

**ANISHINABE VOICE:
THE COST OF EDUCATION IN A NON-ABORIGINAL WORLD
(A NARRATIVE INQUIRY)**

BY

MARY ISABELLE YOUNG

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

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MARY ISABELLE YOUNG

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
of
MASTER OF EDUCATION**

Mary Isabelle Young¹⁹⁹⁷ (c)

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, the author, a Native Student Advisor in a university setting examines how her personal schooling experiences in residential school, high school and university have contributed to the kind of “educator” she has become. She shares her schooling experiences as they relate to what she refers to as “feelings of separation”—loneliness, fear of failure, isolation and alienation, all of which are associated with personal experiences with racism and oppression. She submits the difficulties Aboriginal students face in ‘white’ institutions need to be better understood by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators.

Using ‘narrative inquiry’ or ‘telling stories’ as a method to ‘research herself’ the author attempts to make meaning and learn from her “experiences” by reflecting and analyzing them. She describes how the writing process and the actual ‘retelling and reliving’ of those significant moments, allows her to discover how she contributed to her own ‘colonization’. She offers insight into the importance of understanding Aboriginal students, in the context of both secondary and post-secondary education and she also discusses the impact of systemic racism and how it continues to affect the lives of Aboriginal students.

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Preface

As a note to the reader, I have typed my stories in *italics* and they are double-indented to distinguish them from my commentary, discussion, reflection and analysis and the weaving of the literature. My 'stories' are the data and I attempted to describe and explain the 'feelings of separation' by attaching and telling a 'story' which best explained the feeling. The stories are presented separately in different chapters. These stories however are not presented in chronological order. I did this intentionally because in order for me to complete the circle of events and truly understand the meaning of my 'school' experiences, it made more sense to begin with the story about going back to Bloodvein and ending the second last chapter with my childhood years. The other reason is by returning home, I not only recognized the importance of doing this thesis but I was also convinced that sharing my personal experiences with school was one way of assisting and encouraging the Aboriginal youth with whom I work to pursue further education.

In Chapter One I attempt to set the stage and the framework of the thesis. I have tried to present a brief history and development of my interest in this research. In Chapter Two I describe the methodology and why I decided to use 'narrative inquiry' as the most appropriate method to 'present and analyze the data'.

In Chapter Three I describe the meaning of returning home after being away for thirty years to attend an Aboriginal Youth Conference and the significance of the trip. In Chapter Four I introduce my search of 'self' and how I have tried to balance the two

worlds I live in. I decided to include it because it signifies not only a re-introduction of my culture and my spirituality but it also symbolizes the reclaiming of my identity and it is an affirmation of what it means to be 'Anishinabe'.

In Chapter Five I describe my role at the University of Winnipeg and demonstrate how my school experiences do in fact promote and enhance my understanding of the students' experience in the university, particularly in my advocacy role. In Chapter Six I discuss the characteristics of fear of failure and the feelings associated with it.

In Chapter Seven I explain and provide a sketch of where I come from and it is a description of my high school and residential school experiences. In Chapter Eight I attempt to answer the question 'So What'. This concluding chapter details what I have learned from the process and offers some insights as to what I think will be beneficial for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators who work with Aboriginal students.

CHAPTER ONE

LOOKING BACK: GENERAL BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM

Introduction

Until starting work on this thesis I never took the time to think systematically about, let alone write about the meaning of my school experiences and how they might affect and influence my everyday work as a Native Student Advisor. Newman (1994) argues that “in contrast with quantitative methodologies where you collect data and then write up the findings, in action research writing is the core of the research enterprise. It’s through writing that the stories and the connections which link them begin emerging” (p. 11). Grant (1994) an Aboriginal woman and author wrote “writing is an act of courage for most. For US, it is an act that requires opening up our wounded communities, our families, to eyes and ears that do not love us” (p. 53). Perhaps, for me, it is not so much that people do not love us as Aboriginal people, for me, it is more a need to tell my story so that it may contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal students, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators. A story, not necessarily because I have a better story than anyone else, but because it is important to tell the truth, my truth about my experiences and what they now mean to me. The other reason is, that I do not believe the “feelings of separation” discussed in this thesis, have been fully explained or described (Frideres, 1974; Robertson, 1970; Spindler & Spindler, 1971). Feelings such as loneliness, fear of failure, alienation and

isolation, resulting from my experiences with acts of racism and oppression need to be understood because they have had a direct, and hugely important, impact on me as an Aboriginal student and continue to affect Aboriginal students today. I agree with Grant (1994) when she suggests that “my people were an oral people. This means our stories, our history, our value-systems, our spirituality have been given to us by the spoken, not the written word” (p. 49). Because of this, she feels, “ a great responsibility to share words that are truthful” (p. 49).

One of the reasons I choose narrative inquiry, (I describe narrative inquiry in Chapter 2) as the methodology is because I share that same responsibility and if it means telling personal stories of my schooling , to help other students, my people and non-Aboriginal people, this thesis can contribute towards a better understanding of not just my life as a student in a non-Aboriginal world but it may also explain what constitutes leaving home and moving from a reserve to the city to get an education. It will describe what I, personally, had to give up and show that the human cost to achieve the level of formal education I have so far, has been expensive.

Anishinabe Voice: A Way of Telling My Story

I assumed when I was fourteen years old, the first time I left home in 1966, there was only one way to get an education and that was to finish high school. Back then, I was not aware of a university education. I was simply trying to be the first person from Bloodvein First Nation to graduate from high school. However that also

meant I had to leave my home to accomplish this goal. In those days my definition of education was about books, reading, writing, marks, and “being either a successful student or a drop out”. When I decided to finish high school it never occurred to me that I would experience such an array of what I refer to as “feelings of separation”. I knew that I would miss my parents, brothers and sisters; I had no idea how much. I expected to be myself, which meant I would continue to be Anishinabe, speak my language, be a good student and get good marks. I honestly believed if I attended school regularly, being a successful student would not be that difficult. I may have been naive but the last thing I expected to happen was I would arrive at a place where I found myself being ashamed of myself because I was an ‘Indian’. I understood that I was a treaty ‘Indian’ according to the Indian Act but I did not understand the negative stereotypes that came to be associated with the term. Anishinabe (Ojibwe or Saulteaux) and ‘Indian’ did not mean the same to me. The word ‘Indian’ was a term which was not congruent with who I was and it was definitely not how I identified myself.

It became apparent that the longer I stayed in Winnipeg, and while attending high school and university, for me, the term ‘Indian’ became derogatory because of the negative stereotypes associated with it. The only Indians I knew about were portrayed in Hollywood movies as losers, violent; certainly not the kind of people I would wish to emulate or ever think of as role models. Prior to leaving Bloodvein, I identified myself as Anishinabe and I was comfortable with that identity. I will be using the word ‘Indian’ as I write about my schooling experiences because that is how I was identified

by the school, my teachers and my counsellors at Indian Affairs. It was an identity I was uncomfortable with because accepting it meant 'I was less than'. I remember walking around and riding the bus to school feeling inadequate and yet, in a strange kind of way I had this overwhelming urge to fight harder to finish and graduate from high school. Although, I felt alone and excluded, there was no way I was going to give up my dream. It was too important and at times I was probably obsessed with the idea.

A Hint of Success

I currently work as a Native Student Advisor at the University of Winnipeg and I have held this position for twelve years. I mainly work with Aboriginal students, who come to university with hopes, aspirations and dreams of their own. They are seeking an education to improve or enhance their individual and personal situations but they are also doing it for the community-to help their people; (our people). I have had many discussions with these students about their struggles with "feelings of separation". As an advisor and counsellor it has become very obvious that the students are still grappling with the same issues in the university setting that I did.

Several theories and books have been written and countless studies (Frideres, 1974; Robertson, 1970; Spindler and Spindler, 1971) have been carried out, to try and explain why some Aboriginal students succeed and why some drop out of school or university. These earlier studies were quantitative and they were either sociological or

anthropological in nature and they were used widely in the university curriculum. In most of these studies, the reasons given for dropping out or succeeding were supported by convincingly elaborate statistical data, arguments and explanations. They presented a dismal picture of 'Indian' education. Reading these studies did little for my confidence as an undergraduate student. They often left me wondering, whether the studies truly represented the lives of students being studied and whether there might not be a better way to capture the whole person. Connelly and Clandinin (1988) contend that "all of our experiences take place with our total being" (p. 26). I believed, and I still do, that my experiences as an Aboriginal student embodied much more than merely being a statistic; a number.

I spent years trying to get into a Masters program. I have worked at the University of Winnipeg for twelve years and not having a graduate degree in my position perturbed me because I thought without it, I had no credibility. I had done extremely poorly in my undergraduate degree and I regretted not taking my education as seriously as I should have. I began taking courses in Native Studies at the University of Manitoba in 1986, mainly to convince myself I could do better. I had no intention of doing the Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Education. It was not until I enrolled in education courses that I met professors who were extremely helpful and suggested I could transfer the credits I had into the P.B.C.E. program, which I completed in October 1993. In January 1994, I applied and was accepted into the Masters program in Education at the University of Manitoba.

When I enrolled as a graduate student, it was then that I was introduced to new

and updated material by Aboriginal scholars like Colorado, 1988; Couture, 1987; Gunn Allen, 1986; Hampton, 1995; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Monture-Angus, 1995 and many others. These authors articulated, discussed and offered rational and legitimate reasons for Aboriginal students failing or succeeding. These authors as well wrote about the historical development of and the meaning of Aboriginal education, including the residential school experience from an Aboriginal perspective not “from the perspective of government or the missionaries whose policies controlled them” (Haig-Brown, 1988, p. 25). The idea of being a mere statistic continued to trouble me greatly. I decided to focus this thesis on my own schooling experiences. This decision was not one that was made lightly because it meant placing myself in a vulnerable position. But I decided that pursuing and actually doing the research was more important than my vulnerability. It has been a difficult undertaking, and the anxiety I have experienced throughout this research of self has been quite challenging, yet rewarding. As Connelly and Clandinin (1988) suggested

constructing a narrative account of oneself . . . is difficult rewarding work. It is difficult because so many aspects of life need consideration and because people are so complex that they all have many stories, not only one. It is rewarding because it is curricular and educational. It is a way of making educational meaning of our lives as we continue with the daily grind (p. 25).

The writing process itself and actually seeing my experiences written down on paper, talking to the computer, trusting the computer with my thoughts, my fears, and sharing my susceptibility has been an incredible healing journey and most empowering (Grant, 1994; Maracle, 1996; Monture-Angus, 1995). In many ways, having the

opportunity to reflect on and write about my experiences has compelled me to view myself differently. The analysis of these stories and the conclusion of this thesis will demonstrate this change of perception.

I now see that I endured and fought against racism/oppression, fear of failure, alienation and isolation; these factors had an enormous impact on how I performed as a student. They encompassed all of me, my past, my present, my future and my background (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988; Maracle, 1996; Monture-Angus, 1995).

In this thesis I theorize that the “feelings of separation” which affected me the most as a student living away from home, were my personal experiences with racism and oppression, fear of failure, isolation and alienation. I experienced these acts of racism and oppression and the feelings associated with them in varying degrees while I was in residential school, high school and university and I am still experiencing some of them in my work as a Native Student Advisor. I agree with Anzaldua (1990) when she suggested that

we need theories that will point out ways to manoeuvre between our particular experiences and the necessity of forming our own categories and theoretical models for the patterns we uncover. We need theories that examine the implications of situations and look at what’s behind them. And we need to find practical application for those theories. We need to de-academize theory and to connect the community to the academy. “High” theory does not translate well when one’s intention is to communicate to masses of people made of different audiences. We need to give up the notion that there is a “correct” way to write theory (p. xxvi).

This is another reason why I decided to utilize action research, specifically narrative inquiry, because it is the research methodology closest to my understanding of

oral tradition and history. Paula Gunn Allen describes oral tradition as

a living body. It is in continuous flux, which enables it to accommodate itself to the real circumstances of a people's lives. That is its strength, but it is also its weakness, for when a people finds itself living within a racist, classist, and sexist reality, the oral tradition will reflect those values and will thus shape the people's consciousness to include and accept racism, classism and sexism, and they will incorporate that change, hardly noticing the shift. If the oral tradition is altered in certain subtle, fundamental ways, if elements alien to it are introduced so that its internal coherence is disturbed, it becomes the major instrument of colonization and oppression (p. 225).

Facing New Challenges

Although it had been my choice to finish high school, I frequently questioned the sanity of my decision. I despised feeling abandoned and the disconnection I felt not only from most of my classmates and many of my teachers but from my family as well. I had difficulty concentrating and I detested what was happening to me. School work was not the only thing that suffered; I began seeing myself and the world around me differently. I could not understand why I was not fitting in and why I did not have any friends. There were many occasions, particularly while I was at Churchill High School, when it became quite evident that my motivation to continue was easily replaced by doubt and discouragement.

I believe now, (I may have always believed it) that motivation comes from within. For me it is a driving force to be the best I could be and can be, which basically means that despite the obstacles I faced I could not stop believing in myself. I am more convinced now that the core of motivation is the heart and soul of our being. As a high

school student, my motivation was propelled by the fact that I placed very high expectations on myself (I was not going to fail) but it also came from knowing that my parents, particularly my mother, expected me to do well. Fortunately, I was mature enough, or maybe I was just lucky, to know that I was being confronted with new challenges. Regardless of my belief about motivation, I continued to have doubts and because I was aware of my scepticism, my energy to stay in school had to be continually checked, altered, and adjusted! How did I do that? I persistently reminded myself of the goal I had set out for myself. It was simple; I was going to graduate from high school. That goal seemed pretty straightforward, but at times I felt it was unreachable. The idea of quitting school never left me; it was in every way a major part of my struggle. The temptation at times was quite fierce and resisting it had to be just as ferocious. I was of the opinion that if I quit school I would just be affirming the negative stereotypical images of 'Indians'.

Periodically, the pressure to continue with school was unbearable and my way of dealing with it was to internalize the stress and quietly persevere. Harris and Ordonez (1988) examined what it meant "to internalize, to ingest the poison of oppression? They believe, and I concur, that "it means deep down we believe the basis of oppression....It means we must prove we do not fit the stereotypes born of these beliefs" (p. 306). During high school and in my undergraduate degree, I was not politically astute and I certainly did not realize I was succumbing to the oppression I was experiencing. I internalized the hurt and notwithstanding the turmoil, I refused to be beaten. The only 'power' I could control was my own *personal* power; it was an inner strength which

guided me when I was discouraged, weak, and vulnerable. It sustained me and it contributed to the much needed strength I required not only to finish high school but it frequently assisted me in getting through the day, the week or the month.

Beyond Self-Reflection: The Purpose of the Study

In this thesis, I describe the “feelings of separation” as feelings associated with racism and oppression, such as loneliness, fear of failure, isolation and alienation. These factors played a significant role in my life as an Aboriginal student, and they have greatly influenced how I work with the Aboriginal students, the staff and faculty at the university and the Aboriginal organizations. I define “schooling experiences” as those personal experiences, which became intertwined with the “feelings of separation”. I argue that not only by retelling my experiences but also by reflecting on them I have been able to see how they have helped shape the person and the educator I am, today. I have also learned that education is not just about books, reading and writing. It involves every part of me- spiritually, mentally, physically and emotionally- something I did not know or appreciate as a young and naive student. I wanted to get good marks, pass my courses and graduate from high school. This is not so different from what Monture-Angus (1995) suggested when she described her experiences in law school as “all those years of living in my mind just took me further away from developing a full understanding of myself” (p. 51).

Since I now know and accept that education encompasses all of me, I have

begun to question and challenge the kind of education I have received. This personal journey has not been a pleasant ride. In fact, it has been quite painful because in the reflective and writing process, I actually had to relive those moments. But this effort has enabled me to rethink, re-evaluate, and reinterpret my experiences as educational and to see what they now mean to me (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). A most surprising discovery, is how in the complex and contradictory processes of making choices and making a life, I contributed to my own 'colonization'. I believe if I had not done this reflection I would be hard pressed to accept or face what Maracle (1996) proposed:

we must respond to our conditions of life in order to change them. This change does not amount to taking the same old story and putting the words in the mouths of brown faces to be properly parroted by them. It amounts to finding a way to loosen the grip that colonialism has on us (p. 91).

In this thesis, I have written stories of my personal and schooling experiences and have described how they have shaped and developed the person and the kind of educator I have become. The 'stories', or narratives of my life, are a collection of what I have come to understand as "critical incidents" (Newman, 1990, p. 17); events--I now recognize as meaningful experiences. The stories have not only revealed my biases and my beliefs but more importantly they have served as a *vehicle* to describe, explain and theorize about what I refer to as "feelings of separation". Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to utilize narrative inquiry to examine what impact my schooling experiences, both negative and positive, have had on me as a person and a professional. In writing my stories and analyzing them, I have not just told 'my stories' but have tried to show, describe, and demonstrate how 'systemic racism' in residential school,

high school and university contributed to my 'feelings of separation' as an Aboriginal student and how I passively resisted the oppression.

Significance of the Study

This thesis is not only about the struggles and the difficulties I experienced as an Aboriginal female student in a non-Aboriginal world but the reflection and the analysis of these personal schooling experiences have provided me with an understanding of why I felt it was important for me to belong to the system; a system, that was 'systemically racist'. I felt uncomfortable within it but I could not identify, nor could I name, what it was that I was encountering. I passively resisted the discomfort and today I am reminded of it each and every time I advise or counsel an Aboriginal student.

It is because I have taken the opportunity and the time to reflect on my personal schooling experiences, both positive and negative, that I have come to accept that I *can* work within the university system without feeling the need to give up *who I am*.

My hope and objective is that this thesis can contribute towards a better understanding of not just how my life was as a student in a non-Aboriginal world but it may also explain what it means to leave home; to move from a reserve to the city, to get an education. When I left home, I did not anticipate that I would have difficulty with my identity, my cultural background, nor did I think I was going to allow myself to feel ashamed of my family, experience the shame of being an 'Indian'.

