

DECOLONIZING TRAUMA WORK

Indigenous Stories and Strategies

RENEE LINKLATER

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*This work is dedicated to the two most influential women in my life:
Waakenangok, aka Eva Linklater (1916–2007) — my grandma
— and Marion Dzwin Legge — my mother.*

*It is also dedicated to my husband, Giizhigobimaase, aka Carl Fernández,
for his love and inspiration, to my son, Niiganibeness, aka Blaze Shilling,
to my daughter, Begamaanakwatook, aka dZwin Fernández,
and to the baby who will join us in the spring
for reminding me why we must always think of the future generations.*

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Foreword

Renee Linklater sets up her writing in a way that warms my heart: “This is a story. It is just one story among a universe of stories, told from my perspective. Someone else would tell the story differently. This story takes place on Turtle Island. I am hesitant in putting this story *out there*, because as Thomas King (2003: 10) acknowledges, ‘once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.’” Maybe we know from this humble introduction that we are about to read something that might seem simple, the way stories do, but the humble introduction opens us to writing that will change us. In a thorough, disciplined way, Renee has created something important. By walking us through the landscape of Indigenous healing of trauma, she has gracefully untangled the vines of colonialism that have threatened to squeeze the breath out of attempts to heal Indigenous people. Throughout the process, she stepped decisively to educate her readers in the accomplishments of cultural healing, the truth of Indigenous ways of knowing, and her conduct exemplified what is necessary to create a true and respectful place for speaking about Indigenous healing. She has firmly troubled the ground of the well-intentioned dominant culture’s industry of helpers, medical practitioners, government officials and academics, who insist that they supply needed assistance *if only* people would do what they are told and accept the healing paradigm that their services have constructed without consultation or reference or even *respect* for the knowledge and understanding that Indigenous people bring to their communities. Her convictions have roots in both rigorous academic understanding and skillfully examined personal experience. Renee went on a courageous journey herself to find these stories and to understand how important they are, and her sharing of her own story opens up a special place in this text, as if she left a light on for people who might be reading it and might have their own trauma. In sharing her healing journey, Renee invites us to consider our own. Anyone who comes from Indigenous roots can certainly understand, and probably everyone knows this geography a little. In this sense, Renee is a cultural warrior.

I am privileged to write this foreword for Renee’s powerful contribution. My maternal ancestors included Cherokee people who escaped Andrew Jackson’s Trail of Tears, the forced march of our people to Oklahoma in 1836. My father’s people were the result of the fur trade — a combination of French Canadian and Oglala from the Wounded Knee area of South Dakota. For most of my generation, our fathers were absent or dead, as was mine. As a man in my family, all I had to do was stay alive and stay out of jail to be a success.

Since colonization began as Renee writes, “Trauma has created a climate of systematic oppression, violence and abuse. Pre-colonial trauma was predictable and

consistently set in a cultural context; and its context revolved around death, tribal wars, starvation, separation, etc. In contemporary times, trauma takes the forms of sexual abuse, rape, psychological assaults ... accidents, environmental disasters, wars and holocausts.” Renee points to another kind of trauma that results from mass deaths caused by foreign disease, the loss of lands and resources through relocation and treaties and the imposition of state legislation and institutions, including residential/boarding schools and the child welfare system.

People who have been traumatized seek ways to change their mood and to stop remembering. Some of the ways they find can be self-destructive and may need alteration toward healthier coping styles. The trauma does not go away; but how we react to it and manage it can change in a healing direction.

Illicit and prescription drug use disorders are two to four times more prevalent among Indigenous peoples in North America than the general population. Research suggests Indigenous cultural participation may be protective against substance use problems in rural and remote communities. As Indigenous peoples continue to urbanize rapidly around the globe, the role traditional Indigenous beliefs and practices may play in reducing or even preventing substance use problems in cities is becoming increasingly relevant. A 2010 study of Indigenous adults living in a mid-sized city in western Canada (Currie et al. 2013) indicated that Indigenous enculturation was a protective factor associated with reduced illicit and prescription drug problems. Increased self-esteem partially explains why cultural participation was protective. Cultural participation also promotes resilience by reducing the effects of high school incompleteness on drug problems. In contrast, mainstream acculturation was not associated with reduction in illicit drug problems and served as a risk factor for prescription drug abuse. Such is the power of tradition; it encourages the growth of programs and services that support Indigenous peoples who strive to maintain their cultural traditions within cities, even though we need to know more about how Indigenous cultural practices and beliefs promote and protect Indigenous health in an urban environment.

