

Conquering demons through Spirit: A journey to mental wellness with Aboriginal spirituality.

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Author Note

Meegwetch to Naa noo shka sens diigo, Meehegun doodem, who opened her home and her heart to me, and to the many Elders whose teachings inspire me as I continue along my own healing path on the Red Road.

All my relations,

Janice Edgar

Abstract

This narrative life story is an exploration of a 50-year old Métis women's 19-year healing journey. It focuses on the role Aboriginal spirituality plays in relation to three critical factors in her healing process: fostering a sense of belonging, awakening to Spirit and belief in a power greater than oneself and nurturing creative, artistic approaches to the healing process. Naa noo shka sens diigo, Meehegun Doodem's healing journey and addictions recovery, which began in 1995 after a suicide attempt, is triangular in form. Typical Western medical and therapeutic interventions were complemented by a 12-step program and Aboriginal spirituality, each component representing an equally essential part of her journey to wellness. Drumming, powwows, spiritual ceremonies including sweat lodges, fasting and pipe ceremonies, continue to be as important to her ongoing healing process as the support of a 12-step program and previous interventions provided by psychologists, psychiatrists and medical doctors. For the past 24 months, Naa noo shka sens has been living free of all prescribed medications and therapy sessions with medical professionals; however, she continues to participate in a 12-step program and actively engages in Aboriginal spiritual ceremonies and activities.

Keywords: aboriginal, indigenous, healing, spirituality, addictions

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Post-positivistic methods using quantitative research are the dominant paradigm in health communications journals with limited focus on meaning making and narratives (Eley, Young, Hunter, Baker, Hunter & Hannah, 2007; Kim, Park, Yoo & Shen, 2010; Nazione, Pace, Russell & Silk, 2012; Prussing, 2007). This research addresses this gap through a co-created life story narrative inquiry with Naa noo shka sens, a middle-aged woman of mixed ancestry, complemented by authoethnographic input.

The research draws from, and contributes to, health communications generally (Dutta, 2010; Gair, 2011; Kim et al., 2010; Nazione et al., 2012; Stewart, 2008) and Indigenous mental health and addictions communications specifically (Durie, 2011; Hunter, Logan, Goulet and Barton, 2006; Sones, Hopkins, Manson, Watson, Durie & Naquin, 2010; Yeh, Hunter, Madan-Bahel, Chiang & Arora, 2004; Yurkovich, Hopkins-Lattergrass & Rieke, 2011). The purpose of this research is twofold: to explore how Aboriginal knowledge and spirituality contributes to healing and to give voice to a culturally marginalized perspective. Using co-cultural theory, which recognizes the validity of diverse standpoints and seeks to give voice to marginalized populations (Orbe, 1998, 2005) and a social constructivist lens (Stewart, 2008; Dutta, 2010), this research describes how Aboriginal spirituality supported Naa noo shka sens's healing journey, providing an individual's perspective, gained through lived experiences, into the value of Indigenous-based healing models (Durie, 2011; Hunter et al., 2006; Langlois, 2008; Sones et al., 2010; Turner & Pope, 2009; Yeh et al., 2004).

The goal of this co-created life story narrative is to contribute to an enhanced understanding of Indigenous spirituality and the decolonization of healing strategies. It is intended to inspire health professionals, addictions counsellors and people struggling with mental health and addictions issues to learn more about Indigenous worldviews and the value of

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integrating Aboriginal spirituality with contemporary Western therapies and counselling approaches.

Literature Review

The most significant barrier to healing and mental wellness among Indigenous people is the potential conflict between Indigenous and Western worldviews (Langlois, 2008; Sones et al., 2010; Turner & Pope, 2009; Yurkovich et al., 2011). Mainstream mental health models are limited in their ability to meet the needs of Indigenous populations (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006) largely due to divergent perspectives of mental health, physical well-being, and spirituality (Wesley-Esquimaux & Calliou, 2010; Yeh et al., 2004). New Zealand's *Te Whare Tapa Wha* health model includes four dimensions – spiritual, cognitive and emotional, physical and social – that support the indigenization of its mental health care system and give Maori a distinctive voice in health care services (Durie, 2011). Western counselling models are not holistic and fail to value social connectedness, collectivist relationships and spiritual worldviews – key components of Indigenous cultures (Chino & DeBruyn, 2006), creating challenges for Indigenous people to negotiate and create space for cultural meaning in available services.

