

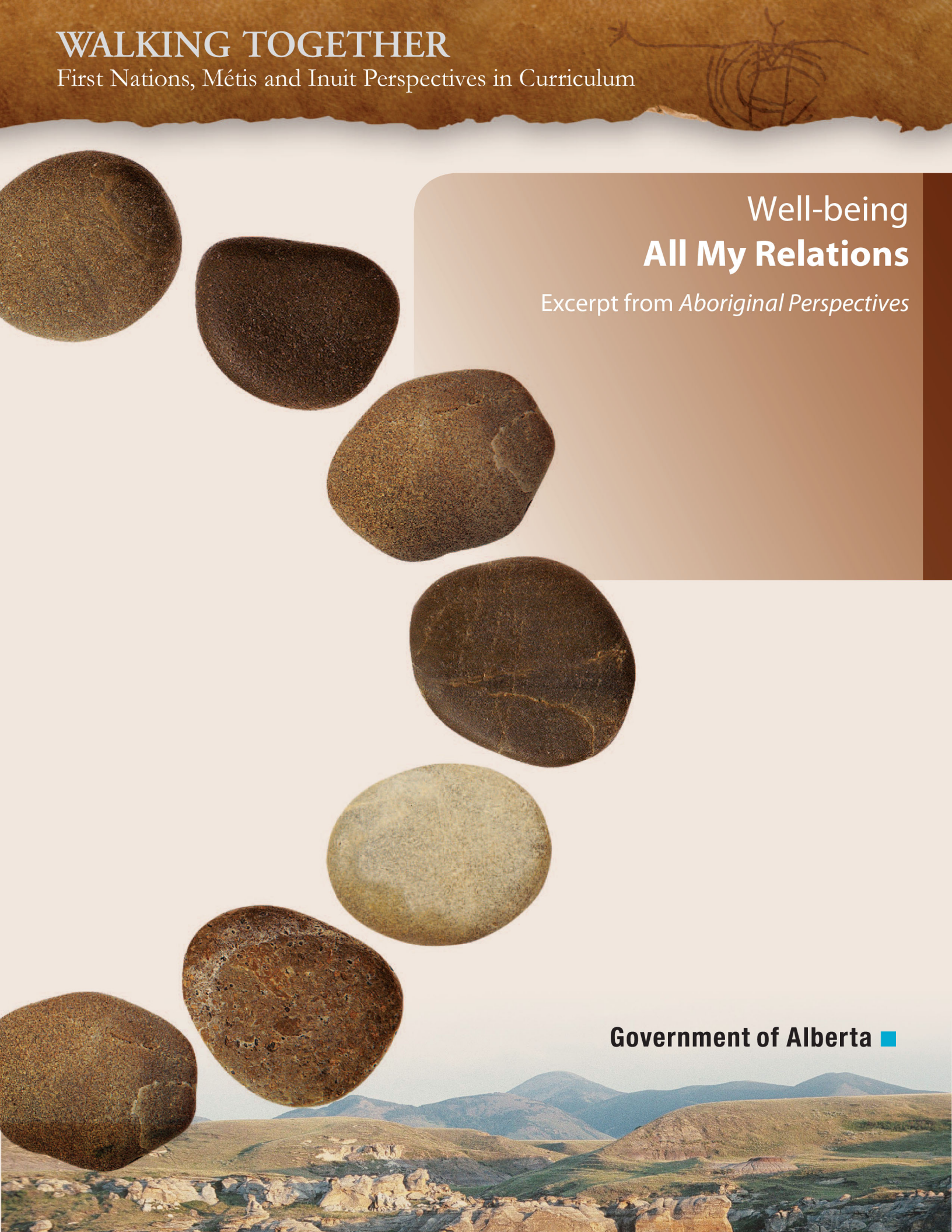
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Well-being All My Relations

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





ALL MY RELATIONS

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

ALL MY RELATIONS

“All my relations” is the English equivalent of a phrase familiar to most Native peoples of North America. It may begin or end a prayer or speech or a story, and, while each tribe has its own way of expressing this sentiment in its own language, the meaning is the same.

