

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Indigenous Pedagogy Empowerment Through First Nation Control of Education

by Dale F. Auger

Government of Alberta ■



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### **INTRODUCTION**

At this time, in many First Nation communities there is a questioning of existing schools as effective educational systems. Many factors have affected the school's role in Native communities. Primary among these factors is that there has been a long history of little or no community control. Generally speaking, as this country called Canada was forming, we the Native people ended up with our lives in the hands of foreign societies or governments. Schooling was no exception; for centuries, governments and the churches sanctioned by them have structured our education. The imposed educational systems have restricted our ability to educate our children according to our own philosophy and traditions.

I remember the words of the Old Ones, "Wunska, wunska!" they would say. "Wake up, wake up from your sleep!" I remember pulling the blankets from over my head, my eyes open. I see the Old Ones in the corner of our hand-made home. I see the spruce bows above and below. Our home had been made days before; I remember helping build it. I remember first picking the spot and how there was nothing there but the open Land. I remember how I watched and learned how my people, the Sakaw Cree, roamed the bushland of the north.

I awake to see my grandfather preparing to skin the beaver; in the middle of our home is a Fire. On the Fire there is a pot of tea. I hear the language of my people, the Sakaw Cree, being spoken. Giving acknowledgement to the beaver spirit, my grandfather takes the feet of the beaver, binds them tightly and hangs them from branched ceiling. "Listen!" my grandfather says to me. "Utee-peeyepi." "Come and sit with me," he calls. "It is time for your teachings; come and learn." With excitement I rush to his side, my teacher. He begins his lesson to me about the beaver. He talks about the beaver as

though we are brothers; he is careful when handling him. There is a long standing respect between these two beings, my grandfather and the beaver. He tells me the beaver was the one who helped us to understand the Land, the Soil, the Trees. Because, he says, the Water was once everywhere and it was the beaver that introduced us to this land. I listen and learn the ways of my people, where the Land and all beings—the two-legged, four-legged and winged ones, the Trees, the Land—are all sources of knowledge; where knowledge among all these beings is willingly shared; where walls of a building, words written into countless numbers of textbooks, and paper-certified teachers are no longer the limits of an educational system. I affirm my birthright to be educated as a Sakaw Cree and to ensure that my children and my children's children for generation to come will have the means to do so as well.

It is no longer acceptable for someone to make decisions from another part of the Land, towards the future of my children as well as the other children in my community. We in our community must assume total responsibility for the control of our educational systems and we must define our own visions of education in our own communities. Only then can a school become a more relevant place for students in each particular community situation.

As Native visionaries begin the processes of creating Native educational systems, a diversity of models will emerge. These models might incorporate common elements, such as the inclusion of Elders as “teachers”, the use of the Native language as the language of instruction, and the use of curricula which have been constructed from a Native point of view. Beyond inclusion of elements such as these, however, Native educational systems will embody a philosophical context which is uniquely Native. Those who truly wish to implement Native educational systems and not merely replace Canadian systems with Native teachers and Native curricula must give serious consideration to what is a Native philosophy of education.

I view this chapter as an exploration of what might be involved in identifying a Native philosophy of education. What I describe results from my being Sakaw (“northern” or “bush”) Cree. My purpose in writing is to present aspects of Sakaw Cree philosophy of education, in the hope that the identification of such a philosophy will provide a means for establishing a solid foundation from which a genuine Sakaw Cree educational system can arise, and to inspire other First Nations to undertake a corresponding process.

In this chapter I speak in my own voice. I have been actively involved in the knowledge I am relating here, for the knowledge was inside me. One Native professor described this research orientation by contrasting it with “academic writing”:



In academic writing, the rule is that the authors do not identify their voices. They speak from a pedestal of knowledge. The individual speaking is not a central part of that knowledge, nor is he or she actively involved in the knowledge he or she has produced. The knowledge is outside of the self ... In my culture [Mohawk], not speaking from the “me” is a violation. The only true knowledge that I can have is that which is learned from what I have experienced.

(Monture-Okanee, 1992: 126–127)

My methodology did include some elements which resembled some of the western sense of research. For instance, I conducted interviews with Elders and analyzed Elders’ documents. However, I have also journeyed into my inner being to honour inner and spiritual realities, for as Cajete (1994: 20), a Tewa Indian from New Mexico, states:

It is the affective elements—the subjective experience and observations, the communal relationships, the artistic and mythical dimensions, the ritual and ceremony, the sacred ecology, the psychological and spiritual orientations—that have characterized and formed Indigenous education since time immemorial. These dimensions and their inherent meanings are not readily quantifiable, observable, or easily verbalized, and as a result, have been given little credence in mainstream approaches to education and research.

## **SAKAW CREE PHILOSOPHY AND KNOWLEDGE**

With some hesitation, I approach the task of putting into words general commentary on Sakaw Cree philosophy and knowledge. I feel reluctant to expose the ways of my people’s minds. The reason is that, in the past, knowledge was taken from us, from our Elders, and used in the wrong way to further control our destiny. We have always wished to be free to totally control our future. In spite of these fears, I feel the timing is right to write about these ideas. It seems the western view of knowledge is in a state of break down or at least is being seriously re-evaluated in light of the social and environmental chaos around us today. We, the Cree, are not alone in our search to rediscover new and whole knowledge.

It is my belief that answers cannot be found in the middle of the problem. My feelings are that I must go back before the time when a process was disrupted. I must backtrack and gather information on how my people looked at knowledge before the western ways disrupted the natural flow of my people’s way of life. How is it possible to go back that far? Much has changed over the years; many different philosophies have invaded the minds of my peoples. What has not changed is the way we access and view knowledge. Even though we might appear

to have changed on the surface, inside our old ways are still with us. Our philosophy still occupies the centre of our core. It is from this core that our future will take shape.

I remember the words of many of the Old Ones. “Go inside,” they would say. “Go and talk to your spirit, your soul.” If the Old Ones have been saying these words for countless generations, words which talk about going inside the “Core”, then shouldn’t we be taking steps to at least try to understand the meaning of the Core?

### **Exploring the Core**

A little boy stares out the window of the cabin. His eyes focus on something downward. The grandmother asks him from the other side of the room, what does he look at. The boy replies that his two little friends are calling him to come out and play. The grandmother tells the boy to tell his friends that he can’t go out because he is not well. She says, “Tell them to forgive you for not going. Tell them you will feed them.” The grandmother walks to the window and on the ground two chickadees hop up and down. The boy runs to the door with food for his friends and calls to them to eat.

Short stories like the above illustrate a primary aspect of Sakaw Cree world-view: that all beings, whether they be two-legged (human), winged, or four-legged, are encouraged to communicate with each other. The boy was encouraged to recognize and communicate with the winged ones. The winged ones were encouraged by the boy when they took the food from him. The boy did not only talk to the winged ones; messages were sent in other ways. Generally speaking, communication without words is deemed to be possible, not just between two-leggeds but among all beings.

The meaning of “beings” is difficult to discuss in the English language. In the Cree language, for example, when stories refer to the weather or Trees, it is as though they live. The story might say “The Tree being talked to the weather being; together they talked”. The language is expressing a fact of the Cree world, that these entities do indeed live. Cree language and philosophy are complementary. There is no consideration of fantasy in the fact that Trees, Animals and humans “talk”, or communicate with one another. There are no barriers (such as the concept of “fantasy”) which prevent humans from experiencing knowledge from other sources, or beings, in addition to human beings.

This tree they call the Birch is such a powerful being, like the mother. I look to her as a mother of the tree beings. She is a giver of life, new and old, always giving. When you

look at her she looks as though she has a dress on, a white dress. Her bark is white like the buckskin dress she wears. The branches look like fringes; they move so nicely when the wind blows. The spring is one of my best times with her; this is when she gives milk. Fresh clean milk, Sap, they call it. When I was a child I would put my head at her feet looking upwards. My mouth opened, I would catch the drops she offered me. The Old Ones make tea with this pure mother's water; they say it gives them new knowledge. I work with this great tree being; we work together, we help each other. When I take her bark I ask her and tell her over and over again how grateful I am. I tell her I will not harm her being. In return I feed her and pray for her. We treat each other well. It is "likeweareone".