The thesis may also serve as a guide for teachers, professors, and students, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to understand what it is and can be like to be an Aboriginal student, sometimes the only one, in a main stream educational institution.

CHAPTER TWO

USING NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS METHODOLOGY

I learned about narrative inquiry as a methodology by taking a graduate course in Action Research. As I learned about this methodology, I decided it was a most suitable and appropriate method to use for the kind of research I was proposing to do which was to investigate and examine what impact my schooling experiences, both negative and positive, have had on me as a person and a professional. A significant difference between qualitative and quantitative research is that, in quantitative research, "the researcher's values are kept out of the study, there are no value statements, whereas in qualitative research the language used in the report may be made in first person and personal. The researcher also admits the value-laden nature of the study and it is context-bound" (Creswell, 1994, p. 6). The other benefit of using this kind of methodology is "because of its focus on experience and the qualities of life and education, narrative is situated in a matrix of qualitative research" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 3).

My understanding of narrative inquiry is that it allowed me as a researcher and writer to be creative, not to be afraid to share my stories. Newman (1994) suggests that "critical incidents are those moments which have allowed me to stand back and examine my beliefs and my teaching critically. They are stories used as tools for conducting research on ourselves" (p. 3). Unless I know where I come from and know what my beliefs, values, and attitudes are, I cannot begin to challenge and change who I

am, either as a person or as an educator. A narrative inquiry is not just about telling or writing stories about ourselves. The stories must offer meaning, not only to ourselves but to others as well. "Narrative is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1988, p. 24).

When I enrolled in an Action Research course in September, 1995 I knew it was different from other research methods I had read about and second, it seemed to me the research course was something I had been looking for -- a vehicle I could use to do my thesis. When I was contemplating taking the course, I decided to go and talk to the professor. After she explained the course and her expectations, I seriously considered not taking the course because I could not see myself "doing research on myself", or perhaps I was afraid of what I would find out about myself, both as a person and an educator? I knew the course was going to be difficult, not in terms of its content but I knew if I was serious about doing a reflection on my schooling experiences it was going to be difficult both personally and emotionally.

One requirement of the course was a piece of reflective writing every week. Every week I would faithfully write my reflections about what I had read or what had happened at work and looked for something magical to emerge -- something which might tell me why I am the way I am. I would ask my professor for direction and she would ask, "What do you think the issues are? What are the tensions?" I kept writing about my work and responding to what I was reading, keeping the real stories at arm's length. My professor kept prodding me to look inward, to "tell stories". When I would

do my reflective pieces, I kept thinking about when I left home and what it was like when I was a high school student. I knew I had stories to tell but I was not sure where to begin my reflections.

In my work as an advisor and counsellor, there is not a moment when an Aboriginal student comes in and says I am interested in going to university. My question is usually to ask what she or he would like to study and the answer is always “I want to work with my people, so I want something I can use”. In his article, “Redefinition of Indian Education”, Hampton states “the second standard of Indian education is service. Education is to serve the people. Its purpose is not individual advancement or status” (1995, p. 21). This statement is not only recognized by most Aboriginal people who are working in the education system, but the students I work with as well. We all know there is an expectation from our communities to offer and give back what we have learned. What is not always talked about is how “being a successful student” sometimes sets us apart from the rest of the communities, but we are also seen by the dominant culture as being different, “a success story”.

I recalled back to June 1971, when I was finally in Grade 12, for the second time. I had been in the wrong program at Churchill High School and in order for me to go to university, I needed to go back and pick up university entrance subjects. I completed these courses at Kelvin High School. I was excited, but I was also sad. There were times I was excited about graduating, but that also meant I was going to be set apart from the other Aboriginal students, including my older brothers and sisters.

Now where was I going to belong? What's so important about finishing high school anyway? Harman and Edlesky (1989) suggest that "the child or adult who has put one foot into the new exciting world where language is power may feel a strong tug on her other foot from those left behind. Family and friends may express resentment, jealousy, abandonment, or simply, incomprehension at their loved one's movement away from them" (p. 400).

This also reminds me of what Hampton said about education and how it is not based on "individual advancement or status", but it is to serve the people. In many ways I did neglect and deny who I was and where I came from because it was easier for me. That way I didn't have to answer questions about my family and there were times I thought admitting being "Indian" would hurt my chances to succeed. Those times were very confusing. Kohl (1994) talked about purposely not learning Yiddish and it's not until he goes to Harvard that he realized he had made a mistake. He confesses "I wanted to be myself, neither minority or majority, and rejected both the pressure to assimilate and to separate. It was very hard to walk that thin line alone, yet there was no one to talk to about my desire to learn everything Harvard had to offer without giving up myself" (p. 24). I didn't give up my language, but the value I accorded my culture was minimal. I hated sitting in the classroom when my teachers presented anything that had to do with Aboriginal people because it was always so negative. It was as if they were talking about me.

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) "the study of narrative, therefore, is the study of the ways humans experience the world. This general notion translates

into the view that education is the construction and reconstruction of personal and social stories; teachers and learners are storytellers and characters in their own and other's stories (p.2). The very first time I stepped into a classroom, my dream was always to master the English language. Here I am in my mid-forties and I am still trying to learn the language. I can get by and I can sometimes describe how I feel with the language, but when it comes to articulating *exactly* how I feel, it fails me. It fails me because it is a language, which does not connect with my heart, my family, my history, my dreams, but it is a language I can manipulate when it suits me. What this means is; I give up part of what I want to say, therefore, I give up part of me. It makes me realize what I have given up to get an education. An expense, I did not visualize, nor did I imagine. One of the things I gave up was being proud to be Anishinabe. I did exactly what Maracle (1996) suggests is "the result of being colonized is the internalization of the need to remain invisible. The colonizers erase you, not easily, but with shame and brutality. Eventually you want to stay that way" (p. 8). Grant (1994) also contends that "who we are is written on our bodies, our hearts, our souls. That is what it means to be Native in the dawn of the twentieth century" (p. 74). The place in the paper had arrived where I found myself just wanting to cry. Cry for what? Cry, because I feel sorry for myself, or cry because I have denied for so long who I am? Am I just realizing now, how I have bought into the system? A system, so foreign, but I keep trying to live it. Is this also the part I admit why I did not want to take the Action Research course?

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest further that "for the researcher, this is a

portion of the complexity of narrative, because a life is also a matter of growth toward an imagined future and therefore, involves retelling stories and attempts to reliving stories. A person is, at once, engaged in living, telling, retelling and reliving stories (p. 4). Similarly, Newman (1995) stated that “Action Research is as much about uncovering our assumptions as it is about seeing new connections” (p.6).

“Memories are stories – pictures of the mind, gathered up and words put to them, making them live and breathe” (Grant, 1994, p. 109). I could not do “research on myself”, unless I was willing to tell some of my stories and hopefully, the stories I choose to tell, will help me figure out why I am the way I am and why I do the things the way I do, both personally and professionally. At times the stories may seem out of context because I do not tell them chronologically but these stories are not just stories. As Grant suggests, they come alive and I had to relive them so that I could find meaning and admit to myself, that each story I had to tell has had some impact on how I work and how I view the world. These stories are like a mirror of my past, but they are also a reflection of the problems I thought I had dealt with and wonder why they keep reappearing? In addition to telling these stories, I discuss what my thoughts were and how I felt about the incidents at the time and I tried very hard not to analyze the stories as I wrote them.

For me, narrative inquiry is not unlike the traditional story telling of the Anishinabe and other Aboriginal people, where “the meaning of legend, myth, story or narrative is bound up in the cultural way of life of the storyteller, and serves to show how some event has a particular meaning” (O’Meara, 1996 p. 123). O’Meara further

implied that “this event was not confined by time or space. Many layered messages were encoded in the stories, which were often told to groups of people of all ages. Therefore, it was necessary to include within these stories a reflection, which illustrated what I have learned, an objective analysis and a meaningful connection to the readings. It was from this process and telling and ‘retelling’ of the stories of my personal journey which revealed how I have been shaped and moulded as the educator and person I am today. Bissex (1988) suggests that “we share our meanings with each other in the hope that the meanings of one person’s story will help seek and find the meanings of theirs” (p. 775). The process of interpreting these stories or critical incidents revealed some of the assumptions I had when I decided to finish high school or rather ‘to become formally educated’. They uncovered some surprises as well. LaRocque (1996) described colonization as “a pervasive structural and psychological relationship between the colonizer and colonized and is ultimately reflected in the dominant institutions, policies, histories, literatures of occupying powers” (p. 11) and one of the surprises I had to acknowledge and accept was that I needed to undergo a process of decolonization. Maracle (1996) suggested that “the expropriation of the accumulated knowledge of Native peoples is one legacy of colonization. Decolonization will require the repatriation and rematriation of that knowledge by Native people themselves” (p. 91).

During my educational leave from The University of Winnipeg between September 1994 and September 1995, I had the opportunity to think about and reflect upon the schooling experiences I have had and how these experiences have shaped who

I am, my beliefs, values, and my world view. This reflection has contributed to my understanding of what Freire (1985) refers to as “conscientization”. It is not simply becoming aware of something, becoming aware of what is happening and what has happened to you, it involves action and a feeling of empowerment. Bisset (1988) stated that “learning from experience is not automatic; it requires certain conditions” (p. 772). It now makes sense to me why I could not reflect on these experiences while I was working. Taking this opportunity to write this thesis made it possible for me to learn from my experiences. In order to accomplish that task not only did I have to step back but I had to leave my workplace. As Schon (1982) suggested

a practitioner’s reflection can serve as a corrective to over-learning. Through reflection, he [sic] can surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situations of uncertainty of uniqueness which he may allow himself to experience” (p.61)

When I left home at the age of fourteen in 1966, my goal was to finish high school, I never expected that I would have difficulty with my identity, my cultural background, nor did I think I was going to allow myself to feel ashamed of my family, including my own shame of being an ‘Indian’. The following poem, which I wrote in February 1996 for my Action Research class describes the agony and the ugly space I was in but it is also a reminder of *where* I have been.

AFRAID

*I heard
"The Only Good Indian
Is a Dead Indian
I never heard that on
The reserve
I was fine before I
Came to the city
What is wrong with me
Now?*

*I have no answer
All I know is that
I am afraid of making
A mistake
I am afraid if I succeed
It will not make any
Difference.*

*There was a time
Laughing at myself
Came easily
Now all I feel is
Shame
I am afraid to open
My mouth
I know that I am not dead
Does this mean
I am no good?
I must be no good
Because I feel ugly
I hate being Indian
Why was I born on the
Reserve anyway?*

*There is nothing I can do
To change that
I can't change who I am
I'm afraid I am
Not prepared to die
Just yet
So I have to try
Harder
"To be a Good Indian".*

Although the focus of this chapter is on methodology, I have made a conscious decision to place this poem in this section because it sets the stage for the rest of 'my stories' and it is also because I now feel a different kind of embarrassment. It is a kind of reality, a harsh reality, which forces me, not in a gentle way to admit to myself that I succumbed and contributed to my own "colonization" process and its impact continues to emerge, whenever I am unsure of myself.

Giroux (1992) proposed that "students need to learn that the relationship between knowledge and power can be emancipatory, that their histories and experiences matter, and that what they say and do can count as part of a wider struggle to change the world around them" (p.8). Prior to writing this thesis, it had not occurred to me that my school experiences mattered but reading Giroux helped me realize how I allowed myself to give up what was most precious to me, my spirituality. I ignored it because the history of my people were excluded; I was excluded and I truly believed I had to give up who I was in order to get a "good education". It is no wonder, I was taken aback when I read what Simon (1987) suggested that "an education that created silence is not an education" (p. 375). How could I have participated in my education if I felt excluded?

Limitations

One of the limitations of this thesis is that not only am I the instrument in this research but I am also the lone subject. I am providing the analysis, the interpretation

and the research is based on my own 'schooling experiences' and my 'stories'. The narrow scope of this thesis may be viewed as bias and subjective and may not be generalizable to others' experiences. The fact that the stories cannot be verified, they may be perceived as being mythologised or at least fabricated therefore may shed doubt and disbelief. The findings of this qualitative study could be subject to other interpretations of my stories. There is a good possibility that this thesis, rather than be seen as courageous may be viewed as egocentric and self-centred, which may minimize the serious nature of the topic, including the type of methodology I have used.

In this thesis, I have typed my stories in italics, double-indented and single spaced them to distinguish them from my commentary, discussion, analysis and the weaving of the literature. This will be evident in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

RETURNING HOME TO BLOODVEIN

I present two stories in this chapter. The first story is about returning home to Bloodvein First Nation in March 1996. It is significant because on the way and while I was in Bloodvein that day, it was the first time I finally admitted to myself that it was important that my family and the people of Bloodvein understood or at least be apprised on what it was like for me leaving home and going away to school. The second story has to do with being sent to the wrong residential school and how I managed to correct the situation.

I decided to include these incidents early in the thesis because they provide a glimpse of not only what the thesis is about but it deals with coming to terms, accepting, identifying and naming the struggles and tensions I have experienced both as an Aboriginal student and a Native Student Advisor. As an adult I now know that the story about the residential school demonstrates my personal experience with “systemic racism”, but more importantly it portrays a picture of my resistance, as passive as it was, to being overpowered and controlled by the residential school system. It is not only a story about confronting fears, regrets, and weaknesses but it is also a story about courage, strength and hope, which I can share with Aboriginal students for encouragement as they begin their educational journeys.

Around the end of February 1996, I received a call from Bloodvein, a place I still call home. The person I spoke to asked if I was free on Tuesday, March 26, 1996. He said, if you are, we are having an

Aboriginal Youth Conference, and we would like you to come and talk about your personal educational experiences. I told him that I was free and I would be happy to do whatever I could to encourage the youth to keep going to school.

After I hung up the phone I thought I wonder if I can do this. I didn't give it much thought until the day before I was supposed to go. This was not the first time, I had been asked to talk about these experiences, but somehow I knew it was time to tell the truth. The time had arrived to tell the students and my people, what it has been like for me since I left home.

Acknowledging these feelings made me feel quite nervous. I thought what will I say? How much can I tell them? The previous times I presented, I never had the courage to talk about how homesick and lonely I was for my parents, my brothers and sisters and my friends. I was never able to tell the audience that when I had left home I cried every day for the first three months and at some point I decided achieving the level of education I have, has been much, much too expensive and I really could not afford to have it pent up inside of me anymore. I had come to a realization that I needed to share these experiences. Not just share them, but I had to do it in a meaningful way so that my stories may benefit those who are now beginning their educational journey. If I can help in one small way to alleviate some of the pain and discomfort the students are now experiencing, then I think it's time for me to take some responsibility and begin acting like a role model I claim to be.

The night before I was scheduled to travel to Bloodvein I told my partner that I didn't want to go. He said "Remember what you always say; the work you do is for the students". I knew if I didn't go, I would not feel very good about it because the students were expecting me. The trip to Bloodvein from the St. Andrews airport is about forty-five minutes.

On the way to Bloodvein, I thought about what I would present because I was still not sure how much and what I was going to tell the students. I was reading Kohl's article, "I Won't Learn from You" in the plane and his statement about exclusion grabbed my attention. He states, "exclusion, whether based on gender, race, class, or any other category, is a way of insulting or injuring people" (1994, p. 21). Reading and

thinking with him caused me to reflect on my school experiences, and it occurred to me at that moment, that was precisely the reason why I was going home. I wondered how I could explain to the students about the exclusion of our history and our people in schools. If I was going to make any sense at all, I would have to tell them how this affected me as a student. I thought about what stories I could share with them so that they would understand the challenges I faced while I was going through high school? I asked myself whether there were certain stories which would be more helpful and meaningful?

As I was asking myself these questions, it dawned on me that I had been hurt because my history, my people and I had been excluded. At times it had felt like I didn't exist at all and, in order for me to think I belonged somewhere, I had undermined my family and my "Aboriginal" identity. It was a survival technique which, in retrospect, has shaped and constructed who I have become as a person and an educator. Going home in a way forced me to admit to myself that I went through high school feeling isolated, alienated myself from my people and family, but most of all, I alienated myself from myself. This is what Edelsky and Harman (1991) meant when they said, "for some students, then, their growth in competence as language users may bring to them and to their families a confused and confusing mix of pride, loss, and pain. This pain has at least two sources: one coming from outside the student and the other from within" (p. 400). This is an example of what I refer to as "feelings of separation" because not only was I physically separated from my parents, my family and my friends but I was also separated from them culturally, emotionally and spiritually. I remember

being very proud of myself when I graduated from high school and I was anxious to go home and show off my diploma to my parents.

Although I had done what I wanted to do, I felt alone and estranged. It occurred to me because I had succeeded in achieving my goal, I was faced with a different kind of separation. Wanting to go home in a sense was an attempt to go back where I came from and to be a part of a life I was familiar with and wanted to somehow reintroduce myself to my family and my people. I had gotten lost culturally while pursuing my high school education and even though I had done what I wanted to do, something was missing. It is true what Judith Newman says about "action research". It "allows us to pose some important questions, it invites us to see contradictions in our beliefs and practices, it affords insight into the large political issues and, more important, it challenges us to change" (1994, p. 13).

When we landed in Bloodvein, I thought about my late father; I even looked for him, because when he was alive, he would always pick me up at the airport. I knew he was there in spirit and the thought comforted me. My mother was not there, because she suffered a stroke in December 1995 and is still in the hospital, awaiting a bed in a personal care home. My parents not being there reminded me that things had changed; I changed.

