

WALKING THIS PATH TOGETHER

Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Child Welfare Practice

SECOND EDITION

edited by

SOHKI ASKI ESQUAO [JEANNINE
CARRIÈRE] & SUSAN STREGA

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CONTRIBUTORS

ABOUT THE COVER ARTIST

Seletze Delmar Johnnie (1946–2012)

Seletze was born and raised in Khenipsen, one of the Cowichan Tribes in Duncan, B.C. He was one of the most generous people I have ever met. Delmar was a loving husband, father, an artist, a role model and a storyteller. The teachings of his Elders were a sacred part of his own personal transformation. In the 1980s, Delmar was one of the first former Kuper Island Residential School students in the Duncan area to speak publicly about his abuse. After years of living with the horrific secrets of his abusive experiences in residential school, Delmar decided that it was time to speak out and let go of the dark secret he had carried his whole life. His disclosure was out of sheer selflessness — he wanted to inspire others to also release their residential school secrets (or, more appropriately, nightmares) and learn to live a life full of love. By spirit, Seletze was a trickster. He learned to share and heal through the power of laughter and love. As a renowned Coast Salish artist, Seletze very generously mentored many young artists. However, if you spoke to these artists, most would acknowledge that what they learned from him was far beyond art; Delmar taught them to live with a good mind and heart — *uy'skwuluwun*.

— Qwul'sih'yah'maht [Robina Thomas]

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An Introduction

ANTI-RACIST AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE CHILD WELFARE

Susan Strega and Sohki Aski Esquao [Jeannine Carrière]

We are both grateful to be visitors here on the lands of the ws'anec' (Saanich), Lekwungen (Songhees), Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples of the Coast Salish Nation. We have been allowed to live, work and play here and we recognize how deeply blessed we are.

It is an honour to publish a second edition of *Walking This Path Together*: we enjoyed working with and learning from each author in the first book. When we were asked to produce a second edition we embraced the notion of advancing child welfare knowledge with what have been identified as current and ongoing priorities for practice. From the first edition we include the story of the bridge, for it is the foundation of our experiences with child welfare and reminds us of the enduring connections we have developed with each other and with the people we have encountered through our work, some of whom are sharing their knowledge in this second edition.

THE BRIDGE

The Norwood Bridge crosses the Assiniboine River just west of its confluence with the Red River in Winnipeg. The meeting of the rivers marks a traditional and sacred meeting place for Manitoba Indigenous peoples. The bridge marks a division between two realities: to the north lies Main Street, the epicentre of Winnipeg's poverty, violence and despair. To the south, Marion Street is a gateway to working-class neighbourhoods and new middle class suburban developments. As young women at various times we both lived under that bridge, because it provided shelter and protection when social workers could or would not. Although we didn't know each other back then we shared a connection, as we were both affected by child welfare through foster care and adoption. We shared the experience of wondering which side of the bridge we might end up on — or whether it was even worth continuing. After long and separate journeys, we met in the hallways of the School

of Social Work at the University of Victoria. We had survived, and how amazing that we had both become social workers and then teachers of social workers! Our belief is that somehow our ancestors invited us to walk this path together, and it is out of those separate but shared journeys that we came to work together.

We share a sisterhood and a story of resistance and survival that in many ways represents the genesis of this book (and we tell a little of our stories later). We developed this book because we want to make a difference for the young people of today who still sit under that bridge or other places of temporary shelter, looking out and wondering, “Is there any hope for me?” We want to make a difference for the families and communities they have been torn from, saved from or estranged from. We believe there is hope and we invited our like-minded friends and colleagues to share their hopes for transforming child welfare practice.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT AND WHY A SECOND EDITION

The practice challenges we recognized in the first edition have since then exacerbated and deepened. Wealth inequality has grown exponentially, and everywhere in the world Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups remain disproportionately poor. Governments at every level have shown themselves to be intractable in working with Indigenous peoples to solve problems that extend beyond poverty: inadequate housing, unsafe drinking water, vastly disproportionate rates of arrest and incarceration and lack of economic development are characteristic of many Indigenous communities in Canada. Progress has been made in a few Indigenous nations with and through the local delivery of child welfare services. But at the same time, social service funding formulas controlled by non-Indigenous governments ensure that only protective services such as investigation and apprehension can be provided. Although considerable wealth is routinely extracted from the traditional territories of many First Nations, very little of it returns in the form of community resources and supports. These conditions provide the rationale for centring anti-colonial analysis and practice in many of the chapters in this edition: child protection has become the contemporary manifestation of colonialism. In this edition we take up anti-colonialist practice alongside anti-racist and other socially just approaches. The worsening of conditions that increase the likelihood that families will be caught up in child protection processes is not unique to Indigenous communities. Poverty disproportionately impacts other racialized communities and racism remains commonplace. The problems that bring families to the attention of child welfare authorities are inextricably linked to positionality, by which we mean factors such as race, class, gender and ability.