There is so much to be told about the relationship humans have with other beings, the Tree beings, for example. Humans have relied on them from the beginning of time. It is a relationship that has never faltered. Each, until now, has been fairly loyal to the other. One such loyal relationship is that of one whom I have come to know as the "Birch Woman".

When I drove up to her log house facing the small lake, I was greeted by a group of small children. She lived in the larger cabin with the one side blocked off, her private place. Her daughters and granddaughters surrounded her in each of their own homes. The oldest daughter is the one who cares for her on a daily basis, tending to her every need. The daughter calls her mother "Mom" or "My Mom". Everyone in the camp and the surrounding area respects her mother greatly.

I had known the old lady and her daughter for some time and they were glad to see me. They had word that I was coming and that I was wishing to learn the ways of the Birch. They also knew that when someone came for such knowledge, there was an unwritten and unspoken law. That law was that it was done in the right way, the giving and respecting way, the way of the Creator. For the last several months I had collected clothes, pots and pans to be given as gifts. It is the Sakaw Cree way that you first give tobacco and cloth print as recognition to the Creator and the knowledge they share. To the old lady I have a second batch of tobacco for her own use. I was told that she loved peppermint candy. In between the candy and tobacco I also offered money. I offered this to her and humbly asked her if she could teach me the way of the Creator and the way of the Birch.

She accepted the offerings and with a prayer offered them to the Creator on my behalf. Her own personal offerings went under her pillow almost immediately. To the

older daughter, I offered the clothes for the children and money for herself. Everyone at that point was very happy and all was proper; all offerings had been accepted.

I had come there to learn and she was my teacher, and in that way it was plain and simple. I had not even settled in when she called one of the younger boys, about eight years old. She handed him a small axe and instructed him as to where I was to start my learning. I followed this young man through the bush, thinking to myself, "I'm going to learn from this young man".

As we walked I noticed just how sure-footed he was. He had done this many times before. He stopped several times, tilting his head upward, listening, saying nothing, and then continuing on. At this point I had really no idea just what I was to be working on first. In the Indian way one asks few questions and learns first from observing what is all around. In the Indian way there are no short cuts to learning the right way. Learning is done with all senses first.

Once more he stopped and once again his head turned, looking upward. At that point I had allowed myself to open all my senses, to feel the unspoken learning. What I got had to do with something between the Trees and the weather. I knew what kind of Trees these were: they were Spruce and I was going to start with picking their roots. This young man did not start his teaching just yet; he sat down next to the tree and waited. I sat next to him and said nothing. Then in a soft voice he said to me in Cree, "Not yet; it's too windy."

Without realizing it, I was already learning, learning without voice. I could feel the tree talking to me, telling me, "Grandson, you must wait for our relative the wind to quit blowing. You must ask him to help you just like you must ask me of the tree beings".

Just then the young man pulled out a small pouch with tobacco in it. He took some in his hand and began offering it to the wind and the spruce tree. No sooner had we done this when the wind stopped and the big spruce tree was still. The young man proceeded to tell me that if we had started looking for the roots prior to doing this, they would not be there. First, we had no yet acknowledged the tree or the wind; secondly, the roots are like the fingers of a human. When a human is standing in the wind and the wind is threatening to blow him down, what does he do? He hangs on. Trees are alive and they react the same way. So, if you are looking for them closes to the surface they are nowhere to be found. They are underground, hanging on; otherwise, the tree will fall over. Everything is related; everything works together. So, to get at the roots you must check

with the tree being and to work with the tree you must also talk to the wind; it is that simple.

Not until after all this unspoken communication had occurred did we eventually begin to dig. At that point all senses are working together; so, locating their whereabouts was easy for the young man. He peeled off the top layer of moss and there they lay. I watched this young man as he worked with the roots. His hands were so sure, almost gentle. Soon I, too, was working with this great part of the tree being, the roots.

All that afternoon we worked with the Tree beings, collecting their roots. Each time I would start I found myself checking and almost openly talking to the wind. Such is the power of unspoken communication, learning without spoken words; that young man put me in the presence of a real teacher.

Later that day I had gotten so many roots that each arm was full with these rings of roots. On my fingers were smaller one; a good day it was!

When I returned back to the cabin, the old lady was pleased to see that I had learned the way of the roots. She had a bucket of Water beside her and took some of them to put into the Water. She then handed me a small knife which was not very sharp. She reached in the bucket and handed me one root, then took one for herself. "These roots are like rivers; each has a bend in it like the river. When splitting them in half you must get over the knots in order to have them long to sew with." She explained that they would be used for the sewing of the baskets we were to make. "We must make them soft so they can be like thread"; she spoke no English and her words in Cree were few. That does not mean that she was not communicating; she spoke to me in an unspoken language, as it is often with our Elders.

When we were done we had piles of small, wrapped root threads. The daughter had prepared a basin of warm Water and several natural dyes. The roots were then dyed many colours. I felt good at this point; the learning felt good. I could not help thinking how this was my way of learning. I felt at home in this classroom; the language was my way.

The next morning I was told that I would be going out with a man who had been taught by the old lady to get birch bark. His name was Muniaw and he knew all there was to know about the way of the Birch. We drove about an hour. When we got to the place I was shocked to see piles of destroyed birch Trees. There must have been some kind of government program that cleared land, acres and acres of destroyed lands. I looked at



Muniaw and asked him why had they done this destructive thing; he smiled and said nothing. Muniaw had come to accept the ways of the whiteman; after all, he was one of these people. “Muniaw” in Cree means “Whiteman” or “white person”. He was a whiteman who had been adopted at a young age by a the Indian people. As far as he was concerned, the Cree were his people and that was final.

We left the truck and walked to the other side of the mass destruction. On the other side were the most beautiful, large, pure white birch. To find such large Trees of this nature was rare; birch are very sensitive tree beings and do not just grow anywhere.

Muniaw walked up to the largest tree and placed tobacco at her roots. With his large hands he held the tree, feeling the surface and looking upwards. Like the young man the day before, communication between other beings needed to happen. The day before, it was with the wind. Today it was with another being, that of the sun. The sun, the giver of light, worked with the birch and that was what Muniaw was addressing.

The lesson the sun gave was this. If I tried to take the birch without acknowledging her being, the birch could not be taken without scarring her surface. Without the sun the bark simply cannot be taken. It was the same with humans, it was told to me. Say a human is walking in the hot sun; he will start to get hot and tired. He begins to recognize the sun as the cause of his own rising heat. What does he do? He takes off some of his clothing. Just like the birch tree. When humans are forced to take off their clothes when it’s cold, they resist. So, too, does the birch. Two beings react the same way to the higher being, the sun. So I waited for the sun to communicate with the tree being. Then, when the tree being said it was O.K., I learned to take the birch bark. That is the way, the way of all beings. Today my respect for the sun is greater than it has ever been. Learning of the sun, the birch, and even myself as a human helped me understand better the power of “whole Knowledge”. Working relationships with all other beings, that is what this learning was about.

Now roots and bark had been gathered and prepared for the creating process. One more entity had to be acknowledged and that was the Saskatoon willow. At this point I had already learned the pathways to communicating; so, talking to this tree being had become more familiar.

In the Birch Woman’s cabin once more we sat, ready to start the creative process. In her bag she pulled out a small bundle, opened it and spread it out on the table. These

items were taken care of like special little helpers: red willow pegs, natural string, measurement sticks, all the natural tools to create.

Over the next several days I learned the many meanings of creation. Human being, the initiator, and the different tree beings working hand in hand. The “crossing of knowledge” I like to call it, where many beings working together, cross each other’s path, sharing and learning each other’s knowledge. I could feel the crossing of knowledge working through my fingers as I created the basket. The making of the basket and its result is not what this was all about. It was something greater: the pleasurable feeling you get when you can see the spiritual beings working together as one. Oh, how I felt so pure as one who creates.

For the next several days I could feel the Spirit Beings with me, so clearly. In my dreams they appeared talking as though they were human themselves. When I looked at the old lady after that I no longer had the need to be spoken to, or told how to. I was just a being that had gotten on that path, the pathway that so many of our ancestors had travelled – a path that requires no previous knowledge, just the willingness to accept that there are other beings on this great mother, the earth. They are here, they are around us, as sure as I am the smallest of beings on this great Island.