Renee’s work shows how traditional Indigenous healing is being re-vitalized and lays out for us its importance in healing. Renee’s work will take forward the work of other trailblazers on trauma, colonization, how Elders relate to the educational system, what Elders offer their clients, and the important roles that Elders play in contemporary Indigenous society. The stories she has captured will circulate far and wide. They will stay with us. They will change us. Their tellers will become part of us. And that is good, for it will lead us into the future, one of integration and cooperation among cultures and health care systems.

— Lewis Mehl-Madrona
Coyote Institute and

Maine Dartmouth Family Medicine Residency

Prologue

Everything about Indigenous research tells us we have to locate ourselves in our research. First, we write our own stories and share our position in the world before we write about the world. This is a big task because first we have to come to terms with who we are and how we come to do the work that we do. I have pondered these questions for a long time, searching for my self and my place in the world. Through my academic journey, I was challenged to unite with my Spirit. Working with my research stories was much like my healing journey — connecting the disconnected.

Following Cree/Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach (2009) and Māori scholar Graham Smith, I felt that it was necessary to be upfront about my experience and worldview. I have also had to be considerate of the fact that this is not only *my* story, it is the story of my family — or families. I wanted to be sensitive to not bring about difficult emotions in family members. I also recognize that this is my version of circumstances and someone else may remember things differently. It has also been important that I not simplify or minimize my journey because I believe that it has been my life experience that has inspired and enabled me to embark on this journey.

My Anishinaabe name is Ozhaawashkobinesi (Blue Thunderbird), and I am from the Otter Clan. That is how I connect with Creation. I was born in 1969 at the Salvation Army's Grace Hospital in Toronto. My mother was an Anishinaabe woman from Manitou Rapids–Rainy River First Nations in northwestern Ontario; she journeyed to the Spirit World in 1985. My mother, uncle, aunts, grandmother and grandfather attended St. Margaret's Catholic Residential School in Fort Frances, Ontario. After residential school, my mother was court-ordered to attend St. Mary's, a Catholic training school for girls in Toronto. A few of my aunts (and a cousin) were also sent to there. After a couple of years there, my uncle and his partner visited her at the school. They told the administrators that they would take responsibility for her and that she could live with them and help look after their young daughter. This is where my mother met my father. My father's family came from England and Scotland and settled in Toronto in the 1900s. My grandmother (my father's mother) was born in Glasgow. My father, although born and raised in Toronto, lived most of his life in Alberta working as a cowboy and rancher. Ironically, my great-grandfather's birth certificate (from England) listed his father as being a "cowman." My claim to fame is that I am from many generations of cowboys and Indians!

I lived with both my parents for the first few months of my life. Family surrounded me. My Anishinaabe grandma and my aunt came to the city to support my mom during my birth. My paternal grandmother and great-grandparents were still living and were very involved in the lives of their descendants. I was already in a matrix of cultures and communities. In November 1969, my mom and I took a

train to northwestern Ontario. She wanted to bring me home. Within a few weeks, the Children's Aid Society of Rainy River apprehended me while my mom cried and protested. I was part of the Sixties Scoop,¹ and I was placed into foster care. Not surprisingly, the adoption records documented that I "was brought to the Children's Aid Society office voluntarily by [my] mother on December 1, 1969 as she was not able to care for [me]." On February 10, 1970, at six months old, I began my journey back to southern Ontario with a couple that was seeking to adopt a baby. I became part of a family that lived in a small rural village with a mother, father, sister and brother.

My adoptive grandparents, my mother's parents (I herein refer to my mother as "mom"), immigrated to Canada from the Ukraine in the 1900s. They met in Canada, married and raised a family with two daughters and seven grandchildren, including me being the youngest and the only adopted one. Grams and Grampa were always so central in our lives; they had siblings that also immigrated to Canada, so there was a strong cultural and linguistic influence. They were all such characters. I remember after one family dinner we were wondering what Grampa, Uncle Nick and Aunt Xenia were doing. They had vanished from the dinner table. We found them downstairs having a contest of who could do the most push-ups. They were all in their seventies. One of the most important teachings I received from my Ukrainian elders was they taught me to *survive*. No matter what happened, "we had to plough ahead." I always found this an appropriate metaphor for this teaching, as ploughing is directly connected with the work of creating and maintaining a garden. Even still, my mom and my aunt are carrying on the Ukrainian legacy of survival by continuing to plant and nurture the earth around us.