“All my relations” is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship to animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, “all my relations” is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they had no relations).

— Thomas King, *All My Relations*

Relationships and the proper balance between them are the focus of traditional First Nations and Inuit worldviews. The Laws of Relationships offer a concise summary of ideas that are shared by all First Nations and Inuit cultures. Because the chart incorporates the ideas of many diverse communities, it is a generic list of principles. In other words, these ideas are not representative of any single First Nations, Métis, or Inuit culture, but they are representative of all to some degree. It is important to remember that each culture has its own ways of expressing these ideas through specific ceremonies, protocols, practices, and languages.

These principles are described as laws to emphasize that they are fundamental ways of thinking. They are not laws in the sense of contemporary Canadian laws — external requirements that individuals must obey. Instead, they are principles that are internalized by individuals and that bind each person to the rest of the world. Acting against these principles would be almost inconceivable. They are principles of a common worldview. This worldview is grounded in the ideas that all parts of creation are interconnected and all have a spirit; that humans must live in respectful, balanced relationships with all in creation; and that the spiritual forces of the world are intended to help survival, not threaten it.

This excerpt on all my relations ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Aboriginal Perspectives*, Toronto, ON, 2004, pp. 71–80.

Laws of Relationships

The chart was developed by educators and Elders from the Northwest Territories and the western provinces. It is intended as an educational tool, not as a guide to any particular First Nations or Inuit belief system.

Laws of Sacred Life

- Each person is born sacred and complete.
- Each person is given the gift of body with the choice to care for it and use it with respect.
- Each person is given the capacity and the choice to learn to live in respectful relationships.
- Each person is given strengths or talents to be discovered, nurtured, and shared for the benefit of all.

Laws of Mutual Support

- People in groups of mutual support are strong. Alone, a person will not survive.
- Identity comes from belonging in respectful relationships with others.
- Agreement on rules enables cooperation and group strength.

Laws of Nature

- The natural world provides the gifts of life and place.
- A people's sense of place and identity is tied to the land or water body that has given the people life.
- The natural world provides people with the necessities of life.
- People must live in harmony with the laws of nature in order to be sustained by it.

Laws of Nature

A Haudenosaunee worldview maintains that while nature can be kind and generous, one of the strengths of its laws is that they are absolute. Nature's laws are evident and clear, and allow no room for compromise.

A person who stays outside on a cold winter night without proper clothing will freeze to death. Any creature — a dog, a deer, a person, a flea — that does not eat or drink will die. Natural law prevails beyond the rulings of any human law. It is simple, basic, and eternal, like the circle of life itself. Humans who live within natural law will live well because nature provides all that is needed for life.

Centuries of closely observing the natural world taught the ancestors of First Nations and Inuit peoples how to live in harmony with their surroundings. These ancestors learned that the physical world exists in a natural state of balance within itself and the spirit world. These first peoples believed the laws of the natural world should be closely observed as guidelines for human behavior. After all, most creation stories describe the human position in the world as a humble one. Humans are not intended to conquer and control the natural world, but to live in harmony within it.

For example, animals in nature never take more than they need. Most First Nations and

Inuit cultures reflect this law by discouraging waste. Inuit people of northern Alaska have a story that explains the rules governing their annual bowhead whale hunt. Their story tells how the Great Spirit created the land, animals, and people, and finally the bowhead whale last as his most perfect creation. However, the Great Spirit realized that the people needed the whale to survive, so he made it possible for the people to hunt it. At one point in the spring, the bowhead swim near the water surface as the ice breaks up. In this way, the whales offer themselves to the people. As the Great Spirit designed, this gift would last providing the people took only what they needed and used all that they took.