I got a ride to the Band Office which is where the conference was being held. The Aboriginal Youth Conference began with an opening prayer by one of the elders. Ten students, ranging from 10 to 16 years of age and seven adults, including my oldest sister and one of my younger sisters, were in attendance. Immediately before my session, an elder, my Uncle Antoine spoke in Saulteaux about his personal experiences. I would guess his level of education is maybe grade two. He talked about the first time the white man came to the reserve and he said, "Yes, the white man brought books, but if we did not resist to keep our land, our reserve we would not have a place we could call home. He suggested because he did not learn to speak English he had to

depend on other people on the reserve to help him understand what was happening. He looked at me and my sisters and he said "one of those people was your mother". He added that education was important and we need to understand the ways of the white man but they need to understand ours. He encouraged the youth present to keep going to school". Then he said something I will never forget. . . he pointed to his feet and said, "Don't just look where you're going; look way ahead; look into the future".

What my uncle had to say was momentous for me. I recalled that Hampton (1995) had suggested Indian education was not for "individual advancement or status" but "to serve the people". It was similar to what my uncle was saying and my uncle's words of wisdom revealed to me that I did not go to school for the community but I had done it for myself. I accepted the fact that I was meant to be there because I, too, need to be reminded by elders, to look beyond where I am now and that I do have a responsibility to 'serve' the people. The importance of protecting the culture and our language was also made very clear to me. Hearing my uncle speak in Saulteaux reminded me of the time I left home at fourteen to go to school. I remembered the experiences that helped shape who I am today--the times in residential school, at Churchill and Kelvin High, at the University of Winnipeg, and now at the University of Manitoba. I was cognizant then that for almost thirty years I have engaged in study of one sort or another, "looking where I am going" but not seeing far ahead. I found myself recalling my schooling experiences--many painful. I felt a sense of responsibility to share what had happened to me--to encourage young people, the ones present at the conference and others, to pursue an education but also to let them know how difficult that can sometimes be.

I had decided to take along some of the writing I had done in a course I was taking at the time. I had thought that if I couldn't tell my stories, perhaps, it would be possible to read some of them. Before I began my session, I placed my binder on the floor and I looked at the audience and I said, "*these papers you see are all about what happened to me when I first left to go to school. I won't read you all of them, but let me share one or two*".

I decided to tell the students at the conference about being sent to the wrong residential school because it was fresh in my mind. It is about loneliness and not having control over my education. More importantly, it is about resistance and it is about the survival tools my parents taught me prior to leaving home and learning how to apply them.

I thought about the about the time the Indian agent (counsellor), my mother and I met to discuss where I would go to school for my grade nine. We met at least two or three times before I actually left home. My mother had been adamant about me going to the Pine Creek Residential School, which was located in Camperville, Manitoba. I remembered hearing the Indian agent promising my mother that I would go there, so once this was established it was clear to me and everyone where I would go to school.

I had to stay overnight in Winnipeg before I could get on the bus to Camperville. I have always recollected that night as very strange. I stayed at the Assiniboia Residence, where my oldest sister and brother had gone. When I arrived, a nun met me at the front door and I found out later her name was Sister Charette. I followed her down the hall, up the stairs, past the washroom and finally ending up in the dormitory. It was huge; it seemed like endless rows of beds, all painted white, made up with either pink or brown blankets at the foot of each bed. Sister said, "there are not very many students here yet, so you can have this bed right by the door". I asked her if anybody else was coming and she said, no. I could feel my heart pounding. I had always shared a room with my sisters and there I was with all these empty beds. Sister

Charette asked me if I remembered where the washroom was and I told her I did. At that she said, have a good sleep then.

I heard her walk down the hall, down the stairs...I was completely alone; I was scared. I had never been alone before; I sat on the bed and I wondered what my sisters were doing. I wished they were there with me. I thought about my parents and all I wanted was to go home. My heart felt so heavy and I was very tired. I tossed and turned and tried to find a comfortable position, but I couldn't. The noise of the traffic was unbearable; how can anybody sleep? I continued to lay there and stared at the ceiling and all of a sudden I felt tears running down both sides of my face. I felt so lonely; a feeling I had never experienced. What have I done? Why did I want to come to school so badly? Maybe when I get to Camperville, it will be better...

The next day I got on the bus to Camperville but when the bus arrived, the bus driver announced we were in Sandy Bay. I panicked. This is not where I'm supposed to be. All I could think of was; my mother is not going to know where I am. She is never going to find me. How come the Indian Agent lied to her? Why did Father Emile put me on the wrong bus? I had no way of calling my mother to tell her where I was. What am I going to do? There were other students with me and when we got to the Sandy Bay residential school, the two nuns who were there took us to the kitchen for something to eat. I remember sitting in the huge kitchen and there were rows and rows of tables and benches. I didn't feel like eating and it made me feel worse that the nuns didn't seem to notice that they had received an extra student. My mother would have noticed.

I thought about the times, we went somewhere as a family. She would count all of us, sometimes two or three times, until she was satisfied she didn't forget any of us. After we ate I remember going up to the dorm; it looked exactly the same as the one I slept in the night before. I didn't want to be there. I just wanted to go home. I felt abandoned and I had no idea where I was. The more I thought about the Indian Agent and Father Emile, the more angry I became. They were both liars – nobody lies to my mother and I was not going to be part of it. I, too, felt cheated, lied to, and I didn't understand any of it.

The next day, more students arrived. The following days are a blur but I remember the second evening very well. There were about sixty girls in the dorm, but it was so quiet; no one was talking. We quietly put our pyjamas on, washed up and there was no noise until

Sister told us to kneel down to say our prayers. Prayer at that moment didn't seem to provide any solace. All I could think of was how was I going to get out of here. I was very confused. But there was one thing I knew for sure; I was miserable and I was not going to stay there. I was going to find a way to leave. I had no idea whether that was possible, but I was going to do everything in my power to change my situation.

Classes were going to start the next day and I thought, why would I start school here when I'm not going to be here for very long? I really did not know what I was going to do, but whatever it was, I would have to decide before classes start. I knew the nuns were not going to help me because when I told them I was at the wrong school the very first night, they didn't seem too concerned. I would have to do this myself. But who would I have to talk to? Then I remembered seeing an office when I came in, but I didn't know how to get there.

I knew the office was on the main floor. As I walked down the hallway, I felt more like the hunted, instead of the hunter. I was terrified and I kept looking behind me to see if anyone was following me. The hallway seemed endless. Brave, I wasn't, but I kept walking until I finally found the principal's office. I knocked on the door; my heart was racing. I felt like running away, but I did not know where to go. No one answered the door and I thought, after all this, the principal is probably not even here. He has to be here. I knocked again. I noticed my arm was a bit heavier and the knock was not as loud and it lacked confidence. Oh come on. Please be there.

Finally the door opened, the priest in his full black cassock, looked perplexed to see me at the door. He looked down the hall to see if anyone else was with me. His facial expression clearly indicated I was disturbing him. My brothers and sisters and I had seen enough priests to know when we bothered them and I was bothering this one. I asked him if I could talk to him and he said, "Come in, have a seat". "Father", I said, "there has been a big mistake. I was supposed to go to Camperville, not here". He said, "What is your name?" I told him and he looked at his list and he said, "No mistake has been made. You are to remain in this school and nothing can be done about it." "But, my mother...thinks I'm in Camperville. And the Indian Agent told her that's where I was going". He looked at me and he said, "there is nothing I can do".

I continued to sit in the chair; it was a comfortable chair. I had never sat in a leather chair before, but this was not an ordinary

situation either. The priest looked at me and said "Go back to the playroom and tell Sister Stephanie you will be staying". I responded by saying, "I'm not going to stay here, Father". There was an extra chair, one of those oak chairs with no padding, in his office and I got up; picked it up and I said I am going to sit outside your office until you transfer me". "You can't sit there," he said. "Go back to the playroom". No, I'm going to sit here. I took the chair and I put it right outside his office. I don't quite remember how long I sat there but I do remember going to the office everyday to ask Father whether I was going to be transferred. I did not attend any classes.

At one point when I was sitting in the chair, I felt so far away from home. The long hallway; the clean floors did not do much to comfort me. My bum was getting sore, but I was not going to give up what I started. I tried putting both my hands between the chair and my bum. I leaned forward and rocked, but nothing seemed to relieve the stress or the ache. What's going to happen to me? I stared at the floor and I began to cry. No one really came to check to see what I was doing? I began to have some doubts about whether my "sit-in" was going to have any effect? Tomorrow is going to be Friday, I don't want to be here for the weekend.

The next day I returned to the office but I felt as sense of uneasiness and I was definitely not as confident that anything was going to come out of my daring "resistance". But I was not going to give up. About one o'clock in the afternoon, Father Chaput called me into his office and he said "Go and get your things, you are going to Camperville this afternoon". I couldn't believe my ears. I ran out of his office and as I ran down the hall, I yelled back to Father, "Thank you!" But under my breath I thought, "I did it! I am going to be transferred".

About an hour later, I was sitting in the playroom and Sister Stephanie came in and she said "Come with me to the front, the cab is coming any minute. I picked up my suitcase and made the trek down the hallway, which had become quite familiar. We passed Father Chaput's office...the chair, my chair was not there. There was not a trace of my rebellious act. I felt kind of proud. I got in the cab and never looked back. The sun was shining; it felt good on my face. For a fourteen year old girl, I felt pretty good for what I had just done.

I disclosed part of this story and some of my schooling experiences to the

students at the conference but what I did not tell them was if I had not believed that my parents loved me, especially my mother and if I had not watched and learned how my mother and father worked, or if they had not taught me discipline and hard work, I would have never had the strength or the courage to demand I be transferred from Sandy Bay Residential School to Pine Creek Residential School. In retrospect, although I was physically separated from my family, their love for me and my respect for them had already been deeply ingrained and no one could take that away from me.

As I related part of my story and as I stressed the importance of family and knowing where you come from, I realized for myself that, as a high school student in Winnipeg, I had not always believed it. As painful as the memories were, going home helped me appreciate what I have accomplished and there was something extremely gratifying about sharing my experiences with the students. On the other hand, I cannot ignore the other important part of this story and which was to clarify for the students who were present and for those who may read this thesis to realize that this is my story and not every Aboriginal student, who leaves her or his community will experience the exact same thing. The other factor was when I initially left home to go to school the missionaries and the Department of Indian Affairs were still in control of educating the “Indians” and I had no outside role models, other than my family. There were no Aboriginal teachers or counsellors, therefore the story that I shared with them is clearly a story which may alert and prepare students for their own educational journeys and to remind them that they do not have give up their identity or be ashamed of who they are. I am not proud of the fact that I was ashamed for being “Anishinabe” but I am pleased

and proud that I can speak my language; it is a part of my identity. My Uncle Antoine who spoke at the Aboriginal Youth Conference reminded me of its significance because if I had lost my language, I would not have understood his profound message.

When I finished speaking, I looked around the room and I had suggested we sit in a circle, I noticed my nephew who was fourteen years old at the time and I caught myself taking a second look because he was going to be leaving the community the following year to attend school in Winnipeg and I thought 'wow, he is just a 'baby'.

It dawned on me and in some ways it amazed me that I had been just a baby when I left and there was something unnerving about that realization but at the same time, I felt proud for everything I had accomplished. Because my accomplishments in many ways set me apart from my people and my friends at home, I decided to devote the next chapter on my search to belong.

CHAPTER FOUR

SEARCHING FOR A 'SENSE OF BELONGING'

The story in this chapter is about re-evaluating my schooling experiences and reclaiming my identity as Anishinabe but more importantly it signifies not only a re-introduction to my culture and spirituality, but it also symbolizes the affirmation of what it means to be 'Anishinabe'. It is basically an introduction of my search of 'self' and how I have tried to balance the two worlds I live in.

In 1979, I went to a Native Awareness Workshop. I was twenty-seven years old and as an "Indian", this was a new experience for me. I was working as a Probation Officer at the time but more importantly, it was also a time when I was still embarrassed and ashamed to admit I was an 'Indian'. I was still trying to be somebody I was not.

The elder, who ran the workshop, took me aside one day and he said to me, "Mary, you are lucky; you have been able to meld the two worlds and you are able to live in both of them. You speak both English and Saulteaux very well." I thought, at that moment, have I really convinced people, including myself, that I have been able to accomplish such a feat?

Today, the words of the elder are still very meaningful to me because I continue to struggle to find a balance between the two worlds. Not only that, but upon reflection, I did not understand the experience at the time, but as I continued to write this thesis the event was obviously very significant. I questioned what happened to me at that particular workshop and I certainly never thought that it would or could contribute, to who I am today, not only as an Aboriginal person, but as an educator. I had not taken part in a cultural event or ceremony prior to this workshop and I was cautious about totally immersing myself into the cultural way of life.

It did not matter that I was inexperienced and did not know the culture or rather the spiritual teachings of the 'Anishinabe', there was absolutely no question I could understand, relate and identify with the

teachings. I recognized and connected with the knowledge I was being taught; the familiarity of the topic was uncanny. It was different from any 'formal education' I had ever received. The concept of "spirituality" presented to me was very clear. It was as if, I had been there and heard all those things before; I felt it in my heart and it was comforting. The significance of the circle in my culture made perfect sense to me and I was content but there was something nagging at me.

I began questioning where I had been and how was it that I had to come to a Native Awareness workshop to learn about my culture. It was confusing, but somewhat reassuring that all those things I was learning were clearly not imaginary. They were very real and they were a part of me and always had been. Maracle (1996) maintained that

Spiritualism is not a learned or bequeathed gift. It is natural to us all. It can however be obstructed and even crushed. It can also be harnessed. A person can be taught to reject its vitality. She or he can be prevented from making use of its potential. But spirit cannot be handed out. Only death causes spirit to depart from the body (p. 115).

I found it consoling but I could not understand why it was that I had ignored this side of me? It was interesting and somewhat sad that the more I pondered and examined the significance of this event, it was not difficult for me to recognize and understand why I had displaced and became separate from the beliefs of my people and culture. I had disregarded my own values, my cultural beliefs, and my spirituality, because I did not think they were advantageous to me. So in retrospect, if I did not see any value in the beliefs of the Anishinabe people, it does not surprise me now why I assumed they would not contribute to my "success". Instead, I replaced "my sense of being" with the desire and the need to be formally educated, hoping to become a "better person" by it. Today, I understand my behaviour as a desire to assimilate but I

am not sure whether I willingly wanted to assimilate. Since then I have discovered that "as Native people, we cannot separate our spiritual teachings from our learning, nor can we separate our beliefs, about who and what we are from our values and our behaviors" (Locust, 1988, p.328). It was at this workshop, perhaps because I was older, that I seriously began questioning my identity, my beliefs, my values and the importance of knowing and understanding my cultural background. This was also the first time I had heard anything positive about 'Indian' people.

As I wrote about this incident, I was careful that I did not divulge specific information about the talking circle. It is not because I am trying to hide anything or there is something very secretive or mysterious about the talking circle, but it is out of respect for those individuals who attended and participated in the same workshop. I have come to understand that, what people disclose and share in a traditional ceremony, such as in a sweat lodge or sharing circle it is not only confidential, but I consider it to be sacred and must be held with the strictest confidence. Consequently I took great care not to identify the people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who were in attendance. However, I had no problem sharing my own experience.

We used a rock in the talking circle to recognize and to signify that the person who was holding the rock was the only person who could talk, without intrusion! The rest of us were there to listen and learn. I conceded that I had never experienced this kind of freedom or "voice" in school or in university because most of the time, I felt that I could not contribute to anything in class and thought what I had to say was not "worth anything". I certainly would never think of interrupting anybody when he or she was talking. I was very passive as a student and I used to think or maybe because I was convinced by my teachers that I was shy.

However when I read Friere's description of "culture of silence" (1988) in which he suggests that "students are silent because they no longer expect education to include the joy of learning, moments of passion or inspiration or comedy, or even that education will speak to the real conditions of their lives" (p.122) it makes sense to me now why I remained silent. The quote also reminds me of the one line I used to find puzzling and every teacher I had male or female utilized it to explain or clarify certain problems. The line was '*it is like riding a bicycle, once you know how, you never forget*'. The other students seemed to understand the connection but because I have never learned to ride a bicycle, I never had one, I spent more time trying to figure out what they meant. I am definitely more apprised now and perhaps the example may seem trivial but the point is, that was *not* the only thing that was irrelevant to me.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) denoted that

the most compelling problem that the First Nations students face when they go to university is the lack of respect, not just as individuals, but more fundamentally as a people. To them, the university represents an impersonal, intimidating and often hostile environment, in which little of what they bring in the way of culture knowledge, traditions and core values is recognized, much less respected (p. 6).

It is true that on different occasions, both in high school and university, I was given an opportunity to speak but I chose not to because I did not have that much confidence in my answers or myself, for that matter.

When it was my turn to speak, I took the rock and I held it for a long time. While I was gathering my thoughts and as I became more connected with rock, I realized the rock was alive. It had energy and the energy shot through both my hands and up my arms. It was such a powerful sensation; it startled me. I could describe it as an electrical shock, but that would not be an accurate description; besides, if it was

like an electric shock, I would have released the rock or, at least, would have made some attempt to throw it away. The energy I felt was positive and, even though I was surprised by its power, I knew in my heart it was not harmful. Even now, as I relive the experience, I can still feel the sensation and the energy. It was breathtaking and truly inspiring.

I was overcome with emotion, I had a hard time speaking so I waited until I stopped sobbing. I thought about my education, particularly the residential school experience, my identity, my family, and I questioned where I belonged. I felt like a lost child. I had confessed to the group at the beginning of the workshop that I knew very little about the spiritual and traditional teachings of my people and my reason for attending the workshop was to learn more.

The more I contemplated about this experience, I believe I was given a gift that day; a responsibility to teach, to share, to heal and help my people. I recall how shocked I was and I tried to ignore what had just happened because I was scared and I did not understand what was happening. I will never forget the meaningful contrast I observed in that particular learning environment. I had been pleasantly surprised and overwhelmed by the “sense of belonging” I felt and the transformation I experienced was absolutely “liberating” (Shor and Friere, 1987). It was there and at that moment I was conscious of the fact that I could talk freely and not feel intimidated. I had a voice, I could express how I felt and it was satisfying to know that someone was listening.