My adoptive father was of English/Scottish ancestry. He was an engineer and worked out of an office in our house. Previously he flew with the Royal Canadian Air Force, and worked on the Avro Arrow. In many ways, he catered to the very essence of my Spirit. When I wanted to go to the park, he would take me, even though we had to drive to the next town where they had schools with playgrounds. He would take me to two or three parks in one day. I would make meals out of sand and leaves and bring them to him to eat as he sat at the top of the play structures reading the newspaper or staring off into space. I used to watch him pace back and forth across the dining room thinking about very serious things. He gave me my first research job. When it looked like I needed something to do, he would ask me to check on the ski conditions. I gladly made my way to the telephone and dialed the number to hear the recorded message. I became very good at reporting back to him, and he always responded like I had given him the most helpful information. When he noticed that I liked to sit high in the trees, he nailed planks of wood between the branches so I could have a place to perch. When I requested, he opened the bathroom window so I could crawl out and sit on the roof of the house. He taught me to drive a car with my knees. I must admit that he didn't always exercise the best judgement — considering I was only four or five. One of my most favourite

memories was being up at our grandparent's cottage and we were down by the lake getting our evening fire ready. He said, "Want to see something amazing?" Of course, I said, "Yeah." He proceeded to pour lighter fluid on the lake and then threw his cigarette in and *poof*, the lake was on fire. Pretty amazing!

All of this came to an end one sad evening when my father's claims about the mafia threatening our lives finally landed him in the Whitby Psychiatric Hospital, where he received electroshock treatments. I have no doubt this procedure changed him irreversibly. He had a number of diagnoses, although the diagnosis that most accurately described his symptoms was likely "manic depression" (now known as bipolar disorder). I was insistent about visiting him, and I remember clearly when my mom took me to the hospital. My brother and sister were older than me, so they had a more mature understanding of the situation. They didn't come with us for the visit. I suppose it was too difficult for them to see him the way he was. But I was ecstatic about seeing him. He took me upstairs and showed me his dorm — a big sterile room with rows of beds. Under his bed was a big bag of candy from his sister. We sat eating and visiting. Downstairs, he began asking my mom for our new phone number. But my mom wouldn't give it to him because he had been calling repeatedly. Despite the instructions I had received earlier, I whispered the new number in his ear. And then I disappeared back upstairs to the candy. I remember the rush of people (parents and white coats) practically flying up the wide stairwell and emerging at the entrance of the dorm room, only to see me smiling and sitting beside his bed with the bag of candy. After his discharge, my father moved to Toronto and continued to struggle with his difficulties. He lived in rooming houses and hostels, and he eventually ended up homeless. In time, he was routed to a home with a high level of care and supervision where he lived out his life. In the years following his hospitalization, our relationship was sporadic and minimal.

When our family separated, I was devastated. Up to that point, my father was my primary parent, and I suppose I had had just too many losses already. In the following years, my mother, sister, brother and I did our best to "plough ahead." I was certainly part of the family. However, deep inside of me I always knew that I came from somewhere else, and my Spirit ached over my lost connection. I remember my brother and I watching *Snoopy, Come Home*. I was probably eight years old; my brother was twelve. I watched Snoopy make the difficult decision to return to his original owner, and the grief expressed by Snoopy and his Peanut friends caused me to burst into tears. I remember the look on my brother's face. I think he knew then that I was having some real difficulties.

My mom was working as a real estate agent when she became a single parent. She had previously been a registered nurse; after the separation, she re-entered the field, furthered her education and specialized in psychiatric nursing. She became certified as a group psychotherapist in Ontario. She worked at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry and the Metropolitan Toronto Forensic Services, as well as the in-patient psychiatric nursing unit and the crisis intervention team for the

Grey Bruce Regional Health Centre. Because of her profession, I grew up with stories of the psych ward. These stories weren't told in a judgemental way. At least I didn't interpret them that way. They were just people's experiences — stories in the universe, and I liked stories.