While the contributors to the second edition are diverse, all share the belief that

anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice is both necessary and possible in child welfare. Some authors are new to this edition and some are returning authors who have revised their chapters to better reflect current conditions. All are fundamentally committed to the notion that we can best help those with whom we work when we are willing to work across difference — when we walk the path together. They share their critical analysis and offer concrete skills and strategies that may help in this journey, providing students and practitioners alike the opportunity to explore a range of ideas and personal visions that can create positive possibilities for children, their families and communities. Across their diversity every contributor shares a passionate commitment to the transformation of child welfare through socially just practices. As editors, we are honoured to present these voices.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

If there is one reason above all others why we put this book together it is because we believe that child welfare can and must change, systemically and in its day-to-day practices. The statistics documenting the number of Indigenous children in care haunt us. The larger story of child welfare parallels our own experiences: those who come to the attention of child welfare are disproportionately poor Indigenous women. Although White children and families have always fared better and continue to do so, we know that poor, racialized, disabled and otherwise marginalized children and families are also disproportionately vulnerable to the child welfare system, particularly to its most traumatic intervention, child apprehension.

In this second edition, as with the first, we bring together the wisdom of practitioners and scholars who are committed to transforming child welfare. We believe these are significant child welfare voices; many of them greatly influenced our own practice and teaching. The authors bring different knowledge and experience but share this important commonality: they ask us in each moment in practice to “see double.” This means that we must understand the situations of the families and children we work with in the context of the larger structural problems they are facing, while, at the same time, we must understand what we need to do on the ground in the practice moment. In one way or another each of these chapters also reminds us that we must be continually engaged in the journey from the head to the heart if we are to be effective, compassionate and respectful practitioners. Many writers remind us that traditional Indigenous child-care methods have worked since time immemorial; thus we must be mindful of Indigenous ways of knowing, keeping in mind that the need for child welfare will only change once

issues such as Indigenous sovereignty, reparation to Indigenous peoples, poverty and wealth disparity are dealt with in some significant manner.

Readers of the first edition may wonder about the absence of a chapter about child sexual abuse in this book. Unfortunately, our Australian Aboriginal (Pallawah) colleague Kyllie Cripps was unable to contribute her child sexual abuse chapter due to illness. For an anti-colonialist perspective on child sexual abuse, we recommend Cripps and McGlade (2008), and for those interested in an anti-racist approach, Bernard (2013). Recommendations for anti-oppressive practice in child sexual abuse include Bolen et al. (2015), Bolen and Gergely (2014) and Bolen and Krane (2013).

Why Is Socially Just Practice So Difficult?

Most social work students enter their studies and most practitioners enter the field because they are committed to social justice and want to work together with people facing the challenges created by injustice. Although most social workers, especially child welfare workers, are disproportionately young White women (Fallon et al. 2003), more Indigenous, racialized and otherwise marginalized practitioners are entering the field. Wherever they are positioned, social work students are taught that collaboration is necessary not only to support clients to make the changes they desire, but also to address the social and political conditions that shape their struggles. Most Canadian social work students learn that anti-colonial, anti-racist and anti-oppressive strategies are essential to eliminate or at least reduce structural inequalities, and the racism, colonialism, misogyny, ableism and other justifying belief systems that lie at their root. Yet many students and new practitioners entering their practicum placement or first job full of social justice commitment recount being told, “Forget all that useless stuff you learned in school — now we are going to teach you how to practice in the ‘real world.’” Inevitably, that “real world” approach requires that workers individualize social problems, pathologize those who struggle with inequities, and accept the notion that workers and clients belong to separate and distinct groups. The difference between workers and clients is presented as hierarchical: the worker is not only different but better than the client, who is “other” and lesser than the worker in almost every way. While these dominant discourses are difficult to challenge, given that both students and workers want and need employment, the authors in this book, most of whom have experience in direct child welfare practice, offer ideas for navigating these challenges in ways that affirm the strengths and wisdom of those with whom we work.

THE CONTEXT OF CHILD WELFARE

State intervention in Canadian families in the name of protecting children has been happening for more than a century. Over this time, child welfare legislation and policies have oscillated between high-intervention/many-apprehension and low-intervention/few-apprehension paradigms (Dumbrill 2006). Periodic concern that the state is too intrusive into the private sphere of the family has alternated with demands for greater state involvement in the wake of high profile child death inquiries. Currently we are in a high intervention cycle.

Mandatory reporting laws, the development of x-ray technology and feminist concern about sexual abuse and violence against women all contributed to the creation of new categories of child maltreatment that are said to require state surveillance, monitoring and intervention.

