

Chapter 5

Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin: Living Spiritually with Respect, Relationship, Reciprocity and Responsibility



Nicole Bell

5.1 Situating Self

Boozhoo. Zongdekwe n'dizhnikaas. Kitigan Zibi n'doonjibaa. Makwa n'doodem. Greetings. My English name is Nicole Bell. I am Anishinaabe from Kitigan Zibi First Nation and I am from the bear clan. It is important for me to acknowledge my traditional teachers whom I have learned from. We learn from our teachers and then we transmit what we learn on to our students—that is how learning and education happens. So I acknowledge Elder Edna Manitowabi, Elder Vera Martin, Elder Shirley Williams and my father (Joe Bell). There was a time in my life when I said that I was not raised in my culture because although my dad was not taken to residential school, he was one of the Indigenous children taken by the Children's Aid Society and raised in non-Indigenous foster homes. As a result, I was not raised with aspects of my culture like ceremony, language, songs and story. I learned those from Elders and traditional people in my adult life. But my dad did teach me about the land. We were a hunting, gathering and fishing family, and so we were always on the land harvesting food.

I have many wonderful memories: fishing, snaring rabbit, partridge hunting and picking apples, berries, fiddleheads, chokecherries, puffballs, leeks and mushrooms. Picking mushrooms requires particular knowledge and skill because some mushrooms can be dangerous. After a day picking mushrooms, my dad would fry them with onions and serve it with venison/deer steaks or chops. Invariably at the dinner table, my brother, sister or I would ask him, "How do we know these aren't the poison ones?" to which he would answer, "Well, if you wake up in the morning, then I know they weren't poisonous". While his response provided a small degree

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of worry, my siblings and I would find it funny because we had trust in his knowledge. I acknowledge that my love of the land definitely comes from my father.

5.2 Sharing a Story

I am the founder of a JK to Grade 12 Anishinaabe culture-based school, the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program, in Burleigh Falls northeast of Peterborough, Ontario. The school evolved from my personal responsibility I have as a parent in ensuring proper schooling for my children, and from the community need for a culture-based educational programme to meet the cultural and academic needs of other Indigenous children. The design of the programme reflects a pooling of the cultural teachings I have received from Elders and from epistemology and pedagogy synthesised from cultural teachings and educational theory and practice received during my teacher education and Master of Education degrees. The curriculum is organised on a medicine wheel framework through which cultural teachings and activities are addressed in the corresponding season on the medicine wheel. Anishinaabe spirituality, worldview and values inform the philosophical foundation of the programme. The Anishinaabe *Seven Original Teachings* are the guiding principles for the way in which individuals are to treat each other within the programme and reflect the values the programme wants to instil in the children:

- Love: capacity for caring and desire for harmony and well-being in interpersonal relationships.
- Honesty: to act with the utmost honesty and integrity in all relationships, recognising the inherent autonomy, dignity and freedom of oneself and others.
- Truth: recognising the interdependence and interrelationships of all life, to relate with one another with generosity, an ethic of sharing and a collective consciousness and cooperation.
- Respect: conscious of the need for kindness and respecting the integrity of oneself and others, to exercise strength of character and self-mastery in order to generate and maintain peace, harmony and well-being within oneself and in the total collective community.
- Bravery: the exercise of courage on the part of the individual so that the quality of life and inherent autonomy of oneself and others can be exercised in an atmosphere of security, peace, dignity and freedom.
- Wisdom: the respect for that quality of knowing and gift of vision in others (and striving for the same within oneself) that encompasses the holistic view, possesses spiritual quality and is expressed in the experiential breadth and depth of life.
- Humility: the recognition of ourselves as a sacred and equal part of Creation, and in the honouring of all of life that is endowed with the same inherent autonomy,

dignity, freedom and equality. This leads to a sensitivity toward others and a desire for good relations and balance with all of life (Bell 2010).

