

My Continuing Journey from Adoption to Identification as a Cree man:

An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry

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## Abstract

This autobiographical narrative inquiry is an inquiry into my experiences as an infant adopted into a white family through to my experiences of finding my birth mom and finding my Cree homeplace. I begin with little knowledge of Aboriginal peoples and their lives. Through inquiry into my school experiences, into a journey with my adoptive family to what was called “Indian Country”, into my undergraduate university experiences with professors and classmates, and eventually into my journey to meet my birth family on Beaver Lake First Nation, I move to an understanding and acceptance of myself as a Cree man.

This thesis focuses on my growing understandings as I moved from little knowledge of my cultural background and discomfort with being Aboriginal to seeking information and experiences that enabled me to complete the search for my Cree home and family. Many aboriginal children have been adopted out of their culture and face a similar journey (Coates, 1999). Using the methodology and methods of autobiographical narrative inquiry, I showed my emotional journey as an adoptee to accept and claim my heritage. My field texts included conversations with friends, mentors, family members, professors, and teachers, journal entries, maps, memory box artifacts, and photographs. I inquired into these field texts through the three dimensional narrative inquiry space. I wrote two narrative accounts, one of my journey through “Indian Country” and another of my journey to my Cree homeplace and family.

The findings show my understandings of the complexity of being an Indigenous warrior that includes well-thought out choices, willingness to stand by the choices, and the value of planning ahead. I came to see both my birth mom and adoptive mom as warriors. As I came to realize that I needed strong mentors and safe spaces to successfully complete my journey, I now

recognize that many members of marginalized communities, which often include First Nations youth, would benefit from mentors and safe spaces.

## **Dedications**

To my Birth Mom for bringing me into this world, for giving me a chance, and giving my parents the greatest gift they could have. Your love is unwavering, and I am honoured to be your son. I love you.

To my best friend and dog Teddy who spent twelve loving and amazing years with me and my family. Your love and our time spent together in the backyard, on walks, and in the basement with me will always be a cherished memory. I love and miss you.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*From a young age, I constantly asked my parents about who my birth mom was. Already knowing the answer they would give, they responded with “We don’t know. All we know is that you were a closed-adoption; that you are Cree, Treaty; you have an older sibling; and when you are eighteen, we will do everything in our power to help you find her.” Until I was eighteen, my parents told me this. As every year my birthday is a celebration, I knew my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday had a deeper meaning than just being of legal drinking age and able to get into bars. It was an acknowledgement to the government system that I was of the age when I could finally start looking into my past, into knowing the stories that I carried in my body of who I was and was becoming. Although, at eighteen, I had the power to look for my birth mom, I did not act on that opportunity. However, I was still curious about the untold story of why my mom gave me up<sup>1</sup>.*

*I lived stories of being the only native<sup>2</sup> child in my class, of being told that all the native people lived on the Northside of the city, of looking through the car windows in my dad’s Mazda van and seeing drunk native people on the street. There is a lot more to these stories that I had grown up with. Elders say that it is important to listen with “three ears: two on the sides of our head and that one that is in our heart,” (Archibald: 2008, p. 8). These stories that I had lived and seen as an urban, Indigenous adopted male were about to be unpacked. This is the narrative inquiry of this thesis.*

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<sup>1</sup> Italics indicates story

<sup>2</sup> Native: Throughout the thesis, I use the terms native, Aboriginal, Indian, Indigenous, First Nations interchangeably. While I realize that this means I use terms that are connected with colonized thinking, I want to show that I moved toward naming myself as Indigenous. At different times in my life different terms seemed to be the dominant ones. The actual term used reflects what was acceptable in my contexts at the time as well as what I was thinking.

## **Introduction**

In this thesis, I inquire into my experiences of what it was, and is, to be an urban Indigenous adopted male growing up outside of the context of any Indigenous culture and tradition. My research puzzle has two parts that help me inquire into the stories of who I am and am becoming as a person who grew up within a dominant white society with my ancestral native identity. The first puzzle piece is my search to understand the complexity of what it means to be a warrior as well as the work involved in moving towards becoming a warrior myself. The second puzzle piece is around my identity, who I am and am becoming, as I searched for my birth mom and began to tell stories of who I am as an Indigenous man.

This thesis grew from the Journeys Program (HECOL 403), a course I had taken in my undergraduate program at the University of Alberta. The Journeys Program was composed of two groups of students: one from the University of Alberta and the other from Edmonton Public School's Inner City High. Every Thursday evening, the whole group took part in a variety of activities in a safe environment. It was a place in which participants were able to voluntarily share stories and feelings from their life. Most of the participants from Inner City High were Indigenous and they often shared experiences of their life as aboriginal urban youth. My experiences interacting with them and listening to their stories helped me learn about some of the realities of life for these youth. During this program, I experienced a paradigm shift in how I viewed the Indigenous information I had learned, both at home, and in my university program over the years. I was learning to view my life differently as I listened to them and thought about their experiences and laid them metaphorically alongside my own experiences.

As an adopted Indigenous child in a white family, I did have some contact with Aboriginal communities. In my childhood, I had some exposure to native culture and people. My

mom<sup>3</sup> took me to powwows and round dances. As well, we had an Indigenous family friend. Through him, I grew up with some knowledge of Indigenous cultures.

As an Indigenous adopted child, I identified superficially with both the Indigenous cultures as well as the western cultures I was raised in. I absorbed information and misinformation about various native cultures through the media, pop-culture, and current stories within the city of Edmonton. Through my childhood experiences and the media, I formed contradictory beliefs about who I was as a native, which are explored later in the thesis.

When I entered the Native Studies program at the University of Alberta, I learned academically about Indigenous histories and cultures. I learned that historically, aboriginal peoples had been proud and in charge of their own destinies, yet I felt that modern aboriginal people had lost their way. I felt ashamed of being aboriginal.

I encountered the devastation of Indigenous cultures through words, expressions, and history, and I began to internalize this information. In my first two years at university, I began to feel embarrassed because I had grown up not knowing my culture.

In 2003, I thought often about the Civil Rights Activist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>4</sup>, a Southern Baptist Minister. In his push to attain equality for African-Americans, Dr. King practiced non-violence. Influenced by Gandhi<sup>5</sup>, Dr. King urged African-Americans to stand strongly and collectively for their rights. I was curious about the source of his strength. My encounters with him, through his book, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.* (ed. Carson, 1998) planted a seed<sup>6</sup> of curiosity about what it meant to be native. Reading Dr. King's

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<sup>3</sup> Mom – refers to my adoptive mom.

<sup>4</sup> As I watched African-American sitcom shows, I heard many references to prominent Civil Rights Leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Dr. King's message in particular captivated me.

<sup>5</sup> Mahatma Gandhi led Indians both in South Africa and in India to resist colonial law through non-violence (1957).

<sup>6</sup> Planting a seed is a kind of metaphor that suggests putting a thought or idea into someone's mind based on an experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

story helped me understand my situation as a member of a minority group within the city of Edmonton. Over time, this connection with Dr. King was in my mind as I slowly embraced Indigenous protocols, histories, and cultures. This exploration occurred outside the University. I continued to explore these concepts more intimately with Elders.

During my later years in the Native Studies program, I connected to my native roots. Through native study courses and by taking the initiative and going more deeply into the history of native cultures and the history of non-white leaders and activists, I began a more intensive exploration of who I was as an Indigenous person. My interests led me to study the warrior tradition through a somewhat convoluted path.

At this time, I felt unready to look closely at the broader terrible injustices inflicted on Aboriginal peoples. Instead, I opted to explore Aboriginal cultures through historical native figures and battles as I have sought out information about battles and wars in various parts of the world<sup>7</sup>. This path felt like a safe space for me to learn more about my culture. In this space I was learning to be proud of being of Aboriginal heritage. While inhabiting this safe space, I began to wonder about things that have now become part of my research puzzle. My fascination with leaders and warriors now took a different route. As I learned more about Indigenous leaders, my view on what the term warrior encompassed gradually changed. The stories that the young Aboriginal people in the Journeys Program and the stories from interviews with Aboriginal youth carried out by Taiiake Alfred in *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*

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<sup>7</sup> During high school, I read extensively about The Vietnam War, World War II, and battles such as The Siege of Stalingrad. Later on, I also read extensively about movements such as The Civil Rights and people such as Che Guevara.

(2009), helped me transition from the historical process of many First Nations people to a modern reality.<sup>8</sup>

My experience with the Journeys Program planted the seed that turned into my search for the modern Aboriginal warrior. I saw how young Indigenous people had to navigate the experiences and situations they lived every day. I explored the stories of historical Aboriginal warriors in order to begin to understand how I could become involved with my Aboriginal culture and community. By exploring the traditional Indigenous stories of warriors, I came to realize that becoming a warrior was a lifelong process.

Alfred (2009) interviewed young people about their concepts of warrior. For many of these youth, who had little exposure to their traditional native culture, being a warrior meant taking care of your family, your community, and taking care of yourself. Sam McKegney, in *Masculindians* (2014), explained that being a leader and a warrior is taking care of your family. I also talked with Elders in the Indigenous communities around Edmonton about the concept of warrior. They acknowledged that the concept of warrior had changed to fit the current thinking of modern day Indigenous peoples.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

In order to inquire into my experiences I am thinking narratively, that is, I am engaged in autobiographical narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state that narrative inquiry “is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (p. 20). The inquirer “enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving, and retelling, the stories of the experiences that

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<sup>8</sup> Based on experience through observation, I had seen native people as tough and intimidating, or homeless and helpless. I generated these images at a young age and it became my dominant narrative until I learned the historical past of my people while in my undergraduate degree program at the University of Alberta.

make up people's lives, both individual and social" (p. 20). Simply put, "narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p.20). As I participated in a narrative inquiry course, I realized that narrative inquiry matched the familiarity of stories and of thinking narratively that I had practiced all my life. I felt comfortable using this way of thinking for my thesis.

I wanted to figure out my Indigenous identity and understand the concept of warrior from inquiring into the experiences of my life. The knowledge I composed and co-composed through my youth and my young adult life eventually formed the basis of my own interpretation of what it meant for me to be an Indigenous warrior. I had worked my way to an understanding of a modern concept of warrior with no sense that I, myself, might be a warrior, or leader. I had not grown up in an Indigenous culture. However, through my interest and study of the warrior concept, I began to recognize that I was, actually, becoming a warrior.

Ultimately, the warrior journey gave me the strength and courage to learn about my own historical past. As I thought about the various steps from my journey, I realized I was ready to search for my birth mom<sup>9</sup>. I found my birth family, reconnected with them, and with my reservation: Beaver Lake First Nation (2013). Although painful, I have started to learn about my birth mom's life journey and to see the ways that her journey has shaped mine.

This thesis is an inquiry into my identity. Within this narrative inquiry, I describe my journey to understanding my stories to live by, a narrative concept of identity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Lessard, 2010). When I started to take notice of who I was and was becoming as an Aboriginal person, I continued to think narratively and to think about stories to live by (Cardinal, 2010; Dubnewik, 2013; Lessard, 2010; Swanson, 2013). Lessard (2013) wrote that "narrative inquiry provides ways for people to share and make meaning of their lives, understand the experiences they are living, and tell stories of that living" (p. 13), and that it "provided a way

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<sup>9</sup> To distinguish from my adoptive mother (mom), I use the term birth mom.

to work with people differently, one that attends to the details of a life and honours the stories that continue to shape the life” (p. 14). Clandinin (2013) draws on the writing of Ben Okri, a Nigerian storyteller who describes that we live by stories. Okri’s words draw “attention to who we are, and who we are becoming” (p. 21) and to Connelly and Clandinin’s (1999) concept of stories to live by, “a set of complex relationships among knowledge, contexts and identities. It is a way of thinking about identities relationally” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 21).

Trudy Cardinal described her lived experience in her thesis *For All My Relations: An Autobiographical Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of One Aboriginal Graduate Student*, (2010), as she found her identity and work as an Indigenous woman in school, saying she “often included lived experiences which regularly brought others into the story, so I was able to seek those moments of interaction as I tried to understand the lived experiences they spoke to in those various assignments,” (p. 46). These storied experiences allowed me to see the various connections and commonalities within the framework of narrative inquiry which has worked alongside my understanding of being a First Nations man searching for his stories of becoming a warrior and his birth mom. My research into composing my unique identity as Ian Jay Cumming was shaped by the concepts of stories to live by and the way of the warrior.

I believe there are two interrelated justifications for my thesis. The personal justification is situated within my own experiences, that is, although I grew up as an adopted aboriginal child in a privileged home within white society, I always had questions about my aboriginal heritage and my birth mom. Many native people, who also grew up away from their birth family, may also have struggled with their identity in relation to both white society and their aboriginal background. Carefully inquiring into my experiences is a way for me to make sense of my own

storied life. Others may find this narrative inquiry helpful to understanding the complexities of lives in similar circumstances.

My second justification for this thesis is situated within my dream to work with aboriginal youth. Through my work in the Journey's Program, I realized that in order to work with youth, I needed to be able to create a safe space for them. In order to do that, I needed to learn more about my culture so that I could understand the ways being aboriginal has shaped who I have become. Part of understanding my culture and myself lead me to connect with my birth mom, build a relationship with her, and ask why she had given me up. Understanding her stories of experience helps me understand the processes of creating safe spaces for others to engage in their ongoing journeys.

### **Ceremony**

*I, a waskapios (helper in Cree) for an Elder conducting a smudge, was one of a group that Sunday morning. The Elder prepared the smudge for us and asked all of us to remove our glasses and anything metal or gold. He then said, "I need a male volunteer to help." There were only three and neither of the other men stood up. I got up and went over to the Elder. First, he instructed me to take off my glasses, then light the sweetgrass in the pan, and then go around the circle, from east to west, while each person took the smoke of the sweetgrass and brushed it all over them. I then lit the match but it was burning the stick so fast that I blew it out. The Elder gracefully held his hand up and said to me "We do not blow out the fire. We simply let the wind take it" (Whiskeyjack, 2010).*



## Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

In this autobiographical narrative inquiry, I draw on the theoretical work of narrative inquiry scholars (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Caine & Clandinin, 2013) and Indigenous scholars (Archibald, 2008; Cardinal, 2010; Ermine, 1995; Lessard, 2010; Lightning, 1992; and Wilson, 2008). In the following section, I tell stories of coming to understand experience narratively and show my developing understandings of narrative inquiry as research methodology and phenomenon (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

### Beginning Narratively

*In the summer of 2013, I first learned of narrative inquiry when I enrolled in Dr. Jean Clandinin's class, Narrative Inquiry as Relational Research Methodology, EDES 501, a two-week seminar course. A dear friend, who had taken the course in the previous year, said narrative inquiry turned out to be the best fit with his thesis. I had been struggling with what methodology to use.*

*I soon discovered how relevant this methodology was for my thesis. As I focused on narrative inquiry, I discovered autobiographical narrative inquiry. At the beginning of the narrative inquiry seminar, the focus of my thesis was to develop programs to help urban aboriginal youth. By the end of the seminar, I realized that first I needed to understand my own stories of who I was and was becoming as an Indigenous person before I could help others. This was another beginning of my journey.*

*On the first day, Jean introduced John Dewey's theory of experience (1938).*

*"[E]xperience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such but they cannot be understood only as*

*individuals. They are always in relation always in a social context” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Jean explained the theory, using pieces of academic literature, had class participants discuss the theory and its application in small groups, and had us report back to the whole class. Finally, she helped the theory come to life by reading a story to the class.*

*As I listened to Jean’s explanation of narrative inquiry, I quickly realized that my hopes for my thesis were congruent with narrative inquiry. My experience in Jean’s class was a journey unlike anything I had experienced before. Her style of teaching, and consequently what was asked of us as learners, allowed us to connect to the methodology. I immediately responded to this form of learning because I was able to put the explanations and stories together into visual pictures. This style of learning reminded me of the days where I learned how to study my notes in junior high and high school through visualization.*

*Each day in that class was truly mind-blowing. I was learning a methodology and way of thinking that made sense to me. The use of story. What also made sense to me was the current situation of my thesis. I was trying to relate narrative inquiry to my thesis but something was just not clicking. I felt my research topic was missing the target. I had planned to identify the makeup of the modern native warrior in one step. In my dialogue journal, I wrote that I felt the papers and essays most people have written for their university classes “do not have their heart in them.” I felt I was breaking ground for myself. For once, I was able to articulate exactly what I thought. Up until then, I had mostly written papers in order to satisfy my professors and get by.*

*I asked Jean “Am I being sensible or outlandish by stating it?” She looked at me and smiled. I then realized that I had to ask myself “What is it that you want? What is it that you wish to do?”*

*In the last class, everyone who was part of the Gandhi Summer Institute<sup>10</sup> gathered in a large circle on the main floor in the Education South Building. There, each of us took turns, going clockwise, sharing our thoughts and feelings about our particular course and the summer institute. As each person talked, they held a bracelet, then passed it to the next person. When the bracelet came to me, I looked at the ground, and let out a long sigh. I lifted up my head and said to everyone that this course changed not only my outlook on my work, but also my life. I teared up because something had changed in my fundamental way of thinking.*

*The narrative inquiry seminar opened my eyes. As a result of the course, I understood I could use story in my research. All along I had been trying to find the perfect example of what the term warrior meant. I had searched high and low to locate this idea. I had thought by researching the indigenous martial art, Okichitaw<sup>11</sup>, taught by a Master in Toronto, I could identify the makeup of the modern day warrior. I had a discussion with Mark<sup>12</sup>, a colleague in my Masters Program, about my situation with regards to my thesis. Did I have the drive to pursue the Okichitaw research topic or was there a better option? Mark said “Well, are you not an urban aboriginal male?” I said “yes?” He then said, “well are you not a warrior?” I said “I guess so?...”*

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<sup>10</sup> The Mahatma Gandhi Canadian Foundation for World Peace (2013), based in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, traces its origins to 1988 when observances of the anniversary of Gandhi's birth were so well received by the people of Edmonton that the initiators launched plans to enlarge the annual observances, to memorialize Gandhi, and to share his teachings through a national foundation. The Foundation has grown over the years and currently supports a summer program of graduate level courses for teachers at the University of Alberta; hosts an annual conference for youth on topics related to peace and social justice; and supports an annual event marking the International Day of Peace and Non-Violence each year on September 21st.

