

In Their Own Words, In Their Own Time, In Their Own Ways:
Indigenous Women's Experiences of Loss, Grief,
and Finding Meaning Through Spirituality

by

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Abstract

This exploratory study sought to understand how spirituality influences the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for seven Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. Writing from an Indigenous research paradigm with storytelling as the research method, five recurring themes emerged from the transcripts: 1) dreams; 2) honouring memory; 3) healing; 4) making space; 5) meaning. In addition, three central themes were present in the five themes: 1) connection; 2) relationships; 3) we are not alone. The research exposed a story within a story, as each storyteller revealed a history of trauma related to colonization, and their healing journey of coming to see, coming to know and coming to be as Indigenous women. The study found that spirituality positively influenced the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning through the maintenance of connections and relationships with their loved one, and affirming meaning or purpose in their life.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my family who supported me unconditionally while I've been on this journey. Whenever I wavered in my commitment or confidence to complete this work, I was blessed to receive love and encouragement from the most important people in my life, my wonderful husband and best friend Jim, my amazing children Tony, Paul, Colleen, Eric, and my beautiful granddaughter Justyce, my always supportive mother Carolyn and stepfather Gerhard, my compassionate and caring stepmother Betty, great 'little' brothers Craig and Thomas and my wise 'older' brother Mark, nephews Michael, John and their mother Gail, nephews Kevin and Lance, loving mother-in-law Kay, supportive extended families, Mark, Lorette and family, Dean, Laura and family, Clint, Betty and family, and Dale, Kelly and family. I would be remiss if I didn't recognize their contribution to my success. From the time I began this journey until its conclusion with this work; several loved ones have passed on. I wish to dedicate this work to their memory, the 'twins'- my sweet and loving brother Dean who died in February, 1990 and my beloved sister Dawn who died in April, 2006, my adored oldest brother Bert who died in April, 2007, my kind and loving brother-in-law Brian who died in October 2012, and my much-loved father Ross who died in November, 2012. Life is not the same without you, but you're never far from my thoughts, and I feel your spirits with me all the time. I am truly blessed to have all of you in my life; this work would mean nothing without you, and in return, I dedicate the rest of my life to you. We can't make up for lost time, but we can enjoy life together from this day on. I love you all, thank you.

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**In Their Own Words, In Their Own Time, In Their Own Ways:
Indigenous Women's Experiences of Loss, Grief,
and Finding Meaning Through Spirituality**

Chapter One: Introduction

Indigenous women's experiences of loss, grief, and finding meaning through spirituality are the focus of this thesis. This introductory chapter is comprised of the statement of the problem, the purpose and goal of the study, as well as the research questions guiding this inquiry. An analysis of literature focusing on historical and contemporary loss and grief theories identifies the significance of this study for social work, and the advancement of Indigenous worldviews and knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

Part of the fullness of life is to experience death and the feelings of loss and grief that follow. Loss and grief as experienced by Indigenous people received little, if any attention from early theorists and may be reflective of the prevailing attitudes towards Indigenous people at that time in history. Benoliel (1999) suggests that, "research on loss and bereavement was closely associated with the emergence of the "death" movement in the 1950s and 1960s" (p. 263). Throughout this time period in history, Indigenous children were forced to attend residential schools, were removed from their homes and placed in foster care in what became known as the 60s scoop, with the focus being placed on assimilation of Indigenous people rather than their experiences of loss and grief.

In the past, research and clinical practice have neglected the cultural and relational influences of the experiences of loss and grief for Indigenous people, despite "persistent calls from practitioners and researchers in the social sciences for greater sensitivity to the contexts

of grief and a more balanced understanding of its positive and cultural influences in our lives” (Kellehear, 2002, p. 176). The exclusion of cultural and relational influences in traditional grief theories calls to question their efficacy when working with Indigenous people.

In preparation for my thesis, I completed a comprehensive and systematic review of loss and grief literature in an effort to identify predominant theories within the contexts of practice and research. This search produced an expansive number of scholarly articles on loss and grief, written primarily within the realms of psychology and sociology. A second, more directed search was completed in an effort to access literature within the social work profession that focused on ‘loss and grief,’ ‘Indigenous people,’ and ‘spirituality’. This search produced only a small number of social work articles on loss and grief. Following a thorough review of sixty-six scholarly articles, and ten textbooks on the topic, I was able to identify only one book chapter, authored by Cherokee social worker, Sherri Showalter (1998), on the topic of hospice care with Indigenous people. Lloyd (1997) presented research findings on the challenges to social work practice with the dying and bereaved, resulting from societal and organizational changes in Great Britain, and the need for social workers to include a spiritual dimension. Malkinson (2001) reviewed outcome studies of grief therapy with a focus on cognitive-behavioral therapy; Goldsworthy (2005) described the application of grief and loss theory to losses other than death; Kramer (1998) presented research findings on the effects of a grief and loss course on social work students. The paucity of social work research in loss and grief literature was unexpected, as Goldsworthy (2005) notes, “working with loss and grief has long been identified as one of the core skills of social work practice” (p. 170). In complete contrast, the fields of psychology, sociology, and nursing represent the bulk of research and practice theories in loss and grief literature.

A review of this literature revealed few articles containing references to Indigenous people. Ellis (1998) makes reference to the use of shamans by Native American people, the importance of grief counsellors, therapists and other mental health practitioners looking at their own beliefs, and having an awareness of the availability of shamans and healers. Walker and Balk (2007) researched the bereavement rituals, cultural values and meanings of death of the Muskogee Creek Tribe in the United States, while Baydala, Hampton, Kinunwa, Kinunwa, and Kinunwa. (2009) described a relationship-based approach to the construction of meanings of death, dying, grief, and end-of-life care of Aboriginal people in the United States. Kelly, Linkwich, Cromarty, St. Pierre-Hansen, Centone, & Gilles (2009) described the elements of culturally appropriate palliative care for First Nations people within the nursing profession, and Kelly, and Minty (2007) discusses end-of-life care issues for nurses working with Aboriginal patients. Wake, Martin, and Dineen (1999) describes the grieving rituals of Australian Aboriginal peoples. Brave Heart (2000) describes historical trauma of the Lakota people, collective survivor identity, traditional values and healing. Hotson, Macdonald, and Martin (2004) describe issues of culture, death and dying, and remote palliative care service delivery to northern Manitoba First Nations. These findings, although not an exhaustive review of loss and grief literature, support the relevance of this study for social work practice, education and research at this point in time.

Early theories of loss and grief were informed through the psychodynamic perspective of Sigmund Freud. According to Bradbury (2001), “Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia* is a classic” written in 1915 during the First World War and published in 1917; it signaled a significant shift in both psychoanalytic theory, and in our understanding of how people react to various kinds of loss (p. 212). As the first systematic study on loss, it proposed that grief

was the cognitive process through which loss was resolved Goldsworthy (2005). It seems that Freud's work, though not without criticism, became the standard from which other loss and grief theories evolved, and remains influential today, as scholars seek to disprove or expand upon his early works. According to Kellehear (2002), the stage theory of grief, which Kubler-Ross first introduced in 1970 gained wide acceptance and many practitioners and popular writers working in bereavement care embraced much of this important early work. Stage theory still forms the basis of our understanding of personal control and adaptation in the face of loss. Bradbury (2001) writes that Bowlby's publication *Attachment and Loss* in 1980, introduced the world to attachment theory, and provided an alternative to Freud's work. She goes on to say that attachment theory proved a significant contribution to the field of loss and grief by emphasizing the relationship between the deceased and the person experiencing the loss, both of which were thought to be components of 'healthy' grief. Worden's (1991) task theory identifies four tasks related to the experience of grief, which "stressed individuality, autonomy and choice in grief, something that had previously not been explored in the development of theoretical perspectives of grief and loss" according to Doka (as cited in Goldsworthy, 2005, p. 172).

My own understanding of grief and loss was formed during my practical nursing studies in the early 1980's. Kubler Ross's stage theory became the predominant loss and grief approach that informed my nursing practice for many years, and even after leaving the nursing profession to study counselling, it became an essential component of my counselling skills tool kit. It was only when faced with the untimely deaths of my siblings that I began to question whether the stage theory was the best option for me. I felt that many of my emotional

and cultural needs were being ignored, and as my own grief didn't follow the prescribed stages, I wondered if something was wrong with me.

While psychodynamic, attachment, stage, task, and process theories “provide us with implications and insights into the dynamics and process of dying and grief” (Feifel, 1990, p. 540) it may be said that this knowledge has led to a concentration on the negative aspects of grief. “Professional interventions focused on ways to reduce the morbidity and mortality associated with grief, and lessen its role in suicide, substance abuse and other psychiatric conditions, such as severe anxiety and depression” (Kellehear, 2002, p. 176). Beven, and Thompson (2003) found that “professional literature has focused primarily on the psychological aspects” while ignoring the spiritual, social, and cultural contexts of peoples' lives. These theories have influenced much of the loss and grief work in social work practice, and may be viewed as incompatible with social work values and ethics, as Goldsworthy (2005) notes:

When viewed in this light, some of the more ‘traditional’ theories of grief and loss that propose ‘stages’ or ‘tasks’ seem to have ignored these basic tenets of social work practice. Their prescriptive nature pathologises the meaning and context of clients’ experiences to such an extent that people who do not fit the constructs of the theory, rather than the theory, are to blame. Thus, grief and loss become medicalised and are viewed as illness rather than as responses to changes in life. (p. 174)

As a result, social workers may not understand Indigenous clients’ unique experiences of loss and grief that are grounded within worldviews, social contexts, spiritual beliefs and collective histories.

Grief and loss theories should be consistent with social work values and ethics, namely, self-determination, inherent dignity and worth, empowerment and a commitment to the diversity of client experience and meaning according to Robbins, Chatterjee, and Canda

(1999). There is no doubt that the death of a loved one leaves people forever transformed, regardless of race or culture. Neimeyer (2006) suggests that grief is personal, and therefore must be considered within the wider systems and contexts of the individual to include our identity and relationships. In addition, Attig (as cited in Goldsworthy, 2005) notes, “These changes in our identity impact on the ‘webs of connectedness’ that link us with others, such as family, friends and work colleagues (p. 367). For Indigenous people, relationships in the form of family and extended family are essential to health and well-being, and extend beyond kinship ties to the land, its inhabitants, to encompass the spiritual. Lloyd (1997) writes that, the experience of death raises questions of a broadly spiritual and existential existence as one begins to search for meaning in the face of loss.

The death of a loved one, though a life changing experience, may in fact be an opportunity for personal growth. Carr (2007) suggests that in spite of the distressing reality of death and subsequent disruption to family relationships, the death of a loved one may serve to emphasize and renew commitments to family through cultural knowledge that maintains connection to their loved one, and create meaning in their lives. Much of past research on Indigenous peoples’ healing focused on pathologies as opposed to resilience, growth, and the positive effects on relationships, identity, and community.

In summary, the focus on the psychological and emotional aspects of loss and grief, to the exclusion of cultural, social, political, and spiritual influences calls into question, their efficacy when working with Indigenous people. The dearth of loss and grief literature in social work speaks to the need for further research as it pertains to Indigenous people, in particular their experiences, and the influence of worldviews, knowledge, spirituality, and relationships. There is a need for research that is conducted by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. As

in the past, the voices of Indigenous people and Indigenous women, in particular, have been silenced as a result of colonization, and oppression. This study seeks to contribute to a growing body of work by Indigenous scholars that seeks to challenge colonial oppression, and develop Indigenous social work perspectives and practices that include Indigenous approaches to helping (Absolon, 1993, 2009; Baskin, 2009, 2011; Hart, 2002, 2006, 2008; Poonwassie & Charter, 2001, 2005).

Purpose and Goal of the Study

The purpose of this thesis is to identify how spirituality influences the experiences of loss and grief, and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. The inclusion of spirituality in social work remains an emerging field. As the literature review suggests, there remains a paucity of literature on the influence of spirituality on the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women. This thesis builds upon the works of other Indigenous scholars' social work research on culturally specific approaches to healing. In addition, this study seeks to address the absence of Indigenous women's experiences of loss and grief in social work literature.

The rationale for my research topic is grounded within my own experience following the deaths of my sister and brother within a year of one another, my journey to negotiate the loss through mainstream and Indigenous approaches to healing, and finally finding meaning and healing through spirituality. While reviewing loss and grief literature, I noticed there was very little content or reference made to the experiences loss, grief and finding meaning of Indigenous people in general, and Indigenous women in particular, or the influence of spirituality on their experiences following the death of a loved one. The intent of this study

will focus on the relational, spiritual and cultural influences that construct meaning from an Indigenous perspective following the death of a loved one.

As an Indigenous researcher, I have a responsibility to focus on the positive aspects of my research topic as a means to balance past research conducted on Indigenous people that mainly focused on the negative impacts or the pathology of grief. My research follows the lead of other Indigenous scholars including Martin (2001) who've written about the positive aspects of our ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing. Wilson (2008) identifies the importance of remaining focused on the positive:

What I've learned from Elders while I've been doing this thinking is that focusing on the positive in Indigenous research focuses on harmony. It forms a relationship that pulls things together. I've been taught that harmony is when things are together-they are linked. Making a connection in this way allows for growth and positive change to take place. Researching the negative is focusing on and giving more power to disharmony. (p. 109)

When I speak of relational, I am referring to our relationships with other people, our ancestors, the land and everything on or above it, as well as the cosmos. I've been taught that as Indigenous people, we do not exist in isolation, but rather we must maintain an interdependent relationship with all things or we will cease to exist. Weber-Pillwax (2004) refers to this as "these natural laws or principles of ethics" that are "meant to govern our relationships with all other living beings and forms of life" (p. 80). This reference to natural laws is a term shared by other Indigenous people including the Sqilxw – Okanagan. Cardinal (2001) states simply, "Who I am is where I'm from, and my relationships" (p. 80). As an Indigenous researcher, the relational aspect of my research is as normal as breathing in and out, it is a part of me, and is reflected throughout my thesis.

As an Indigenous researcher, conducting research from an Indigenous research paradigm, I would be remiss if I did not mention the political and social influences that impact Indigenous women's experiences of loss and grief, which may be directly attributable to colonization. These social influences to which I refer include the Indian Act, residential schools, the sixty's scoop, and other residual nuances of "Indigenous-settler relationships" (Kovach, 2010, p. 42) that continue to be relevant in today's world. I expand upon this topic in more detail in the literature review chapter of my thesis.

The search for meaning following the death of a loved one is a largely spiritual experience and may continue for years, as one questions why this has happened. The quest for meaning may arise for different reasons depending upon the loss experienced. For example, the death of an elder after a long productive life may not result in a search for meaning; however death related experiences more often invoke a search for meaning as a means to make sense of what is happening. These experiences may be influenced by a number of factors including the degree to which an individual receives Indigenous cultural and spiritual teachings, participates in spiritual practices, rituals and ceremonies, attends church or embraces a combination of Indigenous spiritual and Christian beliefs, as opposed to an individual not raised within their culture and/or for whatever reason, is without spiritual beliefs. Walker (2001) notes, "Spiritual experience continues to be a largely taboo topic within Western institutions of higher learning" (p. 20). Bearing this in mind, I posit that individuals who receive cultural teachings, possess strong spiritual beliefs, and/or participate in faith based organized religion, and/or tribal based cultural activities, ceremonies and rituals have positive meaning making experiences following loss.

My goal is to promote an understanding of how spirituality influences the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning of Indigenous women that may be passed on to social work students and other helping professions who provide services to Indigenous women. It is important to me that something meaningful comes out of this research project. As Baskin (2011) writes, “It is important for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to have access to Indigenous knowledges....to help inform the next generation of social work students/researchers who wish to work with other historically marginalized and radicalized communities” (p. 230). It is from this desire to contribute to social work knowledge and practice that my research question arose.

Research Question

My research is based within an Indigenous research paradigm and is an exploratory study. As such, it seeks to answer one question: How does spirituality influence the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one?

Significance for Social Work

Loss, Grief, Spirituality and Social Work

In social work, Indigenous scholars’ research on trauma, historical grief and hospice care seeks to bring attention to the impacts of colonization, ethnocentrism, and issues of cultural safety and competency for professionals. However, within my extensive search for and review of available social work literature, not only are the concepts of loss, grief and the influence of spirituality virtually nonexistent, the voices and experiences of Indigenous people, and most notably, Indigenous women are conspicuously absent. According to Goldsworthy (2005) the experience of loss and grief is unavoidable, multidimensional, and

affects all aspects of social work clients' lives, yet, despite its central role; "the exploration and application of grief and loss theory in social work literature" receives little or no attention.

This point of view is shared with Beven and Thompson (2003) when they write:

There are many areas which are underdeveloped in social work. In terms of professional practice, this leaves practitioners open to the influence of more traditional theoretical approaches to loss and grief which have a narrow psychological focus and are in part shaped by a medical model of grieving. It is our view that matters of loss and grief are multidimensional, and that the sociological dimension is one that has been neglected in comparison with others. Social difference and the associated problems of inequality were seen to be relevant to loss in all its forms. A need to take account of the broader social aspects could be seen as a basic starting point for developing a more sophisticated theoretical understanding of loss experiences and the associated grief reactions. If we are to take seriously the challenge of promoting emancipator forms of practice, then it is clear that we need to address our attention more closely to other underdeveloped areas (p. 192).

Although, social work literature clearly articulates the need for the development of loss and grief theories in order to meet the needs of clients, the influence of spirituality on the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women is an equally important consideration for social work.

The inclusion of spirituality within the social work profession in Canada has undergone a number of significant changes since its inception. In the past, social work was closely allied with organized religion, and rather than helping or understanding Indigenous people, it became another tool of assimilation. Graham, Coates & Coholic (2006) writes that prior to European contact, Indigenous people had a "long tradition of responding to social need that was spiritually-based." (p. 2) Tribal members in need were cared for by the entire community. Following contact with Europeans however, Indigenous communities experienced serious disruptions to their social structures and spiritual practices, as a result of the combination of pious mandates and government policies. The following table provides a

broad overview of the three time periods identified as significant in social work from early history to present day:

Table 1: The Emergence of Spirituality in Canadian Social Work (Adapted from Graham, Coholic, and Coates, 2006).

Time Period	Significant Characteristics
Post-European Contact to Early Nineteenth	This period highlighted by sacred, non-professionalism, volunteerism, low technique, little established research, colonialism,
Post – 1850	Emergence of social work personnel affiliated with religious traditions – Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish; emerging trade union movement; emerging women’s movement and immigrants, Foundation laid for structure of institutional social care – provincially specific – voluntary, attached to churches, industry or trade unions, or affiliated with a poor law tradition.
Prior to 1900	Canadian charitable personnel highly oriented to religious traditions, steeped in religious nomenclature and theology.
Latter half of 19 th Century	Women’s Christian Temperance Union, Young Women’s Christian Association were international Protestant organizations founded in Canada concerned with women’s rights. Welfare state and social concern influenced by religious conviction.
Early 20 th Century	Emergence of secular, scientific & technical profession, orientated to higher learning. American social work pioneer Mary Richmond influences profession transition to secular, technical prowess, Presbyterian influence.
20 th Century	Secular orientation predominated but never entirely. In the 1970’s and 1980’s little attention in social literature devoted to spirituality reflecting growing secularism in Canada, decline in church attendance. The 1990’s saw the re-emergence of spirituality and social work, culture started to be explored as an element of practice whereby spiritual and religious worldviews must be considered, emergence of Aboriginal theory and practice in social work.
New Millennium & Spirituality	Emergence of spirituality as topic of discussion in Canadian social work scholarship and practice. Development of Canadian Association for Spirituality and Social Work in 2001; now called Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work.

The consideration of spirituality in Canadian social work has undergone numerous transformations throughout the history of the profession. The evolution of spirituality in social work is generally seen in a positive light, and may be viewed as a reflection of the profession's current recognition that spirituality contributes to the overall well being of individuals who seek clinical services.

In summary, this thesis presents my research with Indigenous women and my reflections on their stories and experiences. The purpose of this research is to investigate the influence of spirituality on the experiences of loss, grief, and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. This exploratory study is located within an Indigenous research paradigm, and is a significant study for social work in that it seeks to address the paucity that currently exists in social work literature as it pertains to the influence of spirituality on the experiences of loss, grief, and finding meaning for Indigenous women. My goals are to provide a medium for Indigenous women to share their life stories that speaks to the significance of spirituality in their lives, promote an understanding of how spirituality influences the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women that may be passed on to social work students and other helping professions who provide services to Indigenous women, and contribute to social work education, practice and research through the distribution of this work.

Chapter Organization

This thesis is organized into six chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of the research, and the relevance of this study for social work. The second chapter consists of the literature review, which presents an examination of literature relevant to the study, including Indigenous worldviews, knowledge and spirituality, perspectives of death, grief, healing and

finding meaning; followed by a discussion on the negative impacts of colonization as it pertains specifically to Indigenous women. Chapter three outlines the methodological approach for this research, and describes the components of the Indigenous research paradigm used in this study including ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology and research method, as well as the implementation of the research design. Chapter four: finding meanings, presents the stories of loss and grief, and the identification of themes arising from the stories. Chapter five contains a discussion of the themes, and ties the themes back to the literature review. In chapter six, I provide my final reflections on the study, and its relevance to social work education, practice and research, as well as other helping professions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review begins with an examination of Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, spirituality and perspectives of death, grief, healing and finding meaning. This is followed by a review of colonization and the negative impacts on the transfer of knowledge related to cultural practices, ceremonies, and beliefs, specifically as they pertain to Indigenous women. The literature centers on the erosion of matrilineal societies, diminishing of traditional roles, power issues and the silencing of Indigenous women's voices, which continues to be felt in Indigenous communities and urban centers today. Throughout, this literature review includes early works by Indigenous scholars whose writing are considered as relevant. As in the past, Indigenous scholars today seek to educate and counter Western discourse in academia through the sharing of tribal worldviews, teachings, ceremonies and knowledge in their publications and research. In writing and conducting research within an Indigenous paradigm, whereby ancient knowledge and teachings are shared and valued, as much as the life stories of the participants, I believe I would be remiss if I didn't include the

works of past and present Indigenous scholars whose work inspired me to follow their ‘*trails of tears.*’

Indigenous Worldviews

Many times I’ve heard elders say, ‘We have always been here,’ and through my own experience, I’ve noted that many Indigenous people continue to maintain strong relationships with their traditional territories, which are reflected in their creation stories, teachings, ceremonies, rituals and songs. According to Baskin (2011), “Our ancestors left us these methods through the generational teachings that are passed on by our Elders and through our blood memories (p. 58). The teachings are there for those who seek them, and are available through “tribal knowledge systems,” according to Kovach (2009, p. 55). Indigenous worldviews are comprised of interrelationships with the world around them, the universe, the spirit world, and as such there is much that is only accessed through self-reflexivity. Making the invisible visible requires ongoing self-examination, as well as introspection. According to Baskin, “Indigenous worldviews incorporate ways of turning inward for the purpose of finding meanings through, for example, prayer, fasting, dream interpretation, ceremonies, and silence” (p. 58). This is in direct conflict with dominant worldviews and scientific explanations particularly; migration and evolution theories that seek to explain away or dismiss Indigenous worldviews as subjective and mythical. Tinker (2004) explains an important discrepancy between evolution theory and Indigenous worldviews:

A principle objection to theories of evolutionary descent on the part of American Indian people, then, stems from this ubiquitous Indian notion of interrelationship and the respect that Indian people maintain for all life forms in our world, including rocks and trees. Rather than elevate human beings to the apex of an evolutionary ascendancy (i.e., Darwins’ common descent), the lack of human privileging over these other life forms means that Indians understand that all life shares equal status and that value, personhood, and intelligence must be recognized in all life.

If there is a hierarchy of beings in the Indian experience of the world, humans are found at the bottom rather than at the top, being the youngest and least wise of all living things.

We Osage do seem to come close to agreeing with current cosmological (and, perforce, evolutionary) theories in one regard: we hold that rock is *tsage*, the oldest living being—for which reason some call the *tsage* “grandparents” or “beloved old ones.” And we know these old ones to be repositories of great wisdom and balance. (p. 108)

Indigenous people’s worldview evolved from careful observation of the world around them. It is through their examination of the cycles of life, and the relationships between all living things that they learned to “live comfortably in the physical world, and not to unduly intrude into the lives of other creatures” according to Deloria (1999, p. 53).

As previously noted, Indigenous worldviews are contained in tribal Creation stories, and are essential to understanding our responsibilities, as they inform us of our place in the world. Deloria (1999) explains further:

The primary focus of creation stories of many tribes placed human beings as among the last creatures who were created and as the youngest of the living families. We were given the ability to do many things but not specific wisdom about the world. So our job was to learn from other older beings and to pattern ourselves after their behavior. We were to gather knowledge, not dispense it. (p. 131)

The same holds true for other Indigenous people, for example, according to the Sqilxw-Okanagan creation story, coyote was sent to earth by Kwulencuten or Creator to teach humans how to survive. Humans were the last to be formed and as such, they possessed no skills or knowledge about how to exist in the world. Coyote figures prominently in a Sqilxw-Okanagan worldview, as both a teacher and trickster, and is contained in many captikwl/stories. Cohen (2010) refers to this as “cultural capital, the knowledge which informs our lives, practices and relationships: language, stories, practices, customs, songs, and so on” (p. xv). Indigenous creation stories teach us about our place in the world, our reliance upon all other living things,

and how our relationships sustain us. Our relationship to the world around us is further highlighted by Valaskakis (as cited in Kirmayer, Brass, and Valaskakis, 2009) who writes:

In Aboriginal understandings, human beings are themselves powerless individuals and collectivities whose control over their lives comes from interactions with empowered spirits, from a negotiation with non-human and other-than-human forces of nature. The hierarchies of spiritual relations that sustain and empower Indians are located in the range of living beings that are embodied in the natural world, in the environment, animal, other-than-human persons, which like the land itself, specify the significance of place and extend the presence of time. (p. 447)

Interrelatedness best describes the relationship Indigenous people have with the world around them, and is fundamental to an Indigenous worldview.

Couture (1996) uses two short sentences to clearly articulate this meaning, “There are only two things you have to know about being an Indian. One is that everything is alive, and two is that we’re all related” (p. 45). To many Indigenous people this statement requires no further explanation. It simply and accurately defines an Indigenous worldview with two words, (1) alive, and (2) related. Tinker (2004) further explains the concepts of everything being alive and related when he writes:

Respect for the sacredness of the lives of trees, rocks, corn, and buffalo is not just a theological, religious, or mythological cognitional perspective on the part of Indian people. Rather, it stems from our observed experiential knowledge, over countless generations, of the world around us. More than that, it is an experiential knowledge base that continues to be replicated and expanded in remarkable ways that are unavailable to contemporary Euro-Western science and its methodologies that tend to insist on laboratory replicability. Much of Indian knowledge comes from careful observation of the world, always done out of an attitude of relational respect and reciprocity. (pp. 118-119)

Indigenous people understand that they are dependent upon every living thing in the world, and that we must safeguard the land, and all other living entities if we are to survive. Wilson (2001) expands upon the concept of relatedness and Indigenous worldview when he writes:

Indigenous people's sense of self is planted and rooted in the land. The sacred bond with the land is more substantial than a propertied relationship and entails responsibility to all living forms that are sustained from the soil: grasses, medicinal plants, fruit, bushes and trees, insects that live off the plants, birds that in turn eat the insects, four-leggeds that forage on the grasses and hedges, and animal hunters that prey on smaller animals. As an Aboriginal person I am constituted by my individual self and by my ancestors and future generations, who will originate in and have returned to the land....We as Indigenous people are sustained by our connection to the land.

This self-recognition enables us to understand where and how we belong to this world, and it has the profound effect of ensuring that wherever we may happen to be at any given time, alone or in the company of other people, we do not feel alone. This knowledge nourishes us. (pp. 91-92)

In referring to land, it is important to note that most Indigenous people speak of the land in which their nation or tribe has lived upon and been connected to for generations, as opposed to land in general terms. The land is understood through its geography and land forms, which have explicit meanings and spiritual significance. As Meyer (2008) explains, "Land is more than a physical place." Land holds knowledge and places knowing within a physical and intellectual context. "Land is our mother....*She is your mother*" (p. 219). It is within this framework that Indigenous language, knowledge and spirituality come to be, for without land, none of these things are possible.

Language is an integral component of an Indigenous worldview. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) notes, our spiritual self is formulated in part through language, which influences how we view the world, and in turn determines how we act and behave. It has been said that our language transmits our relationship to the land, what plants to pick, where and when, therefore the stories, songs and ceremonies speak to our very survival as a people. For some Indigenous people, their words convey the importance of their connection to ancestral lands and the people who live there. Okanagan writer and educator, Jeanette Armstrong, 1997 (as cited in Anderson, 2000) explains her relationship to the land and Sqilxw people in these

words, “I know that without my land and my people I am not alive. I am simply flesh waiting to die (p. 127). This is both a very personal and powerful statement, and a testament to the strength of our relationship to the land and the importance of relationality. It may leave one to ask however, ‘What do these words mean for those of us who live in urban centers or have never lived on a reserve?’ The migration of Indigenous people from reserves to cities has had far reaching consequences, as Thompson (2008) notes, “Due to colonization and assimilation, and now globalization, several generations of First Nations people do not know their languages, their people’s world view and ways of knowing, or their traditional knowledge” (p. 37). Upon reflecting on the above assertions, I feel the question begs to be asked again, ‘What happens to them?’

When I first read these words by Jeanette, I admit feeling very sad, and thought to myself, ‘How can I possibly claim to be an Okanagan woman?’ I don’t have a physical connection to the land of my ancestors, having lived in Manitoba my whole life, and I don’t speak the Squilx language, beyond a few words in which to bring greetings or to say thank you. The feelings of shame and loss came flooding back, and after what seemed an eternity of reveling in self-pity and doubt, I decided to reread the passage. Upon further reflection, I came to view the words in a different light, and don’t believe they were ever meant to inflict pain upon those of us who, through no fault of our own, did not grow up with our families, or live in our communities. It is my understanding that for the most part, we as Indigenous people speak from our own personal experiences in words that come from the heart, and as such they should not be taken out of context, nor should it be said that we speak on behalf of all Indigenous people. Bearing this in mind, I do believe the words of Battiste, Henderson, Armstrong and Thompson, as they appear above, are an impassioned plea for us to recognize

that our lands are threatened and as such, so be our relationships to the land, thereby our languages, and we as a collective people are threatened. It speaks far beyond our physical connection to the land; it speaks to the very essence of our spiritual selves for “within an Indigenous worldview, we believe we are Spirit beings” (Absolon, 2010, p. 79). Whether we live in an urban centre, were adopted into a non-Indigenous family, spent our life in foster care or whether political barriers prevent us from accessing our communities, cultures, teachings and languages, we can find those teachers and make connections through Friendship Centers or other places where Indigenous people gather. It is within all of us to make those connections and access ancient knowledge that waits for us to reclaim our birthright.

Language, it has been said, is formed from the land as a means for the people to know how to survive. In urban centers this could not be more meaningful, and it is there for us to learn; wherever we happen to find ourselves along this journey we call life. It could be in a park, a school yard, along the banks of a river or even in a ditch along a busy highway. Wherever we are, we can sit down upon the earth, let the dirt run through our fingers, take off our shoes and squish the dirt through our toes, and if we listen carefully, we will hear our ancestors talk to us in the language of our people. This knowledge is contained in all of us, through what is referred to as, “blood memory” (Campbell, 1999, personal communication), and “molecular or cellular memory” according to Lionel Kununwa, n.d. (as cited in Cardinal, 2001, p. 182). Cardinal (2001) goes on to say that this intuition is carried within all of us regardless of whether we are connected to our culture, speak our language, or live somewhere other than our communities. It is something innate, powerful, which draws us together as a collective people.

Ceremonies, songs, stories, prayers, and our natural laws are formed from our relationship with the land. Our spirituality is tied to the land and our relationships that arise from this connection. Our relationship with the spiritual realm provides us, as Indigenous people with guidance in how to relate with all of creation, whether in prayer, in song, or through ceremony. As McKenzie and Morrissette (2003) explains, holism identifies the interconnections between the physical and spiritual, the individual and environment, between the mind, body, spirit, [heart], as viewed through the concepts of reciprocity and collective, and it is understood that healing must occur at both the individual and collective levels. The use of stories and metaphors provides us with connections from the spiritual to the physical world, from the past (our ancestors), to the present (family/community), and to the future (ones yet to come), and are reminders of our responsibilities.

Beyond this, it is important to acknowledge that each Indigenous nation, whether on Turtle Island (North America), Australia, New Zealand, South America, Africa or any other country in the world are distinct and diverse, but because there are many shared values and related practices, we are able to discuss them collectively, (Anderson, 2012). Little Bear (2000) expands further in that Indigenous worldviews are rooted in culture, within a shared philosophy, comprised of values, customs, and most importantly, “interrelationships between all entities” (p. 77). He goes on to say that Indigenous worldviews, although unique to each nation, share a number of additional commonalities in that they are: (1) holistic and cyclical - everything is related; there are patterns that emphasize process rather than product; (2) in motion and change - they are in a constant state of flux and change; one must look at the whole to see patterns rather than only parts; (3) formed through language – which embodies the way a society thinks; most are verb rich, process-or-action-oriented; allows for the

transcendence of boundaries, in other words, communication with the spiritual world or animal world; (4) land-based, whereby the earth is our mother is not viewed as a metaphor, rather it cannot be separated from Indigenous people; our relationship to Mother Earth is honored and renewed through seasonal ceremonies.

To summarize, Indigenous worldviews are wholistic, comprised of relationships to all other living things, develop and change over time, are language specific, spiritual-based, and form the foundation for Indigenous knowledge and knowledge creation.

Indigenous Knowledge

Did you know that trees talk? Well they do. They talk to each other, and they'll talk to you if you listen. Trouble is, white people don't listen. They never learned to listen to the Indians, so I don't suppose they'll listen to other voices in nature. But I have learned a lot from trees; sometimes about the weather, sometimes about animals, sometimes about the Great Spirit.

Walking Buffalo – Stoney

The question of 'What is Indigenous knowledge?' cannot be answered easily.

Indigenous knowledge is holistic, experiential, spiritual, and engages all the senses, or as Absolon and Willett (2004) explain, "It is being, living and doing." It is difficult to define Indigenous knowledge in quantifiable terms and absolutes that will satisfy non-Indigenous inquisitions. In fact, the appropriateness of attempting to define Indigenous knowledge is called into question by some including Battiste and Henderson (2000) who state that most often, attempts to define Indigenous knowledge ultimately become comparisons, which do not acknowledge the diversity of Indigenous people and communities, resulting in the tendency to view Indigenous knowledge as magical or mystical, and therefore lacking in validity. They contradict this view however, by suggesting that, "the knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples are more self-consciously empirical than those of Western scientific thought," in that

“Indigenous knowledge does not remain static, but rather is in a state of constant change, and revision through individual’s observation and comparison with other individual’s observations” (p. 45). This view is shared by other Indigenous people including Struthers (2001) who writes that Indigenous knowledge stands on its own and does not require constant comparison to other ways to be understood or validated, and that essential truths may be missed if viewed through the lens of another culture. Battiste and Henderson (2000) go on to suggest that rather than defining Indigenous knowledge, learning to understand and appreciate the differences would serve to build relationships across cultures. One thing is certain and something that is often misunderstood by other cultures; Indigenous knowledge is intrinsically tied to relationships between ourselves and the world around us.

Little Bear (2000) contends that all things on earth are related, and possess spirit, as well as the knowledge that ensures our survival as a people. This knowledge is imparted through the Creator, and is shared through a reciprocal relationship with our environment. Indigenous knowledge, therefore, is essentially tied to our relations with all living things, and “is derived from communal experience, from environmental observation, from information received, and from the visions attained through ceremonies and communion with spirits of nature” (Cajete, 2000, p. 188).

Paramount to the procurement and sharing of knowledge is language. Language, whether Cree, Anishinaabe, Dakota or Sqiłxw extends from our relationships and connections to the natural world, and as Belanger (2010) notes, the development of languages specific to land bases and ecologies facilitates the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next, through stories, songs and ceremonies to ensure the survival of the people. For some, language and survival as a people cannot be separated, as Armstrong (2006) notes, Sqiłxw -

Okanagan language comes from the land, and the connection to land is the lifeway for Okanagan people. She further explains that in the Sqilxw language, our connection to the land, our location or space, is the same as the word for language therefore, Okanagan people learn to survive through teachings and language that developed through a relationship with the land. She contends that it is our responsibility to connect our individual and collective selves to the land through ceremonies that honour this relationship.

Loss of language compromises knowledge creation and the transmission of knowledge, due to the inability to honour our relationships with the land, the spirit world and each other. Porter (1996) speaks to the consequences of losing the language of his people. His message however, is applicable to other Indigenous peoples:

Without language, there will be no more ceremonies, they will close the Longhouse down. Old people told us, once language is gone, you can't run your ceremony anymore. Got to put away the drums, put away the sacred things, and because they don't understand any other language, our spirit will be dead. (p. 35)

It is messages such as these that relate the urgent need for all Indigenous people to recognize the fragile state of our languages and accept our responsibility for ensuring their survival. Our knowledge keepers are passing into the spirit world and our languages, stories, songs and ceremonies are going with them. Each of us carries a responsibility to ensure this does not happen, just as we are the keepers of the land for future generations, we are the keepers of our language. The knowledge is there, but unless we make an effort, it will disappear. We must see these words as a rallying cry from our ancestors to learn our language, whether in the form of singing songs or saying a prayer to Creator.

When I was about to graduate from the Bachelor of First Nations & Aboriginal Counselling program at Brandon University, I called my community and asked if someone

there would teach me how to bring greetings and say thank you in the Sqilxw – Okanagan language. It was extremely important for me to be able to do that in front of my family, peers, friends, community members and Elders. I remember to this day, my feelings of great pride, mixed with fear as I spoke those words for the first time. Since that day, I have learned a phrase or two more, but plan to one day speak my language. It is a promise I have made to myself, my ancestors and Creator. Although language and relationships are both integral components in knowledge creation or coming to know, spirituality are the ties that bind it all together.

According to Ermine (1999), one important aspect of knowledge creation occurs through introspection whereby knowledge creation becomes a spiritual experience. He goes on to explain that as knowledge and understanding of the world comes from within, it is through rituals and ceremonies, and the experience of self-actualization that knowledge creation occurs, and “is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being” (p. 103). He does however, share the view that the importance of language in the procurement of knowledge through this spiritual or “inner world” (p. 103), should not be forgotten. As Battiste and Henderson (2000) suggest, our spiritual identity is formed through our language therefore, “without language knowledge is lost, identity is lost, we as a peoples, are lost” (p. 49). They further explain that as language informs our prayers, songs, rituals, and ceremonies in which knowledge is passed from Creator and the spirit world to elders, who in turn pass knowledge on through their teachings to the people, the loss of language would mean this doorway to the spirit world may be eternally closed, according to Belanger (2010).

So what are the ramifications for those of us who do not speak our language? Does this mean we will never find our spirit or our identity and spend the rest of eternity as lost people?

I personally don't believe this is the case at all. I know many Indigenous people who do not speak an Indigenous language however, they sing songs beautifully, pray and are some of the most spiritual people I have ever met. I do recognize that we have responsibility as an individual as well as communal responsibility to learn our tribal language if at all possible, and teach our children otherwise the languages will become extinct. If this happens, it will be a tremendous loss from which we as a people will never recover, and the ramifications of which I truly don't think we can fully appreciate at this time.

Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing have survived, and as a Sqilxw-Okanagan woman and scholar, I carry a great responsibility. According to Battiste (2005) this responsibility as it pertains to those of us who work in academe is immense. We are charged with educating non-Indigenous faculty, staff and students who know little or nothing at all about Indigenous people, worldviews and knowledge creation through the use of Indigenous pedagogy in our interactions with others. The responsibility we carry extends to Indigenous faculty, staff, and students within the university, and to Indigenous communities external to the university setting. Most importantly, if we are to promote and establish an Indigenous paradigm in academe, we must first embrace our own Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, language, teachings and experiences of healing and learning. After all, we can only speak from our own experiences and can only take others as far as we've taken ourselves.

The advancement of Indigenous knowledge in academe is an integral component of decolonization for Indigenous people. According to Aluli-Meyer (2008), "Knowledge that endures is spirit driven. It is a life force connected to all other life forces. It is more an extension, than it is a thing to accumulate" (p. 218). She goes on to explain further:

Spiritual principles as epistemology are the intentionality of process, the value and purpose of meaning, and the practice of mindfulness. Spirit as knowing is a real idea that allows us to ritualize ways to collect medicine, read a text, prepare a meal, or communicate with family. It allows knowing to be an act of consciousness that reaches beyond the mundane into connection and alignment with an essence that finds its renewal throughout the generations. This higher reach of knowing collapsed under the weight of homogeneity and assimilation-around the world. It must right itself through our engagement to secure our survival.

...An epistemology of spirit encourages us all to be of service, to not get drawn into the ego nurtured in academia, and to keep diving into the wellspring of our own awe. In that way, our research is bound in meaning and inspired by service to others or to our natural environment. See your work as a taonga (sacred object) for your family, your community, your people-because it is. (pp. 218-219)

My ancestors bestowed upon me membership in the Sqilxw-Okanagan Nation and by birthright, connection to land, community, family, language, knowledge, spirituality and traditions that provide instructions as to my responsibilities, as both an Sqilxw-Okanagan woman and scholar. The recognition of my birthright and the responsibility that accompanies it highlights the relationality of Indigenous knowledge. In acknowledging my responsibilities in doing this work, I see that they extend beyond the walls and boundaries of the institution to encompass the world around me. It is a process that is not only intellectual, but is emotional, physical and spiritual.

Indigenous Spirituality

Spirituality is a cornerstone of our identity as Indigenous people; therefore, in my humble opinion, a literature review that does not include a discussion on spirituality would be incomplete. I believe it is important for me to acknowledge that the inclusion of Indigenous spirituality in my thesis entails a number of responsibilities for me, as a researcher. Most importantly, there will be no description of sacred ceremonies beyond my own experiences of participation and the personal meanings I derived from those experiences. I will however, include citations throughout my work that arise from the works of other Indigenous scholars

that pertains to Indigenous spirituality. Prior to beginning this work, I spoke with Indigenous spiritual advisors and Elders for whom I hold a great deal of respect and was told to speak from the heart. They went on to tell me that if I do this, I won't go wrong. I was also told to pray and offer my tobacco if in doubt, as these were gifts bestowed upon us by Creator and by acknowledging Creator and the spirit world, I would be guided on my journey. I don't believe I am trying to be an Indigenous philosopher by including a discussion on Indigenous spirituality, and as I proceed I am ever mindful of Hart (2008) when he writes of his struggle as to whether or not to include a discussion of spirituality in his work. He goes on to explain:

... I did not want to move beyond what I thought Indigenous communities were prepared to offer outsiders – or make public – since I was mindful of the concern of some Elders that so much has been taken away from our people that we need to hold on dearly to our spirituality as one of the final realms of 'Indigeneity.' (p. 137).

