis History

The term Métis indicates a person who is of European and Indigenous ancestry and who is the offspring of a European male (typically an early explorer or fur trader) and an Indian [sic] woman to produce a generation of mixed-blood children (Goulet & Goulet, 2006). A common misconception about the Métis is that they are solely a mixed-race community. To be a recognized member of a Métis Nation, one must prove that their ancestors originated from a traditional Métis homeland (Augustus 2005; Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006). As such, someone cannot claim to be Métis just by having one parent who is European and one who is Indigenous. The Métis are a distinct Indigenous community that existed pre-confederation who developed their own customs, traditions, and ways of life (Goulet & Goulet, 2006).

The North West Resistance of 1885 was an uprising of the Métis people against the Dominion of Canada to protect the traditional Métis homeland of Rupert's Land (Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006). The government was in the process of redistributing land without honoring and protecting rights the Métis people had to this territory under the Manitoba Act of 1870 (Goulet & Goulet, 2016). Under the leadership of Louis Riel, the Métis people challenged the Dominion of Canada to protect their rights, land, and survival as a distinct community (Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006).

Louis Riel was executed for treason as a result of the North West Resistance – the grief of this defeat and loss impacted Métis identity for generations. (Goulet & Goulet, 2006). Out of fear and for protection, the Métis community became "silent" and were forced to "blend-in" to avoid similar punishment and to survive as a race (Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006). As such, the languages (Michif, Cree, and others) were rarely spoken and stories of culture and history were rarely shared – instead any connection to a Métis community was denied and shame became engrained and transmitted (Fiola, 2016).

Through the scrip system, the ongoing displacement of the Métis community continued after 1885. The newly formed Government of Canada, under the Dominion Lands Act, desired to "settle the west" by extinguishing existing traditional Métis land rights to develop the national railway to further colonization and economic expansion (Augustus, 2005). To do so, the government granted the Métis people scrip certificates redeemable for 160 - 240 acres of land or dollars (Augustus, 2005; Goulet & Goulet, 2006) in return for the submission of their traditional title. The scrip system was used to strip the Métis people of their rights by falsely promising land or financial compensation for the submission of their Indian [sic] title (Augustus, 2005; Fiola, 2016). The scrip contracts were not upheld and only a fraction, if any, of land or financial compensation was actually received by the Métis people (Augustus, 2005; Fiola, 2016). The scrip process was manipulative and coercive – the Métis community did not intend to sign these documents, nor did they understand their meaning at the time (Augustus, 2005).

My Métis History

My Métis ancestry has roots within the region of Rupert's Land that spanned across and beyond Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba (Augustus 2005; Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006). During this era (~mid 1700s), James Peter Whitford (an English fur trader with the Hudson's Bay Company) and Sarah (a *nêhiyaw iskwew*) began a life-long relationship that led to the creation of my Métis family. To register with the Métis Nation of Alberta, I had to document that my ancestors descended from our Métis homeland, and I was able to learn that my family has multiple connections to historic Métis communities within Rupert's Land.

In the early-mid 1800s, my ancestors (the children and grand-children of James Peter Whitford and Sarah) migrated to the North West (now known as Alberta) during the expansion of the fur trade. These ancestors helped establish a new Hudson's Bay Trading Post at Victoria

Settlement, a historic site in Northeastern Alberta near Smoky Lake. Within this area, two communities were formed, Andrew and Whitford, that were named after my ancestor, Andrew Whitford. Generations of my family have resided in these communities, and I am proud that my family was one of the last four Métis families to remain in these two historic communities.

Becoming aware of my family's connection to the Métis homeland and additional Métis communities provided me the linkage to become a member of the Metis Nation of Alberta. Despite this strong connection, I still did not feel I "qualified" to be Métis. As I am fair-skinned, I questioned my Indigeneity based on blood quantum. I also questioned my relationship to culture, as no one in my family spoke the language or had any cultural connections. My family had experienced oppression, but at the time, I understood this oppression more as general hardship rather than the transgenerational consequences of colonization. I did not feel like I was "truly" Métis.

