

**LITERACY AS A WAY OF KNOWING: A COLLECTION OF STORIES OF
WRITING FROM HOME**

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Abstract

This research project explores the interconnectivity of identity (self), relations (family), and place (community) literacy. Through narrative writing, I sought to discover what those connections were and how they are relevant to my life as an educator, artist, mother, and lifelong learner. My research in literacy involves a hybrid approach of academic studies, hermeneutics, and traditional Blackfoot knowledge. As an Indigenous writer and researcher studying literacy pedagogy, the wisdom of my ancestors informed my work through a sophisticated balance of new and old ways of education, such as storytelling, oracy, family, tradition, language, and spirituality. This project was a result of a journey through the phenomena of memory, imagination, story writing, and art/ful living. Literacy became *a way of knowing* that required the need for action, support, and responsibility for literacy advocacy and professional growth.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to Literacy



“We must lay in waiting for ourselves. Throughout our lives. Abandoning the pretense that we know.”

(Pinar & Grumet, as cited in de Cosson, 2008)

I returned to university to pursue graduate studies without really knowing what wisdom and experiences I would gain from such an endeavour. My intention was to improve my knowledge and skills in literacy education and learn how to better help my students. This experience led me on a journey of narrative inquiry, through which literacy has been the pathway for personal and professional growth. I sought to understand what it was about literacy that I found necessary to pursue as my life’s work. This project maps *literacy as a way of knowing* through a narrative landscape of memoir, poetry, and art.

For the Blackfoot community, language is a way of knowing. To understand the significance of stories, relationships, and place, is the essence of one’s identity.

Similarly, I've come to appreciate *literacy as a way of knowing*, as I've learned that to write is to be open to a world of possibilities. That is hope.

De/fining Literacy

Literacy is the foundation of lifelong learning. It is the course of self expression, effective communication, and wellness that is essential for home, school, work, and community life. While in recent years, advances in technology have determined how the global community engages in literacy, storytelling continues to be a powerful way of connecting humanity. Although closely defined by its relation to print, literacy is very much woven into one's experiences, through language in song, stories, traditions, and spirituality.

While there is no standard definition for literacy at the international level, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2005) refers to literacy as “a context-bound continuum of reading, writing and numeracy skills, acquired and developed through processes of learning and application” (p. 30). However, understanding literacy goes beyond knowing how to read and write, as literacy empowers and “enables individuals to think critically, communicate effectively, deal with change and solve problems in a variety of contexts” (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 6).

As the definition of literacy may vary, the interconnectivity among self, family, and community literacy remains constant. As Linder and Falk-Ross (2004) suggest, “literacies are personal, tied to home, school, community, and global influences” (p. 378).

The definition of literacy—the *ways* in which we communicate with one another and with the world—is fluid and may be interpreted in a variety of ways. However, as an Indigenous researcher and literacy educator, I’ve come to know literacy as the knowledge embodied within a language that takes many forms of tradition, beliefs, practices, art form, symbolism, and teachings that are essential to the connectedness of one’s identity, family, community, and place.

It is from this connectivity that multiple literacies have emerged to further help us understand how we think, use, and apply literacy for daily living. Literacies such as family literacy and cultural literacy are connected by the complex nature of language, a natural and integral part of the human experience. My own literacy development has offered me strength and direction, as narrative writing is like good medicine. Just as words carry with them the intention in which they were offered, a story may hold healing and restorative power with the spirit in which it was created.

Working in a First Nations community as a literacy educator for adults, adolescents, and more recently with families, I’ve learned that student success depends, to some extent, on the availability of support and access to literacy resources at home, school, and within the community. Literacy engagement occurs when children are immersed in a place and with people that stimulate learning and language development.

My first teaching position was with Red Crow Community College where I taught adult literacy on the Blood Reservation in Southern Alberta. It became apparent that my students’ learning experiences at home and at school influenced their attitudes and beliefs about education. Many of my students attended residential school, while

others did not complete high school due to attendance and other issues, such as lack of transportation, basic needs, and stability. Presently, I teach literacy at the Kainai Alternate Academy and I am the director of the Family Literacy Program, also on the Blood Reserve. My greatest challenge in teaching is the impact of intergenerational effects of residential school and systemic poverty prevalent in the community.

In researching literacy, I was moved to better understand my students, their families, my community, and ultimately the “narrative self.” By doing so, it became necessary to first reflect on the history of literacy, specifically the educational system in Canada. Such a reflection offers insight into the current social, economic, and cultural devastation evident among First Nations communities. Both historical and political factors have hindered and continue to affect the literacy and language development of Indigenous learners.

First Nations Literacy and Education in Canada: A Brief History

“The memory did not and has not faded...it has persisted, festered and become a sorrowful monument, still casting a deep shadow over the lives of many Aboriginal people and communities and over the possibility of a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.”

(Canada, 1996, para. 13)

In Canada, during the period after confederation, up until the 1970s, the residential school system was supported and implemented by church and state. The purpose of residential schools was to assimilate the Aboriginal population by eliminating language, cultural values, beliefs, and practices. An educational framework was used as a pretense for colonizing First Nations People, a means of

dealing with the “Indian problem.” According to the government of the day, the church-run schools were to “civilize” the Indian population, as well as “elevate the Indian from his condition of savagery” (Canada, 1996, para. 2).

The impact of the residential school system was devastating to the nation’s Aboriginal population. Aboriginal children who attended residential school were forced to leave their families and communities to stay at the institutions for months or years at a time. Generally, the residential school experience subjected Aboriginal children to physical and sexual abuse, neglect, maltreatment, and poor living conditions (Barnes, Josefowitz, & Cole, 2006).

Residential school curriculum, discipline, and instruction supported the effort to eradicate language, traditions, and culture, as children were often punished, beaten, and humiliated for speaking their language (Canada, 1995).

As Battiste (2009) notes:

Children suffer the most from these experiences, which continue as unresolved trauma over time, so that by the time they reach adulthood, as adult literacy workers have found, they have many layers of emotional and psychological issues that need to be resolved before cognitive / academic learning can again take place. (p. 16)

I found this to be accurate regarding my own professional experience teaching adult literacy in a First Nations community. Students were entering my class with unresolved trauma that needed to be addressed before the planned curriculum could be taught.

I used writing as a healing and pedagogical tool that provided students a safe way to deal with some of their issues while at the same time develop their literacy skills. Writing classes became less about what I planned to teach and more about what their own life experiences had to teach them. Writing, visiting, drawing, and culturally relevant activities—all literacy based pedagogy—were ways of coming to know the “true self” through language and creative expression.

Blackfoot Literacy

“Aboriginal languages are the most significant factor in the restoration, regeneration, and survival of Indigenous knowledge, and yet they are the most endangered.”

(Battiste, 2009, p. 17)

Blackfoot language in particular, maintains the cohesive and sophisticated nature of family and community. The government therefore perceived Indigenous language as a threat and a hindrance to assimilation, as the following statement was reported in the year 1895, when referring to Aboriginal People, “so long as he keeps his native tongue, so long will he remain a community apart” (Canada, 1996, para. 31).

The legacy of the residential school system is lasting and evident in the current situation of literacy and language development among Aboriginal youth. For example, according to UNESCO’s (2010) Atlas for the World’s Languages in Danger, the Blackfoot language has been identified as “definitely endangered.” The process of revitalization of the Blackfoot language is being met with immediacy by concerned tribal entities, community members, and Blackfoot elders.

Both Blackfoot and English language pedagogy calls for a renewed appreciation of stories. According to Leggo (2008), “everything is constructed in language,” as he writes “our experiences are all epistemologically and ontologically composed and understood in words, our words and others’ words” (p. 166); our stories and others’ stories.

Listening to my students, many of whom are considered “low literacy” by Western standards, often tell vivid stories about their lives. Such narratives reveal their happiness, but also relate to how they must endure a home and community environment that is affected by deprivation, addiction, gang violence, gender inequality, and the breakdown of family relationships. The act of telling stories reaffirms the transformative nature of literacy and demands a greater worth of oral storytelling.

Literacy educators, particularly of First Nations youth, must be mindful of subscribing to labels such as “low literacy,” as by doing so we limit *literacy as a way of knowing* to merely reading and writing. From a Blackfoot perspective, traditional literacies challenge this, as we consider how parents and grandparents share stories, through intimately spoken conversations. By this measure, my students are literate storytellers, as they engage in a form of literacy that uses voice and individual attention, the most human, yet diminishing way to communicate.

Knowing the fundamental value of reading and writing, I’ve approached the method of literacy research by weaving contemporary and traditional forms of literacy into the fabric of my teaching practice. I encourage and teach students to write their stories for many reasons, as “written autobiography offers the textual production and

reproduction of lived experience, particularly as commanding social forces such as race and gender shape that experience” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 19).

Using the method of story writing as research, has allowed me a deeper understanding of the empowering nature of voice, not only within the immediate learning community, but to advocate for the voice of First Nations youth within the global community.

Cultural Literacy



Cultural literacy is the history, traditions, beliefs, and language of a particular cultural group. It unifies the intellectual, spiritual, and socio-emotional relationships between self, humanity, and Creation. Through such relationships, Blackfoot tradition becomes a living entity. Traditional knowledge therefore is manifested in how we care and support one another and our world.

Traditional Blackfoot pedagogy was and continues to be based on strong and compassionate family relationships which expand several generations. The transfer of

cultural literacy is the language, ceremonies, songs, and stories that originate from the natural rhythms of land and home. These are common themes that generate a space of independence and creativity in my own writing, as well as the literacy education of my students.

Literacy pedagogy extends beyond the classroom to one's experiences in home and community life. This philosophy is particularly significant for the Kainai Nation, where values are cultivated in family and place. Such traditional values are rooted in empathy, kindness, and humour which serve to nourish the learning spirit.

Blackfoot epistemology maintains a collective and intergenerational perspective of literacy learning. For example, familial relationships are intimate and strong within the extended family. The network of aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, and grandparents often share the responsibility of parenting and educating a child. Literacy learning transpires when a collective effort is made to ensure a child has the opportunities, support, and resources to fulfill his or her potential.

Generally, media portrays a bleak picture of Aboriginal People in terms of health, education, and welfare. As a result, the collective perception of Canada's Aboriginal population is often depicted negatively. Understanding cultural literacy allows for a different picture to be created. Despite the obvious injustices within my community, Indigenous thought and language continue to be a rich source of strength and resiliency.

Cultural literacy is to understand our place of origin, teaching us to be compassionate and accepting of others. It is through the reciprocity of words and

wisdom embedded within narratives that connects and strengthens family relationships and builds community.

It is my responsibility as a literacy educator and researcher to learn how writing stories are necessary to reclaim a voice in academic discourse. If we are to contemplate the future of Indigenous youth in terms of agency, independence, and literacy education, we must consider ways to restore traditional Blackfoot knowledge, such as returning to storytelling as a primary source of learning.

Literacy and Poverty

“Canada’s high rate of illiteracy/undereducation is not simply an education problem. It is a symptom of deep and widespread social inequality created, in large part, by poverty.”

(Movement for Canadian Literacy, 2000, p. 1)

First Nations communities are the most prevalent populations in Canada affected by poverty. Poverty is defined as “a human condition characterized by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other cultural, economic, political and social rights” (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2010, p. 1). Research shows there is correlation among poverty and low literacy. By providing ways to promote literacy education within impoverished communities, literacy may act as a catalyst to inform and free a society from the political, economic, and social conditions that oppress them.

Those who grow up in poverty suffer many disadvantages and are more likely to “have learning difficulties, to drop out of school, to resort to drugs, to commit

crimes, to be out of work, to become pregnant at too early an age, and to live lives that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage into succeeding generations” (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund, 2000, p. 5).

In Canada, poverty and illiteracy is a difficult cycle evident in many First Nations communities and has the greatest impact on younger generations. Family income and a parent’s high school completion influence the academic success of their child, as “family poverty can negatively affect every aspect of a child’s physical, emotional and intellectual well being” (Canadian Literacy and Learning Network, 2010, p. 3).

Poverty rates among Aboriginal children are significantly higher when compared to non-Aboriginal children. The Aboriginal Children’s Survey (ACS, 2006) provides a snapshot of the living conditions which factor into early childhood development for Aboriginal children. For example, the ACS (2006) identifies 49% of all First Nation children under the age of six living off reserve, as living in poverty, compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children (p. 16). Although there are a myriad of issues that contribute to the economic reality of First Nations People in Canada, ACS (2006) suggests family size, parental age, lone-parent households, available resources, and level of family income as some of the factors attributing to impoverished living conditions.

For families living off reserve, Aboriginal children are being raised by younger parents aged 15-24, significantly younger than that of Non-Aboriginal parents. Such families may be more likely to have limited income, access to resources, and problem

solving skills, hindering parents' ability to meet their child's physical, educational, and psychological needs.

A significant factor that determines a child's wellbeing is parenting, choices parents make that directly affect their child (Hoddinott, Lethbridge, & Phipps, 2002). Such choices may include life decisions that determine a family's income and education. For example, the time invested in a parent's level of education attainment and subsequent employment plays a major factor in providing the household with the necessary needs. Parents also decide how the income will be spent, either on the adults or for the benefit of the child. These benefits may include investing in a child's education, healthcare, and social wellbeing (Hoddinott et al., 2002).

A child living in poverty experiences stress-related symptoms, which may hinder their cognitive and emotional development. Impoverished families and children are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and mood disorders (Wadsworth et al., 2008) in addition to delayed vocabulary and low academic achievement (Hodinott et al., 2002). One study concluded children "living in poverty showed vocabulary deficits compared to their counterparts in middle-income families, and that these deficits remained when they entered school" (Santrok, Woloshyn, Gallagher, Di Petta, & Marini, 2004, p. 57).

For families living in poverty, particularly for First Nations People, such "choices" become limited due to the social, political, economic, and historical constructs of systemic inequality.