As a teenager living in Toronto, I started to struggle with my identity. I was struggling because I don't think I had formed one. I was missing all the pieces that would help me know who I was and where I came from. I realized that I needed to reconnect with my birth family, as I felt like an empty vessel without them. My adoptive family were always supportive and wanted me to be proud of my Indian heritage, reminding me often of where I came from. But none of us really knew what that meant. I remember my older sister showing me an Indigenous family in the laundromat and proudly telling me that they were like the family that I came from. My mom always told me that when I was ready she would take me back where my birth mother's family lived. As fate would have it, my reconnection was easier than I could have ever imagined, and I returned home the summer I turned nineteen. Over the past twenty-five years, I have, more or less, relocated into my Anishinaabe family and community. I have also rejoined my father's family. Yet I remain connected to my adoptive family. Other than to say that identity formation was crucial to my development and understanding of my place in the world, I won't describe the details of my reconnection experience here; I have written about that elsewhere (Shilling, 2003).

In 1989, I started in Native Studies at Trent University. It was great to be with other students who were pursuing knowledge about our culture and history. It was the first time that I had heard about colonization, residential schools and the *Indian Act*. As I struggled to process how much colonialism had affected my family and me, I realized my route through child welfare was a direct result of Canada's assimilation strategy to disable Indigenous families. One of my coping methods for the distressing emotional responses was to become politically active, and in the mid-nineties, I moved to Ottawa. By this time, I realized that the government was completely negligent in keeping their terms of the treaties. I became involved in the student movement and served as the National Aboriginal Students' Representative for the Canadian Federation of Students. We were at the forefront of the fight to eliminate the cap on post-secondary education funding for First Nations students. We organized an occupation of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and successfully shut it down for one day. They increased security after this event!

My son Blaze was born between my first and second year of university, and I feel that in many ways we have grown up together. It was important to me that I give him opportunities that I didn't have. I wanted him to be raised in a culturally connected environment and to have access to family and community. The Native Studies department at Trent attracted many young families, so we were part of a community in Peterborough. A few years later, I got an employment offer back in northwestern Ontario. I quickly packed us up, and we embarked on a journey that would teach me things that I was completely unprepared for.

It was during this time that I was with my family at a powwow. My uncle and aunt had been talking about my return to the family. That evening, my uncle offered tobacco to the men sitting at a traditional drum and asked them for a song. He was given the microphone and he spoke to the people in the Anishinaabe language. He spoke about how I had gone into the system and had come home. My uncle had a very meaningful way of speaking. They brought me into the powwow circle and we danced. I could feel my mother's Spirit join us. After the song, my family stood with me as all the people came through and shook our hands. This was my sacred homecoming. It was a beautiful summer evening. The night sky was full of stars.

I knew in my heart that moving back to my ancestral homelands was going to be life changing. I revelled in the idea of being closer to my family and immersed in culture and community. I felt a part of me come alive that had been sleeping for many years. It wasn't long after this that my world took a confusing turn. My dreams became very vivid, and I was having spiritual experiences that I did not understand. I remember telling my grandma what I was going through. She asked me, "Are you scared?" and I said, "No, I just want to be able to understand." She shared with me that she also had these experiences when she was younger. As months passed, life became much more intense and my co-workers and I were advised to attend ceremonies because people were trying to cause us harm through the use of bad medicine. This explained my dreams and some of the bodily sensations that I was feeling.

This story is directly related to my understanding and experience of being "unwell" in an Anishinaabe context. It has become an important teaching in my evolving worldview. These types of experiences have been documented by others (Angel, 2002; Brant, 1990; Duran, 1990; Landes, 1968; Mandelbaum, 1979; Moodley, 2005; Taussig, 1987; Waldram, Herring and Young, 1995; Wolfart and Ahenakew, 2000). There is no doubt that I was experiencing severe imbalance and disharmony. During a heightened period of intense stress, I could see the world as I always knew it, but I could also see the Spirit World. It was like parallel vision. I felt frantic and terrorized. The spirits were interacting fully in my physical world by placing objects and sacred items in my space, manipulating my body and interfering with electrical and mechanical devices. Importantly, I was not alone in this journey, so many of these occurrences were witnessed by others and are still affirmed many years later. Fortunately, my family and friends nurtured me and connected me to Elders and ceremonies that aided in the situation and I was spared the psychiatric system. Had I been admitted to hospital, I'm sure that I would have been restrained and drugged. Instead, with family and community support, I stabilized and began to heal through Anishinaabe ceremonies.