<sup>11</sup> Okichitaw (2019) is a unique, powerful, practical martial art system that uses basic but aggressive combat movements that were employed specifically throughout Plains Indigenous Warfare. Based on Indigenous Plains combat techniques and tactics, this concurrent version of the combat art embodies the spirit of the Plains Warrior fighting and warfare applications through the utilization with traditional weapons. All hand, foot and body mechanics are a reflection of specific Plains Cree weaponry and their respective movements. Indigenous weaponry such as tomahawk, lance, gunstock warclub and knife are used in advanced training.

<sup>12</sup> Name has been changed for the purposes of this thesis.

*A couple weeks later I was talking to another friend about the discussion I had with Mark. That's when I realized what Mark was saying. "Wow....." I stated. "I cannot believe this. I was searching for the right term and right example of a warrior not knowing that, all along, I was on the warrior journey." This euphoric moment motivated me to make plans to go home to the reserve. Narrative inquiry became my research method of choice.*

### **Understandings of Narrative Inquiry**

Clandinin (2013) explains narrative inquiry works from John Dewey's theory of experience (1938). Dewey wrote of two criteria of experience, continuity and interaction, enacted within situations. Continuity is taken up by narrative inquirers in the following way "[T]he idea [is] that experiences grow out of other experiences, and experiences lead to further experiences. Wherever one positions oneself in relation to that continuum--the imagined now, some imagined past, or some imagined future---each point has a past experiential base and leads to an experiential future" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2)

Narratives thus have pasts, presents, and futures that can follow a non-linear timeline (Creswell, 2013; Polkinghorne, 1995). Interaction is taken up by narrative inquirers. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) wrote: "Narratives have *personal* and *social* [interaction]; *past*, *present*, and *future* [continuity]; combined with the notion of *place* [situation]," (p. 50). Included in their work are "the *four directions of inquiry: inward* and *outward, backward* and *forward*" (p.50). Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) ideas create the *three-dimensional narrative inquiry space* where temporality is one dimension, personal and social are the second dimension, and place is the third dimension (p. 50).

## **Negotiating Entry Into The Field**

My entry into the relational field of narrative inquiry began with sharing my stories of trying to understand what it meant to grow up within a privileged home on the southside of Edmonton as an aboriginal child and youth. I started by telling and retelling stories about myself as I was growing up. Alongside those stories I was telling, I began “entering these places” because they were important to me and to the direction of this thesis (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 12). I was drawing on these storied experiences to guide me through my research puzzle.

*I was adopted by white English parents, I was learning disabled, and I was bigger than my age-mates both in height and weight. My knowledge of the different aspects of who I was came from external sources such as my parents, my teachers, and my schoolmates. Very early on, I asked my parents about my birth mom. I wondered about other things but I did not know how to ask the questions. I moved through elementary, junior high, and high school becoming aware of the labels others put on me and had spurts of concern about myself. However, these concerns were minor at that time.*

*While I attended school, other students considered me as “the big guy”, the guy with the learning disability. Some students called me fat. For the most part, I believed those terms were unchangeable. To counteract this, I explored identifying myself as a goth, and a metalhead, essentially an outsider. I definitely felt like an outsider each time I crossed the North Saskatchewan River on the Light Rail Transit (LRT). I had to get off at the first stop on Jasper Avenue, the Corona station to get to Edmonton Academy. It was an incredible feeling because I had not been this far away from my parents or neighborhood before. After our family moved from Aspen Gardens, the Garneau/McKernan area became my home. Southside Edmonton was*

*my home. There I knew the landmarks, friends, and family. It was where I played. It was my native land. And now I was feeling that I was in unfamiliar territory, the Northside.*

*The Northside is known to Edmontonians as the rougher side of the city. At least that's what I was told growing up. How do I know? I learned it as early as Kindergarten or Grade 1. In an economically diverse school on the southside, I was exposed to many ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Yet there were no native children. When I asked why, I did not get a clear response other than that native children lived on the Northside of the city. The tone of these responses sounded critical. Can you imagine what that sounded like to me, as someone just becoming awake (Greene, 1995) to being a native youth? To know that my people are viewed as a rejected race? That mindset affected me during those years that I went across the river to Edmonton Academy. I knew I was going to encounter natives for the first time. After I got off the LRT at Corona Station, I walked up the stairs to Jasper Avenue. I walked past, the closest I had physically been to, a 'drunk native'. This experience further solidified my stereotype of native people as being lost. At this point, I was truly an outsider with regards to the native community.*

An outsider to the research may “question taken-for-granted assumptions and openly query meaning behind behavior” (Mayan, p. 79-80). “An insider may have ease of access to the research and setting as well as building a shared understanding and language” (Mayan, p. 79). As I set out to engage in this autobiographical narrative inquiry, I realized I considered myself both as an insider as well as an outsider: I was an insider as I was aboriginal and yet I was an outsider as I had not grown up in the “stereotypical” circumstances that many other aboriginal youth have.

## **In The Midst**

Clandinin (2013) states that “Narrative inquirers always enter into research relationships in the midst” (p. 43). *In the fall of 2002, I entered into the Transfer Year Program<sup>13</sup> (TYP) at the University of Alberta carrying the labels of being adopted, being learning disabled, being fat, being a goth, a punk, and a metalhead. I was also native and had ambivalent feelings about my racial identity. Walking into the KIVA room on the second floor of the Education Building I suddenly realized “I am native!”*

The KIVA room is a two-tier circle which allows students to sit around the edge of each circle. Students were already sitting and waiting. All of them appeared to be native. Everyone was quiet. I sat on the second tier on the right-hand side of the room and looked at everyone. I had dressed in my punk and metalhead getup<sup>14</sup>. I asked myself “how can I interact with these guys?...”

*In the 2002 fall semester, I had my first native studies course. Throughout this course, I felt bombarded. I was exposed to anger about native treatment by the government and by white society expressed by both students and the professor. I felt I had been blindsided by my previous education which had mentioned none of these serious issues. I was overwhelmed by the written information in the course readings. My reaction was to try to survive the negative emotions in the class. I became defensive. My attitude was “You’re<sup>15</sup> not like the other natives,” or “you did not grow up within the culture or way of life so why bother now?” However, each one of these experiences was shaping me. Clandinin (2013) says that “throughout the inquiry, we inquire into*

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<sup>13</sup> Transfer Year Program - The Transition Year Program (TYP) is a University access program for FNMI [First Nations, Métis, Inuit] students who may not be prepared to enter a faculty through the regular admissions route. (First People’s House, 2019)

<sup>14</sup> I wore a band t-shirt, my black studded vest with various band and punk patches, black combat pants, and black combat boots.

<sup>15</sup> You’re – I frequently talk to myself in the second person.

a range of field texts...that allow us to understand who we are, and are becoming” (p. 43). During this time I wrote notes, journals, and academic papers. But as I began work on my autobiographical narrative inquiry, I also began to remember my experiences. All of these are now the field texts for my study.

*In 2004, I was very involved in the music scene. I also worked out in the gym a lot. One important event occurred during our summer vacation, when we journeyed to the Southern United States to visit various Civil Rights Sites. I knew these experiences were important but I did not know.*

*In 2004, I also moved from TYP to the Native Studies program at the University of Alberta. Native Studies was my major and History (my first love) was my minor. I avoided close contact with the native students as I took my History and elective courses over the next four years. As I progressed through History courses and the odd Native Studies course, I thought, “Martin Luther King Jr. was a great leader for the African-American people. Perhaps there were also great Indigenous leaders?” I started to learn more about Indigenous histories and cultures on my own time. Specifically, I found myself looking at Aboriginal Plains History in my classes, but also outside the class curriculum. I was interested in the Plains Culture. I knew I was from an Aboriginal Plains Band in Alberta.*

*In 2008, I was now at the point that I had no more elective courses to take. The history portion of my undergraduate degree was complete. Now I HAD to take the remaining native studies courses to complete my major. In the past 5 years of undergraduate university days, I had found friendship and community through the campus gym, and the local music scene. I felt at home on campus. Although these communities provided great friendships and a family community, I knew that there was a complex issue involving who I was, an Aboriginal person.*



*With that in mind, I stepped into the native student body on campus, accompanied by all my fears and anxieties.*

*I had a new opportunity to meet Aboriginal peoples. I remember walking into the Aboriginal Student Council Centre (ASCC or ASC) on campus. The council is situated in a room in the old Arts building right in the middle of campus. The council sits at a big round table during their meetings. This table is also available for regular students to sit, work, and chat. A few couches line the wall for students to chat or rest. On the walls are posters and pictures, crafts and art.*

Clandinin and Caine (2012) state that “there are implications for how we think of negotiating entry, how we negotiate the relational living alongside or the spaces of story-telling” as you “meet in the midst of...unfolding complex and multiple experiences” that “shape time, places, and spaces where we come together” (p. 170). *In 2002, when I was in TYP, I found the physical space of ASC to be inviting but spent very little time there, because of the atmosphere created by the anger of the native students. When I returned 6 years later, I found the space and the people more welcoming. I was in the midst of these experiences (Swanson, 2013) as a naive adopted aboriginal man. I had many more layers to unfold.*

### **Negotiation of Relationships**

*In 2008, what I found stepping through those doors was love. In that room, many people reacted with care and appreciation. The conversations, the time to hear people, the laughter and joy were abundant. The serious discussions involving historical situations were powerful. I remember I felt amazed to experience this beautiful community. We talked about the histories of our people. There seemed to be more care and respect for each other and less of the anger I had witnessed in my early days on campus. I was able to listen to them without feeling anxious or*

*intimidated. I began to talk about my personal connection to our history. Without realizing it, I was becoming part of the community. I no longer felt like I was an outsider.*

*I recollect the care I took to be respectful of what other people said. I remember listening carefully to their stories and concerns. I took part in the community activities and volunteered at many of the events. I began to participate in civil actions such as Idle No More<sup>16</sup> and various other aboriginal causes. Now, as I slide back in time, I recognize I participated in the student body out of love, care, and a growing understanding of my community.*

*This time, the friendships that formed and the community I encountered were awe-inspiring. I think back to the first major encounter I had with native students and the professor in Native Studies 100. Almost everyone seemed to be angry about everything we were learning. Although I finished the class, I avoided contact with my classmates and my professors as much as possible. Now, I began to see native people as people. I began to realize that many years ago, I had accepted and created unwarranted stereotypes of native peoples. My original stereotypes had first emerged when I heard that native peoples who lived on the Northside of the river, the tough side, the rough side, were hard<sup>17</sup>.*

*As I came to know the people at ASC and in the native studies courses, I saw them as individuals. They were like other people I knew; that is, they were hard working and dedicated but also funny, friendly, opinionated, and caring. The native students pushed and motivated each other. My experiences and gradual acceptance of them resulted in a major shift in my thinking about native peoples. While I got to know the students in ASC, I also thought about how I had internalized stereotypes about native people. Based on these stereotypical views of native*

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<sup>16</sup> Idle No More - a movement started by four native women in 2012 to protest the mistreatment of aboriginal peoples.

<sup>17</sup> Hard - If a person or their expression is hard, they show no kindness or sympathy. (Collins Free Online Dictionary, 2019).

*peoples I had bought into the single story (Adichie, 2009). I had been complicit in the stories that were told about native peoples. It was during these times that I began to awaken to who I was in relation with aboriginal peoples. And I began to see how the other Indigenous students were responding to me: the students and the faculty in ASC did not seem to care that I had grown up in a non-Indigenous home with parents from Great Britain, that I did not know much about indigenous cultural values or the historical knowledge of my ancestors, the Cree. To them, I was Jay. I was someone that they could talk to, hang out with, be friends with, relate to. I had previously not known people of my own culture but here I was “relating” with Indigenous people and creating a shared lived experience with them. I was just hanging out and we were working together to better ourselves and be friends. I realized that I was also native. I was one of them.*

*I thought back to the letter<sup>18</sup> my birth mom had written for me. In the letter, she expressed the hope that I would finish high school and get my diploma. That thought was always with me and her wishes pushed me every step of the way.*

### **Moving from Field to Field Texts**

“Throughout the duration of inquiry, narrative inquirers engage and work within the three-dimensional space of temporality as one dimension, personal and social as the second dimension, and place as the third dimension” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). “[R]esearch puzzles are framed, research fields and participants selected” and “field texts are collected, written and composed...as research texts are written and negotiated” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47).

*Many of the experiences that contributed to my research puzzle occurred during the years that I spent in the native studies program, particularly as I became comfortable in the ASC student space and native studies classes. The identification of my research puzzle came much*

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<sup>18</sup> Letter given to my adoptive parents by social services.

*later, but all the time I was in the native studies program, reading for the classes, and writing the papers, I was doing outside reading on many different rebellious movements. All these elements formed the basis for my field texts.*

An example of an experience in this autobiographical field I was composing was my time in the Journeys Program. *Early in the program, I talked to a program coordinator about an earlier summer when I was living on my own and spent much of the summer becoming part of the street experience. I developed close relationships with many of the street people. At the end of the summer, I walked away thinking what a great adventure I had had. When I remembered that summer in the first week of the Journeys Program, I HAD to talk to the Journeys' coordinator. That particular summer was coming back to me. I now viewed that summer differently. I was an outsider participating in their lifestyles as an adventure, but I did not know life on the street like they did. Looking back, I felt I had taken their stories for granted. This revelation and my guilt motivated me to try to look behind the stories of the inner-city youth and be more involved in the program.* This is one example where I am moving from the field of my experience to the composing of the storied memories as field texts.

The narrative inquiry researcher lives in the field with their participants, and “whether the field is a classroom, a hospital room or a meeting place where stories are told,” in that field, they begin to “compose field texts” (p. 48). Field texts according to Clandinin (2013) are the “records, including, for example, field notes, transcripts of conversations, and artifacts, such as photographs and writings by participants and researcher” (p. 46). Artifacts can be “artwork, photographs (both memory box photographs, and intentionally taken recent photographs), other memory box items, documents, plans, policies, annals, and chronologies” (p. 46).

The majority of my field texts are compiled from my own stories and artifacts including my memory box, photographs, archival photographs, tourist information, and conversations with family, mentors, teachers, and friends.

### **Moving from Field Texts to Interim and Final Research Texts**

The next step in my research was to move from my overwhelming number of field texts to the final research text. This process involved intensive conversations with many mentors, teachers, family, and friends. “The dialogue with participants around interim research texts can lead the inquirer back for more intensive work with the participant if more field texts are needed to be able to compose research texts that researcher and participants see as authentic and compelling” (Clandinin, 2012, p. 47). Although my research did not technically include other participants, I was involved with many people along the way. I had to establish for myself and for these people the compelling truth behind my stories. My process was full of “twists and turns” (p. 49).

### **Representing Narratives of Experience in ways that show Temporality, Sociality and Place**

Autobiographical narrative inquiry is a “way to write about the whole context of a life” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Sylvia Molloy (1991), an Argentinean writer and professor, “notes that autobiography is always a ‘re-presentation, that is, a retelling, because the life to which it supposedly refers is already a kind of narrative construct. Life is always, necessarily, a tale” (p. 5). Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) methodologies of narrative inquiry and autobiographical narrative inquiry provide a “way of understanding [my] experience” (p. 20). The three-dimensional narrative inquiry in my story includes the elements of *temporality*, *place*, and *sociality*.

**Temporality.** One dimension of narrative inquiry is temporality, which “points inquirers toward the past, present, and future of people, places, things, and events under study” (Clandinin & Huber, 2010, p. 3). As I look into my past and consider my future as an Indigenous, adopted, learning disabled, big Cree man, these labels exist in various times and places in my life. These labels were present in much of my school, family, adoption, recreational activities, and vacations. The labels were both more and less present on my journey to find my birth mom.

**Place.** Connelly and Clandinin (2000) define *place* as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and event take place” (p. 480). University was the backdrop for my thesis. The information I learned in class as well as on my own, combined with the conversations I had with people at the university, shaped the stories I lived and told about who I was and was becoming as an Aboriginal person. A trip to the plains of Canada and the United States augmented my learning as I observed various examples of First Nations peoples. Places I undertook to learn more about were Batoche, Saskatchewan and Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota. Years later, I went home to my own reserve, Beaver Lake First Nation, Alberta.