As UNESCO (2005) states,

It is often the poorest, most socially excluded and least literate individuals (especially women) whose rights are violated by those with more power. Their inability to read, write and calculate keeps them from knowing what they are entitled to, and how to demand it. It limits their ability to participate politically in society. It denies them a voice. (p. 31)

The history of Canada's effort to colonize the Indigenous population, including the creation of reservation lands and welfare programs, continues to generate a dependency on government, an enduring result of oppression. The intergenerational effects of residential school, such as addiction, poverty, lack of adequate housing, and low literacy are issues which prevent academic success and emotional wellbeing for many students.

When people endure poverty and illiteracy, conditions of oppression persist, affecting successive generations negatively. Providing a network of support and opportunities for social development and literacy learning is essential in liberatory education. Literacy empowers those who recognize it as a right and freedom. It is a way to inspire a better future for our youth. However, achieving sustainable results in the area of literacy and language development depends on the synergy of literacy engagement at home, school, and community.

Literacy Rates in Canada

Today, low literacy among Aboriginal People of Canada is linked to the gaps among school readiness and academic achievement. Despite progress in recent years, the proportion of Aboriginal people who did not attain a high school diploma remains

significantly higher compared to that of non-Aboriginal Canadians. What is more, for populations living on reserve, the high school dropout rate is 3 times higher, where unemployment, poverty, and lack of resources underscore adverse living conditions (Canada Council on Learning, 2007).

Literacy proves to be a concern on a national level, as in 2003, the International Adult Literacy Skills Survey (IALSS) revealed, “48 percent of the adult population—12 million Canadians aged 16 and over—perform below Level 3 on the prose literacy scale” (Statistics Canada, 2003, p. 9); level 3 being the general benchmark of functional literacy. Compared to the 42% of Canadians that failed to meet this benchmark, First Nations People are overrepresented (Statistics Canada, 2003).

Lack of resources and opportunities for employment perpetuate the level of poverty and low literacy for many families living on-reserve. One example is the lack of a public library or recreation center available for the Kainai Nation, leaving low-income families at a disadvantage in the areas of education and health.

While at times the social barriers to my students’ learning are incessant and difficult to overcome, I share Verriour’s (2003) humility, as I too, wish “to avoid the ‘struggle or battle’ metaphor...largely because I believe there are no battles to be waged, only lives to be lived and stories to be told” (p. 90). As stories are shared, taught, and retold, a space is created where family relationships can be fostered and traditional ways of learning can be restored.

Family Literacy



The family is the basis of a child's learning. Family literacy portrays the dynamic and interrelated nature of literacy education as it is connected to life processes in the home, school, and community.

Teaching my daughter how to read at the age of three, influenced my decision about becoming a literacy teacher. It was through the relationship with my daughter and the storybooks we shared together, where I became passionate about children's literature. The gratification and joy that emerged from teaching literacy was empowering, inspirational, and life-transforming.

As the first known Canadian educator for family literacy, Adelaide Sophia Hunter Hoodless (1892), advocated for family education, she declared, "educate a boy and you educate a man, but educate a girl and you educate a family (British Columbia Women's Institute, as cited in Phillips et al., 2006, p. 14). Although parental influence

does factor into a child's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development, offering support to parents provides a foundation for healthy families. As Hoddinott et al. (2002) suggest, "children will fare better when families have more resources to invest in them" (p. 3).

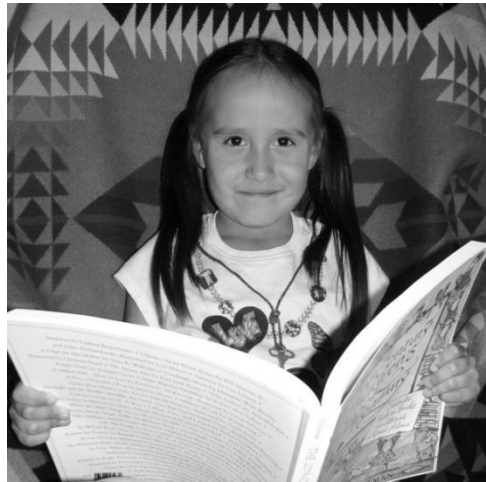
Family literacy is essential to bridging the gap between school and home, particularly for families living on-reserve where lack of transportation, communication, and resources prevent families of their fundamental right to community and educational services. This was my motivation to develop and implement the Family Literacy Program for the Kainai community. As language and literacy skills are first learned in the home environment, a literacy support program was needed to help parents in their efforts to be more involved in their child's learning.

One day, while I was teaching the adult literacy program, one of my students brought me a letter that was sent home from school with her child. This student had extremely low literacy skills and was unable to read the letter independently. Her young child tried to explain what the letter was for (a consent form to participate in an activity about proper dental care). My student explained how frustrated both she and her child were in their attempt to understand the letter, and each other. She noted that she was ashamed to call the school and speak to her daughter's teacher because she felt embarrassed and didn't want to seem like an unfit parent. Her shame was rooted in experiences, which over time, had eroded her self esteem. She recalled professionals making comments such as "can't you spell your own name?" and "you're an adult, you should know how to read!" This caused her to further isolate herself, and left her

with feelings of humiliation and discouragement. The hope of making positive changes in the lives of families regarding literacy begins with a shift in attitude, discrimination, and stigma associated with low literacy and must instead be approached with sensitivity, compassion, and dignity.

The Family Literacy Program teaches families ways to engage in fun literacy learning, while supporting parents, children, and extended family. The program also helps to strengthen relationships by improving communication. Communication skills are taught and modelled for families to prevent family breakdown when a dilemma occurs, such as in the previous example. Families are provided with literacy support and resources that offer basic life skills and culturally specific teachings that promote the family unit as the main source of a child's learning.

Kainai Public Library



As a member of the Kainai Library Committee, I have been working to promote literacy in the schools, workplace, and community. This year, the Family Literacy Program partnered with Kainai Board of Education to organize the 2nd annual Family Literacy Powwow. However, to achieve sustainable results in language

and literacy, we must provide resources to the community. This ultimately, led to the goal of establishing the Kainai Public Library on the Blood Reserve.

There is a lack of literacy resources and programming available for our community members. Establishing a public library will help to address problems that stem from poverty such as family violence, gangs, addiction, teen pregnancy, high school dropout rates, and unemployment.

Currently the closest access to a public library for residents of the Blood Reserve is Cardston, Glenwood, Ft. Macleod, or Lethbridge and transportation for many families is an issue. There are many benefits to having a public library in our community. It will provide families, youth, and elders an opportunity to come together in a positive way that will promote language and literacy. This will not only be a service we provide, but an investment of lifelong learning to Kainai youth and families.

This will be significant for the Family Literacy Program, as it will provide a permanent site and additional literacy resources for Blood Tribe Social Development clients and children. Currently, I load boxes of books and supplies to the location of the Family Literacy Program (a small board room) for families to check out each week, and at times it proves challenging. Having a permanent location where literacy resources and internet access are available will enhance current programming.

This has been a lengthy process and has required numerous meetings with Chinook Arch Regional Library System, who supports this initiative and is also a driving force behind our efforts. If we are successful, the Kainai Nation will be the first in the province to have a public library on-reserve. This will set a precedent in our

province and will potentially help other First Nations communities across Alberta to establish libraries on their reserves.

A public library on-reserve will provide access to resources and information such as books, internet access, video conferencing, and a space for Blackfoot resources and tribal archives. The benefits of being a member of the Chinook Arch Regional Library System include: access to more than 900, 000 library materials, technical and network support, and access to a local website and an online catalogue.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature



“Part of authentic narrative research is constituting an earned new freedom arising from the exploration about truths of teaching, especially those difficult to confront and know.”

(Fowler, 2006, p. 185)

Many scholars have informed my work in literacy research. In a world of many languages, my research has led me on a journey of learning my own language, one that has gone a lifetime unwritten. It is the transformative nature of narrative and life writing that has helped me to appreciate both the beauty and difficulty of “hybrid” worldviews (Hasebe-Ludt, 2003, p. 153).

Because colliding worldviews—specific to gender, ethnicity, religion, and power—“have constrained so many voices in the past,” it is necessary to learn the language of stories (Hasebe-Ludt, 2003, p. 153). In essence, as we dwell in literacy in a variety of ways, for instance through creative processes such as writing and the arts, we stay open to renewing ourselves by reading the word and the world. We become

liberated to voice the truth about what is most meaningful and knowing how to communicate it to others.

In preparation for my own scholarly work, I've had the honour of learning from others whose work specializes in literacy, specifically writing narratively as a means of understanding the political, social, and cultural significance of our lives. Such scholars include Leah Fowler, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, Carl Leggo, and Janice Rahn, all of whom have provided a foundation for narrative research and literacy pedagogy examined in this work.

Narrative Inquiry

In her book, *A Curriculum of Difficulty*, Fowler (2006) discusses how a hermeneutic approach and scholarly analysis of narrative inquiry leads to a mindful and generative teaching practice. Her research centers on how educators can use narrative methods as tools for understanding and improving upon their teaching practice and being. Fowler (2006) uses her own stories, both fiction and autobiographical, as a way of understanding the teaching world and her place in it.

Most significant, is Fowler's (2006) methods of telling stories that offer both the writer and reader the opportunity to explore the difficulties in education. Her work involves researching common themes that arise out of her stories. Working through the eight "orbitals" of narrative inquiry ultimately then, leads to a deeper understanding of the teaching self. By analyzing personal narratives, educators can better understand how to work well despite difficulty.

Acknowledging that the business of education is a difficult one, Fowler's (2006) theory and practice of narrative analysis empowers educators to govern the

teaching self, fostering a deeper sense of agency. Working through the stages of writing personal narratives, creates a space to examine the story as a lived experience. Through narrative research, changes can be made in how we understand ourselves, our students and colleagues, and the environment, resulting in more collaborative and generative ways of learning and teaching together.

Life Writing

“Through literary and literacy engagement with the words, stories, and poems we hope that (listeners) can remember their own stories, gain the courage to tell them and to address the complicated issues of living ethically and with empathy among all our relations.”

(Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 12)

My first encounter with life writing as research was during a writing institute with Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia Chambers, and Carl Leggo. In their book *Life Writing and Literary Metissage as an Ethos for Our Times*, the authors weave autobiographical narratives, life writing, poetry, and photography as a means of literacy pedagogy. Their collaborative research explores the meaning of stories and “braided texts” to understand the interconnectivity of self, others, and place:

Life stories and autobiographical writing locate the writer in a network of contexts, including family, neighbourhood, community, and cosmos. This interconnectedness weaves the personal into the warp and weft of the public, political, and pedagogic. In this way, life stories and autobiographical writing are more than just writing. They have the potential to become transformative curriculum inquiry. (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 205)

Paying attention to themes that arise out of writing life, Hasebe-Ludt (2003) reminds me of the meaningful and restorative work in literacy, as “embodied language here becomes part of the eternal return, of the retelling of tales, the recurrence of memory—yet with a difference, constituting new forms, new meanings, and new knowledge of the world” (p. 155).

The writing process requires me to look within, to search my heart, and to wade through the chaotic and complex spaces of memory and thought. I discovered literacy as a way to understand the interconnectivity of my students, family, community, and Spirit, as it reinforced a sense of empathy, humility, and purpose. As Hasebe-Ludt (2003) writes, “we are connected not only to the earth that surrounds us...but also to the ground of the heart” (p. 156). By re/searching our hearts, we can identify what has taken root, weeding out prejudices to allow the opportunity for inspiration, possibility, and hope to become manifest in our lives.

First Nations Literacy

“To tell a story is to link, in the moments of telling, the past to the present and the present to the past...from this ongoing dialectic emerges the possibility of a future.”

(McLeod, 1998, p. 53)

Indigenous philosophy identifies language and stories as the foundation of individual and collective education. Although much of my research and writing is rooted in family and community experiences, it is necessary to review scholars whose work honours Indigenous knowing as a means of literacy research.

Cynthia Chambers, a professor at the University of Lethbridge, writes extensively on curriculum and literacy research. Chambers (1999) calls for curriculum

theorists to provide a truthful reflection of Canadian narrative landscapes, particularly of First Nations literacy. My research in *literacy as a way of knowing*, involves navigating such landscapes, with the intention of finding my own language. As Chambers (1999) suggests, “finding our own language may mean blurring the lines between fiction and nonfiction, mixing languages within a single text, or crossing genres. Perhaps Aboriginal writers can provide an example the rest can follow” (p. 146).

Similarly, Marie Battiste, a Mi’kmaw educator and professor at the Aboriginal Education Centre at the University of Saskatchewan, researches the “resurgence of Indigenous knowledge” (p. 16) not only for the benefit of Indigenous Peoples but for the global community.

In her article, *Nourishing the Learning Spirit*, Battiste (2009) includes scholarly research as well as photography to discuss current issues concerning Indigenous education and literacy. She recognizes the lack of stories that remind Indigenous youth of their strength, courage, and purpose for learning. As Battiste (2009) states,

Relearning or unlearning the layers of oppression and trauma has, in effect, led to an Indigenous renaissance, the most significant contemporary Indigenous experience that has become a larger international Indigenous movement. The movement began with the first generation of Aboriginal people since the early activists of the late 1960s who have achieved university degrees. It resonates with stories of resilience, creativity, perseverance, and success that Aboriginal learners have achieved...these are the missing human stories that help

Canadians and other Aboriginal people see the strength of values, traditions, spirituality, and the individuals who are the building blocks for the future. (p. 16)

This statement highlights an Indigenous perspective, as it demonstrates how education extends beyond individual progress, and is connected to family, students, community, and the spiritual self.

In addition to Battiste's (2009) research, Ball (2009) reviews current Canadian literature for evidence of a national policy for Indigenous language development, suggesting that to inform practice and policy in literacy and language education it is necessary to include "grey literature," including reports from community-based programs (p. 21).

