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*"To me, Indigenous research means decolonizing the research process through traditional methods and connecting us to discoveries through a more natural way of knowing."*

### THE KNOWLEDGE TREE OF HEALING

#### Dedication

**R**aoul Breton, Pauline Desgagnes, Ann Czinege, and Tammy Breton - the voices of my maternal family. Families hold the knowledge that takes us closer to healing.

#### Introduction

We look to healing through traditional practices. Family is my motivation. Through my writing and research I hope to uncover traditional Indigenous healing practices and share my knowledge with the light of my fire, my children, my mom, sister, brother and all who battle with an imbalance of wellbeing; all those who are searching for a deeper connection to their Indigenous culture to heal, physically, mentally and spiritually.

This is a common theme that I see in my ménage: that of not having the knowledge and connection to our heritage through the loss or separation in our family ties, which bind our souls and fulfills our sense of belonging and Indigenous identity.

My grandfather is my driving force for this research as he is the foundation of where my roots stem from. He was detached from his parents as a child after his father passed away. His daughter, my dear mother also experienced a disconnection. She was raised in and out of the hospital as a young child for years, as she battled rheumatic fever, today her physical health is still not in perfect balanced, she also suffers from an

anxiety disorder. Anxiety is a mental health condition that I rapidly see in my family. This is a sign that overall well-being is not in perfect balance.

The traditions about to be discussed provide lessons learned from Indigenous peoples' voices, through learning traditional healing, outside of a Western research approach of deductive qualitative analysis. The voices of those involved in this research are from the most easterly Mohawk tribe of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois Confederacy, Huron, Secwépemc, Cree, Ojibwaii, Cherokee and Métis people.

For thousands of years our people have learned from our Elder's knowledge that has been passed down through oral relationships. These Indigenous ways of knowing were seldom written down. As such there is an absence of sources of published guidance for Indigenous research protocols, methodologies and processes, based on traditions that stringently conform to criteria according to western research methods.

Just like others, I struggle with the disconnection between the demands of research through the Western practice and the reality of my own Indigenous traditions that I come to know through life's relationships. Decolonizing research is needed and requires consistent action and reflective attention. The medicine wheel with its

circular shape and equal balance represents the interconnectivity of all aspects of one's being. Through my writing and research we will look at how we can balance our medicine wheel through traditional practices and grow like a healthy tree by examining each of the branches in this research to help us heal. First we will start by an introduction to my grandfather, it is important for you to meet him because he is an authoritative figure in my research. Second we look at Mother Nature and what she reveals as healing. This is followed by shedding light on Body Work forms. Finally we look at connecting with spirituality. All of these branches are important because they are foundations in the healing process. I invite you to see all the branches to this tree as a beginning to healing. Uncovering traditional healing practices and sharing knowledge offers help with the battle of an imbalance of well-being, and those that are searching for a deeper connection to their Indigenous culture to heal, physically, mentally and spiritually.

### **My Grandfather, Traditional Healing, and Myself**

Raoul Breton was a bright old man. The sound of his voice is fading from my memory, which makes me very sad to think about. He passed away unexpectedly in the year 2000 from complications of a day surgery which caused him to have a heart attack because he was not stitched up properly, bringing on an infection with poison leaking out into his body that brought on the fatal heart attack. It all happened very quickly and unexpectedly. Shortly after his death I swear, I saw him drive by as I walked down a busy street.

We called him Papa. He was raised by his grandmother who was Indigenous and French. Her father was from the Huron tribe, also called Wyandot; a tribe originally from

Quebec. His grandmother raised him because his father died from heart complications when he was a very young boy, leaving his mother with 11 children to raise on her own.

My grandfather was the favorite of his grandmother. She took him in to raise him because his mother struggled to raise all the children independently. My Papa also had six children of his own. Papa told

us very little about his background but he would share his traditional healing energy with us, which came from knowledge passed down from his grandmother to him. We believed Papa could read your mind if you allowed him to look into your eyes long enough. I never wanted him to read mine so I wouldn't dare look too long. I could feel his piercing sharp eyes, touching

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my soul and looking at my intentions.

