

**A SHINING TRAIL TO THE SUN'S LODGE:  
RENEWAL THROUGH BLACKFOOT WAYS OF KNOWING**

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## **DEDICATION**

This research is dedicated to the memory of my sisters Adeline Provost and Karen Faye English.

## **ABSTRACT**

This research is focused on the teachings of the First Nations people which are grounded in sacred stories and which continue to be recalled and recited through oral tradition. The teachings and lessons derived from the sacred stories can be described as ways of knowing. The study explores the persistence of the traditional ways of knowing as a source for influencing First Nations individuals toward greater cultural identity and strength in their present lives.

The thesis addresses the value of Peigan ways of knowing as a tool for creating greater meaning in life; for enhancing spiritual wisdom; and for developing insight into and appreciation of First Nation oral traditions. As well, the thesis explores Peigan ways of knowing as an available resource for empowering present day Peigan youth.

In researching the First Nations ways of knowing, one Plains Indian group, the Peigan, of which the writer is a member, was used as reference source. The Peigan First Nation belongs to the Blackfoot Confederacy and presently resides in southern Alberta on the Peigan Indian Reserve. All participants of the research are members of the Peigan First Nation.

The research will begin with an overview of the writer's personal experiences as a student in on-reserve and off-reserve school settings, and later as a worker in the counselling profession. The purpose and significance of the study will be presented as well as the research design within the qualitative methodology. Four individuals were selected as interview participants who were

born and raised on the Peigan Reserve. The literature review will reflect current research on the significance of story in the First Nations culture and conclude with the presentation of the recent history of the North Peigan people.

The interview data will then be presented with emphasis on the themes that surfaced. Six major themes arose, which included, renewal and transformation, significance of sacred stories, transmitting culture through story, path of life, the teacher and learner relationship, and finally, the vision for Peigan-Blackfoot youth. The final chapter of the study begins with a summary of the findings and an overview of the themes that details finer points making up the major themes. The implications of and recommendations following the study precede the study's conclusion.

## FOREWORD

From Blackfoot oral traditional, it is recalled how the man named Poiia or Scarface, travelled far to the west as he was instructed by the camp's spiritual advisors. There he would meet the powerful Sun god who had the power to remove the scar from his face. After many days of walking he came upon the great body of water and he pondered how he would reach the lodge of the Sun which was yet further. Poiia lay down to sleep. When he awoke he saw a shining trail on the water's surface that lead to the Sun's lodge. Poiia stepped out onto **the shining trail and walked toward the Sun's lodge.**

Excerpt from the story of Poiia (Scarface) as told by Brings Down the Sun to Walter McClintock recorded in 'The Old North Trail' (1910. pg. 497).

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **BEGINNING THE JOURNEY**

#### **Introduction**

The topic of this research has lingered within me for years, even though I was hardly able to articulate its depth and breadth in discussions with First Nations peers. I was born and raised on the Peigan Indian Reserve in southern Alberta and participated in several of the educational programs that were developed by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, as it was then named, for First Nations students.

In many ways, I sense that the journey began with my parents and even earlier with my grandparents. As I reflected on personal experiences as both a student and later as a student counsellor, I began realizing the need to focus on cultural pride issues as they affected me and in all probability, continue to affect the majority of youth in my community. First Nations ways of knowing and teaching strategies within the field of education is a dynamic area of study yet to realize its potential for today's First Nations communities. The following sections will describe the early beginnings of my journey as both a student, later as a social counsellor and the subsequent insights gained. I present a brief overview of these educational programs as they reflect my journey in initiating this study.

As a point of clarification, the study will use the term Peigan-Blackfoot to emphasize the fact that the Peigan First Nations group are members of the larger Blackfoot Confederacy. It must also be stated that the ideas and concepts being discussed could also apply to the other Blackfoot groups of people, namely the Siksika First Nation and the Kainai First Nation since we share a similar Blackfoot belief system. Reference is also made to the Peigan First Nation, or simply Peigan, as they are commonly known. The Peigan group of people are also



divided by the United States border with the Alberta group identified as the North Peigans and the Montana group as South Peigans. As well, the term First Nation will also be interchanged in the paper with other terms such as Native, Indian, Aboriginal, and American Indian.

### **Writer's Experience as a Student**

My elementary schooling began at the Sacred Heart School on the Peigan Reserve during its final term as a Catholic church operated residential school. My three older siblings also attended Sacred Heart School, as did my father when he was a student. After the nuns left, day schooling began, and I was able to go home at the end of each day. The community had few options in where to send their children for an education, as church affiliation determined this. Integrated schooling was available and busses began transporting students to the neighboring towns of Fort Macleod and Pincher Creek. I transferred to St. Michael's School in Pincher Creek to begin grade six. Later, from grade nine to twelve, I participated in the experiential program whereby the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development paid non-native families room and board expenses to house Native children. I attended schools in Medicine Hat and later in Lethbridge where I graduated. Though all these Catholic schools were in Alberta, I may as well have been on another planet.

The Roman Catholic faith played a strong influence in my formative years. Being a six-year old taught by over-zealous nuns and priests while residing in the school does leave strong impressions. For instance, at the age of six I believed that if I didn't pray daily I could cause the world to end. I learned to recite long prayers before I could spell my name and realized that volunteering to attend church services daily before breakfast to receive sacraments could have the

nuns and priests look favorably upon you. Loneliness and despair became an all too familiar presence.

Throughout my elementary school experience there was never a time that I felt a sense of ownership for my academic performance or ability. I learned much later about the cross-over phenomenon whereby some students are reluctant to learn for a period of time during early elementary grades. I do recall being greatly enthused to begin school prior to grade one for in the classroom was where I was to find pencils, scissors, crayons and paper of every color, items that homes of the day rarely had in supply, let alone for children to 'play school' with.

My identity as a First Nations person was seldom mentioned in positive light within the classroom while the majority of text book references to my people were atrocious. Blackboard borders described how 'a is for apple', 'b is for ball' and 'i is for Indian', and somehow I was left to leave somewhat small and itemized by such an illustration. A curriculum that gave no validation to the rich and beautiful heritage of First Nations people but rather fostered the concept of negative stereotyping did little to prevent the seeds of cultural alienation from embedding within many of the First Nations students.

Education begins at home; this I have often heard and I realize my parents and extended family had a responsibility for promoting and enhancing my concept of our cultural ancestry. It must be remembered that both my parents attended on-reserve residential boarding schools that were harsher than my experience, where they were not even allowed to go home for ten months at a time. My paternal grandparents were taken to the off-reserve Dunbow Industrial School near Calgary, Alberta and never returned home until they reached the age of young adults. My maternal grandparents were sent to the on-reserve missionary school named Victoria Home run by the Anglican missionaries. My

maternal grandparents had to stay in Victoria Home for practically ten consecutive months at a time, since visits home were few and far between. The staff of these schools took it upon themselves to arrange marriages amongst the older students. Parental involvement was totally excluded in the life decisions of the students.

My parents and grandparents had no choice in attending the schools, since they were the only schools available to them and attendance was required by law. I have heard stories about how these parents told their children to run and hide when they saw the missionaries approaching in their horse and wagon to capture the young children to attend school. The curriculum of the day was based on domestic duties for the girls and farm labor for the boys, with of course, strong religious teachings. If I thought the curriculum in my classrooms left little to be desired in the area of cultural pride and validation, I can only imagine what my parents and grandparents had to endure.

There are vivid recollections in my mind about my schooling experience where First Nations lifestyles were presented through grossly inaccurate material that did great injustice to the First Nations learners. It was even worse in the white town schools when the white students would turn to stare at First Nations students after reading aloud the false depiction's of 'savage life'. My student experience was a challenging time and hardly prepared me to look with enthusiasm toward my adult life.

### **Writer's Experience as a Counsellor**

My employment history includes several positions over a ten year period where my responsibilities focused primarily on social counselling of First Nations individuals, this after intensive training and long practice sessions. The individuals and employers I worked with ranged from Provincial jail inmates with

Native Counselling Services of Alberta to teen peer support trainees with the Peigan Board of Education. A recent position with the Calgary Board of Education allowed me to work with First Nations students from all grade levels. Within my duties, I interacted with numerous individuals of all ages and again my attention returned to important issues surrounding transferring cultural pride and strength.

At the end of many a work day I was left troubled at my inability to effectively reach these individuals in ways that promoted their road toward becoming self-actualizing individuals. I felt confident in fostering skills of self awareness, problem solving and realistic goal setting, but there was an obvious void that remained. As I began including segments of enhancing cultural pride in the counselling sessions, it was very apparent that the receptiveness of the individuals was heightened. Whether the session was a one-on-one or group setting, whenever the topic was about who we are as First Nations people, I received focused eye contact and attentive listening which would lead to active participation in discussions surrounding ancestral traditions that they are familiar with and eager to share with others. I was able to confirm for myself that wholeness and self assurance for many First Nations individuals must include validation of First Nations cultural traditions and belief systems.

### **Insights and Assessments**

Early in my adult years I became familiar with the ceremonial aspects of the Peigan community where I resided. It was within the realm of Blackfoot ceremonial ritual and ceremony, reflecting on the story-telling of mystical events and characters, listening to stories about the Blackfoot heroes and heroines, hearing the traditional singers and participating in traditional dance that I began

formulating the framework for identifying the ingredients essential in fostering cultural pride and inner strength in Peigan-Blackfoot youth.

There were several acquaintances that I met along my journey that exhibited quiet self-assurance, high motivation, and inner self determination. The common factor of these individuals, I believed, was a strong connection to their traditional belief systems and their ability to participate in traditional spiritual practices. These individuals fortunate enough to have strong connections to the Peigan ways of knowing did so against numerous odds and must be commended in their commitment to honor their belief system. Today they have become the most significant resource in First Nations human and community development.

The teachings embedded in Blackfoot ways of knowing are as valuable to the present day First Nations population as they were in pre-contact times. The difference being the sense of urgency to make the teachings readily accessible to larger numbers of the youth population. From personal experience, the youth are very receptive to these teachings. As the youth gain from the teachings, they will make positive contributions to the quality of their own lives and thus influence the future generation. The sense of urgency to teach from the First Nations ways of knowing is indisputable given the current statistics illustrating Canadian aboriginal people's over-representation in categories such as child welfare, school drop-outs, social assistance programs, and incarceration.

While discussions continue surrounding transfer of control of legislation and policy to First Nation communities to ensure the survival and enhancement of such communities, three areas of critical concern were identified in the Report of the Special Committee on Indian Self-Government. They include education, child welfare and health. The external controlled education system have done grievous injustice to First Nations cultural belief systems, especially the missionary-run and church-operated residential schools, the Report contends,

It was believed that by removing Indian youth from their homes and placing them in captive environments, the heart and soul of Indian culture would be removed, or a process of de-Indianizing the Indians. Specifically, residential school Indians were not permitted to speak their language, practice their religious beliefs and rituals, or have the opportunity to learn what it means to be a self-actualized Indian. Rather, these institutions were highly regimented with programs and a school curriculum alien to its students. (Saskatchewan Federation of Indian Nations, Special 11:82 in Indian Self-Government in Canada Report, 1983, p.28).

My experience as a student from grades one through twelve gives testimony to the potentially destructive nature of an externally controlled education system. My residential school experience defined a level of fear that I never knew before. I recalled the beatings other students would receive, as we were all made to watch, when they were caught and driven back to school by the priest after their unsuccessful attempt of running away. Religious practices became memorizing prayers and attending church services as often as possible. In order to survive, I memorized in earnest and attended the Latin church service almost daily.

Attending the day school operated by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, I learned to never draw attention to myself, for I displayed neither high academic performance nor athletic skill. My desire to learn and participate in sports had long since died. Being very silent and compliant was the best coping mechanism for me to survive in that system. While my high school years were a blur of confusion and filled with a sense of not belonging, I somehow managed to graduate which seems almost a miracle to me. Only one other student that I started grade one with graduated with me from grade twelve.

Student drop-out among First Nations youth continues to be a major concern for aboriginal communities across Canada. Failure to complete high school cannot be blamed on a single cause, rather there is a complexity of

factors that lend themselves to its cause. Within the same Government Report, it is explained that

While the disproportionate ratio of Indian children in care remains about the same today, it is important to note that the steady increases in provincial government child apprehensions occurred almost simultaneously with residential school closures. The effects of residential schools on this generation of parents must be taken into serious consideration since the Indian parents of today were the generation of residential school children yesterday. They're considered by their people as the lost generation. (Indian Homemakers of British Columbia. Family Unit Concept", Exhibit R, Special 17 in Indian Self-Government in Canada Report, Ibid.)

In my experience as a counsellor, I have encountered numerous families that can trace their educational history to the residential schools. If they did not attend the schools directly, then one or both of their parents attended. The majority have nothing positive to relate about the experience. In one incident, while I was working at the Lethbridge Correctional Centre which is a Provincial jail housing prisoners sentenced for terms less than two years, I was discussing recidivism with a Native inmate. When we focused on his own pattern of returning to jail, he asked if I had ever attend residential school, I responded with a 'yes', then he added, "I spent eight years in boarding school, and this place (Lethbridge Correctional Centre) is easy. It's freedom compared to those eight years" (M. Many Chiefs, Personal Communication, 1992).

Elders are often heard promoting the importance of gaining an education. Without a doubt, they want their young people to have the tools and capability to compete in the modern world, but they also want them to reflect traditional values such as respect, honesty and generosity. Intense efforts continue to surround the need to research and develop culturally appropriate curriculum by First Nations people for First Nations students. Traditionally, First Nations education was all encompassing and based in oral tradition which emphasized living skills

that fostered compatibility and accountable actions. Teaching was every adult's responsibility, and learning was life-long. Possessing knowledge was valued and its creative transference was admired.

Traditional Blackfoot teaching strategies never included punishment, in fact children were treated with the same respect an adult received. Contemporary education of Peigan-Blackfoot children must stress the importance of instilling cultural pride and knowledge along with self-discipline to reach goals. A Blackfoot Elder of long ago reflecting on teaching styles and pondering the consequences of the loss of the Aboriginal knowledge stated,

The Blackfeet do not whip their children, but still they are not without training. Children must be taught, or they will not know anything; if they do not know anything, they will have no sense; and if they have no sense, they will not know how to act (Grinnell, 1962, p. 188).

From my experiences of the various education programs and later as a worker in the helping professions, I am convinced of the need to focus energies on learning of Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing, not only because it is a valuable resource to teach inner strength and cultural pride to Peigan youth, but because therein will be found the essence of who the Peigan -Blackfoot people are.

The following chapter will focus primarily on the mechanics of the research paper.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **STUDYING THE PEIGAN WAY**

#### **Background**

First Nations people have always used their oral tradition of storytelling as a way to ensure their values and customs would remain in the hearts of those present, their children and their children's children. First Nations' stories of past significant events not only perpetuate First Nations world view, but contain values, beliefs and morals that promote harmonious relationships between the human and non-human environments that makes up the very fabric of First Nation culture. The retelling of the stories reaffirmed a way of life reflecting indigenous ways of knowing, that is, ways for making sense of their world.

Each First Nations group has its own stories of origin that describe how, where and why the group came into existence; where the holy articles used in ceremonies originated; why each of the sacred rituals is performed; and how the social structures must compliment certain universal laws. Consequently, it becomes necessary to repeat the rituals and ceremonies for acknowledging the benevolence of the many higher spiritual entities. The oral tradition of the First Nations people asserts that humanity has an obligation to enact respect, reciprocity and renewal for all life forms. The narratives demonstrate indigenous ways of knowing which hold the essence of aboriginal nationhood as identified in spiritual connections to all parts of the universe. The presence of reciprocal alliances amongst the plant and animal kingdoms, and integrity in the interactions and relationships with all human and non-human existence are thus embedded in indigenous ways of knowing.

One Plains Indian group, the Peigan, of which the writer is a member, will be used as a reference source for the proposed study. Peigan stories of origin,

knowing, have a great deal to offer humanity especially at the present time when the imbalance of the ecological community has created an overload on limited resources, which in turn has caused disharmony in all levels of society. Peigan stories, and other group's stories, are based in the simple rule reflecting honor and respect of self and consequently for all of creation.

The values of honor and respect as advocated in Peigan oral tradition continue to exist for First Nations peoples today as they did in pre-contact times. It is the writer's intention to explore the persistence of the teachings described as ways of knowing grounded in First Nations sacred stories as guides in influencing identity and strength in their present lives.

### **Purpose of the Study and Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore the following:

1. The value of Peigan ways of knowing as a tool for creating greater meaning in life, and enhancing spiritual wisdom.
2. Peigan ways of knowing as a tool for developing insight into and appreciation of First Nation's oral traditions.
3. Peigan ways of knowing as an available resource for empowering the present day Peigan youth population.

Particular focus will be given to the last issue, namely the continued existence of First Nations ways of knowing and its potential transference to Peigan youth. This will be accomplished through a twofold process. Firstly, an examination of the experiences of four Peigan adults will be conducted in order to gain a precise idea how ways of knowing found in Peigan oral tradition continue to be drawn on in their daily lives as a source of self empowerment. Secondly, the perspectives of the participants will be used as a basis to make

recommendations on how ways of knowing found in Peigan oral traditions can be used as a source of self empowerment for today's First Nations youth.

### **Significance of the Study**

A study of this nature is essential in a time when many First Nations communities continue to struggle with the effects of colonialism. This is apparent in the many statistics that show the high rates of suicide, school drop-outs, and family breakdown in First Nations communities. An acclaimed report on the state of Canadian First Nations confirmed,

"The high rates of social and personal breakdown ... are ... the responses of individuals and families who have suffered the loss of meaning in their lives and control over their destiny." (Chief Justice Berger in Indian Self-Government in Canada Report, 1983).

This breakdown is the result of the colonization process which occurred during the establishment of the reservation system that designated First Nations groups as land-based, on-reservation, wards of the Canadian government.

The study, in focusing on the continued significance of indigenous ways of knowing, will provide recommendations on means of transferring the self-empowerment to aboriginal youth who may desperately be seeking a culturally sensitive insight into their human spirit. As with all societies, the indigenous future is perceived through the healthy development of their youth populations. Thus far, the majority of First Nations communities have not fared well in this regard. Suicide rates of First Nations can easily surpass the rates of all other racial groups in the world (York, 1991, p.96). Dr. Menno Bolt, a University of Lethbridge sociologist specializing in study of suicide, concurred that he has yet to identify another racial group having as high a suicide rate as the Canadian Native people. He adds, "Even the worst ghettos in U.S. cities don't have as high a rate" (Ibid.).

