

Learning Life Lessons from Indigenous Storytelling with Tom McCallum

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Abstract:

This chapter explores and examines how oral storytelling can be pedagogical tools for learning about one's life through interpreting and engaging in the storytelling process. Tom McCallum, a Métis Elder and a Sun Dance lodge keeper, tells three stories: *Falling Through the Ice and the Sun Dance Tree* and its second part *Sun Dance Story about the Meaning of Life* and two humorous stories, *Humorous Horse Story* and *Dancing Dog Story*. The epistemology informing the research methodology, the importance of Elders as keepers and teachers of knowledge, and the respectful protocol for research with Elders are discussed. Tom and other important Elders 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 community. Stories are real learning tools. By examining the pedagogy of stories from not only our own perspective but many perspectives we can better interpret our lives. Tom, by re-telling his stories, facilitates our learning and making meanings from events in our own lives that give us purpose. From Tom's stories and teachings we learn from the natural and animal world as a real part of our lives.

Introduction

Indigenous Elders are the educators of our children, youth, adults, and communities, and storytellers and historians of our communities. Their stories and histories, shared through Indigenous pedagogies, educate communities and aid in sustaining our cultures. The contributions of Métis Elders help

Métis communities understand the contributions of Métis peoples, past and present, to our provinces and Nations. Métis Elders' knowledge help us understand Indigenous pedagogies in Indigenous education and the ways these can inform the education of children, youth and Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

We explore the storytelling of Tom McCallum, White Standing Buffalo, a Métis Elder who explains the power of stories shared in communities. Through his stories we come to better understand Indigenous pedagogies and practices in storytelling. Tom's first story is in two sections entitled *Falling Through the Ice and the Sun Dance Tree* and its continuation in *Sun Dance Story about the Meaning of Life*. These explain Tom's youthful experience and how it sets a pattern for his learning the meaning of his life. His subsequent two stories, *Humorous Horse Story* and *Dancing Dog Story* share understandings about community storytelling and the role humor plays in teaching lessons.

We begin by introducing the authors, and the epistemological underpinnings that inform the research method and approach. We discuss meanings of Tom McCallum's storytelling and learn how Indigenous pedagogies use stories as an approach to share understandings. Through interpreting Tom's stories, we learn valuable lessons about the role of storytelling and ways that storytelling can influence one's life journey.

Introducing the Authors

I am Judy Iseke, a Métis woman, researcher, and scholar from St. Albert, Alberta which was once a strong Métis community but it has changed over the years into a mixed urban center. I am a descendant of the Métis families that founded this community. In my academic work I have been working with Métis Elders to explore storytelling traditions. I teach academic courses at the graduate level on Indigenous Education in the Faculty of

Education, Lakehead University. I have spent many years working in Ontario and Alberta learning about my own beliefs about Indigenous traditions and storytelling. I consider myself a beginner in these practices and defer to the Elders as the experienced ones. I have heard many stories and am interested in the power of storytelling that is the focus of my research program.

What I have learned in my personal experiences of storytelling is that it is a powerful pedagogic tool in which the old ones tell us stories from which we are to draw our own understandings and conclusions. The stories teach by showing us various ways to look at a problem and help us to consider different viewpoints that might expand our understandings of how to live or how to solve a problem. The stories are situated in a cultural, family, and communal context that provides the backdrop to stories and to which the stories are tied. As such the stories have greater meaning to those within the contexts from which the stories are told than to those who do not share these understandings. But other Indigenous peoples that come to our community and hear the stories can relate to our stories as there are similar stories in their own contexts – stories of love, of family, of trouble, of making due when times were tough, of strength of family and friendship ties that keep us strong, and stories that tie us to the land and to spiritual practices that we are to continue in order to keep the land clean and the people that walk on it healthy. The stories teach us respect for ourselves, for our families, our Elders, our communities, our neighbors and respect for all life. They are powerful teachings that aid us in knowing who we are.

I find myself now, as a mother, teaching my children by telling them stories. They often ask me about some time long ago or some event and I find myself telling them stories of their ancestors, of their relations, of the lands and communities I and their family came from or stories from my life that can help them understand the complexity of the world. The stories just seem to

flow from me as they listen and learn. I find myself, as a university professor, teaching in this way as well. I rarely explicitly lecture on a topic or issue but rather prefer to tell a story from which students are asked to build connections and understandings.

As a Canada Research Chair, I decided to undertake work with the old ones from our communities and to understand the many lessons they teach in their lives and their work as storytellers, educators, healers, and community leaders. I wanted to understand the power of storytelling not just from my personal experiences of hearing and telling stories but from those who had far greater experiences than I did in this important tradition. My research program has brought me into contact with storytellers beyond those in my own immediate family and community. It is a great honor to have the opportunity to work with these knowledgeable people. They have taught me a great deal and continue to teach me as our relationships continue through the research process and beyond.