So what does the story about the Native Awareness Workshop have to do with my schooling experiences? It not only helped me realize its significance; but it taught me and reminded me of the two worlds I live in. Prior to the workshop, I assumed there was only one way to get an education, which was to attend school or university. The difference now is, I no longer believe that getting or achieving a formal education is the only way “to learn” but that learning can happen in various ways. Colorado

(1988) submitted that “when American Indian people come to an experience in life, we are comfortable the stories have walked us through this before. Thus ancient wisdom helps in the decision making and learning of today” (p.10). My participation in the talking circle provided me with an invaluable lesson. I did not have to be ‘white’ to be somebody; I could do it by embracing and celebrating being ‘Anishinabe’. I was struck and mortified by how easily I had separated myself from my own culture, the ways of my people because I believed that it was the only way I could achieve my goal and be a successful student. It was effortless for me to identify and comprehend Fordham’s (1988) explanation that “in an effort to minimize the effects of race on their aspirations, some Black Americans have begun to take on attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics that may not generally be attributed to Black Americans. To “Become un-Black” (p.5).

I have been and still am accused of acting ‘white’ and it occurred again while writing this thesis. I have been publicly challenged from my biological brothers and indirectly by my sisters stemming from their perception for behaving like I am better than them. I have no doubt I did give that impression because I know I have taken on attitudes and behaviours which are not characteristic of my family and generally among Aboriginal people. The best illustration I can provide is, my goal to finish high school was in many ways quite individualistic, perhaps selfish. I never believed I was better than any of my family; I just wanted to belong somewhere. Paula Gunn Allen (1986) maintained that “belonging is a basic assumption for traditional Indians” (p. 127). The idea that I may not be able to fit in with my own family was more devastating than my

struggles ever were to be accepted in the 'white world'. The longer I stayed away from home and lived in the city, it became very clear that I really did not belong anywhere in particular which was neither comforting or satisfying. Paula Gunn Allen (1986) referred to this as

The breed (whether by parentage or acculturation to non-Indian society) is an Indian who is not an Indian. That is, breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to traditional Indians while making them feel alien among whites. Breeds commonly feel alien to themselves above all (p. 129).

I was astounded by what I was uncovering and learning about myself at the workshop and not all of it was good! But for the first time, after leaving the residential school, graduating from high school and university, I was not just an 'Indian', but I was (am) Anishinabe. Being Anishinabe encompasses all of me; it is a self-identity I can give to myself without someone telling me who *I am*.

When I moved to Winnipeg initially in 1967 to attend high school and whenever I had a chance to go downtown, which was not very often, I used to enjoy when someone asked me if I was Anishinabe and if I spoke Saulteaux. The words "Kitanishinabame inna?" (Do you speak Saulteaux?) were like music to my ears and they warmed my soul. That was the *one* time I was reminded where I was from and when this happened, I felt spiritually connected with my family. Unfortunately, it also aroused and revived the pain of being physically separated from them.

During the workshop, I thought about my family daily; fifteen years had passed since I first left home. I had been homesick, lonely, experienced personal racism and my identity as an "Indian" had undergone several changes.

But despite all these negative circumstances, by the end of the week long workshop, I was able to see that being “Indian” did not have to imply that I was ‘a drunk’, ‘lazy,’ and all the other stereotypes. My participation and my willingness to learn convinced me that I did not have to be anybody else!

In the next chapter I describe my role as a Native Student Advisor and demonstrate how my schooling experiences have in fact promoted and enhanced my understanding of the students’ experiences in a university setting. By choosing certain events which affected the Aboriginal students, I argue that Aboriginal students continue to struggle with the “feelings of separation”.

CHAPTER FIVE

WORKING AS AN ABORIGINAL EDUCATOR

This next chapter describes my role at the University of Winnipeg and demonstrates that my schooling, which in the writing process have become my educational experiences can in fact promote and enhance my understanding of the students' experiences in the university, particularly in my role as an advisor, counsellor and an advocate.

On Wednesday, February 5, 1997 I was doing a presentation on my role as a Native Student Advisor at the University of Winnipeg to a group of prospective students, an upgrading class from the Selkirk Friendship Centre. Since I began working at the University in July 1984, I have done this presentation many, many times for students, schools, other education counsellors, tribal councils/education authorities and various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations. This day was not any different or was it?

We all huddled in my office, which is located in the basement of Bryce Hall. The back wall, which is the first thing I see when I enter my office is a concrete wall. It is not the most attractive nor is it the main feature, but it is nevertheless a part of my office. On the left-hand side of the back wall, there are dark grey, metal bookshelves and the books on the shelves are mostly about the history of the struggles and aspirations of Aboriginal people. On the right-hand side, directly behind my desk and chair, hangs a mirrored window. It is basically a fake window; a mirror, which has

nine window panes. I bought it to disguise the fact that "I have no window and probably will never have one as long as my office is situated in the basement".

The other three walls are of natural brick, which contribute to the physical beauty of the office. Immediately to the left, there are four posters of Garfield, the cat. These posters not only signify the humorous part of my personality but they also serve as reminders for myself and the students that humour and laughter are two of the most wonderful healing agents, I know. On the same side I have a desk and on it is a recently acquired (May 1996) university issued computer, which I am still trying to learn how to use. Beside this desk, in the left hand corner there is a beige recliner, where students normally sit for either personal advising and counselling sessions.

To the extreme right and flush against the corner is my desk and on the left hand side of the wall I have two Jackson Beardy prints; one called 'The Bird Family' and the other is 'Hatching Birds'. I also have an original painting on canvas called 'Our Native Land' (1991) which was painted by Ray Francois. On the background is the sun and a teepee and in front of it is an eagle, a buffalo, a pipe and two feathers. The painting is very significant to me, not just because a close friend gave it to me, but everything in the painting is connected. It is that kind of connection, I searched for and needed as a student. My student life was based more on separation than connection, because I tried to fit in the 'white world' but I also wanted to be part of my family. The physical separation from my family and having no friends contributed to my feelings of disconnectedness. I have other Aboriginal art, which include a bonnet made of safety pins and a mandalla.

On the wall that I face while I'm sitting at my desk are two pictures of wolves and there is a credenza against the wall. On the credenza, there are four of five rocks which I have picked up at different places. Two small turtles, one is made of soapstone and the other is pottery. There is also a seashell, which is painted in white, black, yellow and red with four matching rocks. The colours represent the four races. And there is the ever present wolf calendar. On the left hand side of the credenza is a bunch of bull rushes, which were given to me by a former student in July 1985. When I moved into the office in May 1985 I had casually mentioned to him that I thought bull rushes would add to the decor of the office. When he went to visit his relatives and friends in Jackhead that summer, he brought them back for me. After twelve years and spraying them with hair spray, they still look great! I have taken great care in making my office an attractive and welcoming place for students. It is normally quite spacious but having thirteen people in my office that day was a little crowded.

I began my presentation by telling the students what resources were available in the University. I stressed the importance of the First Nations Student Association and the student lounge. The student lounge is located kitty corner from my office. I explained that the lounge is like a 'home away from home' for the students. It is a comfortable place to meet. The space has provided a 'sense of belonging' and it is where students find support and encouragement.

After I had talked at some length, I asked them if they had any questions. One of the female students asked me "What education do you have?" and "How is it you came to work here?". I thought about it for a moment and I told her that my husband

saw the advertisement in the paper and he suggested I apply. He thought I was the right person for the job. After I gave her the answer, I felt somewhat dissatisfied. It was true that my partner had encouraged me to apply but that was not the only reason. As I continued to have eye contact with her, I said "Perhaps if I tell you briefly where I went to school and by the way I am still in school. I am in the process of finishing my Masters in Education at the University of Manitoba. In a nutshell, my thesis is exactly about what you are asking me. It is about my educational experiences, a reflection of these experiences and how I came to work here. I graduated from Kelvin High School and received my Bachelor of Arts from the University of Winnipeg in 1980.

My reason for coming to work here was mainly because I thought I would be able to provide some assistance to the students. Because I had gone through the system, I felt confident that I would be able to understand some of the struggles and the challenges the students would be confronted with as they go through university. I could be in a position to provide not only encouragement but moral support as well.

Another student asked "What was it like for you? Who supported you?" I told her that my mother had always encouraged me to finish high school. At the time, neither my mother nor I knew anything about university. The students laughed when I told them that my mother is surprised I am still school and that she often asks me when am I going to finish. I was not ready at that moment to tell the students and in fact I simply summarized the following story:

I told them briefly that I had attended a residential school (I discuss Pine Creek Residential School in Chapter Seven) but I did not elaborate instead I choose to tell them about my high school and

university experiences in Winnipeg because I decided narrating those particular stories were more appropriate and relevant. I also did not tell the students that one of the things I did not want to admit to anyone, was that I had struggled and often times found it difficult to continue. As an Aboriginal student, I neglected the other important aspects of my being; the emotional, the physical, and most of all my spirituality.

After I left the Assiniboia Residential School in 1971 and moved in with the Taylor's I was very lonely. I had no friends. I spent a lot of time in my bedroom, doing homework or studying. The Taylor's lived in River Heights, on Elm Street and the closest school was Kelvin High School. For some reason, I do not recall the reason I was not accepted.

I went to Churchill High School which is located in Fort Rouge and in many ways it contributed to the difficulty of forming any kind of meaningful relationships. I did get to know some of the other students but I did not see them outside of school hours. I remember going to one school dance. I remember feeling awkward particularly when I realized some of the students were smoking but they were not regular cigarettes! They knew the name for every dance and I was so naive, I did not have a clue what they were talking about nor did I know the steps. I felt totally out of place and I never went to another dance. I was always afraid of getting into trouble with the law and seeing the other students 'smoking up' unnerved me. I associated drugs and alcohol with Aboriginal people because that is what I heard at school, read in the newspaper, heard on the news and I shied away from hanging around people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people who drank or used drugs. Liquor had not been kind not just to my family, but I was also cognizant of the fact that it was destroying the lives of Aboriginal people. My mother did not drink but my father did. He did not drink very often but when he did I found the tension in the house and my own disappointment in him unbearable. I did not like it when he drank and I judged him harshly. I did not understand why he drank and it confused me.

When I moved to Winnipeg in 1967, a year after Camperville, I was fifteen years old and it was the first time I was confronted with racism. There were some occasions, not very many that, I would find myself in a place where there was liquor but I did not feel the need to experiment. What I did feel was discomfort but more importantly, I knew if I drank I would have to face my mother. I did not treasure the thought of disappointing her. I would sometimes have a glass of wine with dinner at the Taylor's but that was the extent of it. I often thought about my mother's expectation of me. These thoughts seemed to occur everywhere, anywhere, anytime; lying in bed, while walking to school,

in the classroom, or on the bus. Her expectations were simple, 'stay out of trouble and go to school'. Her influence, despite being physically separated from her, was incredibly powerful. I worried what she would say whenever I did not do well in a test or an exam and when I did well, I missed her not being around because I could not share my excitement with her.

I attended Churchill High School for my grade eleven and twelve. I was placed in a commercial program, which meant taking shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. I had no difficulty with typing or shorthand but I could not grasp bookkeeping. In May 1971, I realized if I did not pass my bookkeeping I would not be able to graduate. I was failing it miserably! I hated asking for help but I knew if I did not tell anyone, I was going to fail. I eventually worked up enough nerve to tell Mrs. Taylor about my situation. She was very understanding and suggested I should get a tutor and so I was introduced to Sharon Saper.

Sharon was in her thirties and she was very matter of fact and if I did not have my homework done she would sit beside me until I finished it. One Saturday she came and I did not have my homework done again and she said "I'm going out for an hour and when I come back I expect you to have your homework done". She left and I finished what I had to do. After that I made sure I completed my work before she came. She was tough and she did not accept any excuses. She made me work hard and she drilled me and she made me practice and practice. I wrote the final exam and I was amazed at what I knew and how much I knew. That week, Mrs. Cartwright, my home room teacher called me at home to tell me that my bookkeeping teacher, Mr. Lemoine had called her to say that I got ninety-seven percent in my final exam. She asked me what happened and I proudly told her that I had been working with a tutor. She told me that Mr. Lemoine was both surprised and delighted with the results. I was ecstatic, but at same time I knew that I could not go to university with a general grade 12. I was now eighteen years old, a far cry from where I wanted to be. I had imagined and hoped that I would have graduated much earlier than that and I was still not finished.

I enrolled at Kelvin High School in August, 1971 but before I went to register I asked my counsellor from Indian Affairs to come with me because I wanted to make sure I was going to be accepted this time. I was ready for a fight but as usual whenever I prepare myself to do battle, everything works out. I'm sure Mrs. McDonald wondered why I dragged her to the school. Finally I was in the school I wanted to attend

in the first place. There was only one other Aboriginal student in the school. There were two others at Churchill High School. I thought perhaps because I was going to a neighbourhood school I would find some friends but I didn't.

I made friends with Henry, who was the only Aboriginal student I referred to and he happened to be in the same home room. We sometimes got together and played scrabble. He was also in a private home placement and he lived two or three blocks from me. He asked me to go with him to the graduation, but I declined. I did not go to my Grade twelve graduation dance. It was more important for me to go home to show my mother and my father my high school diploma. I knew Mrs. Taylor was disappointed that I did not go but what she did not realize was that I really did not know anybody and I remembered the fiasco of the school dance at Churchill. I was not prepared to do that again. The only person I knew was Henry and I was not about to show up after I had refused his invitation.

I was accepted as a regular student at the University of Winnipeg in September 1972. I was now twenty years old and I did not have a clue why I was in university. I don't quite remember why I registered for the courses that I did. But I do recall that I wanted to take Anthropology because Lois, Mrs. Taylor's younger daughter had taken it. I had no idea what it was about but I registered for it anyway. I also registered in Philosophy, English, History and Psychology. The first year was a blur. It did not matter how much I studied, read, I had trouble grasping the material. It never occurred to me that I might not know how to study! I passed everything except English and I dropped Psychology. I dropped it for two reasons, one because I did not want to participate in a study, which was one requirement of the course and two I was not doing very well in it.

I took Sociology the next year and it was in my Sociology and Anthropology classes that I began to realize that 'Indians' were used as examples for everything. It became obvious to me that whenever we discussed issues such as child welfare, education, economic and social conditions of Aboriginal people, I could not help think the whole class was not just talking about my people, my family but they were talking about 'me'. Some of the things I did not like hearing were that 'Indians were lazy, they were drunks, they were always unemployed, uneducated and they neglected their children'.

Michael Holloman (1996) admitted this is how he felt

As an Indian, I felt that I was being viewed through the parameters of poverty, unemployment, lack of education and a culture that was in the process of being steam-rolled out of existence. I felt I was being studied, dissected and categorized by Euro-Canadian scientific knowledge, and that somehow the real essence of being Indian was missed (p. 126).

There were times when I would sit, particularly in my Sociology classes, all I wanted to do was hide, but there was no place to go. So what I did instead was, to keep my head up, look straight ahead and hoped and prayed that nobody would notice that I was an 'Indian'. Although I did this consciously, I found it extremely difficult pretending I did not exist. Mitchell (1982) suggested that "hiding, or maintaining a face, is emotionally exhausting and draining experience, depleting energy that could be more advantageously directed toward school work" (p. 125). I had very little courage so I never challenged any of these stereotypes; I was alone. I was often left numb, overwhelmed by the negative images of "Indians" and I frequently wished there were other Anishinabe students in my class. I wasted valuable time and energy thinking about the negative things rather than concentrating on my school work. Monture-Angus (1995) in her book, *Thunder in My Soul* captures what it is was like for me when she admits

My experience of formal education as painful is not an exception. In all the conversation that I had with "Indian" people about their post-secondary education, isolation and alienation are always mentioned. It is difficult for any individual to learn when what they are feeling is isolated and alienated (p. 81).

I never told anyone about any of these things, I internalized them, I carried

them like they were my responsibility, my secrets and sometimes I think I actually believed they were true. But when I thought about my mother and father, that is not how I saw them. Both my parents worked hard, they were not lazy and they were not drunks. When I think about it now, it was the healthy and positive feelings I had about my parents, which helped me get through the many hurdles and the doubts I had about myself. I was often discouraged and I sometimes wondered whether getting a 'formal' education was all that important.

I walked the halls of the university wondering what was wrong with me? I still did not have any close friends; I led a lonely existence. I saw the odd Aboriginal student, but I did not get to know them very well. I did become involved in starting the initial Native Student Organization and actually become the vice-president. I kept missing meetings, which were mostly on Saturdays and one day I received a memo asking me to resign and I did, with no argument.

I continued with my classes and I befriended an Asian student named Anita. We both lived in the dorm and she was in most of my Anthropology classes. I studied with her most of the time and one evening, after having a bowl of rice in her room, she asked me what my background was and I told her I was a Saulteaux Indian. She looked surprised so I asked her what was wrong and she said, "You do not look like the Indians on Main Street; you are different". I thought there's that line again and besides what am I supposed to look like? Once I got to university I thought things would be better. Somehow I understood racism existed in high school but surely universities are more open and I considered the students as part of the university community. I remained friends with Anita until she graduated. I was supposed to graduate with her in May 1975 but I failed my science requirement. I graduated from the University of Winnipeg in May 1980.

So what happened in those five years? I began working as a probation officer in September 1975. I was hired on the condition that I complete my Bachelor of Arts, which I agreed to and I enrolled in an evening class every year, until I finally passed. I attempted History of Science twice, Basic Anatomy and Physiology and I ended up taking Physical Geography as my science requirement, which I passed with a

'D'. I was often teased by my co-workers about my lack of intelligence and they questioned why I was taking so long to finish. All I knew was that I continued to run into the same obstacles in my work that I had come across in high school and university. Without writing all about those experiences, (granted they are a part of 'who' I have become), it will suffice to say that having a high school education and having gone to university, did not make much difference. I continued to experience and feel the oppression that I had felt in high school and university and in some ways it was worse!