**Sociality.** Another element of autobiographical narrative inquiry is *sociality*, which includes personal and social conditions. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain personal conditions as “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions of both the inquirer and study participants. By social conditions we mean the existential conditions, the environment, surrounding factors and forces, people and otherwise that form the individual’s context” (p. 50).

*In my first year of TYP, at the time I entered the University of Alberta, I was unwilling to learn about my own culture. As I came to the university, I felt good about myself. I believed I had*

*overcome my learning disability because I had been accepted into a university program. I had lost over 100 pounds in high school. I believed I was at my ideal weight. I could wear the clothes that I liked. I felt good walking onto the grounds of the university and into the KIVA room in the Education Building. As I walked through the door, I suddenly realized that I would have to confront my nativeness. I was distressed and did my best to avoid any personal involvement with the students or professors. Instead I learned about myself in the world outside campus as I participated in both the local music scene and sports facilities. In these places I learned about community. I cultivated a wider understanding of how to interact with people. However, after six years, I had to get serious about native studies. These other experiences helped prepare me to participate in the native community on campus. I felt guilty and impelled to be honest about my earlier judgmental attitude. I was uncomfortable with my earlier decisions. The caring interactions with students and professors in the program provided the impetus for me to inquire more into my own people's history and culture.*

### **Relational Response Communities**

“Response communities are critical elements within the inquiry, as they help inquirers recognize how they shape both the experiences of their participants and their research puzzles” (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 173). My research puzzle does not necessarily involve participants, as it is my own story, but it does involve people who are part of my story. Narrative inquirers “learn about ethical and responsive ways to be in relationships, and to learn to listen again and again...as others attend to us as researchers and as participants in our own inquiries, we also come to understand the complexities embedded with our own journeys as researchers” (p. 174).

I have talked to many people about my research and my stories. Many of them have given me insight into the direction of my story. First of all, my adoptive family has shared their

own versions of the events and conversations as we journeyed to Indian Country (Chapter 3) and as I searched for my birth mom (Chapter 4). My birth family is also part of the research puzzle. The various members of my birth family have accepted me. They have helped me understand who I am and the community I come from. I went into the community with respect. They welcomed me into the family.

Another community that I am indebted to is The Centre for Research for Teacher Education and Development (CRTED) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. The people in this community work together presenting their research ideas and discussing their narrative inquiry research. I have talked about various aspects of my story and presented various sections of my drafts. I found their feedback to be insightful, particularly with regards to the flow and content of my story. In addition, my conversations with mentors, Elders, friends, adoptive family, and people in the music scene and gym, have helped me understand the importance of my journey which has enabled me to understand relationships and gain trust in native communities. The multiple conversations about the research puzzle have been powerful and amazing.

### **Personal, Practical, and Social Justifications**

“The questions of “So what?” and “Who cares?” in “narrative inquiry, as in other forms of inquiry, raise[s] questions of justification, the reasons why the study is important” (Cardinal, 2010). Narrative inquirers need to attend to three kinds of justification: the personal, the practical, and the social” (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007, p. 24).

My personal justification for this research puzzle arose from my frequent wondering about who I am in the multiple communities I live in, my home, school, native, music, gym, and university communities. My hope is that “those who find themselves not quite fitting in, to



stumble across a story where they realize they are not alone, and they too bring an image to the bigger picture” (Cardinal, 2010, p. 294) can be helped to orient themselves in their many worlds.

My personal growth came as I searched for my birth mom and became comfortable in my own skin. “This is our one chance...So ready to see how things turn out...I’ve got something here worth fighting for” (Vigil, 2009, track 4). I needed to learn more about who I was as an Indigenous man on my journey to becoming a warrior.

The practical justification for my inquiry relates to the ways my story may help other Indigenous youth. Many Indigenous youth are also trying to understand who they are and are becoming, that is, they are trying to form their identities. I believe my story can be helpful and perhaps offer youth imaginative possibilities. Other people’s stories can be useful in allowing a “deeper understanding on how social contexts shape experiences” (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 171).

The social justification for my inquiry is to make my stories available for teachers, mental health workers, recreational program coordinators, youth program coordinators, and others as my story may help them “ask questions about teaching, care or social practices” (Clandinin, & Caine, 2012, p. 174).

### **Attentive to Audience**

For researchers, this “contextual narrative enables researchers to further deepen the complexity of the living and telling of stories” (Clandinin & Caine, 2012, p. 175) particularly for children and youth within the native community. “In autobiographical narrative inquiry it is imperative to address the questions of how larger social, institutional and cultural narratives inform our understanding and shape the researchers’ stories to live by” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

I believe the narrative in this research provides a unique perspective on the struggles of one aboriginal youth adopted out of the native community as he attempts to understand the ways his lived and told stories are shaping his identity. There are many other aboriginal people in similar situations. Reading my story may help them to understand their own stories.

### **Commitment to Understanding Lives In Motion**

As I tell my story, I have become more comfortable with who I am and am becoming. One of the ways I have done this is by remembering and telling stories of my past and my present. In telling my stories of remembered experiences to my friends, family, colleagues, Elders and mentors and by listening carefully to their reflections on my memories, I have come to new ways of retelling and reliving my stories to live by, my storied identity.

Anna Neumann (1997) wrote:

People live their stories as much as they tell them in words. They live them in what they do not say. They live them in attending to the words of others rather than their own. They live them in the gaze that comes with inward thought and inward talk while others all around are conversing. They live them in the feelings that come to surround them, that they give off in sighs and looks and gestures, or simply in the feeling that their presence evokes in others. All of these are forms of telling, though without words, and they are forms of telling that we can begin to read and hear through also without words. (pp. 107-08)

I understand that I am in the midst of my stories. These lived stories are not complete, they are always changing. I am becoming who I am. As Maxine Greene (1999) says, "I am what I am not yet". My stories to live by change, as my friends change, as my family changes, as my native community changes, and as my environment changes. "When we as researchers

understand this we also bring a commitment to understanding lives in motion, a commitment to seeing and representing lives always in the making” (Greene, 1995). As I tell my story, I need to be careful about how my stories affect the people around me.

### **Relational Responsibilities**

In Clandinin & Caine (2012),

Ethical understandings in narrative inquiry are marked by living in relational spaces that bring forth researchers’ and participants’ lived ethical understandings, complexities and tensions. Living and being in a relational space, brings forth responsibilities where issues of attentiveness, presence, and response matter (Bateson, 1994; Lugones, 1987). It is marked by a process of self reflection, contemplation, openness and uncertainty (Bergum, 1999) (p. 170).

Ben Okri’s (1997)

[W]ords about changing the stories we live by, changing who we are, also direct my attention to the relationship ethics around engaging in narrative inquiry, because we might change not only our own lives and those who live in relation with us but also the lives of participants and those others who live in relation with them (Clandinin, 2013, Pp. 22-23).

As I progressed through my undergraduate university program, I became more adept at developing relationships with different people. As I began planning my thesis research, I became increasingly aware that my original topic of Okichitaw made me uncomfortable because it was the telling of somebody else’s story. When I found narrative inquiry, I realized that in order to help aboriginal youth, I had to be comfortable with my own aboriginal story.

I realized early on that finding my birth mom and birth family might involve connecting threads that could be sensitive to other family members. I learned to think very carefully about my communication with other people as I told and retold my story. I had to walk the line between being honest and safeguarding other people. My care with these relationships was rewarded when my brother told me “Mom is happy you are doing this. You have a powerful story that can be useful for our people” (Personal communication, March, 2014).

### Chapter 3: Indian Country<sup>19</sup>

“Our struggle at the moment is to continue to survive and work toward a time when we can replace the need for being preoccupied with survival with a more responsible and peaceful way of living within communities and with the ever-changing landscape that will ever be our only home.” –Warrior, 1995, p.126.

#### Introduction

In 2008, a month before I walked into Aboriginal Student Council (ASC) for the second time, I went on a journey through Indian Country. I knew I would be taking Native Studies courses over the next two years to finish my degree. I wanted to go into the courses with more knowledge about the history of native peoples. I was particularly searching for individuals who were identified as native warriors. I was searching for leaders with the strength and moral fibre similar to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was a leader in the struggle against the oppression of African American peoples in the United States. I learned about some native leaders in my American and Canadian history courses, but I was interested in exploring their experiences in more depth. I searched for, and read about, various battles between native peoples and both the United States and Canadian governments. These included the Battle of Batoche (Asfar & Choden, 2003), The Massacre at Wounded Knee (Brown, 1970), and The Battle of The Little Bighorn (Donovan, 2008).

I reflected on my native studies and history lectures at the University of Alberta. I felt an intense desire to explore places where significant events involving people I saw as native warriors had occurred. A part of this desire came from the trips my parents had taken me on to places that had both historical and personal meaning for them.

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<sup>19</sup> Indian Country - I use this term because I heard other native people saying Indian Country. It became how I thought about the Northern Prairies in the United States. It became a catch-all term for me.

*During my childhood and teen years, our family visited a number of places of importance to my parents. The drive from Edmonton to San Diego, where my parents had lived for two years, was a repeated trip that seemed particularly significant to me. Each time we drove, we shared stories about previous trips. A story my dad frequently shared with us as we drove along Route 66 was about a stop that we made in Oatman, Arizona when I was six years old. Dad colourfully describes the encounter I had with a herd of wild donkeys. “Jay, being ever so careful, managed to find himself surrounded by a herd of donkeys. He calmly shared the pellets of food with the donkeys. He was unconcerned about any possible danger.” We heard this story many times. The importance of visiting places and telling the stories of our experiences in those significant places became part of our family traditions.*

*In spring of 2000, I visited Europe on a school trip. I remember describing events to other students on the tour that were ones I had heard on previous trips to Europe with my parents. I basically took over for the tour guide and went into past historical events for each place. That was the first time I shared my stories of past trips and my accumulated historical knowledge.*

### **Indian Country**

*At the end of July 2008, I said to Dad, “Since my sister is gone on her trip, let’s go on one of our own. I would like to go to Batoche, Wounded Knee, and The Battle of Little Bighorn. We can also go to Minneapolis and the Mall of America on the trip.” My dad dryly said, “That’s fine.” My mom said, “I think that’s a good idea!”*

As I reflect on the many trips we took together, I now see how their storied memories became re-placed in these visits and how I internalized a sense of importance for revisiting memories. *In the summer of 2008, my family and I went on a road trip to visit important battle*

*sites involving native people in both Canada and the United States. The trip we took encompassed a lot of Indian Country. We drove through Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba in Canada, along with Minnesota, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana in the States. I wanted to physically visit some of the historic battle sites between natives and police/military branches of the governments.*

*On a cloudy early morning in August, we set out for Saskatoon, Saskatchewan on the Yellowhead/Trans-Canada highway. As we drove east through Alberta, I noticed the vast prairie with small stands of trees. As we reached Vermilion, we encountered rolling hills. These hills lasted until we got to North Battleford and the valley where we crossed the South Saskatchewan River. We stayed the night in Saskatoon.*

Neither my parents nor I had ever been to this part of the world. We were keen on seeing some of these places, particularly the places where battles that involved Indigenous peoples were fought. My parents came to support me in my quest as I learned more about my native background. I was excited about the journey in part because I had learned so much on the earlier trip to the Deep South where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had taken a peaceful stand against oppression. I believed this trip to ‘Indian Country’ would provide a similar opportunity, a chance to visualize where the battles actually occurred. I was uncertain of how I would feel when I visited these sites. I felt a similar level of anxiety as I had experienced when we departed for our journey to the Deep South.

**Batoche.** *The next day was a cool and cloudy prairie day with short periods of sun. We made our way to the village of Batoche, Saskatchewan, situated on the south bank of the South Saskatchewan River.*

I chose Batoche for the first visit of our trip because it was the closest battle site and was Canadian. The village of Batoche is now a Canadian National Historic Site. In one of my history classes, I came across old newspaper articles with pictures of the soldiers riding on a train to reach the northern plains. I also saw a recruiting poster for soldiers to come fight the uprising (Plummer, 2013). I also knew a bit about Louis Riel's leadership in the North-West Rebellion (Miller, 2001). This uprising in Batoche was his last battle.

The government's soldiers traveled close to 2000 miles to reach this area of what is now northern Saskatchewan, specifically to quell the rebellion (Beal, & Macleod, 1984). At Batoche, the soldiers attacked and killed the Métis who worked the land around Batoche and the native bands who lived and traded there (Asfar & Chodan, 2003; Dempsey, 1985; Miller, 2001).

*After parking the car, we walked through the visitor centre and through a gate. My parents and I walked northwest along a dirt road for about half a kilometre to the historic site. The village was screened by trees at the visitors' center. As we walked along the path, approaching the village, we noticed how quaint and small the village was. A church and four houses. Only the church and one house remained standing when we visited.*

*We went into Saint-Antoine de Padoue Church, the first building in the village. As we went in to the building, I recognized the church as a place of worship and of peace. Yet in the midst of the serenity of the church, I became distressed because the church was also a place of war. The walls were riddled with bullet holes. This shocking image swept over me. All at once, I was aware of two different sides to Canada. Prior to walking into the church, my conception of Canada had been of a primarily peaceful country. As soon as I saw the church, that image was immediately altered. It was a riveting image that stuck with me for the rest of this journey and beyond.*



From reading history books and investigating on my own, I knew what had transpired on this riverbank. In 1885, during the Battle of Batoche, the third last battle of the Riel Rebellion, the Métis fought from within this church, as the church was the tallest and biggest building in the village. The bombardment from the soldiers lasted for three days before the Métis were defeated (Hildebrandt, 1985).

In my mind, this church was a touchstone<sup>20</sup> place. The Métis and natives who fought were holed up inside. I felt proud standing on this ground. I was a native man who was alive. Here I was in a place where my people had fought with their backs against the wall.

*After that, we went to the house beside the church. Here, too, there were also countless bullet holes in the walls, even in the dining room and bedrooms. After walking through these two buildings, we walked north along the main path to a viewing area at the edge of the village, overlooking the South Saskatchewan River. My dad and I stood on the wooden deck looking at the river and the vast prairie around us. He commented, “Why on earth would the Government and its troops come all the way out here to fight the Métis and Cree? It just makes no sense.” I replied saying, “I know eh?”*

My thoughts were that the Government of Canada wanted to set an example to other native groups in the west to show that resistance to the government was futile. As I stood there, I tried to be unbiased and understand the situation from both the Métis and government sides. I understood the strategic element of quashing the North-West Rebellion. On the other hand, I

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<sup>20</sup> Clandinin & Caine (2012) describe

touchstones as a quality or example that is used to test excellence or genuineness of others...[or] as a hard black stone, such as jasper or basalt, which was used to test the quality of gold or silver by comparing the streak left on the stone by one of these metals with that of a standard allow. We wondered if we metaphorically touched or scratched a narrative inquiry, what kinds of streaks or marks would be left (p. 169).

thought sending 5000 soldiers 2000 miles to fight these small skirmishes (Eugène, 1886) was lunacy. These thoughts ran through my mind while I walked on this solemn ground.

*On the way back, we went to the St. Antoine de Padoue Roman Catholic Cemetery at Batoche. I read the name Gabriel Dumont<sup>21</sup> on the only cross with a name. In the rest of the cemetery are the unmarked crosses of the Cree warriors who participated in the battle. As I stood there, I felt silence across the land. A terrible injustice happened in this place. I felt alone.*

Feeling humbled, I came back to reality. For some of the dead, Batoche had been their home. The Métis were proud and self-sufficient and built a respectful relationship with the Cree (Asfar & Chodan, 2003; Dempsey, 1985; Miller, 2001). Yet, they died. Here I am. I felt tremendously sad about the loss of lives. Over what? Land? Proud though, proud that they fought back.

In 1870, the Métis had been forced out of the Red River colonies, situated in what is now called the city of Winnipeg in the province of Manitoba (Ens, 1983). After the Red River Rebellion, the Métis dispersed across the prairies setting up a number of new settlements (Miller, 2001). Unfortunately, the government's land control procedures eventually moved onto the western prairies (Dempsey, 1985; Miller, 2001), with the end result being the North-West Rebellion (Miller, 2004). Both the livelihood of the Métis and the ways of life of the Cree peoples were threatened (Miller, 2001, 2004).

*Batoche was a symbol in my mind for both for the Métis and Cree. Batoche is where the Métis and Cree made a stand. As I stood there, I visualized being at the rebellion. Again I realized I was alive because they fought and resisted the government. I did not know if I was a descendant of either the Métis or the Cree in the area, but I felt proud knowing that these people*

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<sup>21</sup> Gabriel Dumont - Métis Leader who fought alongside Louis Riel. He asked Louis Riel to come back from the United States, where he was living in exile, to Canada to help in the Rebellion (Asfar & Chodan, 2003).