One century ago, the French sociologist Emil Durkheim, described collective crisis as "disturbances of the collective order" citing a strong connection between suicide and collective crisis. Durkheim formulated the convincing correlation that disruptions, whether they be due to a sharp upturn or downturn in social circumstances, have results that can be traumatic and often lead to epidemics of suicide. During his 1897 study of suicides, Durkheim focused on Italy where, in the late nineteenth century, large-scale industrial growth spurred economic prosperity resulting in soaring family incomes with an average 35 percent increase from 1877 to 1889. Correspondingly, suicides increased by 36 percent from 1871 to 1877 and by an additional 28 percent from 1877 to 1889. Germany gave evidence of the same trend during this time period following the unification of the country and a sudden spurt in industrial growth. German suicides rose by 90 percent from 1875 to 1886. Emil Durkheim cautioned that

"Whenever serious readjustments take place in the social order, whether due to sudden growth or to an unexpected catastrophe, men and are more inclined to self-destruct."(Quoted in York, 1991, p.94-96)

Though there are cases of Alberta First Nations communities that had drastic rises in suicide, among other social disruptions, as a result of gaining sudden financial wealth, more often than not the case remains that hopelessness and haplessness overwhelms a youth population that sees no viable opportunities to become part of a community that can scarcely be recognized as economically self-sufficient. The reservation system, being a creation of government policy, left little if no room for economic viability of its resources.

A University of Manitoba professor, Dr. Michael Moffatt, believes that First Nations youth have a greater susceptibility to suicide because they feel trapped

between two cultures, their own traditional belief systems with its cultural ways and that of mainstream Canadian culture (in York, 1990, p.97). Moffatt explains,

They don't feel they belong in either one. They know they can't go back to hunting and trapping because those days are over. Suicide is much more prevalent in communities that have a high degree of disorganization, alcoholism and loss of cultural values. (ibid.)

The connection between the loss of cultural values and increased suicides was the focus of Durkheim (in York, 1990), in his classic essay.

He wrote,

Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual forms a part ... The more weakened the groups to which he belongs, the less he depends on them, the more he consequently depends only on himself and recognizes no other rules of conduct than what are founded in his private interests... There is, in short, in a cohesive and animated society a constant interchange of ideas and feelings from all to each and each to all, something like a mutual moral support, which instead of throwing the individual on his own resources, leads him to share in the collective energy... Social man necessarily presupposes a society which he expresses and serves. If this dissolves, if we no longer feel it in existence and action about and above us, whatever is social in us is deprived of all objective foundation. All that remains is an artificial combination of illusory images, a phantasmagoria vanishing at the least reflection ... Thus we are bereft of reasons for existence. (p.98)

Most First Nations communities are, unfortunately, very familiar with deaths that appear senseless, as with completed suicides. These communities have also begun a recovery process from the devastation of colonization. The recovery of the communities, which varies in size and pace across the country, may well benefit from the source of empowerment found in indigenous ways of knowing and the wealth of knowledge which lies therein. The strong connection between such deaths and a weakened connection to their cultural value system becomes apparent thus identifying the need to further research the topic of

indigenous ways of knowing. More specifically, there are definite needs to be met by researching the area of Peigan ways of knowing as this community is no stranger to young people attempting and completing suicides. There is an urgent need to reinforce cultural strength which will assist Peigan-Blackfoot youth in many areas of their lives.

### **Limitations**

The individuals participating in the interviews are limited to four adults who were born and raised on the Peigan Indian Reserve in southern Alberta. The selection of the four individuals was based on their obvious participation in Peigan-Blackfoot spiritual ceremonies among other traditional and cultural activities. The levels of participation varies among the four indicating possible differences in the depth of knowledge about cultural ways of knowing. The focus of the study is limited to the belief and value system of the Peigan-Blackfoot community and is not reflective of the mainstream belief and value system.

The next chapter will discuss research methodology and will detail the way the study will be undertaken.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research issues pertaining to this study follow and include the topic areas of research methods, research design, interview, sample and setting, and interpretation and analysis.

#### **Research Method**

The proposed study will employ an approach that is both sensitive to the meaning participants give their reality, and conscious of the interest to the "ways different people make sense of their lives" (Bogdan and Knopp, 1982, p.27). Therefore, a qualitative rather than a quantitative research method will be used. Qualitative studies allow for descriptive research where the context, setting, and subjects' frame of reference are key in addressing the focus of the study. Further, qualitative research is interested in process, meaning, and understanding thus making it truly descriptive while hoping to "find data to match a theory" (Merriam, 1988, p 19). In contrast, quantitative research is largely deductive in the attempt to match a theory to gathered data (Ibid.).

A qualitative research design which is oriented toward the search for meanings and interpretations people give to events, objects, other people, and situations in their environment will be used (Stainback and Stainback, 1988. p.5).

#### **Research Design**

The study will focus on gathering subjective data, that is, data existing within the minds of the participants' and expressed in the participant's natural language (Stainback and Stainback, 1988, p.7). The case study design was chosen because this study is concerned with discovering new information,

insights, and interpretations of ways of knowing as they are perceived by the interview respondents.

Case studies are a type of naturalistic, qualitative inquiry. Quantitative research models are more rationalistic, based on the assumption that phenomena exist in one reality which can be manipulated and controlled. This is the most basic distinction in design between experimental or quantitative, and non experimental or qualitative design. Experimental research assumes that the researcher can manipulate the variables of interest - that is, there is a great deal of control over the research situation (Merriam, 1988, p.6). Experimental research is also characterized by its major intent: to investigate cause-and-effect relationships (Ibid.). Further, rationalistic studies begin with a clearly defined hypothesis and data gathered are then generalized to larger population groups (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 56-63).

In qualitative research, the focus of case study is to describe as accurately as possible an entity in its natural surroundings (Merriam, 1988, p7). Such descriptors are qualitative because instead of reporting findings in numerical data, case studies use prose and literary techniques to describe, elicit images, and analyze situations by documenting events, quotes, samples, and artifacts (Wilson, 1979, p.448 and Merriam 1988, p.145).

Qualitative inquiry assumes that multiple realities exist in nature where phenomena do not form a single truth but radiate into many truths. Consequently, the phenomena cannot be described in terms of separate independent and dependent variables; rather they are interrelated to form a pattern of truth, and it is these truths that must be searched out, less for the sake of prediction and control than for the sake of human understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p.57). The Peigan participants contributing to this study will offer a



world view that is distinctly Peigan, generally Blackfoot and reflective of common Plains Indian cultural traits.

### **The Interview**

An interview is a method of data collection that may be described as an interaction involving the interviewer and the interviewee, the purpose of which is to obtain information that accurately reflects the experience of participants (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p.82). Thus the study will adopt an interview style using interviews to determine how the participants have used traditional knowledge and wisdom in the modern world to make decisions that empowered their lives and strengthen their cultural identities. The information gained from the interviews will be used as a basis to determine effective means of transferring cultural ways of empowerment to First Nations youth, in the form of recommendations.

In the interviews, certain information is desired from each of the respondents. These interviews are guided by a list of questions or issues to be explored, but neither the exact wording nor the order of the questions is determined ahead of time, allowing the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic (Merriam, 1988, p.74).

Patton (1980, p.79) suggests both wording questions in language clear to the respondent, and being aware of researcher stance. The interviewer should assume a "presuppositional" stance - that is, to presuppose that the respondent has something to contribute, has had an experience worth talking about, and has an opinion of interest to the researcher.

To fully capture the voices of the participants, the responses to the semi-structured interview questions will be heard in such a way that the true value and

meaning will be understood by the interviewer. This will be accomplished through discussions for clarity with the participant, and thus considered as valid information. Following each of the interviews the information will be transcribed and coded with keywords, quotes, and comments. The data gathered will then be grouped into categories reflective of the major topics of the concerns used to guide this study. The question format to be used in this study can be found in the appendix.

### **Sample and Setting**

Purposeful sampling will determine the four participants. The participants will be selected on the following basis: each of the four participants will be from the Peigan First Nations group, born and raised in the community. All participants are active in ceremonial or spiritual practices, and in the performing arts of traditional song and/or dance. As well, each participant is articulate, having academic credentials that range from college entrance or diplomas to university degrees. The participants are all adults, two will be female and two will be male. The participants range in age from early twenties to early forties. The participants have been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and ensure anonymity. The two females will be identified as Karen and Adele and the two males as Ryan and Wayne.

The setting for the interviews will be as comfortable as possible for the participant and will be the choice of the participant, either the researcher's home, the respondent's home, or a place agreed upon by both the researcher and the respondent. Both a tape recorder and note-taking will be used to record the interviews.

Each participant will be offered a small gift and a package of tobacco in recognizing Peigan protocol when requesting significant cultural information.

## **Interpretation and Analysis**

The data analysis of this study, as with all qualitative research, will be an ongoing activity during the data collection process as opposed to after the process with quantitative research methods. Stainback and Stainback (1988, p.64) explain, "Data analysis in qualitative research involves organization, classification, categorization, search for patterns, and synthesis as well as determination of missing information requiring further search to achieve an in-depth, holistic understanding about the topic of concern." Further, as data are collected from the field, generally they are organized into manageable units and/or synthesized into other available information in an attempt to define and/or refine research findings (Ibid.).

The findings of this research will be "fleshed out" as each interview respondent develops a depth of understanding to contribute to the knowledge base regarding the research topic. In following the format for qualitative research data analysis the "analysis is recursive; that is, the findings are generated and systematically built as successive pieces of data are gathered" (Ibid.).

Patton (1980, p.44) advises that a balance of description, analysis, and interpretations be maintained, and that the descriptions presented should be sufficient to allow the reader to understand the analysis and interpretations, thus grounding the abstract to the concrete. Further, the researcher should sort out, for the reader, strengths and weaknesses inherent in the analysis and interpretations presented by using phrases such as "strongly supported by the data" or "weak pattern", all of which will be used in the analysis of this research.

In this study theory is grounded in the data and emerges from them. Deriving theory from the collected data will be using the "grounded theory" methodology (Merriam, 1988, p.142).

The next chapter, will present a review of the literature pertaining to the significance and place of story in First Nation's culture. This information will serve as a background for understanding how the subjects of the study find value in their contemporary re-vitalized practice of ceremony and sharing of sacred stories.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF STORY IN THE FIRST NATIONS CULTURE**

#### **Introduction to the Literature Review**

The literature review will focus on the significance of story, more specifically the telling of sacred stories, in the First Nations culture. The ways of knowing embedded in the sacred stories have been preserved and transferred through oral tradition from generation to generation among the First Nations people to this day. Through the research of the literature it was found that nowhere else can First Nations people find their cultural identity and ties to the land but within the stories which continue to be retold.

The extensive literature on First Nations ways of knowing commonly uses the term "mythology" to describe the oral tradition. However, there is a reason to challenge the use of this term. Vecsey (1988) explained clearly that

The use of "myth" or "mythology" as descriptive terms arouses difficulties with a reading audience. The layperson hears the terms and assumes that these false things are of no importance; myths are things to be destroyed, put aside, and scorned, certainly not to be studied intensively and sympathetically. Even more troublesome, when addressing the people whose mythology we study - American Indians, for example - we find that they have heard their term used disparagingly for so long, by so many people, that the very use of it rankles and insults them. They prefer to terms "traditions" or "stories" or "sacred narratives," rather than the opprobrious term "mythology". (p.1-2)

In studying indigenous ways of knowing, research material is to be found categorized under the topic, Native American and/or Indian mythology. The aboriginal people strongly feel that their sacred stories not be further devalued by using a term which denotes untruth or fantasy within an imaginary frame of events (Ibid.). The terms "sacred stories" and "ways of knowing", which are variations of the terms currently offered in the literature will be used instead while

the term "mythology" will be used only when it is directly quoted from literary sources.

The review of the literature will present an overview of the significance of sacred stories in First Nations culture in four parts: firstly, as being a form of knowledge to the First Nations communities; secondly, as offering guidelines for acceptable behavior applicable in the past, present or future; thirdly, the consequences when the value of sacred stories are neglected by First Nations communities, especially the youth population; and finally, the review of the literature which is the story of the Peigan-Blackfoot people. It is essential that the subjects of this study be presented in the context of their common story of survival and perseverance as a community.

### **Sacred Stories as a Form of Knowledge**

First Nations people view, with certainty, their sacred stories as a form of knowledge, essential in making sense of their existence within all of creation. Italian scholar, Robert Calasso (in *The Lethbridge Herald*, May 1, 1993, D3) indicates "the word 'myth' is used today in a very stilted manner, where the everyday usage has come to mean a lie or something fantastic, and that one should go back to the original meaning of the word: "a form of knowledge", adding such sacred stories "reflects us and we reflect myths". He states further that the important thing is not to explain the stories, as present society attempted, but rather, "understand how myths explain everything" (Ibid.).

It is the group's stories that will define who they are as a society. Not only will they hold the history of a people's geographic journey to their present location with its territorial borders and their allies and enemies in times of conflict, but also their social mores outlining family and community structure. Also included in their stories is the people's beliefs about life before birth and after death, and to whom

they offer spiritual sacrifice along with what constitutes appropriate ceremonial practices.

First Nations sacred stories as a form of knowledge are described by Sam Gill (1987, p.17) as perpetuating aboriginal world view when, for instance a story-teller consults the creation stories for the proper perspective from which to speak. Gill explains:

Language is not restricted to "describing the world. Native Americans recognize, that from one perspective, it is the world. There seems to be a remarkable link between the stories of origin and the life ways of the Native American. ... the knowledge given in the creation stories permeates the life of the people. (p.18)

Vecsey (1988, p. XI), while interviewing residents on Indian reserves, focused on the way First Nations people have traditionally examined their lives, which he affirms is through "their own stories" and which, he adds, is "at least as valid as the discursive methods of academics." He described how his questions were often responded to by seasoned indigenous stories rooted in creation (Ibid.). Reflecting on two such stories, Vecsey (1988) contends:

Both stories indicate also that the spiritual world cares deeply about human life and promises to nurture it, if humans can live harmoniously with themselves and their fellow beings. These two stories epitomize for me the grand corpus of Indian stories that espouse a triple fold declaration of dependence on the surrounding world: of the individual on the community, of the community on nature, and of nature on the ultimately powerful world of spirit. (p. xii)

Bronislaw Malinowski (in Erodes and Ortiz, 1984, p.xv) further stated, "Myth in its living, primitive form is not merely a story told but a reality lived."

Today's Peigan-Blackfoot story-tellers will begin the story with an expression such as 'this is how it was told to me' and identify the source of the story. When the story recounts the events of a sacred mystery,

then a short prayer is also offered. The story will relate to the present event occurring in which the story-teller is a participant. The late Blackfoot holy man, Ben Calf Robe, in 1976, began the story of the origin of life by saying, "Hiyo, all you Holy Spirits. I am going to tell a story that was handed down to me from the first people. I will tell it the way it was given to me and I won't change anything from it. If I have forgotten anything, just pity us for it, don't let us suffer in any way. Hiyo, you Holy Spirits" (Calf Robe, 1979). Such was the reverence given to the people's sacred stories.

Just as First Nations story tellers attempt to repeat stories as they heard them, ceremonials also perform ceremonies in as near to exact ways as the original ritual. Both are able to point to specific geographic areas of significance identified in sacred stories that will tell of their own group's origin. As an example, "...the Blackfoot legends point for the origin of their clans to Nina Stahu or the "chief of mountains" a bold square-topped peak of the Rocky mountains near the great inland lake Omaxeen; and many other tribes, the Takahlis, Navajos, Coyoteras, and the Haitians, for instance, set up this claim to be autochthonous" (Brintin, 1969, p.241). Hultkrantz (1981, p.3-4) was also able to show that each cultural area of North America had a sacred story system that corresponds to historical and ecological factors.

To First Nations peoples, the stories of origin are accepted as nothing less than the truth about who they are as a distinct people. When, for instance, a Blackfoot story of origin is being told, the people or character in the story is accepted as a member of the group listening to the story and any reference to 'the people' will be accepted as the present groups' community, in this case, the Blackfoot community (Crow Shoe, Reg. Personal Communication, 1997). The Peigan-Blackfoot people's language makes reference to themselves and all other



Blackfoot tribes as "Nitsitapi" which translates to "Real People". Not surprising, this is also the translation of many other First Nation groups when referring to themselves in their own language.

Malinowski (1954, p.96) stated ... "an intimate connection exists between the word, the mythos, the sacred tales of the tribe, on the one hand, and their ritual acts, their moral deeds, their social organization, and even their practical activities, on the other" (in Vecsey, 1988, p.15). For the Plains Indians, as well as for other First Nations groups, sacred stories about the supernatural and the corresponding ritual activity that recalled the event are deeply imbedded in their spirituality or religious existence. Significant sacred historic events continue to be enacted in ceremonial rituals to this day by the Peigan-Blackfoot people.

The principal function of such stories, like those of First Nations groups, as identified by J. Campbell (1990, p.1), is to get in touch with the universe, as that of the child with the mother, and to stay there. Sacred stories embrace the knowledge that lends balance and harmony to First Nation society's world view in the most natural way. Four functions of sacred stories of origin described by Campbell (in Flowers, 1988) include:

Firstly, the mystical function where one realizes the mystery that underlies all forms, that which allows the universe to become a holier place; secondly, the cosmological dimension where science is concerned and one sees the mystery of the universe come through; thirdly, the sociological function where a certain social order is supported and validated; and lastly, the pedagogical function where we can learn how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances. (p. 31)

Vine Deloria (1973, p.103) explained tribal religions in terms of individuality where a common basis of equality amongst all creation exists. The various religions are based on the fact that living things are "peoples" in the same manner as the various tribes of men are peoples (Ibid.). For instance, the Hopi

use of reptiles in their ceremonies recalls their hero who lived with the snake people long enough to learn from them the secret of making rain for the crops (Ibid.). Plains Indians considered the buffalo as a distinct people just as the Northwest Coast Indians regarded the salmon as a people (Ibid.). Equality is thus not simply a human attribute but a recognition of the creaturehood of all creation (Ibid.). The individual groups remained in very specific vicinities of their gods, whether it be coastal, plains, or desert areas as this connection created their world view, livelihood and group identity.

