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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

**Pimatisiwin: Walking in a Good Way—  
A Narrative Inquiry into Language as Identity**

BY

**Mary Isabelle Young**



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

First Nations Education

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

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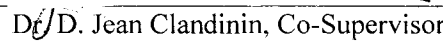
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a dissertation entitled **Pimatisiwin: Walking in a Good Way—A Narrative Inquiry into Language as Identity** submitted by **Mary Isabelle Young** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in **First Nations Education**.

  
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## ABSTRACT

The research puzzle for this inquiry emerged from my experiences as an Aboriginal student in different settings. I began with a story of my educational experiences, my lived story and the stories I carry and talk back and forth as *Anishinabe kwe*. I use my own stories as a frame for my research puzzle. Who am I as *Anishinabe kwe*? Who and what can define me? Does speaking my language, *Anishinabemowin* define me?

The presentation of my narrative account is used as a background and the foundation of my research. I began telling stories of my residential school experiences and my educational journey. In order to explore my research puzzle, I invited two *Anishinabec*, young people to share their stories. One participant, Niin did not speak her language and the other, Aanung did speak his language. I spent several months in conversation with them as they told their stories of who they were and who they were becoming.

To thread this dissertation, I placed my lived story beside Niin and Aanung. I tell their stories in two narrative accounts and I tell stories of our walk together and how we composed our lives together. We began our conversations with my wonder about the relationship between language and identity. The stories we shared and the conversations we had with one another enlightened the inquiry space we developed. As we talked as *Anishinabec*, we began to understand the importance of speaking and learning our Aboriginal languages. I also spent time with Minnie, an Elder in a northern community. Minnie provided hope and inspiration.

The threads I pull are intergenerational narrative reverberations, place, Aboriginal worldview, protocol, relational knowing with our ancestors, betrayal, the impact of Christianity, alienation and isolation, displacement and being alone. This dissertation offers hope for the maintenance and the survival of our Aboriginal languages and the ability to define ourselves and our place in Canada.

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e-mail and phone call everyday encouraged me to continue and pursue my dream. I am sure living with me during this process was not easy but I want you to know I appreciated your understanding and your kindness. I love you.

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**CHAPTER 1**  
**Setting the Stage: Positioning Myself in the Inquiry**

*“Intanishinabemowin niin awind oma biiting.”*  
*We speak Saulteaux in this house.*

In June 1967, after being away for ten months, I arrived home from the Pine Creek Residential School. During that time I was not allowed to go home and I was not permitted to speak in *Anishinabe*. The only contact I had with my family was through letters. The letters I wrote to my mother and father were always read and screened before they were mailed, and, whenever their letters arrived, they were always opened and read by the nuns before I was allowed to read them. I longed to be part of my family; I cannot describe or express how much I missed my family. I will never forget how lonely and homesick I was and I remember crying in bed, in class. As I recollect my feelings from that time, I felt like I was crying all the time. I remember I started asking my grade nine teacher for aspirin and it became a daily habit. She finally asked me why I was getting so many headaches. I told her I was lonely and I couldn't stop crying. She was very kind and I felt like she understood. She gave me the attention I wanted and needed, at that moment anyway.

But my heart continued to ache and there was an empty feeling in my gut. Something was missing. I did not see beauty anywhere. I didn't have much understanding about anything. I did whatever I was told to do: I ate when I was told to eat; slept when I was told to sleep; prayed when and how I was told; went to class when I was told; studied when I was told, worked when I was told to do chores; and went outside to play when I was told. Playing usually meant walking around the yard which was fenced. I can still hear the whistle Sister Mary blew to get our attention. We knew as soon as we heard it that we had to start forming a line so we could do things in an orderly Christian and

Catholic manner (*Looking back I am assuming that was the purpose for lining up that way. We must have looked like robots!*)<sup>1</sup>

I continually craved the company of my family, their laughter. I missed having meals with them. Whenever I thought about my parents, my brothers and sisters, I wondered what they were doing at that moment. I wondered if they went up the river to go fishing. Did my father make a fire and have a picnic or did they go home to eat?

I remember the first time I found out by accident that there were two other students at the school who spoke *Anishinabe*. What I recall the most about the incident was not so much being surprised, but I think I was more startled than anything else. Hearing them literally stopped me in my track. I am sure I could not articulate what I was feeling at the time but now as I look back I think I felt a connection, a sense of belonging. It was like a dream. I know someone here, even though I didn't really know them but something awoke my spirit, my being and the language I heard sounded reassuring and soothing. My heart was immediately happy. I had forgotten how long it had been since I had heard my language. It felt good. It felt really good but it also made me lonelier. I wanted to go home. (*When I think about it now it was like I had been in another world...not knowing who I was; not knowing what I was capable of achieving, not even thinking that I could achieve anything on my own. The students jolted me from a world, where I learned to be somebody else. Hearing them took me to a different landscape, in the way Silko (1996) means, home.*)

When I reminisce about that first year when I left home, I cannot imagine switching from speaking in *Anishinabe* everyday to speaking English everyday or at least hearing English everyday. I have no recollection whether it was easy or difficult. I think I basically succumbed to the situation and accepted that I had no control. As I look back now, the only thing I know for sure is that those two students rekindled my memory that I

---

<sup>1</sup> All *Anishinabe* words and my thoughts or wonders are in *italics* and in brackets. These include my current reflections on recollected stories as I write throughout the document.

had spoken another language and that I could still understand it. I did have a family and I had lived another life, another culture. Who was I then?

### **Unpacking my Suitcase**

I had taken a few family pictures with me but when I arrived at the school, Sister Mary took me upstairs to the dormitory and showed me the bed I would be sleeping in. She sat on the next bed and watched me as I unpacked my suitcase. When I placed the pictures on my night table, she asked to see them. She glanced at them and said, "You will not be needing these. Actually you will not need any of your clothes either so you might as well put everything back." She said, "Come with me," and "I will show you where you can store your suitcase for the year." For the year, I thought! I can honestly say I did not understand what she meant. I assumed she did not know I was going home for Christmas.

I picked up my suitcase (*I recollect I had a sick feeling in my stomach*) and somehow it felt heavier. I followed her. She walked towards the back of the dorm, where there were rows of cupboards. They were all painted white; I suppose to match the sixty odd white metal beds. They took up the whole back wall from floor to ceiling. She unlocked one of the cupboards. It was full of luggage. The suitcases and bags were all neatly stored. I placed my suitcase alongside the others. She said, "Come over here" and she began opening different cupboards. The shelves were filled with socks, shoes, pants, underwear, blouses, jackets, and pajamas. I had never laid eyes on so many clothes. She began taking clothes out and, as she issued them to me, she told me to mark all the clothes, including the socks with the number 14 because that is how I would know they were mine. I wonder how she knew my size? Maybe she had done it for so many years she became an expert at sizing the girls.

*As I write this I still feel heaviness in my heart and resentment for not being allowed to at least keep my pictures close to my bed. Right at this moment the resentment*

*I feel seems deeper than it was then and part of it is because I now recall feeling stripped from my belongings and being asked to put on other clothes. More importantly, my relationship with my family was devalued.*

### **Reliving and Retelling the Moment**

*Narrative is the study of how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future.*

*Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 24*

For some strange reason, I have a need to relive that moment, but this time, I want to unpack that suitcase the way I wanted to and would have liked to. I wonder if it would have made any difference. I doubt it because I know I really did not have any choice in the matter. I must have been afraid of her because I never asked her any questions. Or did I merely admit defeat without a fight? As a forty-nine year old Aboriginal woman what I am now going to do is imagine unpacking my suitcase. What would I do differently? Fortunately, I have since learned to ask questions and I can express what I want and need without being afraid (most of the time). I now have more self-confidence and power, power in the sense to know the difference between kindness and abuse. I have the capability to decide what I want to unpack. I can unpack everything if I want to...or take things out only when I need them. This is after all the *Anishinabe* way. If you find yourself with extra, no matter what it is, you share it with others in the community. You do not keep everything for yourself. One day when you are short of something, someone else will share her or his wealth. Sharing is part of the Ojibway culture, part of the value system (O'Meara, 1996, p. 132) I am feeling quite overwhelmed by what I am feeling right now. I did not realize until writing this what the suitcase signified and meant to me emotionally. It was my only tie with home, with my family and it represented my relationships and connection with them. That was all I had to remind me of home! I recall being sad when I put the suitcase in the storage room.

But why the tears now? Why am I still crying about that ‘storied moment’? Why does it still hurt? As I sit here writing on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor of education south at University of Alberta, being aware there is a meeting of Research Issues in the next room and wanting to be there for comfort and acceptance, I am thinking about my parents, my brothers and sisters and my partner, Ron. Did Sister Mary intend to break the connection with my family? I cannot really answer the question about Sister Mary’s intentions but from the literature I have read on the residential school system, (See Miller, 1996; Mihesuah, 1996; Christjohn, Young, Maraun, 1997; Antone, 2000) and being educated in one I can now assume she and her superiors did.

Today I see that moment of experience quite differently. What I now feel is anger because, as a young girl, I did not know what was happening but I recognize and believe now I was given a new identity. I became known as # 14 and English was the only language I was allowed to speak. I never thought unpacking my suitcase on the fourth floor of Pine Creek Residential School was going to impact my identity and my educational journey as an Aboriginal woman and an educator in my later years. The only thing I understood then was there were rules and, if I wanted to escape punishment, I had to obey them. That is exactly what I did until it was time to go home in June.

What is disturbing is the way I packed my suitcase ten months prior remained intact, unchanged and the pictures of my family stayed hidden in the storage room. But was I still intact, unchanged? What happened to me during those ten months? Physically, I certainly looked quite different. I wonder what I felt like emotionally, spiritually and mentally? All I knew was speaking English had become the language I spoke everyday except when other *Anishinabe* girls and I whispered conversations in *Anishinabe* where we would not be heard, in the dining room, or walking in the yard. Those were the safest places.

When June finally arrived, I could not wait to go home. I was so looking forward to going home and especially to seeing my mother.



## **Going Home**

In June 1967, the bus ride from Camperville to Winnipeg seemed endless. Once I arrived in Winnipeg I had to transfer to another bus to Pine Falls where I would spend one night at the Fort Alexander Residential School. I traveled with two other students and their home was in Fort Alexander. When their mother came to pick them up, she told them that my mother was staying with my aunt in Pine Falls. I got very excited and I asked one of the nuns if I could go and see her. She said, "No, you are scheduled to fly out to Bloodvein tomorrow morning." I did not understand then why I could not go and see her (she was just down the road from the residence). I can now guess what the rationale was but it does not mean I understand it any better, emotionally. I do intellectually. It is a demonstration to me how determined the nuns, who worked in the residential school system, were to prolong the separation between children and parents.

## **Switching Gears \_\_\_\_\_ Switching Places**

I recall vividly getting off the floatplane and I remember exactly what I was wearing and how I felt. Pine Creek Residential School had issued each of the girls new clothes to wear home. I was given a pink cotton blouse with a flowered pattern and it had long sleeves. It had no buttons or a zipper and it was long and baggy. The cotton slacks I was given were brown. I remember what I was wearing not because the blouse and the pants were not trendy but I was embarrassed about being overweight, about having extremely short hair and wearing glasses. I weighed a hundred and fifteen pounds when I left in August 1966; ten months later I weighed a hundred and fifty-three pounds. I felt ugly.

I do not remember what language I used to greet my father and the rest of the family. (I suspect it was English). As I indicated earlier, my mother was not at home. What happened at the supper table that evening is something I thought would never resurface but it has become an inspiration and a driving force in my educational journey. As far back as I can remember, we always ate together as a family and that night was no

exception. After we (my father, three of my sisters and three brothers. I remember we had a visitor but I do not recall his name) were seated, I asked my older sister to pass the salt and pepper in English. Without looking at me my father said, "*Intanishinabemowin niin awind oma biiting.*" (We speak Saulteaux in this house.)

My father was a very quiet man but when he spoke we all listened. Before he even finished his sentence, my immediate thought was, "I know we speak Saulteaux in our home. Why would I forget?" But in that moment I did forget. I wonder why it is that I remember clearly when I switched from speaking English to Anishinabe and not the other way around. In his caring way, my father reminded me of who I was. The nuns wanted me to forget who I was and to become who they wanted me to be. How could I have unraveled what I had been taught at the residential school for ten months in a few hours?

In 2001, I am still uncovering the multiple layers of who I am and am becoming. The difference is I see my experiences in new ways and can see openings for "untapped possibilities" (Greene, 1995, p. 77). Greene reminds me that I am still in the process of becoming. My journey is not about blaming others for what I missed out or endured but it is about taking into account my original landscape, where I come from and by doing that I will be "truly present" to myself. The meaning of my past is not something fixed and final but it "is something I am continually refiguring and updating in the present" (Kerby, 1991, p. 7).

For ten months I was instructed (told) to speak a different language and when I got home I was reminded very quickly that it was necessary to speak *Anishinabe*. I did not have to hide. I did not have to whisper. I did not have to be afraid of being caught. I did not have to sneak to the dining room to see if Jane and Elizabeth were studying in the dining room so we could talk in *Anishinabe*. Jane and Elizabeth were from the same community, Indian reserve (Indian reserves are now referred to as First Nations communities). I noticed they spoke differently. They had a different accent. I did not know it was called a dialect until I began to read about Aboriginal languages and

languages in general. I knew that *Anishinabec* from other communities close to our home community spoke differently but I knew it as *pakan ini ta ko si wuk*, or *pakan izhi kii shi quay wuk*. In English it means, they sounded different and spoke differently. Although I understood and could converse with people from these communities, they did have distinctive accents. I suppose to them, I did too.

After supper the first night home, when we were outside playing, I do remember speaking *Anishinabe* with my brothers and sisters. They would laugh whenever I said anything. They would tell me that I sounded funny. I am not a linguist so I am not sure whether the accent I picked up was from speaking English everyday or whether it was from Jane and Elizabeth. I didn't hear it myself. But when I found out that I had an accent, I wanted to get rid of it. I did not want to be accused of purposely trying to speak differently or to continue using the accent I apparently inherited. I knew of others who had been accused of that very thing. I did not want to be different. I wanted to belong. I wanted to speak and sound the same as my brothers and sisters and the rest of the people in Miskoosippiing, Bloodvein.

The Royal Report Commission on Aboriginal peoples (1996) reported that "language is connected to identity, its presence and use are symbolic of identity, emblems of group existence. Using a language is the symbol of belonging" (p. 612). Greymorning (1997) added that "our languages have been a reflection of those cultural distinctions that have made us who we are as a people and in a sense have been an element of the many things that have made us strong" (p. 1). Back then, I knew I sounded different from my brothers and sisters, and I remember feeling somehow separated because I was not speaking the language the same way. Today as I attempt to make meaning of Greymorning's words, and others, I suppose I wanted to remain connected to the cultural distinction my relatives in *Miskoosippiing* had always offered me. More importantly, I wanted to speak the language in the way our community spoke the language because it was unique from the other communities. It still is and it is this uniqueness which has

become symbolic of how I identify myself as *Anishinabe kwe* and a “symbol of my belonging” and where I come from.

As I recollect these experiences, it feels strange knowing that the ten months I spent at the residential school influenced me that seriously. Unlike my suitcase, I did not remain intact. I don't remember if I told my parents I spoke only English for ten months. It occurs to me now that by speaking English at the supper table, I wonder if I had been brainwashed to believe that the English language was superior. Is that why I did not hesitate to speak English. Hampton (1995) suggested “brainwashing” occurs “when education is used to wipe out identity, language, culture, philosophy, and substitute something else for these” (p. 52). Speaking English had become such a part of me during the time at the residential school but at the time and especially when I got home, I did not see it as brainwashing. In her ethnographic study of the residential school experiences in British Columbia, Haig-Brown (1998) added that “not only were the students not allowed to speak [their language] in school, they were also convinced that their use of the language was an indication of inferiority” (p. 120). *I certainly did not intend to show any disrespect for my father's knowledge or belittle his authority; authority in what he knew and in the way he had taught me. I hope he understood.*

Growing up, the only time I heard the English language spoken in the home was when the teacher, the nurse, the police, the pilot, the priest, who were all non-Aboriginal people, visited our home. It was usually my mother who conversed in English with our visitors; English was my mother's first language. My father spoke it very rarely unless he was comfortable with the people such as the storekeeper and depending on the relationship he had with the teachers. Later on in his life, he became comfortable and learned especially how to tease our visitors in English.

I am quite amazed how he handled the situation at the table that June evening. I question and wonder why I would write or even think this comment. As Haig-Brown and Hampton asserted, was I influenced that much by my formal education that I am still

doubting his parenting skills? Wasn't that the purpose of the residential school system? They intended to make me doubt who I, and my family were. When Miller (1996) wrote about the "remaking of Indian children," he indicated that "the most prominent— certainly the best remembered—of the means that schools used to try to bring about these changes was an assault on traditional Aboriginal practices, in particular the use of Native languages" (p. 199). My father did not scold or yell at me. He simply made a statement and wanted to remind me that the language spoken in our home was Sauteaux. I always knew that and so did my brothers and sisters. By saying, "*Intanishinabemowin niin awind oma biiting*" my father wanted to remind me who I was and to tell me I was home!

### **Memories of my Childhood Education**

When I read Akan's (1992) article on her interview with a respected Sauteaux Elder, Alfred Manitoweyes, the article brought back memories of not only the words of my father but the way he taught me that day, during my younger years and in my adult life. The way he corrected me let me know, perhaps not directly, that I was his daughter and I was *Anishinabe*. Mr. Manitoweyes described the Sauteaux worldview in several ways and one of these has to do with learning. He maintained that "learning involves thinking hard who you are; ultimately learning is a process that resolves, involves, and revolves. Learning is good thinking" (p. 192). This kind of learning was demonstrated many times by my mother and father. I still remember my mother saying, "Mary, think before you say something. If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything." My father would say in *Anishinabe*, "*Nashke nana gata wendan chi pwo keko iki to yan.*" I must admit I have not completely learned this lesson but I keep trying.

My mother did not consider herself *Anishinabe*, even though she learned the *Anishinabe* language and spoke it fluently. She was extremely influential and instrumental in my educational journey and my learning as a young child and in my adult years. She held values and beliefs similar to my father's but her faith and belief in the

Catholic Church was also very strong. It was not that my father did not go to church. He played the organ and my mother led the singing. My mother identified herself as a Metis woman. She spoke English, *Anishinabe*, and Cree. She could read and write Cree syllabics. She spoke some French. She contributed greatly towards ensuring that all my brothers and sisters and I spoke the language, which she proudly referred to as “their father’s language” and she would openly tell people that “it was very important to her we learn and use it.”

I still recall that moment of my return whenever I ask for salt and pepper. But now I regard it as “good thinking.” It is a teaching that reminds me of my father’s beliefs, values and the importance of speaking the *Anishinabe* language. I continue to learn from this moment and it constantly motivates me to pursue my passion for the preservation and revitalization of the *Anishinabe* language and the *Anishinabe* culture. Both my parents offered me another way of looking at education as a whole, my experiences and the world for that matter. Wherever I go, wherever I am, I will always remember I am *Anishinabe*. I will speak it even if no one understands; it is a way of centering myself. My father’s teachings and his passion for the language are a part of me and I will always cherish and respect his “good talk.” My father provided us with food and shelter but in this case my memory of him will forever remind me of my home and about going home. Bateson (2000) suggested that “going home is always both the same and not the same, so perhaps the life cycle has a twist in its return” (p. 245). It seems now I was the one who was twisted. In residential school, I had only one thing in mind. I wanted to go back home but it never occurred to me that the experiences I had in the school might have changed me. This memory of my father allows me to make my experience of that moment “coherent” in the way Crites (1971, p. 298) writes. As I look back, this memory evokes in me a sense of place, a sense of becoming. The trajectory of my journey is always moving back and forth, but reminds me of a space where I can go to for renewal and self-discovery (hooks, 1990, p. 49). This storied moment of my return is that space.

## Storytelling: Learning from example and experience

*Story telling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all Indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every Indigenous person has a place.*

*Smith L., 1999, p. 144*

Growing up and living at home, I never had reason to question my father's authority or his values and beliefs. His values and beliefs included respecting all living things, respecting water, knowing the land, the environment, our natural world and making sure to thank the spirits of animals, who gave up their lives to feed us. The one story I remember is one day, my father was showing me how to clean and prepare beaver. When we were finished I was going to throw out the parts we were not going to eat in the garbage. He said "those things do not belong in the garbage; go down to the river, put them in the river and say 'miigwetch' to the beaver spirit for giving us food." That day, the teaching was very special. However after being away from home in the residential school, being away from the family and immersed in school, I found myself gravitating to these newly found ways of learning. My father's teachings became trivial. Antone (2000) asserted that "the traditional knowledge and values of Native people have not been valued by mainstream approaches to education; consequently their voice has been silenced" (p. 97). I too became silent.

I had survived the first year of being away from home for ten months but in spite of that I wanted to finish high school. The next year, September 1967, I stayed at the Assiniboia Residential School in Winnipeg. I thought...I survived Pine Creek Residential School, I can do this! Well, it was quite different. I no longer had classes in the residential school itself, like we did in Pine Creek; we were housed in Assiniboia but we had to go out to public schools or private schools. All of us had to take the public transit (bus) to school, and that is where I saw my friends being ridiculed for being "Indian." I

went to a private school, an all girls' school. I had no idea what it was like to live in a city. This is what happened....

I was now fifteen living in Winnipeg, (but still living in a residential school). Racism and discrimination were not in my vocabulary. I only knew I did not feel very good about myself. I was living in a totally different landscape, a city. I learned very quickly that "being Indian was not a good thing." I was never ashamed for being "Indian" before, not even at Pine Creek. I slowly began to accept mainstream education as the best and only kind of worthwhile education, because of what I was hearing and observing. Hampton (1995) noted that "Indian children face a daily struggle with attacks on their identity, their intelligence, their way of life, their essential worth. They must continually struggle to find self-worth, dignity, and freedom in being who they are" (p. 35). This was my struggle amidst my confusion of being ashamed and doubting myself. Not only did I doubt myself, but I also noticed I began questioning my father's wisdom, teachings and our way of life. Part of this skepticism was influenced by the fact that the existence of my people (*Anishinabe* and other Aboriginal people) was not part of the curriculum. I felt excluded and I began questioning my identity as an Aboriginal person and, in fact, became quite uncomfortable being "*Anishinabe*" in the city and attempted to disassociate myself from my community. "Indians, as we were commonly known in the 60s and 70s, apparently were all drunks, lazy, bums, and were dumb." I kept hearing this (how could I not, they were said to me, to us, to our faces) and I noticed whenever I went to a restaurant with my "Indian" friends we would get served sometimes, but not all the time. When we went shopping we were followed everywhere in the store. I did not like the way I was feeling. The only time I felt okay or at least felt no one was judging or watching me was when I went home. It felt good to be in the bush, to be by the river, to swim in the river, to speak the language, and to visit and converse with my brothers and sisters. In Winnipeg, late in the 60's and in the 70's, I was questioning who I was. I was lost and sometimes felt spiritually dead, numb. There was nothing comfortable about my



existence (other than my desire to finish high school never left me). I did not live my life; I just survived. I went to school faithfully despite the negative remarks I heard about me, my family and generally about Aboriginal people. Later on I learned to name these experiences as discrimination and racism.

My education at home became less important. Conversing with my parents in *Anishinabe* while plucking ducks, geese and prairie chickens, making pillows out goose feathers, filleting fish, drying and smoking moose meat, and skinning rabbits seemed like ‘a long time ago’ and I regarded them as memories. Although I began attaching little or no value to these experiences, buried way deep in my heart, I felt a loss, a sense that this feeling of not valuing was not right. I learned not to talk about them.

After grade eight, while still living at home, all I ever wanted to do was to go to school. Go as high as I could because no one from my family or community had finished high school. *What I didn't know was that I would change. That I would be given a new identity. That the nuns who taught me would deplore my parents. That my people were seen as trivial, seen as a problem in Winnipeg, in Canada. I also did not know that I, myself, would begin to question our way of life, our way of being, and question what my parents had taught me. I now know their values and beliefs were interwoven with what I was trying to accomplish. However, when I heard negative and racial comments about Aboriginal people, I questioned who I was, who my parents were. I doubted their beliefs and I guess mine as well. Finishing school became complicated and turned into an experience of shame, self-doubt and questioning my parents' values. My self-esteem was shattered and I certainly did not have a positive self-identity.*

I resonate with Antone (2000) for when she examined her own learning, she maintained that “the Aboriginal voice is lifted up when traditional knowledge and values are incorporated into the education of Native students in the school system. To be in balance one must have a positive self-identity” (p. 99). I was not balanced. I also thought about my self-identity as a high school student when I read Alfred Manitopeyes (1992)

description of the “Saulteaux discourse.” He described the twelfth characteristic of Saulteaux discourse as “education which is concerned with the character formation or development of youth and it involves the making of human beings (it means giving children a good spirit” (Manitopeyes, 1992, p. 194).

As a young child, I did not understand any of this but as I grow older and hopefully wiser, I now recognize the difference between the way my father educated me and how I was educated in school and university. When I read Manitopeyes’ concept of a Saulteaux discourse I recognized it. I felt it. I knew it in my heart and in my soul. Manitopeyes affirmed what my father had taught me all along. It was not written anywhere. I lived it. I learned it in *Anishinabe*. I learned it by example. I learned it by doing. I liked who I was.

### **Homeplace**

*A site of resistance.*  
*hooks, 1990*

I grew up in a small First Nations community, approximately one hundred and fifty miles north east of Winnipeg. My father was 17 and my mother was 15 when they married. I come from a large family; my mother had twenty-three children. Six of my brothers and sisters died at childbirth. My older brother, Leonard passed away in 1979. My father passed away November 6, 1992 and my mother died August 19, 1997. My youngest sister, Alice passed away January 17<sup>th</sup>, 1995. My older sister, Margaret passed away February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1996 and my oldest brother passed away July 24<sup>th</sup>, 1999. I have five sisters (two older and three younger) and six brothers (three older and three younger).

My father Charlie was a fisherman, hunter and, later on in his life, a janitor of the local school. He had grade two education and he did not speak much English nor did he ever learn to write it. He instilled in me the importance of knowing and speaking the *Anishinabe* language. My mother was a Metis woman. She worked at home while we were growing up. She had grade four education but I seem to remember her reading

books whenever time permitted. She pushed me to go to school and one of the reasons for this was because she did not get a chance to go to school. She passed on two days before I defended my master's thesis and a week before that she asked me when I was going to finish school. Little did I know I would still be going to school.

Prior to their deaths, both my parents were in the hospital. Whenever I visited with them, I would talk about my experiences of leaving home and going to the residential school. I did this especially with my mother. I found myself getting angry that I had to go to a residential school at the age of 14 and missed spending time with them. It was almost like I had to get to know them again. I wondered why I did not know certain things about them. These visits made me realize what I had missed by moving away from home to go to school. Although my parents are no longer living, they are still very much with me in spirit.

I think about what I referred to earlier, that is, whenever my father talked my brothers, sisters and I would all stop and listen. The teaching at the supper table was not just for me; it was for all of us. Each of us took that teaching away differently. Some probably don't even remember but it was momentous for me, a 'memory', which will be forever etched in my mind and on my body. My father explained by example his way of knowing and teaching and for that he shaped a part of my identity, an identity no one can take away from me. The word that comes to mind is "*nana coom owin.*" *Ingii na na coomic impapa ipan.* He did not tell me what to do. Instead he honoured me with his knowledge. He did it in such a way so I would stop and think about what I was doing. The best way to describe it is that my late father allowed me to figure it out by myself. By attending to this memory, his teaching still allows me to make meaning, make sense of his purpose for what he did. It is this embodied knowledge that I now carry and I try to live with, walk with the best way I can. The respect he accorded me continues to inspire me and encourages me to pursue my passion in the maintenance of the *Anishinabe* language and to use it in my work as an educator. *Kawiin awiya ota kashkitosiin kwayak*

*shi Anishinabemoot, masinaiganing onji*. In English, this means that I do not believe that anyone can learn to speak and fully understand the Anishinabe language from a dictionary. This is not to say dictionaries are not useful because they can be used as a way of preserving our Aboriginal languages. As Aboriginal people, we must also write the dictionaries.

In his oral presentation, at the Banff Symposium on education, Leroy Littlebear (2001), who is from the Blood Tribe of the Blackfoot Confederacy, talked about his language and he suggested that

What [he] is carrying around is a combination of words. We become skillful at combinations. It is a different way of looking at the language. The Aboriginal way of thinking is that language encompasses all of the following: a constant flux, moving, recombining, energy waves, spirit, animate, relations, renewal and land. He believes that as Aboriginal people we need to take a look at our selves within our multiple sites of struggle and we need to free our selves (Notes taken February 5, 2001).

I suppose my desire to write a dissertation on the relationship between language and identity is my way of freeing myself. The worldview embedded in Aboriginal languages is different from that of European peoples (Battiste, 1997; Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Kirkness, 1997; Littlebear, 2000; Mead, 1996). Many Aboriginal people also believe that the Great Spirit gave us our languages and I have heard that said many times by several Elders. Littlebear (1997) suggested “that we need to save our languages because it is the spiritual relevance that is deeply embedded in our languages that is important”(p. 1). Battiste & Henderson (2000) added that “we passionately and intuitively see the sacred realms, cultural restoration, and integrity; it is part of our humanness as Indigenous people, and a part of our consciousness and identity” (p. 81). *As I continue on my educational journey, I need to remind myself constantly where I come from and remember what I learned from my parents. This is one way of seeing how Aboriginal languages are different from European languages.* As Battiste (1996) in the Royal Commission report eloquently puts it

The language is the cement and the bonds...and when we begin to take that language away from the people, when we replace it with this other language called English, we tear the people away from the rudiments of that language in terms of the relationships of the people to each other, the relationship to the universe, their relationship to their universe, their relationship to the animals and the plants. We take away their interconnectedness and we leave them empty, lost and alone. This is a tremendous loss the people feel, as I have felt (p. 464).

This reminds me of the emptiness I felt in the residential school and in high school. This is also affirmed by the personal testimonies by other Aboriginal students found in the book, *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (Jaine, 1993). This too, is an indication of what I was missing, my connection to home and to the land. "Our land base and sacred practices are passed on through our languages" (Littlebear, 1997, p. 1).

