

**Indigenous Storywork**  
Educating the Heart, Mind,  
Body, and Spirit

*Jo-ann Archibald*

Q'UM Q'UM XIIEM



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## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Power of Stories to Educate the Heart

Each Aboriginal nation has particular traditions, protocols, and rules concerning stories and the way that stories are to be told for teaching and learning purposes. The types of stories can vary from the sacred to the historical, from cultural traditions to personal life experiences and testimonials. Some stories are just for fun, while others have powerful “teachings.” Some stories may be “owned,” those that are the responsibility of individuals, clans, or families; some belong to the “public domain,” being available for anyone to tell. Some stories can be told only at certain times of the year.

In addition to knowing the cultural protocols and rules pertaining to the telling of stories, one must know how to make meaning with stories. It is important to appreciate the diversity among Indigenous cultures and to recognize that there are different story genres, purposes, protocols, and ways to make story meaning. Wapaskwan, who is Walter Lightning’s mentor, shared some characteristics of Aboriginal stories and some guiding principles for reading, listening to, and interpreting them:

The way to interpret those stories has never been clear to the literate, academic community until recently. The stories are not just “texts,” or narratives that deal with sequences of events in a linear progression of events.

There are several classes of stories. For example, there are “sacred” stories as opposed to “historical



stories,” and traditionally it has taken 40 years or so of apprenticeship for an individual to work to gain the authority to tell the sacred class of story. That length of time is not required just to learn the texts of the stories, nor how to perform them. It takes that long to acquire the principles for interpretation of the stories.

There is a “surface” story: the text, and the things one has to know about the performance of it for others. The stories are metaphoric, but there are several levels of metaphor involved. The text, combined with the performance, contains a “key” or a “clue” to unlock the metaphor. When a hearer has that story, and knows the narrative sequence of it, there is another story contained within that story, like a completely different embedded or implicit text.

The trick is this: that the implicit or embedded text, itself, contains clues, directions – better yet, specifications – for the interpretation of an implicit text embedded in it ... A hearer isn’t meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately. It is as if it unfolds. (Wapaskwan, quoted in Lightning 1992, 229-30)

The Stó:lō categorize oral narratives into *sxwoxwiyam* and *squelqwel*. *Sxwoxwiyam* are “myth-like stories set in the distant past.” They usually explain how things came to be and how to “make things right for the present generation” (Carlson 1997, 2). *Squelqwel* are “true stories or news” describing “experiences in peoples’ lives” (182). In Stó:lō and Coast Salish cultures the power of storywork to make meaning derives from a synergy between the story, the context in which the story is used, the way that the story is told, and how one listens to the story. The storywork principles of interrelatedness and synergy are woven into this chapter.

Here, the focus is on my experiential story about learning to become a beginning storyteller, which, I have come to realize, began long before I undertook my own storywork research with Elders. Much earlier I was already being taught the significance of stories as a source of education and as a means to achieve emotional wellness.

### **Becoming a Storyteller**

We come from a tradition of storytelling, and as storytellers we have a responsibility to be honest, to transmit our understanding of the world to other people ... In this process, there is something more than information being transmitted: there’s energy, there’s strength being transmitted from the storyteller to the listener and that is

what's important in teaching young people about their identity.  
(Cuthand 1989, 54)

I have felt the story energy and strength of which Beth Cuthand speaks. This energy is a source of power that feeds and revitalizes mind, heart, body, and spirit in a holistic manner. The strength of stories challenges me to think, to examine my emotional reactions in relation to plot and characters, to question and reflect on my behaviours and future actions, and to appreciate a story's connections to my spiritual nature.

### **Learning to Make Meaning from Stories**

My appreciation for the cultural values of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and reverence embedded in Indigenous stories did not occur until I let the Elders' teachings about storywork guide me. I did not intentionally set out to become a storyteller, but I did set out to learn more about the nature of Indigenous stories and how they could be used to produce quality education. I am a beginning storyteller who is gaining understandings about the significant role that stories can play in teaching, learning, and healing. My experiential story is told to exemplify the cultural values and to introduce some issues related to story memory, letting Elders guide a learning process, learning patience, and appreciating silence. The power of a story is shown through stories about a story.<sup>1</sup>