The Peigan-Blackfoot people are members of the group identified as the Plains Indians, of which Hultkrantz (1979, p.127) reports,

The Plains Indians ... more obviously than other Indians, they evince the ideological basis of nature conservationism and nature veneration. Most certainly their ecological situation has motivated this close connection. As specialized hunters, they have felt their affinity to all living beings and their intimacy with the wide, open environment that was theirs for hunting. The Plains Indian identification of nature with God or the supernatural world has been called "cosmotheism" by Horst Hartmann (1973, p.186 ff.), and Werner Muller (1976, p.40) compares it with the Chinese "universism."

Gill (1987) adds, "The story of origin services at once as a prototype for a ceremonial performance and as a wellspring of philosophy and world view. A distinctive characteristic of this paradigm is the way in which it unifies the primordial and physical geographies, the ethereal and the commonplace, and the spiritual and the material" (p.24). Several stories among the Peigan-Blackfoot tell of animals taking on human form to teach the people. These teachings usually culminate in the animals instructing the humans on the gathering of the certain beings (animal pelts, birds, rattles, etc.) which are wrapped together to form a very sacred and tangible sacred and holy bundle. The holy bundle, which now held the embodiment of all the spirits of those beings entering the bundle, along

with a pipe for smoking, became the focal point of a ceremony and was accompanied with specific songs, dances and prayer rituals. As an example, the Blackfoot people in viewing the buffalo as a distinct people much more highly evolved spiritually than they were, report the story of Blue Face who encountered a buffalo trapped in a mud bog. A conversation took place between Blue Face and the buffalo. As a result of encounter between Blue Face and the buffalo, the Blackfoot were given the extensive ceremonial intricacy that lay the foundation of the Horn Society, which remains active to the present day (Bastien, L., Pers. conversation, 1996). Another active spiritual group coming from the buffalo spirit to the Blackfoot people is the Buffalo Women's Society.

It is from this system of belief that the present day Peigan-Blackfoot people have evolved and it is this same belief system that they continue to practice their spiritual existence. Their sacred stories are founded in particular ways of knowing that reflected a reciprocal and intimate relationship with the supernatural world which surrounded their world. The same sacred stories contributed to their sense of group identity and code of ethics.

It was Durkheim who stated, "mythology is one of the essential elements of the religious life" (in Vecsey, 1988, p.25). Myth or sacred story as a religious concept also came from Hultkrantz (1981, p.3-4), who argued that mythology has "its place in religion and its meaning should be sought for first of all." He affirmed, "It is a myth because it has religious relevance and as myth it should be therefore primarily investigated with an eye to its religious value" (Ibid. p.8). Hultkrantz (Ibid.), in supporting the religious aspect of mythology, noted "a religious-scientific type of analysis had been used very sparingly, whereas historical, formal, and psychological investigations have been performed quite frequently" (p.3-4).

Campbell stated, "A ritual is the enactment of a myth ... by participating in a ritual, you are participating in a myth" (in Flowers, 1988, p.82). For many First Nations groups, the sacred stories continue to sustain and maintain the aboriginal way of knowing through their ability to recognize and honor specific songs, characters, and incidents which occurred at particular geographic areas. Asking a Blackfoot person if Napi, their trickster figure in oral tradition, actually existed, would surely cause them to look puzzled and reply, 'of course he did, and I can tell you where he played.' Within the Peigan community at Brocket, Alberta, current enterprises make reference to the land and its cultural connections to Napi, as with Napi's Playground Elementary School, Napi's Place, and Napi Friendship Association situated in neighboring Pincher Creek.

Vecsay (1988) suggests what has been most obvious to many observers, that myths function commonly - but not exclusively - as part of the complex known as religion, further maintaining:

Myths instruct a community regarding traditional beliefs in supernatural beings, using palpable, concrete symbols to signify the numinous. Myths are the major intellectual means by which religious heritage is passed down; they help a people to know about the gods in order to enhance communication with them. They validate priestly duties and reveal the origins of religious paraphernalia (p. 26).

Religious activity that demonstrates mutual respect and equality of all living things is a recurring theme of First Nation sacred stories. Oral traditions perpetuated the belief that all things possessed a soul. "...Very important in some of the tribal religions is the idea that men can change into animals and birds and that other species can change into men...this way species can communicate and learn from each other" (Deloria, 1973, p.103-4). All of which gives evidence to the "logical implication of the unity of life" held by aboriginal people, whereas, "if all living things share a creator...is it not logical to suppose

that all have the ability to relate to every part of creation?" (Ibid.). As Deloria explains, "Many tribal religions go even further, whereby...the manifestation of power is simply not limited to mobile life forms. For some tribes the idea extends to plants, rocks, and natural features which Western man consider inanimate" (Ibid.).

Religions of the First Nations people are now being validated by other nations of people as they are found to be compatible with contemporary scientific ideas. Deloria (1973, p.106-107) explains,

Indian dances for rain, for example, were said to be mere superstitions, songs to make corn grow were said to be even more absurd. Today men can make plants grow with music, and the whole nature of the power of sound vibrations has come into its own. The principles used by Indian tribal religions have tremendous parallels with contemporary scientific experiments. This can be either coincidental, which is very difficult to prove, or it can mean that the Indian tribal religions have been dealing at least partially with a fairly accurate conception of reality.

Deloria (Ibid., p.108)) concludes, "The parallels with conceptions of the basic unity of existence held by American Indian tribal religions is striking. If the nature of the world is a "single continuous stream of life", there is no reason to reject the idea that one can learn to hear the trees talk. It would be strange if they did not have the power to communicate." Peigan-Blackfoot live in a world of inter-relatedness, where all parts of the living systems are connected and can be viewed as one in the same. Within the realm of modern physics, time and space have come to be considered the same. Regarding this awareness, University of Lethbridge Professor, Mr. Leroy Little Bear notes, "In Blackfoot (culture), that is old hat" (Aperture Weekly, 1991, p. 1).

The Peigan-Blackfoot as with other First Nations groups believe all parts of creation exists with a soul and have the ability to communicate amongst themselves and with human beings. The entire world is alive and interconnected

and is available for interaction on a personal basis. First Nations sacred stories teach that personal offerings and sacrifice made in sincerity will open the door to accessible spiritual messages, spirit advisors or healers. Belief in the foundation of stories of origin assists in summoning the great mystery and the accompanying metaphysical power that is readily available.

Giovanni Battista Vico (in Vecsey, 1988), published his *New Science* in 1725, believing "...if students are to understand the profound realities of the human condition, they must first and foremost study the myths produced by human societies"(p.9). Vico saw the sacred stories as "the most useful of human inventions, the most human of human inventions, holding the most searching, least disguised expressions of human being" (Ibid.). He was adamant that "no study of humans can be complete or even begun without firstly an extensive examination the subject group's sacred stories" (Ibid.).

### **Sacred Stories Offering Guidelines for Behavior**

When the stories are told among the First Nations people, whether they are of heroic journeys, trickster stories, or powerful spiritual visitors, the stories are a confirmation of cultural identity and accepted as having actually occurred. Within each story, the listeners learn appropriate ways to behave toward each other as well as toward all parts of creation. Of course, the depth of the lessons gained by the listener is relative to their life experience.

Sacred stories as transmitters of a society's cultural heritage and guidelines for human behavior are presented as "formal narratives, using prose and sometimes verse in a symbolic manner, which are passed down as a tradition" (Vecsey, 1988, p.19). These narratives are not eye-witness accounts of events, but rather secondhand accounts (Ibid.). The recounting of such stories continues to be an art form, where the story-teller may present the event with

extensions including song, dance, art and other elements of expressive culture, as the narratives "are an art form, in addition to being types of consciousness and messages to be communicated" (Ibid.).

The sacred stories of the First Nations people focus on the spirit of relationship and interdependence of all life forms. Within the stories lessons are reflected through simple and exaggerated examples of human interactions with other entities, be they human or other-than-human life forms. Hence, the mythology corpus, as described by William G. Doty (Ibid.), consists of:

...a usually complex network of myths, which are culturally important imaginal stories, conveying by means of metaphoric and symbolic diction, graphic imagery, and emotional conviction and participation, the primal, foundational accounts of the real, experienced world, and humankind's roles and relative status within it. (p. 2)

Joseph Campbell (in Flowers, 1988, p.15) takes the sacred stories out of the tribal context and suggests that myths are the world's dreams, archetypal dreams, that deal with great human problems. From Campbell's perspective, lessons found in sacred stories can offer resolution to inner conflicts through a critical examination of motives, actions, and outcomes of the heroes and heroines characters.

Sacred stories can help in "child development and guide people of all ages in their relations with the human and nonhuman environments" (Ibid.). Social mores can be enforced through public conscience raising to what is necessary and right and what is moral and amoral, thus preserving the mental health of individuals and society as a whole (Ibid. p. 24-25).

The stories can serve as "models and bases for societal versions of reality, upon which individuals can situate their lives:" (Ibid. p. 25). By making narrative sense of the world, myths can aid in adapting the

individual to society and society to the larger universe (Ibid.). In short, they help in defining what human and community development can be.

Recent efforts to redesign First Nation governing systems to better meet the needs of First Nation communities, on the topic of Planning Community Development Education, Marie Smallface Marule, Kainai Nation, President of the Red Crow College at Stand Off, Alberta, states,

We have a chance to shape our institutions so they will conform to our traditional philosophies and ideologies and to adapt these to contemporary times so they will be as useful as they were previously to our community. But it is essential that Indians insist on traditional institutions, systems and processes as the framework for any discussion of Indian government. Our traditional philosophies and ideologies are absolutely vital to our future. They must be clarified to give people a real alternative (Napoleon, 1992, p.12).

Marule's statements reflect the challenge being offered to First Nation community developers to provide creative and appropriate institutional processes that will reflect indigenous traditional values thereby promoting healthy communities.

The need to revitalize traditional ways of knowing and belief systems of First Nations people for their youth is repeated by educators and other writers aware of the difference between mainstream and Native values. It is from the values found in traditional ways of knowing that First Nations communities will be able to conform to traditional philosophies. Educator, Michael Walkingstick Garrett (1995) summarizes the Native value system as,

Generally, Native American values, or what will be referred to as traditional values, consist of sharing, cooperation, noninterference, being, the group and extended family, harmony with nature, a time orientation toward living in the present, preference for explanation of natural phenomena according to the supernatural, and a deep respect for elders (DuBray, 1985; Herring, 1990; Pedigo, 1983; Sanders, 1987; Trimble, 1981).



When Native American children attend public school they are faced with an unfamiliar system and forced to reject the "Native American informal education of storytelling and participation in ceremonies and rituals that teach children how to live in the traditional way" (Pedigo, 1983, p.273). The result is illustrated in a youth population that acts out their confusion and resistance to adapt and "invariably, feelings of isolation, rejection, and anxiety develop as Native American children are confronted with the demands of a social value system that is incompatible with their own" (Walkingstick, G., 1995, p.188).

The traditional value system offers wholistic development of the entire community. It is the "goal of traditional Native American education to develop cognitive, physical, social, and spiritual competence in each child" (Brendtro and Brokenleg, 1993, p.8). Community members "strive for mastery of their environments...When the child's need to be competent is satisfied, motivation for further achievement is enhanced; deprived of opportunities for success, young people express their frustration through troubled behavior or by retreating into helplessness and inferiority" (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, many young people from First Nations communities have been unsuccessful at coping with their frustrations, evident in high dropout rates to high self-destructive behaviors. The sense of inadequacy can range from self-doubt to actual self-hatred and is seldom expressed toward the source of the frustration, but is turned inward (Proshansky and Newton, 1968, p.191). Recalling one such youth, Peigan ceremonialist, Joe Crowshoe (in Meili, 1991) said,

When you hear someone talking about hanging themselves or shooting themselves, what do you tell them? You feel so helpless to tell them anything because they're in such pain. But, if I burn my smudge and pray, then I know what to tell them. A boy who almost shot himself came back to tell me he owed his life to me. I told him,

"No, it's the One above you should thank. He gave me His message to give to you." (p.101).

To First Nations ceremonialists and Elders, the ultimate power is the Great Mystery, the source of life. At desperate times the ultimate power is called upon most fervently. When answers and/or healing occurs, the resultant teaching and healing must be a selfless act that does not glorify the teacher - only the Great Spirit" (Ibid.). Always prayers are requesting a healthy life, guidance for appropriate behavior, and blessings that can be felt by all (Crow Shoe, Reg. Personal Communication, 1997). Often the prayers heard at ceremonies request that all peoples will benefit as this is the teachings of the sacred stories.

In summarizing the most salient functions of sacred stories in society and individual life Vecsey (1988, p. 24) contends, "Myths tend to anchor the present generations in a meaningful, significant past, functioning as eternal and ideal models for human behavior and goals." The entire community can be taught moral lessons while strengthening a common consciousness by recalling familiar ancestors and heroes who serve as paradigms for appropriate conduct. Myths can create and alter institutions in order to promote an acceptable way of life (Ibid.).

The sacred stories of the First Nations people ground present and past generations in rituals of renewal and respect for all parts of creation. To them reciprocity was real and time was fluid. From their sacred stories, or ways of knowing, came the action of creating relatives and defining appropriate ways of relating. First Nations people continue to perform a tradition of formal ritual acts that allows for relating to the world, finding the significance of life, and upholding the responsibility for maintaining order as it was given to the world in the beginning (Gill, 1987, p.25). To this Gill affirms:

In this view their rituals acts are creative acts of the highest order, since the object of their creation is the world itself. The greatest human responsibility is to perform the acts upon which life and reality depend...for many Native Americans all human action is continually measured against traditional patterns so that the way of life is experienced is dependent upon how it is lived (Ibid.).

One such ritual act, the vision quest, allows the seeker opportunity to renew their relationship with creation and the creator, while alone in the wilderness and fasting from food and water, thus creating depth in ways to relate to the spiritual and physical world. Black Elk, the well-known holy man of the Oglala, said the seeker on a mythical journey must "know that all things are our relatives," and he must use terms of relationship whether he is talking about a coyote, a willow, a lump of salt, the earth, or the sun" (Tedlock and Tedlock, 1975, p. xvi). Black Elk adds, "while he is there (on a vision quest), he sees a universe where everything is not only animated, but a person, and not only a person but a kinsman. On his return from the journey he is reborn; he is no longer the same person he was before" (Ibid. p. xx). During a journey into the Great Mystery, the individual may experience an altered reality where the individual might be shown, as Black Elk was, the center of the universe and the kinship of earth's inhabitants (Ibid.). To illustrate this point, Campbell (in Maher and Briggs, 1988) writes,

The central point of the world is the point where stillness and movement are together. Movement is time, but stillness is eternity. Realizing how this moment of your life is actually a moment of eternity, and experiencing the eternal aspect of what you're doing in the temporal experience - this is the mythological experience (p.32)

Elaboration on such events as the vision quests are difficult to attain since our common language is not appropriately equipped to honor an all pervasive power, the Great Mystery, also referred to as the Great Spirit, the Great

Supernatural - Wakan tanka of the Dakotas, and to the Hopi also refer as the Mighty Something. Tedlock and Tedlock (1975) attempts to explain the mystery by offering,

The realm that Radin, Eliade, and Lamé Deer all have in mind is open to all men in all places at all times, but it is also universally hard to talk about in ordinary language...It is open to what Martin Heidegger calls *contemplative* as opposed to *calculative* thought, or thinking that is oriented toward meaning as opposed to thinking that is oriented toward results. One must "release oneself into nearness" rather than propel oneself at a definite target, or, as Papago relating his vision quest puts it, "I somehow tried to move toward my desire" (p. xiii-xiv).

For the American Indian in general, it is a world composed entirely of persons, as opposed to the everyday world of ego and object (Ibid.). Endowing the world with personhood strongly suggests the need to relate and be 'in service with' all others in kinship relationships for the preservation of the world as it was meant to be (Ibid.). The traditional belief system encouraged and recognized those individuals that practiced the value of being in service with all creation.

### **In the Absence of Sacred Stories**

The previous two sections concentrated on the value of sacred stories in enhancing and promoting the cultural strength of the Peigan-Blackfoot people as well as other First Nations groups. The sacred stories have not disappeared nor will they ever disappear, as oral tradition existence. What has occurred is the declining value of sacred stories as the essential component in the transference of cultural ways of knowing. Ultimately, what becomes affected, is the altering of indigenous world view which answers the questions of "Where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things? (Flowers, 1998, p. 71). The review of literature reflecting the devaluing of sacred stories as a meaningful

transmitter of cultural strength and pride will now cite samples of the various influences that contributed to the decline of traditional ways of teaching and learning and the magnitude of this loss.

At the present time not all Peigan-Blackfoot people participate in observance related to sacred stories as a source of cultural strength and identify. The reasons for this are multi-faceted. Primary reasons stem from the result of colonialism which introduced a foreign education and political system to the Peigan - Blackfoot people. The European- based value system was intent on altering the traditional value system and subsequently, the original strength of the family unit and community structure was negatively altered. To the detriment of today's First Nations people, the new system negated the essence of an age-old system that preserved cultural cosmologies in oral tradition whereby the

Natural (authentic) experiences with stories, in natural (authentic) cultural contexts serve the more utilitarian cultural purposes for which the literature evolved: to tell people how to behave, to bind people together in a common cultural community, and to teach and reinforce models which belong to the cultural cosmology (Rietz in Reyhner, ed., 1988, p.165).

The government policies introduced with the treaty signing process solidified the changes to First Nations peoples' lives, which inevitably impacted all facets of their traditional ways of knowing. Unfortunately, these impacts were of an extremely negative nature. The devaluing of the sacred stories was an eventual consequence of this process. To this fact Sam Gill (1987) stated, "In the closing decades of the last century, the Indian tribes could not be broken politically until they had been destroyed religiously, as the two functions supported each other to an amazing degree" (p.218-9).