*I am reminded of the time my father told me to take what we could not use of the beaver to the river and thank the spirit of the beaver for giving up his life so we could eat. This is not just for the beaver but includes all animals, birds and water beings. This is also true whenever medicinal plants are picked from the ground. In residential school and in high school, I tended to forget these sacred ways of viewing the gifts given to us by the Creator. These are the beliefs the residential school system attempted to erase. I did not know, nor was I aware, that the worldview of the Anishinabe was embedded in the language. To me, it was simply a language I used to communicate with my family and my community. I was too naïve to know that not being allowed to speak my language was an attempt to erase me. When I write about accidentally overhearing Jane and Elizabeth speak Anishinabe at the residential school, I wrote it felt good. But now it is even more important. It became clear to me when I read the September Issue (2000) of Grassroots Newspaper.*

According to Akakiaayo I Mukwa Mishomis (Bear Grandfather) he encourages First Nations people to learn the language and goes as far as saying, if you can learn to read and write the English language then you can learn your First Nations language. It has become too easy to use the English language as a form of communication in many

Aboriginal communities. As Littlebear (1997) said, if we continue using the English language in our circles then “we are accepting the idea that English is a superior language” (p. 2). I believe that if I do not speak the *Anishinabe* language, the way my father taught me, I am underestimating the life force and spiritual significance of the language. I am also denying “those cultural distinctions that have made us who we are as a people” (Greymorning, 1997, p. 1). Cajete (2001) at the Banff Education symposium declared that,

Language is our symbolic code for representing the world that we perceive with our senses. Meaning is not connected solely to intellectual definition but to the life of the body and spirit of the speaker. At the deeper psychological level, language is sensuous, evocative, filled with emotion, meaning and spirit. In its holistic and natural sense, language is animate and animating, it expresses our living spirit through sound and the emotion with which we speak. In the Native perspective, language exemplifies our communion with nature (p. 4).

Cajete reminds me that I do feel more spiritually connected with my heart and my soul when I speak in Saulteaux than I do when I speak in English. I particularly notice this difference when I am out in the bush and praying to the Creator or when I sing in the sweat lodge, or where ever I feel comfortable singing. When I hear others speak in Saulteaux at conferences, my response and my reaction to their presentation is different as well. These speakers provide me with a perspective, a position I can identify with whether I agree with the speaker or not. *Mukwa Mishomis* refers to the European language as a dead language because for him it has no spirit therefore he cannot use it to communicate with the animals and nature (pp. 4–5). I too, prefer to use *Anishinabemowin* to pray.

*As I was putting my suitcase away, Sister Mary commented that I would not need my suitcase for a year. I assumed she did not know that I was going home. From September to December, my mother and I wrote to each other frequently. I asked her if I could come home for Christmas. During those three months, I survived on the thought of going home for Christmas. Mid-December most of the girls already knew when they were*

*going home. I waited and I waited. Some would ask me if I was going home and I would say "of course." "When?" "I don't know but I am going home." For the Christmas concert, Gloria, Bev and I sang 'Somewhere my Love' and as I surveyed the audience I was overwhelmed with homesickness. "Why haven't I heard from my mother? Maybe I am not going home." Christmas Eve, I still did not hear from my mother and I realized I was not going home. I remember singing with the nuns at midnight mass; I did not feel joy. I did not understand! I was sad. I was lonely. I think I was mad. Most of the girls had gone home already, except for six of us. The residence felt more empty than usual. Two days before the girls were scheduled to come back I was in the playroom. The priest came down and asked to speak to me. He had a letter in his hand. "Sit down here" he said and he pointed to the baby blue bench. I sat down and he said, "This letter is from your mother. She sent money for you to go home for Christmas but I decided it would be better for you to stay here." I didn't know what to say, what to do. I was angry but I don't know who I was mad at: my mother, the priest, or the school. I do not remember what he said after that; I did not hear him. Maybe I just didn't want to hear what he had to say. Today, it is clear! The residential school system was set up to remove children from their parents to 'civilize', 'christianize' and 'educate'.*

For me, they did more than that; not only did they control me but they controlled my parents. Did the priest think my parents were not responsible enough to take care of me? Did he think he had the right to belittle my parents by ignoring their decision for me to come home? I guess he did; I guess he did! When I relive this moment, I still feel resentment. As a Catholic, my mother trusted them to look after me. I wonder how my parents felt when they knew their responsibility for me was literally taken away. They did not have a choice. When my mother was in the hospital, I reminded her of that incident. My mother taught us not to swear. She certainly never swore but when I mentioned it to her, all she said was "that damn priest" and she cried.

*It all seems very ironic that my mother showed us how to pray and to respect the nuns, the priests and the church but somehow that was still not good enough to pass as a 'civilized' young person. I do not go to church anymore.*

As I tell, retell, relive and write my stories, I am beginning to see those experiences more as a quest and a re-view of the past (Greene, 1995, p. 75). It seems to me I am still in the midst of trying to make meaning of my experiences. I continue to struggle with my stories of life in residential school with my stories in high school and university experiences. From memory, I want to tell and retell to myself and to others the story of what I am about and who I am (Carr, 1986, p. 97). Carr and other authors (Carter, 1993; Crites: 1971; Kerby, 1991; hooks, 1997) suggest we need to make sense of our lives, both in a personal and communal sense. Crites (1971) further stated that “without memory, in fact, experience would have no coherence at all” (p. 298). And so as I re-live my experiences in residential school and educational experiences, I need to make sense not just some parts of it but of the whole experience. Kerby (1991) adds “narratives are a primary embodiment of our understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately ourselves” (p. 3). I carry within me, in my head, in my heart and in my soul the impact of these experiences. They lay dormant in silence until I decided to consciously reflect on them and recollect them so that I could tell them narratively. In a similar way, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) “see individuals as living storied lives on storied landscapes” (p. 24). For me, writing this dissertation affirms that very notion and by telling my stories and writing my experiences narratively, it also affirms I am living my storied life whether that landscape is in the residential school, in a classroom, in a city or living at home in Bloodvein. I live these stories everyday.

As Aboriginal people, the impact of mainstream education and its systemic discrimination and racism has affected each of us differently (Battiste, 1997, 2000; Hampton, 1992). *Not going home for Christmas was very difficult for me. I hated Christmas for many years and, after awhile, I stopped going home for Christmas. I stayed*



*home by myself and worked on jigsaw puzzles. Living with this experience was not easy and I chose not to tell anyone. It was not until I wrote my masters' thesis, (October 1997) that I shared this experience. I despised the control the priest had over me. How can anyone have so much power? The worst thing was, there was absolutely nothing my parents or I could do. I was much older than some of the students when I went to the residential school. I knew my language and it was already instilled in me to speak it, to use it. I knew who I was and where I came from. Even with this knowing of who I was the experience threatened to erase me. It was so much more difficult for others. They ran away and if they were caught they were severely punished. Some students committed suicide.*

*I have come to regard the Christmas incident as a form of mental and emotional abuse. I wonder what would have happened to me if I had not gone home in June? Would I still speak my language? Would I be as adamant about taking control of the kind of education I want? Would I still hold my father's teachings in high regard? By looking back with my current understanding, a mediation takes place and I give that mediation a voice (hooks, 1997, p. xxii). I now recognize my father's teachings do not need to be validated even though I belittled these teachings in high school. He was passing on his values, his beliefs and understanding of the world, his world. This is what I have come to know. It is a voice I hear in Anishinabe and it is my father's voice initially and because of that today I am able to hear and trust my own voice. I have persevered and continue to move back and forth between where I am today and the time and space my father provided for my learning. I resonate with Oakley (1984) who writes that "we make up our lives as we go along, and then go back and turn them into coherent stories." (p.xxiii). Perhaps this is one reason why the issue of language and identity interests me so much. Today, I am more aware and know that I can have some say in what kind of education I want for myself. I hope by what I know and do, I can in some way impact how Aboriginal people determine what kind of education is most appropriate for our*

communities. At the Banff Education Symposium in February 2001, Smith G. in his oral presentation asserted that “conscientization is a way we bring to mind. It is the first layer of awareness. It is about resistance, sites of struggle, critical action, transformative axis and reclaiming voice and vision.”

One way of reclaiming my voice and vision is to explore the relationship between language and the cultural identity of Aboriginal people. If we lose our languages we lose the essence of who we are as a people (Kirkness, 1998; Sachedev, 1998). Others have suggested one way to address this concern is that as Aboriginal people we have to go through a decolonizing process (Battiste and Henderson, 2000; Smith G., 2000; Smith L., 1999). Decolonization to me means that I need to unravel the layers of “identities” I have lived since the residential school days, high school and yes, including university. When I go back to the moment I unpacked my suitcase, in many ways it is a scary thought to think I might have stopped being *Anishinabe*; being erased and becoming someone else (in a sense I did for awhile). The retelling, the reliving and restorying of my educational journey began in my Masters thesis, “The Cost of Education in a Non-Aboriginal World—A Narrative Inquiry” (1997). The thesis was completed but my journey continues. Even after I handed in my thesis, I knew there were issues I did not address, did not attend to and did not want to tell or write. It was not until I went back to unpack my suitcase that I realized the significance of the event. Unlike my suitcase, I did not remain intact.

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology: Walking with Niin and Aanung

*Connelly & Clandinin (2000) advocate that as narrative inquirers “the way we enter the inquiry field influences what we attend to. We deliberately select some aspects that turn up in the field texts” (p. 93).*

I choose narrative inquiry as a way to study the relationship between language and identity because “narrative is a way of understanding experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000 p. 20) and it deals with the notion of “life as a self-renewing process and continuity of life” (Dewey, 1916, p. 2). I have worked with many Aboriginal students over the last eighteen years at a university setting. They come with different and unique stories of who they identify themselves. They come from different ‘landscapes’ and diverse backgrounds. I have often wondered if their identity remained (remains) in tact while they attend university. Their educational experiences (varied) vary and yet in the end, the students’ notion of ‘belonging’ is always connected to their “homeplace” (hooks, 1990). My experiences in residential school, high school and university certainly affected my identity and my ability to speak *Anishinabemowin* fluently. I wonder if the students I know and work with have similar experiences. I wonder if they feel free to identify themselves. Restoule (2000) writes “understanding what influences our pride or shame in identifying as Aboriginal people is important” (p. 102). It depends very much on our experiences with the education system. I think in order to be able to understand this difference, as Aboriginal people we need to be able to identify ourselves who we are. I agree with Restoule (2000) when he says that “In our lives, in our work, in our efforts to educate others, let us identify as Aboriginal people from the our inside place, from ourselves, our communities, our traditions. Let us not allow others to decide our identity for us” (p. 112).

Narrative inquiry felt congruent with who I am, have become and continue to become. It felt congruent with what I wanted to study. Through my proposal, I began telling my story and, as I relived significant moments in my life, I concluded narrative

inquiry honors how Aboriginal people learn and gain knowledge. Battiste & Henderson, (2000) wrote, “Stories are enfolding lessons. Not only do they transmit validated experiences; they also renew, awaken, and honor spiritual forces. Hence, almost every ancient story does not explain; instead it focuses on process of knowing” (p. 77). Cajete (2001) adds “Telling the story of one’s journey is tracing one’s steps through people, events and places that formed you. And as we pause at each special memory we realize that we have indeed been formed by our encounters with the stories of others” (p. 9). Still another way, Archibald (2001) encourages that as “educators, we need to continue sharing our experiences, reflections and perspectives about cultural frameworks that facilitate a process of learning about and then appreciating Aboriginal knowledge and epistemology” (p. 2). In this way as Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest “Narrative inquiry is stories lived and told” (p. 20) and as Aboriginal people we live our lives, our stories and we are only beginning to share these stories narratively for public consumption. As a student counsellor, one way of helping and supporting the students in university has been to share and tell my stories so that they might begin to see that they are not alone. In this way, narrative inquiry honors the way I have learned from the stories of other Aboriginal people. Kvale (1996) asserted that “narratives and conversations are today regarded as essential for obtaining knowledge of the social world, including scientific knowledge” (p. 8). Not only have I learned and gained knowledge from conversations with other Aboriginal people but I have also obtained knowledge from the lives of Aboriginal women especially from books. The books include *Writing as Witness* (Brant, 1994), *Thunder in my Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (Monture-Angus, 1995), *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Anderson, 2000) and others.

## Finding Participants

I purposefully selected the participants because it was important that one participant knew how to speak *Anishinabemowin*, as her or his first language and the other one will not. It was important one spoke the language because I wanted to explore what role language played in the meaning of two others' lives, experiences and stories as *Anishinabe*. I also heard many times when Aboriginal people self-identified as Aboriginal sometimes they would say "but I don't speak the language." So I wondered about language and identity. Or was my wonder about what Restoule (2000) suggested? He argued that "it is important to explore what identifying as Aboriginal means and what is gained and lost in attempting to erase that identity, as well as what it means to change the referents of what is meant by Aboriginal identity" (p. 102). In the spring of May, 2001 I participated in an off campus course called Revitalizing Aboriginal Languages as part of the First Nations graduate program. Two Elders taught the course and one of them was Minnie. I wanted her to be one of the participants because she had affirmed for me the importance of retaining the culture and the language. I wrote more about Minnie in Chapter 8. After several attempts through telephone calls and eventually writing her a letter to the attention of her daughter, she finally, through her daughter (December, 2002) consented to using her story as part of my research on language as identity.

I also wanted a participant who was an *Anishinabe* Elder and spoke the language. This is discussed in the next section. Part of my negotiation was to explain my research puzzle and as the explaining took place, I clarified and shaped my research (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. 73).

## Negotiating My Entry

I contacted the first participant, Niin in January 2002 prior to leaving for a three-month trip to *Aotearoa*, New Zealand. I knew Niin through my work as a Native Student advisor and asked her because I knew she did not speak the language but I was cognizant of the fact that she identified herself as *Anishinabe*. I knew she was interested in the

revitalization of Aboriginal languages. I dropped off a copy of my proposal to her, on Friday, January 18, 2002. She was very excited and sounded keen to participate. When I first met with her at a restaurant, I asked her if she had read my proposal and if she was still interested in participating. "I feel honoured that you picked me to participate in your research" she said. She did not hesitate signing the consent form. After she signed the informed consent form January 29, 2002 I gave her a choice of using her real name or using a pseudonym. Initially Niin wanted to use her real name but after our first conversation May 1, 2002 she changed her mind because she felt uncomfortable. I asked her what name she would like to use. She thought about it for awhile and she said, "Niin." I found it very interesting because in the *Anishinabe* language 'niin' means 'me'. A way of identifying oneself. Niin and I have had lots of fun with her pseudonym.

I also contacted the second participant, Aanung, about the same time. I also knew Aanung through work and I knew the community his mother comes from speak the language. I knew he both identified himself as *Anishinabe* and spoke the language. Negotiating with him was much different. He wanted to participate but he thought, "I might not be of much use." He didn't think he was fluent enough speaking the *Anishinabe* language. (Field notes, January 17, 2002). I gave him a copy of my proposal and a copy of the informed consent form and I suggested he take some time to think about it and to call me when he was ready to have a further conversation. I told him that he was not obligated to participate and if he felt uncomfortable in any way, I would understand and would not hold his decision against him. We met again on January 28, 2002, which is when he signed the informed consent form. From the beginning, Aanung did not want his real name used. He did not have any suggestions. By our first meeting (May 7, 2002) we still did not have a pseudonym for him. I asked him if he wanted me to choose a pseudonym for him. He said, "Okay." I told him I would try and think of one in *Anishinabe*. As I transcribed our conversation, I remembered how proud he looked when he talked about his mother and hearing his voice on tape, his admiration and respect for

this mother resonated. This is when I chose the pseudonym “*Aanung*.” He reminded me of a ‘star’. When I went back to see him to go over the transcript, (May 13, 2002) I told him his pseudonym and I said, “what do you think?” He replied, “I like it.”

I contacted the Elder who I purposely selected to participate in the research because I knew he is a respected Elder in the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community. He also speaks the language. I heard him speak two or three times at conferences and I was interested in what he had to say about language as identity. He agreed to participate in the research. He also chose to use his real name. He told me he read the proposal and he signed the informed consent form January 25, 2002. That day, I spent two hours with him. After several phone calls and finally writing a letter to him in (May 14, 2002) I met with him again (May 31, 2002). Both of these conversations were not audio taped because, at his request, we met in a public place. My contact with him was not as frequent as it was with the other two participants. He lives a traditional way of life. In the summer he was extremely busy with ceremonies. His participation has not been as extensive as Niin and Aanung. After consulting with my co-supervisor Dr. Stan Wilson he suggested I write about the process and the difficulty of Elders participating in research and part of this dilemma is that they are very busy people especially if they are engaged in traditional ceremonies. On Wednesday, March 19, 2003 I spoke to the Elder and he suggested that he didn’t need to be involved but if I needed him for anything he would be available. I thanked him for his kindness and willingness to participate. It reminds me that if I am going to ask Elders to help me, I have to be aware of their time and commitments to the Aboriginal community. A lesson I will try to remember.

### **Being in the Midst**

I engaged in research conversations with Niin and Aanung, taped, transcribed and composed a field text utilizing field notes and personal journal entries. I met with Niin and Aanung to review, to change and/or to delete any information they wished from each

set of transcriptions. We did not engage in new conversations until they were satisfied with the previous transcriptions. As their narrative accounts emerged, I negotiated with Niin and Aanung the order their narrative accounts would appear in the final document. We continued this process up until the final stages of my writing.

For the second conversation I asked Niin and Aanung to find something in their “memory boxes” “a collection of items that trigger memories of important times, people and events” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2002, p. 25). The items they brought provided context for our conversations. These conversations are described in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5. I had a series of conversations over seven months (May 2002 to March 2003) in their homes. As I formed relationships with them, I began to see from their stories, experiences and conversations, the similarities and differences between their storied lives and mine. Through reviewing, changing and discussing the transcriptions, other stories surfaced and we recollected other events and experiences in our lives. Bateson (2000) submitted that “Wisdom comes not by accumulation of more and more experiences but through the discerning pattern in the deeper mystery of what is already there” (p. 241). She sees therefore that “wisdom is born of the overlapping of lives, the resonance between stories” (p. 243).

### **Composing the Research Text**

I use their stories and mine, as well as my personal journal and my field notes of our journey together to compose the research text. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggest that field notes and transcripts combined with journals written of our field experience provide a reflective balance. I did not plan on asking specific questions for our conversations but as we conversed new stories appeared and each of us recalled moments, events and experiences that were meaningful. Topics such as identity, retention and importance of language, schooling experiences, family and personal relationships, cultural values and belief emerged from our talks. The topics resonated with my research



interest, which came out of my own narratives of experience and there is no doubt it shaped my narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 121). I attended to their stories and experiences and considered carefully how to weave our stories in an attempt to make sense of my research puzzle. I resonate with what Oakley (1984) suggested: “it is not original to say that conflict and contradiction are part of being alive; we may choose to pretend we’ve got it all worked out but we haven’t” (p. 3). I certainly was not in a position to know what would resonate from the research, and what would unfold as I formed and developed my relationships with Niin and Aanung. Even as I wrote I did not know what would unfold as I intertwined the participants’ stories and mine into the research text, presented in Chapter 6. What I do know is when I wrote my research proposal, I had to go inside myself, (inward) outside myself (outward) and I had to move backward and forward in time. I travelled from home to Pine Creek Residential School, I relived plucking ducks with my father and I sat in a classroom. I sat on the shore of the Bloodvein River, reflecting on my experiences, my thoughts and memories, moving from place to place. I allowed myself to be in the past, to be in the present and when I looked at each landscape, it offered me a different picture of my self. I moved “inward, outward, backward and forward,” which Clandinin & Connelly (1994) refer to as the “four directions of inquiry.” *As I unpacked my suitcase I saw a new image of myself and new stories appeared as I relived and retold my experiences.*

As I talked with Niin and Aanung, I asked them to enter that 3-dimensional narrative inquiry space with me. We found a space where we learned to tell our stories, from the past therefore leading us to retell our stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 2000, p. 60). I understand this to mean that in each of our memories, there are many stories ready to be told. (*Unlike my suitcase, I changed, I am changing, growing, questioning, wondering and becoming*). But we have to want to remember, to recall, and to recollect and from telling these stories, we will in some way learn something from that experience but more importantly we will learn something about ourselves. Cajete (2001) suggested

that “Telling one’s own story is a way to “remember to remember” who we are and to honor the special life we have been given” (p. 65). The journey with Niin and Aanung involved reflection and interpretation of our present contexts as a way of understanding our past and how we might possibly change how we relate with other people and experience people in the future. Maracle (1996) described it better than I. She stated

I understand that the teachings of my people were directed at instilling in our young children a sense of the self and our importance to the community. The teachings required that we seek not our happiness but the well-being of others. This means that the self-indulgence ideology of “me-first” runs contrary to our laws (p. 41).

When I recall my father’s teaching about the spirit of beaver, it reminds me of my sense of self, the well-being of my community, the importance of sharing, which for me includes story telling and describing how I have lived and continue to live the stories I tell. It is the threading and intertwining of all these pieces which make up individual stories that is significant because “life is not made up separate pieces” (Bateson, 1994, p. 108). The cultural teachings I learned from my father are embedded in my individual story, in my memory and in my body.

The stories, the experiences and the conversions I have had with my participants will be interwoven with my story and my experiences. Kerby (1991) explained that “understanding is facilitated by a clear presentation and development of material, and identity implies certain continuity over time” (p. 6). Therefore it holds true that “temporality in narrative thinking is a central feature” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 29). Just as I have attempted to write my stories in a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space,” in this dissertation the research text will be composed in terms of the past, present and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### **Research Puzzle Surfaces**

I wanted to explore the relationship between language and identity and how it shapes our worldview as Aboriginal people. As an Aboriginal woman, *Anishinabe kwe*, I

believe speaking an Aboriginal language is similar to the way I helped my father clean the beaver and learned to respect the spirit of the beaver. I remember the feel of the wet skin as I struggled to stretch and attach the beaver pelt to a round frame with twine. After I did that my father scraped the extra fat off so once it dried, he could get a good price for the pelt. My story, my personal and cultural identity and my dissertation are not for sale but I want to respect my father by framing and inter-twining my “story” and experiences in a coherent and respectable manner. At the age of fourteen, I did not know there was an attempt to erase my identity, to become someone else. It did not occur to me when I was told to put away all my clothes and the pictures of my family and to put on issued clothing I was actually being asked to change my very being as *Anishinabe*. Because I was not allowed to speak my language in residential school and was made to feel ashamed for being *Anishinabe*, I have come to understand that retaining the *Anishinabe* language is a significant part of my cultural identity emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually. *I do not want to be erased nor do I want to erase the teachings and culture of my father and my ancestors.* I wanted to know by listening to other peoples’ stories what their experiences were, and who they are now in terms of their identity and how language is interwoven with identity. Therefore, I was specifically interested in learning from the stories of Aboriginal people so that I am able to better understand not only the relationship between their knowing and speaking an Aboriginal language but also not knowing or not speaking their language and their identities as Aboriginal people.

## CHAPTER 3 Niin's Story

### **Retelling/Reliving: Childhood (Difference/Sameness)**

I went to school not knowing the language and finding out things along the way. That is what came to my mind right away when I read your proposal. You knew your language but there is one event, which really sticks out in my mind. Mostly because I really did not know what was going on. I will tell you from the beginning. I'm not sure whether I was in grade one or in grade two, actually I think it was in kindergarten, because my mom was home at that time. I remember being outside for recess. You know everyone was running around, playing in the middle of the field. All of a sudden I stopped because I realized that a few of the kids who were in my classroom had formed a circle around me. They were going around and around the circle and I realized I was in the middle of this circle. I was trying to figure out what the heck is going on here? They were saying something and I started listening to them. They were saying "Indian, Indian, Indian." And I was like what? I really didn't understand myself, first and foremost as an "Indian." Right in the middle of when they were doing that, the bell rang and everybody just turned toward the door and started walking in. I remember looking down on the ground wondering, what are they talking about Indian, Indian, Indian? I don't even know how that circle formed in the first place. I didn't catch it. It just seemed all of a sudden they were all around me and I just stopped, looking at them all. The bell rang right away. I just remember putting my head down, walking, looking at the grass, I was really thinking about, what was that all about? I didn't even remember it by the time we got to the door. Except for when I got home I asked my mom.

I remember when I went home, my mother was standing at the counter. She was baking something or other but she was working at the counter and I just walked up to her and I was watching what she was doing. I remember my chin barely touched the counter and I was watching her I said, "Mom, what am I?" And she looked down at me and said

really fast, “Were people asking you what you were?” I said, “Yes, they were calling me Indian.” She said, “Tell them you ’re Canadian.” I couldn’t really figure out why she was sounding so stern and kind of angry. I just thought okay and I turned around but I remember that afternoon really clearly. I think why it stuck in my mind so much is because they were around in a circle ridiculing me. And I didn’t even know. I didn’t even take offence because I didn’t know what they were doing. Even though they were calling me Indian, I was still going yeah, so what? So it always puzzled me about why, why they were calling me Indian. And because I didn’t really feel any different from them, even though I knew my skin was darker, my hair was brown, and I had a shinier face. I really didn’t feel any different from them or feel I was different from them.

I just felt we were all just kids. I think that’s when I started learning that there were different kinds of people. I knew that there were different kinds of people by just looking and seeing like different looking people but not like people who are different from one another. So when I was reading your proposal, that’s what came to mind, cause those nuns tried to take that away from you but with me they were inflicting like harm too but just in an opposite way. I don’t know how else to explain it.

### **Growing Up In The City: An Indian Without A Home**

I grew up in the city. My parents were from different reserves. My mother was Cree and my father was Ojibway. I have two brothers. In the summer time we would all go to both reserves to visit. I liked both places but I have closer relationships at my father’s reserve but I have more relatives on my mother’s reserve. When I was younger, like thirteen, fourteen I told my aunts I thought the people from dad’s reserve were way “cooler” than the people from my mother’s. I liked browner skin, my aunts’ dark brown hair. I just seemed more comfortable with people from my father’s reserve than the people from my mother’s. And I look more like my father’s side of my family. And the land, I really like the land out there better than at my mom’s.

On my mother's reserve everybody was really religious, and some of my relatives from there like to drink a lot. Most of them don't but it always seemed boring cause the people seemed so reserved all the time. But when we went to my father's reserve there was lots of laughter. People would have a drink and by the end of the night, my relatives, my aunts and uncles, would get drunk. But I don't think that all the laughter and the teasing and all that was because they were drinking, they were always like that. My mother's reserve just feels like a big field. One other thing that comes up is people from my mother's reserve will say to me, "Are you going out home," and I would be like, "You mean my mother's reserve?" The question that always comes up when people make conversation with me is "Where are you from?" For a long time I was saying I am not really from anywhere. I didn't feel like I really had a home. I lived in the city; I have always lived in the city. I am close to my relatives on my mother's reserve and my father's but those places are not my home either because I never lived there. So I am a classic example of an "Indian without a home."

I spent a lot of time with my cousin; she was like a sister to me. Her mom is my dad's sister. She was always sleeping over. It seemed like we were together a lot when we were kids and I was close to her mom. When she became a teenager, she started running away so I would go and visit my aunt. My aunt and I got close. I guess it was because I felt, it sounds superficial to say that I felt closer to them because I looked more like them or I don't know. I can't really understand how that is but it just seemed like a way more relaxing atmosphere and people could joke around more. You didn't have to just sit quiet and make sure you don't get any crumbs on the floor. When I think about my mother's upbringing, [apparently] they would always get up early, they didn't drink, and they spent every waking moment cleaning, washing and cutting their hair. My grandmother was very strict. Because my mother learned this from my grandmother, her way of counteracting any form of racism or discrimination or making sure we were not discriminated against she made sure we presented a clean image. We would not be seen

as dirty Indians. My mother has fond memories of [her childhood]. But when I think about it she went to a boarding school and she never knew her language, that was Cree. And my Grandma, I don't even know if my Grandma did or not.

When we went to visit my father's reserve in the summer, I don't think we really had any real games. We used to play house. There was this big rock behind my grandfather's house and we would go up there but it usually didn't last very long because we didn't know what to do. Sometimes I would pretend I was mad and pretending I was just reading the newspaper all mad. That was a part of me playing house. I guess I learned that from my parents. They probably could have had a closer relationship than they actually did but I don't want to comment any further on that. But that's where I got that from and I remember my cousin asking me "What's wrong?" And I'd say, "I'm playing." I don't really think we played structured games. It seemed like we were always talking though. We were always talking and climbing all over the rocks or else playing with bugs, not knowing we were getting covered by hundreds of wood ticks. Dozens at least. I remember going in and my mother would have to pick wood ticks off of me. Out of my hair and my grandpa sitting there smoking and she would drop them in the ashtray and he'd burn them with his cigarette. And then we would take off my jacket and they were all lined inside my jacket. My cousin and I wouldn't think anything of it. And we would just go out not fearing we would get wood ticks on us again. It just seemed natural. I don't ever remember wood ticks stuck to me but they would sure be on us. If we did play any games, I can't really remember.

### **Reliving A Memory**

I remember I used to have this little action figure, a little man and I started playing with it. I played around with it for awhile. I was in my uncle's yard out on my mom's reserve. I was only five years old I think. I started throwing him up in the air and he would fall down and I would throw him up again. Then I threw him up again and I lost

him. I couldn't find him in the grass and I was so attached to it I had to find it. I was looking and looking and I couldn't find it and all of a sudden I came across this grasshopper. I told that grasshopper what I was looking for and I asked him to help me find it. And so this grasshopper was jumping around, zigzagging around. I guess he thought I was chasing him or something but I'm not sure though and I followed him hop after hop and all of a sudden he hopped right over that little man. My jaw just dropped. I was like wow...exactly over top of him. I couldn't believe it. I said thank you and he just kept hopping but this time in a straight line. I always remember that and that memory comes to mind still where it feels as though that grasshopper really was helping me. And he found it for me because he knew I was just a little kid. I know that sounds silly but I really liked that experience.

### **Going To Church**

I can't remember how old I was when I started going to church. I just remember always going to church. And I just thought it was so boring. I would have rather been somewhere else. Every Sunday morning my mother would get up and tell us to get up and get dressed. All we wanted to do was sleep in. Now that I am little older, I like learning about different things and so I have a friend of mine who goes to church and every time a religious holiday passes I'll ask her what it's all about. I asked her what Easter was all about again? And what's that Ash Wednesday or something? And then she says to me, "Well, you used to go to church didn't you?" I said, "Well yeah but I didn't learn." I didn't pay attention. I can picture myself doing it [going to church] but it's hard to believe I did it every Sunday for years. When I was there, I would tune in, tune out, and look around. I would thumb through that prayer book whatever and just not really pay attention. It was so boring. My dad didn't go either. He never went with us to church. What he told my mom was, in addition to him not wanting to go and I think carrying some resentment maybe but I don't know for sure. He worked evenings all the time and



he was just keeping his schedule, you know. Can't get up and go to church. I remember a few times, another thing I never asked my mother was, we'd be getting home and sometimes my dad would be awake when we got back. He would joke around with my mom and say, "Was the priest asking where I was again?" And my mom would say, "Yeah." He asked, "How come you were not there?" I thought to myself, I never heard him say that. I never really got their joke. My dad never went and I know it is because he just didn't want to go. Because I remember one time I played sick, so I could stay home from church, and when my dad got up, he took me out for Chinese food while they were at church. He made sure we left before the others got back. I was like, all right! I guess I never paid attention to what was going on. And even at church, when they are up there talking, it doesn't even seem like they are teaching you about what all those things are for. It just seemed like they were saying so many things. And it never made any sense to me. I remember seeing the priests up there and everything but I can't remember any words they were saying. Except for one time, I was fourteen and I started listening a bit but that was because I thought I caught them making a contradiction. And that's when I thought I am not listening for sure now.