According to the 2008 Canadian Incidence Study (CIS) of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect (Fallon et al. 2010), the number and rate of child protection investigations almost doubled between 1998 and 2008, from 21.47 investigations per 1000 children in 1998 to a rate of 39.16 per 1000 children in 2008. Similarly, the apprehension and placement of children in out-of-home care continues to increase: between 1992 and 2007, the number of children placed increased from 42,000 (5.7 children per 1,000 children) to 67,000 (9.2 children per 1,000 children) respectively (Mulcahy and Trocmé 2010). This alarming increase in the number of families under state scrutiny can be attributed in part to ever-expanding categories of child maltreatment (for example the addition of “exposure” to intimate partner violence to the list of situations requiring intervention), and in part to an increase in the number of families investigated for neglect in the wake of deep cuts to social assistance in Canada’s most populous province, Ontario (Swift and Parada 2004). Given that similar cuts to entitlements and financial and other supports and resources have taken place in most Canadian jurisdictions, we have every expectation that, in the absence of active and politically engaged resistance to the neo-liberal policies and discourses that underlie those cuts, these numbers will continue to increase.

As a multitude of writers note (see, for example, Blackstock 2008; Lindsey 2003; Roberts 2002; Swift 1995) child welfare does not intervene in every family that experiences difficulties. The primary determinants of whether or not a family comes to the attention of child welfare authorities, and how workers intervene with that family, are poverty and race. In Canada, Indigenous children and families are vastly overrepresented on child welfare caseloads, as are poor single mothers and the otherwise disadvantaged: poor immigrants and refugees, and those with disabilities.

Indigeneity

From the time of first contact with Europeans, Indigenous peoples in Canada have experienced many significant losses, including, to name but a few, land, children, language and spiritual practices (Bellefeuille and Ricks 2003; Scarth 2004; Schouls, Olthuis and Engelstad 2002; Youngblood Henderson 2000). Although the rest of Canadian children were viewed as being dependent upon their families, Indigenous children were denied this right through residential schools and the child welfare system, which, as Thobani notes (2007: 123), “pathologized individual Aboriginal mothers and their families as deficient, further enhancing personalized definitions of this lack.” Youngblood Henderson (2000: 71) describes colonialism as an ideology that created a “massive hemorrhage” and a “traumatic legacy” in Indigenous communities in Canada. Unfortunately, as Bennett and Shangreux (2005: 92) note, “non-Aboriginal social workers often do not understand the depth of feelings and the impact that past historical policies and practices have on First Nation peoples today.” Alternatively, while Indigenous child welfare workers may understand these impacts, they work under legislative and policy constraints that may lead them to be seen as “perpetrators of colonialism’ within their own people” (Reid 2005: 30).

To understand the constraints that all workers face, we need to understand some of the history of child welfare and Indigenous peoples. Under the 1951 amendment to the *Indian Act* that enforced the application of all provincial and territorial laws on reserves (provided that statutes did not conflict with treaties or federal law), child protection services for on-reserve and status Indigenous people became a provincial/territorial responsibility. The way in which the federal government funded (and continues to fund) services contributed significantly to disproportionate rates of apprehending Indigenous children, because provinces and territories received money only for children who were apprehended, and not for support, prevention or reunification services. While in 1951 the percentage of Indigenous children in government care was 1 percent, by the end of the 1960s it had reached 30–40 percent, leading to that decade being described as the “sixties scoop.” But, rather than marking a colonial and racist past, the scoop was the beginning of the commonplace practice of removing Indigenous children from Indigenous homes and communities to primarily White foster and alternate care homes. In the past half century, the disproportionate apprehension of Indigenous children, on and off reserve, has stayed at the level achieved in the 1960s and, in some jurisdictions, has dramatically increased, leading Beaucage (2011) to term recent events the “millennium scoop.”

The most recent data available tells us that, although Indigenous people

represent only about 6 percent of the Canadian population, Indigenous children represent 40 to 80 percent of all children in care, depending on the jurisdiction (CWRP 2014). *Kiskisik Awaksisak*, the first report to use CIS (Canadian Incidence Study)-2008 data to specifically examine child welfare investigations involving Canadian Indigenous children, noted that in 2008 there were 140.6 child maltreatment investigations for every 1000 Indigenous children living in the geographic areas served by sampled agencies, while there were 33.5 investigations for every 1000 non-Aboriginal children living in the same geographic areas (Sinha et al. 2011). The rate of substantiated investigations, that is, investigations that result in ongoing monitoring, surveillance or intervention by authorities, is far higher for Indigenous than non-Indigenous children; in the CIS-2008, it was four times higher (Fallon et al. 2010). In Alberta and Manitoba, these national trends are particularly pronounced (Fallon et al. 2010).

According to Sullivan and Charles (2010) and Blackstock, Brown and Bennett (2007), anti-Indigenous bias and racism influence worker perceptions of children's living conditions in ways that increase both the substantiation of investigations and the likelihood that Indigenous children will be apprehended. Similarly, de Leeuw, Greenwood and Cameron (2010) documented how health-care and other service providers applied what they term "colonial narratives" of inherent dysfunction in their assessment of Indigenous people, and de Finney et al. (2011) describe a similar phenomenon in child and youth care practice. These narratives have worrying effects: Denison, Varcoe and Brown (2014) found that while fear of child apprehension did not deter Indigenous mothers from seeking health care for their children, it did deter them from seeking health care for themselves.

