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## **Indigenous Storytelling as Research**

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### **Abstract**

Story is a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities, validates experiences and epistemologies, expresses experiences of Indigenous peoples, and nurtures relationships and the sharing of knowledge. Storytelling is also a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and research approaches. Excerpts from discussions by Métis Elders, whose stories and histories are shared, suggest a complex mindfulness and require “deep respect” in research (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 247). Elders’ stories inform discussions of (a) storytelling types (mythical, personal, and sacred), (b) storytelling as pedagogical tools for learning about life, (c) storytelling as witnessing and remembering, and (d) sharing stories of spirituality as sources of strength. Discussions follow.

Keywords: *Indigenous storytelling, Indigenous research, story types, storytelling pedagogies, witnessing, Indigenous spirituality*

Story is a basic foundation of all human learning and teaching (Cajete, 1994). Storytelling is a practice in Indigenous cultures that sustains communities and validates the experiences and epistemologies of Indigenous peoples. Storytelling provides opportunities to express the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Indigenous languages and nurtures relationships and the sharing of Indigenous knowledges and cultures. It is, as Haig-Brown and Dannemann (2002) explain, that “only as [knowledge] is manifested can it be considered knowledge in any real sense” (p. 453). Storytelling is also an important approach to research among Indigenous scholars (Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009).

Indigenous peoples engage oral traditions, historical/ancestral knowledges, and cultural resources to examine current events and Indigenous understandings in ways consistent with traditional worldviews and cosmologies. Consequently, storytelling is a central focus of Indigenous epistemologies and research approaches. Stories shared are as sacred as the space created when they are being shared (Lewis, 2011), and in story there is spiritual reciprocity (Lewis, 2006). Therefore, “deep respect is required in a storytelling approach to research” (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 247; see also Ellerby, 2001; Iseke & Moore, 2011; Kovach, 2009).

This article extends and uses theoretical and critical understanding of Indigenous education to highlight the importance of Indigenous knowledge and story in Indigenous research. The article proceeds with a discussion of the types of stories and then undertakes a discussion of the storytelling approach to research. Excerpts from discussions by Métis Elders whose stories and histories are shared inform a discussion of (a) types of stories, (b) oral storytelling as pedagogical tools for learning life lessons, (c) the process of witnessing in storytelling to honor Indigenous traditions and ancestors and reflecting the processes of the ancestors in a modern world, and (d) sharing stories of spirituality as sources of strength. Discussions follow.

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Thomas King (2003) warns us that “once a story is told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (p. 10). Indigenous scholars such as Shawn Wilson (2008) also express that some stories, because of their sacredness, should not be revealed because this strips them of their spiritual and sacred elements. To write them down is to transform them, to endanger them, and ultimately may serve to deactivate them (Haig-Brown & Dannenmann, 2002, p. 23). Heeding these warnings and concerns, a respectful stance and reverence for the sharing of stories (Dion, 2004, 2009; Hendry, 2007; Lewis, 2011) is undertaken in this research process because Indigenous stories – told through Indigenous pedagogies – share how to live and understand the world (Archibald, 2008; Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005; Cajete, 2000; Kawagley, 1995; Michell, 2005). Indigenous stories and pedagogies offer the possibility of Indigenous peoples in communities presenting and re-presenting Indigenous knowledges (Iseke, 2010, 2011; King, 2003; Kovach, 2009). Indigenous peoples are engaging in research that is developed by and for our own communities and reflects Indigenous knowledges and empowers ourselves (Absolon, 2011; Dei, 2011; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008; Kovach, 2009).

### **A Research Approach**

This research story includes working with Métis Elders as collaborators to examine stories, histories, and pedagogies shared by Métis Elders in storytelling sessions. The objective was to undertake a collaborative analysis with Elders to understand the stories and histories of Métis peoples and the role of storytelling in the sharing of Indigenous knowledges – past and present. The intentions of the research were (a) to respond to the need for Indigenous interpretations and representations of culture, history, pedagogy, and curriculum; (b) to provide increased research opportunities and publicize the work of Indigenous Elders; and (c) to generate better

understandings of the relationships between Métis peoples' knowledges and mainstream education and research practices.