The religious nature of sacred stories passed through oral tradition and the social and political structures of traditional First Nations life ways blend to create

a way of existence that lay the foundations for community well being. The stories are "meaningful ramifications for human life in all its fullness...they are means to confer life, promote life...they teach ...not only how the world came into being, but also how humans can survive in the present order of life "(Vecsey, 1988, p.29).

Colonialism continues to be the dominant underlying force that causes the de-valuing of sacred stories and the related belief system of present day First Nations people. Other factors which may influence, to varying degrees, the beliefs of indigenous people as identified by Carol Locust (1988) include:. sub-tribe or clan affiliation, tribal society membership, formal education, influence of an outside religion, marriage, and length of time and/or experience off the reservation (p. 315-330).

One significant factor, the western formal education system, continues to have an enormous impact on the loss of indigenous ways of knowing. First Nations Elders and Native and non-Native educators espouse the belief, as stated by Michael (1993) that the "acquisition of knowledge empowers the recipient, but when this knowledge is not built upon the recipient's cultural heritage, it first of all creates a "destabilization" and a dislocation of the individual" (pg. 5). The effects may be seen in lack of attendance, motivation, and desire to achieve among, in this case, many First Nations students. Unfortunately, "only a few of minority members are able to overcome this dislocation; hence, the reason for the high drop out rate and the low success rate among the minority members" (Ibid.). Rietz (1988), in commenting on the use of oral literature in the classroom, explains that:

The collective wisdom of the native culture is usually overlooked in favor of "proper" academic subject matters. Material constituting the culture's oral literature is often judged unfit for classroom use because it does not fit a scope and sequence of sub skills, because it is not a "sophisticated" literature, and because it presents a supposedly fictitious cosmology. (p. 163)

Indigenous oral tradition has yet to be recognized as an essential curriculum that "teaches (by induction) what a people know about itself and the universe, both through story content and through structural device - the organizational and linguistic properties of stories" (Ibid.). Unfortunately, the value of the indigenous sacred stories were not seen in their proper perspective as having the ability to "...bind time, define the natural order and place people in it, and establish, "sensitivity" - what is "right" and "real" (Ibid.).

First Nations leaders of the past three decades, understanding the need to rectify current conditions, adamantly opposed the further destruction caused by the imposed European education system,

Historical attempts to educate Native people according to foreign standards through mission schools, day schools, and residential schools have met with very limited success. The integration of Native children in the provincial school system is also relatively unsuccessful as demonstrated by relatively high dropout rates compared to non-Native children. When the federal government proposed a complete integration into the provincial school systems with the 1969 White Paper, Native protest was so strong and vehement that the proposal was abandoned (Bates and Epp, 1993, p.4).

In summary, it was through Canadian federal government policy that tribal religious ceremonies were banned. The newly formed reservations, or lands designated for Indian people, were turned over to church missionaries and political patronage appointees of the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development as controllers and overseers of the daily lives of the people. It was then that the decline of both the traditional political leaders and the religious solidarity of the First Nations people was accomplished in a very short time (Gill, 1987, p.218-9). The effects of colonialism were extensive and devastating.

## **The North Peigan Story**

The following section will present a cursory overview of the Peigan-Blackfoot people. The writer feels that the inclusion of the story of the people of which the study will focus, and the community where the study's interview participants were born and raised should be detailed as it helps create the context of study. The participants interviewed for this study reflect a world view of the current Peigan-Blackfoot community and therefore presenting their community history and other relevant information becomes essential.

The Peigan First Nations people are formally known as the North Peigans, Aputosi Pikuni, in the Blackfoot language. The United States border effectively separated them from the South Peigan group in Montana, hence creating two divisions of Peigan people. The Peigan, as do the other members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, refer to themselves as Nitsitapi which translates to the 'Real People'. Their story of origin explains how Napi, Old Man, created them at Chief of the Mountains (Chief Mountain) within Blackfoot ancestral territory. At the time of signing treaty number seven in 1877, which resulted in the creation of the reservation system among other things, the North Peigan population was 589 (Dempsey, 1988, p. 33) at present their population is 2500. In the mid 1700's the Blackfoot people freely roamed the Saskatchewan plains living primarily on buffalo, and by 1800, with the arrival of the gun and horse, they would control from the North Saskatchewan River south to the Yellowstone River and from the Rocky Mountains to the forks of the Saskatchewan River (Raczka, 1979, p.7).

At Blackfoot Crossing during the signing of the treaty, the North Peigans asked for the land to be designated as their reserve as that "on the Old Man's River, near the foot of the Porcupine Hills, at a place called Crow's Creek" (Dempsey, 1988, p. 29), a favorite wintering area where the buffalo were known to be plentiful. The buffalo were quickly disappearing from the area, and even as



the treaty was being signed by Sitting on an Eagle Tail, Many Swans, Morning Plume and Crow Eagle, the buffalo herds were vastly reduced (Ibid., p. 29). By 1879 commercial hide hunters had nearly depleted the herds in Canada and the remaining buffalo were slaughtered in Montana in the following season (Ibid.).

The introduction of the reserve system, coinciding with the disappearance of the buffalo, the staff of life for the Peigan people, forced the group to focus on physical survival, contrary to their former custom which boasted a "culture based on abundance and wealth" (Raczka, 1979, p. 9). Many changes were to occur, whereby the resilience of the Peigan people would become evident.

Canadian Government officials at the time were convinced that all the First Nations people should be taught farming regardless of the reserve land location, fertility of soil or climate (Dempsey, 1988, p. 30). Accordingly, a farm instructor was appointed to the Peigans to teach agriculture in 1879 and crops were planted. By the end of 1880 the Agent observed that onetime warriors were "cross ploughing with their own horses the pieces of land which were broken for them last summer" and "Indians also went to the nearby Porcupine Hills and brought out timber for log houses to replace their worn tepees" (Ibid.). Treaty obligations ensured the Peigans received 198 cows, along with calves and bulls, which constituted the I.D. (Indian Department) herd. Impressed by the first years farming results, in 1881 the Inspector of Agencies reported, "These (Peigan) Indians are very well-to-do and will, in my opinion, be the first of the Southern Plain Indians to become self-supporting" (Ibid.).

The Peigans sowed and harvested good crops in the first years as reported in the 1882 harvest which produced 2,900 bushels of potatoes, 550 bushels of turnips and 425 bushels of oats. After storing for their own needs, sold 50,000 pounds at 2 1/2 cents to the government and another \$1,000 worth to nearby settlers (Ibid.). They were able to supply seed the following year to the

Blackfoot, Sarcee and Stoney Reserves. In 1885 an over abundant harvest met with few buyers and in 1886 a severe drought led to a succession of crop failures that would last for fifteen years. Among the changes were a railway built through the reserve in 1899 whereby compensation realized \$2,100 which was used to build a sawmill. The new focus would become cattle-raising which would employ others to herd, to cut and haul rails for fences, and to cut and sell hay (Ibid. p.31-34). The present economy is still based in farming and ranching.

The Peigan people at the turn of the 19th century, as establishing farmers and ranchers, did retain their language, religion and customs, evidenced with the Sun Dance ceremony being held in spite of efforts (by the church and Agent) to suppress it (Ibid. p.33). The Peigan people, aware that settlers were eyeing the reserve lands, "resisted any suggestion that they give up their land, but in 1909 the government forced a vote regarding the sale of the northwest corner of the reserve, and it was approved. A Chief, Big Swan, immediately prepared an affidavit claiming that the vote was fraudulent but he was ignored and by the end of the year 28,496 acres of Indian land was sold for \$205,681" (Ibid. p.34).

The Peigan people always managed to make the best of what they had, persevering in difficult times with the quiet knowledge that as time advanced so must they. Regarding their development, historian Hugh Dempsey said, "Over the years, the Peigans continued to be a quiet, yet independent people, who were not afraid to accept new ideas" (Ibid. pg. 34). Evidence to this included how they were among the first in Aiberta to demand a vote in provincial elections; the first to allow liquor to be brought on their reserve; and the first to assume administration of their own reserve. At the same time, they encouraged the retention of their own culture through hosting their annual Peigan Pow-wow Days and other celebrations" (Ibid. p 34).

At the present time, the Peigan-Blackfoot people making their home at Brocket, Alberta continue to host several types of sacred ceremonies for the renewal of life on an annual basis and they hold their Elders and ceremonialists in high esteem. Economically, there are Peigan business owners and manager, successful farmers and ranchers. Several Peigan professionals have established themselves in urban settings. The administration of tribal affairs is almost entirely directed by community people.

There are several individuals who pursued higher education and now hold bachelor, masters and (very soon) doctoral degrees, with the number of graduates increasing each year. To date there is a Peigan medical doctor, lawyer, archaeologist, associate professors, published authors, school principals and teachers, and most assuredly the list and disciplines will increase with time. Most importantly, the community boasts of caring grandmothers and grandfathers who adamantly voice their concern and encouragement for the younger generation to pursue professional career goals, adding that they did not have the academic opportunities now available. Elders continue to advocate the collective benefits to the entire community as a result of individual academic and career accomplishments.

The Peigan accomplishments are numerous and often highly recognized within the community by family, extended family members and peers. The North Peigan Story is definitely a story of survival, and of the resilience of heroes and heroines that must never be forgotten by the Peigan-Blackfoot people.

The chapter to follow will contain the presentation and interpretation of the interview data.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF INTERVIEW DATA**

#### **Introducing the Participants and the Setting of the Interviews**

Two women and two men were selected as interview participants and are presented by the pseudonyms of Ryan, Adele, Wayne and Karen. Because the study focuses on the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing and it is assumed that the Peigan community in southern Alberta will be largely interested in the findings of the study, the issue of how to effectively introduce each of the participants is of major concern. The Peigan Reserve has an adult population small enough that presenting particular information and circumstances, while introducing each participant, would most likely lead to their identification by fellow Peigan community members. It is the researcher's choice to honor the anonymity of participants as prescribed in qualitative research methods and present only generalized statements of introduction for each participant.

The four participants of the study were selected for their personal history of renewal and transformation within the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing and spiritual belief system. All of the participants were born and raised on the Peigan Reserve where they continue to attend and participate in Peigan-Blackfoot spiritual ceremonies and gatherings. Ryan and Wayne, both married, now raise their children on the Peigan Reserve. Karen, along with her husband and children, lives near but not on the Peigan Reserve, while Adele, a post secondary student, is single with no dependents.

The interviews were scheduled well in advance of the actual event for all but Wayne. In his case, the writer had difficulty finding him to gain consent and schedule an interview. Once this occurred, the interview was set for the following day. On the initial contact, each of the participants was informed in detail of the

purpose of the study and asked to consider being interviewed. No one declined. In following Peigan-Blackfoot cultural protocol, each participant was given a package of tobacco and a blanket as a sign of goodwill by the researcher, indicating respect for the information to be transferred and the integrity intended in recording and presenting the interview data.

The setting of the interviews was carefully planned. Each of the participants were asked to decide on the most appropriate place for their interview to take place. Their home and the writer's home were offered as initial suggestions for possible places. If one of the two options was not chosen, the participant would decide upon another interview site. For both Ryan and Karen, the interviews took place in their homes. Adele was interviewed in the writer's home while Wayne preferred to be interviewed in a vacant adjoining office at his place of work.

Each interview was tape recorded as the participant responded to specific questions offering their exciting alternatives for the Peigan-Blackfoot youth population in a shared vision of a better tomorrow.

### **Overview of the Themes of the Data**

Each of the interview participants offered considerable data which will be presented and interpreted in this chapter. The interpretation of the interview data will be presented in six parts. The six major themes which surfaced amongst the four participants' material and each theme are covered extensively.

The themes include, firstly, renewal and transformation, which includes the individual accounts of how each participant recalls when, where and how they accepted a new way to view themselves in Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing; secondly, significance of sacred story, which reflects how the participants are able to make sense of their lives within the context of being Peigan-Blackfoot

people in contemporary Canadian society; thirdly, transmitting culture through story, where the actual means of transference of cultural identity and strength through story telling is focussed on; fourthly, path of life, referring to the way the participants have decided to live their life reflecting Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing; fifthly, the teacher and the learner, where participants share who were their teachers and how they learned most effectively about Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing; and lastly, vision for Peigan-Blackfoot youth, as the future generation rises, the participants outline what, how and why the youth population in the Peigan community must gain in order to be the true leaders of the future.

There will be some over-lapping of the participant's thoughts and experiences as the six thematic areas are presented. This was unavoidable given the holistic nature of how teachings found in sacred stories have affected and influenced the lives of the participants of the study.

### **Theme One: Renewal and Transformation**

As mentioned earlier, the participants are individuals that are actively involved in the ceremonial life of the Peigan community, some for longer periods of time than others, some at a deeper level of commitment and each with a renewed out look on life since their initiation to active participation in ceremonial practices. This section will describe how each of the participants came to their personal commitment to attempt to consistently role model acceptable behavior and how their presence in life had been altered in a positive way following the incorporation of Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing in their daily lives. It will look at how each of the four individuals, who now seek personal renewal in Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality, became transformed to view life in a profoundly different way.

### **Ryan's Story**

Ryan affirmed that he had made a commitment to live by the ceremonies at the age of twenty-four. He recalls being raised in a home that paid little attention to the Peigan-Blackfoot spiritual practices, in fact much family time was lost to alcohol abuse. At the young age of fourteen he knew there was a calling for him to be fully involved in a spiritual life.

At the age of twenty-one, he began receiving invitations to attend ceremonies in the community. He gave no huge effort to be at the ceremonies. He recalls older people or Elders would give him stern lectures on his behavior which he describes as 'life in the fast lane'. Although Ryan had taken to alcohol and admits to finding much enjoyment in it, at the age of twenty-two, an opportunity arose for Peigan young people to become initiates in a traditional warrior society called the All-Brave-Dog Society. After careful consideration of the options available to him, Ryan pursued a membership into the Society, and was accepted. In gaining membership, he was filled with the over-whelming feeling to participate as fully as he could in Society activities as well as in other ceremonial functions.

As time progressed he found that he actually did not want to part with "the good times with friends." Ryan recalled that sometime between the ages of twenty-two and twenty-three, he was invited to a home of an acquaintance that was a caretaker of a sacred holy bundle. He asked his individual to pray for him to give Ryan strength to abstain from alcohol, which by now was "very much out of control."

Following this visit, Ryan did not consume alcohol for the next six months. During this time he was attending ceremonies, making offerings and placing great faith in the prayers of his friend. The alcohol abuse began again, this time

for eight months, he was exhibiting the same behaviors as before. He recalled how once again he put the alcohol aside. This is when the dreams began.

At this point Ryan admits the awful feelings he endured in the latter episodes of this alcohol abuse, "I felt terrible in every way, physically, emotionally and spiritually." He knew that he should walk away from the lifestyle that was the norm for his age group, knowing there was a better way. To Ryan it was "a vicious battle within him" where he often found himself on losing side. Even with this apparent awareness of how miserable alcohol abuse made him feel, he drank to excess one more time.

Following this last feeling "of being in hell," Ryan made a commitment to himself to stop the alcohol consumption because "one drink was never enough." Immediately after making the commitment, he was visited by a dream person, which the Peigan-Blackfoot refer to as a spirit messenger, in his sleep that instructed him on a specific path to follow.

Ryan, reflecting on those months of inner turmoil and struggle with alcohol, maintains that the spirit world which surrounds this dimension that we are most familiar with, is very benevolent, filled with love and hope for all creation. He spoke of trying to pray in ways that he heard the old people pray, as all ceremonial prayers are spoken out loud and in this way he sent out his messages. Ryan said he knew that his messages were accepted by the higher spirits, his evidence being an experience where he climbed a high hill to offer tobacco and prayer and in that instant, "the sun came down to me." He described how the body of light and heat, that we call the sun, brought its physical presence closer to him as he stood in prayer. For Ryan, the experience was both magnificent and humbling.

Ryan was visited by the dream spirit manifested in the form of an old man four times in the next two month period. Ryan had a dream in which the old man



instructed him to seek his vision by fasting without food and water staying alone in a quiet spot away from people. After the fourth dream, Ryan approached an Elder in the community to describe these dreams. The Elder became his spiritual advisor who called upon other Elders, and the preparation began for Ryan to fulfill the request to fast for a vision that would guide his life in a meaningful way. Ryan completed four days and nights of fasting. It was a difficult test physically as one night saw the first snow fall of the season. Of the four day ceremony, Ryan proclaims, "My life has never been the same since."

### **Adele's Story**

The second interview participant, Adele, in speaking about her own ways of showing renewal referred strictly to the attendance and participation in ceremonies. She counted the ceremonies she was familiar with which included the Peigan and Kainai Sun Dances and the various spiritual societies connected with the Sun Dance ceremony, as well as specific Blackfoot ceremonies performed in the communities, such as the all-night holy smoke ceremony, the medicine pipe bundle ceremony, and the sweat lodge ceremony. The latter was one in which Adele was taught that only Blackfoot men participate in. Each of the ceremonies are distinct from each other and while held in high esteem and sacredness by the Blackfoot people, it is not the intention of this study to describe them in any detail. At the Kainai Sun Dance camp, she saw the Horn Society perform their dance, as would the Buffalo Women's Society. In determining Adele's level of participation, it was found that she was deeply involved for a younger single woman. Adele continued,

I would fulfill vows that I made with each of these societies. I have been in their lodges and know several of their members on a personal level. I have a lot of faith in their prayers and ceremonies. My family have hosted all night smokes and sweat lodges I am very

familiar with these ceremonies. There is also the All-Brave Dog Society that we participate in.

Adele's familiarity with and comfort level around the ceremonies was quite obvious as she described a genuine sense of community among the people at these ceremonies and her own heightened sense of self worth by being a participant in them. She added,

I have much respect for the ceremonies and the societies. I have been at the Sun Dance ceremonies, including those where piercing occurred. I have been around these ceremonies for most of my growing up years. I feel very comfortable, sometimes I would invite friends that have not been exposed to our ceremonies to accompany me. They always enjoy this.

The importance that Adele placed on Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality and ceremonials in her daily life was elaborated;

My honoring of God from day to day starts when I see the light of the sun. It is very important to me because the sun reminds me of my spirituality. The sun spirit is the center of the Peigan spiritual way of life. I have been very sick at times and have often felt that the prayers have carried me through to today. I can not see life without my spiritual practices. It (Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality and ceremonies) tells me who I am, that I am Peigan and Blackfoot.