Laws of Sacred Life

In First Nations and Inuit cultures, children are gifts from the Creator. They are evidence that the gift of creation that is recounted in creation stories continues in a never-ending cycle of birth, life, and death. According to the ancient teachings of many First Nations, the essence of life's existence is to raise and nurture the young and therefore continue life. In this way, individuals have their own role to play in the whole of creation.

This way of thinking led to cultures in which individuals have great freedom. They are given opportunities to learn and understand, along with personal autonomy, or the power to make their own decisions. Seeking control over another would be like challenging the Creator's purpose for that person. Individuals learn to be accountable for both their actions and the consequences of those actions.

This belief in personal autonomy and responsibility served a practical as well as spiritual purpose in cultures living on the land. In a wilderness environment, knowing what decision to make was sometimes critical to life.

Communities had a sense of personal involvement in individuals' actions, however they did not try to control them. Anyone who demonstrated inappropriate choices received direction and guidance from the community to help them make better choices. Those who would not accept guidance and could not abide by the ways of the community were free to leave. Individuals always had the right to disagree, although the unity of the whole group was considered most important. This sometimes meant that a dissenting person would leave a group rather than disturb the sense of togetherness and common purpose.

Laws of Mutual Support

For traditional First Nations and Inuit peoples living on the land, the demands of daily life required that people work together with the natural world, not against it or against each other. Traditional peoples lived within a web of mutual support. Mutual support is a concept that is central to First Nations and Inuit worldviews. The Blackfoot term *aissspommootsiyio`pa*, which means "helping one another," captures this fundamental way of life. In mutual support, people are interdependent, which means they rely upon each other for some purpose. Interdependence is a reciprocal relationship of giving and taking.

Among traditional societies, the structure of this web of support began with the family and extended family system. Individuals turned first to their families for help and support, widening the circle of family around them in accordance with available resources. For example, larger families lived together in times of more abundance or areas with more abundant resources. Kinship bound groups together, beginning with the circle of the extended family, widening with

bonds of clan, nation, and sometimes confederacy or alliance.

Identity in traditional First Nations and Inuit cultures stressed the community more than the individual. Many celebrations and ceremonies involved sharing and strengthening these bonds.

Many First Nations held give-aways, a way of honouring an individual or group. Today the give-away is still significant for many communities. These ceremonies include dancing, speeches, songs, and gift-giving. It is an honour to give as well as to receive, the gesture of giving being more important than the gift itself.

Sharing and Generosity

The Anishinabé language traditionally had no word for savings. Putting items aside for future use or personal gain was against the value of sharing. Families and communities depended upon each person contributing his or her best efforts, with all sharing in the products of those efforts.

The ethic of sharing also extended to non-human elements of the world. Rituals of returning gifts to the land in exchange for its provision of food and other materials were part of all traditional First Nations and Inuit cultures. For example, when cutting down the centre pole for a Sundance lodge, many prayers of thanks would be given to the tree for allowing its use in the ceremony.

In a similar way, when a Cree hunter was successful, the entire community gathered for a feast. Haudenosaunee villagers shared in the tasks necessary to plant, tend, and harvest the crops that would feed them through the winter. In all First Nations and Inuit cultures, people's status increased not by what they had, but by their generosity — what they gave away.

Harmony and Unity

Traditionally, living on the land required that people work together to perform the tasks needed for day-to-day life. Everyone contributed to the work that provided food, clothing, shelter, and tools. People shared a common purpose in which each individual had a role to play. Roles were clearly defined and all contributions were respected. Principles of respect and sharing meant that conflict-generating emotions such as envy and greed were reduced. Most communities lived in harmony most of the time.

Of course not all people got along all the time, and one of the roles of the Elders was to help individuals rid themselves of negative feelings. The goal in resolving or mediating a conflict was to help individuals become whole again and restored to themselves and their community. These principles are still at work today in many communities through restorative justice programs. You will read about how this works in Chapter Six.