*battled for their rights. I was honored to be in this place, knowing that a big battle happened here.*

Now as I look back, Batoche was one of the places where I began to develop both constructive as well as ambivalent feelings about being native. Batoche became incorporated into my story. Not only was I native, but I also began to recognize the Canada I had grown up in was not the same Canada that was taught to me in school. I was standing in a place of major importance to native and Métis peoples and this confrontation had never been mentioned. I now had a window that helped me understand the anger I encountered during my TYP year in ASC, in my professors, and in the other native students.

**Winnipeg and Louis Riel.** *We walked over the rolling hills back to the car, and drove eight and a half hours to Winnipeg. After staying over two nights, we visited the Louis Riel house, where he lived from 1868-1870 with his mother, brothers and their families, on the south side of Winnipeg. The two-story house was set up as it had been a hundred and forty years ago. The rooms were small with wooden furniture that probably had been built on site.*

*As we were leaving the city on our way to Minnesota, we tried to find Upper Fort Garry, where the major actions of the Red River Rebellion took place.*

Upper Fort Garry had been a Hudson Bay Company Trading Post. In 1870, it was taken over by Louis Riel and the Métis in the Red River Rebellion (Miller, 2001). After the Red River Rebellion, the area around the former trading post continued to be developed by settlers with houses, stores, and farms. The city of Winnipeg was formed in 1873 at the site of Upper Fort Garry.

*Instead, in the core of the city, we found a dilapidated stone wall partially hidden by grass and trees. Towards the northeast corner of Upper Fort Garry Provincial Park, we found a*

*locked door that was the worse for wear, one of the entrances to the park. The door was next to a Petro-Canada Gas Station. "Classy," I said to my mom and dad. They laughed.*

Upper Fort Garry was designated a Canadian National Historic Site in 1924 (Canada's Historic Places, 2019). This tucked-away historic site was an extreme contrast to European and American historic areas we had visited that were maintained and celebrated for their past significance. At that time, I thought the absence of suitable recognition for this place of revolution showed a lack of respect for the Métis contribution to the formation of the province of Manitoba (Asfar & Chodan, 2003).

In my extensive trips to both the United States and Europe, I visited many sites that were maintained and showcased for the public. My initial response to Upper Fort Garry was one of dismay. I laughed as I recognized the lack of importance given to the site. I was puzzled by the juxtaposition of a Petro-Canada Gas Station beside an entrance to Upper Fort Garry Heritage Park.

*In Winnipeg, near the center of the city, the last site we visited was Louis Riel's grave at the St. Boniface Cathedral Cemetery on the east bank of the Red River. His picture is on the large tombstone. I got out of the vehicle and walked up to the gravesite, took a picture, and walked slowly back to the car.*

As I stood over Louis Riel's grave, I realized how significant these sites in Winnipeg were. I realized how little information had been taught in the Alberta school curriculum about the treatment of the native peoples and the unwarranted involvement of the government and settlers in the history of Canada. In my eyes, important information about this country was omitted. The emphasis had been more on current and local events and less on how the settlers immigrated to

Canada over the years and began to fill up the land of my ancestors. It was as if the cities and provinces had always been here. The Canadian narrative was incomplete.

As I looked at Louis Riel's grave, I realized there is more to this country than I previously knew. I suddenly felt I was looking at one of my own people. I had read about many rebellions and assassinations in the past history of the United States. However, the reasoned and protracted dissent of Louis Riel was labeled a rebellion by the government of Canada (Miller, 2001). These hugely historical and significant events had shaped the country. This was the last Canadian site we took in before we headed down to Minnesota to the Mall of America.

**Wounded Knee.** *After a couple of days at the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, south of the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, we headed west through the prairie landscape on the I-90. Our next stop was Rapid City in South Dakota. More specifically we were headed to Pine Ridge where in 1890, the Wounded Knee Massacre occurred. I braced myself because I had seen images of this horrific event. I had read about the massacre in university textbooks and watched historic documentaries on television.*

*As we travelled west, we stopped for lunch. While we were at lunch, my dad received a call from my sister. My mom had to pick up my sister and bring her home. My dad and I would have to finish the trip alone. I was sad that my mom would not share this experience with me, but I understood that she needed to go. Since we had to alter our plans we stopped east of Wounded Knee in the small town of Chamberlain, South Dakota.*

*However, the next day, we did have time for my mom to come with us to Wounded Knee. We set out early on the I-90. My dad insisted that I drive. This was a first. Dad was handing me the keys to his Sequoia to drive in a foreign country. I was a little intimidated, but up to the challenge. I got into the driver's seat, turned on the ignition, and off we went. I was a little*

*anxious and wanted to make sure that nothing went wrong. After a while, I relaxed and we all enjoyed the drive.*

*As we drove west between 7:00-8:00 am, the sun was coming up in the east. The sun shone over the undulating plains, illuminating the land's beauty. As we turned south onto US 183, I saw the sun appear through the hills and rocks of the badlands. The land glowed yellow, orange, and red.*

*“How can S.W.A.T. (Special Weapons and Tactics Team), the army, and other law enforcement in their right mind, come down here in the middle of nowhere to fight a fight that has no winners? It makes no sense?” That was my dad speaking. He was commenting on the Siege of Wounded Knee in 1973 (Trimbach, 2007). I replied to him as I was driving and looking out at the badlands, “As well as the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry?” I looked back at him and he shook his head (Brown, 1970). It did not make sense to him.*

We fell into an awkward silence as we drove south on US 183. None of us had been here before. We were the only car on the road. We were perplexed at the lengths the government had gone to in order to destroy native peoples' ways of life. I thought about whether the founders of the United States believed in Manifest Destiny<sup>22</sup> as we drove through the rolling hills and the badlands onto the Rosebud Reservation. As we drove, we all wondered aloud about why the government sent forces to destroy native people so far away from Washington D.C. twice<sup>23</sup>! We had a sense of familiarity as I knew far more about both the incidents at Wounded Knee than I

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<sup>22</sup> Manifest Destiny - was the belief that Europeans should control the world, or at least large parts of it. The Hamite rationalization was the belief, taken from the Bible, that Ham was cursed by God and turned into a non-White person so that “he and his descendants should remain cursed and be subservient to Whites from then on.” To the British, the Indians were clearly descendants of Ham (Frideres & Gadacz, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> The Massacre of Wounded Knee occurred on December 29th, 1890, while The Siege of Wounded Knee took place in 1973.

had about Batoche. There was a parallel to Batoche, but the Massacre at Wounded Knee felt more somber.

*We drove to the site of the Massacre. We parked at the visitor center and got out to take a look around the area. In 1890, the Lakota had been camped by the Wounded Knee Creek. We first walked to the memorial sign that explained the 1890 Massacre at Wounded Knee (Brown, 1970). The temperature was a little cool. Just typical prairie weather I thought as I made my way along the creek. There was not really much to see but I was envisioning the massacre that took place. I identified some of the sites from photographs I had seen. I felt horror as I imagined the bodies and heard the screams of the dying. These images made me feel sick to my stomach. Even though camp structures were not actually there, in my imagination I saw the events and heard the voices of the helpless.*

*The second part of our venture took place across the road on the hill at the mass gravesite for the Lakota people. The Sacred Heart Catholic Church stood in front of the mass grave during the 1890 Massacre. The church burned down during the 1973 Siege of Wounded Knee. We went through a gated entrance into the graveyard. I walked slowly into the site because I knew I would feel extremely heavy and emotional.*

*Why did the government condone the killing? Twice? Why did the government go into our settlements and either hunt, or destroy, or kill our people? Was it because of the Americans' belief in the principle of Manifest Destiny? Was it because the white settlers felt threatened? Was it because we lived differently from them? Why all the rape, all the torture, all the pain? Why all the hate that, in turn, made many of our people hate each other and hate ourselves? These thoughts coursed through my head. I understood why many native bands wanted to rise up, to revolt, to make sure that change happened. That made sense to me!?! But who am I, I wondered?*

*Only a student beginning to learn and understand my native heritage. Someone trying to learn what it means to be a native warrior in modern times.*

*As I looked around the gravesite of the 1890 Massacre, I was reminded of our visit to Batoche. I had an immense feeling of loneliness and felt paralyzed. I was looking at a mass grave of about 300 people. Human beings, people who thought, who hunted, who played, who cried. Why did this genocide occur?*

I felt immensely sad at this place. The calm winds flowing over the grass on the hills in and around Wounded Knee spurred my somber thoughts. I stood beside a mass grave of my own people trying to grasp how the massacre happened. People were buried here. As much as I thought I had learned on my own, as well as through the teachings from professors, my perspective was forever changed after experiencing this sacred place.

*The feelings took me back to other times and other places where I also felt outrage. Places I had previously visited including Batoche, the World Trade Centre after 9/11, and Pearl Harbor. It made no sense to me that so many people died in these places. And for what? To feed someone's need for power? I was angry. Most importantly, I wanted to fight, fight for my people.*

I had similar feelings of the relief, regret, and guilt I felt at Batoche. I felt anger at the massive loss of life and at the dismal present-day situation of many aboriginal people. I was overwhelmed. As I stood overlooking the South Saskatchewan at Batoche and the mass grave at Pine Ridge, I was angry. I was overcome by the unfairness of the government actions towards these people, my people. I tried to wrap my head around my tumultuous thoughts. I discussed my emotions with my dad, but I could not formulate the sentences to communicate the intensity of my emotions. I wanted to go back in time and fight with the people of Batoche and Wounded Knee. I knew that was impossible. There was only one action I was able to imagine. I told my



parents that I wanted to pick up a gun and attack the government. At that time, fighting back is what I thought a true warrior would do.

*After walking through the camp area and the gravesite, we came to an information building for visitors. The door was locked. I was disappointed. Sadly, we started to get into our vehicle to leave. Just then a man appeared over the horizon. He was running toward us from his trailer up on a hill yelling at us, “Don’t leave! I have the keys!” Tired and a bit out of breath, he came up to us. He told us not to go. He opened the visitor centre. Excitedly, we stepped inside.*

*The visitor centre did not disappoint. There were display cases with newspaper clippings of both the Siege and the Massacre as well as books and actual artifacts. Murals covered the wall of this circular building. The murals were a collage of posters, writings, and pictures of individuals; each one showing a piece of the history of the Lakota Sioux People including the time leading up to the Wounded Knee Massacre, and later the Siege of Wounded Knee (Banks, 2004; Brown, 1970; Deloria Jr., 1988, 2003, 2006; Edmunds, 2001; Trimbach, 2007). To me, the murals were expressions of sorrow, and somber, but inspirational, messages. As I looked at the books and newspaper articles on display, I was amazed to see all this information about both events gathered in one place. During our visit, we talked to the man about the events from the past and how the events have impacted the current conditions at Pine Ridge. We thanked him for all his help and stories and bought a few things before we left.*

My dad and I compared the condition of the Wounded Knee National Historic Site<sup>24</sup> (National Historic Site of Wounded Knee, 2015) with the Martin Luther King Jr. sites. We wondered if it was unimportant for the government or the Pine Ridge reservation to provide adequate funding to maintain the site. I felt disappointment and a level of betrayal on behalf of

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<sup>24</sup> The Wounded Knee National Historic Site was proclaimed as a National Historic Site of the United States in 1965.

my people. In retrospect, I believe the maintenance of the site is a more complicated issue. The owner of the land, Jim Czywczynski, who purchased the land back in 1968, has been interested in selling the land at \$3 million. This has outraged the people of the Great Sioux Nation. The Sioux have worked to raise money to help buy back the land and rightfully honor their ancestors (Levine, 2015; National Historic Site of Wounded Knee, 2015).

As we drove through the Rosebud Reservation after we left the gravesite and battle areas at Wounded Knee, I thought about the Lakota people on the Rosebud Reservation and their lack of personal choice and freedom. I was driving through the reservation with my family knowing that I was free to leave the reservation. In 2009, I began to connect the idea that leaving the reservation could be difficult with stories I heard from my native peers at school. I acknowledged that my peers were right. Getting up and leaving their reservations is gut-wrenching (Alfred, 2005; Grekul & Laboucane-Benson, 2008; Frazier, 2001; Trimbach, 2007). When they leave the reservation, the individual has to leave the very different world and family in which they grew up.

The desolation of the reserve was overwhelming to me. There appeared to be no hope for these people. These descendants are living right beside the mass graves of their ancestors. I realized the Wounded Knee Massacre was a representation of the physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction that many native people had faced throughout North America (Deloria Jr., 1988; Fournier & Crey, 1997; King, 2012). In fact, very little has changed. Native people are still experiencing physical, emotional, and spiritual destruction (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). I was impacted to my core.

*We took a different route through Pine Ridge to get back onto the I-90. On the way to the Wounded Knee site, we had noticed the beautiful prairie countryside. After leaving the site, for*

*the first time, I observed the desolation that the Lakota people seemed to face. As we drove through the Rosebud Reservation, we saw many houses in disrepair, burned out vehicles, and areas that looked like a no-man's land. The land was barren, with sparse shrubbery, no crops, and the little grass there was yellow or brown. I felt disillusioned and distressed. I had only been on a reserve once before, but I had paid little attention to the reserve's condition. Here, now, I was paying attention. The beautiful country, with the glimmering sun shining on this land, was a silent reminder of past native history. These images stuck with me through the rest of the trip.*

I had not been familiar with the neglect that can occur on reserves. I knew from reading about reserve communities and visiting low-income and inner city communities that the reserve communities might be poor and rundown (Grekul & Laboucane-Benson, 2008; Sinclair, 2007; Toronto Star, 2013). However, the desolation in Rosebud and Wounded Knee hit me in the face. I had not internalized the fact that past historical events still impacted natives in modern times. These previously strong, self-reliant people were now doing road work. When I am at home in Edmonton, I respect physical labor as a reasonable job, but for some reason, I did not feel that way at the Rosebud Reservation. I had made this journey to learn from past warriors. How could these people ever become warriors (Alfred & Lowe, 2005)? I believed they lacked the will power to get out of their situation. I was disappointed. This proved to be the lowest point of my journey. I was shocked by the actuality of the reserves.

In retrospect, I compare the reality of the lives of indigenous peoples on the reserve with my reality in my adoptive home. I struggle to see myself in their shoes (Sinclair, 2007; Toronto Star, 2013). I contrast my life with my western perspective of being able to move freely from place to place. For the first time I have become more attuned to reservation life.

*The next day after we arrived in Rapid City, we took my mom to the airport, so she could bring my sister home. We said our goodbyes. My mom was happy that she had experienced Wounded Knee and I was glad that we shared this experience. My dad and I drove directly from the airport into the Black Hills in South Dakota.*

**The Black Hills.** *The Black Hills are an important part of Lakota culture. To the Lakota People, they are a symbol of the creation of the earth and their people. However, rights to the Black Hills are disputed to this day.<sup>25</sup> We opted to check out Mount Rushmore which is located in the Black Hills. I had never encountered the full force of American values until we got to Mount Rushmore. The sheer number of American flags, American wear, American folklore, and just Americana was overwhelming. Tourists were wearing T-shirts, hats, bandanas, hoodies, and jackets with American logos. My dad and I looked at one another in amazement. I had never seen such “patriotism” in my life. Mount Rushmore itself was not particularly impressive. I was underwhelmed.*

*After half an hour at Mount Rushmore, my dad and I headed west to see the Crazy Horse Memorial. Famous in North America, Crazy Horse<sup>26</sup>, a Oglala War Chief, is still a symbol of strength and resolve for many native people. As we drove through the Black Hills, we caught a glimpse of an enormous memorial in the distance. We stopped the car to take a look. “My God!” I said. “It is huge!” The likeness of Crazy Horse is in the process of being carved out of a mountain, one section at a time. Crazy Horse is depicted facing south and sitting on a horse. We took many photos, and tried to visualize the completed project. The monument gave me chills. I*

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<sup>25</sup> The Lakota vs. The United States of America: a land claim legal battle based on the illegal seizure of The Black Hills by the United States. The Lakota People contend that the 1877 Act of February was not a legitimate purchase of the land (Lazarus, 1999).

<sup>26</sup> Crazy Horse was a Chief, War Chief, and leader of the Oglala Band. He fought alongside the Sioux and many other bands on the ever-changing landscape of their homelands and the Black Hills against the imperial and settlers forces of the United States Government (Marshall, 2004).

*felt more hopeful for my peoples. I felt that we are finally becoming proud of ourselves as we are inspired by great leaders from our past.*

When I saw the Crazy Horse Monument (<https://www.facebook.com/crazyhorsememorial/>), I became aware that a group of today's natives were taking action to honor their history. After the neglect of the reserves, the site of the Crazy Horse Monument filled me with pride and gave me hope for the future.

**The Battle at Little Bighorn.** *The next day, on our way to Great Falls, Montana, my dad and I stopped amidst rolling hills at the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument (Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument Montana, 2019).*

Custer and the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry met their fate at the hands of the Lakota, Arapaho, Sichangu, Oglala, Black Foot, No Bows, Mniconju, Hunkpapa, Santee and Cheyenne nations (Deloria Jr., 1988; Donovan, 2008; Ehanamani, 2000; Janiskee, 2011; Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument Montana, 2019; Marshall, 2004). The 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry were attacked and killed on the "Greasy Grass" at this battle site.

The visitor's centre has a map of the battle site which is situated on top of a hill. Outside the visitors' centre, the bodies of the soldiers are buried in the cemetery, with the exception of General Custer. His body is interred in the historic West Point Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia (West Point Cemetery, 2017).