Adele then spoke about the transformational process first explaining that it may not be a private event in that "others may be having dreams or receiving messages about the transforming individual." She apparently knew that when a person is changing and taking on greater spiritual responsibility in their lives or, likewise, when they are struggling with major difficulties, that other people could be informed of this process through dreams. Adele said the spirit world is most loving and lets others know when a person needs extra help from others.

Adele was very well versed in the area of dream messengers. What distinguishes an ordinary dream from a sacred dream for her is where "I will see

or hear spirits talking to me." And when she has a sacred dream or a dream that is puzzling she will "tell the dream to my parents and they will look after me, and do whatever has to be done." She explains,

In my case I have had many dreams where animals have communicated with me. I once dreamt that I had a new Blackfoot name, and I saw the person who gave it me. I told my parents and they went directly to the old man in my dreams and told him the dream. They didn't tell him that he should give me a new name, it was the old man that said the dream was instructing him to give me a new name. Because I was sick at the time, we all felt it was important that I get a new name.

Adele then explained the importance and sacredness of having a traditional Blackfoot name. There is a naming ceremony that accompanies the giving of a name. Adele stated, "The old man named me after his journeys all over North America, I guess he wanted me to be healthy and travel far, as he did. I was named after his accomplishments."

In viewing her own transformation, Adele was self-reflective and able to describe any other person that is on their spiritual path as "one that practices the ways taught by the ceremonies, does the offerings, and practices the spiritual ways." Adele adds,

Sometimes when I am confused about what direction to take in my life I will pray for guidance. I usually get the answer in a dream, or sometimes the message will just hit me in the middle of the day while I am doing something very ordinary. This is when I know the message is spiritually directed, because it will come to me when I am in busy traffic or while shopping, without the nearest thoughts to my request, then the message will just come to me.

She was able to identify other young people that take this way of life very seriously. Of that group Adele expressed, "There are young people doing this, I meet them at ceremonies, but we don't talk openly about what we do, I guess this is a form of respect, just a quiet knowing of the way."

### **Wayne's Story**

In Wayne's case, he had a particular dream that indicated there were greater things to come in his life and he would soon be aware of his potential. For Wayne, this was when the renewal and transformation began. He recalls,

Prior to that dream, I was aware of certain peculiar things, for me the most obvious was a sound - a deep rumbling noise - that was always in the background during my daily life. In my dreams I would also hear it. The rumbling noise was first heard in the distance and slowly started to move in closer to me. In one of the dreams the noise came out of a blizzard and all of a sudden it appeared in front of me as a person.

At that point, Wayne considers himself fortunate to be able to draw on the experiences gained earlier in life from the ceremonies his grandparents made him attend: "I had to go back to the ceremonies and from that point I knew there was something that I had to do." One of the ceremonies that Wayne then participated in was one that consisted of fasting for spiritual guidance. Of this ceremony, he said,

I followed it through, completing the ceremony, not knowing what would happen, what the results would be. But also knowing that what my grandparents made me experience spiritually would bring me through that experience of fasting. I participated in this fasting ceremony ... not expecting anything, but I would give it my honest commitment.

Wayne completed the fast and admitted that he was not prepared for what happened next. It was maybe a month later, he said, that the rumbling noise began to come in, "not only in my dreams but it was in my everyday existence." To Wayne it sounded like rolling thunder that are heard in the early summer, right after the lightening bolts. He knew that he was the only one that would hear it, but it became so persistent that when he was with a group of people he would ask, "Did you hear that or did you feel that?" "Feel what?" they would respond.

Wayne found that one other person in his company began to hear the rumbling noise and also feel the trembling of their bodies that it would cause. He explains,

I don't know how it rubbed off onto that other person. At first I would be in a different room, or even outside at a considerable distance then I would hear and feel it and I would phone back to this person. The person would say 'yes, I felt it.' It began happening to two of us at the same time. The rumbling became more intense and lasted longer. One day it came in full force, it was almost as if the top of my head blew off, as if it opened up.

The experience, which he maintains was sent to him by the spirit world, left Wayne a different person, a transformed man. He continues,

For four days I didn't sleep, I was so charged with energy. Within the four days I was doing things and traveling in ways that I can probably never explain, not only was I experiencing the energy physically, I was traveling spiritually through a different realm. At one point I even touched the sun.

Wayne spoke at length about individuals, including himself, who had changed their perception of themselves, others and their environment as a result of similar experiences. Wayne explains,

You would see a drastic change in their personality. They won't talk to many people, because in the beginning stages they have to adjust themselves to the new experience and while they are making that adjustment. They are very quiet, appearing almost withdrawn, sometimes being mistaken for being depressed.

Wayne described how the person may feel physical pain or feel out of tune because of the spiritual experience they have had, and that it takes a period of time to make the adjustments back to this physical reality. Once this is complete, they may start talking about it because they feel so good about it that they want to share it with others. And that sometimes other people will not want to hear about such an experience, thinking the person is strange. "This is a

contemporary phenomenon." Wayne insists that in the past these types of experiences were common place among the First Nations people.

Other indicators of a transformed person, according to Wayne, is their willingness to begin contributing to the community firstly in very small ways. He adds, "even though they have the ability to make radical changes, they will not, rather they will work with the community at it's pace, they won't force anything, because they understand what it takes to go through a transformation." Wayne was adamant that following the event or events that trigger a personal transformation "there is responsibilities that go along with it." The energy, he explains, does not belong to the individual, rather is there for the collective good of the community. Wayne speaks as a strong advocate of community development and making the community a better place for all the people residing in it.

### **Karen's Story**

Karen, the final participant, spoke of her clear commitment to remain involved in the ceremonial practices and to attempt to gain greater participation within the ceremonies. She described how a severe health condition placed her and her young baby in a hospital and how faith transformed her life. Karen asserts,

I feel that I have been given a second chance at life. And I really believe that my baby and I are here today because of my faith in these spiritual saviors, the bundles, and in our Creator. My baby and I were very sick, and that was at the time when I was just starting to be taught about these miracles that occur from these bundles and your own faith. I realized, while I was in the hospital, that the only thing that would get us out of there and healthy again was spirituality. So within that time I began praying everyday, really giving my life to the Creator and really believing that the Creator could get us out of there, not the doctors ... it would be the Creator.

Thinking back to this time of illness that afflicted both her and her baby, Karen reports, "Sometimes you think that times are difficult, that maybe it's just a test, or maybe that's the way it's meant to be so that you could turn and give your full one hundred percent belief to these sacred bundles." She told how her fear was now about her own life and she clung to her new found belief system,

After this experience with my baby and myself I knew I had to go to these bundles and their ceremonies full heartedly and somehow I had to get over the fear that I felt. I had a lot of fear toward these ceremonies, and I believe it was because of ignorance and being taught certain things as a child. Unfortunately, I learned to always be afraid of these ceremonies. Today it is different, I feel like a very holistic person and I feel it is because of my Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality.

Karen spoke of the early years of her life in church run schools that severely discouraged the students from attending their own Peigan-Blackfoot ceremonies, and how families still involved in traditional ceremonies were made to appear ignorant or backward by the school staff. She described the most damaging effect of the paternalistic attitude of the time as being made to be fearful of the Peigan's ancestral sacred bundles and ceremonies because the church and government would prefer to have the people think their traditional belief system was connected with a force that can be nothing less than evil.

Karen, like the other interview participants, has found in the Peigan-Blackfoot ceremonials a very important source of inner strength. Not only is cultural pride and identity strengthened, but in a powerfully significant way, they have found a sense of salvation.

The next section will explore the participants view of life for themselves, humanity and the environment as a result of the incorporation of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality in their lives.

## **Theme Two: Significance of Sacred Stories**

Each of the interview participants gave evidence of how sacred stories has added a deeper dimension to their lives because they believe the essence of who they are as Peigan-Blackfoot people is defined within the sacred stories of their people. One such story was especially reflective of the belief that sacred stories help to make sense of present lives as well as those of previous and future generations. A particular story provided by Wayne has great significance to the subjects of the study, and the Peigan-Blackfoot people generally. It is therefore a good place to begin this section. Other references to the significance of sacred stories will be found in sections that follow. This is due to the fact sacred stories are found to be the foundation of all components of Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing.

Wayne related a story that was told to him by his great grandfather. Wayne said, "Even though I was young at the time of first hearing the story, I remember the story because there were four generations of us at my father's house on that day. Besides my great grandfather, there was my grandfather, my father and me, and I recall their discussion afterwards as very lively." Wayne outlined the major points of the story,

The story goes that it was the first morning that everything came into being. People were very busy making things to sustain their lives, that's when the peoples' building and creating began. This activity continued until the people were satisfied with their material comfort level and it's conclusion was marked by the sun reaching it's high point at mid-day. The sun remained still in the middle of the sky and life was good. Then disenchantment occurred among the people. Some people wanted more material wealth while the remaining people were happy with the way things were. The two groups of people met to discuss their difference of opinion. The Almighty Being gave the people one day to settle this difference. The people viewed this resolution process as a contest to see if their own group would win, understanding that their lifestyle would then prevail. Once the contest began the sun began to move across the sky.



As Wayne mentioned, during the recalling of this story on that particular day, there were four generations in the same room. Wayne admitted that this was no coincidence and that it was meant that he be present to this story telling event. Without a doubt, each of them was a player in the story, which was the reason for the heated discussion. The story continues,

My great grandfather was talking about the children of the setting sun who would have the red sunset. These people had true knowledge, in fact, they would be the last people to have ready access to the knowledge. Following that period, there would be the children of the dusk, who would be marked by the period where all things were beginning to be covered with darkness. Everything would be fading from the human eye. Then there would be the children of the night who would enter into the period of darkness. The children of dawn would then enter and see the red wisps at the break of day, they would be followed by the children of the rising sun who would see the new day.

Wayne recalled that one day in his adult life he revisited this story telling event and inside one moment, he realized how "all the pieces fit together, this was a story of creation and about time periods and how each generation was assigned specific responsibilities to a certain time period." He understood that his great-grandfather spoke of how five generations would be distinguished by certain periods of natural resource development and how, through the oral tradition and symbolism, it would all be represented by one day's travel of the sun. Wayne then understood what his great grandfather was trying to explain to his father, and that "the reason my father couldn't understand him was because he belonged to that generation of the night ... that time period was marked by the residential school, the reserve system, and all those things that contribute to the apparent loss of our culture."

Wayne went on to explain that during the night "you can't see things because it is dark, but it doesn't mean the things are gone, it just means there is

no light shining on them." Wayne's great grandfather tried to illustrate this to him by saying,

All during that time of the children of the night you will see these bits of truths come out. They will be like the stars that you see in the night sky. In themselves they represent certain truths, but even if you should put them all together, you do not even begin to produce the light that you see in the day time.

Drawing from his great grandfather's story, Wayne pointed out, "this generation, that you (the writer) and I are in will be known as the children of the dawn, if you look to the east, you will see the red trim of a new day that belongs to us, my great grandfather said we will be the first people to get back the true knowledge earned by our ancestors or the children of the setting sun." Wayne announced,

The children of the rising sun are our children. We, as children of the dawn, will recognize that our cultural ways are not gone, there is only darkness covering them. We get to see this realization occur. Then the children of the rising sun, that new sun, they will see that the traditional value system is back with them as normal as it used to be. They (our children) will see it all. They will understand where and how everything operates.

Wayne stated that these successive generations would be guided through life by the natural light of the sun, whereas the group of people that wanted more natural resource development at the time of the morning of creation would follow an artificial light coming from fire, "the same fire that is used to melt and mold the natural resources into the things we see around us today." Wayne adamantly stated,

This story is still being played out today. Look at our environment, we can see how the group responsible for adding far more fire than is needed to the resources, has taken that development to a point where the same fire is almost consuming the earth itself. They are unable to stop it, at least not until this thing, this contest, has been

played out. ... We were given one day for the contest and everyday we are reminded of it. When the sun reaches high noon we are reminded of it, when the sun sets, we are reminded of it. When the stars come out at night we are reminded of it. In the morning at sun rise we are reminded of it. We are constantly being reminded.

Like many other First Nations people who extract truth about life and humanity's purpose on earth from oral tradition, Wayne's firm belief in this sacred story was illustrated as he asserted,

I don't need a book, or a bible, I don't even need a watch to tell me that we are moving toward that time symbolized by the mid-day sun. And every time I see another dam going up, another rain forest going down, every time I see another field being plowed under, and somebody says it's progress, someone else will stand up and say it's destruction.

Wayne went on to talk about the momentum toward the 'high noon time' as being indicated inversely by the depletion of the earth's natural resources. Regarding this he warned, "I just look at it and say we are just moving another hour closer to the time when all this will stop and it comes to a head."

Reflecting upon the story told by his great grandfather, Wayne admitted, "it is an extremely notable story, like an archetype for all stories, it is not the only one like this, and all the other stories could fit in along side it." He added, "the other stories branch off just like a tree, with branches that go into different directions." Wayne continued stating the stories all contain knowledge unto themselves, and the various branches of the stories focus into different disciplines. And that at some point you can start comparing these stories, and "all of a sudden there is a connection." The result is seeing how things begin to make sense around you. He was aware that the stories are ways of accessing information and, according to Wayne, if you are not able to access information, then, for you, "unfortunately, they are nothing more than mythology." His

reference to the term 'mythology' in this context is one of false or fantastic presentation of untruths. Wayne concluded that "now when I hear a story, I think 'oh right that's what it's about', I am able to simply cross-reference it, suddenly things begin to make more sense."

Wayne shared another story to illustrate the significance of story and story telling. This one was about a man who went to the top of the Sweetgrass Hills a long time ago and during the night he would travel in spirit to the distant tree line and back to his physical body. The following morning, the man went down to the camp and instructed some teenage boys to travel a certain direction and there they would find a camp of their people. The man informed them of his night travels. The young man did not think to question the validity of the information. They knew the man was telling the truth. There was no doubting, they simply got prepared and went as they were instructed and found the camp. This was their normal way of being with each other and their surrounding reality. The language of story telling sets the context for the listener to respond. Wayne verified this,

Our language does not allow us to tell a lie. In the language, if you're going to tell a tall tale, you would have to announce that in the beginning before you proceed to speak, you would say 'well here's a tall tale or here's a funny story, or here's a joke'. The listeners would then know, if you didn't do this then you are telling the truth. There is always a clear distinction.

Wayne reflected on the (non-Native) writers who visited First Nations people in the pre-treaty era. It was of concern to him that they wrote of the people while not fully understanding the world view of the people. He believes "there are assumptions that we project onto a situation, because we think we see something." Wayne made reference to some of the stories that recounted how Peigan-Blackfoot elderly people would almost cherish their physical discomforts making announcements like, "I went four days without food, I almost froze". He

describes how they "bragged about their adversity as if it were a challenge, followed by how they were then given pity, by coming on to some warmth, some food." He explained that for these Peigan-Blackfoot people, the adversity was actually a process of cleansing, in that, "they saw a blessing, where someone else might view pain and suffering." The people experiencing the adversity would accept it as "Maybe I did something I shouldn't have back there and this is my penance." At the end of the experience they would proclaim, "Now they could start fresh again." He asserted, "We need to understand that this concept applies in this present time." Wayne reflected on what some would call pain and suffering in the First Nations communities, then he jokingly added, "These people came stumbling into my camp and they're actually happy that they almost died."

The significance of sacred stories appear paramount to all interview participants of the study. Ryan also confirmed the importance of sacred stories as holding the original instructions on how to make ceremony because the stories tell the people how and what to gather for the contents of holy bundles as well as how to perform the rituals that correspond to the various bundles. He explained that in Peigan-Blackfoot philosophy, as illustrated through the sacred stories, humanity is in co-existence with the universe and it is important to perform the renewal and thanksgiving rituals incorporated into the various ceremonies.

For Ryan the holy bundles are "the physical manifestation of the people's connection to the cosmos." He affirmed this saying the sacred accounts of past mystical events were shared with him by the Elders who then told him, "if you have faith in what you say and do, then good things will take place in my life, there will be many rewards."

Adele reflected on the significance of sacred stories by suggesting a direct connection of the ceremony and its prayers to the teachings encased in stories.

She maintained, "The ceremony reminds us of the first individuals that performed the songs and the dances and saved all this richness for us today."

From the information received by the interview participants it became obvious why First Nations people everywhere in North America become agitated when their stories are trivialized and placed in the category of non-truths, what Wayne referred to as mythology. It is within the stories of the society that they are able to form their lives and find their place in the tribal group's identity. The immense respect given to Elders in all First Nations communities is also obvious as they are seen as wisdom keepers. The world of spirit is also highly recognized as only a whisper away and therein lies the ultimate truth.

The following section will again focus on the sacred stories of the Peigan-Blackfoot people to explore their effectiveness as transmitters of Peigan-Blackfoot culture.

### **Theme Three: Transmitting Culture through Story**

The transmission of cultural ways of knowing is most evident in the Peigan-Blackfoot stories of origin describing the source of their ceremonies and their first ancestors. It is through the ceremonies that the true essence of the culture is manifested, therein is found their beliefs and value system. Culture for the Peigan-Blackfoot people include such things as their songs, dances, art forms, social and political organizations, all of which are a reflection of the surrounding environment and land base that supported their life style. Oral tradition then must play a very significant role. The interview participants presented evidence that transmission of the culture does occur through story and story telling.

Ryan stated the actual participation in ceremonies gives him a feeling of

meaningful contribution to the well-being of the Peigan community as well as to society in general. He reported that the ceremonies are the opportunity for many people to gather and give thanks to higher benevolent spirits for the many blessings given to humanity. "It all becomes reciprocal, the spirit helpers recognize us and we acknowledge them," he added.

Ryan related the story of how the Sun Dance ceremony, which lay dormant for years, was reactivated by the Peigan-Blackfoot people. Then he spoke of his involvement in the actual ceremony itself. He reflected on how beautiful it was that the entire camp of people and many other members of the community were there to assist in the completion of the ceremony. Of this he added, "No matter how minute a person's participation was, it was equally important in the complete fulfillment of the ceremony." During the Sun Dance, as with other ceremonies, there must be involvement of the community members. Ryan explained by saying,

The ceremony needs the community's participation and community needs the ceremonies to unite them as a single unit. The ceremonies are performed and offered to the Source of Life, and the Source of Life is the spiritual force that creates life allowing the community to thrive.