Eight principles of instruction are identified for the programme, which were adopted from Cajete (1999):

- Nurturing environment: learning occurs more readily in a safe, nonthreatening environment.
- Meaningful content: learning is enhanced by content that has personal meaning.
- Choices: given individual learning preferences, choices for approaching learning content enhance individual motivation to learn.
- Adequate time: learning is developmental and unfolds over time.
- Enriched environment: learning is more likely to occur in an environment that is rich in many forms of stimulation.
- Collaboration: human learning can be facilitated through group work and collaboration.
- Immediate feedback: learning is self-reinforcing through immediate feedback, which adjusts learning response until success is achieved.
- Mastery: the true evaluation of learning is the ability to use concepts and skills in real life.

Also adopted from Cajete (1999) are the contexts and methods through which teaching and learning occurs:

- Experiential learning: learning by doing and seeing.
- Storytelling: learning by listening and imagination.
- Ritual/ceremony: learning through participation and initiation.
- Dreaming: learning through the unconscious and imagery.
- Tutoring: learning through apprenticeship and one-on-one support.
- Artistic creation: learning through creative synthesis.
- Holistic learning: learning through spiritual, mental, physical and emotional aspects of being.

The programme also follows the 12 standards as outlined by Hampton (1995):

- Spirituality: respect for spiritual relationships.
- Service: to serve the community given its needs.
- Diversity: respect and honouring of difference.
- Culture: culturally responsive education processes.
- Tradition: a continuance and revitalisation of tradition.
- Respect: personal respect and respect for others.
- History: a well-developed and researched sense for history.
- Relentlessness: honing a sense of tenacity and patience.
- Vitality: instilling a vitality in both process and product.
- Conflict: being able to deal constructively with conflict.
- Place: a well-developed sense for place.
- Transformation: the transformation of Indigenous education.

The creation of the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program involved taking the foundational philosophy of the design and implementing it into the practice of providing education and healing. In essence, it required that medicine wheel teachings and Anishinaabe spirituality, worldview and values be manifested into the reality of programme delivery. This story comes from my days teaching in the classroom at the Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program.

I was out on the schoolyard one day and saw two of my little kindergarten girls standing over in the yard by a big pile of topsoil delivered to our school for a medicine wheel garden we planned on planting. Our school was on the Canadian Shield, so we needed a little help getting enough earth for a garden. The girls were just standing by this pile of earth. I wandered around the yard checking in with other kids, and after a while I noticed that the two little girls were still standing by the pile of earth. My teaching instinct turned on, and I thought I better go over there and see what they were doing. So that is what I did. They had their backs to me, and I quietly wandered over to where they were. What I observed was these two little girls standing side by side, facing the pile of earth, with tobacco in their hands. These two little 4- or 5-year-olds had gone into the school, went to the medicine table in the school and had taken some tobacco. Tobacco is one of the four sacred medicines to the Anishinaabe people that is used to offer thanks/gratitude and communicate with the Creator and Creation. The girls had come back out to the pile of earth, with tobacco in hand, and I could hear them giving their thanks to the earth. They were sharing (some would say praying) about how they were wanting to grow a garden and were hoping that they would be able to grow a good garden and thanking the earth for being there so they could do that.

I share this story with you because I think it is our hope as teachers that the teachings we transmit to our students will be actualised into our students' everyday lives and that the learnings we teach extend beyond the classroom. That is my hope, and this story represents for me one of those moments when I saw that transmission happening and when I felt like I was making a difference. This is an example of teachings becoming internalised and then externalised out into our students' life and world.

5.3 Situating the Story

This story happened within the context of a culture-based school that was transmitting Anishinaabe worldview. The name of the school, Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin Cultural Healing and Learning Program, translates as *living a good life*, according to the Anishinaabe people. In this school we believed we were raising up our next generation of Elders. The children would be given the traditional teachings to become the Elders who could do the cultural work needed for cultural, community and nation sustainability. We were teaching a very culturally specific curriculum and knowledge that is different than most other schools. A balanced education

facilitates the development of the whole person by having the student participate more fully toward the harmony in the interconnectedness and interdependence of all entities and to express that harmony in one's relations with them. Medicine wheels are mirrors that serve as systems of meaning, reflecting the essential interconnectedness, harmony and balance among all beings. A medicine wheel culture-based curriculum framework reflecting the four seasons consists of the following four direction teachings:

- Medicines: tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, cedar.
- Doorkeepers: eagle, deer, buffalo, bear.
- Life-givers: earth/food, sun/fire, water/moon, air/wind.
- Relatives: plant, four-legged, finned, winged.
- Aspects of being: spiritual, physical, emotional, mental.
- Relationships: self, family, community, nation (Bell 2010).