*I wandered around the vast hills and stood in different locations trying to visualize the events during the attack. The native bands used the hills as cover from the soldiers' gunfire. For hours, they rode their horses in large circles around the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry encampment, eventually maneuvering the soldiers into a small space. I could imagine the bravery, intensity, warfare*

*strategy, and warriorship of the native bands. I was amazed that the native bands came together and were able to defeat the highly trained army.*

*The gravemarkers of the warriors were crosses or stones engraved with the words “Lakota”, or “Cheyenne Warrior” but rarely with names. I was not surprised to see that the recognition of the dead warriors was similar to the Batoche grave markers of the Cree warriors. In each case, both sets of grave markers did not identify the warriors. I wondered what happened to the dead after the battle. Did the native bands leave the soldiers for the government to bury? Did the native bands leave their own dead to give back to the land? The park did have an Indian Memorial dedicated to the native warriors who died. In addition, the memorial recognized native leaders who fought in the battle and survived such as Chief Crazy Horse (Lakota), Chief Lame White Man (Cheyenne), Chief Gall (Lakota), and Chief Two Moons (Cheyenne) (Ehanamani, 2000).*

As I walked the Greasy Grass, I saw the site from different perspectives. The government was expanding its reach by encouraging settlers, imposing treaties on the native bands, and providing soldiers to protect the settlers. The warrior chiefs believed the land belonged to them and their people and were trying to defend the land. I knew I was standing on an important place in native history. In this place, a number of bands came together and fought to prevent the land from being taken by the government to be given to settlers and their ways of life. The battle was an overwhelming success but in the face of the government’s army, they were forced to change their way of life (Brown, 1970, Donovan, 2008; Ehanamani, 2000; Marshall, 2004; Utley, 2008). I was *intensely* reflective and calm at the same time. As we left The Little Bighorn, I knew this part of the journey was important but did not know why.

*After seeing the memorial, my dad and I got into the vehicle. I felt a silence in the air. The Indian part of the trip was over.*

*I asked my dad what he thought of the Little Bighorn National Monument. He told me it was fascinating to imagine such a magnificent battle taking place on a space as vast as the prairies. "It does not occur here..." he said. I nodded and said "Yeah." I knew what he meant. He had grown up in post-war Britain, a country within a continent that had seen so much devastation and death. He wondered, aloud "Why would anyone come out this far to try and control and fight a group of people?" The concept was beyond my father's understanding, outside his belief that the different bands should have been allowed to live in relative peace.*

*As I looked to the northwest and saw the sun sink towards the horizon, I said, "It seems the situation was the same at Wounded Knee, at Red River, and at Batoche, eh Dad?" "The same questions? The same answers." "Yeah, Jay..."*

During our long drives through the northern grassy plains, I spent most of the time wondering about the early interactions between settlers and natives. In each of the places, Batoche, Wounded Knee, and The Little Bighorn battle site, I felt relief that I had been spared from the decimation of the native people. I thought back to when I was a child. I lived what seemed to me at the time a "normal life" compared to both the native peoples who died in these battles and the native people living on the reserves. I felt enormous relief that I had not grown up on the reserve.

I also experienced profound feelings of loss and immense sadness. I felt, somewhat irrationally, that I should have been there to prevent these tragedies. Honestly, I felt shocked, standing where once proud native peoples stood with their families in their communities. The

ghosts of the past. I had learned the history, but I had no emotional understanding of the people and events until I stood at each significant site. I began to own my native history.

At these sites, the connection between my father and I grew. After my mom left to pick up my sister, my dad and I finished our journey. The journey was our way to know and create storied memories within our own family. We created a space of vulnerability in which we could talk about our reactions to the different places.

My dad, from a European background, had no prior connection to these places, and I, an adopted native Cree child who was unattached to any native group, were walking and driving together around these sacred places. My dad was not an onlooker to my passion and emotion; he was a participant with me. He later said that he was distressed by the differences in the memorial sites, one wooden plaque for Lakota people at Wounded Knee, one large memorial at Little Bighorn for the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry (Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument Montana, 2008). My dad was experiencing these places for the first time and learning some of the powerful history of my people. I was learning too, alongside my dad, who had raised me outside the native community.

### **Gathering Threads**

In the Journey through Indian Country, I share the beginnings of my acceptance of my Cree heritage. A crucial element of narrative inquiry in my Indian Country story is place. According to Clandinin (2013), “I was in the landscape, in the parade. As a narrative inquirer, my place(s) in the metaphoric parade was shaping me” (p. 42). I was shaped in these sacred places. I had the opportunity to connect to my people’s past. The various locations on the journey showed me the context of the many native bands who once lived within this great land. I imagined bands of native peoples living their own ways of life before the incursions of



government, armies, and settlers. I had been curious to see the sites but had no idea of the emotional impact I would feel when I visited them.

As I began the Indian Country journey, my image of a native warrior was that of a strong indigenous leader facing overwhelming odds, battling against an oppressive force that had been trying to destroy the native people's way of life. This conception began at a young age with the seeds planted by romanticized stories about Indians (Boyd, 2015; Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000; King, 2012; Shields, 2005; Valaskakis, 2005). These stories rose partly from various pop-culture and media outlets, but mostly, my images came from various pictures of Indians from times past. The image I had was of a strong, wise, self-controlled native, mounted on a horse either looking into the distance or charging into battle. This stoic Indian image developed over many years of my life (Dempsey, 1985, 1988; Ehanamani, 2000; Lakota Dictionary Online, 2014; Utley, 1993).

I confronted my idea of warrior on this trip to Indian Country. As we traveled, I imagined native band encampments set up randomly across the land, hunters roaming to find game, meetings and ceremonies happening; a fulfilling lifestyle. The empty land covering many miles around both reserves opened my eyes to the level of repression that had continued to occur on these lands. On the banks of the South Saskatchewan River at Batoche, when I walked past the graves of natives and Métis who died standing up for their rights, and at the mass grave on Pine Ridge, I viewed them as true warriors.

On my journey to Batoche, Wounded Knee and the monument of The Battle of Little Bighorn, my image of the idealized warrior met with shattering reality. There my perception of the stoic and strong Indian took a dramatically different course. The images of these people that I had learned about shifted into another form of native stereotype. As Adiche (2009) said on a TED Talk, "show a people as one thing, as only one thing over and over again and that is what

they become.” This emerging stereotype arose from the desolation I saw on the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reserves. The derelict houses, the burnt out cars and the native men doing road work gave me the impression of a beaten people with no hope. I considered roadwork to be unworthy of a warrior.<sup>27</sup> I assumed a lack of willingness on their part to strive for a better life. My shifting image of natives being proud people was downgraded to a new stereotype of them as being ordinary and poor.

The journey through Indian country further developed the stereotype I had of native people as being unsuccessful in modern society. By the time the journey was finished, I was angry and fed up with the suffering of the native peoples at the hands of government and western society. Over the course of the journey, I opened my mind to the stories of the warriors that led the battles in the places I visited.

Looking back, the journey served as a gateway for me to acknowledge the pain that was ever present at these sites. Together, my parents and I began to grapple with the enormity of past native injustices. As they became aware of my intense emotions at these sites, my parents were able to participate more deeply in my aboriginal journey through many intense conversations over subsequent years.

As a result of the journey, I took many negative feelings about myself as an aboriginal man home with me. These negative feelings could have made me turn away from my heritage. However, when I returned to University, I had to engage with native studies. I began to learn more about native peoples and native warriors in modern times over the course of the next two years.

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<sup>27</sup> At the time, I expected all the native men to fit my idealized image of the native warrior.

*Over the next five years of taking courses, reading beyond the courses on my own time, actively engaging with my fellow native students and friends, and participating in various ceremonies with members of my native community, I traveled back to the statement I murmured the day I turned 18. That Monday morning in 2001, I woke up in my bed. I looked up at the ceiling and said “Now is the time...you can go and finally look for your birth mom.” I never did. Suddenly, 12 years later, that same statement came back into my mind. After all the readings and learnings, talks with friends and community members, it was time to look into my own roots.*

## Chapter 4: Going Home

### The Phone Call

*“Hello?” The voice on the other side of the line was a female and sounded close by.*

*I replied, “Hi, someone had been trying to get a hold of me from this phone number.”*

*“Oh,” said the voice on the other end of the line. “I think that was my mom who called.*

*She’s not here right now, she stepped out. Can I ask who is calling?”*

*I took a few seconds to reply and said, “This is, umm, Ian L.”<sup>28</sup>*

*The woman on the other end paused for what felt like an eternity to reply before saying, “OH MY GOD...I’m your cousin.”*

### My Family

*I was adopted at six weeks of age. As soon as I was able to understand, my adoptive parents told me I was Cree and native. I wanted to know who my birth mom was, but I did not have a clue about how to find her. When I was six years old, I asked my parents, “When can I find my birth mom?” ... “Can you help me?” ... “I want to meet her.”*

*“Yes, we will help you find her, but only when you are eighteen. That’s how the adoption agency works and there’s nothing we can do about it.” I did not like these answers. I felt having to wait was unfair.*

*I remember being in the kitchen of our old house in Aspen Gardens when I asked my parents if I could have a brother or sister. I was seven years old. They looked at me with surprise. Both my parents are only children. Somehow though they knew how important it was for me to have a brother or sister. All my friends had brothers or sisters or cousins, and I did not. My desire for a sibling impacted my parents and I know they talked about it. I cannot*

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<sup>28</sup> My birth family names are being kept private.

*remember how long it took for them to respond to my question. It may have been days or weeks, but when they answered, they said yes. I was overjoyed. I was going to have a younger brother or sister.*

*My parents told me they planned to go through a private adoption agency unlike my adoption. The process would take time. I did not care how long it took. As long as it happened, I would be happy. Within a few months, my parents told me we were going to adopt a baby girl who was not yet born. My parents told me she was Blackfoot. They wanted to adopt another native child so that we could learn and understand our cultures together. They spoke of how we might be similar in appearance and skin colour. In that way they said people would recognize us as brother and sister.*

*They also explained that her adoption was open<sup>29</sup>, meaning there could be contact with her birth mom and some of her family. My adoption was closed<sup>30</sup>, meaning I had no contact with my birth family.*

*My sister was born in April 1991. I remember that afternoon as my dad came to pick me up from my school to take me to see my newborn sister. We drove all the way from the south side of Edmonton to the hospital where she was born. I was excited! We arrived at the hospital, went in, and put on gowns. My mom was already there. We waited until the nurse told us to go in. When we went in, we saw her. After a couple of days, we brought her home. Our family was complete. Life was different with her around. I held her, helped feed her, and watched as my parents took care of her. I was happy.*

My parents wanted us to learn about our native cultures. They planned that as my sister and I grew up together, we would learn about our cultures. Over time, everyone in our family

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<sup>29</sup> After 1984, contact with the biological family could be open to the child and to both families.

<sup>30</sup> Prior to 1984, adoption of a child within the Province of Alberta was closed, meaning the adoptive family could have no contact with the biological family.

learned about the differences as well as the similarities in the Cree and Blackfoot cultures. The age gap between us, and our differing interests, meant we approached learning about our cultures in different ways. However, I experienced her as my sister. I was her big brother. Family friends thought of us as brother and sister, even though they knew we were adopted. Our parents raised us as brother and sister. Our mannerisms, characteristics, how we spoke, and played reflected our parents' own cultural background. We were English, native and Canadian.

### **My Search**

*When I was 18, my dad helped me contact the Federal Government of Canada to inquire about my status and to learn which band I was from. At that point I learned I came from Beaver Lake First Nation. With that information I could have gone in search of my birth mom. I did not. I had cold feet. I was also busy following other dreams, dreams of diving into the music scene, studying at the university, working out, and sleeping on floors and in the back of vans. I was 18 and experimenting with things that interested me.*

*In 2010, nine years later, I graduated with my Bachelor of Arts in Native Studies. I was 27 years old. Although I took fewer courses than most students each year, eventually I accumulated enough credits to graduate. I was proud I had earned my degree and received my eagle feather<sup>31</sup>. However, I was not happy about where I was in my life. I had imagined that by the time I graduated, I would know what work I wanted to do and I would have a girlfriend. I did not feel engaged in my life. I was leaving university on a low note, having regained all the weight I had lost in high school plus an extra 90 pounds.*

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<sup>31</sup> Cree tradition says that to become a leader within the community, you first attain your Eagle Feather, then your rattle, then your drum, then finally a pipe. This signals the strength and perseverance you have gone through to attain your leadership and role (Cardinal, personal communication, 2012).

*A couple of weeks after graduation, I remember being out for a drive in my old red truck with a friend. I told her I felt a sense of accomplishment by graduation. She responded, "Yes! You did! Now what are you going to do with your degree?"*

*I replied, "Hmmm. I don't know right now but one thing I do know is that I want to connect with my birth mom. I want to tell her that her son not only finished high school, but also earned a university degree." Even as I said these words, I felt scared and uncomfortable. I did not have any idea how to begin, who to talk to, and who to confide in. I did not know many people who had been adopted.*

I grew up knowing that my birth mom wanted me to graduate from high school. She had written a letter to be given to my adoptive parents. In the letter, my mom wrote of wanting more than anything to have me grow up in a loving household with two parents. She also wanted me to graduate from high school. My parents shared her wishes with me over the years. I carried that story close to my heart through my elementary, junior high, and high school years. I told myself over and over that I was not going to let her down, even through times of difficulty. The story of who I was to become, that is, a high school graduate, was a story to live by. I remembered that story as I walked across the stage at my Grade 12 Graduation at the Galaxy Land Hotel. I remembered that story as I wrote my last Grade 12 Diploma Exam. I remembered that story as I received my official high school diploma in the mail months later. I had lived up to, and lived out (Carr, 1986) her story of who I should become. I did it for her.

*That day as we drove around, my friend said, "We all go through difficult journeys. It's confronting these difficulties that make us stronger. When we confront them, we know we are ready...once you go through that door, one chapter ends, and another one begins. There you will see something entirely new and it will change your life forever." I mulled over her words. After a*

*while, she said, “You don’t want any what ifs, right? You don’t want to look back when you’re 50 and say, ‘I should have found my mom when I had the chance’”.*

*“No,” I said.*

*“Then allow Creator to help you along your path.”*

Her questions encouraged me to search for my birth mother. I began to investigate my ancestry. In 2010, for the first time, I started to wonder why my birth mom put me up for adoption. Now I had more knowledge about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada. I was beginning to wonder if the residential schools, the 60’s Scoop, the restriction of my peoples to reserves, and the erasure of their cultural identities, played a role in her decision to give me up for adoption. As I wondered, I knew that my mom was in the midst of these larger social, cultural, and political narratives. I was beginning to place my mom within these larger narratives and to know that she must have been affected by them. Of course, her stories must have been shaped by the ways Indigenous peoples had been treated in Canada, in Edmonton where I was born. That day as we drove around, my friend planted the seed that started me on a search for my birth mom. It took three years for me to take the next step.

In addition to my friend’s comments, the Journey’s Program, through which I confronted and changed the image I had of Aboriginal youth, and a captivating course taught by Dr. Jean Clandinin, described in chapters 1 and 2, motivated me to begin my search. The reflective nature of both experiences impelled me to examine the stories that may have shaped my mom’s experiences, that may have shaped her decision to allow me to be adopted, that shaped the letter that she wrote for me.



*My first step was going to Beaver Lake in the summer of 2013 to walk on the land of my ancestors. I went with a friend from the reserve, and my sister, who came to give me moral support, as well as to see what the reserve was like.*

*In the morning of Saturday, July 20<sup>th</sup>, we set out on the journey to Beaver Lake. The reserve is about two hours northeast of Edmonton. My sister and I met my friend at the Flying J rest stop on Highway 16, east of Sherwood Park so we could follow him. We drove east to Highway 21, and turned north. For two hours, we drove north and east, zigzagging through the rural northern plains. For the last half hour, we drove through the vast boreal forest landscape. This route took us to Lac La Biche, the town just north of Beaver Lake. When we got there, we had lunch. I felt like I was just on the edge of something that would change me forever as the three of us got into my jeep for the drive on to the reserve.*

*We headed south for about 10 minutes until we saw the sign for Beaver Lake Cree Nation. Following the sign, we turned left onto a road that curved east, then south. This took us to a three-way intersection. We saw a sign on a pole directing us to turn left to Beaver Lake Cree Nation. We turned and made our way onto the reserve.*

I entered my reserve for the first time. Memories of the Pine Ridge and Rosebud Reservations came into my mind. The hurt and pain I felt at those two reservations were with me as I entered Beaver Lake Cree Nation. I was also thinking about the emotional message my birth mom had written in her letter for my parents. I thought of the devastation that occurred to us as a peoples, but I was also both empowered and humble knowing that my people, the Cree, were still here. And now here I was on my reserve.