I have heard these sentiments over and over throughout the years. One of my professors during my undergraduate studies expressed similar sentiments during one of our classes. He asked if we thought whether we should share our spiritual knowledge with non-Indigenous people. After a spirited (no pun intended) discussion, he said something to the effect that now may not be the right time, as many Indigenous people were only beginning to find their way back to their cultures, traditions and spiritual practices. He intimated that there may come a time, but for now we needed to protect our ceremonies and the teachings that came with them. It is with these words in mind that I continue on this journey, treading ever so carefully on the path laid out before me.

How does one define Indigenous spirituality? Is spirituality the same as religion? As far as I understand the concept from the Indigenous teachings I have received over the years, there is no one definition for Indigenous spirituality, but rather there are aspects and elements

that are common to Indigenous people all around the world. Baskin (2011) provides a definition of spirituality based within the teachings she has received, which echoes my own beliefs,

...spirituality embodies an interconnectedness and interrelationship with all life. Everyone and everything (both “animate” and “inanimate”) are seen as equal and interdependent, part of the great whole and as having spirit. This view permeates the entire Indigenous vision of life, land, and the universe. (p. 135)

Just as with Indigenous worldviews, knowledge and language, Indigenous spirituality is relational, land-based, and “recognizes that all life has spirit and is sacred” (Absolon, 2010, p. 78). Spirituality is an integral part of who we are as Indigenous people, which includes our past, present and future.

To answer the question as to whether spirituality is the same or different from religion, I once again turn to Baskin, 2002 (as cited in Baskin, 2011) who writes that “the difference between religion and spirituality is that religion is a structured form of spirituality that usually has a group following, whereas, spirituality can include individual experiences with or without a structured belief system” (p. 135). To expand upon this topic further, I suggest an additional distinction between religion and spirituality. In my own life, I have learned through observation and over time that individuals, who maintain they are religious, aren’t necessarily spiritual, and vice versa, some of the most spiritual people I have ever met aren’t religious or follow an organized religion. I wish to be clear however, that there are individuals who are both religious and spiritual. I posit that these individuals have been able to make the connection between their mind and heart, whereby they integrate their knowledge and beliefs into their whole being, and that it is possible to identify the people who possess that spiritual connection through careful observation of their interactions with themselves, others and the

world around them. As one Elder told me many, many years ago, “there is a light that shines within [spiritual] people” (K.T., personal communication, 2002). Our spirituality opens us up to see the beauty in the world around us and in each other. It provides solace when we are in pain; it connects us to everyone and everything in this world and the spirit world. As Absolon (2010) writes:

Each and every being is a spirit being and acknowledging one’s spirit begins with acknowledging oneself. Spiritual knowledge entails awareness and understanding of Aboriginal epistemology and a respectful consciousness of the sacred world to Indigenous peoples. (p. 78)

She goes on to say that spirituality facilitates understanding of our “reality and experiences by considering the influences of all elements of the whole on our individual and collective being” (p. 76). In some Indigenous cultures, spirituality is identified as one of the four aspects of our being that is embodied in the Medicine Wheel, and is often aligned with the direction of the East. Although the Medicine Wheel is not a part of Sqilxw-Okanagan beliefs, from my own understandings, spirituality cannot be separated from us as a people and the world around us. Stories, songs, ceremonies and language all relate the spiritual relationship that exists between the Sqilxw-Okanagan people and all other living things, and provides the blueprint for living day to day, which we refer to as natural laws.

Even though there are many variations between Indigenous peoples’ ceremonies, songs, healing rituals and spiritual practices, there remain a number of similarities that must be acknowledged. As Garrett, 1998 (as cited in Portman & Garrett, 2006) writes, there are a number of spiritual beliefs that may be consistent between Indigenous peoples and may include:

1. There is a single higher power known as Creator, Great Creator, Great Spirit, or Great One, among other names. This being is sometimes referred to in gendered form, but

does not necessarily exist as one particular gender or another. There are also lesser beings known as spirit beings or spirit helpers.

2. Plants and animals, like humans, are part of the spirit world. The spirit world exists side by side with, and intermingles with, the physical world. Moreover, the spirit existed in the spirit world before it came into a physical body and will exist after the body dies.
3. Human beings are made up of a mind, body and spirit. The mind, body, and spirit are all interconnected; therefore, illness affects the mind and spirit as well as the body.
4. Wellness is harmony in mind, body and spirit; unwellness is disharmony in mind, body, and spirit.
5. Natural unwellness is caused by the violation of a sacred social or natural law of Creation (e.g., participating in a sacred ceremony while under the influence of alcohol, drugs...).
6. Unnatural unwellness is caused by conjuring (witchcraft) from those with harmful or destructive intentions. This may be referred to as “bad medicine”.
7. Each of us is responsible for our own wellness by keeping ourselves attuned to self, relations, environment, and universe. (p. 456)

Garrett’s (1998) summation of the similarities amongst Indigenous spiritual beliefs stresses the significance of relationships between Indigenous people and the world around them.

Just as with Indigenous worldviews and knowledge creation, connection to the land is central to spiritual beliefs, and has been described as the lifeblood of the nation. Many nations and tribes identify traditional territories or lands as being where they as a people were created and where they have lived since time immemorial. Stories passed down from one generation to another explain how land is a gift from Creator; that each person carries a responsibility to care for, and protect the land and its inhabitants for future generations. Just as significant, Battiste and Henderson (2000) writes that, “Indigenous peoples construct their teachings around the belief that at certain places there is a sacred ambiance that can and does empower human consciousness and spirituality” (p. 67). The Sqilxw-Okanagan people, whose

traditional territory is expansive, view the land as sacred containing specific sites infused with spiritual significance such as Spotted Lake, and Coyote Rock where “Coyote left his bait while he fished” (Robinson, 2004, p. 241). The connection to traditional lands is not mythological or fantasy on the part of Indigenous people, a fact I can attest to based upon personal experience.

I grew up on a farm in Manitoba, a long way from my community at Head of the Lake, near Vernon, BC. The spiritual bond I feel towards the prairie land I’ve known for most of my life is one of deep love and respect. I felt similar emotions the first time I travelled home to my community near Vernon, BC, and set my feet upon the land where my mother once played and my ancestors lived. I can only describe it as a truly spiritual experience, and the feelings I experienced on that day were overwhelming. I believe I am connected to the mountains through my mother, and to the prairie through my father. It is who I am and how I introduce myself to others.

As with all other aspects of our lives, spirituality and wellness cannot be viewed separately, as Kolezar-Green, 2008 (as cited in Baskin, 2011) writes:

...We can’t separate the spiritual from any other aspects. Mentally taking the time to speak in a good way is an example of how the spiritual influences the mind...Everything in one’s body knows spirit. Spirituality is difficult to put into words. It’s difficult to articulate on its own, to try and talk about it separate from everything else when it isn’t. This is an artificial way to discuss it. Spirituality isn’t just about attending ceremonies; it’s about how we walk in the world, what we believe, how we connect, how we practice our beliefs. ...Spirituality isn’t stagnant. The ways in which we celebrate and acknowledge our existence and experiences change as we advance as species. ...Humility is paramount: We can’t learn everything there is to know about spirituality, nor are we meant to. If we knew everything there is to know, then we would not have anything left to learn. Learning is important even when one is already a teacher. (pp. 135-136)

It's important to remember however, that although we are "spirit beings" (Absolon, 2010, p. 78), we are also human beings and as such, we will experience pain and suffering in our lifetime. Even individuals, who we recognize as having strong spiritual beliefs, are recognized for their knowledge and teachings experience loss, pain and suffering. I believe that how we negotiate these experiences, is dependent upon our spirituality and connections to others.

Indigenous Perspectives of Death, Grief, and Finding Meaning

The literature is sparse in regards to Indigenous perspectives of death and, therefore it is difficult to provide a comprehensive overview. However, the literature available does provide important insight into this topic, and further illustrates the need for additional study. Death from an Indigenous worldview is as diverse as the nations from which they arise, but in broad terms, death is seen not as the end, but rather the completion of one life cycle and the beginning of another where one is reunited with loved ones (Hotson, Macdonald, & Martin, 2004). I remember as an undergraduate student being told that from the day we are born, when we will leave this world has already been determined, and is known only by the Creator. Our lives are a gift from the Creator, as are our bodies, and it our responsibility to treat it as such. I was told this is why taking our own life is disrespectful, and that we will wander in a land between earth and the spirit world until the day when we were supposed to die arrives. It is then and only then that we will move onto the next life, although I once heard a Dakota elder (personal communication, 2005) say there was a ceremony that would help a loved one move onto the next world if they had taken their own life.

Death has different meanings to people, and may be attributed to the teachings one receives. As such, it is important to listen to the stories of those who share, because it is through this exchange that understanding occurs. One such study by Baydala, Hampton,

Kinunwa, Kinunwa, & Kinunwa, (2009) provides examples of individual meanings of death and dying in excerpts of participants' stories taken from the original transcripts, such as this example regarding death by an elder by the name of Mato Maza:

My answer is simple. It's that each individual has a journey and whatever their relationship is to that process, that is what death is to them. For me personally, death is part of the whole process. It's a circle. You're born, you reach certain markers in your life, and death is a period at the end of a sentence. But one sentence doesn't make a whole paragraph or a whole article. It's just one sentence. Amongst it there are commas, semicolons, all those different grammatical markers, but death is just the period saying, "We have finished this. I have finished this, and now it's time to start a new sentence. (pp. 165-166)

He went on to say that the meaning of dying is:

In its simplest form, it's the process of being born in reverse. You're conceived through an act of love between your mother and father and their relationship with the creator. They conceive you through that emotion and action-a force of nature happens. You start growing, developing from a single cell into more cells, attaching yourself more to the universe. The meaning of dying is just shedding those cells. You're just giving them back, you're going back to that final period, when your soul leaves and goes out, you leave those cells here to stay, to mean whatever they mean to those left here. You, and that life force, which the creator and your mother and father got together with, created and you return back. Dying is just a 180-degree spin on how you were created from one force. (p. 166)

In the same study, another participant, named Mato Wi also spoke of the cyclical nature of death. She said:

Death is an English term that is so final that I think when you begin to acclimatize too far over to this term, then death becomes fearful and you no longer recognize the continuance, compared to just saying, "Okay, it's just *this* part of the circle." "Death" is such a final, harsh reality in this society. "Crossing over" is a much nicer term because then you recognize the transition, even "transitioning to another part of the circle" sounds so much nicer than "death." Because you really don't die from here as long as some of us are still here to keep you alive. (Baydala, Hampton, Kinunwa, Kinunwa, & Kinunwa, 2009, p. 166)

The excerpts as presented above further highlight the diversity of beliefs and understandings Indigenous people may attribute to death and dying even within the same family and culture.

Their stories emphasize how we derive meaning from our words. The teachings we receive during our lifetime may be the same, but how we find meaning in those teachings varies according to our individual understandings, and worldviews. As Indigenous people we express ourselves through stories that contain metaphors and construct meanings as we understand them, in our own words. If I paraphrased the stories in my own words, the meanings and intent would be changed. This would not honour the storytellers' meanings and worldviews, and would be considered disrespectful. As noted in the participants' stories, the use of metaphors and words carry meaning for them, yet when I read their words, I derive meaning in a way that makes sense to me, and I understand that death is not the end of something, rather it is only a transition, a beginning of something new. During my own journey of grief following the loss of my siblings, it was teachings such as these that helped me to understand and enabled me to move through the grief process.

It is important therefore, that generalizations are not made with regards to beliefs around death, grief, and finding meaning. This view is shared by Van Winkle, 2000 (as cited in Kelly & Minty, 2007) who writes that the, "Diversity of beliefs might vary between and within aboriginal communities, owing to differences of "traditional, acculturated or religious perspectives" (p. 1460). While some Indigenous people and communities hold fast to their traditional beliefs and practices around death, grief, and bereavement rituals, others may utilize a combination of traditional and Christian beliefs to facilitate the grief process. As one Aboriginal leader in a study conducted by Hotson, Macdonald, & Martin (2004) explains, "I think the whole community leans itself to traditional values and beliefs. However, a lot of belief and traditionalism is masked with conventional religious forms, like the United Church,

Catholic Church, Pentecostal and other religions” (p. 33). These changes may be directly attributed to colonization, and the influences of the churches and missionaries.

Rituals and Ceremonies

Little has been written on the specific bereavement rituals and ceremonies of Indigenous people. However, a study of the Muscogee Creek tribe in the United States by Walker and Balk (2007) provides insights into cultural bereavement rituals that remain consistent despite colonization, and are practiced by tribal members who follow the traditional path, as well as those that incorporate the church with their traditional beliefs. They include, “(a) never leaving the body alone before burial, (b) conducting a wake service the night before burial, (c) enclosing personal items and food in the casket, (d) digging graves by hand, (e) giving a “farewell handshake,” (f) covering the grave with dirt completely by hand, and (g) building a house over the grave (p. 640). I have witnessed a number of similar rituals practiced at the funerals of loved ones by my Dakota, and Ojibway friends. In addition to the ones listed here, there is the lighting of a sacred fire, which is tended for four days and nights before the funeral.

The year following the death of a loved one is considered by many Indigenous people to be the time of active mourning. It is seen as not only a time to grieve the loss, but a time to gather items, and plan for the feast and giveaway, which is held on the first anniversary of the passing. The preparation of feast foods, especially those favorite foods of the one who has passed on is very important, as is the giving away of personal items or gifts to family, friends and community members. In some families the distribution of the deceased’s sacred items that were not put into the casket at the wake takes place at this time. According to teachings I’ve received, prior to contact with Europeans, the family of the deceased was looked after by the

community so they could grieve the loss, and not have to worry about gathering or hunting for food. It was common for Okanagan people to cut their hair, and blacken their face with ashes, as a sign of their grief. Each nation had teachings and protocols specific to their own beliefs, which to some degree, remain consistent even today.

Many nations also had specific teachings regarding personal behaviour following death, and in many Indigenous nations, it was the older women who took the lead role. Anderson (2011) explains that it was common for the older women in the community to come and stay with a family and take care of the person dying, to prepare the body for burial after death, and provide direction to the men preparing the grave. She goes on to share the memories of Métis/Cree author, artist and educator Maria Campbell (1973) regarding the protocols put forth by the women in her family following a death:

It was the grandmothers and aunties as well who relayed the protocols of what to do after the burial. We were told that when the person was buried then we had to turn around, she said. We turned around counter clockwise and we would walk out of that graveyard and never look back; we weren't supposed to say that person's name again. We put them out of our mind for a whole year. Because they needed to make their journey, and it was not up to you to make that journey harder for them. And if you cried or talked about them, then you were keeping them there.

Maria added that her great-aunt was very strict about that: there was no kindness in her voice when she was telling you, "This is what you have to do: don't be sitting around crying because you're just doing that for yourself." At the end of the first year, there would be a feast for the person, at which point it would be acceptable to talk about the person once again. And again, it was the old ladies who governed these processes. (p. 159)

According to Anderson (2011) it was a natural occurrence for Indigenous women to assume a significant role in death, just as they did in birth. She refers to Indigenous women as "doorkeepers to the spirit world" (p. 154), as a metaphor to describe their ability to give life, their close relationship with Mother Earth and their knowledge of the medicines. She writes it was the older women of the community, the midwives, who welcomed in new life and it was

the older women who sat with you as you left this world. As Campbell, 1973 (as cited in Anderson, 2011) said, “It’s an old lady that brings you in, and an old lady that takes you out” (159).

Women also played an important role at the wake beyond the preparation of food, and often took a lead role in managing the grieving process through storytelling and a process known as keening, which Campbell, 1973 (as cited in Anderson, 2011) goes on to describe:

There were customs that they would bring in that were very old. They would make us cry, for example. The old ladies would come in and they would just wail-do this keening that would make everybody cry. And then, when you finished crying, they would bring out tea, and sit around laughing and telling stories in little groups. Singing songs or whatever. And then it would be time to do the whole thing all over again. You would do that four times during the night for the whole time of the wake. (p. 158)

The practice of the old women telling stories at a wake is one shared by other Indigenous people. In the introduction to *Coyote Stories* (1990), written by Okanagan author Christine Quintasket, who wrote under the name Mourning Dove or *Humishuma*, Jay Miller writes, “The best Coyote stories are usually heard at wakes, while family and friends are sitting up all night with the deceased. During the darkest of the night, old ladies will begin to tell the most outrageous stories, helping to relieve the grief and keep everyone awake” (p. ix). Historically, Indigenous women maintained a central role in their communities, and whether in childbirth or death, were recognized for their knowledge and leadership abilities, as well as their spirituality.

Historical Grief

According to the literature, colonization affected the grief process for Indigenous people in ways that continue to be experienced today. The decimation of over 90 per cent of the Indigenous population on Turtle Island may be traced back to the arrival of European

explorers approximately five hundred years ago. Indigenous people were especially vulnerable according to Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski (2004) due to little resistance to influenza, smallpox and other foreign diseases which accompanied the Europeans, the resulting epidemics left medicine men and women helpless and unable to cure their people or to offer comfort, as their medicines, ceremonies and rituals proved useless in the face of such powerful killers. They further explained that “the intergenerational transmission of historic trauma” has left “Indigenous people physically, spiritually, emotionally and physically traumatized by deep and unresolved grief” (p. iii). Focused on survival, many Indigenous people fled their villages and traditional lands, leaving behind their loved ones. Unable to conduct customary grieving rituals and ceremonies or engage in the usual practice of mourning for a set period of time, Indigenous people became vulnerable to “the cumulative waves of trauma and grief” that “have become deeply embedded in the collective memory of Aboriginal people” (p. iii). After nearly four hundred years of death and disease, the hearts, minds and spirits of Indigenous people were irrevocably changed. Following such catastrophic events, history dictates that populations usually enjoy a time of growth and renewal, however there would be no respite, as “Indigenous people remained under mental siege from colonial governments, assimilationist tactics, church and government residential schools and Christian missionaries” (p. 25). Despite attempts by Indigenous leaders to renew cultural ceremonies such as the Ghost Dance, in an attempt to unite their people and provide a catharsis for their pain and suffering, their ceremonies were outlawed and the colonizers strictly enforced the banning of any and all cultural or spiritual activities leaving them “no opportunity to grieve their tremendous losses or effectually heal their shock and trauma; there was no recovery time” (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004, p. 27). Historical trauma has had a lasting

effect on Lakota people according to Brave Heart (2000) who describes how, in the Lakota culture, traditional mourning practices following the death of a loved one included the cutting of one's hair and body, as expressions of grief and "the felt loss of part of oneself with the death of a close relative" (p. 248). She goes on to say that traditional mourning ceremonies were suspended due to government regulations, which left a lasting legacy of unresolved grief and suffering for the Lakota people and the effects of such oppression continue to be felt in communities today. Sadly, many Indigenous people today don't understand why they are "more susceptible to the deeper feeling of grief and trauma in their day to day lives" (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004, p. iv) and believe it is normal to feel this way.

The death of a loved one in the present therefore, may not be experienced as a single loss by a number of Indigenous people, but rather it becomes a cumulative process that occurs in conjunction with the historical loss of family, ancestors, language, autonomy, and land leading to a more pronounced feeling of loss. As Absolon (2010) further explains:

Funerals and burials involve teachings of life and death, which facilitates the grieving process for family and community. Indigenous communities have high incidences of death and loss and our capacity to cope and survive such tremendous losses is fostered through our ceremonies and cultural understandings of life and death. Death, and dying, grief and loss are among common issues that confront Indigenous people. Higher mortality rates plague Indigenous communities and depression is often connected to unresolved grief and trauma. Loss has been felt with loss of people and family members, loss of language, culture, land, freedom, movement, subsistence and livelihood. Those losses are many and are vitally important when considering issues of unresolved grief and loss. Importantly, though, Indigenous theory has teachings which reflect the understandings of life and death. (p. 82)

This understanding of the influence of the past on the present became even clearer to me during my own grief, following the deaths of my siblings. I remember telling people that I wasn't only grieving the loss of my siblings, but rather I was mourning the loss of connection to my community, to the people, our language, songs, ceremonies and rituals. I mourned my

grandmother who died the year before I was born, my ancestors, the teachings I might have received and the knowledge lost. I mourned the historical losses experienced by all Sqilxw-Okanagan people as a result of colonization, and somewhat surprisingly to me, I mourned who I might have been. Not possessing the understanding of life and death from a Sqilxw worldview, it became crucial for me to seek out the teachings of other Indigenous people to help me work through my grief, both historical and recent.

The legacy of historical unresolved grief arising from multiple and overlapping losses is one other component of the colonization of Indigenous people in North America that cannot be ignored. It is however, only one chapter in the long story that speaks to the colonization of Indigenous people on Turtle Island. As an Indigenous researcher, I would be remiss if I did not include a brief history of colonization in the literature review of this work, for as Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski, (2004) explains, “It must be stressed again that the Aboriginal past must be fully acknowledged in order to fully experience the Aboriginal present and to realize the Aboriginal future” (p. 93). They go on to say that it is necessary to “outline and bring to full awareness a much earlier devastation, bringing it back to the collective memory where it can be felt and acknowledged, and then more completely released” (p. 90). Historical grief must be viewed within the context of colonization as it cannot be fully understood without “an understanding of the politics of colonization and its impact on Indigeniety, governance, livelihood, subsistence, freedom, land bases, and living an Indigenous way of life” (Absolon, 2010, p. 82). An Indigenous research paradigm therefore must include a discussion on colonization and the effects on the lives of Indigenous people across Turtle Island.

Colonialism/Colonization

In choosing to write and research from an Indigenous research paradigm, it is important to include a discussion on the effects of colonialism/colonization on Indigenous people. I will, therefore begin this review with the words of Chief Lindsay Marshall, from *Clay Pots and Bones Pka'woqq aq Wagnatal*, 1997 (as cited in Battiste, 2000), which I believe is representative of many Indigenous people, communities and nations in Canada, and around the world, who ask the question “Why did this happen to us?”

Clay Pots and Bones

Dear successive fathers:
 explain to me please, when did the
 change take place, from owners
 to wards of the selfish state?
 Write down the reasons why
 the land under our feet became
 foreign soil in perpetuity.
 Say again how the signers of
 1752 lost as much as they
 gained while the ink from a
 quill pen rested in its
 blackened Royal well.
 What justification exists that
 allowed our mounds to be
 desecrated, clay pots and bones.
 Rock glyphs painted over by
 cfc-propelled paint.
 Our songs and stories protected
 by copyright and law, not in the
 bosom of our grandmothers or
 grandfathers of yesterday.
 The cost of keeping us does
 not reflect the real cost.
 How many ghostly sails with
 reeking holds did English
 ports comfort in early fog?
 Have you much experience in
 the destruction of people,
 besides us? (p. 9)

In order to find an answer to the question why, one first must look at what. What is colonialism? What is colonization? Are there differences in their meanings, if so, what are they? To answer these questions, I looked at a number of resources, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Simply put, colonialism, as it pertains to North America is "...the conquest and control of nonwhite, non-European peoples...following the arrival of Columbus in 1492," (Yazzie, 2000, p. 39) for the expropriation of lands and resources expressly for financial benefits, and expansion. The Meriam-Webster (2011) online dictionary defines colonialism as, "the quality or state of being colonial; control by one power over a dependent area or people; a policy advocating or based on such control," while colonization is defined as an act, "the act or instance of colonizing." It appears that within these contexts, colonialism and colonization may be used interchangeably for the purpose of this study. In clarifying the 'what,' I now move on to discuss the effects of colonialism/colonization on the Indigenous people of Canada, in specific, as they pertain to Indigenous women.

Frideres and Gadacz (2001) notes that there is no doubt that Indigenous people of Canada were colonized, and the social, political, cultural, and spiritual problems affecting them and their communities are a direct result of the colonization process. To understand the impacts of colonization on Indigenous peoples, one must first understand how the process of colonization occurs. Manuel and Posluns (1974) in their seminal treatise, *The Fourth World*, (as cited in Taiaiake & Corntassel, 2005) explains the effects of the colonization process:

The colonial system is always a way of gaining control over another people for the sake of what the colonial power has determined to be 'the common good.' People can only become convinced of the common good when their own capacity to imagine ways in which they can govern themselves has been destroyed. (p. 601)

Many times I've heard Indigenous students say, "Why didn't our ancestors fight?" There is a misconception by some that Indigenous people were complacent or apathetic and allowed colonization to just take place. I admit to being one of those students and I'm ashamed now that I believed our people stood by and did nothing. The process of colonization is most often confusing, insidious, intimidating, and violent, leaving those who are colonized few options. According to McKenzie & Morrisette (2003) "The imposition of a colonial framework on Canadian-Aboriginal relations has had powerful, negative effects on Aboriginal people over nearly four hundred years of contact with the devaluation of indigenous people being a particularly significant characteristic of the colonial relationship" (p. 254).

The colonization process may be understood as occurring in seven stages, according to Kennedy, 1945 and Blauner, 1969 (as cited in Frideres & Gadacz, 2001, p. 3). The first stage takes place when a colonizing group(s) voluntarily enters or forces its way into a geographical area, thereby displacing the Indigenous people inhabiting the region in order to pursue their own interests or the country whose interests they represent. In Canada, the first stage involved both the French and English, though the process of colonization was somewhat different for each country however, the end result remains the same.

The second stage of colonization involves the destruction of the social, political, economic, familial, spiritual, and cultural norms of the Indigenous people through policies and legislation to allow for further settlement and exploitation of the land and its natural resources. In Canada, these policies and legislation took place in the form of the Indian Act, treaties, the development of reserves, missionaries/churches, residential schools, and the banning of ceremonies such as the potlatch on the West coast, and the Sundance on the plains, and the

destruction of matrilineal societies. Bourgeault (1991) describes the Indian Act as “race legislation developed to subjugate a free people” (p. 84).

The third and fourth stages were designed to promote external political control, which in Canada, took form in the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), whose representatives in the form of Indian agents exerted control over who could or could not leave the reserve, band elections and political structure, economic development, and land usage/expropriation. Indigenous people in Canada did not receive the right to vote in federal elections until 1960, which severely limited their ability to participate in the development process of policies that affected almost every aspect of their lives. Due to the severe limitations imposed on Indigenous people by the control exerted upon them by the DIAND, Indigenous peoples and communities became more economically dependent, while at the same time, natural resources contained within reserve lands were exploited for the benefit of the federal government and the country as a whole. Due to a lack of economic development, any monies made on reserve land by the Indigenous peoples living there, most often benefits non-Indigenous businesses and communities.

The fifth stage is comprised of dependency of the Indigenous people on the colonizing nation state. In Canada, this includes the provision of low-quality education and health services to Indigenous communities, which in turn, contributes to poor health and lower life expectancy, chronic diseases such as diabetes, violence and addictions issues. Reserves are dependent on Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (AANDC), which falls under the control of the federal government for infrastructure funding and as a result, most reserves report poor, overcrowded housing, a lack of clean, safe drinking water, and inadequate funding to build and/or maintain housing and infrastructure. Most reserves in

Canada report high percentages of unemployment, and welfare dependency. Unfortunately, this fact may be extended to Indigenous people residing in urban centers.

The sixth stage of the colonization process refers to societal relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, which is most often expressed in forms of racism and discrimination, and is based upon physical characteristics attributed to the colonized group. This leads to oppression and isolation which further excludes Indigenous people from full participation in society, and leads to increased dependence.

The seventh and final stage of colonization “is to weaken the resistance” of Indigenous people so that they are more easily controlled, in order for the colonizing nation to experience the full economic benefits. Such is the case for Indigenous people in Canada where a “culture of poverty” has developed as a result of colonization, and as it is sadly noted, “Once an individual is placed within the traditional culture of poverty, it is almost impossible for him or her to get out” (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001, p. 8).

The protectionist policy of the British government towards Indigenous people in Canada was initially designed to protect Indigenous peoples and lands from exploitation, and prevent the people from aligning with the French against the British, yet as time went on and more settlers arrived the policies moved from coping to assimilation (Tobias, 1990). Henderson (2000) notes, “The massive hemorrhage that colonialism inflicted on Indigenous peoples is well documented” (p. 71). There is a plethora of literature on colonialism/colonization and Indigenous peoples, written by Indigenous authors and scholars from around the world, whose words seek to, clarify, inform, enlighten and deconstruct the colonization process. One such author, Little Bear (2000) identifies that discrimination and oppression arises from colonialism through the maintenance of laws designed to repress

opposing worldviews. He goes on to further explain the devastating effects of colonization on

Indigenous worldviews:

Colonization created a fragmentary worldview among Aboriginal peoples. By force, terror, and educational policy, it attempted to destroy the Aboriginal worldview-but failed. Instead, colonization left a heritage of jagged worldviews among Indigenous peoples. They no longer had an Aboriginal worldview, nor did they adopt a Eurocentric worldview. Aboriginal consciousness became a site of overlapping, contentious, fragmented, competing desires and values that suppresses diversity in choices and denies Aboriginal people harmony in their daily lives. (pp. 84-85)

McKenzie and Morrissette (2003) write that despite evidence to the contrary, Aboriginal people are not “passive victims of colonization” (p. 252), but rather many have worked hard to recreate their relationship and place within Canadian society through healing approaches that respect cultural values and traditional practices. Unfortunately, there are still many others who continue to struggle against both past and present injuries.

According to Frideres and Gadacz (2001) it is the very configuration of the social order in Canada, which prevents Indigenous people from achieving social, economic and political autonomy and success. As long as Canadian society views Indigenous people as “child like” people (Frideres, 2010, p. 21) and authors of their own demise, colonial attitudes will remain unchanged. Unfortunately, the legacy of colonization persists and its effects are often seen as occurring between Indigenous people and within Indigenous communities in the form of ongoing abuse directed at one another, which often results, though not always recognized, from internalized colonization and self hatred (Frideres, 2010). No where can these effects be more visible than with Indigenous women.

Colonization and Indigenous Women

Indigenous women have long suffered the effects of colonization. Too frequently in Canada there is a news report of another missing or murdered Indigenous woman. Since

European contact, Indigenous women's roles, identities and self worth have been attacked and eroded through colonial attitudes and actions that viewed women as chattel or possessions to be used and exploited at whim. According to Anderson (2000) "Colonization is a process that began five hundred years ago, and it continues today" (p. 58). She goes on to explain why Indigenous women, in particular, became the focus of colonizing strategies imposed by the newcomers:

Our cultures promoted womanhood as a sacred identity, an identity that existed within a complex system of relations of societies based on balance...every Indigenous society had a sense of a women's power and position within the community...matrilocal or matrifocal societies, more readily demonstrated the status of their women...what we shared was a common sense of power, a power that was not part of the European woman's experience.

...The Europeans who first arrived in Canada were shocked by the position of Aboriginal women in their respective societies. It was not long before they realized that, in order to dominate the land and the people that were occupying it, they needed to disempower the women. Indigenous systems that allocated power to women were incompatible with the kind of colonial power dynamics that would be necessary to maintain colonial power. (pp. 57-58)

According to Guerrero (2003) Indigenous women, with the arrival of the newcomers, were affected by a double burden in the forms of racist and sexist attitudes, as well as the discriminatory practices that result from such attitudes. She defines this as "patriarchal colonialism" (p. 65) and this term remains as relevant today as it did five hundred years.

As previously mentioned, colonization has been identified as occurring in seven stages, and as noted, the second stage of colonization is the systematic destruction of social and cultural norms of the colonized group (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001). This was accomplished through marriage between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous men, often with familial support, and through the work of missionaries and churches, who believed that the man was head of the household, and women were possessions. Bourgeault (1991) writes, "...Indian

women experienced forms of domination, subjugation, and exploitation somewhat different than those experienced by Indian men”, however, “the fundamental basis of the subjugation of Indian women’s autonomy was the conquest of their labour-power” (p. 149). The author goes on to state that, “Indian women and later half-breed women were exploited both as labour and as sexual commodities” (p. 149). Both of these actions served to undermine the Indigenous view of equality between the genders, and the spiritual aspect of relationships.

In the nineteenth century, the federal government introduced policies to assist with the expropriation of Indigenous lands, which in turn, forced the people to abandon their traditional ways of living (Frideres & Gadacz, 2001). Further to this, the federal government introduced the Indian Act in 1876, which is generally considered to be one of the single most discriminatory pieces of legislation ever enacted. This is especially true for Indigenous women, who continue to be impacted by its policies even today. In the 1952 statutes of the Indian Act, Weaver (1993) notes that, “The Act’s provisions on legal status and band membership contained in section 12(1) (b), which caused an Indian woman who married a non-Indian to lose her legal status as an Indian under the Act,” was far more destructive to women in that this particular piece of legislation affected her children as well. In addition to losing her ‘status’, she also lost:

- her legal status as ‘Indian’ under the Indian Act
- her band membership
- the right to transmit legal status and band membership to her children
- her right to reside on her reserve – her own community
- her right to own land on her reserve
- her right to inherit property on her reserve

- her freedom from land, inheritance, and income taxes as a band resident
- her right to vote for, and hold office in, her band council
- her right to vote in band referendums
- her right to collect band annuities
- her right to collect treaty payments
- the benefits of special government programs for reserve residents
- the benefits of special government programs for off-reserve Indians
- the ability to raise her children in her own cultural community
- the right to return home if her marriage broke down
- the right to be buried on her home reserve

The consequences of this were a large number of Indigenous women who were forced to move from their reserve to the city, away from familial, social, cultural, and spiritual supports, to a foreign and often hostile environment. Frideres (2001) notes Indigenous women in particular were targeted by colonizing forces that resulted in catastrophic consequences to their womanhood, the effects of which they have never fully recovered from, nor have they regained the stature they once held within their communities. McKenzie & Morrissette (2003) go on to describe some of the other effects experienced by Indigenous women as a result of colonization:

Health and social problems are more common among Aboriginal people than among the general population, with Aboriginal women being among the most severely disadvantaged people in Canada. Economically, they are worse off, a large number have experienced physical, sexual, psychological, or ritual abuse related to drug and alcohol abuse, and moreover, historical and social factors work against equal recognition of Aboriginal women within both Aboriginal communities and Canadian society. (p. 253)

The spiritual loss experienced by Indigenous women resulting from their disconnection from the land of their ancestors, their true and real mother cannot be understated. As mentioned earlier, Indigenous peoples' worldview, knowledge transmission, cultural and spiritual beliefs are intrinsically tied to a specific land base where language, teachings, ceremonies, stories, songs and personal responsibilities arise. It is the life blood of the people and is where one's identity is formed and validated. Prior to European contact, Indigenous women carried great spiritual responsibilities for which they were admired and respected. Anderson (2000) explains that, "Native women's' roles in traditional spiritual practices, ceremonies and beliefs demonstrate that native women held positions of esteem in their societies" (p. 71). Indigenous women were healers, midwives, and were considered to carry great powers due to their ability to bring forth new life. Kehoe, 2000 (as cited in Anderson, 2000) describes the intermediary (between earth and the spirit world) role women held in Blackfoot ceremonies:

Women are seen as the intermediary or means through which power has been granted to humans. This crucial role appears in medicine bundle openings: only a woman should unwrap and re-wrap a holy bundle. She hands the powerful objects inside to a male celebrant. It is important to note that the woman sits quietly behind the man and to European eyes seems to be the servant. The Blackfoot see the woman as more powerful than the man, who dares not handle the bundle entire and alone. (p. 73)

Women were central to ceremonies and held positions of esteem. The federal government and the church recognized the central status of Indigenous women, especially as it pertained to ceremonies. In an effort to convert the people to Christianity, Indigenous spiritual practices and beliefs were demonized by early missionaries, and Indigenous women were portrayed as evil and dirty, which stripped Indigenous women of their spiritual and political power, and resulted in them being forced to assume a decidedly less important role within their homes and communities (Anderson, 2000). The effects of colonization continue to be felt today, but

many Indigenous women are returning to spiritual practices and teachings to counteract the damage from the past, and take back their place as spiritual beings.

It is true for many Indigenous women, myself included, that we must access teachings from other tribes due to a disconnection from our own people and communities. Anderson (2000) found that many women begin their healing journey through participation in ceremonies and teachings borrowed from other nations, however it through this path that many begin to receive dreams and visions that reconnect them with their own ancestors and spiritual knowledge. Most importantly, it is through spirituality that Indigenous women are finding healing and meaning once again.

Colonization and Indigenous Spirituality

The colonization of Indigenous people extended to expressions of spirituality through revisions to the Indian Act, which outlawed traditional ceremonies, rituals, and healing practices. This suppression of Indigenous spiritual practices cannot be dismissed as a misunderstanding or disclaimed as being unintentional, as Laliberte, Setee, Waldram, Innes, MacDougall, McBain, and Baron, 2000 (as cited in Iske-Barnes, 2003) clearly illustrates in the following excerpt of the 1895 amendment to the Indian Act: Section 114 contained in the Statutes of Canada, 1884, 47 Vic.c.27:

Every Indian or other person who engages in, or assists in celebrating or encourages either directly or indirectly another to celebrate, any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony of which giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods, or articles of any sort forms a part, or is a feature, whether such gift of money, goods, or articles takes place before, at, or after the celebration of the same, and every Indian or other person who engages or assists in any celebration or dance of which the wounding or mutilation of the dead or living body of any human being or animal form as a part or is a feature, is guilty of an indictable offense. (p. 229)

Within the confines of this amendment to the Indian Act, any traditional spiritual expression whether a ceremony to acknowledge a birth, marriage, or the death of a loved one was forbidden, as were normal everyday practices of showing acknowledgement and giving thanks. Rather than abandon their beliefs completely, many Indigenous people chose to practice their spirituality in secret, while under constant threat of arrest. The devastation felt by Indigenous people, communities and nations, which resulted from the criminalization of spiritual practices, cannot be understated, as Gitksan elder, Vi Smith, 1997 (as cited in Iske-Barnes, 2003) relates:

The banning of the feast hall had a profound effect impact on the spirituality of the people. Spirituality is the fundamental truth that sustains and gives stability to our lives. Spirituality is a profound force in our lives involving our intelligence, self-awareness, emotions, wills, and souls. Our spirituality gives us our energy. The energy of the people, daily interactions as well as rights and responsibilities, were marked by rituals. In the feast hall, relationships were attended to. Funerals, weddings, cleansings, care of territories, and name giving were all part of the spirituality.

I remember a chief being arrested for holding a funeral feast. As the leader of the community, it was his social duty to ensure the carrying out of a proper funeral. When released from jail, he felt forced to have another feast, this one to cleanse his shame at being arrested. Although the law was not his own law, to be placed in jail was still a deep shame and one which required community cleansing.

Over the years, a number of chiefs were similarly jailed. In spite of the punishments, the feasts continued to be held because of their importance to the life of the communities. We learned to use other events such as Christmas, Easter, birthdays, and Thanksgiving as occasions to serve the need to get people together and transact the business of the community. The feasts didn't disappear, it went underground. (p. 229)

The repression of Indigenous people and their spirituality reached beyond communities to include the confiscation of sacred items, often forcibly, from individuals, ceremonial leaders, medicine men and women. Of the spiritual items removed, many were destroyed, while others ended up in museums around the world where they remain today. As a result, teachings and

items were never passed down to the next generation, which has resulted in spiritual disconnection for many Indigenous people.

Repression of Indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices continues today. This statement may come as a surprise for some, but for many Indigenous people these words ring true. Expressions of Indigenous spirituality such as smudging, gift-giving, feasting and other ceremonies are not against the law per se. Yet oppression exists under the auspice of non-smoking policies, Research Ethics Boards (REB), fire regulations, and other policies designed to maintain the status quo for the majority. I can speak to this from my own experience first, as an Indigenous woman who is a student in a graduate program at one university, and second, as a faculty member at another university. As a graduate student seeking ethics approval for my research proposal, I learned firsthand how little knowledge and respect research ethics boards possess for Indigenous spirituality. My proposal was sent back to me by the REB with a request for additional information, which I understand is the norm, and to which I had no problem, as I understand very few proposals are approved at first submission. I was taken aback however, by comments contained in the request for additional information related to the cultural practice of offering tobacco to participants when I approached them to see if they would be interested in participating in my research, and offering gifts of a blanket and ceremonial cloth to participants at the conclusion of each interview. I was told in no uncertain language that these practices were considered inducements and coercion, and I must clearly indicate that in my response by checking yes. I had originally checked no, as I didn't believe I was using either inducements or coercion in my study. To me, if I had not offered tobacco or gifts, I would be viewed as disrespectful to the participants and the relationships we share. The REB also questioned my plan to approach Indigenous women with whom I shared a previous

relationship with to participate in my research project. This practice is viewed as the norm and is acceptable within Indigenous culture, as it is common to seek out individuals who have experience in the topic of interest, and demonstrates respect for the knowledge to be shared. I felt very disrespected and violated by the experience, but more importantly I felt sad to think that in this day and age Indigenous people and their beliefs continue to be misunderstood. It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss all my experiences or the experiences of close friends and colleagues, but at some point in the future, my voice will be heard.

Spiritual colonization affects every facet of life for Indigenous people. This can also be said for our spiritual relationship to the land. Kirmayer, Brass and Valskakis (2009) writes that “the effects of colonization...have not simply been displacement or appropriation of land but an undermining of the cultural meanings of land in the sense of self and personhood” (p. 94). Many Indigenous people today experience a sense of disconnectedness they don’t understand, as a direct result of forced removal from ancestral lands in the past and growing up in urban centres. Many talk of a yearning they feel deep inside, but have no idea what they’re yearning for or why they’re feeling this way. There are literally generations of Indigenous people who suffer the effects of spiritual colonization.

In reviewing the literature for this thesis, it becomes evident that Indigenous people although diverse, share common elements in their respective worldviews such as being relational, holistic, adaptable and land-based. It is also apparent that Indigenous people create knowledge through individual reflection, and participation in ceremonies that honour their relationships with the land, all other living things, and the spiritual world. It is well documented that the effects of colonization are widespread and continue to be experienced by Indigenous people today; while Indigenous women in particular, suffered a greater assault on

their sense of identity through the erosion of their roles and responsibilities and silencing of their voices as a result of colonization. Consequently, the sacred relationships between Indigenous women and their families, communities and nations were severely disrupted. This thesis seeks to re-establish a sense of harmony by means of building relationships and empowering the voices of Indigenous women, through the use of an Indigenous research paradigm that honours the knowledge and power their stories hold.