I had not realized that I was the first Aboriginal probation officer who was hired in Winnipeg and I resented being referred to as 'the native probation officer'. I wanted to be known simply as a probation officer and I made sure my co-workers were aware of it. I refused to work with only Aboriginal clients because I felt quite capable of working with people from all walks of life. And yet there was this nagging and often overwhelming contradiction within myself, not so much the way I worked with people but how I came to see myself as a worker. I did not want to be seen as lazy, unproductive, so I worked longer hours and made sure my court reports were done on time. I wanted to be seen as capable and responsible. I did not want to place myself in a position to be criticized or at least be compared with the stereotypical images of Aboriginal people. I sought approval and understanding; but I did not want special treatment. I did not know what I wanted. All I knew was, when I recognized my clients, who were Aboriginal were being treated differently than the non-Aboriginal clients, there was something wrong. I felt it in my heart and in my soul but I could not articulate or express what I was experiencing. How do you complain about something that does not only feel terrible but you cannot even put a name to it?

I was hired as the Native Student Advisor at the University of Winnipeg in July 1984 and I have been here for twelve years. When I accepted the job, I wanted to assist the students in making the transition to university life a little easier and I hoped that they would not have the same negative experiences I had. This is not to say I did not have any good times but I have come to understand that "the negative experiences are as valuable as the positive ones" (Kohl, 1994, p. 82). Have I accomplished what I said I was going to do? In November 1987, a group of Aboriginal students met with the Dean of Arts and

Sciences to complain about their experiences with isolation in the university. I attended that meeting and I listened as the students described their reactions to the unfair depiction of Aboriginal people. Their request was pretty straightforward and they asked the Dean whether it was possible for the faculty, who lectured on Aboriginal issues to present a more balanced picture of Aboriginal life, which would include both the positive and negative aspects. As a result of the meeting, the Dean sent out a memo to all the faculty expressing these concerns.

As I sat in that meeting, I was reminded of what it was like for me as a student. I thought, 'nothing much has changed and I could still feel the hurt. I totally identified with what the students were feeling and yet I still felt powerless. I felt powerless because I realize the issue was much greater than I. I was the only Aboriginal faculty member in the whole university and why was that? Where could I go for support? Who could I talk to; who would understand what the students and I were really saying and feeling? What could I do as a Native Student Advisor to help the students feel better about themselves? What needs to be changed so that they will feel comfortable at the university? I felt confident that I could help students individually by talking about the issues and effects of racism and discrimination, but I knew that was not good enough!

I remembered in my high school and university years, it did not matter how confident I was or how good I felt about myself, I was vulnerable to the negative realities of the lives of Aboriginal people. It did not matter how hard I tried in school, I was affected by my sense of isolation and alienation. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) suggested that

In the context of a First Nations perspective of the university, higher education is not a neutral enterprise. Gaining access to the university means more than just getting an education--it also means gaining access to power, authority, and opportunity to exercise control over the affairs

of everyday life, affairs that are usually taken for granted by most non-Native people. For First Nations students this is a matter of necessity, for in order to survive the formal curriculum, they must also learn to navigate through the alien power structure of the institution (p. 11).

Feelings of discouragement and the feelings of despair were not isolated incidents and it became quite apparent that whenever I had felt some positive energy it would get diminished by my own self-doubt and feelings of unworthiness. At the same time I was able to recognize that it was that same energy, a fighting spirit which inspired and motivated me to continue. It was that very energy which reassured me I could be successful; that I could finish what I started despite all the obstacles and disappointments. There was no way I was going to give up. Maracle (1996) asserted that "spirituality is reconnecting with the self and our ancestry. It is doing the right thing for your family and your community" (p. 134). I had my family, my brothers and sisters and their children to think about. This was not just about me! I often thought (and I am sure that is why I never told anybody how I felt) that I did not want any of my brothers and sisters to go through what I am going through. I was not having fun and I was emotionally tired. The tears, the pain and the sorrow become part of me and I carried them like I lugged my heavy books to school. I became a loner and in many ways I am still that person; it is something I will have to work on and possibly will need changing.

As I was about to finish my presentation and I noticed that the student, who had asked me what it was like for me was sitting in the beige recliner and she commented how comfortable and how nice my office was. Then she said "I would come to

university if I did not have to take Math” and I told her “You can and you do not have to take Math”! Her eyes lit up and she said “Maybe I will.” It is not so much whether she will eventually come to university, but the significance of her statement for me was a reminder that those are the kind of moments, which contribute to the enjoyment of my work. There is something very satisfying about having the opportunity to encourage prospective students to pursue their educational dreams and to realize that they do have options, choices, and they can indeed participate in their own learning. It is also just as important for them to know and understand that they have the power within themselves to challenge and confront the barriers they think might prevent them from following their dreams. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) indicated that “it is the notion of empowerment that is at the heart of First Nations participation in higher education—not just as individuals, but empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as a people” (p. 14).

I found myself repeating and reminding the students how crucial I thought it was to be involved with the First Nations Students Association because by joining, they would get to know each other as students, share their experiences, help and support one another and their involvement could only contribute and enhance their chances of succeeding.

CHAPTER SIX

FEAR OF FAILURE

In this next chapter I discuss within my stories, the characteristics of fear of failure and the feelings associated with it. I also describe how I placed tremendous pressure on myself to do well; to succeed. If I did not, not only would I have failed myself; I would above all, fail my people.

One day this student came in to see me and she wanted to know “if how and what she was feeling was normal?” I asked her to explain to me what it was she was feeling. She began by telling me that she had been very excited about coming to school but now she was feeling guilty about having to leave her son at home and she was feeling some pressure to do well. She told me that she was the first one from her family to go to university and she did not want to disappoint them. She looked at me and she said when you went to university, did you ever feel this way? I said yes and you know what, I still do. I am sometimes seen as “having made it in this world”, the non-Aboriginal world. I still struggle with it because I know I am not finished with what I think I am supposed to do. I haven’t finished my education and I am not sure I will finish it in this lifetime. But what I do know is that I cannot live my life for somebody else anymore.

During high school and university, I was terrified of failing for three reasons: One, I did not want to disappoint my family and my friends. Two, I simply did not want to fail because all I could think of was the “Indians on Main Street”, the white

people laughed at and I was convinced I was going to end up there. Three, I did not want to believe that I was as horrible as some people made me out to be. When I heard negative stories about Aboriginal people how “lazy” and how “they never finished anything they started” annoyed me to no end. And yet if I succeeded I was perceived as being “not an Indian” any longer because I was judged and compared to the “Indians on Main Street”. The following story will demonstrate what I mean.

I was seventeen years old and I thought, maybe this year, I'll stay in the city and work here in Winnipeg for the summer. I'm old enough; besides I have been away from home for three years, I can look after myself. I figured the job I would get at home can be given to somebody else. I was at the Assiniboia Residential School at the time and Audrey, one of the other students, told me that she had worked for this doctor and his family, but she was not going to go back there for the summer. She told me, all I had to do was look after their two children and that they spent their summers at Victoria Beach. So I thought, that sounds pretty good; I can still go to the beach and it might be an okay summer. She told the family about me and I began working for them right after school finished. I had written to my mother to tell her what I was doing and she told me it was fine. I lasted four days. To this day, I am not quite sure how I lasted that long. Perhaps, it is because I wanted to make sure I gave it a chance; MY BEST.

The first day I reported to work, the Doctor, I don't remember his partner very well; it would not surprise me if he did not have one, but I think he did, he gave me a tour of the house. It was the biggest house I had ever seen. It was certainly a far cry from my home on the reserve and it was different from the residential school. The house was in Tuxedo, off Wellington Crescent, just to give you a sense of what I got myself into. Talk about not doing your homework. All I had thought about was looking after two children; how hard can that be? After all, I looked after my younger brothers and sisters, and they are still alive.

During the tour, he showed me my bedroom; it was in the basement and he assigned the duties to me. I was to cook breakfast, lunch and dinner. He told me what time he wanted his breakfast. It meant I had to get up at six a.m. I thought, oh my God, I can't do this. For people who now know me would die, when they hear this story; because I am not a cook and I will never BE one, or at least not a very

good one. I was cursing Audrey, under my breath, of course. Oh well, I am here now and I will have to learn. I was to do laundry, ironing and any mending that might be required. Hey, I can do that! After he told me about the meals, he said you will not eat with us, you will eat in the kitchen!

When I went to bed that night, I laid in my bed and I tried to figure out what I had gotten myself into; the room was so dark and I thought about home. I could be home now. Except I have decided to be a slave for the summer. The thought was not comforting at all. If Audrey did it for two summers, it can't be that bad. The alarm rung sooner than I expected or at least, it felt like I had just fallen asleep.

I actually made breakfast, lunch, and dinner for them three days in a row. But I experienced something I never imagined, I would. I served them their meals, and I would dish some food for myself, yes, I did have some and I sat in the kitchen. It was one of the loneliest feeling, I have ever had; and it was not as if I had never been lonely, but this was different. I felt rejected. I felt like there was something wrong with me and I certainly was not good enough to sit with them. I felt awful. All I wanted to do was get out of there. I thought about the time, I first left home and I had called my mother to ask her if I could come home. And she said, "MARY YOU HAVE GOT TO LEARN TO STAND ON YOUR OWN TWO FEET" and I did not understand it, then. But maybe, this time she will let me come home. How am I going to get a hold of her.

When I went to bed that night, no matter how hard I tried to convince myself that I could do the job for the summer, I knew deep in my heart, there was no way, I was going to survive. How can I look after the children, when I can't even eat with them? How could I possible do a good job, if I was already feeling rejected and feeling like I was scum? I decided that I would have to tell the doctor, in the morning, because we were leaving for Victoria Beach the very next day. How the hell am I going to do that?

I got up that morning and made breakfast. His partner and the children had left the day before for the beach. I was feeling pretty awful. How am I going to tell him? I served him breakfast and I went back in the kitchen. I couldn't sit still. I paced and I paced until I had enough nerve to go and tell him.

As I recalled and wrote this story, my heart began to race. In some ways, I still felt the same fear that I had experienced that particular morning.

I went in to ask him if he wanted any more coffee. After I poured it, I said, I have something to tell you. He said, "What is it?" As I stumbled over my words, I managed to tell him that I could not work for him anymore. I don't quite remember what reason I gave him but I do remember his response. He put the paper down he was reading and he pointed his finger at me, looked at me with such piercing eyes, and he said "You know what is wrong with you people?" I did not answer.

I put the coffee pot on the table and I placed both hands on the back of the nearest chair. I sensed what I was about to hear was not going to be pleasant. As I stood behind that chair, it almost felt safe. I held on to it like it was going to protect me. He ranted and raved about how Indian people were lazy and that I and the whole bunch of us were all the same. As he stared at me and without putting his finger down he said, "You people never finish what you start that is why you will never amount to anything? I cannot remember everything he said; but I do remember being scared of him. I felt like every strip of protection I thought I had, had just been torn off. I guess in a way he did that. When he finished, I said "I'm sorry".

I went back in the kitchen and I started cleaning up. I felt awful. I felt guilty. I felt like I had done one of the most horrible thing a person could do. He came out of the dining room and I said, by the way, 'can I use your phone?' I knew I could not reach my mom right away. She didn't have a phone. There was only one two-way radio and it was at the chief's house. I called the operator. Thank God, we got through right away. I asked the chief, if someone could go and get my mother. He promised they would call back as soon as they could. She called back half an hour late but it seemed like a lifetime. I told her what I wanted to do and she said, of course, you can come home. She said I will phone my uncle in Grand Marais and ask him to meet you at the Shell station, right on Highway 59. She asked if I had a way of getting there? God all these details, I did not think about. Hold on, I'll see if this man will give me a ride.

The ride was very uncomfortable. We did not talk. I was thinking about all those things the doctor had said to me and I was feeling quite hurt. No doubt, he was angry because I quit. I prayed my

great-uncle would be at the gas station, when we got there. As we were pulling into the gas station, I saw him come out of the station. I felt such relief, and for the time that day, I felt hungry. I had no money. Seeing my great-uncle must have contributed to my bravery, because I looked at the doctor and I said, do you have any money? He looked in his wallet and he threw thirty-five dollars at me. I got out of the car and thanked him the money and for the ride.

When I have counselling or advising sessions with the Aboriginal students I work with I am often reminded of the experiences I had when I was a student. This particular incident is important because even now, whenever I get discouraged I think about what I felt when the doctor was yelling and screaming at me. Not only do I think about it but I can actually go back and relive that moment. Although I had felt inferior and my dignity had been stripped, I could not help but feel a sense of accomplishment. I had the sense to take care of myself and I was not just quitting for the sake of quitting or because I was “lazy”, I quit because I did not appreciate how I was being treated. So when I feel like quitting sometimes, like I have many times with this thesis I can still hear the words of that doctor. . . “You never finish what you start...”. He hurt me at the time but now his words compel, dare and motivate me to continue and to prove to others that I can, finish and follow through on what I start.

In spite of the negative experience with the doctor, I realize now that I stood up for what I felt was right at the time. Unfortunately one of the problems connected with this experience is that now I go to extremes and I try to do everything perfectly.

When I began my Masters program, it was critical for me to get an ‘A’ average. I placed so much pressure on myself I had nightmares about my marks. I don’t recall ever feeling this way in high school or in my undergraduate degree. I tried to figure

out what was going on; what was different? Then I remembered I had mentioned to one of the students that I was taking a course and at the end of the term she asked me what mark I got in the course. I told her I had received an 'A' and she said "good, we (students) would not expect anything less." I don't think she meant to put any pressure on my being a student, but the stress I placed on myself has been extremely draining emotionally, spiritually, mentally and physically.

I think about the many times I have talked with the students and discussed their progress at the university and I usually tell them that marks aren't everything; not every student is an 'A' student. What is important for me, is that not only they pass their courses and get their degree, but that they have learned education is not just about books and marks. Education is about learning the tools and skills to help them in their everyday lives, which is something I never really considered. However I do emphasize the importance of achieving high marks especially if they are planning to go to graduate school.

My marks in my undergraduate degree program were mediocre so when I applied to graduate school I was granted a conditional acceptance and in order to be officially accepted into the Masters program I had to have a 'B' average or better on the first 12 credit hours I attempted. Instead of accepting it as part of the rules and regulations of the program, I took it personally and it meant that I had to once again prove to someone or to others that I could do the work. Rather than seeing it as an opportunity, I reacted and got defensive and I set out on a 'journey of proof'. I was still afraid of failing!

Sometimes I would sit in the classroom, look around and watch the other students and they all seemed to understand what was happening. Most of the students were practising classroom teachers or had taught before and I felt awkward because I was not and in most of my classes I was also the only Aboriginal student. I shared many of my schooling experiences with them and it became apparent that my life history was different from theirs. I wanted to know more about them, how they felt, how they viewed themselves. I wondered if they were satisfied with who they were, what they have become because I certainly was questioning who I was. I suppose in some ways, I was still trying to fit in with the rest of the class.

As I continued to ask and ponder these questions and reflecting on my schooling experiences, I became aware that one of the results of leaving home at an early age is that I have often felt alone and estranged from my family. I have found this to be the most difficult and at times quite painful.

I remembered the time I went home after spending ten months at Pine Creek Residential School and my family and I sat down for dinner. After speaking nothing but English for ten months, I asked for the salt and pepper in English and my father said "Indanishinabaemoomin niin na wind oma", which means "we speak Saulteaux in this house". I had survived the first year away from home and I had passed my grade and I saw myself as being successful. I had to be reminded by my father that I was Anishinabe and I was not any different from my brothers and sisters.

I often think about this story because it is a story, which reminds me that no matter how 'successful' I may be, it does not mean I am no longer "Anishinabe". It is true that I have changed and I am working towards accepting the fact that I am different but I am not better than anyone else. This difference has on many occasions

interfered with the way I interact with not only my family but the people in Bloodvein; a cost or price I had not counted on. I was afraid of failing and I worked extremely hard to make sure I did not but I never considered that being successful would affect my relationships with my family and the people of Bloodvein. Rosa Bell (1992) in the book, *Residential Schools The Stolen Years* describes her relationship with her mother as “not being able to tell her she loved her, because she did not understand why she was sent to a residential school. She felt “hurt and resentful” and she “didn’t know how to break the barriers” (p. 13) she had used to help her survive.

In many ways I have set up those barriers and I have built them in different shapes and sizes. I wanted so much to be accepted in the ‘white world’ so I would not have to deal with racism and discrimination any more. Some of the ways I attempted to accomplish this large feat was to finish high school, go to university, and not just get a good job, but I wanted to become someone important; to be successful. I had not given this much thought until I read *I AM WOMAN* by Lee Maracle (1996) and she advocates that

the first thing a would-be Native Educator ought to come to grips with is the function of education. It is not to become successful. Success is the by-product of what knowledge a person applies to life; it is the satisfactory achievement of something. Too often success is seen as synonymous with wealth, useful employment or a regular salary (p. 90).

Fortunately, my view of education has become more holistic but I do have to admit that when I started working at the University of Winnipeg, I questioned my credibility as an advisor and counsellor, because I did not have all those letters after

my name. Monture-Angus (1995) articulated it better and more eloquently than I can; she confessed that “naively, I believed that once I could write enough letters behind my name that White people would accept me as an equal” (p. 70). When I read and wrote my previous statement, it did not surprise me that my view of education comprised of all these things but what surprised me was, I still place these expectations on myself. I never thought of going to graduate school; I thought of it as something beyond my reach..