Her scholarly work involves researching Indigenous language development and literacy intervention programs in Canada. Currently, there are no guidelines for structured and evaluative language and literacy strategies to raise literacy levels for Aboriginal youth. With Aboriginal populations rising in Canada, literacy levels and Indigenous language attainment continue to decline. More research, structured support, and ways to evaluate literacy programming are needed to raise language and literacy levels of Aboriginal youth.

When Indigenous children learn a language (English or mother tongue), they establish a connection to their culture, and to their relationships with family, community, land, and Creation. Ball (2009) identifies the issues facing Indigenous youth in Canada, specifically the gaps in language and literacy learning. She also

identifies social factors such as poverty and the lack of access to resources which hinder such growth.

Blackfoot language embodies culture. For Indigenous communities, such as the Kainai Nation, having access to cultural knowledge means one must first know the language. As Ball (2009) argues, it is “impossible to translate the deeper meanings of words and concepts into the languages of other cultures” (p. 22). Knowing oneself, therefore, is dependent upon language.

My teaching and writing philosophy calls for a re/turn to traditional ways of learning to complement contemporary education through storytelling and family relationships. Learning and literacy begin in the home and therefore, a support network and access to resources must be made available to parents and caregivers to interrupt the current cycle of low literacy and poverty for First Nations People in Canada.

As I research *literacy as a way of knowing* through narrative inquiry, life writing and First Nations literacy have guided my teaching practice and academic studies. The literature review demonstrates the interrelatedness of scholarly work and the literacy of self, family, community, and place.

Chapter 3: Methodology of Narrative Inquiry as Qualitative Research



“Narrative craft is a method of research that reveals our relationship to language and sense-making and that inform our lives, our work, and our relationships.”

(Fowler, 2006, pp. 96-97)

Narrative writing is a way of storying our lived experience, a way of understanding ourselves, in relation to others and the world. It is a pathway of language and reflexivity, which leads back to the fundamentals in teaching: to listen, to dialogue, and to realize. Personal narratives often present themes that arise from mindful reflection and imagination, a means of considering significant happenings, memories, and stories relevant to the writer. As a student that has chosen a path of narrative inquiry I question: How does my voice *live* in the narrative?

Narrative inquiry “includes not only the story, but also the teller, the told, the context and conditions of the storytelling, and the reasons and intentions for narrating” (Fowler, 2006, p. 9). It is about learning from the processes of literacy rather than

focussing on an end result. Paying attention to literacy as a process reveals how “a person is a text that is continuously becoming” (Masny, 2008, p. 15).

By sharing our stories we nourish the spirit, teaching one another about new and old ways of knowing. In my experience with literacy, a good story surpasses gender, culture, age, and race; allowing themes—such as humility, relief, forgiveness, love, hatred, patience, and empathy—to connect us in ways that make us human. The stories we hear become part of our own narrative, having the power to change us (Heavy Shield, 2010, unpublished paper).

At the heart of writing narratively was my desire to work honestly. As Lamott (1995) reminds me, “good writing is about telling the truth...we are a species that needs and wants to understand who we are” (p. 3). Paying attention to the present, acknowledging the past, and imagining the future, has added layers of meaning and substance to my literacy research.

Knowing in the narrative has prepared me as a writer to become mindful of the strength in stories. I share Fowler’s (2006) description of her work in narrative research, as it offers a truthful account of literacy pedagogy:

Whenever I heard, read, or wrote narratives, meaning began to take shape. I could understand why people did what they did, that what happened to people made them the way they were. I could see the relational networks over time and space that shaped each self. I learned that narratives were a place where people had freedom and responsibility to tell truth, however difficult. The power of good narrative, then, lends itself particularly well to the chaotic, contextual, and complex matrices of educational research. (p. 12)

As I began to use methods of literacy more thoughtfully, insights, truth, and wisdom began to surface in my work. Writing and living in the narrative called for me to re-examine particular beliefs and strongholds that did not contribute to the wellness of my (teaching) self. My perception of education expanded, revealing certain changes I needed to make to continue to teach literacy in ways that positively related to my students, family, and community. Fowler (2006) reminds me that “authentic narrative research is one way of making life texts visible for study,” and that “such study opens questions about the qualities of a teaching text and being” (p. 17).

My narratives have provided me with more than “data” to work with. They serve as a pedagogical guide, confirming what knowledge is most important and what I have yet to learn. Writing is a state of being where I *am* most at home in the world. Just as my ancestors once lived, I follow a nomadic memory and imagination to a place that will provide most sustenance for me and those I care about. Blackfoot philosophy teaches of reciprocity, which is also true of narrative inquiry, where one acknowledges the intricacy of words, wisdom, and teachings that all stem from the *literacy of place*. Literacy and stories strengthen family relationships and are the foundation for a healthy and sustainable community.

This form of qualitative research enabled me to become more conscious of my role in the social, educational, political, and cultural facets of my community. As Donald (2008) shares the importance of stories and language, I am reminded of what is necessary in literacy education:

What is required is *aokakio'ssin* or careful attention to the details of the research context with the hope that a story will arise that will need to be

told...*aokakio 'ssin* is a pedagogic call to pay attention to what is going on around us, interpret these insights in relational ways, and attempt to bring the understandings gained from the interpretive process to expression through language...to share them with others. (p. 33)

The purpose of narrative inquiry as a method for literacy research is to acknowledge literacy as pedagogy for lifelong learning that extends beyond the classroom to the “hidden curriculum” of our lives. My learning involved becoming aware of my own “teaching self,” paying attention to how I define literacy and how my narratives translate into a language that is engaging, restorative, and inspiring.

Narrative Writing as a Way Through Difficulty



“Education makes for some of the best and most hopeful work on the planet, as we reflectively witness engagements of ourselves and our students, in the process of reconstituting life narratives toward more aesthetic, artful existence.”

(Fowler, 2006, p. 177)

Stories emerge from place, relationships, and experiences, both lived and imagined, and as these stories are shared, they leave us vulnerable to having our inner

selves mirrored to us in ways that can be insightful, even revelational. Leggo (2007) understands the value in providing students with literacy support and opportunities which connect them to their community and families, which in turn, strengthens their identity:

The classroom is an integral part of the larger world that teachers and students live and grow in, and therefore, the classroom needs to promote engagement with language and literacy that intersects with and extends beyond the world outside the classroom. (p. 36)

Writing often exposes the way literacies continuously influence and change how I find meaning in teaching and life. Learning from stories—reading, writing, visiting, imagining, creating, and understanding—is a fluid and evolving process, and while narrative writing may explore personal truths, it “also requires heeding and respecting the complex narratives of others” (Fowler, 2006, p. 44).

For example, my daughter, Marley, wrote a poem during a time of a relative’s passing:

Weeping willow

Sad and mellow

Why do you weep?

The sun shines

Skies are blue

Which is why I say

Why weep, weeping willow?

I found myself open to the “location of wisdom, sustenance and hope” poetry may offer (Leggo, 2005, p. 339). I was reminded of all that I am grateful for, especially in times of difficulty. Fowler (2006) understands how these moments of difficulty can serve to enlighten us:

We can articulate the emotions of grief as we also move toward thinking well about loss, pain, and despair and learn the meanings we can from suffering, to ultimately enrich our capacity to live well in the present.

Narratives can teach us how to honour these feelings of ourselves and of others, asking how emotions influence learning and curriculum in the generative curiosity of lifelong learning. (p. 57)

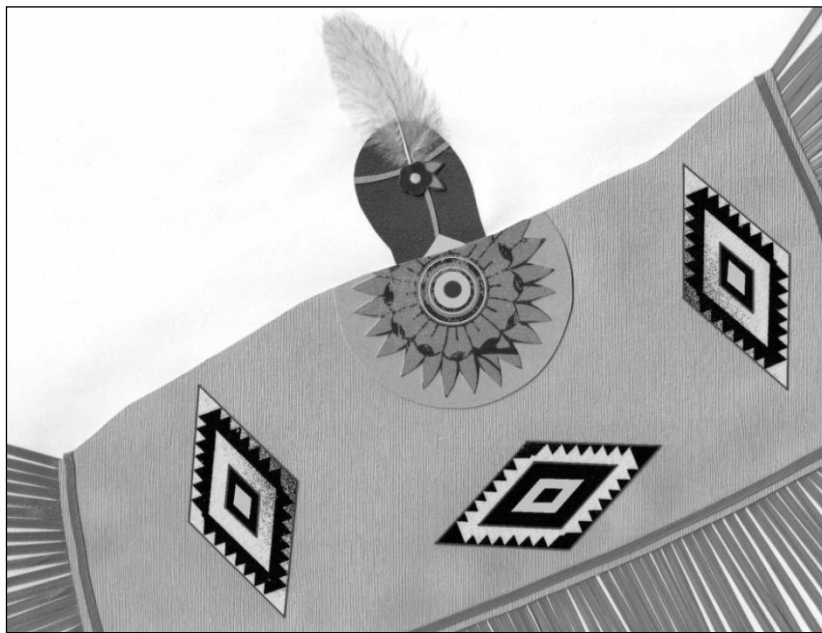
It was through reading my daughter’s poem that I was reminded that “the prime love relationship in life is that between mother and child” (Houtekamer, Chambers, Yamagishi, & Good Striker, 1997, p. 148). I found myself once again humbled by how children (my family and students) have the ability to teach me deeply important life lessons, often with simplicity and great clarity. As Leggo reminds us, “educators are always in process, not afraid of change and conflict” and as writing teachers, we “live in the dynamism of transformation—all the time” (Leggo, 2005, p. 446).

hooks (1994) recalls the inner anguish she felt as a student, because her experiences were limited to academics and did not include the philosophical union of mind, body, and spirit with learning. She notes, “this fear is present because many professors have intensely hostile responses to the vision of liberatory education that connects the will to know with the will to become” (pp. 18-19).

Literacy permeates all facets of my life. I use literacy as a means to elevate my understanding of relationships and the complexity of what it means to be human.

When there is an openness to what others can teach us through the language of those relationships, whether it be through our families or Creation, we can move to a place in teaching that is nurturing, generative, and purposeful.

Literacy as a Way of Knowing Through Narrative Art and Writing



“Dance, music, poetry, and other arts all provide metaphors for lived experience, allowing us to see new ways to live and grow and new ways to know.”

(Higgs, 2008, p. 553)

Writing and artistic expression are processes of self care, a way of giving life to what is internal, unspoken, and possibly not yet realized. As Higgs (2008) suggests, “art making, by its nature, is a transformative process in which the artist and the medium are both changed...defining a reality unseen by the language of objectivity” (p. 551). Artistic expression through arts-based research such as narrative writing,

poetry, and drawing “creates a discursive space in which possible new ways of knowing are fostered and imaginative, creative processes are fueled” (Higgs, 2008, p. 554).

My philosophy is to provide my students with the freedom to explore the artistic value of literacy, as I am aware of the dangerous realities of a teaching life. Careful I do not, as Hasebe-Ludt (2003) describes it, “become part of a relentless busyness to implement a rigidly structured and disembodied curriculum that has left few openings for creative expression for both adults and children, for us to draw, paint, sing, dance, and write together differently” (p. 154).

The interconnectivity of community, family, and self literacies are woven together by the language of our lives. The process of narrative art and writing is often a solitary and sacred act, quite like prayer: a meditation of ideas, stories, intentions and creativity. Place, relationships, and my inner life have much to do with how my stories take shape, what narratives I choose to reveal and how, ultimately then, I can continue to teach and work and advocate for literacy as liberation education.

Higgs (2008) supports the arts as research, as he notes:

Arts reflect the dynamic self of the artist and the artist’s perspective on experience. They are a personal expression of an understanding of the world, and they evoke the distilled experience of being in the world of the individual. As researchers, artists are attuned to the self-knowing reflective practice. The artist as researcher creates meaning. (p. 551)

While I learn to follow an artistic and writing path more instinctively through stories, drawings, and poetry, it seems I have a greater understanding of the teacher I

am becoming. As literacy beings, we must allow ourselves the liberty to read, write, create, and understand the world in multiple ways. It is the essence of learning how to care for oneself, each other, and our place in the world.

Journaling

Finding my voice in narrative inquiry includes writing by way of journaling, always with the potential to reveal “human truths” (Fowler, 2006, p. 12). Journaling or free writing is a way to heighten one’s awareness and to remain disciplined as a writer. Journaling is a practical and valuable form of literacy that is often the initial stage of creative writing or narrative research. As a teacher-researcher, journals are a means of documenting life experiences and a source of deep reflection, ensuring a balanced, ethical, and relational teaching practice. For someone that teaches in a setting that is often confronted with crises, it is important to debrief, to sift through the days’ chaotic events and hard issues to know specifically how my teaching and being contribute to the improvement of the school culture.

Our thoughts and internal dialogue influence our behaviour, how we interact in our relationships and sort out the very complicated happenings in life. Journaling offers a practical way to maintain balance in life, a way to celebrate successes and to relieve the frustration and negative emotions associated with difficulty such as injustices, misunderstandings, or trauma one may experience throughout a lifetime. It is necessary to continually reflect on one’s philosophy and work ethic in a teaching life. As a teaching writer, journaling is as essential and natural as breathing. It calms and focuses the inner storyteller. The pen becomes the voice.

According to Adams and Townsend (2009), “reflection is the process of studying events and outcomes to determine how they happened, why they happened, what could have been done to prevent or increase their occurrence, and what kind of impact they had” (p. 11). Educators use journal writing to document “valuable insights, make important intellectual connections between practice and theory, and make decisions about their teaching that lead directly to changes in practice” (Adams & Townsend, 2009, p. 12).

According to hooks (1994), journal writing is a way to reflect upon praxis, the “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 14). hooks states that “teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (p. 15). The use of traditional Blackfoot pedagogy, such as elder teachings and stories, to which First Nations literacy students can relate, empowers them to write their own stories as well as finding themselves in the stories of others.