My grandparents had five daughters and one son. My grandfather told us that his grandmother was Wyandot or Wendat. My grandfather never spoke of our ancestors to me but he shared information with my eldest aunt Lynn who was my godmother. Emotions run through me as I think about the family that I lost. I know that I still need healing myself. I travel through this journey of trying to connect with my roots and culture. Individual knowledge was handed down through the family. My aunt Ann shared generously what she knew. I dig into my background and our family healing practices in hopes to help heal myself and others that I care about, as well as those searching for answers to help them heal for their needed strength.

Searching back to my Indigenous ancestry of the Huron People is important for me to uncover and learn more about my culture to help myself in this process of healing. My family was from Quebec near the St. Lawrence River; the region where my family on the maternal side came from was,

*Upon the arrival of Samuel de Champlain in Quebec in 1608, was the region that was once under the control of the Mohawks, Iroquois tribe. Early theories placed Huron origin in the St. Lawrence Valley, with some arguing for a presence near present-day Montreal and former sites of the historic St. Lawrence Iroquoian people. Wendat is an Iroquoian language. Early 21st-century research in linguistics and archaeology confirm an historical connection between the Huron and the St. Lawrence Iroquois. (Steckley, John, Autumn 2012).*

The language of the Huron-Wendat is part of the Iroquoian linguistic family and the language of Wyandot is related to Iroquois language, however Huron's were usually enemies of the Iroquois. My great grandmother was a spiritual Indigenous woman who passed along her special healing gift to my grandfather. This gift was an energy form of healing through the mind using strength to take away pain. My grandfather would hold his hand just over the affected area and concentrate while his hand hovered over the spot. You would feel warmth and he would continue to concentrate, as you would no longer feel the pain in the treated area. Knowing more about these practices can help my family, friends, community, all of my relations and all of their relations. I would like to explore alternative practices to healing through nature of indigenous traditions to help revive them and share the traditions with others that are seeking good overall health. My grandfather's practice was passed down to him from our ancestors. I am still putting together the pieces to make sense of it.

## Mother Nature and Healing

I have always felt a strong connection to Mother Nature. I reside in Tk'emlups territory and connect my research to this territory as well a more universal approach so we can use and share techniques inclusive of all Indigenous cultures, from the lands that mother earth provides us.

Research shows that nature heals. Looking at nature and the plants that the environment offers us what we need to take care of ourselves and our relationships with people, and for our mental, physical, and spiritual health:

*We gather our minds together to send greetings and thanks to all the animal life in the world. They have many things to teach us as people. We see them near our homes and in the deep forests. We are glad they are still here and we hope that it will always be so. Now our minds are one. With one mind, we turn to honor and thank all the plant foods we harvest from the garden. Since the beginning of time, the grains, vegetables, beans, and berries have helped the people survive. Many other living things draw strength from them, too. We gather all the plant foods together as one and send them a greeting of thanks. Now our minds are one.*

*Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address  
(National Museum of the American  
Indian Education Office, 2009: 10).*

## Plants from Mother Nature

*I feel a connection to the plants that come from the earth we walk on. The flowers, herbs, trees and even the weeds. I remember as a young child picking as many dandelions as I could pick and making a bouquet of the bright yellow-coloured weeds, that always looked so good to me. My grandfather was connected to the land and plants as well. His entire backyard, which was a half an acre, was a giant garden of produce and herbs. He would even use the dandelions in his salads.*

Through millennia of trial and error, Indigenous people have gained substantial knowledge of medicinal plants, which has been imparted from generation to generation as part of oral traditions (Marles, Clavelle, Monteleone, Tays, & Burns, 2000). Herbs such as dandelion, tobacco, ginseng, sage, sweet-grass and rosehip have been traditionally used as medicine. We Indigenous people believe they can offer us a holistic approach that treats physical and emotional health, as well as, the wellbeing of people:

*Canada's forests have long played an integral role in supporting the lives of Aboriginal people, meeting their physical, cultural, spiritual and material needs. Traditional knowledge related to medicinal plants has been instrumental in the survival and wellbeing of Aboriginal people for thousands of years (Turner NJ, 2009).*