Chapter Three: Methodological Approach

My desire to contribute to the works of other Indigenous scholars who ‘broke trail’ so to speak, by forwarding their research that honours Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2001), began when I first read Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, as an undergraduate student in 2001. Since that time I have followed the evolution of an Indigenous research paradigm and methodologies with great interest, respect, pride and I’m not ashamed to admit, some trepidation. The works of Indigenous scholars including (Absolon, 2004, 2011; Absolon & Willett, 2004; Cardinal, 2001; Cohen, 2008; Hart, 2002, 2007, 2009, 2010; Kovach, 2006, 2009, 2010; Smith, 1999; Steinhauer, 2001, 2002; Thomas, 2004; Thompson, 2008; Weber-Pillwax, 2004; Wilson, 2001, 2008); among others, inspire and guide me, their words touch my spirit, and speak to my heart. As I smudge and offer tobacco; I pray for guidance from Creator and my ancestors so that I may endeavor to do this work with a good heart, a clear mind, free of negative thoughts, and I remember the words of Wilson (2001) “*for Indigenous people, research is a ceremony*” (p.69). It is with great humility that I embark upon this journey.

Indigenous Research Paradigm

This study is grounded within an Indigenous research paradigm. My work is informed by the work of Cree researcher and scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) who describes the concept of “relationality” as the theoretical foundation of an Indigenous research paradigm. Within this framework, he includes the four elements: ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology, which are common in dominant research paradigms. As he explains further, “it is the uniqueness of these four elements that in part hold an Indigenous research paradigm apart from other research paradigms” (p. 71). Conversely, he cautions Indigenous researchers to remember that these elements “are not as important as the relationships that went into forming them” (p. 74). To expand upon the importance of relationships he goes on to say that:

An Indigenous research paradigm comes from the foundational belief that knowledge is relational. Knowledge is shared with all of creation. It is not just interpersonal relationships, not just with the research subjects I may be working with, but it is a relationship with all of creation. It is with the cosmos, it is with the animals, with the plants, with the earth that we share this knowledge. It goes beyond this idea of individual knowledge to the concept of relational knowledge. Who cares about those ontologies? It’s not the realities in and of them that are important; it is the relationship that I share with reality. (p. 74)

After allowing time to reflect upon his words, I’ve come to realize that as an Indigenous researcher, relationships must figure prominently in my work, and as my spiritual teachers and advisors have taught me, everything I do affects the world around me. What my teachers and advisors refer to is that, something as simple as bending down to pick up a stone to look at it, will have lasting consequences. You see by doing this, I have changed the landscape forever and even if I put the stone back in what I believe to be the exact spot, it will never be the same and the world itself has been altered. Although this is a rather simplistic example, it speaks to the ethical responsibility I carry as I begin this journey.

I am fortunate in that Indigenous scholars and researchers, whose work precedes mine, not only speak of our collective responsibility when conducting research, but they willingly share their knowledge, proven strategies and experiences from which to follow. Weber-Pillwax, 2003 (as cited in Wilson, 2008) identifies respect, reciprocity and relationality, as three guiding principles she believes are characteristic of Indigenous research. Expanding upon the three principles, she writes:

All forms of living things are to be respected as being related and interconnected...Respect means living that relationship in all forms of interaction.

The source of a research project is the heart/mind of the researcher, and “checking your heart” is a critical element in the research process. The researcher insures that there are no negative or selfish motives for doing research, because that could bring suffering to everyone in the community. A ‘good heart’ guarantees a good motive, and good motives benefit everyone involved.

The foundation of Indigenous research lies within the reality of the lived Indigenous experience. Indigenous researchers ground their research knowingly in the lives of real persons as individuals and social beings, not on the world of ideas.

Any theories developed or proposed are based upon and supported by Indigenous forms of epistemology. We as Indigenous scholars who wish to participate in the creation of knowledge within our own ways of being must begin with an active and scholarly recognition of who our philosophers and prophets are in our own communities. These are still the keepers and the teachers of our epistemologies.

Indigenous research cannot undermine the integrity of Indigenous persons or communities because it is grounded in that integrity. Clearly this is both a test and a statement of definition for Indigenous research and is made simply as a response to the argument that Indigenous research poses the same threats to the Indigenous community as does non-Indigenous research.

The languages and cultures of Indigenous peoples are living processes. Research and creation of knowledge are continuous functions for the thinkers and scholars of every Indigenous group, and it is through the activation of this principle that Indigenous university scholarship is conducted. Indigenous scholarship reflects inherited Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies and it is the responsibility of Indigenous researchers associated with a university to maintain and continuously renew the connections with our ancestors and our communities through our embodiment, adherence and practice of these. (p. 60)

To further define an Indigenous research paradigm, I refer to Kovach (2010) who writes, “The term paradigm as used within a research context includes a philosophical belief system or

worldview and how that system or worldview influences a particular set of methods,” and may be viewed as being “both theory and practice” (p. 41).

The remaining four elements, ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology may be viewed in terms of relationships and relatedness. As Wilson (2008) explains, “The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality”, while “axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships” (p. 71). In many western positivist research paradigms, the relational is avoided because of the belief of its potential to bias research however; according to Kovach (2010) Indigenous methodologies embrace relational assumptions as central to their core epistemologies.

I acknowledge that the concepts ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology are rooted within a Western research paradigm, and as a result, there may be some criticism of their inclusion in my work however, I follow the work of other Indigenous scholars’ whose work includes these terms as a means to frame Indigenous worldviews. As I grow and evolve as an Indigenous researcher, my work will reflect this change and I will find terms or concepts that better reflect an Indigenous research paradigm based within my Sqilxw-Okanagan worldview, ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology.

In summary, an Indigenous research paradigm is based within the concept of relationality, or the sets of relationships that exist or develop as a result of the research, as well as the accountability of the researcher to these relationships. Included within an Indigenous research paradigm are the concepts of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. Due to the perception that relationality may cause researcher bias, it is most often avoided in Western positivist research however; it is embraced by many Indigenous scholars as being a

primary component of their core beliefs and epistemologies. It may be said that if relationality is not central to an Indigenous research paradigm, then it is not Indigenous research.

Indigenous Ontology

It is my understanding that ontology is our beliefs of what reality is and what encompasses those beliefs. Expanding upon this, Wilson (2008) writes, “reality *is* relationships or sets of relationships” and “there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships” (p. 73). As the previous statement infers, Indigenous people view the world through their relationships with everything and everyone else around them. As Little Bear (2000) states, “If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations” (p.78). It is through this understanding that Indigenous people develop their beliefs about reality and the world around them. Deloria (1999) further explains:

Indian people carefully observed phenomena in order to determine what relationships existed between and among the ‘various’ peoples of the world. Their understanding of relationships provided the Indians with the knowledge necessary to live comfortably in the physical world, and to not unduly intrude into the lives of other creatures. (p. 53)

According to Hart (2006) people’s view of the world influences how they perceive their world as well as their beliefs of what exists within their world and beyond. He goes on to say that as spirituality is an integral component of an Indigenous worldview, a spiritual realm is an important aspect of Indigenous ontology. This sentiment is reflected in the words of Archibald (2008) who writes, “I believe that sources of fundamental and important Indigenous knowledge are the land, our spiritual beliefs and ceremonies, traditional teachings of Elders, dreams, and our stories” (p. 42). Cajete (2000) believes there is a sense that the preservation of Indigenous knowledge and worldviews must include the safeguarding of our sacred symbols,

stories, songs, ceremonies and our relationship to the land, if the true nature of our realities is to be preserved for future generations.

In summation, Indigenous ontology refers to a conviction in the spirit of our realities formed through relationships with the world around us. According to Little Bear (2000), while Indigenous realities reflect the diversity of multiple worldviews, there are also many shared beliefs and values that connect us together in a web of relationships that extend across the four corners of this world. Indigenous ontology is therefore both relational and spiritual, as is Indigenous worldviews and knowledge.

Indigenous Epistemology

Epistemology is our belief in how knowledge is created. Ermine (1999) provides a definition of Aboriginal epistemology, which espouses the totality of knowledge creation for Indigenous people:

Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown. Understanding of the universe must be grounded in the spirit. Knowledge must be sought through the stream of the inner space in unison with all instruments of knowing and conditions that make individuals receptive to knowing. Ultimately it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life's mysteries. It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self.

The spirit is the haven of dreams, those peculiar images that flash symbolic messages to the knower....Our progenitors knew and believed in the power of dreams; it is through dreams that sacred undertakings are attempted. Dreams are the guiding principles for constructing the corporeal. Dreams, the voice of the inner space, give rise to the holy and prescribe all ceremonies on the physical level....The old ones and the culture they developed, understood that dreams were invaluable in understanding self and sought to manipulate the external so that dreams might happen....Blessings and other assorted gifts that permeate Aboriginal thought all stem from dreams. The fruit of the cyclical process involving dreams is the invaluable experience that we call knowledge. Experience is knowledge. (pp. 108-109)

Also included in an Indigenous epistemology is the concept of relatedness, as described by Deloria (1999):

The principle of relatedness appears most often in the phrase “All My Relations” which is used as an opening invocation and closing benediction for ceremonies, but few people understand that the phrase also describes the epistemology of the Indian worldview, providing the methodological basis for the gathering of information about the world. (p. 52)

The importance of relationships in Indigenous epistemology cannot be understated as Wilson (2008) notes:

...an Indigenous epistemology has systems of knowledge built upon relationships between things, rather than on the things themselves... These relationships are with the cosmos around us, as well as with the concepts. They thus include interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas. Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos. Indigenous epistemology is our systems of knowledge in their context, or in relationship. (p. 74)

As all things are animate, imbued with spirit and in constant motion, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance, and space is a more important referent than time, (Little Bear, 2000). Space from an Indigenous worldview, according to Wilson (2001), refers to how Indigenous people derive their sense of identity and beliefs of who they are as a people through their relationship with the land. He goes on to say that “the sacred bond with the land is more substantial than a propertied relationship and entails responsibility to all living forms that are sustained from the soil: grass, medicinal plants, birds that in turn eat the insects, four-legged that forage on the grasses and hedges, and animal hunters that prey on smaller animals” (p. 91). Knowledge therefore, is formed through relationships and observations with the natural and spiritual world, and is how language, songs, ceremonies and stories are connected to the land. Simply put, this is how it was, this is how it is today, and this is the way it will be in the future.

It is widely accepted that spirituality figures prominently in both Indigenous ontology and epistemology, and as Aluli-Meyer (2008) suggests, “Spiritual principles as epistemology are the intentionality of process, the value and purpose of meaning, and the practice of mindfulness” (p. 218). She goes on to say that spiritual knowledge is an extension of our connection to the land or space, the natural and spiritual worlds, is what keeps us grounded and humble, endures the test of time, and influences our actions. Further to this she adds, “It’s not how well you can quote theory; it’s whether those ideas affect how you *act*,” in other words, “knowledge that does not heal, bring together, challenge, surprise, encourage, or expand our awareness is not part of the consciousness this world needs right now. This is the function we as indigenous people posit” (p. 221).

It’s important I believe, to acknowledge the multiple generations of Indigenous people who have never have lived on a reserve, those who may not be connected to an Indigenous community, and the many more that may have no idea where they come from or the name of their community. It’s important to point out that their spiritual connection is as strong as any other Indigenous person, regardless of where they live. As Baskin (2011) so eloquently writes:

Of course, there is land everywhere, even under the cement of cities. Indigenous spirituality goes with us wherever we go. It teaches that a person is a spiritual being and can practice spirituality anywhere. Spirituality is inside us, in a tree in a park, in a flower in a garden, and in the sunset at the end of each day. Land-based ceremony and prayer can happen every day in cities such as Toronto if we want it to. (p. 139)

In my work as a Community Mental Health Worker, it was common practice to walk with my clients by the river or to sit in the park. There was always a perceivable shift in their body language when we sat on the grass or walked amongst the trees. The very act of being at one with nature was a spiritual, uplifting experience. I would like to think it was due to my talents as a clinician, but in my heart I know better. It is our innate connection we feel to our

mother, the land, whether we walk in fields of grass waving in the wind or on concrete, cracked and hot in the summer sun, we feel her healing powers. As the keepers of the land, we have been given instructions as how to care for the land and all its inhabitants in the forms of natural laws that serves to guide our behaviours, and responsibilities. It is these laws that serve to form an Indigenous axiology.

Indigenous Axiology

Axiology may be understood in terms of the ethics and values that guide the research process. From an Indigenous perspective, axiology must extend to include our natural laws, which guide our lives and responsibilities as Indigenous people. These natural laws were given to us by the Creator and as such are sacred. In Aboriginal philosophy, the nature of reality, the values that flow from this philosophy and the social customs that embody these values inform ethics related to relationships. Moreover Little Bear (2000) notes, “the individual’s worldview has its roots in culture – that is, in the society’s shared philosophy, values, and customs” (p. 77) that governs our actions towards others. An Indigenous axiology has been identified as those principles, ethics, and values, which govern an Indigenous research paradigm and Indigenous researcher.

For Indigenous people, our elders tell us to be careful in our actions and our words. As Hart (2008) explains, “it is understood that if you do any wrong to another life, recalling that life is understood more broadly than the English implies or what non-Indigenous people generally accept, then some form of retribution will come upon you and/or those close to you or your decedents” (p. 134). As Dakota ceremonial leader and spiritual teacher M. Hall (personal communication, October, 1999) reminded me on more than one occasion, “*eyan wakan*, words are sacred” and once spoken, the damage is done, and can never be undone. As

an Indigenous researcher, I am conscious of my obligation of being accountable to all my relations, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, and accept the responsibility of my choices. To expand upon the importance of personal accountability Weber-Pillwax (2001) identified the 3R's of Indigenous research and learning as respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. She further explains how we can remain mindful by asking ourselves the following questions:

1. How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between the topic that I am studying and myself as researcher (on multiple levels)?
2. How do my methods help to build respectful relationships between myself and the other research participants?
3. How can I relate respectfully to the other participants involved in this research so that together we can form a stronger relationship with the idea we will share?
4. What is my role as researcher in this relationship, and what are my responsibilities?
5. Am I being responsible in fulfilling my role and obligations to the other participants, to the topic and to all my relations?
6. What am I contributing or giving back to the relationship? Is the sharing, growth and learning that is taking place reciprocal?

In addition to these questions, I consider the following in understanding my responsibilities within an Indigenous research paradigm, as put forth by Hart (2008):

I understand these values in relation to research as meaning that I must respect and honour myself for what I know and do not know; that I must respect and honour others for what they know and do not know; that I must respect and honour the relationship between me, others involved in the research, others influenced by the research, and others generally; and that I must conduct myself in a way that supports and/or helps Indigenous people individually and collectively (p. 134).

In considering an Indigenous research paradigm, it must be understood that the paradigm influences not only the choice of the topic to be studied, but also the methodology, the method(s) used to gather data, participant recruitment and how the data will be analyzed and interpreted (Kovach, 2010). In addition, the researcher must reflect on why they are conducting the research. Research never occurs in a vacuum, but rather a researcher must be honest about what influences the research process, as Baskin (2011) explains:

Every researcher brings her or his own cultural expectations, values, and biases to the research process, and these expectations, values, and biases influences the ways that research questions are created, influence the choice of methods, data interpretation, and research recommendations. Thus, it can only be beneficial to all involved that researchers clearly and honestly discuss their emotional reasons for wanting to conduct any research project. (p. 240)

An Indigenous research paradigm therefore, places responsibilities on the researcher to not only maintain external relationships throughout the research process with all of creation, but more importantly to look inside at their own motives and reasoning for engaging in the research process. Aluli-Meyer (2008) provides a number of questions I reflect upon as I negotiate this journey, which she refers to as “Food for Thought” (p. 222):

1. What is your/my intention in doing research?
2. What are your/my thoughts about my topic?
3. What do you/I bring to the phenomenon of a moment shared with other?
4. How will you/I think through the process and product of data collection?
5. How will you/I respond to experiences and ideas that will be completely new to you? (p. 222)

She goes on to say, “It is fully conscious subjectivity...it holds the promise of being effective in a radically different way if you/I understand its meaning and prioritize it at all levels of

your/my research. It is called meta consciousness. “To be more than a woman of my word. To be a woman of my intention” (p. 222). It is through this process of introspection that a research methodology begins to take form.

Indigenous Methodology

Just as there is no one Indigenous worldview, “there is no such thing as one Indigenous research methodology” according to Baskin (2011, p. 240). As a novice researcher, I’ll admit that these words invoked some feelings of anxiety in me, and my first thought was, where to start? When I began this journey in graduate school, the decision to use an Indigenous research methodology was made before I really understood what it meant. During my graduate studies I had utilized phenomenology as my research method for a project in my qualitative research course. I remember telling my advisor later that same year that I wanted to do Indigenous research and that I would use phenomenology as my research method. In a quiet voice, he turned to look at me and said, “Then it won’t be Indigenous research.” I was both embarrassed and mortified. The confidence I had seemed to dissipate in mid air and I began to question if I was ready to write a thesis. Rather than give up completely, I became determined to move forward with my dream of completing a thesis. My advisor, who did not give up on me, provided me with a number of articles and suggested texts I should read to help me as I began my research journey.

While reviewing literature for this project, I soon discovered that other Indigenous scholars experienced the same feelings of uncertainty and trepidation as I when first embarking on their research journey. Their words encouraged me along, and I felt their presence with me as I slowly found my own way. It became apparent to me rather quickly, that rather than choosing a Western research methodology that fit an Indigenous perspective,

as I initially planned to do, I must first look to my own Sqilxw-Okanagan worldview, cultural protocols, language, and relationships to identify a methodology (Thompson, 2008). This knowledge would provide a firm foundation from which to build my research project upon. Although Indigenous people, worldviews, language and territories are varied and diverse, there are commonalities that exist as a result of shared values and beliefs, which stem from our Indigenous roots, regardless of whether or not we live in our communities or were raised in an urban centre, and it is through those shared values and beliefs that relationships are developed and nurtured.

Relationships figure prominently in an Indigenous research methodology, (Absolon, 2011; Absolon & Willet, 2004; Anderson, 2000, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Baskin, 2011; Cardinal, 2001; Castellano, 2004; Hart, 1997, 2007, 2010; Kovach, 2004, 2010; Martin, 2003; Sinclair, 2003; Smith, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002; Stewart, 2009; Thomas, 2004; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2001, 2008; Wilson, 2001). This includes the development of new relationships, the maintenance and nurturing of established relationships throughout the research process, but most importantly, the accountability we have as indigenous researchers to all our relationships. As Wilson (2008) explains, “an Indigenous methodology must be a process that adheres to relational accountability,” and must include the concepts of “respect, reciprocity and responsibility” (p. 77). There can be no relational accountability without respect, reciprocity and responsibility.

In an Indigenous methodology, respect must extend beyond the researcher’s relationship with participants to include all living beings on Mother Earth, the cosmos, and just as important, to themselves. Over and over, in the works of other Indigenous scholars, I have read their words that describe the personal growth and healing that occurred throughout

their research journey and continues for many of them even after their research is completed. This also speaks to the responsibility we carry as Indigenous researchers. Not only are we responsible to engage in our own healing if we are to grow, become who we were meant to be, and be positive role models for those who follow, but it is necessary if we wish to “observe protocols and respect relations and earn rights to continue the research” (Martin, 2001, p. 5). This responsibility is not to be taken lightly or dismissed as unimportant to the research process. ‘For the people’, is a phrase I’ve heard throughout the years from Indigenous speakers, ceremonial leaders and Elders. Dakota ceremonial leader and spiritual teacher M. Hall (personal communication, April, 2000) told me to remember that everything we do is “for the people”; this includes our partners, families, communities, nations, ancestors and “ones yet to come.” Further to this, Hart (2010) explains that our commitment to the people, is “the understanding of the reciprocity of life and accountability to one another” (p. 9). As researchers, we are therefore accountable to the people, our ancestors; all of our relations and Kwulencuten or Creator, which speaks to the communal element of an Indigenous methodology.

As Indigenous methodologies are built upon the values and beliefs that arise from tribal affiliations and worldviews, the research process allows researchers to undergo a transformation while they, themselves become active participants in the research process (Weber-Pillwax, 2001). At the same time, participants become co-researchers in the research, and within this mutual exchange, knowledge is shared, new information is discovered, and relationships are honoured. This speaks to reciprocity in an Indigenous research methodology, and is our way, both as Indigenous people and researchers. It may be said that Indigenous research methodologies become an extension of the researcher’s life, and as Martin (2001)

explains, “is driven by our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being and Ways of Doing” (p. 5).

Further to this, Cardinal (2001) describes how an Indigenous perspective is imbedded within the research process,

Indigenous research methods and methodologies are as old as our ceremonies and our nations. They are with us and have always been with us. Our Indigenous cultures are rich with ways of gathering, discovering, and uncovering knowledge. They are as near as our dreams and as close as our relationships. (p. 182)

They provide an opportunity for growth, learning and healing in all aspects of one’s being, namely “the Spirit, heart, mind and body” according to Absolon (2011, p. 118). The research method(s) an Indigenous researcher chooses therefore, must reflect the relational accountability that honours the relationship between *us*, as researchers and who, or “where we are getting our information from, just as “*they* share with the knowledge *we* are writing down for our research” (Wilson, 2008, p. 115). From her own experience, Kovach (2010) identified that the research method should be compatible with the theoretical orientation of an Indigenous research paradigm in order to demonstrate methodological reliability and that it must emerge from an Indigenous perspective that includes tribal knowledge. Stewart, 2009 (as cited in Kovach, 2010) writes that, “from an Indigenous research perspective the relational is viewed as an aspect of methodology whereas within western constructs the relational is viewed as bias, and thus outside methodology,” while “...the categorical units (of ontology, epistemology, methodology) are not simply more elastic, but shapeshift to accommodate a worldview outside of western tradition” (p. 42). Building upon ancient knowledge, values and beliefs, Indigenous methodologies are relational and holistic.

It must be emphasized however, that while Indigenous methodologies are reflective of the researcher’s worldviews, values and beliefs, Baskin (2011) reminds us they are equally

respectful to the diversities that are unique to Indigenous communities and nations. Indigenous research methodologies practice reciprocity and accountability, and use the knowledge created in a responsible manner that will ultimately benefit the people and community as a whole (Hart, 2010). Flexibility and reflexivity are also just as important to an Indigenous research methodology, as flexibility allows for change to reflect the needs of participants, while reflexivity challenges us remain true to who we are, to acknowledge our imperfections as human beings, be mindful of our mistakes, and have the courage to make amends for those mistakes while undertaking Indigenous research (Martin, 2003). Most importantly, the research process is a time of personal growth and the discovery of ever evolving knowledge. What is learned today will be expanded upon and challenged tomorrow. The research design and methods of data collection therefore, must reflect all of these qualities within an Indigenous research methodology.

Indigenous Research Method

A storytelling research method is harmonious with Indigenous epistemology, ontology or worldview, and is well documented in the works of Indigenous scholars (Anderson, 2000, 2011; Absolon & Willet, 2004; Archibald, 2008; Baskin, 2011; Cohen, 2008; Kovach, 2010; Martin, 2003; Sinclair, 2003; Smith, 2001; Steinhauer, 2002; Thomas, 2004; Thompson, 2008; Walker, 2001; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2001, 2008). Storytelling as a research method provides an opportunity to develop relationality throughout the research process as Wilson (2001) writes:

Storytelling and methods like personal narrative also fit the epistemology because when you are relating a personal narrative, you are getting into a relationship with someone. You are telling your (and their) side of the story and you are analyzing it. When you look at the relationship that develops between the person telling the story and the person listening to the story, it becomes a strong relationship. (p. 178)

According to Baskin (2011) oral tradition and storytelling are universal to Indigenous people as a means to pass on tribal histories, cultural and spiritual teachings and assist in healing. Kirmayer, et al. (2009) suggests that storytelling may be an integral component of the healing process, as stories facilitate “making meaning from life experience” (p. 442). They further explain that making meaning may be a by-product of the storytelling experience itself, as sharing life experiences through stories provides an opportunity for clarity and introspection, thereby the creation of personal meaning for Indigenous people extends from tribal worldviews, cultural significance, shared common experiences, and is dependent upon the style of storytelling being shared. Wilson (2008) provides details on three levels or styles of storytelling, as told to him by Cree Elder Jerry Saddleback:

...At a higher level are sacred stories, which are specific in form, content, context and structure. These stories themselves must be told at different levels according to the initiation level of the listener. Only those trained, tested and given permission to do so are allowed to tell these stories, which must never vary in how they are told. They are sacred and contain the history of our people. I maybe shouldn't even talk about them here, but it's already on the page, so I'll leave it.

...The second level stories are like the Indigenous legends that you may have heard or read in books. There are certain morals, lessons or events that take place, but different storytellers shape them according to their own experience and that of the listener. The intent or underlying message of these stories remains the same.

...The third style of story is relating personal experiences or the experiences of other people. As I talked about near the beginning of the book, Elders often use experiences from their own or others' lives to help counsel or teach. (p. 98)

During the research process, the sharing of personal life experiences provides an opportunity for the researcher and participants to create knowledge together, in such a way that voices formerly silent are heard.

Baskin (2011) writes that through storytelling, our narratives “serve as important links to the past and provide a means of surviving into the future” (p. 205). This sentiment is shared

by Weber-Pillwax (2004) who writes, “contemporary research by Indigenous scholars uses narratives and storytelling as the primary method of supporting research objectives,” as “these are methods that can stand alone and work well to lead researchers and community co-researchers down many paths of knowledge acquisition and creation” (p. 81). Storytelling allows the researcher to fully participate in the research process, and as a research method reflects the responsibility I feel as a researcher to maintain existing relationships and build new ones through the sharing of life experiences.

As a Sqilxw-Okanagan woman, this research process carries with it a number of significant personal and cultural meanings for me. The Sqilxw-Okanagan people are “the people of the stories and through storytelling and relationship building-by renewing the extended family learning and teaching relationships, the Sqilxwlcawt, ‘our Native way,’ continues and visions are realized” (Cohen, 2008, p. 2) and just as with other Indigenous people, knowledge is passed from one generation to the next through stories. Kovach (2009) writes that “stories were an intrinsic part of Indigenous oral societies long before the rise of Western education and academic research” (p. 27). In the past, customs dictated that an individual in training to become a storyteller apprenticed under a woman or man recognized by their community as one who was blessed with the gift of telling stories. Storytellers were held in great esteem in their communities and were viewed as highly skilled within the art of storytelling. While they were respected as historians and knowledge keepers in the past, this still holds true today in many Indigenous communities.

As a research method, storytelling serves to honour the past and our ancestors, while affording Indigenous voices today with an opportunity to share their stories of strength, spirit, and survival in “a form of resistance to colonization” (Thomas, 2005, p. 223). She explains

that as a research method, storytelling allocates a sacred space in which storytellers use their own voices to share their own stories in their own time. She goes on to write that this forms a partnership between the researcher and the storytellers whereby the storytellers direct the research process in the following way:

Storytelling has a holistic nature in that how the story is told is up to the storyteller—they will tell the story the way they want. Storytellers may opt to share their culture and tradition (spiritual), how events made them feel (emotional), what things looked like, or how they physically felt (physical), or how this impacted their ways of knowing and being (mental)...Because the process of telling stories is in the hands of the storytellers, they have the opportunity to include in their stories that which they wish, that which they perceive as important, that which they want documented. Storytellers hold the power in this research methodology—they are in control of the story and the ‘researcher’ becomes the listener or facilitator. (p. 226)

In this respect, storytelling contributes to relationality and is in keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm and methodology. Storytelling as a research method, Thompson (2008) writes, contributes to a positive change in the way research is “being done for, with, and by Indigenous peoples” (p. 26) moreover, the use of stories and storytelling allows access to information which may not be readily available through other research methods. Sinclair (2003) discovered during her research that “the advantage of the storytelling mode of narrative is a wealth of information arose out of this form and provided a broad picture of the participants’ experiences, and a broad picture of their knowledge of the subject areas” (p. 125). When using storytelling as a research method there are a number of considerations to bear in mind.

Wilson (2008) cautions, the use of English words like “story” to describe the transmission of Indigenous knowledge through oral tradition may lead some in the academic world to deduce that Indigenous knowledge is “make-believe” (p. 97), as the English language connotation suggests. In “*Decolonizing methodologies - Research and Indigenous peoples*”

Smith, 1999 (as cited in Brant Castellano, 2004) argued that the time has come for “an Indigenous research methodology because for too long our stories have gone untold, or have been misinterpreted” (p. 70). In considering the method for this study, I agreed with Wilson (2008) and his argument that relationality must be an integral component of my research, and felt that the mutual sharing of life experiences through stories would build a strong, spiritual relationship not only with the participants/storytellers, but the research topic as well.

In addition to the responsibilities that come from doing this research, it important to recognize that issues may also arise in regards to the readers of this study who might not understand Indigenous worldviews, knowledge creation, spirituality or research. As Archibald (2008) reminds us that, in some cases, it may be necessary to clarify the intent, but this must be done so only after careful considerations are made because to “add more background information, would then change the intent” (p. 55). In fact, this is an important consideration when analyzing, interpreting and presenting the data in its completed form as she further explains:

A major issue regarding reciprocity is that changes to cultural ways of making meaning through story may have epistemological implications. Because learners may know nothing about Indigenous stories, a certain amount of explication regarding cultural context and the story is necessary. Where does one draw the line between explication to lessen confusion and disrespecting the story and learners by telling them what to think (p.126)?

I recognize that these are important considerations as I proceed with this study, and accept the responsibility that comes with engaging in research from an Indigenous research paradigm. The teachings I received earlier in my education, my professional career, and through my own healing will prove an invaluable resource as I embark upon this journey.

During my undergraduate studies, many of our classes were held in circle, and elders were invited to tell stories. I remember that when I first began to listen I didn't understand the need to reflect upon the story and that the meaning of the story may not become clear for some time. Archibald (2008) speaks to this when she writes, "in First Nations cultures long ago, storytellers often told stories and the listeners would not ask questions or talk about the story", rather "they would think about the story and what it meant to them" (p. 115). I find that even now I will get an answer to a story I heard long ago. It is akin to an 'ah ha' moment in non-Indigenous culture. When this happens, I always smile because one of my teachers told me that I would get the answers when I was meant to get them and not before.

A question I often hear from non-Indigenous academics and clinicians directed to Indigenous scholars is, 'How can you apply your research to practice?' My response to this question in regards to storywork is that clients and clinicians often reflect on the stories they've been told. Archibald (2008) suggests "the principles of holism, interrelatedness, and synergy work together to create powerful storywork understandings that have the power to help with emotional healing and wellness," (p. x) and assists clients to move forward on their healing journey. Further to this, it may just be that stories touch an un-colonized part of our professional selves, often allowing us to look through different eyes from a sacred place in our hearts (Showalter, 1998). It is from this sacred place that we're able to see the light that shines from within clients.

In my previous work as a Community Mental Health Worker and a Healing and Wellness Worker, I would often tell my clients stories and ask them to reflect upon them when they left. I explained to the client that we wouldn't discuss the stories as the meaning and creation of knowledge would become clear as time went by. On more than one occasion a

client would return and tell me what meaning they had gotten from the story, and how my story had helped them to understand. Just as with our clinical work, we must be able to connect ourselves to our research through our methodology. As Weber-Pillwax (2001) explains, an Indigenous methodology creates knowledge, and allows a researcher to be actively engaged in the research process, thereby facilitating transformation and personal growth of the researcher throughout the research process. She goes on to say that the researcher becomes engaged in the project as both a researcher and participant; as such, my own story, reflections, observations and experiences are supplanted throughout the research.

In summary, a storytelling research method is harmonious with an Indigenous research paradigm, epistemology, ontology or worldview, axiology, and methodology. Storytelling and oral tradition are common to Indigenous people around the world as a means to pass on cultural and spiritual teachings, tribal histories, and is recognized as a means to facilitate healing. As a research method, storytelling promotes relationality between the researcher and co-researchers whereby the researcher's story becomes part of the research project. Storytelling as research method requires extra time to record, listen to, and transcribe the talk verbatim; for the researcher and co-researchers to examine the transcripts to ensure the correct usage of English words, which will become the public cultural record for future generations; and make certain that both co-operating research partners are satisfied with the research findings, and finished product according to Archibald (2008). As a research method, storytelling allocates a sacred space in which storytellers use their own voices to share their own stories in their own time.

Sampling and Storytellers

Consistent with Indigenous worldviews and an Indigenous research paradigm, I approached Indigenous women with whom I was previously acquainted such as former work colleagues, women I had met through participation in ceremonies, attendance at conferences and workshops or women whose work was familiar to me within the Indigenous community. I also approached women I knew met the criteria I had outlined in my research proposal. All of the women had experienced the death of a loved one, acknowledged being engaged in their healing, and participated in spiritual practices to varying degrees.

Upon receipt of my Certificate of Approval from the Research & Ethics Compliance Board at the University of Manitoba on January 23, 2013, I began to recruit potential participants/storytellers. I initially contacted nine Indigenous women by telephone, and/or email to request a meeting. Nine of the Indigenous women live in urban centers in Manitoba; one woman resides in a rural community in Manitoba and one woman lives in rural Saskatchewan.

Out of the eleven women I contacted, six of the women agreed to meet with me at a time, date and location that was convenient to them to discuss my research project. I met with two of the women in my office and met with three women at their place of employment, while one woman agreed to meet with me at a restaurant.

Each meeting began with conversation about family, health, work, and people we knew as a means to reestablish bonds and acquaint ourselves with each other in order to build trust and respect. During the meetings, I discussed my project with each woman, reviewed a summary of the proposed research, which included the three questions guiding the research, and emphasized that their participation in the project was voluntary. I explained how

each interview would be conducted, and that the interviews would be recorded, if that was agreeable to them. I answered any questions they had regarding the topic and addressed any concerns brought forth. I provided each woman with a folder to keep which contained a copy of the research summary, the three research questions and a copy of the Informed Consent Form with a list of counselling resources attached. In addition I provided my business card which included my contact information for home and work including telephone numbers and email address. Each woman was invited to take the material home to review at their leisure and to think about whether they were interested in participating. I asked each woman I met with if they knew the name(s) of any other women who may be interested in participating in my research project, in an effort to recruit a sufficient number of participant/storytellers. I reviewed the criteria for potential participants/storytellers with each woman to ensure continuity in the research project. One woman emailed me as a result of receiving an email from one of the women I previously met with, and indicated she was interested in learning more about my project. She invited me to meet with her in her office on Monday, February 4, 2013 where I gave her an information folder. We then reviewed the summary of the research project together and discussed the three research questions. As I did previously, I invited her to take the material contained in the folder home to review and to think about whether she was interested in sharing her story with me.

At the conclusion of our face to face meetings, I presented each woman with tobacco as is customary when asking someone to share or asking for a service. I told each woman that their acceptance of the tobacco was in no way an obligation to participate in the research project, but rather the tobacco was a gift from me and a sign of my gratitude for their agreeing to meet with me, for considering my invitation to participate in the project, and an expression

of my respect for each of them. As one of the women picked up the tobacco from the table, she said, "I'll accept this tobacco and take it to the lodge; I'll pray with it and for you, for good things for you throughout this process, but I know you'll do things in a good way" (D.T., personal communication, January 30, 2013). Another woman spoke to me as I was preparing to leave, and said, "Oh, I have no concerns, I know you'll do things in a good way" (N.K., personal communication, January 29, 2013). When the women asked how much time they each had to think about it (participating in the research project), I informed them that I was under a tight time line, and as each woman accepted the tobacco and information folders, they each assured me they would get back to me with their decision. Of the six women I met with in person, all of them agreed to participate in my research project.

I contacted two other potential participants/storytellers by telephone to arrange a meeting, and during the course of our conversation the women surprised me when they agreed to participate in my research without first meeting to discuss the project. They subsequently invited me to meet with them in their homes to conduct the interviews. One of the women resides in the city and one resides in a rural Manitoba community. Dates and times were confirmed for the interviews and directions obtained to travel to the rural location. I was very honoured by their willingness to participate in my research project but more so because of their warm invitation and offer of hospitality.

I wrote a letter to the woman living in Saskatchewan as I had no other contact information for her, and explained my reasons for contacting her. In addition to the letter describing the research project, I provided the information folder containing a summary of the project and research questions, the informed consent form, and my contact information. I invited her to contact me if she had any questions, concerns or required clarification about the

information contained within the envelope. I admit to having reservations about writing to her at all, as I prefer face-to-face meetings and could not be certain how she might interpret my actions. I contacted two other women by telephone that lived in a large urban centre in Manitoba. They requested additional information be emailed to them so they could review the research project. I was told they would contact me if they were interested in participating in the project. I didn't receive a reply from either of the women who requested the additional information by email or from the woman who lived in rural Saskatchewan that I contacted by mail.

In total, eight of the eleven women contacted agreed to participate in the research project. In the end, the storyteller who lived in rural Manitoba had to drop out of the project as a winter storm prevented me from travelling to her home on the arranged day, and later, her grandchildren came down with influenza. I didn't attempt to contact additional participants/storytellers due to the time required to establish relationships and the time restraints for completing my masters program. I anticipated seven storytellers would be a sufficient number to provide the desired amount or degree of saturation of information, as each met the established criteria.

To summarize, I contacted Indigenous women with whom I had previous relationships with through work, participation in ceremonies, workshops, conferences or community activities. In recognition of the importance of experience in Indigenous epistemology, I turned to women I knew had experienced the death of a loved one more than one year ago, possessed spiritual beliefs and were known to follow Indigenous spiritual practices to varying degrees, were engaged in their own healing, and were alcohol and drug free. I anticipated that these criteria would provide participants/storytellers with additional protective factors from any

emotional stress that may surface as a result of sharing their stories. In addition, a list of counselling resources was distributed to the participants/storytellers prior to the interviews. Eight Indigenous women storytellers were identified and asked to voluntarily contribute to this research project. The invitation to participate was made without persuasion or coercion, and participants/storytellers were informed they can withdraw from the project at any time should they choose to do so. A gift of tobacco was offered to potential participants/storytellers when the invitation was extended to participate in this research project according to Indigenous protocol. In the end, seven participants/storytellers participated in this research project. The demographics of the seven storytellers were as follows:

- Ages ranged between 30 and 70 years of age
- Two storytellers were residential school attendees
- Three storytellers identified as having residential school affected families
- Two storytellers suspect familial residential school impacts
- Three storytellers identified as Métis, one identified as Cree/Métis, one identified as Dakota, one identified as Anishinaabe Kwe, and one identified as Inuit
- Two storytellers possessed undergraduate degrees, one possessed a graduate degree, four storytellers possessed post-secondary education (certificates, diplomas)
- All seven storytellers currently live in an urban setting

Storyteller's Consent and Confidentiality Issues

All potential participants/storytellers were informed of the research topic, the purpose of the research project, and my reason for approaching each of them with a request to

participate in the study. In keeping with the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board requirements, a script of what was said to each participant was developed, and included the following points:

1. Researcher introduction: “Hello, my name is Andrea Hinch-Bourns.”
2. The introduction was followed by informal conversation between me (researcher) and the potential participant/storyteller related to family, work, health, and mutual friends to (re)establish relationships and build rapport.
3. “Name, I am currently working on my thesis for my Master of Social Work degree, and as part of the requirement, I must complete a research study. My research topic is how spirituality influences the experiences of loss, grief, and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. I am hoping we can meet so I can share more about what I hope to do. Would you be willing to meet with me? If this is agreeable, I will meet with you at a time and place that is convenient for you.”
4. Dates, times, and locations were arranged, and my contact information provided.

Although the above statement was not read out verbatim to each woman, the points were covered during the course of our initial conversation and are included in Appendix A.

Once participants/storytellers agreed to participate in the research study, their consent, as required by the Research Ethics Board was obtained from each participant/storyteller. As previously mentioned, a letter of consent was given to each participant/storyteller for their examination prior to the scheduled interview. I then reviewed the consent letter with each participant and answered any questions they had, to ensure a complete understanding of their rights before obtaining their signature on the document. The letter of consent is attached as Appendix B, and contains the following points:

1. Initial greetings.
2. A statement of thanks for their willingness to participate in the research study, which includes the thesis title.
3. A statement of intent regarding the study.
4. The purpose of the consent letter, participants'/storytellers' rights to participate, and my responsibilities to the participants/storytellers in a manner that reflects social work's code of ethics, the study's Indigenous research paradigm, and the voluntary right to participate of the consent form.
5. Risks and benefits of participating in this research study.
6. How the data/stories will be collected, stored, and confidentiality maintained.
7. An invitation to ask questions regarding the letter of consent.

Storytellers chose whether to be identified by their first name and the nation from which they belong, or to participate anonymously, in keeping with Indigenous protocol, and ownership of stories. On the consent form (see Appendix B) storytellers will have the opportunity to sign on one of two lines. If they chose to sign on one line, they willingly gave their permission to use identifying information about them. If they signed on the other line, they indicated that they wished to remain anonymous. In addition, verbal confirmation was secured from all participants/storytellers indicating their choice, as is consistent with Indigenous oral tradition. My reason for providing participants/storytellers with a choice in whether they wish to be identified, or remain anonymous is reflective of my respect for the storytellers and the knowledge they share.

Anderson (2010) reflects on the issue of 'Indigenous copyright' and writes, "in providing Indigenous knowledge, one typically identifies who they are and whom they got the

knowledge from, much in the same way that scholars identify their written sources” (p. 3). She goes on to explain, “this system of validating knowledge, acknowledges teachers and thinkers who have gone before, and ensuring that the line of knowledge keepers and knowledge transmission is maintained” (p. 3). The final choice, of course remained with the storyteller. If the storyteller chose to remain anonymous, an alternative name was chosen by either the storyteller, or me, if indicated by the storyteller and used throughout the research study. As some participants/storytellers did not grow up with their culture, they have adopted or borrowed the teachings of other Indigenous peoples; therefore the teachings as shared by the participants/storytellers throughout their story, will be identified through their affiliation to a specific nation in the written summary. For example I am Okanagan but was raised on the plains, therefore the teachings or tribal knowledge I refer to throughout this research study is identified as being Dakota, Ojibway, Cree and Okanagan.

A summary of the research project, including the guiding research questions and informed consent form with counselling resources was provided to the storyteller who agreed to participate in the research project over the telephone, as we hadn't met prior to the interview. In keeping with Indigenous teachings when asking for help or knowledge and as a sign of respect and reciprocity a gift of tobacco was given to the storyteller, in addition to gifts of food. Time was provided for the storyteller to review the information and to ask any questions prior to the interview.