Reflection is necessary to understand our personal intentions, attitudes, thoughts, and language we bring into the classroom to ensure we are respectful of students’ and colleagues’ dignity.

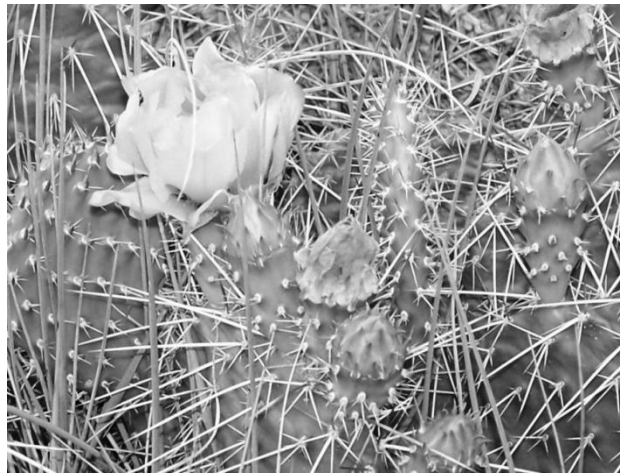
As Leggo (2009) describes it, his discovery of words and language resulted from journal writing as a way to make sense of his personal difficulties he was experiencing at the time. After being told in school he would “never be a writer” (p. 160) Leggo (2009) learned the truth about his gift nearly a decade later:

I learned that my grade 11 teacher was wrong. I could be a writer. I had a passion for words. I had a voice that sang in my writing. I had stories I wanted

to share with others. And for the past three decades I have steadfastly pursued the poet's work that I call the hard work of heart work. (p. 160)

Journaling is often the time I am most vulnerable, taking my words and fumbling, trying to make sense of what it is that needs to be voiced. Revealing my inner thoughts and attempting to stay honest is most difficult. However, it is also the moments where I can examine my experiences in a reflective, meaningful way. It was also the place that I discovered I could be a writer.

Poetry



“In my own reflective practice I have found that writing poetry, drawing, painting, and creating sculpture has enabled me to transcend difficulties, solve problems, and imagine a future when the reality of the world is difficult.”

(Higgs, 2008, p. 545)

Writing poetry calls for a calmer more present experience in the literacy process. Leggo (2009) writes, “Poetry slows the reader down. Poetry invites us to listen. Poetry is a site for dwelling, for holding up, for stopping” (p. 164). As a literacy educator, it is important to recognize how poetic language connects us to one another and with the natural world. Leggo (2009) encourages us to “live poetically” and warns

of literacy as consumption: “One of my ongoing concerns with contemporary literacy is that we are reading too fast, reading for consumption, reading for information as if information will feed and fuel us” (p. 171). It is important to take our time and become aware of the literacies that surround us, as it makes for a more aesthetic, spiritual life.

As Blackfoot people, we have been living poetically for thousands of years. Poetic knowing is very much rooted in the rhythms of stories, songs, drumming, and seasons. Listening to the drum often evokes humility and gratitude that comes with living by the natural rhythms of our environment and honouring *home* as a sacred site.

Life Writing



“The act of writing, and re-writing, autobiographical stories guides the writer in an apprenticeship of understanding the meaning of his or her own life, in an apprenticeship for coping with the unbearable and the incomprehensible.”

(Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009, p. 44)

The potential for learning correlates with relationships that develop from personal and collective literacy. Stories that come out of those relationships are shaped by a writer’s creativity, decisions, narrative style, and language.

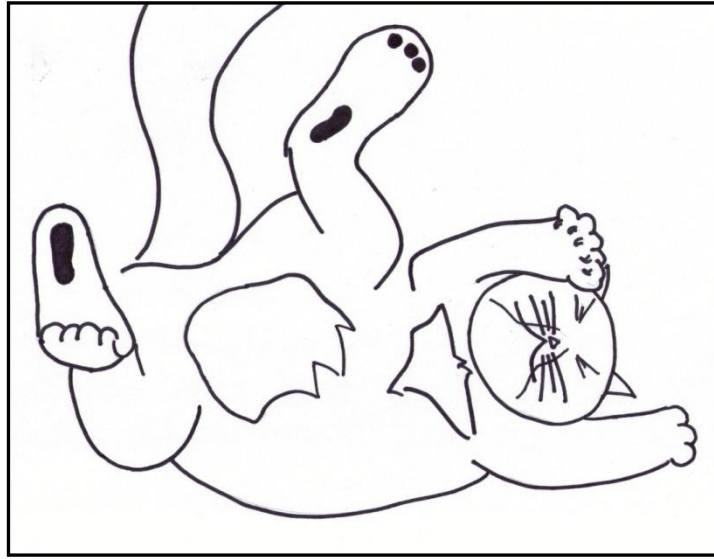
Sharing personal narratives requires one to be vulnerable in the classroom, creating a space of empathy, creativity, and mindfulness. This occurs when the teacher “takes the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material” (hooks, 1994, p. 21).

Researching the synergy of self, family, and community literacy has enhanced my own literacy development and that of my students. It has been through life writing that I gained insight into how relations are an integral part of Blackfoot epistemology.

By writing about my professional and personal experiences, I was able to examine my heart, intentions, mistakes, and think deeply about how to improve my teaching practice (and being) through the quality of these relationships. The more I learned about the teaching self and my relationship to place and family, the more I felt moved to write about such experiences.

Life writing and memoir may also be written in the form of graphic language such as comic narration. This form of art combines drawing, photography, and text, which makes for a powerful method of storytelling.

Graphic Language: Comics as Narratives



“Mitts”

“If one characteristic of good literature is that it challenges our way of thinking, then comics’ cultural position is such that they are able to mount these challenges in unique ways.”

(McCloud, 2007, p. 12)

Graphic novels and comics are a hybrid form of art and literature, filled with multiple layers of sophistication and meaning. Comic art is a method of narrative language that allows the artist/storyteller to express something with both image and text. According to McCloud (2007), comic art may be defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (p. 9). It was during a graduate class with Janice Rahn, where I discovered how this “sophisticated literary art form” (Versaci, 2007, p. 12) could be used to tell my narratives.

At the time, my daughter Marley and nephew Keilan were already interested in graphic novels and comics, however, I'd never considered them a cultural and political phenomenon. That is to say, not until I read my first graphic novel: Art Spiegelman's *Maus, A Survivor's Tale*. The graphic novel is a comic book memoir about Spiegelman's difficult reality of learning of his father's experiences as a Holocaust survivor. Spiegelman's comic drawings portray the Nazi's as cats and the Jews as mice. Versaci (2007) summarizes how Spiegelman is able to achieve an accurate depiction of the narrative through comic art versus the use of photographs:

When atrocity becomes a central subject, as it does in any survivor's tale, distance is needed. In many stories told by first generation Holocaust memoirists, this distance is provided through language: words depicting atrocities are far less silencing than their photographic counterparts because they do not provide a visual shock. What is more, the atrocities described in testimonies and autobiographies retain an element of humanity through the autobiographer's voice. With words, the reader controls the pace and emphasis of the reading; with pictures the viewer is more or less assaulted by the image.

(p. 98)

During the course, I was encouraged to draw. However, initially I was reluctant to try the very thing that is generally discouraged (by many teachers) after elementary school. I recall going to my daughter Marley's grade four parent-teacher interview and her teacher showing me the cover of Marley's math scribbler. The book was covered in doodles, sketches, and symbols from cover to cover. This "concerned" her teacher and according to her, it was proof of Marley not paying attention in class.

It never occurred to me that Marley was bored, or that drawing helped her to concentrate or that, simply, she loved to doodle. Although already graduated from university and in my first year of teaching, I did what I thought was right at the time, which was to tell Marley to stop drawing and “pay more attention” in class.

It’s devastating to know I had anything to do with stopping a child’s creativity, let alone my own daughter’s. Teachers hold such power, influencing children and family members who care about their child’s learning.

It doesn’t take long for a child to realize just how much power a teacher has. My first lesson of this was when I was in first grade...

I was six years old and eating lunch in the gymnasium at a Calgary elementary school. The principal, a lady with silver hair and blue eye shadow, came up from behind me and grabbed me by the shoulders, lifting me up off my seat. Without realizing what was happening, I was slammed back down again. The words “sit properly!” stormed over me. In the days following, a set of bruised fingerprints surfaced on my arm. When I finally got enough courage to tell my dad about it (I thought I’d be the one to get in trouble for not “sitting properly”), he drove me to school the next morning in his little brown Datsun to have a talk with the principal. I couldn’t wait. *She was really going to get it.*

As we sat in her office, I’d imagined my dad telling her off, knowing she would never touch me again. What I didn’t expect was what came next. She, very simply, denied it. It didn’t take much convincing and with Blue Eye Shadow glaring at me, my dad turned to me and asked, “Did she do this to you?” My tiny six-year-old

self was shrinking under the spotlight of two very powerful grownups. I did what any six-year-old would do and shook my head “no.”

As I started to understand literacy in a more expansive and holistic way, it was as though I began to shed old attitudes and perceptions of literacy, making it possible to view literacy as essentially what makes us human: our words, stories, emotions, and experiences. When I let go of perceptions I had about literacy, I realized what I was doing was discriminating against certain forms of literature, including graphic art. I was preventing my learning and artistic potential by what I had been taught through a socially constructed belief that states: “it’s considered normal in this society for children to combine words and pictures, so long as they grow out of it” (McCloud, 1993, p. 139).

Versaci (2007) discusses how comic book memoirs often confront the reader with the use of graphic language:

By revealing to the reader the various ways of presenting one’s past, memoirists call attention to the space between an event and its retelling...this medium allows memoirists to experiment with different autobiographical voices, and over a body of work, they can occupy a range of storytelling positions, from active commentators on their past to detached observers of it. (p. 64)

By studying “graphic language” or comic art as literature, I became aware of this powerful form of literacy as a way of storytelling. As Versaci (2007) notes, “by their very nature, comic book memoirs present the world as seen through their artists’

eyes and those 'visions' become the memoirists' powerful and evocative worldviews”
(p. 45).

Chapter 4: Writing from Home: A Collection of Stories from Self, Family, and Community Literacy



“It takes a long time to see the view whole.”

(Leggo, 2009, p. 64)

The following narratives are an invitation into an intimate space of personal experience and the phenomenon of memory. Memories and ideas often come in fragmented pieces like patches of a quilt. As words and images were stitched together, whole narrative patterns began to emerge seamlessly and in a meaningful way.


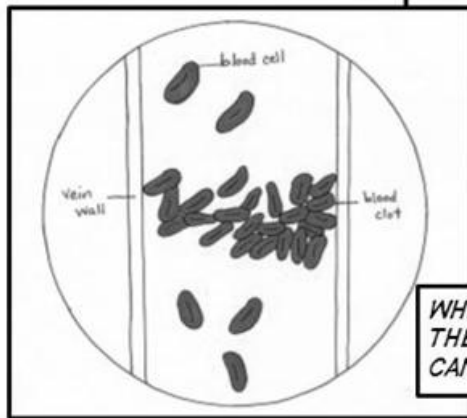
All efforts have been made by the author to obtain permission from family and individuals who appear in the following narratives. In some instances, names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy and ensure anonymity.

Narrative 1: My Blood

WHEN MARLEY WAS JUST A NEWBORN, I DEVELOPED DEEP VEIN THROMBOSIS ALSO KNOWN AS DVT-A BLOOD CLOT.

A line drawing of a woman with long hair, wearing a simple top, cradling a newborn baby in her arms. The baby is wearing a cap and is wrapped in a blanket.

MY LEG BECAME SO SWOLLEN, I COULDN'T WALK OR EVEN BEND IT.

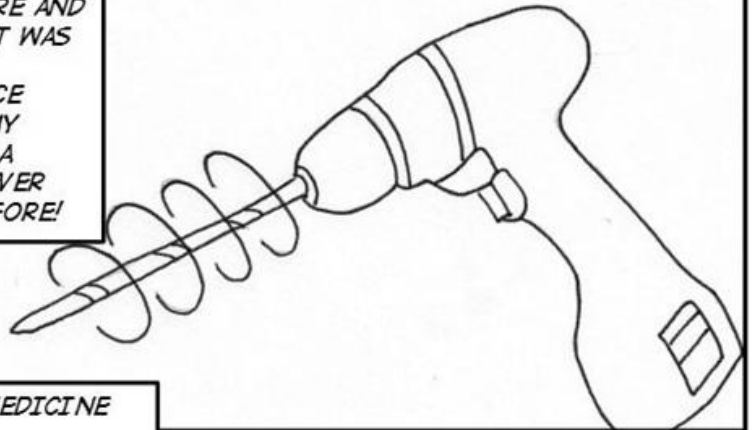
A line drawing of a person's legs. The right leg is extremely swollen, depicted as a large, dark, vertical balloon. The left leg is normal. The person is wearing a high-heeled shoe on the left leg.

WHEN I GOT TO THE HOSPITAL THE DOCTOR SAID BLOOD CLOTS CAN HAPPEN POSTPARTUM.

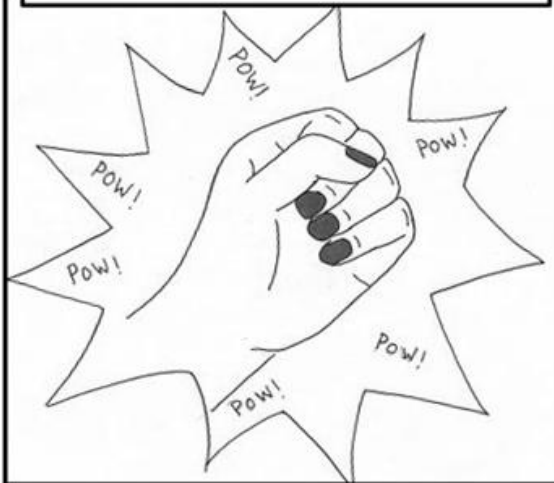
A line drawing of a woman lying in a hospital bed. She has her hands clasped over her face and is crying. There are tears falling from her eyes. To the left of the bed is a heart rate monitor. To the right is a box labeled 'blood thinner' with an arrow pointing to it. The woman is wearing a hospital gown.