While some jurisdictions have delegated some child welfare authority to Indigenous nations and agencies, it is rare for Indigenous people to have comprehensive control or autonomy in child welfare matters. Indigenous agencies and service providers must conform to provincial or territorial child welfare legislation and standards of practice. As Landertinger (2011) points out, while delegation initiatives are welcome, the legislation and the system built around it are inherently colonizing and it is no surprise that they produce colonial results: since the devolution of child welfare to Indigenous authorities in Manitoba, the proportion of Indigenous children in care in that province has increased rather than decreased. Although promising differential response practices like family group conferencing and alternative dispute resolution are being developed and implemented in some jurisdictions, workers are discouraged from pursuing these for all but the most benign situations, and these alternative interventions are often poorly resourced. Indigenous approaches to child welfare that emphasize the involvement of community, Elders and extended family hold promise, as do the

introduction of custom adoption practices and traditional family caring models of practice. But even in situations where Indigenous people have assumed authority for child welfare services, efforts to introduce culturally congruent practices are challenging under the auspices of existing legislation. The result is, as Mandell et al. point out (2007: 152), “the lack of a cultural fit between child welfare, ideology, law and services delivered.”

Race

Although the intersections of race and child welfare in America, especially racial disproportionality in child protection, have been extensively researched and documented, Canadian investigations of these matters are relatively recent (see, for example, Lavergne et al. 2008) and it is worth noting that the CIS-2008 (Fallon et al. 2010) did not collect data related to race beyond Indigeneity. Research in one Ontario city with a Black minority population noted that, although only 8 percent of the population was Black, 65 percent of the children in care were Black (Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable 2009). Although they do provide statistical data, descriptions of the disproportionate involvement of child protection authorities in the lives of Black African children have been provided by Bernard and Gupta (2008) and by Clarke (2011, 2012) for Afro-Caribbean families. These authors also document incidents of racism to which some workers subject racialized families. Font (2013) notes that Black parents in America are disproportionately referred to parenting courses when compared with White families, regardless of the nature and extent of concerns; this suggests a deeply embedded idea that Black parenting, like Indigenous parenting, is inherently deficient. Similarly, Maiter and Leslie (2014) and Maiter, Stalker and Alaggia (2009) describe disproportionate, and too often racist, child welfare interventions with racialized immigrant families. As with Indigenous children, racialized children are often placed outside their communities; Daniel (2011: 2231) reports that about 45 percent of foster parents care for children from a different racial background than their own.

Poverty and Inequality

Poverty and inequality have both increased markedly in Canada over the last thirty years. Wage inequality doubled from 1977 to 2005, and the gap between the top percentile of earners and the other 99 percent also widened considerably: in 2006, 11 percent of the nation's income was concentrated in the hands of top earners (Brzozowski et al. 2010). Wealth inequality has also increased substantially. Wealth is a broader measure than income, as it takes into account assets beyond income such as housing and investment, minus debt. Drawing on data drawn from Statistics Canada, the Broadbent Institute (2014) showed that the bottom 50 percent of Canadians own just 6 percent of the wealth in Canada, while the

bottom 30 percent own just 1 percent. The wealthiest Canadians, those in the top 10 percent, saw their net worth increase 42 percent from 2005 to 2012, while the poorest, those in the bottom 10 percent, saw their net worth shrink by 150 percent. It is not surprising, then, that in measures of child poverty (keeping in mind that all children live in families, so it is family poverty that is actually being measured), Canada ranks 15th out of 17 peer countries (Conference Board of Canada 2014).

Poverty and inequality both have serious material consequences. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett are epidemiologists who share an interest in population health. In their book *The Spirit Level* (2010), they reviewed over thirty years of worldwide epidemiological research into the causes of very significant social class differences in life expectancy. They document how rates of both mental and physical ill health increase sharply with each step down the class ladder, while rates of violence, bullying, drug abuse, low numeracy and literacy scores, poor educational attainment, imprisonment, low levels of child well-being and others also increase. They note that these problems all become from twice to ten times as common in more unequal countries, while in more equal countries, that is, those with less polarized class divisions (such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), there is much less differentiation in rates and more overall well-being for people at all wealth and income levels.