Collecting the Stories

Prior to beginning the interview, I offered each storyteller refreshments and the opportunity to smudge, if possible. I wasn't able to provide one storyteller the opportunity to smudge before an interview as the interview took place in my office where smudging is not

permitted. Each storyteller and I engaged in informal conversation related to health, family, people we knew and other such topics. In addition, I answered any questions that storytellers had about the interview process. The conversations lasted as long as the topics and served to renew relationships and build connections with each storyteller, as well as to calm any anxiety or nerves. Kovach (2010) writes, conversation will facilitate the co-creation of knowledge, and build rapport and trust between storytellers and researcher, which I found to be true. During the course of the conversation, I extended an invitation to each storyteller to share their story of loss. I instructed each storyteller to share as much or as little about the death of their loved one as they felt comfortable in sharing. Each storyteller was invited to refer back to the research question they had been provided at any time during the interview, if they wished. Once the storyteller began to speak I remained silent, engaged in active listening and quiet observation, as a sign of respect and in keeping with Indigenous protocol, unless the storyteller directed a question to me.

The interviews were open-ended and unstructured to allow the storytellers an opportunity to tell their story without interruption or direction from myself, the researcher. Storytellers were not asked to share specific making meaning strategies as such; rather this exploratory study asked storytellers to share their experiences of loss and grief and describe how spirituality influenced their healing journey without any leading questions from me, which may have influenced the direction the story would take. Prior to the interviews, a number of the storytellers indicated to me they would prefer that I ask questions in order to keep them on topic, to which I agreed. I recognized quickly that as a researcher, I must remain open and flexible in my approach, and adapt to meet the needs of the storytellers. As Minichello and Kottler (2010) suggest:

Some participants will require a bit more structure than others will. Some will tell their stories with little prompting except an initial inquiry or two; others will stop and start, looking for a bit more direction. Depending on the relationship you develop, the personality of the participant, and their responsiveness at any moment in time, you will need to make continual adjustments in your style and approach (p. 38).

Once the interviews began however, I found that I didn't need to ask questions, and in fact, as the storytellers began to share their stories they found their voices and shared freely.

Storytelling not only provided a narrative of their experience of loss, as well as their progressive journey to find meaning following the death of a loved one, it also facilitated the opportunity to share other intimate details of their lives. It was a truly beautiful experience and I was honoured and humbled to be a part of it.

Initially, the length of time for each interview was set for between one to two hours. Once the interviews began however, each storyteller set the time and pace for their interview with the interviews lasting from one to three hours. The storytellers talked until they indicated they were done, as a sign of respect and to demonstrate relationality, as only they knew how long it would take them to tell their story. Once the storyteller was done sharing their story, a gift of ceremonial cloth and a blanket was presented to each, again to demonstrate reciprocity and appreciation.

Field notes were completed immediately following the interview, as opposed to during the interview, once again in a show of respect. All the stories were audio-taped and transcribed in their entirety by a transcriptionist hired by the researcher due to time restraints. Each storyteller was informed of the necessity of hiring a transcriber and their permission obtained. Once the interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were given back to each storyteller for their review and to check for accuracy. Storytellers were asked to indicate any changes, deletions or additions they wished to make to the transcript before returning it to me.

Storytellers hold copyright to their stories and as such will determine what is to be included, and how their knowledge will be disseminated. Additionally, returning the transcripts to the storytellers assists in the validation of the data collected. In keeping with the informed consent form, I am responsible to ask permission to use the storytellers' stories for anything outside of this thesis, including publications of the thesis, papers, articles, and /or presentations, unless otherwise indicated by the storyteller.

Safeguarding the Stories

The audio-tape recordings, transcripts of the interviews, and all research related documentation were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office at Brandon University or in my home office. I am the only person in possession of a key to access the locked files. When transporting the audio-tapes or transcripts, my briefcase was locked securely in my vehicle.

Protection of Storytellers

I did not perceive any physical risk for storytellers in this research project, as my intent was to address how spirituality influences the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for the storytellers following the death of a loved one. Prior to each interview I explained that in the event that storytellers experienced any feelings of sadness, renewed grief or loss, as a result of sharing their story, I would be available immediately following the interview to debrief with them. In addition, I provided my contact information to storytellers, and told them they could contact me at anytime should they need to debrief further following the interview. I believed that my years of experience in the field of mental health as a counsellor, and Community Mental Health Worker/Wellness Worker in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous agencies, provides me with adequate assessment and intervention skills to identify potential problems and provide appropriate interventions, as required. Due to my past

experience and knowledge of community resources, I developed and provided a list of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community resources and counselling agencies. I also told each storyteller that I would be willing to arrange a talking/healing circle for storytellers to share and debrief, or coordinate a letting go ceremony for them should they wish, and would secure whatever actions were necessary to ensure their safety and security, so they would find this a positive experience.

Story Analysis: Identifying Themes

The method of data analysis for this study is a mixed qualitative approach that will utilize both an Indigenous research method (storytelling) for gathering knowledge, and a Western research method for interpretation and presentation of the knowledge collected. Kovach (2010) explains that, “Within a paradigmatic approach to research, the paradigmatic influences the choice of methods (i.e. why a particular method is chosen), and how the data will be analyzed and interpreted” (p. 41). A narrative analysis, a non-Indigenous qualitative approach to data analysis was initially considered as a means to identify stories within the stories, locate turning points or epiphanies, and identify contextual meanings and metaphors (Creswell, 2007). Upon further reflection, a narrative approach was deemed inappropriate due to the need to dissect the storytellers’ stories in a manner I viewed as being disrespectful. During the interview process, it became apparent that the stories were in fact, stories within stories that contained many similarities to one another. It is always fascinating to me how similar the stories of Indigenous women are to one another. I believe it speaks to our shared past regardless of where or how we grew up. Rather than “pull pieces or chunks” of the stories out, and risk losing their meaning altogether, I decided to include condensed stories and themes in a manner similar to Kovach (2006) who presented the findings of her doctoral

dissertation “in two ways: a) condensed conversation; and b) thematic grouping of the data” (p. 101). As in her research, I will include an introduction, the condensed story, thematic groupings, and my own reflections, which allows for a reader to engage in further interpretation in the future. This is compatible with Indigenous oral tradition in which a storyteller shares their story, and the onus falls upon the listener to pull out the meanings and teachings that are significant to them. I propose that readers of this research will engage in a similar process, and identify those meanings and teachings that will be useful to them in their work.

The identification of themes related to finding meaning strategies and spiritual significance began with the storytellers sharing their stories, and writing my field notes after each interview, which included my observations of the storyteller during the interview. Transcriptions were read and reread initially to facilitate my immersion in the stories. This was a necessary step as I hired a transcriptionist, and missed the opportunity to become immersed during the transcribing process. At this point, the transcriptions were returned to each participant to review and check for accuracy. The transcriptions were returned to me by the storytellers once they had a chance to read them. None of the storytellers made any revisions, additions, or deletions to their stories before returning them to me.

To identify themes, I turned to the work of Ryan and Bernard (2003, 2010) who write that “Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research” (p. 85). They go on to describe twelve observational techniques for identifying themes which include:

1. Repetitions – the more the same concept occurs in text, the more likely it is a theme.

2. Indigenous Typologies or Categories – look for unfamiliar, local words, and for familiar words used in unfamiliar ways.
3. Metaphors and Analogies – people often represent their thoughts, behaviors, and experiences with metaphors and analogies.
4. Transitions – new paragraphs, pauses, changes in tone of voice, or the presence of particular phrases may indicate transitions or themes.
5. Similarities and Differences – searching for similarities and differences by making systematic comparisons.
6. Linguistic Connectors – words and phrases that indicate attributes and various kinds of causal or conditional relations.
7. Missing Data – instead of asking, “What is here?” one asks, “What is missing?”
8. Theory-Related Material – Rich narratives contain information on themes that characterize the experiences of informants, but we also want to understand how qualitative data illuminate questions of theoretical importance...as Spradley (as cited in Ryan and Bernard, 2003, p. 62) suggested searching interviews for evidence of social conflict, cultural contradictions, informal methods of social control, things that people do in managing impersonal social relationships, methods by which people acquire and maintain achieved and ascribed status, and information about how people solve problems.
9. Cutting and Sorting – there are many variations to this technique however, the main premise is exactly as it states. After reading and re-reading the text, identifying quotes, cutting, and sorting into piles, themes emerge. This process can be as simple or complex as the researcher desires.

10. Word Lists and Key-Words-In-Context (KWIC) – these methods use observation to generate word lists, and then count how many times the words appear. There are computer programs to generate themes and data.
11. Word Co-occurrence – this approach arises “from linguistics and semantic network analysis”, and is ‘based on the idea that many words commonly occur with other words to form a particular idea’ (p. 66).
12. Metacoding – examines the relationship among a priori themes to discover potentially new themes and overarching metathemes from a fixed set of data units (paragraphs, whole texts, pictures, etc.) and fixed set of a priori themes. It is less exploratory than other techniques.

The determining factors in choosing which technique(s) to use in this study were influenced by the following factors including the type of data, skills required, time restraints, labour requirements, number and types of themes, and processes to test reliability and validity of themes.

The storytellers shared their life experience stories which were transcribed verbatim and resulted in rich narratives containing thick descriptions. Due to the amount of textual data generated, I decided to employ a cutting and sorting technique to identify initial themes. Although there are computer programs available that would make the data analysis phase of the research less time consuming, I wanted the opportunity to become immersed in the data in a way that wouldn't be possible if I used a computer program to analyze the data. I believed that computer generated themes would miss the emotional nuances that would only be visible through manual analysis, and as a result would not adequately describe the meaning of their experiences, as the storytellers intended.

The transcriptions were first read and then re-read, while I made notations in the margins and highlighted the text in different colours according to specific themes; this process was repeated with each story. Following this, I decided to rewrite the transcripts in their entirety in an effort to become completely immersed in the stories, as I had hired a transcriptionist and because of this, I felt I had missed an important step in the research process. Once I completed this task, I left the stories for a period of one week, so I could come back and repeat the process to see if the themes originally identified had changed, remained the same, or if new themes emerged. This action provided an opportunity to validate initial findings, and proved invaluable in the identification of a wide range of themes during this stage of the analysis. Once I was satisfied I had identified all possible themes, I began a secondary process of reducing the themes according to similarities and patterns of meaning as expressed by the storytellers. During this aspect of the analysis, I began the process of relating themes back to the three headings I used in the literature review, Indigenous Worldview, Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous Spirituality. During this time, I noted that there were separate stories related to these concepts that resulted in my referring to them as, *Coming to see*, *Coming to know* and *Coming to be*, which will be expanded upon in the discussion portion of this study.

The inclusion of an Indigenous worldview in the data analysis is one way to ensure the research maintains cultural rigor, as presented by Martin (2001), and is therefore in keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm. Throughout the research process I was mindful of past research done “on” Indigenous people, and the disrespectful manner in which it was accomplished, as well as the harm done to countless numbers of Indigenous people and communities.

In conducting this research and completing the analysis, I accorded the storytellers the same respect that I would expect to receive if I were in their place. Throughout the research project, I engaged in personal reflection, referring back to my own experience of loss, as a means to connect with the storytellers' experiences. Self-reflection is viewed as compatible with an Indigenous research paradigm, as it allows for total immersion of the researcher in the stories, experiences, and allows the researcher to eventually discover meanings within the data. I was ever mindful however, that I must not infer meanings to the data that arose from my own experiences, as opposed to the experiences of the storytellers.

Once final themes were identified, and summaries of the stories developed, the findings were given back to the storytellers for them to review and check for accuracy. This was deemed necessary as Martin, 2001 (as cited in Hart, 2007) suggested that "Indigenous research data interpretation has less to do with capturing "truth" or drawing general conclusions and more to do with checking with the participants" (p. 156), and reflects the relational aspect of an Indigenous research paradigm. By returning the findings and having storytellers review the condensed stories and themes, the validity and reliability of the research findings may be determined by the participants themselves. Further to this, the ability to identify and apply themes that may be recognized or used by other Indigenous women is in keeping with the goals of the research project.

In summary, this chapter describes the components of an Indigenous research paradigm including epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology. Storytelling as a research method is reviewed for its compatibility with an Indigenous research paradigm and methodology. In addition, the chapter seeks to explain the identification and recruitment process, outline informed consent procedures, identify any risks to storytellers and describe

appropriate actions taken to minimize risks, as well as illustrate the interview format, and data storage. A discussion on the analysis of the data collected including transcription of audio-tapes, identification of themes, and the role of storytellers in determining reliability and validity of research findings is included. The final contribution to this chapter is the insertion of my own story and reflections that I engaged in while undertaking the analysis of the stories. The next chapter will include a discussion of the findings including identified themes, excerpts of stories, researcher reflections, and the relation of research to finding meaning through spirituality.

Chapter Four: Finding Meanings

In this chapter I will discuss the process from which I derived meanings from the stories shared by seven Indigenous Women or as it is commonly referred to in Western research, data analysis. The women's stories represent their experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning through spirituality, but more than that, their stories speak of trauma, pain, struggles, healing, strength and resilience. They provide a lens through which to view their world while providing a positive image of Indigenous womanhood (Anderson, 2000), as they move beyond their pain to find meaning and purpose in their lives. Their willingness to share of themselves, their innermost thoughts, memories, hopes and beliefs is a gift I will cherish for the rest of my life.

When I was undergraduate student in university, I was fortunate to take two courses taught by Maria Campbell, Cree/Métis author, educator and activist, and although I don't remember the exact words or the date, she told something to the effect that, when someone shares their story with us, we take a piece of that story into our heart forever. Nothing could be truer. I will forever remember how each woman touched my heart and spirit with their

words. In reverence to the storytellers, I will share in this thesis, as much of their stories as time and space will allow me. Although, I removed most of the pauses, repetitive words and nuances from their stories, I think readers will find the power of the women's stories remains intact. I did include some pauses, descriptive words and repetition of words in parts of the stories that proved particularly moving or difficult for the storyteller, in an effort to relay the emotional essence of the experience. As is often the case in research, one begins with a plan or map of what you wish to study, however once initiated, the research process takes on a life of its own and you encounter unexpected twists and turns before you reach your final destination. It is in these twists and turns that most often present the best vantage point from which to view the experience. The same is true in this study.

As indicated previously in Chapter Three, this chapter will include condensed versions of the stories and the themes identified during the research process as well as my personal reflections. I chose to write in this fashion, for two reasons: first, to honour the Indigenous women's voices that put their trust in me and second, to immerse the reader in the words and stories shared by the seven Indigenous women who graciously participated in this research study. In order to meet the "rigor" requirements and expectations of a research study, I will present themes and a discussion of the themes to satisfy my thesis requirements. I respectfully acknowledge that the themes I identify and the meanings I ascribe arise from my own subjective experience, which is in keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm.

The storyteller's stories emerge, for the most part, from the research question provided to them in advance of our meeting. The stories that emerged are the storyteller's own words and what they willingly shared. I believe this produced the richness of the narratives and detailed descriptions of their experiences that I in turn share with you. I begin this chapter

with the storyteller's narratives of loss and grief following the death of a loved one. The storyteller's share their stories of loss and grief, and as is common, each story takes on a life of its own. Out of the stories emerges a pattern of themes, often interwoven, that speaks to the life experiences of the storytellers. The stories and themes, as I present them in this work do not follow a linear path; rather they more clearly illustrate a spiral as the storytellers move along on their journey of grief. As Absolon (2009) suggests, "integral to the outcome of any story is the perspective from which it flows" (p. 178). It is from these perspectives that meaning is found. By including excerpts of the stories, I honour the women's voices. Six of the storytellers chose to be identified by their spirit name, and one wished to use her father's surname. All the storytellers believed, as these were their stories, they wished to be acknowledged for the knowledge that they shared as is in keeping with oral tradition. This is where our journey begins.

Part One: In Their Own Words – Stories of Loss

Each storyteller decided how much they would share about the death of their loved one. As each woman shared, it became clear that telling their story of the loss was only one strand in the story of their life, and as always, I was struck by the similarities in their words and experiences. The time we spent together was much more than a research study, and proved to be an experience that touched my emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual self.

As is always the case when I sit with Indigenous people and women in particular, I am struck by the familiarities in our stories, although our lives were/are so different. Indigenous women share a life story shaped through colonization that continues to be affect us even today, however I feel each time we share our stories and begin or continue with our healing, we cut away at those ties that bind. The stories that are shared within the pages of this thesis

are not for the faint of heart. The life stories of the seven Indigenous women who graciously agreed to participate in this study go beyond their stories of loss and grief following the death of a loved one. Their voices join together in what Absolon (2009) refers to as re-storying, which she writes “is the process of restoring our history and ourselves,” and as is the case here, “stories of survival [that] are horrific and magnificent all at once” (p. 182). Their stories appear as they were told to me.

Storyteller, *She Who Moves the Water*, a Métis woman who grew up in a Métis community in central Manitoba, began by sharing the story of the loss of her brother in 2004,

I lost my brother in 2004 and he was my oldest brother. It was unexpected and it was right before Christmas when I lost him. I think initially I went into kind of like a little shock. I couldn't believe it; I couldn't believe that I just lost him. Even speaking about it now, because I never went to that place in awhile that I just kind of feel emotional, but yeah, that was a major loss for me. Do you know I've did things in my own way and my own time where, like losing my brother just before Christmas. I remember I went to where he grew up, where I mean, after he left home, where he stayed with my dad. So I went to just be with my dad. I think my dad coped well, but then I remember when we went there that evening because we'd just been to the hospital first, and that's where we had to go see his body, so that was hard to see. It was hard to see his body, and I think that's what, uh, yeah, when I seen him, yeah, it's really true.

You know, I remember my two bigger children, like were there, but they're all in the car, but I knew I that I didn't want to let my bigger children see him, and it's just because I don't want them to have a memory of, like, seeing my brother laying there like that, because he had to have that, I don't know what they called it, that breathe, so they had something in his mouth, that thing was still in his mouth. I don't know why. And then yeah, so we went there and just tried to help my dad and my dad, because my dad was very close to him; my dad was, like he lived with my dad, and so I tried to go there and tried to, uh, you know, and maybe to, I kind of shut down my feelings because I wanted to be some sort of support to my dad. Then my dad had to get rushed to the hospital because I think my dad had almost symptoms of a heart attack, because he just couldn't believe it when they told him that, probably.

The loss of a child often puts tremendous strain on a family's relationships, especially for the parents of the child. If there is already marital strain, then the relationship may further deteriorate, placing the surviving children in a difficult position as they try to meet the needs

of both parents while experiencing their own grief. She Who Moves the Water shares how the sudden death of her brother affected the relationship between her parents:

My mom and dad divorced when I was fourteen and they haven't really talked since then. When my brother passed away, I don't think they even talked because that was what their relationship is like. My dad never went to her and hugged her, saying we lost a son. Anyway, without even talking, my dad wanted him to be buried in one community and my mom wanted him buried in a different community. I was helping my mom because I was with my mom after leaving my dad and I was making arrangements to have him buried where my mom wanted, and my sister was with my dad and she was making arrangements to have him buried where he wanted, so we're working with that same funeral home. Okay, so he's [my dad], cancel that, he's going to be buried over here. My mom was getting angry because she still has issues around my dad because my dad was abusive to her. I never seen that because he was totally different with us, but I guess in the time when he's early drinking, back when the relationship was young, he was abusive with her. I think he used to be, from what she says; he used to be really abusive, used to beat her bad and stuff like that, so she has a different view of him. Anyway, he [my brother] ended up being buried in the community where my dad wanted him buried.

My mom looked at it and I think she kind of sees him now, that's where he grew up until he was eighteen basically. Sure he left a little bit to go do a few things, but he always came back there and he loved fishing, he loved being by the water. Where he's buried there at the graveyard, it's right near the lake, so that's just a nice metaphor because that's where he grew up, he loved fishing, and my mom understands that, but I think she gets caught up in, well he did this to me, you know, my dad. She gets all caught up in that pain and hurt where she doesn't see that part, and I think that's where she's kind of stuck. She can't see beyond that abuse and pain. It's a sad part of a lot of people, they cope, they can't see beyond that pain. I guess because the person I am and where I'm at in my life, I can see a little bit beyond that pain. I remember my brother's funeral, I think that was the day we're going to bury him, I felt like I wanted to run out of there and scream, but I just stood there, I just sat in my chair.

She goes on to share her memory of the first loss she ever experienced, the death of her younger cousin in a drowning accident, which she remembers despite being a young adolescent at the time:

I remember when I was a young girl, I must have been, I think I was fourteen or fifteen, the first loss I ever remember really feeling, I lost, uh, one of my little cousins. He was my auntie's little boy, and a really beautiful little Métis boy. He [had] that, uh, dirty blond hair and he had nice big blue eyes, he had eyes like my grandpa, and uh, my auntie lost that little boy. I guess him and his little friend got on a little raft

because, we lived next to a lake, and him and that little boy got on that raft. It was, you know, just the time where early June, where, you know, currents are probably still strong and that kind of stuff. And, um, yeah, my auntie's little boy was seven, I think my auntie's little boy was going to be eight that September. My auntie's little boy didn't make it and I just, I start, the raft started going farther, I guess, like they panicked and got scared; I heard her talking about him one time and I had a big breakdown. They jumped off that raft and the other little boy, he made it to shore, but our little boy, he didn't make it to shore. I remember, too, at his wake, they brought his body and it just, you know, when I think of how sad it was, to see his little body in that coffin, and you know, his little face had a scratch, here. The body didn't come out of the water right away so I guess being along those, what you call them, like there was those things that would not dig but scrape the water to find it [the body] so I don't know, one of those things must of got him, it kind of scratched him, he had a scratch on his forehead, and he, he looked like, like life was gone.

I just kind of went, in the wake you know, probably emotionally, psychologically, everything, mentally, down. And then I heard my mom plainly. My mom said, "Don't cry." She yelled at me, and then I just, I just, uh, like I just shut myself down after my mom yelled at me. I just, you know, I felt so sad and I was so hurt, because I was really close to, uh, like we're all close, all of us cousins, we're all close, but it, uh, that little boy died. I don't know, we all liked him, because I guess he looked different. Like, you know, like he was sandy blond, blue eyes, very cute, tanned skin, and we all liked him, we all wanted his attention, we all wanted him to like us. Like we use to have little things, like, I remember when he was a baby, we used to act like our other cousin, who he would come to, that's the one he liked most. It's like we all used to kind of fight for his attention.

The loss of her cousin was a traumatic loss that impacted everyone in her family, as her family and extended family were all close. Even at her young age she knew that this loss would change her family forever. She goes to describe the how her family was affected by the death of her cousin:

So I think that was a really big loss to my family, my grandparents, everybody. Of course the parents and he only had one brother, so it was the two children. I think this past year it was thirty-one or thirty-two years that he's been gone. My auntie was, like I know that nobody's ever the same, but my auntie, I don't think she ever healed from it. I know nothing is completely healed, but my auntie, I don't know how much she ever really accepted it. My auntie just went kind of down. Like my auntie's, she's still around and like drinks. I'm not there, but from what my mom says, you know, she probably drinks on a daily basis. My auntie was never the same after she lost her little boy. I remember even with my grandma, when my grandma was in the hospital with symptoms of a heart attack or she had had a heart attack, I don't know why, but I asked my grandma about the loss. My grandma said that losing a grandchild was a big

loss to her and it really impacted her. I could see that not only my auntie and his brother was affected, I [could] just see that the way my grandparents, they're all affected by losing him. That's the first loss I ever really felt, and at the time like I said, my mom told me, don't cry, in her mean voice, so I just kind of shut myself down and I just sucked back all the feelings. Even at the graveyard, I don't think I even cried at the grave yard, when that happened, to the actual burial. It was kind of rainy, but I can remember we're walking away from the graveyard and it's like the sun started shining, and it's kind of like things happen.

He had a nickname from his parents; it was because like I say, [he had] dirty blond hair and he was just a very, very cute kid. I remember lots of things about him. I remember they were talking, you know, how every so often you bring up people and then I learned about him, like a lot of things about him had to do with water, but I can never remember all the things. A lot of things to do with him had to do with water, and you know, sad that's how he went to the spirit world back in the water.

Being the first loss she experienced, there were many aspects of her cousin's death that stood out for her. Her mother's reaction to her crying carried a negative association for her. As a result, her response was to shut down her emotions and hold her pain in. Our coping strategies are often formed through the role modeling or responses of others, especially when we are children, and it is through these that we learn to respond to loss in a positive or negative manner. This was true for She Who Moves the Water, but despite her initial experience, she learned through her own healing, to grieve and negotiate her losses in a healthy way when her grandparents passed away.

The death of a grandparent for many Indigenous people leaves a large void in the family that can't be filled, as historically, grandparents were the teachers in the family whose responsibility was to transfer knowledge to the younger generations. She Who Moves the Water describes how the passing of her grandparents affected her:

My grandma passed away in 1999 and that was a big loss because I was really close to my grandma. My grandparents were, you know, really good grandparents. They weren't abusive to us; they weren't abusive to their grandchildren, so I have a lot, only good memories of my grandparents. Even at that time that I lost my grandma and my brother and my grandpa later, I lost my grandpa in 2006. Where I think with the last two losses, my brother and my grandpa, I was already in the helping field, so I was

kind of in a better place where I could deal with it, I didn't turn to negative things to cope, so I think that made a big difference. Also with my grandma already I was not drinking, because I stopped drinking in 1993 and even that probably made a big difference in how I grieve and my healing journey. I imagine if I was drinking, I don't think it would have gone the way it went, so definitely not drinking, not using any kind of drugs made a difference in my healing and my moving forward.

With my loss of my brother in 2004 and my grandpa in 2006 because I was in a profession where you're doing healing work with people, you have to be addressing your own stuff too, if you're going to be able to work with them, even with grief and loss. I don't really think with counselling people, if somebody shared their story of loss to me, I couldn't be effective to them because I didn't deal with my own stuff. I know that I chose to actively grieve for them.

It is evident from the words of *She Who Moves the Water*, that by addressing her own healing needs, she was able to grieve the deaths of her brother and grandparents in a positive, healthy way. She also connects her own healing journey to her work as a helper, and recognizes that to be an effective helper, she must move beyond head knowledge, to walk the walk, and connect to others through heart knowledge.

The second storyteller, *White Buffalo Woman* is Anishinaabe Kwe. She grew up in an urban centre and for most of her life has followed a traditional life, as taught to her by her parents and spiritual teachers. She shares the story of losing her father in 2006:

The loss of my dad was a little bit different, quite a bit different; that one was, how would I say, for me to work through the loss of my dad which was in 2006, December 14th. I remember what was a big indicator for me because I rely on prayer a lot, because that cleans out my spirit, [my voice] and I talk to the spirits. I remember praying that one morning and putting out my tobacco, but it was different from the other prayers, because normally when I pray, I have that sense of, okay, everything is going to be okay. I remember praying that morning and I didn't have that feeling. So it's like I already knew that, you know, his journey had begun. Even two days prior to him being, to his passing, I remember going to their apartment, he was very insistent on me and the girls coming over for supper. He said I have a turkey and I'm going to make the turkey. I remember phoning him, because I was so tired from school, I was going to university at the time, and I said maybe just save some turkey; I'll bring the girls over tomorrow, but he said no, he was very insistent on us coming over, so he came and picked us up. I remember walking in the door and it was literally a Christmas supper. You know, he had the turkey, he had had the potatoes, even the cranberry sauce, vegetables, pies, everything, and this was December 12th, so when I

look back on it now, it was like he already knew, he already knew he was going to be going on his journey and so I'm grateful, I'm so thankful that we were allowed to sit with him for that meal.

She goes on to describe what happened the day her father died:

When he passed away, it's like he wouldn't physically leave until each one of us from the family talked to him and we gave him that permission; so my mom talked to him, then two of my brothers, but one wasn't there, he had left the hospital briefly and by this time we had already taken my dad off life support. We knew that wasn't how, what we wanted to do with him, to keep him alive on life support, so they had already taken that off of him, so he was still breathing on his own. So I talked to him and I just said, "It's time to go, you'll be okay and we'll be okay; we're going to find our way." He just kept breathing, and sure enough, my younger brother showed up and I said, "You have to talk to dad. Say what you want to say to him." So he did, and then sure enough, once he was done talking to him and saying what he needed to say, at 5:41 p.m., my dad took his last breath. I don't know if I went into, like a shock or because I felt numb, I didn't feel anything.

Giving permission to her father to let go and pass on, is an important aspect of White Buffalo Woman's story. It exhibits the selfless nature of her family, and a never ending love for his comfort and quality of life despite the pain and grief that accompanied his death. The feelings of numbness described by White Buffalo Woman appears to be a normal reaction, and may be a protective measure, as the death of her father was a great loss to her and her family.

White Buffalo Woman's story shares how the death of a loved one is difficult to comprehend as an adult. If however, the death occurs during childhood, what is normally experienced by youths and adults, may prove to be frightening for younger children, as they struggle to understand what is happening within their world. Storyteller Evaluardjuk, an Inuit woman, shares stories of the first deaths she experienced as a child that reflect this point:

The very first time I experienced a loss of a person was when I was, I think four or five years old when we were out in our hunting camp. It was our traditional camp and this lady who used to look after us kids, keep us busy when our mothers were busy with their chores; when she got married, I think she got pregnant right away and I remember it being summer time and she lost her first child. She didn't know how to deal with it, I think. She was very cuddly, like [she] just wanted to hang on, almost for dear life and she cried all the time. What most us, I think, felt was, uh, how come she's

[crying], the baby's gone. How come she's crying more and more and more? I didn't understand what that was all about until I experienced my own feeling about losing someone. It was my brother.

He was just eighteen years old and I think I was eight or nine. I remember him very busy getting ready in the morning and he so wanted to go hunting with his uncle; he was so happy that he was going to spend some time with his cousins. It was almost like jumping up and down happy. They were supposed to be back from the hunting trip in the evening. It was just tide in, tide out and then come back when the tide came back in, but they, they didn't come back. I think everybody thought they had just camped. They must have caught a lot of seals or maybe a whale so they, they didn't really worry about them because they were seasoned hunters. The uncle was and the boys were learning; there were three boys. Then in the morning somebody came after the tide had gone out, they had found one body and the boat. Later on in the day they had found the other body and [then] two more bodies.

My parents were crying. My older siblings were crying and we didn't know what was going on until finally somebody, one of the older kids sat us down and told us that our brother had drowned, and we said, "What's that mean?" They said, "He's not coming back! He's gone! His body's gone!" I think we didn't know what to think of it. Our parents were just, um, um, that was their second child that they have lost and the first child they had lost was, a, a little girl before I was born, my older sister. I did, I didn't know anything about that death. It was like the world was falling apart all around us because nobody fed us little kids; no one took care of us. All they did was cry, and anger, blaming each other.

I didn't understand that because I don't know how I felt really, and then when we went to see his body, this part I, I don't really understand but, um. But I guess it was the norm in those days with Inuit people, um, when my parents went to see my brother's body and our uncle's body, they took us with them and we saw the body. Like we were, they didn't say no, no you can't see this. They didn't say that, they just led us into this big hangar where the bodies were and they showed us, and I remember my mom and dad, they were hugging my brother's body and calling his name and telling him to wake up. We just stood there looking at them. I think there were three of us little kids, and then my uncle's family came and more things going on.

Then, when we got home, I don't, there was so many people going in and out, in and out and bringing food, spending time, talking, playing cards, and just not letting us be alone. They just stayed and talked to my parents about my brother. You know, the way they saw my brother. They were talking about good memories and um, how proud my parents should be the way he, he grew up and um, that he's gone to a good place and that maybe soon we'll have, um, another boy in our family. That's what my, our people do, is name after someone who has gone to bring that person's spirit back, into the family. So there were the people who were coming in and out; they were trying to give hope to my parents, to ease their grief and comforting them.

Then the burial day came, and I think they had a Christian burial service. I don't remember really about that part, but everything was done, I think, pretty much according to the old traditional way. Make sure the body's facing East, the head is facing the East because they have to look, they believe in the sunrise. It's like bring the

spirit into the beginning again. So that's how those kinds of things, even though they seem so small but they're a huge part of laying the body down into the ground at that time. I don't know if it's a norm today, you know if it's the practice of my people. Anyway, it was after that, the way I remember that day that we were going back to our place and somebody gave us a ride in the vehicle and we could see the clouds moving and somebody said, "Oh I think your brother's up there already." It was one of the little kids, it wasn't the adults. A little kid was trying to comfort us too I guess, and it was a warm feeling. I felt that when that little boy or that little person, little girl or little boy said I think your brother's up there already.

My parents, um, they took it really, really hard. I think for my mom, he was named after her dad, and she prized him you know, her son, and he was going to go places in her mind, you know. He was a very happy person, always joking and making fun. He was just that type of a person, and for our dad, he was, um, joy to him because in my dad's sad times he, he would always make fun and bring him back, you know, a little comfort and I think that's why they took it so hard. They didn't really talk about it, but that's my understanding today, um, the way they were, the way I remember them going through the grieving process.

Being a child may in some ways help to insulate them from the reality of what has happened, while at the same time, what they do remember may be confusing and frightening, as illustrated in Evaluardjuk's story.

It is evident through the stories shared here, that every experience of loss is different, as is individual response to that loss. The stories reveal how past relationships with the deceased figure prominently, and affect the ability to grieve following the death of a loved one. Evaluardjuk's story reflects how unresolved issues from the past may complicate the experience of loss, as she shares the story of the death of her mother:

Then my mother died. It was February 14, 1976. My mother and I never really got along that well, but I felt like there was a light at the end of the tunnel between the two of us. When this happened, she was always sick with bronchitis and she probably had asthma or COPD because she was always coughing and was short of breath. She was like that for years and years and years, and we knew she was going to go, but we didn't think that she would go that fast. She was forty-eight years old when she died. I was so upset, angry and in disbelief that my mom would leave us like this, I didn't even go to the funeral service. I was so upset; I even accused my dad of killing her because he was not very nice to her in their marriage. Used to beat her up so much, her little body, I don't think could take that kind of beating, but she got away from that, and my dad came and I told him, "Why did you come? You don't deserve this woman;

you don't deserve to be here." I was so upset with him, so if he was going to be at the funeral service, I wasn't going to go, and he was, so I didn't go!

Anyways, over the years I, I still haven't resolved the fact that my mom had left my dad and that she had left me when I was fourteen, basically to defend myself. She knew my dad is an alcoholic and he can't stay away from the booze, and I was a young girl. I was so upset with her. I didn't know, I couldn't believe that she did that, that she left me behind when she left, took my sisters and my, my two brothers and my niece with her, so I had a hard time forgetting her, forgiving her for that. She had apologized to me why, why she did that? She had told me before she, she passed on. She said, she told me she loved me and that um, she knew my father would not let harm come to me despite his drinking, that he would take care of me. She said she couldn't leave the others behind with him because she didn't know how he would deal with, with them, but she knew he would take care of me, because my name is after my grandmother, my dad's mom and he would take care of his mom. So she knew that he would take care of me. When she explained that to me, I asked her, "Why are you telling me now? Why didn't you tell me before?" She didn't have any answers for that. I so wanted to have an answer, but it was not meant to be, and the day she left, I think I wanted to tell her I forgive her, but I didn't. I carried that probably for another ten years, ten or twelve years with me, you know that anger. Why and why and why and why?

For Evaluardjuk, many issues of the past surfaced when her mother passed away, and this complicated the grieving process.

She goes on to describe how the death of her father wasn't as difficult to accept as the death of her mother. Her story shows how prominently relationships influenced her own experiences of grief:

When my dad passed away I was older and I think I had experienced death a lot more, [so] that when he passed, it was not near as bad as my experience with my mom. (sniffs) It was different. He was a funny man, always trying to make people feel happy and I think that's why my brother was like that, (chuckles). My brother was the image of my dad when he was younger. But my dad, uh, sometimes he was full of rage and anger. Lots of times we saw that and we didn't like it, but I think, most of accepted that's the way he is and only he can change him, we can't. You know, we can't buy him happiness. When my dad was, um going, he actually thought he was in heaven for awhile there. We were visiting him there in the hospital; all of us sisters were there. There are five of us sisters. We were all there and he said, "Am I in heaven already?" And somebody said, "Why?" He said, "All of my daughters are here?" (laughs) And he said that his brothers, he had two brothers he was really close to and he said they would, they had come. They had already passed on. They had come to see him in his

dreams, and he said they were getting ready for him, and my dad said, "I think I know what that means." Yeah, and he left it at that.

So he said, "I think I'm ready to go home." So we took him home and they even brought a bed for him from the hospital, the reclining ones, yeah. (sniffs) And he slept most of the time. He drank water and that was about it, and then he died very peacefully. While he was, um, when he would wake up he, um, he would, because we were in his house and he was trying to comfort us and trying to make us feel welcome and, uh, um, telling us to make ourselves at home and you know, he was trying to be the host even though he was the one we were caring for. He, it was just comfortable the way he went, you know, the grieving process didn't seem to be as long, even though the loneliness for him comes and goes.

In contrast to Evaluardjuk's feelings when her mother passed away, the loss of her father was very different. She shares how her family came together to spend the last days with her father in his home where they were able to share love and laughter. Her father's acceptance of his impending death, and his peaceful transition from this world to the next made his passing less difficult.

The loss of a family member, whether nuclear or extended, is an emotional event, laden with memories and past experiences. I have noted that it is common for some Indigenous people/families to adopt other persons into their family as a brother, sister, mother or father, and the relationships are as sacred as that of a blood relative. The response to the passing of an adopted family member is therefore just as strong. Evaluardjuk's story of the death of her adopted father is an example of the depth of her feelings and the grief she feels at his passing:

My adopted dad passed away in November, beginning of November, uh, no excuse me, in October, late October. That happened pretty quickly. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in early September and he was going for his appointment. They, my adopted mom and him were staying in a hotel, he was going for his appointment the next morning. The morning that he was going for his appointment, he got up and, um, he went to get some water, came back to bed, lay down and passed away. I think the autopsy results, uh, they, he, he died of a heart attack. I think he wanted to go that way, in a way it was a blessing for him, sad for the family because we wanted him to be

around for awhile yet, but that's being selfish a bit. We don't have any say in when who goes you know, they go when they go.

For Evaluardjuk, the passing of her adopted father is no less painful than the loss of her biological father, and the bond between them is just as strong.

Lone Eagle Woman is a Métis woman who was born and lived in a small Métis community in southwest Manitoba until the age of four. She then moved; along with the rest of her family to a large urban centre as her father wanted pursue further education. She shares her story of the emotions she felt upon learning her mother was terminally ill and her experience of being at her mother's bedside when she passed away,

When we started to learn that she [my mom] was going to die, I remember I wanted to run! I wanted to run away from the situation because I thought, oh my god, my mom's going to die. What are, what are we going to do, what are we going to do and I remember just getting panicked and, um, I wanted to put on running shoes, literally, and start running and run away from it, because I didn't know how to deal with it, I was powerless. I wanted to help her but I knew that it didn't matter what I was going to do, nothing, nothing that I could do was going to save her because it wasn't in my hands. I had a hard time into accepting that this power greater than ourselves, um, was in charge. I had to move into accepting that mom was dying and there was nothing any of us in our family was going to be able to do.

When my mother was dying, actively dying, we were, uh, before she died she went into this burst of energy and she wanted to dance, she wanted to go to bingo, she wanted to smoke a cigarette, she wanted to eat, you know, where's my husband I want to dance and it was, wow, what's happening. Next thing you know she's in a coma. So suddenly, she went from this big burst of energy and being present, to now she's laying there in a coma and now it's, this is getting closer now. You know, so I'm standing there like, whoa, we better, what are we going to do? I remember sitting there going, what do we do? Let's call the priest, so we go back to our religion, right? I remember when the priest came in and he anointed her, we were all sitting there with her and I remember feeling that validation of, oh my god, the priest is here, this is really happening and she's really dying because he's here to anoint her which, I mean, we say the anointing of the, it's anointing of the sick, but we always look at it as the last rites, the last rites.

And I remember feeling like, oh my god, this is it and I think I even said, after he was done, I think I even said, oh my, I, I, think I'm pretty sure I said, oh shit! Like that. Right out loud. And then I looked at him, went oh my god I'm sorry I just said that, but I remember just feeling like this is it, this is it. We are now moving into the transition of letting her go and are we going to be able to do this? So as we're standing there praying and I'm sitting there thinking this is really happening, now I can't stop

this, so I think I'll just cry. So I, I started weeping and I, I, uh, I was thinking, um, at the time, how selfish of me. Why am I crying, because, you know, she's going to be going to a better place, I don't know where she's going, but I think it's probably a very beautiful place that she's going to be transitioning into. I need to accept that, but at the same time, I was being so greedy, saying I don't want her to go, I don't want you to take her, I'm not, I'm not done with her. She needs to still be here, and, you know, I was so mad at cigarettes. I remember being so mad at cigarettes, because it was cancer, right, she smoked and she wasn't going to give up smoking.

At this point in telling her story, Lone Eagle Woman became emotional, and moved from sharing the story of her mother's passing to speak about the passing of her father:

I'm going to talk about my dad and what happened to with him, so, um, my dad, like I remember stepping out of the room and the eldest were in the room with him when he, when he left. I just stepped out and me, my, my two younger sisters, uh, sorry, my younger sister and my, my elder sister, the three of us that are younger weren't in the room and that's when he decided, he's outta here. He had his sister and three eldest siblings in the room with him, and I remember walking back in there and going, oh, he's gone, so I put my hand on his heart and I remember looking at my watch, thinking oh, it's twenty to four in the afternoon and feeling, okay, it's done. We did give him permission, it was important for us to give him permission because he was hanging on. I don't know what, but I remember we had to say to him, we're all here dad and it's going to be okay, you know, if, if you see mom, like go, you know if, if you have that time, that opportune time to go, then go. I remember feeling like, okay, I'm being greedy here and he's gone, like this is, this is it, now he's gone to be with mom.

Two storytellers spoke specifically of the importance of giving their loved one permission to leave this world. For Lone Eagle Woman giving permission to her father to continue on his journey is the ultimate expression of love for that person. In contrast, when her mother passed, Lone Eagle Woman chastised herself for being selfish or greedy because she didn't want to let her mother go. This exemplifies the contradictory emotions one experiences when a loved one dies.

The death of a loved is an emotionally laden experience that takes time to heal. For other storytellers, such as Blue Sky Woman the emotional loss of losing a loved one may be difficult to heal from, especially if there are residual issues. Blue Sky Woman, a Dakota

woman who was born and lived on a Dakota reservation in southwest Manitoba prior to attending residential school, relates many stories of loss, beginning with the death of her son, a loss from which she has never fully recovered:

My name is and I'm a Dakota. Well, you know, I'm older now so I went through a lot of deaths, uh, my loved ones are passed. I've, uh, I had sisters and brothers that have gone my parents and my grandparents so there's a lot of different, different, uh, feelings there. My son, uh, was the most, uh, uh, loss that, that I felt. And, um, I felt like I lost everything. I didn't want to go on with life, Still bothers me, (voice breaks) at first I was angry because of what he had done and, uh, what the people had done to him, I was angry for the longest time. With my grief, when my son passed, I wanted to get it over and done with, I didn't want to talk to people, I didn't want to see people. I just wanted to pray for my son and see him for the last time at the funeral home (voice breaks) and we buried him. Then after, but I regretted after, I had done that because I didn't do it the right way, because I, maybe that's why I'm still feeling sorry for myself, not feeling sorry, but that I didn't do things in a traditional way. He didn't have an Indian name, which I could have gave him, but I was so distraught and wasn't thinking right, and there was nobody to help me. Just me and my girls so, uh, we didn't know much, I didn't live on the reserve and I wasn't taught all these, uh, traditional stuff.

