

## **TAKING IT BACK, PASSING IT ON: REVERENCE FOR THE ORDINARY IN BUSH CREE TEACHER EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract / Résumé**

Researching teacher education in a remote Alberta First Nations community was a slow and satisfying process of forming face-to-face relationships with traditional Cree women educators. I asked "What is important for people to know around here?" Through photography, diary writing, interviews, and participating in community activities, I noticed how the women cherished ordinary things they did for and with each other. I describe how we shared what resulted with members of the local Cree Nation in thirteen formal ways.

Faire de la recherche sur l'éducation des professeurs dans une communauté autochtone éloignée de l'Alberta s'est montré un processus lent et satisfaisant en vue de tisser des relations face à face avec les éducatrices crees traditionnelles. J'ai demandé: "Qu'est-ce que les gens trouvent important de savoir, par ici?" A travers des photographies, la rédaction de journaux intimes, des entrevues et la participation à des activités communautaires, j'ai noté combien les femmes chérissent les choses ordinaires qu'elles font pour les autres et les unes avec les autres. Je décris comment nous avons partagé les résultats des recherches avec les membres de la nation cree locale en treize points formels.

The purpose behind the teacher education study (Mader, 1996) described in this essay, was to understand local knowledge and how traditional values might become part of teacher education. I planned to use the findings to contribute to a better way of educating teachers in schools and universities. Since learning from experience and learning from stories about those experiences are an integral part of the Cree people who were educating me, I chose to report the research that way as well. I detail in story form what happened between myself and the traditional educators I worked with. I began that work in a First Nations community which I shall call Moosetrack in the summer of 1993 and successfully defended the PhD research three years later. However, my associations with the friends I made during that time continue. And to this day I take all writing which mentions that work back to the Reserve in northern Alberta to have it "okayed".

This paper is for readers interested in using local knowledge to improve the way they educate and learn. It expands on my 1996 dissertation about local Indigenous knowledge with additional stories.

## Research Background

By local knowledge I mean a shared way of life that teaches a set of values through action, and stories about those actions. I include in that meaning a sense of place described by O'Brien and Flora (1992:97). They say that local knowledge "is context-specific...accommodating the global variety of people expressing and generating such knowledge: Turkana herds-people, Colombian peasants, and Kansas farmers are thus similar in their common ability to produce context-specific knowledge". The Native people in Moosetrack do not use the term "Woodland Cree" used in anthropology to describe themselves. They say "Bush Cree".

I followed that tradition in my studies with four Moosetrack women. The women said they worked with me so that their school-aged relatives and neighbours might benefit from our findings. We hoped local teachers would use them to make improved curriculum decisions. We hoped teacher educators would use local teaching/learning practices in their work at universities so that all teachers might benefit from Bush Cree women's Indigenous wisdom. I have used knowledge from that inquiry in mainstream, First Nations and Métis classrooms and in the education of future teachers. How I did that is discussed elsewhere (Mader, 1987). This paper will detail how those findings were taken back to Moosetrack and shared with community members before being passed on to the general public.

My first two trips to Moosetrack were a week each in August and October of 1993. The next visit was in mid-1994 when I collected the bulk

of the data. It lasted ten weeks. Times between visits were connected by phone calls averaging once a week. In 1995 I went north twice, a thousand kilometres from my base in Edmonton, for a week each time. I continued the phone calls. In addition I met my research participants in Edmonton for several days at a time throughout the year. One occasion that regularly brought us together was the annual Pilgrimage at Lac Ste. Anne near Edmonton. It seemed half the Reserve went there to camp and take part in ceremonies. Each summer I brought my tent and continued to pay attention to clues for my research question, "What is important for people to know around here?" Sixteen seasons went by since my first visit to Moosetrack, four times a summer-autumn-winter-spring cycle. Then in the summer of 1996 I moved to British Columbia. I visited Moosetrack only once that year. By then community contact had settled down to regular and sustained phone calls with two of the women. At a conference in February 1997, and again in 1998, Agnes Moberly, the chief research participant, who by then had become one of my closest friends, and I co-led teacher aide workshops in Edmonton. In hands-on presentations we worked with our audience to help them make their own links to their own local knowledge.

### **What Unhurried Time can do with Ordinary Activities**

I've taken a long slow time with the research, but I am happy about that. The slow part was important. Just as I liked slowly putting my dissertation together, I like slowly giving away what I learned. I like putting into practice what I have learned. In *A Wishing Bone Cycle*, a Cree storyteller says to his audience:

You should know this thing. Maybe it won't be easy to hear inside the story, but it's there. Too easy to find, you might think it too easy to do (William Smith Smith quoted in Norman, 1976:172).

What is this thing that won't be easy to hear inside the story you are reading here? In this essay about research findings and sharing them with the community from which they came, lies tucked the value of moving slowly through everyday events. This is not an easy thing to hear because it is so ordinary. The merit of spending unhurried time in ordinary activities runs counter to western trends. I will therefore model for you in several different ways what won't be easy to hear inside this story.

To rephrase what this thing is that you should know: the ordinary is worth valuing. All kinds of important learnings and teachings are ordinary. The simple giving and taking of ordinary time, for example. Again and again, I saw how satisfying it was to make sure all the stories I was given, fit all

the stories I had taken. It took time for each person named in the study to approve what I had written or to suggest changes. It took time for the local Cree Board of Education to find two people willing to read and critique 250 pages of draft dissertation, and for me to include their suggestions. It took time to sit down with the Chief and keep him posted. Writing took the most time. Yet these things were leisurely and satisfying. Work and play became one and the same, just as they did with Smith Smith.