Indigenous Elders, as the wisdom and knowledge keepers of Indigenous communities, are situated in communities as leaders in sustaining Indigenous cultures and pedagogies (Ermine, 1995). Elders and cultural keepers have long been researchers of the natural world and our relationships to it (Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006). Their stories express these interrelationships and teach them to the next generation. They educate children, youth, and adults about the living systems of which we are a part (Castellano, 2000; Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Elders who participated in this research shared deep understandings of storytelling. Within their stories were understandings of the living systems in which we share our lives (Iseke & Brennus, 2011).

Elders are important in the process of recovery and resistance to colonial realities and in reinsertion of the importance of remembering our past and remaking our futures. Elders mentor and provide support and have systematically gathered wisdom, histories, skills, and expertise in cultural knowledge (Smith, 1999). Their role as Elders is based on their knowledge and the way they use their knowledge for the collective good (Smith, 1999). Elders share their stories and expertise through collaborative dialogues. Elders' stories also are shared to counter the silencing of Métis stories that have occurred (Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Haig-Brown and Dannenmann (2002) express that there is need to take seriously knowledge found in stories (p. 454) because stories can be spaces of resistance (Lewis, 2011). Stories are also shared to provide access to Métis stories that will help our children and members of the Métis Nation be proud of who we are.

In this research program, the author contacted four Elders based on their previous involvement with a research program involving Métis Elders. They consented to come to Thunder Bay, in Northern Ontario, for a nine-day period to be video and audio recorded sharing

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discussions of storytelling with each other. A local Elder and I welcomed the Elders onto the territory through a ceremony. Gifts of tobacco and cloth were given to signify that each person would speak truth, as they understood it. It also signified the relationship and responsibility of the researcher to respect and honor the relationship with the Elders and the knowledge that they shared throughout the research process and in the process of representing their stories in papers and other dissemination activities. Each day began with a smudge and pipe ceremony to ensure that the research was undertaken in an appropriate way. Each meal shared had prayers associated with it. The ceremonial aspects of the project were not recorded.

On the first day, the author provided a set of discussion questions to Elders to encourage their thinking about stories that would be important for them to share. These questions included:

**Indigenous Knowledge and Stories**

- Who are you? Where do you come from?
- Who is your family?
- How were stories part of your upbringing?

**Indigenous Knowledge and Storytelling**

- What types of stories are there?
- How is storytelling used to pass down principles, values, and beliefs to the next generation?
- How does storytelling connect the past, present, and future?
- One generation with another?
- People and stories?

**Oral History and Storytelling**

- How do stories contribute to oral history?
- Who were the historians in your family? In your community?
- How is storytelling a Metis practice?
- How can stories help us to understand our histories? Our past?
- Why does the storytelling of histories matter?
- Can stories help us to reclaim our history? How?

**Indigenous Languages**

- What is the significance of telling stories in Indigenous languages?
- Do stories need to be told in Indigenous languages?

**Teaching and Learning**

- How is storytelling an Indigenous way of teaching?
- How were stories used to help you learn?
- How were stories used to help others learn?

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How does the storyteller encourage listeners to take responsibility for listening, interpreting, and reflecting upon stories?

How do stories incorporate several possible explanations of events or ideas?

How does storytelling encourage creativity in those listening?

### **Youth**

How can some of the richness of the stories be shared with our Youth who don't speak the language?

How is storytelling used in your community today?

How do you use storytelling in your work?

How does storytelling help our children in their lives?

### **Spirituality**

How do stories teach us about our spirituality?

Elders were free to explain in their own way and to share the stories that they felt would be most important to inform this educational project that would be shared more broadly through films and through publications. Although they all already knew each other, the first morning each Elder was asked to introduce him or herself. They introduced themselves to the film crew, who had been given prior cultural training on how to respond respectfully to Elders. Elders shared who they were, where they came from, and some things that were important to them in their work.