Eventually my mom just got tired of trying to wake us up every Sunday morning and then one day she got up and went to church by herself. And that was that, I woke up and she was gone. But I could tell, I remember when she got back she must have been really disappointed that we were not there with her. And I will probably always feel bad about that yet I won't feel bad about that. Because I really had no idea why I was there, why I should be there except if I didn't I was going to go to hell. [I knew this] because I asked my mother one day what hell was. She told me, "That is where you go when you don't pray or believe in god." That day, I also learned I was not supposed to use that word. Now as an adult, I think as long as I pray just before I die [I will be okay].

I remember as a little kid, we would brush our teeth and get ready for bed and she would get us to say our prayers all the time. It was just the usual, I think I might have

seen it on Walt Disney or something. You know, pray for my mom and dad, pray for my brothers and pray for this person, that person, probably without even praying and just saying this person, that person. I guess my mom told me that and that's kind of what you are supposed to do and it would be on your conscience if you didn't pray to god the night before. You better do it tonight you know, I don't remember her saying what the word sinner was but I remember her talking about what a sin is and to me it just seemed like rules of what you should and should not do. Other than that I really never understood. I did not really understand why I was there or what I was getting out of it. And at the end of church, when it was starting to get closer to the end, I began feeling really good. Church is over, I was walking out all happy and then my mom said to me, "Do you think you might be happy because you went in there and prayed?" I said, "Could have been," but saying in my head, "I am just happy because I am out of there." And never seeing any other Aboriginal people in church. I'm just thinking about it now. I never saw one other.

### **Connecting With Other Aboriginal People**

[In junior high], I had a lot of friends. Just a couple of blocks from our place there was a low rental housing complex and that's where my friends and I used to hang out all time. In elementary, I can only remember one or two students that I knew for sure. And they were really quiet and I was loud. I was way different than them. I remember this girl in grade six, she was really quiet and always kind of afraid and always off to the side and I think I only heard her say maybe two words. She didn't have great clothes and her hair wasn't always brushed. I don't know what ever happened to her. I just remember her being there. I never felt like I had to go and include her because she's a sister. I just noticed that was the way she was.

### **Absence Of Anishinabe Language**

I never heard the Anishinabe language spoken at all in public places or in school. The only place I heard it was at home. My dad spoke Saulteaux fluently. The only time I

would hear it was when he was talking on the phone with one of my uncles or something like that and they'd be talking and laughing. Or when my uncles came over, they would speak Saukteaux all the time. I think I told you this before, my dad thought he would teach me how to count. He said, "I am going to teach you how to count." [We were] in the basement and he said, "Payjik is one, twojik, three jik," and we just started laughing and that was it. So my dad showed me how to say payjik and made a joke. This was the extent of my dad's Saukteaux lesson.

On my dad's reserve they spoke it all the time and us kids would just be running in and out of the door. It was kind of like, you know if my son, Douglas would have come up here, sit at the table and I would say no, this is adult talk. It was kind of like that distinction so I never asked what are you saying because, to me it felt like I was intruding on their conversation. Never really thinking, hey that's my language you know. I should be learning it. I didn't even know enough to be able to say that. My dad went to a residential school and after he graduated he went to a seminary for two years; he was going to be a priest. I don't know what happened there but he left and he never returned. I always wonder about that a lot. It reminds me of the time my brothers and I were playing underneath the kitchen table and my mom and dad were in the living room and they were having a bit of an argument. I don't know what it was about though. I just remember my mom asking my dad how come he didn't teach us kids the language. I remember him raising his voice, because I got all scared, you know when you hear some one raising their voice and he said, "What do they need that for?" And looking back, it seemed like I knew then that's it. We'll never know the language now. But that was his attitude about it. What do they need that for? And sounding really angry. When we visited my dad's reserve, my mother did not speak the language so she would just sit there. I remember her mentioning it to my dad that she did not know what they were saying, and my dad would just laugh at her. It was like what some husbands do, who don't want their wives to know

this and understand what they are saying even though it's not really anything. I know that she would just take care of us and talk with my aunts and she would be clued out just like us.

### **Reaction To Not Knowing The Language**

A big part of me feels really guilty that I haven't taken it upon myself and learned it by now. I feel guilty about not doing it but I am also angry about what happened in residential schools, and how they prevented so many people from speaking their language. They did the same thing to my dad. He did not pass on the language because of his experience there. I get angry about it and resentful toward those people back then. And even resentful today, when people don't, and yet [there are] all these resources going towards people learning French. In university you can get a degree speaking German, and get a degree just to speak those languages and only now they are just starting to offer our languages. In school I took French and I never got taught Ojibway or Cree. I was not offered it. Yes, I guess that's guilt, anger, and resentment. But there are other things that I want to learn. I want to learn the language, it will be very difficult to learn it really well under my circumstances because I am going to stay here [in the city] and I have to work. I have to take care of my son. I know very few people who speak the language. But I did take an evening course because I want to know. I know that *Saulteaux* is really an expressive language. It is a language where you can describe so much. So I was always curious about how I would express myself in the language and the things I would say. That is what I was curious about so I enrolled in just a basic course to learn *Saulteaux*. And we got this book and I was learning the words starting from the English words and translating them into *Saulteaux*. I was just memorizing those translations and it just didn't seem very fulfilling. Even if I did learn a few words, it really didn't feel like an authentic experience. I could go ahead and memorize all these words but was I really speaking the language or just memorizing a bunch of words and trying to remember the way you are supposed to put them in grammar and always having to go back to English so I kind of

just left it. But I know it's in me. I know that because I use lots of hand gestures, sounds, and I hate using the word "it."

My uncle will sometimes speak to me in the language. At first when he did it, he would ask, "Do you know what that means?" I'd say, "No, I don't." He would laugh at me all the time and so when he started doing this more and more, I started pretending until he figured out that I didn't understand. There are some things, I don't say I would understand but I can figure out that this person wants me to go and get that thing if I am in a position to hand it to them. Something like that you know. I did get another Saulteaux lesson from my cousin but that was all swear words. So I know swear words and few words.

In university, the only time I heard it spoken is when an Elder came and that was only a couple of times and one of the students who would speak the language once in awhile. I brought it up but I never did do it, I wished I did. You know how in university, especially in Philosophy, there was Latin every where. [I] needed a Latin dictionary just to read my English textbook so I could understand what the words meant. And German, I had to get German dictionary. They would do the same thing, use little phrases. So in my paper, I was going to do that and just use little phrases in Saulteaux words and not give any definition. I never did it because I didn't know the language and I didn't take the time to go and find some phrases. You just reminded me of something else. Language did come up one time when I was in high school. And that was only once, very briefly. That was with my science teacher. And he asked me, "Where are you from?" I gave him my standard answer; my mom and dad come from two different reserves. He said, "You better watch it. I know Saulteaux." He knew a little bit. I forgot what he said. He told me a little phrase. I was telling my cousin about it afterwards and she said, "you should have told him *manatis*." You're ugly. I remember my aunt was the one that came closest to teaching my cousin and I the language, every day language. This is that, this is this, just

simple things. But the other thing was my uncles would roll their eyes and laugh. It seemed like they took pride in knowing the language and I not knowing it.

### **The Challenge of Knowing the Language and Culture**

My son, Douglas doesn't ask about the language but I do tell him little things along the way. I'm kind of thinking he is kind of like me a long time ago. I didn't really know there was a big difference so I am teaching him that there is difference. And that we are *Anishinabe* and he's *Anishinabe* or I tell him the English word is Aboriginal. But I am kind of torn about how much I should tell him about the negative things that happened. I've already told him how the land got taken over and some of the things that happened in residential schools, about not speaking the language but I'm not sure what he really thinks of it. It must be making a difference though because we were driving down the street one-day, and we were sitting at the red light and he was looking around at all those flags and then he said, "How come there is nothing Aboriginal around here?" He said it just out of the blue. "Yeah you're right," I said. "I don't see one thing." That one really surprised me. I guess kids must have asked him a couple of questions already. Like one time I picked him up from school and he asked me, "Why is a feather special?" I guess kids must be asking him about that. I notice when I go and pick him up at the club, not so much now but when we first started going there...Douglas's little friends would see me coming in and go to Douglas and they would look at me twice. And I could tell what they're thinking. She's an Indian; something like that. That must mean Douglas is an Indian. He doesn't have dark skin. He's got brown eyes, brown hair but really fair skin. So I noticed that his friends took a double take when they saw me. But I don't know of anything that he's experienced like prejudicial attitudes. I have told him that some people will treat people badly because of the way they look but not really saying the racism part. I explain in terms of describing and mainly saying that they're different. Not really saying White people are racist against him. With the kind of work I have done he is

aware why I have chosen to work in Aboriginal organizations. I think he knows that we don't come from anywhere else. We come from here. So many other people come from other countries like the French, they come from France.

### **Learning From a Memory Box: Wondering**

This was my dad's dictionary. It's old and all worn out. The copyright date is 1960. I didn't get this until after my dad passed away, cause it was in his filing cabinet and no one touched things that were in his filing cabinet. So I took it because my brothers were not using it. I used it so I just kept it. But also in the filing cabinet I found a couple of letters that he kept. Those letters were between him and this priest. I don't think it was a bishop. These letters were his correspondence with this priest. There were just a couple of letters there and they were dated 1961 and 1962. When he got out of residential school, he went into a seminary. He was there for two years, 61 and 62. (Our last conversation I told you he just dropped it and that was that). I figure he got this dictionary when he was in the seminary because he had to take lots of classes. I used the dictionary a lot when I was in university. I noticed that there were lots of words that were underlined, circled or something. It didn't really click to me at first until I started to come across a few more words. I started thinking about those words and why he may have been contemplating those words so much. I thought that, I would just look through a little bit of it when I knew this was going to be my object that you and I would talk about. I thought I would open it up, flip a few pages, try and find the words that were underlined. So I marked them here. I'll just find some words and list them off to you and see what you think?

[When Niin opened the page, she decided the first word she came across was not a good example, so did not share it.] Here's one, justice. [The next one is] kernel and the closest definition here is 'the essential part of anything, its core'. [The other words are] kingdom, knowledge, knuckle, label, margin, mercery, (definition, wares or goods to be found in a mercery shop. A mercer is a dealer in textile fabrics), merchant, miner, (he used to be a

miner), minister, mirror, pester, and sub-principle (an under principle, a secondary or the like and a little circle on sub. I'm wondering what the word sub is). So that is just a sample of the underlined words in this dictionary. If we look at that list, it all has to do with knowledge, with the minister in there, the church, economics, merchant, mercer and the word pester.

That just makes me think that maybe someone was telling him, like a disciplinarian. Either he was pestering someone or else someone was telling him not to pester by doing such and such. Justice and kingdom made me think about what he might have been learning or going through while he was in the seminary. Really thinking about those words. Because I know I am like that too. I'll see a word and think about what its meaning is and the context. Not only in the context it was given to me but also what the word itself means. So I think there was a lot more in my dad's mind than he let on, that's for sure. You know Aboriginal people on the margins being labeled. Mirror I don't know, that's a tough one. When you look in the mirror, who do you see? I can't even make that intelligible. When you look in, what's looking back at you? It's more than just you looking back at you because that is kind of impossible. So I don't know whether that is what he was thinking of. Yeah, but those are the words when I just opened up the dictionary and thumbed through page by page and marked the ones that were underlined. Knuckle. I don't know. It just makes me think of, maybe a threat. Getting a knuckle on the head or calling somebody knucklehead or maybe being called a knucklehead. I don't know, that is the only connection I can make with that one. And sub-principle, I guess that would have a lot to do with what he was learning about kingdom, every body is a subordinate in the kingdom. It would be stuff like he was reading in his theological studies. As you know he spoke fluent Sauteaux and I don't know how much English he spoke when he went to residential school. I don't even know for sure when he started. And so I know he had a lot to learn in residential school and from what I hear they didn't



teach very well. Go to school half the day and work the rest of the day. And then for dinner have two pieces of bread; one with molasses and the other one plain.

### **Directly Affected by Parents' Experiences in Residential School**

I went to a conference for work and it was to honor residential school survivors. I went and sat down with these women, talking with them and I just asked them which residential school they went to. I said, "My mom went to a residential school." Right away they just started telling me, and it seemed like they were little girls again when they were talking to each other. That one girl said, "I didn't care. I spoke my language. They would just beat me." She was talking down the line to the other girls. I don't know why I am calling them girls, they were all Elders. They talked about the cockroaches. The nuns would let their hair grow long and would cut it all off whenever it got to a certain length. It seemed like they were saving to cut their hair as a punishment. Another punishment for speaking Cree was to wash the other girls' dirty pads and they would be sent in the dark room. They would be shoved in the dark room like solitary confinement for just speaking your own language. And most of them had to learn the hard way like why they were even being punished because they were not even told why they were being punished. Even if they were told they couldn't understand. That just makes me feel very angry.

My mom had a good experience. When she went in, my grandma was very strict. They didn't speak their language so it was really different. They spoke English. The only thing she missed was her mom. She got a job with the principal; I don't know what you called them, the dean or the biggest boss of the residential school. She would get jobs in their house as a cleaning lady. She said she was never abused. The only thing for her was being away from her family. But my dad never said a thing. Nothing.

I think my dad's other family members went too but they were all successful in going AWOL or otherwise hiding out. My aunt spent a lot longer than my uncles. They never talked about it either, just about being strapped for speaking their language. But I

remember I went out there and Douglas was fishing and I was sitting on the dock reading that book the National Crime, about residential schools and my aunt happened to walk up behind me and said, "Hello and Hey, what are you reading?" I closed the book and showed her the cover. And she said, "Oh, residential school," and she just looked over my head and started talking to Douglas. She just totally avoided the subject. So I didn't pursue it. They don't say anything. I even asked my grandpa, "Do you remember an Indian agent being around here?" He said "Indian agent?" I didn't see no Indian agent. But there was a priest around here all the time." But he [told me] that the priest really kept to himself. From his experience anyway, he didn't help people too much.

I asked Niin, "What was that first word you said was not appropriate or not a good example?" She looked it up and said, "Gradation. Gradationally. That's a series or succession resulting from gradating. To gradate is to have to grade or range so as to blend, harmonize, show differences in rank or order. To shade, especially to shade into another or each other as colors, gradationally. Ha, molding and like blending in. Shade into each other. Huh, huh. Yeah. Hey, I didn't check to see if assimilate is underlined but I know saint isn't." (Laughs, only because I looked.) No, it is not underlined. They just used gradation to hide it. I noticed these words were underlined when I was going to university. It didn't really become mine until I started using it when I went to university. My mom just had that stuff at the house. And then when I went back to live with her that is when I started really looking at that stuff and then I said, "Hey a dictionary, right on. I need one." AND... I felt kind of close to it because it was my dad's. And there was also another book there that I should show you, which is interesting too. This book is called *Morals and Dogma* (Laughs). The ancient and accepted rite; it's the masons. I don't know if you've heard of the free masonry? I just happen to hear something on the radio this morning. I didn't catch the whole thing but they talked about these masons, how they are still around. They're talking about brotherhood and worshipping god. I don't know when my dad got interested in this but it's a really old book too. The copyright is 1914, March

1914. There is something else in here too. I just saw it. This old thing is a card. It looks like it is advertising a store, Catholic Church goods house. The list on the back of the card included vestments, oils, etc. I guess this is the store where the Catholic Church probably bought what they needed for the church. I guess my dad used this card as a bookmark. I don't know. I didn't read too much into it. It's quite a good read. It sounds really positive. But I didn't study it too much. But this was also with my dad's stuff. These masons are not as rigid as the Catholic Church would be, hierarchies and all that. So I think he must have been searching out that kind of spiritual life and to be closer, to have that kind of brotherhood kind of thing. But that was all taken away from him when he went to the residential school and not taught about the spiritual part of our culture. I guess they persuaded him that he was a heathen and probably heard things like, you're going to go to hell if you do that. I just think they brainwashed him to thinking all those things so he started seeking all the stuff out. And then when he couldn't find it in the Catholic Church or with these masons; I don't know what else could have happened but he decided to leave that and he probably realized that it wasn't really him. And that he wasn't going to find what he was looking for there. And he might have gotten abused, sexually abused, other kind of abuse, I don't know. I have no idea about that.

He never mentioned anything spiritual in the sense of a church or a medicine man or anything like that. He never even mentioned a belief in a Creator or god. He never talked about anything like that. It seems like my dad was always there but since he was always working evenings I really didn't see him a lot. We really did not get into any real conversations. We were just a parent and a kid. He talked to me when he was telling me something or I would talk to him when I was telling him something. That's about it.

### **Attempting to Understand a Void**

I started on my spiritual side, slightly before I discovered all of this stuff like these books and making those connections with words. Because I had always gone to

church growing up, I didn't know about the spirituality of our own people; I never knew anything about it. People would ask me, have you ever gone into a sweat and somehow looking at me to see if I knew anything about it? Of course I would have to say, no I don't. I felt a little lost. I only knew about Christianity and god, but I felt there was something not right. I felt, I knew and I know that there is a spirit world and our natural world. But I would just superimpose those images of Jesus and god, over whatever I felt I knew. I started praying to understand the *Anishinabe* side of spirituality. Slowly it started to come. I honestly asked to pray to understand that part and I felt that I would. I slowly started to learn more. Part of it I felt in my heart and another part [was] once I started going to university I read a lot. I started coming across books about spirituality. I started learning more about it mostly through reading and books like Basil Johnson's *Ojibway Heritage and Ceremonies*. I read *Seven Arrows*, *Thirteen Original Clan Mothers* and other books, which I cannot remember right now.

I have to add I met a friend, outside the university, who knew about the culture and spirituality. I started talking with her and she taught me a lot through our conversations. Through talking with her and reading all those books, somewhere along the line I learned that my spirit could only be recognized, this is what I thought at the time, only if I knew my Indian name otherwise I am just anonymous in the spirit world. So I did find out what my Indian name is but I only know it in English. It turns out that, that medicine man does not know the language either. So it was like, stuck again! I felt like that because I didn't know how to speak *Saulteaux*, I knew my Indian name but I didn't know it in the language. Yet I had a real feeling, a real sense that I knew that there was a spirit world, and we are as much in the spirit world as we are in the physical world, right at this very second. But since I can't speak the language, I can only go by feeling. I can't hear what my ancestors and what the grandmothers and the grandfathers are telling me. I have had those experiences where it felt that there were grandmothers, one time there was a grandmother and a grandfather. They were talking to each other and I was

there. It was like they were two parents trying to teach a little kid something. They were talking to each other, discussing how they were going to teach me. It seemed like he had one way and he was going to stick to that way and she had other ideas. She would look at me and talk to me but I did not know what they were saying. I could see them there, not totally clear but I could hear voices. It was not exactly a murmur and in my dream it was not exactly a language that I can say I heard before. Even when I was awake and this was when I was in university there was a grandfather, I think he is still around and I think he was helping me and probably still is. He spoke to me in the language too and it just seemed like he was right in front of me. I didn't know what he was saying. Another time I was falling asleep. I could hear it but I couldn't see anything. It was dark. I was half-awake and half-asleep. I could hear people talking to me. There were definitely two people talking and there were four more there. But I knew they were talking to me, talking to my understanding. But I didn't know what they were saying and I tried to remember what they said and I asked my uncle, I would just say a few words to see if he understood me and he couldn't make out one word I might have been saying. And I can't remember them now. He said, "It doesn't sound like you're saying anything." He couldn't make out one word. I can't remember what I did with that paper. I guess I just got frustrated. I probably threw it out. Or I just thought I would find out sometime, somehow. Not knowing my language I feel like a mute in the world [and yet] I know where I am and I know that I belong [here].

I can't help but think about when I was in that class, learning Ojibway. Learning from English words translating into Saulteaux just wasn't doing it for me. There was a game I started with a friend of mine one time. We had to speak in verbs every time we said something. We could not use nouns. It was a lot of fun, even in English. I came across another article. It was a radio show in the States. It's called Native America Calling and I was just looking at their topics and I printed it out. I was thinking about you when I saw that. They're talking more about the ecology. How has the written word

impacted oral cultures of our world? How have alphabets affected the way we relate to nature? At the end it starts talking about morals and about how in the language for example when we switch to English, can we express that same, I think profound understanding of the world as we know it, the natural world as we know it. And all of a sudden it loses all credibility in modern science and modern science has to come and explain why the trees grow leaves. Oh yeah and every thing gets so individualized. I don't know else to describe it. And English is not very poetic. I don't care what anybody says. When I go to the bush or sit by a river I want to stay there forever. It reminds me, reminds is too slight a word, it reminds me what is really important. And that's living life and being a good person and knowing in my heart that I am a good person. And knowing that there is so much more to life than just scurrying around in all this concrete and worrying about really trivial things. And always dealing with things like work and if those things went away we would probably be fine. I feel that life force. Energy. You know when I use the word ancestors and I know the definition is the people in your family who lived before you. They just lived at a different time. For me, those same ancestors seem to know so much about life. It's hard to expand on that in words. But I just feel a comfort knowing that they are still there when you go someplace totally by yourself. The comfort in knowing that they are there and you are reconnecting, rejuvenating. Because I know when a lot of things are happening in my life and having a hard time sometimes, a part of me feels like I am already walking out into the middle of a big field and I am just going to sit there. I want to stay there a long time.

When I learned that the Elder, who gave me my name, did not speak the language I was just like, damn! I just let out a big sigh and if he could have seen me he would have seen my shoulders just shrink. Not disappointed in him or anybody but when I look back at it now that only means I have to learn it. That's what I feel it's telling me right at this very moment. That I have to go back and learn it myself. It is not going to be someone else telling me and me remembering. There's something different about the process that I

haven't fully grasped yet and probably will not unless I go through that experience. I asked him when we were still in the sweat lodge if he knew it in Ojibway and he said, "that I would have to go and ask somebody else." I don't know if he caught what I was trying to ask him because I was thinking, 'how did you find out?' He explained to me that they, the spirits [sic] talked to him in English because they know that he doesn't speak the language. And right away I thought, well how do I do that? But maybe I'm not trusting what I already know and just dismissing it because I don't know the language. Not fully regarding everything that is in my understanding or not knowing how to put it in a sentence, where I feel like I have accurately represented what I feel. I don't know all of them by heart but I know there is a separate word like my Indian name is, there are two words. I know them separately but I don't know them together. Oh I'm really getting behind on my life understanding here. I don't have much time. There are so many things I haven't started on because, well I have started on but I haven't made progress on because I am too busy doing my job, too busy making sure that my son does his homework, trying to get him into sports. Mostly scurrying around and trying to make a living and have shelter but not dedicating myself to learn the language or getting a better understanding of my spiritual side. And that's who really I am. And these other things are side characteristics, the tangible part of my spirit. But I don't know the kernel, the core of it. It's a mystery to me still but not entirely. Oh yeah, I get that message sometime that they're telling me, "We can't give you everything at once." And it's not a situation of tough love either. A part of it but not entirely because it's just impossible to gain that much understanding all at once.

### **Connection with the Land**

When you suggested we talk about Aboriginal worldview I was thinking about, thinking about it. It is something I have thought about for a long time now and I guess I have you to thank cause I have made a big break through in my thinking. But it seems

like you know how when you know things separately, but you don't know them together? Now I think I've gained a better understanding of these things together. Because when I think about the worldview of the *Anishinabe* as opposed to our life style in the city, what would be an accurate term? What I always thought was, what is the worldview, what is my worldview according to me as *Anishinabe*? And seeing that it's different from my daily life; like the way society is, working, house and it seems there is an emphasis on material things. And I'm always wondering how to bring my *Anishinabe* worldview together with the non-*Anishinabe* world of living. I am expressing myself in the way that I am thinking in my head but you know how there's our way and people talk about our way, our traditional way, and just wondering how those things sustain time and even get carried on. I am thinking of the generation before me like my mom and dad. My mom doesn't carry a lot of the culture and traditions with her. It's not real apparent. But how I grew up and she made us go to church and we didn't go to any other kind of ceremonies yet in my adulthood, I was able to learn about these things. It just seemed to click and that I could learn about these things and comprehend what a teaching is trying to get at, easier than others I have talked to, especially someone who is not *Anishinabe*. I know this one woman, I think she is Finnish. She really enjoys the spiritual side of *Anishinabe*. She says there is lots that she just doesn't really get and another woman I was talking to just thought that medicine people think things up, they sit there for awhile, pretend they are thinking for a long time and then they just make it up.

A person who works in mainstream media asked me that. They're wondering about the truth, the truth of those things whereas I don't. It is not a question with me. Yeah. I don't think that it might not exist. So that's a really long way of saying, I wonder how *Anishinabe* worldview exists? I am just thinking out loud. Another person who made me think about it more and that person also works in a mainstream media organization. She told me that she doesn't think there is anything really different about us and that if we looked at our DNA we would all be the same. Those kinds of things stick in my head



and I know we are not the same. We just don't blend in to the ways of other people and when you asked me if we could talk about *Anishinabe* worldview, I thought to myself, what precisely makes it different from the rest of society? And this picture here, I bought this calendar right away because I love this picture on the front. (It was a picture of a family; a mother, a father and their child). This picture was taken in Alberta 1910 and these people are Blood. I always liked looking at this picture. It just seems so soothing to look at and to see them. 1910 that wasn't really all that long ago and I notice they are already starting to wear, their clothes have changed, they have more beads and more European stuff. And yet they still look like they are real Indians. But when I was thinking about this topic last night; this picture is close by to my desk. I was sitting there thinking about it and through thinking about it and looking at this picture, I knew the beginnings of what made our, when I say our, I mean my worldview as *Anishinabe* person. Where it's different starts at "The Land" and we are, this land all through Canada. We are from here. This is our land and things have changed really fast but yet gradually. When I look at these three people, this family (*referring to the picture*) a long time ago, we were connected to the land and living off the land, they had a really different lifestyle than what I do. A very much different lifestyle than I do. A big part of their life probably was the spiritual side of their life. When Douglas and I were driving in the car and we were talking about a long time ago, if we could live back then, living in teepees. Usually we talk about that in the wintertime and say I can't believe they used to live outside. Anyway we were talking about that in the car and he was playing his game boy and I said to him, "You wouldn't have a game boy." And he said "What? No way. I would hate it; I would be so bored." But I told him he would have a really spiritual way of life and he would be playing games and he'd be hunting, fishing, helping out the whole community. Especially when I was telling him that he would have a really spiritual way of life, that's when...he didn't want to take me on anymore and thought hey, you got a point there. So when I look at this picture, I'm kind of jealous of them too. That they had, I know it must have

been a really hard life but at the same time having that opportunity to have such a deeply, spiritual life. Not sitting around meditating all the time but just seeming to be in tune with nature, yourself and your family and the other people who live in your community. So I was thinking about that connection to the land, living a real spiritual life and thinking about language. And me not knowing the language, I can see, it's almost like there's supposed to be three major things in my life, but I am not sure what they are yet. One of them is the language and I don't have that part but I kind of have the other two.

### **Spirituality: Experiencing Life**

I haven't exactly figured that out but I know one is my connection to the spirit world and knowing that connection and feeling that connection in my daily life. The third one I am not exactly sure about. All I can say is that there's supposed to be three things. Ask me in another ten years...Okay, I am just going to be jumping around here for a second cause I have to try and figure it out. So the big break through that seemed like a big, big break through last night, seems so obvious now; that big difference in *Anishinabe* worldview comes from the fact that we used to live on the land and lived a very spiritual life. So then I wonder like how, what carries that to present day to me? It's through that connection, part of it is through that connection that I know that I share with the spirit world. And then another part is just [my] learning from other people, some books that I have read, and through friends. So that was the biggest thing there.

When I think about my mom, the thing that I think carried through was working hard, I think she had to work real hard and I think I picked a lot of that up from my mom. And I know this woman in the picture would have had to work really hard. So it's working to have a happy life, working toward having a happy life. And with my dad, all I can say, that I know now is to just to make sure to go to work everyday. And don't get sick and make sure you go to work everyday and so I go to work everyday. Almost everyday. But other than the working part; I think honesty. Looking at this picture, it

seems like a bigger leap for me to connect my parents with this picture than for me to connect myself with the picture. I know that's my spirit. But being able to articulate more what that is; that's the really difficult part. That's a really difficult part to put into words. Like you knowing the language, I wonder what you would say is the *Anishinabe* worldview. In the language, what kinds of things would you say? That got me thinking. These are English terms describing *Anishinabe* language, talking about what is animate and what is inanimate and how the language changes a lot. It's not like French words, male and female but it's living and something that is not alive. I was thinking about that this afternoon. I was watching. I got part of a program on the Inuit people. It was an older documentary but they were talking about how the Canadian military doing military testing in their land and they were showing shots of these war heads, I don't know if there is a difference, I know there are nuclear war heads. You know big parts of a bomb that don't explode, just sitting all over the place in the bush and there was one where there was a crater from where a bomb blew up and part of the bomb was still sitting there. They were interviewing a few of the Inuit people and they had subtitles in English. I was reading it and clicking in to what kinds of things he was saying, they were just sitting around a kitchen table and looking out and telling the person who was interviewing him how all this military testing was affecting their way of life. He didn't go so far as saying his way of life, he was just talking about the way it affected the land and he was talking maybe for thirty seconds but three times he said, "they spread death everywhere." And he talked about all those parts of bombs, flying around and he talked about the planes flying really low and he said, "it's like an explosion going by and it disrupts the wild life." Some of the wildlife started to eat at night when the planes aren't flying and some species you can't (he didn't say species) some animals you can't eat anymore because some of the things they ingested from the military testing, from the Canadian government. But the way he described it "just spread death everywhere" and you think about all the noise and like you know when a plane goes over, smoke comes out and ends up as soot on the

ground. He didn't explain it the way I just did. And the military is doing testing there so they can make progress, whereas he describes it as "spreading death everywhere." And I just thought those are two really big contrasts.

I don't know exactly when I learned about [animate and inanimate] and I don't even know from whom [sic] but it might have been by Chief Dan George. But knowing that everything is, all of nature has its own spirit, it's alive like the tree isn't just wood growing in the ground. I don't know when I learned that but it seems that once I knew because I didn't, I don't think I always knew that as a kid like the things in nature. I knew that people had spirits because I had that explained to me when I was about four years old when my grandma passed away. But it was not extended beyond people but just knowing that I felt, I did feel as though that there was a language that the land spoke in different parts of it. And this came through from another book I was reading, I can't remember the exact title but it referred to different languages of different parts of nature and how the trees talk real slow (laughs). But after reading that part of the book, when I would be walking, the trees would catch my attention. For example, the trees that were on the boulevard, on one street there was a really tall elm tree and in the middle of the street, the trees were fine. They were growing straight up. They were really big and they looked really strong but as I got closer to a busier street, the branches of the trees were starting to twist and they looked to be growing a lot differently. I think it was because they were closer to the busier street and how sensitive they are to the movements around them. The part of me knowing about their spirit I think just comes out of respect for life. I don't think ah na they don't have spirits, what am I nuts? I don't feel that way at all. And I think I had a sense of that too when I was a kid but that could be because I remember being alone a lot of times when I was a kid like not lonesome but I would just go and do my own thing.