I am Brennus and I am of Northern Irish and Canadian heritage. I am a free-lance writer and researcher. Being of Irish decent, there was always one of my uncles telling an Irish traditional story full of humor and life lessons. I understand well how the old stories of Irish legends like Brian Boru and Cu' Chulainn have shaped Irish culture and tradition and my understanding of what it means to be Irish - long before St. Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland. Sadly, I cannot speak Gaelic. However, I am an *Outsider* when it comes to Indigenous oral storytelling. As part of my Undergraduate and more particularly, my Master's research I was involved in studying with the Oneida Nation Educators and Elders, concerned with themes of cultural, environmental, and language erasure and recovery. Storytelling was also an important theme.

For this research and chapter, I have been involved with understanding and interpreting the meaning of Tom McCallum's stories in regard to my own understandings of my own traditions, in regard to that I had come to know in some way in the Oneida Nation, and in regard to my learned experiences and interactions with Indigenous educators and students, and non-Indigenous students at University of Toronto. I come to this research with my humble thoughts and ideas, of which it is an honor to work with these Indigenous individuals, educators and communities.

Epistemology Informing the Research Methodology

Kovach (2005), a Nèhiyaw and Saulteaux researcher, cautions that conceptions of research are “so entangled with haughty theories of what is truth” (p. 32) that we may forget that research is truly “about learning and so is a way of finding out things” (Hampton, 1995, p. 48). Smith (1999, p. 7) suggests “researching back,” like “talking back” as a form of “recovery of ourselves, an analysis of colonialism, and a struggle for self-determination” (p. 7). Research that engages in this resistance, recovery, and renewal is central to Indigenous peoples as it supports our lives and work in communities and in academic settings.

Elders are important in this process of recovery and resistance, 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).

The research methodology in working with Elders must be based on respectful relations. Lassiter (2000) explains the importance of dialogic and collaborative texts produced within Indigenous communities that are based on human relationships which “produce deeper dialogues about culture” and “engender

moral and ethical commitments” (p. 610) between collaborative participants in research.

Being ready to hear the stories when the tellers are ready to tell them calls the researcher into the relationship of listener and reflects the holistic process of both parties and asks the researcher to remember that deep respect is required in a storytelling approach to research.

In an oral culture, story lives, develops, and is imbued with the energy of the dynamic relationship between teller and listener. The story can only exist within an interdependent relationship of the narrator and audience. Writing story becomes a concession of the Indigenous researcher (Kovach, p. 101).

Both Winona Stevenson (2000) and Shawn Wilson (2008) explain the complexity of putting oral stories into written texts. They both use a style of writing that shifts quite deliberately between a narrative style of experiences and more analytical style of discourse reflecting the stories. This chapter follows this style.

Kovach (2009) explains that there are two forms of stories – the ones with “mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories” and then there are the personal stories of “place, happenings, and experiences” that are shared with the next generation through oral traditions (p. 95). Tom McCallum explains in a discussion in regard to this chapter that the name for the mythical kind of stories to which Kovach alludes are called “Atayohkiwina” in Cree. “These are not made up but come from the spirits. There are certain spirits known as Atayohkan” thus the name for the mythical elements but “these are not stories per se, but have been given to us as a people.” Tom further explains that the stories that Kovach called 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. Telling stories is a practice in Indigenous cultures that has long sustained us (Castellano, 2000).

A Research Approach

“Research, like life, is about relationships” (Kovach, 2005, p. 30). The cultural context, just as in storytelling, positions the participants in research including the one we might typically think of as the researcher (Bishop, 1998). Research in such a context becomes a collaborative venture whose effect is the shared development of new storylines (Bishop, 1998, p. 207). Kovach, drawing on King (2003), suggests that “each story is alive with the nuances and wisdom of the storyteller” (p. 27) or in this case the multiple storytellers involved in the process, including the researchers who also tell the story of the research. This research story includes the focus to work 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 in order 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 1) to respond to the need for Indigenous interpretations and representations of culture, history, pedagogy, and curriculum, 2) to provide increased research opportunities and publicize the work of Indigenous Elders, and 3) generate better understandings of the relationships between Métis peoples’ knowledges and mainstream education and research practices.

In this research program Elders were contacted by Iseke based on their previous involvement with a research program with Métis Elders. Gifts of tobacco and cloth were given by Iseke to ask the Elders to participate in the discussions.

The exchange of tobacco signified that what was spoken was truth as each person knew it. There was a further

recognition that the person’s story would become a part of the social and historical fabric of the people, a historical truth, through their honour. It requires belief in another’s integrity, that there is a mutual understanding that speaking untruths will upset the relational balance (Kovach, 2009, p. 103).

For Iseke and the Elders the tobacco also signified their relationship and the responsibility of the researcher to respect that relationship with the Elders and the knowledge that they shared. It suggested the responsibility to the integrity of the stories told and to respect and honor the Elders throughout the research process. It also was a commitment to continue to work with the Elders in representing their stories.

These Elders had worked with numerous organizations that conducted research including the Métis Center, National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) in Ottawa. Elders were given an information letter about the research and asked to sign a consent form indicating they consented to the research as this research was being conducted in conjunction with a university and the university ethics committee wanted to see forms signed.