My assessment began with a talking circle of me, my grandma, my aunt and uncle and my uncle's mother, brother and sister. I was surrounded by grandmas, aunties and uncles. My younger cousin also sat in, listening with curiosity. They asked me all kinds of questions, such as: Who had I been around? Who might have I offended?

Were there people who were jealous of me? Had I broken any spiritual taboos? What had I been dreaming? What ceremonies had I been put through? Who conducted the ceremonies? After hours of discussion, concluding at six in the morning, they decided that there were too many factors and that my gramma should take me to a shake tent ceremony. They even decided together who should be approached to conduct the ceremony. I had been to a few shake tent ceremonies before and knew that is what we did when we needed to seek advice directly from the Spirits. The following week, my gramma, aunt and sister brought me to a shake tent where it was revealed that I needed cultural healing to deal with my spiritual afflictions.

The next week, I was taken to meet some Elders who my aunt thought would be able to help. I offered tobacco and shared with them what I had been experiencing. They told me to come back in a few days for a sweat lodge. When I returned, I spent the afternoon with them visiting and preparing the lodge. A few more people arrived that evening. Before we went into the lodge, we sat in the house and they started the ceremony by praying and smoking their pipes. The old man sat beside me as someone sang a healing song. I felt a wind breeze across me. Then the old man spit into the palm of his hand and we all watched and saw little black bugs moving around as he said, "Look at that, they are still alive!" I thought that was interesting until the woman across from me said, "Those came from you." Shocked, I exclaimed, "No!" but she nodded yes. The older woman then put a beaded emblem on her forehead to protect her own Spirit. She proceeded to put bear grease on my arms and then rubbed a rock up and down my arms. As she did this many little bugs came out of my pores. This was my first experience being doctored in the Anishinaabe way. And it was just the beginning. At this ceremony, I also received my Anishinaabe name, Ozhaawashkobinesi (Blue Thunderbird). I was grateful that Ozhaawashkobinesikwe (Blue Thunderbird Woman) came into the ceremony and offered me her name and her protection. I continued with ceremonies over the next few months and was cleansed of other spiritual intrusions. I felt I was unravelling layers and layers of a protective wall that I had built around me over the years. I attended a few sweat lodges, a peyote ceremony and was put out on a four day fast on an island. All of these ceremonies helped me become grounded in myself and strengthen my Spirit. My dreams and spiritual sight seemed to remain strong — and fortunately, less overwhelming.

In retrospect, I realize that if a psychiatrist or some other medical model practitioner was assessing me, then I could have had a few diagnoses from the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*). However, I honestly do not believe that such diagnoses would have been helpful, particularly because I was not seeking psychotropic medications for my difficulties. This was affirmed months later, after I had moved back to southern Ontario. After returning to university and attending a class that caused severe panic, my medical doctor prescribed Ativan (an anti-anxiety medication). The next day, I took one of the pills. Within moments, I felt like a truck had run over me and I realized that the medication was

not providing the type of relief that I needed. Fortunately, my doctor also recommended I begin journaling immediately and seek out counselling. On that note, I went to an Aboriginal agency and was offered short-term crisis counselling. But more importantly, I was connected to cultural and community resources that could view my fragile state as one of injury. It also gave me the opportunity to become a volunteer, which kept me connected with community, rather than isolated at home.

I started to realize that I had been severely wounded, not just through my recent encounter of being under spiritual attack, but through a lifetime of injurious experiences. For the first time in my life, I was actually feeling how much my heart had been broken. The crisis had been the catalyst that brought me to the centre of my being — to the core of my Spirit. And I began a healing journey that, over the years, would involve many practitioners and healing modalities, including continued spiritual and ceremonial support, culturally based counselling and education, chiropractic care, acupuncture, massage therapy, cranial sacral therapy and four years of psychotherapy. I also remain connected to my doctor of natural health, who provides advice on vitamins and natural supplements. Now focused on my own wellness, I engaged in a healthier lifestyle of yoga and regular physical exercise. I had designed my own wholistic healing plan. It is also important to share that at different times, and in different ways, I sought the support of synthetic and natural forms of anti-depressants. I fully acknowledge that regulating emotions sometimes requires the use of psychotropic drugs or natural remedies. But once the disruptive emotions have healed, there is no need for external regulators. I believe that a healthy person has the capacity to cope with and tolerate uncomfortable circumstances. My goal was to strengthen my own capacities.

