The Experience of Story Telling: Being Told Stories & Telling My Own

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Abstract: Cross-cultural, cross-generational, anecdotal experiences of a Caucasian, third generation Canadian female developing ‘communicative competence’ within an informal learning environment of a small First Nations reserve in British Columbia. Who is the learner? Developing active citizenship in a rural setting via a respectful lifeworld exchange.

As I sat this morning in meditation posture attempting to gather my thoughts and to waken my intuition in order to prepare my story, three ideas planted themselves in my consciousness: some things are meant to be; life is like a jumble sale; and “your spirit can precede you” (Williams, 1993). Each of these ruminations apply to the following slice of my journey during the years from 1980 to 1993.

The Dream:

One night sometime in 1985 I awoke from a vivid experience which I remember to this day. (It did not resound with me until some time later, perhaps two or three years in fact.) The dream was about me standing with an elderly man with long, lank, grey hair, on a wooden sidewalk, beside a dirt road. There were dusty children all around. The old man’s eyes were very clear and sparkling. We sat down on the wooden sidewalk, and he spoke to me about his children. I called him Grandfather Joe in my dream, because somehow I knew that was his name. He smiled and looked gently out at the unconcerned youngsters playing in the road. He looked at me with his kindly eyes and spoke to me. He asked me to look after his children. He explained a few things which I did not grasp nor remember. He asked me again to help his children. They were playing and did not appear to need help. I questioned him about this strange request. He quietly smiled with his eyes. I woke up. I remembered the dream for the next few days, and had a sense of pleasant peace about me. I forgot the dream for a long time.

The Beginning:

My husband, Brian, and I, having both been old hippies, and creating a life with each other in the early 1980's, determined to ‘go back to the land’ in order to raise our son, in a wholesome, healthy environment, away from the ‘me generation’ which was markedly rising out of the ashes of the disco era. All was dependent upon Brian’s ability to find relocation via his employer, B.C. Tel. After much searching we discovered a 115 acre ranch nestled in a mountainous valley forty-five minutes drive north and east of Pemberton, near the idyllically named community of Devine. In order to reach this property, one must follow Highway 99 from North Vancouver, past Squamish and Whistler. When you arrive at Pemberton, you head towards Lillooet, but continue driving right through the Mount Currie (Lil’Wat) Indian reserve. The first time I drove through the reserve land, I burst into tears. I was not ready for the state of poverty, and dilapidated housing which met my eyes (Joseph, Jean, Brooks, 1991). With two female partners, (who never
really settled in the place, and who years later eventually sold their half of the land to a multinational conglomerate), we bought the property and moved into a six hundred square foot cabin with a gravity fed water system, heated with a wood stove, and shared with wild life (pack rats). We discovered over the years, that we were situated on traditional native territory when we found an arrowhead in our broccoli garden, and a spearhead under our lilac trees.

Brian became the telephone man for the Pemberton district (640 square miles) and I became a rancher. We were unique in the tiny white community of loggers, hunters, farmers and heavy equipment operators, because we are vegetarian and because Brian had a steady job. This set us apart, and we found that the romantic ideal of barn raising and quilting parties never materialized for us. As we raised our son, and refurbished buildings on the property, I felt a need for more creativity and employment-based purpose in my life. In addition, over the years, I fought many personal environmental battles over toxic spray programs directed at our land and the regional district. Pitted against Forestry, Highways, and B.C. Rail, I began to meet other community members who brought me into contact with several of the local First Nations bands. We were fighting the same battles in some instances, and this experience led to my meeting people from the Samahquam Band south of Lillooet Lake, and the Lytton Band over the Cayoose Mountain range. I had already been interacting with members of our local Anderson Lake (N’Quatqua) Band whose reserve lands are intersected by the main road. For locals to access mail (which is delivered by the daily Bud car of B.C. Rail) and the only ‘corner’ grocery store available within a forty-five minute drive, we had to drive through the center of the reserve (McIntosh, 1989).

By 1985, after several adventurous attempts to make money for myself, and our farm, from selling eggs, flagging for the highways department, and having a roadside stall, I phoned the Squamish office of Social Services which regulated our area. I wanted to inquire about the possibility of using some of my previous employment skills which had been as a Courtworker for the John Howard Society in Vancouver, a Family Support Worker for the Ministry of the Attorney General in Delta, and as a Child and Youth Worker for a non-profit society in Burnaby. Not long after that phone call, I was offered a short term, eight hour per week contract to work with a 12 year old native boy living at home in our local Anderson Lake Band. At approximately the same time, due to my environmental battles, I was asked to sit on the Board of Directors for the Stein Rediscovery Program that was underway with the Lytton Band and the Mount Currie Band in the Stein Valley. This program’s mandate was to integrate both native and non-native children from rural and urban areas by having ten-day hiking and camping experiences within the shared traditional territories of these two First Nations.