I go out of my way not to kill bugs. I do kill flies when I get a bad feeling from them (laughs). And mosquitoes, I haven't really gained that understanding yet. But just

last night when I was writing things down, I was thinking, thinking, thinking and all of a sudden a spider dropped right out of my hair. I don't know how it got to my head. It was just a tiny spider. And then I saw another spider and I always talk to them too. I say, "you're not going to catch anything there." I think that way too but I am also at odds with myself, I contradict myself a lot and I feel really bad how much I kill just driving my car everyday, how much I kill by using all these products. I guess that's where I see the two, it's really hard to bring the two together and still say well I need to drive my car. And just feeling bad for doing things that are regarded as normal. In some ways expected and yet me knowing that, "We shouldn't be doing those things." So they're always polarized and that picture reminds me of that (again referring to the family picture on the calendar).

When I think about Aboriginal perspective the political part comes to mind because that is the easiest one to name knowing that Canada does not have an innocent history. When you ask me about the Aboriginal perspective in teaching courses, I know it's not just an Aboriginal person, as long as an Aboriginal person doing the teaching, it's not just that. Although, [I think] that is a big part of it. If we just talked about Aboriginal day and what the people in government were thinking about all the reasons they should have it and what they should have. (June 21 was declared by the Governor General of Canada in 1996 as a day to celebrate and recognize the diverse cultures and outstanding contributions of First Nations, Inuit and Metis). One of the bigger [reasons] is the pow wow dancers, the drum. To non-Aboriginal people, they probably just think there are not many opportunities to get together like having a pow wow unless you're out on the reserve. That kind of thing doesn't happen in the city spontaneously or on a regular basis. People coming together just to be together and for dancers to dance and each have different reasons for dancing. I guess it is to make our distinctiveness visible on that day. It's visible on that day. Just because they have one day, people know there will be Aboriginal people out celebrating our culture. Now that I say it like that, they're just saying oh well, we'll let you out of jail for a day but then you [will have to] go back in

and hide it all because we don't want to see it. You have your one day, now put it away and get back to work. Having just one day and like everybody has their day. Otherwise we are just all the same. That explains to me more about another thing I was thinking about English. With the English language you really have to rely a lot on your intellect and your feelings part is not as important. But in *Anishinabe, Inuktituq* [for example] that guy on television, he wasn't giving me a break down of all those planes, and bombs and the pollution, carcinogens. He just said that "it spread death everywhere" and it told me all of that at the same time. It talks about how alive our world is, how little things that we do impact that and it goes the other way. Things are dying. Um, um so I guess that Aboriginal perspective part in courses would probably have a lot more to do with the way we feel as human beings and our relationships to other people and the natural world? And that would in turn affect how much I drive my car, what kind of products I buy. Because that concern that I have about what I learned through the way of life of our people. Um. Um that's what I meant. Oh I see now. Oh yeah, okay. I have a better understanding now and the sun even came out; see right on the picture. (The sun shone on the picture).

When I think of protocol, I think of when I was sitting in church and I would be watching that priest getting that communion ready and he would do it the same way every time, exact same thing. I regard that as kind of a protocol. Because it seems like there is an order that he has to do every thing in and if he broke that order, I'm not sure what the implications are. But when we talk about the protocol with our ceremonies and they say, "what's the protocol?" I would just say do what ever you feel. They [the Elders] are not going to do anything bad because it seems like that person was there with a good heart and they won't destroy anything or harm people. That's what I would feel comfortable saying, "Do whatever you feel but this is the way we do it and this is why." That protocol part, I can just see that priest preparing that communion but if he didn't do it that same way, I'm not even sure why the Catholic Church has communion and why you eat what they call 'the body of Christ'. And what was really confusing about that was

when I was in grade two, our school was close to the nuns' residence (convent) and there was this one nun who would bring us a snack or a treat (her idea of a treat). When we opened up the box it was just white sheets about one foot by one foot and they had a bunch of holes cut in them. You know when they made communion they punched them out and then she would give us those sheets as a snack. I remember that when we were at recess she would open the box and everybody got a sheet and we would start eating it. I recognized the size of the holes. I think she told us too that it was communion. I guess she just didn't want to throw it out. I was six or seven. There were two nuns who taught in that school. I never had them as teachers though. My brothers did. They said that she was really wicked.

When I read all those books, I didn't just keep reading book after book, I didn't read them as novels. A part of it was, I got hooked and like you say identifying with those experiences. For me it was being able to learn a lot going through that experience because you are reading that book. Whereas the philosophy books, I don't really touch those anymore. When I was going through with my studies, I found them interesting and I could talk a lot about them but now that they don't really have a purpose like helping me get my degree I don't really read them at all.

*I received an e-mail for Niin on Wednesday May 29<sup>th</sup> and she wrote:*

*I just wanted to add that I always heard our perspective is different because of our connection to the earth but I wasn't able to think it through before and was not able to make it intelligible, to me. Now I can. In retrospect, I often find that I make things more complicated than they really are. I was always trying to attribute the way we look at the world to other things like teachings of the medicine wheel or an encompassing philosophy of life. And knowing that there are so many of these things...no wonder why it was so difficult to narrow it down. Anyway, it was nice to have talked with you last night. See you next week.*

### **Language: Part of Who You Are**

I think when you first asked me or when you first told me what your research was and you asked me to participate, I was surprised that you picked me. I think it was so

unexpected and that I would be involved in your research. And even to be picked by you as a participant is an honor, thank you. After I read your proposal, I thought about it some more.... I just thought "Right on Mary!" I do want our languages to be revitalized. I want all of us to have the opportunity to learn our language. In Canada it is stressed that there are two official languages, French and English and I think, what about us? I was glad to see you were doing this research and I hope lots of things happen from it. That was the biggest thing and I could picture you standing in the front and I am behind you going go, go, go. Me and a whole bunch of little people. The first time that you came over here what did we talk about? Oh! Yeah now I remember. I told you all those things I was saving up. I remember telling you the same thing happened to me that has happened to you, only backwards. I am reminded that I do not speak the language when I go to different conferences and when I am talking to people who are older than me, older Anishinabe, like elders. They kind of look at me and think tsk, tsk, tsk. You don't know your language, do you? [I think that] because sometimes they say something to me in Ojibway or Cree. (I'll be...aniin and I don't know it and I feel bad in that situation). I would say I feel sad that I don't know my language. I feel bad that I haven't devoted all of my energies toward learning it. I feel mad at the way things are set up here in Canada that makes it really difficult to learn the language again, especially in the education system! Can't have Ojibway immersion although they now have Cree immersion but only in a couple of places. In a broader sense, if I could stop that moment in time and think of all the things I feel bad about, I feel sad about my mom and dad. My mom was never taught her language. I don't think her mom and dad knew the language either. My dad was in residential school and I have an idea what he went through. I also feel bad, that's the only way I can describe it. I feel betrayed but it's so hard to say who betrayed me? Who did this to me? I feel like being mad but there is no one I can lash out at. Yeah in my head it seems like it was the priests and the nuns and the Canadian government all through the 1800s, 1900s and 2000s so far. I guess because I can't point at people



individually. It feels like all those things stay inside of me. They don't go anywhere. You have to transform it somehow. Yeah but then there is, if I went to the Prime Minister of Canada and really told him what I thought, that wouldn't give me a lot of satisfaction either. Because I don't think he would do anything anyway. So it is something really large and abstract and definitely involving people. There isn't a person or people I can confront about that. I just kind have to swallow it or suck it in and let it come out as rage. A lot of time I have been working, I've worked at Aboriginal organizations and when we're all together, everybody talks and jokes around. Especially when there is a group of us and we're in the middle of a place where there are non-Aboriginal people around us and if we could talk in our language, I think that would be extra fun. I feel that would help me, and I guess I feel I need to do that, to show other people we're not the same as you. We're different and we come from this land here. That would be something they couldn't twist it around, there's nothing they could manipulate or that they could turn things around because they would not know what we are saying. And it would be front and center for them that we are a different culture than they are because it is a totally different language and we have different ways of doing things, understanding things. Having the language, I think would help make that understood.

[When I was going to university] and I studied in the student center, the center was really relaxed and I noticed people with an accent didn't feel shy about it whereas in the university I noticed they were shy. I could tell that they were shy. People knew one another or if you didn't know that person, you knew somebody in their family. It just felt good to know that there were lots more *Anishinabe* people going to school and doing all kinds of different things. I could actually see how many people were doing that but otherwise everybody pretty much spoke English and slang I guess. [For myself] even if I did know who I was, I didn't feel like I had to announce any difference. I think things started changing for me in that way and began when my dad passed away. I got closer, even though I was always close to my dad's side of the family. With him not there then

there was just me and my aunts and uncles instead of me kind of like going through my dad talking to my aunts and uncles. Because they missed him they could see more of him in us kids. They liked that so we all kind of got closer. I think it was around then that I first learned the word *Anishinabe*. It was mostly my uncle. I remember I used to always refer to us, I would jokingly and every time I said it I would say it jokingly, "Indians." I guess my uncle sensing and picking that up offered me that word, *Anishinabe* and so I started using that. I guess he noticed I kept saying it as a joke, Indians and he said, "*Anishinabe*." He just said it and I just starting using that word after that. It was only later that I knew it was a word that we called ourselves but I didn't really know that it had a translation. It wasn't until I went to university several years later that, I learned that word meant people and I thought that's really neat. Because now that word doesn't mean the same as it used to either; there are different kinds of people. I guess it's still the same but it's been changed to meaning like us from this area.

We were talking earlier about places where I notice I am not speaking the language, it is when I am with my family. When I am at my grandpa's and we are at a gathering, not as often as we used to but we still have gatherings. And they are all talking and I don't know what they are saying and I know they still feel that's my family and we are close but I'm a city Indian. When I go and visit my dad's side of the family, I can sense they have pain in their hearts too because I don't know it. But I also feel they kind of blame themselves so nobody says anything specifically about that. I was just on the phone with my aunt before you came and we did mention that my brothers and I do not know the language. I'm trying to remember what we were talking about right before then. We were talking about last summer for some reason. I can't remember the conversation right now. But both of us kind of skipped over it. It seems like there was a flicker of memory about residential school; my aunt going to residential school and she said, "You would have had three languages Ojibway, Cree and English." And we just kind of paused and moved on and talked about something else.

## **Death: A Reflective Way of Seeing Relationships**

When I got older I went more [to my dad's community] because with my mom and dad we would maybe go once or twice a year. I went more on my own. I wasn't really that old when he died; I was sixteen. He died three days after my sixteenth birthday. It was sad but I don't know about anything else. I didn't cry until at his funeral but otherwise I was just stone faced. I remember standing there with my mom and my dad of course and this priest who was there. I guess he was there for us and he said a little prayer too cause I was still in the hospital room. I remember standing there and the priest was beside his bed, being concerned saying that's too bad. I remember standing there with my arms crossed just looking. I don't know why I remember that priest so much. Actually I remember quite a lot. I just thought, I don't mean to be mean but I just thought what a fake, he was just doing that I thought. I do remember thinking that my dad would have probably pushed him away and maybe I should have done that. But I didn't want to do that. I still don't think I should have done that but I think that would have been his reaction if he could see what was going on. There was a nurse in the room consoling my mother. I don't know what else to tell you.

The priest reminded me of something really cold and unloving and [someone] wanting to punish people. People who wanted to take our culture away from us [or somebody] that lacks any understanding. I was going to say understanding or compassion but I have to put those two together. Understanding and compassion because they might be compassionate but [it does not mean they understand]. And what I am saying is they would have to be both, together. It comes to mind when I heard about residential schools stuff started coming up. I remember one comment from a priest. I just read it in the paper, He was talking about how everything those priests and nuns did back then, gave us, our people, a twisted sense of and he used the word Creator out of respect he would say God and he gave us a twisted sense of that. That's what also comes to mind too when I remember that priest standing there beside the bed. A twisted sense of Creator.

I started crying when we were in the church because, I could have probably held it in, but they let the immediate family go in and see the casket first before even the service started and that's when I cried. But not really that long. It seemed like I cried and I got it out and I kind of felt good because I remember even like just getting used to standing there beside the casket with him in it. And I was curious about what they did to his body. So I touched his face, no I touched his hand, the top of his hand and it was hard, hard and cold. And then I pushed my finger into his ribs, like I put my hand/my fingers against his ribs with the intention of kind of pushing to see, being very wary that I might just push it right in. It just felt like, and I remember after I did that I'm trying to remember which brother I looked at, because my brothers were standing there and my mom was there and I just said, "That doesn't feel like him." Cause he had make-up on you know. It's very difficult to explain but that was my first reaction "That's not him." I think that is what probably contributed to my enhanced understanding of human beings and spirit and how so much more we are spirit than the body, especially when you see one that is all cleaned up and not alive anymore. I don't know why I wanted to touch him. It wasn't because, you know how people will kiss the person, like showing affection, I didn't feel that, I just wanted to feel what his body felt like. And through the regular part of the funeral, I think that's where it, it didn't feel like the kind of ceremony that I know today. Back then I just thought we're just in church and we have a funeral and you have to have a funeral and do things in a certain way, sing these church songs. It was just a regular church burial but it just seemed like we were just going through the motions cause that's what we're supposed to do. I'm curious about how that might have been different if we had one of our ceremonies, when someone dies.

I don't fully understand it and there is a part I don't understand. While I loved my dad, he wasn't that great a father. A whole school year had gone by since I started high school and working and I always remember saying that I was going to move out when I was eighteen because he was really strict and he yelled. So I think I was already as a kid,

I was pushing away from him. The whole time knowing that I would eventually turn into an adult and we could have a relationship but then it wasn't that close. A part of me feeling very strong was because I was starting to push away and I started working and I kind of had a feeling I could take care of myself from then, and to be strong for my mom. She was really crying. I think a mixture of those two things. I think that's why. I don't know what else to say because I was the youngest and there I was the one not crying. I just felt, probably because I had two brothers they kind of toughened me up too. So we never really had a family relationship where we're all showing lots of love for each other. We're still a close family minus all that...stuff you might see on a television show.

*I wondered if Niin had talked or thought about her father's passing. I wondered because she was having difficulty reliving the moments leading to his death and funeral. So I asked her.*

The last time I talked about my dad was in October. I don't know exactly when but throughout the year from October 97 and throughout the next year, which was when my aunt passed away. My dad's sister and I were talking about it to my cousin for support. It wasn't that long ago since I talked about it. Maybe like two years ago when it came up in conversation. But it was mostly to comfort my cousin. That's the only reason why it came up. But I've thought about it.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Composing a Life with Niin**

#### **Reconnecting with Niin**

*As I was driving to Niin's house, May 1, 2002 I wondered what it would be like to do research with her. I wondered if she was as nervous as I was about our journey together. I had made an entry in my journal, January 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002 when I initially contacted Niin to participate in my research. She had been very excited and I arranged to meet her for lunch January 18, 2002. It had been important for me to contact her before I left for New Zealand later on in the month, because that meant I would not see her for three months.*

*So here I was three months later and it seemed ages since I had seen her. I had remained in contact by e-mail while I was away. I knocked on the door and she invited me in. She led me to the kitchen and asked me to sit down. I placed my tape recorder on the table as she was preparing tea for us. Where do you want to start? I said (noted on the first transcript).*

#### **A Childhood Story**

She told me a story about the first time someone referred to her as “Indian” and how she had never thought of herself as one. It had seemed so innocent to her even though she had been encircled and ridiculed by some of her kindergarten classmates in the middle of the playground. As she told me the story, it still seemed so clear in her mind what happened that day and somehow this event as she expressed “really sticks out in my mind” (May 1, 2002). Prior to this she had not felt or seen herself as different from her classmates. She said, “I really didn’t understand myself, first and foremost as an Indian.” But the more she thought of it and reflected on it, it was the fact that they had encircled her without her knowing which puzzled her. It was more puzzling for her when she told her mother about the incident and her mother told her to tell others she was Canadian. For Niin, what had occurred was a reminder that not only was she made to feel

different but also she began noticing and “learning that there were different kinds of people.” *She reminded me that when I was in residential school, we were all Indians. We were all from different communities but we were still Indians. It was not until I went to Winnipeg and attended a private school that I noticed I was different. “All the girls from the reserve are dumb,” the white girls would say. I suppose in some ways the other Aboriginal girls and I were encircled and ridiculed.* It was obvious that particular incident lay dormant in her memory and when she read my research proposal on “language and identity,” she was reminded of that moment and relived it. She recalls, “I just remember putting my head down, walking, looking at the grass. I was really thinking about it, what was that all about?”

### **Deprived of a Language**

Niin described herself “as a classic example of an Indian without a home.” Her parents came from different reserves. She did not live in either of the reserves so she did not consider them home. She grew up in the city. Although her mother was Cree and her father Saulteaux, she did not learn either language. *I wondered how it was she didn’t learn either language. I guessed it had to do with her growing up in the city but I felt it was more complicated than that.* She felt more comfortable with her father’s family because they were darker. “I look more like my dad’s family. I liked my aunt’s dark brown hair and I really like the land out there.” In terms of her relationship with her mother, she recalls mostly going to church every Sunday and how she thought it was so boring. She seemed surprised as she told me this story how she did not remember seeing any other Aboriginal people. She does not remember hearing any Aboriginal languages spoken at school or anywhere public except when her father talked on the phone with her uncle or when her uncles came over to visit. *I remember as a little girl when my mother, my brothers, sisters and I would go and visit our relatives in the community on Sundays the only language spoken was Anishinabemowin.* As a little girl, when she heard her

father and his family speak Saulteaux, she did not recognize it as her language and she states “hey, that’s my language; I should be learning it; I didn’t even know enough to say that.” *I was not deprived of my language and I felt sad that Niin had been denied her language.*

She does remember her mother asking her father why he didn’t teach us, her and her two brothers, the language and she recalls how her father raised his voice in anger and responded “what do they need that for?” *I recall once I was in university and especially attending conferences or workshops I became aware that many Aboriginal parents did not teach their children to speak their Aboriginal languages. In a depressing kind of way, when Niin told me what her father said, what came to mind were words like colonization, assimilation and Christianization.* She said,

A part of me feels really guilty that I haven’t taken it upon myself and learned it by now. But I am also angry about what happened in residential schools and how they prevented so many people from speaking their languages. They did the same thing to my dad. I guess that’s guilt, anger and resentment.

*When Niin talked about her anger and resentment, I thought about the many Aboriginal students I work with and have worked with at the university, many of them do not know their language either. The reasons for this are surfacing. I wonder if that is the same reason why I did not know about traditional ceremonies until I was an adult.*

### **Intergenerational Reverberations of Residential Schools**

Although Niin did not go to a residential school, it was clear she has been affected directly from her parents’ residential school experiences. It struck me that she regarded her educational and life experience as not “different” from mine but she thought of it as “sameness.” She reminded me that when I went to residential school, the nuns and priests tried really hard to take away my language but with me she said, “They took it away before I was conceived.”



*I had not looked at losing the language and culture quite that way before but when Niin expressed it that way, not only did I feel a sense of sadness but I also felt nauseated. I was reminded of the sexual and physical abuse cases, which occurred in residential schools, which have been and, are before the courts. By the assimilation and the Christianization of her parents, Niin was definitely robbed of her language before she was conceived. I wonder who can represent her in court. I wonder about her son, Douglas.*

Not only did she evoke my own hostilities of my residential school experience but she also reminded me that impact of residential schools is still very real today. It has affected her and her son, Douglas. I remembered Niin telling me that her mother did not speak her language and that she had had a good experience in residential school. She recalls her mother taking her and her two brothers to church every Sunday and her father did not join them. She told me her father entered a seminary after he graduated from residential school, to become a priest but had decided to leave. I can only assume their experiences were the reasons why her mother wanted Niin to call herself Canadian and why her father did not want to teach her and her brothers how to speak the language. *I wonder if that is what erasing does.*

Niin wonders what happened to her dad in residential school and in the seminary. Niin said, "I think they just brainwashed him and he might have gotten abused. I don't know. I have no idea about that." *Listening and attending to Niin, I remembered I used to wonder about my late brother, Leonard. He also went to a residential school and the seminary. After Niin's questions about her father, I wonder even more. At the time he went, I thought he was too young to go to a seminary. But I also know back then, in the 60's and 70s, the Catholic Church and the residential schools deemed it a success or a graduation for an Aboriginal boy to enter the seminary. Like Niin, I wonder if he was sexually and physically abused. I wonder if that is why he struggled with alcoholism and his relationships. I will never know because he was killed in a car accident in 1979.*

### **Attempting to Know Her Father**

For our second conversation, I had asked Niin to look in her “memory box” and find an object, or something that was meaningful to her as a student and we would talk about it. She brought out a Webster dictionary. It was special to her because it had belonged to her father and she apparently used it quite a bit while she was attending university. She noticed there were many words that were circled or underlined. Two of the words were justice and kingdom. She continued talking and said,

Justice and kingdom made me think about what he might have gone through while he was in the seminary. Really thinking about those words because I am like that too. I’ll see a word and think about what its meaning is and the context. Not only in the context it was given to me but also what the word itself means. So I think there was a lot more in my dad’s mind than he let on, that’s for sure.

Not only was the dictionary special to Niin but it also was a way of trying to know and figure out her father. She had taken the dictionary after her father passed away. She describes her relationship with her father, as

We were just a parent and a kid. We really did not get into any real conversations. He talked to me when he was telling me something or I would talk to him when I was telling him something. It seemed like my dad was always there but since he worked evenings I really did not see him a lot.

She added, “I was going to move out when I was eighteen because he was really strict and he yelled. The whole time knowing that I would eventually turn into an adult and [then] we could have a relationship.” *Another result of the residential school experience I thought. I remember I had to basically renew my relationships with my parents, brothers and sisters when I first returned home from Pine Creek Residential School. I have heard of other residential school survivors who had difficulty or could not show affection to their children. It makes me wonder if this is what happened to Niin’s father.*

### **Negative Impact of Christianity**

Niin readily moved back and forth to her childhood days and as she talked she realized that perhaps her relationship with her father could have been better. She cried as

she told me how she watched him suffer with encephalitis and being in the hospital room after he passed away. She captured the moment and remembered how she was annoyed with the priest and felt he should not have been there. She said,

I remember standing there with my arms crossed. I don't know why I remember that priest so much. I don't mean to be mean but I just thought what a fake. I do remember thinking that my dad would have probably pushed him away and maybe I should have done that.

*As I listened to Niin talk about her father, I remembered my own father when he was in the hospital and he asked my mother, way ko to kwen kaapi mini zhaa man? (I wonder what way, which path I should follow?) In preparation for his eventual death and in his 70's, he was still questioning whether he should follow the Christian path or his traditional spiritual beliefs. It made me sad when I heard him asking the question. Like Niin I wondered what happened to him along the way; what was it that made him switch from his traditional spirituality to Christianity. Niin reminded me of my own anger and resentment with the way the Catholic Church viewed (maybe still does) our spiritual beliefs as paganism and instilling the fear of going to hell in catechism classes. I wonder if this was the reason why my father asked the question. For his funeral an elder began with a pipe ceremony, the church was smudged with sweetgrass; followed by a traditional Catholic funeral. Does it make up for it? I don't know.*

Niin's memories of going to church every Sunday morning are very vivid. She described how bored she was and not really understanding what she was doing there. She said, "I really had no idea why I was there, why I should be there except if I didn't I was going to go to hell." *As a child I remember this threat so clearly. As a family we also went to church every Sunday but my mother, brothers and sisters and I would get up every morning at 6:30 including Saturdays to go to mass. Getting up that early was tough and much tougher in the winter. My father stayed home with the youngest ones and made breakfast but he did come to church with us on Sundays. I told Niin, "I went to mass so many times surely I have been saved already."*

## Aboriginal Worldview and Spirituality

When Niin began reading books like *Ojibway Heritage and Ceremonies* by Basil Johnson other books such as *Seven Arrows* and *Thirteen Original Clan Mothers*, she began wondering about her own spirituality. She felt there was a void in her life. “I had always gone to church growing up and I didn’t know about the spirituality of our people. I never knew anything about it.” She prayed to understand the *Anishinabe* side of spirituality and from conversations with friends she learned little by little about the *Anishinabe* culture and spirituality. She knew there was something not right.

*She reminded me that I knew very little about my culture especially traditional ceremonies. I too, learned about spirituality from books. I may have known I was spiritually connected with home but I did not know it as spirituality.*

Someone had told her that the only way the spirit world could recognize her spirit is if she received her “Indian name” also known as a “spiritual name.” Niin described the spirit world as something having a bigger dimension, where our ancestors are but the spirit world is still connected to the land.

She did go and ask an Elder for her spiritual name. The Elder gave her a name but the Elder did not know his language either and Niin received her name in English. There was no one present who spoke the language to be able to translate her name to *Anishinabe* at the ceremony. As she related this story and her experience, Niin was still feeling disappointed and in some sense inadequate and she described the moment as “stuck again!” She added,

I felt like because I didn’t know how to speak *Saulteaux*, I knew my Indian name but I didn’t know it in the language. Yet I had a real feeling, a real sense that I knew that there was a spirit world. But since I can’t speak the language, I can only go by feeling.

When she looks back at the ceremony, she remembers not being disappointed with the Elder or anybody in particular but she realizes she has to learn the language. She said, “That’s what I feel it’s telling me right at this very moment.” Niin recognizes the

Anishinabe language is not like English or French because it has to do with how we classify things as animate and inanimate. “All of nature has spirit,” she said.

I told her my name was given to me in English too but I knew how to translate it. I asked her what her name was and not only did I experience my own inadequacy as a fluent speaker but my own vulnerability as a researcher as well. I don’t know everything. I could not translate her name without having to go to, do I dare say, a dictionary? No, I decided I would phone my oldest sister. Although Niin laughs at how her father tried to teach her how to count in *Anishinabe* by making a joke, she still wishes she could speak the language. Despite not knowing her language, Niin has a strong connection with the land. She told me that, “The big difference in the Anishinabe worldview comes from the fact we used to live on the land and lived a very spiritual life.” She shared with me that when she goes to the bush and sits by a river she would like to stay there forever. When she is there it reminds her “what is really important, which is living life and being a good person and knowing in my heart, I am a good person.” In her worldview, “it means “working toward a happy life.” She finds it comforting that when she is totally by herself, her ancestors are still there. She describes ancestors as “people in your family who have lived before you.”

*She reminded me of the time, my younger sister Alice passed away. I cried for days. I missed her terribly. One night, I was woken up by a bright light. It was so bright it lit up the whole bedroom. From my bed and through the window, I can see the stars and the moon when it is full. I noticed there was a new star. I had not seen it before and it was dancing. I told an Elder about it and he said, “That is where our people go when they leave this world; they become stars. She came to tell you she is okay and you don’t have to cry for her anymore.”* I understood when Niin told me she was comforted by the fact that her ancestors are still here and knowing that she gets rejuvenated and re-energized. *I also thought about the times I have spent in the bush or sitting by a river and*

*feeling the same sense of harmony and feeling spiritually uplifted by the silence, by the beauty and stillness.*

### **Identifying as Anishinabe**

Niin grew up in the city and has always lived in the city. Earlier I mentioned she referred to herself as “a classic example of an Indian without a home.” She expressed that she doesn’t have a place she calls home and *I wonder why it is that the city is not home to her; I must ask her that next time I see her. I wonder how she views home and what characteristics does it have to have before she can call a place, home? When I saw Niin on Wednesday, November 20, 2002 I asked her where she felt at home.* She said, “I like being outside, the bush and sitting under the sky. When I was young and when we visited both my father’s family and my mother’s they always made us feel at home and it was the way they treated us. They made us feel comfortable.” Not only does Niin feel she does not have a home but she also lives with an absence of the *Anishinabe* language. She said, “In school I took French and I was never taught Ojibway or Cree. I was not offered it. I want to learn the language.” Niin would like to see all Aboriginal people be given the opportunity to learn their languages. She indicated to me that “In Canada, it is stressed that there are two official languages and I think what about us?” *Niin is politically aware of the Canadian situation and knows now why she was not taught her language.* She added,

I feel bad that I haven’t devoted all my energies toward learning it. I feel mad at the ways things are set up here in Canada. It makes it really difficult to learn the language, especially in the education system. I feel sad about my mom and dad. My mom was not taught the language. I don’t think her mom and dad knew the language.

Niin remembers not feeling different from the other students in her classes. Today she looks at her son, Douglas and he reminds her of herself when she was young. She said, “He is kind of like me a long time ago. I didn’t really know there was a big difference so I am teaching him that there is a difference. We are *Anishinabe* and he’s

*Anishinabe.*” Niin clearly identifies herself as Anishinabe and knowing that she feels responsible for teaching Douglas about the residential school system but is careful in terms of how much of the history of Aboriginal people in Canada she should tell.

*I was pleased to hear Niin say that because many Aboriginal people think we should stop talking about the residential school system. And I think it has only been recently that some Canadians learned that such a system even existed. Niin now understands the void of not having the language and informing Douglas about what happened and what is still happening today is important to her. Otherwise like many other children, Douglas will never know what happened to his mother, his grandparents and his great grandparents. I agree with Niin that we have to talk about it so we can move on. But before we do that, we have to understand it.*

She wonders what Douglas thinks about what she tells him and wondered if it was making a difference. Apparently one day they were out driving. They were stopped at a red light and he noticed flags from around the world and he asked, “How come there is nothing Aboriginal around here?” Another time Niin picked him up from a community club and he asked, “Why is a feather special?” *Douglas does notice I thought.*

On Thursday May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002 I went back to see Niin to go over the transcript. After she read it over and suggested some changes I asked her,

Mary: What did you think about when you read the transcript?

Niin: That there are [sic] lots of things that I don’t really understand and I don’t think it’s within my power to understand everything right away. And I know that is like a given that I can’t understand everything right away. But when I read it over, I guess it just reaffirms how much, how little I understand about me growing up just speaking English. And growing up with an absence and how I can just talk about it but I can’t. I just feel there is so much I feel I have not come to an understanding of. That’s what I was thinking.

Mary: How do you see yourself in the transcript?

Niin: I’ll say initially and I will ask you more about what you mean. How do I see myself in the transcript...as a girl who doesn’t know her language and just going through life and not knowing the language I feel I should have.

Mary: I guess what I mean is when you read it, do you see yourself in it and how do you feel about the person you are seeing?

Niin: I think that despite everything that's happened to us, the original people of this land, and how I have grown up, I didn't really have it that bad. It could have been worse. When I read the transcript, I remember when I was younger, I think about everything that happened to our ancestors, I think I've done pretty good. I think I'm a strong person but then I kind of have to be strong. I'm really proud to be Anishinabe. I feel a sense of closeness with Aboriginal people in Canada. You have to work really hard at learning how to get things done. I need to provide for my son and myself.