The holistic approach of Indigenous healing systems involves spiritual and intimate connection with the natural environment (Densmore F, 1974). Studies were reviewed and compiled by Meeker et al. who provided detailed information about 384 plants used by the Ojibwa. (Davidson-Hunt IJ, Jack P, Mandamin E, Wapioke B, 2005):

*The most common plant parts used to prepare different remedies are: roots, rhizomes, stem, bark, leaves, flowers, fruits, young shoots, and whole plants. The most frequently used plant parts were roots, followed by leaves, whole plants, fruits, and rhizomes. A total of 28 major ailment categories were treated with medicinal plants. Gastro-intestinal disorders, musculo-skeletal disorders, cold, cough and sore throat, injuries, respiratory system disorders, urinary system disorders, and dermatological infections were treated with the highest diversity of medicinal plant species (Uprety, Y., Asselin, H., Dhakal, A. et al. 2012).*

Secwépemc elders share stories of the creation time including a time long ago when the animal spirit Coyote helped the Old One create the world and everything in it. Wild onions, carrots, strawberries are just some of the plants that the people then harvested. Bulbs and roots were an important plant food for the Secwépemc. The traditional territories of the Secwépemc covering a large part of the Plateau region were filled with wild sage.

Sage is an antiseptic, anti-bacterial medicine, conferring strength, wisdom and clarity of purpose. It is a powerful purifying medicine and believed to drive away negative energies. Sage tea is a tonic that aids in indigestion and menopausal problems. It has many physical uses and spiritual uses such as to smudge, it is recommended for smudging because all people can smudge with sage at any time. While smudging it is particularly important for women who smudge when they are on their moon time and during this time, use their own individual sage and not share. Another powerful medicinal plant is sweet grass, which is used by First Nations people for spiritual cleansing. The braiding of sweet grass in itself honors the teachings of interconnection between mind, body and spirit.

*When sweet grass is walked on, it bends but does not break. Hence, it has been associated with the virtue of kindness. If someone has suffered an injustice, that injustice can be returned with kindness, as does sweet grass, by bending and not breaking when walked upon (Kiskeentum, 2008).*

Until the advent of pharmaceutical medicine during the start of the 19th century, healing in all cultures relied upon plants, many of which are still used in today's pharmaceuticals. The mackiki database is an electronic searchable version of the list of medicinal plants (Uprety et al.31) and stemming from a review of 49 publications issued between 1881 and 2010 in scientific journals, books, theses, and reports. It is currently the most comprehensive database on medicinal plants used by Indigenous people of the Canadian boreal forest and is named "mackiki" after the Algonquin word for medicine. This offers a wealth of information such as this small example of information from the database on Soapberry, buffalo-berry:

*Uses: •Decoction applied externally to treat aching limbs, arthritis, and sore head and face [Cree: 95]. •Whole plant :Tea used as a tonic [Dene 100]. •Leaves and stem :Decoction drunk as a purgative and emetic [Cree 13, 96]. , to relieve constipation, tuberculosis [Métis 13]. , and used as a wash for cuts, swellings, and skin sores due to impetigo [Métis 13]. Shoots Tea from new shoots drunk to prevent miscarriages and used as a wash for arthritis [Cree 95; Métis 13]. (Uprety, Y., Asselin, H., Dhakal, A. & Julien, N., 2012)*

Mother Earth bestows us with materials and plants to help take care of our wellbeing. We have a special relationship with the earth as did our ancestors. There's an understanding that we take only what we need, and must use great care when doing so, aware of how we take, and how much of it is withdrawn so that future generations will be considered and practice reciprocity. Our relationship is based on a spiritual connection with Mother Earth that guides Indigenous peoples to reverence.

## Body Work and Touch Healing

Since the earliest times, our hands have been a natural response to emotional pain, with hugs and caresses to comfort. Physical touch



has been used to treat minor ailments in a drug free way. The Cherokee people of North America, for example, were well versed in body therapies and energy healing. They developed a comprehensive, sophisticated bodywork system that encompassed a form of osteopathic massage and manipulation, breath, and energy work. The Cherokee people also used this practice and also crystal scanning and healing for the channeling of spirits a form of energy medicine.