The Elders were given a sheet of paper with research questions that would guide and focus discussions. They were then free to respond in whatever way they saw fit. A talking circle format was used to encourage discussion and to ensure opportunities for full participation of each Elder. Elders were audio and video recorded while sitting in circle. All Elder discussions were transcribed and roughly sorted into topics. Film scripts, papers, and chapters were written based on the transcripts. Iseke visited Elders in their homes in Northern Alberta and at Sun Dance ceremony and local visits in British Columbia to discuss the films, papers, and chapters. Ongoing dialogue via e-mail and telephone conversation has helped to ensure that the research continues to be respectful of the ideas Elders shared. Three films have been

produced and one is in production that draws together some of the ideas that Elders shared. Versions of the films have been provided to Elders for ongoing comment and feedback.

This kind of filmmaking and research is as much about the process of community relationships as it is about the development of film products and research outcomes. The Elders wanted to see their stories on film and wanted to ensure their ideas were shared with the next generation and these films are welcomed as ways to do this within Indigenous communities. Elders also understood that their ideas would be shared in academic papers. The researcher has been in contact with the Elders and shared a version of the paper and sought feedback from the Elders.

To ensure we had a good research time together, Elders held a pipe ceremony. They were asked with tobacco to do this ceremony. All present were included in the ceremony. Ceremony was held in the research space where the ongoing work of producing film and papers would continue. A closing ceremony was provided by the Elders in giving thanks for this opportunity together. The closing allowed us all to be a part of a complete cycle of ceremony over these 9 days.

Introducing Tom McCallum

This chapter draws upon stories from one of the Elders in the research, Tom McCallum, who was born and raised in Ile 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 used. 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 shares stories in this text and has

reviewed this text prior to its submission to make any changes he saw fit. Tom’s stories are in italics. We have edited Tom’s stories in the interest of space.

Tom McCallum explains that

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.

Carabi (1994) similarly suggests that stories are ways we create ourselves, and they are what we are made of. Our understanding of these stories combined with our lived experiences help us mold and create who we are. Taylor (1996) suggests that we reach deep into ourselves and connect our own understandings to those in the story. Smith (1998) suggests that stories do not have a single meaning but have a plurality of meanings based on our own interpretations of the story. The stories allow us to “pose new questions and in doing so challenge us to imagine new possibilities, to ‘expand the limits of where we can go’” (Gross, 2009, p. 78). Tom teaches us through stories so that we can interpret and come to understand meanings in our own lives through the stories.

Vaserstein (2001), drawing on Allen Ryan’s book *Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art*, wrote that stories entertained and educated and provided adventure for generations of Indigenous people. These encouraged “curiosity, ingenuity, playfulness, earthiness, irreverence, and resilience” as well as an understanding of “self-identity of Native people and their place in the world” (p. 309). Tom believes that it is up to the

listener to find the appropriate meaning for themselves within these stories from the particular perspective in their lives.

Tom's Falling Through the Ice and the Sun Dance Tree

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, helped out. Something was calling me. So the following year I started Sun Dancing.

Taylor (1996), in a discussion of oral tradition and storytelling as it relates to Native Theatre in Canada, explains that storytelling is a form of creativity and passing on Indigenous knowledge and experiences that involves "taking your audience on a journey" (p. 29). Tom takes the audience on the journey of falling through the ice and the understanding that much later is explained – that he is to thank the Sun Dance tree for saving his life. Taylor further explains that storytelling relates the history of community and explains human nature. Taylor explains that in storytelling each teller is involved in a

“process of reaching deep inside yourself to find that nugget that is your grounding, your earth, the essence of who you are. It was a way of explaining human nature” (p. 30). That nugget for Tom was the tree and the connection to the Sun Dance.

In Tom's story he tells us, although he does not understand at the time, that the poplar tree appeared to him, that he did not think about his mom or family. Vizenor (1992) explains that “the awareness of coincidence and personal stories is much more sophisticated in tribal cultures” (p. 227). It takes Tom some time to truly understand the coincidence or synchronicity of the poplar tree and the Sun Dance. Tom explains that we do not allow for co-incidence in our world. He suggests we replace the word coincidence with the term synchronicity – a term shared with him by Claide Abins – A Metis ceremonialist who has shared his teachings with Tom. Gross (2007) adds that natural elements are part of the story. Wilson (1996) further adds to this idea, that life histories reflect human stories as well as non-human elements. In Tom's case the image of the tree is powerful and as Phelan (1996) suggests “I still don't know why it was a coyote that appeared that day ... As I thought about what coyote taught me” (pg 131). Tom thought it very strange at the time that it was the poplar tree that appeared at this moment. He did not understand fully the meaning of the tree for many years, but he understood it would become important.

Schwenniger (1995) reiterates that in non-human nature we can find spiritual power. He gives the example of a boy who finds a chipmunk is a tree stump. “The chipmunk turns out to be a human boy.... The stump from which he emerges turns out to be the chipmunk boy's wise old grandfather who delivers an oration about who the human boy will become” (p. 149). In Tom's story we see the interconnections of the poplar tree that foreshadows who Tom will become – a Sun Dance lodge keeper.