*My reaction to this conversation was a reminder that I had made a promise that I would not harm my participants. Did I harm Niin by asking her these questions? When I asked her the second time how she felt about the person she saw in the transcript, she thought long and hard before she responded. As I watched her, I felt that I had aroused some negative feelings or I had insulted her in some way. I saw sadness in her eyes, in her body and heard sadness in her voice. How could I have done that? I felt remorseful and responsible. I felt obligated and compelled to remind her that I did not want to do her harm or hurt anyone else who does not speak the language.*

*I drove home and I did not feel good about what had just happened. It was something I had thought might happen because of the sensitive nature of the research but I had hoped I would be able to prevent it. Was I rushing by asking her those questions? I wondered if it would affect my relationship with Niin. I cared for her so much (Journal entry. May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2002).*

When I went back to meet with Niin on Tuesday, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2002 I reminded her of our conversation and I asked her if I had offended her in some way. She told me I hadn't but I did feel her frustration of not knowing the language. *When I left her home that evening, I reflected on the day Niin told me that her mother suggested she to tell her classmates she was Canadian. I thought she is not going to tell Douglas he is Canadian. I thought, Niin is making a difference in his life and I believe in my heart Niin will learn the language and teach Douglas as well.* That is the hope I see in their lives. Niin will not be erased and she will not allow Douglas to be either.



## **CHAPTER 5 Aanung's Story**

### **The Story He Lives By**

When I was little my family and I lived in the city. We moved to a small rural town when I was about three. For the most part I grew up in that small town. My mother is Aboriginal and my father is non-Aboriginal. My mom grew up on a northern reserve, but when she got married she moved south. I have two brothers and three sisters. The family was always close and we went everywhere together. We were always together. My siblings and I would play games outside and we were always active playing sports or something, keeping busy. We all went to church together every weekend. No one stayed home. We always ate together. It was just the way it was. We were always protective of each other. My father worked in the city and my mother worked in the home, taking care of us all the time. Both my parents worked really hard.

### **Relationship with Mom and Dad**

My mom and dad moved back to the reserve a couple of years ago. It's a big change in her life to go back home. I can tell she is really happy. My dad is making that sacrifice for her now. She had left home for him. She left home so long ago. She did a good job raising us and adapting to a different lifestyle away from other *Anishinabec*. My dad has always been away from his family's home. He seemed to be more comfortable living where my brothers and sisters and I grew up than my mother seemed to be. Now my father is making that sacrifice and he's adapting to a different kind of life. He seems to be adapting well. Now that they live in my mother's community, up north, my mother visits with my grandma everyday. I think it's just good for her to feel that she is part of the community again. She's really happy right now. With all the problems that go with living on the reserve, she is still really happy. For me too, just being there I can feel the connection. It is a very powerful place for me. I cherish every opportunity I have, to go home.

My dad is doing really well. I think he is happy to live up there too. There are lots of things for him to do. My siblings all live there now so the family is close, closer than it has been for a while in a lot of ways. I am the only one who lives here in the city. [When we lived in that small rural town] my mother spent a lot of time at home. I know she experienced some racism. There were times when there were things that happened. Some of it came from other kids at school. They'd try to make hurtful comments because we were different. We were "Indians." My mother was very defensive and protective of us and she didn't take any shit. She wasn't afraid to express herself if she thought her children were being mistreated. It was unacceptable and so she would let other people know this. She would encourage me not to back down if someone challenged me to fight but my father's approach was to "turn the other cheek." I respect that approach too but I probably developed that more as an adult. I really had a hard time when I was young, socializing with other kids...feeling that sense of belonging and it's affected the way I interact with other people to this day. And that's something I accept. I recognize it. It even affects the way I relate to other Native people because I'm not used to feeling that I am part of a group or anything, especially when it comes to people my own age. I often find it easier to speak to older people.

My mother she didn't lose her language. She kept it strong. She spoke to us in the language all the time. She would always tell us stories. Maybe my understanding of oral tradition is different from other peoples' understanding of oral tradition but she always talked to us in the language. For me, personally the way she brought me up, she put a lot of trust in me. I was very open with my mom and I can pretty much talk about anything with my mom. That's the way it's always been. I've always had that kind of relationship where I can talk to her about anything. My siblings do too. But I know I really have a close connection with my mom.

### **Schooling Experiences: Feeling Different**

As a child I have very vivid memories about how some of my teachers treated me. Being the only Aboriginal in my class. My older siblings went through that at school too. I could be really shy sometimes. Sometimes I was a little self-conscious of myself. I remember in music class one time. I think I was in grade three. My music teacher asked me to come down from the risers. There were different instruments in the classroom and there was a big bass drum. She wanted me to hit the drum for the songs we were singing. I don't know why but I remember saying to her that I didn't know what she wanted me to do. And I remember she said, "Well you should know what to do, you're Indian." I remember feeling singled out in front of everybody.

I did not know any other Aboriginal students in elementary, just my siblings. We were the only ones. When I was in kindergarten there was one family but they were only there for a few months. They were not there that long and after they left I was the only one. I had a friend, he was Metis and we kind of identified with each other. That was all in my first year. Right from the beginning I always knew I was different. I still remember the first day of school. We walked to school and my mom came to talk to my teacher. I can remember vividly how those kids came out; quite a few of them came peeking out the door. They were looking at us, me and my mom. I always knew I was different right from the beginning and I went through a lot of hard times in school. I used to get into fights all the time when I was little. I don't know. They [other students] used to call me names, swear at me, and sometimes they would even talk about my mom. I used to fight over those things. It got to a point where I almost started liking it, (fighting) you know, as I got a bit older. It was hard those first couple of years and after the kids knew who I was; it didn't become much of a problem a little bit later. I had a reputation as a fighter. Most of the time I didn't tell anybody so my parents would never find out. I might have been [luckier] than other kids who got into fights at school. I usually didn't get caught. If my mother did find out about it she'd be mad but I wouldn't get into trouble.

By the time I got to grade seven, it was different again. It was brought to the forefront again that I was Native. We had an elementary school in town and a high school that started at grade nine. A lot of young people from the surrounding rural communities came to town to attend high school. When I was about 12 to 14 years old, those years were really tough. That's when a lot of changes started happening. I really became homesick for the reserve. I really felt like I didn't have any place at school with the other kids. I enjoyed my time at home but I really didn't enjoy going to school. I really didn't do anything to rebel or anything. My marks started slipping at school. I had a close friend who lived in the same town and he'd help me out a lot. Whenever my brother came to town, we would always do things together. I don't know if I did anything in particular to ease what I was going through. I didn't really analyze it back then. I guess I was living day to day like any other person that age. I always looked forward to going home. I remember I was thinking about it in my head how long it was going to be before I could go home to the reserve. Like I said I really didn't do anything to rebel. I really didn't think about it too much. I just knew I wasn't happy going to school. My older siblings were in high school at the time and they had their share of problems too. But we never did talk about it. I was pretty independent when it came to school and life at home. Those were two separate things. For everything that came with school I was pretty much independent. I didn't really get help from anyone. I did my homework myself and the same goes for the problems that came with school. I pretty much kept them to myself.

My siblings went through the same things I did. They had their problems too. That was more hurtful than anything else...hearing about things that happened to them. It really didn't bother me the things that happened to me because I felt like I could deal with it. We were always protective of each other. Maybe it came from going through those things together feeling different from the rest of the community. We are stronger because of that. That's one thing that really stands out in my mind when I think about our childhood (my siblings and I). I remember when white kids saying were talking about

their siblings, they would say “I wish they would die.” Saying awful things like that. I don’t understand where someone could come from to say something like that. Those things are ugly words. Always hearing people say, “I hate my brother. I hate my sister.” Even though you know they didn’t really mean it but even just to say it, it never made sense to me. I always expressed love, loyalty to my family members. I was never afraid to show that. I would walk to school with my sister everyday and people would find that strange. I didn’t understand why. When I was growing up I attributed their negative attitudes to maybe a difference in culture or something. I didn’t understand.

In grade nine there were more students, a lot more people I didn’t know. I was not familiar with them and they were not familiar with me. So when they saw me as being the only Native kid in school, I went over those negative experiences all over again. It was hard again the first year and a half of high school but afterwards, I was in a position where those things were not happening too often. I think my mother knew I had a hard time with the kids at school. It got to a point where it never really hurt me. It didn’t feel good but I never got to a point where I was ashamed of being Native. It never became an issue. She understood that. My dad was a little more like...you should walk away from fighting because it is not good. My mom saw things differently. She knew that I had problems at school and sometimes things were even directed at her from other kids. Like I said, they would say really insulting things to me because we were Native.

When I was in grade ten, my cousin came down from the reserve and he lived with us for a year. He went to the same school and that made things a lot better for me. That was probably my best year of school when he came. People actually took to him pretty good. He was athletic. We were on the volleyball team together. That was a good year for me. He got along with my best friend and they became really close friends themselves. When my friend passed away, he was one of the pallbearers. He came down to the funeral. He came down right away when he found out about what had happened. When I was young I didn’t have a curfew but I really never went out. I stayed home a lot.

They never really pushed one on me and I just knew when it was time to come home even when I started getting into bad habits like drinking. I'd come home at a certain time. It wasn't until I became older that I'd come home at a ridiculous time of the night. Like four in the morning or something. But when I was younger I did not have a curfew and I didn't abuse that. There really wasn't a need for a curfew. They were pretty flexible with us. I was told to go to sleep at a certain time when I was younger, in elementary school at the latest 10:00 p.m. I remember other kids had to go to bed after dinner at 7:30 or 8:00 p.m. I couldn't even imagine that. When we got a bit older like in our teens they didn't really tell us when to go to sleep and some people might perceive that as not having control but they just gave us a lot of responsibility to take care of ourselves and just know. I think [my parents] put a lot of trust in us. I think they were very flexible in a lot of ways. I remember staying up late especially on weekends. They didn't enforce a lot of rules on us. But I think I was a lot different than other kids. I didn't go out. I didn't go to dances or anything like that.

### **Stories My Mom Told Me**

My mother used to tell us stories all the time especially about how they used to go out on the trap line. Ever since I was small she used to tell us those stories and a lot of the times I would hear the same stories over but I would not get tired of hearing them. Sometimes she would tell us stories that grandpa would tell them during the wintertime. We call them *atsokanag*. [Traditionally *Anishinabec* only told these stories in the wintertime and it is still practiced today]. She would tell us those ones [but] also stories about her experiences; things that happened while they were on the trap line. Maybe funny stories or times when it was dangerous or when something significant happened. She described how they would prepare hides or travelled by canoe. She told me stories about what it was like before there was hydro in the community, before there were any roads and before there was any real amount of outside contact. She remembers in the

summer time being in a tent and at night when they were told to go to sleep they could still hear that drum from the community, which was ten miles north of where they were. That is how peaceful and quiet it was. My mom used to talk about how life was so different when she was a little. She has seen so many changes in her generation; being on the trap line and it wasn't like the way it is today. Back then the community was more like a summer settlement, not as we know it today. When they started school, things changed a lot. I learned so much from my mom. I don't know what grade level she finished. It wasn't too far. She grew up on the trap line mostly. That's where she did her learning. That's just as valuable if not more valuable than mainstream education, as far as I am concerned. I always think about my mom. She always used to tell us stories about the trap line and when she was younger. I think moving away from the community, after growing up, up north and then moving to a rural community, not an Aboriginal community kind of changed the way she saw things.

It's just that when you become removed from your home and other people who speak the language and those memories you know living in that environment, you see things in a different way. My mom began to see things in a different way. She was removed from her people who spoke the language. She was removed from that whole lifestyle, that whole environment and altered the way she sees things to a certain extent. Sometimes I think it really affected our ways. My mother is really a loving [person] and I believe her life in the bush really affected her in a certain way. It didn't matter whether I went to school or work, she'd be there and she'd say, "Be careful" even if I was just crossing the street. She had those experiences [in the bush] and there was so much potential for danger and [I think] it got to her that way.

### **Institutional Narrative**

I believe I went to university because of my dad. I felt like there wasn't any choice. It felt as though it was expected of me. It's not like I didn't want to go. Ever since

I started high school, I realized it was an expectation. My dad did not come right out and say I had to go to university. That was my impression and my understanding. He didn't force me to. I grew up with an idea of what my parents' expectations were. I excelled in school when I was younger. When I was in high school my marks weren't that great; they were all right. My dad encouraged me to take the higher level courses, 100, 200, 300. There was a reason for that and I assumed it was university. I basically knew I was going to go to university if I got sponsored.

My dad helped me with my homework when I was a child but to be honest I didn't get a lot of help from my parents, academically. I read a lot when I was very young. I remember reading the encyclopedia. We weren't spoiled when we were kids. We didn't have a lot of toys or anything. I had siblings at home I could play with. We watched television and we read books. My dad got me a subscription of the National Geographic. I remember looking at the maps all the time and learning about the location of other countries. When I was in high school, I wasn't so keen on learning that much, I was kind of tired of it. I wasn't interested in school but I still maintained a good enough grade. When I think about it now it might have been better to get some work experience before I went to university but realistically it is easy to say that in retrospect. I guess my feeling then was if I didn't go then, I was not going to go later. I don't think I was mature enough though; I was seventeen. I turned eighteen a couple of months after school started. I can't believe that; it doesn't seem that long ago.

When I started university it was like an awakening. It was different meeting other Aboriginal people down south. I met a lot of people in the city. My first year was pretty lonely. It was pretty depressing. I remember watching other kids from my high school adjust to university. I remember seeing how they were doing and they were going through feelings of anxiety and fear; going into this big school where they didn't know anybody. From the beginning it didn't bother me as much. It wasn't anything new to me because I felt like I was used to feeling excluded anyway. There was no change. A lot of



those students ended up leaving university after about a month. One of my friends though completed the same program I did. I think he is a RCMP now. But a lot of those students left and my first year of school was hard. I started off pretty good and my marks were pretty high. I was doing okay. I had a B+ average until the very end of the school year. My best friend passed away that spring, in February and that was hard. I took four courses and I only completed one term paper. I didn't fail any courses but I had three D's. It wasn't good. One of them was even an Aboriginal related course; a political science course and I didn't do too well in that. I wasn't interested in school.

I took a summer course right away. I did okay and then I went back home for the summer. I came back the next year. It was rough and I started drinking a lot. I drank pretty heavily but I still went to school and finished my courses. I did average, mediocre. When I went to [back to university] the second year I started meeting more Aboriginal students. My schoolwork wasn't that great and I was placed on academic probation. I didn't go to school the next year and I took odd jobs in the city during that year but I really didn't commit to anything. I guess looking back on it I was not that mature but I smartened up when I returned to school [to university]. That is when I started progressing to a stage where I [began] improving on my marks. I started taking things more seriously.

When I think of non-Aboriginal students throughout my educational experience, it seemed that they just remained ignorant about Aboriginal issues and chose to stay that way. In university the ignorance was still there and I reached a point where I, as an Aboriginal student just got tired of it. There comes a point where there is no use in trying to explain yourself or to try to teach them about why we are so angry. The fact that we have to give some kind of explanation [i.e. sponsorship for our education] is cause enough to be angry. [We do not get free education.] You know there is a saying, "is it our duty as the oppressed to educate the oppressor?" Is it? I've lost count how many times I've heard these questions. This ignorant mentality of "why should we be responsible for what happened in the past?" And "all these Aboriginal people getting special rights and

privileges” and that we are getting handouts. [That we get everything free]. I don’t know how many times I heard that in the university. And it gets tiring trying to explain to people. How do you begin to explain? And people think that [the stereotypes, discrimination, and racism] is all in the past. [It becomes difficult] trying to get them to understand that it is still going on and that we are still suffering the consequences. We are still suffering from things that are happening to us right now. We are still in a position where our quality of life is [much] lower compared to the rest of society and they are still reaping the benefits of what’s been done to us. They are still reaping the benefits of colonization and they don’t even know it. And if they do, they don’t want to acknowledge it. So there is a lot of shame there. There’s a lot of guilt. It’s a matter of keeping things hidden. Sometimes I think people think that we exaggerate the conditions of life we live in. That it is an exaggeration to use the word “genocide,” when we talk about cultural genocide. It seems like we don’t have the right to use that word, when we are living in the poor conditions that we do. And even in the school curriculum, for example conflict resolution and international developmental studies, the two are closely related. What I noticed in those courses was that people put so much emphasis in other places of the world, like the Middle East or Northern Ireland, but they don’t have an inkling of what’s going on here. The instructors never really made an obvious effort to include anything like that in the curriculum. They don’t want to talk about Oka and they don’t want to talk about anything pertaining to the relationship between First Nations and Europeans. The way I see it [I think] it’s just a reflection of the way our relationship is as First Nations people with non-Aboriginal people. It’s a reflection of the ignorance that exists. It’s a reflection of that denial, not wanting to acknowledge the fact that the benefits that they [non-Aboriginal people] live with are [were] taken at the expense of us. That’s how this nation was founded, as we know it today as Canada and the United States, North America. It continues to be that way. Maybe a lot of the younger generation, a lot of the people who are not Aboriginal just don’t see it. I think they’re

taught not to acknowledge it, maybe subconsciously. These are the issues I still think about concerning my education and my experiences at school (both high school and post secondary).

There is a condescending attitude towards Native people, which is evident in most of the books we used in Native Studies. I would comment on this many times in class, the professors knew about this and we discussed it very often. A good portion of the documentation that has been recorded on Native people is like that. That's just the reality. At the same time it can still be useful. Because when we combine it with what our Elders say like my mother, my grandmother you can get some kind of understanding. You know I remember grade six history I had really good marks but when I think about the texts I think about all those lies and biased information our instructors told us. An example is the land bridge theory. I remember textbooks, which recounted many of the battles that were fought. When the Indians were slaughtered they were battles; they were wars but when the white people died at the hands of Native people they were called massacres. It was a pretty distorted view of history. History only started with European contact and onwards. There was no emphasis on our history. I remember my second year of university in a history class on Native people we were asked to write down all the Native leaders we knew. I didn't know any because we weren't taught about them. We talked about the British and the French, apparently the only two founding nations. I didn't know that much at all. It was just a reflection of what we were taught. I came to the realization that I didn't know a lot in terms of our history. I knew stories of my community but that was about it. I didn't know anything about anywhere else.

I felt comfortable in university for the most part but the first couple of years were tough. But when I started meeting more people I felt very comfortable. It was a valuable experience for me. I will never regret going to university. It's valuable. It was not so much the classes; it was the living experiences I had with the people I came across; things I learned from them...students, teachers and generally other people I was exposed to and

the experiences that went with them. They became very valuable. I wonder what my life would have been if I didn't go to university.

### **Moving Into the City**

I remember when I first came to the city, when I started going to university, there were a lot of things going on with Aboriginal people, like Oka. I was being exposed to people who participated in rallies, protests and others who went to ceremonies. I remember when rap music was beginning to be really popular with the youth in the city. I couldn't believe what an effect that had, even at home. It reached there a little bit later but it reached it just the same. All these people were talking different, dressing different. I guess because we are marginalized, a lot of us could identify with that. I personally didn't but a lot of people did and they still do, even pow wow dancers, the way they dress. They identify with a different culture. I guess it's an urban culture. To be honest when I was a bit younger it used to make me angry because that's not us as far as I am concerned. It made me think about a lot of things. My first reaction was "what's the matter with these people?" I used to get annoyed and then later on I figured it was a reflection of how we lost our identity. And it's manifested in how people express themselves; we don't [all] know how to speak the language and so we identify with other cultures. It is a reflection of how we lost our identity and we are grasping on to other things similar to our own and choose to identify in that way. At the same time it waters down our identity as Anishinabec. I think there is so much we can learn and we should be excited about learning the language. We need language in the curriculum because satellite television is big competition against the older generation when they try to reach the young. We've seen those changes in our communities. They've happened very quickly.

Living in the city is different. I'm used to living in a small community. It's something I am still adapting to. For me the city is a very lonely place. There are a lot of people but to me there isn't a sense of community. There is some sense of a community

amongst Aboriginal people. It's very tightly knit in many ways. To me, there are negative and positive aspects of it. Everyone seems to know everyone. The negative and positive aspects depend largely on what kind of people you become peers with at a social level. There are times I feel part of the community, the Aboriginal community in the city. It's different when I live on the reserve. On the reserves, everyone knows what's going on with everyone. There can be a lot of gossip. To me it's almost the same way in the city but not quite because we live in different neighborhoods. Attending pow wows in the city could be a time to meet with people I have not seen for awhile and that can be really positive.

### **Identity: That is Who I Am**

I never felt embarrassed about being who I was. My mom made sure I would never feel that I was less than anybody else. I think my mom really instilled that pride in me about being Native. I never once felt embarrassed about being *Anishinabe*. I believe that I've always been aware of my identity. I come from two cultural backgrounds. My mom as far as I know is full-blooded. I think there is even some Sioux ancestry in her. My great, great grandmother was Sioux. I know it sounds like a cliché but it's true. My great, great grandmother was a Sioux. She was a Sioux princess (*chuckles*). My dad is of Irish and German ancestry. I guess English too. It's kind of a mix. I don't deny either side. To be honest I've always identified myself as *Anishinabe* because that is how I felt the world saw me and that's how I've always felt comfortable identifying myself. I guess it had a lot to do with the fact that my family from his side are far away and we only saw them once a year. Whereas we would visit my mom's family for two months every year and those winter road trips, in the winter and in the spring. So I always felt that I could identify more with Native kids. I want to be respectful of how the Metis identify themselves but I never identified myself as Metis. Some people have asked me that and I tell them that I don't identify myself as Metis because that is not a part of my culture as far as I see it. Their culture is something specific as far as I am concerned. If people can

trace back their roots back to that heritage, that's fine. But for me personally, I identify myself as *Anishinabe*. Some people are offended with the term "half-breed" but I don't care if someone calls me "half-breed." When I was growing up amongst non-Aboriginal people, they saw me as being Native. I was not white enough. I had some friends and I had a couple of meaningful friendships but for the most part that was it. I didn't have a lot of friends when I was away from my mom's community. I always felt like I wasn't really fully accepted. I was to a degree. Even my teachers, I always felt discriminated because they treated me differently. I excelled at an early age in school but I don't think that was really recognized by some of my teachers because I think I wasn't treated the same as the other students. To be honest there was still some feeling of not fully belonging when I went to the reserve as well. But it was not as extreme as it was down south. I always felt more or less like that was my home, the reserve. I'd get teased because I did not know how to speak *Anishinabemowin*. I guess it affected me but not so much that it broke my spirit. In a lot of ways, growing up in a small town isolated from my people almost did. Because when I look back, thinking of memories as a child, when I started going to school, I was very outgoing and outspoken as a kid. Slowly that changed because I felt like I did not have a place. But now that I am trying to learn more about who I am, I feel a little more grounded. It makes me feel good and strong.

### **Positioning Myself in the Language: Where Do I Fit?**

You know when I was four or five years old, I spoke more than I did when I was a bit older. My mom told me I would speak to the older ones. But when I got older I did not speak [the language] that much. My mom always spoke to us in English and Saulteaux and I guess it was always engrained in us. In a way we knew what she was saying but I personally, didn't get into a habit of responding back in the language. I answered her in English. It hasn't been until now that I am older that I am making more of an effort to learn more.

But the year my cousin lived with us, was a good year and maybe that was the start of really making an attempt to speak a little bit more because he was there. He spoke English well and he has always spoken the language, he's fluent. He offered to teach me syllabics. He used to work with the Native Studies program at the local school. [He offered to teach me and he would use syllabics]. He said he could do that but I want my mom to teach me. But I feel like I am running out of time. I hope my grandma is around for a while but the truth is that we are all getting older and we're running out of time. I feel sad and I have to start speaking [*Anishinabemowin*]. I make more of an effort to try and say things in the language so we can speak to each other. Usually my mom is there when I talk with my grandma, so she translates.

I've always felt close with my extended family. I consider a lot of my cousins to be almost like brothers. Some cousins are closer than others but I find that's really common among Indian people, the extended family. And even though I didn't grow up with him, I spent that one-year with him and we've always had that relationship, where we are like brothers. His dad I remember at one point in time said, "treat each other good cause you are like brothers." I've always felt that way with my cousins. I know I am going to learn to speak more fluently. I am really fortunate that I have peers that speak fluently and they speak both languages very well. I identify with the people from back home. I see them come to the big city and I like their demeanor. I like the way they speak the language. They are not afraid to do that and why shouldn't they speak their language. I am happy when I see them.

If I compare myself to the people in the city, it seems like they think I speak more fluently but when I am on the reserve, I feel I don't know how to speak like everyone else. I understand quite a bit. There is a lot I don't know and that's the truth. I don't know if I will ever get to a position [where] I will be able to speak the same way as a person who grew up speaking the language as their first language. I don't consider myself fluent. I speak quite a bit I guess when I have to but I do not feel confident in myself. And there

are fewer people who speak *Anishinabemowin* here in the city. There are not too many people to talk to. Sometimes when I am around Elders that I know here in the city, they will speak to me and I try to speak to them as much as I can. Sometimes they are surprised that I speak because to be honest there are not many young people who speak the language anymore. Even back home on the reserve, when I was little and I would go up there for the summer, my cousins who were the same age as me did not speak English. So I had to speak in my broken Saulteaux when we played. But now it's different, when I go up there and I see little ones playing, they are all speaking English now. Some of them still speak Saulteaux but it's mixed now. Before there was no English being spoken but now those young ones are starting to speak English and I guess I am afraid the use of language is going to become weakened.

When you first approached me I was reluctant. "I thought I don't know if I can be of much use." I don't speak as much as I think I should but you know I believe that I have to go home sooner or later. Out of all my siblings, I am the only one who lives in the city now. The whole family lives back home on the reserve. I am the youngest and one by one they went back home to the community. They are all at a point where I consider them fluent speakers because they live there. They went through a process where people would laugh at them if they made a mistake. But they just kept trying, kept doing it and now they are at a point where they are all speaking the language. My oldest sister always spoke it out of all of us when we grew up down south. I am really proud of my sister. She is so independent. She's learned a lot [since she's moved back home]. I feel like I want to go home just to catch up to her. I have an older sibling who never left the reserve. He stayed home and always spoke both, English and Saulteaux.

I go through so many feelings when I think about the language. I get frustrated; I get frustrated when I compare myself to them. My grandma doesn't speak English; I can count on one hand how many times I have heard her say English words. That's the truth. I can't really have a conversation with her in the dialect of the language. When I talk to



the Elders down here, it's a little bit different. I don't know what it is but maybe they are just accommodating me. They mix *Saulteaux* and English and then I respond the same way. The Elders at home do not do that. They speak "old school," [meaning they speak it the way it is supposed to be spoken. They do not mix *Anishinabemowin* and English]. I understand them a lot of the time but speaking back to them is more challenging for me. I figure the best way to learn is to go back home. I am going to do that eventually.

Every summer I feel like going back home. It never happens though. I'm trying to maintain work to support myself here in the city and there's not that many jobs back home. So I am always caught. I just started an indeterminate job last week. I left one job I almost feel a little sad because I am not going home for another summer.

### **Language: A Way of Being Judged**

A year and half ago my grandma ended up in the hospital and it was pretty serious. She was in the hospital for a couple of weeks and for whatever reason nobody could escort her to the city right away. I would go and visit with her everyday. She enjoyed that and I did too. But it was hard. It was really hard and I realized if I could just be immersed, be around it and be in a position where I had to speak it, I would learn a lot more. I learned a lot more within those two weeks. But it was frustrating because the doctor and nurse would come in and the nurse would talk about what was going on and she wanted me to translate how my grandma felt. My grandma told me how she felt in *Saulteaux* and I told the nurse the best I could. But when it came time to telling my grandma what the doctor said, it was hard and I got really frustrated. I remember the nurse looking at me like "don't you know how to speak to her?" And that was a very sick feeling. It was like shame but it was anger at the same time.

You know we've been forced to assimilate and yet they're often surprised when we don't know how to speak the language or know about our culture. That's how I felt at the time. Really frustrated. But I have it in mind to go back home and learn, someday. I

am fortunate; I think I am lucky in my situation compared to other Aboriginal people because my peers back home speak a relatively high level of Ojibway and can teach me. When my mother phones she speaks to me in the language. Sometimes I have to ask her to slow down because realistically I don't understand everything she is saying. She has started to make more of an effort to speak to me in the language on a regular basis now that I am older. She knows I want to learn. She speaks to me a lot in Saulteaux. I answer her in English and Saulteaux. It's hard to do but I do. It's the same with my cousins. They call me and certain cousins speak more Saulteaux more often. When I hang around with them long enough I start to pick up quite a bit. For the past couple of years, I feel like I have not gone home as often as I used to and I feel like I am starting to lose it. Sometimes I surprise my siblings like my older brothers if they hear me speak. They laugh at me because they really don't hear me speak it that often. I remember phoning my parent's place; my older brother answered the phone and I asked to speak to my sister and he said "*Awaanane kiin?*" (Who are you?). [He sounded annoyed.] He was acting like an overly protective brother. I told him it was me and he started laughing and said, "I hardly ever hear you speak *Anishinabe*."

My girlfriend is in the same position as I am. Almost identical. Although her community is not isolated like ours [his mother's community up north] you can go there by road anytime but they still preserve the language. Her grandfather speaks the language. I go out there and visit. I try to speak to him. I think he enjoys that and I like speaking to him but he knows my understanding is limited. I like him a lot. He knows my girlfriend is trying to learn too. He always encourages her to speak and not to let anyone stop her from trying to speak. [Also] not to have that feeling of shame or anything when somebody laughs. He's very patient. He is a very good teacher. I'm going to learn a lot from him too. I have a lot of respect for him.

## Aboriginal Worldview

As Aboriginal people we look at things our own way; a lot of that is rooted in the language. It comes directly from the language. [It's] just the way we see the world, the concepts we have and the understanding that we have in general. When non-Aboriginal people want to have an understanding or try to understand something from an Aboriginal perspective, I honestly don't think they can. I really don't think they can. Our worldview is rooted in the language and it is drastically different from other worldviews. An example is the way we classify things as animate and inanimate. English speaking people consider rocks and trees inanimate and if you want to break it down in a grammatical sense we can talk about those suffixes like *mitick* (tree) *mitickok* (trees, an animate suffix). It shows that we see it as being a living thing with spirit. *Asin*, *asiniik* (rocks). And when you put the ok sound, suffix *inninowok*, (men) *ekwewok* (women) those are living things whereas things with an "an" suffix like *onagun*, (dish) *onagunan* (dishes) are inanimate and they are not living things. That's the best way I can understand it [Aboriginal worldview]. It's different when we speak in the language. If we speak about he or she, the context is always in the third person. If we are talking about an action we express it in a verb. *Pimosay*, he or she is walking. There is no distinction between he and she. It's just third person. Those are just a couple of examples of how our worldview is expressed in the language. It is evident in the language and when you are brought up and that is the language you speak in your mind, it's a part of who you are. It's a reflection how we think as human beings, as *Anishinabec*. It's different than English. When we talk about worldview, there are certain things that are kind of complicated to describe in English because they are based on different understandings, different worldviews and I know worldview is an anthropological term but it makes sense. That's how we see the world. These concepts are engrained in us and when we don't speak the language or we haven't been brought up hearing the language we lose that, we don't have it, it is not part of our identity anymore. [I think] it affects the young who do not speak the language. It is

becoming lost. We can be taught those things but it is not the same if we do not speak the language. Because it is not something you can just be taught, it is a part of who you become [especially] if you grew up speaking the language.