Ryan added that even the non-participating community members benefit from the ceremonies, as the prayers and offerings are made for everyone.

Ceremonies, for Ryan, are the mechanism for opening new ways of understanding the gifts we have in life. These gifts, he stated, were "anything made for our use and comfort and therefore should be utilized in a way that reflects appreciation that they have come from the holy earth."

Adele was aware that her Peigan-Blackfoot culture was transmitted through story, she stated. "When I hear the stories I am confident that our Blackfoot way of prayer is still there, we are still doing those things the first

individuals were instructed to do." When asked to explain this, she offered the following example of the Scarface story:

I think of the story of Scarface, because when he had something wrong with him, he felt he could change it. In this case, he thought he could have his scar removed from his face. My people's ceremonies are very powerful and can heal emotionally and physically. Some medicine men and women are more gifted than others, that is, some have greater powers or a stronger source of (healing) energy.

In asking Adele to continue with the story she was reluctant, feeling that she could not do the story justice. I sensed she was feeling inadequate to tell a sacred story that was very significant in the community. She said she would only highlight the parts of the story that lead to the ceremony. She continued,

Scarface went to his holiest people and they were not able to remove the scar from his face, each one sent him to a stronger person. The strongest person told him he would have to go directly to the source of life or the Sun spirit, and Scarface was instructed on how to get to the sun's home. So he traveled west as far as he could go. There he was taken to the Sun's home. He was not accepted right away by the Sun and his wife, the Moon, but after he saved their son, the Morning Star, he was accepted. Morning Star asked his father to make medicine to remove the scar from his new friend's face. The Sun built a sweat lodge and during the four rounds of the (purification) ceremony the scar was removed.

Adele then explained that this was only part of the story "that tells me that there is power out there and you can best access it through ceremonies." She then mentioned prayers, faith and offerings which will "help you find out if your affliction should be removed." She then expressed that "sometimes the answer is in learning to live with the affliction, and that is where your greatest learning will occur, and not when it is removed." Adele reflected back to the Scarface story,

In Scarface's situation the scar had to be removed so he could give evidence of the source of the greatest healing energy, because all



the people of the camp knew of his desire to remove the scar, and how the holiest ceremonialists had not been able to help him. In the end Scarface brought back to the Blackfoot people the ceremony of the sweat lodge which can heal disease of the mind and body.

Adele went further to explain that after Scarface was taught "the purification ceremony" he brought it back to the people to use. Adele reported that she was taught that only the men are allowed to participate in this ceremony, because it is so powerful. Adding, "when my dad sweats he takes care of the entire family and all of our relatives, this is how we believe."

Karen also found that the transmission of culture was through the ceremonies, she identified those ceremonies that carried the most significance for her personally were the ceremonies associated with these bundle owners and the all-night holy smokes during the winter. Regarding the ceremonies, she stated,

There are the medicine pipe openings in the spring and the main Sun Dance during the summer. Watching the societies at the Sun Dance, mainly the Horn Society. You see from their organization, how highly structured they perform their dance. I always think back to the old days of how our people must have lived and if our ceremonies are as strict as they are today, imagine how our lifestyle must have been then.

Karen then referred to her own practice of incorporating her awareness of cultural ways in her life on a daily basis,

Each day I begin the day by protecting myself and cleansing (centering) myself. I feel that if I didn't do this daily, I would be out of balance. When I am at work I also make sure that my work area is cleansed and purified each day so only positive energy will be allowed into the area that I work in. All these come from my teachings from the spirituality. As well, I have learned other important things. But to me it is very important that you start your day by protecting yourself.

By cleansing Karen is making reference to the use of sweet grass as an incense whereby its rising smoke is used to alter energy by transforming the surrounding energy field to a positive level, which is then felt by the person or persons using the sweet grass.

Wayne contends the Peigan-Blackfoot spiritual practice, culture and related customs are all interconnected and that "they are very much alive today...just as strongly present as they were two hundred, three hundred even five hundred years ago." He described the presence of an unlimited source of power or energy and that people do not, in many cases, know how to comprehend or access it properly. For Wayne it is a type of energy and it is constantly there. He pointed out,

In a lot of cases, when people talk about spirituality, they make reference to a particular ceremony or to certain things that must first occur but what I see the ceremonies as is ways of preparing one's self to tap into that energy.

Wayne went on to compare the preparation of tapping into the energy through ceremony with that of an athlete preparing to run a long distance. For Wayne, a physical and spiritual conditioning must first occur and it is the ceremony that fulfills the spiritual conditioning, and, provided the ceremonial part is done properly, the ceremonial preparation can take many people through the dimension of pure energy. He attests that "once you have shown the individual how they can tap into that energy, what occurs is a form of instant education."

Wayne then cautions,

Once you tap into the energy you can only do so for a certain length of time because of the power that it has. If you tap into it for an extended period, it's like anything else, if you're not ready it can become harmful. Just as if you might exercise too much, taking something beyond what you are conditioned for is foolish. In some

cases the ceremonies are designed to build you up physically as well as in the spiritual sense.

Wayne stressed the importance of self-preparation through ceremony "prior to entering a completely different realm." And it has to be done gradually so you can come cross the thresholds easily because there is a temporary detaching from the physical self. Of this realm, he states,

You enter into that spiritual world, it is beyond any physical experience that you may have had where sight, sound and touch are highly sensitized. Upon your return it is extremely difficult to find a method to translate that experience. One of the most difficult things to do is to talk about it, to be able to share that experience with other people.

It is finding the medium to share the experience of being one with the source of energy that Wayne sees the significance of story telling. As he explains,

Again, this is where the stories are very important, because it seems that only through the stories are you able to bring that energy back to speak about. You can then begin to share it (the experience) with other people, it is through the stories that the energy is dispersed and explained in a way that people can accept it.

Each of the interview participants illustrated how they understood the transmission of culture through the original story then through corresponding ceremony. The ceremonies are performed again and again for the community and by the community. The constant mention of energy by the participants is striking and will be examined further.

The next topic will be the personal journeys that lead to each participants present way of being within the dimension of healing energy.

#### **Theme Four: Path of Life**

Each of the four participants related a renewed perspective of life as a result of a heightened awareness and renewed appreciation for the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing. The participants were able to venture forward on a new journey which will be described here as path of life. This section will give an overview of each of the interview participants and their individual presence in the world, each in their own way, sharing a common path of life.

For Ryan, to participate in the ceremonies as fully as he does is, in his view, a major accomplishment, given the numerous obstacles he had to overcome in his younger life. He states, "For me, it is almost mystical that the Creator now uses me as an instrument to perform the ceremonies." Of his participation, he states, "I am a visual example to the other participants, the curious and the believers alike, that when someone makes a commitment to do their best, the best in them will surface."

From the ceremonies, Ryan gains self-healing from past hurts he has inflicted on others and from the hurts inflicted on him by himself and others. He went on to say that he wishes to never purposely hurt others and to develop greater patience and tolerance for all humanity. This is the way he wants to lead his life and he reminds himself of this each time he enters a ceremony. Ryan feels the ceremonies give him a renewed belief in our connection with the cosmos and its healing powers that are readily accessible. When asked to explain further he replied, "It is a spirit that I feel that sends messages that the Source of Life has acknowledged the ceremony and accepted the offering and sacrifices of the sponsors of the ceremony, the participants and the ceremonialists." Ryan added that at the completion of a ceremony he has "a sense of accomplishment and feelings of pride for myself personally, and for the other participants." He described another feeling present that brings peace within

himself and is "surely within all the participants." He describes this feeling as love. There is much happiness following the ceremony, people wishing each other the best and extending invitations to the next ceremony.

He continued that this positive energy is felt as a strong presence and for Ryan, this is the essence that must be pursued for the well-being of the community and for all of humanity. Ryan's own commitment to live a lifestyle that exemplifies the goodness of the spirit in the ceremonies becomes obvious. For him it is the spirit's presence that "makes you believe and strengthens your faith that miracles can occur and be witnessed."

Ryan carries much personal pride in his accomplishments in the Peigan-Blackfoot ceremonial life and in his professional life. He senses the two go hand in hand in that he could not be as effective in his work life if he were not so committed to participating fully in the ceremonial life. Ryan explains that his present lifestyle is altered with an outlook on life that holds greater possibilities for achieving career goals and personal well-being of the mind, body and spirit. When asked what anyone can gain by being as connected to the ceremonies as he is, he replied,

There is peace from within that fills your life, you feel confident in all that you do, your self-esteem is raised, your identity as a Peigan person becomes very meaningful, and mostly you have a desire or a yearning to learn more about our ways of knowing.

He concluded by saying "if we place the same amount of energy into our everyday activities as we do in the ceremonies, what a positive environment would be available for the community to enjoy.

At a young age Adele was introduced to the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing which was the most natural way for her to incorporate the belief system

into her life. She sees another variable in her choice to carve her life's path in that direction. She explains,

The Creator chose for me to experience sickness at a young age, teaching me at the same time to be spiritual. I started having dreams about myself and my family, which gave me inner strength and spiritual guidance. Also my parents played a big role in teaching me and guiding me. If it wasn't for their commitment to Blackfoot spirituality I wouldn't be as strong spiritually today.

Adele's confidence appears to be extremely grounded by her and her parent's ceremonial involvement. Regarding her illness that she still carries, Adele admits, "My life has taken a different path than many of my friends' because of the ceremonies I attend. This all started when I was young and I didn't know anything else but my Blackfoot spirituality."

In her interactions with her peers she gives the impression of wanting to give them some of her knowledge and yet still wanting to be accepted as a teenager within the community. Adele contends,

At my present age, and I still believe that I am young, I am able to speak to my peers about developing their faith. Their faith doesn't have to be in the Blackfoot ceremonies, as long as they are able to pray. They need to have faith in something, that is what gives you confidence to face the world each day. I don't know what kind of a person I would be today if I wasn't raised with the ceremonies. I see how lost a lot of my friends are. I still have fun with my friends, sometimes we have a lot of fun together. I don't do anything real foolish. I know that the spirit world will not look disapprovingly on me for enjoying myself, in fact sometimes I will ask for protection that nobody will get hurt, because there is a lot of crazy people out there.

Adele sees the protective forces around her at all times. For her, there is no sense of apprehension, only a sense of security and belonging.

The path of life that Wayne now travels was selected for him. It occurred during an experience where he was immersed in healing energy, which he describes in the following way,

During the experience, I was able to see back in time. I travelled through a time line, I was able to pick up things here and there. This is where a lot of the research I now have comes from. I know which book to pick up, and I am able to go to a certain place and know what I am going to find. When I go there what I find simply confirms what I have been told.

Wayne went on to explain that his new awareness also occurs in his association with animals and plants. He said, "I can understand animals in a certain way that I never did before, and they can communicate with me in ways that I never understood that they were capable. The same thing occurs with plants." His explanation carried a story with it,

A friend of mine tells of being instructed to go pick four trees for a particular ceremony. So he goes out and spends all afternoon selecting four trees and then brings them back. His instructor says "what you have brought me is not what I instructed you to get . What you have brought me is four branches of the same tree. What I am asking you is to get me four trees."

Wayne then explained that what the man actually wanted was four different species of tree and not four trees of the same species. Wayne continued saying the instructor knew, as he now does, that the tree does not grow from the ground but grows under the ground, and what we actually see are the branches that stick out above the ground. Wayne also said this is the same with all plants, where the "entire mass of the plant is underneath the ground and what we see are only the extras. They grow into what we think are trees and what we think is grass. But the main part of the plants we never do see." As for the animals and birds, Wayne announced,

They all exist as one, like all the birds, the geese, the ducks, they all exist as one being, but yet they are all individual and a part of the same being. Even though the buffalo has been almost exterminated, those few buffalo that remain still represent the millions of buffalo. In essence, they are still here with us.

Wayne continued by explaining how the concept of oneness also applies to people. "We, as Peigans, still represent a unique identify that is alive, it is still with us, like the grass or branches, its mass is underneath. We are parts and pieces of that being of Peigan." From this point he made reference to the Peigan ancestral inheritance, affirming,

This is how we make contact with the foundation of our identity. As individuals we have become detached from our identity as Peigans. By going through the ceremonies we become reattached, and once reattached, we can have access to the collective knowledge. With the trees, the moisture travels through the root system and it is sent to where it is needed. Once we tap back into our identity, we can tap into that energy, that nourishment that is there. It will sustain us and all our needs.

Wayne expressed that his life was profoundly impacted as a result of certain experiences that resulted in his current path of life. He explained,

Today I try to use that energy, try to bring it to share it with everyone, yet knowing that it is an up hill battle. Sometimes I get very impatient. Often when I am going to do something, I've already received direction on what I must do. Then I do what I am told, but when I get to a certain point, I have to wait. At times I begin to wonder if I was wrong, or if I was abandoned. Maybe that I even did it wrong, then all of a sudden, just before I feel like abandoning the plan. I will go back and try it again, then things will fall into place. That waiting was to allow certain other things to happen, then it is time for me to move again. I am not waiting so much for other people as I am waiting for time. Because everything is happening at a certain pace. When I get my direction, I just operate ahead of time doing things, then I have to wait for time to catch up.



Karen's life path has changed due to her increased participation in the ceremonial functions, she is able to identify her own advancement by recalling her desire to become an active participant. She stated,

I was no longer going just as a spectator but I was going as a person that was actually a part of the ceremony. And I began understanding that my day to day life really stemmed into my spirituality. If I didn't start my day with cleansing and smudging, then I felt very open or vulnerable. I didn't feel like this before. I think the indicators of a transforming person are when a person really begins to feel ownership, really begins to know and live the life that you are being taught.

Karen said she began by first attending these ceremonies just to support a relative and her family in "the responsibilities they had taken on through keeping a holy bundle and I didn't feel forced into it, but I wanted her to feel that the support was there and it was sincere." Karen began her involvement by supporting others while at the same time, this new experience had other effects on her: "I noticed I had a lot of nervousness around these ceremonies, I had a lot of fear." Karen's process of working through the fear was helped by gaining information and clarity,

My relative started to explain things to me and tell me why we did certain things during the ceremony and what certain things meant. It was following this that I began to get less confused and instead, to really count on the ceremonies, especially when I was a university student. I would rely on spiritual assistance from my relative during really hard times when I was doing difficult research papers or exams and I just needing some clarity.

Karen spoke of being introduced into the world of spirit saying, "the dream world was where I really began to be contacted by these holy spirits, these saviors, the holy bundles that were in our family." She adds that "if it weren't for these dreams and the things that happened around me" she would not have become convinced of the sacredness of the ceremonies. Karen then concluded

that she could have been another person "watching the dance, watching the ceremony, I wouldn't have a feeling of ownership that I have now."

In viewing her life to this point, Karen asserts her participation in Peigan-Blackfoot ceremonial life has inspired her to become a self-actualized person, stating, "I'm not there yet, but I am working very hard at it ,whether through attending a ceremony, smudging everyday, taking courses, visiting people that know things." In living a spiritually richer quality of life, Karen insists that "without my faith and without my knowledge of the Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality I wouldn't look forward to these activities and functions, I would be lost." She added,

I wouldn't sit for hours with friends, relatives and family and be able to talk about these bundles, and really feel love for them and not be afraid of them. I think I have been inspired to be very confident in our spirituality and to know that these saviors take care of our family at all times.

Karen was told by her relative-teacher "that it is not just herself that owns these holy bundles it is our entire extended family, in fact it is our whole community that owns them. She only takes care of the bundle." Karen was aware that anyone can turn to them for help. She concluded with "I really believe that they really do take care of us ... I feel confident and knowing that we are taken care of."

The participants were very obviously touched by the traditional and ceremonial ways of being and do offer excellent role modelling for the Peigan community in cultural identity and strength. The next section will focus on the teacher and learner relationship of each of the interview participants.

#### **Theme Five: The Teacher and The Learner**

The vast amount of knowledge that is accessible through Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing necessarily requires a teacher and learner relationship for its

transference. Each of the participants was able to identify their teacher or teachers, the way in which they learned the information and concepts presented to them, and how they are developing into teachers themselves. This part of the study will present the teacher - learner relationship and its dynamics.

Ryan speaks very fervently about how life was his greatest teacher, he views his upbringing in his childhood home as a valuable teacher. As far as having strong role models, he does not argue that he had them, "I shaped my life perfectly after what I was exposed to. Both my parents drank alcohol to excess, so did all my older siblings, so I became exactly like them - isn't that how it works?" At the same time he offers no excuses and lays no blame for his abusive behavior. He describes knowing that way of living so fully that he will never return to it, and feels compassion for those that are still struggling with similar situations and conditions. It was as a lesson offered and a lesson learned. There is also a certain amount of pride in his ability to pull himself from that self-destructive lifestyle.

Ryan identifies his father as his first teacher of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality. Even though his father was not involved in the community's ceremonial events, he did recognize Ryan's potential or calling to become much more deeply involved. He stated,

After I had some dreams and some experiences I had a heart to heart talk with my father and he admitted that his knowledge was limited in this area, adding if this Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality was an area that I was interested in pursuing, that I should go and speak to a specific ceremonialist which he named.

The best way to learn, according to Ryan is actual participation. For this reason he encourages others to "jump right in" because the arena for learning is available to whomever is interested, and because this is how he began. For years he never refused an invitation to attend a ceremony. Ryan went on to list

many individuals who were ceremonialist and spiritual Elders that transferred specific information to him.

Adele related how she came to be so familiar with the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing, and surprisingly her first statement sounded very much as if it came from a much older person: "I can only speak for myself and how I was taught." She continues with,

I believe one source of learning are the dreams one has, for they have very important messages and signs to either move ahead, correct your present action, or offer whatever guidance you need at the time. There are signs during consciousness, such as animal guides, nature's way of communicating or anything that the Creator chooses for you to see or experience in a special way.