A talking circle format was used to encourage discussion and to ensure opportunities for full participation of each Elder. Each Elder took a turn speaking, and they stimulated ideas among each other. Elders also went back to their respective hotel rooms and made contact with their respective communities, sometimes bringing forth stories they had discussed with the Elders at home that would be important. They decided upon the stories they would share, if they would share at all. Elders were audio and video recorded while sitting in circle. All Elder discussions were transcribed and roughly sorted into topics. Questions that emerged from this rough sorting were followed up in recorded discussions. Two days were spent with each Elder in Elders' homes. (For one Elder, who was working away from home, it was recorded in Thunder Bay.) The questions often took the form of "in our last meeting you mentioned the topic of (a

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topic). Could you tell us more about this?" Elders also had freedom to share whatever stories they wished to share. Elders' further discussions were transcribed and added to the previously sorted transcripts. Film scripts, papers (Iseke, 2010a, 2011a, 2013; Iseke & Desmoulins, 2011; Iseke & Moore, 2011; Iseke & Ndimande, in press) and a book chapter (Iseke & Brennus, 2011) were written based on the transcripts. The films (Iseke, 2008, 2010b, 2010c, 2011b), copies of drafts of published papers and the book chapter, and links to some published papers are available on my website at [www.ouelderstories.com](http://www.ouelderstories.com). The films, papers, and a book chapter were shared with Elders to ensure they approved the way they were being represented. The Elders in this research agreed to have their stories and wisdom from these stories taped and shared so that their knowledge is not lost and is passed on for others of their community to learn and grow as people and a community. Elders reviewed a copy of this paper prior to its submission and made suggestions and corrections where required. This paper reviews excerpts from previous publications from the work with the Elders as a way to discuss Indigenous storytelling as research.

### **Types of Stories**

There are many kinds of stories in Indigenous traditions and many uses of storytelling. Maggie Kovach (2009), a Cree scholar and theorist who describes story as research methodology, explains that there are two types of stories: those with mythical elements that are intended to teach or share and ones she refers to as personal stories.

Métis Elder Tom McCallum, White Standing Buffalo, discusses these ideas from Kovach and explains the power of stories shared in communities. Tom McCallum was born and raised in Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan, and is fluent in Cree and Michif – a unique language to the Métis peoples composed of an Indigenous language with French and/or English language words that

are woven together into a unique language. Tom has a passion for the Cree language and promotes its use as he explains the way the language has shaped his way of seeing the world. Tom grew up on the land and has a close relationship with it and in working with medicines. Tom uses traditional teachings to work with inmates, youth, men's healing circles, and in cross-cultural workshops. Tom McCallum explains that in Cree, mythical stories are called "Atayohkiwina" and "these are not make up but come from the spirits." There also are certain spirits known as "Atayohkan" but "these are not stories per se, but have been given to us as a people." Tom explains that personal stories are called "Acimona" and are "stories about human life and events . . . observations and things you may have heard from someone else – kind of like news." Tom further notes that "Atayohkiwina don't change, just Acimona" change (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 247–248).

Wilson (2008), drawing upon Cree Elder Jerry Saddleback's explanation, suggests there are three levels of stories. At the higher level are

sacred stories, which are specific in form, content, context, and structure. These stories themselves must be told at different levels according to the initiation level of the listener. Only those trained, tested, and given permission to do so are allowed to tell these stories, which must never vary in how they are told. They are sacred and contain the history of our people. I maybe shouldn't even talk about them here, but it's already on the page, so I'll leave it. (p. 98)

At the second level, Wilson discusses Indigenous legends, or what Kovach called mythical stories and McCallum calls Atayohkiwina. He explains that there are stories that you may have heard or read in books that teach morals, lessons, or events. They can be shaped by the storyteller – drawing on the teller's or the listeners' experiences – but the underlying message of these stories does not change. The final level of storytelling, what Kovach, McCallum, and Wilson call personal stories or personal experiences, are used often by Elders in teaching and counseling. To



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tell these stories, Elders draw on their experiences or those of others to aid listeners. It is a particular use of these kinds of stories as pedagogical tools to which we turn next.