*Almost instantaneously, the road became gravel and twisted and turned to the east. We reached the main intersection just before the reserve. There was a gas station on the corner of*

*Cardinal Drive and Range Road 134. We continued east and passed a ballpark behind the gas-station. Trees lined both sides of the road. We came, then, to the general area of the reserve with the band office and school to the left and the medical centre to the right. Further down, I spotted the sporting complex/hall. We stopped to take in the scenery but after a couple of minutes, we turned around, went back through the general area, and turned right as my friend directed me through the reserve to the Beaver Lake Campsite.*

I traveled these winding roads as a visitor, yet the reserve felt like home. This was my reserve. I had been a visitor in the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Reservations but here in the Beaver Lake Reservation, I felt calm with little of the anxiety I felt on the drive up. I felt at peace because I was not yet expecting to meet my family. I was happy my sister and good friend were beside me and I listened carefully as my friend told me stories of the reserve. The houses called up photographs of reserves I had seen in books.

The road we drove on was gravel. I had often driven on gravel roads in rural communities. Somehow driving on this gravel road felt different. I began to think the road was a kind of metaphor for my life journey. Perhaps others had also looked down that road, torn between staying on the reserve and leaving the reserve for unknown opportunities. I realized how difficult the decision was. To maybe find a better life but to leave family behind. Somehow I knew my mother drove down that road and made that difficult decision for me, for my life journey. And now, here I was, on this road, the son of a Cree woman who had given me up for adoption so perhaps I could live differently, have two parents in a loving home and graduate from high school.

*We passed several houses on both sides of the road in this closely wooded area. We passed the cemetery, an old church, and an old house with a ramp to the front door. We drove*

*down the winding road until we came to the tollbooth for the Spruce Point Campgrounds, located on the reserve. We did not have to pay as my friend had his status card<sup>32</sup>. We drove to the shores of the lake, parked, and got out. We walked to the edge of a dock and peered out over the lake toward the far treed shore.*

*My friend said, as he pointed northwest to the campground, “So where we started was the white side and this here is the native side.”*

*“I can see the difference,” I said. We both chuckled.*

I grew up in white society. I was accustomed to the privilege and freedom that entailed. When I saw the houses and cabins on the other side of the lake, the white side, they looked nice and well kept. The reserve appeared rugged and tough in places. We laughed because it was exactly the difference we both expected to see. The houses on the reserve appeared sturdy but pretty basic to my southside urban eyes. For most of my life, I was a person who was part of the settler/colonial story taught in my university classes. Now I was beginning to awaken (Greene, 1995) to how I had been shaped by familial and schooling narratives. The Beaver Lake Reservation, that I was now beginning to see as my home, was in better shape than I had expected. The reserve looked comfortable. I wondered if I could live there. Could I imagine myself there if my mother had not made the decision to take me down that metaphoric road to adoption?

*We walked back to the vehicle and made our way back through the reserve. We pulled over on the right side of the road. My friend talked of the history of the reserve, the politics on the reserve, the weather, the interactions among people on the reserve, and what might happen when I found my birth mom and my family.*

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<sup>32</sup> Status Card - As I write this thesis, I have decided to apply for my status card.

*After he was done talking, I said hesitantly, "Do you think we may have passed or seen anyone that was one of my family?"*

*"Maybe," he said. "Hard to say, but there is a high probability."*

*I managed to say "Mmm...yeah." That was all I could muster at that point. I did not know what else to say.*

The thought of seeing someone who was family had been on my mind all day long. I wondered if anyone would notice me. Would they think I was related? I have heard stories of how someone can identify a relative even if they have never met them before. I do believe that could happen.

*We made our way back to the gas station where we filled the gas tank and I went in to pay. There were a couple of other people inside. Native people. Inside I felt astonishment and was thinking "these are my people! I could be related to any one of these folks. What do I say? Do I say anything?" I said nothing as I went up to the cash register, paid for gas and food, and walked out the door. "Not today," I said, as I got into the vehicle and drove out of the reserve. "Not today."*

At that time, I had decided that being on the reserve was enough. I was content that I had come. As soon as I got back into my vehicle I felt relieved. The reserve was a beautiful place. The blowing trees, combined with the grey and cold rainy skies, did not disrupt my love and appreciation for finally seeing where I came from. I had thoughts of wanting to simply walk into the band office or the local hospital or to ask the gas clerk about a family on the reserve who had a son, grandson, nephew, or cousin adopted out who was named Ian. I did not though. I willed myself to leave and go home. As much as I longed to see my birth mom, or any family, I was not

ready. I drove back to Edmonton to the family and stories that I had grown up with, the comfort and ease of my urban life.

### **How Bad Do You Want It?**<sup>33</sup>

*I was over at a friend's one day.*

*"Do you think about your birth family and where you came from?"*

*"I do" I said.*

*"Then why don't you go look? What's stopping you?"*

*I paused "I don't really know?"*

*"Then why not?"*

*"My revolution STARTS HERE"*

(Murphy, 2004, track 11)

*In early October, I worked up my courage. I went to the Post-Adoption Registry<sup>34</sup> within the Department of Alberta Human Services in Edmonton. I asked for my closed-adoption files and filled out reams of paperwork which included signing a release form. I was told it would take 10-12 weeks to get the information.*

*On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2014, I got a call from the Post Adoption Registry advisor assigned to my case, telling me my files were ready to be picked up. I thanked her, and then asked if she could give me any information over the phone. She said, "Yes...would you like to know your birth name?"*

*I was anxious to know right away, so I said "Yes, I would."*

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<sup>33</sup> (Thomas, 2011)

<sup>34</sup> The Post-adoption Agency is a provincial agency in Alberta that deals with adoption, birth family information, and provides information and services related to all adoptions granted in Alberta to adult adoptees, descendants of deceased adoptees, birth parents, birth family members and adoptive parents.

*“Your name is Ian James L.”*

*I felt an immense change in my body as I started to sweat and was filled with anticipation. I finally knew my name. I managed to respond, “thank you for letting me know. I am forever grateful...I will be in soon to collect my files. Thank you once again.” I hung up the phone and immediately began texting and phoning my friends. I deliberately waited to tell my parents until I got home. When everyone was home, I let my parents and sister know that my birth name was Ian James L. My mom said “Oh wow! That’s great!”*

*My dad said, “That’s great news Jay.”*

*My sister was happy for me and said “Yay!” My family was delighted to hear the news. I let them know that the adoption files were in and that I was going to pick them up as soon as I could.*

Up until this point, my sister and parents were the only family I had known. My friends had become my brothers and sisters. Now I was entering a new world and community. I had a second family. This family might only know me with a different name. In the past, my parents had supported my desire to find my birth mom. However, up until I went to the Post-Adoption Registry, I had never taken the necessary steps to find her. As I look back now, I realize it was easy for them to verbally support my search as long as I did not act. When I found the information I was, of course, excited. I did not consider the emotions my adoptive mom, dad, and sister might be feeling. My mom and dad would have realized that much in our life was going to change as a result of my actions. However, when I brought home the file, they were happy to support me in whichever direction I took. My mom and dad wanted to meet my birth mom. My sister wanted to meet her. Their encouragement helped me as I brought my files home to show them.

*The next Monday, the first chance I got, I picked up my adoption files. My advisor sat with me and showed me my mom's name. I had wanted to know her name since I was three years old. Now I knew.*

*My advisor went through the rest of the file with me making sure I understood that some of the names and file numbers were missing from the document due to privacy regulations (Alberta Social Services, 1983). I learned that I had a brother five years older than me, aunts and uncles, a step-grandfather and a grandmother (Kokum). On my birth father's side I had aunts and uncles. I had not thought about my birth father. There was also a statement from my mother containing her hopes for my future.*

I had a family. I had a birth family. This knowledge filled me with excitement to know I have a birth family and with pressure to take the necessary steps to meet them. All through my life, I wanted to know my birth family. I was now ready to reach out and touch them. I was learning who my birth family was. These files were part of the process.

*Later that night, I shared the file with my parents and sister. When I did a search on Google for my birth mom, I found a phone number for a business in the Lac La Biche area. I gathered my courage and phoned, the first step. I was ending one chapter and beginning another. I thought about my friend four years ago who first pushed me.*

*Much to my relief, someone picked up the phone and said hello. I inquired about my birth family as I said, "I am Ian James L. I am searching for my birth family. Do you happen to know any of them?"*

*The person on the other end of the line said, "I know your Kokum but I cannot disclose her phone number or information due to privacy regulations. I can pass along your number and contact information to her."*

*I said, "That will be good. Thank you."*

*A few weeks went by before I received two phone calls from an unknown number. I saw these missed calls but did not phone back. The third time I saw the same number, I did not answer. I phoned my friend who had taken me to the reserve to talk about returning the call. I was anxious about getting in touch with my birth family. Would it be a good or bad experience?*

*He said to me, "If you don't make the call, you will be stuck in your comfort zone. You may always regret it. Use this as motivation and phone whoever is trying to contact you!"*

This was the moment of truth. I wanted to phone the number back and ask if they were looking for Ian James L. I was also afraid of what I might hear on the other end of the phone. I was afraid of hearing stories that might be painful. I was also afraid about hearing how well they had done without me. Had they moved on from my adoption?

*Later that night, I called the number and spoke with my cousin. That phone number was the link to my birth family. The connections started to happen. First I talked to my cousin for three hours. Twenty minutes later, my brother called.*

*"Uhh, hi. Is this Ian?"*

*"Ahh, yes it is."*

*"I am your brother," the voice on the other end of the line said.*

These two people, my cousin and my brother, had been unknown to me. They, however, had always known I existed. Hearing the voice of someone from my birth family had been a dream of mine. I had just listened to people who were family. My friends had grown up with cousins and family with the same biological background. I had not. I grew up with my adoptive family who shaped and influenced me. However, I was not physically or emotionally like them. I



did not sound like them. “You sound amazing. You sound like your mom in a lot of ways...”

These words reverberated throughout my body. No one had said that to me before.

During these conversations I felt the love and care emanating from various family members. I talked to my cousin, my brother, my Kokum, and my Aunt. They helped me connect to the past, and present of my birth family. These people had known I existed but they had no idea where I was. They were people who had loved me even before I was born. In these conversations, members of my birth family were careful and compassionate when they described what had transpired with my birth mom at the time she decided to put me up for adoption.

### **I Got Something Worth Fighting For<sup>35</sup>**

*I drove to the Denny’s across from MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta. I had a rush of energy on this cool March day in 2014. I was about to meet my cousin for the very first time; the first time I would meet a member of my birth family. I talked about the meeting over and over with my friends and family. How would the interaction go? Nothing could prepare me for the actual meeting.*

*I pulled up to the restaurant and parked. I took a long breath and sighed as I got out of the vehicle to go inside. When I entered Denny’s, I did not know who to look for. I looked around. Then all of a sudden I heard a voice behind me “Are you wearing shorts? Do you know how cold it is outside?”*

*I turned around and chuckled. “Yes, I do know how cold it is out there.” It was my cousin’s boyfriend who had spoken. He waved as I came over smiling. To his left was my cousin, a beautiful native woman. She got up and smiled and cried as she hugged me. I embraced her with love and said “Hi.”*

*“Hi”, she said back to me. “You have your mom’s cheeks.” I smiled.*

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<sup>35</sup> (Vigil, 2009, track 4).

*We sat down and the questions began. How are you doing? You look great! Where did you grow up? What are you doing? What are your favorite movies and videogames? How are your parents? How is Kokum? How is your sister? These questions began to blur. I answered hers, as she answered mine. After a while, I felt that part of me took a step back to take it all in. Here I was talking to my cousin for the first time. This meeting had only been a dream a few years ago and I thought silently, "Here I am, with someone I am related to."*

*After the questions and answers, she brought out photos of my mom and I saw, for the first time, what my mom looked like. "You see, you have her cheeks." I looked at the photographs and was filled with complete awe. I was looking right into my mom's eyes and face. A strong and beautiful woman. My cousin then showed me pictures of the rest of the family including photographs of my Kokum and my brother. It was surreal to see these photos of my family, my birth family.*

For the first time I was seeing myself as a character in the stories that my birth family members told about me. I was part of other people's lives, people who knew I existed. I saw photographs of my family growing up, playing, living, and loving. I was part of their consciousness, their knowing. This meeting was special. I was my cousin's cousin, and my mom's son.

*We talked for three hours that day at Denny's. We learned each other's histories. My cousin was happy that I had been taken into a loving and caring family. My birth family had tried looking for me. The search attempts had been emotional. My cousin said that looking for me was difficult. Finally my cousin told me that she and her boyfriend had to get back home. We took photographs and said our goodbyes. My cousin was teary-eyed. "We never forgot you; we prayed and hoped."*

*I said “I am overwhelmed to have met you. You are my cousin.” We hugged for a while, and then parted. She gave me photos of my birth mom. I looked at the photographs as I sat in my jeep thinking to myself “Is this for real? Did I just meet my cousin for the first time?”*

**Can We Start Again?**<sup>36</sup> *“I wonder what he is like? I wonder if he will like me, or if I will like him? What are his experiences? What are his stories?” These questions went through my head on a cool winter night in March. I was driving to my brother’s house to meet him for the first time. My emotions and anxiety were high. I would be meeting my mom’s only other child. The older sibling I had known about as I was growing up.*

*I played music in the background. Bands like Unearth, Bane, and Verse. My intense involvement with music had helped me as I searched. Music made me feel braver. I could hear the encouragement of my family and friends in my head as I drove.*

*I tried to find my brother’s house. First, I knocked on a door thinking it was my brother’s place. The man who answered the door told me that they might live on the same block, but across the street. I went across the street and rang another doorbell only to be told I still had the wrong address. I apologized and looked down at my phone to check again on the location of my brother’s place. “Man, was this frustrating as well as nerve-racking,” I said to myself as I laughed about how smoothly this was not going. I noticed his place was two houses east.*

*I walked down the street and finally found his house. I felt anxious and heavy, like something was holding me down. Yet I still felt release. I was telling myself that one part of my journey was about to be complete. Another part would begin as I met my brother. Uncertainly, I walked up to his doorway. I stood there for a couple of seconds taking in the brisk night air. “Alright,” I said to myself. “Let’s do this!” I rang the doorbell, and the door opened.*

*“Tansi! Hello my brother. That means hello in Cree.”*

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<sup>36</sup> (Bedard, 1999, track 7)

*In the doorway of my brother's home, I shook his hand and hugged him. His children sat on the couch looking at me, their new uncle. He said, "Come and meet your Uncle Jay." One of them got up and gave me a hug.*

*I hugged her back and said, "Hello. How are you doing?"*

*"Okay", she responded shyly.*

*I said to myself, "I know that feeling."*

*My brother then introduced me to his wife saying, "This is my brother."*

*I said, "Hello."*

*My brother showed me around his house and then he and I left for dinner at a restaurant. We walked together to the vehicle.*

As I walked, I thought about who I was with; my older brother, my flesh and blood. It was as if time had stopped. Here was the older sibling mentioned in my adoption file. I had not known if my older sibling was a brother or sister. My parents thought I had a sister. However, at the meeting with Alberta Human Services, I learned I had an older brother. I was ecstatic. Just a few months ago, I had no brother, only my adopted sister.

*We got into my vehicle and decided to head to Denny's. I told him that I had met our cousin there just the week before. He smiled and laughed. When we sat down, there was an awkward silence. I wondered, "What do I say? How do I begin this conversation?" He opened the conversation, saying, "Well, this is a bit awkward hey? What does one say to his brother for the first time?"*

*I replied saying, "What about those Oilers?" We laughed as we both knew the Edmonton hockey team. Our conversation too was filled with questions and responses. However, my conversation with my brother picked up some different narrative threads. We were brothers from*

*the same mother so I knew we would talk about her, but how? My brother mentioned her first. Looking down at the table, hands fidgeting, he said, “Mom always wanted the best for you. She did not want you to grow up in a tough situation. She wanted you to understand and get to know the world. To pass high school, and get that degree. To be happy and successful with loving parents. That was her dream and if she was here, she would be happy.”*

*I reached out and grabbed his hand. “She is happy.”*

*He broke the silence saying “Well, without getting too sappy, she is. Two grown men getting emotional.”*

*I laughed. “Being emotional isn’t out of the ordinary. We are being men by being open.” He smiled and we continued talking about mom, her life, and how strong she was.*

*“She was always poignant<sup>37</sup>, independent, strong, and stubborn. She took no shit from anybody.” Then he said, “You know mom did not like swearing. When I swore, she said, “Boy, no one will ever take you seriously with language like that. You must present yourself accordingly and be proper.”*

*I smiled and said, “You know, she would get along with my mom and dad. I was never allowed to swear, and had to carry myself with the utmost respect.” I told him I had to follow my parents’ lead and be polite. I also learned politeness from my Grandparents<sup>38</sup>. “Even from a young age, my Grandma insisted that I let others go before me when I opened a door. ‘Let them go in until you are the last person left.’ I never forgot it.”*

*My brother responded, “You were brought up well with loving parents, grandparents, and a family.”*

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<sup>37</sup> I think he meant passionate and outspoken when he said poignant.

<sup>38</sup> My four adoptive grandparents lived near us while I was growing up.