In most of my courses, I was the only Aboriginal student and the stories I shared about my experiences with school were quite different from the other students. It was in my Action Research class that I began seriously looking at the meaning of my stories because one of the requirement of the class was to do a reflective piece every week. The purpose was to collect from these reflective pieces “stories” which would serve as data to investigate and to do research on ourselves as teachers, and in my case as an advisor and counsellor. I thought how hard can that be? Well, I can admit now it was not easy; it has been one of most exhausting exercises I have ever had to do. The surface issues which touched on how I felt about my schooling were not good enough because I had to search deeper, way beyond reflection because I had to determine what they meant and what I learned from them.

I enjoyed the class but I also found it draining and overwhelming at times. I was not simply telling stories, I was searching for themes, “themes which would help me construct my own theory and method” (Schon, 1982, p. 319) and examining tensions, which (Newman, 1987) refers to as “critical incidents” (p. 373). I actually

became excited when I realized that it was possible to do research on ourselves by using stories. As a child, in my youth and now as an adult I have learned and I continue to learn many lessons from both traditional and contemporary stories of Aboriginal men and women. My interest in 'story telling' comes from the fact that "my people are a storytelling people" (Monture-Angus, 1995; Grant, 1994; O'Meara and West, 1996). I have related the stories of my education with the students, the faculty and friends but it never occurred to me that I would in fact use a collection of these stories as 'data' to do research.

When I began the course and started collecting these stories I was not quite sure what purpose they would serve and I did not know what I was going to find but I was willing to take some risks. This involved making myself vulnerable to the other students in class, much like what I am doing writing this thesis. Sometimes when I would share and read my reflective pieces, containing my tears was impossible; I found it extremely difficult. After leaving my evening class, on the way home or when I got home, I would question why I had made a fool of myself again? What I did not realize was that I was not just "telling and retelling those stories", I was "reliving them" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Once I became cognizant of this fact, then I was ready to seriously reflect and actively explore how they contributed to the kind of professional I have become? The next question was, if they influenced how I think as an educator, how have they affected my personal beliefs, my attitude and my overall world view?

When I questioned my value and credibility at the University of Winnipeg, my

way of addressing and resolving the issue was to merely add a few more letters behind my name. I knew in my heart that was not where I would find the answer; I needed to look deeper than that and determine what it was that was causing me such turmoil and tension at work. I agree with Monture-Angus (1995) when she asserted that “in my lifetime, I have learned more from reflecting on my personal experiences and from my Aboriginal teachers than I have from any educational institution” (p. 65).

Working towards becoming a ‘Reflective Practitioner’

When I decided to go to graduate school, I knew I would not necessarily become a better person but it was still important for me to look at alternative ways of working not only with the students but also with the university. I was and still am confident that I am capable of understanding the experiences of the students and because of that I am able to assist them in striving for their educational dreams and aspirations. One of the tensions I have felt as a faculty member is to publish and to do research. It was gratifying to read (Schon, 1982; Newman, 1987; and Rose, 1989) suggest that research and practice do not have to be separate. They can become one in the same; they have to be so that as a “reflective practitioner” (Schon, 1982) I can reflect and analyze the actions I use in assisting the students.

As a Native Student Advisor I have brought with me a wealth of knowledge and experience on what it is like to be an Aboriginal student. I am aware the students come with similar problems I experienced but that does not mean that every student is

not *unique*. The solution to the problems they face are never the same and it is for this reason that I have to be able to “reflect on action” and “reflect in action” (Schon, 1982, p.55). The reality is that it is not enough to understand and empathize with the students but I have to have the ability to find alternative ways of dealing with some of the issues. What works for one student does not necessarily mean it is going to work for the rest of the students. I do not always know what students will discuss when they come to see me but it is easy to identify with some of their fears particularly their fears of failure and what it might mean when they do succeed.

I am also aware that as Aboriginal students, when we leave our communities to get an education we do change. The other aspect of this is when we do achieve our educational goals and attempt to go back to our communities we are not always accepted. As an Aboriginal educator, this is an area which concerns me greatly because if it is true what Hampton suggests that Aboriginal education is not for individual achievement but to ‘serve the people’ then the next chapter should clarify how I see the purpose of telling about my schooling experiences. It is an unveiling of who I am, where I come from and how my early schooling has contributed to where and who I am today.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A JOURNEY OF HOPE, DREAMS, AND ASPIRATIONS

In this chapter I provide a pretty detailed picture of where I come from and it is a description of my high school and residential school experiences. This chapter was probably the hardest to write or pull together because it includes a fairly lengthy period of my life. It also deals with my experiences with racism, which I particularly did not want to discuss but I decided that this thesis would not make any sense if I did not. It is a story about a child hurried to becoming an adult and it characterizes both my weaknesses and strengths.

The stories I present in this chapter are stories of my early schooling, my experience at Pine Creek Residential School and high school in Winnipeg. I wanted to write about attending school in Bloodvein because that is where 'school' became meaningful to me and I enjoyed going to school. I learned very quickly and I learned to compete not just with my self but with my sister, Mildred. I also present a brief family history basically to describe my background.

A Brief Family History

I was born July 7, 1952 in Bloodvein, Manitoba. My father, Charlie was Saulteaux; he spoke very little English and spoke it only when it was necessary. He was a fisherman, hunter and trapper. He cut and chopped wood; hauled water and he

started the fire in the morning and cooked breakfast every morning. He played the church organ every Sunday. Although he was a practising Roman Catholic, there was no question he believed and wanted to practice the beliefs of the Ojibwe people; his people. Apparently when the oldest ones were born he wanted them to have spiritual names but because of the Roman Catholic influence, we received first or middle names after the 'saints'.

He looked after us when my mother went away to the hospital to have the youngest ones. Later on in his life, he became the janitor of the school. He also ran the pool hall and organized mini-croquette tournaments in the summer. He was a mean card and chess player. He loved winning. He was a brutal competitor. It was wonderful and amazing to watch him. My father did not have any formal education but he was well versed in the community affairs and he was a hard worker. (My father remained as the school janitor until about four or five years before he died. He passed away November 6, 1992. It is worth noting that prior to his death, my father asked my mother what path he should follow; the cultural beliefs of the Ojibwe or the Catholic Church?)

My mother was Metis and a devout Catholic. Her first language was English and she learned to speak Cree, Saulteaux and French. She gave birth to twenty-three children; five died at childbirth and Josephine died when she was ten months old from bronchitis. My mother was a midwife, took care of the sick, she volunteered at the nursing station and became the dispenser of medicine. If there were medical complications, she stuck close by to the two-way radio to request and receive

instructions from the doctors in Pine Falls. She volunteered at the mission and in the winter she started the fire in the wood stove in church so that it would be warm when the congregation arrived. She cooked all of the meals, except for breakfast and she always made sure we ate lunch and dinner together. She made all of our clothes, quilts and blankets. She and I also helped my father at the school every Saturday morning. And last but not least, she made us go to church every morning at six o'clock and we said the rosary every night before we went to bed. After the younger ones grew up, my mother bought and managed her own store. She also ran the post office and was the local magistrate for several years. (My mother passed away in August, 1997.)

I had eight brothers (five older and three younger) and seven sisters (three older and four younger). Out of the sixteen living I was the ninth child. My oldest brother, Albert and my oldest sister, Lillian went away to Assiniboia Residential School in Winnipeg. Neither of them completed high school. I don't remember Albert, that much, but I missed Lillian very much. I admired her and I used to think she was the most beautiful person in the world (she still is) and I was proud she was my sister. Albert passed away July, 1996. Lillian lives in Bloodvein and she worked as a Community Health Representative for many years and was a band councillor for several years. None of my older brothers or sisters attended high school, except for Leonard. When he first left home at age fifteen, he went to a seminary in Otterburne but was later sent to the Assiniboia Residential School. I was there at the same time but I only saw him at meal time or in church on Sundays. He was never quite the same after he left these two institutions. As I write about him, I now have some

understanding what he must have had to endure. He died in a car accident in June, 1979. He was thirty-three.

My second oldest sister, Margaret went to a convent in St. Boniface and her life also, took a different turn. My sister, Mildred passed her grade eight the same year I did but my mother would not let her go to school with me because she said she needed her at home. A year or two later she took upgrading and later applied and was accepted at Brandon University where she completed her Bachelor of Education degree. She has been a teacher for twenty odd years. The rest of my older brothers are living in Bloodvein. Neetee used to work as a carpenter but is now unemployed due to medical reasons. Frank was Chief for a few years; fishing is still part of his livelihood and he owns the local store. My third oldest brother, Alex has a natural talent for mechanics but because he does not have his papers he has had difficulty getting work.

All of my younger brothers and sisters either completed their high school or completed the G.E.D. My brother, Louis graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Brandon University. My sister, Virginia received her Bachelor of Education degree from Brandon University. My sister, Yvonne and my brother, Danny are currently in the education program in Brandon University. My sister, Martina is currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Manitoba. My youngest sister, Alice obtained a diploma in Business Administration. She passed away January 16, 1994. She was thirty-five. We're still waiting for John (the youngest) to decide whether he wants to pursue further education.

It is obvious that my family and I have been greatly influenced by the Roman

Catholic church. This is quite evident from the different educational paths we have taken and the different institutions we attended. I would also suggest that it has affected our closeness as a family. I will divulge later in the chapter how I have been affected.

The next section of this chapter describes my early schooling and who and what factors influenced me to pursue further education.

My First School Teacher

When I was about four or five years old, I would watch the students (including my older brothers and sisters) come out of the school. I used to wonder why I had to wait until I was six years old to start school. I was ready and I was curious to know what it was like to be a student.

Brother Leach, also known as 'Ayapaycat', because the first sentence he taught everybody was, 'I have a cat'. He was our teacher in Bloodvein for many years. He was originally from London, England. Everyone of us, also learned how to pronounce words, such as 'calm' and 'armful' without realizing there was the letter 'l' in calm and that there was actually the letter 'r' in armful. He taught the whole community. He stayed at the Roman Catholic mission, where he served as a dispenser of medicine, a postmaster and also managed the local store. He also served as a magistrate and operated the two-way radio. He basically had all the jobs, but he played a significant role and he was, in every sense of the word, an important person in our community. He wasn't a very tall man; as a matter of fact, when he wore his black cassock, it made him look even smaller and thinner. I remember him as being very old and frail, he was about sixty or seventy by the time I had him as a teacher. He may have been small in stature but he had energy.

One of my fond and vivid memories of him, is that he always remembered everyone's birthday. The day I turned four, I was playing outside by myself. I was wearing a dress my mother had made for me. There was nothing stylish about the dress but I loved the colour; it was

Caribbean blue. As I continued to play, I wondered if Brother Leach would remember my birthday. I had heard that he would take the birthday girl or boy to the store and he would let them pick their own chocolate bar or candy. Today was my day!

I looked up from what I was doing and I saw Brother Leach coming down the road. I ran up to greet him and said, "It's my birthday today, you know." He said, "I know". He took my hand and he said, "Come on, let's go to the store." He unlocked the door. I walked in and headed straight for the candy counter. He stood behind me while I took great care to pick out a chocolate bar. I wanted one I had never tried before.

As I was doing this, he said "You can have anything you want in the store." I looked up at him and said, "Anything?". He nodded his head. I thought, in that case, I better take a good look around the store to see if there is something else I might like. I moved away from the candy counter and began looking all over the whole store, which was basically a one room building with lots of shelving. As I was taking great care to look around, Brother Leach was trying everything in his power to lure me back to the candy counter. He began picking individual bars and he would say, "How about this one?". I would just shake my head and tell him, I wanted to keep looking. I sensed his impatience and he seemed to be sighing a lot.

I looked up... and there it was; the biggest doll I had ever seen. It was shaped more like a teddy bear and it was beautiful. I looked up at Brother Leach and I said, "I'll have that." and I pointed to the doll, which was hanging from the ceiling with a fishing line. He got up on the step ladder and handed me the doll. When I took it I was surprised at its size it was almost the same size as me and it was soft.

He walked me home and as we were approaching my parents' house, my mother came out and she said, "Where did you get that from?". I was just going to tell her and Brother Leach said, "I told her she could have whatever she wanted in the store, for her birthday and that's what she picked." For a second I thought my mother was going to ask me to return it but she didn't.

** On July 7, 1958 I celebrated my sixth birthday, a birthday which would allow me to start school. I started school the following September and attended the one-room school. It was not anything I had imagined, at least the physical set up. There were four rows of desks; two students in each. There were four windows on the south side and*

one window, at the back on the north side and a wood stove at the back of the classroom. There was a blackboard in front and one on the north side. The classroom seemed quite small but I was happy to be finally in school. Brother Leach's desk, which was usually messy was strategically placed in front of the class. I don't remember much about the first day of school but I do remember what was written on the front blackboard, "I HAVE A CAT." in big block letters. Brother Leach was my teacher for grades one and two. A new school was built in 1960, with two classrooms and I don't believe he taught after that. We had two new, male teachers; they were both French.

Grade 3 to Grade 8

Everyone was excited about the new school and the new teachers. We now had single desks; we did not have to sit together. Our teacher's name was Ray Trudel. He was young, probably in his early twenties. He taught grade one to three. I don't remember anything significant about him. I must have done pretty good because I skipped grade three. I was now in the big leagues.

I enjoyed school and I had fun going. Mr. Touchette was a kind man and he was very encouraging. He called me "the bright one", which embarrassed me, every time he mentioned it. I felt awkward for two reasons: one, I had bypassed my older brother, Neetee and I was in the same grade as my older sister, Mildred. Although I was quite sensitive about their feelings, I still tried my best and actually became very competitive. I had to be, Mildred was quick and she was smart. She read a lot more than I did. She sat in front of me and I used to tease her and I was constantly poking at her.

One day I decided I was really going to get her. We each got a new geometry set. I wonder what I can do with this protractor? So the scheming began. It took me days to chisel a hole through the back of her wooden desk. One morning, when she least expected it, I took out my protractor and I jabbed her (not hard) in the back. She jumped from her desk, screaming "Ouch, Ouch" and I quickly put away my protractor. I continued to sit at my desk and I pretended I did not know why she was shrieking. I just smiled at her! I guess I can say she was very kind because I don't think she told Mr. Touchette what happened and it also does not mean she was not annoyed. She did not appreciate it much that day, but now, she loves telling and 'retelling' this story. (her version of

course) particularly when she wants to convince anyone who will listen that I was a real "devil" in school.

I especially remember this one day when Mr. Touchette decided to have a spelling bee and whoever was the winner would get five dollars. At the end my sister, Mildred and I were the only ones left. We were both in Grade 7. The whole class was now waiting in anticipation. The last word we had to spell, was any word beginning with the prefix "pre" but we had to say what the word was before we spelled it. Mildred went first and my heart was pounding, I couldn't think of a word. We were standing beside one another, I covered my face with my hands so I couldn't see her. All of a sudden, she said 'priest' and as soon as she said it, she knew it was not right but I still did not have a word.

Mr. Touchette said, "Well, Mary, what word are you going to spell?" I looked at him and I said, 'prefix' p-r-e-f-i-x. For a second, I thought he is not going to allow it. It seemed too simple yet brilliant, but he did. Mr. Touchette let me out early for lunch that day. He told me that he did not want anyone to take my five dollars. I bought navy sneakers and a pair of hot pink stretchy socks. Youch!

I told this particular story because it is about competition and striving to do my best. More importantly it was one of first times I had a taste of 'success' but the other thing I remember is because I had won Mr. Touchette in a way pointed me out which set me apart from the rest of the class and I was not sure at the time whether I was comfortable with being separated from the others. It was a new experience; an event which introduced me and taught me how to be humble.

An Introduction to a Different World

I missed Denis Touchette after he left Bloodvein. I don't quite remember why he made that decision other than, it was probably one of those times, when you know you have to move on. However before I

dismiss him, I want to tell another story, a story which introduced and lured me to the world I live in right now. Mr. Touchette took great care to tell the class about the south, no place in particular. He mentioned it enough times to make me curious about the place he went home to on weekends.

When I was ten years old and in grade 5, Mr. Touchette came up with an idea that whoever did well in school, he would take them home for the weekend. There were four of us who went. He took us to his home town, Aubigny, Manitoba. I will never forget this trip, because it was the first time I was ever outside of Bloodvein.

Preparing for it seemed endless. I was anxious to get going but I worried about what I was going to wear? What will it be like? What does Winnipeg look like? I could not answer any of these questions. I had trouble controlling my excitement. My mother bought me a new jacket; it was hot pink with a black collar and there was black trim on the two front pocket and she made me a new dress. She also gave me a new scarf, which I promptly lost between Matheson Island and Pine Dock. It was a very hot day and all the car windows were open and I was playing air plane from the backseat. I decided to use the scarf as the air plane but unfortunately I dropped the scarf almost immediately, which of course made me panic because I would have to tell my mother what happened to the scarf. The trip was not all that interesting, but the fact that I saw and was in Winnipeg and it was enough to make me want more.

We got a new teacher in Grade 8; Mr. Leonard Chaske. He was not as much fun as Mr. Touchette. He was okay a teacher but he also had other interests, which had nothing to do with school. I did not like the way he looked at the girls or at me. My sister, Mildred noticed it and she would never leave me alone with him.

Growing up in Bloodvein, school, became a major part of my life. As I alluded to earlier, I couldn't wait to start school. However, I began hearing that a person could quit school when they reached grade eight or when they turned sixteen. I was in grade eight but I was only thirteen; besides I wanted to keep going. Mr. Touchette had planted a seed and I wanted to pursue it. I did not want to quit; I enjoyed it too much. Competing with Mildred was not only inspiring but challenging.

What I didn't know at the time was that my sister Mildred motivated me and she gave me support and encouragement. I had positive experiences with all the male teachers I had except for Mr. Chaske and it was my sister Mildred who protected me.