Within this worldview, a good life requires harmony with the rest of the physical and spiritual worlds. To the Navajo people, the greatest compliment one could give was to say that someone takes care of his or her relatives. First Nations know that this statement includes not only parents, siblings, and extended family, but also everything in all of creation.

Humour

One of the best ways to reinforce a social bond between people is to share a good laugh. Few experiences as easily forge bonds of unity and common worldview.

Sharon Shorty, a Tlingit and Northern Tutchone woman from the Northwest Territories was drawn to storytelling in her youth. She noticed that Elders often used humour in their stories to help make their point. Shorty's character Gramma Susie has strong opinions about everything, and her comments about First Nations people and communities make her audiences laugh. Her style is common among First Nations comedians and in First Nations communities.

First Nations comedy can be described as a kind of satire. Satire is an ancient form of humour found in many cultures. Satirists use humour to poke fun at, make a joke of, and expose hypocrisy, foolishness, and injustice.

One way satire appears in First Nations humour is through jokes about serious topics. Satire highlights injustices, but also tries to spark change through this exposure. In other words, it makes a point while getting a laugh.

For example, some First Nations comedians twist stereotypes into jokes. Stereotypes are rigid ideas about all individuals in a particular ethnic, national, or cultural group. Stereotypes prevent people from seeing others as individuals.

One comedian who likes to play with stereotypes is Don Burnstick, a Cree comedian from Alberta. Burnstick is known for his "redskin" jokes, which get audiences of all ancestries laughing. But his jokes, like many by First Nations comedians, uncover a truth. In this case, it's a truth about stereotypes with an ugly history behind them.

Audiences sometimes find themselves being made fun of, but end up laughing at themselves. For many First Nations people, laughing at one's self is the best laughter. It keeps a person modest, down to earth, and in spiritually in touch.

Most First Nations comedians agree that if you end up laughing at the expense of First Nations peoples, then you've probably missed the point of their joke.

First Nations comedians often use their own life experiences to fuel their humour. Don Burnstick used laughter to get through a difficult childhood and drug and alcohol problems. He says that despite all that Aboriginal peoples have endured, they have never lost their sense of humour.

Charlie Hill, a successful Native American actor, writer, and comedian from the Oneida Nation, would likely agree. He says that by laughing about painful experiences of the past, he "turns poison into medicine."

Mutual Support Today

The values of interdependence that once supported traditional ways of life are still a part of communities across Alberta. At a personal level, intermarriages between groups have created a web of kinship ties

between communities. For example, most First Nations people have many relatives in Métis Settlements. One Métis woman expressed the closeness this way: "It is no wonder that Métis Settlements are close to reserves. That is where our *kohkoms* live."

An obvious area for mutual support is in the political realm. Organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations and the Métis Nation of Alberta meet regularly and work together to help their member communities or nations.

The Treaty 7 Education Consortium combines the education efforts of five nations in Treaty 7. The consortium shares information, expertise, and contacts. Most importantly, it speaks with one voice to the provincial government to influence resource and policy decisions.

Some groups have economic partnerships. For example, Pimee Well Servicing Ltd is owned by six First Nations from northern Alberta: Heart Lake, Frog Lake, Saddle Lake, Kehewin, Beaver Lake, and Whitefish Lake. Pimee or *pimiy* is a Cree word meaning “oil.” The business cleans oil rigs and was awarded an Alberta Chambers of Commerce Business Award of Distinction in 2001 — the Eagle Feather Business Award of Distinction. Chiefs from each owner First Nation are on a board of directors that works together using traditional decision making methods.

The legal world also offers many examples of mutual support in action. Aboriginal groups watch one another’s legal battles closely. Because of the system of legal precedent, a victory for one is often heralded as a victory for all. For example, when Métis hunter Steve Powley won hunting rights in a September 2003 Supreme Court decision, many Métis and First Nations groups across the country applauded. Powley’s success in Ontario may help other groups working to resolve hunting and fishing rights issues.