I remember when I was in university; I worked on a research project as an Aboriginal liaison. [My task was to give advice to the researchers] an idea on how they could do their research in terms of being sensitive to Aboriginal perspectives or issues. After doing all that research, [the professors who were doing the research] realized they did not have any input from Aboriginal communities and they wanted to be culturally sensitive, I guess. No matter how much my co-worker and I (as research assistants) tried to make things a bit easier to understand, it seemed futile because they could never really grasp the concepts we were talking about. I'm sure many of those people were very sincere about what they were trying to accomplish but it was after the fact. In the end it seemed like it was more a formality, instead of a real desire to [understand the research from] an Aboriginal perspective. It seemed like it was something they were obligated to do. It was a politically correct way of doing something but it should have been part of the process right from the beginning.

The word protocol is often used by non-Aboriginal people when they refer to our traditional ways. That word has no meaning for me whatsoever. It is a foreign Ideology. It's a foreign concept and it's alien to us [*Anishinabec*]. That's a reflection of things I was going through when I was trying to help out with that research. A lot of the times we were trying to find ways of expressing or describing the kind of research they were doing to First Nations people. We were using terms and terminology, based on foreign concepts because they originate from a European worldview. How could we make these [terms] understandable to First Nations people? For the most part, we couldn't because we couldn't translate them. I have mixed feelings about [the word protocol]. I think it is a reflection of the times we are living in now. People are making more of an effort to be politically correct and I guess, sometimes peoples' intentions can be sincere. Sometimes

it's just part of playing the game. Sometimes it's kind of contrived and that's when it becomes annoying to talk about things like protocol. It does not come from the heart. It doesn't come with emotion and it doesn't come with true respect. It's more of an obligation and gaining access to something. It's not reciprocal. It's about taking and it's about a means to an end.

### **Why of Language**

I took an Ojibway class in university because I wanted to speak at a higher level. I loved that class. It was a lot of fun. It brought my speaking skills up. That course did me a lot of good and it was a good experience. I want to learn more for a lot of reasons. I want to learn so I can speak. I want to learn so that when I have children, hopefully I'm blessed to have children sometime in the future. I want them to speak. I want to be able to speak with them. I want grandma, my mom to speak to them and tell them stories at night. I want to learn about the old ways [the culture] because [I] can't fully understand unless [I] speak the language. I guess that is [one of] the main reason I wanted to start learning. That's not to be disrespectful for anyone who speaks English and wants to pursue that way of life. For me, personally I feel I have to speak the language [to be able] to appreciate and to fully understand to the best of my ability.

### **Christianity Versus Spirituality**

I was brought up Catholic growing up in a non-Aboriginal community. We went to church every Sunday. We didn't miss mass. And we went through the sacraments. We were kind of brought up strict. We followed that way. And for some reason when I got to be about nineteen or so, I stopped going to church regularly. I don't know why. I guess it happens to a lot of people. When I started meeting more Native people, that's when I started learning about the culture, traditional culture. I always thought it was ironic how people here in the city and some of the southern communities knew so much about traditional ceremonies. And back home everyone is Christian and yet they speak the

language, you know the high level of speaking. It's ironic. It was weird but I started slowly exposing myself to ceremonies. But that's all I did. I just exposed myself more at a slow pace. I didn't dive into it. I wasn't overly excited about it right away. I started taking courses that were related to Aboriginal spirituality and I started to get more interested and that's why I started asking my mom questions. I don't want to say I learned a lot from the classroom but it helped me to know what kind of questions to ask and that's when I started learning quite a bit more. My mother never hesitated to tell me anything about the old ways even though we were brought up Catholic. She never rejected the old ways completely. They had a place. She never rejected it. You know the church has a history of teaching us that our ways are not good. "It's the wrong way" and that's the struggle I have always felt, an inner conflict I continue to deal with to this day. I am starting to go to church again. But at the same time I still believe that the church and the culture both have a place in my life.

We prayed a lot. We would usually say the rosary once a week together as a family. It took about 10 or 15 minutes to drive to another town to go to church and so we would say the rosary on the way there. And we would usually do it once a week at home in the evening. We would do the different mysteries on different nights, different days of the week. Yeah I remember praying a lot, part of that Catholic upbringing. That probably kept me going because we went to church every Sunday. We didn't miss. You know I probably don't acknowledge that as much as I should and like I mentioned before I am starting to go back but not regularly yet. Both of my parents had a lot of faith.

My mom told me our home community still had traditional ceremonies when she was a little girl. She told me about my grandpa, the things he took care of, the sacred "items." I don't think she really participated in ceremonies like I have. I guess I'm in a position where I am exposed to it now. There was an Elder who still practiced the shaking tent ceremony but unfortunately it is not taking place any longer. She comments on the irony about the south and the north, too. She finds it ironic that the southern

communities have the knowledge and are in a position to strengthen the ceremonies again. That's not really happening in our community. At least it is not brought to the forefront. It's not visible but it's still there. It's still there whether the people admit it or not and it's still with the Elders. They still know about the old ways. And personally I think whether they know it or not, the young ones know a lot too. Because it is in the language and they speak that language, more so than down here in the south. It's just in the language. It's in the way we see the world especially the ones that speak more. They see the world differently compared to the people who live in the city and do not speak the language. It's like the way we see things as being alive, having a spirit. It's a very descriptive language. Some people might laugh at what we believe and the way we see the world, about nature. But we have a relationship with the land, it's sacred, it's "different." It's our own. Some people might be able to grasp the concepts to a certain extent but many don't and perhaps never will. I believe many would [understand the concept of animate and inanimate but not necessarily all of them. It just comes from the environment that we grew up in. I don't know if we have qualities that are considered Aboriginal. I don't know if those things are innate in all of us? I think we can have an understanding of it if we have grandparents or relatives who speak the language and share these things with us or we've witnessed them first hand. We learn from observation. I think it's much stronger when we are brought up speaking [the] language and understanding that way.

I believe people have a lot of misconceptions about Aboriginal spirituality is. They think we worship the birds and animals but that is not the way I understand it. It comes from a different worldview. The European culture for the most part sees things as being dead; not having a spirit and that's not how we see things. We see all living things as having spirit and I don't believe we worship these things. It's just that we have a relationship with them as living beings and we respect them because we believe they have a spirit. And as spiritual things we all have a relationship [with] Creator.

I am beginning to learn from going to ceremonies from and being exposed to those teachings, from listening and from observing. There is so much to learn. A lot of the teachings are based on simple realities, simple truths but at the same time there is so much knowledge out there. We are always learning and it's a life long process. It's about life; that's when we speak about *pimatisiwin*. The good life. That's what it's all about. It's a search for a good life and being well, to heal.

### **Learning From Other Books**

This is a book written by a missionary I used it for one of my term papers. [*If I name the book; I risk identifying Aanung and his mother's community*]. I guess when I was reading this book I was kind of thinking about religion and spirituality because I come from both backgrounds. We were brought up to go to church and yet we learned about the traditional culture. I was thinking about [my] inner conflict. When I read it, I read a lot between the lines but some of the things I came across in the book made me do a lot of thinking. To be honest some things disturbed me. I thought about whether my mother's community benefited from it at all. I guess some of the things that really struck me [were the way] the author described how the ceremonies took place and how they ceased to exist. I guess in my mind, some of it is questionable. I guess it is just how things evolved. People putting away and moving away from a certain way of life and grasping to another. I guess it made me think about how it was back then. My mom always talked about how there was never any problem with alcohol when they were young. And when I think about that now, the ceremonies are not there anymore and alcoholism is a big problem in the community. They are all Christians now. I have mixed feelings about it. It's like we lost something, but the language is still there.

The main reason I showed you the book is because there are pictures of my mom and my grandpa. It was interesting reading about our community. There is one that I read, my dad bought it for me and it was by a priest, who lived up there a long time ago. I



couldn't read it too much. Those books I can only read for so long. They are interesting but it's always a matter of reading between the lines. If I go over what they say I kind of get annoyed, very annoyed really. Because they display condescending attitudes towards the people, especially the ones who practiced, the healers in the community. I don't think [the authors] have the same understanding of our spirit world as we do. I would also be skeptical as to whether or not they grasped that understanding of living. What we consider living [*pimatissiwin*]. Maybe they did but personally I kind of doubt it.

[When I read books written by Aboriginal authors] usually it is from their experiences. They are not books written in our language, they are written in English. There is [usually] an underlying theme, a commonality [which exists] among Aboriginal authors. They tend to write from experience, about their personal experiences not so much about research, taking an academic approach like how academic scholars do. When I think about that I think about school, I think about grammar and how we were taught not write down [I] (from the perspective of the first person. Why is that wrong? It's part of that different worldview. I think we can also learn vicariously through other people. It comes across when someone shares her or his personal experiences. Though I think in the end, we all learn best from personal experience.

### **Homeplace**

When I go home to my mom's community I feel really good. I certainly feel a strong connection when I go home. There are many spirits there. I dream about home all the time. Some dreams are very vivid and sometimes the time frame of my dream is almost like an entire day. I intend on going home at some point in my life, in the future to learn how to speak more, to experience that. My grandpa passed away when I was about three. I have many memories from when I was small, even of crawling but I have no memories of him. I asked my grandma questions about him and she has told me lots of things. I spoke to my mom on the phone over the weekend and she told me they had a

feast, a memorial feast for my grandpa. They invited family members. I wish I could have been there. I know some people do it for four years after but we do it every year. We still burn tobacco and make that offering. Like I said [my mother's community] is highly Christianized but at the same time we still keep a lot of things from before and they will never go away.

[When I was young] and when we went home to my mom's community, I would play with my cousins. We were all about the same age. We would go fishing. My cousin would go fishing with my dad and I. I'd go blue berry picking with my grandma and I remember watching her cut fish a lot. Whenever we caught fish she'd cut it. She would put cardboard on the floor and [filet the fish on it] and I always loved watching her. My cousins and I played outside a lot. We would go tobogganing in the winter. We would slide down a hill towards the lake. In the summer, we would play with slingshots; the kind you made from a [branch]. We used to go to a place we called "*ishpapakang*" (cliff) it was really high and we would go for a walk there in the summer time. It was nice.

We would always stay at my grandmother's home. We were always around her. It wasn't until I was older that I made more of an effort to spend more time with her was no particular reason for going home to my mother's community it was just that time personally. I was too busy playing when I was little and just being around the younger ones. When I look back on it now, I realize how lonely my mother must have been living away from her home community. Not really being around any Native people at all. She was limited to making phone calls to keep in touch with the family. We'd be out of school for the summer and my dad would also get the summer off so we would go to the reserve. We loved going home. As a child I was happy growing up in the home. It was a happy home but after the summer holidays I didn't like leaving my mother's community. It was always a big adjustment to come back. For me I didn't like coming back south [to the rural town]. I didn't like it. I never really felt I belonged in that town and going to

school there. I didn't like it. In my mind, the reserve was my real home. I loved the land. I loved my family. I was always happy when I went home for the summer.

We didn't really speak the language in that small town. It was mostly my mom speaking to us in the language. My dad did not learn to speak the language but he knows what my mom is saying. Sometimes he'll joke around and he'll say [something] in a sarcastic voice and mimic my mom when she is saying something. My sister is two years older than I am so we used to play together quite a bit. I spoke English all the time until we went home in the summer time. We would go to the reserve and we would be with our cousins. When we were little my cousins did not speak English; they only spoke Saulteaux. My sister always spoke more than I did. For some reason she always picked up more. She's always spoken more Saulteaux than me. We would speak the language around our cousins. Most of time I would speak English and they would respond in Saulteaux but I did try to speak Saulteaux, too.

### **Becoming**

I went through a period during university where I wasn't really self-disciplined. I did a lot things where I was living just to have a good time and I didn't really discipline myself. That had to change and it eventually did. I quit drinking. I quit smoking. I quit going out. I changed the atmosphere, the environment I would hang out in. I changed my peers. I made those changes. It wasn't that long ago. During my last two years of university I was pretty disciplined. I've changed a lot in the past three and a half years and I've learned a lot. I went through many negative experiences with that lifestyle and I eventually recognized that I wasn't really happy. By then my parents were already gone back to the reserve. I was by myself and I had to grow up. It wasn't time to be a kid anymore. I knew how lonely I felt coming off from bingeing. I wasn't happy. Maybe some people tell themselves they are happy when they are doing those things but anyone that says that is lying as far as I am concerned. I knew I wasn't happy at that point. It's

superficial happiness when you're living like that. I knew I had to make changes and my strength came from going to ceremonies. I hear a lot of people my age talk about how they went through periods where they were ashamed of being Native. I'm fortunate I have never felt that way. I can honestly say I never felt ashamed. I'm grateful because my experience is different [from] their experiences. We all face different circumstances. Both of my parents were really good role models. I never saw my parents drink. I never saw them smoke. I never saw them hit each other. I saw that with other families but I never saw that with my parents. It has affected the way I felt because that is how I identified as being Native was through my mom and my grandma. [For other Aboriginal people] I believe the impact of colonization has contributed to being ashamed of who they are, [which may lead to] having difficulty with their identity.

I am more closely connected with the culture now. I was already making an effort to learn about it before but I wasn't committed, I wasn't disciplined. I smoked cigarettes; I drank alcohol. I thought I was beginning to have an understanding but I really was not leading that kind of lifestyle. I [now] have a lot of respect about walking that path, that red road. I think there is a lot of work needed [to heal] our selves and our people, but unfortunately there is a lot of contradiction. I get sad when I hear about people who claim to walk a certain way but they are not being good role models to young people. I'll give you an example like pow wow. I like going to pow wow. I think a lot of young people need to be told you can't walk on two different roads, you can't dance and sing at the drum and then go [to a drinking] party. I don't agree with that. I feel strongly about that but not to a point where I want to talk about people in a negative way. For me it hurts because I think it's not a good thing for younger people to see these choices as being okay. We need to be stronger. We need to be disciplined, to live healthier because there's a lot of responsibility that comes with this kind of life. It's not easy. I've heard people say we shouldn't attack the messenger but we should listen to the message. We're killing the message if we are not living up to it and we are not presenting ourselves in a good and

respectful manner. If we're not following the message that we are carrying out then it defeats the whole purpose and it kills the message, the good message, the positive message we are trying to send out. The young ones aren't stupid; they can see and they have all the senses to witness those things. It doesn't make our pursuit for that kind of life as strong as it should be. It doesn't become really that meaningful because they sense that dishonesty. I just want to say that. We are all human and I don't wish to put judgement on anyone. I've done it myself because I have been a walking contradiction. It's not to be judgmental. I really care for our people and I have so much to learn. I want to have all my senses so I can learn. Life is hard but it can really be rewarding.

## **CHAPTER 6** **Composing a Life with Aanung**

### **Negotiating My Entry with Aanung**

Like Niin, I had also contacted Aanung before I left for New Zealand. When I called him and told him about my research, I mentioned I had thought of him as I wrote my proposal and was now calling him to see if he wanted to participate. He seemed hesitant but I got the sense he was really interested. As a way of negotiating my entry, I suggested he take some time to think about it and when he thought he was ready, to call me and we would meet for lunch. He called about a week later and we met for lunch on January 17, 2002. I remember driving downtown; it was a bright, cold January afternoon and I still wondered whether Aanung would participate in my research. I had a copy of my proposal and a copy of the informed consent form but before I showed him the proposal we discussed my research topic further.

When we finished lunch, he still had not decided. I gave him a copy of the proposal to read and to take some more time to think about it. He called a week later and said he was ready to sign the informed consent form January 28, 2002 (noted in my field notes). We went for lunch that day and after he signed the informed consent form, I asked him if he had an e-mail address so I could stay in touch with him while I was away but he didn't. I promised I would call him when I got back from New Zealand and we would meet at his place for our conversations. His response was "Let's not meet at my place. I don't have much furniture. I only have one chair in the living room." I told him I didn't mind. I said, "We can sit on the floor to talk." He wondered whether we should meet somewhere else, maybe at the university. I reminded him that it was important for me that I protect his identity and I did not want to place him in a situation where someone might see us together. I told him it was not so much that someone would see us together. The hesitation was I would be taping all our conversations. After I explained my reason for wanting to converse with him at his home, he agreed we would meet in his apartment.

*When he told me about his apartment, I thought about my bachelor apartment in my second year of university. None of my furniture matched. I had a twin size bed, a lamp, two chairs and a small kitchen table. They were just pieces I got from second hand stores or someone had handed down to me. I didn't invite anyone to come over to my place nor did I want anyone to see where I lived. Had I been embarrassed about my living conditions? Was Aanung embarrassed?*

*As I was driving home from lunch I felt good and happy that Aanung was going to participate but I also felt a sense I was abandoning him. I thought about him many times when I was away. We had begun our conversation when he said, "I don't know if I can be of much use. I don't speak [Anishinabe] as much as I think I should but you know I believe that I should go home sooner or later" (Aanung, January 17, 2002). My immediate thought was, is this not one way language and identity are connected because it has to do with place. Aanung associated his ability to speak the language with his mother's community, a community he also regards as home. I thought I haven't lived in Bloodvein for years and yet I still call it home. Going home means I am still connected with my family and my relatives at home and I am still connected to the land. This is how I have chosen to define myself. I acknowledge the place where I was born. I knew in my heart he had a story or two to tell and I wanted to engage in a conversation with him.*

*Now three months later, May 7, 2002 I was on my way to his apartment. I wondered what our relationship would be like? In some ways, I was comforted with the thought of knowing that through negotiating my entry we already had formed a relationship.*

I remember being excited as I was driving to Aanung's place. I knocked on the door and Aanung invited me to sit at the kitchen table. A very good place to have a conversation I thought. Aanung offered me a glass of water and as he sat down, I said maybe we should check to see if the tape recorder works and see if it will pick up our voices. Aanung seemed nervous and I don't think he was totally comfortable. My task, I

reminded myself was to make him feel as comfortable as I could. But when he began telling me about his mother, he became much more relaxed and seemed at ease with himself and our conversation.

### **Sharing and Reliving Family Stories**

Aanung began...

My mom used to tell us stories all the time especially about how they used to go out on the trap line. My mom used to talk about how life was so different when she was little. I don't know what grade level she finished. It wasn't too far. She grew up on the trap line mostly. That's where she did her learning. That is just as valuable if not more valuable than mainstream education as far as I am concerned.

*As I watched, listened and attended to his story about his mother, it was easy to see Aanung's deep admiration and respect for his mother. I could not help but think about my own father, my uncles and my brothers when they would go up to the trap line. Sometimes my father would be away for two or three months. In preparation for the journey, my mother cooked at least fifteen bannocks for my father to take. As my father packed his grub boxes, everything was done methodically, double-checking to make sure there would be enough tea, sugar, flour and all the basics he and my brothers and uncles would need for three months. I also thought about my mother and how she and my younger brothers and sisters would have to find our own food. My mother showed my siblings and I how to set snares for rabbits and we would go out every morning to check the snares. Sometimes we would get a rabbit or two but many times we didn't get anything. I remember one time there seemed to be a long period of time we didn't get anything. Food was running out and my mother refused to go on welfare. (She must have learned sometime in her life that being on welfare was frowned upon and it was a way of being judged, as I did when I got older). One spring, the snow was beginning to melt. I remember walking back home with her (I don't remember how old I was) from the local store after unsuccessfully trying to get food on credit. She was walking in front of me. All of sudden she said, "Naapin (Look)" as she bent down to pick something up from the*



ground and when she stood up, she held a can of Klik with a big smile on her face. Someone must have dropped it on the way home during the winter months. We had something to eat that night and continued to wait for my father to come home. As I listened to Aanung tell stories of his mother, the life I shared with my mother and father seemed so long ago and yet they were ever so present at that moment. They were staring at me in the face; they were with us in spirit. They are a part of my life and who I have come to be and becoming but I needed Aanung to remind me, to recollect and to relive those moments. I say Miigwetch to Aanung for this experience but especially for allowing me to hear my mother's voice again. His mother grew up on the trap line and that is where she received her learning and education. This is something Aanung holds in the highest regard, especially the fact that his mother, even though she left her home community to get married and lived in a non-Aboriginal community she continued to speak Anishinabe. My father too received his education in the bush, on the lake, and on the trap line. I had forgotten that until Aanung began talking about his mother's education. Besides the stories of the trap line, Aanung said, "Sometimes [my mother] would tell us stories that grandpa would tell them during the winter time. We call them *atsokanag*." [Traditionally *Anishinabec* only told these stories (legends) in the wintertime and it is still widely practiced].

Aanung talked about how his family ate, prayed and went everywhere together. *I thought about when I grew up in Bloodvein. My mother took us everywhere. She took us when she visited her friends, relatives and getting a babysitter for us was very rare. Aanung described how they went to church every Sunday, and how they said the rosary. We went to church every Sunday too and we would sing hymns in Anishinabe but we also went to mass every morning at 6:30 during the week.* Going to church is still important to Aanung and like his mother he believes both Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality have a place in his life. However he also admits he has an inner conflict with balancing the two. He said, "My mother never hesitated to tell me anything about the old ways even

though we were brought up Catholic. She never rejected the old ways. They had a place.” When he read the book that he had brought out from his memory box, he was reminded of his inner conflict between religion and Aboriginal spirituality. The book was about his mother’s community and it described how the community switched from practicing traditional ceremonies to Christianity. Although Aanung describes himself as coming from both he admits he has some concerns. He said, “I have mixed feelings about it. It’s like we lost something, but the language is still there.” This sense of loss is disturbing for Aanung but at the same time he continues to practice both.

When Aanung related the story of his Catholic upbringing he said, “I probably do not acknowledge that as much as I should.” *I found it interesting because I sometimes want to forget that part of my life but Aanung is right. By my acknowledging it I can see how the beliefs and the ideology of the Catholic Church shaped who I was at that time of my life. And in some ways those beliefs continue to challenge me still today. It was important for my mother to bring us up Catholic but today I have a choice. Some of my brothers and sisters continue to attend church and the others follow the traditional way and attend ceremonies. I no longer go to church but I do attend ceremonies when I can. Aanung also reminded me of the Christian beliefs I held as a child, both at home and in the residential school. I was reminded of my fear of the devil, going to hell and how hard I had to work to go to heaven. I shudder now when I recall sitting in Catechism classes and remembering how scared I used to be imagining burning in the fires of hell. When I think about it I had so much fear. Now if I compare it to how I feel when I go into the sweat lodge or pray to the Great Spirit, the Creator privately in the bush, by a river, anywhere, it is not fear I feel but a feeling of serenity and humility. I wonder when my beliefs changed.*

### **Choosing to Identify as Anishinabe**

Aanung mentioned repeatedly that he has always been proud to be *Anishinabe*. He said, “I never felt embarrassed about being who I was. I think my mom instilled that pride in me about being Native.” Aanung used Native and *Anishinabe* interchangeably and he only used the word Indian when he related his experiences with racism and discrimination in elementary and high school. As we continued to converse, it became quite clear that Aanung’s relationship with his mother contributed to Aanung’s identity as *Anishinabe*. His father is non-Aboriginal and although Aanung recognizes himself as “half” he does not see himself as Metis. He believes the Metis culture is quite distinct and he doesn’t consider himself part of that culture. *I thought about my mother, who was Metis and it occurred to me I had not seen her as Metis. The only time it was obvious was when my maternal grandparents came to visit in the summer.* Aanung explained how he defined himself and why. When he told me about his experiences as a young boy he said “growing up down south, people saw me as Native. I was not white enough.” He also felt more at home in his mother’s community than where he grew up.

### **Connection Between Home and Language**

Aanung sees a connection between language and home and it is a reminder for himself where his roots are and where he comes from. Although he did not grow up on the reserve, he not only has a strong connection to the land but also with the people in his mother’s community. He believes the best way to learn *Anishinabemowin* is to go home and he frequently mentioned he is going to eventually do just that. After being away from her community, Aanung wondered how that might have affected his mother’s ability to speak the language. He told me he asked her “Do you think in the language or do you think in English?” She kind of laughed and said that, “she is starting to think more in English.”

*I remember when my visits home to Bloodvein became less frequent I noticed my ability to speak and think in Anishinabe did not come as easily. I found myself wanting to*

*translate Anishinabe words into English or vice versa. Conversations I had in my dreams were still in Anishinabe and I apparently spoke Anishinabemowin in my sleep (according to my partner. I wonder if that was a good thing). I noticed as the Anishinabe language became more absent in my everyday life, the more I began to think in English. I was reminded of this experience when Aanung wondered how his mother's move to a rural, non-Aboriginal community affected her. He said, "She was removed from the people who spoke the language. She was removed from that whole lifestyle, that whole environment" and he believes the removal "altered the way his mother saw things to a certain extent."*

*In Chapter One, I wrote about my disconnection from home when I was in residential school and while attending high school. Although I could not describe the void I felt, today I understand it was similar to how Aanung describes his mother's way of looking at things. I did not realize by being removed from my family, my environment might have changed my outlook. At the time Aanung made this statement, I did not realize it was so multi-layered. I did not see the stories within his wonder. It is a reminder that by moving away to go to school, I too experienced a subtle loss of my language. I became less fluent. I wondered if my way of looking at things was altered, as Aanung believed his mother's way was.*

### **Schooling Experiences and Yearning to go Home**

Growing up in a non-Aboriginal rural town, Aanung found himself being the only the Aboriginal student in his classrooms and in the schools he attended. He got into many fights because he was discriminated against for being different. He explained this by saying, "They used to call me names, swear at me and sometimes they would talk about my mom." *I understood why he would get mad if the non-Aboriginal students would insult his mother. I recall getting mad at the other students when they called my parents, my brothers and sisters names. In grade five or six I remember getting into fights with the*

*other girls. It may have happened only a couple of times because when my mother found out I got into a fight I found myself in worse trouble. I either a spanking or I was given more chores to do or both. I figured it out quickly that it was not worth it. Other than his siblings, Aanung did not know any other Aboriginal students. He said, "I didn't have [a] place at school with the other kids. I enjoyed my time at home but I really didn't like going to school." As Aanung related this experience to me and his reactions to the experiences, I could not imagine him going through something so difficult at such a young and vulnerable age. I recalled sitting in classrooms in high school and university as an adult and feeling alone, isolated and alienated because there were no other Aboriginal students in my classes. I thought then it was hard but listening to Aanung, it must have been extremely difficult for him.*

And yet in his resilient nature, Aanung commented,

I was pretty independent when it came to school and life at home. Those were two separate things. For everything that came with school I was pretty much independent. I did my homework myself and the same goes for the problems that came with it. I pretty much kept to myself.

*I remember in high school I pretty much kept to my self, too. I was living in the city away from my family. In some ways, although I was living with a non-Aboriginal family, the expectations in the home were the same as my home. Study, do your homework, go to school everyday and work hard. I had no friends and like Aanung I did not go out much. School and life at home, in the city and on the reserve were two separate things. I did not write home and tell my parents what I was experiencing.*

Aanung added,

I really had a hard time when I was young, socializing with other kids...feeling that sense of belonging and it's affected the way I interact with people to this day. And that's something I accept. I recognize. It even affects the way I relate to other Native people because I'm not used to feeling that I am part of a group or anything, especially when it comes to people my own age. I often find it easier to speak to older people.

Despite having a hard time at school, it is understandable why Aanung's sense of belonging is intimately connected with his mother's community. It is also easy to see why he has a strong and loving relationship not only with his mother but also with his grandmother. Aanung has fond memories of his visits to his mother's community in the summer. He said, "I always looked forward to going home. I remember thinking in my head how long it was going to be before I could go home to the reserve." *He reminded me of when I longed to go home from Pine Creek Residential School but I also recalled my grade twelve graduation. I did not go to the graduation ceremonies because I wanted to go home and show my diploma to my parents. Besides I really did not know anybody that well in my graduating class. (I was asked for a date but I did not accept).*

*I also recollect when I went home for the summer and the summers after, the acquaintances I had made prior to going to residential school and high school became less important. Instead I spent more time with my parents and my siblings. Just recently, my sister, Virginia asked me, "Who was your best friend when you were growing up." Her question took me by surprise and my answer was even more surprising. I said, "I didn't have a best friend." I loved being with my parents.*

### **Being Anishinabe in an Urban Setting**

Aanung related his experiences when he first moved to the city to attend university and he calls this time of life "an awakening." Although he did not seem to notice a difference between high school and university, he watched and observed the other students from his community "going through feelings of anxiety and fear." Although he found it depressing and lonely the first year he said, "From the beginning it didn't bother me as much. It wasn't anything new to me because I felt like I was used to feeling excluded anyway. There was no change." *He brought to mind my Masters thesis where I discussed what I experienced in university. I referred to them as "feelings of separation" which included alienation, isolation, fear of failure and a search for a sense*

*of belonging. All of these I believe are associated with racism and discrimination. I wondered if his experiences in elementary and high school prepared him [or numbed him enough] to handle his experiences in university. I did not sense any apathy from him. It just didn't surprise him.*

It was not until he started meeting other Aboriginal students in his second year that he became comfortable in university. It was a new experience for him but he found himself gravitating to other Aboriginal students *like I did with Jane and Elizabeth when I first heard them speak Anishinabe in Pine Creek.* Aanung also identified with the other Aboriginal students and recognized the books he used in his research and his textbooks were often condescending to Aboriginal people. He saw the bias, which existed in his textbooks and again envisioned it as reality. He said, "At the same time they are useful because when we combine [the books] with what our Elders say, like my mother and grandmother you can get some kind of understanding." *I wondered if Aanung ever got angry and wondered if he was always so calm, kind and understanding. I remember how I used to get so angry and frustrated with the curriculum, the opinions, hearing the judgments on the Anishinabe people in my classes.* Further in our conversation, he began describing how he thought, "non-Aboriginal students remained ignorant about Aboriginal issues." He speaks of his anger and impatience with the non-Aboriginal students for thinking that Aboriginal students get a free education. It bothered him that non-Aboriginal people do not understand that the stereotypes of Aboriginal people, discrimination and racism are still very much present today.

But where I noticed Aanung's frustration has to do with his fluency or lack of fluency in the language. He doesn't consider himself fluent. He tells a story about the time his grandmother was hospitalized and he visited her everyday. His grandmother does not speak English and he found it difficult conversing with her and it aggravated him. He said,

What was really frustrating was when the doctor and the nurse came in and the nurse would talk about what was going on and she wanted me to translate how my grandma felt. My grandma told me in Saulteaux and I told the nurse the best I could. But when it came to telling my grandma what the doctor said, it was hard and I got really frustrated. I remember the nurse looking at me like “don’t you know how to speak to her?” And that was a sick feeling. It was like shame but it was anger at the same time.

Aanung believes because we, as Aboriginal people, have been forced to assimilate “we don’t know how to speak the language or know about our culture” and I agreed with him. *I recall my father being in the hospital in 1990 and I would go and visit him whenever I could. He didn’t know how to speak English either. My mother was there everyday. A couple of nights before he was scheduled to have his surgery I had a dream about him. It was very vivid and I woke up with the telephone ringing. It was my mother and she said, “Dad wants you to come and get him. He is releasing himself today.” I said, “I know.” “How do you know?” she said. I told her, “Never mind, I will be right there.” When I walked into my father’s hospital room, the doctor was there and I heard him even before I entered the room, talking to my father like he was a child and in a condescending way. My father smiled when he saw me and told the doctor, “This is my daughter, Mary. She goes to university.” The doctor asked me to translate to my father that neither the hospital nor he would be legally responsible if my father voluntarily released himself. I informed my father and he said, “Can you tell him that it is not that I don’t respect his medicine I just want to try something else.” After I told the doctor, he simply repeated his first comment. I thought, I wonder if he understood my father’s kindness and respect for his knowledge and his skills. I felt proud of my father. I am glad I was able to reciprocate for teaching me the language.*

For Aanung it must have been thoroughly maddening that he could not help his grandmother as much as he wanted and the medical staff made him feel not only inadequate but was somehow deficient. He describes it as “a sick feeling. It was like shame but it was anger at the same time.” Although he was frustrated, Aanung said he



“learned a lot within those two weeks and if I could just be immersed, be around it and be in a position where I had to speak it, I would learn a lot more.”