The Middle (and the Best):
I carried on with the Stein Rediscovery program over three year or four years, and proudly spoke at the first Stein gathering (at the top of the mountain) by the headwaters of the Stein River in the rain, about the environmental fight for resource protection from the provincial government’s mandates and five year plans. Over the next few years I sat on the Board and attended the following three years of Stein gatherings - one in Lytton when Ruby Dunstan was Chief, one at the mouth of the Stein River where it joins the Fraser, and one in Mount Currie when the headliners were actor Martin Sheen and singer Ian Tyson (and the Board Members had
to pay to get in according to the Mount Currie Band Council).

My work with the young man from the Anderson Lake Band was challenging, fun, and somewhat successful for both of us. My contract was extended, and I also became his home school tutor at one point when he was suspended from grade seven for sexual harassment, for snapping a girl’s bra strap. I developed a tentative relationship with his mother, younger brother, and father (who had suffered brain damage from a logging accident). Both his parents were recovering alcoholics, and in small bits, I was able to piece together some of the early trauma which he and his younger brother had lived through. This was the beginning of my learnings about native culture, devastation, assimilation, abuse, and poverty issues.

In November of that year, while I was dropping my son off at the one-room schoolhouse halfway between our farm and band lands, I sat on the school steps in conversation with the teacher and the band education coordinator. We spoke about the work I was doing with the young fellow from the reserve, and the positive response the Band had received (unbeknownst to me) from the nearest native social worker in the Tribal Council (in Lillooet). The band school coordinator mentioned that the Anderson Lake Band Council were considering taking over their own social services program and were speculating on how to achieve this and who could handle it. Even though they could not identify a band member who would be able to fill the position, this was a program the Chief and Council wanted developed because it was difficult for most of the band members to get to Lillooet for their welfare checks, for drug and alcohol counseling, and because of the lack of local services to Anderson Lake. He said that they might be looking for someone off reserve if necessary. The trip to Lillooet was arduous, usually undertaken by a daylong train journey, or sometimes by a two-hour tortuous car ride over the back-country Duffy Lake road, which was unpaved, and often closed due to rock or snow slides. I cautiously mentioned that I would be extremely interested in the position if they should decide that a non-native would be considered, and left it at that. Three months later, in February of 1986 I received a phone call out of the blue, from the Chief of the Anderson Lake Band asking me if I would be interested in creating a social development program for the reserve. Absolutely!! I was asked to come down to the Band Office and meet with the Chief and Band Manager to discuss the prospect. I had no idea of the immediate nature of their request, and was surprised when they handed me two large policy binders from the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA as it was called at that time) and asked me to go home and read them. I was to begin March 1st, 1986 during the last month of the ‘85-‘86 fiscal budget, so that by April 1st everything would be in place to start up the new program. This truly was the beginning of a whole new way of life for me, and looking back in time, I can see that my whole paradigm of existence was about to explode with new information, new cultural awareness, new friends, and new purpose.

The creation of the social development program for the N’Quatqua Band went very smoothly. The Chief and the Band Manager accepted me without hesitation and postulated that I was capable of the demands. I lived up to their expectations, and spent many extra hours creating a program of accountability and responsiveness. (I was employed half-time.) I listened to stories, I asked questions, and watched carefully (Absolon, 1991). I admit that I was slightly intimidated and also naive enough to not comprehend the magnitude of responsibility that I had shoulders.

