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**FOR BOOK: Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health in Canada**

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### **Reflection 5: Two-Eyed Seeing in Medicine**

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#### **Abstract:**

First Nations across Canada have been painfully reminded that our health depends on us. Our own ways to better health lie within our own culture. We have forever embedded these understandings within us, but because of the dominant attitudes of European culture towards indigenous methods, we are unable to utilize them. The four components within Traditional Knowledge are spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual. We must realize that when these four components are not in harmony, we are in jeopardy of having poor health. We need to use our Aboriginal stories to pinpoint possible solutions, to study the plant world and to use the proper herbs, plants and trees for our good health and well being. Therefore, we need to utilize "Two-Eyed Seeing" to determine the benefits both in medical science and Indigenous knowledges. Another reason for "Two-Eyed Seeing" is to teach medical students and those in health sciences, especially Indigenous groups, about the validity of our Aboriginal sciences. We must also provide the opportunity for all students to learn about alternative medicines and to document their effectiveness. We must believe that the Indigenous ways of knowing concerning human health and well-being are vital for us to survive. Using both new technologies and adhering to traditional practices can lead to better outcomes in health. Including Indigenous knowledge in universities would provide the opportunity for students to learn about alternative medicines and document their effectiveness. Two-Eyed Seeing helps us understand how Traditional Knowledges can work for a better and healthier world.

#### **Text:**

First Nations across Canada have been painfully reminded that our health depends on us. We know our pathways to better health lie within our own cultures. We have these understandings forever embedded within us, but because of the history of domineering and dismissive attitudes of European culture towards our First Nations' cultures, towards our Indigenous methods, and towards our Traditional Knowledges, we are unable to utilize them.

Traditional Knowledge teaches us there are four components involved in human wholeness: spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual. We must realize that when these

four components are not in harmony, we are in jeopardy of having poor health. And so, when you force people to abandon their ways of knowing, their ways of seeing the world, you literally destroy their spirit and once that spirit is destroyed it is very, very difficult to embrace anything – academically or through sports or through arts or through anything – because that person is never complete. But to create a complete picture of a person, their spirit, their physical being, their emotions, and their intellectual being ... all have to be intact and work in a very harmonious way.

We know that today First Nations people have to be able to walk in two worlds: that of their native community and that of the newcomers, of the white people, whose ways are the ways of mainstream society. We cannot overemphasize how important this ability is for the recovery and health of our communities and our community members, and especially for the nurturance of our children and youth in grade schools and for the wholistic health and professional capabilities of our older students studying in mainstream institutions of higher learning or in the professional schools of health sciences.

"Two-Eyed Seeing" can help us understand how our traditional teachings, our Traditional Knowledges, can work together with the knowledge of the newcomers for a better and more healthy world. Two-Eyed Seeing (a phrase coined by Elder Albert) grew from the teachings of the late Mi'kmaw spiritual leader, healer, and chief Charles Labrador of Acadia First Nation, Nova Scotia, especially these words: "Go into a forest, you see the birch, maple; pine. Look underground and all those trees are holding hands. We as people must do the same." Two-Eyed Seeing is, therefore, the gift of multiple perspective treasured by many Aboriginal peoples. The phrase was coined when Albert felt that audiences hearing Chief Labrador's words could benefit from additional encouragement towards the "it's us" consciousness of the "Trees Holding Hands".

Two-Eyed Seeing is a guiding principle that refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of (or, best in) Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and learning to see from the other eye with the strengths of (or, best in) Western knowledges and ways of knowing ... and, most importantly, to using both these eyes together, for the benefit of all. Two-Eyed Seeing adamantly, respectfully, and passionately asks that we bring together our different ways of knowing to motivate people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to use all our understandings so we can leave the world a better place and not compromise the opportunities for our youth (in the sense of Seven Generations) through our own inaction. More recently, on the basis of several years experience in explaining the principle to diverse audiences, Albert has also begun to say: Two-Eyed Seeing is hard to convey to academics as it does not fit into any particular subject area or discipline. Rather, it is about life: what you do, what kind of

responsibilities you have, how you should live while on Earth ... i.e., a guiding principle that covers all aspects of our lives: social, economic, environmental, etc. The advantage of Two-Eyed Seeing is that you are always fine tuning your mind into different places at once, you are always looking for another perspective and better way of doing things.