Tom's Continues the Sun Dance Story about the Meaning of Life

In 1994 I went to a Sun Dance. I had been dancing a number of years since then, but I went to Kehewin [reserve]. I brought some tobacco. ... I got a really, really long print. ... to thank the tree for saving my life. ... It was dark blue, beautiful blue color. I went to this one man, I said "I have come to pay this tree back" and I told him the story, and he said "I know just the man you need to talk to". He led me to this Elder, and told that Elder the story, and what my intentions were. He said "Ok, come with me". So he had blanket offerings, and that flag was tied to that tree, that long flag. So the tree sat like this. ... And they got ropes on it. And all these Elders stood over here, and I was standing there with them. And they said "Ok!" and they pulled up the tree, and as they pulled up the tree all these elders there started crying. And tears just jumped from my eyes too, I don't know why, until that tree was up, and that pfft, it was gone. We all stopped crying.

On the second day of that Sun Dance, I was dancing, danced all day, and then ... four o'clock in the morning these people come to wake me up. They said "you better take your wife to the hospital she's going to have a baby". ... I took her to the hospital in Bonneville, that's where my daughter was born. So I gave her the name Kehew because of the Kehewin reserve. And that was in July, and the second name I gave her was Nepin, which means summer. Kehew Nepin is her name. It means Eagle Summer.

... I went back to the Sun Dance and they were dancing already, it was about 8 - 8:30, in the morning. I crawled in the tent with my son and I immediately fell asleep. I was just sleeping real nice, when somebody shook my foot. I looked up and it was that Elder. He said ... "are you going to go and finish?" I said "no I have to stay here with my son." I didn't want to go. He said, "Never mind that", he said, "I got lots of daughters, lots of granddaughters

here, they'll take care of him. He said, "you go and finish."

So I went back to the Sun Dance, they were dancing, and I started dancing. Then we went down, and I heard him coming, and he stopped everything. And had me stand up and he announced the birth of my daughter. And all the whistles started, and drums and they broke into a song and started singing. And that Sun Dance lodge started to spin around. Like this... And all of the colors of the rainbow were there because of the cloth that was there. And I started to raise up. I started to raise up like this and I flew away. I came to this place with this beautiful green grass all over. And people... there is little paths like this, people were walking and talking in very, very gentle tones. Gentle voices and laughing. Everybody seemed so happy. And I stayed there. I could here the drums, I could hear people talking, I could still hear the whistles. But I was not there I was somewhere else. All day I was in that place, I didn't want to come back. I never felt any sensation of dancing at all. I was just hovering in the air. Than I heard the Sun Dance chief say this would be our last set, we're going to shut down. And in my mind I was thinking "No, No. Don't shut it down. Please. I wanna stay here, I don't wanna go back." And I was thinking, "I wonder if there is another Sun Dance somewhere so I can go back to this place." But my understanding of that is that, that poplar, white poplar tree, had granted me a life, giving me another chance at life to finish what I need to do on this earth. And when I acknowledged that, when my daughter was born, again that tree took me somewhere and showed me what life is about, what's real. What we're all about.

Kroeber (2004) documents that storytelling creates “imaginable impossibilities” and “liberates our imaginations” to create possibilities (p. 76). In particular, in regard to this story, storytellers in Indigenous populations are fully connected and ‘in-tune’ with the natural world around them. Tom, in Kehewin, at Sun Dance, learns from the poplar tree lessons that are

shaping his life. These lessons are partially learned in the spirit world (Carabi, 1994).

Smith (1998) explains that stories have a plurality of meanings rather than a single meaning. The person listening to the story has to listen and interpret the story, finding meaning in the story from their own experiences. There are many meanings that one could draw from a story, depending on what the listener hears, highlights, and emphasizes and ultimately what they interpret. Smith writes that listeners “are invited to construct their own meaning, to enter into liberative conversation[s]” (p. 532). Gross (2009) writes that “the power of the story comes from our reaction to it....So the whole process is very organic...a storytelling tradition [is] to mutually enrich each other” especially to encourage the listener to make connections (p. 76-77). Storytellers can therefore create new questions and possibilities to imagine and to expand understandings and the limits we place on imagination. Tom creates possibilities for us to think about our own lives and to draw meaning from past experiences and events in order to have clarity and focus.

In this process “old stories change; [and] new stories emerge. ... They encourage us to become members of a community engaged in telling, hearing, retelling, contradicting, and reweaving, rather than in simply receiving” (Smith, 1998, p. 532). Often the communities are made up of families and extended families, as in the case of Tom’s Sun Dance story in which the Elder has daughters and granddaughters to look after Tom’s son. Gross (2009) suggests that “Families are one of the blessings...Living without family would be like trying to live without air and water (p. 72). Tom affirms the importance of his family and community in the Sun Dance.

In regard to this paragraph, Tom reflected on his own journey and added in regard to old stories changing to new stories 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 unfold, but in fact it is a continuation of the same story just a new chapter so to speak (McCallum, personal communication, Apr. 5, 2010).