This was a laborious and challenging area to research. Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona & Barbara Mainguy, offer workshops on this practice, which is a rare teaching, Dr. Mehl-Madrona who is Cherokee himself, looks at his culture as well as the Cree traditions, and how they intersect with conventional medicine via a social constructionist model. He has been writing about the use of imagery and narrative in healing since the 1980s and is certified in psychiatry, geriatrics, and family medicine. His research collaborations include work on various psychological conditions, issues of psychology during birthing, nutritional approaches to autism and diabetes, and the use of healing circles to improve overall health outcomes. The Cherokee people also used this practice and also crystal scanning and healing for the channeling of spirits a form of energy medicine.

Dr. Mehl-Madrona says individual knowledge was handed down through the family:

*It's definitely a more indigenous way of teaching. The Cherokee art of healing touch is rarely encountered today. It is a comprehensive, sophisticated bodywork system that encompassed a form of osteopathic massage and manipulation, breath to reanimate the body and "draw spirit" into affected tissues, and energy work. Central to this technique are the alternation of deep pressure and gentle rocking release. The practice incorporates Cherokee breath work techniques, as a means of restoring spirit to all parts of the body and incorporation of imagery, dialogue and offers the importance of ceremony, ritual, Osteopathic or "manipulative" medicine as a means of dialogue with the body, the use of acupressure, energy meridians, crystals, and energy medicine and a closing ceremony (Mehl-Madrona, 2014).*

The technique my grandfather was taught from his grandmother, which was passed down from her father's Huron traditions was connected to illness:

*The Huron Wendat recognized three types of illness: Natural causes, cured by herbs, drugs, poultices or sweating, Un-natural social behaviour thought to be witchcraft, dealt with by a Shaman and Psycho-illness that manifested itself in dreams. The Huron Wendat considered dreams to be the language of the soul. If dreamed desires remained unfulfilled, harm or even death could befall a person. Dreams and desires had to be interpreted by a Shaman (The Life of the Huron Wendat. (n.d.)).*

## Spiritual Energy is Life

Learning about traditional healing practices helps people, including myself to reclaim our Indigenous identity and make sense of the world around us, and to understand the natural world as well as the spiritual world. I have been searching for ways to connect myself with the spiritual side of healing and strengthen positive mental health. Losing people close to me and not having this outlet has made healing more difficult. Embracing practices with these therapeutic tools reflects the understanding that the spiritual world plays a part in balancing our overall well-being.

In my personal culture a Shaman person is regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits, especially among some peoples of northern Asia and North America. Typically such people enter a trance state during a ritual, and practice divination and healing. (Shaman: Definition of Shaman by Lexico. (n.d.)). There is discussion and debate around shamanism and is sometimes viewed in western science as a pseudoscience. A psychoanalyst whose special professional research area is the psychological treatment of schizophrenia, a pursuit which has occupied twenty years of his life stated, "But the researchers who do take this position know relatively little, in terms of actual data, about the mind of the shaman, his world view, and the philosophical premises that form the basis of his healing activities" (Boyer, 1969). The Catholic church viewed a Shaman as a demonic figure. In contrast to this view Boyer

stated “I have stressed that shamans are usually not auto-cultural deviants and have even suggested that in some cultures, shamans are healthier psychologically than their societal mates.” (Boyer, 1969). Indeed, modern physicists are beginning to link certain aspects of shamanism to recent findings from quantum mechanics (Lyon, William S., 1998).

Within my culture of the Wendat a Shaman was a healer and there were four kinds:

*Those in control of wind, rain and weather, Those able to predict the future, Those able to find lost objects, Those able to heal the sick. Men usually took the position of healer, while women dealt with witchcraft and sorcery. The Shaman used visions and dreams to tell which actions to take. To achieve these visions, the Shaman would fast and remain celibate until an answer was received. The Shaman worked with drugs and herbal remedies and mask or shell rattles. Shaman (men and women) were highly paid and highly respected. (The Life of the Huron Wendat. (n.d.)).*

In the past decades shamans have gained credibility. There is a growing awareness and body of evidence about the efficacy of certain rituals such as the Sun Dance and Sweat Lodge ceremonies and creating a circle of healing and sharing our gifts. Practicing is about connecting with nature to deeply connect with the natural spirits, the elements and land, the spirits of the land through all the elements of water, and earth and connects our roots and branches and offers us to see our true essence and is irrefutable.