### **Storytelling as Pedagogical Tools for Learning Life Lessons**

Another aspect of storytelling is as a pedagogic tool for learning about life. I explore the storytelling of Tom McCallum further, and through his stories I come to better understand Indigenous pedagogies and practices in storytelling. Tom explains:

Stories are a history of our people from many lifetimes and that stories are real. Storytelling was used in communities as a form of entertainment . . . because we have what we call a holistic approach. We include a lot of things in storytelling that we leave for the other person to be able to interpret themselves. It gets their mind going. It puts their experience together and validates them as a person who has the ability to be able to draw from that storytelling and relate it to their own lives. (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 249)

Tom further explained the importance of stories, a significant pedagogic practice used by Nehiyaw<sup>1</sup> educators “when we tell those stories from an aboriginal language, it’s like we all get in the same canoe and we’re all paddling together” (McCallum, discussion during filming). Tom further explains that

From an Aboriginal language perspective, everything that we see has a life of its own, the creator had put that here including our stories, because our stories are the experiences being shared, those experiences are alive. It’s not dead, it’s not static and it’s not a noun. (McCallum, discussion during filming)

In “Learning To Be a *Nēhiyaw* (Cree) Through Language,” Daniels-Fiss (2008) outlines the writings of Noskiye, a Cree journalist, who explains that “everything made by the Creator is alive and anything made by man is dead. An example: A tree is alive but when it gets cut down and made into a rocking chair it has no spirit” (p. 240). Noskiye further explains that a tree –

mistoos – is singular and referred to in third person, but a forest would be referred to “as a group of living spirits” (Daniels-Fiss, 2008, p. 240). The importance of a tree in Nehiyaw traditions is explained in Tom McCallum’s story of falling through the ice:

At 13 years old, this one fall, the ice was just starting to freeze and people were skating along the shore because the ice was already thick around the shore. . . . And there were four of us. We thought we would go across the lake. People said “No. Don’t go. You’ll fall through. It’s not thick enough.” But we were kids. We thought we could do it. So we took off, started skating across, heading for this island we called big island. And there was a crack that ran across from one point to the other, and I stepped over that crack and the others guys stepped over also and we went to big island and skated there most of the day. It started getting dark and I told those guys I said “we better get back, better get home” and they said “okay.” We came to that crack and they asked me, “how are we going to get across” and I said “well, we’ll get across the same way we came. We’ll step over it.” So they all did. They all stepped over the crack, except me. I told them “I’m going to jump over that crack, you know, we stepped over before. I’m going to try jumping over it.” So I skated back and took a run at it, when I came close I jumped over the crack. Made it, it was easy to jump over, but when I hit the ice on the other side I went right through. . . . And I went underneath and I looked up and it was pitch black all over. I looked up and there was a little hole there of light. And I thought, that must be where I came through so I started swimming, and I came up through that hole, and the water pushed me up, the pressure of the waters. . . . So I got on top of the ice and it would bend and I would go back again. . . . There was nothing to hold on to. . . . The biggest guy in our group, and he tried to come close and every time he’d come close the ice would crack and he’d jump back. . . . I was starting to sink. And what went through my mind was these poplar trees that we see outside, trembling aspen. In the springtime their leaves dance in the wind, beautiful, beautiful sight. That’s the thought that came in my head – I thought I’ll never see those trees again. And a big lump formed in my throat. Tears came down my eyes. And I wondered why, I mean to this day I wonder why I didn’t think of my mom, I didn’t think of anyone else, except for that tree. That tree is what I thought about. And at that time I thought well, I can’t let go, I’ve gotta try once more. So I kicked once more and I pulled myself up. And I went like this (reaches out) and there was a hole in that ice where there wasn’t before. And that’s where I hung on. It’s impossible for a hole to be in the ice in the fall time. There is no reason for it but it was there, and I hung on until that guy came. When he came close enough I told him to throw me his jacket and that’s how he pulled me out.