Tom's story of falling through the ice and being saved by the Sun Dance tree demonstrates the connecting of an old story – the Sun Dance, with a new story – Tom's experiences of seeing the Sun Dance tree when in the water. Gerald Vizenor (1992) explains that stories in the oral tradition “are the remembered landscapes” (p. 226). In the case of Tom's story there is the landscape of the space in Ile à la Crosse and the lake and the ice. There is also the landscape of the spiritual world in which Tom's story of the Sun Dance takes place. Vizenor contends that “the landscapes of tribal memories are heard, read, and remembered as personal and new ceremonial stories. The natural world is created in personal stories” (p. 226-227). In this case the way of living as boys in another era in another place is witnessed in Tom's story. This is a new personal and ceremonial story that creates the natural world. Carabi (1994) contends that “natural elements, and members of the natural world by extension, have their own story to tell and so engage in the dialogic process as well” (p. 47). The poplar tree is a main character in this story, teaching Tom about the cycle of life.

McAvoy (2002) contends that “Cultural/symbolic meaning is where a place creates a sense of emotional symbolic, historic, spiritual and cultural significance for a whole group. It often involves spiritual connections to nature” (p. 390). In the case of Tom's story the place of the Sun Dance

creates this significant location. Tom's story about falling through the ice suggests that “a heightened sense of place or connection to the land is the result of the importance placed on the human/nature relationship and a long historical tie to the land” (McAvoy, 2002, p. 391). Tom's history of living on the land/territory creates this set of relations and connections. His story of seeing the Sun Dance tree further suggests the Tom's relationship to the land and the spiritual aspects of life (McAvoy).

Tom speaks of the Sun Dance ceremony which Smith (1998) explains “is a sacred rite of transformation, ... a way to change his life” (p. 528). “The sun dance, ... held in a circular lodge built from fresh cut poplars, covered with brush ..., involves singing, drumming, dancing and prayer” to Creator as well as giving thanks (Jenish, 1999, p. 27). Morgan (1999) writes the Sun Dance is four days and

a time of celebration and plenty. It starts with a tall tree being ritually cut and carried to where the ceremony will take place. There, the cut end is buried securely. That part that stands above ground is draped with cloth banners honoring the four directions ...Thus decorated, the tree is considered an umbilicus, connecting the tribe to the earth (p. 10).

Further Smith contends that “the Sun Dance marks a communal coming home” (p. 520). We see this in Tom's story about going to the Sun Dance and entering into a sacred community of dancers, into the sacred world in which he is transformed, and into the sacred circle of life. Tom's life is changed by the Sun Dance and by thanking the tree.

In editing this chapter Tom further explains his understandings of the Sun Dance: “My understanding of the Sun Dance is that we go there to sacrifice ourselves for the duration so

that other people may live” (McCallum, Apr. 5, 2010). He further explains his understandings of the Sun Dance tree.

The trees were made before us human beings and is closer to the Creator than we are so it has agreed to give up its life so we may continue to live. The trees were the first children of Mother earth and as such they are our grandfathers and they give up their lives for us. It goes through four stages and has 4 names till it reaches Creator -- 4 days after the end of the Sun Dance.

The cloth that we use to decorate the tree represents clothes. We are clothing the tree -- beyond the 4 directions it includes the whole universe-- and the colors are representative of the sacred vibrations each color vibrates at.

... In my Sun Dance we carve the tree on the north and south sides. On the north is the lightning representing the Thunder beings and on the south the buffalo. The connection that we have with the tree is to the Creator. The earth provides the nourishment for the tree and we feed the tree berries before we stand it up.

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. (McCallum, Apr. 5, 2010).

Tom’s telling helps us understand how he learns the full lesson of his life.

Hernandez-Avilla (2002) explains that 'language is story.' Through these stories, the past and the future come together in the present conscious situationality/relationality. ... 'stories are, in a sense, maps.' Maps to deep truth(s), maps that help us to know the lay of the land and of our bodies, of our points of origin/emergence, of our hearts and spirits, of the universe, of our minds, of the planet we call home, we call Earth. These story maps allow us movement between the past and the future: looking back, we look forward, looking forward, we look back, always conscious of how the present moment at once holds both past and future (p. xi).

In Tom’s story we see a mapping of his life, connecting of past, present and future in his own life and also in the lives of his family and the community members, all connected in ceremony and in life. As Hernandez-Avilla (2002) suggest “the stories are given back and forth, shared and cherished. They are sustained by humans, by relations in the natural world, by those in the spirit world, by the earth herself. The spirit(s) speak(s) in stories.” (p. xi). In Tom’s story he connected to the spirit world in the Sun Dance ceremony as he is shown his connection to all of creation again as he was when he saw the Sun Dance tree as a youth. In sharing this story, Tom “can (re)connect through the land, through memory, through spirit” (Hernandez-Avilla, p. xvii). As Wilson (1996) explains “my connection to land and place is solidified with each telling of the story” (p. 12) as is the case with Tom.

Tom shares the story of his daughter’s birth while he was at the Sun Dance at Kehewin – the place of eagles – and

also the name of a reserve in Northern Alberta. Thorton (1997) clarifies that

place names tell us something not only about the structure and content of the physical environment itself but also how people perceive, conceptualize, classify, and utilize that environment. ... The context of narratives, songs, and everyday speech, provide valuable insights into the ways humans experience the world and appropriate images of the landscape to interpret and communicate their experiences. ... Place names also convey a great deal of information about the social environment (p. 209).

