

Title: On Tribal Consciousness – The Trees That Hold Hands

By: Murdena Marshall, Elder, Spiritual Leader, and Associate Professor of Mi'kmaq Studies (retired; Cape Breton University); Eskasoni First Nation, Mi'kmaq Nation, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada

In the traditional world, knowledge is not a documented collection of facts. It is a living entity, transferable from one generation to another, from one person to another. Possessing spirit, it lives in specific places; stories, oral traditions, prayers and the daily dialogue of people. This concept of knowledge is embedded in our language, which is dominated by the presence of the animate and the inanimate.

Traditional knowledge is known through watching and listening, not in the motionless way that educational institutions now demand. It is experienced through songs and ceremonies, through the activities demonstrated through hunting, fishing and gathering medicine. Knowledge interacts with, and is visible in, the daily life of a person, in our association with animals and trees, with plants and with the spirit world. It is present in our dreams, in our visions, in our ceremonies and with all of creation. It is felt in the spirit of the people.

Often over the years I have been asked “what does TEK (or Traditional Ecological Knowledge) mean?” I, myself, needed a bit of room and time in order to introduce the concept thoroughly into my consciousness, so as not to mislead, misconceive, or misinterpret the possible sacredness of this new found frontier. As interest in this entity called TEK became of increasing interest to those outside traditional culture, time was of the essence, so therefore work had to be initiated promptly. Elders from each community had to be connected with, and in the early nineties those who would still possess an understanding of this concept of knowledge were still, for the most part, intact. My task was to research, record and translate the information received.

During this time, I also talked to professors, parents, and people who specialized in language, hoping to see a light bulb ignited in my head, hoping to receive the gift of knowledge. But it didn't happen. Around that time, Dr. Cheryl Bartlett of Cape Breton University and I became good friends. We talked about students and my inquiries on traditional knowledge, and each time the word “science” crept into the conversation. Then, we decided to modify the existing curriculum for the four year science program at the university, and add traditional concepts into it. At that time, my mind was still struggling with the phrase “Traditional Ecological Knowledge”. But I was handed the mandate to fill in the blanks where English scientific wordings were removed, and replace them Mi'kmaw concepts. I was to record how we could see the world through “two eyed seeing”; First Nations sight and the non-native visual imagery. Somehow, we had to combine the Mi'kmaw understanding of the ecology and the non-native's impression of his ambient surroundings. At first, it seemed impossible.

The first thing to be done to understand TEK was to review the learning acquired from the elders. They explained that tribal knowledge is a result of cultural upbringing; that the language allows and supports us in viewing the world's contents as being alive. Once

you give recognition to any tree, any plant, any fish, any star, and give them the pronoun he/she, then you have confirmed to yourself that they are alive. You are the one that gave that recognition, therefore you must give them respect equal to any human being.

In our language, it is okay to talk to birds, trees or other living foliage. You loudly admire a tree, feel sorry for it and thank it for the products and services it renders. But walk down to Wentworth Park and start talking to the trees and ducks and see how long it will take for the police to arrive. You see it is okay to talk to trees in our language, sometimes they even answer you. Charlie Labrador, the late Elder, once said this: if you look beneath the forest floor you will see that the trees of different species are all holding hands. Why should we not mimic the tree and touch someone's hand? 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 Mother Earth is a living example of wise principles, a life giving Mother, and a healing bounty. This is the consciousness of our Elders.

Our minds as First Nations are nurtured by our Elders. Our consciousness is cushioned and lined with traditional insights. As an example, science students from different cultures see the diversity of moss on the floor of the forest. Non-native students step on the moss. They take off their shoes and they realize that this area is soft to walk on and it is also cool. You can stand there and rub your toes in the soft inviting piece of greenery. The native students also see and feel the exterior qualities of moss. But they also are aware of other benefits that the moss can offer. The native students know that if you lift this beautiful natural carpet and expose the intricate design of the underlay, you will see golden threads consistently interlaced with the exposed under-earth. Also they will realize that long ago moss was vital to make infants dry and comfortable; and all of that knowledge is scientific. As I began to work through this exercise, seeing from two eyes, I began to realize what it meant to possess a tribal consciousness along with Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Some of our Elders have been trying to pass on this tribal consciousness to assist in dealing with health issues in our communities such as teenage pregnancy and childrearing practices, or to ensure the transmission of the complex world view. However, the absence of the Mi'kmaw language in some communities makes it difficult to implement this knowledge, as the understanding is embedded in the structure of our language.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge is a reflection of your own tribal consciousness. Both science and mystery are inherent in it. For example, the words from our Elders always reinforced the belief that at one time all creation was one. We understood each other since we spoke the same language, occupied the same world and practiced our ways of respect and sharing. In 1993, a bio-chemist at Oxford University in England found through years of research that at one point after the creation of life was established all living things shared the same DNA. When I heard this, I was thrilled beyond words, and thanked my ancestors for their generosity and wisdom. They needed no microscopes, schooling or labs as is required to be a scientist, and yet they knew this scientific truth.