This Chief - my Chief - had been elected by the Band, even though he was the son of a man who held the title of Hereditary Chief. His father, the Hereditary Chief, would come into the
Band Office several times a week for an excuse to get out of the house, and stretch his aging bones. He appeared very old, but was probably only in his 70's at that time. His wife was suffering from some form of dementia, and he liked to come and sit in the Band Office to watch life and to tell stories. My Chief, too, was a story teller, and I learned many aspects of the Band’s history and politics by hearing these stories during coffee breaks from our regular work. I learned how the Band came to be where it is. The land was never a permanent settlement. It was a gathering place, a sacred place for the neighbouring Nations, until one day the Indian Agent declared it to be a reserve, and the people who happened to be there at the time, now had to live there. This relates to why the three main family lineages on reserve, do not always see eye to eye. They have come from different places, and see things in their own way. I learned how some of the people got their names. These were based on the white man’s need to register people and send people to their own reserve, or off reserve. One woman had children by a French trader, and hid in the bush near another community called Bridge River. She came to this area when she could sneak away to be with her family, when the Indian Agent was not present. The white Agent returned. He could not tell who had been there before, so she stayed, and he gave her the name of the French man that he thought had fathered her children. I learned that N’Quatqua means the place of the rocks, because of two large rocks down by the lake. I learned that the animal totem for N’Quatqua is the bear, and I thought back to the fact that I have in my possession a set of Grizzly claws which I had discovered in our house in Vancouver, when we had purchased it from an elderly gentleman. I learned how the town of Mission got its name. The Anderson Lake Band had presented the local missionaries with over 100 acres of land on which to build a school. The missionaries/priests had taken the land, sold it to the railway, and built their school down in the lower mainland near the Fraser River, in a community which they then named Mission. Once again the inherent trust in the Catholic church was abused. The Band is presently negotiating to have that land reinstated, as a result of this breach of trust.

Another elder, would, over several years, also tell me stories when I went to visit him. He was suffering terribly from rheumatism and diabetes and had trouble walking. All too rarely, I would stop by his house to sit and talk. It was difficult for me to understand him because English was his second language and he was not fully articulate in it. There was no way that I could speak the language of the Interior Salish which was the mother tongue of these people I was living with. He told me about the language of “Chinook”. This is a trading language developed by the Natives, the white traders, and the missionaries. It was a combination of English, French, pidgin English, and various Native dialects.

A female elder, whom I had met several years before, because I had given her rides to the train, or home from the store, when I saw her trudging along the dirt road, loaded with a knapsack, gave me her blessing when I took my position as social worker. She had taught me about dried salmon. She pressed some into my hands on several occasions, and told me not many “Shama” (white people) liked their wind-and-smoke dried salmon. I loved it and we became good friends. (Band members would laugh at me during gatherings when I would eat their “Tsuan” - a fishy soup made from the dried/smoked salmon strips.) It was she who first told me of the horrors of residential school - of attending for only three years when she was about 9, 10, and 11. She told me how they punished her for speaking the only language that she knew - her own. When she didn’t speak English they gave her only bread and water. She had to stand facing the
wall in her slip for days on end. She was cold, she was lonely, and there was no one to help her. She ran away at age 12. She was in her 60's when she told me these events, and I had not begun working with the band yet. I was aghast and horrified. When my own father came to visit, we picked her up on the road with her knapsack, and drove her to the train station. She was taking dried salmon to Lillooet relatives, and she gave some to my father, who also liked it very much. As we drove home alone, I told him her stories. He too could not believe such things happened in Canada but thankfully, did not dispute the truth of them, nor question her sanity.

After several months I was told by one shy young mother, that I had not yet visited the elders. At first I did not understand. But she explained to me that I had not gone to spend time with her grandmother. I realized that not only was I in breach of protocol, but that I may have looked like I was disparaging their family. I had not really thought about visiting because I had not been invited, and when I did consider it, my fear was one of possible rejection as an outsider. I made a house call to the young woman’s grandmother who was the matriarch of that family. I did not know what to expect and the visit felt very formal for my ‘white’ view of the location - being out in the country. Looking back now, I may have tried to buy my way into favour. She was in her 60's and was sweeping the floor as she had done all her life. Her arthritis hurt and she also looked after an adult son (the father of the young mother) who was confined to a wheelchair. We had some small talk. It was somewhat stilted. I came up with the idea of obtaining a vacuum cleaner for her in my role as social worker, and I left on that note. I never really felt that I had been accepted by this woman. I did not know how to prove myself to her.

As I tell my story, I realize that all these people - the Band administrator, the Hereditary Chief, his wife, my Tsuan provider, my ‘Chinook’ storyteller, and my vacuum cleaner recipient - all of them, are now gone. It hurts to think that I have not honoured them with words until now. They are part me, part of who I am. I have them to thank for how I now see the world.

New housing was being offered by DIA for the first time in years. Five families had been chosen, (before I became involved), to select an architectural design from several offered, and to choose everything from paint colours, to flooring, to cabinetry, to appliances. In a small band of about one hundred and fifty people, those houses were a very big deal. Many of the local ‘white’ families were jealous, and it was not until I realized very clearly how desperately this housing was needed that I myself did not have a pang of envy. That first month of work I found that more than one family had three generations, up to 17 people living under one roof, with worn linoleum flooring, unsafe wood stoves, and outhouses. Over the years more housing sprang up, and some families were able to return home in part due to Bill C-31. This bill attempted to redress Native women who had lost their Native status by marrying white men. The extra funds under that Bill were spent exclusively on those newly returned members while I was their social worker. A visiting ‘dignitary’ from the housing department of DIA took me aside during an inspection and asked for a report on the difference the new housing was making for families. I made an off-the-cuff remark, with a tinge of irony, because of my workload, that perhaps he was referring to something akin to a Master’s thesis. He took me seriously and the request was dropped.