When I transcribed a story by Elder Marie Nanooch, I found it held the same easy going relationship:

We used to take our time.  
 Look at everything.  
 It's so nice early in the fall.  
 And we'd never  
 Get to the cabin fast where we're gonna  
 Spend the winter (Mader, 1996:90).

"We'd never get to the cabin fast where we're gonna spend the winter" she said, and paused to let time settle in. Her sense of wonder touched me and inspired me. I learned to follow time, not struggle to direct it. Once I did that, I had no trouble fitting myself into what unfolded in Moosetrack. And once I was able to fit in—that is, once I found my place within one family—what emerged was this: important local knowledge was nothing less than quite ordinary bits of living happening in full view for *anyone* to notice. Like an open secret or the still curriculum (explained later), local knowledge is freely accessible to everyone. Maybe it won't be easy to hear it, but it's there. It's there inside of things I've always known, inside of things I felt drawn to no matter where I was. Hundreds of my photographic slides show such pleasurable moments. They cover thirty-five years and all continents. Viewed as a whole, the slides have the reassuring commonality of ordinariness about them. Baking bread. Feeding baby. Watching a muskeg. Graduating. My time with women from the local Bush Cree Nation unmistakably confirmed this: ordinary is important. And when the ordinary is valued, western work/play boundaries disappear.

Barre Toelken makes this point with a story. His inquiry into local knowledge makes one wonder when is making a basket working, when is making a basket playing, and when is making a basket singing? He calls his story "The Basket As Folk Song".

Suppose we hear an Indian woman from northern California say that we cannot learn to make baskets until we learn all the proper songs. We are told that the materials for the baskets must be softened and shaped with the lips and teeth, and that without the songs the baskets will be meaningless. We infer as

the conversation develops that a basket seems to be in the same category as a song, perhaps because they both come from the mouth, perhaps because they both use the same or similar kinds of images. The basket seems to fit into a genre other than the one we might have assigned it had we not asked into the matter. Suddenly, we think, They must believe the basket is a visible song! and we ask the old woman, who smiles back as if to say, "What *else* could it be, after all?" Note that we have made the discovery and have been able to articulate it because we could hold two generic concepts in mind simultaneously and recognize that for this culture they are apparently registered as one (1979:155-156).

The key is to hold two generic concepts in mind simultaneously, and recognize that they could indeed be registered as one. What a possible discovery for teachers who wonder, as I once did, why "free time" does not always entice students! If work and play are both satisfying, why not spend recess finishing math puzzles?

I noted carefully what Moosetrack research participants, their extended families and I engaged in, and recognized the importance of give and take. I could hear how research participants and their families referred to the various companion pieces of the work as "our stories", "our pictures", but "your drawings", and "your book". I wondered, what was behind the women's ownership of the pictures but not the sketches or the writing? I wondered, but like so many other thoughts, I simply accepted the four phrases and set the question aside. What I did do was to search; search for words that communicated how the ordinary was important. What fit was the word "reverence". In Moosetrack, ordinary carries with it a reverence. According to Webster, reverence means an attitude of deep respect and esteem mingled with affection. I also noticed a social component and added "fun" to Webster's definition. Reverence shone through fun as well.

There were seven of us in this study. Four were Bush Cree women, one of whom passed away early in the study but continued to represent learning from the spirit world. Hers is the final story in this paper. One was Acadian, a Catholic nun who for over thirty years has made Moosetrack her home. I counted myself as well, a certified teacher and experienced learner with a lifelong interest in cultures and local knowledge. (My own ancestors are from the Black Forest in southern Germany.) Cow Moose completed our research team. She kept crossing my paths to represent nature-as-traditional-educator. Through her I saw how people learned by simply being with nature.

What attracted me to each participant was word-of-mouth, and the way each taught. You should talk to such and so I was told after I had explained

how I planned to learn from Moosetrack traditional educators. What did they feel was important local knowledge? I *did* talk to such-and-so, and then talked to the people *they* suggested. At every stop I communicated how I wasn't interested in showing anyone the mainstream ways. There were plenty of teachers already doing that. My hope was to study ways I might educate teachers differently. I wanted to support what local women knew so that they too would be asked to contribute their knowledge and experience at teacher inservices, not just male experts from the outside. One of the thrills from this study was hearing a participant of our February 1998 workshop for Teacher Aides ask if Agnes would come work with the teachers in a Métis Settlement school. "We learned so much here today, but our teachers are the ones who would really benefit", Agnes' colleague from a nearby community said. "Do you think I could?" Agnes wasn't asking permission, she wanted my opinion. I nodded. "Yes, you could. We've done six workshops together and you just keep getting better. You could." Later Agnes said she thought she could do it alone. She knew the aides in that school, if not every one of the teachers.

Eight months after we (the research participants and I) shared the finished work with the community of Moosetrack, a criticism surfaced. The way I received it followed Moosetrack protocol; it was passed on indirectly, told to someone who told me. The complaint was a complaint which supporters of hard science methods make less and less. The critic dismissed our research, "because it is only about one family and a few friends". His hard science question, how large does a sample size have to be to be of value, has in fact been answered by the work of countless qualitative researchers. Like their quantitative counterparts, qualitative researchers also pay systematic attention to the ways people do things, conduct themselves and live their lives. Qualitative investigations into topics of interest to educators who wish to teach in a new way, validate studies which have only a few participants. Examples<sup>1</sup> of research with small sample size include the work of Carol Gilligan (1982), Nel Noddings (1984), Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule (1986), Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna (1989), T. Minh-ha Trinh (1989), Julie Cruickshank (1990), Max Van Manen (1990), Dianne Meili (1991), Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly (1994) and Marija-Liisa Swantz (1996).