### **Sources of Knowledge: Elders**

Our Elders have been a source of knowledge in our community as long as we can remember. They have been our source of knowledge by helping us to be aware of our roots. As the most prominent part of our traditional education, they are themselves the roots of our culture. The role of Elders is like that of the roots of a tree. They hold the tree stable; when the wind blows, it is the roots that hold the tree intact. Roots are the foundation.

Just as there are many roots forming the foundation of one tree, so are there many Elders, each one distinct in his or her own right and with his or her own knowledge, forming the foundation of Sakaw Cree traditional education. Through lifelong experience, our Elders are our knowledge-carriers; through their wisdom and spiritual insights, they are our knowledge definers. They have always been there to help those who have wandered, those who wish to find their way back, as is described in this next story.

I sat in his cabin. I sipped on his tea. I shared his muskrat tail. He is one of my grandfathers. He is from the people of the beaver. His whiteman’s name is Old Man Beaver. His cabin is small and it faces the lake. His wife has since passed on. He is a calm man; he likes his cigarettes rolled very round and thick. “Come with me”, I ask him

one day. "I'll drive you to the store." He agrees. He walks to the corner of his cabin, dragging his old worn out moccasins on the floor. He then grabs his belongings and we walk towards my new vehicle.

He thinks nothing of the world from which I come. Yet, he is aware that I come from a different world – a world where a man's own philosophy is not as important.

He knows that we were born brothers and we once shared the same pond. For some reason I left and was forced to swim elsewhere. He tries not to lose perspective of that.

Old Man Beaver taught me a lesson that day – a lesson of what is important for now and for the future. A young university student driving an old traditional professor to the store. In some ways I want him to see that I am successful in the whiteman's world. He knows that I want him to recognize that. He does not speak. We proceed. He stares straight ahead and says nothing.

One mile down the road he begins his lesson to me. He reaches for his small bag of tobacco and paper and begins to roll himself a big round cigarette. Once it is in his mouth he pulls out a wooden match. I observe him from the corner of my eye. He knows that I observe him. I say nothing.

So, here we are driving down the road in a brand new 1988 Dodge Caravan, complete with all the trimmings of luxury. My personal canoe. I am proud of this vehicle because in the whiteman's world you are supposed to be proud of material things – things that shine and show well.

He reaches forward with his wooden match and goes directly to my dashboard. He strikes very firmly across it with his match. He lights his cigarette. I am stunned. He has threatened me. He has sent shock waves down my spine. In my mind I scurry like a chipmunk who senses danger. Outwardly, I don't react. I couldn't react because he waits for me to react. I say nothing. We drive on.

In the whiteman's world where I come from his act can easily be viewed as savagely disrespectful, uneducated, unsophisticated. However, there is another world with which I am very much losing contact. This is his signal to me. This man of the beaver game me a signal: Don't ever lose contact with our world. Don't let shiny objects burn your eyes, because once your eyes are gone you can no longer see beneath the Water.

We got his tobacco and we went back to his cabin by the lake. We smoked. We talked.

The eight hours it took for me to return to my city home were long. The scar that showed itself so clearly on the dash board of my new van is still there. So, too, is the thought of my grandfather, the Beaver.

Elders like Grandfather Beaver continue to share their philosophical thoughts on the importance of staying true to one's roots. Our Elders are essential sources of knowledge for Sakaw Cree. It is critical to incorporate them as teachers, as knowledge-carriers, into a Sakaw Cree system of education.

### **Sources of Knowledge: Animals**

In the larger Canadian society learning takes place in institutions, such as schools, colleges, and universities. In these institutions, learning is done primarily in classrooms. In the Native society, learning is not confined to classrooms. Elders believe that learning takes place in the whole of life: Life and all that lives are viewed as the true teachers of this earth. Included among these teachers are the Animals, better known to us as the four-legged beings.

Indian people have lived off the Land for many generations. They have come to know the Land and all that moves on it. For instance, when a family experienced a shortage of meat, the first thing they would do would be to look to the sky. They would do this because the sky can predict where the moose will be a day from then. If the sky shows a warm spell, the hunter knows the moose will be coming down from the hills to where the snow is shallow. A moose knows that if the snow begins to melt, the top part will eventually freeze, forming a hard crust. To a moose, this crust is about as bad as the bugs they get in the spring. If he were to stay in the hills where it is deep, he would surely fall prey to wolves. A moose cannot run in this type of snow because whenever he takes a step he breaks through the crust. The problem comes when he lifts his foot out again. The front of his feet scrape against the crust causing his hair to eventually wear away. (This would be like a man banging his knuckles one hundred times against a table.) Down below, where the snow is much shallower, he can move more easily.

This is one example of knowledge derived from observation of animal behavior. In the past, understanding the behavior of Animals meant feeding your family or not. Knowledge from Animals goes beyond the surface level of observing animal behavior, though.

Animals teach us about the many worlds that exist around us. They have no barriers, no limits. They have the ability to cross back and forth to each other's world, four-legged talking to



the winged ones, the winged ones talking to the two-legged ones. No limits, no lines. The next story provides an example of how easy it can be for all beings to cross into each other's world.

A young boy looks to become a man. For the first time he must provide for a family of his own. The young man must go to the grandfathers of his community. He approaches the grandfathers and says, "I must go fishing to provide for my family for the first time. I have never been on the lake alone before. I am asking for your guidance so that I will have a strong spirit and will have a strong mind." The grandfather turns to the young man. "If you wish to catch many fish you must call on the spirit of the MAGWA, the loon. The MAGWA is the one who understands how they swim. It is also he who has total understanding of where they swim. It is also he who has total respect of the Fish Spirit."

In order for this young man to succeed, he is asked by the grandfathers to call on the loon. That night he goes to the lake's edge and begins to call the loon. Across the lake the loon replies and swims towards the young man. The loon calls, "What is it that you ask of me and the loon spirit?"

"I ask that you give me the knowledge to understand the Fish Spirits. I need the wisdom to be able to capture the Fish Spirits. I am a young man with a young family and they depend of me." The loon turns towards the lake and says, "Yes, I will help you because you have come to me in the right way. I will go to the Spirits of the Fish below and tell them that you need them to help you provide for your family." The loon dives and the young man waits.

Before long the loon reappears on the surface of the Water. "Young man, the Fish Spirits have said that it is okay that you take them for your needs. They also said to take only what you need; do not be greedy."

The young man asks the loon where he must go to capture the fish. The loon replies, "At the mouth of the river you will see a tree that has been cut by our brother the beaver. Beside the tree they will wait."

The young man was so happy he turned to the loon again and said, "Loon spirit, what must I do to repay for your good deed?"

"You need not repay me, young man," the loon said. "Repay only the Fish Spirits. When you get your first drum, make a song about the fish beneath. When you make that song, tell the Fish Spirits how grateful you are that they provide for your family."

“This I will do,” said the young man. At the next feast, the you man sang his new song in honour of the Fish Spirits.

Stories such as these look to the Animals and Birds as a source of knowledge. The people looked to the Animals and Birds for answers on how they could feed their families. Animals had a firm place in the circle of beings; all were connected; all were one. This connectedness formed the foundation of education

Learning about and acknowledging that there is order and respect in the relationships among all beings is part of the education process. The language of “natural relationship” includes proper respect given to other beings, as the following story illustrates.

I remember as clear as there is day. I was just a boy when I again witnessed the respect our people had for the four-legged ones. In this case it was a big, older bull moose. A funny kind of respect, I remember thinking at the time. The moose pulling the hunter deeper and deeper into other worlds, worlds that only could have been travelled by a people who understood the meaning of all other beings, beings that acknowledged each other and depended on each other. It is not the taking that was the challenge but the asking for the right to take. Imagine man, the two-legged, asking the four-legged for the right to capture his being. Many times the right is not given and in some cases the right must be earned.

