

WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Well-being Cycles of Life

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





CYCLES OF LIFE

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A seed dropped into the soil grows into a plant, produces leaves, and flowers. The flowers bear seeds, which drop to the ground and become new plants, and so the cycle continues. The cycle of life is a view of existence in which all things end at the beginning in a never-ending cycle. While the plant lives, it thrives on the rain that falls from the sky. It takes in moisture and nutrients from the soil through its roots, and cycles the moisture back to the sky by breathing it out through its leaves, in a process called transpiration.

A deer might wander by and nibble at the plant, grazing on its leaves, which contain some of the soil's nutrients. The deer's body cycles the plant food into energy and passes what it doesn't need back to the earth. Its droppings nourish the soil so that more plants may grow. Later, a wolf could eat the deer. What the wolf doesn't eat will feed smaller animals, birds, and insects. As the wolf moves through the forest, some seeds might stick to its fur, travelling with the wolf for a while before falling to the ground, where new plants will grow. When the wolf dies, its body decomposes, returning to the soil. All things are connected. Birth leads to death and death generates more life.

At the heart of the cycle of human life sits the woman, just as Mother Earth is at the core of all life. Around the woman is the family and extended family, circled in turn by clans or other groups of relations. These wide circles of relations form a nation. A circle of nations makes a cultural group or confederacy. Circles of all humanity are linked with circles of the physical and spiritual worlds that make the planet.

Nature's patterns are circular: flowers, tree rings, and the ripples in water if a stone is dropped in. The round moon revolves around Earth, which rotates as it circles around the spherical sun. All the circular planets orbit the sun. And so the pattern continues beyond the universe into infinity.

In the Cree language, Earth is called *Okâwimaw Askiy* — “Mother Earth.” Many First Nations and Inuit cultures make a connection between the planet and women. Both have the power to create life. Mother Earth travels in a path with nine other moons (planets) around the sun; pregnancy lasts nine moons (months). The cleansing night moon (the lunar moon) circles once a month, as does a woman's monthly cycle.

Like Mother Earth, women were highly respected in traditional First Nations societies. Elder women of a community often provided guidance to community leaders. They were seen as the protectors of the community's young and the keepers of the culture.

Because of their gift — the ability to give life — women are considered especially powerful during their monthly cycle. A young woman's onset of this cycle was a cue in many traditional cultures to give thanks through ceremonies for the fertility that continues life.

In most traditional First Nations cultures, certain ceremonies were only for women. Women usually had their own pipe and among people of the Blackfoot Confederacy, only a woman of high moral character could preside over the *Ookáán*, an important ceremony held as part of some Sundances.

CEREMONIAL CIRCLE

The circle is a universal symbol of connection, unity, harmony, wholeness, and eternity. In a circle, all parts are equal.

In Cree, *miyowicihewin* means “having good relations.” The circle is a symbol of this cultural value.

When a Cree First Nation’s dance is held in a circle, it is a cue that the dance affirms *miyowicihewin*. It symbolizes the coming together of the nation, and the unity of the First Nation’s social, spiritual, and political institutions with the Creator.

Many ceremonies are performed in a circle, acknowledging the unity and interconnectedness of the participants with each other and the world. The pipe ceremony, for example, follows the sun’s path in a circle. Stories are often told to a circle of listeners and various meetings and decision-making institutions are conducted with a circle of participants. The talking circle and justice circle are two contemporary examples of how First Nations and Inuit peoples continue to acknowledge the significance of the circle in day-to-day life.

If something goes wrong in one part of the circle, everything else is affected. Many contemporary environmental movements reflect traditional First Nations and Inuit beliefs about the necessity of using nature’s gifts with respect. Such practices keep the circle in balance. Just decades ago, littering was commonplace and almost all waste went into landfills; few people thought about the legacy of garbage left for future generations. This kind of thinking reflects a worldview that isolates rather than a worldview that is holistic, emphasizing the significance of the whole rather than the parts. Today most municipalities have shifted their thinking with recycling and composting programs. Wisdom and ways of life that were the foundation of traditional First Nations and Inuit cultures for hundreds of years has just recently become commonplace in mainstream society.

In many First Nation cultures, the circle is then divided into four, like a compass. These four directions and the number four have significance in many First Nations cultures. Each time that the sun rises in the east to circle across the sky, the day moves through four parts: morning, afternoon, evening, and night. The days join together to bring four seasons.

The concept of four directions is sometimes represented by the idea of four winds that blow from the north, south, east, and west. Many dances incorporate the four directions, which symbolize different things to different nations. In one interpretation, the east represents the sun and fire; the south, the thunderbird and water; the west, plants, animals, and earth; and the north, wind and air. Some First Nations also identify four sacred elements of creation: earth, water, air, and fire.

THE MEDICINE WHEEL

About five thousand years ago, while pyramids were being built in Egypt and Stonehenge was under construction in England, the people of the North American Plains were also laying stones. The form of their low-lying stone creations varied from region to region, but most included a

variety of stone circle, cairn, and spoke configurations.

About seventy of these ancient stone structures still exist today, marking hilltops, river valleys, and open prairie in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and some Midwest states. The largest and most elaborate of these, known as the Bighorn medicine wheel, lies atop Medicine Mountain, a sacred site in Wyoming. In the 1880s, someone referred to this structure as a *medicine wheel*, and the term stuck.

To First Nations, the term *medicine* is not restricted to herbal or chemical remedies for illness, although it can, of course, include these things. Medicine traditionally includes spiritual energy and enlightenment. The medicine people of traditional societies were powerful individuals who communicated with the spirit world. They used their knowledge and powers to benefit the community and strengthen spiritual balance.

In many traditional First Nations societies, illness was seen as a sign that a person was not in balance or harmony. Medicine people had the job of restoring a person's balance, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. If the Bighorn medicine wheel and other such stone structures were used for spiritual ceremonies, the name *medicine wheel* may well be appropriate.

However, according to the traditions of the Blackfoot Confederacy, there is no such thing as a medicine wheel. Blackfoot nations built many stone structures, but each had a specific identity, purpose, symbolism, and name. For example, some were *mâmma'pis*, which means "tipi rings," while others were *a'kihtâikssin*, which means "cairn or memorial." Memorials were built at burial sites to honour prominent leaders, Elders, warriors, or holy women. *A'kihtâikssin* were also built to mark the site of sacred lodges or sites where visions were received. The markers indicated to others that the site should be respected as a spiritual location.

Today the term *medicine wheel* can also be used to refer to a concept for learning and healing. This form of medicine wheel has been adopted by many First Nations peoples, regardless of whether it was part of their traditional culture. Generally, the teachings of this kind of medicine wheel help people to attain healthier minds with a greater awareness of how to live peacefully and harmoniously with Earth.

The contemporary medicine wheel is usually presented as a diagram that includes various forms of symbolism and philosophy. For example, a medicine wheel diagram might identify four directions on a wheel and connect each direction with aspects of life, such as spiritual, physical, emotional, and mental health. An individual might examine each aspect to evaluate whether they have balance in their "life circle." There are many interpretations of the medicine wheel charts.