Chapter One

Remembering Where I Came From

Through my experience with Elders, traditional healers and Aboriginal helpers who have incorporated our values, beliefs and practices into their work, I have witnessed our own ways of helping. I have participated in ceremonies that have contributed to the healing and wellness of many people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. All of this has convinced me, as a social worker, that our ways of helping can be followed in social work and other helping practices. Unfortunately, this conviction is not shared throughout the helping fields.

Historically, the social work and psychology professions have acted as an extension of Amer-European systems imposing colonial processes of oppression (Duran and Duran 1995; McKenzie 1985). In fields such as child welfare and mental health, Euro-centric helpers have pressured and coerced Aboriginal people to follow the ways of the societies that they established in the Americas. Most often this has meant assimilation and the internalization of colonial processes. I concur with the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ (1994: 158) statement that the social work profession’s ethnocentric practices and disrespect of Aboriginal cultures have produced anger, distrust and a lack of confidence among Aboriginal peoples towards the profession. Aboriginal people recognized long ago the need for fundamental changes to social work practices within Aboriginal cultures and have been calling for these changes for many years (see Mawhiney 1995; Morrissette, McKenzie and Morrissette 1993; Schwager, Mawhiney and Lewko 1991). In particular, they have strongly emphasized that traditional Aboriginal practices have to be acknowledged and supported as a method of healing for Aboriginal people (Absolon 1993; Clarkson et al. 1992; Hamilton and Sinclair 1991; Hodgson 1992; McCormick 1995; McKenzie and Morrissette 1993; Morrissette et al. 1993; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1997).

As a Cree man who works in the field of social work I am committed to following our peoples’ call for the use of Aboriginal ways of helping. This book is one of my attempts at fulfilling this commitment. It is born out of my work in a Master of Social Work program. It is based on writings about Aboriginal ways of helping, my discussions with Aboriginal helpers and my reflections upon my own participation in sharing circles. Most significantly, it incorporates my personal life experiences with helping. So, while it is based upon many ideas expressed by others, it remains my understanding
of Aboriginal approaches to helping. This is not “the” approach representing all Aboriginal peoples. It is important to remember that within Canada there are more than fifty Aboriginal languages, over six hundred reserves, hundreds of Metis and Inuit communities, and thousands upon thousands of Aboriginal people living in towns and cities. To believe that there is one Aboriginal approach to helping would be naive, to say the least. When all the peoples are lumped together under the term Aboriginal, their various worldviews and practices are easily distorted. Unfortunately, there are many times when the terms Aboriginal, First Nations and Native are used out of convenience, and thus little attention is paid to particular groups of peoples, particularly by the dominating Amer-European societies. On the other hand, Aboriginal peoples face common challenges—colonial oppression being one of the greatest—which encourage the identification of commonalities among us. Thus, my intent in writing this book is to develop and present an approach to helping that will, I hope, stimulate our people to discuss and critique this and other Aboriginal approaches to helping. Key to these critiques will be the voices of individuals from particular nations identifying how this and other approaches support their worldviews in the helping processes. From these dialogues I hope that we will carry these approaches further, if not develop new, more effective ones.

What I Offer

This book is about an Aboriginal approach to helping. It addresses several topics, each of which relates to the others and all of which tend to support the need and/or application of this Aboriginal approach. In order to explain the need for an Aboriginal approach, I briefly discuss colonization from an Aboriginal perspective, ontological imperialism, social work’s role in colonial oppression and the dynamic of resistance. I share an experience I had in order to demonstrate that ontological imperialism is still occurring today. I close this chapter by explaining the role this Aboriginal approach has in resisting these forms of colonial oppression. Chapter three outlines the foundational principles, values and views upon which Aboriginal helping methods are based. The Aboriginal approach outlined is general in nature in that it does not focus on specific issues. Further, since it relies broadly upon Aboriginal concepts, values and perspectives, it can be effectively incorporated by helpers trained in disciplines which involve counselling, supporting and teaching.