The Disconnection from My Métis Identity

I came to realize that these questions and my reluctance to identify as Métis were indeed linked to the historical attempts to displace the Métis community. My great-great grandmother Jessie Littlechild (Whitford) claimed scrip under the North West Half Breed [sic] Commission of 1900. On the scrip certificate, her signature is actually completed by the issuing officer – it says "her, Jessie Littlechild (X) mark". As a result of that "X", my ancestors and future generations were disenfranchised and no longer recognized as members of a distinct nation.

My great-great grandmother Jessie Littlechild (Whitford) *nitanskotapan* continued to experience further oppression as an Indigenous woman. She was a fluent speaker of the *nêhiyaw* language, but she did not teach her children or grandchildren to speak their language (Stanley Venne, 2005). As a result, generations of my family did not learn the language – I consider this a great loss.

Analyzing the Loss of Métis Identity: The Effects of Colonization

We know who we are… we don't need anybody to tell us who we are… we self-identify.

Harry Daniels (as cited in Goulet & Goulet, 2006, p. 3)

The experiences of my ancestors, family, and myself align with the literature concerning the effects of colonization on Métis identity. Previous research has identified these effects as

internalized colonization and lateral violence which inhibit positive identity formation (Fiola, 2016; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009; Weaver, 2001). These forms of oppression have consequences for self-worth and affect how Métis identity is disclosed and navigated. The resulting consequences are shame, disenfranchisement, and assimilation that are a continuation of colonization. Hence, my early personal struggle of questioning if I was truly Métis.

Internalized Colonization

Internalized colonization occurs when Indigenous people adopt oppressive, colonial beliefs and values criticizing themselves and their own community (Fiola, 2016; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009). The adoption of these beliefs and values represents how the colonized mentality becomes engrained, leading to self-deprecation. When the colonial rhetoric surrounding Indigenous communities ubiquitously portrays that they are deviant and incapable, members can easily be convinced of their own perceived inferiority (Fiola, 2016). As a result, self-deprecation occurs when Indigenous community members acquiesce to these oppressive views by internally believing that they are truly inadequate. This internal belief affects an individual's sense of worth and dignity manifesting lateral violence and a need to employ protective tactics, such as silencing, passing, and blending (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009).

Lateral Violence

Lateral violence is the replication of internalized colonization onto fellow members within the Indigenous community to further elicit shame and oppression (Fiola, 2016). By exerting this internal colonized mentality onto others, one is able to distance themselves from oppression and regain a false sense of power and integrity (Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009). This behaviour serves a purpose – conforming to the colonial mentality conveys the message that "I am not like the rest of them" in an effort to elevate and redeem the sense of self. Accordingly, lateral violence is a continuation of the shame, disenfranchisement, and assimilation that is fostered through Indigenous self-colonization (Fiola, 2016; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009).

Silencing, Passing, and Blending

The effects of internalized colonization and lateral violence influence Métis self-identification through the use of protective tactics. The tactic of "silencing" has long been a survival mechanism for the Métis community (Fiola, 2016; Richardson, 2009; Richardson & Seaborn, 2009) and dates back to the shame and disenfranchisement engendered as a consequence of the North West Resistance and scrip policy (Fiola, 2016). Consequently, generations of Métis children learned to deny their Métis heritage and hide their identity (Fiola, 2016; Goulet & Goulet, 2006). Métis community members still continue to downplay their Indigenous roots and emphasize their European heritage to "blend in" (Fiola, 2016). For Métis people who are fair-skinned, the tactic of "passing" is utilized when they dismiss their Métis heritage by "passing" as European (Fiola, 2016; Richardson, 2009). This tactic stems from the additional fear of not wanting to be deemed a "wannabe" by fellow Indigenous community members (Fiola, 2016; Weaver, 2001). These protective mechanisms resulting from internalized colonization and lateral violence perpetuate shame and disenfranchisement.