My memories of encountering First Nations stories in school curricula go back to my teaching experiences in elementary schools from 1972 to 1979. I also have faint memories of learning about a few Indian legends through the subjects of reading and social studies during my elementary and high school years. These memories are ones that I have tried to forget or to ignore because I felt humiliation and emotional pain over the way that the Indian cultures and peoples were represented and studied. Indian stories and by implication Indian cultures and peoples were portrayed as simplistic and primitive. Walter Werner and colleagues (1977) examine the multicultural content of and the pedagogy used in social studies curricula prescribed for elementary and secondary schools across Canada during the 1974-75 school year. The common approaches to teaching about Indian cultures at the time are described as "museum and heritage" at the elementary level and as "discipline and issues" at the secondary level. The former approaches, which I would have labelled "arts and crafts" (e.g., colour a totem pole made from an egg carton), tended to reinforce stereotypes because of the superficial treatment of culture. With the "discipline" approach, Indian people became objects of

study. The “issues” often focused on the so-called “Indian problem.” These same approaches were what I had experienced as a student at least fifteen years earlier. Learning about Indian cultures through the public school curriculum was something that I endured. Perhaps this was why I was drawn to developing better curricula about First Nations through teacher education and later as a teacher. I didn’t want other First Nations children to suffer the same humiliation that I had experienced.

I admit, as a teacher, to using basal readers that had an Indian legend or two in them, but I supplemented these with other culturally based material that I found or developed. There was not much available, especially any developed by First Nations. I did not realize the significance of stories at the time, but I did feel that using an Indian legend to teach reading, particularly comprehension skills, was not appropriate. Dissecting the story for the purpose of developing a list of comprehension questions, to be discussed first in a question-and-answer format and then in writing, felt wrong. I did not hear traditional stories being told when I was a child; however, I did hear many life-experience stories. Not until I started working with the Coqualeetza Cultural Centre, the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum project, and the Elders’ Group did I begin learning about the educational importance of stories.

In 1975 I became part of the Stó:lō Sitel Advisory Committee, which oversaw the development of the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum. The committee comprised ten to fifteen educators from the public school districts, band schools, Stó:lō communities, and Coqualeetza staff, all of whom met on a monthly basis. The committee developed curriculum policies, gave feedback on the curriculum approach and materials, and liaised with school administrators, teachers, and Stó:lō community members. The Advisory Committee and Elders’ Group were the vital community link to the curriculum project. The Elders’ Group became the “backbone” of the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum. The group provided the cultural knowledge, guided the process of development, and verified all material before it was published.<sup>2</sup> I also became one of the curriculum developers and, later, senior consultant to the curriculum project. The curriculum-development group included a coordinator, an artist, language and culture specialists, a writer, and a secretary. The process of working with the Elders and their stories included first getting their support and establishing their trust in the Stó:lō Sitel staff, tape-recording the Elders telling their stories, transcribing them, and finally putting the stories into text and developing illustrations for storybooks.

The need for the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum was first suggested by the Elders. They wanted their weekly meetings to focus on documenting cultural knowledge, but they didn't want the tape recorder used. I wondered whether this was because they didn't feel comfortable with the technology. Shirley Leon, the Coqualeetza Cultural Centre's manager, recalls that "every meeting we would bring the tape recorder, but they didn't want it turned on. It was at least eight months before they finally said at one meeting it was okay to turn the recorder on" (personal communication, 31 January 1996). She felt that the Elders needed to be reassured that those working on the documentation of cultural knowledge and the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum had the same intentions and motives as they did – the work was for the children and future generations. During this process, the written version of each story, its illustrations, and the accompanying teacher's lesson plan were verified with the Elder who had told the story.

I'm not sure why the printed text was selected as the main medium to represent the stories, aside from the fact that books were and are the predominant tool for instruction. Perhaps we wanted to legitimize First Nations stories through a literate form in school curricula. The Coqualeetza Cultural Centre was beginning to use video for some cultural programs, but developing them for school use was too expensive. Preparing the written/illustrated texts was time consuming; some stories took a full year to go through the developmental/printing process. The Elders were adamant about getting the story texts right, as Shirley Leon recalls: "[The Elders] would correct how their story was written. They would say, I didn't say that, you're putting words in my mouth ... that's not how I said it" (transcript, 5 December 1995).