Skids, the people called him; a big man about six foot six or so. He was, I should think, in the prime of his life; fit as a fiddle. He had grown up in a family of boys or young men, where each day brought with it always new ways for the hunt. His father was known by the people as the “bear man” because it was said that one time many years ago he had problems with the other worlds. The talking and the asking for the right to take had not been learned yet at the time. His father, still young at the time, had killed a moose and had left it only to return to see a grizzly claiming it. He attempted to chase the big bear away only to find himself being torn apart. The bear ripped through half his face, leaving him scarred for life. He had a little dog at the time that taunted the bear away from him. Skids laughs at the next part. I guess the bear was leaving his father as he lay on the ground. As the bear was leaving, his father got up, picked up a big stick, and with the biggest swing he hit the bear square on the head as he walked away. The bear barely felt it, or course, and once again continued his assault on his father. Once again the small dog kept biting the bear in the back foot, luring him away. Skid’s father’s life was spared by the bear.

Skids talked about the lessons learned that day by his young father at the time. First, he said, perhaps his father did not ask in the right way for the right to take the four-legged, the moose he had killed. Perhaps the bear, who is the protector anyway, was asked to step in and restore order. Bears are protectors of the spirit world, you see. His father resisted the law of the being world by hitting the bear, only to find himself harmed even more. Skids talks a lot about his father, who has since passed on to the spirit world himself. His father bore the scars of the bear, reminding him for the rest of his life of the power that all beings possess.

This man, Skids, was taught the ways of all other beings early in life. He was on a hunt himself on time. He had shot a moose, but the moose refused to die, just refused to stop. It ran and ran, taking him further and further into the hills. The snow and the wind beings began to help the moose being by falling and blowing as hard as they could. Skids soon lost the trail in the wind and the snow. He turned back to his camp where I was waiting. We both sat in silence, each of us aware of the need to have that moose. Then in through the space in the top of our tent flew the hunter's friend, the whiskeyjack. He perched on the side of the poles looking down at us. His eyes spoke to us, almost as if to say, "Can't get him, eh? What's the matter with you, two-leggeds, don't you ever learn? You've got to ask first. Ask the moose being, like you should". Skids kept his head down, then looked up only to see the wisekeyjack fly way. I heard him; I knew what he meant, but I said nothing. Skids turned to his medicine pouch, opened it and pulled out a small willow fungus. He took a stone near the Fire and placed it on top. He lit the fungus and began to pray; together we prayed.

Soon the weather began to let up and Skids decided to return in pursuit of the moose. This time I followed a distance behind. What I saw was amazing. That whiskeyjack was leading Skids into the hills without tracks to follow. Soon the whiskeyjack stopped; it was as though he was calling to the raven to help from that point on. One raven came; then there were two, then many. They took him straight to where the moose was lying. He had given his life in honour of the moose being. Skids turned the moose over and with his knife he lifted the head and took above the top lip a small piece of bare skin. He later told me that the cleanest part of the moose was this part, and in honour of the moose being, it must be given back. He took this part and offered it to the tree beings in order that this moose spirit might still walk high as the Trees. He placed it on the tree branch with a prayer. Why this part, I asked. Because before this moose eats anything, he cleans it first with this part of his top lip. It is as though he wipes it clean first before he eats. The moose is a clean animal you see, one of the cleanest. Sure enough, when you

look close to a moose you see that there is no hair on the small area above his top lip. That is what it is for.

As all this was going on, the ravens watched above together with the wiskeyjack who had joined them. Skids opened the moose up; with his hand he scooped a hand full of blood. He drank it. This one is for me, he said. This is what I had offered to do in honour of the moose being. Skids offered me to drink and so I did.

What was so amazing was that as soon as we drank and offered there to the moose being, the ravens and wiskeyjack flew away all together. What was this all about, I thought through the years. Was this really direct communication with other beings? Yes, it was; I witnessed it. I felt it even as a young boy. Skids neglected to ask the moose for its being to feed the family. The moose resisted, making it hard for Skids. The snow and the wind beings helped the moose by making it impassable for Skids. Only when the wiskeyjack gave him a second chance to take the right way, did everything go right.

There are many worlds that form layers in understanding all other beings. Many times they are as clear as day and other times one has to call for them. Calling them might be in the form of prayer. Prayer is recognized by all beings as the channel for communication. If one being fails to recognize it, all other beings can refuse to cooperate and might eventually work against that being. That is why every event is started with a prayer; to recognize all beings, no matter how big or small.

Skids learned what was to be learned from his father's encounter with the bear spirit. Once on his own, he continuously tested this unspoken spiritual law. Time and time again, though he was reminded of the fact that he, as the two-legged, is not superior to all other beings. Without recognition of all beings in the right way, life can be difficult. In all this crossing of knowledge between all other beings, I watch and learn. This is how it is done; this is our way, the way of learning from all beings.

### **Sources of Knowledge: Land**

The land has always found a firm place in the language of our people. Like the Elders and the animals, the land holds equal to all. Even in today's words, people will still refer to the land and the people as one--- "PEOPLE OF THE LAND". The land is everything to the Native people.

Each group of people has a way of speaking of the Land; it is the central core of their existence. In their prayers, the Land is mentioned to the highest of honour. In the



songs, ever so sacred, Sakaw Cree sing to the Land, “We are ever grateful that you take care of us; we are ever so grateful that you provide for us; pity us for we are small”. The land was and still is, ever so sacred to the Sakaw Cree people.

So prominent to our people was the Land’s voice that even our clothing spoke of the land. Although ever so decorative, the designs’ true intent was never to be overlooked. The designs spoke of where a people lived on the Land. For example, if a people lived by the Water, then their designs would speak of all that existed around and in the water: the Fish, the Flowers, each spoke about their place on the Land. Or if a people lived near the mountains, then it was the mountains that were represented in the designs. The people showed respect for the Land by carrying these designs on their clothing. Wherever the people, they carried constant representation of their Land with them. The designs were a language that spoke of where the people lived and how they moved.

The Land also offers to the people very special and sacred places. The people help the Land speak by protecting and honouring these sacred places. For example, a place by a certain lake could carry spiritual significance, so a song or design might have been given to honour that place. In many cases, the particular place might have been an area which had helped the people to survive, a place where the fish came to shore, for example. That place might then have been honoured each year with a feast. The land was, and still is, ever so sacred to our people, the people of the Land, Sakaw Cree.

When the man walks the Land from one end of his territory to the next he comes to understand its every move. This understanding does not stop at the level of physical environment.

When his children need fish in their diet, he goes to the water and asks if it will be all right to move on its surface. This may be done the night before. The hunter might take a small gift to the Water, maybe a handful of Fire ashes. The water likes ashes because when they are spread across the surface, it leaves images of smiling, happy faces. Quiet time with each other; that is what is needed – acknowledgement.

The next morning the water would grant the hunter his request by giving calm days for as many days the hunter would take fire ashes. To have the water not working with you can mean windy, rough waters.

The hunter asks the water for a moose to feed his family. The water can make a deal with any being. He might ask the mosquitoes to bring the moose into its depths. In

many ways these deals that are made are much the same kind of deals that any human makes, providing, of course that it is done in a respectful manner. When one goes and asks for help from another, the unspoken deal might be that he has to return some day, a deal is in order. When you go to the Water and ask, you give.

What does the Water have to give to the flies to bring this huge beast to its shores? Let's ask.

Little mosquitoes, this spring you called me to help you with your eggs. You were afraid at the time that the Water wasn't bringing you enough nourishment to help you grow. That was done. Do you remember this time? The mosquito replies, "I have grown well and strong, thank you water". The water and the mosquito have come to an understanding. They must work together.

That night when the hunter has taken his ashes once again to the water as an offering, the water tells him in the smiling faces the deal has made with the mosquito. Tomorrow at this time the moose will be directed to the depths of the Water. The hunter the next day waits and, sure enough, gets his reward.

The seasons are tied so closely to the land that they are almost one. Everything goes by the seasons. We all know that moose run to the water to escape the mosquitoes and flies in the mid-summer. But did we have any idea that somewhere someone was making a deal about something? The land has these powers. Only the land can make such deals with higher powers such as seasons. We as humans know this. That is why we have this close relationship with the land. We talk about the land being an important source of knowledge and before we know it the water and mosquito enter. There comes that circularity of Life again: everything relates to each other.

