



Land-based Healing in First Nations Communities

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It's winter time, the time when we share our stories. This story began a long time ago, but last summer it re-emerged when I was home at Manitou Rapids-Rainy River First Nations in Northwestern Ontario. I texted my friend Al Hunter to see if he was around for a visit. He invited me to make Bear Grease, a traditional medicine used by our people. I was very excited as I had often used Bear Grease in ceremonies and healing procedures and I was very grateful to learn more teachings and participate in preparing the medicine. As I arrived I was happy to see another friend, Geraldine Cameron. The three of us spend the day in the bush making medicine as we visited and talked about the healing in our communities.

As each hour passed I felt myself becoming calmer and more aware of the connection to the land — listening to the birds, the trees and remembering the times of being immersed in my healing work. I felt myself breathing deeper, letting out sighs of stress and exhaustion. As I commented to my friends that this day was exactly what I needed, Al responded “if people would spend more time doing these types of things then they would feel a whole lot better.” I absolutely agreed. In these more recent years I've been focused on building family and programs and haven't had much time for self-care. For many of us, the work-life balance is a struggle.

When I reflect on my own route to wellness and how challenging that journey is at times, I'm reminded of the land-based healing opportunities that I was able to take part in. Although we didn't call them that 20 years ago, I now recognize that it is helpful to acknowledge “land-based healing” as a modality, as it has implications for the development of wellness programs and funding allocations. I have also come to realize that the colonization that Indigenous peoples experienced and that the efforts of the Canadian government and churches to forcibly prevent First Nations peoples from practicing culture and ceremony has had devastating impacts on our identities and well-being in general. We are now in a time of recovery from colonization, and this includes reclaiming Indigenous healing practices.



Twenty years ago I didn't have the understanding or language to articulate why land-based healing is a necessary component for many Indigenous peoples to reach a greater level of healing and wellness. And in fact, many people and many cultures around the world appreciate the value of disconnecting from the fast-paced world and reconnecting with nature, but for many Indigenous peoples it has become an essential part of our healing.

I remember the first time I fasted, my Elders had put me out on an island in a lodge for four days and four nights. While I pondered life and prayed for guidance and good health, my Elders held ceremonies for my healing. Because I was part of the 60's scoop and removed from my family and community as a baby, my Spirit craved connection, but my wounded self stayed protected and isolated. In the decades to follow, there would be many times that I would return to my Elders for care, attend ceremonies, spend time with family and seek out traditional teachings that supported my growth and healing.

In many ways, I now recognized that it was the land-based healing opportunities, including the medicines that come from the land, that engaged my Spirit and supported my healing. When the time came that I felt safe enough to delve deeper into the traumatic incidents that I had experienced, I sought out services of a clinical psychologist. I spent a few years in therapy unpacking, remembering, making connections and coming to terms with the way life is. I would go back and forth between my therapist and ceremonies, each time making more progress. At one point I was describing to my therapist a very moving experience with Spirits

in the Sweat Lodge that brought me to the core of my wounds and propelled the pain to surface in an intense release. I remember she had a look on her face that I didn't quite understand and she asked "are you writing any of this down?" I responded "no, but I don't think I'll ever forget this happened." I also feel that not everything should be written down.

And so when I think of where we are at in recognizing the harms caused by colonization — the extent of trauma, mental health, substance misuse and addiction issues — and the need for evidence and evidence-based practices, it should be well acknowledged that land-based healing programs ought to be supported through appropriate funding and an integral part of our health care system. Land-based healing is an investment that will no doubt result in better health outcomes and increased wellness within Indigenous communities.

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