I STAYED IN THE HOSPITAL FOR ALMOST 3 MONTHS.

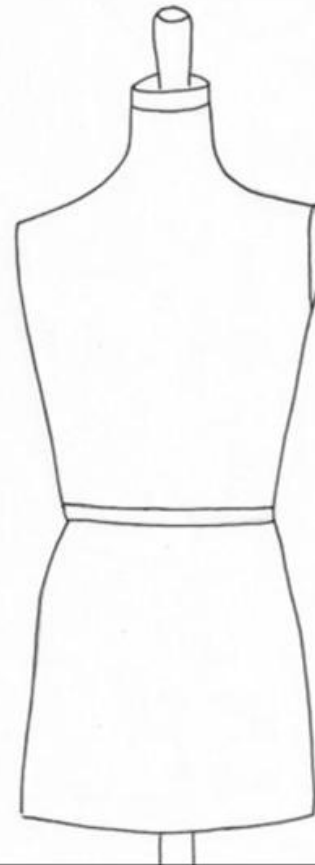
I HAD EMERGENCY SURGERY WHERE THE DOCTORS INSERTED A WIRE AND A TUBE IN MY VEIN. THE CLOT WAS MOVING UP TO MY KIDNEY. DOCTORS WORRIED IF A PIECE BROKE OFF AND MOVED TO MY LUNGS, I WOULD BE DEAD IN A MATTER OF SECONDS. I'D NEVER FELT THAT KIND OF PAIN BEFORE!



THEY GAVE ME POWERFUL MEDICINE TO BREAK THE CLOT!



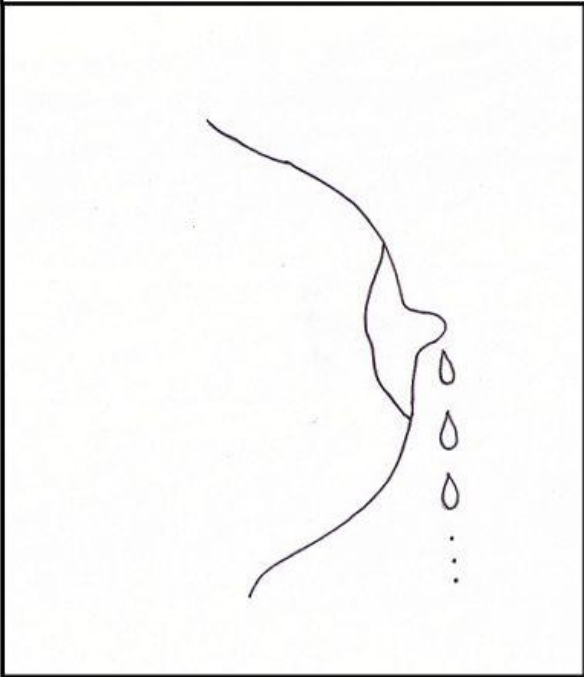
I HEARD THE WORDS: BLOOD TRANSFUSION, AMPLUTATION AND EVEN DEATH.



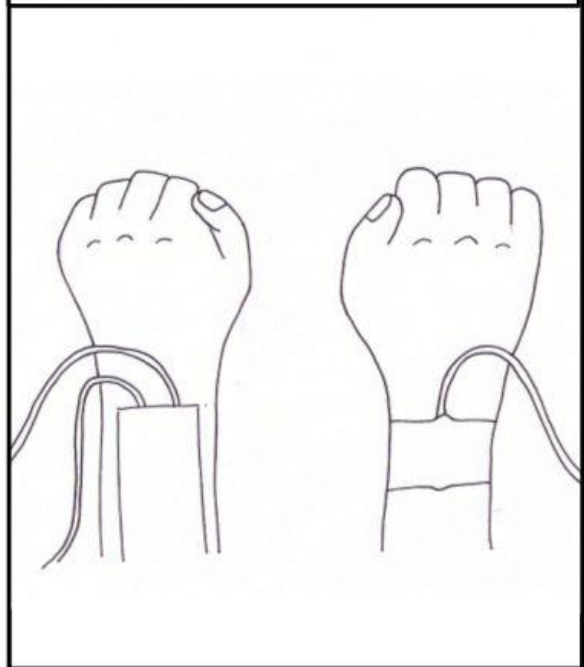
BUT AFTER 2 DAYS IN THE ICU...

IT DIDN'T WORK!

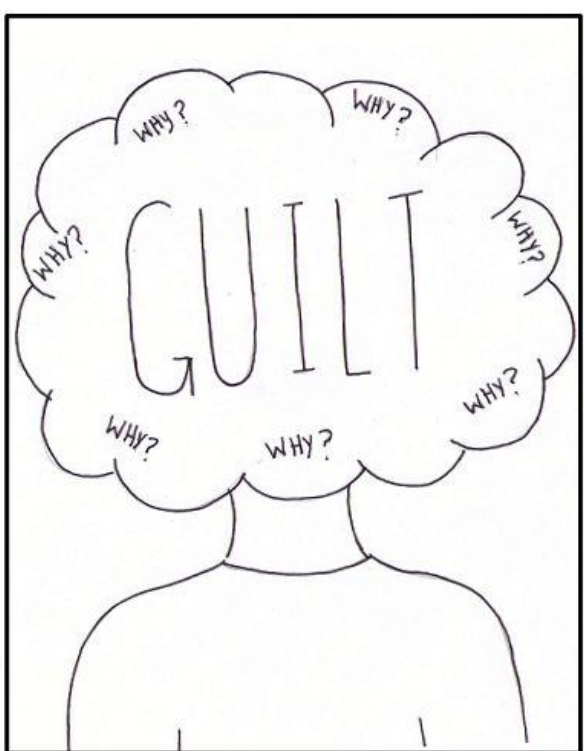
I HAD TO STOP BREASTFEEDING BECAUSE OF THE MEDICINE I WAS TAKING.

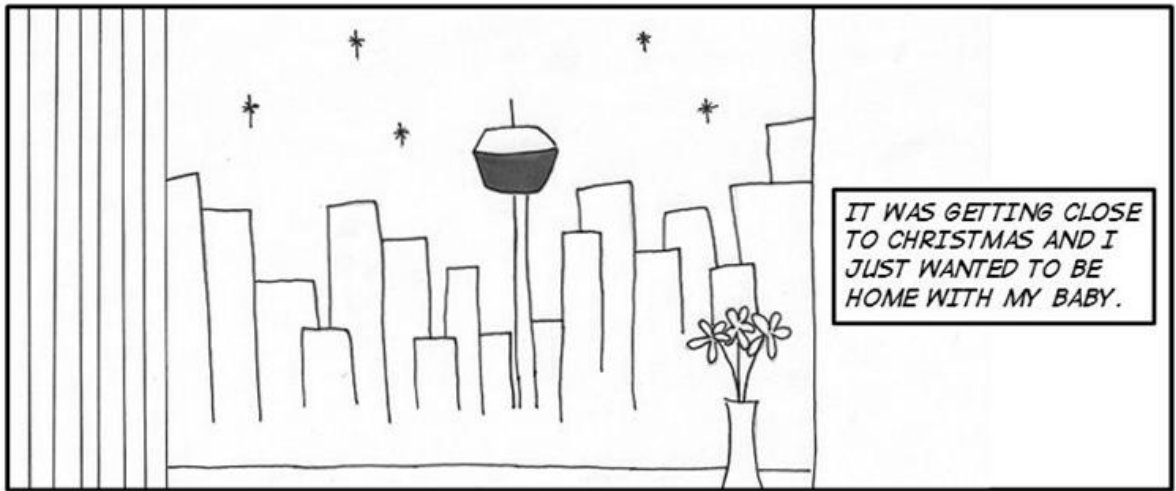


IT WAS HARD TO TAKE CARE OF MARLEY. SHE WAS SPENDING ALOT OF TIME WITH MY IN-LAWS.



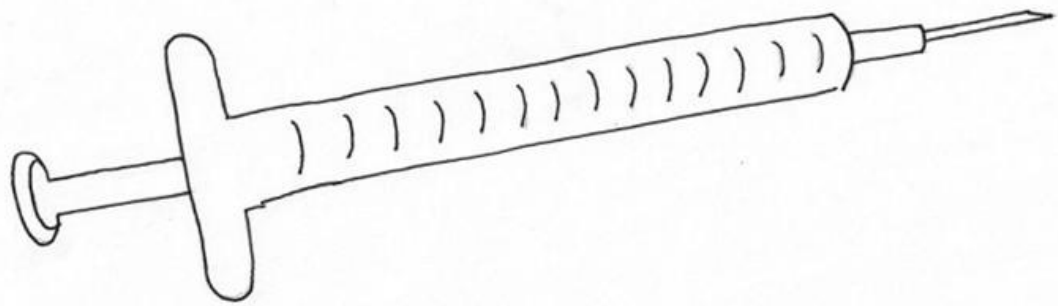
THE SWELLING IN MY LEG HAD GONE DOWN, BUT I STILL COULDN'T WALK.



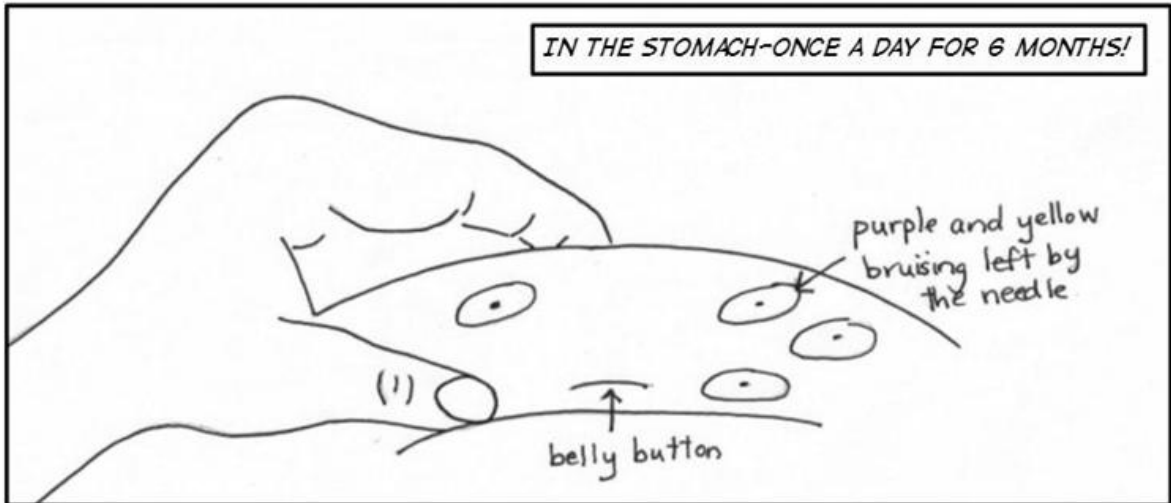


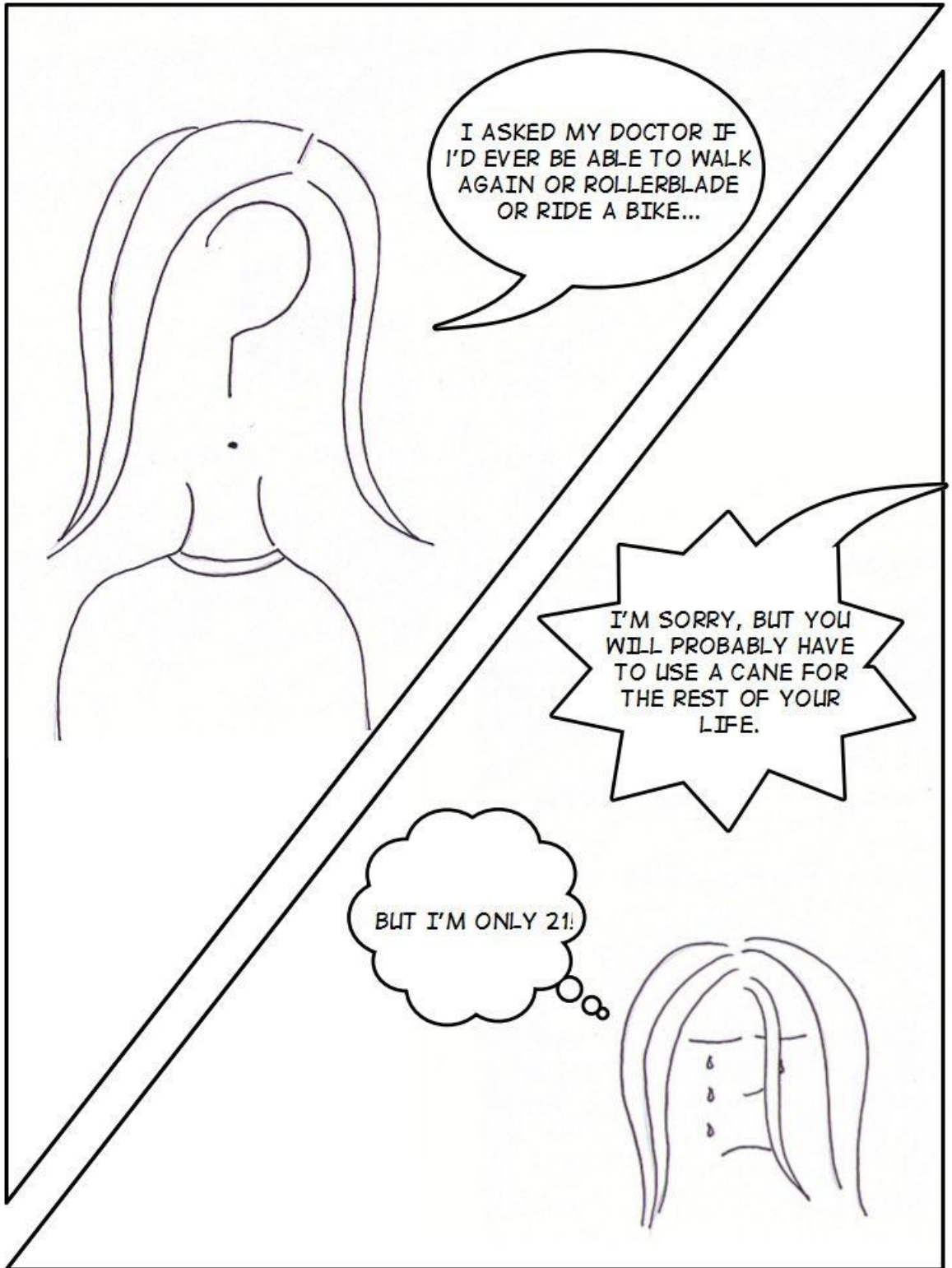
IT WAS GETTING CLOSE TO CHRISTMAS AND I JUST WANTED TO BE HOME WITH MY BABY.