*I explained that my parents came from England and Wales. Each of them was an only child. “We do not have a big family: just my mom, dad, my sister, and me. Our housekeeper and caretaker became another mother for my sister and I. My friends became my family.”*

*I asked my brother if he had a best friend. He said he did, back home. He asked me if I did.*

*I said, “Yes, I met my best friend the first day of Kindergarten. On the first day we all stood up and said our names. Immediately afterwards I went up to him and asked, ‘Do you want to play?’ Twenty-seven years later, we are still best friends.”*

*My brother was happy saying, “A friend of yours, is a friend of mine. I would like to meet him sometime.”*

*I said, “You will one day.” I explained that because I had no cousins or siblings around my age in my adoptive family, building friendships was my way to create a family. I told him “I love to be around people and talk. I have friends from all walks of life who have become dear people for me”. He wanted to hear more about my friends.*

*“They come from school, from the university, from the music scene, from the neighborhood, from the gym. They have all been there when I needed help.”*

*My brother was happy I had good friends who were loving, caring, strong, and trustworthy. He said, “You are in good company because just getting to know you now, you grew up with loving parents, and loving friends.”*

I learned about his story and his strengths and struggles. Being an Indigenous man in this country is not easy. He dealt with many issues on his own but he also understood his strengths and capabilities.

*He spoke of our mother and said, she had a yearning to learn and to explore, to run. He said, "Mom had a way to let you know. You know mom would get up and go. Like just go anywhere. She was not a homebody. She loved being around people and would constantly find herself randomly on other people's doorsteps." I thought "Just like me."*

*I told him I read her letter in the adoption files. I said, "She was very articulate and had a way with words. People twice her age would not be able to write so eloquently." He smiled, knowing what I meant.*

My brother helped me understand that my mother was a loving human being but was also extremely tough and stubborn. She was very independent. and sometimes took off to explore the world. My brother found her absences very difficult. Yet, as he talked to me, he helped me understand our mom and why she sometimes left.

*After eating our food and talking for a couple of hours, we opted to head back to his place. Before we left, we took a couple of photographs of this historic occasion at the restaurant. On the way home, we talked about how terrible the Oilers were doing that season. Clearly, we both loved hockey.*

*He said, "You know the entire family, with the exception of our Uncle who is a Chicago Blackhawks fan, are Montreal Canadiens fans."*

*I shook my head and responded, "I did not grow up loving the Canadiens. I appreciated Patrick Roy as a kid. Who didn't? But really, we know where it's at. And that's the Edmonton Oilers."*

*"Damn rights!" he said to me.*

*I told him “You know it’s going to be the Oilers who bring home the cup<sup>39</sup>, right? Mark my words, if any Canadian team will bring it home, it will be us.” He smiled and nodded his head.*

*When we arrived at his home, we went inside to continue talking. I asked him a question. “Do I have anything in common with mom?”*

*My brother said, “You have her quest for knowledge. Her thirst. You want to know more...and that you don’t give up easily. You never quit.” His words echoed through my body.*

*Growing up, my parents had always said to me that I had a passion to keep on going. Whether I was working on a puzzle, schoolwork, or playing, I never gave up. My mom used to tell me that I was like Little Red from the Berenstain Bears Book “The Big Road Race,” (Berenstain, 1987). The book describes a race in which Brother Bear is driving a small and slow red car. It was up against big, fast, strong cars. In the story, the fast cars deliberately cheat. One by one, the cars broke down. At one point only the black car was left. Throughout the story, Brother Bear’s car, Little Red, kept on “putting” through the course and overtaking the broken down cars. The black car had not noticed him. At the end of the story, the black car stopped to get some ice cream because he thought he had the race in the bag. When the driver of the black car saw Little Red go past, he rushed to his car to try to win. However, Little Red putted over the finish line and won. That book was a childhood favorite of mine.*

*When I told my brother the story, he responded, “Your mom is right. You are persistent.”*

*By now, it was getting late and he had to work in the morning. I said “I better get going.”*

*He said, “Not a problem. This is the first time meeting my brother so sleep is not an issue.”*

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<sup>39</sup> The greatest trophy in all of sports, Lord Stanley's Cup.



*Before I left, he held out his hand with photos, a ribbon, and my birth certificate. He said, "Here, mom would want you to have this." At this moment, I was holding my original official birth certificate showing my full name, the name my birth mom had given me.*

*I thanked him and asked, "Do you know why I was called Ian?" He said he did not know. Mom had not told him. He then gave me a card that came from the hospital where I was born. In the card was the very first picture of me, my name, and how much I weighed. I was blown away.*

*"7lbs? That's it?" I said. My brother laughed. "Well clearly I am much bigger than that now."*

*As we got up, I said, "We need to have another photo of us. A better photo." He agreed. We looked strong. We looked like warriors. We hugged and said we would have to catch a hockey game, and meet regularly. We said goodbye. The door closed. I walked slowly to my vehicle. I looked to the sky and smiled.*

This night is one I continue to savor. When I saw my brother, I was reminded of how strong we are. We looked like warriors. We were both tall, and physically strong. For the first time, I saw him in the flesh. Here was my big, older brother. Of course I was the bigger brother out of the two. I loved him, I knew he was my brother the instant I saw him. The stories he told reflected his strength and his struggles. I saw myself through him, how he was part of me. How we learned and operated. His stories resonated with me. Prior to this night, I thought no one knew how I truly worked. I thought he seemed to know. I recognized the sensation that I had seen when my friends interacted with their siblings. Was this sensation a biological recognition? **"One chapter ends, and another one begins."** *I was reminded of my friend's words, as I was about to meet my birth family. Words cannot describe the emotions I was experiencing; anxious, scared, happy, fearful, joy, anticipation. Yet, with all these emotions, I felt focused and humble. I*

*had wanted to meet my birth family from as far back as I can remember. I had envisioned the meeting many times. I had to find the strength to get into that vehicle, pick up my brother, and take the two-hour journey to my reserve to see my Kokum, and the rest of my mom's family.*

I wanted to understand where I came from. I wanted to meet my birth mom but I knew that was impossible. I wanted to meet my family. I was scared. I felt numb. I was about to take a step into the unknown. Yet while acknowledging my anxiety, I stuck to what my friend had told me four years earlier. "One chapter ends, and another one begins."

*I said goodbye to my parents and my sister. As they hugged me, they wished me a strong and safe journey up north. I closed the door and headed to the vehicle. In the car I played the music of my favorite bands. I glanced to the left as I drove past my house. I was filled with memories of my life.*

*Twenty minutes later, I picked up my brother, and we headed to the reserve. My brother went to sleep. I was alone with my thoughts as I concentrated on the road. I would be meeting my birth family for the first time.*

I was filled with excitement and trepidation. I realized I would meet people who had known I existed from the time of my birth. This realization was powerful for me. I had many questions running through my mind. Who am I? What am I? Why did my mom give me up? What had been wrong in her life?

*"We're getting close," my brother said. "Turn here." I turned right.*

*"New routes," I said to myself.*

*He said, "This is the back way to their house and the reserve. It's easier to get to."*

*I sighed.*

*"Want to turn back? he asked."*

*I laughed nervously at his question.*

*“No,” I said, “but I can’t feel anything in my body.”*

*“Don’t worry,” he said. “This is what you have been waiting for all your life. To meet your birth family. To know who are you, and where you came from. There will be a lot of people there. Are you sure you want to go?”*

*We both laughed.*

I realized I was not sure when my brother asked. But here I was, about to meet and greet my birth family for the first time. I was in the final moments of knowing only my adoptive family and friends. We were approaching the final intersection and seeing in the distance the road and house where everyone was waiting to see me, a long lost son. I was nervous. Thoughts of my family, my friends, my gym mates, my school and my music were running through my head. How was I going to interact with a family I had “known” but not known throughout my life. I could turn back. I did not. I went forward.

*After the final four-way intersection, we turned into the driveway. “Wow” he said. “Look at all the vehicles here. There are a lot of people. Nervous?”*

*“Just a little bit,” I said.*

*We got out of the vehicle and made our way to the deck. My cousin and her boyfriend were outside having a smoke. They hugged us. “Packed house!” she said. “Are you ready?”*

*I responded nervously with a smile, “I was born ready.”*

*“Well, here we go,” she said.*

*“I’ll go in first, with the video camera to capture the moment,” my brother said. “You can take in the moment with Kokum and the family.”*

*My brother entered first and closed the door allowing me to get mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually prepared for this encounter. "Thirty years" I told myself. Friends, family, places, thoughts, influences, all are here with me as I am about to go through this door. I let out a sigh and said, "Thank you," before opening the door and going through.*

*"Tansi! Hello, hello! How are you doing?" Overwhelmed with many new faces and people, I went straight to Kokum and hugged her. "Hi Kokum. I'm here. I'm here. She's here with us. I love you and have missed you."*

*Silence filled the room. Tears came down people's faces. The echoes of separation came swirling through that hug. The silence was full of joy. Here, in this moment, of family past and present, I felt the connection between Kokum and grandson that had never been severed.*

*"I have something here for you," I told her. I handed a stuffed green frog to her. I said to her, "I received a green frog when I was in foster care for six weeks after I was born. The foster family gave me a stuffed green frog which I still treasure. I wanted this stuffed green frog to connect you to my entrance into the world."*

*She accepted it and said, "Thank you my grandson. I love it and I love you."*

*I went around the living room, introducing myself to everyone. I met so many people. Many said, "Hi, hello, how are you? You're my cousin, you're my uncle, you're my cousin, you're my second cousin." I felt so welcome. Many children ran around. I made my way to the kitchen to introduce myself to more family members.*

*One relative introduced me to my mom's sister, my Aunt. I took a few seconds to look at her. A beautiful lady. She looked like my mom had looked in the photographs.*

*"Hello," I said to her.*

*She replied “Hello, nephew! How are you doing?” It took awhile for me to compose myself. “I am doing well.”*

*Next was my Uncle who had been barbequing the food. “Hello! How are you doing?” as he extended his hand to greet me.*

*I shook his hand and said, “I am doing well.”<sup>40</sup>*

*We later gathered around the kitchen table for Kokum to say a prayer. She said it in Cree. Such fluency and power in those words. It made me realize that I had a lot of work to do in order to match her high level of Cree. After the prayer, we ate, conversed, shared stories about growing up, and family history. To my surprise, my birth family had decorated a cake with the name Jay to honor my adoptive parents. After eating, I hung out with my cousins. I felt anxious about our interactions. “Hey, so you’re my older cousin?” one cousin said.*

*“Yes, yes I am. How is everything going?”*

*“Fine. My fiancé and I are getting married next year. You are invited.” I said I was honored and thanked her. We talked a bit more about everything and anything.*

*Next I sat down with another cousin. After a moment of awkward silence, I said “What do you think of those Oilers?”*

*He said, “Yeah, they aren’t doing too well, being out of the playoffs.”*

*“Yeah it’s brutal eh? I keep on saying that it’s them that will bring us back to the Promised Land.”*

*He smiled. “I hope so, or at least Montreal or some Canadian city.”*

*“Yes, yes indeed!”*

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<sup>40</sup> At this point, Kokum, my brother, and I went to see my birth mom as described on page 86.

The love and connection I received from my family was unparalleled. It was something I had not ever experienced before. I realized that my anxiety about meeting my birth family had disappeared. I had worried they would not accept me. I realized as I was in the room that they were accepting me. I had hugged my Kokum, talked to my aunts, shook hands with my uncles, laughed and talked to my cousins. I looked like I belonged to this family. My skin complexion, my facial features, my body, my strengths. I was the biggest person there, but I now saw the origin of my size and strength. What an amazing feeling to hear and see comments such as “Wow, you have your mom’s cheeks, your father’s nose.” These were characteristics my adoptive parents could not tell me. I found it comforting to be among people who looked like me.

I was surprised to have a strong connection to my birth family in the form of sports. My brother and I shared a love for the Edmonton Oilers, albeit this love was being constantly tested. However, in my birth family, the level of passion for the Montreal Canadiens and Chicago Blackhawks was amazing. I connected with them through our shared love for hockey. There was a unifying dislike for the Toronto Maple Leafs that made me smile.

Now, with this new family I was meeting, there were connections with other interests, like the gym, which my cousins visited too. The love for fitness, working out, and the iron (Rollins, 1993) was one that we talked about on that day. That motivated me to do better in my gym workouts. My cousins were putting in the work to get jacked (Gray, 2014), I wanted to as well.

My interest in sports was a connection I did not have with my adoptive family. My deep connections with my adoptive family came in the form of a strong interest in history and going

places, of stories being told about my parents and their interactions with the places they had been, in movies and music.

*With all the talking and stories being shared, time passed quickly. It was almost 5:00 p.m. I said my goodbyes starting with Kokum. Then I said goodbye to every family member and thanked them for being there to meet me. I said I was grateful they had not forgotten me. We took many photos that day both with, and without me. I honour the memories of the past and of this celebration. I will never forget.*

**It won't be long, we'll meet again<sup>41</sup>.** *In the afternoon, after meeting everyone, Kokum, my brother, and I drove to the cemetery. I turned onto the path beside the headstones. I drove cautiously trying not to disturb the peacefulness.*

*"Here we go. Stop here," my Kokum said. "I'll wait in the car with the heat on while you and your brother go." I walked alongside my brother to the grave.*

*My brother said, "Here we are. This is the one." I pulled out the purple flowers I brought with me from Edmonton and gave one to him. We each laid our flowers at the head of the grave simultaneously. We stood up and my brother pulled out the camera to film me. I stood there for a while, the wind blowing through my hair and alongside my body.*

*My brother said, "Well she wanted us one day to meet, and now, you know, she asked [me], like, to try and find, to try and find Ian. I mean, at the end of the day, it's all up to ahh, we can't [couldn't sic] do anything from our side, you know, so...I know she had wanted to see [Ian] at that time that she was, she knew she was gonna go..."*

*"Yeah," I said.*

*"She was hoping that she would see you before she was gone."*

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<sup>41</sup> (Jones, 2004, track 4).

*“Yeah”*

*“But that’s just not the way the Creator had it. I guess [it was] not in his plans.”*

*I stood opposite him with both of us looking over our mom’s grave. “Hey mom...I know you are here with us.... I know you are here with my brother and me. You know, ever since I was a kid, as long ago as I can remember, I wanted to know who my mom was. I wanted to know who gave birth to me. I wanted to know where I came from.”*

*“My parents, my adoptive parents, but my parents, when they took me in when I was six weeks old, you know, they would always say to me, that you’re Cree! You’re an aboriginal person, or as we liked to call ourselves, back then Indian or native. Not at all political. I always knew that I was native, that I was Cree. I was proud...I was proud. I was proud to know that, and that I was also a Cumming. You made my mom and my dad very VERY happy to have a child. You gave them something. You gave me something. When my parents first picked me up and took me home, they had bought baby food and other necessities.. They stocked up. When I came, you know what I did? I ate it all...all in one go! At that point, my dad wondered if it was a mistake to have this baby. “This guy is going to cost me a fortune in the food business.”*

*On that cool May Saturday, I told her I learned how to read, how to write, how to swim, how to draw, how to learn to ride a bike from my dad, how to play, how to be a kid. How my parents had pushed me with my education, taught me to learn, and to understand. Then I held up my Diploma and said to her “In the letter that you gave to us it said, ‘You wanted me to pass high-school.’ So...for fourteen years I went to school. I went to both public and private schools. On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2001, Grade 12 Graduation Day, I walked down that aisle. I was the first one on stage. Gave a speech. At the end of the speeches and [the] ceremony, we all took turns to walk out. As we walked out, I turned to the crowd and I bowed. I went into those diplomas writing my*



*ass off. Studied so hard for them. 12 years. 12 years of doing this. [Studying] Countless hours of being put to the test, put to the grindstone in order to get this diploma. All for those five tests. You know, my mom would force me to bring home my binders every night because she wanted me to succeed. So you can imagine what that would have been like for 12 years having to deal with that! But she would push me and so I wrote those diplomas, had a great summer in 2001 and then in October, my diploma came. This diploma, mom, that you wanted me to have, to show something to the world. You know mom, I did this for you. I know if you were here, you would tell me that I did it for myself. And yeah I did do it for myself, but I also did it for you.”*

“What would I give to behold

The smile

The face of love

You’ve never left me

The rising sun

Will always speak your name.”

(Jones, 2004, track 4)

My birth mom passed away on October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013, near the time I contacted Alberta Human Services to begin my search in earnest. I carry her wherever I go, telling my story of being a Cree person growing up, adopted, in a loving and caring home. My experiences in the world helped me understand the reality of being Indigenous. It made me want to grow and to learn. Whether on the plains of South Dakota, in the urban sprawl of Edmonton, at music concerts and shows, in gyms, and in the classrooms, she was there every step of the way. Her love never wavered. She fought through the storm to believe in me.

*A while back, I asked my brother about mom. Upset, I said “Why did she leave? Why did she give me up?”*

*With grace and power, he stated, “She did not give you up, she gave you a chance.”*

*-Hiy Hiy*

### **Gathering Threads**

One of the crucial aspects of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is the element of place. Although I had known since I was 18 years old that I was from Beaver Lake Cree Nation, I was not familiar with northern Alberta. I was concerned because I felt the need to explore the place of my ancestors. My trip to the reserve the year before I met my birth family was integral to helping me understand place. I felt that being familiar with the area would help me feel calmer when I visited my birth family. I know that place helps me put events into context. On that visit to the reserve, I felt comfortable.