Chapter four discusses one specific Aboriginal helping method—sharing circles, chosen because they are already established within many Aboriginal cultures. Information that I relate about sharing circles is based upon a small
body of writing about them and also on my reflective exploration of them. This involved talking intensely with five individuals who have conducted sharing circles: Bernie, Fanny, Glen, Marg and Mary.3

Bernie, a Cree woman, has been a social worker for several years and has conducted sharing circles regularly, particularly in one of her positions serving women in a residential setting. She has also participated in sharing circles outside of her workplace. Fanny, a Cree woman, has worked as a nurse for many years. She has frequently conducted and participated in sharing circles, both within and outside her work experiences. Glen, a Cree man, has worked in social work positions and has explored the ways of many peoples. He has frequently participated in and conducted the sharing circle in personal and work settings. Marg, a Cree woman, has worked in various positions related to helping, the most recent being in a residential treatment program that regularly and frequently incorporates sharing circles. The eldest of the individuals interviewed, Marg, has learned about sharing circles and other Cree practices for many years. She has recently begun teaching about these practices to others who approach her with a request to learn. Mary, a Cree woman, has worked as a social worker and traditional counsellor in various settings, including a residential treatment centre and a shelter for families facing abusive situations. She has been conducting and participating in sharing circles for years both within her work and in her personal life. While all five have participated in ceremonial practices beyond sharing circles, four of them consistently and regularly participate in and/or conduct ceremonies. While all of them presently reside in Aboriginal communities, they each have had the experience of residing in communities where Aboriginal people are not the majority of the population. In the fourth chapter I also draw together the written material on sharing circles and this Aboriginal approach and highlight the commonalities between this approach and sharing circles. Sharing circles are used to represent important aspects of Aboriginal cultures, since they have been used and continue to be used by Aboriginal peoples in helping situations. In Chapter Five, I discuss how the Aboriginal approach is and can be used in various situations including work with individuals, families and groups. I also describe how the approach is followed when addressing family violence. I close the chapter with an example of the Aboriginal approach and sharing circles being used together with a focus on building the self-esteem of youth.
Where My Heart Lies
I remember the words of a dear friend who has been actively learning about our Cree ways for many, many years. She had cautioned a mutual friend that we have to be careful when we read books to try to learn about our ways because we never get to know the authors; we don’t know what they are like or where their hearts lie. With her words echoing in my mind, I was concerned that readers would not know where I was coming from and, in turn, not know the background to the information in this book. While I cannot truly share myself with you in ways that you would come to know me as a human being, I offer these few words as a step towards understanding where my heart lies.

I am a Cree man. I am a citizen of Fisher River Cree Nation but I reside in Winnipeg, Manitoba. While I frequently travelled the two hundred plus kilometres north to Fisher River and Dallas, Manitoba, to visit my grandparents as a child, I was raised in Winnipeg by my mother, Vivian Thickfoot. My family consists of my mother and niece, Kim, who both reside in Winnipeg, my sister Fjola (Fj sounds like that in fjord), who now makes her home in Norway House, Manitoba, my little grandma Edith (little being a term of endearment), who lives in Peguis, and my traditionally adopted brother Ronn, his wife Fariel and my niece Jessica. At one hundred years of age, my grandma is older than her weight in pounds! Besides my other grandparents, my two brothers have travelled to the other side. My oldest brother, Jimmie, passed away when I was a baby, and my second brother, Gerald, passed away in 1992. I have many aunties, uncles and cousins spread from Fisher River, Little Saskatchewan and Norway House, Manitoba, to Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario. Some are close to me, others are getting closer, and some I haven’t met … yet. I am also blessed with a “family of choice” made up of very close Elders and friends.

Among the first Cree families to live in Winnipeg, my mother faced many challenges raising four children on her own, including poverty, isolation and racism. Apparently, the Children’s Aid Society came to the hospital very soon after my birth to take me away. The social worker said it was because my mother was single and already had three children. This was the time of the “sixties scoop” and a time when single parents were not looked upon well. Fortunately, my mother was, and is, a strong woman. She fought off the social worker and pulled in support, a church minister, who came and stood by her. Others weren’t so lucky. My mothers recalls that there were several other Native women on the same hospital floor at that time who, soon after delivery, lost their babies to the Children’s Aid Society. She tells one story that ends with her watching a friend stand in the street sobbing
while her friend’s last child is driven away by a social worker. Even when the Children’s Aid came regularly to the door for the six months following my birth, my mother hid us in the closet and called the minister to get rid of them. She always fought to keep us together as a family, no matter what we faced.

One of the most significant choices my mother made when I was a child, and which has affected my life greatly to this day, regards our language. While I grew up listening to my mom speaking Cree to my grandparents, aunties and uncles, as well as her friends and co-workers, I did not grow up hearing her speak Cree to me or my siblings. When I was an adult and before my mother lost her ability to speak—due to a burst aneurysm and stroke—she was teaching me Cree. It was during one of our “lessons” that she explained how much she and others were put down for speaking Cree. One story was about her witnessing a teacher put a clothespin on a fellow student’s tongue for speaking Cree. She also believed that the best start she could give us in life was to teach us English. Besides, she would say, “you kids never wanted to learn.”