The curriculum team developed one or two stories for Grades 1 to 4 in the manner described earlier. The stories that the Elders selected for inclusion in the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum contained information about cultural traditions, environmental knowledge, and values concerning interrelationships among people, nature, and land. The Elders' stories were then matched with the concepts of family, community, and culture prescribed by the Ministry of Education for teaching social studies at each grade level. The curriculum developers added a contextual introduction to the stories explaining that Stó:lō children heard stories from a grandparent either at bedtime or when they demonstrated disrespectful behaviour or broke a cultural rule. Hearing stories from grandparents at night or when one misbehaved resonates with traditional story ways.

The Elders were careful with the selection of stories appropriate for children. The ones that they shared were those that they had heard as children. For one of the grade levels, we wanted a story about plants, but the Elders would not give one. At first, we thought that they did not remember; however, they told us much later, after we had moved onto a different unit, that the stories they knew about plants were not to be told to children, as these stories had powerful knowledge about plants' medicinal, healing, or spiritual use that was too strong for children. At the time, I thought they meant only that children would not understand such stories, or that their content/language was too difficult for the children to understand, or that the stories would not interest children. I did not understand that power is embedded in some of the stories.

During the weekly discussion sessions with the Coqualeetza Elders' Group, the curriculum staff also asked questions about the age-level appropriateness of each story, about the meanings or teachings of each story, and about how these meanings or teachings were and should be presented through the use of story. During this research phase, as we called it, I learned to have patience and to wait for an answer when asking Elders questions. In the large group meetings, I recall at first feeling intimidated going before the Elders and asking questions because I didn't know them, hadn't done research in this manner, and I wasn't sure how to talk to them in a culturally respectful way. Now, I realize that I wasn't culturally ready to work with the Elders at the time. I had sat in on their meetings and observed the seriousness with which they approached the documentation of the Halq'emeylem language and cultural information with the linguist who was then working for Coqualeetza. I started by saying which reserve and which family I belonged to. Among the Stó:lō it is still customary to say where and which family you come from if the Elders don't know you so that those listening can place you within your community/family history. Identifying one in relation to place and family is part of knowing how one fits within the collective or larger cultural group, which is part of the holistic Indigenous framework.

I remember that often there were long silences after I asked my questions. At first, I was uncomfortable with these long silences and wondered whether the Elders didn't understand my questions or didn't want to answer. Sometimes, Shirley Leon would help by asking individuals to share their experiences in relation to a question. I learned that these silences were important because the Elders were thinking about the



questions and preferred not speak until they were sure about their answers. Silence is respectful and can create good thinking. They would answer with stories of personal, family, and community experience. Sometimes, a question was not answered when it was asked because the Elders needed time to reawaken their memories and ensure that what they said was the truth as they knew it. They recognized that the work they were doing was a part of recording “oral history.” Because it was for educational purposes, the cultural knowledge had to be accurate. Shirley Leon links the effect of taking time to think and talk about cultural knowledge to the process of making meaning from stories:

I think Elders [who] were born storytellers weren't spontaneous decision makers ... I think that came from the history of the stories; you don't make up your mind [quickly]; you have to think about it ... maybe two, three days ... Some of our [curriculum] questions, we [had] to wait three, four weeks before we got answers. I think that's something we have to remember in today's life ... everything is so fast-paced, Elders are starting to say, “At least talk about things, especially where the language is concerned, don't you change anything unless you talk about it for at least six months.” (Transcript, 5 December 1995)

The directive to spend more time talking about knowledge that is important has implications for researchers and educators who want and need particular knowledge immediately. The Elders understand that traditional forms of knowledge contained in the Halq'emeylem language and in their stories need to be carefully transformed into English and into current educational practice. We must also recognize that those who have the cultural knowledge often have to remember what they were told years earlier, that sometimes there is a translation process that occurs from the Halq'emeylem language into English, and that the Elders may not have thought about the topic of inquiry for years. I have often heard the Elders say that much of what they know about traditional knowledge was “put to sleep” – was not talked about. Ceremonial knowledge was also “outlawed” with the banning of cultural ceremonies in Canada from 1884 to 1951.

