

STORYTELLING⁴⁷

Stories have played a very prominent role in the traditional lives of Indigenous people. Many have survived and can consequently be of importance to contemporary Indigenous people in rediscovering the culture of their people and in teaching it to younger generations. Archibald (1997) reminds us that stories can be used as a way in which to achieve holism. The offering of stories is therefore essential. According to King (2003) everything is a story; personal beings are stories. Cultural survival therefore depends on the telling of these stories in their many forms.

Stories were historically used by Indigenous people as a means of externalizing human plight by embodying and representing them in storied plot and characters. This externalization provided a means of communion among the people as externalization involves the subjectifying of the world in which they lived by communally sharing in the nature of internal experiences. For Indigenous people in particular, storytelling was a time of social gathering and entertainment which utilized the means of externalization through humour.

Stories also served as a filter for experience in that they were utilized to contain fears. Indigenous people traditionally utilized the sharing of stories to represent in liveable form the structure of the complexities through which they must find their way.

Stories were also utilized as a pedagogy in teaching the young. Through stories, children were given explanations as to why the world is the way it is and why their people do what they do - providing explanations for

natural phenomenon. This is evident in the creation story of the Anishinaabe people as well as stories addressing circumstances such as how the loon got the ring around its neck, or how the raccoon got its mask.

The pedagogy of stories also addressed and taught moral values, and social and behavioural conduct. Consequently, stories were utilized by Indigenous people as a means of shaping the identity of their young. The stories of traditional Indigenous people contained a variety of images, identities, and models that were considered to be socially acceptable. Hence the stories reinforced individual personalities to imitate the moral models contained in the various stories.

“Stories with the power to capture the imagination were like a library of scripts that people could play with; they could try on different identities and roles, without the costs and risks that accompany choices in ordinary reality. Stories fostered character development by offering patterns that people could use as models or reject. They could also provide criteria for self-examination”.⁴⁸

Stories have an important place in the lives of contemporary Indigenous people. They can turn to these teachings of the past to acquire some of the spiritual teachings which are needed for the survival of the people. The stories contain the spiritual ways in which ceremonies, dances, and other spiritual activities should be conducted. Many contemporary Indigenous people who are searching for, or following, the spiritual road are approaching the Elders for the spiritual knowledge contained in the stories.

47 Adapted from Bell, N. *Just Do It: Providing Anishinaabe Culture-Based Education*. 2010.

48 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996, p. 626



In making a link with the traditional stories, Indigenous people can acquire a positive sense of Indigenous identity. Through acquiring the traditional knowledge of their people, the Indigenous person can gain a sense of pride and understanding for who he/she is as an Indigenous person. His/her sense of self will consequently become evident in the actions as the individual will begin to imitate the teachings and knowledge of the traditional teachings and stories, in both a subjective and objective way. Consequently a personality will be shaped by the knowledge contained in the traditional teachings passed on through stories.

Because many of the stories were directed to the children as a means of education, they can again acquire this important role in today's Indigenous society. Indigenous children can learn the moral codes of conduct and behaviour through the traditional stories told by the Elders. The children can learn values and morals as well as vital knowledge which explains their world in a culturally relevant way. In essence, they can acquire the knowledge to follow the traditional road of their people. Consequently, the children will have the knowledge to carry the culture of their people through

future generations. It is believed that this will ensure the younger generation's survival as Indigenous people.

While stories have played a prominent role in traditional times and still provide cultural value today, personal narratives and stories historically and presently provide cultural value as well. Narrative's primary function is one of authorizing, founding, and setting in place ways of experiencing the world.⁴⁹ The evolution of meaning through narrative posits that "meaning does not inhere in events but involves weaving those events into stories that are meaningful at the time. Events, after all, are stories known directly only to those who experience them and interpret them to others, who in turn make their own interpretations of what they hear. Personal narratives based on shared metaphors and responses to common problems in one generation may be reworked quite differently by the next. A concept of narrative - like culture - that is more complicated and differentiated provides ways of thinking about how human communities continue to hold together, and about how divisions that at one time seem deep recede and are reworked in the process of building alliances at another time".⁵⁰

49 De Certeau, M. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. 1984.

50 Cruikshank, J. *The Social Life of Stories*. 1998, p. 2.

Many stories that Elders tell are narratives about social transformation of the society in which they live as well as about individual creativity. "Oral tradition may tell us about the past, but its meanings are not exhausted with reference to the past. Good stories from the past continue to provide legitimate insights about contemporary events. What appears to be the 'same' story, even in the repertoire of one individual, has multiple meanings depending on location, circumstance, audience, and stage of life of narrator and listener".⁵¹

The stories of Turtle Island's (North America's) Indigenous people have played an important role in their traditional lives. They have provided knowledge, explanation, humour, teaching, and entertainment. They are thus essential to the survival of today's Indigenous people as they contain the vital history, teachings, and knowledge of the traditional ways which are required for those traditional Indigenous people who are struggling to find a balance of Indigenous identity in a modern Euro-Canadian world.

51 Cruikshank, J. *The Social Life of Stories*. 1998, p. 43-44.