Adele definitely received teachings from her dreams, she then acknowledged her parents as the secondary teachers in her life. She said. "My mother and father have much knowledge, they have accepted immense responsibility in the past years, actually since I was a young child. This teaching occurred right in the home since a young age." Of her own environment, since Adele's parents were full participants, she asserts "Blackfoot spirituality is not only culture but a lifestyle and the whole family learned as one." Adele admits that she faces difficult situations and knows how to approach these situations,

When the dilemma I am in is particularly difficult, I will ask for spiritual assistance with an offering. I have watched my parents do this for years. I never asked them to show me how to do make offerings. I only watched them and even went with my mother as she gave her offerings.

Adele went on to describe how she learned from her mother, "Sometimes she would tell us around the supper table that she went down to the river to put up an offering, the purpose of the offering, and how she felt after the offering." It was years of this experiential learning that Adele was exposed to that helped to

find her own strong path. Of her mother's ways she admitted, "I guess this was her way of teaching us, and only when I was older she would advise me to put up an offering to help me...she already knew I knew how to do it."

Adele was able to see her illness as a teacher of many things and not just a teacher to herself, but to those around her. Adele understood that her illness caused distress for the entire family as well as for herself. Recalling the early years, Adele said, "my parents tried to help me make sense of why I was ill ... by doing this, I became more in touch with the Creator and myself." Adele continued,

I believe, in my heart, my parents also learned from me and my illness, and they reached greater spirituality as a result. My mother has a lot of compassion for other people that are sick, because she is strong and never suffered from any serious ailments. I know that we each have our own road to travel. I need to travel mine knowing how to take good care of myself.

Wayne speaks in retrospect of gaining what knowledge he has and his responsibility since acquiring it. He reports, "I didn't want it, it was something that I knew was deep in my heart and I knew it was there for my acquiring".

When recalling where the journey began Wayne explained,

My grandparents expected me to do certain things, but at the time I was still very much into young people things, partying and such. My grandparents were very persistent and they didn't judge me for what I was doing. They would tell me 'there is a ceremony that is coming up and we want you to participate on our behalf' and a lot of times they would add 'straighten yourself up to go there'. Out of respect for them I would give up my friends and our fun times for that particular occasion. There were a number of these ceremonies and other things that they asked me to do, I would do them and then continue on with my fun times.

Wayne was clearly able to identify another source of teachers which he called the dream spirits. Wayne gives evidence of having the ability to cross over time and space boundaries. He admits,

Like with the rumbling, that (dream spirit) being has been there through a lot of my experiences. In my dreams, I never see this person, but I am always talking to him. Sometimes, in my dreams, I will go looking for him. He is not always there, because this being does his own thing too. Once, in a dream, I found him at a sweat lodge. On that occasion I was going up a coulee and on top was a sweat lodge. One of the men attending the door saw me and came down to talk to me. The ceremony was still going on and they were all surprised to see me there. It was like they said, "who is that - are you guys expecting someone else?"

Wayne chuckles at the circumstances of this particular visit. The nature of the relationship that has been developed between Wayne and his dream spirit is illustrated,

All of a sudden the man (my spirit guide) comes out of the sweat lodge. Yet I never see his face I only know his presence, and he comes over and wonders what I am doing there, saying "You're not supposed to be here." While at the same time he's asking, "How did you find me? I'm supposed to be looking for you."

Wayne says that other people who are in his company can also sense the presence of his dream spirit. He explains this by offering, that many others have gone through this transformational experience and there is a kinship bond between such people based on their common knowledge. Wayne confessed,

I don't know how many others (students) are also depending on this one being, but I do know that there is many of these dream spirits as there are many people that have gone through the transformation. I can recognize them and they can recognize me. We don't have to talk. We could be sitting across the room and yet we will know.

Regarding the teacher and learner relationships, Wayne reflected on his youth and claimed,

I don't know how my grandparents did it. They never got mad at me, or got after me, they never even forced me. They did it very kindly. I responded to their gentle kind ways and that's what I respected. I didn't have to listen to them, I could have been gone, but they were so kind and gentle that I couldn't help responding to this. I never responded to the threats or beatings from my teachers and others. I took the beatings as a challenge, the more I got beaten the more I wanted to know if I could get a better beating. "I really made him work to beat me, can I do it again" That was my attitude.

Wayne concluded with "I could not turn down my grandparents' gentleness. I respected them, and I would say 'for you I will do it this time.' Then they would ask again."

Karen referred to a relative who was a holy bundle owner as her best teacher. Of her she says, "she had very patiently taught me to behave at these ceremonies, how to see the ceremony and bundles without fear." Karen was able to see how her relative, her husband and children were able to "live with holy bundles and live daily life in spirituality." Karen continued with,

She tells me things during the ceremony and it's not like she phones me everyday and tells me this is what you have to do, it's during the ceremony when it is happening that's when she describes things to me. She is the type of teacher that teaches by showing and teaches by doing and that's why I think she is the best teacher that I have had. She doesn't make me feel afraid or nervous. She has total confidence and therefore I have total confidence in what she is teaching me.

The participants expressed a variety of ways of learning all heavily influenced by the First Nations method of teaching and rearing children which is by modeling and encouragement. Each reflected on their childhood and adult experiences of learning and being taught by adults and other family members. A

teaching learning atmosphere founded in respect for the other becomes very apparent. In the next section, each of the participants identifies specific ways of making meaningful contributions to the Peigan-Blackfoot youth in the area of transferring cultural identity and personal strength.

### **Theme Six: Vision for Peigan-Blackfoot Youth**

It is apparent that all communities in this country are intent on providing the best for their young people. The issues facing the Peigan youth are immense and the concerns surrounding the youth population of the Peigan community are a major concern expressed by each of the interview participants. Each offered their vision for the future of Peigan-Blackfoot youth, and these are presented in this section.

Over the years that Ryan has been involved in Peigan -Blackfoot traditional ways, he has had young people approach him for guidance. He offers them the surest way to be guided, which he affirms is "attendance to ceremonies." He requests that these young people go to the sources that know of the ceremonies and make effort to be there, as once they understand the ceremonial procedure, then there is the possibility of them to ask to be more involved by offering to work in some way. He said, "even to offer to haul and chop wood for the fire is a worthy contribution - that's how I started."

Ryan emphasized the importance of extending invitation to the youth population to attend the ceremonies within the community, as well as in the other three Blackfoot communities. The young people "need to realize how rich and beautiful our way of life is". Once they know how to approach an Elder they will be well on their way to "becoming proud Peigan people." In being a proud people, Ryan asserts that we, as a community, must preserve the teachings of



the old people along with emphasizing the traditional value system that stresses respect for all things in much more obvious ways.

Ryan continued with how today's youth are taught in ways and knowledge of the western culture and that there is "no getting away from that", but that it is possible for all the Blackfoot school systems within the Treaty 7 area, and possibly the Blackfeet from Montana, to gather and collectively develop Blackfoot philosophy courses that will be available to all the students. Ryan stated, "they (students) should be taught the proper way to respond to the world around them." He also stressed the importance of the community Elders to "stand behind these teachings." He adamantly stated,

I am a strong believer that the proper setting and context can change a person's way of thinking. They can then live on a day to day basis with the rituals such as the sweet grass smudge, just to breath in positive and do away with all negative energy. That would make a difference. Those are some of my thoughts.

Adele agreed the youth would benefit greatly by being involved in Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing. She reflected on her own experience when she said, "Anyone seeking inspiration, advice, or a better life in general can gain from Blackfoot spirituality because it offers all this ... it would be very helpful if it could start within the family life and spread out from there." Upon further reflection of her own peers Adele stated,

My wish for the future for Peigan youth is for better education both in the home and at school. The home is so important because that's where it all starts. Today we live in a white mans' world so we have to try and conform in some ways. White mans' education is the only way I see. I can say this because I worked hard in school and got the results I wanted. I know not everyone has an easy time in school. It takes a lot of determination to succeed.

She explained that Blackfoot spirituality is a lifestyle within the culture. It should be taught in the home "by your parents and grandparents and not in Blackfoot schools." Adele's opinions come from her interaction with peers and her own education which was entirely in integrated schools. She went on to say,

Today I see a lot of time and attention spent on teaching culture in Native schools. But they should spend school time strictly for academic education because that is the only way to reach career goals in Canadian society. I believe teaching the whole nuclear family Blackfoot spiritual ways through ceremonies will have a greater and more positive effect on the youth.

Wayne described the present Peigan youth population by saying, "I can see that the young people know that there is something wrong, but they can not tell you what it is." He pointed out,

They will tell you, "I feel like this, I feel like that." All these feelings that the system is creating. It is frustration. But they haven't gotten to the point yet where they want to accept their role.

Wayne, knowing that he must be patient, felt helpless viewing their situation, stating he thinks of saying, "I wish I could have the opportunity to share with you what I have gone through, then you will completely understand what is going on." He admits,

Once a person has tapped into that energy, and makes the necessary adjustments to their life, they can choose what they are going to do with their life. If they decide to become the best baseball or hockey player in the world, or anything they want to become, it gives them the motivation and determination to do that. Nothing can stop them. Anything that they want at that point, they can pursue it. They are given the choice, the doors become open to them on what they want, it's almost unlimited.

Wayne expanded on his vision for the Peigan youth, in how he could show them the first step, by sharing with them in story, an example or something that will bring them a step closer to tapping in on that energy. He asserts,

Once they tap into it the first time, they will know what to do, you don't have to tell them, or teach them anything. You just sit back and let them go. You don't worry about them anymore, once they've got it - they got it.

Wayne is confident that the youth will teach themselves and they will always come back and tell you what they have learned. "I tell them, that from the stories I have been told, your generation is going to know more than my generation, and we know more than the last one." He explained that each generation must accept their limitation, simply because of the generation that they are in. "It is confirmation of the story of creation," he added.

When asked about the protocol regarding who should approach who in wanting to gain traditional or spiritual knowledge, Wayne responded with, "the practitioner would have to be approached by the prospective student." With regard to today's Peigan youth Wayne lamented,

It is one of the most difficult things to have to watch the youth endure what they do, yet knowing they don't have to. If they could only approach you for guidance. Once they do approach then you have an obligation to them.

Wayne began to speak about the parent and child relationship in the area of transference of cultural identity and strength. He asserted,

The only youth that you have a right to approach is your own children. You have an obligation to bring them to that energy. Then it is up to them. Once they have reached the energy that is their rite of passage. They have gone from being a child and are entering the next level. This should occur around adolescence. Once they tap into the energy they will know how to go through it.

For parents, Wayne concluded it is a fourteen to fifteen year challenge to try to get their children to a state of readiness. "It's how you raise them to get them to that point to get them through that ceremonial process."

Karen, who has received specialized training in child development and works closely with children. She stressed the importance of spiritual development in all children. Karen explained that when studying child development, it is taught that during early adolescence and throughout development, spiritual awareness and growth has to be nurtured. She warns,

If you do not teach your children spirituality, ... they will realize something is missing in their development. I feel that you have to raise your children with spirituality whether it is Blackfoot or whatever.

Karen emphasized the importance of nurturing spirituality in children "beginning the first day of their lives." She gave example of her own ceremonial involvement with her child,

My son will soon be fourteen years old, and I have exposed him to ceremonies ever since he was a baby. He is going to grow up with a real confidence in our (Peigan-Blackfoot) spirituality. One of the things that he looks most forward to in the summers is going to the Sun Dance. He sees it as a time to be with his friends to socialize, to learn new things, and he enjoys watching the ceremonial dancing. Because of his experiences he wants to become a member of a spiritual society. I think that is just the greatest thing that I have ever done for my son.

Karen was adamant about the current the need to develop wholistic children in the First Nations communities, explaining,

Children that are very self assured and have a good understanding of who they are when we, as parents and educators have provided for every aspect of the four main parts of development, that is, their spiritual, physical, mental and emotional needs. If we raise children to be confident in each of those areas I feel that we will have very strong First Nations communities in the future.

The result, according to Karen, would be having "very confident children that can compete in every walk of life, in any sport, education system, or whatever they choose for themselves."

Karen reflected on a recent trip where she toured the schools in Arizona, observing that their Native culture is readily available and being taught in depth: "I'm not just talking about superficial things such as how to bead and other stuff of the material culture." She saw the Navajo culture taught with all its different aspects. In the area of art and fine arts, "the kids were really developing a sense of who they are ... I don't see this type of learning here." Karen also spoke of the White Mountain Apache community which was also visited during their Sunrise Dance. The Sunrise Dance is a seven day celebration of a rite of passage for young ladies entering puberty. Karen was able to see how the entire community becomes involved and the result is young people exhibiting total confidence and pride in who they are as Apache people. In summation, she affirmed that, "I really think that kids have to have a sense of pride in their nationhood, and have a very clear understanding of who they are."

Karen gave another example of what the youth of today need. At her place of employment Karen described a lecture from a young Blackfoot man from the community who was invited to speak to the children. He spoke of the spiritual societies that used to be active in their community and he made reference to individual children in the room and how their relatives were members of these now dormant societies. The response of the children to the resource person was very interesting. Karen related,

These were the same grade nine kids that raised heck with all kinds of teachers from the first day of meeting them. Well, when this man came in and related these stories and tied it in with who they were, he had these kids captivated for almost two hours. The kids didn't

try to run out of the classroom at least fifteen times with excuses of needing the bathroom.

According to Karen the children "sat there and they ate up everything he said, and when they walked out of the classroom they walked out with pride, showing up as confident little beings, simply because all of a sudden they knew who they are." Karen declared, "We have to do that for the well-being of our youth, we have to teach them who they are." She continued that the youth have to be made to feel very welcome at the ceremonies, that they are important, and want to learn more. Karen stressed the importance of spending more time with the kids, especially the ones that want to learn. For her, we all have a responsibility to teach them, "that is how we are going to help them prepare for the future."

Karen commented on the need to expose the youth to their community's ceremonies as well as getting very knowledgeable people to teach them: "If it has to occur in the classrooms then that is where it should occur." She added, "If parents at home don't want to teach them, then maybe the school is the only place that it is going to happen." Because she believes that "somehow, some way this information has to be given to these kids." As an educator, Karen proclaimed her own way of transferring cultural identity and strength,

On a daily basis, my students need to see me as a practitioner of my faith and my spirituality. I could blab it out to them, you know, say anything that I want to say, but if they don't see me behaving the way that a spiritual person should behave, they are not going to buy into what I am saying.

Karen maintained the need to "really examine our adult resources and decide who could deliver this type of information to our kids ... because a lot of these kids have not had a fair shake of life." Karen emphasized the need for Blackfoot educators to learn from the Apache and Navajo, for whom she gained

immense respect, ways that they successfully transfer cultural identity and strength. She concluded with "something special is happening there and their children are showing it."

The concern for developing a new direction for the young people of the Peigan community was evident with each of the interview participants. The participants reflected on their own youthful experiences as well as introducing some ideas from other First Nations communities in other areas of the country. The importance of participation in the ceremonial activities of the community was also a major area of concern. Each of the participants stressed the value of attendance at or participation in ceremonial activities.

The following chapter will include the discussion of findings, implications and conclusions of the study.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

#### **Research Summary**

The purpose of this study was to explore Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing to determine their value as a tool for creating greater meaning in life and enhancing spiritual wisdom; to determine the potential for ways of knowing as a tool for developing insight into and appreciation of First Nation's oral traditions; and to determine the applicability of ways of knowing as an available resource for empowering Peigan youth.

From the extensive data collected from the four Peigan participants it can be determined that the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing would make a profound impact in creating greater meaning in one's life by enhancing spiritual wisdom, by being a valuable instrument in developing insight into and appreciation of First Nation's oral traditions, as well as by becoming an available resource for empowering the present day Peigan youth population.

The data collection and interpretation process was geared toward resolving the central issue of the study, which was to determine how Peigan ways of knowing persist as a means of self-empowerment, and how can they be transferred to Peigan youth as a means of increasing cultural strength and identity. The major themes that arose from the data gave evidence that Peigan ways of knowing clearly offer a persistent means of self-empowerment that generation upon generation of Peigan people accessed in order to create clarity and meaning in their lives. As well, the data suggests that the transference to Peigan youth will increase cultural strength and identity and can be accomplished as an individual, family and community endeavor.



The next section will summarize what the interview data suggests by outlining major themes that arose.

### **Themes from the Interview Data**

Several themes became obvious from Ryan, Adele, Wayne and Karen's interview material. Each of the themes will be presented and expanded upon. The order they are presented is in no particular sequence. To begin, the reference to First Nations Elders as the keepers of wisdom was prevalent throughout. The importance of the role of Elder within the community becomes critical as they are viewed as the ones who know the sacred stories, the ceremonies and the way of life as it used to exist. The Elders are seen as the wise ones that have years of lived experience to draw from when approached to give advice on personal matters. They participated in the ceremonies for more years than other community members and can therefore ensure the correct procedures and protocols are strictly followed. Within First Nations communities great respect is bestowed upon their Elderly population as they emulate the lived experience of a value system that promoted harmonious relations.

Dreams and visions offering direction and guidance arose as a strong theme of the interview data. The participants believed that by being granted spiritual dreams and visions they were being recognized by the spirit world in a special way. They referred to being visited by spiritual messengers with valuable information about their present situation in life. The messages were accepted as important directives that, when adhered to, would greatly improve their quality of life. In all cases the improved quality of life was accepted to alter their outlook on life, to increase their spiritual growth, and to add to their peace of mind. Visions are recognized as powerful connections to the spirit world where the recipient is

usually given a extraordinary skill or ability to operate at a higher level on earth as a gift to be used for the collective good of the community.

Another theme, ceremonial involvement, was very important to each of the interview participants. It appeared that their participation in ceremonies was an integral means of renewing their faith and an opportunity to recommit themselves to Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality. It must be mentioned that attendance and participation in Blackfoot ceremonies requires a huge commitment of time and energy, as many ceremonies are hours long, even days long. Each participant felt their involvement in ceremonies was one of the highest activities they could offer as an act of faith to their Creator.