Today, discourse on Aboriginal education often speaks about the need to decolonize our perspectives and experiences by critiquing the impacts of Western education on Indigenous cultures and education (Battiste 2000, Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996b, Smith 1999). In taking a different perspective, Graham Smith (2000), a scholar of Maōri

ancestry, challenges us to examine the political struggles inherent in the educational sites where Western and Indigenous education meet. He emphasizes achieving an Indigenous consciousness-raising process that does not dwell on the colonizers but focuses on how Indigenous thought and action become transformative, thereby serving to improve Indigenous living conditions. I believe that the Elders' reminder to us to take time to talk in order to ensure correct representation of their Indigenous knowledge is an example of engaging in both decolonization and transformative-action processes. Through these processes we go back to important cultural principles that have survived colonization attempts in order to maintain Indigenous knowledge that will facilitate the type of transformative action that Smith advocates. Maybe the rabbit who has the responsibility to pass on cultural knowledge in the story "Coyote's Eyes," presented in Chapter 1, shows us what can happen if we don't critically engage in a decolonization or transformative-action process.

In the case of Stó:lō storytelling, no written sources exist that describe or analyze how people became storytellers and how story listening and the making of story meaning occurred. There are Stó:lō stories that anthropologists, linguists, and Stó:lō storytellers have published. The researcher/educator – who is also a learner – must establish a trusting teaching-learning relationship with those who know about storytelling, and she/he must learn the cultural implications embedded in the talk of the Elders. Wapaskwan's statement about the importance of knowing the implicit meanings of a (con)text or story rings true. An example would be the term "longhouse," which refers to a place where particular ceremonies and values are practised. Elders will not explicate the term's meaning because they assume that you know or feel that you ought to know what they mean. If you do not know what they mean, then there is an expectation that you will take responsibility for finding out. At one time, asking direct questions about what one said was considered rude. One reason for this relates to making meaning from stories, a process that involves going away to think about their meanings in relation to one's life. Today, Elders know that many Stó:lō people do not know the traditions, so they are willing to explain more. Some are used to talking to various people about cultural ways and have found methods to explain cultural meanings.

A deeper level of story meaning first occurred to me during a discussion at an Elders' meeting about the story "Mink and Miss Pitch," which

was told by Susan Jimmie. It is one of the many stories in which Mink looks for a wife. I summarize it here.

### MINK AND MISS PITCH

Mink is a Trickster character journeying to find a wife. He often picks beautiful but unavailable women and wants to marry them immediately. Mink usually has trouble because of his quick pick. Miss Pitch is the new object of Mink's attention and desire. Mink tries to persuade Miss Pitch to marry him by saying that he will look after all her needs. She lets Mink get close to her one night but turns down his marriage proposal the next day because she implies that they are too different to have a good marriage. She then ignores him. Mink won't take "no" for an answer and gets angry, then violent, with Miss Pitch when he can't have his way. He hits Miss Pitch with one arm, then the other, and kicks her with one foot, then the other. Then he butts her with his forehead and gets stuck to her pitchiness, overnight, in this awkward position. The next day, when the sun warms Miss Pitch, she releases Mink, knowing that she has made her point. Mink goes away. His search continues.

The Elders related some of their understandings from this story: the problems of intermarriage, the cyclical effects of violence, and the need to challenge relationships because of major differences. At this moment, as the reader, you are invited to join the story circle in order to add your meanings gleaned from this story.

Before this discussion, I didn't like the story because of Mink's violence. I saw no humour in the story, yet the Elders said that it was a humorous story. My understanding was stuck on spousal abuse. After listening to the Elders' discussion, I began to think beyond the physical violence and about cultural and racial differences, particularly about problems resulting from these differences. I started using this story in Stó:lō Sitel workshops with educators, usually reading the text version at the end of the workshop. I did this because I wasn't comfortable or confident enough to tell the story. I used the story to reinforce points introduced during the workshop, especially those where difficulties occurred when people with opposing views and attitudes encountered

one another. I would hint at these meanings by personalizing them in this manner: “Sometimes I feel like Miss Pitch wanting to ignore and to keep people away who have differing views or who are aggressive in wanting the quick and easy approach to teaching Aboriginal students.” From these workshops, I realized that people connected with this story on an emotional level; some shared their experiences of encountering interpersonal differences.