Wendy Wickwire, who interviewed only one person, Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson, summed it up well when she wrote:

Harry's world is our own world, relevant to native and non-native alike. From the established epics of King Arthur or Ulysses, to the narrative epics of Harry Robinson, the oral traditions of a community and society living with the land tell us

of a common magic contained therein. Knowledge of this magic as lived and recounted by its storytellers and its prophets, is the beat at the heart of a living culture (1989:28).

Having placed this work in the narrative tradition of qualitative educational research, I return to the discussion of choosing the research participants. To repeat, what drew me to each woman was the way each taught "traditional." I use traditional in the broad sense that Native people themselves do when they say someone is steeped in the "cultural way". Built into such a definition is room for change. The following are all comments I remember well from work with other Native groups:

They're traditional dancers alright, but they sure jump around more than we did in the olden days (Shuswap).

She is traditional. Raised by her grandmother (Tahltan).

Traditional... means those Native people who are maintaining and living according to Native traditional values and are usually more spiritually oriented (Bull, 1991) (Cree).

Traditional education, or experiential learning as I use the term, also apply to old European ways where people learned and taught each other by telling and listening to stories, playing games, copying masters and practising skills. In Europe before there were schools as mainstream societies know them today and before the Reformation made reading and writing a tool for the indoctrination of Christian ethics about work, women and nature through Bible study, back then apprenticing locally, then travelling, was how one learned.

Before the scientific revolution the act of knowing had always been understood as a form of participation... The very act of participation was knowing (Heshusius, 1994:15).

Many White people share my beliefs in ancient educational techniques and holistic thinking. But most Canadians do not, and mainstream schooling reflects that (Goodlad, 1986; Sutherland, 1986). Through lectures, worksheets and questions at the end of text book chapters:

One learns passivity. Students in schools are socialized into it virtually from the beginning (Goodlad, 1986:233).

## How a Giving Circle Works

I came for brief periods from the Outside and went back to the Outside. Still, I was able to join Reserve life a little. I made friends. I worked. I played. I watched. I listened. I helped out. I noticed how readily people gave things away. I joined in that too. If I was given an invitation to a potluck, I made double the amount of potato pancakes that was expected and encouraged people to take the leftovers home. (I watched my Cree landlady do that with her rice casserole.)

People told me stories about their youth. I showed them slides of mine. They teased me with a raunchy nickname I still can't shake. I turned red but laughed back with mighty hunter stories and created "in-jokes" about a certain someone's husband who snared one skinny little rabbit on a hunting trip. What he had hoped to do was feed four of us on his kill that fall weekend. You won't need to bring much food my friend said, we'll be eating moosemeat.

I told that tale even if the skinny-little-rabbit story set me up as a target for yet more humour. "She brings us bark from 500 miles away, and it's good for nothing!" They said my bark was old bark and too hard to carve an olden-time toy boat from. People had told me how the mighty hunter often repeated my joke at his expense (personal communication, 95-01-09). I copied him, grinned and passed on the bark story to much laughter.

A family gave me moosemeat. I invited them to help me eat it. And so it went. My story for theirs, my time for theirs. We also exchanged money, clothing, pictures, jokes, vehicles and affection. Reciprocal, informal, ordinary, quietly generous. A circle built from giving. A Giving Circle.

In Moosetrack, the relationships that the women have with everyday experiences are valued and passed on to the next generation. Not all the time and not by everybody. Many people want what mainstream culture represents. And yes, the hard-to-talk-about, the stereotypes exists. But a sense that things are "good enough" and the importance of "feeling good" endures. Ordinary brings pleasure. Quietly and without being talked about, the answer to my research question, what is important for people to know around here, is lived and passed on. I asked each woman to help pick photographs which represented that. Figures 1-4, clearly show what is important; one: young people and their modern future; two: land; three: spirituality; four: old people and their old ways. These they said are important above all else.

What does this have to do with sharing local knowledge from research to improve the education of Moosetrack youngsters? Since I am a teacher educator, there is a good chance some of my students will get jobs in Band-controlled or Métis settlement schools. For them I stress modelling

as a way of teaching. I model the importance of the ordinary. I demonstrate how my student teachers might model home-to-school-connections for their students as well. As Linda Akan from the Saulteaux Nation learned from Saskatchewan Elder Alfred Manitopeyes:

Ideally, teaching implies setting an example by being an example and carrying the message of our Ancestors (1992:193).

After 16 years of following instructions and knowing exactly how to get high grades, my undergraduates were used to being told what to do. Many struggled to become independent thinkers. To help them, I shared my Bush Cree experiences and told stories from my work entitled *Reverence for the Ordinary* (Mader, 1996). In my education classes my university students embraced experiential ways of learning/teaching in theory. But in their practise teaching, many students fell back on how they were taught as children. Back then the focus was on classroom management, on correct answers, on the hard sciences. In that olden days scenario, competition meant life was a race. A few won. Most lost. To this day, people from the dominant society compete hard to be extra-ordinary. In a worldview governed by hierarchies, the scramble for recognition leaves little time for reverence. I want to help my students with the skills they need to compete hard, but a well rounded education also provides time for reverence.

## Taking the Findings Back

As mentioned, our research team chose a series of four photographs (Figures 1-4) to show the ordinary things that people in Moosetrack value.

Figure one, young people and their future, is illustrated by two small girls, while figure two, the land, is represented by muskeg. Figure three, spirituality, features a teepee-shaped church and figure four, old people and their old ways, presents a historic photo of a mother and child. We shared these images with the world once we made them into postcards.<sup>2</sup> The local Band Council bought four thousand to give away at conferences and meetings.

