

Exhibit: National Inquiry into Missing and
Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

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NOURISHING THE LEARNING SPIRIT:

LEARNING IS OUR PURPOSE IN LIFE

Our Elders relay how we come into our bodies and our awareness in order to learn. Life is a journey of our spirits that are in a relationship with Creator. The Elders likened birth to an occurrence when the spirit joins with the physical body to become body, mind, emotions, and also spirit. Provided with a purpose and gifts for the spirit from Creator, the spirit journey is directed toward the discovery of these gifts and the fulfillment of that purpose. Families, communities, places, and ceremonies nurture the spirit in informal learning environments and in more formal environments, where it is expected that schools will validate the existing knowledge base of the students and provide an environment, experiences, and knowledge, where students may work toward fulfillment of their gifts and purposes in accordance with the laws of Creator, passed down through the collective stories, traditions, customs, and identities of Aboriginal peoples.¹

Aboriginal families and communities have a special role in this journey – to foster a strong collective identity and provide wisdom for their children and youth as they engage in lifelong learning. Through our families, peers, and communities, we come to learn about ourselves through our ecologies, land, and environments. Our Elders and families share their knowledge of place in their daily personal and communal adventures on the land, in traditional tales, timed with the seasons, and in the context of everyday life. We come to know ourselves in place, and by its depth of beauty, abundance, and gifts, we learn to respect and honour that place. All Indigenous peoples have, then, a land base and ecology from which they have learned, and it is there that they honour the spirit of that land in ceremonies, traditions, prayers, customs, and beliefs. These, then, are the core foundations of Indigenous knowledge, learned within a language and culture.



EN BREF Selon la philosophie autochtone, l'Esprit entre dans cette existence terrestre animé par un but et possédant des dons spécifiques pour l'atteindre. L'Esprit apprenant a un Esprit d'Apprentissage. Mais cet Esprit a été freiné pour les peuples autochtones canadiens, qui se trouvent dans des conditions de pauvreté extrême, vivant l'isolement, l'impuissance, l'impérialisme culturel et le racisme. On leur a dit, tant verbalement qu'implicitement, qu'il n'est pas bien d'être qui ils sont. Cependant, une renaissance autochtone internationale a pris racine. La communauté mondiale est de plus en plus consciente des limites de la modernité ainsi que des possibilités et du potentiel des savoirs autochtones, qui s'avèrent un système de connaissances étendues et utiles. Les besoins les plus pressants, actuellement, sont de continuer de contrer le racisme et l'eurocentrisme, ainsi que d'offrir ce que le Sage Albert Marshall appelle le « double regard » : normaliser les connaissances autochtones dans le programme d'études de façon à rendre disponibles les savoirs tant autochtones que conventionnels – non seulement pour les peuples autochtones, mais pour tous les peuples.

In Aboriginal thought, the Spirit enters this earth walk with a purpose

for being here and with specific gifts for fulfilling that purpose...

It has a hunger and a thirst for learning.

LIVING OUR WAY TO NEW THINKING

Learning then, as Aboriginal people have come to know it, is holistic, lifelong, purposeful, experiential, communal, spiritual, and learned within a language and a culture.

What guides our learning (beyond family, community, and Elders) is spirit, our own learning spirits who travel with us and guide us along our earth walk, offering us guidance, inspiration, and quiet unrealized potential to be who we are. In Aboriginal thought, the Spirit enters this earth walk with a purpose for being here and with specific gifts for fulfilling that purpose. In effect, the learning Spirit has a Learning Spirit. It has a hunger and a thirst for learning, and along that path it leads us to discern what is useful for us to know and what is not. Our individual gifts for fulfilling our purpose are expressed in ourselves, in our growing talents, and in our emerging or shifting interests. These gifts often manifest themselves in surprise and in joy. That time of learning has often been called a 'wondrous' time and lasts a lifetime.

THE EROSION OF SPIRIT

Sometimes, as has been the case for Aboriginal people, learning loses its meaningfulness and its wondrous moments – as in residential schools, where students were sent from their loving families and forced to endure the tragedies of a lost childhood, a result of forced assimilation policies and practices that disrespected who they were, where they came from, their language, culture, relationships, or skills on the land. They were abused, and the emotional and psychological scars remained with them, adding to the layers of colonization and racism that would create further scars and baggage. Public schooling pursued a path quite similar, and the effect has been an erosion of spirit, a downward spiraling, and cyclical patterns that defeat their life purpose and create multiple blocks to learning.² This history has led to multiple layers of trauma, which Duran and Duran call a 'Soul Wound' that describes both the collective and individual experiences of so many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples of Canada.³ This has

reverberated across Aboriginal peoples' experiences with education, even today, as there are few safe places for Aboriginal languages and cultures to thrive.

Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been relegated to systemic poverty. They are the most economically disadvantaged Canadians by all standard measures. They suffer the worst educational systems created in Canada, the worst conditions of life, the most unemployment, the lowest incomes, and the poorest health.⁴ The 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,⁵ and other reports before and since, consistently attest to the dark side of life Aboriginal people have had to endure on reserves. Yet, most still prefer to live in their homelands, in a cultural and customary place, and continue to hold high hopes that education can help their children to close the gaps in Canadian demographics. These demographics, as told without the context of the historical experience and government funding formulas, are quite damaging to everyone's estimation of Aboriginal peoples – but not to their estimation of the government or the society itself, which have created them.

When Aboriginal people are compared to others whose skills, experiences, histories, and cultures are different, Aboriginal people are depicted as having to do more and learn more in order to be on par with Canadians, whose Eurocentric skills of language, discourses, numeracy, literacy, graduation rates, etc. are far different from those of Aboriginal peoples. In 2004, the Auditor General of Canada noted that it will take 28 years for First Nations children to catch up to the Canadian average.⁶ Yet, there is no contextualization of these statistics. That context, for Aboriginal

people in Canada, is laden with Third World poverty, isolation, unemployment, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and racism (both individual and systemic), as evidenced by run-down schools, inequities in funding of those schools, assimilation to English language and Eurocentrism that is now normalized in all schools, lack of consideration of the cultures or spiritual growth of these students, lack of funding and research on methods for dealing with special needs, and more. In the educational environment, including but not limited to residential schools, Aboriginal people's experiences are relayed in spoken and unspoken messages, complete with statistics telling them that it is not okay to be who they are.

Children suffer the most from these experiences, which continue as unresolved trauma over time, so that by the time they reach adulthood, as adult literacy workers have found, they have many layers of emotional and psychological issues that need to be resolved before cognitive/academic learning can again take place. These issues must be addressed before the Learning Spirit can be fully re-activated. Changing learners' attitudes towards themselves then becomes the primary goal for adult educators working with Aboriginal learners, but "reaching the spirit of a person and lightening the load they have carried for so many years requires patience, perseverance, positive thinking and

unconditional caring."⁷ Benally says it like this: "When we are not taught in this way, drawing on all four areas of knowledge, we become spiritually, emotionally, socially, physically and environmentally impoverished. We become narrow in our views and cannot see the connection between all knowledge. We wind up perpetuating the imbalance within and between ourselves, other people and the natural world."⁸

In order to move to an overall positive cultural identity, according to cultural identity development models, individuals will have to go through a process of unlearning what they have unconsciously internalized. "Part of this process is learning their own history from the perspective of members of their own culture, reclaiming what has been lost or unknown to them, and reframing what has often been cast subconsciously as negative in more positive ways."⁹

RESURGENCE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Relearning or unlearning the layers of oppression and trauma has, in effect, led to an Indigenous renaissance, the most significant contemporary Indigenous experience that has become a larger international Indigenous movement. The movement began with the first generation of Aboriginal people since the early activists of the late 1960s who have achieved university degrees. It resonates with stories of resilience, creativity, perseverance, and success that Aboriginal learners have achieved, despite Canada's educational policies that generated the tragic indicators mentioned above. These are the missing human stories that help Canadians and other Aboriginal people see the strength of values, traditions, spirituality, and the individuals who are the building blocks for the future.

Today, Indigenous peoples around the world continue to feel the tensions created by a Eurocentric educational system that has taught them not to trust Indigenous knowledge, but to rely on science and technology for tools for their future, although those same sciences and technologies have increasingly created the fragile environmental base that requires us to rethink how we interact with the earth and with each other. The global community is becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of modernity and technological knowledge, of the possibilities and potential of Indigenous knowledge, of the nature of our loss, and of the desperate need to repair our own systems. These tensions create many quandaries that touch on issues of diversity, inclusivity, and respect.

It is vital to protect Indigenous knowledge, not only for the sake of Indigenous peoples in their own environments, but also to raise general awareness of the vitality of Indigenous knowledge and its dynamic capacity to help solve contemporary problems. Most schools and universities focus attention on fragmented cultural practices that make Aboriginal peoples visible only in their artistry, performance, and archival and museum work, and as such perpetuate notions of Indigenous peoples as historical and exotic, not contemporary and global with a knowledge system that has value for all.

However, both nationally and internationally, Indigenous Knowledge is being revealed as an extensive and valuable knowledge system that must be made a priority or mission in education, not just for Indigenous students but for all students. Scientists, ecologists, and social justice activists are coming to understand the consequences to the world when Indigenous peoples, their languages and their knowledge, are denigrated, dismissed, or denied the resources necessary to retain them.