The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (2006) established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), to contribute to truth, healing and reconciliation that addressed the legacy of Indian Residential Schools. Subsequently, Canada's Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology conducted a comprehensive examination of Canada's mental health needs and services, and released *Out of the Shadows at Last: Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada* in May 2006. The report includes numerous recommendations addressing the unique mental wellness needs of Canada's Aboriginal people including the need for more Aboriginal mental health professionals and a

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proposal to incorporate Aboriginal perspectives in policies, programs and services (Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology, 2006). Understanding Indigenous worldviews can change current practices that oppress Indigenous people (Dutta, 2010; Stewart, 2008; Turner & Pope, 2009) and enhance empathy levels for “outsiders” among healthcare professionals (Gair, 2011; Selby, 2004; Stewart, 2008).

Method

Qualitative inquiry is a decolonizing methodology that enables oppressed groups to preserve and claim their distinctive cultural legacies, strengths, and institutions (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Smith, 1999). Life story narratives nurture close, intimate relationships that enable under-represented groups to tell their stories in their own way, support the development of a network of multiple and diverse voices and facilitate the exploration of human experiences and meaning making (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007, Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Narratives recognize the value of the particular and the role of culture; enable storytellers to reimagine and reshape their lives; and provide opportunities to de-colonize re-presentation forms and knowledge (Clandinin, 2007; Ely, 2007; Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Plummer, 2001). Additionally, the story-based approach respects the oral storytelling traditions of Aboriginal cultures (Archibald, 2008; Willox, Harper & Edge, 2013). Autoethnography supports a deep, reflective process that enhances meaning making and supports innovative and unconventional presentation forms (Ellis & Berger, 2003; Medford, 2006).

Data Collection

Data were obtained through a co-created life story narrative inquiry that explored Naa noo shka sens’s healing journey through addictions recovery and mental wellness (Atkinson,

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1998; Clandinin, 2007, Gubrium & Holstein, 2001, Plummer, 2001; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Naa noo shka sens, a resident of Ottawa, Ontario, has relied on a 12-step program, mainstream and Indigenous healing resources for the past 19 years to overcome alcohol and drug addictions and achieve sustainable mental wellness. This research was covered under Royal Roads University's umbrella ethics review and the subject signed a consent form. To respect my subject's privacy, we agreed to use her Spirit name. Between December 2013 and March 2014, we met five times at Naa noo shka sens's home for interactive interviews in which Naa noo shka sens shared details of her healing journey, which began in May 1995 following recovery from an attempted suicide. Interviews were audio-recorded using QuickTime software. Interactive interviewing permits the exploration of sensitive and intimate issues that require empathetic listening and respect for participant emotionality (Ellis & Berger, 2003). Questions were open-ended, enabling Naa noo shka sens to determine direction and to encourage a stream of consciousness interchange that promotes deeper responses (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007). Formal interviews were transcribed, on an ongoing basis, and complemented by field note references that recreated the emotion of the moment (Elliott, 2005, p. 26), as well as field notes taken during Aboriginal spiritual ceremonies we attended together, including three drum circles held in January 2014, two pipe ceremonies held at the Kumik Lodge in Gatineau, one sweat lodge held in December at the Moose Creek Sweat Lodge and participation in three Elder Teachings at Health Canada's Iskotew Lodge.

The final transcripts were combined with field note data and reviewed repeatedly using in-depth reflective analysis and a comparative approach (Atkinson, 1998) that incorporated reflections, comments and insight drawn from my own experiences with Aboriginal spirituality, drumming, ceremonies and conventional therapies. These notes were then shared with the

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subject and we met one final time in March to discuss key themes evident in our experiences and to co-create the storyline of my subject's healing journey through a reflexive, dyadic interview (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin, 2007; Ellis & Berger, 2003; Riessman & Quinney, 2005).