It went out of my mind until 1985. I gave tobacco to this medicine woman and told her this story. And I asked her what does that mean? And she prayed with that tobacco and she told me, “That tree saved your life. That is the center pole of the Sun Dance tree. It has given you back your life. Someday you will have to go back and repay that tree.” And in my mind I thought “Well, I guess I’ll go to a Sun Dance.” And I did. The following year I went to a Sun Dance. I didn’t dance, I went and looked, observed,

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helped out. Something was calling me. So the following year I started Sun Dancing. (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 250)

Tom did not understand why a poplar tree appeared to him at that moment rather than images of his mother or others important in his life but suggests that it is “synchronicity – a term shared with him by Claude Abins – a Métis ceremonialist who has shared his teachings with Tom” (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 251). Later Tom became a Sun Dance lodge keeper and explained that

I understand this to be a part of my journey on this earth. . . . A pact so to speak that I had made with the Creator before I came to this earth. . . . I am a part of an unfolding of this journey toward wholeness and although it seems new to me, my spirit already knows about it. . . . As a human being it may seem it has changed and a new story unfolded, but in fact it is a continuation of the same story, just a new chapter so to speak. (Iseke & Brennus, 2011, p. 253)

Tom’s story of falling through the ice, seeing the tree, and connecting to the old story of the Sun Dance with his new story of a child in the water expresses what Gerald Vizenor (1992) explains in oral traditions as remembered landscapes that are “remembered as personal and new ceremonial stories. The natural world is created in personal stories” (p. 226). Here the tree, the ice, and the events tell a story of the natural world and Tom’s relationship to it as well as his relationship to a ceremonial tradition and its continuation. Tom explains further that

It has been told to me that the Sun Dance is the closest any human will ever be to the Creator on this earth. It is a very profound event or ceremony that will be described from many dimensions. Some people will obviously encounter more than others due to their journey and how much work they have done on themselves. It is hard to describe as it is an experience and words cannot do justice to what it is about. When one is connected to the tree via the ropes through piercing one starts to understand to some limited degree what this is about. . . . It seems that like all other ceremonies, that you can only describe it based on your experience with the ceremony and it will vary with everyone. (Iseke & Brennus 2011, p. 254)

Tom's story emerging from his youth and its meaning in adulthood demonstrate pedagogical growth and the development of understandings in the life process and in sharing this process through storytelling. The journey of learning is a process of "reweaving rather than simply receiving" (Smith, 1999, p. 532). Tom's story is woven into the fabric of community and family and through his sharing the story; it is part of the pedagogical power of storytelling.

Tom's pedagogical practice of sharing the stories created an imaginative landscape, a ceremonial landscape, and connections between the natural and spiritual worlds. These stories can create "emotional, symbolic, historic, spiritual and cultural significance for a whole group" (McAvoy, 2002, p. 390). Tom's stories also suggest the transformative effects of stories and of traditional practices such as the Sun Dance ceremony. In the sacred community of dancers, singers, and those participating in the Sun Dance, there is the sacred circle of life that is central to Tom's story and his transformation and learning life lessons. He connects his past with his future as a Sun Dance lodge keeper, and he connects land, memory, and spirit, working with the story of his place in the circle of life, ceremony, and community. Listeners to the story must work through the connections that Tom is making and create new connections for themselves in understanding the story.

### Storytelling as Witnessing and Remembering

This making of new connections through storytelling is involved in the process of witnessing that I turn to next. In previous writing about witnessing (Iseke, 2011), I have drawn upon Simon, Eppert, Clamen, and Beres (2000), who contend that knowing does not occur in solitude but rather in relation within the process of "a communicative act" that they call "pedagogical witnessing" (p. 294). I do this when I engage in the process of witnessing another person's

**Comment [KMD1]:** YOU ADDED: with the story of his place-in-the-circle-of -life, -ceremony, and -community.

I took out the hyphens because I think adding "of" made things clear and the use of hyphens as you have it is more for use as an adjective and using them here just adds more confusion

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testimony. I allow my reading, viewing, or listening to be an event, and this is allowing their witnessing to interrupt my own life. This pedagogical witnessing is a historical consciousness and functions to link a series of acts in community [where](#) knowledge is shared through revisiting the past.