The binding force of these relationships is the Land, referred to as "THE MOTHERS" to all beings that walk her ground. She is the one that plants the seeds of wisdom and respect for all and each. To speak about the Land is to speak about the interconnectedness within the natural world. However, it is more than this. It goes beyond the surface level of ecology. All beings are related, connected; they are one. Humans are the brothers and sisters to the Animals, the Trees, and all that is part of our Mother Earth.

### **Sources of Knowledge: Spiritual Messengers**

There has never been any question in the minds of the Sakaw Cree of the past and of today as to who is the higher power. It is "the creator". Sakaw Cree people of today might live differently

than those of centuries past, but this basic belief remains the same. Today, as before, when a person needs help or seeks knowledge, he or she goes to a “medicine man”, the creator’s messenger.

These messengers bring direct knowledge and teachings from the Creator to all beings. These messengers are chosen not only by the Creator, but by the Elders of that community as well. These chosen ones are a gift to the people from the Creator. They are born into power and knowledge. When they are brought into this world, their learning begins from birth until the time they return back to the spirit world. The Elders take this chosen child and begin his lifelong teaching. The teachings will be based on the understanding of the higher power, the Creator. This student will grow to be a teacher and a messenger as soon as possible. The people await his new and fresh knowledge.

The spiritual philosophy he gathers from the Creator and the Elders will be re-taught to others when it is time. In the time that his teacher is teaching the philosophy of the Creator, he or she can at no time think of himself or herself as “the power”. Messengers do no control the basic teachings. So, they might say something like, “Creator, I am small, I am helpless. Please help these people, they ask of you”. The teacher must not be the one who controls knowledge; instead, the teacher is one of the providers of knowledge.

The spiritual teacher has a heavy responsibility in his teachings to the people. Sometimes the people go to these spiritual teachers on a daily basis for small problems. Often it is just to sit and listen and learn. It must be kept in mind that a spiritual teacher is not the only teacher in the community; there are many. Each teacher has his or her own distinct chosen “profession:”, shall we say. There is the hunter, the tree person, the medicine root person and the list goes on and on. What is unique about the spiritual teacher is that most of the other teachers seek the knowledge he carries with him.

When problems are too great for the spiritual teacher, he can call on the help of the Creator directly. This may be done in many ways, one of which is the sweat lodge. The sweat lodge is a small dome-like “school house”. The lessons include how to take better care of the body and the spirit or the soul. Lodges like these are common in native communities even today. They remain as the most active teaching centres.

A sweatlodge is made from willows that are interwoven to create a half-moon, dome-like structure. It traditionally was covered with animal hide, but today canvas is used. Before the willows are cut, the ground must be given tobacco. This is what must be done: an offering to the willow tree, the Land, Water and Stone spirits.

The ground is taken and made into a mound where the pipe or the spiritual powers will sit. Again an offering is given to the Stones and to the Fire for heating them. Everything is acknowledged, everything has a place.

The messenger conducts the lodge. He calls on the spirits. Whatever kind of teaching spirit is needed is called. Within the lodge, teaching is done in many ways. There are the oral teachings, the spiritual healing, and the physical healing (the body). Learning and healing merge into one process. The spiritual messenger makes it possible for all people to have access to spiritual knowledge through the sweatlodge.

The spiritual world is still the main source of knowledge for Sakaw Cree. There are many sources of knowledge in the worlds of the spirit that have not been used for a long time. The return of the spiritual world to the Indian community can mean a return not only to an old but also a new philosophy.

The law that followed after Canada made treaties with Indian nations, called the *Indian Act*, outlawed First Nations spirituality and attempted to put an end to our way of thinking and the way we gather knowledge. Taking our way of thinking and replacing it with another does not always work, especially when it is done by force, as in this case. The language of the Cree was spiritual language. It contained secrets of how to enter the spiritually philosophical thought. Outlawing all aspects of these processes left a people looking for the messengers, their spiritual teachers.

## **THE CROSSING OF KNOWLEDGE**

Knowledge comes from many sources. As I have described in the previous section, a Sakaw Cree worldview acknowledges the Elders, the Animals, the Land and the Spiritual dimension as primary sources of knowledge. These sources do not exist in isolation of each other but are deeply intertwined, or interrelated. To “educate” a child using these sources of knowledge involves a process that interweaves, or interrelates, the child in among, all these sources. Such an educational system is not foreign to the child, for the child comes into our world already able to tap into these sources of knowledge. The newborn has engaged and continues to engage in a process of “crossing knowledge” with all beings. In times past, the affirmation and support of this process formed the basis of Sakaw Cree education. To provide a truly Sakaw Cree education today, this process which is natural to the child, must once again be nurtured.

In order to explain how this process occurs naturally and how it can be nurtured throughout a child's lifetime, I must first discuss the concept of “beings”, that we are all equal and are of one creation, without lines or barriers free within this discussion. I shall look at the



idea of “spirit rings” and what it means to acknowledge and use them (versus what happens to children when their “schooling” denies them).

Following from my examination of the concepts of “beings” and “spirit rings”, I shall discuss the notions of “new knowledge”, “old knowledge”, the “crossing of knowledge”, which results from the free communication among beings, and the “sharing of knowledge”, where all beings teach each other as was intended by the Creator. These ideas form the foundation of a Sakaw Cree philosophy of education.

### ***Beings and Spirit Rings***

The concept of “being” involves viewing reality as multi-dimensional. Rose Auger, a Cree Elder, states,

It [a being] is a spirit that is in a different plane than this Earth plane. It can be an ancestor who at one time was here. Or it can be the spirit of an eagle or even the spirit of the moon. The real spirit in the moon is who we address as “Grandmother”. And then we have other beings like Thunder Beings and know what they look like spiritually. So that’s what beings are. There’s beings below the earth. There’s beings in the mountains.... There’s all kinds of beings and Indian people know this. And it’s all been passed down from generation to generation of the knowledge of these beings and powers that they carry.

(Rose Auger, 1995)

Acknowledging planes or dimensions other than just the physical one opens doors to different kinds of communication. Elder Rose Auger states,

When you have a human being then you have a body, a face and a person you know is here; you can comprehend that. But people who have lost connection to the Great Mystery, they don’t have what we have. They’ve created a body; us, we have our visions, our connections. So our connection to the Creator allows us to relate to other Beings, the Moon, Animals, etc. And we can relate to that spirit.

(Rose Auger, 1995)

Understanding how communication among all beings is possible requires an understanding of the notion of “spirit rings”.

The Creator gave all beings the same right to this planet; this was made clear in the natural law, a law that has been passed down for generations in our traditional teachings. The Creator gave all beings the tools to reach out and communicate with each other, a kind of

invisible code, a code with which all beings are born. This code I hall call “spirit rings”. These rings are needed to communicate and interact with each other. It works like this. If one being is reaching out, the other will read and also reach out in a language, a spiritual language.

Imagine yourself standing on a very crowded sidewalk, at a bus stop, for example. Your eyes are focused forward. You need not turn around and count all the people around you to know that you are in the company of many human beings. You can “feel” their presence, their existence. Though you might attribute this feeling to your senses of sound or even smell, I suggest that it is more than this. It is that you are “tuned in” to the human “being”, that you have an awareness of the human form of being that goes beyond the five physical senses.

Acknowledging other beings and their existence can be of a similar nature. As I sit in the middle of a beautiful, natural are, I feel the presence of many beings, the tree beings, for example. I *feel* their presence; I acknowledge their existence. By extending into my own spirit rings I can be “tuned in” to the spirit rings of other forms of being. Perhaps a short story will provide a clearer vision of how these rings might look and respond.

I remember walking along a quiet, little pond when I was a lot younger, a boy. This was a frog pond. I can remember because of the sounds that came from it. Frogs in the spring—there is no sound like it. As I got closer to the edge I could see large dark spots in the still Water, almost grayish black. The closer I got I could see more and more of them. I had seen the likes of these before but had never investigated them until that time. I entered the Water to my knees and leaned over to get a closer look. What I saw was little black eyes staring back up at me. They were eggs, frog eggs. I could see the eggs inside but I wondered what was that stuff around it. I reached in with my bare hand and attempted to scoop them up. I couldn’t. They kept sliding through my fingers, like slippery coating or film around the egg. Why was it there? To protect the egg? From what or whom? Maybe it was there to help the eggs grow? Maybe it was food? I left the eggs as I found them. Somehow my interest had been satisfied.