I gradually became more familiar and comfortable with this story and began to appreciate its humorous aspects. Imagining Mink as he physically clings to Miss Pitch in his “sticky” predicament as a result of his disrespectful behaviour and selfish thinking is funny. The Elders know Mink as a Trickster character who gets into many difficult situations, and they can laugh at and with Mink. I now appreciate that Miss Pitch simultaneously exercised power and experienced difficulty in saying “no.” When Aboriginal people say “no” to aspects of Western education that clash with our cultural knowledge and ways of knowing, we often feel assaulted by the continued pressure to conform through new forms of colonization, such as government policies and procedures. But like Miss Pitch, we stand upon the ground – the land – of our cultural knowledge, which has sustained us since time immemorial: we prevail.

In 1981 I took a break from the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum project to work as a First Nations studies instructor and then as the co-ordinator and later the supervisor for the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP) at the University of British Columbia. The concept of the emotional and healing power of story became more real to me as I learned to tell stories in a new context with First Nations adult learners enrolled in a university program.

### **Living the Power of Story**

When I began working for the NITEP, I used First Nations stories in classes that I taught and in educational talks that I gave in a manner similar to that described in the Stó:lō Sitel curriculum project. I gradually gained the confidence and ability to remember and tell stories without using a written text. Before 1990 I had not trained my memory to retain these stories; perhaps this was due to my reliance on the literate form and to my lack of confidence in telling stories. I began to remember humorous stories, mostly about Coyote, and I consciously used my memory more and used writing less when listening to lectures and when recalling phone numbers and even grocery lists. This memory-building

exercise revealed how much I and today's ways of living rely so heavily on the use of literacy. The story "Coyote's Eyes" was a fun way to try to learn the balance of which Terry Tafoya spoke. I would imagine seeing the world only through the lens of the oral way and through use of the memory, only to realize how unskilled I was and how few people live this way today. The Elders are those most familiar and skilled with orality. They also read, but they recount cultural knowledge and history through orally told stories. There are some whose oral accounts are rich in detail about events, dates, names, and places.

Then I would switch to the literate lens and appreciate its archival function and the opportunity to rest the memory and listening functions for a while. Having the typed transcriptions of the Elders' talks and stories gave me a feeling of security, as I knew that I could keep going back to them to complete a thematic analysis and to get necessary detail. Talking, hearing, and feeling during my personal interactions with the Elders as well as visualizing their stories during and after our sessions helped me to establish some thematic notions that were verified by their textual record. The written record of their stories lacks the nuances of our interpersonal interaction and the depth of the emotion and humour that were shared. Because the oral process, unlike the written record, involves the listeners' memories, it is limited by what the listeners can recall and later share with others. Used together, orality and literacy find a mutually beneficial meeting place where each has a function that contributes to increased understanding of storytelling. I was beginning to value the function, or worldview, of each of Coyote's mismatched eyes, so to speak.

The stories that I really remembered were ones that I did not set out to consciously try to remember, and they came from both oral and written sources. They were ones with which I instantly and strongly connected on an emotional level first. But I also connected with them physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Something that the characters experienced in each of these stories grabbed me emotionally. When I say that I connected with them physically, I mean that I reflected on behaviours and actions of mine that needed changing or that needed to be practised more. My imagination was challenged to visualize the stories' plots and characters and to think about the possible meanings of the stories. It was as though these stories became embedded in my body, in my emotional being, in my consciousness, and in my spirit. My experience differs from that of some other scholars who have worked with

Indigenous storytellers in an attempt to understand the power of stories to help one to live a good life. Here, I will digress for a moment to illustrate this point.

Keith Basso's work with the Western Apache uses a hunting metaphor to show how stories told to someone may "hit" her/him purposefully in order to "promote compliance with standards for acceptable social behavior" (1996, 41). In the words of Western Apache consultant Nick Thompson:

It's like an arrow, they say. Sometimes it just bounces off – it's too soft and you don't think about anything. But when it's strong it goes in deep and starts working on your mind right away. No one says anything to you, only that story is all, but now you know that people have been watching you and talking about you. They don't like how you've been acting. So you have to think about your life. (Quoted in Basso 1996, 58-59)

Nick Thompson says that the land in the Western Apache territory "looks after us. The land keeps badness away" (61) because its stories and place names are essentially good: "they make you remember how to live right, so you want to replace [heal] yourself again" (59). Perhaps the way that some stories pierced my consciousness is similar to the action described by Elder Nick Thompson. As a beginning storyteller/teacher, I received a few stories that became part of my heart knowledge. When telling stories for educational purposes, at first I spent time planning which story to tell, then I developed my talk around the story.