Despite all the challenges of our life, I have many fond memories. When I was a child we lived in the core area and later the north end of Winnipeg. I remember playing at the Native Club and getting hamburgers from my auntie who worked there, going to pow wows to watch my older sister dance, playing street hockey with my brother and watching television at my auntie’s home in Point Douglas while my mother and her visited over bannock, lard and tea. We later moved to low rental housing located in River Heights/Tuxedo, a very wealthy area of Winnipeg. All the stories related to low income kids surrounded by kids from PMQs (personal military quarters) and affluent families are too numerous to mention here.

Around the time of this move, my mother got a job working with the Native Alcoholism Council of Manitoba. The first time I can really recall Elders visiting our family is associated with her work there. My mom spent much time learning from Elders. She never forced us, her children, to follow her in her learning. Because of her experiences as a child, she had made a decision long before to let us determine our own path. Despite this choice, we still had opportunities to spend time with these Elders and had indirect moments of listening as they talked with my mom. Other moments were more direct. I remember sitting in a sharing circle in a church basement as a young boy. There must have been at least forty people there, with two Elders conducting the circle. While I didn’t understand all that was happening, since much of the conversation was in Cree, I sure felt it. The feeling from that ceremony never left me, and I am thankful for the experience and the
time with those two old men.

When I was twelve, two things happened to my immediate family which affected us as greatly as any event we ever faced. One was the birth of my niece. She brought a new commitment to our family. I think her birth encouraged my sister, who already had her diploma in nursing, to go back to school to obtain a degree. She later graduated with a Bachelor of Nursing degree in 1982. Along with my mother’s constant encouragement for us to go to school since “it’s a way out,” my sister’s lead in this area influenced our family more than I can explain. The second thing to happen was my brother Gerald, at the age of eighteen, being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. From just prior to that point to the end of his life, my brother lived in constant pain. There were many times in the middle of the night when I watched my mother cradle him in her arms as he cried. Later, he stopped the sobbing. In one of his stays in the hospital, he would listen to people older than him complain about and compare their pain, and he didn’t want to grow up doing that. He explained to me that this was his reality and he was going to live with it. To him, this meant going to university and getting an education. He graduated with a Bachelor of Social Work degree in 1986, after many years of alternating school with hospital stays. I believe if I have any strength or compassion in my heart, I gained it from my family.

My formative years in grade school were bittersweet. While I made many wonderful friends from all sort of backgrounds, I also learned about stereotypes and racism and my anger. All too often, I let out this in anger in self-destructive ways. I am thankful that despite these challenges I was able to enter university in 1984 through the University of Manitoba Special Premedical Studies Program (spsp). If it wasn’t for this program I would not have been eligible to attend university because of to my poor grades in high school. spsp focused upon my abilities and potential, not my limits. It is an access program providing support to individuals who face social, educational, cultural and economic barriers. At that time it provided personal counsellors and extra academic and financial supports to individuals wanting to enter a health profession. I wanted to become a physician, specifically a psychiatrist. However, after two and half years of preparing to enter the Faculty of Medicine, I changed my mind and decided that social work’s wider perspective would fit more with my views. After another two and half years I graduated from the Bachelor of Social Work program in 1989. One of the things I learned through my experiences was that, given the opportunity, support and desire, anyone can reach goals they thought were impossible.

Four days after my graduation I began my first job, as a case manager
for Winnipeg Centre Child and Family Services. Based in the core area of Winnipeg, I was blessed with the opportunity to work with many families, most of whom were Aboriginal. The people were always teaching me something, usually something about myself. I was always amazed at their resilience. Despite the amazing odds they faced, they managed to survive one way or another. Some of my co-workers would get upset when they were scammed out of bus tickets or parcels of food, but I thought it was right on that the families we served had learned enough about the system to manipulate it and get what they needed as they understood it. I was also reminded how oppressive social workers can be. I remember two workers who would speak about being the best mothers around and how they would save these poor children; usually this meant apprehension. Indeed, they had among the highest apprehension rates around. I never believed that the best way to help a family was by tearing it apart. If I had to apprehend, it was the toughest thing I did. I remember one large family that I was working to try to keep together. The file about them had been open for years, and it seemed that they were written off as a family. While I worked with this family, they remained together one way or another. The mother always had contact with her children and provided direction on how things should be handled. Once I left the agency, this family was dismantled to the point that the mother did not know where her children were. Her biggest crime was that she couldn’t control her children’s actions. I truly disbelieve that foster parents or a levelling system of care could do better than her. The true difference was that foster parents and the care system had far more resources, albeit limited, than this mother. On the other hand, I also recall how abusive some parents could be to children, and I knew that these children needed safe homes. To me safe homes meant aunties, uncles and grandparents, not strangers. Among the many things I learned from this first working experience was that our people have very different perspectives and realities than Amer-Europeans, regardless of whether we are receiving services from them or working alongside them. Often these differences, not ourselves, determine the fate of our people.