Subject interviews were complemented by five other interviews conducted in February 2014 with Peace Flame Drum Circle peers, to gain multiple perspectives on the value of Aboriginal spirituality, in general, and Aboriginal hand-drumming specifically, to the individual healing journeys of others. These interviews were also recorded using Quick-Time and transcribed for reference. Exploring the impact of the drum circle and spiritual ceremonies was a deliberate strategy to decolonize healing journeys as these activities are outside formal health care systems (Willox, Harper & Edge, 2013).

Analytical Framework

My subject's story was constructed temporally and spatially, to recount experiences in particular places and times (Laslett, 1999). The sequence and consequence of ideas was then analyzed repeatedly for meaning making (Plummer, 2001). Through joint discussions and deep reflection on field notes and transcripts, and examining their relevance to our shared healing experiences, we co-created meaning making through the identification of key themes (Ellis & Berger, 2003). We intend to collaborate further to identify innovative ways to share Naa noo shka sens's healing journey and ensure her voice is heard. Through authenticity of representation and trust, we can work collaboratively to identify creative ways to share this research more broadly in the public domain, and contribute to the decolonization of healing (Archibald, 2008; Ely, 2007, Richardson, 1990).

For this report, we have used thick descriptive scenarios that embody a wide range of verbal and non-verbal actions to convey emotional content, to enable readers to become

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intimately involved and “moved” by the plot (Sarbin, 2004). We have also been mindful of the potential for ethical dilemmas caused by sharing sensitive, personal information that could impact family, friends and acquaintances and personal relationships as we prepared this report.

Results

During the analysis process, Naa noo shka sens and I discovered two powerful metaphors that will enable readers to understand her journey. We also identified three key factors which Aboriginal spirituality supports in her healing process – it helps nurture a sense of belonging, it awakens the Spirit and belief in a power greater than oneself and it promotes creative and artistic healing explorations and expressions.

Combining Triangles to Create a Guiding Star

Naa noo shka sens’s support on her healing journey is triangular in nature. Three, equally important components support her ongoing well-being. “I’ve been blessed to have the 12-step program, the Red Road and counselling, which has been my triangle – to help me build a really solid foundation for my life,” she said.

Typically, on her healing path, which encompasses the four directions of the medicine wheel, the Red Road supports spiritual health, the 12-step program provides physical support – preventing her from succumbing to cravings, and Western-based interventions and counselling provide emotional and mental support. However, since May 2012, Naa noo shka sens has been free of prescription medications and has not sought the support of a Western-trained therapist for mental and emotional wellness, relying on the other two sides of the triangle to provide the support she needs to enjoy sustained well-being. She said:

You know when I (and this is the first time I think of that), when I look at my triangle, the triangle of the Red Road – mind, body spirit – and the triangle of the

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12-step program – recovery, service and unity – that creates a pretty incredible star (*laughter*). .

From Small Nut to Mighty Oak

The guiding star is not the only metaphor for Naa noo shka sens's healing journey. Naa noo shka sens's kitchen table is a heavy, oak heirloom that served as her birth family's dining room table for as long as she can remember. In 1993, her father was downsizing his living quarters and offered her the table. It has been a fixture in her own kitchen ever since. She said, "For some reason, this table allows people to feel safe enough and comfortable enough to really express their emotion and it's been referred to as 'that damn kitchen table that brings on the tears' (*laughter*)."

Many of Naa noo shka sens's closest friends and acquaintances have experienced its power. She talked about her friend in Toronto who has felt its energy across the miles:

Often I would come home from my day and she would be here and we'd have a talk and she would bawl her eyes out. Today she's in Toronto and whenever she needs support or counsel, she'll call and she'll cry and I'll say, 'Guess what?'

And she'll say, 'You're sitting at your darn table' (*laughter*).