The women and I selected eight other photographs as well. These photos expanded on local knowledge and show still more examples of reverence for the ordinary. They detail what else is important. The community is important. Modern schooling is important. Gatherings are important. Joking is important. I enlarged all twelve pictures to poster size and had them framed. The twelve formed the basis of my dissertation. I wrote short explanations for each picture and worked them into the final chapter as a companion visual dissertation. What I wrote was what I said to the research participants about each image.

**Four Postcards tell**

"What is important for people to know around here?"

The words on the back of each card are reprinted below it.



**Figure 1: We Value Our Future**

Two cousins from the Cree Nation in our home town of Moosetrack, Alberta, Canada. They are proud of their ancestry and face the future with confidence--they know they are an important part of our close and family-based First Nations community.

My initial plan was to organize a dance and give away the pictures there. But the women thought it would be best to join the preparations for such a dance already in progress. They told me to work instead with the sponsoring families of an Annual Memorial Round Dance and Giveaway. Like them I bought food, cooked moosemeat and pitched in to get the Community Hall ready. I was delighted: the research results would be shared as part of an established tradition. The Master of Ceremony (MC) a visiting Elder, would incorporate our work into the evening celebrations as he saw fit. My unique contribution would be a short speech that the MC would translate into Cree and a photography exhibit that would remain in the public buildings of the Reserve.



**Figure 2: We Value Our Homeland**

Boreal forests (poplar, fir, spruce) and muskeg ponds filled with bulrushes are common in northern Canada. They are an important part of the way of life for our Cree Nation. This spring landscape is near our community of Moosetrack, Alberta, Canada.

It happened as planned. February 1996, when the temperature was well below minus 37 degree Celsius, and school had been closed for several days, it happened that way! One night when it was so cold outside that my nostrils stuck together and snow squeaked underfoot, we remembered people who had "passed over" into the spirit world. Local knowledge tells how the northern lights are the spirits of those ancestors. Local custom lives that knowledge. The Moosetrack memorial dance is held during the season the northern lights are most active.

We hung the framed enlargements of our best of 900 photographs around the Moosetrack Community Hall. I watched people come in. Before and during the feast people studied the pictures. Without words young and old from all areas of the local Cree Nation indicated that the photographs indeed captured what was important around here. Some even said so. I watched people tell each other, "Read the words that are with the horse and wagon picture". Only a few people studied the summary comments



**Figure 3: We Value Our Spiritual Traditions**

St. Joseph Catholic Church in the northern Cree community of Moosetrack, Alberta, Canada. The church resembles a teepee which is an important part of the culture of our local Cree Nation.

mounted beside any other pictures. With that single exception, people preferred our visual summary to my writing.

The Giveaway Ceremony began after midnight. People removed the photographs from the wall and piled them onto a blanket on the floor. I had given the MC the names of those who would accept each picture and what public building it was meant to hang in. (The framed photos are now in the health office, the band office, the school, the church and the cultural centre.) We also added the boxes of 15,000 postcards. They would go to the women in the community to use as fund raisers. By mid 1997 they had sold over \$1,000 worth. I also gave away a large portfolio case with a stand-up picture display of life in the local Cree Nation. I gave it to the Director of Education to use during teacher recruitment in Edmonton. Prospective employees could see what was important to people around here as they waited to be interviewed.

At the same time as the pictures were piled onto my blanket, a second blanket was being heaped high with traditional giveaway items. There were frying pans, hamburger flippers, mugs, bowls, towels, pillow cases, blankets, hand-knit mittens and socks, crocheted Afghans and pot holders. After



**Figure 4: We Value Our Old Ways**

A Woodland Cree mother and daughter photographed in 1951 at the junction of the Little Red River and the Peace River near Moosetrack, Alberta, Canada. Once a popular fur trading post, the area continues to be a summer gathering place for people of the local Cree Nation. This "moss bag" which holds the baby is still a prized gift for our new mothers today. It is called that because moss was once used as diapers. Nancy Metsikassus is the mother in the picture.

a short ceremony all pictures, kitchen utensils, drumming, singing, dancing and joking would make their way into the ordinary lives of community members and their visitors.

Not everyone came. Round dances generally attract those who tend to still follow spiritual traditions. For families who no longer did this we devised other ways of sharing our research. I already mentioned six of the ways by which we did this; but there were several other ways as well, including postcards, framed pictures, summary descriptions of what the pictures show, short speeches in English and Cree, and a round dance. A 7th way, was that each school year Agnes offers to share our research with the teaching staff of the tribe's three local Band-controlled schools. Agnes has been a teacher assistant (TA) and pre-school teacher there for 20 years. Another way, 8th, was that I wrote a letter to the Chief and the Regional Board of Education reminding them that they had agreed to review my draft dissertation and offer suggestions. I incorporated those changes (9th), and sent a revised version for final approval. I also made a six page summary of the 250 page document for every board member, the 10th way of sharing.

Yet another, the 11th way of sharing research with the community, happened when I gave the board a copy of my book. The final chapter, the companion visual dissertation and reproduction of the photograph exhibit from the round dance was written especially for the board members. Local custom allowed me to give it to them indirectly through a spokesperson. My Cree landlady, whose family I lived with during my ten week stay, acted on my behalf. She knew the work well and answered questions.