Soon after my experience in child welfare, I moved to Whitehorse, Yukon, and started working on a Master of Social Work degree by taking my electives through correspondence. It wasn’t too long after my move that I found myself in a term position with the Council for Yukon Indians, as the Yukon Native Alcohol and Drug Addictions Program treatment manager. I was hired to implement a new service program developed by a consultant and a committee of individuals from the communities. However, when it came time for me to implement the program, none of the communities were
aware of the predetermined direction of the program and it was halted. As a result, I ended up reviewing and analyzing services being implemented by the federal and territory governments and their impact on the First Nations peoples in Yukon. Throughout this experience I was learning how important self-determination is to Aboriginal peoples, on both the community and nation level.

During this time in Yukon, I had become very close to a Tlingit family, so close, in fact, that one member presented to me the idea of adopting me into the family, thus the clan. If you understand the beauty of Yukon, you would know the significance of this idea. Upon being informed of the idea, one Elder, a beautifully wise woman I had become close to spoke with me. She talked about the clan system and what it would mean to be adopted into one. She discussed what being Tlingit meant to her and the commitment that would be expected of me. She discussed my connection to the Cree people and territory. Through her words I was learning, on a different, more intense level, about the importance of my identity and my connection to the land and people.

I returned to Winnipeg not only to complete my degree but to continue my learning about Cree values, beliefs and practices that I had actively started before I moved to Yukon. That fall, my brother Gerald passed away. This had a tremendous effect on me in more ways than one would expect. I reflected upon his zest for life, regardless of the barriers he faced. I recalled my mother’s words about how short life is and recognized my desire to live life fully. My brother was working on his Master of Social Work degree and teaching for the Faculty of Social Work at Thompson at the time of his passing. A memorial was held in his honour in Thompson and I was asked to attend. It was then that I got to know the people at the faculty site. Later that spring I was asked to teach a course over the summer. Before the completion of the course, I was offered a one-year contract to teach at the site, and that one year ended up being five years.

The program was an access program, just like the one that helped me through my first degree. To come full circle and teach within such a program was a true blessing for me. More so was the learning the students offered to me. These students had left their homes throughout northern Manitoba to attend the program in Thompson. Most of them were Aboriginal women with families. While not everyone who enrolled completed the program, the graduation rate has been, for the most part, greater than that of the university in general. Considering that the program’s content included material taught on the main campus in Winnipeg and additional material to support the program’s appropriateness for a northern setting, I believe the
students have more than demonstrated their resilience and abilities. Their consistent questioning of the appropriateness of what they were learning and their commitment to their families, communities and people, along with my own critique of the content of the various course, challenged me to find material and examples which were inclusive of Aboriginal peoples’ experiences. I was also spending significant time with Cree Elders and ceremonial leaders while I was in Thompson, as well as travelling across the prairies to learn from various Cree people. In fact, I became so consumed in the teaching and learning that it took me a total of six years to complete the Master of Social Work degree. It was through the teachings from these people, the students’ desires for relevant curriculum, the completion of my thesis on an Aboriginal approach and my commitment to the well-being of Aboriginal peoples, that I recognized the need for our views to be included in the social work curriculum.

I then returned to Winnipeg to prepare for my next dream, my doctorate degree. I began working with Health Canada’s Medical Services Branch (now referred to as First Nations and Inuit Health Branch) through an interchange agreement with Anishinaabe Mino-Ayaawin (AMA), which is a First Nations health organization serving seven First Nations in the Interlake region of Manitoba. I lasted three and half months with Health Canada before I realized I couldn’t work on that side of the fence. I have since been working directly for AMA, as a manager setting up their mental health program. My experiences here show me the limitless abilities of Aboriginal people when given the opportunity to develop, implement and deliver programs that follow the direction and desires of the people we serve.

These experiences have shaped me, particularly in my role as a social worker, and I have come to hold certain beliefs very strongly. I believe all people have abilities, some of which are more pronounced than others. Many Aboriginal peoples refer to these as gifts. I believe we are to seek out these gifts and try to understand how they are to be used. Indeed, this belief is demonstrated in our peoples practices of fasts, vision quests and the deep contemplation experienced in many ceremonies. I believe we are to use our gifts for the betterment, wellness and self-determination, not only of ourselves, but also of our families, communities and nations. I also believe that the differences between Aboriginal peoples’ and non-Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews, values, beliefs and practices are real. These differences challenge helping relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples since the ability to make strong connections can be difficult as a result. I believe one of the best ways to help our own peoples is to use our abilities in a manner which follows and supports our peoples’ perspectives,
values, beliefs and practices. When differences arise between our own and other peoples’ ways, then the most appropriate resolutions for us remain within the cultures of our peoples. I believe that our Elders, particularly those following our traditional ways, hold the deepest understanding of our cultures. As such, I believe our Elders hold many answers to how we are to resolve differences and concerns and the ability to set direction for Aboriginal peoples. Because of my experiences and beliefs, I have attempted to rely upon the wisdom of Elders.

