

# The use of stories for healing interventions with women

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For centuries, Aboriginal<sup>2</sup> people have utilized stories as an integral part of their oral tradition. This has preserved history, with stories about past events and the reaction of a community or individual. Stories are also effective in teaching about life, in passing down values and culture throughout the generations.

Stories continue to be utilized in the present day. At the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, stories are told on a regular basis. These stories might be legends from long ago; they might be personal stories about one's life history. They might also be contemporary stories or recent events that are shared. Elders, staff, and/or the residents (inmates) might tell these stories, to help one another in daily life.

## Background

Story telling incorporates the value of *respect*, which is fundamental to Aboriginal society. Some of the stories have a moral (which is shared at the end of the telling), but most often, an individual is told a story and left to determine the meaning or the moral of the story for themselves. This is considered respectful, as stories can contain many elements that will spark an individual's attention, depending upon their place in the Circle of Life<sup>3</sup>. Patricia Montour-Angus writes in *Thunder in my Soul*, "The tradition of oral history as a method of sharing the lessons of life with children and young people also had the advantage that the Elders told us the stories. They did not tell us what to do or how to do it or figure out the world for us — they told us a story about their experience, about their life or their grandfather's or grandmother's or auntie's or uncle's life. It is in this manner that Indian people are taught independence as well as respect because you have to do your own figuring for yourself. (p.11)".<sup>4</sup>

Terry Tafoya in *Finding Harmony: Balancing Traditional Values with Western Science in Therapy* writes, "I want to emphasize the importance of stories and how we make sense of things. Part of finding a harmony is recognizing that we all have a lot of stories to tell, and the value we find in Native stories needs to be recognized in the same way that we recognize and show respect to other stories... Listen, stories go in circles, because they are stories inside and between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your

way home. Part of finding is getting lost, and when you're lost you start to open up and listen (p. 11)."<sup>5</sup>

## Stories

Stories can also be utilized in professional practice, as outlined in *Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion Practice*, "Stories have played a long and important role in our histories. All cultures have story-telling traditions. Before writing, stories were the living libraries of knowledge and the basis of learning... The [A]boriginal tradition of the story-telling circle, where each person speaks in turn without interruption, is increasingly used in community meetings and professional gatherings. Its power lies in people speaking from the heart of their experiences, without the threat of interruption or disagreeing challenge<sup>6</sup>."

The foundation of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge is 'healing'. *Creating Choices*, April 1990, stressed the need to respond in a culturally appropriate way to the needs of incarcerated Aboriginal women. The *vision* of the Lodge describes the healing process as:

- a) Self-knowledge; to acquire through awareness of self and of the issues that have affected one's life in order to start the journey towards healing.
- b) Equality to acquire the knowledge and ability to empower oneself so that one can deal with the work from a position equally.
- c) Aboriginal Spirituality and Traditions to acquire and/or deepen knowledge and understanding on one's role as women, mothers, and community members through Aboriginal Teachings, Traditions and Spirituality.

A selection of stories is shared here, with some interpretation by residents in a sharing circle at the Lodge. The Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge is located on the Nekaneet First Nation. The following is an excerpt of a traditional story as related in the Nekaneet First Nation Vision and Philosophy for the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (unpublished, p 3-4):

The making of the land goes back to when there was no land or animals. There was a flood that last 40 days and 40 nights. Wesakechak<sup>7</sup> and the animals went through a great flood. They made a raft that would carry the animals. From the raft,

the muskrat was the only animal that could swim down through the water to the bottom and get some dirt. Wesakechak took that dirt from the muskrat and stood on top of the Okimaw Ohci Hills. He blew the dirt from his hand and created land. After some time, he asked the coyote to go see how much land was there. Always the coyote came back, saying there wasn't enough. Then one young coyote, a yearling pup, went and didn't come back for a long time. When he returned, he was old and said there was enough land. That is why this is a special place, a very special place.