Spirit rings, then, are like a coat of film around each being. They are a means of communication among beings; they are the key to accessing knowledge from many sources.

Portrayals of humans who can communicate with Animals are not unknown in our contemporary Canadian culture. There was the “Grizzly Adams” television series, for example. Characters like these are depicted as “special” or as having extraordinary abilities. However, to our people, nurturing this openness to other forms of beings, including animal beings, was a very core part of our educational system.

Ceremonies were given to us by the Creator so that different beings might be present in one fixed area. The sweatlodge is a place where beings come together and communicate as equal beings. In this context, as a human, you are no more than a participant in a congregation of beings, including the willow being, the Stone, the Fire, the Water, and so on. Then with the presence of the bear spirit being or the eagle spirit being, a powerful gathering force takes place in the sweatlodge. You are giving up your human self to be able to unite with all other spirits that are there; you are opening yourself up to merge with a congregation of beings. Through your prayers you humbly acknowledge that you are only a small part of this union of beings. By shifting from your physical being into your spiritual self, into your spirit rings, you are able to openly communicate with other beings.

Sometimes when you come out of a powerful sweatlodge, when your body has been put up as an offering and your mind has been put to rest and your spirit has travelled freely, and you lie down on the ground with your arms and legs sprawled out and look up at the Trees, you feel so good that you can see again the same rings around every being that is surrounding you what was experienced in the sweatlodge in a spiritual state continues to be manifest in the physical state. You can see the spirit rings of the winged ones as they fly by and you can see the spirit rings radiating power that the tree beings carry. These are the ways that the Creator has given to us, the Sakaw Cree. As long as there are Trees on this great Land and as long as the winged ones continue to fly and the four-leggeds continue to roam, we, the Sakaw Cree, will continue to respect and acknowledge the existence of all beings and keep open the paths to communication which are made possible through spirit rings.

The whole time we have been talking through this journey, without realizing it, we have been checking ourselves to see if this is reality as we know it or if it is some kind of spiritual path we allowed ourselves to enter. Again, without realizing it, we were actually walking down a spirit path of some kind, just the same kind that little children talking to animal beings do, doubt-free or questioning-free paths. We, the Sakaw Cree, know this as the spirit walk.

As we know it, no one being can take a walk like what I have been describing without having these spirit rings around his/her being. Like the frog eggs and the questions I had back then, these rings are the key to what path walks are all about. Perhaps they are the test that the Creator has given to all of us, a test that we need as beings to help us get over this thing westerners know as reality. The word “faith” might be used, but I think the phenomenon is something bigger than this human label. Faith can restrict; the word can restrict humans to one area, one belief, religion or god. To our people this cannot be the case, because spirit walks are too prevalent in our every day lives and in the teachings of the Elders.

We do not see this all lumped under the name of religion. It, the Elders believe, is the way we can open and close access to any world or one reality; we are dealing with many, as many as we feel we can handle. The more one can handle, the more knowledge one obtains. For example, if I were to live in world with one path, one definition of reality limited to one plane of existence, I could very likely exhaust myself on that one path by the time I reach elder-hood. We all know what Canadian society thinks of people who are old and tired. They are put in a place where their usefulness is not important. In our culture, however, our Old Ones continue their spirit walks throughout their lives, constantly bringing forth new knowledge.

By allowing ourselves to accept spirit rings, we also accept that we can take a spirit walk when needed or when called. In the end, knowledge is moved from being to being. To understand this movement of knowledge among beings, we shall begin with how a child brings new knowledge into this world.

### ***New Knowledge***

Understanding knowledge in the purest sense is very important to our people especially recognizing the Knowledge is sent directly from the Creator through a child. Elder Rose Auger states,

In our own traditional way we view a child as a spirit, an entity that comes from the spirit, an entity that comes from the spirit world and brings its own duty and its own identity and its own knowledge from the spirit world. It's new knowledge. The spirit of the child has an endless amount of new knowledge and senses. When he comes into the world he develops those senses to what are his gifts.

This new knowledge of the child is accessible to Elders, as is illustrated in the following story. The images in this story were and are still quite common in any Native community today. Because of the changing times, however, such as occurrence might be less open than it has been in the past.

This is her first child. Her growing child within is preparing to enter the world. She is visiting the Old Ones once more. She feels it is time to learn more about her growing child. This is the way it is done with the Old Ones. You visit them; you learn from them. Before long she is entering their home. With a sudden burst of energy she is greeted by two of the community's older women. To them this is a special time, not only because of the child's physical being but because of the new knowledge this child carries with it. "Come sit, young granddaughter, sit here", says one of the kohkoms; the other gets her tea. The attention is welcomed gratefully by the young mother. She sits in the same place



she sat the last time she was there, her back rested, hand to the side. She is comfortable. Already the mood changes, breathing slows down. All three are in tune with each other, silence.

Then, with her eyes closed, one of the kohkoms lifts her hands upward above her head with continuous prayer. She then moves them slowly, still in prayer, downward, resting them on the young mother's belly. Still in prayer she begins her communication, her hands still both pressed softly.

Soon the tenseness turns to relaxation. Talking becomes open and then everyone talks. "He is a happy child, he smiles a lot", says the kohkom. "He needs you to eat more Fish, maybe those fish eggs you ate not long ago; he likes those. He talked of the winged ones, yellow ones, little yellow winged ones. These are the Spirit beings he talks to the most."

The kohkom goes on to say that because this child has the gift of talking to other spiritual beings like the winged ones, he shall be given the name of YELLOW WINGED ONES, a powerful name. "In the spirit world the yellow winged ones are highly respected for their good luck and honesty," says the Kohkom. Because of this name, this child will have the power to work with people who have hard times in their lives. In this name-giving to the child all people recognize the power that comes with it.

"Granddaughter, they say you are healthy; your child is healthy. Prepare." With that the grandmother ends her prayer with a song, hands still on the belly of the young mother. Before walking home the mother talks with the kohkoms once more over tea.

Because of the changing times this sort of communication among Creator, child and Elder does not go on quite so openly. However, because generations have communicated this way, it simply does not disappear altogether. What happens is that different approaches are taken, leaving the basic understanding still intact.

The newborn child, then, is a source of knowledge from the Creator. Elder Rose Auger states,

When children are born into this world their new knowledge is endless. Because they have that connection, a powerful connection with whatever, and they (the elders) can learn from this spirit of the child. This spirit has not been interfered with; his spirit is strong.

(Rose Auger, 1995)

The Elders recognize the newborn's purity of knowledge, that this knowledge is endless, and that the newborn is connected powerfully without interference, pure.

As such, newborns arrive with an intact process of accessing knowledge from other beings. This is possible because the unborn child has been in an unbounded, free state of being. I call upon the dandelion being to explain this further.

When spring moves towards summer, many great changes occur on the earth. Birds return, then settle on the Land; Trees reach upward with their changing colours. Not far behind, animals move, looking for each and their own kind. Amongst these many changes one being comes to mind, that of the dandelion. Growing dandelion works its way up to the open air; then it settles in with the summer something changes, the colour of yellow disappears. What replaces it is a unique, circular, ball-like thing. This ball looks like it is made up of many little arms, branches. Soon the whole landscape is filled with so many of these white circular images. When you get up close to them, they seem so perfect in their creation; they are one. But then, the Wind being blows and blows, and soon one's turn to millions of free, new beings flying through the air. Free.

To describe the free state of a child's whole knowledge, I think I could find no better comparison: free like the dandelion seeds in the air; there are no lines or restrictions. The child's new and who knowledge is pure and free. Like the dandelion, the Creator gives the seed, then growth, only to have the new seed blow in the wind, free, a time to communicate with others. As the new seed blows from the white ball, it is set free to discover all other beings. So, too, does the Creator give the gift of whole knowledge to the child.

Into the care of the Elders, the child is sent out into the world. Birth. This child has a firm understanding of what it takes to communicate with all other beings. This communication might not come in the same form as what we as "mature adults" recognize; nevertheless, it is still there. The newborn's motor skills are not yet developed; the spoken language is also not yet present. What is there is this deeper understanding of communication, a set path, a path that was learned in the unborn stage. This we call the "chosen path". As in the story above, the Creator has given the child yet unborn a name which reflected what his chosen path might be. All three parties accept these words that give the name, "yellow winged ones". By the Creator giving his name, much of this child's future will depend on how well the channels are left open. That is where the Elders come into play, like the kohkom who put her hands on the belly of the young mother; she is assuming her role. She, like many Elders, is like the path openers. They work to guide all the young to their respective chosen paths.