We need to utilize Two-Eyed Seeing to determine the benefits both in the modern medical science knowledges and in Indigenous knowledges. It can help teach Aboriginal students in medical school and other health sciences about the validity of our Indigenous sciences within Traditional Knowledges. We must also allow other medical school and health science students to learn and to see the validity in our Indigenous sciences. We must act on our belief that the Indigenous ways of knowing concerning health and well being are vital and can help all to live better. Two-Eyed Seeing encourages that we draw upon both new technologies and traditional practices to lead to better health outcomes for all. In including our Indigenous knowledges, we would also be providing the opportunity for students to learn about alternative medicines and to document their effectiveness.

In appropriate circumstances, while working within a Two-Eyed Seeing approach, we could also choose to use words that resonate more closely with traditional ways of knowing. For example, rather than talking about "positive psychosocial outcomes" for child development, we could talk about how storytelling can nurture a child's spirit of interconnectivity ... one that is well prepared for lifelong learning, seeks to be in harmony with all of his or her relations, and works towards balance within his or her experiences over the entire life journey. We need also to use our Aboriginal stories to pinpoint possible solutions and to study the plant world, to relearn to use the proper herbs, plants, and trees for our good health and well being.

And thus, as Elders we maintain that when, as First Nations people, we recover from cultural starvation, we can again become conduits of Traditional Knowledge for our children. We can start this recovery by using our language and spirituality; in our traditional territory of Mi'kma'ki this means we must use our Mi'kmaw language and our Mi'kmaw spirituality. We need to recapture our stolen spirits, revitalize our broken methods, and map anew our journey towards healthy communities. Standards introduced by another culture push out our own knowledge, our own language, our own spirituality ... and weaken the will. If we have learned anything from Two-Eyed Seeing, it is to appreciate the wisdom in our Traditional Mi'kmaw Knowledge - to remember it, to honour it, to cherish it, and to claim it.

Where do understandings that nourish our traditional teachings, our Traditional Knowledge, come from? Well ... Mother Earth provides for us, shelters us, feeds us, nourishes us. So, we then must look to her good example for guidance. Our actions toward her must be

actions of gratitude. We, too, must be humble, and provide for other living things. We must provide shelter for the vulnerable, medicine for the sick and nourishment for the hungry. We must always look to Mother Nature to inform us how to live, we do not inform her. For example, as we watch the birds consume food and then regurgitate it into the mouths of young, we also chew our food so that babies can accept it and then place it in their mouths. As we watch the animals of the forest construct their homes out of the materials nature provides, so do we honour them by imitating their examples. As we see the species of the fish swimming along the warmer shoreline in the early spring, so they may grow and develop, so we forbid our children to swim in the waters until after this vulnerable time for the fish has passed, so that they will respect these fish which will later give their lives for them. Our seasons are adjusted to the cycles of the earth and her species, so that our children may always be reminded of the integrity and beauty of creation, and of our dependence upon her. We watch and we learn.

Our traditional teachings were and remain very subtle. No one ever sits you down and says "Do this." For example, when children say "Where is the baking powder?" there is no lesson that teaches "Over there." And, no mother puts her child down and says "Look at me while I go for the baking powder." The children learn themselves by watching and when they grow up - three or four years old - they start doing it. And so you see them, when they are playing house, they start using their mouths, they start pinch-puckering their lips to point out directions or instructions, just as they've seen the adults doing. Children watch and they learn.

The role of language within our social structure and our worldview must also be emphasized and it must be understood that they are intimately connected - the language provides the "hardwiring" for understanding relationships within the family, the community, and the culture. For example, let's consider parenting: our Mi'kmaw language allowed us to teach respect and since we come from a collective thought, a child knew that he or she could not get away with anything. Every adult in the community had the right to forbid wrong doing by children when the parents were absent. Then along came standards from outside (e.g. children's aid) and convinced us that discipline and punishment were solely a parental right - that only biological parents could administer any form of child rearing. As a result, our right to parenting was distorted. So now we find ourselves being monitored by organizations to prove that we are parents but that process then excludes all other interested parties who may be of some assistance as we try to recover from cultural disarray. We need to recover from cultural starvation before we can again become parents, we need our language and spirituality to recover. We need to recapture our spirits and our methods on our journey towards healthy parenting. We need to develop our own priorities and utilize those which work best. We need to reintroduce our traditional teachings in parenting. They may seem ancient and out of touch to some, but it instills pride in our children.