Following the Elders’ Example
Of great significance to me and a great influence on my writing of this book are the many opportunities I had to spend time with Elders and in ceremonies. As a child I was greatly influenced by my grandparents. I hold many stories, memories and teachings from all of them. I recall one grandfather’s love of the bush, sleeping under his Hudson Bay blankets, and listening to him hum as I fell asleep in his one-room house. I recall staying with my grandparents in Fisher River, listening to my grandfather as he prayed in Cree and listening to my grandmother as she told stories on how to behave and treat others. As a boy I was able to sit and listen to Elders as they visited with my mother or when they shared in circles. Later, I started attending ceremonies and took an active interest in learning about them. Before I left for Yukon, I began learning about Cree ceremonies and when I returned this work intensified.

One of the results of this interest and work is that I have followed our practices as I sought information for this book. I initiated the process which led to this book with a ceremony. Throughout my learning and writing I followed my grandfathers’ examples by including prayer and song to help me. I remembered my grandmothers’ commitment to helping others and attempted to maintain this commitment. As best I could, I followed the teachings Elders shared with me during our visits. For example, I incorporated the offering of tobacco. Tobacco has been used by Aboriginal people for centuries as part of an exchange between two or more people, animals, spirits and/or the Creator. Usually one individual will offer tobacco when requesting or appreciating something. When requests are made, the individual who is offered the tobacco is free not to accept it, thereby indicating that he or she is not prepared for various reasons to meet the request. The inclusion of tobacco emphasizes that the exchange will be, among many things, honest, respectful and kind. This inclusion of tobacco coincides with mainstream ethical concepts such as confidentiality and the rights of individuals to participate or not. In order to maintain a respectful and
balanced relationship with the people I talked with, I offered tobacco to each of them when I made my request for information on sharing circles. When we were finished, I offered each of them a blanket in exchange for the gifts that they shared with me. In this way, I tried to follow the example the Elders had set.

I share these experiences and beliefs with you in order that I do not misrepresent myself and you can understand where I stand. I do not profess any great wisdom. More accurately, I am blessed in that through talking with Elders and many other Aboriginal people, I have obtained a little bit of an understanding of our people, of our ways of helping and of our aspirations. I am trying to further this understanding by using it as a guide for my daily life and in my helping practice with Aboriginal peoples. This learning and my beliefs are incorporated into these pages, but I must emphasize that I certainly do not think that my life and understanding is any better—or any worse—than what others have experienced and understand. Indeed, a phrase comes to mind when I think about sharing my perspective on helping: “I don’t know anything.”

“I Don’t Know Anything”
I have heard this statement from many Elders, and I am still trying to come to grips with its meaning. I do realize that what I know is far from what these wise, old people know. To me, having information and knowing something are very different. I’ve been in school for most of my life in one form or another and I have been given a lot of information to hold. From my life experiences and reflections on these experiences I have come to know a little about myself. But when it comes to life and when I remember what these Elders have said, I get the sense that I really don’t know much about anything out there. So when I pull together the ideas of many people, include my thoughts and offer these words about an Aboriginal approach to social work and other helping practices, it is within this context. I leave it up to you to decide what information you can come to know. Feel free to leave the rest.

Notes
1. The term Amer-European as opposed to Euro-American, is used to emphasize the European base of people and their ideas.
2. Some people use alternative terms for conduct, specifically facilitate or host. Similarly, the word conductor, facilitator and host are used interchangeably. In following my experiences in northern Manitoba, I will primarily use the term conductor.
3. To ensure the anonymity of these sharing circle conductors, I am using pseudonyms for them. Indeed, two of the individuals interviewed preferred to remain anonymous.

4. The sixties scoop refers to the wave of apprehensions of Aboriginal children. Literally thousands of children were taken from their homes and adopted to non-Aboriginal families throughout Canada, the United States and Europe. While the name focuses on the sixties, this process of adopting out Aboriginal children continued right up to the middle of the 1980s. For further discussions on this matter, see Johnson (1983), McKenzie and Hudson (1985), and Fournier and Crey (1997).