Without the work of the Elders, it would be easy for anyone to forget his or her chosen path. Unfortunately, this is what is happening to our chosen young today: they have little or no path openers in their lives. Then, too, some choose not to use such channels even if they be placed directly in front, as in the gifted child or the name. I can see that the physical task the Elders have, keeping paths open, is a bit overwhelming for them. With the language diminishing, the new Elders know less and less about the overall value of keeping paths open. On one hand this might seem hopeless, but on the other there is this new-found strength in keeping communication lines open and free. When you have had this way of thought in your past for thousands of years, it is so deep in the blood of your veins you do not even know it. Only when we sit down with our Elders or our Old Ones do we see and understand. It is still there, clear as a blue day.

### ***Old Knowledge: The Education of the Child***

The context in which the Elders strive to keep paths open is one that results from generations of accumulation of knowledge which is based on the natural laws of the Creator. This context, or system of “Old Knowledge”, is founded on ideas that have been discussed above. That is to say, the Old ones believe that when a child comes into this world he brings with him many sources of knowledge. These sources are often called gifts from the Creator. A newborn child, then does not come into this world blank or empty. On the contrary, the newborn is whole and full of knowledge. He or she also has the ability to communicate with other beings. All beings cross each other’s paths, free moving. There are no lines or barriers. This is what a newborn child might “see” even before his eyes are opened. As a child, or two-legged being, the first thing that is done is to recognize all other beings. The Tree, Water, Fire and everything else is seen as equal. The Old ones believe that all beings communicate with each other even before physical birth takes place. In any case, all beings are quite familiar with one another already. Before the child can even see or speak a language, he or she is communicating.

This unique ability, or gift, continues as the child grows. Even before a child has spoken the first word, much communication has gone on already. What the spoken word does is merely open the line of communication with other two-legged beings. When the doors to this unique world are opened to others, that is where the Elders come in. Elders are masters of opening and closing the doors to other beings. They have been recognized as the true masters of teaching the knowledge of all other beings. Because they have a lifetime of knowledge, they can tap into all forms of knowledge. Theirs is the domain of “old knowledge”. Within this domain, the process of recognizing and nurturing new knowledge was in place; deeply hidden in some communities today, it still is.

The uniting of old and new knowledge, then, traditionally formed the basis of a child's education. The Elders see the child progress; when the time is right they decide how the child should proceed. The child and the Elders begin a life-long bond together.

The Elders do not attempt to discourage the way a child looks at or communicates knowledge. They encourage it; they broaden this knowledge. This is the time that we know as teaching, as expanding the sources of knowledge, as "school".

In the teaching or expansion of knowledge by the Elder, there is a reinforcing of the child's awareness of all the beings. The Old Ones take recognition of the child's spiritual companions, all the spiritual equals with which this child works. They assist the child to work within this spiritual realm. For example, a child might be given the spirit of the bear. So from that point on, the bear spirit becomes one of the main focuses of that child's existence. That child will learn from the bear and can contribute to the community in doing so.

As the Elders nurture the child, there are checking points. For each child, what kind of knowledge shows up more than others, what the Creator has given, is noted. For example, the child might have a strong sense of working with his or her hands. Or he or she might have a deep interest in the Water source.

Once these predominant kinds of knowledge become more and more evident, the Elders designate a specialist for the child. The child will be in the company of this specialist for years to come. The child might become a physical healer, so that he or she is best put in the company of a physical healer, one who works with the hands. In another case, the child might be sent to a plant healer, one who works with plants, if that child has been given the gift to understand the plants (where they can be found and how to use them). Other examples include the child who is given the gift of animal communicator or the child who, as a water communicator, understands the Water, the Fish and all that moves beneath. A final example is the child who has been noted to be a tree communicator. To understand the tree means to understand the roots. Soon the roots become a source of knowledge in themselves. Doors open when you discover the way to communicate with beings within beings.

Through his or her relationship with the Elders and then with a specialist, the child's original ability to communicate in the many, many different worlds greatly expanded. In the process, the child comes to understand that there are sources of knowledge within; she learns to access the knowledge she has brought with her into this world. Old and New unite.

The Elders also learn from the child and her knowledge. They re-acquaint themselves with the child's "whole knowledge". The Elders admire the child for her boundary-less sense of knowledge. The child is respected for her New or Whole knowledge.

Another way of looking at accessing knowledge is through the imagery of an eagle. An eagle in flight soars through the air until he focuses on his next meal and swoops down and skims the surface of the Water. When he breaks the surface of the Water with his claws, he pulls out a fish, taking only what he needs. The Water closes again. Like the eagle, a young mind accesses the knowledge it needs without having learned any particular accessing skills because it is a natural process; the source of knowledge from other worlds have not been blocked. The doors to other worlds open and close just as the surface of the Water opens and closes to the eagle as he gathers his food.

Let me give an example. When my four year old son was first exposed to his guardian spirit, he was more than willing to push it to its limits. His guardian is the hawk and his words to me were, "I ride my spirit; we ride over the Trees. Dad, can you ride with us? We go so fast". Indeed the knowledge to which my son has access is limitless.

In the Sakaw Cree worldview, there are many worlds and children have direct access to them. To venture into these other worlds, as children do, is to experience the core knowledge of my Cree people. Elders support and facilitate this process.

### **Crossing Knowledge**

The creating of a sweatlodge provides a means for understanding the concept of "crossing knowledge". To make a sweatlodge, willows are twisted to cross each other, creating a dome-like structure.

When the willow tree is approached, a small amount of tobacco is given to its being as a sign of acknowledgement and respect. When each tree is taken, thought and prayer are given to all beings with which the person works. One tree might be given to the winged ones; another might be for the four-legged. Thought and recognition are given. These Trees are taken to a place that is clean and free of any pain or bad thoughts. Tobacco is again given to the Land, the mother, for her recognition. A sweatlodge will be built. When the poles are placed in the ground, each pole represents some kind of being. Then the willow is bent to meet another being from the opposite side. As this goes on, what begins to happen is a crossing of other beings. Willows representing beings cross to touch and support each other, leaving a tight circular structure. A sweatlodge is born. The sweatlodge is where beings meet to talk with each other.

The willows are the Spirit Beings that connect us to all the universe; so their crossing becomes a place where there are no boundaries, there are no set rules of thought. The sweatlodge can be a place where humans can cross over to the many different worlds, a crossing place of knowledge.

The crossing of knowledge happens like the willow trees crossing to make a sweatlodge. Old knowledge meets new and together they form whole knowledge. Other processes for combining old and new knowledge include the vision pit, or vision quest, as people like to call it today, and the daily practice of lighting smudge and praying. These are all tools for crossing over, for connecting with our spirit rings.

All beings, including humans, have the ability to cross over to seek and gather each others' knowledge. Earlier this was called "communicating freely with other beings". Among all beings, the winged ones (Birds) the four-legged (moose, deer, etc), the Trees, Water and so on, none is more prominent than the next and there is the recognition and respect of each other. From this comes talking or communicating in a language known only in the spirit world. Trees talk to Birds, and so on, all made possible by this "spirit talk". Elder Rose Auger states,

When you are of that path and you live by natural laws of the Creator, you can feel a lot of times you need to go here for some reason. That's spirit talk and it comes and goes anytime. But you, the human being, have to be a clean state; you have to love yourself and take care of yourself. You don't do anything which is abusive to yourself. And you have to be like a channel that is free of anger, jealousy, selfishness – these are things that inhibit so many people.

(Rose Auger, 1995)

Young children, unlike adults, live in clean states naturally. Spirit talk, communicating with other beings, comes much easier for them. Here is an example of how this talking might occur.