Thus it should come as no surprise that children from poor families, whether or not they are Indigenous or from visibly ethno-racial families, are far more likely than children who come from adequately resourced families to have contact with the child protection system (Keegan Eamon and Kopels 2004; Jonson-Reid et al. 2009; Schumaker 2012). For example, in Quebec, Esposito (2012) found that poverty, when measured in terms of neighbourhood socio-economic disadvantage, increased the risk of out-of-home placement by 55 percent for children from birth to age nine. Similarly, Esposito et al. (2013) demonstrated that poverty significantly contributed to the increased risk of out-of-home placement for all children. Blackstock (2008: 9) notes that over 60 percent of cases of child welfare involvement for Indigenous children are due to neglect that is directly related to poverty. As Cheng (2010) points out, poor children also remain in care longer and are less likely to be reunited with their families. According to the CIS-2008, unstable or unsafe housing, another measure of poverty, was associated with increased likelihood of substantiation of complaints, and with alternate care placement (Fallon et al. 2010). It should be noted that Indigenous families are less likely to have stable housing and are more likely to live in poverty than any other racial or ethnic group in Canada (Loppie-Reading and Wien 2009; Wilson and MacDonald 2010).

When poor families come to the attention of child welfare authorities, it is

most often due to complaints or concerns about neglect. Although definitions vary somewhat across jurisdictions, “neglect” is generally defined as the inability or failure to provide a child with adequate clothing, food, shelter, supervision or medical or dental care. We note, however, that this definition is limited to the omissions of individual caregivers: such neglect cannot, for example, be assessed against a government that sets social assistance rates far below the poverty line. Over half (56 percent) of Indigenous children and one-fourth (25 percent) of non-Indigenous children removed from their families are removed for neglect (PHAC 2010). One of the ongoing conundrums in child welfare is that a child may be removed from a poor family, without any possibility of preventative financial and support resources being provided by the state to avert removal; yet, once placed in alternate care, the care provider routinely receives more from the state to care for that one child than the entire biological family is eligible to receive.

Writing about disproportionality in Australian child welfare, Long and Sephton (2011: 100) note that while definitions of abuse may be consistent across cultures, “definitions of neglect are more subjective, malleable, and culturally particular.” According to Jonson-Reid et al. (2009), child protection interventions are grounded in a particular construction of White middle-class family life against which the poor, Indigenous and racialized families that come into contact with child protection authorities are assessed. Similarly, Bradt et al. (2014) found that child protection decisions are significantly influenced by socially, culturally and historically dominant assumptions. Although providing families with material resources and supports can be effective in preventing apprehension and placement (Keegan Eamon and Kopels 2004), Anglo-American child welfare regimes, in contrast to many European ones, eschew such remedies, even in the face of compelling evidence in support of this approach. International evaluations of policy and practical supports for early child development conducted by the United Nations Children’s Fund and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) rank Canada last among all wealthy western countries (Kershaw et al. 2010). Sweden outranks Canada in all measures of child well-being even though Canada is a wealthier country (Gilbert et al. 2011).

Most salient is that the rate of child welfare investigation in Sweden is less than half that in Canada: 17.5 per 1000 children compared to 39.1 per 1000 children (Cocozza and Hort 2011), confirming that the provision of material supports has a direct impact in reducing child protection involvement in families. From a practice perspective, it is important to note that the provision of material resources also has a direct bearing on what happens as a result of investigations. Out-of-home placements are relatively rare in Sweden: when they do occur, they are mainly voluntary, mostly involving children aged thirteen to seventeen, and

usually resulting in reunification; whereas, in Canada, most apprehensions are involuntary, about 40 percent of placements involve children under four years of age, and many children never return to their families (Gilbert 2012). These contrasts demonstrate that tackling poverty in child welfare not only preserves families: it is also very likely to be cost-effective. Yet this approach seems to have little appeal for the public, for policy makers or for the politicians who direct them, suggesting that other forces must be at work.

As Jones (2002) notes, under neo-liberal welfare regimes, problems associated with poverty are defined as problems of character and morality rather than as problems of inadequate supports and resources. For example, while the parents in research conducted by Russell, Harris and Gockel (2008) identified a lack of material resources as their most significant barrier to more effective parenting, the main intervention by workers was to require them to attend parenting classes. Indeed, poor parents themselves equate poverty with bad parenting (Russell, Harris and Gockel 2008). Individualizing discourses encourage us to separate “good” parents from deficient parents without consideration for the contextual factors that impinge on parenting resources and abilities (Berry 2013). In order to understand why these discourses are so powerful in Canadian child welfare, it is necessary to consider how neo-liberalism is shaping not only politics and social policy, but also beliefs and perceptions.

Neo-Liberalism

A full discussion of neo-liberalism is beyond the scope of this chapter; those who are interested in more detailed information might look at Orlowski (2011) or, for a more generalized discussion of ideologies and their impacts, Naiman (2012). We concentrate here on how neo-liberal ideologies, and the social policies that flow from them, interact with child welfare systems.