The medicine wheel curriculum framework reflecting the four seasons consists of the following seasonal cultural practices:

- Traditions: maple syrup, planting, birchbark, edibles, strawberries, spear fishing, lodge building, hand crafts, hunting, wild rice harvesting, apple picking, tanning, storytelling, outdoor survival, snowshoeing, ice fishing.
- Teachings/stories: creation story, seven ancestors, land of spirits, Nanaboozhoo stories.
- Ceremonies: fasting, feasting, sweat lodge, solstice, powwow, full moon, feast for the dead (Bell 2010).

The bigger picture of the story involving the kindergarten girls, and how it relates to initial teacher education, lies in transformation and self-actualisation.

5.4 Spirituality in Environmental Sustainability Education

Transformational and self-actualising education from an Indigenous perspective includes helping students to “find life and realize a completeness in their life” (Cajete 1994, p. 12). Transformation and self-actualisation occur through teaching holistically whereby educators engage all four aspects of who their students are as human beings. That means teaching to students' mental, physical, emotional and spiritual capacities. The two little girls in our story thought about their teachings (mental); they went inside of the school to get tobacco (physical); they felt like they needed to give thanks (emotional); and then from their spirit they offered up prayers of thanks (spiritual). All four aspects were actualised in that little act of what they did.

All education, including environmental sustainability education, must engage all four parts of our beings: our minds, our bodies, our hearts and our spirits. While it may seem easy to envision how we could engage the mind, the heart and the body, it is somewhat more difficult to envision how we could engage the spiritual or the

soul. Talking about spirituality in education can cause tension because some equate it with religion. From an Indigenous perspective, spirituality has nothing to do with religion. Spirituality is about knowing, feeling and acting like we are connected to the natural world. It is a spirit-to-spirit connection, and it is accessible to all people regardless of religion because we all share this same natural world, this one planet. It is not about religion; it is recognising that we only exist but for the life-givers that provide us with everything that we need. The life-givers are the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, the sun that provides light and heat and the earth that provides us with the food that we eat. We all need those things, and that is universal.

Spirituality is also about being humble enough to acknowledge that we are the most insignificant beings on this planet because we cannot live without the life-givers and what is provided for us—yet the life-givers can exist without us, and perhaps the planet might be all the better. The earth does not need us, but we need the earth. This degree of humility creates an understanding that we are the most insignificant of all the creatures on earth. In the Anishinaabe creation story, humans are created last because everything else needed to be on earth first. Even the plants and animals had to exist so that we would have something to eat. Coming last in the order of creation tells us how insignificant we really are in the whole scheme of creation, and this is a spiritual realisation that is manifested in many different ways by Indigenous people.

5.5 The 4Rs: Respect, Relationship, Reciprocity and Responsibility

The spiritual connection can be actualised through the four Rs: respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility. Respect, or re-spect, asks us to “look again”. By using our gift of vision, we can really see what is happening. It is no accident that Indigenous peoples have exceptional observational skills. They always had to know how everything in the natural world worked because their lives absolutely depended on it; their survival depended on that knowing. The gift of vision and being able to see creates awareness, including becoming aware of our surroundings and what is going on in our world. An identity in relation to the natural world is then created. We see ourselves in connection to creation, which in turn creates a value system that we walk through life with. In this identity and value system, there is a strong sense of belonging to a place and this results in the feeling of rootedness to a place. Indigenous people are deeply rooted to their places.