I wasn't, I didn't participate in my mom, mom and dad's, uh, funeral so that, uh, they didn't, uh, usually when the, they, I was told, I was asked how come you're not, uh, in there. I said because I wasn't asked. They don't, you know, she said, uh, my cousin was saying that, you're, you're supposed to be doing that and I said I wasn't asked and besides, I don't know how. I don't know what to do. And she said well, you should all get together as a family and plan all these things and I, I said, well, that never happens.

I accept my parents passing and my brother, my brother I sort of still miss him when it comes, his birthday. I think about him because he was closest to me and we'd share everything. (sighs) We used to sing together, little joker, he joked around quite a bit. He used to tell me about his kids, what he was going through, how his drinking got to him. He wished he could quit, then he'll quit for awhile and then he'll go back again. It was just a continuous thing but he was, we, we just sat and talked and give each other support. He was the only one in the family that the only one in the family that was like that, but now I lost him so I have nobody. I have no one in my family. They don't understand because they're all younger than me and I can't explain to them because they, they don't understand at my age, when, what I went through. So, I accepted I had sort of accepted his passing, but like I say, it still breaks my heart. I accepted my sister's passing because I know what she went through in her life. She passed on with rheumatoid arthritis like I have and I know how it does, but she gave up. She didn't want to take no medication anymore, then she got worse and that's how she passed. And now I have rheumatoid arthritis, I know what I'm going through, I know what she went through and I accept her passing.

My cousin just passed away and he was, we had fun when we were growing up, yeah, he brings back a lot of memories, happy memories. Sliding on the hill, one time he took this car hood and went to the highest hill and he says come slide with us. I saw him go down the hill and he went, there's a road down the hill, he bumped that side of the road, flew up in the air and went to the other side. He says, come on, he says, come down the hill with us, I said, no, I might get hurt; I don't want to get hurt. He says, ah you're chicken, he says come on, and he was like that, he was rough, you have to do it. So we went and holy, that was the first and last time I ever slid with him. There's four of us on that car hood and it went really fast, it was really slippery, and we went up in the air about four feet (chuckles), six feet, landed on the other side and we all, I don't know, I landed on my bum and my side and I just laid there. I just about cried because it hurt so much and, uh, and he liked that, he just got up and laughed because he was having fun, but (chuckles) us, we were little, and so it, it wasn't as much fun. It was fun sliding our way but not his way (chuckles). And so, he left a lot of memories like, uh, chasing us on a horse or with a stick when we played tag. At night he'll scare us when we're playing hide and seek, a lot of good things but also scary. That was the fun times I think about when I think of him, he makes my heart happy and yet it's sad that he's gone. It was his time to go because he suffered a lot as he got older with, uh, diabetes. So it's, uh, he just passed recently, but he left a lot of good memories, and his kids are really nice, uh, talk to them, talk to my cousin. We sit there, talk, laugh and reminisce how he was, she was a little girl then, but she grew up with him in the house, so it was okay and she remembered a lot.

There are many facets to Blue Sky Woman's story; she speaks of the loss of her teachings, feelings of isolation from her younger siblings, acceptance of the passing of her siblings and cousin as a means to end their suffering. The most poignant aspect of her story however, is the regret she feels for not burying her son in the traditional way and her need to make it right. As Blue Sky Woman's story reflects, knowing one's culture and the traditions, rituals and teachings that accompany death would prove to be a great comfort during one of life's most trying times.

The support of family and community is another invaluable source of strength that one may draw from when experiencing the loss of someone you love. Cloud Dancer is a Métis woman who was born and raised in a large metropolitan city in Ontario. She and her mother moved back to the small Métis community of her mother's birth when she was a youth, where

they lived until the unexpected passing of her mother. She shares her story of how the death of her mother affected her life:

Well, um, thank you very much for asking me to participate in this and I'm going to, to share some of my story about my experience with loss and grief and finding out what it means to me. When I moved to Manitoba, back in the late seventies with my mother, my mother was a single parent at that time, and we set up a life here in Manitoba for ourselves. I was very close to my mother, she was my mother, my father, my best friend and the first loss I'll talk about, or the in depth loss that I'll talk about is when I lost her in 1985. So when, when she passed away it was, um, not expected. She was young. She was only fifty-four years old. I was twenty-two at the time, and we were quite shocked. She didn't die suddenly, but we had a very short time, twenty-four hours to three days notice that she was going to pass. So we, um, raced up to the hospital and sat with her until her time came. She didn't expect to die, she was always very, very fearful of it.

We actually used to, we used to talk, um, because I was extremely ill when I was younger and I was like, oh yeah, Mom when I die I want to be buried with my blue satin running shoes and this top and whatever. I don't know, we just talked like that, but it was always me going first because that was always what we thought, you know, because of poor health and whatever. Unfortunately, um, she, she passed away and I couldn't remember a thing. I thought, you know, I don't remember her saying what she wanted or whatever.

She was the first child in a family of nine to pass, um, so her brothers and sisters were quite devastated, so were her parents who were still alive at that time. So she was the first one in the family to pass that was very close to all of us, so we all shared in this grief, um, in the sudden loss of her life. So getting through that was hard because there's a whole bunch of things, like being Métis, I wasn't really aware of what that meant at the time. I was living with her at the time when she passed away, there were some challenges with that, too, with other family members. I didn't feel like I had any real support or anything.

So suffering that loss, afterwards I had to, we lived in a low rental and I had to pack up our belongings and move, because I didn't qualify to stay there. There wasn't only myself living with my mom, we also had my niece staying with us who was intellectually challenged, so it was a significant loss. Prior to my mom passing and going, well, going in for the surgery that she was expected to recover from; my niece was put into foster care temporarily while my mother recovered from surgery. I was working at a hospital, so that arrangement was just extended after the passing of my mother, but there was like a lot of things I had to pick up and finish that mom didn't complete. There was a pending court case and I had to go to court because she had passed and it was where she was going with someone else, so I had to take over that role. That was very challenging and I was totally naive and uneducated in that area, so I didn't know what to expect, it caused a big division within the family as well, so that was what was going on prior to her death but everybody pulled together when she did pass.

After losing my mother I felt, um, you know, I was, I was kind of angry and kind of like I, like careless, like I didn't care. I started, um, drinking and partying a lot and actually for the first two months it was unbelievable. I had two jobs and I would, I would get up at noon go work at the hospital, get off work from the hospital, go to the restaurant and work there till it closed, then I'd go to the bar and I would party all night. Then, like it was a cycle for two months and, you know, it was funny because people that you thought were your friends, who were your friends when you were doing things that, when you were complying with what they wanted and what they expected from you and whatever, um, it was fine. You know, I had this cheer leading squad, like, cheering me on doing that. It was one day when I realized that you know what, for the first time, nobody's going to phone for me, looking around where I am, nobody's going to, you know, ask where I was or even care and I thought, you know, that's what my mom would do. Even though I was, I was an adult, she still like, you know, where were you last night, what did you do, who were you with, or if I was out an extended period of time, she would, she would phone for me, looking for me and making sure that I was okay. That's when I realized that, you know, that's not going to happen any more so, you know, there was, I was dealing with this sudden sadness that I felt but also the realization that my cheering squad, they weren't really people that I could count on to get me through what I was going through.

Up until the moment, the day that my mother died, I could never stay alone. I always had to have somebody with me, I don't know, I was an adult but I just didn't like staying alone, but, you know, right after, like the day she died, I started staying alone. It was, I don't know, it was just like an attempt like, you know, tempting evil like to bring it on. (chuckles). You know, because you feel like the worst thing has happened to you, nothing worse could, like nothing out there could be worse than what you're feeling so, again, too, this being the first and the most significant loss to that time, it was pretty, it was pretty powerful.

Cloud Dancer's story of the loss of her mother is an emotional journey that is made more difficult through the lack of support she had from her extended family. In her story she shares her struggles to find her way after the death of her mother, and the realization that for all intents and purposes, she is alone in the world. Embedded within her story of loss, are stories of learning to cope with the feelings of grief, and her struggle to find meaning.

Just as with Cloud Dancer and for the other storytellers I met with, sharing their stories of loss proved to be only one small part of their stories. For Star Dancer Woman this was especially true, and as she relates the story of losing her mother, the extent of her pain is clear,

You know when my mom passed away, it was really hard. I still have regrets with my mom because there was so much that happened between us through the years that, you

know, we had so many things to work through, but I loved my mom and my mom was, she was one of those really, really beautiful, good, good people. Kind to a fault, like, she would give [you] the shirt off her back, she was just that way, and she loved people. She taught me a lot of things, and then when she passed away I was really, like really, really lonesome for her, you know, really even yet I still, like I still miss her a lot.

Stories of loss and grief are personal and emotional following the death of a loved one. Life holds few certainties, but death is one of them.

All of us, from the moment we're born move towards the day when we will leave this earth. Even so, the death of a loved one often proves to be one of life's most painful experiences; however, it may also prove to be a hidden opportunity as Kirmayer (2009) writes:

Grief can be a “washing with tears” that opens us to both past and future. Through mourning what was lost, we commemorate the past, contributing to historical memory, identity, and tradition. By acknowledging the pain and vulnerability of loss, we remain open to others and, ultimately, to the possibility of renewal and reconstruction. The inability to grieve may be an unwillingness to acknowledge loss and therefore an inability to recognize what is valued, which must be regained in other ways. (p. 456)

As the previous stories illustrate, once the unthinkable happens and a loved one dies, there are many influences on how we process the feelings of loss, grief and finding meaning that inevitably follow.

Part Two: In Their Own Words, In Their Own Time, In Their Own Ways

Themes

Spirituality, cultural teachings, ceremonies and rituals may facilitate healing of the emotional and intellectual self, while strengthening relationships between the physical and spiritual self following the death of a loved one. This in turn may assist the bereaved to find meaning in the experience. In my own experience, there is no exact formula for this to occur

and is dependent upon many variables. It is a subjective, solitary journey, taken in the company of others who are experiencing their own personal journey of grief and loss.

Also, it is true that not all Indigenous women participate in ceremonies such as, the Sweat lodge or Sundance, but there are other means in which to connect to and replenish their spiritual selves. As Anderson (2000) writes,

If women cannot access spirituality through particular ceremonies, there are other ways that are common to many Native traditions. Dreams, visions and the simple acknowledgement that there are spirits all around us all the time have been helpful to many Native women. (p. 134)

‘We are never alone,’ are four words that provide comfort in times of grief, and echo throughout the stories shared by the women in this study. As previously mentioned, the degree to which the women participate in traditional ceremonies may vary greatly between the storytellers, but the commonalities of their spiritual quests to find meaning following the death of a loved one are apparent.

It is from the stories of their quest that five themes emerged, and will be presented along with excerpts of the storytellers’ stories. The themes identified are presented in a manner that tells another story, one from which the life stories of seven Indigenous women interweave their past, present and future together. Their stories give explanation as to how connections and relationships are preserved through five recurring themes: 1) dreams; 2) honouring memory; 3) healing; 4) making space; 5) finding meaning. Three central themes: 1) we are never alone; 2) connections; 3) relationships figure prominently and are present in all five recurring themes.

Dreams

I’ve come to see from the teachings I’ve received that dreams have long been recognized as a source of knowledge, guidance and healing for Indigenous people. Six of the seven

storytellers included narratives of their dreams as an element of their stories of loss. She Who Moves the Water speaks of dreams that preserve her connections to loved ones, who have passed:

Just the other night, I dreamt of my grandma. My mom's parents, those ones, I was raised with those ones. We lived next door to them, so those ones I knew well and I dreamt of my grandma. My grandma passed away in 1999 and that was a big loss because I was really close to my grandma. My grandparents were really good grandparents. They weren't abusive to us; they weren't abusive to their grandchildren, so I have a lot [of] only good memories of my grandparents. My grandma, this week I dreamt of her. I was beside our old house and I saw on the ground what looked like bundles of sweet grass. It's like she was there and I was going to ask her, well, where do I find sweet grass? In my dream I wanted to ask her that question, but in my dream I don't remember asking her that question, but then she told me. It still came out like an answer and she told me where that sweet grass is. I know that's something I want to do, because I know where she told me, so I want to go, hopefully this summer I'm going to try to go where she told me that sweet grass is. I know all those loved ones are always still with us in that spiritual form, and when they come through dreams, like in my case, it'll be through dreams I'll get little visits from them. I'm thankful for that, that they come to me, come in my dreams.

Maintaining connections through dreams is echoed by White Buffalo Women. She speaks of the guidance she receives from her father when he comes to her through dreams:

He still comes to visit in dreams, but even my dreams now, I can accept that his spirit has come to visit me, but I know he's going back to that good place, I know that now so my dreams aren't painful anymore, they're not lonely, and he always has a message to leave me with. The last message he left me with was, he was sitting on a chair, we were outside and just trying to figure out, you know, my, my youngest daughter has some, uh, her asthma is, uh, is, we're trying to figure out, you know, different things for that anyway. Then, um, I remember my dad sitting there and I remember trying to ask him what am I going to do, like what are we supposed to do, what are the answers for, for my girl's asthma. And then, uh, his spirit was starting to lighten because he was going back, and he, the only thing he told me was, you'll know what to do and you're going to know what to say. And then I was trying to get him to stay there, what do I say, what do I do, but when I woke up, I knew that it had to do with ceremony and that spirituality, use that to help your daughter heal because when, when my daughter, when we lost my dad, that's when her asthma worsened, she was five.

Dreams may also be a source of comfort for those left behind, in addition to providing guidance.

Evaluardjuk recalls how a dream helped her mother to fulfill a cultural tradition that helped to facilitate healing for the family and maintain the connection to her oldest brother following his passing:

I don't know, maybe two or three months later, my mom said, "Your brother came to see me last night." That's my brother. Oh why didn't he come to see me? We wanted him to come and see us too, but we didn't realize that it was his, his spirit that came to see our mom. She said, "I think it's time to name someone, to give that name to a baby," so my aunt, my mom's cousin's wife was expecting and she was due any day and that child was named after my brother. Yeah, after my mother had a dream, she went to see my uncle. My aunt and uncle, after she had her baby, named their baby boy after my brother, so he was my first, uh, my spiritual brother. Yeah, and he basically, I guess, grew up with us that little boy and even today he's my spiritual brother. He and I keep in touch. He calls me his sister and I call him my brother, that's how it is in our culture, to carry on with the spirit of the person who has gone. He's got that spirit too, very happy, makes people laugh, tries to cheer people up if they're sad, you know he's got the same characteristics of that brother of mine. Yeah, that was my very first experience of losing someone.

Dreams may cause conflicted emotions. At times our dreams provide a connection to those who have passed and offer comfort.

There may be times however, when we're left feeling disconcerted because of what we recall in our dreams. Lone Eagle Woman describes a dream she experienced following her father's death:

I think part of my spirituality; I have a gift of vision. I guess you could say the gift of dreams and after my dad died I dreamt of course. I dreamed that we were in the hospital, my mom's dying and my dad's walked in. I'm behind glass, there's a glass wall there, but we're at the hospital and I overhear the paging system for my dad to go to emergency. I'm thinking, oh my god, dad's got to go to emergency, maybe we'd better go, so I grabbed my eldest sister and we walked to emergency. I'm standing there behind glass [and] all of a sudden I see, I see dad, but he can't hear me. I'm yelling, dad, dad and I'm banging on this glass. He walked in all somber, like very, um, so sad and he was just shuffling his boots. He had his hat on, his leather jacket and he walked to my mom, lifted her up and she said to him, oh, finally you're here, now I can go. He kissed her; he put her head down and then walked through the wall. I'm just like going, wait a minute. So I basically believe that I witnessed my mother waiting in purgatory for dad. I honestly believe that's where mom has been waiting all this time, for four years. She waited for him to get there and now that he arrived there,

ah, finally I can go like, so she moved on, she transitioned on to the next reality of, of, uh, spirituality, wherever that is in God's hands in, in heaven.

I remember feeling remorseful for dad because now he's going to be alone in purgatory now waiting for himself to move on to the next and I remember thinking, oh my god, he's going to be waiting again alone. He was alone here after she left, and when he got sick with his cancer again, he decided that he wasn't going to go for treatments or anything because he said, you know what, mom's not here and I'm not going to drag anybody else through all the treatments that I have to go through. You know, he was just very lonely.

Our dreams often reveal a correlation between our beliefs and the teachings we've received throughout our lifetime.

At times, they corroborate our spiritual truth and what we learned from our loved ones while they were alive. Lone Eagle Woman speaks to this as she shares a dream, in which her mother comes to her:

I totally believe that and again through my mother who came to visit me, I dream about this house, it's a huge home. I can hear voices, I go in and out of rooms, I never see anybody, but I can hear people talking. This one room that I went into, my mom was there. She was standing at an altar and there was this humongous book right in front of her and there's a stranger sitting there. I heard my dad's voice, but it wasn't my dad. I remember standing there thinking who's this guy and I'm looking at my mom. My mom said you know what? There's a book, there really is a book and she said our names really are in a book, so is all of our life. In our end, she says, in your end you're going to be judged. So this complete stranger was talking in a different language, he was speaking to me, too, but I couldn't understand him. When I talked to the priest about it, he basically confirmed for me that was a witness to my mother's testimony to me. That stranger, who was talking in a different tongue, was the witness to what my mother's testimony was to me in that dream.

From the stories shared by the participants, it is apparent that dreams may alleviate some fears and concerns after a loved one dies.

When Cloud Dancer's mother passed away, she was worried about her and wondered if her mother was all right. Through her dreams, she received reassurance, which helped to alleviate some of her fears as Cloud Dancer reveals:

I just want to reflect on, um, after my mother died. I felt quite concerned about her well being. It was very, very hard to watch her die. During those days, you know, she's trying to be brave and so after she passed I was quite concerned. One time I had a dream and I was dreaming about something totally irrelevant, I don't even know what it was, but it wasn't anything that would really pique your interest at all. All of a sudden, my heavy heart came and I was feeling quite concerned about my mother, how she was doing and, you know, hopefully, the Creator was taking good care of her. She spoke to me and she said that, she told me that everything was going to be okay and that she was getting her wings. So again I've had that second overwhelming feeling of relief, well not relief, just peace I guess, she was at peace and it was okay for me to, to kind of move on, to stop worrying about her and to move on. I didn't really understand what the meaning of that would be until later on, after meeting the elder and working at an Aboriginal organization, being taught about the different connections and interpretations of having visions and the different dreams that I had.

Cloud Dancer shares how dreams sustained the connection with her mother while she grieved her loss, thus providing a measure of comfort, and at the same time offering an opportunity for her reflection and healing:

In one vision, I was dreaming that I was having a visit with my mother. A friend of mine actually wrote a poem, because I was telling her about this experience, (sniffs) she wrote a poem for me and I put it in the paper every now and then on the anniversary of my mother's death. I was having a dream that I was in a room and it was very old fashioned, decorated old fashioned and very small and close. It was a very small space, very comfortable and my mother was sitting across the table from me, we were having a visit and I was really enjoying that visit. It was just great, it was, it was very fulfilling and I was trying to ask all these questions, she was holding my hand across the table and somebody was at the door. I wanted to ignore that somebody ringing the door bell at the door, I was looking out the, they'll go away, they'll come back later if it's important but my mother, we had a conversation and she told me everything was okay, that she was good. When the door bell rang she told me to go and see who it was, I said well, no, no, they'll come back later and she goes, no, she goes everything will be okay, you go, you go answer the door. So I went and answered the door, it was people, they were there but I could see them anytime (chuckles) but when I went back my mother was gone. I was a little bit perturbed (chuckles) at that, but I was trying to understand too, I guess maybe, we can't dictate the time, the amount of time we're sharing, in our visions with people.

I've been told that dreams may also provide guidance or help us to understand, especially during challenging times.

A friend told me that at such times, I was to offer tobacco and pray for guidance, and my answers would come to me in my dreams (M. Hall, personal communication, 1999).

Similarly, Blue Sky Woman shares her gratitude for the guidance she receives through her dreams:

I sit here and think, think a lot, what I should've done and what I shouldn't do and oh yeah, I should've done it this way, or a dream will come to me and then I said, hey, you know, I should've done it that way. So then I'll tell my friend and I'll says, you know what I had a dream and I'll tell them about my dream, and then when I go to a sweat, I ask the Creator, uh, I thank him for showing me that and then I go from there.

There are times when persistent dreams serve as a reminder that there may be unfinished business or unresolved issues with a loved one, as Evaluardjuk reveals in her story:

I used to have these recurring dreams before that and, um, there was a man dressed in, uh, caribou and sealskin clothes (sniffs), [I] never see his face but I knew that he had a great big beard, moustache; seemed like his whole face was covered with, uh, fur and he would look for an entrance to this place where I was. [He would] go around and round, (sniffs), never finding an entranceway. It was after that experience with talking to my mom and saying my prayers that that dream never came back. The last dream I had of that was, looks like they were, this person was getting closer to the doorway, but never finding it, and that time when I woke up he was almost there. I woke up and I think my fear woke me up because he was so close and I didn't want him to come in. I know that person is him because of the way he was built and the clothes he wore. When they make them, um, men and women's clothing in Inuit culture, they, there's a very big difference, even though everything is seal skin and uh, caribou skin. There's always a difference and you have, you can see where they originated from, the way the design is, and this person was from my area. Yeah, and after that I never had, that dream never came back. So I don't know what that means, but, uh, I stopped that, uh, ugliness from coming back, I think that's what it was, I don't know, that's only my interpretation (chuckles) it might mean something else.

She believed the unsettling dream was connected to her own unresolved issues with her mother because the dream stopped once she dealt with her pain.

Cloud Dancer recalls a dream she had regarding a message she was to relay or pass on to someone else. She admits to being confused as to why she was chosen to carry a message that was clearly meant for someone else, and shares her experience of when this happened to her:

[Dreams] there was another one where I was told to give a message to an elder, who had to share the message with another elder that the white buffalo was coming. A white buffalo is a very sacred object, not object but sacred animal spirit in the Aboriginal community (sniffs) and it was kind of, you know, so exciting. No one thinks much about the white buffalo and about what that meant. I went to the elder and I said to him, you know this is what happened and this is what I need to do. He told me what I needed to do in order to share this information with him, so I offered him tobacco and he gave me direction as to what to do. Basically, it was to follow what the dream or who in the dream shared this with me. So I told another elder, she told the other elder and it was exciting for that other elder because that other elder actually returned back to that community where the white buffalo was coming. (sniffs) A few years later, the white buffalo came back to that community so that was really, you know, it was kind of weird (laughing). This happened years apart, I didn't read anything about the white buffalo coming back to this Aboriginal community so I had no control over that, no insight, just this vision in a dream and the message went out that way, so I almost feel like a messenger, a tool or resource, you know.

As the storytellers demonstrate, dreams are powerful sources of knowledge and serve as important portals in which to maintain connections following the death of a loved one.

Dreams may also illuminate our subconscious fear and anxiety for things yet to come, as She Who Moves the Water relates that she believes that through her dreams, she may be readying herself for the day when her parents pass on:

I already in myself, in a way, I don't know if I'm preparing myself. I'm going to lose them one day, although in our way that I grew up, we weren't supposed to talk about death like that, so that's why I don't, I'm kind of watchful, but in my own way, I think I kind of prepare myself, although I can't really say because we weren't supposed to talk like that. Even in my dreams, it was some dreams I had where I lost my dad, I lost my mom and then I woke up. Sometimes I don't know if I was making any noise in my sleep, but I woke up and I was crying, like I could feel the tears. I guess in my dreams, I was probably grieving even though they're still around, but I don't know, my dreams telling me that you're going to lose your mom and dad one day.

Through the stories shared, it is apparent that for the women in this study, dreams provide an important portal from which to view their world, as well as to create knowledge and understanding. Their stories described how dreams served to maintain connections with their loved ones provide guidance during difficult times, facilitate their healing, and finding meaning following the death of a loved one. The literature relates the importance of dreams in creating knowledge, and maintaining connections and relationships. According to Anderson (2000), “many women will talk about the guidance they receive from their ancestors through their dreams...Through dreams and other experiences, many women experience connections with ancestral spirits” (p. 135).

For the Indigenous women in this study, it appears that their dreams did not focus so much on the past; rather they served to illuminate what actions must be taken to move forward and/or their purpose or meaning in life. This may prove to be one point of misunderstanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. As Tinker (2004) writes, the main difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous interpretation of dreams is that non-Indigenous view dreams as remnants of a painful past, while Indigenous people view dreams as revelations to the future. The stories shared by the women in this study demonstrate the significance of dreams to provide guidance, maintain connections and support them in their healing. Just as important to the storytellers is finding a way to honour the memory of their loved one.

Honouring Memory

All seven storytellers related stories of their healing which took place through a variety of means including honouring the memory of their loved one, participating in ceremonies and rituals, identifying teachings, connection and self reflection. According to Baskin (2011):

Indigenous people are said to be leading the largest healing movement throughout Turtle Island. This is consistent with the Seven Fires Prophecies of the Anishinaabe, which tells us we are currently in the time of re-learning our cultures...Healing is achieving wholeness, which focuses on the health and wellness of our bodies, minds, hearts and spirits. (p. 134)

As She Who Moves the Water explains, keeping the memory of her loved ones alive and honouring their memory is very important to her own healing. She especially wants her two younger daughters, who didn't know the deceased family members to have a connection to them. In order to achieve this, she shares stories with her children so as to facilitate a connection:

I had two children that my brother didn't see, but my seven year old, like already she was in my belly at that time. I told her the other day that, I said well, you were in the same room because you were in my belly when he came to our place that year he passed away in December. He came to our house around December 9th, I was pregnant at the time and that's the December he passed away. I said you're in the same room as him, you know so even her, she feels like, uh, both of them, they feel like, almost like, uh, you know, just like they knew them and they didn't even physically ever see him, but they both, like, felt that they knew him.

Like the other day, my other little daughter, she's talking about something, almost like losing something; I think it was her dog. Then the bigger girl, the seven year old said, now you just reminded me about losing my uncle. So she felt, almost like kind of sad, because she got reminded of it. Then I told her, well I'll get you a picture of him so you can keep it in your room. Yeah, so even that, like I'm glad that my two younger children that never knew him, in the physical form, you know, they love him and feel close to him. It's just like, yeah, so I know he's always going to carry on with, you know, in our lives and my children still have a lot of love for him. You know, like in sitting here talking about it I didn't think it was going to be, you know, kind of like sad thinking about him because I had never really took myself in that place to really think about him and talk about him. I guess, you know, I always just carry on.

For some, identifying something that embodies the person who has passed away, provides meaning and offers comfort. It may be in the form of a special song, a food they were particularly fond of, a place or a special time of year.

This too, is dependent upon the connection made by the person grieving to the person gone. For *She Who Moves the Water*, comfort comes in the form of a tree, which also serves to honour the memory of her grandmother:

Oh, that tree in my backyard of my grandma, this past year my husband, I've been trying to get him to do that, but this past year even my son, he just made me so happy. That tree's a big tree; it's probably, I don't know, ten feet tall maybe. My husband and my son put Christmas lights all over that tree, he always surprising me. I went outside that morning and that tree was just lit and I felt, that's just so nice. I know I'm loved, and my husband and son just wanted me to feel the spirit of my grandma, so that's what they did for me. That was a very nice, a very nice gesture and I think like with myself, that's the way I am. What I think about people and people I lost, I don't know if its metaphors or symbolism, yeah, maybe that's the word, symbolism. I need those kinds of things, almost to be reminders of them and have that connection still. Like you know my grandma and that tree, my grandma was so foundational to everything and just thinking about a tree and its roots, like the, the growth of a tree and that's so much like symbolism to my grandma.

As her story illustrates, the use of metaphors or symbolism provides an ongoing connection to her grandmother, while honouring her memory.

How we grieve and how we honour the memory of our loved one may be part of our cultural traditions, for example, putting out a spirit plate, placing an item of significance on their gravesite, hanging their colours or holding a memorial feast. How one makes the offering is dependent upon the teachings received. *White Buffalo Woman* speaks to the spiritual and healing aspect of feeding her father's spirit:

[When my dad died] I felt like, okay, he's going to be okay, but right through the whole experience, I relied on my spirituality, my prayer, even to keep talking to him and we would keep feeding him. To this day we still do that. I know the loved ones that are passed on are with us, but I don't rely and expect my dad to help me from where he is over there. I don't want to do that to him, that's what I have Creator and grandfathers and grandmothers for, that's what I have ceremonies for, but the whole thing, it was a learning experience.

The feeding of her father's spirit is one way to maintain a connection to her father while honouring his memory. For *White Buffalo Woman*, this selfless act is her way to assist him in

his work in the spirit world, as opposed to asking him for guidance and help for herself. She relates that she relies on Creator, the grandmothers and grandfathers for assistance, and wishes only to honour his memory.

Feeding the spirit or offering a spirit plate is reflected in the story of She Who Moves the Water, who speaks to remembering her brother through the offering of a spirit plate:

Like I said, the ones that I lost will come to me, but not to bring me right down. Even my brother, thoughts of him, they'll come and go and if I need him more, I'll do things specifically for him. Like sometimes around Christmas time or my brother's birthday, I'll do the little, what do you call that, you know, at Christmas when you have a good meal, like a spiritual plate and I'll put that out in the back yard.

She also honours her brother's memory in other ways that holds meaning. In addition to setting out a spirit plate, she shares how she honours her brother's memory as time draws near the anniversary of his death each year:

I think of myself, my grieving and my loss and how I dealt with things. I can't say specifically, okay, this is what I've done. I don't remember doing anything to help me grieve. I guess I just did what, you know, as it came up or that I could do certain things. Even with my brother, I don't remember doing anything specifically. One thing my brother used to like, cigarettes and his coffee. My brother struggled with alcoholism too, like my dad. My brother, I think was two years, because he was off and on again, but that time I almost knew, I knew he was going to stay sober and in some ways I could see him staying sober. I think it was two years my brother didn't have alcohol, and my brother used to like his coffee and his cigarettes.

One of the things I'll do is, there's this guy that I kind of know from around here, I don't know him well, I just kind of know him. I think he struggles financially and I don't know anything more about him, but a few times I seen him around Christmas time and I gave him, I think, five bucks each time; said go get yourself a coffee or something. In my way it was because I want to do, because one time when I seen that guy, it was right on my brother's anniversary, on the twenty-third and the stores are still open, I bumped into him outside a store, then I gave him, I think it was a coffee because it was my way. I wanted to remember my brother by giving somebody else, money for a cup of coffee because that's what my brother liked, his coffee and a cigarette. My sister, when she goes through that way, she would get a cup of coffee and take it to his grave and leave a pack of cigarettes, because that's what my brother used to like. I'll give somebody money and especially around his anniversary, you know, if they're getting themselves a cup of coffee or something, we keep their memory alive, we keep their, their legacy alive. I think that culture and your identity,

from my experience, it almost sets you up for how you're going to grieve. Cultural identity or cultural ways for me, I grieve this way because that's what I knew to do.

In honouring the memory of her brother, She Who Moves the Water views it as a means to maintain a connection with his spirit while helping another, and in this way, she honours the relationships with the world around her. She and her sister engage in the same practice, which speaks to their cultural and spiritual beliefs, and as she relates, it is what they know to do.

For others, honouring the memory of someone who's passed may arise from what is important, and has meaning for more than just themselves. Evaluardjuk shares how she would like to honour the memory of her adopted father:

I want to honour him this year. I'm working on that, that's a work in progress. I've seen so many ways that people honour their relatives, ancestors, um, I haven't decided on which one I would do. I know the Dakota; they have a ceremony called Wiping of the Tears. I like that process. Then the Cree has a feasting ceremony to honour their ancestors; that's another way, but I have to talk to my adopted mom and my sisters and brothers about that before I do any of that. The last two months has been very strong, I know I have to do something. I know one of the ways I'm going to do it is when I go to the Sun dances this summer, I'll bring a flag for him, to honour him that way, that's one way, but the other ways, I'll talk to my relatives first before I do anything. He was good for me, he was there for me, and now my adopted mom, she's been diagnosed with lung cancer too, and she's going through radiation treatment, so yeah, we have to pray for that too.

She shares that she will honour her adopted father's memory when she attends the Sundance this summer, but will consult with her adopted family members before planning any other activity. Acknowledging the feelings and wishes of her adopted family members speaks to the respect she places on their relationship. Honouring his memory is important to her, but maintaining connections must be a priority. In this way, it may be said that through her actions, she honours his memory.

Wanting to honour the memory of a loved one in a way that is both respectful, and keeps their spirit alive is a shared desire among the storytellers. At times however, there may

be extenuating circumstances that prevent or at least complicate one's ability to do so. Blue Sky Woman relates that she feels the need to honour the memory of her son in a cultural way, but is not sure how she should proceed:

I lived off the reserve since I was eighteen and I lost most of that and didn't know. When I came back in the early seventies I started to pick up Sundance's, but I still didn't quite understand all their, my traditional ways. So that's how I was, uh, to this day. I need to do something, I keep searching, to do with my son, because I know sometimes that I think of him and it's strong, it's, it's right there, just like he's calling, saying something, so I have to do something in our traditional way so I'll be, uh, I'll be, um, I'll accept his, uh, departure, I guess. And it, it was hard. It, it is hard for me to, to, uh, when I think of him it is hard for me to talk about him. Just the way, the things that I've done and even with my girls, they, they know that and so we all say we have to do something. I have to do something. So that's coming in the future so maybe I should do that, do that soon.

The need to honour her son's memory appears to be essential for her own healing. She shares that she and her daughters plan to work together to provide a traditional way to honour his memory. She shares that the loss of her son is still painful, and difficult to think about, but she knows it is something she must do if she is to be able to heal and find meaning in his death.

At other times, just following the wishes of a loved one that incorporates their beliefs is a way to honour their memory, as was the case when Blue Sky Woman's grandmother passed away:

With my granny, when she passed away, she was buried in the white man's way because she was brought up in the Christian faith, so everything was done in a Christian way and in a church. I don't want to say a white man's way, that's sort of rude to say that, but that's how it was. Then they had services, they didn't have no wake or anything. They just had that body there overnight and they had locked the church. The next morning they went back or sometimes they'll just bring the body back and have services at the church and bury the body. So there was actually no meaning to that with my grandparents, but some did have, I went to a couple that had traditional ceremonies and it was so long.

Although she knows that following the wishes of her grandmother to be buried with a Christian service is the respectful thing to do, and is a way to honour her memory. Blue Sky Woman freely admits it is difficult for her to find meaning in the way she was buried.

It is apparent from the above stories that honouring the memory of a loved one who has passed away is an important part of the grieving process. Knowing how to honour their memory so one is able to grieve, and facilitate healing is never easy. Losing someone you love is the one of the most painful experiences in life. It takes time to grieve and heal following the death of a loved one. Healing is the third theme that evolved from the women's stories of loss and grief.

Healing

For White Buffalo Woman, the death of her father was a significant loss for her and her family. She relates how the impact of losing her father affected her and how, despite her pain, she moved towards healing:

It was a tough journey, but I knew that I had to sit with the pain, with the loneliness, with the hurt and even feelings of abandonment because we ask ourselves, "Why is this happening?" Even being angry at the person, because there was a lot of stuff going on in the family, a lot of arguments and people not getting along, for me, that's where that anger came from, you know, if you were still here, this wouldn't be happening.

So I had to sit with that and what was helpful for me is, uh, it was always ceremony. It was always prayer, smudging and even talking, talking to people about it, talking about it no matter how painful it was. I didn't want to stay in that place and it wasn't good for my spirit and for my whole well being. Even to write about it, I found that very, very helpful.

Acknowledging the pain and anger one feels after the loss of a loved one is important, as White Buffalo Woman shares. She speaks to the importance of feeling her grief, and allowing herself to experience the emotions that accompany the pain of losing someone. She goes on to say that being in the company of others is an essential component of her healing journey:

I relied on going to sweat lodges and relied on going to full moon ceremonies, always having that connection to people. Some days it was a lot easier to lash out in anger and that's when I'd have to step back because even that spirit of anger could take over a person and it was over taking me sometimes so I had to sit and talk with that spirit of anger and even sit with that pain, just really work through it instead of avoiding it and working around it, instead of lashing out at people. [That] was what I worried about, I didn't want to do that to my family, and I didn't want to do that to anybody.

For White Buffalo Woman, participation in ceremonies and rituals provide an opportunity to come together with others in healing.

The women in this study reveal that having a connection to others and maintaining relationships is supportive when negotiating the feelings of loss and grief after a loved one dies. Blue Sky Woman recalls how her family came together to grieve when her sister passed away:

My sister when she passed away we all grieved with the family and did what, uh, in our traditional ways. What we did was, we had a memorial ceremony, they'll take out all their stuff that was put away, and then they'll have a big ceremony. Then they'll have a give-away and they'll let the spirit go. That's how I understand [it], and sometimes they would cut their hair, they'll keep it with them and when the time came they'll let it go. Little things like that like my mom wanted to do. My mom and dad, that's what they'll do and they'll talk, they'll tell us and their [one who passed on] pictures and everything of theirs, of them, were put away and when the time came for that memorial, it'll be laid out.

For her family, ceremony and ritual are important in the grieving process. It is an opportunity to share teachings and protocols around death, as Blue Sky Woman shares in her story. This knowledge in turn provides a cultural blueprint from which to plan and put into action, following the death of a loved one.

For some, this knowledge is lost or inaccessible due to external forces, which may hinder the grieving process. For Blue Sky Woman, a residential school attendee, her pain following the death of her son, and her struggle to find healing is ongoing:

After my son passed, I, I tried to deal with it and it took, it's taking a long time for me to get over it. Most of the time, I don't talk about it because I'm still going through it. For me, it's going to take awhile yet, but I figure that if I keep talking about it to other people, with the youth or parents, young parents that have lost their loved ones, maybe I could talk with them in a sharing circle about how I felt and maybe I could get over my grief that way, too.

In spite of her pain, she looks for something positive and meaningful in his death. She shares that she would like to speak to others who have experienced the loss of a child, as her experience may be helpful to them in their grief.

She goes on to share that she didn't learn how to grieve in residential school, and in fact, her experience there taught her to keep her emotions concealed. Despite this, she maintains her compassion for others, and strong spiritual beliefs:

We weren't taught how to, how to do the grieving when you lose a loved one, very close relative, but I do respect people that pass on and I pray really hard for the families. I ask the Creator to help them and for myself, too and for everyone in that's in the building that are praying for him or her because I know, I don't know how to express it, I can't, I'm not verbally, uh, talkative to talk with somebody in a crowd. I'm a quiet person that I could just talk one on one to a person, you know, to somebody that I really trust that I could talk with but, I keep everything to myself. I'm dealing with the anger, through the frustration of not knowing how to go past that, sometimes it's very confusing for me trying to deal, walk through it and I just quit. I quit. I don't think about it, I don't do it, I just blank it out, out of my mind, then again it comes back and then I try it again.

It may well be that Blue Sky Woman's attendance at residential school resulted not only in the loss of her cultural traditions around death, but disconnected her from her family and community, as well. Her experience may also hinder her ability to grieve, and ability to heal from the death of her son. Her words are a powerful reminder of how painful her experiences are even today:

I've lost all my traditional growing up, being at residential school and I couldn't seem to, uh, to, uh, talk about things like that, because I felt ashamed. I felt like people went through that and just, just the things that I went through, intimidation and thinking that, uh, they must think that I wasn't a good mother. You know stuff like that, that goes through my mind and it's hard. I'm still struggling through as, as old as I am, but

some, uh, most days are really good. There's a lot of stuff that is still lingering from residential school, but I have to get over it. It's hard for me to talk about it. I try to be strong, always think next time when I talk about residential school I'm going to be strong, I'm not going to cry, but then when I think of that, then I start talking about it, I still go like that. And its, I try to deal with it, with that hurt, the loneliness, intimidation and the abuse that I went through there. I always think that I was strong, but I'm not strong, I'm not strong yet. It'll always be with me until I go, I guess. I keep telling my kids and my grandkids, don't be negative, always be positive or if they're angry at somebody I said, don't say that, just ignore it, then talk, talk about it. Don't, don't let it bother you. It, it is hard. Don't keep it inside you because it'll, you won't be able to, uh; go on with life if it's there. I said I'm, because I struggle, I'm struggling because of what I went through in life. Not, not just ordinary life, I said, I think it's mainly the residential school thing.

Healing may take years as Blue Sky Woman's story relates, and may be affected by many events or past experiences. In her story, she relates how her emotional self remains wounded from her residential school experience, and this in turn hinders her ability to reach out for help to plan a traditional service for her son that would ease her distress and facilitate healing.

For others who attended residential school, they have found healing from the residual pain. Evaluardjuk, another residential school attendee shares her story of healing and what she's learned:

I used to hear people say, let it go. I never understood what that meant. I thought when you cared for someone; you keep them with yourself, within you, in your heart always. Today I understand what letting go means. It means to not carry them in a negative way, to myself, but to celebrate their life and if I'm going to share my experience with them, then I have to do it in a positive way instead of always talking about anger, the pain, that either they inflicted upon me or my, or someone close to me, but by talking about what they've accomplished, what I know. So letting go can take different forms at different stages. I know that today because I've experienced it. Part of letting go is, you know, sometimes when a person is gone you want to keep certain things that belong to them. For me physically, letting that person go sometimes means letting that thing, their belonging go somewhere else and not be in your presence, that's physical letting go. Spiritual letting go is understanding that they have to go to the other side, and I think in my culture, Inuit culture, it means to go to another person, to a baby who is named after the one that have gone, and to accept that baby has your mom's name or your uncle's name or your dad's name, that's them now. Not the one that you remember even though the memory of that person is still with you, but that's that person now. Just saying that or accepting that, that's part of letting go, but always

crying and grieving and keeping them in here, to yourself, that's too painful and it keeps you down, it keeps a person down.

In her story, Evaluardjuk speaks to the process of 'letting go' as a means from which she is able to heal her pain following the death of a loved one. A culturally significant ritual such as giving the name of the person who has passed to a newborn baby in the family is spiritually significant, as it facilitates the acceptance of the loss of a loved one. Acceptance of the death is an important step in healing.