In this case the name of the place where this child was born becomes the name of the child and reflects the cycle of life in which she becomes a part of the story and “the mutual influence of the earth and its inhabitants upon each other” (Thorton, p. 210) as “the ties between the people and the land are close” (p. 218).

Tom’s daughter’s identity is associated with the location of her birth and the story in which it unfolds. As Karr (2000) explains that Indigenous peoples “often see themselves, a part of the environment they inhabit, drawing a defining notion of who they are, an identity, from their surroundings” (p. 383). Jenish (1999) explains that all things we do have purpose and that children are often named in ceremonies such as the naming ceremony but in this case this was done at the Sun Dance.

In Tom’s story he falls through the ice and the water surrounds him. He is drawn into that water and when he emerges from it he sees that tree. In these early experiences he is already “making connection with mother earth and the spirits. ... The preparation is mental, social, and spiritual” (Tollefson & Abbott, 1993, p. 216) towards his eventual journey as a Sun

Dance lodge keeper. In this process “the land manifests soul: its own ... stories give identity to a place. ... That’s how you know you belong” (Cochran, 1995, p. 70). Within this connection “the spirit inspires imagination that creates a world of spirit, the land inspires stories that create an identity for the land” (p. 71). Tom’s identity is reflected in the stories in how much this has meant to him and his journey.

Switching Focus to Humorous Stories

Tom further explains about storytelling. “*Storytelling has so much in it, it’s not only something that is serious, but it’s very beautiful stories, very serious, or very romantic. There is also a lot of humor in it.*” Garrett, Garrett, Torres-Rivera, Wilbur, and Roberts-Wilbur (2005) explain that “stories, anecdotes, witty one-liners, these are all examples of an expression of the spirit of Native people in a tradition that is unique to every tribal nation but shares the same power across tribes” (p. 194). They further suggest that “stories and anecdotes are but one means of reinforcing and reminding in-group members of the cultural values and unspoken rules by which they live” (p. 198). They also suggest that “oral traditions emphasize the important life lessons through the subtle humor expressed in stories” (p. 196).

Tom’s Humorous Horse Story

I wanna share a short little story about people sitting around camp fires and drinking tea and just sharing stories, sharing laughter. ... Where I come from we have a lake and there are 4 rivers that empty into that lake and people live in different areas. ... The method of travel long time ago ... used horses ... so whenever they went hunting they would try and take a horse in the event that they would kill a moose. And ... a one horse sleigh. ... This was in spring time. ... It was a beautiful sunny day and the

guy was going hunting. ...The sun was beating down and the snow was starting to melt so it was easy goingTowards the evening it started to get cold and ... that snow that melted turned into ice. Very slippery. ... When the horse slipped the sleigh would slide, ... hit the back of the horse, and he would get scared so the horse would kick and he starting kicking that sleigh and the sleigh started to break into pieces ... by the time he got home there was nothing left of the sleigh just 2 runners and that's what he was ridding on all the way home.

And this other guy ... sitting there said "oh yeah I know that happened to me this one time ... but for me my horse is a little smarter... and he figured it out. ... There was a clump of ice here and a clump of snow there so he would go on the clump of snow there and he would ski to the next clump of snow and that's the way he got me home ... and so I got my sleigh home 'cause that horse is really smart." ...

So that's the kind of stories that there are too. It's just to make people laugh, whether it happened or not. ... It's like a cartoon almost. So, those lighten up the atmosphere. They used to have competitions like that, where they'd have a big can of tobacco, somebody would win that. Who could come up with the best story. And that's just the part of the people coming together and gathering and sharing after they haven't seen each other for a long time.

Vine Deloria explains that Indigenous people “are brought together by sharing humour of the past. They are retold over and over again wherever Indians gather” (p. 147, 152). Carabi (1994), in an interview with poet Joy Harjo quotes her words that “Indian people have one of the most developed senses of humor I’ve ever heard” (p. 46) that “in the middle of all the tension and destruction, there is a laughter of absolute sanity” (p. 47).

Stories have “a high tolerance for disorder, seeking out the unfamiliar, embracing physical existence” (Gross, 2009, p.

67). Tom's horse story deals with the harsh reality of physical existence in a humorous tone. In this story, Tom is also interested in the real connections between humans and animals. Vizenor (1995) explains that “animals are imagined in nature and literature, translated, and compared in memories, narratives, and cultural contexts” (p. 662). Through stories and understandings of animals we can sometimes “trace out presence in animals” (p. 662). Tom’s story relates horse behavior to human behavior, showing us how the horse is stumbling around just as human’s sometimes do. Humans sometimes cause destruction in the process as does the horse breaking the sleigh. This relationship of human stories to animal stories is repeated in Tom’s dancing dog story.

Tom's Dancing Dog story

I'll give an example of how storytelling connects the past to today, and how it may impact the future. ... So when the creator was making everything, everything had a gift, and it seemed like there was something, like in the story of Adam and Eve, there were forbidden to eat of that one tree. They couldn't eat that fruit. Well that's kind of like what happened. Take for instance dogs. Dogs were able to talk to people, all animals had the ability to talk to people. They still have that ability, it is us as people who do not have that ability to be able to listen to them anymore. It was mentioned here that listening... is very, very important. The art of listening, we seem to have lost that, or put it away somewhere.