A 12th way we gave the research back to Moosetrack was at yearly conferences for Teacher Assistants in Edmonton. There Agnes Moberly, the chief research participant and I conducted three workshops. In 1997 about a dozen local Cree Nation members and school staff came who had not been at the two previous events where we had shared our findings. We used audience participation and role play to show how traditional methods of education could fit contemporary classrooms. We showed how these methods could be used by mainstream or First Nations educators. We made clear how other things, among them a curriculum we called the "still" curriculum, were being presented at the same time. This still curriculum refers to what is also taught while the teacher is teaching her curriculum-as-planned (Aoki, 1993). Still teachings happen by the way the desks are arranged, by the kinds of questions being asked, by the hundreds of small and big ways teachers reinforce obedience, independence or competition. The still curriculum does not draw attention to itself. Like any open secret it is in full view. It is available as local knowledge.

## **Mainstream Schools use Classic Teaching Strategies**

Both years Agnes and I showed how certain classic teaching strategies and room arrangements train children to follow orders, let the teacher think for the whole class, and produce students who keep creative thoughts to themselves. Whole group instruction is one strategy of this classic approach to education. Children sit still and learn what experts tell them in school. Top marks go to those who repeat exactly what they heard. Two research studies, one from the United States (Goodlad, 1986) and one from British Columbia (Cassidy and Bognar, 1991) underscore how widespread teaching-for-compliance is.

## **Traditional Education happened Face-to-face**

By contrast, Agnes and I taught that traditional education offers valuable face-to-face techniques that could improve mainstream schools and classrooms. The techniques are based on experience and prior knowledge. We showed how our research from the community of Moosetrack can contribute to a learning environment where decision making is shared and ordinary local knowledge is counted as important. Here is a sample from our workshop.

I held up a black outline pattern of a sled dog and a sled.

This page is like the hundreds of worksheets a teacher gives to students. She might tell them, "Colour the dog and the sled". She might tell them which colours to use. She might remind them not to go outside the lines. She might bombard them with obvious local knowledge, "Careful, those scissors are sharp!" "Watch that you don't cut off the ears." What this teacher is also teaching besides how to make an old-fashioned toy is the mainstream focus on right or wrong. I stressed that her students would soon learn that everything is either good or bad. I went on to say that in today's workshop we would demonstrate and practise another way of teaching called by some, "experiential learning" (Schon, 1987; Akan, 1991; Raffan, 1992; Simosko, 1995; Reed, 1996).

I told the participants,

This other way is a traditional way used by traditional educators in many cultures. In the traditional way students are expected to watch. In the traditional way teachers value silence. In the traditional way students have the freedom to experiment. In the traditional way independence is highly valued. In the traditional way no one talks about what everybody knows.

That last phrase came to me as a hint dropped by research participant Nelly Nanooch. "Talk to Nelly Nanooch. Four of her boys graduated from grade 12. The youngest will too!" the local principal told me when I was putting the team together. Armed with a thermos of tea I'd made from local plants, I visited Nelly. I also spent a day helping Nelly tan moosehide. With very few words she modelled traditional education. Her way of giving me feedback on that day was through an indirect method and a time-honoured one: the legendary moccasin telegraph. A few days after the tanning she would tell another research participant, Sister Bernadette Gautreau, not that I talked too much; after all I knew the stereotype Native perception of White people is that they talk too much. Instead, she stated that I talked about what everybody knows. It took some time to figure out what Nelly meant. That in itself is "traditional".

What she meant was what Shirley Brice Heath meant in her (1982) comparative study about questioning. Heath looked at the kinds of questions asked at home and at school by White and Black parents in Appalachia. In the Heath study, White teachers (who were also parents) knew for example, that in a picture book they were discussing with their children, the cat was black, the bird was eating a worm and two girls were laughing. To test their students<sup>3</sup>, these White teachers asked questions they already knew the answers to. If the students were the teachers' own youngsters the children had lots of practise and knew how to answer those kinds of questions. But if these White teachers asked these same questions of their Black pupils, the students were silent. Black children had no prior experience in how to answer such questions. What could they do except stay quiet? Anyone with eyes could see that the cat was black, the bird was eating a worm and the girls were laughing. What Nelly meant is also discussed in the work of Basso (1979), Ross (1992) and Hampton (1993).

In the traditional way I invited the workshop members to gather around Agnes' table and bunch up so they could relate face-to-face. I told them not to ask any questions, not to discuss the obvious, but to remember what they saw. I told them that they could then rearrange the desks into tables with four or five people at each and make their own dog team. All the materials were handy, cardboard, scissors, patterns, needles and thread. Participants could help each other. They could teach each other. They could ask Agnes or me for help. But in traditional fashion, they were not to correct each other. They were not to point out mistakes. To strengthen their understanding of traditional teaching I told stories from my work in other parts of the world. Then I stood back.

What followed was an amazing twenty minutes of companionable silence mingled with soft conversation and quiet laughter. Not everyone had

noticed that Agnes cut out her dogs freehand; that the pattern remained untouched beside her. Not everyone noticed that Agnes used cardboard from old cereal boxes. Not everyone noticed these and other things. I saw men and women choose to trace out the patterns onto new cardboard strips. Some cut out their dogs and sleds at the same time as their pattern. Some held up the pattern to the light and cut out the cardboard as they held it underneath. And some did what Agnes did, they cut out the dogs freehand and grinned at what they had created. My own dog had a body that was way too stretched out. "Wiener dog" Agnes called it. Other workshop members had dogs with legs the proportions of a giraffe. Some of their animals had ears like bears or muzzles like pigs. Still, everyone treasured what they made.