Neo-liberalism is sometimes mistakenly conflated with capitalism, but, while capitalism is common to many political contexts, neo-liberalism is a particular ideology that prescribes how capitalism is taken up. We can make this distinction by looking at an historic example. During the period from the 1940s to the 1970s, Canada was as much a capitalist country as it is now, but operated mostly under the ideology of liberalism. Thus it was, in common with most western European and Anglo-American jurisdictions, what is commonly referred to as a “welfare state.” In these decades, federal, provincial and territorial governments launched an extensive array of public policy initiatives directed at ensuring the well-being and security of Canadians, including old age pensions, socialized medicine, funding for post-secondary institutions and students and so on. Governments also invested extensively in what is referred to as infrastructure: public works projects such as

roads, bridges, clean water systems, public libraries and so on. As these sorts of expenditures were financed primarily through taxation, they consequently had an impact on corporate profits and individual wealth; however, they were widely supported as necessary for the public good — for society.

One of the most important changes heralded by neo-liberalism is the disappearance of concern about the health or well-being of society, and its replacement by concern for the well-being of the market. In order to facilitate this change in social welfare states such as Canada, governments assured people that once the central tenets of neo-liberalism (the rule of the market, deregulation and privatization) were widely applied, a “trickle-down” effect would bring about benefits for everyone. For example, deregulation (elimination of rules and regulations that govern the market) is upheld as promoting freedom, though, as Orłowski (2011: 172) notes, “these discourses do not address what kind of freedom or for whom.” A notion of freedom has been used, for example, to support tax reforms that differentially benefit the wealthy and corporations, while many living wage jobs have been eliminated, and many formerly public services are now privatized. Despite assurances that everyone benefits from neo-liberal initiatives, regardless of social class, the most measurable effect has been markedly increased inequality: more people are poor, and their poverty is more extreme. Neo-liberal policies have brought about a significant decline in the quality of life for Canadians who rely on public services, that is, any Canadian who cannot easily purchase a formerly public service or supplement the “lean” public services that still exist. As Naiman (2012: 196) points out, Canada now ranks in the lower end of OECD countries in terms of social spending and, if health care spending is excluded, ranks close to the bottom. Increased disparity between rich and poor not only has material consequences but also demonstrably intensifies issues of dominance and subordination and superiority and inferiority; these intensifications are most notable in societies with the biggest gaps between rich and poor (Andersen and Curtis 2012).

A central tenet of neo-liberalism is that any dependency on the state is not only bad in and of itself, but fosters further problematic behaviour. For example, keeping social assistance rates below, and, in some jurisdictions, far below the poverty line is explained as necessary to motivate those that receive benefits to find employment. The implication is that people, or at least some people, too easily become dependent and so must be de-incentivized away from reliance on state support. International comparisons conclusively demonstrate that this is false: OECD countries that provide the most generous social assistance benefits also have the highest rates of successful transition from state benefits to employment (Kershaw 2007). But it is essential to point out that dependency is not universally

vilified: certain kinds of dependency are considered to be not only acceptable but also necessary. For example, the biggest recent recipients of public money in most western democracies are financial institutions and major industries such as oil and gas. In 2014, federal and provincial governments provided \$34 million dollars to Toyota and \$71 million dollars to Ford, in addition to tax reductions for both corporations, without requiring any employment guarantees or return on these investments. As Fraser and Gordon (1994) pointed out two decades ago, dependency is cast in a negative light through its interactions with gender, race and class. Young, single, Indigenous or racialized mothers on welfare are frequently portrayed as lazy people who rely on handouts rather than supporting themselves. Alternatively, no stigma attaches to White, male and elite corporate leaders who rely on government subsidies, often called incentives or “tax relief,” that prop up corporate profits and ever-increasing executive compensation.

Neo-liberalism’s emphasis on the individual, who is positioned as entirely in control of his or her circumstances regardless of contextual factors, has important implications for practice in the human services. If we believe, as we are taught to within neo-liberalism, that those who do well have achieved that entirely by their own efforts, and those who suffer do so as a result of their own shortcomings and failures (see McQuaig and Brooks 2013 for an exploration of these beliefs), then our policies, practices and interventions focus on individuals without taking account of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The supports and resources available since the elimination of the welfare state are those that target individuals or individual families for specific interventions over the short term. These factors taken together explain how a worker might feel justified in requiring a desperately poor mother to attend a parenting class rather than provide her with material supports. Further, neo-liberalism as an ideology encourages us to see no need for the type of political engagement that might change those circumstances and contexts.

By considering how the discourses and norms of neo-liberalism emerge and play out in our practices and policies, we may better understand why human service practices have so readily evolved in the direction of individual intervention (see Newbury 2010 for further discussion of how neo-liberalism impacts work with children, youth and families). Neo-liberal policies make it very difficult for families to transition from “at-risk” situations (Albanese 2010): they cultivate attitudes of blame and further marginalization in workers (Winegard and Winegard 2011). Pleas for governments to attend to the race, class, gender and ability disparities implicated in almost all child welfare difficulties have been numerous and well-articulated (see, for example, Callahan 1993; Cameron et al. 2007; Lindsey 2003; Roberts 2002; Swift 1995). But, because neo-liberalism transforms structural

impacts into matters of personal responsibility, the preoccupation with protecting individual children from the abusive or neglectful actions of individual caregivers, almost always mothers, excludes consideration of political questions about race, class and gender inequalities.

