



Volume 11
Issue 1

Urban First Nations Men: Narratives of Identity and Well-Being

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Where are the positive stories about Aboriginal men in Toronto? Why do we so often hear stories in the media, and dominant discourse about Aboriginal men that involve drunkenness, violence, laziness, and entitlement? Have the stories about Aboriginal male warrior-caregivers, fathers, leaders, and healers disappeared? How do urban Aboriginal men find a positive sense of self within the often racist and discriminatory larger society? The first author, Celina Carter, worked as a nurse at a community health centre for Aboriginal people in Toronto. Here, she came to know many male Aboriginal clients and colleagues who did not look anything like the stereotypical images that are often portrayed. As a white settler with seven generations of ancestors living on this land, she wanted to gather stories both for the Aboriginal community she practiced nursing with, and also for her community, whose members so badly need to hear strength-based stories about Aboriginal men. The following excerpts are from interviews with three urban First Nations men

who identify as living a balanced life. These stories were collected during Ms. Carter's Master's of Nursing thesis that was guided by an Aboriginal advisory committee from the community, with ethics approval from Ryerson University. The excerpts share the three men's symbols of identity and narrative typologies.

GENE: A Quest

Gene loosens his tie and undoes the top two buttons of his collared shirt. He slowly pulls at a little leather string around his neck. He brings it up over his head and out from under his shirt. On the end of the string is a little yellow tobacco pouch. Gene lays the deer hide tobacco pouch on the table; its original tobacco is inside. We look at it in silence. Gene tells me of his childhood growing up on the reserve with his mother, father, siblings, and extended family. He tells me about figure skating and later coming out as a gay man. He tells me of his successful career. He tells me about the way his life is guided by the Seven Grandfather teachings—namely, by honesty and respect. When the story is finished, he picks up the tobacco pouch, puts it around his neck, and tucks it back under his collared shirt.

So as I wear it every day. ... You can't go without feeling it on your body or you can't go without thinking about it. [It] being there is what reminds me continuously where I came from.

Knowing himself and where he comes from, supports his sense of wellness. He tells me:

My physical health and wellness, my spiritual health and wellness, my mental health and wellness, my emotional health and wellness are all facets of who I am as a person. And if one is off, then I'm not well.

Gene's identity-narrative typology is that of a *quest*. Quest stories describe the storyteller or protagonist as living their life in pursuit of something that can be learned and passed on to others (Frank, 1998). The protagonist lives this quest and, in doing so, experiences changes in their self and beliefs (Frank, 1998). Gene's quest has been to stay on the "good" path, continually learning and evolving: "I want to live a good life, so I want to be in this positive space of happiness and joy and enlightenment." For Gene, part of staying on a good path means embodying the Seven Grandfather teachings. After he heard about the Seven Grandfather teachings in his early twenties, he said to himself:

"That makes sense!" This is exactly the way that I live my life ... that I focus on living my life. And I think without having words before these were the ways, so respect is important to me, honesty is important to me. All of those pieces sort of made sense and it was kind of an "ah-ha" moment for me from a First Nations background to say

‘that in words [the Seven Grandfather teachings], is ... what I believe my culture has instilled in me.

He believes that these teachings encompass what his world and Aboriginal teachings are all about: respect, treating people well, and balance. As Gene proceeded in his journey, he learned that his Aboriginal identity, including the grandfather teachings, is something that will help keep him on this path. Gene tells a story of a turning point when he was immersed in “gay culture” and he lost focus on his identity as an Aboriginal person.

The pendulum swung completely to my identity as a gay person and my identity as an Aboriginal person kind of minimized during that period of time. ... I think if I stay down this path of being within the LBGT community, it may take me into a negative place because there is just a lot of debauchery. ... That’s when I’ve gravitated a little bit more to how can I be re-engaged in what it is that I’m doing with the community as an Aboriginal person, as a First Nations person.

Gene’s Aboriginal identity was once “diminished” and he strayed from his path; he does not want this to happen again. Moving forward, Gene wants to impart these teachings to others, as he believes that they provide the support and guidance that people need in life. He stated that, “In thinking about those traditional values, ... to actually

impart them into my nieces and nephews, ... imparting them with the right support and giving them the right directions is important.” As reflected in Gene’s story, living the teachings is a way of life for him. They are the foundation to making good decisions and staying focused on living the good life; the tobacco pouch hanging around his neck and brushing against his skin reminds of him of that.

STEVE: A Reincarnation

Steve has a black case with the medicine wheel painted on the front. He unzips the case and removes a drum; this is the symbol that he has chosen to represent his identity. He holds the drum in one hand and rubs the surface of the drum with his other. It is a round-dance style drum, but Steve also uses it for sweat lodges. The drum feels cold; he gives it a little tap. Steve turns the drum over in his hands. Finding dirt on the edge, he tells me it is from the sweat lodge from the night before. He brushes it off, apologizing that he is getting mud on the table. Steve tells me that the drum is made of untreated moose hide—it is special, made in the old way, not with the chemically treated hide that so many drums are made of today. He turns the drum around, showing me the inside, where you can see the light coming through to expose the swirling shades and different patterns in the skin. He made the drum, having gotten the moose hide last fall: “You take the hair off and you scrape the inside off, where the meat and the guts all used to be—so they scrape that off. *Fleshing*,

they call that.” Sinew is sewn through the hide, holding it to the wooden frame of the drum and keeping it taut.

It [the drum] reminds me of that heart-beat and it reminds me to behave and stay balanced. And it reminds me to [be] a good person. ... And when I sing, I try to sing my best and put my heart into it when I sing and when I drum. So yeah, it reminds me of all those good things and I accredit the drumming and the drum to, you know, what helped me to quit using drugs and drinking, right. So it’s a big part of my life. ... Growing up, I knew little about being Native and as I got older I was curious, and the drum, sort of, it was the gateway.