Some of the most memorable impressions of working, living, and learning on reserve are:

- Being accepted by the Lillooet Tribal Council, as the only non-native social worker within the eleven bands, and having my place be sanctioned due to respect to ‘my’ Chief.
- The giddy excitement of the Band females when Evan Adams, the native actor, came to put
on a play about alcohol and sexuality, and getting our pictures taken with him.

- The pow wows and gatherings that began with the desire of one young teenaged girl who went after the Indian Princess title (much as I was against beauty pageants); how we managed to squeeze out some development money to purchase a three-foot diameter drum; the upsurge of pride in dancing, and creating regalia for the youth of the band.
- The funerals for those who passed on, the drum beat, the three day watches around the fire, the coffin in the living room, the community procession, the lowering of the caskets, my fighting with funeral homes over inflated costs and refusing to pay the bill until the price came down.
- The trauma of nine suicide attempts in one year with two of them being ‘successful’.
- The lack of employment and the creation of several development corporations.
- Local oppression of white employers/settlers viewing all natives the same (Adams, 1975)
- The sweat lodge, when the one fellow who kept his traditional spiritual ways, invited myself and the Australian health nurse, as the first women and the first non-natives into his sweat.
- Being helicoptered into the traditional territory along with the Chief and 8 teenagers, to hike the mountains and peaks to let them see where their ancestors proudly stood, and the danger of an electrical storm in the helicopter on our return to the Band several days later.
- The women’s group which resulted in healing and strengthening the women to the point of frightening the men with their clarity and presence. Arranging for them to attend the Justice Institute’s course entitled Native Women and Healing - the only Band to attend. I hang the picture of that experience on the wall of every office I have had since that time.
- The trigger of realization in 1987 that a person I was working with had the same name as the man in my dream from years before.
- The Easter egg hunt that I planned for all the children, when I hid the eggs and no one showed up. They had not called me in the middle of the night to “clean up the blood” when a party got out of control and someone blew his brains out. They said they wanted to spare me, and have recently repeated this reason, but at that time I didn’t know if they did not call because I was not really one of the Band.
- My return after many years to my friend’s funeral, October, 1999 - the first traditional native styled funeral to be held within the Tribal Council. They allowed me to hold the eagle feather, and to speak about the sharing and caring which they taught me, and which I hopefully carry back into my own white world’s culture. The second Chief whom I served under, took me aside and gave me great praise and credit for being “the kind of social worker that we need, who gets involved with the community, and who is there for the people when they need help.” This was a great weight off my heart which I had carried for 10 years fearing I had not measured up.

The End (perhaps):

My ‘tour of duty’ ended abruptly during the summer of the fifth fiscal budget with which I was involved. The sudden climax to this part of my life was gut-wrenching and it has taken this long to place perspective around it. But just as I mentioned at the beginning of this story, some things are meant to be - both beginnings and endings. The ‘jumble sale’ of visions of events and individual faces which have flashed before my eyes as I have written this paper has renewed my
faith and overwhelmed me with gratitude. My spirit did precede me with this story, with my
dream experience, and after this story it preceded me again so that I was able to move on both
eemotionally and physically, but for the better from these experiences.

I thought when I was about to write this paper, that I would have to dwell upon the
domestic violence that I encountered, the deaths due to alcohol, the educational lapses, the
confused parenting over the lack of role models and abuse associated with residential schools, or
the sad departure of my own place under a third Chief who had other focuses for his future. This
has not been the case, and the paper has written itself. It has been a story worth telling, of a
wonderful community sitting precariously between the Interior Salish (most bands of the Lilooet
Tribal Council), and the Coast Salish of which Mount Currie belongs, although part of the
Lilooet Tribal Council. (The land just past our ranch has a large footprint with 6 toes in a rock,
which demarcates the Coast and Interior Salish territories.) I have recently heard that the present
Chief has pulled out of treaty and land use negotiations, based on a referendum, until clarity is
achieved. The voice of the people is being listened to. This community allowed me to have a
wonderful home, and I thank them for that. If I am permitted to borrow a phrase, “all my
relations.”