One Foot on the Dock and One Foot in the Canoe: Reflexive Self-inquiry in Applying a Transformative Subsistence Orientation in Ontario Fire Service Education

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Abstract
This is a reflexive journey into the paradoxical experience of working as a subsistence-oriented feminist academic, on the professionalization process of the Ontario fire service.

A wobbly way of life, this balancing act has become: the seeming paradox of working within what has been called the last bastion of the white male dominant workplace, the fire service, while maintaining a life-affirming subsistence orientation, grounded in principles of equity and transformative practice. It feels like I am straddling two continuously moving forces; as if one foot is on the dock and the other in a canoe.

Reflexive Self-Inquiry
This is a reflexive journey into the experience of two worlds. In one world, I build on research that promotes subsistence learning (Barg, 2001). In keeping with Hart (1992), I identified motherwork as a site of subsistence-oriented learning, grounded in life-promoting practice. Building on the work of transformative adult educators such as O’Sullivan (1996), I share the belief that collectively, we must change the course we are on, not only for a kinder, more peaceful world, but for planetary survival! Hall (1996) suggests that while adult educators have a significant role to play in this quest and must maintain hope, sometimes this task seems impossible!

But program planning for fire service education? Surely bridging these worlds is also impossible! This paper provides a glimpse of the perils and joys of this struggle-filled journey.

A View from the Village
According to Cole and Knowles (2000), autobiographical inquiry is “a process embedded in an examination of past experiences within the context of current and future actions” (p. 14). As I reflected on my struggle to survive and thrive in my two worlds, I discovered that my paradoxical journey originated in the village of my birth, Reinland, Manitoba. In our relatively isolated and devout Mennonite village, we lived by a Biblical mantra, which we believed required us to ‘be in this world but not of this world’. We interpreted this to mean that as a people, we were to refrain from practices of dominant culture such as participation in war and consumerism. (Of much greater significance to young girls like me, this impacted exciting worldly practices such as mini skirts and lipstick!)

Yet, in order to take political stands such as pacifism in relation to significant world wars, our people were exceptionally astute. With many organic intellectuals among our elders, we studied the world around us, and keenly observed the politics of public
policy and the practices of dominant culture. At the same time, we practiced a way of life that embodied an internal integrity that I only began to appreciate long after I left. Yet in that village, I learned to observe the world around me with unusual clarity while practicing and promoting a way of life that was grounded in a principle of life-affirming subsistence-orientated practice.

**Straddling my Current Worlds**

Now, as a feminist adult educator, working to raise the level of professionization of the Ontario fire service, I have planted myself firmly in the midst of the structures of power within a branch of the Ontario government, at a location where I can influence those in positions of authority. It is a journey of consciousness-raising, because, as Walters (1996) has indicated, I recognize that “people are shaped by their own experiences of class, color, gender and imperialism” (p. 309). I use this knowledge to meet my workplace colleagues at their own location and yet demand tolerance, equity, collaboration and mutual respect to push the boundaries and broaden perspectives.

Miles (1996) has said (of groups who are marginalized), “when people are engaged in a collective struggle to define themselves they also decide what and why they need to learn” (p. 278). My workplace colleagues are also struggling to redefine themselves. In the midst of that struggle, I look for crevices, small spaces I can fill, by facilitating a process where they can decide what and why they need to learn, yet press on toward more equitable and tolerant ways. In that field location, where dominant culture values have a stronghold, I contribute to a more equitable world by provoking (albeit one lonely step at a time) glimpses of transformative, subsistence-oriented change.

This is my perilous journey; one that wobbles continuously, struggling against the elements, drifting back and forth, seemingly never finding solid ground. However, it is an imperative journey, because only when transformative societal changes are made simultaneously in locations of power as well as where oppression is prominent, will we change collective course we are on.

**References**


