



*Stoking the embers of ancient fire:  
Counselling First Nations adolescents within  
a narrative approach.*

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It is the thesis of the present paper that the oral tradition of Canadian First Nations people lends itself towards a rich cultural predisposition to meaning-making through narrative, leading towards a narrative approach as being culturally sensitive, deeply respectful and meaningful in counselling work with First Nations adolescents. In addition to a discussion about the vital importance of working within the existing narratives of First Nations youth, the author will unfold a personal narrative as a Canadian Algonquin person. This narrative piece serves to highlight externalisation, re-authoring of the story, the opening of possibilities, and the provision of a new context for the experiencing of adversity.

**Keywords:** *externalisation, re-authoring of the story, provision of a new context, oral tradition*

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## A JOURNEY OF STORIES: NARRATIVES OF FIRST NATIONS ADOLESCENTS

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By the time our Canadian First Nations children reach their place of adolescence, they will have already been exposed to a multitude of narratives about who they are. Having come from a people who have historically existed within an oral storytelling tradition, they will have listened closely to the larger themes while watching the storyteller carefully. Some of these stories will have been illuminated and infused with the energy of pride, wisdom, empowerment, rich meaning, and optimism. Some of these stories, however, will have been told through the eyes of dominant culture with little interest in recounting the recent history of cultural decimation or in reflecting the incredible courage and resiliency of First Nations people who have collectively survived unthinkable horrors. Even more unsettling, some of these stories will have been told through the perspective of the young people's own eyes and reflect unprocessed experiences shaped by narratives of powerlessness, injustice and disregard.

The present paper seeks to demonstrate that the historical oral tradition of First Nations people lends itself towards a rich cultural predisposition to meaning-making through narrative, leading towards a narrative approach as being culturally sensitive and meaningful in counselling work with First Nations adolescents. Understanding the oral narratives of First Nations adolescents becomes key. In coming to know the stories they have already digested, or have been forced to ingest, we get a sense of the flow and movement of narratives that might become important in their storied journey towards self-understanding, voice, vision and meaning.

This paper will endeavor to provide a breathing example of a narrative approach through the writer's own creation of meaning, seeking to examine dominant narrative impact, externalise the problem-story, re-author the narrative with a focus on strength and resiliency, and finally develop questions with new meaning-making possibilities. Although no longer an adolescent, as an Aboriginal person (Algonquin), this author hopes to provide a personal exploration of narrative techniques within the context of this paper that will hopefully become transparent to the reader. A further hope is that it will provide vision and inspiration to see how such directions might unfold and be potentially very fruitful in terms of counselling work with First Nations adolescents.

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## ORAL TRADITION OF FIRST NATIONS: THE MAKING, KEEPING AND NARRATIVE OF MEANING

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Hanson (2009) discusses the oral tradition of Aboriginal societies throughout North America, and points to the fact that oral transmission of stories has historically provided the legends, lessons, patterns, rituals, wisdom and historical records of Aboriginal cultures and identities. Oral traditions of record keeping and knowledge, which include verbal and expressive narratives such as art, dance and drums, are considered highly complex, sophisticated, layered, and highly specialised (Hanson, 2009). Interestingly, Hanson discusses the tendency of Western discourse to consider people of oral tradition as being 'peoples without history', instead prioritising and validating the use of the

written word as somehow more objective, and by extension more accurate. This provides an example of a dominant narrative impacting and significantly displacing the natural health and transmission of Aboriginal narrative. In the present day, there is recognition of the tremendous sophistication and vital importance of oral narrative. There is a renewed effort amongst First Nations to practice, preserve, honour and protect this aspect of their cultural identity.

Hanson (2009) goes on to point out that, although First Nations utilise the written word as an instrument of documentation in the present day, many continue to depend on oral traditions as a dynamic, intrinsic and key aspect of their culture, societies, and identities. Indeed, it becomes vital to recognise and respect the place of oral narrative in Aboriginal culture and in our work with First Nations youth (Legacy of Hope Foundation, 2012).

And so, how are narratives coloured in light of the tremendous pain and suffering experienced in recent Aboriginal history? Are First Nations adolescents able to access healthy oral tradition enough to offset negative or destructive dominant cultural narratives that may be contained within their experiences? Hanson (2009) discusses oral traditions as a 'collective enterprise'. Certainly the abuses and relentless systematic attempts at aggressive assimilation by Canadian culture have impacted on collective oral tradition as well as individual Aboriginal narratives about life, history, identities, and worldview.