*I thought yes that would help him because it certainly helps me when I am around my family for a long period of time. And I have to admit living in the city has affected my ability to speak the language as fluently as my brothers and sisters. It is this lack of fluency that sometimes frustrates me as well. But I am also aware if I am around where the language is spoken and I am immersed in it, when I go home I become more fluent. I can verbally express and pronounce the words and sentences in my head and in my mouth like the rest of them.* Aanung said, “There are fewer people who speak *Anishinabemowin*. There are not too many people to talk to.” I agree being *Anishinabe* in the city, makes it much more challenging to speak the language. Inevitably, it affects our fluency and the confidence to speak it. So we both agree that we need to speak it daily.

#### **Aboriginal Worldview: *Anishinabe* Way of Seeing the World**

*I have engaged in many conversations and discussions about the Aboriginal worldview with academics, students, and friends but I have never had such a passionate discussion with any of them until my conversation with Aanung. When he began talking, his facial expression and his body language immediately changed. He became quite stoic. It was like he went to another level, a higher realm of his existence. He reminded me of Elders I have conversed with or heard speak at a conference or listened to at a ceremony.*

He began by saying,

As Aboriginal people we look at things our own way; a lot of it is rooted in the language. It comes directly from the language. [It's] just the way we see the world, the concepts we have and the understanding we have in general.

Right from the beginning of our conversation, Aanung maintained the best way to learn the language is for him to go home. He spoke of his mother growing up on the trap line and how she received her education there. Language to him is always connected with

the environment, the land and the rest of creation. The distinction he makes with the Aboriginal worldview is that...

People have a lot of misconceptions of what [our] understanding of spirituality is. They think we worship the birds and animals but that is not the way I understand it. It comes from a different worldview. The European culture for the most part sees things as being dead; not having spirit and that's not how we see things. We see all living things as having spirit and I don't believe we worship these things. It's just that we have a relationship with them as living beings and we respect them because we believe they have a spirit. And as spiritual things we all have a relationship [with the] Creator.

He doesn't believe non-Aboriginal people can grasp the meaning of our Aboriginal worldview because so much of it is embedded in what we believe, our values, and teachings from the Elders. It is the spiritual significance that he places on his (our) relationship with all of creation, which demonstrates his understanding of the Aboriginal worldview. He said, "In the Anishinabe language we classify things as living (animate) and non-living (inanimate)." Although Aanung repeatedly told me he is not fluent in the language he had no difficulty articulating his understanding of the Aboriginal worldview. He did this by referring to how we add suffixes to words. He said "if you want to break it down in a grammatical sense we can talk about those suffixes like in *mitik* (tree) *mitikok* (trees, an animate suffix), it shows that we see it as being a living thing with spirit." He proceeded to give me other examples.

*I have read several authors on the topic but I had not quite understood it or heard it the way Aanung explained it. Aanung also related his understanding to gender. He said, "It's different when we speak the language because it is always third person. For example, "pimosay...he or she is walking. There is no distinction between he and she. Its just third person." I thought yes, our language and our worldview is different because our language is verb based not noun-based. Aanung especially surprised me when he talked about protocol.*

He said, “the word protocol does not mean any thing to me. It’s a foreign ideology, it’s a foreign concept and it’s alien to us as [Anishinabec].” Aanung associated it with political correctness. He believes there are times the intentions of non-Aboriginal people to understand our way of life are sincere but at times their intentions annoy him. He considers protocol as something not genuine. He said, [Protocol] “does not come from the heart. It doesn’t come with emotion and it doesn’t come from true respect. It’s more of an obligation and gaining access to something. It is not reciprocal. It’s about taking and it’s about a means to an end.” *Wow I thought, what a profound way of viewing the world, his world. He appeared very wise at that moment. I know I have and still have concerns or get suspicious when I am asked, “What is the protocol?” especially when it comes to attending traditional ceremonies or simply wanting to see an Elder. I know that I cringe when I hear the question but I did not fully understand the reason for opposing it. I only knew I felt and feel uncomfortable. When Aanung described it I had some sense of what my objections were. My understanding of the word protocol was not as deep as Aanung’s but it definitely made perfect sense to me. I learned something very special from Aanung that evening. I remember I made a comment as I was leaving his apartment. I said, “Your mother taught you well” and he responded, “I still have a lot to learn.” I do, too.*

*As I write at this moment, I am more aware of my objection. As Aboriginal people or Anishinabe we are often asked that very question. There is an underlying assumption that each of us knows not just our culture but also the culture of all Aboriginal people. The diversity of the Aboriginal people is not taken into consideration. I think about Aanung in the hospital with his grandmother where the nurse expects him to know and speak his language. I think about him in his music class in grade three when his teacher tells him he should know what to do with the drum because he is Indian. I wonder if he recalls the book he showed me about his mother’s community and he wonders who benefited from that book. I also think about myself and other Aboriginal students in the*

*classroom where we are expected to know everything about Aboriginal people. Aanung further commented that within the Aboriginal worldview “these concepts are engrained in us and when we don’t speak the language or we haven’t been brought up hearing the language we lose that. We don’t have it. It is not part of our identity anymore.”*

*As Aanung described his understanding of the Aboriginal worldview, it is evident that his understanding and his position in it, comes from his mother’s community, family, his mother, and his grandmother. He learned at a young age from this mother that speaking the language is important. He wants to become more fluent not only because he wants to be able to converse with his grandmother but also he sees and feels the sacred connection we have with the land. He wants his future children to speak it.*

*In our conversation, Aanung took me to many places, to many landscapes but he especially took me back ‘home’. Not only did he remind me of my childhood, my father’s cultural values and beliefs but also he evoked feelings of contentment and wonder. I thought about the time my father told me to return what we couldn’t eat or use of the beaver back to the river and to thank the spirit of the beaver. It is very clear why Aanung wants to become fluent in the language. He wants to understand the teachings.*

*He says, “It’s about life. That’s when we speak about *pimatisiwin*, the good life. That’s what it’s all about. It’s a search for a good life and being well. Healing.” He is proud to be Anishinabe.*

## CHAPTER 7 Intertwining Our Conversations

*I teach that stories are inner things: you're interacting with a living story.  
The way the western man is taught to read is to find meaning, the symbols.  
Instead I say no, a story is not something you figure out the meaning of  
but something you carry with you the rest of your life to talk back and forth with.*  
Sarris, 1997, p. 229

In this chapter I want to firstly weave my narrative account beside Niin's and Aanung's narrative accounts and secondly intertwine our conversation with the theory and literature in order to make sense of our relationship and make meaning of our experiences. I will do this by talking back and forth with their stories and by interacting with the literature and my story. When I initially embarked on my journey with Niin and Aanung, I had a feeling that we would have similar experiences and I looked forward to spending time with them but at the same time I was unsure how we would compose our lives (Bateson, 1989) together. I wondered how my own 'narratives of experience' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) would resonate with their experiences and their stories. What landscapes and places would we visit together? What emotions would be evoked from our conversations and our time together? As I formed and developed what I have come to know as a close and trusting relationship with each of them, I was struck by the ease with which they shared their experiences, their struggles, their frustrations and their desires. Not only did they share them in a very thoughtful and provoking manner but when they openly expressed their wonders, they also reminded me of my own frustrations. I recalled my own struggles to belong, to be accepted in school, in university and generally in the non-Aboriginal world.

I begin by telling a story of my father, a story that I talk back and forth with and love to remember. One evening my father was teaching me how to connect the beaver pelt to a circular piece of wood (red willow). He had bent the red willow branch and fastened the piece of wood with a string of rope. He had made different sizes depending on the size of the pelt. He got one, he thought, that would fit the pelt I would be working

on. It wasn't the biggest one he had caught. He got the twine and a long sewing needle with a hook and placed them on the floor where we sat. I was young, I was inexperienced and I remember very clearly and even today I can unmistakably sense the feeling of the wet beaver pelt. It was very heavy. I remember not really liking the feel of it. As I reminisce I can still hear the sound of the needle going through the skin and then I remember pulling the twine through the skin and attaching it to the frame. Instinctively, I knew I had to do it right. I had to make sure the tension was right as I attached and connected the beaver pelt onto the piece of wood. I undoubtedly knew I had to do it right because it was our subsistence. Not only would we have food on the table after my father sold the furs at the local store, perhaps we would get new clothes, which we rarely got. I'm sure he had ideas of his own that I didn't know about—perhaps a new canoe, maybe an axe, or a new blade for his saw. Regardless what he thought, my lesson that night was not only to learn a skill, to learn to say “Miigwetch” to the spirit of the beaver but more importantly as Anishinabe, [ I ] have to take care of the gifts given to me by the Creator (Littlebear, 1997, Battiste, 1998). When I think about it now those were the moments I was close to my father. Talking with that story back and forth is special and so in this chapter, I want to connect our three stories in a respectful and special manner, in a circular way, all the while feeling the wetness of the beaver pelt because I want to do it right. Not too tense, not overly tight but I want to be able to talk back and forth with Niin and Aanung as we carry our stories together.

### **Carrying Our Stories Together**

My late mother was a Cree-Metis woman; a proud woman and she contributed immensely to the education of children and adults in our community. Like Aanung's mother in the rural community, she was an outsider in my father's community and apparently was not initially accepted by my father's people because of her Cree-Metis heritage. I wonder now, if it was not only the fact she learned to speak Anishinabe but

also because she cared for us, her children, my father and the community, which helped her to eventually be accepted by the community. My late father was *Anishinabe*, who was reserved and quiet, but he had extensive knowledge about the environment he lived in. He knew the bush, he knew how to navigate the rivers, the lake, and he lived his knowledge (Ilutsik, 2002). His language taught him how to navigate nature. It is definitely evident now that he passed his knowledge on to my brothers, and in many ways he also passed it on to my sisters and I.

Niin's mother is Cree and her late father was *Anishinabe*. Aanung's mother is *Anishinabe* and his father is non-Aboriginal of mixed ancestry. Prior to negotiating my entry with Niin and Aanung, I knew each of them identified themselves as *Anishinabe*, which is one of the reasons why I selected them to participate. I wonder why it is, why it was, that the three of us choose to identify ourselves as *Anishinabe* or was it our parents who decided how we were going to identify ourselves? My mother referred to *Anishinabemowin* as my father's language and not only was she adamant that my brothers and sisters and I learn it but she also learned and spoke it. I suppose for me, by my mother insisting we speak the language she also gave me my identity as *Anishinabe*.

Niin's mother does not speak her Cree language but her father spoke *Saulteaux* fluently. She did not learn either language, even though her mother questioned her father why he did not teach her and her brothers the language. His answer apparently was, "what do they need that for?" Niin said, "You knew your language when you went to school; I went to school not knowing the language." She also pointed out that the residential school tried to take the language away from me but with her "they took it away before I was conceived." What a sad but truthful commentary I thought. It was heartbreaking for me to hear her say that and I felt her loss. In addition to reading about the impact of residential schools, (see Haig-Brown, 1988; Jaine, 1993; Johnston, 1987) I have also attended many educational conferences, seminars and workshops where the loss of the Aboriginal languages was discussed. I recall hearing adults, particularly

women who lament their decision not to teach their children to speak the language. Many adults consciously did not teach their children a Native language so that they might avoid punishments incurred through its use at school (Haig-Brown 1988, p.122). I wonder if this was Niin's father's intention when he said, "what do they need that for?"

Residential schools were built and constructed to insulate Indian children from the influences of their parents and to change their identity (Tobias, 1991; Miller, 1989; Titley, 1986). I have read and heard many personal testimonies on the impact of the residential school system, but I have not thought of it narratively as Niin expressed it to me. Although I have spoken and have written about my residential school experiences, her comment reminded me that I have switched to telling and retelling these stories, narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I was not aware I was doing that until I heard her comment. With the exception of books like *Residential Schools: The Stolen Years* (Jaine, 1993) and *Indian School Days* (Johnston, 1988) most of the literature on residential schools is presented in a non-narrative way. For example, most authors on the subject (Miller, 1989; Miller, 1996; Titley, 1986; Tobias, 1991; Wilson; 1986) provide an historical overview of the system. They informed us "it was a tool used by the Canadian government and the churches to "educate," "christianize," "assimilate" Aboriginal people. In *The Circle Game* Christjohn, Young, Maruna (1997) argue that there is value in using personal narratives as a way of doing personal research of residential school experiences. They added

the passion to understand one's residential school past, and the past of those who went before, is the desire to see the present in ways other than as it would be depicted by those responsible for it. It is a desire to **make sense** of one's own experiences, as they relate to residential schooling, to sort out one's own **current** life dynamics in terms (to some degree) of what has happened before. Indeed the past is not dead, for those for whom residential school is a continuing reality, undoing the myths and half-truths of their experiences is a step forward toward personal and social freedom (p. 177).



Inquiring into personal narratives, stories of living in residential schools, is still a relatively new phenomenon.

As I listened to Niin, I thought about the literature I read about the residential school system as well as the research I have done. I was reminded that it was not only the children who went to the residential schools who were affected. The impact is intergenerational and it is still felt today. Sometimes I think I have resolved the way I was affected but, conversing with Niin, I thought about what it was like to be with my brothers and sisters prior to going to a residential school. We all spoke the same language, we were connected to the land, we went to school together and we enjoyed each other's company most of the time. I realized, at the moment Niin was talking, that going to the residential school disrupted my relationship with my brothers and sisters. Our relationship with each other changed for all of us when I returned home. Not only did my stint in the residential school affect the way I relate with my family but my leaving home to go to high school and university compounded it further. Sometimes I wonder if the relationships will ever return to the ways they were before I left. Granted it is not the same kind of loss as Niin's loss of language but it is a loss nevertheless. Although Niin did not go to a residential school, both her parents did. As stated earlier, in these institutions children were punished for speaking their language and, in the end, it was Niin's father who was indirectly forced to not teach her the language. She said, "my father did not pass on the language because of his experience in the residential school and the seminary. I feel betrayed as I think about my experience but I don't know who betrayed me. I am also angry about what happened in residential schools and how they prevented so many people from speaking their language." Niin's father did have a choice but Niin doesn't have a choice to teach her son, Douglas the language. I refer to this as another intergenerational reverberation of the residential school system. I am reminded of my strong belief that as Aboriginal people and educators, we need to continue talking about the residential school system. Children like Douglas need to know what happened

to our languages much the same way Gardner (2000) a Sto:lo, a non-speaker wanted to know what happened to her language. She said, “I came to discover that I have been a s'texem, “a worthless person,” one who doesn't know her history and that this state of affairs was a deliberate government effort to eradicate any trace of my identity as a Sto:lo person (p. 9). This is a reminder for me to be mindful of children like Douglas.

As I listened to Niin, I acknowledged my own anger and felt a similar sense of betrayal to the one she was expressing. Despite Niin's anger and disappointment, her resilience showed when she said, “I want to learn the language but it will be difficult to learn it really well under my circumstances because I am going to stay here [in the city]. But I know it's in me. I have to take care of my son, Douglas.... When I look at him I think he is kind of like me a long time ago but he knows we are from here and he is *Anishinabe*.” Niin said, “Not knowing my language, I feel like a mute in the world [and yet] I know where I am and I know that I belong” [here]. I believe one day she will learn the language.

When Niin described her visits to her parents' home communities she said, “I thought the people from my dad's reserve were way cooler than from my mother's reserve. I liked browner skin, my aunts' dark brown hair. I just seemed more comfortable. I looked more like my father's side of the family and the land, I really like the land better than at my mom's.” Perhaps this is the reason why Niin choose to identify herself as *Anishinabe*.

Aanung's mother, on the other hand, and similarly with my mother, both instilled in us the importance of language and to be proud to be *Anishinabe*. “I think my mother instilled that pride in me to be Native,” he said. “Even though I come from two cultural backgrounds, my father is of mixed ancestry. We only saw his family once a year but we spent two months every summer with my mother's family and to be honest I've always identified as *Anishinabe*.” Aanung's mother spoke to him in *Anishinabe* and although he responded in English he understands and speaks the language but qualifies it by saying it

is “limited.” As I attended to Aanung, he reminded me of my own inadequacy in the language. I referred to my changed relationship with my family earlier and part of that has to do with fluency or lack of fluency in the language. They spoke it all the time, still do, and both Niin and Aanung are right when they say, it is not always easy to find someone who speaks the language living in an urban city. In many ways I am lucky because two of my sisters live in Winnipeg and I am able to converse and visit with them in Anishinabe. Kirkness (1998) reminded us,

That through the use of our languages in our homes and in our communities, important values can be better understood, customs can be more accurately practiced, the wisdom of our Elders would be more readily shared and understood and a unique sense of humour can be enjoyed. A whole new world would be opened up and a sense of balance restored (p. 29).

We are also aware as *Anishinabe* we will relate differently in our homes, in the sweat lodge if we only speak English (Harris, 1990; Kawagley, 2001; Littlebear, 1997). Like narrative inquiry our language is relational, it has context, it is situated in place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It has a cultural context and our culture is embedded in it. Cajete (2001) further stated “Indigenous people are people of place, and the nature of place is embedded in their language” (p. 4). I agree that it identifies who we are as a people and where we come from (Kirkness, 1997; Greymorning, 1997; Hampton, 1992; Harris, 1990). In a similar way, Kawagley (2002) suggests, “We have to know place in order to know self, for place is our identity (p. 5).

So I understood when Aanung talked about his mother moving away from her community to a non-Aboriginal community that it might have changed the way she saw things. He says, “When you are removed from your home and from other people who speak the language, you see things in a different way.” I began seeing things a different way. By leaving my home, to go to school, I became less fluent but I have not stopped speaking the language. What I noticed the most was my feeling of disconnection with the *Anishinabe* world, my family, my place in my home community as I tried to adapt and

find place in an urban center. Aanung talked about not really belonging in the rural community he grew up but he also did not feel he totally belonged in his mother's community either. I could identify with the feeling of displacement, a feeling of wanting to belong somewhere, some place. I remember trying desperately to fit in and trying to understand the non-Aboriginal world, and at times I felt it was impossible. I recall taking the bus to Churchill High School and going to school by myself. I felt lonely. I did not make friends very easily. I was shy. The only contact I had with my classmates was in our classes. I lived outside the neighborhood where the school was located so I really did not have any meaningful relationships. I was also conscious that I did not speak English as fluently as the rest of my classmates and the non-Aboriginal family I lived with at the time.

Learning to speak English was excruciating sometimes but I also wanted to learn to speak it fluently so that at least I could communicate and converse with my classmates. In university I did not hear anything positive about Aboriginal people. The negative things I heard in class (high school and university) made me feel alone, isolated and alienated in ways spoken by others (Monture-Angus, 1995; Atone, 2000). I felt like I did not belong in high school and university either. I wondered where I belonged. I did not live my life. I survived. I felt excluded as I sat in my classes and I began questioning my identity. I went to school faithfully despite the negative remarks I heard about me, my family and about Aboriginal people generally. Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) add that

For the First Nations student coming to the university, survival often requires the acquisition and acceptance of a new form of consciousness that not only displaces, but often devalues their indigenous consciousness, and for many this is a greater sacrifice than they are willing to make (p. 7).

Aanung, Niin and I continued with our education and went on university even though all three of us recognized the new form of consciousness. Aanung said, "I never once felt embarrassed about being *Anishinabe*." Niin doesn't really mention it. I wonder why not. I know there were times I felt ashamed and embarrassed because I felt inferior from the

rest of the class. I could not bring myself to ask questions when I should have because I simply had no confidence in myself. Harris & Ordone (1988) suggested that

Self-doubt is the soul of internalized racism; self-hatred is its substance. The self-doubt and self-hatred that result from internalized racism determine how we react to just about every situation we encounter (p. 306).

Experiencing racism and discrimination depleted my energy and I began questioning my identity as *Anishinabe* and whether I would succeed in anything. I had no place in the city where I was comfortable. I wanted to go home but if I did that I would not finish high school. I felt caught sometimes but I was determined to complete my high school. I did not want anyone to say I was uneducated or dumb, as I had heard many times. Chief Oren Lyons (1997) suggested that

If you are not secure in your identity, when you go to university you become whatever the university is. It is important to have pride in your own heritage. Know who you are first. Know your nation, your history, your clan, and family. Even if you learn all you can in school, it's only half of what you already have (p. 14).

I really did not know myself as a high school student and an undergraduate student but now when I go home and as I continue on my educational journey, these experiences seem so long ago but they are still stories I talk back and forth with. In high school, contact with my family was sporadic. Sometimes I would only see my parents at Christmas or when I went home for the summer. In some ways, not seeing my family affected how I saw myself. As I attempted to speak English fluently and like Aanung trying to fit in, having little contact with my family I became less fluent in my language.

Today, when my feet physically touch the ground at home, I am very much aware and conscious that speaking *Anishinabe* is spiritually connected with not just my family but also with the land and the environment (Basso; 1996; Battiste; 1996; Silko, 1996). This is another story I talk back and forth with everyday especially now as I write this dissertation. Niin and Aanung reminded me of my own connection to the land. When I began my conversations with them, I was aware of my passion to speak my language but

what I did not realize was how closely and intimately I am connected to my home community, the place I grew up. Basso (1996) stated

The experience of sensing places, then, is thus both reciprocal and incorrigibly dynamic. As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate on which the attention has been bestowed, and the movements of this process—inward toward facets of the self, outward toward aspects of the external world, alternatively both together—cannot be known in advance. When places are actively sensed the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind, to the roving imagination, and where the mind may lead is anybody's guess (p. 55).

As I mentioned earlier, I wondered what landscapes and places, Niin, Aanung and I would visit together. Of course, I could not have known this in advance. They reminded me of places where I played as a child, the places I went fishing with my mother and father, where I picked berries, where I swam, and where we had our Sunday picnics. I did not realize my relationship with them would take me back to these places and how these places are interconnected with language and my identity.

They particularly took me to a very special place at home. I used to go to a place called *Nayaapikang*. It was just down the bank from my parents' home. We fetched our water there, we swam there and when I wanted quiet time, I would go and sit there and wonder about life. I did not always do this growing up. It really began when I went home for the summer, after spending the first year in Winnipeg. I loved it there and as I dangled my feet in the water, I made many decisions about what I wanted to do, to be, to become.

Both Niin and Aanung are very wise and I learned just as much about me as I learned about them. I was also reminded about what Bateson (2000) said about wisdom. She believes that “wisdom comes not by accumulation of more and more experiences but through discerning pattern in the deeper mystery of what is already. Wisdom, then, is born of the overlapping of lives, the resonance between stories” (p. 242–243).

Aanung talked about his family moving back to his mother's community and leaving him alone in the city. He said, “I consider all of them fluent speakers now

because they all live there” and “I think the best way to learn the language is to go home.” Aanung truly believes this in his heart, mind and body. He adds, “When I go home to mom’s community I feel really good. I certainly feel a strong connection. There are many spirits there.” Niin may not speak the language but she has a strong connection to the land and the people. She says, “When I go to the bush or sit by a river, I want to stay there forever. It reminds me of what is really important. And knowing there is so much more to life than just scurrying around in all this concrete and worrying about really trivial things.” Sarris (1997) would add, “I go out to nature and I wonder what don’t I know. I constantly have to humble myself. Through prayer I get inspiration and the Creator talks back to me (p. 229). When I read Sarris, I imagined Niin sitting by the river connecting with our ancestors, which she described as “the people who have lived before us. They knew so much about life and I just feel a comfort knowing that they are still there when you go someplace totally by yourself.” I wonder what she wonders about or doesn’t know.

Both Aanung and Niin reminded me of the connectedness I feel when I go home. Aanung talked about enjoying going for a walk in the summer time to a place called “*ishpapakang*” (cliff). As soon as he said it, “*I thought, I remember places at home with the same name.*” There are many cliffs along the shore of the Bloodvein River and we generally refer to them as *ishpapakica*. It was easy to see that Aanung had a relationship with that particular place. As he spoke, I “self-consciously attended” to the places I remembered from home (Basso, 1996, p. 54). One particular place I remember is called Charlie Bird’s. I imagine a man by that name lived there, which is why it was called that...I don’t personally know the story. It was a place where children went tobogganing in the winter. It was a peaceful place where you could see the vastness and the beauty of Lake Winnipeg. My sister, Yvonne took me there when I went home in January 2003. On our way there she said, “You won’t like what you see.” When we got there, I saw that most of rock had been blasted so it could be used to fix the roads. It does not look

anywhere like I remember. This makes we wonder about children like Douglas, how will he find places.

When Niin mentioned how she values her connection to the land, and Aanung as well, I remembered and recalled certain events and experiences in my life. I remember going up the river by boat to fish with my mother and dad. I remember snaring rabbits and hauling water from the river for my mother to do laundry. I especially remember helping her hang up the laundry, including in the dead of winter. I think it was only in the early 90s that my mother finally got running water in her home. I had not thought about these memories and experiences until my conversations with Niin and Aanung. Silko's (1996) suggested that

The myth, the web of memories and ideas that create an identity, is part of oneself. This sense of identity was intimately linked with the surrounding terrain, to the landscape that has often played a significant role in a story or in the outcome of a conflict (p. 43).

She also evoked these memories and stories. She brought to mind what it was like growing up on the reserve. We depended on the land and as an isolated community I crossed Lake Winnipeg in a boat many times with my father, when it was calm and when it was stormy. I learned to respect the land, the water. I trusted my dad's navigational skills completely but it doesn't mean I was never scared or thought I was going to die on the lake. I agree with Silko that identity is intimately connected to the landscape and this connection has shaped my identity and it has played a significant role in my story.

Reading Silko, I particularly recollected what my father said at the supper table, "We speak Saulteaux in this house." "*Intanishinabemowin niin awind oma piiting.*" It means more than that to me now. It is not just about speaking Anishinabe in the house. It is about place, it is about the environment we come from, it is about the connection we have to the land, to our lakes and streams, our relationship with the animals, the water animals like the beaver, the sturgeon and all the fishes, and birds. It has to do with my relationships with all living things, with all of my experiences with people (Battiste &



Henderson, 2000; Hampton, 1992; Kawagley, 2002; Smith, 1997). It is a gentle reminder that I have to have respect for the spiritual relationships that exist between all things (Hampton, 1992, p. 283). Archibald (2001) learned from the Coast Salish Elders that “it is important to recognize the spiritual power of places and the healing nature (physical and emotional) of the environment (p. 1). Like Niin, I find solace and peace when I am in the bush or sitting by a river. The power, the energy I feel is spiritually uplifting and it is indeed healing, both physically and emotionally. No wonder Niin wants to stay there. Niin described the feeling she experiences as “life force” and I too feel the presence of my ancestors. Similarly, when Aanung goes home to his mother’s community, he refers to this interconnectedness and his connection as a place with “many spirits.”

Both Niin and Aanung share the same tension regarding learning the language because they both have to stay in the city to work. Learning the language for Niin will be more difficult and Aanung feels he will not improve unless he goes home. In some ways I feel that same tension especially if the time between visits with my family is lengthy. As children, both visited their parents’ communities in the summer and continue to have relationships with their families. Niin describes herself as “an Indian without a home” and Aanung refers to his mother’s community as “really his home,” not the rural community where he grew up nor the urban community where he now lives. Their memories of their childhood are deeply rooted with their parents’ communities. They remember what it felt like when they visited. Whenever I met with Niin and Aanung, I was forever mindful of my parents, my brothers and sisters because as we talked, inevitably both of them would take me back home to Bloodvein. I remember picking blueberries with my mother on hot summer days and watching her fillet fish like Aanung did with his grandmother.

For our third conversations, I specifically asked both Aanung and Niin whether they would feel comfortable talking about their understanding of the Aboriginal worldview. Both were willing to have a conversation. As I listened to Aanung eloquently

describe his understanding of the Aboriginal worldview as “*pimatisiwin*” he reminded me that I hold the same understanding but sometimes I forget. Like Niin, I get so busy scurrying around that I do not always pay attention to my spiritual side. It was only when he shared his thoughts and wonders with me that I was intensely aware of my own beliefs, my values and understanding of the Aboriginal worldview. *I recalled the incident at the Pine Creek Residential School, when I over heard Jane and Elizabeth speaking Saulteaux. They reminded me that, not only did I know how to speak my language but also I came from another place and I was carrying a different kind of knowledge. Teachings and education I received from my parents. I had forgotten to attend to this embodied knowledge.* In another way, Clandinin & Connelly (2000) say, “In narrative inquiry, people are looked at as embodiments of lived stories. Even when narrative inquirers study institutional narratives, such as stories of school, people are seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives” (p. 43). Similarly, Brant (1994) a Mohawk woman wrote about the experiences of Aboriginal people she says, “who we are is written all over bodies, our hearts and souls” (p. 49). So when Aanung said, “As Aboriginal people we look at things our own way; a lot of that is rooted in the language. It comes directly from the language. [It’s] just the way we see the world, the concepts we have and the understanding we have in general.” I was able to understand because I attended to Aanung from my experiences and what is written on my body. “We classify things as animate and inanimate. It shows that a tree (mitik) and a rock (asin) as being living things with spirit,” he said. Silko (1996) also maintains that

A rock has being or spirit, although we may not understand it. The spirit may differ from the spirit we know in animals or plants or ourselves. In the end we all originate from the depths of the earth. Perhaps this is how all beings share in the spirit of the Creator. We do not know (p. 27).

The way Aanung told me his stories of his experiences; his knowledge about the Aboriginal worldview was so closely related with notion of “*Pimadizewin*,” or a worthwhile life that Manitopeyes (1992) asserted. That evening I saw Aanung as an

Elder. I don't think he would refer to himself that way. He told me earlier that he learned a lot from his mother and it was evident as he talked. Niin, on the other hand, describes life as simply wanting "to be a good person", to work towards a happy life" which is a similar belief to the ones Aanung and I hold; it is about walking in a good way.

Neither Aanung nor Niin grew up in their parents' First Nations community but they visited every summer and both expressed their connection to the land, the sacredness of the land where they find comfort and serenity. It was clear to me that it was the land, their families and relatives that kept them going back. I learned about my own sense of sacred, my own spirituality and the spirits of the animals at home as well. That is where I go when I need to renew my energy, both physically and spiritually, when I want to remind myself who I am and where I come from and what I know. When I listened and attended to their stories I realized the extensive knowledge I received and learned from both my parents. It is an education I cannot take for granted. I have to live it. Bateson (1994) says, "to attend means to be present, sometimes with companionship, sometimes with patience. It means to take care of" (p. 109). By attending I recollected that by the simple act of fishing, my father had taught me about patience and perseverance. Manitopeyes (1992) considers perseverance as the second characteristic of the Saulteaux worldview because it has the same implications as continuity of life"(p. 192) which is similar to Dewey's (1938) notion of "continuity." Life is ongoing and learning is a life long process.