My son, Sohkes, who is four; said to me as we talked about our return to our first home by the lake, "That bear is still around the cabin, Dad; he's looking for food". "Are you scared?" I asked him. "No" he replied, "because that is Neepin's (his sister's) spirit and he knows that we're his friend, and you know what Neepin always feeds him in that same spot, you know that place right by the Water. That's why I'm not afraid and you know what else? My spirit is the hawk and I could fly; Hawks and bears are good friends, that's right, eh Dad?"

There is still the checking point that a child needs to refine his free thought, but basically his path is clear when communicating with other beings. It is this open freedom to which I am



referring when I talk about open path. There is no doubt in the mind of the bear, nor is there in my son. The hawk? Well, his voice is waiting to speak.

It is this kind of language that has carried our people for thousands of years on the Land. Sharing, speaking to each other and to all other beings. It is a way that we need to affirm to our children and our teachers. It is a way that has not left us, a way that is still with us.

Old and new knowledge must continue to work with each other; paths must stay open. Open paths are like the sweat lodge when the willow branches cross: something powerful happens. Opens paths allow for communication among all beings, which affirms the sharing of knowledge.

## **SHARING KNOWLEDGE**

Years ago, our traditional world was based on sharing, not only in terms of the essentials of survival, but more importantly, with regard to knowledge. *Knowledge was the main commodity in the traditional world of our people.* The Creator's beings from all worlds, shared with each other. This was done in many different forms. For example, among the two-legged (humans), when death approached, the one who was about to leave this earth passed on old knowledge to one of the next generation through special ceremonies. I myself have gained knowledge in this way.

Whoo-hoo, the owl, the owl call, such a distinctive call, a call that speaks a language like no other language of the being world. The owl is a communicator that can be understood by all beings and is so well respected in the being world that when he sits on his tree he commands respect. What is it about this owl, this winged-one being, that carries such wisdom and deep knowledge but sends fear into all beings, misunderstood fear, this powerful winged-one being?

This winged-one, the owl, is the carrier of all information directly, from the spiritual world. He is not just restricted to what is "bad information" as many might think. He can be and is also a carrier of what is good and pure information. When he sits on his tree, his eyes are fixed in one position, leaving only his head to move with such authority, giving the impression he is not but is equally present in the other world, spirit world, being world. He is a great representative of both worlds and has equal respect and authority in those two worlds.

What is it that gives this winged-one being such authority in these two complex worlds? The Creator gave this one being this authority not only by giving him the wisdom, knowledge, and farsightedness to walk in those two worlds, but also gave him the physical appearance which

represents what we know as spirit rings, visible in the appearance of his eyes. The eyes represent the beings, each separate in their own right, distinctive. Separate, side by side but located in one fixed area, the head. The owl's head.

What is even more unique about this being's eyes is a striking ring around them, a circular ring around each eye. The rings around each eye do not close but are joined. These rings around the eyes join together to form one; this is the crossing point. Crossing knowledge. Beings crossing, uniting independently but free to form one.

This is the power the Creator has given this wise being, this winged-one we know as the owl—a sign and reminder to all other beings, including humans. This is the Creator's way of reminding us of this connectedness that he wishes all beings to have. It is his wish for all to work together as one but still stay independent. This is the message he left on the eyes of the owl for all to be reminded. His word is marked on the head of the messenger, the owl.

Our people have always had a deep fear of the owl. The reason might be that the owl was given the right to carry many messages. As humans we only remember the owl when he brings messages that are “bad”. Since the coming of the European we adopted the idea that bad is evil, the devil. Traditionally our people looked at something tragic that happened as “meant to be”. That is the way of the Creator, the Creators will.

We learned from the owl and the owl was grateful to let us use his name in one of our dances. “the owl dance”, which is still used today in high regard across this land by many nations. The owl dance represents unity, connectedness, wholeness, sharing of knowledge. This owl dance is one of the highest of dances because it brings two human beings together to connect as one. Two distinctive human beings come together as one man and woman - two of Creator's gifts together as one. This dance requires both man and woman to physically touch and dance as one. However, this name, the owl dance, was not given because of the physical nature itself by something more.

Like the rings around the owl's eyes, the two humans are brought together in unity to share spiritual knowledge. Two spiritual rings come together as one. This again is what I have called “crossing of knowledge”. We, as Indian people, are born with the gift to recognize each other's spiritual rings. We are born to feel when another being is reaching out and wishing to cross knowledge. This is what the owl dance represents. This dance you can still see today. It is a dance that requires that your body and spirit be whole before entering into it. This is the way of the owl when we see him sitting high on the tree taking care of not only the physical Land but

the spiritual as well. He sits there representing himself and the Creator as one. The owl, the wise old owl.

There are many other examples of how the sharing of knowledge happens among all beings. The crossing of knowledge is a process that can occur among all beings, but the sharing aspect adds the dimension of intent and responsibility. Especially for the human being, sharing implies a willingness, a choice, to work towards uniting old and new knowledge, knowledge from multi-dimensional sources, from among all beings.

### **THIS JOURNEYS END IS A BEGINNING: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The coming of the Europeans to North America disrupted and altered the way of life of First Nations peoples, which made it difficult for us to maintain our long-standing processes for having old and new knowledge come together as one. The newcomers, over the years, worked to separate our spiritual connections, replacing our ways with their own structured system, which we know as schools. When our traditional children entered these schools they were taught a different way, a way that has not been good for us a people nor for the maintenance of our spiritual connectedness.

We are truly at a disadvantage when entering the school systems as they are structured today. We enter into these structured systems having been encouraged by our families and the Elders to maintain our birthright, our spiritualness. However, in the schools we are taught to not rely on our spiritual knowledge, our spirit rings, or to communicate with other spiritual beings. We are taught not to communicate or connect with all other beings. Instead, we are taught that we are individuals who need to rely on one primary individual, the classroom teacher, for our knowledge.

We are at a disadvantage when having to learn a foreign language, the English language, a language that speaks of the human individual as the superior being. Talking to other beings or following our spiritual dreams is classified as myth or fiction, not truth. *Emphasis on humans as only body and mind diminishes humans as also spirit*, and spiritual rings become fantasy, non-existent, and therefore deemed not important. The structure of Canadian schooling tells us that spirit is separate from teaching and learning. Even knowledge is considered separate, something out there to be poured into the minds of the children by the all-knowing classroom teacher. We are told the Tree, the Birds, the Animals are separate from us and function at their own levels of existence without crossing over into ours.

We as a people who have been functioning for thousands and thousands of years on the Land have been forced by law to turn against our own ways, our spiritual ways. What is in schools today is truly not our way of thinking and it is truly not the way that the Creator has given us at birth, we are clearly at a disadvantage. Without spirit rings we become floating, spiritless beings, alone. We float in time and space without truly connecting with other beings.

All said, that does not mean that we cannot learn these new ways, since they are here to stay. We will and do learn the Euro-Canadian ways, but in learning them we should not give away our spiritualness, the Creator's gift to us. I believe we can learn the foreigner's ways and still hang on to our own spiritual knowledge. We can be true to this crossing of knowledge old and new, as true as an owl flies, reminding us that this is the way of the Creator. The Creator gave us these gifts; surely the intention was that we hang on to them.

We, the Sakaw Cree, are a unique people and we have a way of thinking that differs from that of the Euro-Canadians. We are connected, yet free --- free to access traditional knowledge, old and new, as we wish.

*The educational systems that will emerge as true Sakaw Cree educational systems must support the continuation of processes which acknowledge and affirm the spiritual connectedness of all that exists.* These systems will honor the interrelatedness of all beings and encourage the crossing of knowledge among all beings. Sources of knowledge will be not just books or classroom teachers but the Elders, the Animals, the Land, and the Spiritual realm through which all sources of knowledge are interconnected, in which old and new knowledge unite, and by which we become who we as humans, as Sakaw Cree, are intended to be.

## **NOTES**

*Editor's note:* Various words (e.g., the Land, Water, Fire, Animals, Birds, Fish, Soil, Spirit beings) which are common nouns in the English language and culture, in this chapter usually begin with an uppercase letter, as proper nouns (especially when used in the plural). This convention is adopted as a rough means of capturing in translation the respect in which these parts of creation are held in the author's Cree language and culture. The editor asks the reader's indulgence for any inconsistencies in the application of these difficult-to-articulate stylistic rules. No disrespect is intended to reader, author or creatures.

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