My journey to the reserve allowed me to adjust to the forest, lake, and roads on the reserve. The visit helped me adjust to the pressure of knowing that this was the place where my biological peoples, cultures, and traditions are placed. Looking inward and backward, the seeds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for me to eventually connect with my birth family were planted in the letter my birth mom wrote for my adoptive parents. In addition to the actual information, my parents told me stories about my birth mom and her dreams for me. These stories fueled my desire to make her proud. Even in my darkest moments, I wanted to fulfill her dream for me by finishing high school. My parents turned her wishes into stories that motivated me. All through school, I remembered her words as well as the support and encouragement of my adoptive parents. I worked through the problems that I encountered in school. I worked to overcome my

weaknesses and build my strengths to succeed in school. My parents gave me the tools in order to succeed, thus, allowing my birth mom's dreams to be fulfilled.

I had special interactions with each member of my birth family as I got to know them the very first time as well as from our continued conversations. The relationships I built from my first interactions shaped how we came to know one another in other settings. Some of our interactions included stories about my mom because I did not get to physically meet and know her. I listen to people whenever they speak about her and what she did during her life. These stories further shaped my stories to live by and helped me tell a story of knowing why she placed me for adoption. I know that she wanted me to be happy and to live in a loving home. By taking my time to find her and my birth family, I realized that what I was looking for in terms of a family became real when I went to Beaver Lake Cree Nation.

When I became more informed about the history of native people, I began to inquire into my identity as a particular Indigenous male from a particular place. I began the journey to understand who I was in all of my particularity; more than an urban Indigenous man who was adopted as a baby. In this chapter I went from identifying as Jay, an adopted Aboriginal male comfortable in white society, to identifying as Ian Jay L., a Cree man from Beaver Lake First Nation. I began to see myself as a Cree man with a particular biological family which was situated within the larger social narratives of my Indigenous family. I am part of a family and they are part of me.

## Chapter 5: Rise<sup>42</sup>

I have been living and telling my stories for more than 30 years now, stories of my origin, my creation story, a native baby adopted into a white urban family. I lived and told my stories as a child, who struggled in schools, had a learning disability, and was overweight, but who was supported, loved, and cared for by his adoptive family. About 6 years ago, when I took a class in Narrative Inquiry, I began the inquiry process that has resulted in this thesis. I learned that it was important to inquire into my experiences to see them as nested within larger social, cultural, familial and institutional narratives.

The narrative inquiry approach was instrumental in my stories to live by, to claim my identity as a Cree man. The four directions of narrative inquiry: *inward* and *outward*, *backward*, and *forward* are part of the inquiry process (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Temporality was one dimension: past, present and future times as I told and inquired into my stories of experience. Time that was both unfolding and enfolding me over places and relationships and intergenerationally. Place was also central as I inquired into the places where I lived, the places where my families lived, the journeys that I undertook, and the places where I studied. The *personal and social (inward and outward)* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50) included the many conversations I had with my friends, family, and birth family members as well as the ways that I felt about and experienced these relationships.

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<sup>42</sup> “Rise” (2012) is a track from composer Hans Zimmer who composed the track for Christopher Nolan’s movie “The Dark Knight Rises.” (2012) produced by De La Noy, Melniker, Tull, & Uslan. The song was built on the words “Desi Basara” chanted by prisoners in a scene in the movie where Bruce Wayne is stuck in a pit and climbs out to freedom. The words “Desi Basara means “Rise.” I found both the song and the movie to have similar connections for my journey home, as well as finding my identity.

The inquiry process involved telling, writing, and retelling many stories, inquiring into artifacts and places, and undertaking a journey to come to know my biological family. As I went through the inquiry, I began to tell different stories of who I was; I was retelling my stories. I was also reliving my stories and being changed by the inquiry processes. I have undergone significant changes in who I am and am becoming. After growing up as a native person adopted into a white family, I found I needed to come to terms with my Aboriginal background. My journey to Indian Country and my journey to find my birth family shaped a shifted story in which I began to name myself as a Cree warrior.

### **Personal Justifications: Finding stories to live by as a Warrior**

As I finished high school and entered university, I remember searching for leaders and warriors in books, articles, movies and media. Over the following years, I began to realize that effective leaders followed their ethical obligations to ensure the survival of their community and family. These leaders and warriors were usually people who resisted social oppression for themselves and for others. One of the first leaders I identified was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who carefully considered and implemented the morality and effectiveness of nonviolent resistance within the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. I learned from his stories; but I also wanted to find Aboriginal warriors. I was looking for stories of Aboriginal warriors who could shape my stories to live by. As I learned about the warriors, I came to the realization that a true warrior involves many attributes beyond fighting battles including the ability to face many difficult decisions.

During the family journey through “Indian Country”, described in the third chapter, I began to understand, in more complex ways, the native history books, and materials I had read, and the lectures I had heard. The “Indian” and Métis battles against the governments of Canada

and United States, described in chapter three, brought me into unknown territory. While I had asked my parents to take me to these places where I felt my peoples' histories were situated, my experiences on that trip were such that I began to wonder where I belonged. I felt, as I shared the stories in the "Indian Country" chapter, that I should have been alongside the warriors that fought and died in Batoche, The Northwest Rebellion, Wounded Knee, and The Battle of Little Bighorn. Standing in these places moved me in ways I had not expected. Here hundreds of Indigenous peoples had died as they fought battles against government forces that sought to oppress them.

In the stories that I read, the Aboriginal warriors and leaders were all men. However, in the last two years of my undergraduate degree, and throughout the years I spent doing my masters, I knew a number of Aboriginal women who were strong leaders within the university and community. I wondered about women who had also been warriors, who may also have lead during these battles but perhaps in different ways. I was beginning to see the complexity of the decisions both women and men had to make in difficult circumstances. I know that both women and men can be warriors.

In the native studies courses, I made new connections between my experiences on my journey through "Indian Country" with what I was learning in class. Equally important were the stories shared between other Aboriginal students and myself in class and in ASC.

As I learned more about recent Aboriginal history and modern day life, I began to feel angry and perhaps somewhat cheated by the formal education system. There had been so little about the history of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada in the mandated Alberta curriculum. Other than a few lessons about the Iroquois and the Huron peoples when eastern Canada was first settled, there was no subject matter knowledge about Aboriginal people in my elementary, junior

high, and high-school education. The living situations for modern day Aboriginal peoples, the residential school system (Legacy of Hope 2015) the 60's Scoop (Crey & Fournier, 1997), and the restrictions of the reservation system (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) were never taught. When I learned about the residential school system, I was baffled and confused as to why it happened. Initially, I thought parents should have fought to keep their children and not allowed them to be taken into residential schools. I read the stories of parents trying to hide children so government agents could not take them. Eventually, I realized parents were powerless against the government. I learned about the 60's Scoop gradually. According to Sinclair (2007), in the 1960's, "Aboriginal children were apprehended in disproportionate numbers throughout Canada and adopted primarily into non-Aboriginal homes in Canada, the United States, and overseas. Approximately 70% of those children were adopted into non-Aboriginal homes (Fanshel, 1972, York, 1992; Timpson, 1995; Fournier & Crey, 1997)" (p. 66).

For a period of time, I wondered if I had been part of the 60's Scoop. I now know that I was not, but, perhaps indirectly, both the residential schools and the 60's Scoop played a role in my mom's decision to put me up for adoption.

I was also angry about the Treaty System that legislated bands to small sections of land and forced them to abandon their culture and language. Andrews and Olney (2007), document the banning of the potlatch and pow wow ceremonies by the Government of Canada to try to force assimilation of aboriginal peoples. Government Agents enforced the harsh rules deemed necessary to control the aboriginal population on the reserves (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). I was angry and sad about all of the oppression. I had a better understanding about the modern day living situations, such as inadequate housing and non-potable water (Elash & Walker, 2019), for many Aboriginal peoples as a result of these

government tactics. I had not known about Canada's Indian Act and I did not know about the structural inequalities in funding and policies for Aboriginal peoples. I learned many of these details through the Native Studies program at the University of Alberta. I felt betrayed.

After I took the Journey's Program, which involved working with inner-city youth, I moved into the Master of Arts in Physical Education & Recreation & Leisure Studies which is now the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta. It was while I was in the Masters program that I enrolled in the Narrative Inquiry course and began to look into my experiences in order to tell, retell and relive my stories as an Aboriginal man.

Through the telling and retelling of my stories of experiences, my identities and my stories to live by have shifted from being ones in which I storied myself as an uncomfortable, overweight, learning disabled, and male Aboriginal university student. Now I am retelling and reliving my stories of experience and claim multiple identities, as a member of both my white family and my Aboriginal birth family. I have learned how to work with my learning disability, how to accept my body and work with it, and how to independently search out knowledge. I experience myself as more confident. Now I proudly claim myself as a Cree man, someone knowledgeable about the situations Aboriginal people inhabit. I see myself as a participant in the changes Aboriginal peoples are working towards.

The narrative inquiry into my stories of experience has profoundly shaped how I understand what it means to be a warrior. I learned, as I inquired into my birth mom's stories, that she made the difficult decision to place me on the metaphoric road leading out of the reservation. She made that decision because she thought I would have better opportunities. This awakening was important to how I told my stories. I had to integrate this information with my own ideas of where I came from and what I was meant to do. Through these inquiry



conversations with myself and trusted friends and family, I continued to search for stories to live by as an Indigenous male and as a warrior. The connection with my birth family and their connection to my mom deepened my understanding of myself.

After I met members of my biological family, I listened to their stories, particularly the stories that they told about my mom. I heard about the displays of strength and resilience that persisted in her life. My discussions with my brother and other family members were insightful in helping me understand that while my mom had a tough exterior, she was kind hearted. One of my uncles spoke of her as being a stubborn person. She wanted to be in control of her life and, from the stories I heard, I believe she made that happen.

I relate her strength and decisions, her resilience, and kind-heartedness, to the tradition of a warrior and leader. According to the stories I heard and ideas I gleaned from her writing, she displayed both acts of kindness and stern opinions. She took responsibility for the difficult decisions she made, including the decision to put me up for adoption. My birth mom, at 21, made difficult choices, choices that shaped my path out of the reserve. I wonder if she knew I would find my way back. I am, after all, the son of a warrior.

Through the narrative inquiry, I came to another understanding. I realize that I have been raised by two warrior women. The first warrior woman was my birth mom who made the hard decision to give me up for adoption in order to for me to grow up with two loving parents and have the opportunity to earn my high school diploma. The second warrior was my adoptive mom who read the letter from my birth mom and took responsibility for fulfilling the words my birth mom wrote in the letter that came with me. She took on the responsibility to give me the best chances as I composed my life. My mom was strong. Even when she discovered my learning disabilities, she still did everything possible to ensure I received the best possible education. She

chose schools that helped me learn, taking into account both my areas of strength as well as my areas of weakness. Her genuine love was evident in her other choices for me. My adoptive mom made sure that I had an eclectic group of people surrounding me; grandparents, teachers, mentors, and family friends who were strong and loving. My mom was a planner. She not only set up a scaffolding around me that supported my strengths, but also made her planning structure transparent so that I gradually learned to think ahead and make plans for myself. My adoptive mom also gave my birth mom an even greater gift, by being a great mom<sup>43</sup>.

Both my birth mom and adoptive mom have shown me how to be a warrior, how not to give up but to continue to meet the challenges in my life head on. I know my birth mom was under strong family pressure to keep me in my birth family. It must have been difficult for her to face family members each day and resist the pressure to change her mind. Her vision for my future remains strong. My adoptive mom faced the day to day pressures of my learning disability and her concern that even within their family, I would face discrimination because I was Aboriginal. She planned very carefully all my life to deal with both issues. Both of my moms persevered in the face of challenges providing an example to me of warrior indomitability.

### **Practical Justifications: Forward looking stories to live by**

My uncertainties from looking at my past are now leading me to look for ways of living into the future. According to Franklin (2017), narrative inquiry identifies this change as dislocation from the remembered past to a present moment while constructing an identity for the future. The future holds infinite opportunities for untold and new stories (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

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<sup>43</sup> I also learned a great deal from my adoptive dad. He led by example and he expected me to learn from his examples. My mom and dad worked together to plan my learning and education.

As I am in the midst of a journey, I will continue to work to hear stories from my birth family and continue my relationships with my adoptive family. Both my Aboriginal and urban communities will be part of my future. I have been, and will continue, participating in round dances, pow wows, and telling my stories to school groups. I am still learning about Aboriginal protocols and ways of knowing but I am working to understand those protocols and ways of knowing that are part of my Cree culture. I hope that my story of the struggles I went through as a result of growing up in a different culture and searching for my birth culture will be of use to others who are also searching. Many children, now Indigenous adults who were adopted into white families, or put into foster care, as a result of the 60's Scoop, and as a result of the fallout from residential schools and the harshness of the reserve system may wish to find their aboriginal roots (Sinclair, 2004). Some of these adults have been discouraged from coming to know their cultural backgrounds and their birth families. Some are ashamed of their identification as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit. Some are unable to locate information that will make it possible for them to regain their culture. Perhaps, as they read my narrative inquiry, they may find ways to attempt their own journeys to their birth cultures and birth families.

In addition to the many Indigenous children who were adopted, other adults who were adopted as children may also search for their birth families. The story of my search, while different from theirs, may be helpful to them. This is one of the first studies that documents the story of an aboriginal baby who was adopted by white parents and the journey he followed in order to search for his birth family, his aboriginal identity, his culture and his heritage. A major aspect of the journey was the time required, the support of others and the safe spaces necessary for him to gradually accept himself in both his urban identity and as a Cree man.

This thesis also provides insight to teachers, social workers, and adoptive parents to assist adoptees in their own journeys. Foster children and children who know they are adopted, undergo many anxieties wondering if they are truly accepted by their parents and other family members (Sinclair, 2007). The variety of caregivers that come into contact with these children need to be sensitive to their questions and their doubts which take on different characteristics as they grow. The caregivers need to provide safe spaces for conversations to take place. My adoptive parents and people at the University of Alberta provided thought-provoking conversations in safe spaces that allowed me to initiate the search for, and to meet, my birth family. I hope my stories become part of the safe spaces that communities can provide for youth to learn about their culture and history.

I am a Cree man from the Beaver Lake First Nation and I plan to be more present with my birth family and to, over time, become a part of the family and community. If the opportunity comes to interact with other members of the band, I will do so. I know that this will take time as I need to develop relationships that are sustaining and educative for those in the family and community. Perhaps, as we work together, I can become the kind of warrior that my birth mother and adoptive parents helped me see by the lives they lived.

### **Social Justification: Making relationships and programs for attending to the experiences of Indigenous youth**

My roots are in Edmonton. I am aware there is a need for programs and mentoring for urban youth, both First Nations and marginalized youth (Blackstock, et al, 2006). I hope to have a role as an Indigenous male, participating in urban Indigenous communities. I learned from my experiences as I inhabited multiple spaces<sup>44</sup> in the city. From my knowledge of the city, my

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<sup>44</sup> I imagine such spaces could be found in various gyms, community centres, schools, university, the river valley, and the streets and neighbourhoods in all four quadrants of the city.

vision is to have mentoring and leadership circles that will build a positive experience for First-Nation, Métis, and Inuit youth, first within the city, and then in rural/reservation communities. The first step is to create spaces for them to come in and explore their bodies through physical activity. Over time, this space could become a safe space for youth, allowing them to build confidence and strength in their mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional selves. Lavallee (2007, 2008, 2008) has explored a similar approach where “rather than starting with a deficit approach or focusing on skill development, this research began with a holistic understanding of health, specifically the indigenous teaching of the medicine wheel” (2013, p. 5). In her initial program, physical involvement was the step into the holistic exploration for participants. A major obstacle for such programs is cost. Funding could come from various levels of government, from service groups, or by negotiating for the free use of space from different organizations.

In my journey, I was helped in major ways through listening to the stories of people in different communities and through sharing my stories within these communities. I shared with caregivers and mentors within my communities. As a privileged urban Aboriginal youth, I connected with teachers who went out of their way to ensure that I passed my classes. In addition, these teachers provided different perspectives through story and information. Initially, caregivers, friends, and teachers and later on, mentors, Elders, and professors told stories of their own experiences. These stories involved tests, live events, or certain issues I had at the time. From their stories I learned how to have confidence to explore the topics, subjects or interests I had. Most importantly, these people, through storytelling, created safe spaces that worked for me.

My personal interests flourished when I was given safe physical spaces to explore my own thoughts and feelings. I know that youth like to be involved in physical activity. As youth

participate in a variety of forms of physical fitness in safe spaces that also encourage stories, the youth can develop new ways of knowing. The reconfiguration of Edmonton's downtown with a new arena and Ice District has changed the spaces available to the inner-city community. The city has built and renovated recreation centres mainly on the outskirts of the city. These recreation facilities are excellent for suburban communities, but they are too far away, and too expensive, for inner-city youth and families to access. Often, inner-city youth avoid these facilities because of fear of being judged or stereotyped. I hope to contribute to my people as well as inner city youth in general by working to provide safe spaces in the city and on reserves for youth.

I want to be a Cree warrior, a warrior for Indigenous peoples.

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