

# Métis Wisdom: Learning and Teaching Across the Cultures

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For two hundred years the Métis were:

...not merely biracial, multilingual and bicultural, but the proud owners of a new language; of a syncretic cosmology and religious repertoire; of distinctive modes of dress, cuisine, architecture, vehicles of transport, music and dance; and after 1815 of a quasi-military political organization, a flag, a bardic tradition, a rich folklore and a national history... (Peterson 1985)

My parents' memories, the details of their parents' lives, and their parents and beyond, these memories are now my very own. Long deceased uncles and aunts with Red River Métis nicknames like "Kiton," "Taptine," "Betsie L'Assinaboine" and "Dodo" still live on through me. Even though I have lived a good part of my life in southern Ontario, very far from the Prairies, Métis culture is central to the many ways in which I recognize myself.

My family loved storytelling. Uncle Joe loved to tell about shape-changers and spirit-beings and their mysterious "doings" on the CNR trains which he worked on all his life. There was always humour, especially in stories about great-grandfather, a "coureur de bois" with a well-trained horse who always got him back home, whether grandfather was conscious or not. I recall many stories of anguish and anger over loss of land and the poverty of displacement the Métis people suffered. Down generations we remembered the pale and shaken uncle André, home from Stoney Mountain prison after having served nearly two years for playing a part in Louis Riel's vision.

The Dominion of Canada's suppression of

the Métis publicly silenced our voices. At home, shame lowered our voices, as though it was still dangerous, all these years later, to openly show resistance. Telling our stories was survival. My mother raised her children to resent and fear "les anglais," government, authority and the Church. Today I understand more clearly her furious resistance against anything she understood as domination. Her struggle has been synthesized in my life as a persistent urge for freedom.

I have tried to preserve some of the elements of Métis identity, although I hold no romantic vision of "the way" (Bear 1994). As a parent, a student, and especially as I was about to teach my very first class, I asked for direction and strength from the Grandmothers and Grandfathers, through clouds of calming sweetgrass smoke or smudge. Often I offer an honouring gift of tobacco to the Earth, to the tree-beings, or to fish or partridge we take when hunting. This is my parents' way of respecting Aboriginal knowledge, which sees spirit in all material existence.

In my forties, my son was grown and my divorce was visible on the horizon. Like many other women, I made a plan to escape to the university, and freedom, hey, hey! I had always lived with the inner tension of negotiating at least two worlds and the university offered the same tension, only more so! As an undergraduate, I saw that my professors often claimed unbiased, neutral, universally useful knowledge. It seemed as though they were answerable only to the standards of their individual disciplines. My Métis consciousness noted, resisted and struggled over the frequent clashes between our widely disparate viewpoints. In my Canadian Literature class (in 1993) Emily Carr's novel *Klee Wyck* was offered as a nod in the direction of

Native issues. My heart would beat faster and my voice would become very small if I attempted to challenge some of the racist and imperialist views offered in class. Often silence was easier. I was a long distance away from expecting respect and being able to communicate naturally about my Métis values. Eventually, I learned to speak like a middle-class educated academic, but my writing, my thought processes, still reflect the deep ambivalence that living in two (often incompatible) cultural frameworks can produce. There are always two voices speaking, one which uses words like "incommensurable" with some facility, and another which says, "Hey, hey little sister, where you goin' with all that fancy talkin'?" My grandparents knew the subtle art of communicating through cultural complexity. I'm a slow learner.

My first semester in Graduate School was a paralytic blur of tears, anxiety fits and self-searching. It seemed a most unlikely place for me to re-connect with the wisdom of my elders, but that is what eventually happened. I have returned full circle to an appreciation for the syncretic cosmology of the Métis mind. I like to think that the Grandmothers sent me to just the right teachers. True, these were not Métis women (there are no Aboriginal women in that place, yet) but they taught me useful ways to think about language through de Saussure and Althusser, about power through Foucault's ideas, about Derrida's deconstruction of the webs of discursive and non-discursive practices and about feminist/culturalist notions of gender, age, class, and race. My teachers are strong women who do difficult intellectual work and who possess a warrior spirit I recognize as my own.

In Graduate School I felt intimidated and silenced when my inner world was challenged by the material I was learning. I noticed particularly in a seminar setting that there were tacit rules of communication (such as, we must now speak academese) which ruled out certain areas of concern or ways of speaking. In my final year all students were to present our "work in progress" to the university community. For days before my presentation, I burned a lot of sweetgrass and bugged the Grandfathers for advice. They told me "let the Grandmothers speak in that place there,

granddaughter." They said that I should "interrupt academic norms by writing inside of another logic, a logic that displaces expectations of linearity, clear authorial voice, and closure" (Lather 1989), or words to that effect. I mean to say that I risked exclusion by not following the rules. Before I presented my work, which timidly contested western critical approaches to evaluating Native writing, I told the following personal story:

Since we are all going to tell each other stories anyhow, I've decided to begin my presentation with a personal story. When I was a little girl, Grandmother made extra money by going into the bush beside our farm with a sack and a trowel to dig up tiny, bluish-green plants. Grandmother sold these plants to drug companies in Minnesota. I asked her one day if I could go with her, and when I saw her getting out her sack, I put on my boots and jacket and followed her to the bush. As I caught up to her, Grandmother turned to me. "You, there," she said. "Step very carefully, and when you get tired, don't whine." I have rarely followed Grandmother's advice. I have made many false steps and done a lot of whining - hey, hey it's true!