According to Andrews (2004), the oak tree represents strength, endurance, openness to new spiritual forces and experiences in nature's realm. Naa noo shka sens and I sat at her oak table for all the interviews conducted for this research and I also felt the power of its energy as we shared stories of our healing journeys. She explained its significance to her:

The energy it's absorbed over all the years (*tears*). It started off very much like me – a lot of chaos, a lot of negative energy, a lot of trauma. It was our dining table at home (*heavy sigh*). There was a lot of fighting and arguing in our home.

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A lot of holiday dinners here where, you know, arguments would break out, or it would get tossed aside or knocked over in fights...over the last twenty years that I've had it, at least 19 years of that it supported recovery, very much like me. And here it is – it's still solid. It's like me.

The Search for Belonging

Naa noo shka sens says from as far back as she can remember, she struggled to fit in with her family. As the only red-haired, blue-eyed child in her birth family, she felt different and alone. She was the second youngest of six children and there is an 18-year difference between her and her eldest sister, who had a different father. Her mother suffered from severe depression and was hospitalized often. She told me her two older sisters were like mothers to her:

In fact, one sister, who is 11 years older than me, often said that she really resented me. She would get home from school, and what she would have to do is get me out of the crib, and change me and feed me. Because my mother was depressed a lot it became her responsibility.

While her Dad was an “awesome provider”, ensuring the family always had a warm, comfortable home, plenty to eat and clothes, he was an alcoholic. She said, “There was never any kind of emotional support (*stifles a tear*) but I understand you can't give what you don't have. I understand that. For him, he was never really involved.”

Naa noo shka sens was sexually abused, her mother would periodically and unpredictably “fly into rages and totally lose control” and when Naa noo shka sens was 12, her half-brother committed suicide. She vividly recalls the late night phone call:

I remember her [her Mom] calling my Dad down and instinctively I knew that something was wrong...I tiptoed out of bed and I went and I sat in the stairs and I

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listened. And I heard her say, um, that they found my brother hanging in his apartment that he had committed suicide...and the next day I remember that she told me he had died in a car accident and I was so angry with her for lying to my face. I didn't say anything for years.

Struggling to numb her pain and fit in, Naa noo shka sens turned to alcohol. She told me she took her first drink at the age of 12 and she remembers it like it was yesterday:

Homemade wine that my Dad made. It was the most horrible thing I ever drank (*laugh*). I stole this bottle of wine from the basement,,I remember how warm it felt in my gut and I remember that for the first, the very first time in my life, I felt that I was okay...because I'd never felt okay in my life.

Numbing herself out with drugs and alcohol became a pattern that escalated in frequency and duration as time passed, until she bottomed out in May 1995 while living in a small town near Sicamous, British Columbia. She told me "everyone's bottoming out experience is different" and then she described hers:

For me, I remember feeling desperate, hopeless. I actually remember times (*voice cracks*) where I wanted to die, you know. I would sit in my car on the train tracks and I'd wait, and I'd hear the train coming and I would hear the whistle blowing and I was trying to will myself to stay there...I wanted the pain to stop. And um (*crying*)... I never thought this would be so friggin' emotional...so, my bottom came...I OD'd on pills and alcohol...I was in a coma for a week.

When she regained consciousness, the first person she saw was her Dad and she said it triggered a memory to an incident in her childhood:

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I had a flashback vision of when I was little girl, stomping my feet and saying ‘I’ll never be like my Dad’ because he drank a lot and ruined every family holiday, and created chaos...that was like a slap in the face...I realized I was just like him, if not worse. That I was definitely an alcoholic and I had done pretty well all those things that I said I would never do.

She left the hospital two weeks later and shortly after, moved back to Ottawa.

In July 1996, an acquaintance took Naa noo shka sens to Ottawa’s Odawa Friendship Centre. For the first time in her life, she said she felt she belonged:

There was a 12-step program meeting, but it was a very different one – it was kind of a cross between a healing circle and a formal 12-step program meeting. And I felt at home immediately...that was the beginning of my journey on that so-called Red Road.

It also marked the end of her dance with alcohol and drugs.