In truth, I forgot to ask what Agnes did during this time, but as I went around to each small group I told the story of how I learned to make this "olden-day-toy". I remembered with them how Elder Marie Nanooch had casually mentioned it to me one day and I had asked her to show me how it was done. "We used to do this for the little ones" she said, but made no move to do so again. A whole year went by before she did. Time was precious. I knew she liked her bingo. Then one day she told me she was going to make a dogsled and dogteam for the grandchildren in her preschool class. She added, "It's been 28 years since I made one of these. I didn't do one for my youngest. But I made it for the other ones." Marie then gave me the first dogteam and sled she had made in 28 years.

As I went unobtrusively from one table to the next, I wondered aloud what the workshop participants were learning about ordinary things. "You mean like patience?" asked one. "You mean like paying attention?" laughed another. I nodded. One by one they came up with ordinary things I would want all students to learn. A sense of pride in their work. A feeling of satisfaction that they had worked alone. A feeling of satisfaction that they had helped another person. A fun toy they could do in their classrooms and with their cousins. And so on. Agnes and I were confident and sure of our knowledge; yet we felt vulnerable. We were not at all certain of our audience as we were the night of the Memorial Dance. There we knew people related to *Reverence for the Ordinary*. Weeks later, when someone from Moosetrack asked how the workshop went I said, "We were not preaching to the converted like at the round dance at home. So it was harder." What was harder was that in traditional fashion, the indirect clues were subtle.

No one walked out, yet I wasn't certain what our Bush Cree participants felt about our traditional approach. No one said. In traditional fashion I would be expected to read the clues to "figure it out". Signals I saw that made me think we did "okay" were smiles, in-depth conversations between

people who were meeting for the first time, a reluctance to leave at break and at the end, stories about what my personal exhibit of *Reverence for the Ordinary* brought to mind for them. Praise was low-key—a nod, a wave, a friendly touch. The older women in the group each made a point of speaking with Agnes. Some told their olden day stories to me as well.

What we were teaching was so singularly ordinary and non-spectacular! Agnes and I both knew we worked in an age in which workshop participants were often dazzled with new information and entertained with pan-Indian truisms. Pan-Indian truisms are generic statements about all Indian peoples. They are sometimes based upon one tribe's local knowledge. They may be true in one specific culture, but do not necessarily fit when they are introduced to a different tribe. Pan-Indian customs are nonetheless adopted as their own by many Native and White people who grew up without knowledge of their own local traditions.<sup>4</sup>

Weeks later a few feedback forms arrived by mail from Grant MacEwan Community College in Edmonton. Out of over 70 participants, ten offered an opinion. Eight were positive: as one said whose comments represented the rest, It was very informative. I really liked it. It reinforced information that I know and told me it was alright to teach in a traditional way. I would recommend it. Of the remaining two, one was bluntly negative:

Not overly informative. Quite boring.

The other left us wishing for a bit more information:

Was well presented but I expected something a bit different.

What did people expect who drove fourteen hours from their Bush Cree Reserve to an Edmonton college campus to hear us? "They seemed to like it" was all Agnes said. "One thing's for sure. They'll never tell us if they didn't!" I laughed. A heightened sense for clues and trust in my intuition was what research with Agnes, Nora and Nelly gave me. Agnes nodded thoughtfully.

Eventually other feedback fragments reached me via the moccasin telegraph. Apparently someone had said,

It's too bad that our way of teaching couldn't have been used from the beginning in the schools. Now it's too late, because even Native teachers teach like White teachers.

Someone who did not agree with what we shared passed on these comments:

I don't believe in romanticizing what Native people had in the past... Why discriminate? There's already too much said about differences between Natives and Whites. Our kids will have to

compete in the Whiteman's world so let's stop wanting to go back to the way things used to be.

I called Agnes and we discussed our reactions to this news by phone.

I quoted from Howard Norman's *The Wishing Bone Cycle* (1976) and repeated what the Swampy Cree Elder Jacob Nibènegenesábe wrote:

I try to make wishes right, but sometimes it doesn't work (Norman, 1976:1).

I know we also tried to make our wishes right.

I wondered aloud if perhaps I should have included yet more personal stories about traditional educators from my experience in other parts of the world. Would it have made a difference to the workshop? In each three hour session I had talked about Ghana, Thailand, New Guinea, Afghanistan, Tsimshian or Kaska country, and the Black Forest. "Probably not" said Agnes. Like their counterparts in mainstream society, some people in Moosetrack follow one tradition, others a different one. Some play hockey or bingo or visit relatives. Balance is kept when each in their own way contributes to the whole.

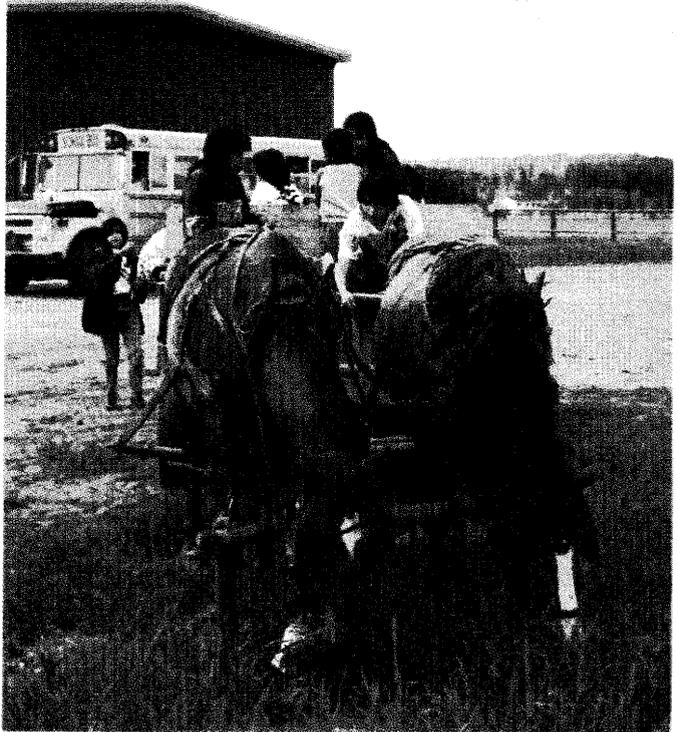
After several minutes of such weighty conversation there was a lengthy pause. In it I felt the urge to use a popular Bush Cree custom. The one where seriousness is always tempered by laughter.