For others, the creation of understanding through knowledge is an important step in the grieving process, particularly for those who weren't connected to family and community as a child. The need to heal anger or shame becomes the first step in healing. In other stories, the women shared their need heal unresolved issues from the past. Star Dancer Woman relates how her own healing ultimately led to healing her relationship with her mother, and forgiveness:

I had to work on myself a lot and I had to work on my relationship with my mom, too, you know through those years because I blamed her for a lot of things that happened. Then as I was learning, as I was learning about what happened to our family, what happened because of a whole system that was in place, right, colonization, residential school. I was able to learn to forgive my mom. I was able to show her compassion and really see my mom for the beautiful person that she was, but that happened over time. When I was in school I had to start looking at some of the trauma in my own life, some of the things that happened.

Star Dancer Woman relates an important consideration in her story regarding the need to heal past trauma. As she shares the loss of her mother and her healing journey following the loss in a separate story. Her ability to grieve and finding meaning relates back to this story, as it is through her healing from past trauma that she accesses the cultural teachings, ceremonies and rituals that help her to find meaning.

This is consistent with the stories of all seven women, and as Evaluardjuk shares in her story, the Cree teachings and ceremonies of her adopted father and his family helps her to accept his passing and begin the healing journey following his death:

My adopted dad, he was a First Nation man so when they had the burial service for him, they had the four day wake; people come and go, talk about him, you know, funny things and good times, sometimes sad times and just bring him to life. Of course lots of feasting and crying, all the mourning process going on and the service itself was all done in Cree and it was traditional. There was maybe two or three hymns sung, but that was for his family, like his sisters and his brothers because they wanted that part, but my adopted mom and her kids and her side of the family, they're very traditional people so they did all the service for him and to honour him, to honour his life and it was a good way to let him go.

The funny part about it was, uh, when we learned that he was diagnosed with lung cancer we had a sweat lodge ceremony for him and one of the elder sons conducted the ceremony, the sweat lodge ceremony. When he [adopted dad] went into the sweat lodge, he was trying to take over, because he was so used to being the one to do the ceremony. The eldest brother said, "No, no, no dad, it's our turn. We're praying for you, this is for you from us. You know, so that the grandmothers and grandfathers could take care of you. We're doing this for you, so you just sit back and relax." (chuckles) He [adopted dad] said, "Okay," then he lay down. He was a funny man, but there was a serious side to him, too.

She shares that the relationship with her adopted father was strong, and her memories of the time they spent together helps her to heal from her loss:

When he was teaching, he was teaching all the time, like he knows I have asthma so when we went to his house, he was in his bedroom for the longest time. He came back out and he talked to mom in Cree and he came back out and gave me a little gift. I asked him, "What's that for?" He said, "For your asthma, you have to take this medicine." So him and I always, from the time he adopted me to the time he, on his very last few days or months, or the last month of his life, he gave me, you know, medicines and I always used to bring him medicines whenever I went up there. Yeah, I would pick medicines here and there and then save some for him. So him and I always exchange medicines. So he gave me that last medicine and I used most of it and I kept a little bit so that when I go up there, I'm going to ask, show me what this looks like and we'll go pick it. Then he gave us moccasins, yeah, it was almost like a parting gift, a remembrance gift. He was just beautiful. We talked to him when we got back, over the phone, and he was just so happy that we came up, we went to visit with him and spend some time.

The cultural teachings he shared with her, and the medicines they shared with one another speaks to the reciprocity of their relationship. Although it is a great loss for her, she shares how the traditional wake and burial helps to facilitate her healing:

When we finally put him into the ground, it was done in the old way, you know. The night before the boys the boys went out to dig the grave with shovels, they didn't use the backhoe, and then when they buried him, when they put his coffin into the ground, they used the shovel to bury him. It was a long process but it was a good way to, to let him go. Yeah, yeah, yeah, um, and it was not near as painful as it would have been if it had been rushed, you know, the body stay in the morgue, and we only see the coffin at the church and then bury him. You know, there's no time in between to say goodbye, whereas the way they did it, the Cree people did that, the wake for four days to let him go, for the community to come and see him, and help with the mourning process. Like the whole community did that, yeah, it was just, it was good. Yeah, miss him lots. My husband always says, yeah, I know a con when I see one, he says. (laughs) Because he likes to, uh, make jokes and try and con you into doing something (laughs) that you're not supposed to do. So it was, uh, there was always that kind of friendship going on.

The memories she carries with her of the special friendship and the bond they shared, helps her in her grief, and she shares how the ceremonies, rituals, and community support were comforting during a difficult time.

For some, the teachings that normally accompany a ritual or ceremony weren't present, and the knowledge and understanding comes much later in life from unrelated sources. For She Who Moves the Water, her memory of attending a wake as a youth, and seeing tobacco being used held no significance for her at the time:

I went to someone's wake and I was a young girl, but like I said, I must've been old enough where it was okay for me to go, but the tables, all around that room, they had in little bowls, uh, cigarettes and I never thought anything of it. Here, now when people like [talk about] the importance of, the ceremonial aspect of tobacco, that's what these Métis people are doing. I just never knew or never seen that connection then, the meaning, but I remember there was tobacco at the tables and everything.

In another incidence, she relates that she remembers tobacco being mentioned following the death of her aunt, but once again, there was no explanation as to its importance:

I remember when my grandma lost one of her daughters, I was young at the time and my auntie was, I think, forty-two. She lived in the city and her death was kind of suspicious. I heard that morning my grandma found out that her daughter died, some sort of bird or something came to her place, [the bird hit] the window, but you don't think anything of it until later. You know, you'll hear them talking or then you hear them saying how they seen that, you know, it's not until later that they said, oh yeah, you got some bird come to the window? I remember my mom, one of her friends is a guy from a First Nations community and he really practices cultural stuff, you know, tobacco and stuff like that, he knows the meaning of it and he told her, we'll put some tobacco out if that should happen. I'm not saying you could prevent anything, but still, you'll know if there'll be something deeper to it.

Although she didn't appreciate the importance of the tobacco in the funeral rituals when she was young, She Who Moves the Water now understands the spiritual significance of tobacco through the teachings shared with her, and uses it in her own life. The use of tobacco to pray or as an offering to Creator is shared in the stories of the other storytellers.

For Blue Sky Woman the importance of attending ceremonies, praying with tobacco and smudging are a normal part of her daily routine, and essential to overall sense of well being:

My Dakota language, the teachings they give us that I've learned from the Sundance and the sweats, my whole heart is in it. Praying, the prayers that I pray, I know that they're answered, when I need the feeling, need to go and sweat, I do that although I can't barely get around, but I still do it. And I feel very, very good when I come out of the sweat (sniffs). But living here, I like to smudge, but where I'm living now, I can't do that. The people don't understand so when I go to somebody's place or I go to the Friendship Centre, they smudge and I just smudge for maybe about five minutes because I think that I'm, the times I've lost smudging that I'll take all that in, you know, to make me feel good (chuckles). To purify myself and to feel, you know, anyway that's, that's how I'm dealing with things right now. I'm still struggling through it, but like I say, once I go through the sweat, I feel good for a couple of weeks and then I go again. Once summer comes, we sweat every week so I'm looking towards that because that really helps me, helps me in every way in my life.

As she lives in an apartment in the city, Blue Sky Woman isn't allowed to smudge, but on rare occasions she finds a way to smudge despite the fire regulations:

Once I get up, I open the window and breathe in the cool air; it just makes me feel so good. I stand there, pray, ask for a good day and then that's good. I have that window open all day and I close it just before bed. That's how my life is here in this apartment, the air helps me. Sometimes it's really cold but I don't mind, I just pray with tobacco, but I can't smudge, that's the only thing this place doesn't accept is smudging or smoke, no smoking in the building. So sometimes I sneak, I sneak it, one little leaf of sage and I go by the window and close my bedroom door, put out a towel at the bottom so they don't smell smoke, I put all the fans on, then I stand by the bedroom window and I smudge. I do sneak it in my bedroom just to smell it and thank the Creator for giving me life this long, my health being good now and everything. So prayers, I pray every night, every day or when I'm out and about I pray. If I see kids crying, I pray for them, if I see old ladies that are barely walking, I pray for them that they have a better life. I always pray for people that are in the hospital, the homeless, people that are hungry, pray for everybody and people that are going to school that they have strong minds so they could learn a lot of traditional ways, and for non-Native people that don't understand our ways, for them to understand what we believe in and what our traditions are, I pray they understand. I go through that, not every day, but maybe once or twice a week.

Prayer, smudging, offering tobacco and attending ceremonies all facilitate healing, but healing doesn't occur in isolation, as families are affected by the death of a loved one.

White Buffalo Woman speaks of her healing as occurring in conjunction with her family's healing. She shares how she had to put her and her children's need for healing first:

At first, one of the things were I was, that role in my family that I had was more of the "look after everybody role." So at first after my dad had passed I was very focused on my mom and even lost myself for awhile, and ended up getting sick, physically ill, because I was so caught up in worrying about her, so I finally had to work through that process and be okay with letting her go and letting her do her own healing. I had to keep looking after myself, because I was becoming less, less there for even my children's needs. I didn't even want them to see me cry at first, and then later on I learned that that did affect my youngest daughter's spiritual well being. To this day we're still trying to repair that in a way. I want my children to be comfortable with talking about emotions even if they are painful and working through them, knowing who they are, you know spiritually, physically, emotionally, mentally and I think they're finding their way. I guide them as much as I can, but I don't, I guess, save them all the time. I let them learn what they need to learn, but they always know that I'll be there for them when I can. That's what I learned from my dad, he couldn't always rescue me, I had to learn for myself and that was the only way that you're going to strengthen yourself as a person, but to always continue learning about yourself.

Although she found that she needed to focus on her own healing and that of her children, that's not to say that she didn't work on the healing of her family as a whole. On the contrary, White Buffalo Woman relates how her family came together to heal following her father's death:

Our family sat in many ceremonies together after the loss we shared, we began to share what our experiences were with the loss of our father and even though we lost the same person, each one of our experiences were different, and so we began to talk more about that, and that in itself was healing for us as a family, too. We attended ceremonies together, just relying, and asking for that guidance from the spirit of that pipe, the spirit, that sweat lodge, the grandmothers and grandfathers, that is what helped me make it through this whole journey. You know, sometimes I wonder, people that don't have spirituality; I don't know how, how they do it, that's something I share with my children, more so today.

During their healing journey, she recounts how there were many emotional moments that may have torn their family apart but they persevered together:

We [family] were all hurting, but it came out in anger. So once we started really addressing the hurt and our feelings, we fought hard as a family. We fought hard, and what I mean by that is we fought hard by using, the utilizing ceremony, because we weren't going to give up on ourselves as a family and I know that's what brought us back together. Sure there were a lot of hurtful words that were said and a lot of things that were done, but we just kept ceremony, we kept reaching out to our, our teachers. We took our cloth to ask for those prayers, that guidance so our family would stay together. We reached out because we first stuck, we stayed as a family, we didn't talk outside the family a whole lot, but because all of us were hurting, there came a time where we had to start reaching to outside help and that's what we did, and I think it strengthened our own individual spirits really. It was a lot of talking, a lot of crying, a lot of just allowing ourselves to sit with that pain and to let it come out when we were in a sweat lodge or a ceremony, any kind of ceremony, not to hold back, because my dad even told us through teachings, we weren't given tears for nothing. Creator gave us those tears to clean out our body and to let go of that pain. So those teachings, we started and we started healing, a lot of healing was taking place. We still have our rough days to this day, but we always have our ceremonies to help us through it. Slowly but surely we started finding our way again.

What stands out in her journey to heal herself and her family is her commitment to maintaining her relationships with family members while engaging in her own healing. She shares how she continues to work on her healing and what helps her to overcome the pain:

So through that whole grief, that loss experience, I take as many teachings as I can and I think that's what people have to do to work through, to work through that, because we learn a lot about ourselves when we experience loss, and I'd rather do that through spirituality. I love myself too much, I love my children too much, and my family too, to reach out for that bottle, reach out for the drugs. I'd rather reach out to Creator and grandmothers and grandfathers for that help because I know it's there and I know it's going to be done in a good way. I find through the ceremonies too, when I would allow for my body to heal, I had to let it experience the crying; I had to talk, to shake, sweat, all those seven healing teachings and I had to keep letting that repeat in itself, you know, in my own body experience. I had to keep allowing those experiences to come and not to shut them down. I strongly believe that we can be the healers of our own self if we allow that spirituality to come in and not shut it down. When we have so much hurt and pain and we close our self off, that hurt and pain and anger, that hatred, could shut down that light that shines inside of us, and that's what Creator has a hard time seeing. So then we feel like we're in a place of darkness, when we start doing that work and sitting with that pain, rather than avoiding it, little by little that light starts coming back. That's what I found to be my whole journey through the loss of my dad, especially.

To this day we pray more, we smudge more, because I notice that she will shut down. When I didn't cry in front of my children, I taught them that and I can see now when I look back, I didn't know at the time what I was doing, but when I look back now, when I didn't allow them to see those sacred tears being cleansed from even me and not role modeling that, she started to shut down. Even to this day she'll ask me, Can I cry? I find that sad, so that's where we bring in that prayer, that's where we bring in that smudge and I tell her, I want you to voice, you've got to voice that pain. If you want to talk about grandpa, if you want to reminisce about the good times that you remember with him and if you need to cry, then don't hold back. So again, together as a family we keep moving forward and using our ceremony, our medicines, our prayer, and I find that to be really helpful for my children, but it's ongoing.

The journey hasn't been easy for White Buffalo Woman and her family, but the ability to come together in healing speaks to their love for one another and their father.

Having the support of family members is shared throughout all the stories. Lone Eagle Woman shares how she asked her siblings to assist her mother in making plans when it was discovered that their mother was terminally ill. She states her mother and siblings were totally

against the idea when she first talked about it, but eventually they all met to discuss what was going to happen and how they could help their mother have some say in the planning:

When we started to learn that mom was going to die, I remember I wanted to run! I wanted to run away from the situation because I thought, oh my god, my mom's going to die. What are, what are we going to do, what are we going to do and I remember just getting panicked and, um, I wanted to put on running shoes, literally, and start running and run away from it, because I didn't know how to deal with it, I was powerless. I wanted to help her but I knew that it didn't matter what I was going to do, nothing, nothing that I could do was going to save her because it wasn't in my hands. I had a hard time into accepting that this power greater than ourselves, um, was in charge. I had to move into accepting that mom was dying and there was nothing any of us in our family was going to be able to do.

I went and sat with my mom one day and I said listen, because we can't do anything mom, I want to know, like, do you want to talk about anything, is there anything you want to talk about? Do you want to talk about like, your funeral, because mom, this is our reality and I said, I'm scared, but I don't want to be guessing what you would want to have done either. I want to know, can you be strong enough and talk about what you want. I don't want to be standing there that day wondering what did you want to wear, what kind of music did you want, and who did you want as your pallbearers? I said, I really want you to be part of this, can you help us, do you think you can do this? At first she was, oh god no, you know, I don't want to talk about this! I remember just having to go to my family members and say to them, you know what, I think we need to talk about this. Everybody was just appalled at me because they were just like, what do you mean, are you crazy, why are we going to start talking about this, and I just said, because it's our reality. We have to talk about this, it's going to happen.

So we arranged a time to meet with mom and dad. Dad more or less talked about his plans and what he, his wants as well, but it kind of, it, it brought our family together to a point of, um, the hardest thing that we'd ever had to do in our life was to, to sit there and pre-plan mom's funeral while she was sitting there. At the same time it gave her dignity to say to her, we love you enough that we want to make sure what you want in your service is going to be there and that we're not going to be dressing you in something that you didn't want to be wearing. All of us siblings were together, the grandchildren, our spouses, we sat and we talked about it and we planned it. At the same time, the decision to start going through their stuff, because they had a lot of things, my dad really, he collected a lot of stuff, so that day we were able to say to mom and dad, can I have this. Then we all sat around and we went through things, so then it became like a give-away, like a give-away while they were sitting there to say, yeah, you know what, you take this. Both my parents were religious, very religious and we grew up attending church, so my dad had accumulated a lot of, of iconic items of the church. So, I have this full basket of books and items, these old items, like, where holy water go into and you know, things from churches and I inherited the big bible, like the big family bible, so I have this big huge black bible. I started to see that

connection of our spirituality and my dad is a very spiritual person. That's where I gained a lot of my spirituality and beliefs were through my father and what he had in his own upbringing, his own beliefs through that time of growing up in the Christian faith.

Lone Eagle Woman makes reference to a give-away as her and her siblings assist their parents to plan for their funerals and divide their belongings. Planning ahead may have initiated the healing process for her and her siblings, in addition to providing a sense of having some control in an uncontrollable situation.

She goes on to describe her feelings as her mother's death approaches and how she drew comfort from her faith and the rituals associated with that:

How do we even accept that somebody is going to die and allow that transition to happen? Where do we find peace within ourselves? When my mother was dying, actively dying, we were, uh, before she died she went into this burst of energy and she wanted to dance, she wanted to go to bingo, she wanted to smoke a cigarette, she wanted to eat, you know, where's my husband I want to dance and it was, wow, what's happening. Next thing you know she's in a coma. So suddenly, she went from this big burst of energy and being present, to now she's laying there in a coma and now it's, this is getting closer now. You know, so I'm standing there like, whoa, we better, what are we going to do? I remember sitting there going, what do we do? Let's call the priest, so we go back to our religion, right?

I remember when the priest came in and he anointed her, we were all sitting there with her and I remember feeling that validation of, oh my god, the priest is here, this is really happening and she's really dying because he's here to anoint her which, I mean, we say the anointing of the, it's anointing of the sick, but we always look at it as the last rites, uh, the last rites. And I remember feeling like, oh my god, this is it and I think I even said, after he was done, I think I even said, oh my, I, I, think I'm pretty sure I said, oh shit! Like that. Right out loud. And then I looked at him, went oh my god I'm sorry I just said that, but I remember just feeling like this is it, this is it. We are now moving into the transition of letting her go and are we going to be able to do this? So as we're standing there praying and I'm sitting there thinking this is really happening, now I can't stop this, so I think I'll just cry. So I, I started weeping and I, I, uh, I was thinking, um, at the time, how selfish of me. Why am I crying, because, you know, she's going to be going to a better place, I don't know where she's going, but I think it's probably a very beautiful place that she's going to be transitioning into. I need to accept that, but at the same time, I was being so greedy, saying I don't want her to go, I don't want you to take her, I'm not, I'm not done with her. She needs to still be here, and, you know, I was so mad at cigarettes. I remember being so mad at

cigarettes, because it was cancer, right, she smoked and she wasn't going to give up smoking.

Lone Eagle Woman's story attests to the truly emotional nature of experiencing the death of a loved one. It appears that despite all of our efforts, we are rarely ever fully prepared for the finality of death.

From the stories, it appears that relying on spiritual beliefs and feeling a connection to a higher power provides a sense of peace when faced with losing a loved one. Cloud Dancer speaks to how she drew comfort and strength from her faith during the difficult times following the death of her mother:

I was raised Christian, that was the spirituality that we were; I was familiar with at that time. We weren't regular church goers by any means but we did attend on the special occasions, Christmas, Easter, those types of things. Even then my mother didn't attend a lot because she wasn't well and she was disabled. I will say that one of the things that kind of struck me the most is when the doctor was on the phone, he told me she was going to die. I stood up and I was all alone, I was on the phone and I just stood up in shock, um, like, go through the roof kind of thing. Then it was just like, almost like a feeling of warmth or peace or something came over me, like, I don't know, like something hugging me or holding you close. To me, that was the major connection with spirituality that I've experienced throughout my life. When I was younger and really sick or there were challenging times in my life, I would always pray, being Christian, you know, or we would pray. I remember pleading with God saying don't let that happen and I'll never, ever, swear again, you know. (chuckles) I'd do that; I would try not to but, you know, never ever really happened.

Anyway, you kind of have this relationship with your Creator or whatever but, um, that's what happened to me when I found out that she was going to pass, and after she did pass there was, you know, there was such sadness. Sadness, like, and I felt like I had to console everybody. I had to, you know, make funeral arrangements, I didn't even know what, you know, like a step by step kind of thing. I had no idea, and I had everyone older than me, with different supports and everything, uh, coming at me, asking me questions and making demands of me, I didn't know how to really respond, and I don't think I was the nicest person at that time. (chuckles) Anyway, my mother was buried June 3rd, uh, she died on June 3rd and she was buried on June, uh, I don't even remember now, June 11th, I think. She died a few days before her fifty-fifth birthday. So, um, it wasn't anything elaborate by any means, but it was, it was, you know, it was a nice, a Christian burial.

For a time after her mother died, Cloud Dancer reveals that she turned to alcohol as a way to deal with her anger and pain following the death of her mother.

She relates how she came to the realization that she needed to return to her faith as a means to heal, but as she shares, overcoming her anger wouldn't be easy:

I ended up going to church; I don't know a season where you go to church every night. (chuckles) So I was there, I would go to church and I felt comfort in that and, you know, so I, I was okay. That's where I got my strength and the priest at that time was, he was very understanding, he was wonderful, I mean he was very comforting and it was a good relationship. I'd liked going to church and I felt like I was contributing something.

So then (sighs) when, so the first year afterwards, um, I wouldn't say I suffered from depression, I, I was in a depressed state is what I would say, and it was also combined with anger. It didn't take much for me, if somebody started, you know, being demanding, aggressive or confrontational with me, I would be confrontational right back. I was angry and I thought (sniffs), you know, um, we believe like, you know, that there's evil out there and, you know, and the wives tales are the Métis traditional teachings to fear the devil, during Easter, Lent period, the Lugaroo would come, he would take on the devil and would take on the figures of animals and scare you. You know, there've been many stories, my grandfather, my grandmother sharing stories and this was a legitimate fear, I mean, adults believed, not just, you know, something that you used just to scare the kids. You know, you believe in that, but the state of mind I was in, it was just like, you know what, if there's evil out there, bring it up, because I'm so angry right now that, you know, nothing is going to do me in. (chuckling) Just bring it on, I can take that on.

Cloud Dancer's response to her mother's death is not surprising. Anger is a common reaction following the death of a loved one, and each storyteller shared how they were angry at some point during their journey of grief. Along with anger, the women spoke of experiencing a sense of sadness at the physical loss of their loved one.

Star Dancer Woman refers to how she was feeling very lonely for her mother in the year after she passed away. She goes on to describe how the sweat lodge provided healing, and understanding:

When she [my mom] passed away I was really, like really, really lonesome for her. You know, really even yet I still, like I still miss her a lot, eh. I went to the sweat lodge

to do my grief work and, uh, this was about almost a year after she passed away. I was still really grieving [my] loss, like I was still in a lot of pain, and we had a women's lodge at that time. My sisters-in-law were all in there and they were singing. I was really singing, I was crying and I was saying, momma, this is really hard here without you. I'm just talking like that, talking to her, I just want you here and I miss you. I was saying those things and the women were singing and the singing got louder and louder. I was crying and releasing more, and then all of a sudden it just got quiet, it was like the women were singing far away. Then I went to this place and I could hear my mom's voice, she said in Cree, she's calling [me], I turn around and she's there. She's standing really proud, she's just like this, you know, she's standing very proud, her hair is very short, I always thought she would come to me with long hair but her was cut very short and she was wearing this long, like long dress. I can't even say what colour it was but she was very proud standing there. She said, uh, my girl, she said my girl, all my gifts I leave to you, she said, I left them for you and the girls, but I also left you what I didn't heal, she said. And I was back in the sweat lodge and the women were, you know, it was really loud again and I understood what it meant. Like I understood intergenerational trauma, I understood what it meant, you know, we hear it and we know it up here (points to head), but at that moment, I understood. All those generations of hurt she carried, too, and she passed that on to me unknowingly and it was up to me to use the gifts that she gave to me to do that healing work.

Star Dancer Woman shares that through ceremony; she maintains the connection to her mother's spirit. She goes on to say that through connection she receives the gift of understanding and knowledge, which helps her to move forward on her healing journey. The powerful description of her experience in the sweat lodge is testimony to the healing power of ceremony, and is shared by other storytellers.

Maintaining connections with loved ones through ceremonies, prayer, and relationships with the land, Creator, and the spirit world appear throughout the stories shared in this study. White Buffalo Woman finds that spending time on the land helps her to connect with her father's spirit and helps her to heal:

I had to not only continue to talk to my dad's spirit, but relying on nature. I remember going out to the sweat lodge area by myself. I was having, the relationship with my oldest daughter, there was a lot of tension going on and we weren't getting along. I woke up one morning and I thought I heard her walking around in the hallway, that's why I woke up, but she wasn't there, that's when she was still going through her drinking. I just had the urge; you know, go out to the land and go out to the sacred

ceremony area, so that's what I did. I got up, I took my tobacco, went out there and I sat around and I prayed. I walked around the grounds and went to the area where my dad used to have his sweat lodge, the sweat lodge area. You could still kind of see the outline at that time, anyhow, I was talking to my dad, you know, saying things are a little bit tough right now, and this is where you used to have your sweat lodge. All of a sudden I heard this loud screaming behind me and I turned around and there was this huge hawk hovering above our little shed, very close to me. I wasn't that far from it and it hovered there for awhile, it was just screaming, looking at me and when it was done, it flew away to the east. For me, that was another, it was like, it reconnected me to my spirituality, because sometimes I go through, I would go through periods where it would get weak, then I'd start to doubt, even, you know, have a lot of self doubt, and so I knew there was a strong message there to keep going and not to give up. So I stayed out there for awhile, just continued to pray, to ask for that guidance, that support and a little bit of healing so that I could keep moving forward, and to recognize that I have a lot of work to do yet in this world, on my journey.

She reveals how she maintains her connection to her father's spirit through her relationship to the land. White Buffalo Woman admits to having self doubt at times, and says she receives strength through prayer, and sitting on the land where her father's sweat lodge used to be. She refers to the land as the sacred ceremony area where she finds healing, and reconnects to her spirituality through the land and nature.

This sentiment is echoed by Star Dancer Woman who shares how her connection to the land aids in her healing. She relates a memory of how her spiritual beliefs and relationship to the Creator, land and ceremony, helps her to heal, and move past trauma. She goes on to share her respect for the healing power of our Indigenous ways:

I went home and got all my sacred items, I got my drum, I brought my rattle, I got my medicines and I took a blanket and went out to the east site. I went there and I spent the rest of the day until late that evening out there. I was singing, I was using my drum, I was praying, I had my tobacco, I was, you know Andrea, I rolled around on the ground and I screamed, and I kicked and I cried and I hurt. I yelled like an animal, you know, and I did everything to get rid of all that. (voice shaking)

I think back and I think about how pitiful I must've looked, you know. When you think of how compassionate the grandfathers are (voice filled with the emotion) and I think, you know, for witnessing that kind of emotional pain and (sniffs) but I stayed out there that day, then finally by the end of the day I was just really tired and I think I fell asleep for awhile, just on the ground, because I was right beside the sweat

lodge...I learned something that day and that night, how powerful our ways are...I could just do it on my own with the medicines, through prayer, through the belief and our grandmothers and grandfathers, through the belief in our Creator, the gifts we were given, all of those things.

Star Dancer Woman's story is only one of seven that speaks to the need to connect with the land for healing and guidance.

This need is especially strong for individuals who, for whatever reason find themselves disconnected from their communities. For Blue Sky Woman, the desire to move back to her community, to have that connection to the land is equally important, as she believes it is where she will find healing:

I get depressed and think about the bad things once I moved. Go back to the community, that's where my mind is all the time; I want to go out there. I want to go out there, but right now, because I'm old and not so well I have to learn to accept that, but I can't wait for summer because I'm going to camp out there again. So I'm waiting forward towards the summer time. Spring time's where life is so good out in the open. My girls know that and I keep telling them, I said I'm going to move back home. Where you going to live? I said I don't know, I'll just put a tarp over that car I said, that's all I need. And they just, you're going to sleep under the tarp? Yeah. What if there's snakes and stuff like that? I said that's okay, they'll just crawl by. (chuckling) Although I'm scared of snakes, I say they'll leave you, they don't know, I said. They'd just keep on going where they're going (chuckling) and then they'll say, err, mom, I don't know why you want go over there. I say well, that's how I am. Maybe as I grow older it's going to be stronger, I don't know, I said, but I am. Still haven't, but my youngest girl said mom, I got news for you. I said what is it? She says I'm going to move to, you know, back to, to the community. I said when, could I come with you? She says well not, not for a couple years. I said, aw. (chuckling) I said and that's a long time. She says yeah, you can live with me. I said, oh, now I keep praying that it's soon because I can move back out there and I'll just sit out there. Buy a rocking chair I guess and just sit out there in the shade and in the wind. Ah, [that's] just the best.

The longing in Blue Sky Woman's words for her community and the land is palpable. Her connection to the land is still strong despite her attendance at residential school. It is where she feels whole, and finds healing.

The stories shared by the women in this study speak to the importance of ceremonies, rituals, cultural teachings, and connecting to the land to facilitate healing for those who are

grieving the passing of a loved one. Another theme that appeared in the stories is making space.

Making Space

Making space refers to remaining open to other ways of finding healing that may differ from normal beliefs or teachings. White Buffalo Woman refers to her experience of making space:

I remember after losing my dad, I remember a few months afterwards, that I, again I went through that weak, that weak time of just wanting that physical connection with my dad and just being almost uh, searching around for it, even going to a non-Aboriginal psychic woman because I knew they were gifted, my parents always told me everybody has a gift of some sort. So I heard about this psychic woman and when I met her, I could see that she was very gifted. I didn't tell anybody because there was a little bit of shame, you know, for going to a psychic person, but you know, some of the stuff she told me was very accurate and even surprising because I hadn't told this person anything. So again that was kind of a wakeup call again for, uh, even though our loved ones have gone on, they are still around and that when we go through our weak times, that we are still being carried by Creator, he knows, Creator knows when we're, when we're hurting. Creator will carry us when we need help and that guidance when we're feeling weak.

White Buffalo Woman recalls her parents speaking of the gifts that other cultures possess, so she reaches out as a means to connect with her father's spirit. She is not alone in seeking guidance from alternative sources.

The women in this study, all share stories that speak to looking outside their culture for guidance and healing during times of loss and grief. For Evaluardjuk, making space facilitated healing and allowed her to forgive her mother:

[After my mom died] I, um, came across a process where I could write to my mom. You know, I must've mentioned it so many times to somebody to, or to anyone that would listen to me when I was, uh, in my pain, you know, you just want people to hear when you're in pain. I must've mentioned it to everybody that could listen to me so many times and finally somebody said, "You know, if you want to get on with your life, you have to do something about it. You can't just keep talking about it. You can't just keep bringing it up because it's killing you." Well, fuck, sorry! That's how I felt

you know, but I was in so much trouble with myself that, uh, I couldn't listen. I couldn't listen to, uh, solutions. I thought they were just, you know, giving it back to me and saying, you deal with it, it's yours, you know, which is true.

The process was to write a letter to her in my language, in her language that she understood and tell her everything I wanted to tell her, and ask her whatever I wanted to, so that's what I did. After that, the process was to, uh, either go out in the bush or stay in my room and talk to my mom and say my prayers. I don't know how long that took, an hour, two hours, three hours, just to let it all come out. It was, um, up to that point, it was the most rewarding feeling I've ever had in my whole life. I couldn't believe how much lighter I felt, how my head even felt lighter. Even my chest wasn't so tight no more. I just felt, it just felt like my pores opened up from the garbage that I had been carrying all those years towards my mom, and then I felt love towards my mom. (voice breaks) I hardly ever felt love towards my mom before that (voice filled with emotion). And it was so good! Yeah, yeah, that was a spiritual awakening for me, and I think my mother was happy, too. One of the spiritual experiences like that just never goes away, it stays with you, because I think sometimes I want to, I want to go there again and experience that feeling, but um, no; experience like that is only one time and that time was the time.

For Evaluardjuk, making space proves to be not only a life changing experience, but a deeply spiritual experience. She describes having a spiritual awakening, the likes of which she knows instinctively, she won't experience again. She shares that after years of carrying anger towards her mother; she feels love for her mother that she never knew before, and peace within.

Opening one's self to new possibilities or making space for Lone Eagle Woman required her to trust and open herself to a part of herself previously unknown:

All my life, I've been walking on this fence, even today in the work that I'm doing today, even today, I'm on the fence of Christianity and traditional beliefs. It's a balancing act because I don't just walk into somebody's room presuming that because they're a First Nations person or they're an Aboriginal person they are automatically going to want to smudge. I can't do that because I don't know anything about that person. you know, or maybe their own fears and insecurities of what they don't know about, what goes on at a pow wow, because they didn't know what, they just knew that we don't go there, we don't participate in that, so no, you're not going to go either. I always grew up with this inquisitive mind of, well I wonder what happens there, I wonder what it's about. So in my sobriety, in the early sobriety I started to open that bit of a door to Aboriginal spirituality because I started working at an Aboriginal organization.

There was a man that came there to do a practicum, he had a twelve week practicum to do and he was authorized to come with us as staff to do his practicum.

Every Friday morning, we would have a sharing circle where we would smudge with sage and we would share about how our week was and what's on our heart. It was a really nice concept because we were able to share how we were feeling, so I began to get comfortable in a setting of other people because I had a lot of insecurities growing up. Working at that organization, learning about the Aboriginal spirituality and in a program of recovery, all of a sudden I'm bringing those two worlds together and they actually jived pretty good. The spiritual growth I was finding in attending ceremonies opened up the door to, now I'm going to Full Moon ceremonies and that's where a lot of healing came and a lot of my hurt and pain came out. I was able to cry openly and let myself release so much in that sacred ceremony that it was empowering because I started to heal, I was starting to heal. I was starting to heal my hurts and I was starting to forgive myself for my hurts.

Through the program as well there are steps in the program and they're there for a reason. I had a really good sponsor who walked me through the first six, seven, eight steps like bang. I think that's really what helped me to maintain sobriety. The few steps that are there to help me look at all of the things that I've done in life, where I went wrong and to forgive myself. To also forgive other people for the harm they did to me. I knew I was hanging on to all that hurt and pain, not forgiving people and not forgiving myself was really a weight, held me down a lot and was a real big cause of why, why I continued to drink, because there was no light there at the end, complete darkness. Once I started getting involved with ceremonies and with the group, I started to see, this feels nice, this feels good. I can trust some people now because of what happened to me before in a circle, I started to realize this is totally different people. So healing started to be part of my life and the realization of how powerful spirituality is and what a big piece of our living is spirituality.

I really started to come to terms with what's inside of me, feelings of happiness and joyous. Free is about releasing our pain. I realize now that if we just sit still long enough and ask for guidance, you know, that comes, that voice comes within us. If we sit long enough to ask for help, we will receive that. I truly believe that spirit is always listening, it's always there to listen and it's always there to help. I don't say that I'm a traditionally practicing person, but I do support that because I do see the healing that has come, I have witnessed and I have felt, so when I'm helping somebody who is traditional, having that respect to say yes, I can help you in this area. Do you have a traditional elder that you normally work with, we can make arrangements here and we can do this here? I never, ever state I am a traditional elder.

The journey of making space for Lone Eagle Woman is twofold. First, she becomes immersed in Aboriginal spirituality, which is unfamiliar to her, and second, she embraces her sobriety and the healing that comes from that process. In making space, she finds healing and a connection to a part of herself she never knew. From this awakening, she discovers true joy and happiness in her own life, which she shares with others in her life.

In a similar manner, making space for Cloud Dancer provides a sense of belonging, community, and understanding she never experienced in her life:

I always felt like I had a connection with something else, but I didn't know what it was, and nobody in our family ever investigated or pursued the Métis culture and the spirituality. When I started working at an Aboriginal organization in the community, I realized then that there was a lot more to me than I ever knew before. I met an elder who was my boss, I was very fortunate and this was truly a blessing in my life. I think the Creator puts people together for a reason. He taught me so much in regards to who I am, being Métis and what that meant. The connection between the Métis culture and the Aboriginal culture, like there's no, it's like a kind of a gray area for me. There's no absolute, like I don't practice, um, I don't Sundance, I don't participate in dances, pow wow's and those types of things, but I do participate in other parts that I feel comfortable with like smudging, attending sharing circle, feasts, pipe ceremonies, and those types of things, but there's a gray area for me. I was very fortunate to discover that, be told and be taught and the teachings given to me by this particular elder. It made my connection with my spirituality much greater, I was able to be comfortable with it and understand everything I wasn't sure about, and I think things that my family don't understand at all and unfortunately won't have the opportunity to experience, that's what really kind of helped me get through my grief, my grieving process, and, uh, surviving the loss of my mother.

Through making space, Cloud Dancer discovers who she truly is as a Métis woman, and from this knowledge she finds a sense of confidence she never experienced before. She attributes this to her ability to move beyond the pain of losing her mother, and to heal.

Making space may not always prove to be the right road. Star Dancer Woman explains that while she initially believes making space for the church and the teachings of the bible is what she needs, it proves not to be what she was looking for in her life:

Before that [my healing journey began] I went to the churches, I studied the bible for seven years. I went to see those people that read palms...I used to go to the psychiatrist.

Instead, Star Dancer Woman finds healing through making space for her own cultural teachings and ceremonies. Returning to her mother's community, seeking the cultural teachings from Elders, and participating in ceremonies facilitates her healing, and spiritual growth. Under the guidance of her cultural teachers, she shares that she finds healing from the

loss of her mother through self reflection, and introspection, which facilitates Indigenous knowledge creation, whereby she finds meaning and purpose in her life.

Finding Meaning

Reflection or looking inward is one of the ways that Indigenous people create knowledge and understanding. The process may occur immediately following an experience or it may not happen for many years. Following the death of a loved one, finding meaning slowly emerges from our grief, healing, and spirituality. Finding meaning or purpose in the loss of a loved or affirming our direction in life, may become apparent through dreams, but as She Who Moves the Water shares, this may not happen for many years after the death.

She describes a recent dream where she receives a powerful gift from a loved one long passed:

In about November, yeah, it was after the conference in November and I was just kind of stressed with doing the course, yeah, more so the course. Well, then I had a dream; I guess I would say, you know, [I'm] kind of gifted in the area of dreams. A lot of healing dreams will come to me and that's how I healed or got a lot of help through dreams, because dreams always told me what to do, like, in terms of my healing. In November I received a dream, I would see a few dreams about spirit names and in November I received a dream that was like, uh, "She Who Moves the Water." In my dream, it just showed everything. It just showed what I was here to do, to work with people, and metaphorically, like, move the water inside of them. So that was a big dream for me and it kind of just affirmed everything for me. Now I feel more grounded, I feel this is who I am and this is my spirit name because I know it came from spirit, it didn't just come from me thinking up a name. This name came from spirit that's why I feel more grounded, just more, what's that word, substantiated. So yeah, that was a big dream.

The confirmation she received through her dream was a defining moment in her life and the spiritual connection she feels to her name, She Who Moves the Water, extends far beyond her name to encompass her calling in life, to work with people:

Just recently, I don't know quite where I was, I don't know if it was at a workshop or something, my grandmother came to me about my little cousin that passed. This many

years later, thirty-two years later, I felt that I accepted it, accepted his loss. Of course it's very sad and it was a difficult loss for my Auntie and her family, but in a way I kind of accepted it, his loss. I felt that in a way he gave me that gift of the water and I just felt really connected to him. It's almost like through him I was given that gift; I was given that calling to work with people, to help people in their healing, because they say the body's what, sixty percent water. You know, recently I connected the two, just almost aligned his loss, my spirit name and what I am to do, how I am to live my life. That's why I accepted his loss, because I felt like he gave me that gift, he gave me that gift of water and to work with people in such a sacred manner, so I know he'll always be with me. It's a funny thing, I don't know if I really dreamt of him since his passing. I don't know, I guess it'll be like, when they're going to come, they'll [spirits] come. I remember one time, I remember my grandpa or grandma said something about dreams and when we lose people and them coming back to us. I don't know what more to say, but I'll always feel him, and even my kids, I tell them about my little cousin and how he was the cutest little Métis kid there was, but you know the sad thing is my Auntie still actively drinks.

Just as important, through her dream, she is finally able to reach a place of acceptance for the death of her young cousin, so many years ago.

For White Buffalo Woman meaning arises out of her healing and spirituality:

To know that they're always going to be there; I find that still gives me the strength to go on and taking the teachings, even having that spiritual connection to my dad and taking the teachings he instilled in me and sharing those now with the work that I do, with the people I see. So in a way, his spirit's living through me, and just knowing it was his time. Creator knows when our time here on the physical realm, physical world is done, and knowing that we continue to go even when we're done here, we continue with that good work over there.

We were always taught that Creator knows what's going on inside of us, but we have to through prayer, talk to Creator, ask for that guidance, that help and how to work through difficult times. To always take the teachings, to always take the teachings from everything, whether it's good, whether it's our hardships, there's always a teaching there somewhere. So it's those teachings that I continue to remember today. Even asking, "What would my dad expect me to do?" "What would my dad want me to do in this situation?" So even then I was still having that connection, that connection to his spirit. I had to do that for the longest time, and then when I felt strong enough, and then I didn't have to rely on that so much, I guess. I guess it's more or less trusting myself based on the teachings of spirituality that I've been taught by both my parents and having trust in, in myself that I will be okay and I can move forward, because I have that strong foundation.

During the healing journey, comfort is derived from maintaining connections to those who have passed. For White Buffalo Woman, finding meaning not only facilitates the process of acceptance, but also the ability to let go.

Star Dancer Woman finds meaning following a sweat lodge ceremony where she connected with her mother's spirit. Meaning comes to her in the spiritual form of a gift from her mother:

My mom's Indian name was connected to turtles, so after that I started getting turtles. I've got turtle earrings, turtle necklace, a turtle shell, you know, I even found a huge turtle shell like this, yeah; the back of the turtle shell at the East site was this big. (makes a large circle with her arms) I went to an elder and she said that was part of my bundle, right, that's supposed to be the turtle, all the turtle stuff is part of my bundle, but this turtle shell, I wanted to paint it, you know, I wanted to do that and she said, you can't keep it. She told me, you have to send it back on its journey; it just came to tell you that you're supposed to have that turtle bundle from your mom, and so I had to go and put it back. I had to feed it, put out green cloth with tobacco for that turtle shell and put it back where I'd found it. That's what I did and oh, I didn't want to do it, but I did it anyway. I did it anyway and then it was just like a release, eh. It was a release of all of that and a, a letting go. Yeah, instead of holding on to that and my mom's come a few times now, she's come back a few times to come and see me, come to visit.

For Star Dancer Woman, finding meaning requires her to let go, but she finds a sense of freedom in doing so. She maintains her relationship and connection with her mother's spirit through ceremonies and dreams that lessen the feelings of loss. Through her connection to her mother's spirit she finds meaning and purpose in the gifts she receives.