Spiritual symbolism within the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing was very prevalent in the data. Among the symbols presented were the sun, lightning and thunder, the act of smudging and the reverence given sacred bundles. To the participants, Adele in particular, accepted the sun as spirit of the Creator, Ryan used the term the Source of Life. Because the sun is considered the source or catalyst of life on earth, Ryan emphasizes the need for humans to give thanks for all that is by sun dancing, where individuals participate in the Sun Dance ceremony. Likewise, lightning and thunder are recognized as very powerful spirit symbols that bestow many gifts of life to the earth as well as indicate timing for specific ceremonies by their presence in the open plains. The act of smudging by using incense is representative of the constant need for individuals to humble themselves, to find their center or balance within themselves helping them to behave in respectful ways to all that surrounds them. The sacred bundles are the physical representation of creation on earth including all that walk on earth, fly in the sky, and swim in the water. They emulate the Peigan-Blackfoot world view by reminding humanity of their relationship to all things. The bundles are

referred to as saviors by Karen capturing their incredible meaning to the community.

Each of the participants gave strong evidence of the self-actualization process they continue to experience. Their belief system that is immersed in traditional ceremonies has given each one a higher quality of life as a result. Wayne lives an existence that is in harmony with people, plants, animals and the spirit world; Adele is a very self-assured, confident teenager with a bright future; Karen was able to replace her uncertainty and fear with trust and faith, increasing her belief in herself and others thus raising her expectation of self and others; finally, Ryan who conquered his addictive habits now accepts his role as a future ceremonialist.

Pride in belonging to the Peigan-Blackfoot people is obvious in each of the participants. Each continues to develop a strong sense of identity and cultural pride as members of the Peigan First Nations community. Each made direct statements claiming their cultural inheritance as Peigan individuals. The transference of cultural identity and pride was closely connected to their knowledge of participation in Peigan-Blackfoot cultural and spiritual activities. Wayne compared the identity of being Peigan with the reconnection to an ancestral inheritance and thus gaining personal empowerment. Karen described herself as holistic as a result of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality, while Adele stated proudly that she is Peigan and Blackfoot and her participation in ceremonies reflects this pride.

The learner and teacher relationship that advanced the participants to their present level of cultural pride was another theme. The participants recognized immediate family members as teachers, these included parents, grandparents and close relatives. Dreams and visions were another source of teaching. Wayne speaks of the gentleness of his grandparents as they made requests for

him to attend ceremonies. Karen's relative taught her in non-threatening, practical ways that gave her trust and faith. Adele learned simply by living with her parents, absorbing and incorporating their practices. Ryan sought the advice of elderly men and women who willingly gave to him while recognizing his father as his first teacher.

Participants all exhibited strong family and community connections and concerns. Wayne spoke of having responsibility to teach his children about the energy source that gives meaning to life, and how every parent is responsible for teaching their children about such matters. Ryan's strong sense of community sprang from his life lived almost entirely in the community, his work and his involvement with ceremonies at the community level. Karen showed support to her relative that was deeply involved in ceremonies as well as spending much of her professional career in making her community a better place to raise children. Adele's love for her immediate family is apparent as are her strong ideas on respect of self and others.

The view of adversity in their lives was accepted as tests to make them stronger and more appreciative. Karen and Adele related how personal illness had brought them to a crisis situation where they decided faith in the ceremonies and the Source of Life would guide them to peace, thus strengthening their faith. Wayne spoke of physical hardships that strengthened the body, mind and spirit where the pain or suffering can be offered as a form of penance and thereby allowing the recipient the opportunity for a fresh start in life.

All four of the participants lived basically very ordinary lives, making them appear as just another Peigan community member. Upon closer observation it is clear that they each have chosen an extra-ordinary view of the world as a result of their belief system. A new knowledge gained through a vision or dream experience may have been involved in their altered outlook of themselves and

others. Each one exhibited a quiet confidence and self assurance that can be attributed to their cultural identity and practice in Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality.

The following section will highlight three points of special significance also suggested by the interview data as major themes.

### **Points of Special Significance**

Three areas will be reviewed as themes requiring greater focus, the relationship of sacred stories to the ceremonies, spiritual experiences as experienced by the participants, and the view of Peigan youth.

#### **The Relationship of Story to Ceremony**

It is possible to find within the oral tradition of the Blackfoot people a story that would correspond to each of the societies that exist, as well as a story for each of the ceremonies performed. In conversation with Reg Crow Shoe (1997), Peigan cultural and spiritual advisor, several ceremonies and society origin stories were discussed. For instance, the beaver medicine bundle ceremony came about from a story about a woman who was taken by the beavers into their home, the beavers gave her husband the bundle for taking his wife. The beavers then instruct the man to perform the ceremony for the people. In another story a female elk turns herself into a woman, referred to as Elk Woman, by singing, "My wristlets are elk teeth; they are powerful," she then moves a tree with head motions alone. The sacredness of this particular story is re-enacted during the Sun Dance ceremony by the ceremonial woman wearing an elk hide robe over her clothing.

As a final example of the connection of story to ceremony, the origin of the medicine pipe bundle comes from the story of a strange young woman who appeared mysteriously to two warriors. She asked to be directed to their spiritual

leaders. One man, not knowing she was the physical manifestation of the powerful thunder spirit, entertained thoughts of seducing her. He immediately fell to the ground as a decaying corpse. The other man delivered her to the camp's spiritual leaders where she presented them with the medicine pipe bundle. With the transfer of the holy articles to the people the spirit world would give detailed instructions on the performance of the ceremonies. There are numerous other stories regarding holy articles and the origin of societies with the Peigan-Blackfoot oral tradition.

### **Spiritual Experiences**

The sharing of spiritual experiences by the participants was somewhat surprising to the writer, not that they would not have experiences to share, rather that they would be willing to share these experiences as part of a study. It can be assumed that their contributions were made as part of their own commitment toward the development of the Peigan youth and ultimately for the collective good of the community.

Wayne referred to the questioning of the validity of one's spiritual experiences as a contemporary phenomenon, suggesting that there was a time, among the First Nations people that everyone simply believed the visioning and dreaming experiences as ultimate directives. Because they were common place, everyone had these experiences. It may be that fewer First Nations people are having spiritual experiences or they may be ignoring those that they do have. It can be assumed that one must be ready emotionally and spiritually for spirit messengers through the process required for vision questing. The participants also gave evidence of a process of self evaluation that resulted in a humbling process prior to acquiring a spirit message.

Spiritual experiences such as dreams and visions where the spirit world is in direct contact with the person continue to occur among the Blackfoot people.

### **View of Peigan Youth**

Generally the participants viewed the Peigan youth as needing guidance to a state of readiness, and they felt confident that once the path is set for the youth, they would be capable and responsible for their continued maturity and spiritual growth. Ryan felt they should attend the ceremonies and pursue greater ways of becoming actively involved. Adele, being youthful and academically confident in her abilities, felt the school was the wrong place to teach Peigan culture. She thought this was the responsibility of the home and the school should focus mainly on creating employable citizens.

Karen, as an educator and promoter of holistic growth, viewed the school as having a responsibility of creating adults that are confident in their identities as First Nations people as well as capable and marketable. Wayne lamented the state of the present day youth population, wishing he could do much more for them, while at the same time he accepted that they were each on their own personal journey toward self-actualization. His only concern was that there be enough adults to guide and direct youth when their readiness has arrived.

The next section will present the implications of the research findings followed by recommendations, suggestions for further study, and the closing remarks of the writer.

### **Implications of the Research**

From the research several implications have been drawn and will be presented. These include value and validation, identifying resources, promotion of the Blackfoot language, leadership qualities, and transferring cultural beliefs.

The richness of the Peigan-Blackfoot oral tradition, value system and belief structure must be acknowledged as a well-spring of knowledge and wisdom. Though the presence of this richness has always been available to the Blackfoot communities, it has seldom been recognized and called upon for its excellence for individual, family and community development. Current mainstream perceptions that categorize indigenous stories as fiction only serve to undermine Peigan youth by further devaluing their oral tradition inheritance for 'scientism'; and therefore seeming more intent to 'get with the times'.

The Peigan youth population, especially, must be presented with several ways and means of accessing the knowledge and wisdom that will result in cultural identity and strength. It is important to highlight the source of the fear of the Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality, as identified by one of the participants. Fear is a common response to the unknown, and what was very familiar to the recent generations of Peigan people was the indoctrination of Christianity which is taught through fear. Instilling fear of one's own ancestral spiritual beliefs is a means to genocide.

In order that a transference of cultural identity and strength occur for the Peigan community, especially among their young people, it is essential that sources of the cultural and traditional knowledge be identified and made available. Resources not only include individuals, such as specific Elders, ceremonialists, and spiritualists, each of whom is a precious resource, but also the researching of archeological sites. Detailed will be a people's historic journey to the present, the documentation of an oral tradition both from the hearts of the Elders as well as from interviews of ancestors filed in provincial and national archives. Critical is the examination of the Blackfoot language for concepts and translations that demonstrates Blackfoot people's connection with the cosmos.



To ensure the true essence of the Peigan-Blackfoot ways of knowing be accessed, the Blackfoot language must survive. The survival of the Blackfoot language is based on it's continued use, and it's continuation is realized by the promotion of the language for its significance to the peoples' identify. The Blackfoot language conveys and advances the world view of the Blackfoot people giving constant reference to who they are in the realm of the Great Mystery. An example of the wealth of the Blackfoot language is apparent by a simple comparison of two terms making reference to 'oneself', the English term for 'I or me' to the Blackfoot term 'niisto'. There is no equivalence to meaning as 'niisto' makes reference not to 'me as a person' but rather to 'me as a spirit'.

From the study it was identified that there are numerous Peigan individuals that exhibit strong leadership qualities. It was also determined that the Peigan-Blackfoot youth population requires a transference of these leadership qualities in order that young people come to view themselves as capable and worthy individuals. The transference of leadership qualities will compliment the transference of cultural identity and strength even though this may come from two different sources within the Peigan community. It is essential that the young people experience a kind of consciousness raising facilitated by their own community members. In past personal experience in working with teenagers, I found that they see no difference when comparing qualities of a leader, a follower and a friend. This implies how natural and non-confrontational they view community interaction.

From the interview data, it was determined that Peigan-Blackfoot cultural beliefs are transferable and that wisdom gained from the ways of knowing can be gained through a process appropriate or applicable to the individual. It was found that an 'instant education' can occur for those who they were selected for the 'calling' to experience a life with exceptional meaning and greater responsibility.

The ways and means to incorporate the transference of cultural beliefs within the context of the Peigan community will be outlined in the recommendations section which follows.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations stem from the interview data and research implications. The major topic headings include the promotion of the Peigan-Blackfoot culture, networking among the Blackfoot communities, and the researching of the Blackfoot culture.

### **Peigan Culture Promotion**

The promotion of the Peigan culture is paramount in transferring cultural identity and strength. There are several ways the Peigan community can promote their culture for the entire community, with a special emphasis on their youth population:

- a) Language.** The Blackfoot language use must be evident everywhere in the community, including the homes, schools, and places of employment. A directive of this nature must be endorsed by the elected leadership of the community;
- b) Elders.** The continued respect granted to the Peigan Elder population must be made obvious to the young people. The protocol in approaching Elders for cultural information, dream interpretation or personal guidance must be taught in the community in order that the purest source of cultural richness be nurtured and fostered;
- c) Story Telling.** The significance of story telling must be given validation. The contents of stories must be viewed for its value in creating strong communities. The numerous story tellers in the Peigan community carry a wealth of knowledge that must somehow be accessed; and

**d) Resource Collection.** The center for the collection of the wealth of Peigan cultural resources within the Peigan community continues to be facilitated by the Old Man River Cultural Centre. In order that the Centre increase its volume of resources, whether in the form of printed material, audio cassettes or videos, the Centre should be supplied with the necessary financial assistance to hire the required staff to effectively collect, transcribe, and promote their resources.

### **Networking amongst Blackfoot Communities**

The Blackfoot communities include the Peigan Nation at Brocket, the Blood Nation at Standoff, the Siksika Nation at Siksika, each in southern Alberta, and the Blackfeet Tribe at Browning, Montana. The four Blackfoot communities can contribute collectively toward the continued revitalization of the Blackfoot culture in a number of areas. The following list is limited, presenting an indication of the value of networking among the four communities:

- a) Resource Development.** An extensive directory of Blackfoot cultural resources can be developed to collectively represent the four communities;
- b) Student Exchange.** An exchange program can be established where groups of students can visit other Blackfoot communities during the times of their cultural events, which would include the various ceremonial celebrations;
- c) Career Promotion.** Cultural pride and community pride are complimentary. Being proud Blackfoot people necessitates the need to be fully self-sufficient in all areas. It is vital the young people are encouraged to enter careers that lend themselves to community independence within the Canadian (and American) economy;
- d) Local Heroes.** There are many community heroes, past and present, that deserve recognition. In building cultural identity and strength, the history of the

community must be documented, identifying those individuals. Each Blackfoot community must be responsible for its accurate documentation of local heroes;

**e) Institution for Research of Mother Culture .** As a collective effort, discussion should be initiated by the four Blackfoot communities into the establishment of an institution for the research of the Blackfoot culture. No greater gift can be presented to the future generations of Blackfoot people.

**f) Community Development.** The need to build stronger communities begins with strengthening the family unit. The development and facilitation of programs, for those families wishing to participate, will result in polishing skills in effective parenting, creative problems solving and decision making, as well as other areas of their choosing. It is essential that the community members be involved in the design and delivery of all programs. Often community colleges or human service agencies have developed programs which need to be made culturally appropriate and delivered by First Nations individuals to be truly effective in the First Nation community. As part of the community development program, a culturally sensitive home and school liaison project must be initiated. It is undeniable that the current mainstream education system has not offered a pleasant experience for many First Nations people. In order to address this issue, the development of an effective home and school liaison program is essential. The program must work toward establishing effective school and community interaction; assist in developing relevant Peigan curriculum, cultural resources and learning activities; facilitate the necessary in-service and activities for teachers on Peigan identity, culture and history; as well, the gathering of information for the development of an effective First Nation student counselling system.

The next sub-section will offer suggestions for further study in First Nations ways of knowing.

### **Suggestions for Further Study**

Based on the information acquired in the interview data and literature review, there are several topic areas surrounding oral tradition that are suggested for further study. An in-depth study in the oral traditions of First Nations culture will reveal a wealth of knowledge. Because each First Nation group has an identity of their own, it must be research that is specific to one group of First Nations people.

Within the study of the oral tradition, the sacred stories must be researched as a distinct topic unto itself. Studying the stories within oral tradition will allow the researcher to make the distinction between trickster, sacred and other categories of indigenous stories.

Research in the area of developing a classroom model to effectively teach cultural identity and strength to First Nations students would add to the resources available to communities for strengthening their youth's self pride and esteem.

A valuable aspect of research would be an annotated bibliography of First Nations cultural ways of knowing, which would also be a valuable resource for First Nations communities. The specific area of Blackfoot wisdom should be researched in order to properly have an account of the ways of knowing.

### **Conclusion**

While gathering the data, it was heart warming to be witness to fellow community members voicing who they are, describing how they got to this point in their lives, expressing their relationship to the world of the Great Mystery, and feeling gratified to be contributing to a university research paper. The need for First Nations people to be able to voice clearly, 'this is who we are' is timely. There is much to be learned from First Nations philosophy of life and relationship.

The review of the literature was also an attempt to give validity to the most crucial area of First Nation identity, the oral tradition of all the First Nations people. As time progresses First Nations individuals are rising up to be acclaimed authors who lend themselves to writing about the true essence of who the Real People are. In the past, many of those gifted writers were also occupied in attempts to bring resolution to critical political issues faced by First Nations people that little time was left for them to simply write.

The research findings are not only found in the interpretation of data, but also in the review of the literature and in the writer's personal journey to this study. To capsule the personal journey, which is similar to a majority of the parent generation in the Peigan community, it is essential that it be voiced that many Peigan-Blackfoot individuals desire to learn and gain greater skills and knowledge. The urge for learning begins, as with all children, at a very young age. To finally start attending school is a great accomplishment. What happens to that desire to learn is another story. For many Peigan-Blackfoot people, the process of befriending the enemy, the culturally bias education system, is a necessary process which may entail radical changes to the present system.

The writer believed it was essential that the North Peigan Story be included in the research paper. As a group forced to take on a new life style, it then becomes remarkable to recall a history of accomplishment, whereby, only few years was needed to effectively compete with the community's surrounding economy. The history of the Peigan as presented gives credence to the participants' information and answers the questions, ' who am I and where did I come?'.

The process of exploring the value of Peigan ways of knowing as a tool for creating greater meaning in all aspects of Peigan life seemed to explode into a life of its own. There was much personal fulfillment in completing a qualitative

study of this nature, not only as a member of the study group's community but as a student of the community culture's ways of knowing. The study seemed to unfold by itself and issues that were not first perceived, nor personally intended to be part of the study, suddenly become the foundation of the study. These were, namely, the ceremonies. There was a concerted effort made to not draw details about ceremonies, but only indicate connections pointing to their significance and connections to sacred stories. A common concern arose regarding the future well being of the youth population as the underlining driving force of the study. With this in mind, it is hoped that the references made to ceremony, whether vaguely or directly, will be accepted by my peers as appropriately presented.

The study, following a qualitative research method, was a teacher in itself, as the writer is left a more knowledgeable person as a result of the process. There is new appreciation for community, nature, and the spirit that has arisen as a result of being personally involved with the gathering data process. Strangely, by admitting to have gained more knowledge and appreciation, there is also an area of huge wonderment at a people's resilience. Clearly, the First Nation culture is most effectively transferred through the function and retelling of stories, as well, the essence of the sacred stories continue to be revered through the performance of ceremonies.

It is hoped that the study will be received appreciatively by the First Nations community at large and, primarily, by my own community the Peigan First Nation.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The initial interview with the four Peigan adult participants will include the following questions:

1. What aspects of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality stand out most clearly for you?
2. Describe the importance is Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality in your day-to-day life?
3. What are indicators of a transforming person within the context of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality?
4. Describe personal experiences that propelled your personal transformational process within the context of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality.
5. How has your life has been impacted as a result of these personal experiences?
6. Describe your best teacher(s) of Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality?
7. How did this teaching occur?
8. Which sacred narrative(s) has (have) inspired your present life and describe how this inspiration took effect.
9. How can Peigan-Blackfoot spirituality contribute to the lives of Peigan youth?
10. Describe your vision or wish for the future well-being of Peigan-Blackfoot youth?
11. How do you think this vision or wish might be accomplished?