Goetting (2012) discusses the more recent history of First Nations in terms of the many individual and collective abuses suffered at the hands of dominant cultural agendas. Included in this discussion are stories of horrific experiences and multi-layered abuses incurred in residential schools, stories of relocation, isolation, displacement, loss of control and self-determination, and issues of crippling poverty (Goetting, 2012). Fournier and Crey (1997) discuss how policies of forcible assimilation into mainstream culture have pervaded and impacted every era of Aboriginal history, with each new Canadian era developing or expanding rationale for the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes, families, and cultural attachments. The intergenerational trauma as a result of such measures have been far-reaching and profound, including loss of language and culture, significant abuse suffered in residential school settings, and the exploitation of vulnerabilities in Aboriginal children through loss of cultural attachments (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2011).

Goetting (2012) discusses that it becomes essential to understand these factors and their impact on individual and collective worldview in terms of our work with Aboriginal young people. Coming from a culture of narrative tradition and therefore listening closely to the legacy of the stories around them, an adolescent may have had significant exposure to themes of collective pain and suffering. A young person listening to the dominant narratives may have experienced a significant degree of shame, grief, and unbearable discomfort in regard to their cultural history and identity as interpreted through the eyes of others. In the words of Wingard (2001), 'Grief's presence has been with us for a long time ...' (p. 1). It may indeed be the case that grief's presence has been with the narratives of First Nations adolescents for a long time, not only within the context of their own life but within their past generations and now threatening to move forward into generations to come.

*Grief and Loss have always walked with First Nations peoples. Grief and Loss have always been part of the circles of understanding that allow them to pause and turn back, able to connect with the lessons and wisdom of those who have gone before in order to guide those here now, and those to come. Making room for traditions and connections of story, song, dance and ritual have allowed First Nations people to sink their feet deeper into the earth, able to feel grounded by natural rhythms of life. When Darkness came, there was movement in Fire to embrace the lessons of their Ancestors. There were important things to see and know inside Darkness and Fire. There was a deep trust of Darkness moving to Light.*

*It has been a long time now that a New Dark has descended upon First Nations people. It has been swallowing them whole. Cut-off from the embracing of Darkness and Fire, it has stayed with them, not able to move to Light, becoming something they have never known before. New Dark has left them blinded in Aloneness, unable to see each other, unable to gather together for strengthening Fire. First Nations people have courageously struggled to understand New Dark, bravely trying to find their way towards things that will restore their strength. New Dark has forced many to stumble around desperately, falling towards cliffs and becoming caught in strong winds and swift currents. Many have died in New Dark. First Nations have been unable to sink their feet deeper into the earth. Aloneness has disconnected them from movement and meaning in the lessons of their Ancestors, who watch with patience and love, always waiting ...*

In the above narrative of the present author, New Dark represents an externalisation of the historical themes of aggressive cultural assimilation, loss of ritual and traditions, themes of tremendous pain, disconnect with healthy narratives, as well as current-day themes of depression and suicide. Suicide rates for Aboriginal youth are estimated to be five-to-six times higher than for non-Aboriginal youth in Canada (Health Canada, 2010). First Nations youth face a world of abnormally high rates of diabetes, infant mortality, teen pregnancy, tuberculosis, and issues with substance dependency (The Globe and Mail, 2012). First Nations youth face a world of traumatic history, inadequate housing, unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to basic necessities (The Globe and Mail, 2012). Wherever they may be, on reserve or living in urban areas, First Nations youth face tremendous risk of a cultural emptiness and aloneness both presently and in narratives of recent history, all of which leave them yearning for their own stories. For many, it may very well seem that New Dark has indeed swallowed them whole.

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### NARRATIVE PRACTICES WITH ABORIGINAL YOUNG PEOPLE: STORIES AS STRENGTH-HEALING-MEDICINE

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A narrative approach can encompass many different themes in terms of working with First Nations adolescents. It can be about exploring the ways of understanding one's identity and coming to know the stories that have influenced this understanding along the way (Morgan, 2000). It can be a process of coming to

know dominant cultural narratives that have been ingested, and

moving to disown that which was never ours, but which was forced upon us. It can be about understanding problem-stories and how one interacts with problem-stories in their life (Morgan, 2000). It can be about re-authoring problem-stories and creating new life narratives within a strengths-based perspective, pulling fragments of life experience where there was a feeling of success, a show of competence, or a different way of coping. In this way, these fragments can now be seen, known and woven into a new narrative of empowerment (Morgan, 2000). In the words of Wingard & Lester (2001), it becomes about 'Telling our stories in ways that make us stronger' (book title).

Central to a narrative approach, and reflected in Wingard & Lester's book title, is a use of the term our stories. This is a key empowering shift in a narrative approach. A narrative approach holds the belief that people are the experts in their own lives (Morgan, 2000). This becomes a philosophy, stance and posture that can cultivate a sense of empowerment. Within this energy, First Nations adolescents begin to know that their experiences, their perspectives, their views, and indeed the very language they use in describing their lives, will not be questioned, debated, minimised, or met with a static change-process agenda.