My family's disconnection from our Métis identity was the result of colonization and the disenfranchisement, shame, and oppression imposed on my ancestors. It is apparent that my ancestors internalized this oppression and subconsciously replicated lateral violence within our own family and community for protection. I was saddened to learn that my ancestors were not given the opportunity to proudly self-identify as Métis. The best way I can honor them is to restore my spirit and be just that – a proud Métis woman.

Restoring Identity – Restoring Spirit

> *We are of the spirit and it is this connection of restoration which will rebuild a child, a family, a community, and a nation of people.*
>
> (Simard, 2019, p. 72)

Literature on Indigenous healing reflects that participating in ceremony and forming a relationship with spirituality are vital to identity development (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, & Altschul, 2011; Duran, 2006; Fiola, 2016; Ross, 2014; Simard, 2019). The disclosure and navigation of Indigenous identity cannot be separated from ceremony and spirituality – these are an Indigenous understanding of identity (Fiola, 2016; Simard, 2019). Transcending from

internalized colonization and lateral violence entails creating a connection to oneself, the ancestors, and ceremony to release shame, detach from oppression, reaffirm identity, and restore the spirit (Brave Heart et al., 2011; Duran, 2006; Ross, 2014).

Within an Indigenous universe, identity is an ever-developing living and breathing force – identity is a verb or a process that is "animate" or of spirit (Richardson, 2009; Simard, 2019; Weaver 2001). Identity is spirit or rather the sum of the spirit (Simard, 2019). Ceremony is how one comes to know themselves spiritually and in relation to all creation – it is how connection is restored among all relations, including the connection to ancestors, family, and community (Johnson, 2016; Ross, 2014). Ceremony is the heart of a *nêhiyaw* universe where all the teachings exist and become lived (Makokis et al., 2010). Through ceremony, one learns their gifts and purpose from the ancestors and experiences having those gifts and purpose honored and nurtured by all their relations. Ceremony is how we learn who we are – ceremony is how spirit (identity) is healed, nurtured, and revived.

The understanding that identity is spirit becomes further illuminated as I share my process of reconnection and the additional *nêhiyaw* teachings I have received that guided me to embrace my Métis identity and my spirit. The void in my spirit has been (and is being) filled and I am prepared to live, honor, and share my story. I have come to form meaningful relationships with my ancestors, family, and community – I am the sum of all their spirits.

tâpwêwin: Honoring My Truth

I want to be more involved in the whole process of getting our stories out. We have to strengthen ourselves and look after the young ones coming up.

Tantoo Cardinal (as cited in Goulet & Goulet, 2006, p. 302 - 303)

One outcome of my social work education is that I have become me. I was mentored in ceremony to experience the teachings and have my gifts and purpose nurtured and honored. This process reflected the *nêhiyaw* pedagogy of *kiskinohâmakewin* (learning by doing) where teaching occurs through observation, mentorship, participation, and guidance (Makokis et al., 2010). The practice of *kiskinohâmakewin* affirms that knowing and doing are intertwined – after receiving the teachings there is a responsibility to model and live those teachings. I now have a responsibility to honor the practice of *kiskinohâmakewin* by sharing my journey of learning to live the teachings.

The *nêhiyaw* teachings on *tâpwêwin* (truth) support the understanding that a story or lived experience is a journey of truth. Within the Seven Teachings, the final teaching is *tâpwêwin* (truth) which is taught by the *miskinâhk* (turtle) who carries all the previous teachings on its shell. The *miskinâhk* exemplifies how *tâpwêwin* is lived and practiced – derived from the word *miskinâhk* is the term *mêskanaw,* which means a pathway or a journey. As *tâpwêwin* is taught and modeled by the *miskinâhk,* to be on a *mêskanaw* means to be on the pathway of living and seeking truth. The *miskinâhk* is an unwavering being that commits to following the path of truth – the turtle remains steadfast on its path of truth and does not venture off course. The *miskinâhk* also has the ability to recede inside its shell and be introspective, affirming that knowing yourself is central to living and experiencing truth.