Sherry spoke, "This version of Creation makes more sense to me than the Bible story." Shannon followed up, "This story uses elements of Mother Earth, Wesakechak took a lowly muskrat. I understood that the animals, in their wisdom, their strengths and weaknesses, helped to create this earth." Jasmine talked from a different viewpoint, "I heard of this Wesakechak when I was young. He didn't only create this place; he was at my reserve too. He gave the land to our people and created the animals. The first time I heard about Wesakechak, I was in Grade 2. He created this land for his people and sacrificed a lot. This story makes me feel good, proud that I'm Native, because we're powerful people. This also makes me want to go more into our spirituality and look up our people, because there's not too much written. It hurts because it's been taken from us; we owned it all and just got a little bit. We're in the governments hands now; we go by their rules." Terry Tafoya writes, "When you are growing up you may hear a story over and over again throughout your lifetime, but as you acquire different experiences, your understanding of what that story is about will alter, even though the story doesn't change. (p. 20)"

Sherry compared the story to her own circumstances, "The great flood is like going through tough times, hitting a bump in the road. Making a raft to carry the animals is like making a raft to carry yourself through rough times. The coyote came back, never gave up, no matter how tough times get; there's always hope. That young pup went through a lot, overcame obstacles in life. No matter how much you struggle, never give up; it will get better."

Jasmine, a 20 year old Aboriginal woman, first offence, serving 6 years for manslaughter, shared her life story. "Alcohol became my best friend, because it took the pain away and made me forget about the past and what had happened. I did a lot when I was drunk because I didn't care what happened to me or to others around me. By the time I was 16; I became violent and started to fight with anyone who got in my way. At the age of 13, I started to slash up to try and get rid of the pain on the inside, but it always came back, so I did more of the slashing. I wasn't

*having fun, I was only hurting myself, and keeping myself from coming out of my deep depression, trying to cover up the pain I had inside. I closed myself from the world outside, and lived in my own world. At the same time, none of what happened is your fault. There are people out here who do love and care about you; it's just that everyone has a totally different perspective of showing their love."*

Sherry acknowledges Jasmine's story, "It's similar to why I drank, to get attention. I was a people person, I needed the attention. It's good to tell these stories to other people, so they can see through different eyes, so they can see the direction they are heading." Honi has a different view, "I can't relate to that story. I grew up in a good home. When I turned 10, I was sexually abused. One day, my abuser took me outside, and shot himself in front of me. I didn't want to tell anyone. I started drinking when I turned 20, I didn't know how to deal with issues. Alcohol and drugs were our coping strategy. When I lost my sister, I started doing drugs. I grew up with spirituality, but when my sister passed away, I lost everything after that."

Shannon (37 years old, Caucasian, serving 3 years for fraud) also reflected on Jasmine's story, sharing the circumstances surrounding her crime, "I grew up in a dry household. I wasn't sexually abused until I was 21. I was raped, I was a virgin, and I got pregnant from that rape. I couldn't tell my parents, because our house was so strict. My husband was so abusive. I was raped again by 2 men where I worked. I blamed myself. The anger, resentment welled up. I never resorted to drugs and alcohol. I funneled the money and got a high, exhilarating, my way of getting back at them.

Sherry, a 22-year-old Aboriginal woman, first offence, serving 28 months for drug trafficking also shared her personal life story. "I had a good life with my family, until my parents started to drink and go to bars. I was only 7 years old when I first got abandoned. I had no idea how to take care of myself, while my parents were out getting drunk and fighting. Child Welfare stepped into my life, I didn't know where I was going, all I knew was it was some place safe. Well, at least that's what I thought. In that foster home, I was abused, sexually. I was scared, but I had nowhere to run. As I got older, I found a way to take my pain away. I started to drink at the age of 12. Then, when my daughter was 9 months, I left her with the wrong babysitter. She ended up in a foster home just like me. I then went into a deep depression and I didn't know what to do."

The sharing circle following Sherry's story was insightful. Shannon said, "It's almost like we're on autopilot, when you come to a point and say, 'Oh my, how did I get to this place?'" Honi shared, "its like when we were all drug addicts, nothing stood in our way." Jasmine reflected on her own

story, "At that time, we were really depressed, deep depression, our survival of coping with past issues. All the stuff we did was to get drugs and alcohol. For me, when I was depressed, I'd isolate myself, stayed in my room and didn't talk to anyone. Honi went further, "We were like zombies out there, we didn't know what reality was, until you were sober for a few days." Jasmine continued with similar thoughts, "The reason I never cried when I was out there, was I thought it was a weakness. Now, I know its part of our spirituality, our emotions are a part of us."

Terry Tafoya writes, "It is a question of telling many different stories because — as human beings, as communities — we need as many stories as possible; as many perspectives because that is what finding harmony is about (p. 24)." One can see from the various words and emotions how stories can be shared, and how this brings understanding and harmony between people. Sharing of life stories allows for compassion from one another and a common bond, similar life experiences (although different as described above) brings new respect and caring for one another.