The environment is directly related to the people who inhabit it. It is the world's Indigenous peoples who are cultivating 80 percent of the world's natural biodiversity, and



this is taking place within their cultural cultivation of Indigenous knowledge. Paul Hawken, author of *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice and Beauty to the World*, asserts that at the current rate of decline, we can expect to witness half of our living cultural heritage disappearing in a single generation. The world will suffer immeasurably, he notes, with a loss of the ethnosphere, which is the sum total of all the "aesthetic, intellectual wealth contained within the invisible folds of sound," leaving us as a people and a species – and Earth itself – deeply impoverished.¹⁰

Scientists have just begun to recognize the potential of Indigenous knowledge, but there is still much work to be done. In order to protect it, we must consider the Eurocentric biases and cultural appropriations that are endangering Indigenous peoples' cultures and languages, for these cultures and languages are the source of Indigenous knowledge. In schools, we must engage in a critique of the curriculum and examine the connections between – and the framework of meanings behind – what is being taught, who is being excluded, and who is benefiting from public education. We must centre Indigenous knowledge by removing the distorting lens of Eurocentrism so that we can immerse ourselves in systems of meaning that are different from those that have conditioned us. As we embrace this process, we can begin to untangle the knots in our minds and practices that have created the existing web of knowledge so that we can weave a whole new cloth with threads that create a coherent but diversified pattern.¹¹ Thomas Berry, author of *The Dream of the Earth*, suggests: "It's all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not learned the new story."¹²

The recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of remediation, recognition of rights of Indigenous peoples, and a renaissance among Indigenous scholars, social activists, and allies. Their struggles represent a regeneration of the dignity and cultural integrity of Indigenous peoples, where success has been found in affirming and activating the holistic systems of Indigenous knowledge, engaging Elders, communities, and committed individuals. These practices reveal the utility, wealth, and richness of Indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings, and experiences to animate educational achievement. Once again in the struggle, Aboriginal languages are the most significant factor in the restoration, regeneration, and survival of Indigenous knowledge, and yet they are the most endangered.¹³

The initial educational struggle for Indigenous educators, then, has been to sensitize the Eurocentric consciousness in general, and educators in particular, to the colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Indigenous students. This does not come easily to Eurocentric-educated White people, for it requires their unlearning as well – challenging their meritocracy and superiority myths to learn how their privileges were constructed and maintained in a racist society.¹⁴ The second struggle is to convince them to acknowledge the unique knowledge and relationships that Indigenous people derive from place and from their homeland, which are central to their notions of humanity and science, and passed on in

their own languages and ceremony. This is the emerging work of Indigenous scholars who have been part of the indigenous renaissance. Once so convinced, the next tension is for all learners to learn it respectfully with Aboriginal people and without appropriating their new knowledge and experience for their own expedient ends.

My work over the past three years as co-lead of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre funded by the Canadian Council on Learning and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada has demonstrated that there have been many successes among Aboriginal people, and these successes come with increasing access to literacy programs; improving the number of schools and their capacity; increasing the number of qualified First Nations, Métis, and Inuit teachers; involving and partnering with parents and Elders in the delivery of education; respecting and honouring their languages, cultures, spiritual foundations, relationships, and place in their learning; and starting the Learning Spirit early and nurturing it, not just in elementary and secondary schools, but throughout life. As socio-economic status increases among Aboriginal peoples, so also do their successes in learning.

Two eyed seeing is to normalize Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum

so that both Indigenous and conventional perspectives and knowledges

will be available – not just for Aboriginal peoples, who would be enriched

by that effort, but for all peoples.

In our work in teacher education at the University of Saskatchewan, we are helping pre-service teachers to recognize racism – their own and that of the system – in a course that offers both self-exploration and reflection with readings that share how racism, classism, ableism, and homophobia are normalized in practices that, while silent and unseen to those who practice them, are damaging and traumatic to those learners who are their targets. Their awareness is likened to one holding a torch; yet they are but one torch in the universe until a growing mass of them can make one great light. In their awareness in schools across Saskatchewan and beyond, they can make a difference by effectively addressing racism in contemporary society, but they are just a few. That journey is one that cannot be taken alone or with few numbers. It requires a greater local, regional, national, and global effort

At present, the greatest needs are to continue to address racism and Eurocentrism in society and to offer what Elder Albert Marshall called Two Eyed Seeing: that is to normalize Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum so that both Indigenous and conventional perspectives and knowledges will be available – not just for Aboriginal peoples, who would be enriched by that effort, but for all peoples. Aboriginal knowledge serves to ground our interrelationships with each other – all things, animate and inanimate; to honour the land, the animals, the ecology that gives all of us sustenance; to honour our relationships with one another and respect our diversities, recognizing that we are all one, coming from one Creation, learning to learn, to fulfill our

journey, our earth walk, as our Creator and we have agreed upon. It is about balancing our brains and our selves and our societies in a world that could benefit greatly from the teachings of Elders, whose wealth of wisdom is abundant to those who listen and act. Finally, it is about every educator making a commitment to both unlearn and learn – to unlearn the racism and superiority so evident in our society and to learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners.

Finally, as Parker Palmer (1980) suggests, "We don't *think* our way into a new kind of living; we *live* our way into a new kind of thinking."¹⁵ |

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Notes

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