I first received the Turtle Teachings while participating in an Indigenous women's circle. During the circle, the women were asked to introduce themselves, stating who they are, where they are from, and who they are related to. All of the women who shared prior to me introduced themselves firmly and had a strong sense of their identity. When it was my turn to share, I reluctantly just shared my name before quickly passing the feather to the woman to my left. Afterwards, a *nôcikwêsiw* (old lady – grandmother) reminded me of the Turtle Teachings. She explained that I have to speak my truth and honor who I am – if I do that over and over again, I will become grounded in my identity and my path will continuously unfold.

As a consequence of this teaching, I have made a commitment to always introduce myself relationally and it has been fundamental to my journey. The Turtle Teachings reflect that my story is a journey of truth and that I must commit my whole life to living and seeking truth. The entire process of practicing introspection, interpreting my lived experience, and sharing who I am in relation to my ancestors and family is how I express and experience my truth. I have come to view truth as a verb instead of a noun – it is a process of "truthing" that is ever-evolving as opposed to a place of arrival or a destination.

miyo ohpikinawâsowin: **Nurturing my Spirit**

An experience of truth is lived when one is raised in ceremony to learn the language and have their spirit nurtured, gifts revealed, and purpose honored. The teachings on *miyo ohpikinawâsowin* (raising children spiritually well) reflect how children are raised to live their truth in the context of their spirit. The term *awâsis* is often interpreted to mean "child" however,

embedded in this word is the root word *"awa"* meaning animate, and the suffix *"sis"* which indicates smaller version of the root word. Consequently, the concept *awâsis* more directly implies "a small animate spirit" or "a small spirit engaged in a human journey". These terms are further embedded in the *nêhiyaw* concept of "good child raising" or *miyo ohpikinâwasowin*, where "*miyo"* means good, "*ohpiki"* means to grow, and "*awasow*" means to warm oneself over a fire. All of these concepts reflect the spiritual role of raising children and how one warms their own spirit so they can then nurture the spiritual fire of the *awâsis.* An *awâsis* experiences truth when raised in ceremony, learning the language, and being nurtured by their parents, family, and community to discover their spiritual gifts and purpose.

Regarding my identity, the *miyo ohpikinâwasowin* teachings revealed that I needed to see myself as an *awâsis* or "a spirit engaged in a human journey" and re-experience my development to nurture my spirit. By understanding that identity is spirit, it became apparent that my connections to myself and my ancestors, family, and community determine who I am – the sum of all my spirits create me. This process of reconnection required letting go of the shame, disenfranchisement, and oppression I had inherited to relearn who I was through the eyes of being a child. This release and return to my beginnings could only happen through ceremony, especially the sweat lodge.

matotisân: **Sweat Lodge Ceremony**

In *nêhiyawewin*, the *matotisân* (sweat lodge) is a healing ceremony – the root word *"matoh"* means to cry indicating mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical cleansing (Makokis et al., 2016; Marsh, Coholic, Cote-Meek, & Najavits, 2015). The body, mind, and spirit heal by crying and sweating to release the negativity being carried by oneself and all their relations (Marsh et al., 2015). The *matotisân* ceremony begins with the lifting of *ospwâkan* (pipe) where tobacco and cloth are offered to the ceremony holder, ancestors, and spiritual helpers for guidance and support. During the *matotisân,* there are four rounds and each round has a different focus – the ancestors, oneself, our loved ones, and the stages of life. Within each round, four songs are sung that represent the healing, guidance, and support being sought. Through offering protocol and engaging in song, the *matotisân* teachings address the collective effects of imbalance and severed relationships (Marsh et al., 2015).