School Away from Home

Pine Creek Residential School was beautiful on the outside. When I arrived and saw the building and the church I thought, 'Wow, this is nice'. Sister Mary met me and took me up to the dorm. I lugged my brown suitcase up four flights of stairs. When we got to the dorm, she assigned a bed to me.

I had ironed and packed my clothes neatly and as I began to unpack, she said "You will not be needing those. You can put your suitcase up here in the cupboard." After I put my suitcase away, she went to another part of the cupboard and began taking other clothes out. She gave me new underwear, a pair of red stretchy pants, a yellow short sleeved blouse, socks and a pair of shoes. She told me my number was 11 and all my clothes would be marked as such. I had never really wore pants before and I thought it was kind of neat. Before we went downstairs, she went over the rules with me. I don't quite remember what they were. When she took me downstairs, I noticed that all the girls were wearing the same clothes; some wore blue pants, blue blouses or white. They were all the same style. But what struck me the most, was how young some of the girls were; some were 6 or 7 years old and maybe younger.

I started classes and that was the first time I took French and I was convinced I was never going to understand it. I missed Mildred. I bet she would understand it. I missed my family. School was not the same and I was not having much fun. Our home room teacher, Sister George Albert was feisty and she had the greatest laugh. She was warm and caring. I took a liking to her and trusted her more than Sister Mary. Sister Mary was strict and mean and if she ever laughed, it sounded incongruent. I was quite uncomfortable with her. She was tall, skinny, wore a permanent frown on her face and looked quite unhappy.

Sister George Albert, on the other hand had a warm and bubbly

personality and I often wished she was our dorm supervisor. I looked forward to her classes but there was something missing. I asked her for an aspirin every day and one day she said "Do you have a headache, again?"

I had been there three months and when she asked me that question I realized that I had cried every day. I cried myself to sleep every night and I remember at times crying in the classroom. I had lots of headaches. One day I asked Sister George Albert if I could talk to her after class and that I wanted to tell her some things about my family. We talked after school and I asked her if she could help me talk to Sister Mary about phoning home. She said she would try, but she was not going to promise anything. When Sister Mary found out what I had done, she was annoyed and told me I could ask her if I needed anything and not to bother the other sisters. She did arrange the call.

My parents did not have a phone so we had to phone the operator ahead of time so that my mother could go to the chief's house, to receive the call. When I got on the phone the operator instructed me to say 'OVER' when I finished what I had to say and say 'ROGER' when I understood. I was familiar with the procedure because I had watched and listened to my mother's conversations with the doctors, whenever she had to call about a patient. The operator told my mother to go ahead...

Hi Mary. How are you? OVER

I want to come home. OVER

ROGER "Mary, you have to learn to stand on your own two feet." OVER

I couldn't believe my ears. She could not have heard what I said. I was numb. I stayed on the line and I thought maybe if I tell her again she will hear me. I was about to repeat it again and all I could hear was static. I told the operator, "Get her back." She said, "I'm sorry, but the signals are out." Even though I was familiar with that too, I walked away from the telephone thinking 'I hate her. She just does not want me home.'

After that phone call, I settled down and reminded myself why I had decided to leave home.

While writing this thesis the following story is one which affected me the most because it was an incident, I tried to block out and it had been the first time I had reflected on it. I had thought about it many times but I did not know that it had affected me so intensely. I missed my family very much at Pine Creek Residential School. My mother wrote to me faithfully every month. I am sorry now that I did not keep any of those letters. Let me take you back to Pine Creek Residential School.

Every day after school, I would go back to the playroom and Sister Mary would have the mail. I would go and sit down and wait to see if my name would be called. Some of my friends and cousins wrote to me, but when I found out the nuns or somebody opened our letters before we got them, I wrote them back and told them not to write to me anymore. I can't quite recall who it was who wrote me this particular letter but it was obviously a kind of letter which was not acceptable. I know this, because Sister Mary took me aside and told me it wasn't. As I'm writing this, I wish I could remember what was so bad about that letter?

In November I became noticeably anxious about going home for Christmas. I wrote a letter to my mother and asked her whether I could come home. My parents did not have much money, but I thought if I let them know early enough that I wanted to come home, they could save some money. By late November, I could sense the excitement of the other students, who had been assured that they were going home. My friend, Eleanor, kept asking if I was going home. I told her that my mother's most recent letter had indicated that there was a slim chance. I did not give up hope. The energy in the residence was different. The students teased each other and laughed more; most of all, their smiles were more noticeable. Amidst this climate of hope, I waited every day for a letter from my mother.

Part of the pre-holiday hustle and bustle involved preparation for the Christmas Concert, which we were putting on for the nearby communities. Because I knew my family would be unable to attend the program, I found the practices extremely difficult. My parents had been present for all the concerts I had participated in previously. It had

been decided by Sister Mary that Georgina and I would sing 'Somewhere My Love'. Sister Mary gave me a mint green dress to wear to the concert.

As I looked at the audience, I felt neither nervous nor scared, but the feeling of home sickness overpowered me. I wished I knew if I were going home. I wished my parents were here to see and hear me sing. After the concert, Eleanor, her sisters, and most of the girls were getting ready to go home. Everybody was going home except me and four other girls. I still did not give up hope. I had faith that my mother would try very hard to get me home. There was no way she would allow me to stay here for Christmas.

On Christmas Eve, I was faced with the harsh reality that I was not going home. I did not know what depression was until that day. I could not understand why my mother had not sent the money. In her last letter, she had indicated that she had written to Father Masse to ask him, what the bus fare was from Camperville to Winnipeg. I hated being there. I was lonesome. I was mad at my mother for not sending for me. I felt abandoned; I felt dead inside. There was an emptiness about the residence I had not noticed nor had I experienced. The playroom was cold and it had no life; it was hollow - much like the way I was feeling. I did not want to go to Midnight Mass but I knew I had no choice. I do not remember getting any presents. I don't think it would have made any difference. Those were the longest Christmas holidays I ever had.

A couple of days before the students came back, Father Masse came down to the playroom to see me. I noticed he had a letter in his hand. My first thought was, finally my mother has written to me. He said, "Sit down. This letter is from your mother. It came before Christmas but I decided it would be better if you stayed here for the holidays. It was too far for you to go home anyway." I was speechless. I was numb, so much so I could not even cry. I was a zombie. I had no strength. After he told me about the letter, he got up and walked away as if nothing happened. I continued to sit on that baby blue wooden bench and stared into space. I felt beaten and helpless.

After I wrote this story, I could not believe how angry and humiliated I was. I have tried to tell myself that I had not been abused or oppressed in residential school and I realized from this story that I had been.

Seeing Through Adult Eyes

During one of my visits with my mother, she began talking about when I went to the residential school and she said, "I will never forget that 'they' didn't send you home for Christmas. I still think about it and I still do not understand." She started crying. After a while, she said, "But we did okay by it; we helped lots of people and those we couldn't, did not want to be helped." This was the first time she ever told me what it had been like for her.

I had often wondered how my leaving for school had affected her. Her comment also made sense to me because 'education' for my mother was always important. We had to be pretty sick to miss school. She made it her responsibility to be a good example for the community and one way of doing that was to make sure we went to school everyday.

She also went to a residential school when she was six or seven years old. She told everybody she only had grade four education and she wanted to make sure we were educated. When she told me how she felt about not going home for Christmas, my heart sank. I never knew how difficult it had been for her. My heart ached, my eyes filled with tears, and my throat burned from trying not to cry. I allowed my tears to flow freely down my face. The pain I felt for her was unbearable. I wanted to scream, yell, lash out at somebody, because I had not understood why I couldn't go home, other than what the priest told me. I was confused by my feelings of hate, anger and frustration but at the same time I felt this incredible love and compassion for my mother.

Ron, my partner who accompanied me on many of the visits was there and when he noticed that I was taking deep breaths, he asked me if I was okay. I had been taking deep breaths to control my emotions. I was glad Ron was there to hear what my mother had to say and to witness what had just occurred.

I was thankful to have been given the opportunity to hear my mother express her own fears and frailty. As a child and even as an adult, my mother rarely, showed any kind of weakness. A weakness, I do not consider as negative but rather a sign of human kindness and understanding. She always had amazing resilience for pain and suffering. As a 'medicine woman', (I use the term loosely), she witnessed and was very much part of the pain and suffering in Bloodvein. Her strength and her capability of enduring the pain of losing her children and her partner, my father through death, was (and is) truly remarkable to see and observe.

When we left the hospital I was totally exhausted but I felt good, knowing that my mother had not stopped loving me. I had spent the majority of my high school years wondering whether she loved me as much as she loved my brothers and sisters. I had convinced myself she did not care about me.

When I first wrote about the incident with Father Masse, (the priest who with held my letter, see p. 85) I went back to sit on that baby blue bench; perhaps a metaphor of my innocence and helplessness. I realized I had never dealt with it. I tried to block it out and pretended it didn't happen. Thirty years later, it is as fresh as the day it happened, except now it is not numbness I feel. It is overwhelming anger and humiliation. I feel like somebody has just taken advantage of me, raped me and I

feel absolutely defenceless. All I feel is helplessness; I have no power and I have no control. I feel like I have been stripped of my human dignity and I feel a sense of loss. I have no spirit.

At the time, I was confused and I was shocked. I now feel ashamed because I had blamed my mother and I had cursed her. The only other thing I knew was that I had never experienced anything so mean or cruel. But because of my innocence and being a child, yes, I guess I was a child, I did not have those fancy words or the understanding of the concepts. How could I be expected to express what I was feeling? How could I understand? Or maybe I wasn't supposed to understand and just accept it.

Isolation: A Survival Technique

Since Christmas 1966 and every Christmas after that I thought about what had happened to me in Camperville and for a long time Christmas had no meaning -- I hated it. Christmas simply became a reminder of my own powerlessness, feelings of isolation and alienation. Going home for Christmas became less important to me. I actually stopped going home altogether when I was about twenty one. I preferred instead to stay home by myself and work on a jigsaw puzzle.

So what does this all mean? The difference now is not only do I know my mother's side of the story, but the truth is neither of us had any control over what happened. I refused to believe I was ever abused by the nuns or priests, but when I

relive this story, I was. It is a story about someone having power and authority, not just over me but over my mother. It is a classic example of the power, which has been bestowed to the “colonizer”. The sad thing for me, is both my mother and I are “products of the residential school system” and we have been ‘colonized’. A difficult thing to admit. It certainly affected me personally in a serious and debilitating way; one of the reasons why I choose not to have any children was because I did not want my children to go through what I went through, especially racism. In some ways, I guess the “priest” and the Catholic Church have won because in essence they interfered with one of the most precious blessings I had—my right to have children. However, I can take pleasure in knowing that my unborn child or children will remain forever ‘protected’.

A New Beginning

On December 22, 1996, Ron and I went to listen to a couple of bands, Wild Band of Indians and Chester Knight and the Wind play at the West End Cultural Centre. As I listened to Chester Knight and the Wind sing their Victory Song, I could not help think about my first Christmas away from home. The beat, the lyrics, the words of the song captured my heart and soul. There was such a contrast with the way I had felt, thirty years prior and the feelings I was experiencing at that moment. These following words particularly caught my attention “....Children of the Spirit, Children of our love, Dance out your destiny, Make Your People Proud...” (From the CD Freedom, Chester Knight/Falcon’s Dream Productions, 1996).

As I listened to them play, I was overwhelmed with emotion; pride I had not felt for a long, long, time, and it was the first time I felt free from the grips of my painful Christmas in 1966. Perhaps it was meaningful because I had written about it prior to going to the concert and had managed to pull out the skeletons, which had always plagued my understanding of Christmas. After they finished playing, I went and thanked Chester for bringing me comfort and joy. I felt good; really good! I thought about my high school days and my life in Winnipeg, with the Taylors and what it had been like being away from my family.

In Chapter 3, I indicated it was time to tell the truth about my experiences and as I reflected about high school, Assiniboia Residential school and living with the Taylors, these are the “stories” which I wanted to share. No one told me I was going to be challenged for being an “Indian”, that I would question my identity or that I would be confronted with racism. I was forced to find ways to survive but at the same time I was also very lucky to have met the Taylors, who supported me and encouraged me to attend school. They provided me with an alternative way of life; not necessarily a better life than my own family. By accepting me into their home and letting me share their life with them, treating me as part of their family helped me establish and maintain a healthy and positive view and understanding of the ‘white’ world. I believe if I had not had this experience, my view of the ‘white’ world would not be quite as positive.

Resisting or Accepting Assimilation

Attending high school in Winnipeg was a different story. It was unlike my experience at the Pine Creek Residential School. I thought if I could survive the first year I can survive anything. I arrived in Winnipeg the last week in August, 1967 to enroll in grade ten. All the other students arrived about the same time. The students were mainly from northern reserves but there were some from the south such as Roseau, Sandy Bay, Fort Alexander and Griswold. Our home for the year would be the Assiniboia Residential School, which was located on Academy Road, in a neighbourhood which was and still is considered one of the affluent areas of Winnipeg.

I had no idea what school I was going to attend. None of us knew. We were just told by the nuns or the priest what school we would attend. To this day, I am still not sure how they decided who went where. There were several schools open to us, including public schools but most students were sent to private schools such as St. Boniface College, St. Mary's Academy, Sacred Heart Convent, and St. Charles Academy, which was probably the farthest from the residence. It is still located on St. Charles Street, the last street off Portage Avenue west, just before the west perimeter. When I was told that I would be going to St. Charles Academy, a private school, an all girls school, I thought it can't be all that bad. Besides my mother would approve, not only because I would be attending a good Catholic school but I would also be taught by nuns.

The school year began by putting on my navy blue uniform, a white blouse with a royal blue bow tie, navy knee high socks, a royal blue blazer with a wide yellow stripe on the bottom and black shoes. After breakfast, I think there were ten of us who were assigned to go to St. Charles, we would take a bus on the St. James Bridge and we would transfer at Polo Park to a St. Charles. Sometime the bus driver would wait for us and other times, he wouldn't. The thirteen mile bus ride became a bit much some times, particularly as the year went on.

As hard as Pine Creek Residential School had been, at least I did not hear comments like those I heard at St. Charles Academy which were "those girls from the reserve are dumb". After a while, I started to take it all in and the only way I knew how to deal with it was to internalize it. I did not tell anyone how I was feeling. I never even thought of asking the other girls if they were feeling the same way. The

more I thought about that comment, the more I believed it. I was not doing very well academically. I did not like myself and at times, I think I actually hated myself. I was fat; I was carrying around this extra weight that I had put on in Camperville. I had always enjoyed school and I was beginning to dislike it a lot. But I would tell myself that I could not quit. I told myself I was the one who wanted to come to school and no matter what happens, I am going to finish what I started.

I went home that year and for the first time in my life I felt dejected; I was a failure. I could not bear the thought of going home and telling EVERYBODY that I too, had failed. I was both embarrassed and ashamed. I had always done well in school and EVERYBODY knew that to be the case. I never thought of myself as being dumb nor did I ever think that I might fail a grade. I simply did not know what to do with it. I did not try to explain to anyone what may have contributed to my failure because it would sound too much like an excuse. The more I tried to understand what had happened, the more depressed I became. My mother was more objective; she told me I could try again. Her words were not very comforting and I retreated into my shell and continued to feel sorry for myself. I could not accept the fact that I had failed my grade ten. I spent most of the summer trying to figure out what I had done wrong.

The Indian agent came to Bloodvein a couple of times over the summer and he wanted to know what I was going to do about school. I told him that I was never going back to school and at the time I think I really meant it. I had convinced myself, perhaps there was no way I would get my high school diploma. But there was a part of me that I could not ignore; I kept telling myself I had to go back to school. I know I can do it!.

There was this rock formation, about 400 yards from my parents' house. It sloped down to the river and that is where I would go, to think. There was a perfect place where I would sit and let my legs dangle into the water. Here I would contemplate my future. One day I was sitting there and I knew my mother was working at the nursing station, so I decided to go and see her. There were no patients except Mrs. McLennan, the nurse. I don't remember what they were talking about but what I heard Mrs. McLennan say was, "If you think you are the Queen of England, then you are the Queen of England." I thought what an interesting idea. I went back to the riverbank to think about what I was going to do.

The next time the Indian agent came, I met with him and I told him I was ready to go back to school but I would only go back on one condition. He said, what's that? I told him, I wanted to go back to St. Charles Academy. He looked puzzled and he said, "But, I thought you did not like it there". I told him that was true, but I had to go back there because there were things I needed to work out for myself. I knew if I didn't go back, I would never recover from my shame and embarrassment, let alone the bruise on my ego. The next year went without incident (at school) and I passed my grade ten. I had accomplished what I needed to do and I felt much better about myself.

That same year, 1967, I met the Taylor family. I was playing cards with one of the other girls, when Mrs. Charette called me into the office. We did not go into the office very often unless we wanted to use the phone or needed something else or we had done something wrong. My immediate thought, of course, was that I did not do anything wrong; why is she calling me into the office. She asked me to sit down in a very serious tone and she said, there is something I want to discuss with you. Now I was really racking my brain trying to figure out what it was that I had done. She looked at me and she said a Mrs. Taylor had called the school and she was looking for someone to do her housekeeping on Saturdays, would I be interested? I told her I was and asked when I would start and she said, she wants someone this morning .

So that very morning and every Saturday morning after that I would go off to 250 Elm Street. I would walk there from the residence and would arrive there for ten o'clock and leave about three o'clock. I felt quite responsible because, except for the first morning, Mrs. Taylor would leave me alone to do my work. I appreciated the trust she afforded me and was thankful that she did not feel the need to watch over my shoulder. I enjoyed my work and took my responsibilities seriously and made sure I did a good job. I really did not get to know the Taylor's because they were never really there. One morning I was in Dr. and Mrs. Taylor's bedroom and I was dusting this picture of a man who could have passed as a younger version of Dr. Taylor and I thought, this must be their son, but I had never seen him. I could feel his energy. It was like he was in the room. I wonder where he is; I have to ask Mrs. Taylor. I met Lois, the younger daughter who was about the same age as me and their oldest daughter, Marion.