In December 1996, she attended her first powwow at the Odawa Friendship Centre. She said the intense throbbing heartbeat of the powwow drum reduced her to tears:

I couldn’t understand why I was crying so hard and I went to Grandmother Lillian and (*voice gets quiet*) she told me the drum was healing my spirit...I cried and cried and cried...all day. So when I did finally have a drum [2002] and joined a drum circle [2004], I felt that power. I felt that heartbeat. I felt ‘a part of’ not ‘apart from’.

Aboriginal spirituality and drumming has been instrumental in enabling Naa noo shka sens to find her sense of place in this world. It encouraged her to explore her heritage and

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discover her Métis roots. She explained how the Mik'maq Honour Song moved her deeply the first time she heard:

The first time I ever heard it, I sobbed and I sang it [although I had never heard it before],,,I connected to that song. It was like that cellular memory and you know, I since have discovered that I have Mik'maq ancestors.

Naa noo shka sens continues to feel a strong sense of belonging through the Peace Flame Drum Circle she joined in 2008. "It touches me so deeply (*tears*) that... (*silence, long exhale*) that sometimes I find it overwhelming. It blows my heart wide open to see that love and that acceptance within that circle."

Awakening to Spirit

In hindsight, Naa noo shka sens believes she always had a connection to Spirit, she just didn't understand it, and in her early years the drugs and alcohol contributed to the confusion:

As a child I remember feeling things and sensing things and not knowing what it was. And sometimes it was kind of scary. I remember this one experience. I was in Grade 8 so I had to be 12 or 13, and I was upstairs in the bathroom and I was sniffing glue. And I was doing it near the bathroom window to try to cover up the fumes. As if you can cover up those horrible, (*laughter*) horrible fumes. But I remember how the bag I was using kind of stuck to the windowsill and formed praying hands. And then I saw – it was like you'd get in a fortune cookie – a little strip of paper going by, with the words on it saying, 'Naa noo shka sens, you shouldn't be doing this'. And that freaked me out so much... I screamed and I was, just like, out of control. And she [my Mom] ended up, somehow coming into the bathroom, the door was locked, I don't know how – and ended up taking

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me to the hospital. But I remember that. I remember that like it was yesterday.

For me [now] that was a sign, that was a sign of Spirit, you know.

At the time, with her mind clouded by drugs and alcohol, she dismissed experiences like this as “freaky episodes”. She said she used to think she was crazy:

I was more willing to think and feel that I was crazy than gifted. When I think about it today, it makes me feel sad. I was more willing to accept that label, being crazy, deranged, unstable rather than gifted and spiritual.

Today, after 19 years of sobriety she said she views those experiences differently:

I remember as a child seeing things, or shadows, which I understand today were spirits. But I didn’t understand, I didn’t have anyone to guide me, to help me to understand those things. With a clear mind and open spirit, I feel and experience from a very different perspective...today, I see that that was Spirit.

In 1997, Naa noo shka sens participated in a week-long Inner Child workshop facilitated by Grandmother Lillian of Manitoulin Island and other Aboriginal Elders. It was during that week that Naa noo shka sens received the proof she needed to believe in a higher power.

At the workshop opening, Naa noo shka sens did as all the participants were asked and chose a color that would represent healing to them. She explained how the experience changed her views about a higher power:

Up until that point I had always been kind of like a ‘doubting Thomas’. I would be willing to believe as long as I could see something first. And there is something that happened that week. And to this day, even after all this time, my logical mind wants to explain what happened. And there is no logical way to explain it.

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Naa noo shka sens described how, during that workshop she had her first visual memories of the sexual abuse she had experienced as a child. She explained how Grandmother Lillian had her do a ceremony to give birth to that pain:

At the end of that workshop, we did a sweat lodge...Grandmother asked me to stay, to stay in the Lodge after everyone else had gone out...Grandmother Lillian had me lay down and prop my legs up, like I would give birth again, and she had Grandmother Heather do the same thing, and our feet were touching around the Grandfathers, around that sacred pit in the sweat lodge. *(It is customary to refer to the heated rocks in the pit as Grandfathers.)* And every time I screamed in pain and pushed, Grandmother Heather felt that pain also. So we just gave birth [to the pain of sexual abuse she experienced as a child] again. When I got out of the lodge I couldn't even walk. And then, someone picked me up, and brought me home *(long pause)*. When I went to the washroom that night, I had a big purple stain in my underwear. Purple, almost like the colour of grape. And it really freaked me out because the colour I had chosen at the beginning of the week that would represent my healing was purple *(long pause)*. So Spirit was showing me that my healing was happening...I still find it hard to believe, even after all these years. And I know what happened, I was there...*What are you thinking about right now, why the tears?* Well, I'm thinking, wow, I guess that must have been when I was really ready. You know. Really ready to see, or to believe.

Naa noo shka sens's said her connection to Spirit did not happen overnight, it was a gradual process on her healing journey:

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Occasionally, I would have a realization. Someone would say, ‘Well how did you know that?’ and my answer was like ‘I don’t know...and the more I would try to understand it, the less I understood it...as human beings, we are so programmed to work from the mind and I began to understand that Spirit works through the heart.

Naa noo shka sens’s first drum was gifted to her at a giveaway held after the one-year passing of Toe Knee, a friend she met in recovery. *(In First Nations traditions, after a person crosses over to the Spirit world (dies), their personal possessions are distributed among friends and family on the first year anniversary of their passing).* Naa noo shka sens told me that the bond she and Toe Knee shared was reaffirmed soon after she received the drum, despite his physical absence.

The first time she used the drum was at Grandfather William’s annual Spiritual Gathering in Maniwaki. She had attended this gathering, as well as the Maniwaki Round-up, many times and Toe Knee had been to several also. She said that that first year that he wasn’t there, after his death, she very much felt his presence:

One morning I was sitting by the lake, with tobacco in my hand, praying...crying, really missing him, you know. And I said, ‘Toe Knee I know you’re here because I can feel your presence but if you could show me a sign, that would be really, really incredible, you know.’ Out of nowhere, from my left side came a butterfly. It was just - fshhht - flying around me and I knew, I knew that it was Toe Knee ’cause I had just asked for a sign. So he flew around me a couple times and then he was flying away and I was crying, and I said, ‘Toe Knee, if that’s you, please come back.’ That butterfly turned around, came back and landed on the lens – the left lens of my sunglasses. And stayed there for about two minutes. I just lost it.

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I burst out crying (*pause, tears*)... that moment, where that butterfly turned around, came back and stopped...and (*laughter*) it was like he was looking right into my eye, you know, like, how could I ever doubt?

Participating in other Aboriginal ceremonies, including fasting, has also supported Naa noo shka sens's healing. She told me she's worked hard in different ceremonies and described her experiences with fasting:

You know, I've done five fasts...I do remember one fast where I was so cold. My God, I just couldn't warm up. I was so cold. And then that cold created a lot of pain – physical pain. But it was also very symbolic of emotional pain. And I realize that, I remember too, my feet were like ice the whole time. Even though I was wearing wool socks and I had lots of blankets and I knew, that one fast, my daughter dropped me off there and I know, without a doubt, if I had driven myself there, I would have left because it was sooo painful...I remember laughing to myself, out loud – way out in the bush – thinking, 'Oh I'm so willing to be spiritual as long as it's not too damn uncomfortable'. And I laughed at my cold feet, because it was so symbolic. In my life, I always had cold feet – fear...it was so symbolic...at that same fast, I remember my mother came to me in a dream. And she comforted me. She's gone now. But she comforted me in a way that she could never in the physical world.

The drum has become an important medium on Naa noo shka sens's healing journey, a sacred tool that facilitates her connection to Spirit. She told me about an experience that happened in December 2013 when she and Grandmother Joanne were at the Kumik Lodge:

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I brought in the grandmother drum that we made (*Naa noo shka sens and ten other women made a large community healing drum that can accommodate many drummers – both men and women. It was made after Grandmother Heather passed, to honour Grandmother Heather who wanted a community drum to support healing*) and um, there was just Grandmother and [me] in the Lodge...I asked if I could honour her by singing the Cree Honour Song, and when I started to sing, I was very aware that it was Spirit singing through me. It was almost like I was watching and I was absolutely fascinated how every cell in my body was vibrating and tears just rolled down my cheeks and I sang in a way that was so incredibly powerful that to me was, was incredible...when the song was over I burst out crying and Grandmother was crying and she said, ‘Oh my God,’ she said, ‘That wasn’t you singing.’ And I said, ‘I know’. I felt it, I felt, I felt so many spirits enter me when I sang that song.