It took a few years to fully stabilize, but I still participated in the world. In fact, I believe that connecting with community and returning to school was central in my healing. After I had some time to reflect on my experience of working in my home territory, I thought that maybe it would help our communities if we learned about colonization and talked about how colonialism changed the ways that we relate to each other. I decided to complete a master of education in adult education and community development, with a focus on transformative learning. Through this opportunity, I came to the realization that education is vitally important in the healing of Indigenous peoples.

After I completed my master's, I taught a course for the Native Studies department at Trent University and held the position of group activities counsellor at the healing agency where I had previously accessed services and been a volunteer. I then returned to graduate school to begin a Ph.D., yet I kept myself closely connected to family and community work. I was also attending many training sessions available to Indigenous practitioners that explored topics relating to historical trauma, multigenerational trauma, mental health issues, addictions, grief recovery and cultural ways of healing. During my studies, I thought about my own experiences in healing and the experiences of others. It seemed important to talk with Indigenous health

care practitioners, to critique Western psychiatry and to acknowledge the cultural philosophies and Indigenous strategies being utilized in healing — in short, it seemed important to decolonize trauma work.

Locating myself in the research for this book has been challenging because, in many ways, I am centrally located in it. I have experienced and witnessed the complexities of trauma, and I have been continually reminded of how colonialism has impacted my family and myself. Researching and writing has triggered my own history, and I often feel overwhelmed with the constant trauma talk. My responsibility to myself in this process became to ground myself in wellness so that I could feel balanced. And more so, it was important that I do this from an Indigenous framework. It is also clear to me that those who do trauma work need to recognize the intense effect it has on them. This is a difficult task because many of us are immersed not only in the trauma that exists in the community but also in the trauma that exists in our families. And for Indigenous families, this trauma seems to be continually unfolding in various ways.

It was essential that I came to terms with the reality that two generations of my family attended residential schools. I am relieved that in June 2008, the Government of Canada offered an apology and compensation to former students. Sadly, many, including some of my own family, passed on prior to this acknowledgement. Tears streamed down my face as my seventeen-year-old son and I listened to the CBC broadcast of the apology. I feel that the effects of the colonialism will be felt for many generations. The most troubling family tragedies that we lived through in recent years were the suicides of one of my aunts, who took an overdose of her antidepressant medication, and my eighteen-year-old cousin, who hung herself. The multigenerational trauma experienced within our families can never be minimized, nor can our abilities to survive and adjust to such circumstances. I am beginning to understand that Indigenous peoples are resilient and have the ability to remain hopeful and optimistic, although, unfortunately we have lost many people who have given up in a desperate attempt to end very painful circumstances. I hope the healing movement within Indigenous communities continues to increase the prevalence of culture-based strategies and wholistic opportunities for those seeking to heal their wounded Spirits and broken hearts.

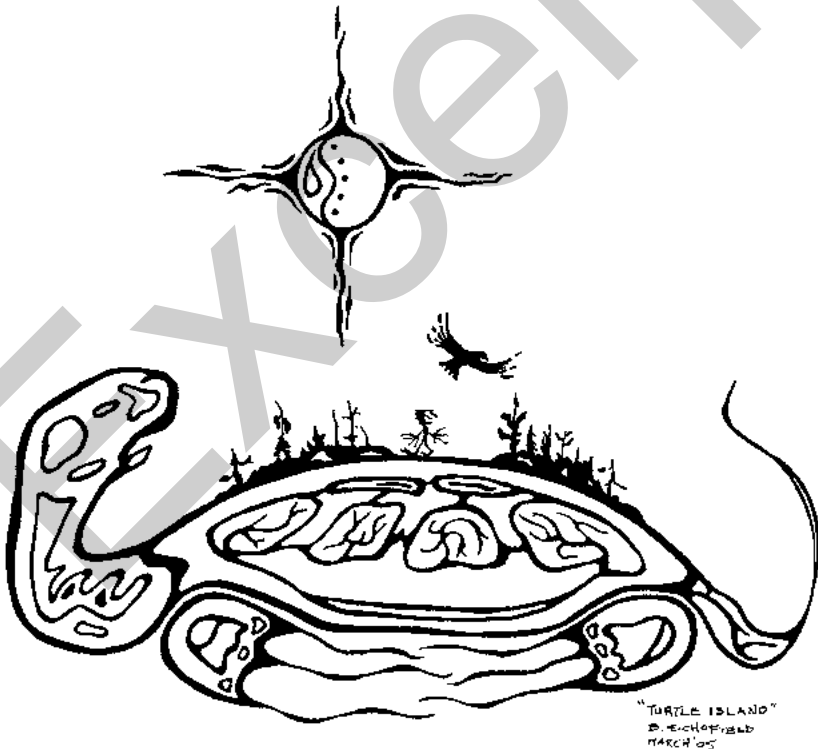
I am thankful that my journey through life has placed me in a position to be able to bring together Indigenous health care practitioners to share stories and strategies of how they walk with our people and help them bring a greater sense of wellness to their lives.

