



## The Path to Knowledge

# ALL MY RELATIONS

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Chelsie Parayko is a Cree and Ukrainian woman, and a member of Missanabie Cree First Nation, located in the Treaty 9 area in Ontario, Canada. In 2017, she followed her passion and started her journey at the University of Winnipeg in the Master's in Development Practice in Indigenous Development Program and will graduate in October of 2019. Her Grandmother, Alice Souliere, was a residential school survivor and Indigenous women's rights activist, and has been one of her biggest inspirations. In 2018, Chelsie's community, Missanabie Cree First Nation was, after 112 years, finally recognised and received reserve designation in their traditional territory. Her goal is to help her people "whose vision it is to regain and restore our rightful place and through the strength of our people, never again be denied our place in society," (Missanabie Cree First Nation Vision Statement, 1998).

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### **Abstract**

In this modern world, Indigenous peoples find space for our original ways of knowing and being, and their own understanding of what their role is within it all. Weaving together our original ways of knowing, the western world and our individual journey we create a path that allows us to find connection and unity among our nations.

**Key words:** Bridge-walker, connection, relationality, two-eyed seeing

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<sup>1</sup>"Turtle Island" is what some Indigenous peoples of Canada call North America.

*When another Native person recognizes and reflects back to me my Nishnaabe essence, when we interact with each other in an Nishnaabeg way, my Indigeneity deepens. When my Indigeneity grows I fall more in love with my homeland, my family, my culture, my language, more in line with the idea that resurgence is my original instruction, more in line with the thousands of stories that demonstrate how to live a meaningful life and I have more emotional capital to fight and protect what is meaningful to me.*

*(Simpson, 2015)*

## All My Relations

Nearly ten years ago my Aunt Lori came home from a conference and told me she had heard the most profound term when referring to Indigenous peoples within our modern context, the term bridge-walker. She described it as the reality of Indigenous peoples navigating between two worlds, western and original Indigenous. She talked about how we as Indigenous peoples face the task of walking through the world needing to understand and function within both ways of knowing. We can walk through western systems, learning how to manoeuvre in those foreign systems for western ideals of prosperity, and we walk through our own original systems understanding and celebrating the relationality of everything and the role that we play within that. This is done at varying paces given the cultural genocide that has taken place globally at the hands of colonizers, however, it is our reality. There are many wise knowledge keepers that have come before me with this understanding, some referring to this walk as two-eyed-seeing (Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2015), or some referring to it, like my Aunt, as bridge walking.

When Auntie Lori told me about this concept, I heard and understood what she said at a rather surface level space. I was in the beginning stages of walking my own path of understanding what it meant to be a Cree woman, so it took me a while to really understand what she was telling me. At the time I had just left my job working at a financial institution because of fundamental values differences. The bank's bottom line was money and I watched as clients were, in my opinion, taken advantage of, and the bankers that did these tasks were promoted. I eventually went back to school and completed a Bachelor of Business Administration where I once again found myself having this feeling that, while I loved the business world, something was amiss. I continued and completed a certificate in Community Economic and Social Development where my strictly western business education set me up for a very limited view of how to help encourage prosperity. My classmates called my understanding into question multiple times, and it was then that I realised that my view was incredibly limited, there was a whole other perspective that I was missing.

### The Braid

Looking back, it is clear to see that what my Aunt was teaching me was what my subconscious was screaming for and as I unfold that concept, I understand there is a third aspect to this walk, my own understanding and path. I have now begun to look at this path that I am walking as a braid with three strands. The first is my original knowledge, the second is my western knowledge and the third is my own understanding. These three strands weave together to make my braid, my path, my current self. This journey is ever changing and shifting given my understanding of each strand and the space that I hold myself within.

## Strand One

The first strand is our western insights. As Indigenous peoples it is our reality that colonizers came to our lands, implemented their systems and have had an impact on our ways of life both from a historic and present perspective. Our communities would have evolved over time, however defining what that might have looked like is very subjective and truly something we will never fully understand. What we do know is that western systems have been the dominant systems that have been implemented in our country, and we are now required to function within them. Certainly, I myself can do a large amount of unlearning from this system to honour my original ways of knowing, however for my community and for my future generations I learn these systems to be powerful in those spaces.