Creative Paths to Healing

Art has also opened doors that have helped Naa noo shka sens heal. She was introduced to collage in 2005 at a 12-week Family Stories workshop offered through the City of Ottawa’s Catholic Services that was designed to address and heal family of origin issues. She described a homework assignment that required her to find images and words to create a collage:

The directions for it was to just flip through some magazines and cut images, words, whatever spoke to us, without giving really any thought, or without planning – to just cut stuff out. And then to piece it together and create on the paper, one side what your life has been, and the other side what it’s like now and where you’d like it to go.

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Given that Spirit works through the heart, and not the mind, Naa noo shka sens expressed that she found this activity particularly liberating. She told me that it was one of the first times she really got out of herself and it had a profound impact and opened the door to wanting to explore more through collage, and other creative avenues:

I bought myself, um, a scrapbook and uh, you know, I use it when I need to process something – I'll create collage, sometimes I'll just draw or you know, like through creativity, I have found a lot of healing.

She also participated in a workshop that explored art therapy mechanisms. Reflecting later, on the role of art on her healing journey, Naa noo shka sens commented:

What comes to mind after reading this passage is that creating gets me to feel, connect to the heart rather than the mind. When I'm in my mind, it really limits me through what is considered good, bad, intelligent, acceptable, etc...when in the heart, all is good.

For Naa noo shka sens, beading, sewing, journaling, sketching, painting and drumming are all creative routes to healing.

Learning to Trust Self

For Naa noo shka sens the most difficult part of her healing journey has been learning to trust herself. It was only in the past ten years that she began trusting her instincts, and even today, at times, she finds it hard. She said, "I find it quite remarkable (*pause*) that sometimes I've been more willing to trust and believe in someone else than myself, you know."

Reflecting on her healing journey, through this experience, has enabled her to really see how far she has travelled and the self-assurance and confidence it has inspired. She told me that now she knows, from her experience, that whatever comes, whenever it comes, she'll be able to

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handle it. She said, “There isn’t anything that I can’t, that I can’t handle. Yeah, I know from experience. And if you’d have asked me that ten years ago (*laugh*), I’d have said ‘forget it’.”

Naa noo shka sens described the many paths to support she has found through Aboriginal spirituality – through meditation, smudging, drumming, participating in a sweat or pipe ceremony, sitting in nature or by water, or speaking with Elders..And although these options support her, she also appreciates that everyone’s healing journey is unique and she is not in a position to recommend what may work for others. She said it is important to listen to your inner voice and trust it will guide you correctly:

I want it to be on record that that may not always be the case for others. That, there are times, where I think it is very wise, for me, for others, to seek that professional help...no one can really know what’s best for someone else. So, I really trust myself. And it took a long time to get there because I was always sooo much more willing, ummm, to trust someone else.”

Discussion

Naa noo shka sens’s healing experiences with Aboriginal spirituality are not unique. University of Alberta researchers identified several health-promoting benefits of Aboriginal hand-drumming among women who belonged to a drumming circle in northern Ontario (Goudreau, Weber-Pillwax, Cote-Meek, Madill & Wilson, 2008). In addition, Martin (2011) documented the drum’s role in connecting mind, body and spirit and Kennedy (2009) examined the value of employing an Indigenous perspective of education and learning.

Interviews with six members of the Peace Flame Drum Circle confirmed that many members experience a deep sense of well-being and connection through Aboriginal hand-drumming (CKCU, February 21, 2014). Some say it provides them with “good energy”.