I reminded Agnes how we closed our workshops. She chuckled as she remembered my joke from that Memorial Dance. You, the reader, will remember how I said earlier mostly people looked at the pictures, but also they'd asked each other, "Did you read what's beside the horse and wagon picture?" The picture showed the importance of home-to-school connections. Here is the written summary. It points to the importance of joking and storytelling in traditional education. (For an indepth discussion on Native humour see Ross, 1992.)

#### "Travelling From School To Home"

In this photograph I won't say much about what everybody knows is important—the wagon, the child holding the reins, the bus, modern education and the kids leaving their school to travel home. Instead I'll tell one lesson from this picture in a joke. I want to show how important joking is to people around here.

There was this newcomer on a reserve much like Moosetrack. Now, because this is a story about education let's make him a teacher. Everyday on his way to school let's have this teacher pass by horses. They belong to a Cree. Since our study focuses on women, let's make her a woman. Always the teacher looks



at a certain horse he wants to buy. But whenever the teacher asks the owner if he could buy it, the old lady shakes her head and says "Horse don't look too good". The teacher always argues with her. He points out the smooth coat. The strong legs. The healthy teeth that the horse has. "You're wrong" he'd say. "It's a beautiful horse." He'd say that. But the old woman is stubborn.

One day the teacher comes with money in his hand. "I'll give you \$100 for this here horse". Still she shakes her head. She says "Horse don't look too good". He comes back the next day with \$125. Again the old woman shakes her head and says "Horse don't look too good". This goes on for a while. When

the teacher holds out \$300 she finally nods. The teacher is very happy and takes his horse. But the next day he is back.

He is mad. "Hey" he shouts, "your horse is blind. What are you doing selling me a blind horse?" The old lady she shakes her head again. She says, "I told you, horse don't look too good" (Mader, 1996:225-226).

## **Teaching Yes**

In mainstream fashion I spoke with Agnes about what everybody knows: "Maybe some of the people didn't hear?" Not everybody listens to the ordinary. Some can't hear inside the story. I resolved to find still other ways to show how important ordinary is. But I was happy with nine out of ten and one abstention. My goal is not 10/10. My goal is to reach educators already in the field and rediscover with them old ways of educating. My goal is to influence how we educate new teachers, to educate new teachers differently, to show education students how to teach "traditional", to value and use field studies.<sup>5</sup> My goal is to show my own faculty that when we tell our education students what to read, write, study and think every moment of their university days, what we are modelling is dependency, compliance and conformity. Finally, my goal is to remember what I preach, to give assignments that let my students choose how to demonstrate their learning. At the following year's conference where we made a rag doll and baby swing, the hosting institution, Grant MacEwan Community College, altered the way it collected feedback. We ended up with 50 or so sheets and all were highly positive. What participants liked best was that we did not rush them along.

I like to tell the story about how I think of that kind of teaching as "Teaching Yes". Years ago I was visiting a Shuswap friend for a few days at Christmas. We were doing dishes. She was wiping and putting them away. Her grandchildren were close by observing us. "Can this be washed off?" my friend asked. She handed back a plate and pointed to a dirt spot I'd missed. The answer was obvious. I nodded yes and rewashed the plate.

The next Christmas we remembered that conversation. We were talking about my attempt to change mainstream thinking. I described how I often talked about that moment as "Teaching Yes". My friend laughed. It was her turn to nod. She looked at her children and their children sitting around watching us work. We were making turkey sandwiches. "These kids think we have a direct connection to the Creator 'cause we're old. They just don't know how much of it is plain hard work!" Yes, it was work. But it was pleasurable work.

Marie Nanooch knew this when she remembered how as a young girl she'd never get to the cabin fast where she was going to spend the winter. Navaho basket makers knew this when they sang while they worked. Cree Elder Thomas Smith Smith knew this when he taught how local knowledge was inside his story; too easy to find, readers might think it too easy to do.

I knew this when what emerged from my studies with traditional female educators, was a reverence for the ordinary and an unhurried, modelling approach to educating. The give-and-take experiences were challenging and fun. It takes a long time to understand a season, to tell a story properly, tan moosehide or walk to the winter cabin. But with slow work and fun even the difficult gets done. Even it becomes a source of satisfaction.

This concludes how we took back and passed on our research to the community where the research came from. My experience with many cultures, much of it captured on slides as stated earlier, lets me conclude that teaching traditional is not only a First Nations way of teaching. Traditional educators on every continent have for centuries used the slow face-to-face techniques we documented in our research with Bush Cree women.

### **Give a Story - Get a Story**

In the beginning days of this research when I had asked Agnes if she would work with me she said "Yes. But we want to get to know you too!" I remembered her words those sixteen seasons. They helped me see how research is mutual storytelling and how mutual storytelling fits in the Moosetrack Giving Circle.

It turned out to be a satisfying way to go. T. Min-ha Trinh, a Vietnamese-American film maker and writer summed it up well:

A story [is] a living thing, an organic process, a way of life. What is taken for stories, only stories, are fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves (1989:143).

