

REFLECTION

We Were Not the First on This Road: Reflections on My Past and Their Future in Indigenous Education

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Taking Up Community Responsibility as An Education Leader

I am pleased to be invited to share my reflections on where we have come on the road of Aboriginal Education in Canada, and I stand honoured to be included among so many Indigenous women scholars, colleagues, and mentors. I recall with fondness the 15 years I spent studying and working at the University of Alberta, one of the largest institutions in the country at the time. It was during those years that I found my voice and grew my confidence to see myself as a woman of integrity, both in my personal life as well as in an academic environment. It was those years spent in the campus community where I gained a strong sense of responsibility not only to my immediate family, but also to my place and identity in relation to my ancestors and the generations that came before me. I offer this reflection on the challenges in my walk as an Indigenous woman and education leader, for those to come.

Much has changed in the 20+ years since completing my Ph.D. in 2001. In re-reading my dissertation "Voices from the Heart of the Circle," something I had not done since I put my pen down and started the next leg of my journey, I know it was part of the foundation that guided me throughout the remainder of my career in postsecondary institutions and the Department of Education. In essence, my dissertation constituted a promise and a commitment to take up the responsibility to continue the work of those who came before us, as well as lay stones on a path for those who come after us.

My Walk through Higher Education

Clearly, universities have made some strides/advancements in program development, supports, and spaces for Indigenous students. When I first set foot on campus, there was only one Indigenous faculty member and very few Indigenous students. Today there are numerous Indigenous faculty and students on campuses across the country as well as many emerging Indigenous scholars in all fields with wide academic knowledge and resources to draw from. We now have among us many authors of fiction, non-fiction, and scholarly research, in fact too many to even know. This makes me relieved, happy, and proud.

My dissertation gathered the stories of Indigenous women's experience in university and the interrelationship with identity development. My hope was that my findings would contribute to planning and advancements in the knowledge, resources, and supports available to assist Indigenous students as they arrive on campus and struggle to find a place to belong and the resources they need to be successful. I also wanted to add to the body of methodology available within the academy—methods that fit better within our own Indigenous context and culture. For instance, talking circles used as a methodology for speaking, listening and sharing are widely used today, but they remain a sacred ceremony to be respected and honoured, which should not be forgotten.

Our travels have brought us to this point, with many opportunities available for Indigenous students now. It is my hope that we/they do not lose track of those who came before, those who laid the path for others to follow. I worry we may lose our way without that generational connection. I wonder if the experience is personal to them anymore, in seeing themselves as walking a path laid by others as well as assisting those to follow them.

Losing Track of Generational Connectedness

Are Indigenous students today looking back and making connections to their past, to their parents, community, and ancestors? While I am very proud of all my young relatives' accomplishments, I do wonder if they are aware of or think about how their work sits within the bigger picture, the road that was laid out before them. Or, like many modern people, do they think they represent a new beginning totally separate from those who came before? I am not sure, but it worries me if they do not understand their generational connectedness.

I have always seen my own journey in relation to my mother's journey and my grandfather's journey. It sounds shallow now, but my mother who was born in the 1930s used to talk about how the goal for her and her First Nation sisters was to marry a white man and all would be well. Education was neither something to aspire to, nor was work, independence, or career. My mom did manage to marry a white man, doing the best she could at raising eight children born in ten years (no twins either). Sadly, though not surprisingly, she had a nervous breakdown after child number seven, ending in the hospital for several months. At this time she was 26 years old, lost after the passing of her dear father and only remaining parent. Though tragic, this experience turned positive when she was told by her attending psychiatrist that perhaps she could find her way back to wellness by connecting with her People.

Honouring Those Who Walked Before Me

Despite the lack of any meaningful hands-on support from my father who never understood why she could not find her wellbeing inside the home, my mother summoned all the courage she could to navigate public transit to inner city Toronto with half a dozen kids in tow. There she was able to find many others like her, mostly poor, mostly lost, all of them looking for each other and their people. Together they sought to get stronger so they could understand their sadness, their past, and make a better life for themselves, their children, and for "Indian people" in the city. My mother was a part of the early Friendship Centre Movement that changed her life, our family life, and the lives of many, many others across the country.

I witnessed that small group of people, mostly women, dedicate their time, energy, money, and lives to improving life in the city for Indigenous people. They fought hard to lay those stones and build the path that helped so many others to survive and eventually thrive. As an adolescent, I was forced to tag along so I could help to look after my younger siblings. At first, I was resentful; but now I see that time differently. Those years shaped me, and I am forever grateful to my mother's generation for their commitment, courage, wisdom and tenacity.

While I have chosen to live and work alongside my Indigenous relatives across the country, I never stopped seeing my own journey as part of my mother's journey, my grandfather's journey, all part of a continuum of those who came before me.

Following In Their Footsteps

My parents, grandparents, and ancestors' journeys, including the scholars who came before us, struggled through a different time when the path was not so easy, when the old ways of life were interrupted and replaced by the settler ways. I cannot help but see their experiences as being so much more difficult than the experiences of our generations and subsequent generations. I grew up hearing the story of my grandfather, Chief Jack Jones, who was part of the generation who fought to get the vote for Indigenous people in Canada in the 1960s, when no Indigenous political organizations existed to represent and support our Indigenous nations. I cannot forget the image of him sneaking off the reserve, out of sight of the Indian Agent, to hitchhike hundreds of miles to Ottawa to request even demand an audience with the Prime Minister. I am told he had no money in his pocket and so he slept on the side of the road when he could not walk any further. It would have taken days to arrive at his destination, although it is an eight-hour car drive. On my own journey, whenever I feel tired, frustrated, afraid or alone, I think about my mother, my grandfather, and my ancestors. Then I know I can, and will, carry on despite the difficulty of the day or of my walk. It is their hard work and the stones that they laid on the path which deserves credit for my direction and accomplishments.

In this same way, I am grateful for and aware that today's Indigenous students on campus are trodding their path given the hard-fought strides and well laid paths of leaders like Dr. Carl Urion who was the only Indigenous scholar at the U of A well into the 1980s. Imagine how hard it must have been for him to find his way and lay those stones for the rest of us. We owe him. We honour him.

Do Indigenous students today see themselves as part of a continuum, a community, a nation? Do they know what our ancestors witnessed, what hardships they had to endure, and what contributions they made? Do they have that sense of responsibility to add to the story, our history, our Peoples? I hope so, although I fear otherwise. I have heard about more than one Indigenous professor whispering to another that if they must read one more "grandmother story" they'll be damned. My thinking is that if I read Indigenous writings or hear Indigenous stories that do not include their grandparent's story, I'll be damned!

To those younger relatives who are on their journey today: *"Please explore your past with pride and humility so you can know and see how you not only lead, you follow. Don't lose sight of this."*

I suppose one could look at it another way. Perhaps younger generations do not agree that it is important to understand how they fit within their family history and our collective history as a People. Perhaps this omission is the natural outcome of all the hard work of previous generations. Perhaps it is a sign we have come far enough on the continuum that we do not need to acknowledge or honour the path laid by our predecessors. In drawing from my Indigenous mind, I do not agree.

To my own grandchildren, I say, you come from a long line of Indigenous leaders. Please take the time to know from whom and from where you came. Your relatives and ancestors worked hard, they struggled, they fought, they conquered the challenges before them, to get us here. They did it for you.