Child welfare's devolution into child protection is not the way it "has to be"; Nordic models demonstrate how working in partnership with families (child welfare) dramatically reduces the rate of traumatic intervention (child protection) (Walmsley and Tessier 2014/15). The practices and policies that evolved over the last few decades do not represent better and more progressive practice, although they do "exemplify the privatization of citizenship and individualization of responsibility" (Chen 2005: 146). The technologies of risk management that dominate child protection and most other social services in neo-liberal regimes serve to simultaneously enact power relations and render them invisible. While resisting and transforming child welfare practices at the micro-level are important and necessary strategies, these are not enough: child welfare will not be transformed until the political system that facilitates and constrains it is also transformed.

WALKING THIS PATH TOGETHER: OUR STORIES

Because we realize that engaging in anti-racist, anti-oppressive and respectful practice in child welfare, especially given the context that we have outlined, is extremely challenging, we would like to share a little more of our stories, as we did in the first edition, so that readers see how our own commitment to anti-colonialist, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice came to be. We present this in the form of a conversation between us.

Susan: I entered child welfare with a great deal of knowledge about social justice and a commitment to practice in socially just ways but persistently found my attempts thwarted. I worked initially in northern Manitoba in Cree and Saulteaux communities and it was very clear to me that the problems I saw were fundamentally related to displacement from traditional lands and lives. All the families I worked with had been devastated by residential schools and loss of traditional territories, yet all that I had learned about social justice really didn't help me much to figure out how to be in practice.

I believe that anti-oppressive practice is equally possible when children are taken into care, and when they are left at home, in part because I was a child who needed to be apprehended. When I did go home briefly at age fifteen, my worker talked about it as if it was a punishment, and

I experienced it as a punishment. I wanted to stay in care and didn't understand why it was so difficult for the system to find me a safe and caring place to be. While I was in care I still had lots of contact with my family, with my brother and sister, grandparents, aunts and uncles, but I didn't have to live at home with my father and stepmother, where it was really dangerous. I don't remember the social worker making efforts to maintain these relationships but I remember everyone in my family making an effort to stay in touch with me while I was in care. In many ways being in care really worked for me and perhaps it was not so difficult because I still had connections to my family.

From my present perspective I understand that because I am White, workers did not see a need to separate me from my connections because I did not need to be assimilated. Perhaps my workers even thought I needed to stay in touch with the better parts of my family to successfully become a nice White middle class girl. Most of the girls I was in care with, in the home for girls and on the street, were Indigenous. Because I was White it was easier for me to "look promising," which I know increased the efforts social workers made on my behalf, and my access to resources.

Jeannine: It seems that the agenda was different for each of us. Susan lived in kinship arrangements and yet this did not seem possible for Aboriginal kids. Being White made you look promising and you have such a leg up being viewed as one of the kids who "made it" (finished school, held off on having children despite the odds). It's much harder to look promising if you are Indigenous. This relates to the policies of the time where Indigenous children were viewed as "illegitimate, un-adoptable, unworthy" of having a caring family.

Social workers had a lot of power in our lives and it seemed important to be grateful. I remember that my original reason for being a social worker was because I thought I could do a much better job than the models I had.

Susan: My understanding of how to engage in socially just practice has been a long time coming and is still under construction. Some of the Indigenous teachings that I have been given and exposed to, along with anti-oppressive practice ideas, helped me figure out how to put social justice into practice. My experiences working in child protection were a study in contrasts. In the North I worked only with Indigenous peoples and then I worked in a part of the B.C. interior that had once been densely populated with Indigenous people but there was not a single Indigenous person left. So I went from thinking that child welfare was all about race

to thinking that child welfare was all about poverty. Now I know that it is those two things together that make the perfect child welfare storm. If you are poor and not White and have children, you are almost certain to have child welfare show up at your door sooner or later. Until anti-oppressive practice came along I didn't really understand how to braid together that kind of analysis with my professional practice even though I learned much about respectful, strengths-based engagement from my B.C. child welfare colleagues. Since I came to live in the Coast Salish and Nu'chul'nuth territories and had the opportunity to work in Indigenous communities, I feel that who I am and what I do is so much more open to examination and that is a good thing. This is not information I received in my social work education or as a registered social worker. What I received from Indigenous teachings was that I had to live and work what I said I believed in.

One of my first experiences in research involved interviewing young women in care — young women like me and like the girls I was with on the street. What they told me about their experiences in child welfare saddened me because it was clear that not much of any significance has changed. I think particularly about one young Indigenous woman who came to her interview with a whole file of clippings about colonization, residential school and the sixties scoop because she thought she needed to prove to me that Indigenous people came to involvement with child welfare for these reasons. This experience fuelled my commitment to changing child welfare and my recognition that for Indigenous peoples it has to change within the context of a history of child welfare trying to destroy Indigenous peoples.