So these dogs love to dance, oh they just loved dancing. But they were forbidden to dance. For some reason the creator said "no you can't dance", there's a reason why for that, but I'm not sure what it is. But they were forbidden to dance. But they loved to dance, and they wanted to dance, it was inside of them, they just couldn't get it out. ... But there were certain things in the physical body of these animals that the creator could hone in on and know

what they were doing, and it happened to be the rectum. ... So they had a council meeting, they wanted to have a dance, but how could they have a dance without the creator knowing? So they said, well we got to find some way of taking that rectum out, or whatever is in that rectum and putting it somewhere else, so that the creator won't know we're dancing. So they did. They devised a way. So they had this great big clearing where they all gathered, it only had one entrance, and they all gathered there and as they went in they took their rectum off and put it at the door. And they all gathered in there and they danced, and they danced, and they danced. All night they danced. They were so happy. And there was one dog standing on a hill watching for the creator to come. Early in the morning the creator was coming and hollered at the other dogs and they all ran out. And on their way out they grabbed a rectum and stuck it on there. But of course it wasn't theirs, because they were in such a hurry they didn't have time to look for their own. So they just grabbed one and stuck it on there. So today when you see two dogs meeting each other right away they go like that, they sniff each other, they're still looking for their rectum.

Tom speaks about *when the creator was making everything, everything had a gift, ...all animals had the gift to talk to people.* Andrews (1998) writes that Indigenous stories “frequently include animals that act as creators, messengers, protectors, guardians, and advisors. They were often thought to possess human qualities and had the ability to speak, think, and act like humans” (p. 197). Tom's story then subtly suggests the strict roles given by the Creator to dogs per say, and mentions about forgetting to listen. Tom's very humorous and elaborate story shows what happens when dogs go against the rules.

Taylor (1996) furthers this by stating how animal stories can relate to the human community. “It was a way of explaining human nature” (p. 29). How is this done in Tom's

Dancing Dog story? Gross (2007) writes that “humor 'gives reason to play' and humor 'sustains reflection” (p. 71). In Tom's story the dogs are playfully dancing and there is a reflection about their not following the rules. Stories allow one to “be able to see him or herself in a frank and open manner [and] to recognize the shortcomings of his or her character” (p. 72) in this case the shortcomings of the dogs following Creator's rules. Tom's story emphasizes physical and slapstick comedy with anal humor which is common in Indigenous storytelling (Gross, 2007, 2009). In Tom's story the dogs are in a rush to escape the creator so they pick up any anus whether it is theirs or not and attach it. This story explains the peculiar behavior of dogs sniffing each others behinds.

“There are stories about dogs... 'We're kind of tough on dogs.” (Gross, 2009). In fact, Garrett et al. (2005) have another version of Tom's story of why dogs sniff each other's behinds: “I nominate that dog for president who smells good underneath his tail” (p. 194) after the dogs cannot find an appropriate leader amongst the fast runners, good hunters, and other characteristics. Vizenor (1995) goes further in his ridicule of the dog, “and remember, dogs don't like ghosts or witches... For instance, has created a wild and comic scene of two dogs stuck together in a natural sexual dance” (p. 673). However, the relationship between humans and dogs also includes respect of learning from dogs in Tom's story. Vizenor states “Indians and dogs go together. ... It's an ancient, honorable alliance” (p. 663). Tom illustrated this idea in his story of how our behavior can be understood via the humorous behavior of the dogs. Here we see the influence of dogs and humans learning from each other and the strong relationship of dogs and humans in the humorous stories.

Conclusions

Tom explains that stories are real. We can understand them as true pedagogic spaces. In stories we create meaning. Through Tom's pedagogy he is teaching us to look at a story from many perspectives and find key elements of our own lives that give us purpose and meaning. Enriched by these pedagogic experiences we can create lives that are powerful and meaningful. In this process of hearing stories we are challenged to understand Indigenous knowledges not just as stories told by an Elder, but as stories in our own lives that help us reinterpret our own lives and the meanings we make within them, as is the case with Tom's story of ceremony.

Ceremony is a pedagogical location in which Tom learns lessons about the importance of family, community, and the cycle of life. Through vision and spiritual awareness Tom understands himself, his role in life as a Sun Dance lodge keeper, and his place in community and the cycle of life. When Tom shares these stories with listeners he takes us on his and our own journey to help us imagine and understand the connections he is making while we make new connections within our lives.

Nature is also a teacher in Tom's stories. The landscape helps us understand the connections to place. The tree is a main character that foreshadows Tom's future role in life. It is also the way that Tom connects to the spirit world through the Sun Dance ceremony and here the tree affirms its' and Tom's spiritual power. We are challenged to consider our own spiritual journeys and the process of developing our own spiritual power.

In the emergence of Tom's story from an incident as a youth to a full realization of its meanings as an adult, we see the pedagogical growth and development of understanding through the process of life and storytelling. The journey of

learning is a process of "reweaving rather than in simply receiving" (Smith, 1998, p. 532). Tom's story becomes woven into the fabric of the family and community through his telling of it. This is part of the pedagogic power that storytelling has in communities when stories are told and retold.