Gradually, the process of my planning which story to tell in order to illustrate some meaning changed to one in which I let my intuitive nature select the story to be told. Instead of planning which story to use and framing my talk around the story, I waited to get some feeling from the group or the situation or waited until a particular story came into my mind and being – wanting to be told. I have heard other storytellers say that they will not know exactly which story will come out until moments before they are to speak. It is the storytelling situation and the needs of the people that guide the selection of story in these circumstances. Knowing the stories intimately, as though they are a part of one's being, is essential if a storyteller is to use her/his intuitive sense for telling stories. The thoughts of the late Harry Robinson mean more to me now. He was told by his grandmother that to remember a story you must "Write it on your heart" (Wickwire and Robinson 1989, 28).

I remember a time, 4 February 1992, when I was to tell a story to a small group of third- and fourth-year NITEP students enrolled in an educational seminar. Sheila TeHennepe, the instructor and my friend, wanted a story that could be used for the term's seminar sessions. Her plan was that I would tell the same story at the beginning and end of the term. I went to the classroom early before anyone arrived, waited, and asked for guidance from the Creator. When selecting a story to tell, I had come to rely on this practice of getting a sense of the place and people and asking for this type of help. It was a beautiful spring-like day, the windows were open, and upon hearing the birds' songs, I knew which story to tell. This session was my first powerful emotional healing experience with story, where the story took on a "life" and became the teacher.

We put our chairs in a circle. Sheila introduced me and then gave me a jar of home-canned pears to symbolize the act of feeding the storyteller, a symbol of reciprocity, which Leslie Marmon Silko, of Pueblo ancestry, talks about: "That's what you're supposed to do, you know, you're supposed to feed the storyteller good things" (1981, 110). Then I told the story "The Bird in the Tree."<sup>3</sup>

#### THE BIRD IN THE TREE

There were two male cousins; one lived in a northern isolated part of BC, and the other in the city of Vancouver. One day, the northern cousin came to visit his city cousin.

The city fellow wanted to bring his cousin to the better, more lively parts of Vancouver. He chose Robson Street. Robson Street gets quite busy with lots of people walking along the street, shopping and looking around. There's lots of traffic, loud music being played from the car stereos. As they were walking down Robson Street, the northern fellow said, "I feel out of place here. This cement sidewalk is so hard, my feet are sore from walking on it. There are so many people, you get bumped a lot. It's so noisy. I miss my home. I miss the quiet. I miss the smell of the land. I miss the trees and mountains being close by, and I miss the birds' songs. I feel as out of place here as that bird I hear singing in a tree at the end of the street."

The city cousin said, "You must be homesick: how can you hear a bird singing in a tree at the end of the street with all this noise?" The northern cousin said, "Let me

show you something. Do you have any coins?" The city fellow handed him a pocketful of change. The northern cousin took it and threw the coins onto the cement.

A strange thing happened as those coins hit the sidewalk. There was a moment of silence. In that moment of silence, the people and their noise stopped. In that moment of silence, those who listened heard a bird singing in a tree at the end of the street.

After telling the story, I asked the participants to say whatever they wanted in relation to the story. I also asked them to hold a small rock while speaking; they could also choose not to hold it. I said that for me the rock serves as a reminder of our connection to the earth and serves as a "witness" to what is said. Our people, the Stó:lō, believe that rocks come from a life form – the earth – and have a lifeforce within. In many of our stories, transformations occur between humans and forms of nature, such as rocks. Rocks can be like our relations, like family members, who listen to us. As each person began talking about how she/he related to the story or about what it meant to her/him, the power of the moment seemed to keep on building. Each personal story connected deeply, on an emotional level, with each person around the circle. Some cultural songs were shared.

Because the experience became an important turning point that created an important realization, I asked Sheila TeHennepe and two of the participants, Floy Pepper, an Elder originally from the Creek Indian Nation of Oklahoma, and Shirley Sterling, of the Nlha7kapmx (Interior Salish) Nation, to reflect on this experience, their perceptions about the power of story, and this particular storytelling session. They readily agreed because they remembered the powerful effects of the experience, although its details had faded by the time I asked them, almost four years later. As Shirley Sterling said: "Sometimes I have a hard time remembering what I said yesterday" (transcript, 7 February 1996).