In addition to healing, the *matotisân* is a metaphor for the mother's womb – a warm and safe place that provides nurturance and life. The physical frame of the *matotisân* represents the turtle and is formed by seven willow branches that symbolise the seven stages of life known as the Turtle Lodge Teachings. The *matotisân* provides reconnection to the path that is supposed to be followed in life restoring identity, development, spirit, and truth. When participating in the *matotisân* ceremony, I have been able to re-experience my beginnings connecting to who I am. My process of reconnection began with participating in a *matotisân* ceremony, where I asked my ancestors for their support in becoming a Métis woman. I have re-experienced my beginnings, re-connected to who I am, and am on the right *mêskanaw* (journey). Not only are my ancestors supporting this path – my ancestors are creating it!

***nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw*: Grandmother Mountain Woman**

To restore my spirit, I experienced, as an adult, a naming ceremony. When I introduced myself, I shared my spiritual name, *nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw.* My name is a reflection of what my ancestors prepared me for as it encompasses my gifts and my purpose. *asiniy* means rock and is an animate being that teaches determination within the Four Natural Laws – the rock is a strong and resilient being. *asinîwacîwiw* is the *nêhiyaw* term for mountain or a cluster of rocks. Within the teachings on the Spiritual Grandmothers, the Mountain Grandmother sits to the West and provides the gift of water to give and nurture life. The word *nohtikwew* is often translated to grandmother, but it means to be an old lady who has filled her tipi with so much love (physically and spiritually) that all the space is occupied, and she sits outside protecting all that she has created (Skywoman as cited in Makokis, 2001). My ancestors have taught and prepared me for being a *nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw* – a strong determined woman who gives and nurtures life while filling her home with love to sustain her family and community. My name is my journey.

***tâpwêwin:* Honoring my Truth**

I have experienced *tâpwêwin* (truth) by learning from my own story and rediscovering my gifts and purpose and I now have a responsibility to serve my community. In the context of social work practice, my Métis identity is intersected with my social work identity. My ability to fulfill my purpose as a *nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw* is dependent on my relationship to *nêhiyaw* ceremony, language, and teachings – and these determine who I am as an Indigenous social worker.

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From an Indigenous universe, social work is a sacred helping role and spirit is inherent to fulfilling that role (Richardson & Seaborn, 2009). As the intent of Indigenous social work is to revive the spirit, instill purpose, and strengthen the community, social work is sacred work (Richardson, 2009). My strength as an Indigenous social worker depends on how I recognize the sacredness within myself to see the sacredness in others (Richardson & Seaborn, 2009). Finding purpose is preceded by knowing who you are. I had to learn who I am along with my gifts and purpose – to walk *mêskanaw* (the path of truth).

As Indigenous social work exists in the context of spirit, ceremony and relationships are central to social work practice. In addition to knowing myself and having purpose, I have a responsibility to be spiritually and relationally well to exemplify how a good, balanced life – *miyo pimatisiwin* – is lived. This responsibility is linked to practicing with congruence or living *tâpwêwin* by remaining on my path of truth or *mêskanaw.* As such, there is no severance between the personal and the professional self within Indigenous social work practice – my Métis identity is my social work identity.

The *nêhiyaw* concept for a social worker further illuminates this intersectionality and responsibility. In *nêhiyawewin,* the definition for social work is *miyo otôtemihtohiwew otatoskwew* – a good relationship worker. Being a *miyo otôtemihtohiwew otatoskwew* entails practicing good relations and relational accountability/ The intentional sharing of my story is how I practice good relations and relational accountability.

When I share my story in the context of ceremony and relationships, I am acknowledging that the telling of this story is not in isolation. The story itself and how I share it must be for the wellbeing of all my relations – my ancestors, spiritual helpers, family, community, and generations of Métis *awasisak.* My story is how I express my truth and honor the collective truth of the Métis community to envision a new reality where Métis *awasisak* are raised in ceremony, speaking the language, and connected to their ancestors all while knowing who they are and where they come from. In the words of Louis Riel (1885):

> We must cherish our inheritance. We must preserve our nationality for the youth of our future. The story should be written down to pass on.