Possessing knowledge which is traditional or tribal is a mirror image of our spirituality. There is nothing we cannot understand in this way. Science can seek to explain many things, but in the tribal world there is another realm. We not only value knowledge, we combine it with the assistance we have sought from the spirit world. One should not be afraid to seek assistance to complete a thought. In our world, you are a physical being and you are a spiritual being. This can only make our understanding stronger, for as they say, two heads are better than one.

One of the best examples of how we merge spiritual guidance with knowledge is our child rearing practices. One's opinions, ideas or solutions on parenting are never considered serious unless that person has been a parent themselves. Being a parent is preparation of character; a member of the female gender must practice graciousness in order to accept the responsibility. She will be surrounded by Elders who seek to monitor her behaviour, activities and attitude during her crucial months of pregnancy. She is reminded that the welfare of the baby both spiritual and physical now take priority in her everyday living.

The mother must make sure that the baby's spirit is not injured in any way. One of the most important rules is to learn never to bad mouth anyone, never wish bad on anyone or gloat in anyone's misfortune. In fact, the whole family on the mother's side must exercise this caution. It takes practice and a lot of patience to ignore a rude remark or words intended for malice that are directed to you or your family. Your words and your actions are monitored by you so that they do not cause injury or insult to anyone. In this way, the belief is that the baby is resting peacefully within your womb and will not inherit any of your habits or lack of control. If the mother is unruly, the Elders believe that the baby is not protected, and is vulnerable to evil or wrong doings of the spirit world. Our responsibility to each other, our connectedness in respect is therefore reinforced as a new being prepares to come into the community.

The mother to be is protected from witnessing any kind of violence. The belief is that the baby feels everything the mother goes through. If the mom is angry and resentful, the baby will be born with an attitude since all emotions are taught. You have to teach someone to hate before they know what hate is. Equally true, love, kindness and generosity and patience must be taught for anyone to become giving. Elders believe that a baby should not know or feel anything unpleasant but rather come into the world with feelings of peace and balance toward humanity.

There are many other such beliefs during pregnancy that remind us of our spiritual ties to one another. After the baby is born, other beliefs continue to remind us both of the fact and the mystery of connection. For example, mothers are encouraged to talk to their babies. After awhile the babies become the best therapist; you can tell them how rotten their dad is and they always agree with you with e'e,e'e, as you pour your heart out. They never disagree but continue to encourage you to vent by their constant e'e,e'e. It does not work in the English language. Another rule that is delicate is that you must never view the baby from the head, but go in front and make eye contact. The belief is that the baby's spirit can become confused and may leave. This is consistent with what we know now

about failure to thrive in children who do not receive one to one contact. Likewise, the mother is encouraged to sleep with the baby. Experts now know that the baby's breathing rhythm aligns with the mother and SIDS is almost eliminated when babies sleep with mothers.

We raised our children as our culture demanded. Our teachings were and remain now very subtle. Our language also allowed us to teach respect and since we come from collective thought a child knew that they could not get away with anything. Then along came Children's Aid, and convinced us that parenting, discipline and punishment was a parental right and only biological parents could administer any form of child rearing. The community itself was instructed not to interfere with another person's child but to look for reasons to give to the representatives of authority to show how these parents were incapable of taking care of their own children. Of course, the standards were used to judge and convict parents who were unfit in the eyes of the government. Our right to parenting was distorted in the mid-fifties, so now we are being monitored by organizations to prove that we are capable parents, but in the process all other interested parties which may be of some assistance are excluded. We are still trying to recover from this cultural disarray.

We need to recover from cultural starvation before we can again become conduits of this traditional knowledge for our children, using the Mi'kmaw language and spirituality to recover. We need to recapture our stolen spirits, our broken methods and beaten efforts on our journey towards healthy communities. We can never use standards introduced by other cultures. They only weaken the will with the dark path of pride. If we have learned anything from "two-eyed seeing", it has been to truly appreciate the wisdom in Traditional Ecological Knowledge; to remember it, honour it, cherish it and claim it. Even to open the door on sharing it. For science in the traditional sense divorced itself from the spiritual understanding, the *consciousness of knowing* that reminds us of our interdependence on each other and on Mother Earth. Our greatest hope is that our children, both native and non-native, will be armed with this two eyed perspective so that knowledge of the physical is never again separated from the wisdom of the spiritual.