Instead, a narrative approach is dynamic, seeking conversations and considering the directions of the conversation 'as if they are roads on a journey' (Morgan, 2000, p. 7). Stories become the roadmap for new questions that lead to new conversations that will view problems as separate from the person (Semmler & Williams, 2000). Their words and experiences are welcomed and honoured, even if only presented in fragments, bits and pieces. The way they describe their circumstances and problem-situations, indeed their very language, is explored with openness, curiosity, and a keen ear towards themes of resiliency and strength that can be highlighted, brought forward through respectful and deferential questioning, and re woven into a story of strength and possibility (Morgan, 2000). New stories and new possibilities are created. As the helping person listens to the narrative of the First Nations adolescent, that person will rest in the wisdom that 'people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives' (Morgan, 2000, par. 4). A narrative approach rests in the understanding that people create meaning out of the circumstances of their lives, and that the narratives of a dominant culture can influence meaning. Therefore the key is to engage a process of meaning-making through exploration of existing narratives with a focus on the creation of new strengthening and healing narratives (Semmler & Williams, 2000).

A narrative approach accepts a person as exactly where they are, provides a sense of reflection so they can see where they are, while seeking to create openings of possibilities where they might decide they were meant to be (Sue & Sue, 1990, as cited in Semmler, Lucey & Carmen, 2000). Semmler & Williams, 2000) discuss key techniques involved in a narrative approach, which include the opening-up of existing narratives. Where did they come from? What are their meanings and effects in the creation of problems? Included in technique is the understanding to move the energy of the problem as separate from the person in order to come to know it, study it, and see new possibilities to change the story. These techniques include deconstructing the dominant cultural narratives, externalising the problem,

re-authoring the story, and providing a context for the new story.

To remove or externalise a 'problem' from within the Aboriginal adolescent to a place where the adolescent can look at it, discuss it and create meaning around it, can greatly assist the adolescent to understand problem-stories as separate from self. In a narrative discussion of how the problem came to be, one is opening and engaging the potential to create new awareness of *great strengths in light of great struggles*. Historical oral traditions of Aboriginal people have always highlighted tremendous meaning-making possibilities through story-telling and the examination of themes removed from the individual. The ear of the young person may already be keenly attuned to listening and absorbing that which will strengthen and feed the spirit, and that which will locate *Ancient Fire* inside *New Dark*.

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## ANCIENT FIRE INSIDE NEW DARK

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*The ways of their Ancestors have shown them that the gathering in Darkness and Fire has always led to Light. The pause to look backwards in the walk with Grief and Loss has always led to their feet sinking more deeply into the ground. However New Dark has left them spinning with Grief and Loss bigger than they have ever known, disconnected completely from the feel of the ground, unable to find their way back to each other, unable to pause and unwilling to look backwards for the great pain it brings. They have been forced to stumble blindly in the crippling deep of New Dark.*

*Yet, the ways of their Ancestors have always shown them that the gathering in Darkness and Fire leads to Light. This is wisdom they have always known together, a trust they have always felt together. Alone and separate, could they still sense this wisdom that always remains? Could they still know the truth of pausing, looking back, sinking their feet into the ground where they stand, even if not together at that moment? Could the embers of Ancient Fire be found inside each of them to lead the way back? And from these embers of Ancient Fire found inside each of them, could they find their way towards each other, able to gather together in Fire now able to move towards Light?*

Where will the conversations go? What possibilities might open up for a First Nations youth while thinking about the embers of *Ancient Fire* inside? What possibilities might become apparent in viewing their situation removed from them to a much larger picture, framed in strength, courage and *great resilience in the face of great struggle*?

The above narrative seeks to demonstrate the opening of possibilities and recognition of ways-through derived from the process of externalisation, re-authoring of the story, and the provision of a new context for the experiencing of adversity. These are the very themes of a narrative approach.

For the present writer, the above personal narrative serves to emphasise strength and courage, a battle with something profound, a people's struggle to place their feet back in the earth, and the embers of individual fires that are part of the process of strengthening a collective fire. The above personal narrative seeks to open new avenues of re-interpretation of historical and collective pain, suffering and loss. *Ancient Fire* speaks of adaptation to that *which can't be changed*, and movement towards the embracing of *that which can*.

This is the task of First Nations adolescents: to connect with their own sense of growing courage, strength and wisdom through the collective oral tradition that is their legacy and birthright. In this way, a narrative approach to counselling work with First Nations adolescents can provide a potentially effective and culturally sensitive framework of *that which can work in harmony with that which is*.

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