In Moosetrack, learning and educating were a reciprocal concept: teaching/learning. The woman who gave what she knew, the teacher, and the woman who accepted her teachings, regularly traded places.

The very last time I was with The Woman Who Passed Away, it was the day before she suffered a stroke; she gave me a present. (In many Aboriginal communities it is the custom to not speak the name of a deceased person for a year.) Through a translator the Bush Cree Elder said, "I am giving this to you."

I want to copy her. Having written down a little of what I noticed is important to the women I worked with and what they feel is important for people to know in Moosetrack, I pass on the Elder's words. To you my readers, I am giving this to you: the possibility of satisfaction from reverence for the ordinary. The Woman Who Passed Away was one of six others who helped me understand her local knowledge in face-to-face encounters. Her way of teaching traditional was indirect. She let me find all on my own, the story she had put into the necklace she was giving to me. Like Smith Smith said, I should know this thing. Maybe it won't be easy to hear inside the story, but it's there. Too easy to find, I might think it too easy to do. It took time to figure out her message. She made it from white plastic beads and black bear claws. It wasn't easy for her either; it was hard work to put that story into that necklace; to get that bear and earn money to buy those beads. But she did those things. And then she gave it to me and I took the necklace. Took it to make meaning from. Satisfaction for her! think, came from making something lovely. In my case satisfaction came from figuring something out; it is satisfying to take the old ways and the new ways and figure them out.

What I have just written can be argued away, of course. And if I were still in high school I would have spent much energy in doing so. How did my English teacher Mrs. Hansen know, really and truly now, know that Shakespeare had put all those things into his writing on purpose which gave me such joy to figure out? At age 15, I would not allow Mrs. Hansen to rationally convince me that Shakespeare had placed his printed symbols consciously. She could not give me scientific evidence that his symbolism or wisdom was anything but accidental. Yet as an adult, I have understood Mrs. Hansen was right: writers carefully plan where to put their images. The research with Bush Cree women confirmed my English teacher's words. Like an open secret, local knowledge is stored in places where it can be approached through experience and hard work.

Reverence for the ordinary was an important thing to hear inside the women's stories in Moosetrack. Reverence for the ordinary isn't an easy thing to find. But it is satisfying. Slowly The Woman Who Passed Away, Cow Moose, Agnes Moberly, Marie Nanooch, Nellie Nanooch, Sister Bernadette Gautreau and I would be delighted if local teachers found pleasure in it also. Maybe a few of them will join the Moosetrack Giving Circle and pass on our local learning/teachings to the women's school age relatives.

## Notes

1. An 86 year old friend, Donald Grier, visiting from Victoria, British Columbia, asked me why most of my books are less than 15 years old. "It's the academic system" I told him. "Academia trains me to write about someone else's work. And academics prefer to read what's written about in the past year or two. We academics tell each other it's important to be 'current'." I told Don that to defend my PhD I needed to prove I knew what other researchers wrote about my topic. He and I then spent a lively hour discussing the one book he had pulled from my shelves and spent the afternoon with, Joseph Conrad's *Typhoon*. Though I offered him my dissertation he didn't take it. But he was sure pleased when I gave him Conrad's book to keep!
2. To order sets of four postcards, write "Local Knowledge Series", Box 608, Fort Vermilion, Alberta, T0H 1N0.
3. Here I am reminded of Brian York, a Shuswap secondary school student. A number of years ago he used to grin and say "just testing" when I managed to answer his question after a long and drawn out silence. Even if I eventually gave the answer he was looking for, I often had no idea what he was asking. "The answer he wanted was so obvious" I remember thinking, "Surely, he's looking for something else." All I could tell for certain by the way he said "just testing", was that Brian was playing with me. I understood his complex humour only after I'd read Heath (1982) many years after I taught him! To test his White "pupil", my Native "teacher" asked a question to which he already knew the answer. Like Heath's students, I too kept quiet: it was such a silly question.
4. An example is the tradition of burning sweetgrass. Sweetgrass stalks are picked when they are still green and braided in a special way, then left to dry. When lit and fanned the glowing ends give off a most fragrant scent. Burning sweetgrass as "smudge" (spiritual cleanser) is a common public and private Plains Cree ceremony. I have seen thick and thin braids of sweetgrass for sale at pow-wows, I have seen them traded, I have seen them presented as gifts to guest speakers. On the other hand, Bush Cree in Moosetrack use a certain type of fungus in similar ceremonies but they are held in private. In the interior of British Columbia I have seen First Nations people use sage frequently in public and in private. On the west coast I have seen cedar used, but only in private. To claim, as some Aboriginal people do, that all Native people use sweetgrass smoke to cleanse themselves spiritually is simply not so. However, I have seen the custom spread, pan-Indian fashion, into communities far removed from their Plains Cree origin. I saw how that angered one old Haida woman (personal communica-

tion, Windy Bay, Haida Gwaii, August 1991). And once when I tried to pursue the topic with an artist friend, the man evaded me by saying something like "I don't like to correct what other people do" (personal communication, Victoria, British Columbia, New Year's Eve 1985).

5. Ian Wright (1995) describes three types of field studies. One involves learning at a place other than a classroom, eg. teaching a lesson on swamp life at a swamp. A second type directs students to find answers that the teacher asks at a certain site. For example, on a visit to a shopping mall students may have to figure out how many stores cater exclusively to males. In the third type of field study, students go to a site or spend time with someone with no preconceived idea of what to do when they get there. Instead teacher and students respond to whatever questions emerge for the students and the teacher. I tried to do that in Moosetrack.

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