The drum keeps Steve balanced and is part of his health and wellness. He explained:

I’ve learned ... health is four aspects of a person: the mental, emotional, physical, spiritual. And if your mental health is unbalanced, it may affect your physical health. Or if your spiritual health is lacking, it may affect your emotional health. And all of those sort of play hand in hand so balance is somewhere being in the middle of all of those things. ... It [the drum] reminds me [to] stay balanced.

The typology of Steve's narrative is one of *reincarnation*. I use the definition of reincarnation as defined by Aboriginal social activist and educator Allyson Anderson (2008). She explains that reincarnation is about reawakening Aboriginal male identity and reclaiming the accompanying role(s) within family and community (Anderson, 2008). She defines it as a spiritual journey that involves reconstituting "fragments of traditional masculinities that have survived generations of physical and cultural genocide" (Anderson, 2008, p. 186). Reincarnation can take place through rituals, rites of passage, and the rejection of colonial definitions of Aboriginal masculinity in order to redefine Aboriginal manhood and restore connection to women, mother earth, and the community (Anderson, 2008). Reincarnation is not simply about being reborn; it is the process of reclaiming identity and culture after genocide.

The typology of reincarnation fits Steve's narrative, as he recounted becoming reconnected with his culture and finding a way to reclaim his Aboriginal identity. This reclaiming occurs in the context of colonization having broken the link between his family and their community and their Aboriginal culture. Reconnecting to his Aboriginal identity and culture was a key narrative idea underlying Steve's story. Steve was born "without" his culture and his story reflects the journey of discovering Aboriginality.

Some of the cultural practices that I use have really helped me to be the person I am, a fairly healthy person. But that

being said, I didn't grow up that way. I didn't grow up on reserve. I grew up in a very non-Native community. And that community was as diverse as white bread and a glass of milk.

Although supportive, neither of Steve's parents could teach him about Aboriginal culture because his Ojibway mother grew up in a foster home and his father is non-Aboriginal. However, he explained, "My mom was curious [about our culture] and we started going to powwows." Together with his mother, he embarked on his reincarnation. Part of his reincarnation was also returning to his mother's reserve: "It almost felt like reconnecting to a part of my family's history that I never knew before. So ... it almost felt like a sense of coming home." The connotation of "home" in his statement reflects a level of comfort and a returning to one's origins.

The typology of reincarnation continued throughout Steve's story. Steve recounted that he engages in rituals, especially related to drumming and promoting rites of passage for his daughters. As reflected in his narrative, Steve reclaimed what it is to be an Aboriginal man living a balanced life and living the teachings of the drum. As Steve's path of the drum became more engrained in his life, he also forged stronger bonds with his community, becoming a leader, advocate, and protector.

JACY: A Romance

Jacy reaches into his black leather and wool work jacket. From within the inside breast pocket he

pulls a folded piece of white paper. He slowly unfolds it and lays it on the small round table in the space between us. It's a picture of Buffalo Calf Woman. He positions it so it faces me, saying, "It's a Native American folklore myth; it carries a lot of weight in our community. For us, it represents life, renewal, new lessons ahead—a lot of good things." He shares stories of how this symbol represents learning respect for the community and for women. At the end of the interview, he tells me to keep it, but first shares his own personal Buffalo Calf Woman experience.

I had a bad feeling. ... That girl is pushing her body against me and all of a sudden my stomach went really bad, like it was turning, like someone was opening up a safe...all of a sudden I felt this tap on my shoulder and I looked back behind me and there was this drunk Indian guy and he was like 30 or 40 feet away, just sitting down and drinking his drink and looking at me. ... Then I looked around, because my grandfather always said when someone touches you, or you don't know what it is, look around. So I looked around and I noticed there were two guys that were looking at me and [my cousin]. I didn't like the way they looked at us. ... "I'm outta here, man. I don't like this place. I don't like this place at all. Let's get ... out of here." [The next day] there were police all over the place and

then we saw those two girls. ... She goes, "Yeah, just after you guys left, two other guys came up and they were talking to us and my ex-boyfriend was in the crowd and he came over, and he beat one up and he killed him!"

The typology of Jacy's narrative was that of the *romance*. The romance typology is not about love, as one might imagine, but about the protagonist overcoming obstacles en route to his goal (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). The journey and the struggle to achieve one's goal is the essence of the romance story. Jacy's narrative reflects a journey of overcoming challenges in which he stays true to himself and his values as his identity evolves. Some of the challenges in Jacy's narrative involved being adopted and separated from his Aboriginal culture, as well as experiencing violence when he returned to the reserve later in life. Jacy cultivated a way of healing himself by seeking out dancing and a community that was respectful and full of laughter and that practiced the traditional ways. The dominant theme in Jacy's narrative is not necessarily about his positive Aboriginal identity, but rather about the strength and perseverance it took for him to get there.

The majority of the stories that he tells involve a conflict that is resolved through trusting his instincts, which requires him to know himself. His narrative reflects the ways that he engaged in various experiences and opportunities that prompted a change of course in his life, as in the many times

when he made a decision to leave school, home, the reserve, Winnipeg, a job, and so on, all of which changed his life journey. Through each of these experiences, he recounted learning about himself and emerging more self-assured and self-knowing. For example, while Jacy was living on the reserve, he experienced betrayal and hurt. He explained how he knew when it was time to leave the reserve:

I'd had enough. ... They were fighting
their chief and his security guards, ...
and I didn't want to be a part of it. ...
There was a big giant eagle wing and a
head that was pointing towards
Winnipeg. And I remember thinking, ...
I got to go. The next day, I was gone.

References

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