WHEN I WAS FINALLY RELEASED FROM THE HOSPITAL, I HAD TO GIVE MYSELF AN INJECTION OF BLOOD THINNER...

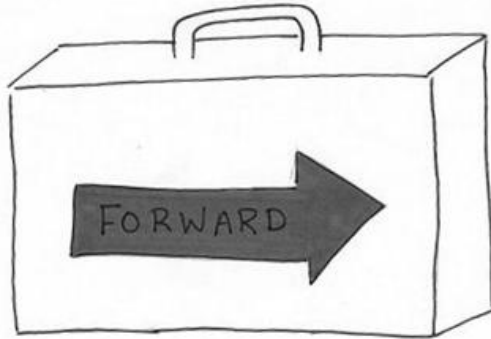


IN THE STOMACH-ONCE A DAY FOR 6 MONTHS!

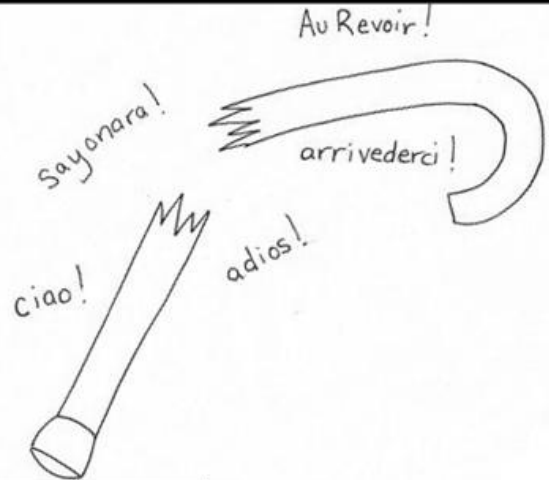




WITHIN A FEW MONTHS, I MADE SOME MAJOR LIFE CHANGES...INCLUDING LEAVING MARLEY'S DAD...MOVING 800 KMS AWAY.



WITHIN 6 MONTHS, I WAS WALKING WITHOUT A CANE!



I PRAYED... AND PRAYED... AND PRAYED...



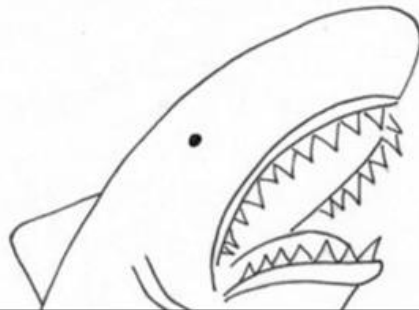
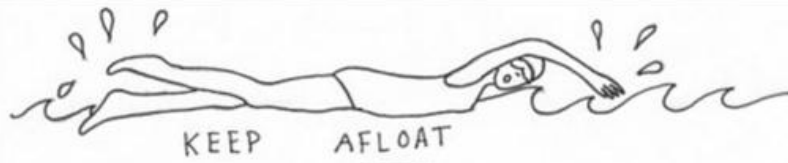
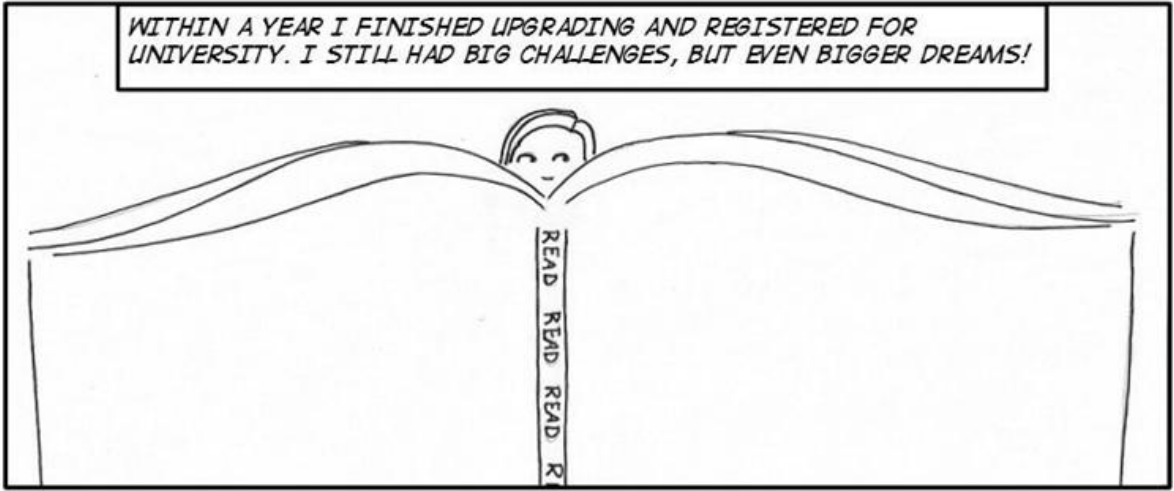
I BEGAN TO REALLY APPRECIATE THE SMALL THINGS IN LIFE.



AND LEARNED TO NEVER TAKE ANYTHING FOR GRANTED.



WITHIN A YEAR I FINISHED UPGRADING AND REGISTERED FOR UNIVERSITY. I STILL HAD BIG CHALLENGES, BUT EVEN BIGGER DREAMS!



MY BLOOD CLOT DISSOLVED COMPLETELY AND TODAY I'M MORE ACTIVE THAN I'VE EVER BEEN.

IIKAKIMAAT- NEVER GIVE UP!



I'VE NEVER BEEN HAPPIER!

THE END

Narrative 2: East



Max Purchase

I stand atop the coulees in Lethbridge, Alberta, one of the places I consider to be home. It's July and the summer's heat rises in waves off the land. The dry grassland is the colour and texture of elk hide, beaded with cacti, wild roses, and milkweeds. I am facing east, where in the mornings I usually greet the Sun. But it's mid afternoon now and the Sun is behind me warming my back. Below is the Oldman River and if I continue walking east, down the ravine, I will cross the bridge to Indian Battle Park where I can sit and rest by the river.

There is a slight breeze that ripples the prairie grass, giving the illusion of flowing water. It's difficult to imagine where I'm standing was once covered in glaciers thousands of years ago, leaving behind deposits of bone, minerals, and stones as if like a trail: either to be followed or found, but never to be lost. Like my own history, there are remnants and artefacts of lived experiences, family blood lines and language that is a constant flow of past, present, and imaginings of a future.

Just as the Oldman River has carved its path through the coulees, I continue to shape my own path, making my way through life, writing dreams and learning how to be content with *not knowing*. I gather stories left by my parents and their parents

before them and so forth, while seeking the creation of something new. Always with the intention of leaving an offering for those that will eventually take their own path: my daughter, my students.

Life depends on the stories we tell—ourselves and the people we love—especially when we are faced with difficulty. It is in the language we use that shapes our lives, as words are what sustain us as individuals and as a collective. Much like calling on our ancestors, writing is like prayer as it empowers the spirit and is faithful in times of uncertainty.

Standing here overlooking the coulees, reminds me of another time I'd been facing east, in a place far from home...

It was in 2006 when I travelled to Newfoundland for the first time. As a graduation gift from my dad, I was going to meet his younger sister Vicky, my aunt whom I'd never met before. As my daughter Marley and I landed on "The Rock," the heavy humid air seeped through me, a greater feeling than I had imagined it to be. Any apprehension I had about meeting Vicky was gone after we shared our first hug. It was strange to have only spent a few moments with her, and already it was as though I grew up knowing her. There were so many things that told me she was my dad's sister, but most of all, it was the eyes.

After staying the night at her home in Cornerbrook, Vicky had planned a trip to drive across the province to St. John's, where she was joining her teammates to train for the Royal St. John's Regatta, an annual rowing competition that dates back to the 1800s. The Latin motto being *Certamen Traditione Regatur, Let the Contest be*

Governed by Tradition. Following tradition, Vicky, her daughter Emily, Marley, and I set out on a drive across the province, heading east to St. John's.

Following the map of Newfoundland (which now hangs in my office as a reminder of another place I call "home"), Vicky humoured us as we joked about the names of places on the map: "Goobies," "Blow Me Down" mountains, and "Come by Chance." Seemingly, it was by chance that there I was, 3000 miles from home, meeting family for the first time in 28 years. Each of us sharing the same bloodline and standing on the same family soil.

It was during the drive, where I learned that Vicky's dad, my grandfather, Max Purchase was a prisoner of war in World War II. Vicky handed me an article with the title "The Long Death March" from the glove compartment. It was earmarked. I began to read my grandfather's words:

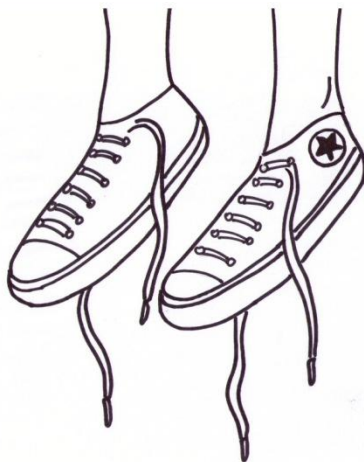
One morning I woke up to find that I was a prisoner of war in the hands of the Germans. We marched 147 miles by foot across the island and taken from there by ship to Solonica in Greece. It was in Salonica that I with the assistance of some Australians organized a first escape from the notorious St. George Barracks which was at one time during the First World War, I understand, occupied by the Turks. The place was filthy dirty. However, we discovered the old sewerage system which ran through the compound and emptied in the hillside outside. One Sunday afternoon during an Australian famous penny-up game, there were eleven of us who went through the manhole into the sewer where we crawled for $\frac{3}{4}$ miles until we reached the source where the old sewer used to empty. From there we made it to Salonica and after three weeks hiding out with the population, we were rounded up during a raid

that was frequented by the Germans and we were taken to an S.S. Division Headquarters and after questioning we spent 7 days in a cell and we were placed on a cattle car of a train-destination Berlin. We travelled for 15 days of rail travel in late October with little clothing; it was quite cold. During my 4 years of incarceration in Germany I was practically in every stalag (prisoner of war camps) they could build. Although I never made much progress in getting out of the country, we sure played havoc in breaking out of various camps. I understand Esrom May, of Point Rosie, who went over in the 6th contingent was shot after he had gone through the barbed wire with several other prisoners and apparently the Germans had challenged them to halt and when they turned around they mowed them down with machine gun fire. Following Hitler's birthday, a New Zealander, a Welshman and myself broke off from the long death march and we hid in a barn for 4 days until the American forces caught up to us and I was glad to see the end of it all.

When we arrived to St. John's, our first stop was Signal Hill, the farthest point east in Canada. We parked the car and walked up a mild hill before reaching the ocean. Its greatness was overwhelming. I suddenly became aware of how far away my grandfather was from his family as he fought to survive all those years ago. It made me lonesome for *home* as I realized this was my history too.

Now, as I stand over the grassy coulees, I offer my grandfather's story, for those that will someday take their own path, for strength, as it has strengthened me.

Narrative 3: An Education of *Life*, Writing



*An education is about staying awake through life, especially through difficulty,
knowing everything can change in a moment.*

My Blackfoot name is *Nato 'yi 'kina 'soyi*—*Holy Light that Shines Bright*. The elders say you should live in such a way that honours the name you've been given.

I always knew I would return to university to complete a master's program. In 2009, after three years of teaching, I entered a graduate studies program at the University of Lethbridge with a focus on literacy. At the time, I was teaching adult literacy at Red Crow College on the Blood Reserve, and it seemed to fit with the direction of my professional journey. I returned to the university that summer.

It was during my first course that I was introduced to life writing. By that time, I had made a personal commitment to take my own writing more seriously by focusing on writing children's books and young adult fiction.

The members of the group, all women, formed an instant connection with one another. I was immediately inspired by the energy and the diversity that came out of this new community of learners that I was now a part of. At first, it was difficult for

me to write. We were encouraged to write about deeply personal issues that shaped our lives as individuals and educators. I've always been drawn to fiction writing and although I had agreed to write honestly about my life, there were elements of fiction that came through my writing that helped me creatively and to write from a place that was real and engaging. One of the major projects I'd been assigned was to write a story about a difficult time in my life.

I decided I was going to write a story about the earliest time I came to know the mystery and fear of death. When I was 15 years old, my best friend's brother committed suicide. The writing of the story had been difficult, so when I had actually sat down to write, I began writing a version of the story from a character's perspective. Writing a fictionalized version was the only way I knew how to tell that story.