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Roger Gamache, a member of the Peace Flame Drum Circle, shared details of his healing journey which was kick-started following an autumn 2001 diagnosis of primary progressive multiple sclerosis (PPMS), the most aggressive form of MS, which has no known cure. By the spring of 2002, Roger was confined to a wheelchair, unable to talk or feed himself. Medical professionals suggested he find a long-term care facility that could provide the level of care needed and make him “as comfortable as possible” for the duration of his life.

Roger refused to accept this “death sentence”. In the fall of 2002, he underwent second-generation chemotherapy despite a risk of permanent heart damage. When that did not help, he began exploring options in the holistic and naturopathic realms. In early 2003, he consulted with medical staff for guidance on weaning himself off the 15 medications he was taking to manage symptoms; and he decided to fast. Two weeks after he began fasting, he was able to stand and take a few steps. He drank only distilled water and was bedridden for 41 days. His weight went from 199 to 146 pounds. While it took three years to recover from the physical impacts (e.g., loss of muscle mass) from his illness and fasting, today he is living an active life. His physical well-being was complemented by regression therapy to support mental and emotional healing. He also became a regular member at Health Canada’s Iskotew Lodge noon-hour Teachings. Roger says today he finds strength and sustained well-being, on the mental, emotional and spiritual fronts, through Aboriginal hand-drumming, sweat lodges, fasting and other spiritual ceremonies.

My own experiences on the Red Road, initiated in 1996 after a mental breakdown that resulted in a one-week stay on the Ottawa General Hospital’s psychiatric ward, confirmed to me the value of listening to Elders’ Teachings and participating in sacred ceremonies, including sweat lodges, powwows, water, moon and pipe ceremonies. I have also found sustained healing

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through Aboriginal hand-drumming. I have been drumming weekly ever since I made my own hand drum in August 2009. I have found drumming supports my well-being and enables me to sustain mental and emotional balance.

Conclusions, Limitations, Recommendations for Further Research

The Government of Canada acknowledged the injustices and harms experienced by Aboriginal people and the need for continued healing through the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (Government of Canada, 1999). Part of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's mandate was to coordinate national events to enable Aboriginal people to share their stories, which is an important part of their healing journey and helps generate increased awareness among Canadians of this tragic chapter in Canada's history. The final of seven national events was held in Edmonton, Alberta March 28-30, 2014. Nonetheless, there continues to be a need to share the healing journeys of those who have found paths to healing, to support those struggling to find a path to sustainable well-being. Exploring and sharing the lived experiences of those who have mended their broken spirit may support others.

Annually, one in five Canadians experiences a mental health or addiction problem and the annual economic burden of mental illness in Canada is estimated at \$51 billion including health care costs, lost productivity, and reductions in health-related quality of life (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). According to Statistics Canada data, the perceived need for mental health care (MHC) counseling is unmet among 19.8 per cent and partially unmet among 15.7 per cent of household population aged 15 or older (excluding the territories), with 24.5 per cent reporting an unmet need for information and 6.9 per cent reporting a partially met need (Statistics Canada, 2012). Exploring the value of Aboriginal spirituality for non-Aboriginal audiences may help support much needed healing..

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By identifying opportunities where Na noo shka sens and I can share this story with academics, we hope to encourage more researchers to consider using life story narratives of vulnerable populations who have suffered through trauma to explore new paths to healing. Additionally, enabling these individuals, who ordinarily have no voice in academia, to be heard, may help influence new approaches to wellness that honour and respect Indigenous values. More compassionate listening and sharing of healing stories may also reduce the number of paths among vulnerable populations that lead to incarceration.

Endnotes

As we concluded our review of this final report, Naa noo shka sens reflected on how much healing she has achieved over the years, with the help of many, both in the physical and Spirit world. She said:

One of the things I find mind-boggling is that when people are going through pain or through trauma, how the one thing that we all have in common is that thought that we're alone. There were some places where reading through the researcher's comments and reflections on the transcripts brought up more pain, more realization that, wow, there's still a lot to heal. Even though I've done a lot of healing there's still a load of healing that needs to happen, within myself.

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