The stories share how our relationships and connections to our loved ones remain long after they've passed from this world into the next. For She Who Moves the Water finding meaning and healing through dreams, confirms and validates her calling to work with Aboriginal people:

I felt that in a way he gave me that gift of the water and I just felt really connected to him. It's almost like through him I was given that gift; I was given that calling to work with people, to help people in their healing, because they say the body's what, sixty

percent water. You know, recently I connected the two, just almost aligned his loss, my spirit name and what I am to do, how I am to live my life. That's why I accepted his loss, because I felt like he gave me that gift, he gave me that gift of water and to work with people in such a sacred manner, so I know he'll always be with me.

Just as in the story above, for Cloud Dancer, finding meaning also comes in the form of a dream:

I dreamt one day that I was sitting at a table, I was sitting with some grandmothers at this table and we were going to be eating, we were waiting for the food, and these three grandmothers were sitting there. They were huddled around; they were talking and looking right at me. They were talking quietly amongst themselves and then they stood, they were laughing and I was wondering what's wrong, was it something on my face, but they came and sat and they said to me, we're going to, we're recognizing you as a healer. I panicked right away, I was like, and I'm not a healer, right away. I'm not a healer, I know what the medicines are, but I don't do the ceremonies and this panic came over me. They were very calm and they said in their very reassuring way, no, not a healer with medicines but a healer with words (sniffs). I told my elder afterwards, I phoned up an elder and I shared this with her, she was very calm like the other grandmothers in my dream, and she told me that she always knew that I was. She told me different things throughout our time that we've spent together, how I've shared, you know, basically counselled people with my words and I never thought of it that way. That's the first time there was a connection made with that, and I was taken aback, totally stunned at the fact that people recognized this in me and I don't even recognize it in myself until I'm told.

Working with people or service to others resonates throughout the stories of the seven women in this study. In this respect finding meaning involves walking with others on their healing journey.

Before this can occur however, the women all share the importance of addressing their own healing needs. Lone Eagle Woman relates that finding meaning in her life came through her own healing, spirituality, and forgiveness:

I never came looking for this kind of work; it was a sense of calling that came to me. In all these years, in my whole entire life, I've been running away from it, because I felt like I'm not good enough, I'm such a broken person, why would you want somebody that's been molested and gone through alcoholism. Why would you want me to your servant, to be walking [with] people because my belief was that you need to be perfect? People must be perfect to be working in this kind of work, but that was

all my own internal belief, my own insecurities and my self-confidence. It was the belief I was not good enough to be present in anyone else's life at all.

I smudge because sage is such a cleansing feeling. I need to cleanse myself in a sage ceremony or at home, and there's nothing wrong with praying by myself either. You hear people say you can't have both, you can't walk with religion and you can't walk in a traditional way and it's like, yes I can, because I'm learning how.

I don't just need to be open to that person's pain because that's first and foremost, what I'm sitting with is other people's pain and ensuring that their comfortable enough to share a piece of their story with me that they've never told anybody, and let them cry. I am privileged to hear pieces of people's stories that come out as we've smudged, because that's what smudging does, right, cleanses so I'm sitting in a sacred space and I'm allowing that person to share their bit of story that they've never ever told anybody. I let them cry because that's what it is, it opens up the pain so they start to weep, then they realize, holy mackerel, I've been carrying that around for years.

I'm witness to that, I'm privileged to be in that area, I don't do that on my own though. It's not me. I'm here in my human form, this is who they see, this is who I'm reflecting, but it's through the grace of God always, it's through the grace of the Creator. He is always with me because I always ask him to be with me when I'm working with people because I cannot do this kind of work on my own. I don't think anybody can.

For Lone Eagle Woman, accepting her purpose in life did not come easy. Through her own healing she is able to find meaning in her work, as an extension of her relationship and connection to God/Creator. In her work, listening to other people's pain is a powerful healing tool; just as being able to share a piece of one's own story with others is healing.

Finding meaning for Blue Sky Woman is connected to her grief and healing following the death of her son:

Most of the time, I don't talk about it because I'm still going through it. For me, it's going to take awhile yet, but I figure that if I keep talking about it to other people, with the youth or parents, young parents that have lost their loved ones, maybe I could talk with them in a sharing circle about how I felt and maybe I could get over my grief that way, too.

For her, the desire to talk to others who have lost a loved one and help them through their grief is seen as a way to help her to heal from her own grief.

The stories all reveal that healing is connected to one's journey to find meaning. As Evaluardjuk shares, she ultimately found meaning through a combination of her own healing, spirituality and forgiveness towards her mother:

When I'm within spirituality, I do less of those negative things. I think I become more harmonized with my surroundings. I feel more acceptance the way things are rather than either trying to fix them or try to be part of the solution, you know, letting things be because I know I can't do it, yeah, basically a lot more acceptance. You know, I would stay this way had I not written that letter and talked to my mom and the Creator about it. So yeah, there are definitely different forms of letting go, and understanding what happens when you let go helps a lot, makes it easier to let it go because it can become very heavy and weigh you down. So that's part of my understanding. I think understanding death is part of our living, is another way to let go. We always see it as a negative part of our lives, death, even though to the person that is going, I think it's very peaceful, because that's what I saw in my dad, it was very peaceful for him.

For Evaluardjuk, finding meaning came through the process of letting go of the negativity and anger she'd carried for so long. Through her own healing, she describes being able to feel acceptance for those things in her life for which she has no control, which in turn, affords her a sense of freedom. She comments that "when I'm within spirituality, I do less of those negative things." This is a very powerful statement, as it speaks to her ability to focus less on understanding the 'why' of life, but rather, to place trust in her relationship with Creator, the world around her, and just be in harmony.

In summary, this chapter presented condensed versions of the stories shared by the seven Indigenous women who participated in this research. Embedded within their stories of loss and grief were five recurring themes: 1) dreams; 2) honouring memory; 3) healing; 4) making space; 5) meaning, which were presented along with excerpts from their stories. Three central themes were identified and were present throughout: 1) we are not alone; 2)

connection; 3) relationships. The themes and central themes arose from my own subjective understanding, and will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

Chapter Five: A Discussion of Themes

In this chapter I provide a discussion of the five recurring themes and three central themes as identified in the previous chapter in relation to the literature review, more specifically, as they pertain to Indigenous Worldviews (coming to see), Indigenous Knowledge (coming to know), and Indigenous Spirituality (coming to be). In keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm, I present a brief conversation on the effects of colonization that appeared throughout the life stories of the seven Indigenous women who participated in this research project. These effects were the catalyst for their healing and spiritual development, which then enabled them to finding meaning following the death of a loved one. Excerpts of the stories are used as a means to tie the themes together with the literature.

Coming to See, Coming to Know, and Coming to Be

The literature speaks of ways of knowing, ways of being and ways of doing (Martins, 2003). The reality is that there may be Indigenous women who, for whatever reason, may not fully understand the meanings of these three phrases. Through the stories shared, I've come to understand that an Indigenous worldview is ever evolving, and for the most part, an unconscious act. Just as how the Indigenous women in this study, myself included, view their healing journey as ongoing, so too, is learning to see the world through what (Baskin, 2011) refers to as an "Indigenous lens" (p. 47) or as I propose, *coming to see*.

As an Indigenous women, I note that how we see the world is heavily influenced by many external experiences, which we may internalize as truth, therefore, part of our healing journey is learning to identify and filter the negative truths that prevent us from moving

forward and finding meaning. Baskin (2011) writes, “Indigenous worldviews incorporate ways of turning inward for the purpose of finding meanings through, for example, prayer, fasting, dream interpretation, ceremonies, and silence,” (p. 58) which facilitate healing. It is through turning inward, or introspection that we learn about ourselves, others, and the world around us.

Indigenous knowledge or *coming to know* occurs through our observations, and lived experiences with the world around us. Knowledge is created from both our external and internal experiences, and is therefore shaped by our worldview. The more we *come to see* the world through an “Indigenous lens” (Baskin, 2011, p. 47), the more we *come to know* about our relationships and connections to the physical and spiritual world. Just as an Indigenous worldview is aligned with introspection, so too is knowledge creation through fasting, dreams, cultural teachings, ceremonies, rituals, our connections to Mother Earth, the Creator and the spirit world. Indigenous knowledge formed from an Indigenous worldview is therefore a spiritual experience and according to Ermine (1999) coming to know, just as coming to see, is an ongoing, ever evolving process.

Indigenous spirituality or *coming to be*, also speaks to our relationships and connections with self, family, community, nation, Mother Earth and all its inhabitants, the spirit world and Creator. Indigenous scholars have written extensively on the relationality and interconnectedness of Indigenous spirituality, (Absolon, 2004, 2009, 2010, 2011; Aluli Meyer, 2008; Anderson, 2000, 2011; Archibald, 2008; Baskin 2005, 2009, 2011; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cajete; 2000; Cardinal, 2001; Cohen, 2010; Deloria; 1999; Ermine, 1999; Hart, 2002, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010; Kovach, 2006, 2009, 2010; Little Bear, 2000; Wilson, 2001, 2008; Wilson, 2001). Indigenous spirituality is holistic, honours our relationships,

strengthens and maintains our connections, and facilitates healing. In reflecting on the stories shared by the seven Indigenous women who participated in this research, connection was a recurring element of their spirituality. What is common to the stories throughout this thesis is that spirituality is an integral part of their being as Indigenous women. Each woman's spirituality is comprised of values and beliefs, shaped through life experiences, relationships and connections. Spirituality is so important to each of the seven women's lives that Lone Eagle Woman and White Buffalo Woman made reference to the question, what do people do who don't have spirituality?

Just as with an Indigenous worldview and knowledge, spirituality is formed through introspection. White Buffalo Woman and Star Dancer Woman relate how they sit on the land to find healing and connect to the spirits of loved ones passed. Their words suggest that honest self-examination of values, beliefs, judgments and intentions is also necessary for one to connect with the spirit that exists inside all of us. It requires us to focus on internal rather than external forces through teachings, ceremonies, rituals, fasting, sitting quietly on the land, dreams, prayer or *making space* for any action which supports inward reflection and connection. This is echoed by Sterling-Collins (2009) who writes:

We each need to connect to our spirituality in whatever way works. Some may find it through organized religion, others may seek a connection to the mother earth and all living things, some may meditate, and there are many other forms of spiritual empowerment. (p.80)

It appears that how we connect to our spirituality is not as important as making a connection to our spirituality, as it has a profound impact on our lives.

One of the storytellers Evaluardjuk, shares that when connected to her spirit or spirituality, her actions and behaviours towards others are caring and supportive, and when

disconnected from spirit, her feelings and conduct towards self and others reflect the same. Spirituality therefore, strengthens our relationships and connections with self, the world around us, cosmos and spirit world, thus the belief that *we are never alone* becomes our truth, either "...through dreams, visions and the simple acknowledgement that there are spirits all around us all the time" according to Anderson (2000, p. 134).

Just as with spirituality, the significance of language appears throughout the literature review, and in the writings of Indigenous scholars (Anderson, 2000; Archibald, 2008; Armstrong, 1997, 2006; Battiste & Henderson, 2000; Cardinal, 2001; Little Bear, 2000; Porter, 1996; Thompson, 2008; Wilson; 2008). As the literature reflects, no one would dispute that our languages are in serious danger of vanishing; however the focus on knowing one's tribal language may be somewhat unsettling for some Indigenous women, as there are many, many of us who cannot speak our own language. Throughout the stories in this study, the storytellers make reference to language and their ability to speak or understand their own language in varying degrees. Some of the women spoke of drumming and singing songs in the sweat lodge, while others spoke of being able to understand their language through their parents and grandparents speaking the language to them, but not being able to speak it fluently themselves. Blue Sky Woman speaks to the importance of her language and the teachings as being what helps her to heal. Evaluardjuk and Blue Sky Woman continue to speak their language despite having attended residential school, and one storyteller, Cloud Dancer shares that she is learning to speak Michif through language lessons.

Knowing or learning to speak their own language figures prominently in the stories of their healing journeys, as it provides the missing piece of the puzzle of who they are as Indigenous women, whether Métis, Anishinaabe, Cree, Inuit or Dakota, and strengthens their

bonds to family, community, nation, ancestors, Mother Earth and Creator. It facilitates the transfer of teachings and meanings to ceremonies, songs and the significance of space. In the interim, those who do not speak their own language are content to borrow the language of other nations, whether it is through songs, prayers, spirit names or stories. Finding their voices in the company of others is the first important step in a long journey, and as I learned while on my own healing journey, *'we heal alone, together.'*

Loss, grief and how we find meaning is a spiritual journey, but as the stories of the Indigenous women in this thesis reveal, healing after the death of a loved one often involves revisiting unresolved pain and finding answers to unanswered questions. The journey is often lengthy and complex, requiring support and understanding, which may be difficult if those around us are experiencing the same loss. Identifying a safe environment and trusting relationships is paramount to negotiating the pain and grief associated with loss or healing.

As one of the criteria for women to participate in this study, they must acknowledge being on their healing journey. This is meant to be a safety measure designed to protect the storytellers from any emotional pain that may resurface, as their stories include aspects of their healing from past traumas and how their journeys to wholeness began. During the time the seven storytellers shared their life stories with me, it became evident that colonization affects them all in various ways, despite the fact that the storytellers range in age from their thirties to their seventies, they come from different geographical locations, and their life experiences are unique to each of them. Their stories possess common characteristics and come together in a number of ways, most notably, in how colonization did, and continues to, affect their lives. For example, two of the storytellers attended residential schools, three storytellers believe there is a history of residential school attendance in their families, while

two storytellers suspect there is residential school effects, but haven't completed any research. Though the impacts of residential schools on those who attended, and the intergenerational impacts have been written about and researched extensively, it is beyond the scope of this work to discuss them in any detail other than to relate to them as they appear in the stories of the women who participated in this study. The same is true for the effects of the 60's scoop or involvement in the child welfare system on the lives of the storytellers. Two storytellers share how they were affected by colonization as children, having been removed from their families and placed in foster care, while another storyteller made reference to the 60's scoop as a possible reason why her parents prevented her from visiting a reserve with her school friend.

All seven storytellers mention experiencing some form of abuse, whether alcohol, drug, physical, sexual and/or emotional, as well as, exposure to family violence at some point in their lives. The women relate stories of teen pregnancies, and admissions of feeling shame about being an Indigenous woman, beliefs that the abuse in their lives was somehow deserved, and as one woman shares, maybe she was a "dirty squaw" and that's all she was good for. Some spoke of feeling isolated, unlike and alienated from family members through their attendance at residential school, changes to family dynamics or separation due to involvement with the child welfare system. The stories reveal that trauma is a common experience in the lives of the women who participated in this study, and is not uncommon, as Baskin (2009) notes:

Traumas that have been faced by generations of Indigenous peoples are now part of our collective memory. These painful and destructive memories, passed from one generation to the next, perpetuates the cycle of unhealthy interactions and relationships with family members, community members and the self – struggles that need to be addressed in the whole. The effects of disenfranchised grief (named as anger, guilt and helplessness) have created shame within Indigenous people. This shame of their own

culture and community has spurred internalized racism and hatred that must be worked through even before the guilt and grief. (p. 135)

Unfortunately, the stories shared of the seven Indigenous women are not exclusive to them. Many other Indigenous women and men share similar experiences, myself included. If these past traumas are not dealt with, one consequence may be that they interfere with our ability to grieve, and find meaning following the loss of a loved one in the present.

As I listened to the women share their stories, I was struck by how similar their accounts were, while at the same time, I was keenly aware that all the women were raised in different towns, cities or Indigenous communities, born at different times, and were from different cultural backgrounds. They do however, share three important features, they are all Indigenous; they are all women, and colonization has shaped all their lives.

Colonization

The intent of this study is not to focus on the negative effects of colonization, which have been widely documented. I would be negligent however, as an Indigenous researcher and Indigenous woman if I didn't include a conversation on colonization. I begin with a brief review of colonization, and its effects on Indigenous women. According to Morrisette, McKenzie, and Morrisette, 1993 (as cited in Baskin, 2011), colonization encompasses:

...cultural dimensions which involve efforts to achieve normative control over a minority group or culture. [With Indigenous peoples] these efforts included: displacement of traditional forms of governance with representative democracy and an authoritarian model of leadership; the devaluation of traditional spirituality, knowledge, and practices through the actions of missionaries, the residential school system, the health system, and the child welfare system; and the imposition of artificial legal distinctions among Indigenous peoples. (p. 3)

Indigenous peoples' worldview, knowledge transmission, cultural and spiritual beliefs are intrinsically tied to a specific land base where language, teachings, ceremonies, stories, songs

and personal responsibilities arise. It is the life blood of the people and is where one's identity is formed and validated. This is where the lasting effects of colonization continue to be felt today.

Nowhere has the impacts of colonization been more destructive than in the lives of Indigenous women. Indigenous women have always carried great spiritual responsibilities for which they were admired and respected. Anderson (2000) explains that, "Native women's roles in traditional spiritual practices, ceremonies and beliefs demonstrate that native women held positions of esteem in their societies" (p. 71). Indigenous women were healers, midwives, and were considered to carry great powers due to their ability to bring forth new life.

Historically, Indigenous women maintained a central role in their communities, and whether in childbirth or death, were recognized for their knowledge and leadership abilities, as well as their spirituality. It was common for the older women in the community to come and stay with a family and take care of the person dying, to prepare the body for burial after death, and provide direction to the men preparing the grave (Anderson, 2011). As the effects of colonization began to be realized Indigenous women's traditional roles were eroded, and as a result, Baskin (2009) writes, "...many traditions around death and dying have been taken away through colonization, leaving our people without culturally appropriate ways to grieve and recover" (p. 135). This has left some without the knowledge of how to attend to their loved one in a traditional manner after they've passed away, which opens the door to guilt and shame. One storyteller speaks to this in her story of the loss of her son. The spiritual losses experienced by Indigenous women resulting from the effects of colonization cannot be understated.

Stories of Colonization

All seven storytellers share experiences of trauma in their stories. It is their story within a story; it is the place to begin their story, to situate their life within their stories of trauma, their stories of healing and re-claiming their place in the world.

Blue Sky Woman, a residential school attendee, shares how her past experiences of colonization continue to affect her life today:

We weren't taught how to, how to do the grieving when you lose a loved one, very close relative, but I do respect people that pass on and I pray really hard for the families. I ask the Creator to help them and for myself, too and for everyone in that's in the building that are praying for him or her because I know, I don't know how to express it. I can't, I'm not verbally, uh, talkative to talk with somebody in a crowd. I'm a quiet person that I could just talk one on one to a person, you know, to somebody that I really trust that I could talk with, but I keep everything to myself. I'm dealing with the anger, through the frustration of not knowing how to go past that, sometimes it's very confusing for me trying to deal, walk through it and I just quit. I quit. I don't think about it, I don't do it, I just blank it out, out of my mind, then again it comes back and then I try it again.

Blue Sky Woman's story is a poignant reminder of the pain many of our people who attended residential school continue to carry with them, and speaks to how their experiences affects their ability to grieve. Her story is an illustration of why it's not possible for some Indigenous people to 'just get over it.'

Following the death of her son, Blue Sky Woman speaks of wanting to 'do something' as she shares that she didn't do it the right [traditional] way when he died. She shares that she doesn't know what to do, and is reluctant to ask. Through her story above, she relates that 'we weren't taught how to grieve' in residential school. Blue Sky Woman shares that she continues to feel the effects of being at residential school:

It's more, mainly (sighs) going through the tough, the tough, uh, feelings of, uh, uh, I guess maybe rejection. Like I say the intimidation, being afraid to speak your thoughts, your feelings, ashamed of being, of being, uh, who you are because, uh. (sighs) I

remember us growing up and kids used to make fun of you just because you had a short hair cut or, you know, very, very hurtful feelings they'll say to you that, that's still in with me and I can't deal with that. I feel like it's still there in, I don't want to talk about it. There's a lot of things that I think it has to do with, uh, I keep everything to myself, which is not so good, but if I blank it out, then, then I'm okay for awhile. I try to spiritually deal with it because I'm still going through that, but I'm trying really hard.

Her reluctance to speak, feelings of shame, intimidation and pain are never far away from her thoughts, as her story reveals. Blue Sky Woman's story reflects the words of Absolon who writes, "Sometimes people are reluctant to share what they know or think. This is not just an Indigenous cultural characteristic of being shy. Some people have internalized fear and lack self confidence in expressing what they think or feel and hold back their views, ideas and feelings" (p. 179).

She goes on to share that she likes to smudge, as a means to cleanse her mind, but she encounters challenges because the building she lives in won't allow her to smudge:

I really believe my Dakota language, the teachings they give us that I've learned from the Sundance and the sweats, my whole heart is in it. Praying, the prayers that I pray, I know that they're answered, when I need the feeling, need to go and sweat, I do that although I can't barely get around, but I still do it. And I feel very, very good when I come out of the sweat (sniffs). But living here, I like to smudge, but where I'm living now, I can't do that. The people don't understand so when I go to somebody's place or I go to the coffee club, they smudge and I just smudge for maybe about five minutes because I think [of] the times I've lost smudging that I'll take all that in, you know, to make me feel good (chuckles). To purify myself and to feel, you know, anyway that's how I'm dealing with things right now. I'm still struggling through it, but like I say, once I go through the sweat, I feel good for a couple of weeks and then I go again. Once summer comes, we sweat every week so I'm looking towards that because that really helps me, helps me in every way in my life.

Ceremony and prayers are a way of life for Blue Sky Woman, and her inability to smudge in her home because of 'no smoking' regulations is an example of how colonization continues to affect her life today, although it may not be viewed as such by some.

As previously mentioned, some of the stories reveal that as children, they witnessed their parent's abuse of alcohol, and subsequent family violence before being placed into foster care. McKenzie and Morrissette (2003) suggest this may be attributed to colonialism, which resulted in the "internalized perceptions of inferiority, leading to self-defeating responses such as alcoholism, violence, and abuse" (p. 257). Star Dancer Woman speaks to how she survived at home, and protected her brothers as a child before being placed in foster care:

When I was a little girl, I grew up with a lot of addiction in my family. My mom and dad were both addicted to alcohol and there was a lot of drinking, violence in my family so I witnessed that, a lot of that when I was a little girl. I used to take my brothers in the bedroom and I would lock the door, like, I'd stick knives in the door to lock people out so my brothers and I were safe in my bedroom. And what I used to do is, I would lay on my bed and my brothers would be sleeping or whatever and I'd be able to look out the window and I could see the stars, sometimes the northern lights, too. I could see northern lights from my window; I used to think that was my safe place. I used to think that I would go to the stars. I would take my brothers on my mattress, I would be out there, I would be amongst the stars and I would drown out all the noise and all the partying that were going on, so that was my escape, my place where I felt safe and I could keep my brothers safe there, too.

Even as a child, her story speaks to her connection to the cosmos, and the safety and security she experienced. I've been told through cultural teachings that children are born innocent and pure, and as a result, they are more in tune with the world around them. Star Dancer Woman's story relates to this teaching in that she sought a connection that would provide her with a sense of security.

Our Indigenous worldviews, knowledge and spirituality all speak to the relationship we have to the earth, the spirit world, and the cosmos or universe. In another story, Star Dancer Woman shares the significance of this story as it relates to her healing journey.

Moving Beyond Trauma: Healing Stories

The women all share that their healing journeys began when they reached a point in their lives where they could no longer ignore their pain, from a desire to be happy or because they experienced a turning point in their lives. Their stories speak of how some turned to their culture for healing after initially accessing psychiatric or counselling services through non-Indigenous agencies; others attended Alcoholics Anonymous, while some sought out cultural teachers and participated in ceremonies or turned to their Christian faith. Where or how they began their healing is not as important as their *making space* for whatever helped them in that moment in time, in their lives, that moved them to begin their healing journey. The storyteller's all share similar experiences in which they turn traumatic incidents into positive, healing experiences, in essence, re-writing their histories and life stories (Absolon, 2010). All the women in this study achieved this by "...enacting healing methods based on Indigenous worldviews, epistemologies and theories of practice" (Hart & Sinclair, 2009, p. 236) at some point in their lives. Their healing is of itself, a testament to their strength and resilience, although not all the women view themselves as being strong.

Another commonality to all their stories is how at some point along their journey, they made the decision to reach out to their Indigenous roots. Through education, some of the women discovered the truth about how colonization affected their ancestors in the past and how the intergenerational impacts continue to plague Indigenous people today. For most, it was the first time they'd heard the reality behind residential schools, the 60's scoop, the Indian Act, and learning of the atrocities directed at Indigenous people. This knowledge caused a great deal of additional pain and anger however, along with the pain came understanding, with understanding came forgiveness, and with forgiveness came freedom. Freedom came in the

form of being released from the shame, guilt and beliefs that one deserved to be treated badly. The realization that events in history happened to Indigenous people rather than because of Indigenous people removed the stigma and blame, and assigned it where it belongs.

Healing is a recurring topic that appears throughout the stories of the storytellers, and is seen as the impetus of their spiritual development. In her previous story, *Star Dancer Woman* reveals a painful memory from her childhood. Through her life story, she shares how she turns a painful experience from her childhood, into one of healing, as an Indigenous woman:

I began my healing journey in 1989. I was going through a really, really hard time in my life, I was depressed a lot, I was just always in a lot of emotional pain. Then I went to see some of the elders on my reserve and there was one lady in particular that I went to see. I would go talk to her and ask her what I could do about certain things and she would always tell me, you have the answers inside of you, she'd say. That used to kind of make me mad because I wanted her to tell me what to do. I wanted her to tell me, you need to do this or you need to do that, but she would never do that. She'd just listen and she'd tell me that I needed to go inside and find those answers over time. She talked to me about maybe getting my spirit name. So there was a man that came to the reserve and he was doing ceremonies and giving spirit names and that's when a lot of things started to open up. We started to realize our ways were starting to come back, talking about our way of life that we had before colonization and residential school. ... There was still a lot of people in the community who said that was bad medicine, that's evil. But I went to see that elder anyway, I wanted to get my spirit name. I was told to take him a gift and some tobacco and I went and talked to him and he said he would give me my spirit name. I didn't really tell him the story or anything, but I was really surprised when we came to do the ceremony for him to give me my name. I came to the place where we were going to hold the ceremony, there was lots of people there and I said, oh, there's lots of people going to get their name. He said, no, these people are here to support you. You know, I felt really important and he took me into the place where we were having the ceremony and there's two elder ladies that sat on each side of me... He was talking Ojibway and I couldn't understand him so one of the ladies was interpreting for me and she said, you have a beautiful name, and I said, well, what is it and she said, he called you *Star Dancer Woman*. ... I started to cry because I understood who I was and I understood why I got that name. I knew right away and that's what [the story above] came to me... because I still yet, I still use the stars to feel safe.

Through her story, Star Dancer Woman is able to re-story her past trauma into a healing experience that transforms her pain and fear into something meaningful, so that she is able to apply it to her present, thereby moving her towards her future of walking with others on their healing journey. She attributes her healing and her spirituality to re-claiming her identity as an Indigenous woman, and it is through this that she is able to negotiate the journey of loss, grief and finding meaning following the death of her mother.

I believe it's important to share the stories of healing that extend beyond the research question in this study, because it is through their healing that their life stories changed and the spirituality of the seven Indigenous women in the project evolved. Their healing from past trauma is what facilitates their ability to find meaning following the loss of a loved one today. Absolon (2009) refers to this as "re-storying our histories and ourselves" (p. 182). By engaging in this process, the storytellers restore healing and harmony to their lives. In the course of their healing, they come to see the world through their own Indigenous eyes, knowing becomes spiritual, made possible through their relationships and connections to the world around them, Creator, and the spirit world. As Sterling-Collins (2009) suggests:

...in order to achieve holistic balance, one requires harmony in the quadrants of the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual...we must talk about spirituality and the dimensions of it that are often more difficult to explain. Many of us could benefit from expanding our own thinking and belief systems about holistic balance and harmony and considering the relevance and importance of spirituality. (p. 80)

For the women in this study, coming to see, coming to know and coming to be occurs simultaneously throughout their healing journey; shared in their own words, in their own time, and in their own ways.

Indigenous Spirituality

The storytellers who participated in this research project all spoke of spirituality as being a central energy in their life. For them, spirituality includes every element in their lives, how they view the world, interact in relationships, maintain connections to others, create knowledge, heal, and find meaning in their lives. As with all other aspects of our lives, spirituality cannot be viewed separately, as Kolezar-Green, 2008 (as cited in Baskin, 2011) writes:

...We can't separate the spiritual from any other aspects. Mentally taking the time to speak in a good way is an example of how the spiritual influences the mind...Everything in one's body knows spirit. Spirituality is difficult to put into words. It's difficult to articulate on its own, to try and talk about it separate from everything else when it isn't. This is an artificial way to discuss it. Spirituality isn't just about attending ceremonies; it's about how we walk in the world, what we believe, how we connect, how we practice our beliefs. ...Spirituality isn't stagnant. The ways in which we celebrate and acknowledge our existence and experiences change as we advance as species. (pp. 135-136)

My objective for completing this study is to present the positive influence of spirituality on the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. In light of this, a discussion of the influence of spirituality on the lives of the Indigenous women who shared their life stories with me is warranted.

Just as with Indigenous worldviews and knowledge creation, connection to the land is central to spiritual beliefs, and has been described as the lifeblood of the nation. Many nations and tribes identify traditional territories or lands as being where they as a people were created and where they have lived since time immemorial. Stories passed down from one generation to another explain how land is a gift from Creator; that each person carries a responsibility to care for, and protect the land and its inhabitants for future generations. Just as significant, Battiste and Henderson (2000) writes that, "Indigenous peoples construct their teachings

around the belief that at certain places there is a sacred ambiance that can and does empower human consciousness and spirituality” (p. 67).

Indigenous spirituality is relational, land-based, and “recognizes that all life has spirit and is sacred” (Absolon, 2010, p. 78). Spirituality is an integral part of who we are as Indigenous people, which includes our past, present and future. Even though there are many variations between Indigenous peoples’ ceremonies, songs, healing rituals, and spiritual beliefs, there remain a number of similarities that must be acknowledged. Baskin (2011) notes that:

...spirituality embodies an interconnectedness and interrelationship with all life. Everyone and everything (both “animate” and “inanimate”) are seen as equal and interdependent, part of the great whole and as having spirit. This view permeates the entire Indigenous vision of life, land, and the universe. (p. 135)

As I listened to the stories shared during our time together, and later, as I read and reread the transcripts, it became clear that there were similarities ascribed to the meaning of spirituality by the storytellers. Each storyteller shares ideas of how their spirituality came to be over time. Whether it be through the observation of family or community members, connections and relationships with Elders or spiritual advisors who share their teachings, through their attendance at, or participation in ceremonies, church, and through their own healing. Each woman spoke of feeling a connection to ‘something’, whether it is land or Mother Earth, God or Creator, ancestors, spirit world, or grandmothers and grandfathers. Van Winkle, 2000 (as cited in Kelly & Minty, 2007) writes that the, “Diversity of beliefs might vary between and within aboriginal communities, owing to differences of “traditional, acculturated or religious perspectives” (p. 1460). Through their stories, the storytellers relate the sacredness of their relationships to family, extended family, community, the land and its inhabitants, the spirit world, and Creator.

Most importantly, they speak of their ongoing connection and relationships with loved ones who have passed. Indigenous perspectives and beliefs around death are as diverse as the nations from which they arise, but in broad terms, death is seen not as the end, but rather the completion of one life cycle and the beginning of another where one is reunited with loved ones (Hotson, Macdonald, & Martin, 2004). It is through their stories of connection and relationships to this world, and the spirit world that the belief, ‘we are never alone’ emerges. As Anderson (2000) notes, “many women will talk about the guidance they receive from their ancestors through their dreams...Through dreams and other experiences, many women experience connection to ancestral spirits” (p. 135).

For She Who Moves the Water, the spiritual bond she feels to the land and all living things are an extension of her relationship with her grandparents that remains unbroken, even though her grandparents have passed on:

My grandpa, my grandma, they lived their life really close to the earth. They lived their life that way so they ate off the land, they trapped from the land and that’s why I was close, probably that’s what helped me really, to that sense of connections, sense of belonging, you know to nature, animals.

She goes on to explain how her spiritual sense of belonging and connection extends beyond her sense of identity, to how she views the world, and how she governs her actions as a Métis woman.

Her spiritual connection speaks far beyond our physical connection to the land; it speaks to the very essence of our spiritual selves. She believes this is also true for other Métis people in her community:

We had our old, used to call it a gymnasium, but it was like, the building still stands in our community. It used to be a, like a, I think they did like bingo hall and community events there, but in front of that building, we used to have a, like a cement padding or you know, we could stand on type of thing and it had like a big statue of mother Mary,

a big statue of mother Mary, [it] probably was about five feet tall that statue, nice statue. Like most of the people in our community, our values and our beliefs were, I guess believing what the Christian faith taught about mother Mary and, you know, Jesus and that kind of stuff.

The people were, those people weren't like you know when people talk about religion. Religion today it gets so organized, and whatever that kind of stuff. We pray, you know, when you go to church, but the Métis were different. The Métis, it wasn't for them an organized religion. Sure we went to church, we go on Christmas and just about every Sunday a lot of families went, but their way of life was, for them it was for the spirituality. You could see the way those people were they had such a respect for, uh, you'd see in our behaviours, you couldn't do that, because there was some sort of spiritual thing in it. Everything was just all embedded together or they're just connected to what you do and what you say.

For *She Who Moves the Water*, Métis spirituality embodies the meaning of respect, and is evident through the behaviours and actions of herself and the other members of her community. McKenzie and Morrisette (2003) suggest that, "such beliefs reflect a spiritual tradition...to maintain harmony and balance between all living things and to ensure that the knowledge...is transmitted to the next generation...to guide behaviours to ensure continued survival" (p. 259). For her, connection to others is taken literally; therefore one must govern themselves accordingly.

She goes on to say that her spirituality as an integral part of who she is, and as such, coping with loss and grief becomes a spiritual experience:

When I think about loss and grief its part of life and it wasn't firmly taught to us to think you're going to lose somebody. It wasn't from explicit things they said, it was just through their actions and what we had seen. I think that's how I kind of learned to deal with stuff, with spirituality, because prayer was a daily thing for us. We weren't told in an adverse way, pray for ten minutes; it wasn't like that we were, in a good way, instructed about prayer. That's what my life became, it was a daily thing and I still use prayer, that's how I coped. Praying and just being quiet to help me, to help me cope, deal with the feelings. I think I've been fortunate, I grew up in a Métis community and I lived here first of my eighteen, nineteen years of life, and I think that it set the stage for later in life. Our spirituality, I think that's what really grounded us. We just kind of knew who we were, who we were as Métis people. You know, even when I talk to my mom, even though I've said some things that were, they're really

strong in their beliefs and their values. There are a lot of those things, probably it helped me, you know, in my grieving.

She maintains that while some Indigenous people and communities hold fast to their traditional beliefs and practices around death, grief, and bereavement rituals; others may utilize a combination of traditional and Christian beliefs to facilitate the grief process. For She Who Moves the Water spirituality is not seen in terms of either/or in her own life or within her Métis community, rather spirituality is a way of being and doing.

She relates that for her, healing takes place through introspection, or as she refers to as “just being quiet” in an effort to make sense or find meaning. It is through this knowledge creation that understanding occurs. The search for knowledge may take place in many forms, and may be a necessary step in our spiritual development.

White Buffalo Woman describes how her family turned to another nation when they first embarked upon their spiritual journey:

Ah, bonjour, I'm from the Turtle Clan. What is spirituality to me? Growing up with a traditional background; at first we had reached out to the Dakota people and they helped us out for awhile. It was an Dakota Elder who had given me my first spirit name, and I remember being so proud, I was in grade three and being so proud of that name and that it was something, that it was mine. I think that's where my spiritual being started awaking more and being proud of who I was. We spent time with the Elder and her family and then it came to a point though that she said we can only walk with you so far, because your own people, Anishinaabe have your own beautiful teachings and because of that language, we can only take you so far, so go be with your people now, find your teachers.

White Buffalo Woman expresses that her time spent with the Dakota people is where her identity and sense of pride, as an Indigenous woman began to develop. As she spoke, her gratitude is evident for having had the privilege of sitting with the Elder and her family.

Anderson (2000) writes that it's not uncommon to borrow teachings from another nation, and as White Buffalo Woman shares this serves to:

...demonstrate the importance of having traditions that feel like they belong to us even if they are borrowed. Many women start out on their learning journey by participating in ceremonies that do not come from their particular nation. In some cases, this connects them to spiritual ways of their own ancestors. (p. 134)

She goes on to relate how her spiritual self became stronger as she and her family immersed themselves in the teachings and ceremonies of their own Anishinaabe people. It was at this time that spiritual knowledge came to her in many forms, including dreams:

I was fortunate to have parents that worked together, walked together in their own spirituality, their walk, and their traditions. I always knew when I was growing up; I always knew I had my background of who I was as an Anishinaabe Kwe. My parents told me that you'll always have your ceremonies, your background and this way of life. It was a place in my life where that spirituality became stronger again, through dreams even; through dreams of standing on a mountaintop with my uncle who's my dad's teacher, and an eagle coming to us, a big flying eagle to us and telling me that you don't have to be angry anymore. For me that was such a big teaching in itself, the sacredness of that messenger, messenger of the eagle that came to me and gave me that sacred message.

She goes on to say that for her, learning is ongoing and an important part of her spirituality, as it is through knowledge creation that she maintains her connection to loved ones who have passed on, and sustains her relationships with the world around her.

For White Buffalo Woman, it is her spirituality that enables her to find meaning after the death of a loved one:

So to this day I try to continue taking whatever teachings I can, whether it's in my dreams, whether it's anything that happens during the daytime because to me, spirituality is my connection with everything around me, with people, with animals, with the medicines that we use, the spirit that's in the medicines and asking that spirit for guidance, for help and direction. For me, that's what helped me work through a lot of grief and loss, whether it was with my grandmother, who passed away in 2001 and already having that understanding of that sacred place they go to, that they won't hurt anymore, they'll go over there and they do that sacred work they were meant to do as Anishinaabe people, the ceremonies will continue over there. For me having that understanding, that belief, that faith that they're over there, that helps me to believe that we are going to be okay while we're here. Knowing that sure, maybe I did lose a loved one, but I'm never really alone. I will always have the grandfathers, grandmothers and Creator with me and I know that I could reach out to them whenever

I need to and not only when I need to, but even to be thankful for each day, to be thankful at the end of each day, the beginning of each day for what I have and what has been put in front of me.

The knowledge that we are never alone, even when someone we love dies, is not only comforting for White Buffalo Woman, but is something that she is thankful for every day. Expressing our gratitude for the gifts we've been given, and for the teachings we've received in our lives may take many forms, depending upon our beliefs, but the one that recurs throughout the stories is prayer.

The storytellers speak of prayer as a means to give thanks, to ask for guidance or direction, and to provide comfort during difficult times. Evaluardjuk shares how she learns to pray from her father, and how the lessons he taught her stay with her, even though he has since passed on:

My dad, he's the one who taught me that you can pray anywhere. You don't need to go to a big fancy church to say your prayers, Creator is everywhere. He told me one time that when he would be out hunting, because sometimes they would be away for a week or two, when we were still living in our traditional land, um, he said prayer was the one that would save him from himself because, you know, his mind would start wandering, especially if there was no game to catch, to bring back. He said lots of times when he said his prayers, he said, "I say my prayers all the time." Not to say that I don't, you know, he said, "I say it all the time, even in my drunkenness I say it." So he has to stay close to his Creator, yeah, he told me that story where he would ask for help and, um, the next day they would get something, you know, caribou or seal, or maybe go fishing, you know, get some fish. Sometimes when the weather is bad up there during white outs or when you can't see nothing, you're stuck in one place and he said sometimes, um, insanity can get to you, right. Insanity can get to you because your mind is playing. He said lots of times prayers helped a lot in those days so yeah, you can pray anywhere, that's what he taught me. I always remember that, um, it just made so much sense, and he said too, one time, um, you know why I go to church? We said no. Well he said, that's where all my friends are, I don't want to be left behind. (laughing) So he would go to church, you know, just to be to be in the same realm with them I guess, yeah, he liked company.

For Evaluardjuk, prayer is an expression of her spirituality that helps her to grieve the death of a loved one, just as the Inuit ceremonies and traditions passed down through generations. For

the members of her community, their spirituality includes making space for both Christian and

Inuit traditions:

When we go to church, there's no spiritual participation like they do in First Nations. There is none of that where I come from, but of course, spirituality is everywhere, no matter how you see it. Yeah, it's everywhere, so he gets that from attending church services and ceremonies like that, but a lot of traditions, like burial traditions are still intact even though to the outside person, they look like your normal, um, religious ceremonies. But to the people, they put their own tradition in it, in all of the services including the language, the feasting and the give-away. Yeah, they have a give-away ceremony after the feast. It's been practised ever since I can remember.

She goes on to say that an important part of finding meaning following the death of a loved, comes in the form of letting go:

I used to hear people say, let it go. I never understood what that meant. I thought when you cared for someone; you keep them with yourself, within you, in your heart always. Today I understand what letting go means. It means to not carry them in a negative way, to myself, but to celebrate their life and if I'm going to share my experience with them, then I have to do it in a positive way instead of always talking about anger, the pain, that either they inflicted upon me or my, or someone close to me, but by talking about what they've accomplished, what I know. So letting go can take different forms at different stages. I know that today because I've experienced it.

Part of letting go is, you know, sometimes when a person is gone you want to keep certain things that belong to them. For me physically, letting that person go sometimes means letting that thing, their belonging go somewhere else and not be in your presence, that's physical letting go. Spiritual letting go is understanding that they have to go to the other side, and I think in my culture, Inuit culture, it means to go to another person, to a baby who is named after the one that have gone, and to accept that baby has your mom's name or your uncle's name or your dad's name, that's them now. Not the one that you remember even though the memory of that person is still with you, but that's that person now. Just saying that or accepting that, that's part of letting go, but always crying and grieving and keeping them in here, to yourself, that's too painful and it keeps you down, it keeps a person down.

In addition to her Inuit culture, Evaluardjuk shares that she participates in Cree ceremonies, which she learned from her adopted father and other Cree Elders, and her stories, reflect the respect she has for the ceremonies.

She relates that it is her spirituality and participation in ceremonies that helps her to grieve the loss of friends and family in a healthy way:

With all of this, for me, the most helpful process has been the spiritual process. Sometimes I need to talk to someone that's good, counselling services, a friend, mentor, confidant, but spiritual ceremonies are the ones that have helped me a lot. I went to a Sundance for four years and uh, uh, it just took me out of myself. It helped me to let go a lot of the issues that I carry from my life and from the loss that I felt. I know for me, um, I've lost friends and through the Sundance ceremony, it has helped me, you know every little bit helps. I lost three friends, my husband and I lost three friends in a very short period of time, and it was during the time when I was Sun dancing, so I offered their colours, offered tobacco and prayed for their families. It was during my dance that it helped me to overcome my losses that way, remember the good times and uh, the gift I had to spend time with these people and to be friends with them, you know. So it, yeah, spiritual help has been one of the most rewarding processes for grieving, for me. Spirituality means to feel the presence of Creator; it's the spirit of the universe, to live it every day and to feel its presence every day.