When the time came to submit the assignment, my confidence had withered and I thought the instructor may not accept my work after all, I was specifically told *not* to fictionalize. I approached my instructor at the end of class with the assignment and told her that although my story was based on my life experience, I had fictionalized it. As I handed her the assignment, my "writerly" self deflated. In the days following, I had tormented myself with doubtful thoughts, wondering why I hadn't just chosen a story that was "easier" to write. I was confused. I had listened to my heart and creative instinct, and was now regretting it.

As our class gathered the following day, conversations and laughter filled the room as we found our seats. My heart raced as I waited for my story to return to me. As the class started, a handout was provided to us with a list of everyone's names on it.

“You will find your name on the handout along with a highlighted passage somewhere on your assignment. We are going to have you read the highlighted part of your paper in the order of the list of names.”

I skimmed the list of names on the handout. My name wasn't there. I began to leaf through my story to find which section I would be able to share with the group. The assignment had been graded, but there was no highlighted portion. A lump started to form in my throat. I was being excluded. It was as though I'd heard the words, “you'll never make it,” all over again...

I was doing my PSII at a junior high school and placed in a grade 7 class. On the very first day of my practicum, my teacher supervisor told me, “In teaching, you either sink or swim, so I'm just going to leave you in here with them and we'll see what happens, okay?”

I had done my PSI with a grade 2 class, so working with teenagers was an entirely different experience. I had prepared my lessons and done the best I knew how. I thought I was managing okay until one day another student teacher had pulled me aside in the hallway.

“I need to tell you something,” she said urgently, “I was getting a coffee in the staff lounge and overheard Mr. X talking to another teacher...”

“And?” I waited.

“He was talking about you and said that you're never going to make it as a teacher!”

Unable to share my story with the class left me feeling as though I'd been silenced somehow. My stories didn't matter. My voice didn't matter. I had considered

approaching the instructor to discuss it, but the last time I did that, I ended up with a “D” in the class. This time, *I knew better*. In the days following, I had doubted my decision to return to the university. I was devastated. I thought to myself, maybe my stories are not worth writing and sharing after all.

The next day, I was back at the university ready for class, this time feeling as though the whole world was conspiring against me. I was annoyed with my instructor and secretly thought it would be better to dismiss the teachings of life writing, after all I thought, “this was my life and I was going to do what I wanted with my writing.”

We had started with a group discussion that morning. Laurel, a young beautiful high school teacher that I had befriended in the days prior, had paused before taking her time to speak.

“Before I start, I need to say something,” she paused and there was a collective silence that filled the room. She held her hand over her mouth and tears ran down her face. Kate, who was sitting beside her, reached over and put her hand on her back, for comfort.

“I’ve just been diagnosed with cancer.” Everyone sat in silence while she cried. “The doctors need to do more tests but they don’t know how long I have to live.” I was stunned.

That afternoon, she had shared her thoughts about family and how she was learning to forgive, to help her through this time of uncertainty. As I meant to console Laurel, it was her that gave me comfort in her gentle words of faith.

Now, as I near the end of my master’s program, I am humbled by the instructor who taught me what I thought was a difficulty in writing about death was really my

own fear of life writing. And Laurel, whose words will stay forever, reminding me to appreciate life (writing).

My Blackfoot name is *Nato'yi'kina'soyi*—*Holy Light that Shines Bright*.

Elders say that you should live in such a way that honours the name you've been given.

Narrative 4: If You Fall off a Horse, You Should Get Back on

As we enter the Agriplex, the familiar smell of livestock is enough to make my eyes water. A young man in beige overalls and rubber boots tends to the horses, taking no notice of our arrival. However, down the dimly lit corridor, large shadows of movement cast about from behind the stables, a welcoming sign.

We cross through the gate to find the elders waiting for us. I greet them with a handshake, *oki* (hello) I tell them, then sweep the dust from a small section of bleachers and take a seat. A group of four horses are tied along the arena post. Chloe approaches one of them and gently slides her hand down the front of its face, leaning her forehead against it for a brief moment. She talks to him as she strokes the long of its neck, but I am too far away to hear what she's said. I imagine they are kind words exchanged by friends whom haven't seen each other in awhile.

A grandfather's voice echoes throughout the arena, "Okay you girls, come over here and we'll get started."

The soil on the arena floor has been freshly grated, and sprayed with just enough water to keep the dust down.

"Wipe your shoes on the steps below," I say, unconscious of my mothering tone. The girls jump over the gate and scrape the soles of their shoes, leaving large clumps of mud on the edge of the steps.

After beginning with a prayer in Blackfoot, the students listen intently.

"A long time ago," the elder begins, "everyone worked. We worked really hard. But now, some people live a hard life. You kids need to stay in school, so you can have a good job, have a nice car, and provide a nice home for your family."

A bird flutters its wings in the ceiling ducts, causing clumps of dust and insulation to float down like giant snowflakes. The students and I are quiet. I think about my dad and how he's worked hard all of his life to provide for his family and I'm grateful to have parents who instilled in me a sense of work ethic and creativity, knowing not every child is brought up that way.

"So I want you girls to try hard," the elder continues, "try hard here like your teacher. She's gone to school and got a good education; look at her as a role model."

I am humbled by his words and even more so, by what going to school has really taught me: literacy is the way out of poverty. Not only in a financial sense, but intellectually, socially, and spiritually.

The elder clapped his gloved hands together, "Okay, now you can get some boots on and get these horses ready."

The students rush over to a dusty hockey bag and quickly exchange their brand-name sneakers for an old pair of cowboy boots. I watch (safely from the bleachers as I usually do) as the students brush and saddle the horses.

It's been almost 20 years since I last rode a horse. I was 14 then...

My older cousin Timothy and I were visiting our Uncle Steven at the Band Ranch. We were bored and thought it would be fun to go riding. After pestering Uncle for some time, he saddled two horses, but not before warning us of their feral nature.

Tim got on first and waited for me while I was hoisted up by my uncle. I'd wondered if Tim was as scared as I was, after all, we were city kids; the only thing I was missing was a black duster and a lip full of Copenhagen. I followed Timothy out of the stables and down the dirt road, but I was stopped short when Uncle Steven

hollered out and pointed to the neighbouring house, something about a bag of vegetables. I steered the horse around to an elderly lady who was standing on her front step, holding a plastic bag. She wore polyester pants and a flannelette pyjama shirt, much too warm for the hottest day in July.

I dismounted (*always on the left*) and ran over to her, snatching the bag from her hands and quickly returning to the horse, not wanting it to run. I gripped the horn of the saddle, clutching tightly to the bag of vegetables and wedged my foot into the saddle's stirrup. The horse neighed loudly and rebelliously. And then, just as I was pulling myself up, the horse whipped itself around in a circular motion. Panic struck, leaving me without time for any rational thought. You'd think my first response would be to let go. But no, something more like stubbornness kicked in, just as it had when I was nine, when Reagan, the class bully, dared me to see how long I could stay on the merry-go-round, as she (and other amused classmates) spun the equipment violently.

The horse continued in circles until I was hurled into the air like a ragdoll, with the same force and trajectory as the merry-go-round, landing in the dirt...still gripping the vegetables.

I could hear the horse trot a few feet away and the old lady calling out to me. As I got up, the taste of dirt was thick on my tongue, and rimmed my eyes and nostrils; my pride hurt more than my rear. I walked back to my uncle's house, snivelling, and when I saw him he was half laughing as he asked me what happened.

“You'd better just stay inside now.”

I quickly stopped with the tears and told him I was okay (staying inside on a summer's day was the only thing worse than getting bucked off). My other uncle, Ed,

who was sitting at the kitchen table, laughed so hard he began to cough, choking out the words, “You know girl, if you fall off a horse, you should get back on.” He took a slurp of coffee and lit a cigarette, first holding in the smoke then exhaling through his nostrils, like a steaming bull. I could see Tim out the front window, still riding his horse under the hot sun. I ran back outside and yelled, “Help me chase down my horse!” I waved over to the dark shadow which by then was grazing at the bottom of the hillside.

We chased the horse for almost an hour before finally getting hold of it. We decided to take the horses up the hillside where the land opens up to grassy plains. Tim went first and I followed behind him. Only, instead of going up the hill diagonally, he galloped straight up the steep incline, spooking my horse.

Suddenly, the horse lifted up onto its hind legs and I found myself again, bracing for the inevitable. There was a sharp snap of the reins and I was hurled backwards, first landing on my on my side, before rolling back down the hill. The wind was knocked out of me. When I managed to look up, Tim, who had made it successfully to the top of the hill, was laughing.

I cradled my throbbing wrist as I cried all the way back to the farmhouse. When I got in, my uncle Ed, still sitting at the kitchen table rolling cigarettes, said “Girl, I told you not to get back on.”

“How come you don’t ride, Hali?” Chloe asked as she mounted the horse.

“I just don’t,” I told her matter-of-factly.

“Well, why do we have to ride, but you don’t...and *you’re* the teacher?”

I sat there for a few minutes with her words nudging at me. I glanced over to the bag of boots and saw there was a pair about my size. I took off my jacket and took a deep breath. As I put the boots on, everything seemed to quiet around me. Walking into the arena, mud clumped to the soles of my boots that were already two sizes too big, forcing me to accentuate my steps.

The girls had already saddled their horses and were riding, but I could feel they were watching as I was about to get on. And for a moment, I was a 14 again.

Narrative 5: A Poem

The days are shorter

time to break camp

Old Man is waiting and remembering

me...

though my memory is murky

I gather my stories

and start moving

then stop long enough to rest

waiting for others

Iikakimaat

We're almost home

It's time now

the nights are longer,

Winter is coming

Keep moving

Narrative 6: Let the Land Be Your Classroom

We pulled up to Dan Fox's ranch, where he and his family reside on the Blood Reserve in Southern Alberta. My students and I loaded off the bus and walked through the gate, where we met my mom, Faye and my aunt, Marge (also Dan's sister). An experience such as this—shared not only with blood family, but also my *school* family—was something I felt fortunate about.

As we approached the others, I saw there was a large buffalo carcass hanging from a tractor, and beside it was a flatbed truck with two or three additional bodies that lay in a heap already skinned. I hugged my uncle Dan and introduced the students. Three men stood near the hanging buffalo, their clothes and gloved hands stained with blood.

“Watch where you walk, there's puddles of blood over here,” Dan signaled to the red clumpy puddles that were scattered around us in the dirt, as if there had just been a heavy rainfall of blood. To the west was a corral that had been fenced recently, with new wooden posts and wire, made by a rancher's hands. I decided to walk over to get a better look at the large buffalo and two calves that huddled together within the enclosing. Peering in, I noticed the fence extended two feet higher than eye level, an indication of what is required to contain these animals.

The emotions that surfaced from being so close to the buffalo were unexpected. Perhaps it was a reminder of the mystery of creation and the ability nature has to draw out something within us that often lays dormant, as we live so far removed from the natural world.

Slight gasps and commotion disrupted my gaze. I turned to witness one of the workers cut through a leg of the hanging carcass. He sliced off each hoof in a motion that was effortless and passed it to a young woman who tossed it into a pile of dark wet fur and hooves. The eldest of the men (likely the most experienced of the butchers), sliced through the buffalo's neck severing its head. The massive piece dropped to the ground in a pool of dark blood, liquid dripping from its neck like syrup. It took the strength of two men, who picked it up by the horns and rested it beside another buffalo's head.

The sky suddenly grew dark with heavy storm clouds and it began to rain, at first a cool drizzle, then a downpour. We were offered plastic garbage bags to help keep us dry and I took one willingly (the students not so much). Tearing holes in it, I pulled it over like a poncho, but my hair and jeans were already soaked and my whole body chilled. The tractor rumbled loudly as it craned the swaying body onto the flatbed truck; the grinding of chains and metal reminded me of nails scratching on blackboard.

“We’re going to do another one,” a low voice called out.

Eagerly, the students gathered on the north side of the fence and peered through the wire mesh. We watched, as a young woman stood confidently inside the corral with the buffalo, holding a rifle like a skilled hunter. Dan stood with her and I felt my heart pounding in my throat. *I was torn between acceptance and sympathy.* The adult buffalo got excited and paced back and forth along the fence, the calves blocking a clear shot. The woman's aim stayed with the buffalo as it trotted along the

fence, close to where the students were gathered. A collective scream came from the crowd as they dispersed, some ducking, while others ran out of the way.

“Okay, you kids need to be quiet,” the woman scolded before giving Dan the rifle.

He hoisted it up to his shoulder and aimed. The students became silent again and watched through the gaps in the fence. The buffalo continued to pace nervously, and then halted. Steady. The blast from the shotgun startled me and the buffalo fell over.

“He’s twitch’n out!” one student yelled. The buffalo’s legs jerked violently for a moment. But within seconds it lay motionless. The animal’s large glassy eye seemed to look right at me as its spirit faded away.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe that just happened,” a student muttered under her breath.

A lump formed in my throat. Another man went into the corral and took hold of the buffalo’s hind leg, attaching it to a large chain. Dan opened the gate allowing the tractor to drive in. Slowly, the buffalo was dragged from the corral and hoisted up into the air by its hind legs. The tractor parked in the same place where the last buffalo had been slaughtered and skinned. A silver farm pail was placed under its head and with a swift cut of the blade, blood drained out.

One of the men grabbed the buffalo’s foreleg and massaged it back and forth, pumping any remaining blood into the bin. The pail was removed and the buffalo was positioned on its back with its spine between a set of railings that were raised a foot off the ground. Another man, slit through the fur along the length of the leg, and began

skinning the hide of the animal. The other two men joined in on either side and within minutes, the fur was completely removed from the buffalo's underbelly. The students let out a gasp when greenish liquid drained from its anus, dripping down its tail and onto the ground.

"Must be coming from its shit bag," a student said.

The butcher, who was hovering over the buffalo's head, turned around to face us.