As further illustration of strengths in traditional ways, we offer the example of how the Mi'kmaw worldview and its traditional social structure nurture a healthy spirit of connectivity and interconnectiveness. The clan system within the Mi'kmaw Nation has existed since time immemorial. Clans are named after animals that lived, year round, within our traditional territory of Mi'kma'ki. Thus a person might belong to the Bear Clan, another to the Moose Clan, a third to the Muskrat Clan, someone else to the Lobster Clan, and another to the Squirrel Clan (to name a few examples). The clan line is passed down via the mother so a child is a member of the same clan as her or his mother. Each clan has a matriarch whose role is as overall Grandmother to those in her clan. Some clans have annual gatherings to weave the circles of interconnectiveness even more richly; it is a time to celebrate belonging to a clan, learning culture, and feeling collective identity, and also a time to reconfirm interconnectiveness with the natural world. Moreover, clan helps reinforce a person's connections to members of his or her family, no matter where he or she is living or how distant the connection. Clan members are family in a dynamic circle that continues to grow. This expanding sense of wholeness and connectivity provides understandings about kin and all of one's relations.

Our relations extend to all on our Earth Mother and in our stories, in our language, it is also okay to talk to birds. It is okay to talk to trees. So, you see, it is okay to talk to all beings in our language and sometimes the trees and birds or others even answer you. If you are downhearted or depressed, go into the forest and listen to the trees. You will hear them whisper, hear the sap running. Just try to interrupt the gentle breezes blowing through the boughs. You can actually make yourself feel better through meditation and intensify your traditional beliefs. We believe our Mother Earth is a living example of wise principles, a life giving Mother, and a healing bounty. This is the consciousness of our Elders.

Like me, you may love and admire a tree, or you may feel sorry for it because it has to give up its life for my accommodations, for keeping me warm, or giving me a roof. I feel sorry because someone's life has to end for my benefit. It serves me and never complains. It is not unusual for a First Nations' person to go out into the park or the yard and talk to trees. It is absolutely normal, but only on Indian reserves. If I do it out in Truro, or if I do it in Halifax, or if I do it anywhere that is a non-native community, I will be arrested for being nuts - I am here to thank the trees. But, when you walk down the street and you start talking to trees and ducks, and you get these queer looks like "She is talking to animals. They do not answer her back". But it will not take long for them to declare that you are not normal at all - that there is something wrong with you. And thus, we need to remember the wholesome, healthy consciousness in the teachings from our Elders.

Traditionally, teachings such as the above would begin very early in one's life and would have been conveyed in the form of story. This is also imperative today because children need to know their ancestral teachings before *jumping without a parachute into another culture*. Stories are the main vehicle of instruction and guidance and thus a vital tool at all stages of life development, but especially during the early years of childhood and adolescence where such guidance affects life choices. Stories are everywhere, they are all the time. As a child, if someone else is there with you, they would be telling a story. Stories are not merely narratives to fill time or lull a child to sleep, they are vehicles of cultural transmission that allow spiritual knowledge transfer ... along with the emotional (feelings conveyed by the narrative), physical (sound vibrations), and intellectual (a traditional teaching). Traditionally, nothing was taught as black and white. Rather, everything was story ... where you have the responsibility to listen and reflect. This is a much more profound way of learning because you have the opportunity for relationship with the knowledge. And, furthermore, because you can return again and again to the story or you can hear it over and over, and each time you will find new and richer understandings relevant to your own personal journey, to your growing sense of wholeness and interconnectiveness.

And, thus Two-Eyed Seeing is needed to help us understand how Traditional Knowledge from an ancient culture can work for a better and healthier world. Traditional Knowledge was never meant to stay static and stay in the past. Rather, we must bring it into the present so that everything becomes meaningful in our lives and in our communities.

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