Elder and grandmother Alma Desjarlais is a pedagogical witness and recognized Elder in Northern Alberta whose work as a healer and educator is well known. Born in Frog Lake, Alberta, Alma is the daughter of N’hiawuk (Cree) parents but became Métis after she was stripped of her First Nations status upon marrying a Métis. She speaks her N’hiawuk language and was taught to be a healer by her grandmother and family. She works with healing medicines and is a pipe carrier and contributes to the healing lodge with her husband, Albert Desjarlais. Alma explains that teaching the traditions can be difficult because “it’s very hard to teach—to try and take them back to the herbal medicines when it’s easier to swallow a pill. That’s what we’re working against” (Iseke, 2011, p. 319). When we remember ways that traditions were shared in Indigenous communities, we must consider that the teachings were intended not only to inform a present audience but were to be passed on to the next generation and for seven further generations. Leroy Little Bear, a Blackfoot scholar, tells us that the English word *story* means “involvement in an event” in Blackfoot, noting that “if a Blackfoot asks another Blackfoot to tell a story, he is literally asking the storyteller to tell about his ‘involvement’ in an event” (as cited in Kovach, 2009, p. 94).

Alma Desjarlais also explains the traditions she passes down to her family and her process of learning these traditions:

I was about 50 years old when my late brother brought me a pipe [for a woman], and he told me . . . “You’re old enough to have a pipe now.” I guess we didn’t realize that he was getting us ready. And he gave the sweat lodge to my younger brother and his pipe.

Getting us ready to go on our own. When we first started with the sweat and he used to come down to teach us the sweat with us. And then he'd be singing. All of the sudden he'd quit, and then he'd say, "Phil keep going." 'Cause we didn't sing very much when he first started. I knew some songs. It kind of took time to start on our own. . . . Albert [Alma's husband with whom she shares a healing lodge] sings and I help him some times. At first I'd start him off, and then he'd sing the rest of the way. . . . Métis women were the best Medicine women, and the men . . . They said they lost their culture but . . . the culture was always there. The people were the ones that were lost along the way, being forbidden to practice it themselves 'cause they were being taught by the priests that it wasn't right—that it was evil. And I think, the Métis people would be strong pipe carriers. (Iseke, 2011, p. 319)

Alma, in sharing this story, is what Kovach calls a storyteller. In referencing her brother and the ways he taught them, she honors his memory and the strong links of the passing on of traditions through generations and the link between the teller and the story in oral histories and traditions.

Alma Desjarlais also teaches in and oversees a cultural camp on their land for young people to help them learn N'hiawuk language and traditions – including making dry meat, dried berries, smoked fish, and canned meat and fruits. At the camp, young people from the community of East Prairie, where Alma lives, and other communities learn to skin beaver and to make moose callers, birch bark baskets, and fish scale art. The children also sing, round dance, and participate in give-away ceremony as well as in sweat lodge and daily pipe ceremonies. They also learn the Cree language.

In our discussions during filming, Alma Desjarlais shared that “the stories, should be . . . told in our language and then translated even though they don't . . . [speak the language]. I always tell my kids, they don't sound as good in English when I tell them something.” As further evidence of the importance of the language and its use in education (Ratt, 2001), consider that in N'hiawuk/Cree the word for teaching is “*kiskinohamâtowin* meaning a communal happening or event involving the people, the earth, and creator. The term suggests that our faith is embedded

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in the word along with nurturing and working together at maximum potential” (Daniels-Fiss, 2008, p. 240–241).

In Alma’s many stories she witnesses the strength of her grandparents and community Elders. We as listeners are called to bear witness to her stories and the events they express as “they are contextualized socially, politically, and historically” (Iseke, 2011, p. 319). The importance of stories for remembering and making history available in Alma’s stories supports our understanding by reflecting upon and engaging with the knowledge of community.