Kawagley (2002) a fluent Yup'ik speaker says, "I am thrust into the thought world of my ancestors" but he also goes on to say, "We, as Native people, have seen our languages become impoverished in the last several centuries. Many of us now speak our Native languages at the fourth or fifth grade levels (if such a grading system existed for us" (p. 2). Niin, Aanung and I recognize we have to speak the language to preserve it as well as becoming more fluent. Littlebear (1997) adds, "Our languages empower and unite us. We need to save our languages because it is the spiritual significance that is deeply

embedded in our languages that is important. At the Voice of the Drum International Summer institute, in Brandon University, (1998) Dr. Peter Sharples, an influential Maori educator stated that, “language is important. It has spiritual significance and we cannot exist without language.” Greymorning, 1997; Littlebear, 1997; Little Bear, 1997; Kirkness, 1998; Battiste, 1998 and many others would agree. I also think of Niin when she went to receive her spiritual name and it was given to her in English and how she recognized she has to learn the language. She said, “That’s what I feel it is telling me right at this very moment. That I have to go and learn it.”

As I finish this chapter, as I intertwined Niin’s and Aanung’s stories with mine, I reflected back to the evening my father taught me how to attach the beaver pelt unto a circular piece of red willow. I wonder how many beavers he framed in his lifetime. I think of Aanung and how he has his mother, his grandmother and family to improve his fluency and I wonder if he will ever go home. I hope Niin finds a teacher like my father and Aanung’s mother, a person who will teach her bit by bit the way I attached the beaver pelt so that she will have the opportunity to teach her son, Douglas.

In the next chapter, I write about the kind of person, elder and grandma I would like Niin to meet, to serve as her mentor.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **Threading the Beaver Pelt**

I begin this chapter by pulling the narrative threads that Niin, Aanung, and I share. I want to attach these threads to a circular piece of red willow, like my father taught me so many years ago. These are stories and experiences about how we have been shaped by the relationships we have had and to some extent how our relationship within the inquiry developed and grew. As I worked in the field with Niin and Aanung, “moving from field to field text and moving from field text to research text,” I have come to understand that “Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 60). I resonated with Anderson (2000) when she wrote, “My relationships with the interview participants have been really important. We exist because of and for our relationships we hold with everything around us. Knowledge is therefore of no use if it does not serve relationships” (p. 46). The inquiry space we developed together and maintained throughout our time together was based on trust, respect and the interconnectedness of our stories, our experiences, and our lives.

We walked in “four directions” the way Clandinin & Connelly (2000) suggested, that is, we “moved forward, backward, inward and outward to make sense of our past and present experiences and wondered about our lives in the future.” But as Clandinin & Connelly also wrote the inquiry kept us situated in place. We recollected stories and experiences we had forgotten about and felt feelings we thought had left us. The feelings we felt evoked new feelings as a way of trying to understand our place in the now, the present. As we conversed with one another the feelings and experiences we had, resurfaced and we relived them from different eyes, time and place. We began to feel our “multiple realities” (Greene, 1995, p. 94) and recognized and acknowledged the “multiple sites of struggle” (Mead, 1996, p. 414) we experienced and in some ways still encounter. I am reminded of what Bateson (2000) said about stories. She said,

Stories of individuals and their relationships through time offer another way of looking, but we need ways to tell these stories that are interwoven

and recursive, that escape the linearity of print to incite new metaphors. I believe the choices we face today are so complex that they must be rehearsed and woven together in narrative (p. 247).

So in this chapter, I want to reciprocate for the time both Niin and Aanung willingly spent with me and for reminding me to walk in a good way. The pieces were constructed in a way that would honour both the “storied lives” and “sustained narratives” (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 19) of Niin and Aanung, that is, they stand alone. The structure of the dissertation was not intentionally planned but rather as I ‘lived’ with Niin and Aanung and negotiated the sections which would appear in the dissertation, the telling and retelling and reliving of their stories and experiences contributed to the shaping and the threading of the dissertation.

The thread I start with is the intergenerational narrative reverberations we all carry in our bodies, in our memories, in our souls. Because of Niin’s parents’ experience in the residential school system and Niin’s father experience in the seminary, Niin was not given the opportunity to learn her language. Her father did not want her to learn the language. This gap, this void now impacts her son, Douglas. When I read Bateson’s book, *Full Circles Overlapping Lives* (2000) it helped me see how Aanung, Niin and I “have been shaped by [our] individual history and the histories of our communities” (p. 227). As I wove together our stories, I agreed with Bateson (2000) that our lived stories are “examples of the ways lives have changed and the way this plays out in the relationships between generations” (p. 229). Aanung was embarrassed, angry and felt somewhat ashamed when he was unable to translate for his grandmother what the medical staff were saying at the time of her hospitalisation. In his frustration, Aanung speaks of assimilation and how we were forced not to speak our languages and practice our culture. Maracle (1996) writes, “I write about racism to free my mind. Racism is the poison that crippled my tree” (p. 138).

*When I think of Aanung’s words, I think about how both he and I felt excluded as do Aboriginal students, in school and in university. I also think about, how many people*

*did not, or may still not know that residential schools existed. Many especially do not know the purpose of these institutions. During this narrative inquiry I have come to know that not only was the education of Aboriginal people fragmented but I have also come to realize that some non-Aboriginal people are now beginning to question why we were not included and are not included in the curriculum. When I read Maracle I am reminded of the systemic racism that existed and still exists in educational institutions. How could Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people receive a well-rounded education when none of us were given a complete picture of Canada, especially the conditions Aboriginal people were living and are still living today. Most people may know the Indian Act exists (maybe /maybe not) but does everybody know that our Treaty Rights are entrenched in the Canadian Constitution of 1982? When Aanung talks about having to explain to others about Aboriginal people, this is what he means. I feel and know his frustration because I have been there. It is emotionally tiring. Many Aboriginal people do not know our languages or our cultures because the role of the residential school system and the Canadian government was to Christianize, educate and civilize our nations. I believe today all of us are suffering from consequences of this grand scheme. As Aboriginal people we were supposed to assimilate and possibly disappear, as a consequence of this grand scheme.*

My relationship with my family was disrupted when I went to the residential school and, by moving away to go to school, my fluency in the language was weakened. Worse, I was ashamed of being “Indian.” As Mead (1996) indicated, “The power of colonialism worked effectively as a means of restructuring individual and group consciousness and memory, both within and away from the direct influence of the colonizers” (p. 232). One of these examples is the gap Douglas will experience or maybe is now living, unless we can find a way to help him with this void.

Although the intergenerational narrative reverberations have affected us all, as we walked together, we have come to understand the importance of speaking our language and what that means to our identity as *Anishinabec*. Aanung wants to go home to improve his fluency.

*I wonder if he can go home. Why does he have to go home to speak Anishinabe? We were placed on reserves and most of our communities are not close to urban centres. Most northern communities are isolated. Most of the time we can't go home because there are no jobs for us at home. The jobs we find are in the city, which is why Niin and Aanung are both living in an urban centre.*

Niin is determined to learn her language and this gives me hope for Douglas. Despite the intergenerational narrative reverberations we have experienced in one form or another, I

also see the resilience and perseverance in all of us. Fife (1993) pointed out and I believe I can say that Aanung, Niin and I “have found that the written word does not have to be wrapped in the thoughts of the colonizer, but rather can convey the resilience of our survival” (p. 2). We can tell our stories and we can share our experiences. I agree wholeheartedly with Cajete (2001) when he says, “Telling one’s own story is a way to ‘remember to remember’ who we are and to honour the special life that we have been given” (p. 9). Witherell & Noddings (1991) similarly suggested that, “Stories invite us to come to know the world and our place in it” (p. 13), therefore “Our stories motivate us” (p. 280) to walk in a good way.

The second thread I pull is one of place. All three of us have a place, places, where we go to rejuvenate ourselves and to re-new our energy. It is at these places that our spirituality soars and we are able to feel the energy and the life force of our ancestors. I resonate with Cajete (2001) when he states that

Indigenous people are a people of place, and the nature of place is embedded in their language. The physical, cognitive, and emotional orientation of a people is a kind of “map” they carry in their heads and transfer from generation to generation. This map is multi-dimensional and reflects the spiritual as well as the mythic geography of a people (4).

Niin may not speak the language but she is able to feel the energy of our ancestors but I wonder about Douglas. Where he is going to find places, a place he can connect with and feel that same energy. I wonder how do (I) we provide him with a map so he can carry it in his head.

Anderson (2000) in her book *Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* she writes,

Aboriginal children are precious to us because they represent the future. They are not considered possessions of the biological parents; rather they are understood to be gifts on loan from the Creator. Because of this everyone in the community has a connection to the children, and everyone has an obligation to work for their well-being. Each one of us has a responsibility. This work is urgent—not only because Aboriginal children have been (and are yet) assaulted, but because the focus on children and



the respect that our societies gave to children were so severely damaged with colonization (p. 162).

As *Anishinabec* and educators, Anderson reminds me of my own responsibility to create spaces for children like Douglas and to remember that children are “gifts on loan from the Creator.”

The third thread I pull is one of Aboriginal worldview. This is the Aboriginal worldview we carry in all of us; our embodied knowledge is embedded in the worldview. We believe all living things have spirit and we share a deep connection to the land. These beliefs, so central to our worldview, have nurtured and strengthened our relationship with each other. Aanung said, “it is what we call *pimatisiwin*, that’s what it is all about” and Niin describes it simply as “being a good person.” Their words of wisdom brought pleasure to my narrative inquiry space and my educational journey. Cajete (2001) says,

Learning is always a growth and life process. Learning is a reflection of our formation of ‘face, heart and foundation.’ Pueblo elders have said, “It is good to share one’s life with good thought and intention.” This is not only good thought, it is also a way of standing in the world (p. 18).

The process Aanung, Niin and I experienced was nurturing, reflective and it helped us see where we stand in the world and how we should walk on this earth.

The fourth thread I pull is one of protocol. Aanung’s definition of protocol is something I will talk back and forth for a long time, or maybe use as a reminder for as long as I walk on this earth. To remind you, Aanung said,

Protocol does not come from the heart. It doesn’t come with emotion and it doesn’t come with true respect. It’s more of an obligation and gaining access to something. It is not reciprocal. It’s about taking and it is about a means to an end.

I am aware and know there is a certain kind of protocol in many, probably most Aboriginal societies. Protocol in the way we welcome and greet people either in our homes or in our communities. However, what Aanung is talking about is the way protocol gets bantered around especially when non-Aboriginal people expect every Aboriginal person to know how we are supposed to behave in ceremonies and to know

how to ask for something. Some of us have learned this way of knowing but not all of us have had the opportunity to learn these things because of the reasons I presented on page 161. Kawagley (2002) tells a story about his visit to a Native Hawaiian charter school. It is a good example of how protocol (was) is used. He writes,

When my hosts and I arrived, we were met by the students at the entrance of their school. They sang in their own language and several students made welcoming remarks again in their own language. When protocol called for my response, I responded in my Yupiak language. To see and hear the protocol that had been practiced for millennia by their people made my heart feel good. This happening after hundreds of years of barrage to change their language and culture gave me hope that we, too, can save our Alaska Native languages (p. 3).

To me, the way protocol was used in this situation “came from true respect, heart, emotion and reciprocity.” It was not done to gain access to something. By passing it down from generation to generation, I would imagine it would take years to learn the correct protocol. Like Aanung, I do not believe it is something you learn by just asking anyone. I believe I would have to be completely immersed in the culture to understand it and know its significance.

The fifth thread I pull is one of relational knowing with our ancestors. When Sarris (1997) stated, “Our traditions survived, and that’s something to stand up for. If our ancestors got us this far, we owe it to them to keep going and learn from their teachings” (p. 232) I thought of Niin. She feels the ancestors’ presence, their life force and their energy when she is alone by a river. I feel their spirit when I am in the bush. I have been told many times by Elders that I am not alone when I am in the bush. They tell me our ancestors have been there before you and they are still there with you. “Spirituality is re-connecting with the self and our ancestry. It is doing the right thing for your family and your community” (Maracle, 1996, p. 134). In some ways, I think this is also what Sarris is referring to and believes. Hampton (1992) writes,

The reason why Indians have persevered, that we have not vanished and there continues to be hope for such a thing as Indian education are rooted

in the spiritual values and traditions that make us who we are. These traditions stretch back into the dawn of our existence as Indian peoples, and it is the morning star of the East that reminds us of what is Indian, the origins of our existence (p. 286).

I would also add that it is the relationship we have with the natural world and the communication we still have with our ancestors which has helped us persevere and survive. Niin, Aanung and I believe everything has spirit. We share a deep understanding of our connection to the land and the relationships we have with the universe, the natural world and spirit world. Knowing Niin dreams of her ancestors makes me hopeful that they will help and encourage her to learn the language. I know in my heart there is a reason for her having those dreams. However having to live in an urban city does not always allow us to pay attention to our spiritual side, which is the next thread I pull.

Within this thread, are the threads I will use to finish threading the beaver pelt. This is a reminder of the twine I used when my father showed me how to attach the beaver pelt for the first time and I am beginning to hear the sound of needle as I am about to begin pulling the threads. This section has to do with our reality in our educational journeys, in our everyday lives and trying to walk in a good way. It is about betrayal, the impact of Christianity, alienation and isolation, displacement and being alone. These are “feelings of separation” that Niin, Aanung and I have experienced at different times of our lives. These are the stories that we carry and still talk back and forth with. These feelings are related to racism and discrimination. When Niin’s classmates surrounded her in the playground and ridiculed her, I view that incident as racism. She had not thought of herself as an Indian before that incident. Her mother’s reply, “Tell them you’re Canadian” was a classic answer when Aboriginal people felt they needed to deny their ancestry. I referred to myself as Canadian at some point in my life because I was ashamed. Maracle stated, “To ask our students to hold themselves up under the biting lash of racism is criminal. To ask our students to forget the past is to negate their present. The present they enjoy is not disconnected from their past” (p. 91). Niin, Aanung and I

may not have enjoyed reliving and retelling our storied lives but they are what we carry. They are written on our bodies, minds and memory. We understand and recognize our anger, our frustrations of not knowing the language or lack of fluency we have in the language, but we also know where these feelings come from. It is clear to us that the history and lives of Aboriginal people have to be included in the curriculum so that children like Douglas will also understand and not leave him with a void. But it is also important for all educators and students to know the history of Canada especially in relation to Aboriginal people. I explained earlier what I believe resulted in the kind of education or the limited education we all received. I have quoted Aboriginal scholars who have undergone similar experiences, I refer you to the bibliography, if you would like to read more. I also encourage you to go back and read Niin's and Aanung's narrative accounts as well as mine. I hope it is evident that the residential school system, some churches and the Canadian government all played a major role in how we, as Aboriginal choose to identify ourselves. Like Niin and Aanung, I choose to identify myself as Anishinabe. Kawagley saw hope in saving the Alaskan languages when he visited a charter school in Hawaii and I also found hope and inspiration from an Elder I met.

Revitalizing Aboriginal Languages is a course in the Graduate Program in First Nations Education at the University of Alberta. When I took the course, it was offered off campus in *Mistassini*, Quebec and it was a Cree Immersion course. Northern Quebec is a long way away. As it turned out, this course made all the difference in how I engaged in this narrative inquiry because of an Elder I came to know there. As I lived this narrative inquiry, I felt Minnie beside me, a constant presence. In this section I want to talk back and forth with the stories I saw Minnie the Elder, living and telling.

We arrived at our campsite, which was on an island, after a very long arduous journey. After we got settled and found our spots in the tents, we were invited to have supper, which is when I met Minnie. When I saw her I loved her immediately because she reminded me of my mother and my grandmother. I noticed her sense of humour right

away. When I got up the first day of our arrival, I remember feeling disappointed that everyone, except Minnie, was speaking English. However, it didn't seem to bother Minnie. She continued to speak to us in Cree. I tried to speak to her both in Anishinabe and in the limited Cree I know. Sometimes I would understand her and sometimes she would understand me. I recall the comfort I felt being with her.

*What I felt was quite different from sitting in a classroom or sitting in my office at the university, both at The University of Winnipeg and at the University of Alberta. Being out in nature and by the lake brought a sense of harmony and a peaceful existence. I am not sure if I have ever experienced this feeling at work or in my studies. It is normally, like Niin would say, "scurrying around" and never stopping to watch the trees or taking the time to go and sit by a river. Although Cree is not my language, it felt good to be around it and to hear it everyday. It reminded me of the times when I was growing up at home and being around my family.*

After breakfast, the female students especially were excited to help with anything Minnie and her friend Sarah had planned for the day. I learned very early in our stay that they have been best friends for a long time. Minnie seemed eager to teach us whatever we wanted to learn and she suggested that she would teach us how to make bannock.

*I thought about the years that I have spent advising and counselling Aboriginal students at the University of Winnipeg. I hope that I was and am always as eager to help and assist the students as Minnie was. I wonder what would happen if I found ways to make bannock with them as we talked together. I also wonder how I could do this with the staff and faculty so that we could make University of Winnipeg a welcoming and comfortable place for students to come. A place where they can grow and learn from the stories they carry and the ones they pick up along the way.*

Minnie was very careful about how she mixed the dough. She combined the baking powder and salt together. She was mindful when to put in the lard and the amount of water to put in, and how long she felt she needed to knead it so that the bannock would not be hard. All of us who were there watching her, of course, wanted to know the exact measurements. *She measured like my mother used to, by instinct and from experience and I remembered, whenever my mother showed me how to make something, she encouraged me to watch and listen.* Throughout the ten days as I spent more time with Minnie, I became aware that by watching and listening to her, she was in fact, showing me an

alternative, possibly the best way of preserving the language. She was very patient and laughed with us. She did not make me feel inadequate nor did she make me feel foolish.

*Now as a researcher, educator and counselor I try to use my language in everything that I do. Minnie taught me to be proud of my language and to be thankful for all the gifts I have been given. Whenever the students ask me to say a prayer before we eat at our monthly potlucks, I always pray in Anishinabe. It is my way of teaching that speaking the language is important and that I must use it daily. I have tutored students in the Ojibway classes and made sure it was fun for the students to learn and that I did not make them feel foolish.*

Cajete (2001) writes,

As co-creators with nature, everything we do and experience has importance to the rest of the world. We cannot mis-experience anything, we can only mis-interpret what we experience. It must be emphasized that what we think and believe, and how we act in the world impacts on literally everything. We humans bring our reality into being by our thoughts, actions and intentions (p. 15).

*Watching Minnie reminded me to respect the students and as Cajete suggested, how I act impacts the relationships I form with the students. In high school and in my undergraduate degree, I did not know of any Aboriginal scholars or educators I could emulate. I had no intention of going to graduate school. Now as I am finishing my doctorate, it is important for me to encourage Aboriginal students to pursue graduate work and not wait until they reach their forties. Since the completion of my Masters, I have had more questions, telephone calls about applying to graduate school. It is not only applying that I encourage. When the students get there, I would like them to remember who they are, like Chief Oren Lyons suggested.*

Minnie makes all the tents. She has a Singer sewing machine, which she operated manually. She sat on the ground in her tent with her left leg under her and the right one stretched out in front of her. This is also how she sat when she made bannock. As I observed her, it was clear she had made many, many tents this way. It seemed second nature to her and she looked very natural as she sewed. She seemed very proud and enthusiastic with her work. She did not display any arrogance or self-importance but she simply saw it as a way of contributing to their way of life and to the community.

*Now every time I am asked to do a presentation, either in Bloodvein or by an Aboriginal organization, I always remember Minnie. Not only that but I make every effort to deliver my speech in Anishinabe. I have travelled to other Aboriginal communities and*

*I have attended and have spoken at conferences about the value and the importance of speaking our languages. I was recently asked to talk about language on APTN television. In a small way, I see this as a way of giving back to the community. This dissertation is my contribution to both the Aboriginal community and the non-Aboriginal community but it is especially for my home community. It is also for my brothers and sisters, who continually remind me that they are happy I have not forgotten how to speak in Anishinabe. I know I need to find ways to contribute to my community as Minnie did to hers.*

Minnie talked about her trap line and hunting grounds and expressed her sadness about what the local mine has done to the environment. Apparently, some of the lakes had to be drained because there was so much damage from the mine. She was visibly sad and upset about the fact she is not able to pass on her hunting grounds and trap lines to her children. She began to cry as she told us that this is what she had worked, dreamed and hoped for, for her children and family. She told us that she has always lived in the bush. One of Minnie's relatives earlier in the week had talked about the plans of the local Hydro regarding the building of a dam. Hydro apparently was trying to bribe the people with jobs, money, housing, and anything they could think of, in order to sway the people into agreeing with their plans. None of those promises or bribes were meaningful to Minnie and she didn't care about any of them. The bush is her life. She told us she finds healing in the bush and she gets this by just looking at the trees. She believes everything has a use or a purpose.

*Like Niin, Aanung and I, Minnie has a deep connection with the land, the bush and, like my father, she too, lives her knowledge. I recall a student I worked with several years ago. He was from one of the First Nations communities in northern Manitoba, a community which was flooded by Manitoba Hydro. His community had to be relocated. I asked him to tell me a story of how they were relocated. Apparently, they were given new land and when the community finished moving, all the houses were burned down and then the area was flooded. He said, "We watched from the other side of the lake." I had no idea this is what happened. As I write this, it reminds me of a burial, a loss of someone, who can never be revived or resurrected. How does anyone capture the energy, the sacredness of that particular place again? It's gone. It's life and spirit sucked out of it. Not only that, I wonder what happened to the people of those communities psychologically, emotionally and spiritually?*

My guess would be what Battiste & Henderson (2000) claimed and that is “Indigenous knowledge disappears when Indigenous peoples are stripped of their lands, their languages and their lives” (p. 11). The Maori had a similar experience. Smith G. (1997) writes “The rapid loss of the language shows a strong correlation with the rapid loss of the land” (p. 5). If Minnie’s life is the bush and if Hydro floods her trap line, how does she stay connected to her sacred places? How will she pass on her wisdom and knowledge to her grandchildren? Where will she go for the plants and medicine she collects? I am also reminded how important it is to stay connected with family, with our communities and form meaningful relationships with nature and with each other.

The friendship, which existed between Minnie and Sarah, was wonderful and beautiful to watch. It was obvious they loved and respected each other and they demonstrated this by how they helped and supported one another. There was no competition between them. With the gifts they were given by the Creator, they shared them with each other and as such complimented each other.

*These are the kind of friendships we would like to see the Aboriginal students develop in the Aboriginal Student Centre at the University of Winnipeg. We would like to see them nurture their relationships, and in the process form lasting relationships like Minnie and Sarah. By forming these relationships, it would in turn become a support system they could rely on as they go through their programs. In many ways, I am reminded that I did not develop these lasting relationships because very few Aboriginal students went on to university from high school when I went to university. I wonder how my experiences would have been different if there were other Aboriginal students in my high school classes. I know there were only two other Aboriginal students in Churchill High School and one other one in Kelvin High School. I am guessing there must have been maybe ten Aboriginal students in first year university. When I began at the University of Winnipeg there were forty-six students who self-identified, now we have about seven hundred students. I wonder how to create spaces to nurture these relationships, among these students that emulate the relationship between Minnie and Sarah. I also remember attending a session with the cohort of Maori graduate students at the University of Auckland in February 2002 and their motto was, IF ONE FAILS WE ALL FAIL. I will never forget it. It was a reminder to me that as Aboriginal people, as Aboriginal students, we need to help and support each other to succeed in whatever we do. My way of offering support and encouragement is writing this dissertation and honoring the narrative accounts of Niin and Aanung and honoring Minnie for everything she has taught me.*



Minnie takes the importance of teaching the language very seriously. She and her husband contribute to teaching the language in context. Every year when she and her husband go to their fish camp they take a little boy or little girl, not of school age with them and teach them the language. One of her daughters told me that they do not use “baby talk” but they talk to them like adults. They learn pretty quickly.

*Recently a member of my home community heard me conversing with one of my sisters and she commented, “Mary, Kayapi onakatchipitoo Anishinabemoot. Ambe mawinja ka pimatchat. Mary left home so long ago and yet she is still able to express herself beautifully in Saulteaux. As I write this I think about what Niin, Aanung and I said about living in an urban center and the difficulty of finding people to converse with in Anishinabe. The same way I would like to see the students nurture their relationships with each other; I also want to encourage them to speak their languages. In some ways, we have started to do this in the students’ lounge where students are beginning to use some Anishinabe and Cree words. It is a reminder that we come from different places and we need to remind each other to be proud of who we are. The other thing, which comes to mind, is the connection to my family, the connection to my home community. When I am around my siblings, I find it easy to switch the way I express myself. We encourage each other to communicate in our language rather than in English.*

*Offering Aboriginal languages in schools or universities is one way of creating spaces for children and adult learners to learn to speak their languages. I learned to read and write in Anishinabe using Roman orthography in University. When I watched Maggie tell stories as she made bannock and filleted fish, she was showing me how to learn the Cree language.*

Sterling (2002) said, “ grandmothers are natural teachers because they take care of children” (p. 5). She also believes and I agree that, “Like the grandmothers before us we can create lessons built on experiences and storytelling to transmit knowledge and skills, cultural pride, and self-confidence” (p. 5). I think of how the *Maori* developed “language nests” to revitalize their language in the 1980’s and this was accomplished by getting mothers, aunties and grandmothers to teach the children the language. Today they offer a week, long total immersion *Maori* language course that is held in a marae (Lee, 1996, p. 72) for adult learners. I met one of these learners on my trip to New Zealand. We have much to learn from the *Maori* and we must begin creating spaces for our children and non-speaker adults to learn our languages other than in schools and universities. Not only

that, as Aboriginal educators, counselors, teachers, and professors “we also struggle for our students, space for them to be different, space to make choices and space to develop their own ideas and academic work” (Mead, 1996, p. 118). *At the University of Alberta, I was extremely lucky to find such a space at the Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development, specifically in Research Issues. A place I have come to know as a safe place, a place I could be different and develop my own ideas and feel comfortable sharing my thoughts and wonders.*

The second last day of our class, we went on a tour of the local elementary school. I was impressed with the classrooms. The first thing I noticed was the syllabics on the walls and how the students worked with them in the classrooms. I believe using syllabics is one of the best ways to learn the Cree language. However what impressed me most is demonstrated in the following story. One early evening, I went to visit Minnie. Her dishes were not done so I offered to do them for her. She busied herself with other things and she was humming to herself as she worked. I suggested to her that we should have a singsong. She invited Sarah to bring her hymnbooks. Minnie’s granddaughter had been there with her all day. Minnie showed her how to make fried bannock and how to sew. I watched her granddaughter and she appeared to thoroughly enjoy spending time with her grandmother. She was enthusiastic and keen to learn. She was in the tent with us that evening. After Minnie and Sarah sang one hymn, Minnie asked her granddaughter to join them to sing and she handed her a hymnbook. I noticed it was written in syllabics. The granddaughter was about nine years old and I was thoroughly in awe when I saw her sing from the hymnbook. I don’t know if it was so much that she could read the syllabics or whether it was how Minnie included her in whatever we were doing. It was also very encouraging to see a young child understand and speak Cree.

*A month after I met Minnie, I went home to Bloodvein to do some research. I especially wanted to spend some time with the Elders. With the help of my oldest sister, Lillian I was able to meet with most of the Elders. While I was there I asked Lillian if she could teach me how to read and write syllabics, which she did. I thought it was*

*interesting how we turned the church upside down to find a hymnbook, which had the guide for reading syllabics. My sister is an accomplished syllabic reader and writer. I have not mastered writing and reading them but I have been able to write letters to Lillian in syllabics and like anything I need to practice. And when I learn, I plan to begin to create spaces where Niin and others can learn to speak the language. Minnie taught me this as well.*

The last night we spent in the community, I had an opportunity to stay with Minnie and her husband. Most of her family came over with their children. They did not hesitate to share with me what they know and have. They displayed no arrogance, nor did they feel the need to be competitive. The grandchildren were very respectful of their grandmother. Their affection for her demonstrated how much they loved and adored her. It was clear the children were taught about generosity and kindness. Before the end of the night, her granddaughter gave me two photographs, one of her and one of her grandma. Minnie signed her name at the back of her picture in syllabics.

I have read about the importance of maintaining and preserving Aboriginal languages in scholarly papers, books and journals but I must say Minnie's presence at camp and her teachings added to my understanding. She created an enduring memory in me. She exemplified how the Cree culture is embedded in the language. The way Minnie and her husband voluntarily teach young children the language is an example how not just the Cree language can be preserved but other Aboriginal languages as well. Their example is a demonstration of how as individuals we can contribute and achieve this goal.

Minnie is probably one the most beautiful Cree woman I have ever met. She is caring, non-judgmental, encouraging and fun. She is the kind of Aboriginal elder, teacher and educator I would like to become. She brought back many memories of my mother and father and instilled in me once more, the pride of being brought up in my language and how that is connected with who I am today. As an *Anishinabe ekwaysance*, an Ojibway little girl, I learned from stories told by my parents and the elders. I learned by watching and observing how things were done whether it was plucking ducks, skinning rabbits, muskrats, and beaver, making bannock, sewing, or simply being shown how to

behave properly. Because of the way I learned as a young girl, visiting Mistassini and being with Minnie reminded me of the way I was raised and taught by my parents, Charlie and Isabelle. I want to honour them for educating me in this way. They shaped what I have come to know and who I have become and am becoming. Minnie reaffirmed my own context and for that I am truly grateful for having met her. She will remain an inspiration and a mentor for many years to come. She motivated and encouraged me to utilize the resources of the Elders and honour the Indigenous knowledge and the concepts we possess. More importantly, she taught me to value and speak my language like she values hers. Minnie's life is a guide for me and she offers me hope for our continued survival of our languages, our culture, our values, and our beliefs and, with the way she teaches young children, she offers me hope for Douglas. I hope I have given similar inspiration to Niin and Aanung because they too inspired me.

Niin and Aanung, you must know that I could not have done this without you and I say Kitchi miigwetch to both of you. We have travelled many places; we have re-lived our stories, re-collected our experiences; we laughed and spilled many tears. By doing that we have rejuvenated our selves. By sharing our lives, our stories and our experiences and everything we have done together, I hope someone will recognize herself/himself and begin to heal. Like you said Aanung, "*pimatisiwin*, that is what it is all about." For you Niin, it is about being "a good person" and I respond by saying, "I am going to try to learn to walk in a good way." Both of you taught me that, and if we achieve that one small step towards all of us walking in a good way, both Anishinabe and non-Anishinabe, then we have accomplished something we didn't see at the beginning of our journey nor could we have even imagined.

For you the reader, I hope you recognize the importance of speaking our Aboriginal languages and how they are so important to our identity and to who we are as a people. I wonder how you can see yourself in helping us to achieve our wishes and not leave Douglas behind. He and many children like him, are one of the reasons why this

dissertation was written. He needs to know what happened to our languages so that he will be able to define himself, name himself and be proud of who he is. *Kwa yuk ka kwe pimosata*. Let's walk in a good way.

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