In the act of remembering, reading, and hearing ceremonial stories we create personal connections to the natural and spiritual worlds. Tom's stories create imaginative landscapes in which we can understand our own stories. The stories have the potential to create "emotional, symbolic, historic, spiritual and cultural significance for a whole group" (McAvoy, 2002, p. 390). Tom's stories of the Sun Dance ceremony also explain the sacred rite of transformation. The sacred community of dancers and sacred circle of life are central to Tom's transformation and in learning the lessons of life that enable him to take up his role as a Sun Dance lodge keeper. Tom is connecting past and future as he tells the story in the present connecting through land, memory, and spirit, using the story to affirm his place in the cycle of life, ceremony and community. He reaffirms his place each time he tells the story. As listeners to these connections, we are challenged to understand, accept, acknowledge, and honor the connections that Tom is making in his story. We are called upon through this pedagogic practice to understand ourselves in new connections.

Spirit inspires connecting landscape to Tom's own life journey and finding meaning in the connections, like the Sun Dance tree and how it plays a major role in Tom's life. It inspires us to consider the role of stories in understanding identity, life journeys, and in creating and making meaning within pedagogical moments created in stories.

Humorous stories inspire connecting to community and reaffirming relationships and connections. They suggest ways

to find humor in the harshness of the physical reality of life. Hunting can be a very challenging undertaking but there is humor in the telling of this hunting story. The stories also show us the parallels between animal behavior and human behavior, learning about resilience in the horse story, learning to laugh at the struggles, and learning that we are also fallible. In the dog story we learn about the consequences of not following the natural order and disobeying Creator with humorous consequences in the story. Both stories are a reflection through animals of our own behavior. Humor sustains reflection and allows us to be frank about our own shortcomings (Taylor, 1996). While storytellers make fun of animals they also honor them (Vizenor, 1995). They help us learn to honor the alliances and interrelationships between human beings and animals and the many lessons to learn from these interrelationships which is a valuable pedagogic practice in which to engage students and listeners.

Tom's personal and historical stories help us understand that youthful accidents can lead to understanding one's responsibilities as community storyteller and Elder. They suggest that the many stories inherent in our own lives may take on greater meanings as their lessons become evident later in life. These are powerful pedagogical moments.

Tom's stories educate communities and aid listeners in understanding, in a personal way, one's place on the land, and in the community, culture, and spiritual world. This is powerful teaching that needs to be shared in broader educational circles. His pedagogy emphasizes that listeners have responsibility to be active participants in the story, to interpret meanings, and make connections to their own lives. This is important in the development and understandings of children and youth. Through this type of pedagogy, listeners are encouraged to develop a 360 degree viewpoint that allows them to see any

problem from multiple perspectives and to consider multiple solutions to problems so that they are better prepared to encounter, learn from, and deal with problems in life.

Indigenous pedagogy encourages a broader understanding of identity in relation to the cycle of life, the natural world, the community, and the Nation. This kind of community education enriches the lives of community members, including children, youth, and adults. It creates a sense of interconnectedness and engagement within the spiritual and communal lives in Indigenous culture.

As educators, we are challenged to consider Indigenous pedagogies and their power in aiding students/listeners in challenging their own assumptions and narrow viewpoints. We are challenged to reconsider Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies in our classrooms, our homes, our communities, our workplaces and our cultural settings and ways these can inform educational practices and decision making. Students/listeners must understand that Indigenous pedagogies disrupt our taken-for-granted assumptions about what education is and should be. They challenge us to consider how we live storied lives and how the stories we tell and believe partially dictate the decisions we make and the way we live our lives. By telling/living/believing new stories we broaden our understandings and find new ways to make our lives meaningful and can find new meanings in the lives we live.

As educators we are also challenged to consider pedagogic practices that go beyond telling stories to explain facts but rather as a practice to expand one's ability to think about, understand, consider, reconsider, and challenge the very ideas we assume we know. Storytelling, while often assumed to be a process one uses with young children, is a powerful form of teaching that gives us knowledge and skills that can put us in

a powerful and thoughtful place for our entire lives. It is a practice that we benefit from as children, grow deeper understandings of as we grow, and if we remain open to storytelling, it remains a practice in which we can learn for a lifetime. This would appear to be a wonderful and powerful undertaking and a worthy pedagogic practice from which all educators could learn lessons and in which all communities could develop understandings. Perhaps the greatest task for education in today's practices is the development of the next generation of storytellers who can practice the skills, develop the knowledge, encounter and become the 360 degree perspective, and master the ability to understand the complexity of life. In these stories we are challenged to reach inside ourselves to find our own interpretations and meanings in the stories and to connect these to our lives in multiple ways with each new telling.

Storytelling is a powerful practice even if it appears simplistic from the outside. The most powerful stories take a great understanding and a complex mindfulness to comprehend. These most complex and powerful stories cannot be reproduced here as the reader/listener to stories must develop the ability to comprehend and understand the stories. These stories and lessons have been left for another telling by a powerful storyteller when the listener has reached the developmental stage to understand them. Until then we can learn a great deal from initial stories that help us develop the skills and knowledge to get us ready to hear more complex stories.

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