Spirituality is a way of life, according to Evaluardjuk and the other women in this study. The only difference in the spiritual beliefs of the storytellers is in how they choose to express their spirituality. In all the stories, the women share commonalities such as feeling a connection to something greater than themselves; relationships extend beyond this world into the next, and the belief that we are never alone.

Just as with other storytellers, for Lone Eagle Woman, her spirituality is consist of a combination of her Christian upbringing, and the Indigenous teachings she receives:

I was raised Christian Métis. Both my parents were religious, very religious and we grew up in attending church, so my dad had accumulated a lot of, of iconic items of the church. So, I have this full basket of books and items, these old items, like, where holy water go into and you know, things from churches and I inherited the big bible, like the big family bible, so I have this big huge black bible. I started to see that connection of our spirituality and my dad is a very spiritual person. That's where I gained a lot of my spirituality and beliefs were through my father and what he had in his own upbringing, his own beliefs through that time of growing up in the Christian faith.

The idea of trying to bring two worlds together may seem daunting to some, but Lone Eagle Woman shares that she believes her healing is a result of her dual spirituality, her healing

helps her to find meaning in her life, and enables her to walk with others on their spiritual journeys:

All my life, I've been walking on this fence, even today in the work that I'm doing today, even today, I'm on the fence of Christianity and traditional beliefs. It's a balancing act. [When I was] working at the Aboriginal organization, learning about the Aboriginal spirituality and in a program of recovery, all of a sudden I'm bringing those two worlds together and they actually jived pretty good.

Lone Eagle Woman is at ease in practicing her Christian and traditional beliefs, and the same may be said for Cloud Dancer:

The connection between the Métis culture and the Aboriginal culture, like there's no, it's like a kind of a gray area for me. There's no absolute, like I don't practice, um, I don't Sundance, I don't participate in dances, pow wow's and those types of things, but I do participate in other parts that I feel comfortable with like smudging, attending sharing circle, feasts, pipe ceremonies, and those types of things, but there's a gray area for me. I was very fortunate to discover that, be told and be taught and the teachings given to me by this particular elder. It made my connection with my spirituality much greater, I was able to be comfortable with it and understand everything I wasn't sure about, and I think things that my family don't understand at all and unfortunately won't have the opportunity to experience, that's what really kind of helped me get through my grief, my grieving process, and, uh, surviving the loss of my mother.

For Cloud Dancer, she believes the combination of her Christian and Indigenous spirituality helps her to heal, and find meaning in her life following the death of her mother.

She shares that learning about her Métis heritage, and what it means to be a Métis woman is a positive influence on her life:

I'm more comfortable in blending my spirituality and my Catholic upbringing and knowing my Creator is my God, Jesus. That's who I pray to, they say you can't pray to more than one God and that I'm sinning, so you start to feel bad and guilty, like, you know, a really bad sinner kind of thing. Realistically, what it means is when you blend that together, the Creator is Jesus and Jesus is God. It all revolves around Mother Earth, you know, we've always talked about Mother Earth and this whole connection. When you're confident in all that knowledge and having that experience with everything, knowing how your world works, there's a certain comfort zone in that.

My spirituality has evolved immensely. I feel like I keep going back to feeling confident because there was a time when I just wanted to blend into the wall, I didn't want anybody to notice me or talk to me (chuckles) or anything, but by acknowledging

being Métis and learning about my own culture, my own heritage, even though my family wasn't carrying a flag saying they were Métis and they were, there was no denial, but I don't think that they had an insight or an education as to what that really meant to them. They just assumed that it was just one family to another and they didn't connect it with a culture, traditions or a nation. Before, I just felt there was loss, and I think I always connected it with not knowing my father and him not being in my life, but I know now it had absolutely nothing to do with that, it had more to do with the fact that I didn't know, (sniffs) I was looking, there was more to it and didn't know what it was, I think it was that connection.

As her story reflects, Cloud Dancer speaks to a newfound sense of confidence and comfort in knowing who she is; she relates to feeling a sense of connection in her life that she attributes to her spirituality, and the knowledge about the world around her. These factors, as McKenzie and Morrissette (2003) relate, “seemed to support resilience, and...are associated with well-being” (p. 264).

Lone Eagle Woman also refers to knowledge creation as a spiritual experience that occurs through dreams, and is one way she maintains connections to others, the world around her, the spirit world, and the universe:

Spirituality, how does it help? For me, I think it comes through dreams and feeling that connection. We're connected to the earth here, and I believe we've got this cord that we are actually grounded to this mother earth, but we also have a cord that just, kind of goes right through us, right up, up into that universe, wherever we've come from. When we walk on this earth, I think part of having spirituality is having an understanding of humanity in a way where we have compassion for people. When I feel the spirit is really connected with me, if I'm listening and I'm told something, it's that intuitive feeling. I've learned that I need to release other people's energy. I need to release other people's things from me, so I smudge because sage is such a cleansing feeling. I need to cleanse myself in a sage ceremony or at home, and there's nothing wrong with praying by myself either. You hear people say you can't have both, you can't walk with religion and you can't walk in a traditional way and it's like, yes I can, because I'm learning how.

She relates that in her work with people, smudging helps to cleanse her body, mind and spirit, and let go of others pain. She shares that her Christian and Indigenous beliefs bring comfort

and healing in her life. Her words reflect the understanding that provides comfort for the other Indigenous women in this study, as they realize they are never alone.

For Lone Eagle Woman, the belief that certain places hold spiritual meaning is clear when she shares her experience of connecting with the spiritual lands of her Christian faith:

I went to the holy land to just kind of go and see what the holy land was all about. Where did he [Jesus Christ] walk? How did it feel? I wanted to know, so I went, I went by myself and it was incredible.

Through her story, she shares how the connection she experiences while on her pilgrimage is life altering, and speaks to what Tinker (2004) suggests that, “the traditional relationship to land was not ownership but something more intimate” (p. 456). Lone Eagle Woman views the world through her spirituality; it is her values and beliefs that strengthen her relationships, and enables her to feel compassion for others:

I often wonder how do people that don't have a belief, spirituality, or anything, how do they even get by in life? It kind of puzzles me sometimes. How do people get through life if they don't have any kind of faith or any kind of a belief system? What do they do? How do they get through their lives without having some kind of a feeling of connectedness with something out there that's bigger than what we are? It makes me wonder, but that's one of my questions, right? You know, living and dying, we're all headed that way, we're living here today, we're here today, and we don't know what's promised to us tonight, tomorrow. It's for this very moment I'm sitting here, I'm alive and I'm functioning, but we don't know what our destination is from here to there, but in my faith we are taught that there is a book of life and that our names are written in this book.

For Lone Eagle Woman, her spiritual beliefs regarding life and death helps her to focus on the present, and directs her behaviours and actions. This may be said to be true for other storytellers including Blue Sky Woman.

She recalls the spiritual teachings she learned as a child regarding respect for the spirit world. Today she continues to follow her Dakota teachings, and when the opportunity arises she shares them with others:

When we were growing up everything was done by walking or wagons or so that that was, uh, I liked that. And then as soon as dark came, we all had to be in the house and in bed. We covered our food, we couldn't expose any food because of the spirits that were wandering around at night, so they don't come to your house, that's what we were told when we were small. Always cover your food. Never eat outside in the dark. So that stuck with me and I still do that to this day. I try and teach my kids and my grandkids, I said, don't, after a sweat we, of course, the sweat is over at night and I always think, oh my god, I think to myself, oh my god, the kids are eating apples outside or eating sandwiches and, uh, it really bugs me and so I'd go out there, say go, go, go inside, go inside and eat. (chuckles) They'll say why, it's hot in there; there's too many people in there. I said its okay, just go inside and eat, don't eat outside. I don't know, it's just me, it's in me and, uh, they'll just give me that look, I'd look at them and I said go inside. And then they will, they will listen to me and they'll stand there, I said when you're finished you can go outside. So then that's how it is to this day and I tell my kids that, too. And my youngest girl, she's more into traditional ways than my other girl, so she does the same thing. She covers all her food, uh, whatever's exposed in her apartment because she always says that she hears things and my grandson hears, he gets scared at night sometimes and he holds onto her, so I have to go over there and smudge her home. Like things like that she's into and she's learning.

She shares that respect for the spirit world is as important as respect for the physical world and all living things. Her teachings are based within her spirituality, and acknowledge the presence of the spirits of those who have passed on. The stories shared by the storytellers relate that whether through prayers or ceremonies such as the sweat lodge, the spirit world is acknowledged. White Buffalo Woman shares how she trusts in her connection to the grandmothers and grandfathers for guidance.

All storytellers refer to a connection with Creator, God or Jesus that is maintained through prayer. It is this connection that facilitates healing, as Star Dancer Woman shares:

To know that, you know, that there's something bigger out there, bigger than what's going on here in this little place, in my little life. To find something, something to believe in, something that was greater than my life or greater than myself. So I started, that's where I started my journey, my healing and started going to the sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies and each time I went, I became stronger, I started to understand my life better.

We're able to sit together, heal our mind, our bodies, our spirit through the use of our ways of life, so that's what I'm really thankful for everything, everyday. The healing of my spirit, my body, my emotions, I go to the sweat lodge; I help my

husband with the sweats. I smudge every day, every morning I smudge, you know, I pray every morning, I go to my sisters-in-law, I go out on the land and I do those things. Those are the tools that we've been given. It's a very simple way of life, like even going picking medicine, I still go out in the summer times and I go pick medicine, that's very healing, it sustains me. I've been gifted with those teachings, given those teachings and able to use them in my life to do my healing work, going to the elders, going to the ceremonies.

You know, just to have a ceremony to welcome spring, like how beautiful is that and just to remember spring is coming. We forget that spring is going to come, you know, we get discouraged and get down in the dumps, be we gathered together to pray, we talked to one another, we ate together, we sweat together and shared the medicines, the food and all those things to continue. So I'm really, I'm really thankful for that. Sometimes I forget those things, to be thankful every day for everything. You know, to be blessed with my children, my grandchildren and to be blessed to find a partner who I get along with and who cares about me and who I care about very, very much.

Star Dancer Woman refers to her spirituality, her connection to something bigger than herself, her relationships with her partner, family, extended family, to the physical and spiritual world, as what sustains her. She refers to the healing she receives through participation in ceremonies, learning about the medicines, and receiving knowledge through teachings provided by Elders and spiritual teachers that assist in finding meaning.

White Buffalo Woman shares her own story of finding meaning through spirituality:

We [family] attended ceremonies together, just relying, and asking for that guidance from the spirit of that pipe, the spirit [of] that sweat lodge, the grandmothers and grandfathers, that is what helped me make it through this whole journey. You know, sometimes I wonder, people that don't have spirituality; I don't know how, how they do it, that's something I share with my children, more so today.

For her, and the other storytellers, the connection to the spiritual world is tied to her relationships with family, ceremonies, Creator and those who have passed on. The stories all share that how we come to understand death, heal, and find meaning is a spiritual experience, and is reflected in the words of Absolon (2009) who writes:

The spirits of the people are strong and resilient, witnessing our resiliency is healing in itself. Our relations are critical in this process as it is not a journey meant to be taken alone. It is both individual and collective. (p. 94)

Storytelling

As this chapter reveals, storytelling affords an opportunity for our voices to be heard, and that in itself is a freeing experience, which provides for the healing of our spirits. As

Absolon (2009) writes,

The voices that we have and the distinct way that we have of telling our stories provides us with doorways to free our minds, hearts, spirits and bodies from colonial shackles. Within our cultures we have practices where the sounding of our voices was instrumental to our well being. Singing, story-telling, dancing, smudging, chanting and talking with one another are healing practices resonating with the sound of our voices and the use of our bodies. Finding time space and time for silence allows us to become re-centered within and to hear messages...Rebuilding and claiming our minds, hearts, bodies and spirits from our own perspectives enables us to reconnect and remember each other and ourselves. (p. 194)

Just as Absolon's words reflect, storytelling as a research method allows space for the seven Indigenous women to share their stories of trauma, pain and healing; of loss, grief, and finding meaning through spirituality following the death of a loved. From their stories, loss and grief is seen as a spiritual experience that reinforces their relationships and connections to their loved ones who have passed on through dreams, healing, honouring memory and making space, while providing opportunities to find meaning, and purpose in their lives.

In summary, this chapter presents a discussion of the recurring themes and central themes identified in Chapter Four in relation to the literature review, more specifically as they pertained to Indigenous Worldviews (coming to see), Indigenous Knowledge (coming to know), and Indigenous Spirituality (coming to be). In keeping with an Indigenous research paradigm, colonization and the effects on the lives of the seven Indigenous women who

participated in this research project was included. In the final chapter, I present my reflections as they relate to social work and other helping professions.

Chapter Six: Final Reflections

In the previous chapters I included excerpts from the life stories of the seven Indigenous women who participated in this research study. All of them share their experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning through spirituality, but more than that, they share their experiences of trauma. In a story within a story, they reveal how their earlier experiences of trauma are the catalyst for their spiritual quest for healing, which provide the foundation from which they are able to move beyond their grief to find meaning. This is in keeping with the criteria for recruiting participants for my research, as I chose Indigenous women who acknowledge being on their healing journey. As such, I deliberately chose not to share too much of their stories of trauma, except as it pertained to the literature review and colonization. I felt I didn't want to exploit their pain, and chose instead to speak about their experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning. I believe it is a necessity to include a discussion on colonization, but only in terms of its relation to the research topic.

I felt it is important for me to share a portion of my own experience as it was the catalyst for this research. My own experience of loss, grief and finding meaning became a spiritual experience, and I wondered if the experiences of other Indigenous women are similar to mine. When I decided to explore this topic further, I began a rudimentary search of loss and grief literature, and identified there was conspicuous absence of the voices of Indigenous people in general, and Indigenous women, in particular. As the original inhabitants of Turtle Island, it is still confusing to me why we remain for the most part invisible in the literature,

textbooks and curriculum of social work programs, and those of other helping professions when Indigenous people utilize their services in ever increasing numbers.

More recently, Indigenous scholars have produced works that forward Indigenous approaches to healing, challenge colonial oppression, and develop Indigenous social work perspectives and practices (Absolon, 1993, 2009; Baskin, 2009, 2011; Hart, 2002, 2006, 2008; Poonwassie & Charter, 2001, 2005). My motivation for conducting this study is to add to this growing body of work. My focus is to identify how spirituality influences the experiences of loss and grief, and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one. The inclusion of spirituality in social work is evolving however, even as the profession recognizes the diversity of cultural beliefs and practices, there remains a paucity of literature on the experiences of loss, grief, finding meaning, and the influence of spirituality on the experiences of Indigenous women.

Food for Thought: Considerations for Social Work

Social Policy

As the seven women's narratives in this study revealed, healing takes time, and as such, funding is the first thing that comes to mind. Although the stories shared throughout this research reveal that the storytellers sought their own avenues for healing, this is not always an option for some Indigenous people. My background in clinical practice requires that I acknowledge, and call attention to the need for consistent, long term funding of Indigenous healing initiatives across the country that provide services to all Indigenous people including status, non-status, Métis and Inuit. First Nations & Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) funds short-term (approximately ten sessions), crisis counselling through Non-Insured Health Benefits for status Indians and Inuk who qualify. While I'm pleased that the federal government provides

funding for this service, based upon my own personal experience, short-term crisis counselling is akin to the story I heard as a child about the little Dutch boy who stuck his finger in the dike. I speak to this based upon my previous experience as a Community Mental Health Counsellor, an Aboriginal Healing and Wellness Counsellor, Counsellor/Coordinator of the Brandon Aboriginal Healing Centre, and ten years of experience in the field of mental health.

Working in conjunction with Addictions Counsellors to assist clients with co-occurring disorders, I'm aware of the challenges clients face when they reach out for services. Building a trusting relationship with a client takes time, especially if the client has a complex past, so ten sessions may only scratch the surface of the problem. As for short-term crisis counselling, it may be effective to assist the client to cope with their life in the moment, but the underlying issues remain untouched, so the cycle will continue unchecked. I remember a conversation I had with a service provider who flies into northern Indigenous communities to provide short-term crisis counselling under FNIHB. The individual made a comment to the effect that clients never reach their potential because they're only able to deal with their immediate crisis. This is the sad reality for many Indigenous people.

Most of the women in this study share that they've been on their healing journey on average, for more than fifteen years. Some of the women reveal that they accessed non-Indigenous psychiatric or counselling services in the early stages of their healing journey. Mental health and addiction services are free, provided through funding from the provincial government in Manitoba, but waiting lists are often lengthy, in some cases one year or more is common. In recent years, waiting lists to access residential programming for addictions has increased as well. In my own experience, I've had clients who wanted to access residential

programming for their addictions, but was unable to due to long waiting lists, and by the time space came available many clients changed their mind. Sometimes the window is very small for clients wanting to access services and if that window closes for whatever reason, the opportunity to support the client with their healing may be lost forever.

I volunteered at the Brandon Correctional Centre for a time where I assisted the Spiritual Care Provider with sweat lodge ceremonies. The centre has large numbers of Indigenous people, male and female, many of whom have undiagnosed mental health issues, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, learning disorders and addictions issues. Many have experienced abuse in one form or another or were exposed to family violence. It is often the first experience they have with cultural teachings and ceremonies. I can't help but believe that if the money earmarked for building and staffing more prisons was spent on healing programs, reducing child poverty, building housing and infrastructure, supporting community development, and settling land claims, the need to build more prisons would not exist. I could go on to write an entire thesis on this topic, but it is beyond this work to discuss the policies related to funding and fiduciary responsibilities of the federal and provincial governments. It is a simple equation really, number of years colonized should be equal to number of years of funding for healing initiatives, plus funding for housing, infrastructure, poverty reduction, health, and community development, which in turn equals self-sufficiency and self-determination; it's quite simple, really.

Clinical Practice

In so far as social work is concerned, when one considers the lengthy history of the profession in Canada, spirituality as a consideration in clinical practice is relatively recent.

Although the interest in spirituality is welcomed, some may ask why now? Baskin (2011)

writes,

Clearly, spirituality is emerging as an area of interest within the helping professions, including social work, psychology, psychiatry, and the health sciences. She goes on to say with some optimism that such interest in spirituality also means that more helpers and educators are listening to the needs of service users and students who practice some form of spirituality.

...she hopes that practitioners and educators are beginning to see people and the world around them in more holistic ways, a view that has been influenced by Indigenous worldviews. (pp. 134-135)

The question as to why the social work profession is showing an increased understanding of the importance of spirituality is not as important as the question of how does social work and more importantly social work clinicians define spirituality?

I ask this question, not from a place of arrogance, but rather I ask those in clinical practice to tread carefully, and identify their own beliefs concerning spirituality. As previously mentioned in the literature review, spirituality is not religion and vice versa. I mention this because there may be potential for discord between a clinician and client, if worldviews differ on the meaning of spirituality. The inclusion of spirituality in clinical practice has the potential to enhance and improve client services as long as it's practiced in a respectful way that acknowledges individual client's values and beliefs.

Through their stories, the Indigenous women who participated in this study shared how spirituality was an integral part of their healing from early trauma, and how later, it helped them to find meaning following the death of a loved one. As each storyteller spoke of their spirituality, it became evident that their beliefs shared commonalities, but just as apparent was that each woman's healing journey was unique. In light of this, social work clinicians may

wish to engage in “critical self-reflexivity,” (Baskin, 2011, p. 70) and prior to incorporating spirituality in their practice, I put forth the following questions to consider:

- What is spirituality?
- How do I define spirituality?
- Where does spirituality fit in my clinical practice?
- How will I assess the spiritual needs of my clients?
- How much do I know about the spiritual beliefs of Indigenous people?

The above questions are by no means the only ones that clinicians should engage in, but they are a good place to start. Baskin (2011) offers more specific questions that social workers should seek to answer before engaging in clinical practice,

- Why am I working with this specific population (e.g., street-involved youth of colour, Indigenous single mothers) in this particular place (e.g., agency or organization)?
- What do I have to offer (e.g., knowledge of appropriate resources, non-judgmental attitude) to this population?
- Will I stand by these service users when the work becomes difficult?
- What are the areas of my work that challenge my values and beliefs and why?
- Am I committed to ongoing learning from service users and through self-reflexivity?
- What social policies and social work practices do I see as oppressive in the context of my work with this population, including within my place of employment, and how can I work toward changing these practices? (pp. 70-71)

To these I would add the following questions for social workers and other helping professionals, working with Indigenous people,

- What do I know about colonization? Is colonization relevant to my profession today?
- When in contact with Indigenous people through my work, can I identify whether they are status, non-status, Métis, or Inuit? What do each of these terms signify?
- How do I know if spirituality is important to a service user?
- What do I know about Indigenous spirituality?
- What do I know about the Indigenous people that live in my area?
- What are my assumptions regarding Indigenous people?

I pose these questions because they arise from my own personal experience. Not too long ago I was speaking with a colleague who'd stopped at my office door. I don't remember what we were talking about, but I do remember that in the course of the conversation she made the comment, oh, I thought you grew up on a reserve. When I said no, I grew up on a farm, she was genuinely surprised. Now, in all fairness to my colleague I don't believe her comment was intended to be disrespectful, but it does speak to the lack of knowledge people have in regards to Indigenous people and the beliefs that they hold. I believe this may be attributed to the failure of our educational system from primary through post-secondary education.

Education

In writing this thesis, my hope is that the significance of spirituality in the lives of Indigenous people is recognized, and contributes to social work education in some way. My research provided the opportunity for seven Indigenous women to share their stories loss, grief and finding meaning through spirituality following the death of a loved one. In addition, their stories exposed a story within a story, in which the storytellers shared their stories of past trauma and healing through spirituality. Their emotion filled depictions revealed journeys from pain to wholeness, and as they healed from their trauma, they discovered strength and

peace through spirit. This research presents a correlation between colonization, trauma and healing, as well as loss, grief, and finding meaning through spirituality.

Numerous social work curriculums in Canada include courses on anti-oppressive practice and Indigenous people and social work. The content of the courses varies from institution to institution, but recently, the addition of Indigenous based curriculums in undergraduate and graduate programs are being offered at a number of universities, and more post-secondary institutions are developing similar programs for future consideration. The Indigenous based curriculums honour Indigenous worldviews, knowledge creation, spirituality, and emphasize the holistic nature of helping and healing. This is an exciting time for those individuals considering social work as a profession, and is long overdue.

Indigenous social workers from across the globe have begun to gather at conferences to discuss the challenges that face Indigenous people, educational initiatives and healing practices and to share their research findings. The number of books and articles published by Indigenous social workers and scholars has increased substantially in the past ten years. Social worker Gail Baikie (2009) relates that despite this progress, the professionalism of Indigenous social work continues to be challenged as “subordinate or inferior to “real” social work” (p. 44). She goes on to say that this is due in part, to the “universally applied code of ethics and standards of practice” (p. 44). Tamburro, 2010 (as cited in Baskin, 2011) speaks to this following her examination of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) policy,

A post-colonial examination of the CASWE policy on Aboriginal content shows that the policy did not include several themes that were included in the literature. These themes include history from Aboriginal perspectives, Indigenous worldviews, and current issues foregrounding the effects of colonization. The ahistorical approach to Aboriginal content is an important omission from the CASWE Accreditation Standard

SB 5.10.13. Omitted from the policy was the need to decolonize social work practice with Indigenous-centric content and a post-colonial theoretical or anti-colonial approach. (p. 266)

Tamburro's work brings me back to the story I shared earlier about the colleague who assumed I grew up on a reservation. There is a need for social work and other helping professions to include education that provides a historical overview of colonization and its continuing effects for Indigenous people in Canada, as well as health and healing from an Indigenous worldview.

It is my belief that one way this may be achieved is by making introductory courses in Native or Indigenous Studies required courses for university entrance programs or pre-studies for social work, nursing, psychiatric nursing and/or medical school. Social work and professional program graduates may then be better prepared to work with Indigenous people who access these services. I recall a conversation I had with a psychiatric nursing graduate who approached me at work one day. She said she'd been applying for jobs in the months since graduation with little success, so she was thinking of taking a job in a northern Indigenous community. Her question to me was, "What do I need to know about Indigenous people before I go there?" I was stunned and didn't know what to say for a moment. Once I gathered myself together, I told her a good place to start was with the community. I told her learn as much as she could about the people and the history of the community beforehand. I told her that if she decided to go, once there, to spend time with community members, getting to know them, letting them get to know her, and build relationships. I walked away thinking wow; they really don't know anything about Indigenous people. I still find it incredulous.

I think that's why it's so important that we teach all service providers, not just social work students, the historical truth about Indigenous people and colonization. I believe it may

serve to create understanding; dispel myths and half truths related to Indigenous people, and challenge students to identify their own personal biases and beliefs, which may hinder their ability to provide adequate services to Indigenous people. One hour presentations on the medicine wheel, cultural teachings that talk about why Indigenous people don't make eye contact, or the sacred medicines and smudging aren't accurate depictions of the realities of Indigenous people. As long as the history of colonization and Indigenous people remains a taboo topic in social work and professional education, little will change for the Indigenous people who access those services.

Healing may be part of the educational experience for some Indigenous people, and as such, must be a consideration for social work and other post-secondary programs. Two of the women in this study related how they learned about the 'true' history of Indigenous people while attending university. They shared how learning about residential school, the 60's scoop and colonization caused very strong emotional reactions to what they were learning. I remember my own experience, and how a classmate described it as akin to walking out of class as a piece of raw meat. I remember the anger I felt as I learned what happened to Indigenous people since contact, and sitting in class, watching a film with tears streaming down my face. One woman described having to leave the classroom because she was triggered by the course content and began to remember experiences of being abused as a child. She related how she spent hours looking for someone to talk to before finally finding a faculty member in her office who let her talk, uninterrupted until she was done. She then shared how she took her sacred items and went to a safe place, where she sat on the land, drummed and sang, cried and released her emotions until she was spent. What would have happened to this student if she didn't find someone to talk to or if she didn't have the sacred knowledge that

directed her to sit on the land? Many students won't relate they're experiencing problems, they start missing classes, don't hand in assignments, and some simply quit. I used to say to my classmates when I was a student, Aboriginal students don't just come to school and learn. We learn, we heal, we support one another, and we teach other students about our history, furthermore, we defend our people to other students, dispel myths and endure racism, before going home to care for our families, and study. It's an exhausting process.

Research

Just as education is a healing experience, so too is research. Prior to writing my thesis, I chose this topic because I wanted to add to the growing body of literature on Indigenous approaches to healing. My focus on loss, grief and finding meaning through spirituality arose from my own experiences following the deaths of my siblings. While searching through grief and loss literature, I came to the realization that the experiences of Indigenous people, more specifically, Indigenous women were conspicuously absent from social work grief and loss literature. My decision to utilize an Indigenous research paradigm was twofold; first, I wanted to conduct research that honoured the relational and spiritual aspects of creating knowledge from an Indigenous worldview, and second, I wanted to, as Absolon (2011) writes, make the invisible - visible.

Healing came through my research topic, of which I was emotionally connected, and continued throughout the research process. Each stage was an opportunity to learn more about myself as an Indigenous women, and scholar. Self-reflexivity was an integral component of my research experience. As I proceeded through the stages of my research, I recalled the words of Aluli-Meyers (2008), "It [research] is fully conscious subjectivity...it holds the promise of being effective in a radically different way if you/I understand its meaning and

prioritize it at all levels of your/my research. It is called meta consciousness. “To be more than a woman of my word. To be a woman of my intention” (p. 222). I aspired to those words throughout my research, and I pray I was successful.

It’s an exciting time to be an Indigenous scholar in social work, to follow those scholars who broke trail, in order to make the journey less arduous for the rest of us. Future considerations for Indigenous social work research are limitless; there are many exciting opportunities to conduct research based within Indigenous worldviews that advances knowledge creation that is holistic, meaningful and spiritually based. As each Indigenous social work scholar completes their thesis or dissertation, our voices are no longer silent, our healing becomes visible, our ancestral knowledge shared in as much as we wish to share, our connections to Mother Earth, Creator and the spirit world maintained, and our relationships strengthened through collaboration and celebration. With each article that is written, with each book that is published, we meet the colonizing forces head-on. There is still much to do, but when I look back from when I began this journey, I am in awe of the work that has been completed.

Final Thoughts: The End of a Long Journey

The Indigenous women who agreed to participate in this study, the stories they shared, and everything on these pages comes from Creator. I was truly honoured to sit in the presence of these beautiful women as they shared their stories with me, and as I complete this work, I take a piece from each and every one of their stories with me in my heart.

If you met any of these women, you would be struck, as I was, by their quiet confidence, humility, compassion, kindness and beautiful spirits. Unless you heard their stories, you would never suspect the challenges they’ve overcome, the heartbreak and pain

they've experienced in their lives or the fact that more than one of them, has at some point in their life, contemplated suicide. You would see how they've devoted their lives to the service to others, how they wish to educate non-Indigenous people to the problems facing Indigenous people, how they wish to work in collaboration and partnership with non-Indigenous professionals and agencies, and how they work to forward Indigenous approaches to healing. You would never know the ghosts of their past are never far away, how beneath the quiet confidence, the doubts can still be heard or how they continue to work hard on their healing. You would never know what an honour and privilege it is to sit with any one of the Indigenous women who participated in this study, to hear their story, to see their tears, and to take a piece of their story into your heart. No, you would never know.

Despite of all the challenges I've faced in my own life, here I am writing the final reflections for my thesis. Honestly, I didn't know if I would ever reach this place, and to be quite frank there was a point in time where I didn't even know if it mattered anymore. Thankfully, Creator knew better than I. The topic for this thesis came to me in a dream, and throughout this process I have been guided by the grandmothers, grandfathers and the Creator. When my mind became bogged down in the process, I would step away and go outdoors to replenish my spirit. I smudged, prayed for guidance and offered my tobacco. Completing this thesis proved to be a cathartic experience. The time I spent with the storytellers, hearing their stories, helped me to heal my own grief, and liberate myself from the pain I've felt for too long. Writing this thesis was also a spiritual experience from which I found meaning and purpose in my own life. I end this thesis as I began; with the words of Wilson (2008), "*Research is Ceremony.*" Limlimpt – Thank you.

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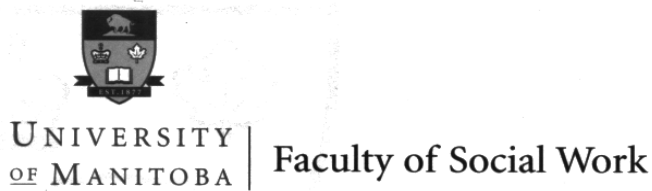
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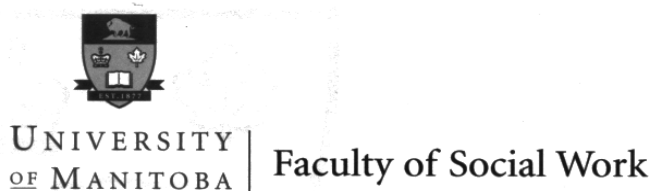
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Appendix A: Oral Telephone Script

1. Researcher introduction: “Hello, my name is Andrea Hinch-Bourns.”
2. The introduction was followed by informal conversation between me (researcher) and the potential participant/storyteller related to family, work, health, and mutual friends to (re)establish relationships and build rapport.
3. “Name, I am currently working on my thesis for my Master of Social Work degree. I am hoping we could meet so I might share more about what I hope to do, and to ask you if you would consider participating in my study. Would you be willing to meet with me? If this is agreeable, I will meet with you at a time and place that is convenient for you.”
4. Dates, times, and locations will be arranged, and my contact information provided.



521 Tier Building
 Winnipeg, Manitoba
 Canada R3T 2N2
 Telephone (204) 474-7050
 Fax (204) 474-7594
 Social_Work@UManitoba.CA

Appendix B: Consent

Informed Consent to Participate and be Audio-taped

Researcher: Andrea C. Hinch-Bourns

Research Supervisor: Dr. Michael A. Hart
 Assistant Professor

Limlimt/thank you for indicating your willingness to consider participating in my Master of Social Work thesis study entitled:

In Our Own Words, In Our Own Time, In Our Own Ways:

Indigenous Women's Experiences of Loss, Grief, and Finding Meaning through Spirit

The consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should provide you with a basic idea of what the research study is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or require additional information or clarification, please don't hesitate to ask me. Please take your time to read this carefully, so you are able to understand the information contained in the document thoroughly. I will answer any questions or concerns you may have at any time throughout this process.

1. Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to understand your experience of loss, grief, and finding meaning following the death of a loved one, and to consider how spirituality influenced your experience. I intend to interview Indigenous women, like yourself, who have experienced the death of a loved one, and for whom spirituality is a significant part of your life.

2. Procedures involving the subject, including their nature, frequency and duration: If you agree to participate in the research project, I will contact you and arrange to meet you at a time and location that is convenient to you. When we meet, I will offer you some refreshments, and if agreeable to you, a smudge and prayer, followed by informal conversation about family, health, mutual friends, and any other topics you wish to discuss until you feel comfortable and ready to share your story. Prior to our meeting, I will provide you with two questions that I developed, in order to familiarize yourself with the research

topic. You may refer to the questions during the interview, if you wish to do so, however they are meant to act only as a guide and as such, I encourage you to share what you wish to share. The question guiding this research is:

1. How does spirituality influence the experiences of loss, grief and finding meaning for Indigenous women following the death of a loved one?

While you share your story, I will remain quiet out of respect. The interview will last approximately one or two hours, perhaps longer, depending upon your willingness and ability to share. When you have shared all you wish to share, I will be available to debrief or discuss your experience with you. I may make field notes after the interview to assist me with transcribing the audiotapes and help me to remember little subtleties and nuances that occurred while you shared your story. I plan to transcribe your interview as soon as possible while information is fresh and my recollections are clear, to ensure the transcription is as accurate as possible. Once I complete the transcription, I will provide you with a copy of your story and ask that you read it carefully to check for accuracy, and to identify if there is anything you wish to add or remove from the transcription before I proceed to the next phase of the research project.

3. Description of Recording Devices: If you are agreeable, I will audio-tape the interview, and if you wish, I will make a copy of the recording for you to keep. In addition, I will make notes of our conversation, and your story following the interview. The audio recording will be transcribed word for word, and a copy of the completed transcript will be given to you to review. I will contact you after you have had an opportunity to read the transcript to see if you would like to add, change, delete or remove anything from your story or our conversation.

I will then proceed to include parts of what you have shared in my thesis paper. Once I've completed my thesis, I will contact you and provide a summary of how I have incorporated what you shared in the paper. You will once again have the opportunity to change anything you have said, direct me to use the information differently, or remove anything I've included.

4. Description of Benefits: There are a number of benefits that may occur as a result of you agreeing to participate in this research study. By telling your story, you will provide an Indigenous perspective on the experience of loss, grief and finding meaning through spirituality. You will increase awareness and understanding to non-Indigenous people and professionals, on Indigenous ways of healing, the importance of Indigenous spirituality, rituals, ceremonies and knowledge, which they may use in their interactions with Indigenous people. You will assist in the development of social work literature which includes Indigenous voices and experiences that may be used in the education of social work students. You may find that telling your story is a healing experience for you, and take comfort that your words

may help other Indigenous people to re-discover their cultural ways of being, knowing and doing.

5. Confidentiality: All information you share during the course of this project will be held confidentially, meaning that I will not identify who shared the information with me, unless you direct me to do otherwise. If you are agreeable, I will use a digit recording device to audio tape the interview. If you decide you would prefer not to have the interview recorded, I will make field notes following the conclusion of the interview and debriefing session. The audio recordings will be locked in a filing cabinet at my home or in my work office at all times and will not be made available to anyone unless you provide direction or consent to the sharing of the tapes. My plan is to transcribe the audio tapes myself, however, if it becomes necessary to hire someone to transcribe the tapes due to approaching deadlines, a lack of time, illness or any other unforeseen circumstances, I will seek your consent before proceeding. I will keep the audio-tapes for no longer than six months following the completion of the thesis paper, oral defense, revisions and final acceptance of the thesis by the University of Manitoba. After that time, I will destroy the all identifying information including audio-tapes, unless you direct me otherwise.

In keeping with traditional protocols, I will not include the descriptions of, or record any sacred ceremonies for this project. I will refer to sacred ceremonies by name only, for example, the Sundance, and any reference to the ceremony will be based on individual experience and the teachings received. In the event that I am not sure whether to include certain information in this project, I will seek clarification from participants, ceremonial leaders and/or Elders before proceeding. I do not foresee any consequences for you if you decide to share information openly, other than people may want to contact you to request further discussions and/or to use of the information in other studies. If a request for the contact information of a participant is received, I will contact the participant for direction as how to proceed.

6. Description of Risk: I do not perceive any physical risk for your participation in this project, as I am intending to address how spirituality influenced your experience of loss, grief and finding meaning following the death of a loved one. However, it is possible you may experience emotional distress as a result of sharing your story. If you find that you are experiencing feelings of sadness, grief or loss, I will be available immediately following the interview to debrief with about your experience. You may stop the interview at anytime if you feel you do not wish to continue or if you become emotionally overwhelmed. In addition, I will provide a list of counselling resources, and will arrange for a talking/healing circle, a letting go ceremony, or any other ceremony at your direction. I will make every effort to ensure that you, as a participant, find this a positive experience.

7. Remuneration/Compensation: If you agree to participate, I will follow traditional protocol and present you with tobacco, if this is in keeping with your traditions. In addition, I will present you with a blanket and a gift of ceremonial cloth as a sign of my appreciation for your support, your time and contribution to this study.

8. Withdrawal from Project: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary; therefore you may withdraw from the project at anytime during the process by informing the researcher either by phone or email without any negative consequences to yourself. All confidential data including consent forms, audio-tapes, interview notes, transcripts and contact information will be destroyed immediately by the researcher upon notification of withdrawal from the research project.

9. Description of the Debriefing: Time will be set aside after the interview has ended should you wish to debrief about the experience of telling your story. Should you feel the need to talk to a professional counsellor, a traditional healer or Elder, or attend a ceremony, as a result of your participation, a list of resources will be provided to you or arrangements may be made for you on your behalf, if you prefer. **Please note that a request to participate in a sharing circle or other ceremony may result in your anonymity being compromised (Please initial here).**

10. Dissemination of Results: As part of the requirement for my thesis, I must complete an oral defense in front of my thesis advisor and committee members. The oral defense is open to participants, and other members of the University of Manitoba community including faculty, staff and students. The oral defense will include all aspects of the project including the results. A written copy of this work will be kept in the University of Manitoba Library, while a digital copy will be available online. The researcher will obtain your consent prior to any other use of the results of the research study such as in an oral presentation or publication of the findings.

11. Summary of Project Findings: A summary of the project findings will be distributed to you once the project is completed, either through email or mail, according to your wishes, within four weeks of the oral defense and completion of the final revisions. If you would like to receive a Summary of the Project Findings, please indicate on the space below.

12. Confidential Data: All identifying information including the list of participants, alternative names chosen by participants/storytellers, contact information (unless otherwise indicated), consent forms, audio-tapes and transcripts related to this project will be destroyed within six months of completion of this project. Any/all information shared by participants/storytellers during the course of this research project will remain confidential and will not be referred to by the researcher for any purpose other than in an academic/professional capacity pertaining to the completion of the thesis, publication or presentation of research project findings. The researcher will seek the expressed or written

consent of participants/storytellers to any presentation or publication of the research project findings beyond completion of the thesis in the space provided on this form.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have read and understand to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this study, and agree to participate. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researcher, sponsor, or involved institution from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, and/or refrain from answering questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or additional information throughout your participation. You may contact me or my supervisor at the following numbers:

Student Researcher

Andrea C. Hinch-Bourns

Supervisor

Dr. Michael A. Hart, Assistant Professor

This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba's Psychology/Sociology Research Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

If you consent to participate and wish that all information you share to remain confidential, meaning that your identity is not shared, please sign on the following line.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

If you consent to participate and are willing to have yourself identified with the information you share, please sign on the following line.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Do you wish the Student Researcher to contact you prior to the presentation or publication of the research project findings for any purpose other than for the completion of the thesis?

Yes _____, I hereby consent to my contact information to remain on file for this purpose.

Participant's Signature Date

No _____, I hereby consent to the use of the research findings for presentation or publication beyond the completion of the thesis.

Participant's Signature Date

If you would like to receive a Summary of the Project Findings, please indicate below and provide either a mailing address or email address.

Yes, I would like a Summary of the Project Findings _____

No, I do not wish to receive a Summary of the Project Findings _____

Mailing Address:

Email:

Participant's Signature

Date

Appendix C: Counselling Resources

Region	Mental Health Services	Phone
Brandon	24 hour Crisis Line/Mobile Crisis Unit	(204) 725-4411 1-888-379-7699
	Crisis Stabilization Unit	(204) 727-2555
	Mental Health Services 800 Rosser Avenue	(204) 578-2400
	7 th street Health Access Centre 20-7 th Street Adult Community Mental Health Worker	(204) 578-4800 (204) 578-4822 (direct line)
	Centre for Adult Psychiatry (CAP) API-150 McTavish Av East	(204) 578-4555
	Addictions Foundation of Manitoba 510 Frederick St	(204) 729-3838
	Counselling Services	
Brandon	Brandon Counselling & Mediation Services 935-26 th Street	(204) 724-6492
	Foster Common Unity Counselling Services 1015 Princess Ave	(204) 728-3758
	The Counselling Centre for Hope, Healing and Encouragement Inc. 335-9 th Street	(204) 726-8706
	Orval Henderson & Associates 1-458 12 th Street	(204) 725-3046
	Indigenous Healing Services	
	Aboriginal Healing & Wellness 108-6 th Street Mental Health & Wellness Counselling	(204) 726-1112 (204) 726-8791
	Brandon Friendship Centre 836 Lorne Ave Traditional Healer/Elder Services	(204) 727-1407
	Winnipeg	
Mental Health Services		
	Adult Community Mental Health Services Crisis Services Case Management and Rehabilitation	WRHA Mental Health Central Intake (204) 940-2655
Aboriginal & Community Supports		
	Aboriginal Health & Wellness Centre Abinotci Min-Ayawin Room 215 – 181 Higgins Ave	(204) 925-3700
	Eyaa-keen Centre Inc. 547 Notre Dame Ave	(204) 783-2976 1-877-423-4648
	Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata 94 McGregor St	(204)925-0300 1-888-962-6294