Alma’s acts of remembering “endeavours to bring forth into presence specific people and events of the past in order to honour their names and to hold a place for their absent presence in one’s contemporary life” (Simon, Rosenberg, & Eppert, 2000, p. 4). Alma honors her brother and, in some of her other stories, her grandparents for their roles in helping her become a healer. In acknowledging their sharing and actions, “she brings their understandings and traditional knowledge into contemporary times. This is a powerful form of remembrance and counters the historicizing of traditions and Indigenous peoples” (Iseke, 2011, p. 320–321).

The process of writing, remembering, and witnessing history in Alma’s life stories begins a process whereby what is assumed to be forgotten or lost is brought forth and bonded to the present through “emotions, cultural identifications, and historical narratives to particular groups, families, or communities” (Felman & Laub, 1992, p. 53). When Alma shares stories of colonization and residential schools, her words enable listeners to “live through a crisis” (p. 53) and support change and transformation. Alma’s stories teach us how to transform our learning and teaching practices, to use storytelling within a new era profoundly affected by genocide, and to practice traditions in transformed but continuing ways. Her storytelling is an educational practice that aids us in attending to the past and reconsidering our futures.

### **Storytelling as Supports to Spirituality**

Some of the connections that both Alma and Tom were making in their stories were spiritual connections, another aspect of this storytelling research process. Alma Desjarlais explains that “to me spirituality is one of the great things we believe in. . . . The grandmother spirit is with us when we’re praying. And the grandfather rock, and the eagle, and the four-legged grandfather” (Iseke, 2010, p. 90). Spirit inspires finding meaning in the connections. Spirit also inspires us to consider the role of stories in understanding identity and life journeys as well as in creating and making meaning within pedagogical moments.

Spirit beings in the celestial or spirit world guide, support, help, heal, and watch (Portman & Garrett, 2006). In various Sun Dance traditions, there is “the belief that the Creator planted a Sacred Tree for all the peoples of Earth within which healing, power, wisdom, and security could be found” (Portman & Garrett, 2006, p. 455). Tom, a Sun Dance keeper, explains in regard to the Sacred Tree that spiritual practices in community are “more than believing. It’s much more than that word believing. . . . It’s almost you have gone through with it and been a part of it. It’s in you. That’s the teaching, what we call teaching” (Iseke, 2010, p. 91). This way of life is referred to as Pimatisiwin, or walking the good life and living in balance with all our relations (Portman & Garrett, 2006; Young, 2005). Tom explains that in considering health “we see it as a total balance of not only the individual but to their family, to their community, to their society, to the world, and beyond into the spirit world also” (Iseke, 2010, p. 93). Further Tom explains that “this is what we call in English, spirituality. And it’s all inclusive. It’s not exclusive to one race of people. There’s many portions of it, but they’re all intricately tied together” (p. 93).

Albert Desjarlais, Alma’s husband of 40 years and an Elder who shared stories in this study, was born and raised on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement in northern Alberta. He learned



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traditional Indigenous spiritual and healing practices from his grandfather, who lived these traditions in the 1800s and through six generations of teachings that were passed down in his family. Albert explains that it is important to

thank the Creator and his helpers. . . . We're just as weak as you or anyone else. As soon as there's something that's hard to do for ourselves we can't do it because we're too weak as humans, as human beings. We got to go to where there's more power, to the Creator and his helpers. (Iseke, 2010, p. 88)

Winona LaDuke (2005), an Anishnawbe scholar, explains that spiritual practices reaffirm the relationships between human beings and creation and these are expressed in oral traditions of storytelling and are reinforced in teaching lodges and Sun Dance and renewal ceremonies as well as other ceremonies. Through these spiritual and educational practices, people are able to connect with the deepest part of themselves and to affirm personal and collective identity.

Elders acknowledge that resistance to spiritual practices and distancing from these practices has occurred because of residential schools, Christianity, government policies, and schooling practices. The out-of-balance lives are due to our lack of relationships to environment, community, and spiritual practices. But these Elders suggest that reconnecting to ourselves, listening to the stories, and drawing life lessons from them as well as reconnecting to language, culture, traditions, and spiritual practices can guide each person on his or her journey. Vine Deloria Jr. (1998) suggests that spiritual practices create a sense of order in the chaos of life so it is possible to find peace and contentment.