A final story is shared, from Margaret Cote-Lerat (a Saulteaux woman from Saskatchewan). The story is written in English, Saulteaux and Saulteaux syllabics.

#### ***A Humorous Story in Plains Ojibway (Saulteaux)***

*"Apparently, a long time ago, when the earth was new, all the animals were capable of speaking. So one time, all the dogs decided to have a big conference. These dogs had their meeting in a big building. As they entered the building, they all took their tails off, and hung them by the door".*

*"So, now, they were really enjoying themselves, when suddenly, the building caught on fire. Now these dogs were running every which way, and as they were running out, in the excitement, they all grabbed any old tail. Now that they were outside, they put on their tails. "Oh my", says one of the dogs, "This is not my tail!" All the dogs looked at their tails and began smelling each other's tails trying to find their own. It is still so today, this is what dogs do, they still smell each other's tails, trying to find their own". The End.*<sup>8</sup>

This story brought lots of laughter to the group. Shannon said, "I have to tell my husband. We have 2 biscion-shitsu dogs, and they are always doing that to each other. Sherry said, "It's a funny story with a practical message. It also made me think about taking a second look at yourself, are you sure that belongs to you?"

This led to a discussion about looks and beauty. Sherry said, "Some dogs have ugly tails, and some have big beautiful bushy tails." Jasmine asked, "Is that from the inside or the outside?" Shannon said, "Some people are really beautiful, but when people look at them, they can see the ugliness inside."

Honi completed the session by taking a different view, "When dogs are running around on the reserve, maybe they can talk to one another, maybe they are talking together? They might be talking about which is the best house, who has the best food!" This is an interesting comparison, thinking of dogs communicating and what they would say from a dog's perspective. Terry Tafoya also writes about this, "One reason that we tell our stories is to try to see through a different kind of eyes (p. 23)."

The residents had a final message of hope, within their stories of hopelessness and loss of faith. Shannon said, "Different Elders hold your attention. You don't want to leave when they are talking. You want to stay and soak up the atmosphere. I'm so much more open and receptive." Honi spoke, "They speak from the heart, with lots of love." Jasmine said, "Elders and healers help us realize what we need to do for ourselves. We are realizing that there's a lot 'out there' for us. They made me realize there's nothing that I can't do. I know where I stand in life, and I know what I have to do. It will get done."

"This wisdom comes from the hard-won experiences of the countless generations of people who have gone before us. It is taught through the songs, dances, stories, prayers and ceremonies of our people. This wisdom gives us nourishment to develop our full potential "The Sacred Tree" (p. 24).<sup>9</sup> ■

<sup>1</sup> Clare McNab is the Kikawinaw (Director) of the Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge, C.P. 1929, Maple Creek, SK S0N 1N0. Jasmine, Sherry, Honi and Shannon were residents (inmates) at the Lodge.

<sup>2</sup> The term Aboriginal refers to both First Nations and Metis people. Other terms are also utilized in this paper, including Native, and Indian.

<sup>3</sup> The Circle of Life is the teaching that life is a circle with many components, most often represented in groups of four. Examples include: a) the four aspects of an individual include the physical, mental, emotional, and the spiritual; b) the four hills of life include infancy, childhood, adulthood, and old age; c) the four circles include the individual, family, nation, and the world; d) the four spiritual principles of Love, Honesty, Unselfishness and Purity. A person may be at any stage on the Circle of Life regardless of their age.

<sup>4</sup> Montour-Angus, Patricia. *Thunder in My Soul*.

<sup>5</sup> Tafoya, Terry. (1995). Finding Harmony: Balancing Traditional Values with Western Science in Therapy. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Labonte, Ronald & Feather, J. (1996). *Prairie Region Health Promotion Research Centre*, University of Saskatchewan. Handbook on Using Stories in Health Promotion Practice. Health Canada.

<sup>7</sup> Authors note: Wesakechak (Way sa kay chuk) is a Cree word, and is the name of the first 'man' on earth. He could talk with animals and do miraculous things. He is sometimes called the 'trickster', and is found in other Aboriginal cultures/legends as well.

<sup>8</sup> Cote-Lerat, Margaret. (1989). *A Humorous Story in Plains Ojibway (Saulteaux)*. Regina, SK. (Unpublished)

<sup>9</sup> *The Sacred Tree*. (1988, April). Four Worlds International Institute, Lethbridge, AB.