## Second Strand

This strand is our connection to our original ways of knowing and is likely the strand that was speaking to me when my western centric focus was causing great inner struggle. This is the strand that allows me to understand things and operate from a place of connectedness and keeps me grounded in who I am as a Cree woman. This strand keeps me connected to my ancestors, walking in a way that honours the path they have walked before us, fighting to keep us alive and well.

As someone whose family and community were disconnected from our land, language and culture, my path to reconnecting with my original ways of knowing is something I have only begun to walk recently. My elder and knowledge keeper Dan Thomas told me that the most beautiful thing about our culture is that we are able to collect things along the way that we connect with, that speaks to us as Indigenous peoples (D. Thomas, Personal Communication, March 2019). To me this means that our connection to culture and identity is something that is ever evolving and keeps us linked to those that come into our path and have a profound impact on us. It is also what connects us to all our relations, thus being something that comes with great responsibility.

## Strand Three

The third strand is the strand that we personally bring to this path. As individuals we all have had individual experiences, individual connection to ceremonial or original ways of knowing that have created our foundational pillars or our tikanga. We also bring a new set of understanding, knowing and being, depending on the space that we are occupying. This strand brings in both our original ways of knowing and our western knowledge to form the person we are and the way that we contribute to our communities. It weaves around these two very different perspectives and brings them together to create a path that allows us to be grounded in who we are, what we know, and the western life that has been put upon us. We find prosperity when we find a way to honour both.

This strand is incredibly critical as we walk through other communities as it is part of what we bring when we are guests on their lands. This could mean our neighbours a community over, in the next province, or it could mean as we move outside Turtle Island, there are implications, responsibilities and reciprocity that must take place as we walk. As I write this article, I am sitting on the traditional territory of the Māori people, I cannot help but consider what this means for the Indigenous peoples I encounter. A wonderful knowledge keeper, a local kaumātua, helped me to complete a ceremony for cleansing my spirit. He explained to me that he would conduct a karakia and then would call my ancestors and the ancestors of

Aotearoa to weave a basket around me to ensure that my journey on this territory would be a good one, one that is guided by those spirits. As he spoke the words, I could feel the weaving across my body, I could feel the beauty of this ceremony bringing together the ancestors and I knew more than ever that my path was the good path, the third strand in my braid was made stronger.

Understanding and being careful within that third strand is something that I take very seriously. During a pōwhiri, another knowledge keeper and kaumātua said “we are many moving parts of one body”. When we walk, we walk with our ancestors, with our family, and among our new connections. This is true across oceans and notions of borders. We must hold ourselves to an understanding that we are all connected and our actions and inactions impact all our relations.

As we walk our path, and find harmony between our western realities, our original ways of knowing and being weave through those worlds, bringing it all together. As I walk through this section of my path, I am conscious that my time on Aotearoa is contributing to my braid, allowing me to gain the strength from the knowledge and relationships I build while I am here. This is, I believe, one of the most critical steps within my own path as I draw great connection between my Cree family and the whānau I have gained while here in Aotearoa. As we weave all of these strands together, our path becomes stronger and we become more powerful for our people, we are able to find power and strength in connection. There is something so profound in seeing the vast similarities, the progress and resurgence and the relationality, it has fed my soul to know that my own community is not alone in our understanding of our ways of knowing and being.

The braid view is a living path that we, as Indigenous peoples, walk every day. With each step I must ensure that I am aware of each strand and walk in a way that honours the paths that our ancestors have shared with us. We ask those ancestors to walk with us, or to weave a basket of good and love around us so that we are able to do the good works that are necessary. Our original ways of knowing, our western realities and the journey we are on as individuals must all be in the forefront of our actions, it is my responsibility that I am so incredibly grateful for.

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