Jeannine: I remember working in foster care and removing kids from what was documented as the most deplorable conditions; however, these kids wanted to go home. That was their first choice and I knew that, for the most part, these kids were never going home. We spoke of permanency planning while Elders cautioned us that nothing is permanent.

I was fortunate that some of my early teachers were Elders and that I was able to take these teachings and combine them in social work practice when it was a very new concept to include spirituality in practice. I found that working with young people from those teachings as well as an anti-oppressive lens was making a difference in how these young people perceived hope in their lives. I also learned much from some of my predecessors in Indigenous child welfare, such as First Nation agency directors from the 1970s (Blackfoot Tribal Services — now Siksika

Nation Child and Family Services Agreement in Alberta and the Dakota Ojibway Tribal Council in Manitoba) and how they were the forerunners in taking back the administration of child and family services in our own communities and with our own ways of caring for children. It wasn't long before Métis agencies were also set up to deliver services from a Métis perspective.

I became convinced that extended families had as much and more to give our children than strangers, and that with support they could become the preferred arrangement for Indigenous kids in need of protection. I always felt that I was accountable to my community as well, maybe more so than my employer, if I was working for a ministry. This was a tough balancing act but one that was worth the risk. At the end of the day, I wanted to be the type of social worker who did not give up on those important community and cultural connections for Indigenous children. If I ever forgot, I knew that someone from the Indigenous community would come and remind me of who I was and where I came from. You cannot separate your personal location from your professional work as an Indigenous social worker, in whatever community you work

Those kids I worked with for the most part did not have regular contact or didn't know what happened to their families, and they had fears, anxiety and some fantasies about what was going on in their family. It seemed to be such an effort to first of all know who their extended family was and where they were, to maintain connections with them and facilitate those connections, because drivers were so expensive and cultural resources were scarce.

For a few years I was involved in special case reviews of Indigenous children who died in ministry foster care and community agency care. Those were troubled times in my career, as I cautiously reviewed files, case notes and interview notes with the workers involved. I took my role very seriously as the voice for the children who had passed to another world. I was reminded of how important record keeping is and how children and their families are portrayed in case notes. My heart also reached toward social workers who felt they had done what they could and carried a burden of guilt for not having done more. For me the heart of this book is those children, who inspire me to this day.

My life has come full circle. I came into this world as a Métis child adopted into a non-Métis family. My adoption story has been woven into my professional life to remind me of some important teachings that I wish to uphold. Now I am in an academic position conducting research on cultural planning and adoption of Indigenous children. I don't believe in coincidence — I believe in possibilities. My life could have been very different, and I am grateful that the possibilities that lay before me included an exploration of this important work, guided by my ancestors and all those who are my mentors in this world and the next. There is no resting place away from the world of child welfare until every Indigenous child is confident in their place of family, community and ancestral knowledge, and until there is non-judgmental help freely available for every family that is struggling, whatever the reason. Although we both said we would never work in child welfare, we have both found our place of work.

Thus, we extend the invitation to all who might read this book.

THE INVITATION — ORIAH MOUNTAIN DREAMER

It doesn't interest me
what you do for a living.
I want to know
what you ache for
and if you dare to dream
of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me
how old you are.
I want to know
if you will risk
looking like a fool
for love
for your dream
for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me
what planets are
squaring your moon...
I want to know
if you have touched
the centre of your own sorrow
if you have been opened
by life's betrayals
or have become shrivelled and closed
from fear of further pain.

I want to know
if you can sit with pain
mine or your own
without moving to hide it
or fade it
or fix it.

I want to know
if you can be with joy
mine or your own
if you can dance with wildness
and let the ecstasy fill you
to the tips of your fingers and toes
without cautioning us
to be careful
to be realistic
to remember the limitations
of being human.

It doesn't interest me
if the story you are telling me
is true.

I want to know if you can
disappoint another
to be true to yourself.
If you can bear
the accusation of betrayal
and not betray your own soul.
If you can be faithless
and therefore trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see Beauty
even when it is not pretty
every day.
And if you can source your own life
from its presence.

I want to know
if you can live with failure
yours and mine
and still stand at the edge of the lake
and shout to the silver of the full moon,
"Yes."

It doesn't interest me
to know where you live
or how much money you have.
I want to know if you can get up
after the night of grief and despair
weary and bruised to the bone
and do what needs to be done

to feed the children.

It doesn't interest me
who you know
or how you came to be here.
I want to know if you will stand
in the centre of the fire
with me
and not shrink back.

It doesn't interest me
where or what or with whom
you have studied.
I want to know
what sustains you
from the inside
when all else falls away.

I want to know
if you can be alone
with yourself
and if you truly like
the company you keep
in the empty moments.

(Mountain Dreamer 1999, used with permission)

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