During the conversation Shirley said that she remembered the bird imagery from the story vividly because she was reminded of her father's affinity for birds. Sheila, who is non-Native, had worked with NITEP students for twelve years and had gained cultural understandings from interactions with the students and other First Nations. When I used the term "power of story," Sheila and Shirley each identified this power as the story having its own life:



We didn't know what was going to happen ... I remember [one of the participants] was hurting [emotionally, spiritually] and somehow it [the story] took care of her and [then] all of us ... I'd say [this story] had a life of its own. (Sheila TeHennepe, transcript, 3 November 1995)

I've always had that sense that stories have their own life ... because sometimes when you tell a story to a hunter, the hunter will take, interpret that story differently than say the basket maker. And the basket maker may remember other details. So the story takes on a life of its own and it travels from person to person and it ... takes a different shape, but there's something the same. Each person interprets slightly differently and yet it's really amazing how some stories will persist ... [for years]. (Shirley Sterling, transcript, 17 February 1996)

From the way that Shirley talked about the story, it is evident that she believed it has a "life," even though she is aware that story listeners will shape a story to their situations. This "life" derives from a story's core values, or teachings, which keep the story going and useful to people.

Sheila also believed, and I agree, that the use of the circle, rock, and food establishes respectful contextual signals that say,

this is a time to sit together ... The rock, the circle, represents a certain kind of behaviour, and people in the circle know that something can be brought into the circle to do. These signals mean that things are going to go in a particular way ... [They] open up a way for the story [to be] put into the circle, and it goes from there. (Transcript, 3 November 1995)

In this particular storytelling experience, the way of sharing was open-ended. Shirley's relationship to the story "The Bird in the Tree" had a powerful healing effect on me, for I gained appreciation of a story's impact on another person.

She said that last night she was feeling very lonely. Her home was in northern BC, and she was missing her family and was finding it hard getting used to living in the city. She called home. Her mother answered and she could not talk about her sadness; she could not say anything; she could only cry. Then her mother started to sing her some traditional songs. That was all she did, little else was said. At the session, the

student said she felt better after hearing those songs. The bird's song reminded her of the healing effect of her mother's songs. (Fieldnote, 5 February 1992)

Floy Pepper shared her memory of how the rock that was sent around the circle took on its own power:

All right, for the first time in my life I had to hold a rock that felt like it was alive ... I don't know where the feeling came from; it was like from the story. But ... as I handled the rock it was ... like I had something alive in my hands. I've never felt a rock that felt that way before ... It was almost as if it had vibes. So I associated [the rock] with the powerful thing that happened there.

As Floy and I talked further, she remembered the strong spiritual feeling that increased with each person's words and/or songs:

To me it was sort of a spirituality thing, and then when Shirley sang her song, that really got me because I'd been through a disastrous period during that time. I thought that whole experience that afternoon was really ... uplifting ... It was like something great happened ... As I reflect back ... I can recall [those] feelings. [Shirley] ... recorded that song for me, when I play it I still get the same kind of feeling you know. (Transcript, 9 January 1996)

The storytelling experience of 5 February 1992 made me understand what others have said about stories and about the talk associated with them, which is that stories have an ability to soothe, to heal. In this session, the story and the storytelling context enabled the participants to interact with the story, to let it help them bring out emotional concerns so that others could then help. This particular story has been heard by Sheila a number of times in different contexts. She shared an experience in which "The Bird in the Tree" again "became a life of its own" and created "a place ... a reality" to interact through story.

One day, only a couple of months ago, I was walking downtown, on Hastings Street, with a friend and chatting. It was still warm, it was a nice day and another friend of ours came running out of one of the buildings ... she was visibly upset ... She was startled to see us, so we

talked. She didn't want to say what was wrong, but she said she would be okay in a minute, but for that moment she was not okay ... We talked to her, to see if she wanted to go for a walk, go have coffee.

This is the part I can't explain, but it happened. It was like that place on the street, was so clear, somehow we were inside a bubble ... nothing else was going on, but you know how busy Hastings Street is. [This] zone has three people in it; it was really quiet. The friend that I was with reached down on the ground and picked up a maple leaf, a fall maple leaf. It was not fall. [She] gave it to the woman that was upset ... there was a little tree ... standing next to us which we hadn't noticed. Our friend took [the leaf], it was like a treasure, something to take care of her and she left.