Note

1. According to Johnston (1983: 23), this term was first suggested by a long-time employee of the Ministry of Human Resources in British Columbia who “admitted that provincial social workers would, quite literally, scoop children from reserves on the slightest pretext.”

Colonialism, Indigenous Trauma and Healing

This is a story. It is just one story among a universe of stories, told from my perspective. Someone else would tell the story differently. This story takes place on Turtle Island.¹ I am hesitant in putting this story out there, because as Thomas King acknowledges, “For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world” (2003: 10). With this hesitation, I offer this story to the healing work being done in Indigenous communities. It is also written in honour of Indigenous health care practitioners, as these helpers and healers support, nurture, guide and inspire wellness in our people.



Courtesy of Bentley Schofield, this drawing represents male/female existence, the elements (earth, air, fire, water), elongated hands and feet are roots and limbs that are still growing, and “the Turtle is watching to see what we do with what the Creator has provided for us.”

Cultural approaches are essential for Indigenous peoples to move forward in healing from colonization. Over 500 years of contact between the original peoples of the Americas and settler nations has produced extensive displacement and disconnection. Colonialism, manufactured by settlers, caused a great deal of damage to the spirits of Indigenous peoples. It is necessary to declare that the root of injury has been caused by colonial violence, which was significantly enforced by governments through legislation and institutions. We are now in a process of healing from this historical trauma (Brave Heart, 1998, 1999, 2004; Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995; Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski, 2004).

Colonialism, Indigenous Health and Western Psychiatry

As a direct result of colonization, the vast majority of Indigenous people have lived, or are living, in trauma; in most cases, this trauma is multigenerational (Brave Heart, 1998; Brave Heart-Jordan, 1995; Brave Heart Debruyne, 1998; Duran, Duran, Brave Heart and Yellow Horse-Davis, 1998) and is relentlessly being reproduced and reinvented in various forms. High rates of Indigenous homelessness, experiences with the child welfare system, involvement with the justice system, acts of violence, suicides, accidental deaths and pervasive use of alcohol and drugs are results of living in trauma. It is widely recognized that Indigenous peoples are often not well served by Western treatment styles (Benoit, Carroll and Chaudhry, 2003; Gone, 2004; Hodge, Limb and Cross, 2009; Mehl-Madrona, 2007b; McCabe, 2008; Stewart, 2007; Struthers and Lowe, 2003) and those seeking help are often confronted with more alienation and traumatization. Sones et al. point out that data regarding the mental health and wellness of Indigenous peoples is lacking “partly because of the challenges in the identification of indigenous clients, mistrust of mainstream mental health, frequent absence of culturally competent care, and lack of access to indigenous healing options and care” (2010: 55). Furthermore, culturally influenced Indigenous behaviour is often misinterpreted by Western-oriented clinicians as evidence of psychopathology (Brant, 1990). There is a clear need to address the issues of culturally inadequate care that Indigenous peoples often encounter while seeking to address their trauma and particularly while accessing the mental health system. It is now recognized that when culturally appropriate care is provided, patients respond better (National Aboriginal Health Organization, 2008).

For the most part, Indigenous trauma has been largely “diagnosed” through non-Indigenous theories. Western frameworks of psychiatry and psychology have medicalized the experiences of Indigenous peoples, applying diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder, further pathologizing their trauma. Yet there are Indigenous health care practitioners that utilize strategies that are rooted in Indigenous philosophies, worldviews and trauma-informed approaches; however, these practitioners are often challenged by a vocabulary that may not represent their context in an accurate way. This is not to say that Western forms of psychotherapy