Looking at the evidence from the literature suggests that the wellbeing of Indigenous people is enhanced when they maintain their ‘traditional’ culture. For First Nation peoples, Sweat Lodge ceremonies are now a common use in drug treatment programs across the United States. The number of Sun Dance participants increases annually, as do the number of dances. Positive associations with engagement with traditional cultures have been shown in research conducted into a link between Indigenous culture and wellbeing for Australian Aboriginal people. Greater attachment to, or engagement with traditional culture is seen to create a stronger sense of self-identity, promote resilience and positive sense of community, a

number of studies have presented evidence that individuals from such minorities achieve better life outcomes if they maintain a stronger affinity with traditional culture, drawn primarily on studies of North American populations. Fleming and Ledogar reviewed studies relating to ‘Indigenous spirituality’, but deem this concept of spirituality to be closely bound up with culture and ways of living in Indigenous communities’ (2008:47). The presence of interactive effects between cultural affinity and facts such as self-esteem, and self-efficacy have also been investigated. Some key themes that arise in testing and explaining such relationships are enculturation, self-identity, resilience and sense of community.

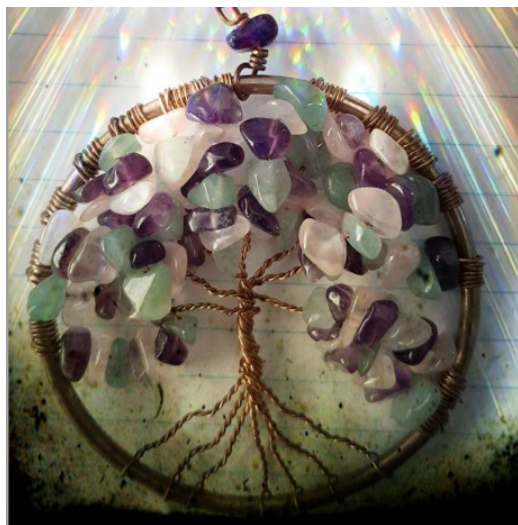
## The Roots will Continue to Grow

We began this paper with the idea of growing like a healthy tree through traditional practices; a tree with branches to different approaches to healing. Stepping back to look at the tree and reviving our knowledge of traditional practices is important because it connects us to where we belong and helps us to self-identify and offers us guidance in life as well as perspectives of what is important to us. It empowers us and helps us to take back what is ours, our traditional ways.

This reclaiming is important for myself and for my role in making this knowledge available and bringing awareness to these practices that are not as commonly practiced today. My motivation is reviving traditional healing practice through speaking with family and hearing their stories to rebalance, rediscover, repair, redefine, and reclaim our cultural traditions for good overall health that is like the well-balanced circle of the medicine wheel. As a mother, I want my children to be able to know these alternatives without having to put together the pieces, as I have had to do. This sharing of knowledge will help them in their wellbeing throughout their life journeys.

Being healthy overall is all connected to these traditions and with one thing out of place it is not balanced. If spiritual well-being is not satisfied it also affects mental health, which in turn affects physical health. They all need to be full in order for life to be successful. Traditional practices to wellbeing, such as plants from mother nature, body work, and spirituality, offer healing potential when we are connected to them.

Personally the more I learn about my background and the connections to these traditions of healing, the stronger I feel and the more pride I carry with me. I see the metaphor of the knowledge tree of healing as ongoing. Maintaining our 'traditional' culture enhances the wellbeing of ourselves as Indigenous people. Our roots continue to grow. I invite you to research in this space of family and elders' knowledge that can touch lives. I welcome you as my family network in expanding our understanding of healing beyond Western views. My hope is that what is written here provides space for further research. This is a beginning - of my own flourishing tree of knowledge about healing and perhaps yours. This is a beginning of a deeper connection to Indigenous traditional practices that help us grow and heal.



**Image: The Knowledge Tree of Healing, crafted by cousin Ammy Hootnick, Métis**

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