Both my friend and I were thinking of your story, totally. It was like we were inside the story ... It was like being an actor in the story ... all of a sudden [there] was silence ... It was like that same [story] space opened up. We could say to each other, it was exactly like Jo-ann's story ... a silence was created, it was a spiritual silence for me. I hadn't ... actually connected to that part of the bird story before. I felt the silence. It wasn't money on the ground, it was a beautiful leaf, that leaf was a gift ... Later on [we saw this same woman] at an event, and she felt much better and was appreciative of that beautiful moment. I can't articulate it well, [but] it was like living out that story. (Transcript, 3 November 1995)

After the NITEP storytelling experience, I began to wonder about the potential of the power in story to heal the emotions and spirit. "The Bird in the Tree" isn't a traditional First Nations story, but it became my story to use in a cultural way that enabled people to interact with a story and each other through a storywork process. I also wondered whether this was one way that stories became attributed to particular storytellers. If so, then which cultural rules apply to this story? Because I am Stó:lō, does "The Bird in the Tree" become a Stó:lō story, or am I appropriating someone else's story?<sup>4</sup>

As I return to this particular question sometime later, I am nudged to rethink the emotional and spiritual healing process that occurred. Aboriginal people living in the city can feel alienated from their home territories or dislocated from their traditional teachings in a Western-dominated environment. The use of Indigenous traditional knowledge such as that found in story, song, and speech provided a framework for the contemporary story to work for the group.

The important point of my relating this story experience is that the power created during the storytelling session seemed interrelational as it moved among the storyteller and story listeners in the storytelling situation. This interaction created a synergistic story power that had emotional, healing, and spiritual aspects. This synergistic story power also brought the story “to life.” Becoming a storyteller and experiencing the power of storywork gave me more confidence to work with story in an educational curriculum designed for school-age students.

but the important point here is that this was their way of giving a message to the speaker that they had heard, had gotten the speaker's message, and did not need to keep hearing the same words repeated in a needless fashion.

- 9 See Brown (2004) for a full examination of the importance of Indigenous emotional competency to learning and curricula.

#### **Chapter 4: The Power of Stories to Educate the Heart**

- 1 My story is a retelling of life experiences constructed from memory. It is interwoven with personal interpretations and contextual descriptions that resonate with the notions that the narrator can also be a commentator who offers "criticism" (Tedlock 1983, 236) and that "writing, as much as possible, should reflect oral tendencies to engage the larger world in which the spoken word lives" (Sarris 1993, 45). My story also resonates with ideas presented by Clandinin and Connelly (2000).
- 2 For a fuller description of the development and implementation phases of the Stó:lō Sítel curriculum, see Archibald (1995).
- 3 This story is not a traditional First Nations story. A friend sent me a written version of this story, but it did not have an author. I have adapted it and, over time and through repeated tellings, made it mine. I liked it when I first read it and began to use it for some talks in order to have listeners think about making space in their busy lives to hear the beauty of First Nations peoples' songs, words, and stories, which often get drowned out by the dominant society.
- 4 When I tell this story, I explain how I received it, and I say that it is not a traditional First Nations story.

#### **Chapter 5: Storywork in Action**

- 1 See *Delgamuukw v. A.G.: Reasons for judgment* (1991). This is the historic Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en land-claims case brought to the Supreme Court of British Columbia. See also Ross (1992), in which the author, an assistant Crown attorney in northwestern Ontario, presents his experiences as a narrative about the differences between Ojibway and Cree concepts of justice and those of the court system.
- 2 For more discussion of the effects of the Indian Control of Indian Education policy, see Kirkness and Bowman (1992) and Battiste and Barman (1995).
- 3 The term "workable" is used here cautiously. The differences between Aboriginal concepts of justice and those used in the Canadian courts will not be resolved through this introductory curriculum for children.
- 4 I am grateful to the Law Courts Education Society of British Columbia for giving me permission to use extensive quotations from the storytelling video and the teachers' guides.
- 5 Some stories fall under a family's domain. Others know this and respect the family's cultural stewardship or ownership of the story. The family ensures that the story is taught to family members, and they have the responsibility to keep it "going." Ellen White's family gave her the responsibility to continue telling "The Creator and the Flea." Ellen White uses the publishing term "copyright" to show that she has cultural ownership of this story. I am grateful to Ellen White for giving me permission to use this story.