This value system can then be actualised through our relationships, with other human beings for example, but also in how we interact with the world around us that sustains us. Relating in this way realises the interconnections that exist among all things, including our kinship to the natural world. Anishinaabe people acknowledge their relatives by referring to the earth as mother, the sky as father, the sun as grandfather and the moon as grandmother. The plants and animals are acknowledged as

elder brothers and sisters. The family of creation is acknowledged, and Indigenous people see themselves in relation to creation, which is manifested in ceremony by stating “n’kaniganaa”—all my relations.

This relationship must also be balanced. Balance is a foundational principle in Indigenous worldview as it creates harmony. Balance is maintained by ensuring there is reciprocity by giving back, ensuring there is give and take. Part of giving back includes giving thanks and recognising that when we harm one thing in the natural world, we are harming ourselves. If we poison the water, we know that we are harming the health of the water and all that inhabit it, but we are also harming ourselves because we need to drink that water.

Responsibility then requires us to respond with our abilities—response ability. Anishinaabe teachings share that we are all born with certain gifts and we develop these gifts throughout our lifetime. We therefore have a responsibility to use these gifts for the goodness of all. Responsibility calls us to do, to behave and to act using our gifts. The hope is that this acting and doing and behaving become a way of life; that it is just part of who we are and how we are to live in the world. With responsibility comes an eye to the future. A strong sense of vision is extended into responsibility when we always look far ahead into the future. Anishinaabe teachings, and indeed many other Indigenous teachings, speak to a *seven-generation principle* which means when we want to act today, we look seven generations ahead and see what kind of an impact that is going to have. This practice brings insight into the decisions that we make now.

5.6 Returning to the Story

To live life in a spiritual way is to live respectfully in reciprocal relationships that result in taking responsibility. Reflecting back to the story of my two little kindergarten girls, they had respect for the natural world. They felt in relationship with it. They were being reciprocal by giving back and by giving thanks with the tobacco they were holding in their hands. They were responding and being responsible because they went into the school on their own accord and did this. My hope is that they will take what they have learned and walk with it throughout their lives.

5.7 Spirituality in Teacher Education

I now work with teacher candidates and try to employ the same pedagogy as I did when I taught small children. I offer a 12-day on-the-land experience at my home titled Learning From the Land and Indigenous People. The worldview of Indigenous people is a direct reflection of the natural world, and since there is a global/universal need for all students to learn about the state of the planet, I have provided a land-based learning experience since 2007 to serve the dual purpose of learning about

Indigenous people while instilling an ecological consciousness in teacher candidates and ultimately their future students. Teacher candidates spend 75 hours with me on the land and water in my community of Burleigh Falls and Lovesick Lake in the Kawartha Lakes in Ontario, and where the Canadian Shield begins. The placement assists teacher candidates to teach to and about Indigenous people while instilling an environmental consciousness in their future students. These objectives assist teacher candidates in implementing the *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework* (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME] 2007), and *Acting Today, Shaping Tomorrow: A Policy Framework for Environmental Education in Ontario Schools* (OME 2009).

Through experiential land-based and culture-based activities, teacher candidates identify connections that are made on multiple levels: with their sense of self, with the environment, within the learning group, with their teaching practice and with the Indigenous culture. Their experience is summed up by this student:

I came away with a better understanding of Anishinaabe culture as well as a new yet familiar approach to teaching and learning. This was a rich experience—a lot was accomplished in a short time. I feel full of possibility with respect to future teaching. I also feel connected with local Anishinaabe culture and the land. I now have new skills so that I can teach about Anishinaabe and First Nations peoples to my classes in a respectful and engaging way. I feel that I am also better prepared to teach Indigenous students.

In the Learning From the Land and Indigenous People alternative settings placement, teacher candidates have the opportunity to learn about Indigenous people through the land and to move through the 4Rs. I engage them spiritually with a hope that they will teach to their students' spirits, resulting in spiritual connections to creation. I encourage teacher education programmes across Canada to consider how they can instil and foster spiritual connections with the environment in teacher education through respect, relationship, reciprocity and responsibility.

N'kaniganaa.

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