***niwahkomâkanak*: To my Ancestors…**

My ancestor and grandmother stories follow me – they shape and nurture who I am today. Through their stories and guidance, I know that I am a Cree-Métis woman or a "woman of spirit on a human journey" – *niya nêhiyaw-âpihtawikosisân iskwêw.* To be an *iskwêw* is to be connected to fire – *iskotêw.* These *iskwewak* have given me my fire, my *iskotêw.* My ancestors and grandmothers have revived my *ahcâhk* (spirit) and I am the sum of all their *ahcâhk*. I thank them for continually nurturing my gifts and sharing my purpose. I am a strong determined woman who will give and nurture life while filling my home with love to sustain my family and community – *nohtikwew asinîwacîwiw iskwêw nitsiyihkâson.* This is the story of my spirit – *nitahcâhk otâcimowin*.

To my ancestors and grandmothers, I am grateful to you all – kinânaskomitinawaw.

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Appendix: Glossary

âcimowina – personal stories that have teachings and lessons

ahcâhk – spirit

amiskwaciwâskahikan – Beaver Mountain House; Edmonton

asinîwacîwiw – mountain; a cluster of rocks

asiniy – rock; grandfather rock (is animate)

atayohkewina – sacred creation and teaching stories

awâsis – a spirit engaged in a human journey; child

awâsisak (plural) – spirits engaged in a human journey; children

ayahpatisi – the Wondering Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

ayawawasowin – the Planting Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

ékwa – and

isîhcikêwin – ceremony; how to come together and arrange; the way it is

iskotêw – fire

iskwêw – woman

iskwewak (plural) – women

kakehtawewin – the Wisdom Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

kayiwatisi – the Fast Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

kehtayak (plural) – old men; humble and kind beings; male Elders or knowledge keepers

kinânaskomitinawaw – I am grateful to you all

kiseyitamowin – the Decision-Making Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

matoh – to cry

matotisân – the sweat lodge ceremony

mêskanaw – path of truth; journey

miskinâhk – turtle

miyawata –the Happy Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

miyo ohpikinawâsowin – raising children spiritually well

miyo otôtemihtohiwew otatoskwew – a good relationship worker; social worker

miyo pimatisiwin – the good life

miyo wîcetowin – good relations

nêhiyaw – Cree

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nêhiyawak – the Cree people are the four-bodied people; also described as *newoyawak*

nêhiyawewin: the Cree language

newo – four

nicâpân – my great grandparent

nicâpânak (plural) – my great grandparents

nikâwiy – my mother

nimosom – my grandfather

nimosomak (plural) – my grandfathers

nitahcâhk – my spirit

nitanskotapan – my great, great grandparent

nitanskotapanak (plural) – my great, great grandparents

nitsiyihkâson – who I am umbilically connected to; my name is

niwahkomâkanak – my ancestors; my relatives

niya – "I"

nôcikwêsiw – an old lady; a grandmother; female Elder or knowledge keeper

nôcokwêsiwak (plural) – old ladies; grandmothers; female Elders or knowledge keepers

nohkom – my grandmother

nohomak (plural) – my grandmothers

nohtâwiy – my father

nohtikwew – an old lady; a grandmother

ocinewin – the breaking of natural law

ohci niya – I am from

ospwâkan – the pipe; the pipe ceremony

otâcimowin – someone's story

paskwâw mostos sâkahikan – Buffalo Lake Métis Settlement

pastahowin – the breaking of sacred law

tânisi – hello, how are you?

tâpwêwin – truth; the Truth Stage within the Turtle Lodge Teachings

wâhkôtowin – all my relations; community; relational accountability