"Anyone wanna lick?" he joked as he flapped the massive tongue in front of us. The girls screamed and stumbled backwards. Then the heart was removed. An old lady said something in Blackfoot. *It makes good soup.*

One student leaned into another and whispered, "these *napiikoaksi* are doing all the cutting."

It wasn't always this way.

The buffalo was hoisted up again. The fur completely removed, its naked body covered with patches of white fat and muscle. The robe was dragged to a fresh area of grass, folded neatly, and taken away.

"Everyone stand back please."

An extreme incision was made along the animals under belling, revealing its innards.

Careful with the cut or it will spoil the meat. The man reached inside the buffalo. Slicing. Cutting. A bright orange tarp was dragged over and put under the hanging buffalo. With one solid gush, a large, bloody mass spilled out onto the tarp.

"Drag this over to the old lady and she'll show you how to cut it up."

Three students dragged the tarp over to a grey Ford where an elderly lady got off, wrapping her head in a scarf (the way grandmas often do when there's a chill). She put on pink gardening gloves, with the words "domestic goddess" embroidered on the cuffs.

"Who wants to cut?" she asked.

My mom was first to volunteer. Though the rain had let up a little, there was still a constant drizzle and it was enough to keep everything damp. She crouched down and the old lady instructed her where to cut. A rancid smell wafted upward and burned my nostrils, but my mom seemed to take no notice and sliced the meat in a way that was familiar. The old lady gestured with the pink gloves and asked if anyone else would like to try. Rylan eagerly volunteered and took the knife.

"Aarhh! That must be the stomach. Look at all that grass," he said in a muffled voice, as he covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve. Small pockets of shredded grass poked out of a large balloon-like organ. The old lady directed the stomach to be dragged away and emptied. After putting on blue latex gloves, Rylan knelt down and helped to drag it away. He gagged, coughing out the words, "oh, that smells gross!"

A few feet away, the stomach was emptied and washed out near a water truck. The old woman worked hunched over the orange tarp for awhile longer, then gave my mom a plastic bag with the liver and kidney, speaking in Blackfoot.

The afternoon seemed to pass by quickly and when it was time to head back to the school, a couple of hours had passed. We thanked Dan and his family for having us, then shook hands and exchanged hugs. As we drove away, the tires spit up gravel

and mud, knocking the underneath of the bus and I'd realized what it meant to *let the land be your classroom*.

Narrative 7: A Haiku of Difficulty

Still as white tail deer

I stare at literacy

Unable to word

Narrative 8: The “F” Word

Waking in the early morning
to prairie fields and milkweeds

From the kitchen
familiar smells of
coffee, smudge, and bannock

A song of
Blackfoot words and singing birds,
family voices, and country noises
now just a memory

traded with toxins
creeping through a window crack
and dripping from the tap

Have some tea...

and

I'll tell you a story
of what's come to be,
a fracking tragedy

Narrative 9: A Curriculum of Life and Death

I was in my classroom preparing for the day's lesson when I heard the bus driver beeping the horn, a sign of the students' arrival. In the last couple of days, some students had managed to sneak out the west side doors to smoke, share a joint, or make a run for townsite, where they would hide out at a relative's house and return to school when the hot lunches arrived. Today, the students came into the library area and signed in. Arriving soon after them were two elders.

Iitamikskinoatoonii (good morning). I offered them a cup of coffee and a place to sit. *Always acknowledge a visitor and offer them something to eat and drink.* My grandfather's kindness lives on through the teachings of his daughter, my mother. The chairs had already been prepared in a circle: a morning meeting place for prayer, announcements, and student voices. As we settled in, conversations and laughter turned to whispers and eventually silence.

The Kainai Alternate Academy is housed in the Old Saipoyi building which was once an elementary school. Years ago, it was condemned by Health Canada due to mould, rodents, and poor air quality. Despite its condition, the building remains open for community programs and social events, including the occasional wake service.

One morning last week, I had arrived to work earlier than usual. I didn't like the idea of being in the building alone, but I knew it wouldn't be long before the others would show. I was wiping down the blackboard in the classroom when the students arrived. A few of them asked if they could play basketball in the gym. I told them they could, as long as it was okay with the maintenance worker. I could hear the students run down the deserted hallway, followed by the echo of a bouncing ball. But moments

later, the students returned, this time, without a bounce. I figured the gym was locked or the mats had been left out by the previous night's occupants.

"There's dead body in the gym!" one of the students said as she came back into the classroom.

"There's a coffin in there!" another added.

"That was scary!"

Just then, the maintenance man came into the classroom and said, "There was a wake here last night and the funeral's today. You won't have the gym until tomorrow."

I'd gotten used to the occasional coffin in our gymnasium, but I could never get used to the idea of me being the *only* one in the building with the deceased. The slight discomfort of death being so close to the classroom subsided as I, as well as the students, recognized this as *the way things were* at our school. Soon, we relaxed and carried on with the day. With no disrespect to the deceased, we always found humour in the situation.

It wasn't uncommon for us to carry on with regular classes as the parking lot filled with vehicles and a white hearse parked prominently in the front. Mourners walked in and out of the building, while some gathered together to smoke cigarettes and speak comforting words to one another. If you were to look out my classroom window on that particular day, you would see small children tugging at their parents or running around, oblivious to the sorrow death brings about, while others shared hugs lasting longer than a usual embrace. Possibly to ease the heaviness, the students teased

each other about making it down the hallway for a free meal or bumping into a relative to borrow money.

“We’ve come today to pray and smudge with you,” the elder said as we began circle.

There’d been three wake services at our school within a span of a couple of weeks and the elders were here not only to pray with us, but to smudge the school. One elder started with a story:

“I’m going to tell you students a story. My friend had a niece and she was very sick. My friend brought his niece to an old medicine man. Nobody knew what was wrong with this little girl, but she was very, very sick. The medicine man asked my friend: ‘did you bring this little girl to a wake?’ and my friend said ‘yes, I brought her to a wake.’ The medicine man replied, ‘this little girl, she picked something up from being around the dead body. There is nothing I can do for her.’ That little girl was only about four years old and she died. It’s not good to go to wakes. That’s why we’re here. We’re going to bless you and smudge the school. You see, a long time ago, it wasn’t like that; when someone died, only the family would go to the funeral, but things are a lot different now. A lot of kids and families use that gym and it’s important that we pray and smudge. We’ll pray that you kids do good in school and that you listen to your teachers. Your teachers are here to help you, so it’s good to listen. We’ll pray that you listen really good.”

The elder’s wife prepared her smudge box. The way her hair was wrapped in a flower patterned scarf and the movement of her aged and delicate hands, reminded me

of *Isitakii*, my grandmother. She poked at the sweet grass and sprinkled sweet pine, causing the smoke to thicken and coil above her. After they prayed, the smudge made its way around the circle. One of the elders turned to me and said, “This sweetgrass here,” she held out the small piece of sweetgrass that I had given her earlier, “this sweetgrass is *really* old.”

I felt shy because I knew that was a reflection of how often I’d smudged. “It’s really old and it doesn’t burn as good. I’ll tell you what to do. Don’t throw that piece out.” She gave me the sweetgrass and I held it in my palm. “Wrap it up in fabric and when you get the chance, go to the Sundance and you know that center pole? You place it there, as an offering. And if you have others like that at home, don’t throw them away, just wrap them up together and take them to the Sundance, and at that center pole, place them there. Okay?” I nodded. “I have another sweetgrass in my truck, I’ll give it to you.”

“Ah. Thank you.”

She turned her attention to the group and asked, “Do you know why we smudge? Does anyone know why it’s important to smudge?” The students were quiet.

“We smudge because a long time ago, there were no priests. No church. This is how we prayed. This is how we ask God, the Creator for help...for protection. My husband and I, we smudge twice a day: once in the morning, when the sun comes up and then once in the evening. It’s good to pray. We pray so that we can have strength to go on this straight path.” She gestured with her hand.

“If you pray, then the Father, the Creator, he’ll hear you. But you really have to believe. You have to pray that you don’t go off the path, like this.” She curved her

hand, to show a winding shape. “A path like this, you don’t want to be on. It’s the path of drugs and alcohol. Maybe stealing or lying. We want you to be on a good path, but you have to pray. You have to believe.”

I considered my own path. At times, my strength and faith seemed to waver. But on this particular morning, I felt the presence of God, spontaneously and with immense clarity.

We thanked our guests and the students took turns shaking hands and hugging the elders. I shook the elder’s hand and as I leaned in to hug his wife, she whispered into my ear,

“Ikakimaat. You be strong.”

I returned to my classroom where the elder entered. He was clothed in a Pendleton style blanket as he smudged the classroom, praying quietly in Blackfoot. His wife followed behind him, her words lingering, *“follow those footsteps that are on the good path. Follow the footsteps of your grandmothers. It will make things easier.”*

Narrative 10: Ókonokiistsi

It was last summer when my daughter and I pulled up to the house. The same house that my grandmother *Issitaakii* had lived for much of her life was now the home to her daughter, my mother. Inside, I find my mom, my brother and his girlfriend, Colinda, visiting around the kitchen table. They've been waiting for us. I get teased for being late; *kipitaakii* (old lady) is the word I hear. We laugh and visit awhile. A light breeze enters through the open window and is a relief from the sweltering heat.

We had planned to go berry picking in the morning, but we go anyway though it's middle of the afternoon and not the best time of day to be working under the sun. To the east, *mokowansiitsi* (the Belly Buttes) still cradle a handful of tipis that remain from the Sundance, a reminder that summer, too, will be ending soon. It is about a 15-minute walk behind the house and down a small ravine to reach the berries. As we set out, each carrying an empty pail, there is no trail to guide us, so we make our own path.

My mom uses a walking stick to help her hike through the tall grass and I am reminded of *old grandma* by the way she wears her flower patterned scarf to wrap her hair back. My daughter, Marley follows close behind. We're careful to avoid the hidden burrows in the prairie floor that may be home to gophers, badgers or rattlesnakes. Anyone who has ever walked to their vehicle in the evening after a pow wow knows just how quickly you can go from sauntering along one minute to laying in the grass the next.

When we reach the top of the hill, I take a moment to rest and observe the valley of trees and listen to the river that flows through it. A deer appears in the thicket

below and leaps into the forested area, its white tail waving good-bye. On the other side of the river is the neighbouring hutterite colony—a place my uncle sometimes goes to buy eggs and homemade banana bread for bargain price.

Once we get to the bottom of the hill, I find a good spot and start picking. I try grabbing at clusters of berries (to fill my bucket faster), but the most I can pick are a few at a time. I taste as I go and it's not long before my fingers are stained deep purple.

Lowering one of the branches hanging overhead, I am reminded of a *Napi* story that an elder once told me...

As the story goes, one day, Napi was very hungry (knowing Napi, he was probably *starving*). Looking for something to eat, he came upon a riverbank and noticed a bull berry bush, there at the bottom of the river. Right away, he dove into the water and tried to swim to the bottom. But before long, he returned to the surface without any berries. After several attempts, Napi became frustrated and was now more determined than ever. Just then, an idea came to him. If he would tie two large boulders to his waste, surely this would get him to the bottom where at last he could reach the berries. And so, with two large boulders tied to his waist, Napi jumped in the river and sank straight to the bottom. Searching for the bull berry bush, Napi found nothing but pebbles and seaweed. Frantically, he worked to free himself and swam to the top, choking and gasping for air. Tired and out of breath, Napi crawled onto the riverbank and lay on his back to rest (still hungry). When Napi opened his eyes, there was the bull berry bush hanging over him.

“How do you say Saskatoon berries in Blackfoot?” Henry’s voice yanked me from my storied thoughts.

“*Ókonokiistsi*” my mom replies.

“*Ókonokiistsi...ókonokiistsi*” I say the word a few times, knowing that if I don’t, I’ll soon forget.

That’s when I notice, growing out of the bleached grass around me are tall ribbons of sage. I heed the warning, *careful not to pull the root*, knowing the plant would then cease to grow. I put down my bucket and gather a small bundle (to use for the times I like to smudge).

When we decide to go back up the hill, a couple of hours have passed. Our ice-cream pails are full and I have a new appreciation for the grandmothers who gathered here before me. I stop and crouch down to bury a fresh cigarette in the dirt, an offering to *Á’pistotooki* (the Creator) and I realize home will always be my greatest teacher.

Chapter 5: Epilogue



Narrative writing such as journaling, life writing, poetry, drawing, and photography provides insight into one's thought life, experiences, and imagination. As a researcher, this process offers ways to learn about the multiple layers of literacy education. Living in the narrative—to gain wisdom that comes from our own storied lives—is to recognize the day-to-day subtleties that are gifts from *Ihstipatapiopa* (Creator). Hearing the stories of others and telling personal narratives cultivates empathy, compassion, kindness, and hope in my teaching practice and philosophy.

Increasing the literacy levels in a First Nations community requires a holistic, community-based approach. Learning by means of community and family relations is traditionally for the Blackfoot, the predominant center of education and language learning. A thousand words can be spoken in one single gesture. As educators, the language we use in our relationships is especially important.

I continue to re/search and reflect on my own literacy development and progress as a lifelong learner. Identifying how literacy crosses over into my home, classroom, and community life has become necessary. It provides a map of my

thoughts, knowledge, and experiences of what I know to be true about literacy. Insight into my own literacy development through Blackfoot epistemology has enhanced my teaching as a literacy educator and writer.

Literacy is what empowers people to make choices that bring about change in their own lives and the lives of their families. It is in the spaces of multiple literacies that words hold the power to generate empathy, hope, love, and creativity, providing us with the wisdom that is needed to learn and grow from one another.

By sharing what I've learned about the interconnectivity of literacy through life writing, journaling, poetry, short stories, graphic language (comic art), and photography, I hope to empower others to engage in their own literacy and language development. By exploring various literacies, perhaps more youth will re/turn to traditional knowledge of home, relations, and place, as their voices are valued and greatly needed in our world.

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