Some listeners told me later how they enjoyed being told a story, that my quiet voice almost put them to sleep. Even so, I knew that I had gained something precious - the confidence to draw on the wisdom of my elders, and to begin to express in an academic setting Métis knowledge about the "ineradicable plurality of the world" (Bauman 1992). I am aware that in some university settings, receptiveness to many voices and the representation of the concerns of "others" is perceived by marginalized peoples as being merely tolerated in an "open forum" which is not actually open at all. There is little point in saying we "ought to" value diversity and to respect the identities and worldviews of others, if these values are not modelled with clarity in learning situations.

Currently, I am teaching part-time and thinking full-time about difference and similarity -

how I am like you and not like you - and about communicating in diversity. Within the Indigenous Studies Programme, cultural nationalisms and identity politics are seen by some as essential to the struggle to maintain the small space we have gained within a large university. Non-Native students make up the majority in the classes I teach. Many textbooks about Native issues are written by non-Native academics, who often seem to me to be engaged in a discussion with their peers, divorced from the lived realities of those they write about. My Métis mind sees the need for balance in these works. Rather than dismiss all non-Native perspectives as coercive, Native teachers and scholars can choose texts in which the authors situate themselves and their disciplines, and show an ability to work with the Native communities they write about, when defining and deciding.

One such useful text is non-Native writer Kit Minor's *Issumatuq: Learning From the Traditional Healing Wisdom of the Canadian Inuit* (1994). She develops a culture-specific design for helping and education which begins with the recognition that the "experts" in this instance are the Inuit people. A cultural visitor may become a facilitator if requested to do so by the group. Minor's work valorizes Inuit knowledges. She has a reciprocal relationship with the people she writes about and she brings her facilitating skills to the Inuit people with great respect and understanding for issues of difference-similarity. Minor's text demonstrates a "connected form of knowing" (Belenky et al, 1986) which places a relationship of trust, openness, and respectfulness ahead of purely intellectual interests. Her book will be useful to me. I can "dialogue" with this woman.

Is it possible to truly communicate with one another across academic and cultural gulfs? I think it depends on what we expect. It is helpful to me to organize my thoughts around what Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice call "the spectrum of dialogical exchange" (Burbules and Rice 1991). This spectrum shows that all dialogue is not agreement, that dialogue "can take the form of maintaining difference, not trying to eliminate it." The spectrum looks like this:

a. agreement and consensus; identifying beliefs or

values all parties can agree to;

b. not agreement, but a common understanding in which the parties do not agree, but establish common meanings in which to discuss their differences;

c. not a common understanding, but an understanding of differences in which the parties do not entirely bridge these differences, but through analogies of experience or other indirect translations can understand, at least in part, each other's position;

d. little understanding, but a respect across differences, in which the parties do not fully understand one another, but by each seeing that the other has a thoughtful, conscientious position, they can come to appreciate and respect even positions they disagree with;

e. irreconcilable and incommensurable difference.

As an Aboriginal woman, teaching in a university, I have no choice but to attempt to understand those who have profited from our deprivation and to reach out to those who are willing and able to talk across our sometimes incommensurable differences. One way to do this is to play the "believing game" (Elbow 1986). I can choose to believe that I can learn from what another has to say, thinking about openness and trust, and withholding judgement. My elders got so wise by listening, turning things over in their minds, looking for strong teachings from the natural world, as well as from human cultures. I'm not suggesting naïveté. I know that Aboriginal knowledges continue to be appropriated, or distorted and used (in some instances unwittingly) in ways which perpetuate domination. Trust doesn't come easily.

Within the university and elsewhere, there are those who adopt an adversarial approach when trying to communicate. Eager to demonstrate intelligence and knowledge, they pounce on another's ideas and subject them to aggressive questioning. For many people, Native and non-Native, this approach almost certainly guarantees silence and frustration. In all my relations, but

especially when I am an instructor, I try to imagine myself practising connected forms of knowing along with the critical awareness that:

If you can talk to me in ways that show you understand that your knowledge of me, the world, and the "Right thing to do" will always be partial, interested, and potentially oppressive to others, and if I can do the same, then we can work together on shaping and reshaping alliances for constructing circumstances in which students of difference can thrive.

(Elsworth 1989)

With students, colleagues and networks of activist groups, I try to use this "connected form of knowing," placing the relating before the politics whenever possible. I am often slowed down by my difficulties with thinking things through. Agreement and consensus feel so cosy, but often I find I must settle for the less comfortable (d) on the "dialogical spectrum," little understanding but a respect across difference. Respect allows me to keep the lines of communication open, even if there is no agreement possible. These thoughts on how to talk across difference are just a beginning attempt to think about these important issues. Grandmother gave her wisdom in tiny fragments, knowing that it was my life's work to discover their meaning.

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