That same day, Dr. and Mrs. Taylor came home from grocery shopping and I was upstairs and she called up and asked if I wanted some lunch. Dr. Taylor was sitting at the table, eating his lunch and

reading the Free Press. I remember eating a fresh crusty roll with peanut butter and banana. After all these years I still enjoy eating the same thing for lunch and of course I associate this sandwich with the Taylors. But something else happened that day, which I will never forget. Dr. Taylor finished his lunch, excused himself and went to watch television. I thought this is a good time to ask Mrs. Taylor about the picture. I said, "Is that your son in the picture up in your room?" Instant sadness covered her face, her whole body and she had tears in her eyes and she said "yes, Don was killed by a motorcyclist, who was drunk". I wanted to do was over to her hug her, but I couldn't so instead I just sat there and cried with her. I felt connected with her. I left her home that day with such sadness in my heart but I was also kicking myself for not minding my own business.

I was now sixteen years old and the next year I would go into a private home placement, which basically meant that I would be living with a family. It was always a scramble for the counsellors at Indian Affairs to find homes for all the students. One Saturday morning, it was early June, I was walking on Academy Road, my regular route to the Taylor's. The sun was shining, I was anxious about the next year. Will I still work for Mrs. Taylor? I wondered, what it would be like to live with someone I don't even know. Maybe I'll mention it to Mrs. Taylor and see what she says. I did and without hesitation she said, "You are welcome to come and live with us."

The next school year began with having my own bedroom for the first time in my life. I had always shared a bedroom with my sisters and slept in a dormitory for three years. I was excited but I worried about what clothes I was going to wear to school. Maybe the uniform from St. Charles Academy wasn't so bad; at least everybody wore the same thing. I asked Marion to help me shop for clothes because I knew she was up to date with the fashion world.

I adored both her and Lois. Lois was feisty, she was smart and I admired her vitality. Both our bedrooms were on the third floor; Dr. and Mrs. Taylor and Marion slept on the second floor. Lois and I would sometimes do crossword puzzles before we went to bed. Both of us smoked and every once in a while, Mrs. Taylor would ask us if we were smoking again. Whenever she would ask, I would look at Lois, she would look at me and she would answer, "of course not".

I lived with the Taylors from 1969 to 1973. In my first year university they took me with them on their holidays to Hawaii for two weeks. Marion became a close ally and she encouraged me when I felt

like quitting, particularly in high school. She helped me with my essays and was always willing to read and correct my papers. In my second year I moved into the Sparling Hall residence at the University of Winnipeg.

Marion planned to go to New Zealand for her holidays and the night before she left, we all went out for a family dinner. She dropped me off at the residence and that was the last time I saw her. On her way back home she was killed in a plane crash. She was thirty years old. I was devastated, but so were the Taylors. I did not talk to anyone about how I felt and because of that, I am not sure whether the rest of the Taylors realized how much her death affected me. She had been such an inspiration, a perfect role model and I wanted to be just like her. After she died, I moved back in with the Taylors for another year. I missed her terribly.

It is worth noting that Dr. Taylor was the Dean of Theology at the University of Winnipeg for several years and in my first year university Lois and I would get a ride with him. Having him and Lois at the university provided me with comfort and a sense of security. Dr Taylor passed away in August 1995.

Mrs. Taylor worked as a Probation Officer and was the Coordinator of Intake. She had to work Tuesday evenings and when I lived with them Dr. Taylor and I would pick her up. Many times, I would run up to her office, which was located on the third floor at Building 30 Fort Osborne Barracks. I used to admire her office or maybe it was because she looked so official and important. Little did I know that when I became a Probation Officer I would eventually end up in that very same office. I continue to have contact with Lois and her mother and over the years, I have learned to love and appreciate them more and what is more important is that I am able to tell them that I do.

Having had these experiences however does not mean that I do not understand when students talk to me about racism; the important lesson for me is, I am able to admit now that racism still exists in schools colleges and universities. Maracle (1996) reminded me. . .

to ask our students to hold themselves up under the biting lash of racism is criminal. To ask our students to forget the past is to negate their present. The present they enjoy is not disconnected from their past (p. 91).

which means I have to have the courage to tell Aboriginal students, such as the ones I met with in Bloodvein in March 1996, the truth about my experiences. It is something I have to keep in mind as I work with the students and faculty on a daily basis.

After my first year at St. Charles Academy and I wanted to quit, it was the feeling of 'being inferior' which made me hate white people, particularly white' girls. What I did not realize at the time was, part of the hate that I felt was towards me because a part of me believed that maybe the 'white' girls at St. Charles were right and I was indeed dumb. It had been the first time I really questioned whether I did have the ability to finish school and continue with what I had set out to do. I easily identified with what Harris and Ordonia (1988) meant when they suggested that

Self-doubt is the soul of internalized racism; self-hatred is its substance. The self-doubt and self-hatred that result from internalized racism determine how we react to just about every situation we encounter (p. 306).

In my work as a Native Student Advisor, I understand why Aboriginal students get angry when they are confronted with racist incidents, because when I did, I was plagued by my own feelings of self-doubt and self-hatred. These were the feelings which at times could have easily destroyed me as a student and as a person. They affected both my self-esteem and confidence. If I had not had the support from my family and the Taylors, I do not believe I would be where I am today. I still maintain and believe Aboriginal people need to get an education but it must be an education

which invites and accepts our participation. We must be included in the curriculum.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) proposed that

what First Nations people are seeking is not a lesser education, and not even an equal education, but rather a better education—an education that respects them for who they are, that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in the relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives. It is not enough for universities to focus their attention on “attrition” and “retention” as an excuse to intensify efforts at cultural assimilation. Such approaches in them selves have not made a significant difference, and often resulted in further alienation (p. 14).

I wanted to finish high school not just for myself but I wanted to be an example for my younger brothers and sisters and thought that maybe they would follow my footsteps and in many respects they have. I am going to boldly suggest that if I would have read works, such as Maracle (1996); Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991); Hampton (1995); Monture-Angus (1995); Grant (1994) and other Aboriginal writers, I may not have felt so alienated and isolated. Their works and writing were not available when I was in high school or during my undergraduate degree. In my graduate program I found their material and research very useful not because I agreed with everything they published but I could relate to their ideas; they have a similar world view and they have an understanding of what is needed to make a university a comfortable place to be for Aboriginal students. They suggested that the services and programs offered by the universities “must connect with the students’ own aspirations and cultural predispositions sufficiently to achieve a comfort level that will make the experience worth enduring” (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 5). Monture-Angus (1995) also denoted that “education is important if and when we are able to educate our young in a

decolonize way. Colonialism and its consequences are the obstacles (p. 80). As an Aboriginal educator, this is one of my responsibilities but I cannot do it alone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: LEARNING IS A CIRCLE

From the narrative inquiry process and from my readings, academic, scholarly and literary pieces, I have learned various things about myself. I learned that I have lied to myself and I have tried to ignore and block some of these experiences I had because I did not want to face or deal with issues attached to the experiences. I now understand, from this inquiry, that all of these factors have contributed to my own confusion of who I am. I had no idea what I was going to discover and I certainly did not know this journey was going to be this painful. The most difficult lessons were admitting to being a 'racist', albeit my education, particularly my residential school experience, was entrenched in "systemic racism" and acknowledging my own contribution to my own "colonization" process.

When I began contemplating writing this thesis I did not know exactly where the stories would lead and how I was going to weave the literature. In addition to the writing and narrative inquiry process, one of the most poignant and powerful moments which facilitated what I was attempting to do was when I read Monture-Angus (1995) and she suggested that

wisdom comes from what we do with our life experiences. Wisdom is about how we make our life experiences work for us, after we have worked to understand what the experiences mean. True wisdom requires much self-reflection. It is in this way that First Nations recognize and credential people (p.77).

Not only have I grown personally and professionally from this experience but it has

also been a healing journey and the analysis clarified many of the issues I have not been able to confront or had the courage to face.

This 'research of self' has not only changed my perspective of education but it has also provided me with a change of heart, a different view and interpretation of my schooling experiences. This thesis has led me to believe and affirm that my culture, my people, the Anishinabe and other Aboriginal people have our own kind of education, an education which encourages and teaches us not only how to survive but how to live with each other. The knowledge we have within the culture may not always be written; nevertheless, it has been passed on for generations and will continue to be passed on in this manner. As a young student, this is the knowledge I was cognizant of and knew existed, yet it was this very knowledge I personally belittled, particularly in residential school, high school and in my undergraduate degree. I take responsibility for part of it because I did not dare challenge nor did I ask for help, unless it was absolutely necessary. I also have come to recognize how my personal choices were formed within the context of the colonization of Aboriginal peoples. I make reference in this thesis to undergoing a 'decolonization' process and what I mean is I was not aware I was yielding to my own "colonization process"; I was convinced, perhaps not totally that if I bought into the system I would be 'successful'.

In this chapter I attempt to answer the question 'So What'. I understand the risk I have taken to write this thesis and perhaps I did forget at times who I was writing it for. There is no doubt this was an incredible healing journey personally but I did not start this thesis with that intention nor did I think it was going to result in sharing what I

consider a very private part of myself. Nor did I realize it was going to end up being in a sense such a depressing thesis. This concluding chapter is an illustration of what I have learned from the process and offers some insights as to what I think will be beneficial for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators to be aware of and know while working with Aboriginal students. Although I have discussed some of these within the thesis, they are worth summarizing.

I began this thesis as an investigation of the impact of my schooling experiences and how these experiences may have contributed to the kind of educator I am today. I read what Connelly and Clandinin (1988;1990) and Newman (1990; 1994) had to say about narrative inquiry and having to 're-live' and 'retell' the stories in order to find their meaning. I thought I understood what they had to say but it was not until I commenced writing that I truly comprehended what they meant. I could not tell or write any of my stories until I actually 'relived' those moments; the worst one being the one at the residential school when Father Masse withheld the letter from my mother (see p. 80). When I wrote that story, I could not believe my reaction. I could not stop crying. After reading the literature and 'retelling and reliving' this story, I now recognize and accept that it was (is) a clear example of 'systemic racism'; something I did not want to believe before. Elliot and Fleras (1992) indicated that

racism at the institutional level or societal level can be regarded as impersonal, unconscious, unintentional, and covert. As well, this type of racism is difficult to detect and combat. Systemic racism is the name given to this subtle, yet powerful, form of discrimination which is entrenched within the institutional framework of society. With systemic racism, it is not the intent which counts but rather the *consequence* (p. 64).

I discovered that I had avoided telling that story because, if I did, it meant admitting that I had been emotionally abused and I did not want to present or view myself as a 'victim'. I hoped that I could successfully block it out and I would not have to deal with it. However, writing this thesis has helped me to resolve my own issues with racism; I now understand why I found the meeting with the students and the Dean of Arts and Sciences so painful (as discussed on p. 49).

This admission had been difficult to share but at least I can seriously begin to undergo a 'decolonization process', which should help me address and handle the issues in a more helpful manner. As much as I would like to believe that racists incidents do not occur as often as they use to, it does not mean that 'systemic racism' no longer exists. Perhaps it is not as blatant, but I have no doubt that the Aboriginal students, who come to Winnipeg to attend high school and university continue to be hindered and affected by it. Many have discussed their personal experiences with racism and if they are being confronted with it, then I would assume (in some instances I know) that they are also affected by their feelings of isolation, alienation, and fear of failure.

Personally and professionally I find it disturbing that in 1990s, the success of Aboriginal students continue to be hampered by 'systemic racism'. I may not have understood it when I was a student in residential school, high school or in my undergraduate program but it was clarified for me when I read the following submission by Kirkness & Barnhardt (1991) that

for First Nations students coming to the university (an institution that is a virtual embodiment of modern consciousness), survival often requires the acquisition and acceptance of a new form of consciousness that only displaces, but often devalues their indigenous consciousness, and for many, this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make. If they enter and withdraw before “completion,” however they are branded by the university as a “dropout”—a failure. Those who persevere and make the sacrifice can find themselves in the end, torn between two worlds, leading to a further struggle within themselves to reconcile the cultural and psychic conflicts arising from the competing values and aspirations (p. 7).

I have found myself in this very place and it does not matter whether I was fortunate to have had positive experiences, had the support of my family and the Taylors, I experienced all the “feelings of separation” I have been referring to, emotionally, spiritually, physically and mentally. Perhaps I would not have felt so isolated and alienated if I had not internalized all these feelings but if I do that I would be implying once again that systemic racism does not exist; it does exist! Not all Aboriginal students got (get) the same kind of family support that I did when I went to school but ironically it is the negative moments, which have affected me the most and they have indeed impacted immensely to who I am today.

In my work as a Native Student Advisor and counsellor, my experiences have also contributed to my understanding and empathy for Aboriginal students and it has often been evident in my counselling and advising sessions that sharing these experiences with the students have clarified and has helped in putting some of their issues in perspective. However, I believe that it is still not enough to simply understand, identify and empathize with the students; schools, colleges and universities must teach from a curriculum which includes Aboriginal people. I am suggesting this

is what Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) meant when they wondered “whether those who are in a position to make a difference seize the opportunity and overcome the institutional inertia soon enough to avoid the alienation of another generation of First Nations people” (p.14). One of my major goals when I finished high school was to pave the way for my younger brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. This had been my way of preventing them from experiencing the “feelings of separation” and perhaps alleviating some of the pain but I had no idea how huge that challenge would be and still is.

The ‘stories’ I decided to write about, exposed some of my assumptions and they revealed my attitudes, my biases, values and my beliefs. Knowing now what these are, I can begin to change who I am as an educator and how I work with the students, the staff and faculty and Aboriginal organizations.

Recent literature, particularly by Couture, 1987; Hampton, 1995; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991; Monture-Angus, 1995 and others have proposed various ways of improving the conditions and the comfort level for Aboriginal students in universities, including the establishment of Indigenous and First Nations post-secondary institutions. I support the merit of these proposals and I understand the basis for their arguments. Alienation, isolation and systemic racism are areas of great concern for me and the students I serve and “we need to reclaim our essential selves, engage ourselves as the cultural, spiritual, emotional and physical beings we are and march forward, laying to rest one hundred years of prohibition and arrest” (Maracle, 1996, p. 89).

This thesis may present a dismal and depressing picture of my schooling experiences (many have had worse) and it is easy to simply concentrate on the negative incidents and the impact of 'systemic racism'. In spite of my realization that 'systemic racism exists, I believe that formal education is one way to improve the conditions of Aboriginal people. This needs to be done in a cultural and relevant manner. If I had no faith at all, I would not be working as a Native Student Advisor, encouraging Aboriginal youth and the students, with whom I currently work to pursue further education. I now have more confidence in my interaction with the educational system; it is still not yet a perfect system. Aboriginal students now have access to literature, books and resources written by Aboriginal writers and role models, who work and write from an Aboriginal perspective and have been successful. There is an attempt by educational institutions to offer inclusive curriculum which allows students to make choices and receive a variety of views, rather than simply a Euro-centric philosophy or world view.

The years I was a student, away from home spans from 1966 to the present and several changes have occurred. The presence of Aboriginal educators and counsellors have increased not just in Manitoba but across the country. Aboriginal focussed programs and the establishment of Indigenous institutions have offered valuable and quality education to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. Individual bands and tribal authorities have taken local control of Aboriginal education.

Many of the issues related to 'systemic racism' continue to exist and one way to combat this problem is have more Aboriginal people working in schools, colleges

and universities at all levels. I have been hesitant about openly challenging the presence of systemic racism in my work because I am the only Aboriginal faculty member and much support is needed to achieve any headway or change. It is therefore important to know who my allies are and together as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators we can begin not just addressing but confronting this problem in a positive and meaningful way.

As I stand back and review what has happened to me, I want to say to the students that in high school I knew exactly what I wanted and I did everything in my power to achieve that goal. I did not have the same sense of direction in my undergraduate degree and therefore did not have the same enthusiasm and I certainly did not work as hard. This changed again when I entered graduate school. I may have started the program to add more letters after my name but now, it is more important to show that it is possible to get a university education including graduate school, without having to give up who we are as Aboriginal people.

I have presented a painful and disturbing picture of my life as a student but it is realistic. At first glance, it appears gloomy but for me it is a thesis with a strong sense of hope. I realize now I took my studies and carried my responsibilities way too seriously because I was too busy trying to survive. I did not participate in any extra curricular activities. I continue to work hard but I have found other outlets, such as sports, to release the tensions, the pressure of wanting to do well, and I have learned to have fun. For spiritual healing, I participate in traditional ceremonies and maintain healthy and positive friendships with Aboriginal men and women; something I was not

comfortable doing as a young student. The major difference now is I do not just want to survive, I want to live. I continue to desire success and to resist whatever I feel will affect my self-esteem, my self-worth, my identity and determination in a negative way.

This thesis may appear disheartening because by telling and retelling my stories I have revealed contradictions about myself; the hope in that is I now more fully understand why that is and why I have become who I am. If I would not have gone through 'retelling and reliving' of my stories, I believe I would simply continue to do presentations, which would in some ways ignore the impact of "systemic racism". Returning home to Bloodvein in March 1996 taught me I can no longer neglect my duties and responsibilities to the Aboriginal community. I shared my story to help other Aboriginal students and I also shared it for the parents and the rest of the people in our Aboriginal communities. I challenge all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators to confront "systemic racism" so that Aboriginal students can concentrate on their studies rather than having to waste their energy in dealing with the "feelings of separation".

I take comfort with the fact that by sharing my 'stories', and providing a reflection and an analysis of these stories, they have revealed to me that because of the oppression and racism I experienced in my life, I now can help others clarify and put their experiences into perspective. So by refiguring my past I have created a purpose in my future (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

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