Ceremony is a pedagogical location in which each Elder learned lessons about the importance of family, community, and the cycle of life. Through these practices each Elder has come to understand his or herself and then has shared his or her understanding with others, witnessing the transformative effects of storytelling, of ceremony, and of finding balance.

Through the sharing of these stories, these Elders encourage listeners to continue on his or her spiritual journey, to imagine a future in relationship to a complex past, and to make new connections in their lives.

### **Conclusions**

In this discussion I have tried to complicate our understandings of Indigenous storytelling by considering the kinds of stories told in Indigenous communities. From discussions of storytelling types as mythical stories or Atayohkiwina, personal stories or Acimona, as well as sacred stories, discussions extended understandings of storytelling as pedagogical tools for learning about life and as important forms of witnessing and remembrance. Storytelling as witnessing and remembering allows engagement with ideas of the past and supports transforming ourselves today. By learning from stories and storytelling, we are a part of the process of recovering from colonization and its effects and of remaking ourselves. In storytelling, we can become who we are meant to be. In the stories we tell of who we are, where we come from, what we understand, and how we belong, we make ourselves and our connections to our world. Through storytelling and ceremonial life, we are involved in the lifeways of a people, culture, community, family, and tradition, and in it we make a new story today of our connections. Whether our stories are pedagogical or witnessing and therefore have a teaching function, or ceremonial and have a spiritual connection, the stories are important to our cultural life.

Storytelling as a research practice enables the researcher to engage with the stories and histories of families, communities, and cultures and to begin the transformative process of understanding oneself in relation (Lewis, 2006, 2011). The research, as a result, is located in connection to the storytelling context and as such cannot be separated or generalized from the context. And yet this seeming specificity does not limit the value of the research to a single

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location or event because the transformative effect of the stories can continue with those who hear the stories and take up the challenges of transformation posed in the stories.

Indigenous stories and the knowledge systems they reflect are continually supporting communities and individuals in meeting the challenges of life. They are dynamic and evolving to meet the needs of modern life. In fact, media forms such as the Internet, YouTube, and Facebook encourage Indigenous storytellers and storytelling to find relevance and meaningfulness to a younger generation. These modern media forms encourage connections and creation of new stories to meet the needs of current and future generations as part of the process of Indigenous storytelling.

Indigenous storytelling pedagogies encourage broader understandings of identity, community, culture, and relations. Community education located in Indigenous storytelling has long been a powerful form of education that enriches the lives of community, creating a sense of interconnectedness between family, community, and nation and with all relations as well as with the spiritual understanding of self and the spirit world.

As educators we are challenged to understand the kinds of stories we might consider, the pedagogic practices of storytelling, and the uses of stories to transform our understandings of the past and present and of ourselves in relation to a world unfolding as well as to consider the benefits of storytelling to challenge assumptions. As educators we also must consider the spiritual aspects of ourselves as valid and appropriate parts of who we are and find supports for viewing ourselves in spiritual ways through storytelling.

Storytelling is a tried and true pedagogic practice that reflects the epistemologies of Indigenous communities. It may well challenge the very notions of what we think good teaching is and what educational processes we might consider in our educational environments.

#### INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING AS RESEARCH

Storytelling is a process that can be simple for children, with growing complexity for the more deeply knowing, and can be a powerful space for the development of knowledge and skills. If we remain open to storytelling, it is a practice through which we can grow for a lifetime. Whether we remain avid listeners to stories or develop into storytellers ourselves, the power of storytelling as pedagogy, witnessing, and supports for spirit suggest that a complex mindfulness develops through storytelling. The stories from the Elders have been shared by powerful storytellers for listeners when they are ready developmentally to understand them. Until then we can learn a great deal from these initial stories and can use these stories to help us get ready to hear more complex stories. I thank the Elders who have inspired this article.

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#### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> There are various spellings of Cree words, so for consistency I use the spelling that Tom McCallum uses across various papers written and referenced here.